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Abstracts

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As President Hugo Chávez's government busied itself with refuting multiple accusations that it is harbouring militants – which shut down and strained relations with Colombia and Spain respectively – Venezuela's opposition swooped in to grab almost 48% of September 2010's legislative vote. Since the Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela's losses, however, Chávez's government has ramped up its efforts to push through its agenda ahead of the National Assembly's reconstitution in January 2011 – in recognition that any delay in populist measures will jeopardise its chances in the 2012 presidential elections – and has embarked on a tour of Europe and Asia that will include defence talks. In an election that saw the return of the opposition, as well as a voter turnout of almost 70%, the country managed to avoid violence or destabilisation, albeit with 110,000 troops deployed to around 12,000 polling stations, according to defence minister Carlos Mata. Anti-Chávez elements in Venezuela celebrated after the opposition managed to overturn the president's two-third majority in the National Assembly. The opposition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática have achieved a symbolic and material milestone in dispossessing Chávez of his two-third majority and will be able to impede chavista bills.

Defence minister Carlos Mata said in late-August 2010 that a combination of police, soldiers, the national guard and intelligence officials will be sent to border areas within days to counter Colombian guerrilla and right-wing paramilitary activity. Colombia's decision to send an additional 2,000 soldiers to the border came on the heels of Mata's announcement. As opposed to Venezuela's military build-up at the border in late-July 2010, both the more recent moves were made as part of efforts to ease relations between the two countries since former President Uribe claimed in July 2010 rebels were sheltering in Venezuela. Chávez claimed he had sent military units to the border in late-July 2010 to hedge against wild card military action by the outgoing President

Uribe. Relations have warmed, albeit cautiously, since Uribe's successor Juan Manuel Santos took office in early-August as quickly as they froze in July.

As a an ideological sibling of Uribe – Santos was defence minister under the former president's cabinet – the change in Colombia's leadership will do little in improving fundamentals in the country's relations with Venezuela, especially vis-à-vis the former's alignment with the US. Although mutual suspicion and tension is certain to remain, the admittedly predictable but swift resolution of July's break in diplomatic relations at least shows that political and economic expediency is at the forefront of concerns for both parties in the near-term.

Meanwhile, Venezuela said in October 2010 it would conduct an investigation into claims that Basque separatist organisation Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) militants had trained in the country. Spanish Prime Minister Jose Zapatero had requested the Venezuelan government's support in investigating the claims made by alleged ETA members Xavier Atristain Gorosabel and Juan Carlos Besance Zugasti, who were arrested in September 2010.

Chávez met with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in April 2010 for talks on defence and energy, and although no arms contracts were signed, the Russian leader subsequently said that arms order from Venezuela may top US\$5bn, Reuters reported. Russian credit lines make up US\$2.2bn of the total amount, which enabled Venezuela to purchase a number of products in September 2010 including T-72 tanks and a S-300 advanced anti-aircraft missile system, according to RIA Nosti. Meanwhile, Chávez's government was negotiating a deal with Spain's state-backed Navantia in October 2010 to add to its navy and upgrade its shipyards, according to El Mundo. The EUR1.2bn (US\$1.68bn) deal includes the manufacture and delivery of four ocean surveillance ships and four coastal surveillance boats.

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