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# US 'ally' Colombia is cozying up to dictators and terrorists

BY KRISTINA FOLTZ, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 12/01/23 11:15 AM ET

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Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, right, accompanied by Colombia's President Gustavo Petro, speaks at a joint press conference at the Miraflores Presidential Palace in Caracas, Venezuela, Saturday, Nov. 18, 2023. (AP Photo/Ariana Cubillos)

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Colombia, designated in 2022 by President Joe Biden as a major non-NATO ally, has historically partnered with the U.S. army in maintaining a semblance of rules-based international order in South America, fighting narcoterrorism and crime groups backed by neighboring Venezuela.

But in recent years, the balance of power and geopolitical allegiances in Latin America have shifted. With the election to the Colombian presidency last year of former M-19 guerrilla Gustavo Petro, both a Venezuela and Hamas sympathizer, the U.S. needs to rethink its relationship with Colombia.

With all eyes on Ukraine and war erupting in the Middle East, Iran's proxy Hezbollah has had ample freedom to expand its operations in Latin America, largely unnoticed by the international community. Hezbollah, which recently declared its allegiance to Hamas in its warfare against Israel, is a transnational U.S.-designated terrorist organization with a physical presence in Venezuela.

The story of Hezbollah in Latin America began some years ago.

In 2020, U.S. prosecutors charged Venezuelan politician Adel El Zabavar with a vast narco-terrorism conspiracy. In 2014, El Zabavar traveled to the Middle East to recruit members of Hezbollah and Hamas to train and indoctrinate recruits at secret base camps in Venezuela. Narco-groups and Islamic terrorists thus joined forces in Venezuela, finding a sympathizer in dictator Nicolás Maduro, in a marriage of convenience and criminal expediency.

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The ultimate goal, according to prosecutors, was to “create a large terrorist cell capable of attacking United States interests on behalf of the Cartel de Los Soles” — a group of obscure Venezuelan criminal gangs, sponsored by the Venezuelan state with the Venezuelan armed forces at their disposal. The cartel is still trading drugs and gold for weapons and recruits, launching a vast and well-funded asymmetric war against the U.S.

An avowed Maduro ally, the current Colombian president can no longer be trusted as a reliable friend amid such major security threats. By ordering Colombian armed forces to stop fighting terrorist groups and to essentially cede territory and grant impunity to narco-gangs as a part of his highly controversial program “Paz Total,” or “Total Peace,” Petro has become a tacit friend of narco-gangs.

Former Colombian Sen. Ingrid Betancourt said Petro “financed his presidential campaign with narco money” and used “Total Peace” to allow “the guerrillas to take over Colombian territory.”

Petro’s recent declaration that Colombia’s public/private oil company, Ecopetrol would become an associate of Venezuela’s state-owned oil company Petróleos de Venezuela, or PDVSA — one of the worst environmental polluters in the world — sent shock waves throughout Colombia and the world. Ecopetrol is a major employer and wealth generator of Colombia’s economy with a solid long-term energy-transition plan and a history of successful management.

The idea of partnering with PDVSA, a system that has been used for embezzlement, with decrepit infrastructure, owned by a corrupt and incompetent dictatorship, is not only insulting to Ecopetrol’s management but sends a shocking message about Colombia’s economic future should Petro and his cronies continue in power.

Following the savage attack by Hamas of Israel on Oct. 7, Petro didn’t condemn Hamas. Instead, he accused Israel of genocide and threatened to end relations with it. Israel responded by discontinuing its exports to Colombia. Similarly, Petro never condemned Vladimir Putin for his brutal, unprovoked, ongoing assault on Ukraine.

Petro has been spinning his propaganda web to the U.S. and playing to both sides of the ideological divide but is incapable of concealing his hatred of the U.S. and Western values. The U.S. should put pressure on Petro with all possible negotiating tools to use his relationships in the region to bring about a swift regime change in Venezuela. If he proceeds with a Colombia/Venezuela oil partnership, the U.S. should make it clear that Venezuelan oil-related sanctions will be levied on him and Colombia.

If Petro continues to defy the U.S. and support Nicolas Maduro and Iran’s terrorist proxies in the region, Colombia should lose its status as a major non-NATO ally.

The U.S. should not embrace strategic military relationships with presidents who support illicit crime, narco-trafficking, political imprisonment and extrajudicial killings. America and Israel can no longer pretend that a friend of terrorist organizations is in any sense an ally.

It’s time to face the rapidly unfolding hybrid warfare in Latin America before the U.S. loses its influence in the region entirely. The security threat is real, the disinformation campaign is massive and the stakes are high.

*Kristina Foltz is a Rotary Scholar based in Bogotá. She writes about Colombian affairs. Follow her @kristinafoltz1.*

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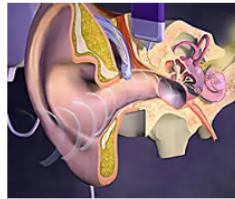
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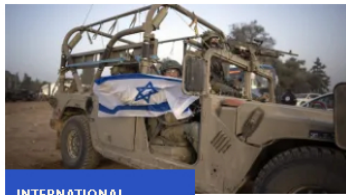


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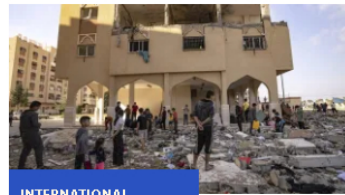
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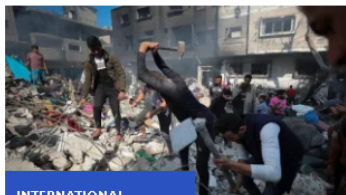
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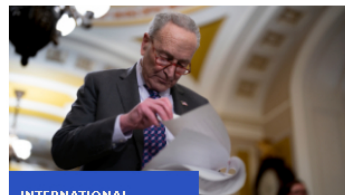
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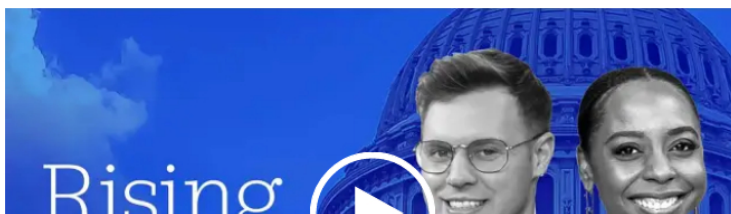
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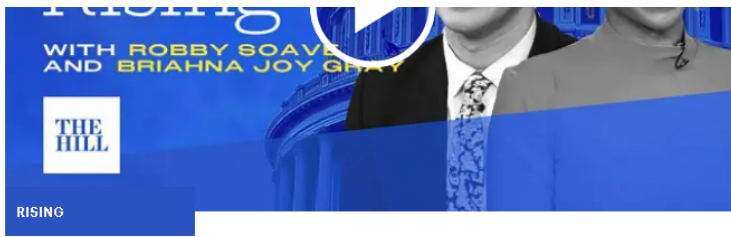
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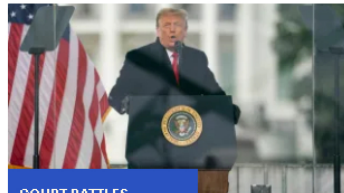
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