Colombia-Venezuela border: Securitisation of migration and Venezuela's political crisis

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ABSTRACT

Colombia and Venezuela share a geographical border of 1,274 miles. Although both countries have historically had contentious border crossings, the antagonistic nature of migration across the borderlands has increased following Venezuela's current internal political crisis. The article argues that Venezuela's political climate has led to further securitisation of migration across the Colombian-Venezuelan border. It supports this argument in three ways. First, the article discusses the border as both a geographical and a man-made border. It also examines the similarities and differences that exist across the Colombian-Venezuelan border. The countries share the same language, Spanish, which unites the region and its diverse peoples with a shared history.

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Nevertheless, socio-economic, environmental and cultural differences widen the dividing lines between these two nations.

Second, the article explores the border crossing (migration) trends. The article further discusses the effects and reasons for such border crossings. Third, it explains the securitisation theory and uses it to discuss how the border has become increasingly securitised by local and international actors. Finally, the article calls for a de-securitised approach to cross-border migration. In this regard, the article supports greater bilateral, regional and international cooperation to address the plight of people crossing the border and living in border regions.

Key words: Colombia-Venezuela Border; drug trafficking; migration and securitization.

Frontera Colombia-Venezuela: Securitización de la migración y la crisis política de Venezuela

RESUMEN

Colombia y Venezuela comparten una frontera geográfica de 1.274 millas. Aunque ambos países históricamente han tenido cruces fronterizos conflictivos, la naturaleza antagónica de la migración a través de las zonas fronterizas ha aumentado después de la actual crisis política interna de Venezuela. El artículo sostiene que el clima político de Venezuela ha llevado a una mayor securitización de la migración a través de la frontera entre Colombia y Venezuela. Apoya este argumento de tres maneras. En primer lugar, el artículo analiza la frontera tanto geográfica como creada por el hombre. También examina las similitudes y diferencias que existen a lo largo de la frontera colombo-venezolana. Los países comparten el mismo idioma, el español, que une a la región y a sus diversos pueblos con una historia compartida. Sin embargo, las diferencias socioeconómicas, ambientales y culturales amplían las líneas divisorias entre estas dos naciones.

En segundo lugar, el artículo explora las tendencias del cruce de fronteras (migración). El texto analiza más a fondo los efectos y las razones de tales cruces fronterizos. En tercer lugar, explica la teoría de la securitización y la utiliza para discutir cómo la frontera se ha vuelto cada vez más securitizada por actores locales e internacionales. Finalmente, el artículo considera un enfoque de des-seguridad de la migración transfronteriza. En este sentido, apoya una mayor cooperación bilateral, regional e internacional para abordar la difícil situación de las personas que cruzan la frontera y viven en regiones fronterizas.

Palabras claves: frontera Colombia-Venezuela; tráfico de drogas; migración; securitización.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary studies of borders understand them as spatial domains and

institutions. However, borders can also be geographic, demarcated by nature. The Colombian-Venezuelan border reflects a geographic border and a man-made institutional border defined by political actors. As a geographic border it is extensive, covering 1,274 miles (Hidalgo & Centeno, 2022). With such a long border, it is heavily crossed, with significant flows of people, goods, and services crossing the border every year. In addition, it is a border region characterised by violence and armed turf wars between non-state actors (Pinzón & Mantilla, 2020).

Over the past decade, the situation at the border crossings between Venezuela and Colombia has progressively intensified, primarily due to Venezuela's internal political turmoil (Hanke, 2023). This crisis peaked in the mid-2010s and has significantly altered the nature of interactions at these border points (Tarver, 2018). Historically, the migratory flow between these two South American nations has been characterised by various cycles, reflecting each state's changing socio-economic and political landscapes. However, the latest phase of migration, particularly since 2014, has been markedly different in scale and nature (Tarver, 2018).

This paper argues that Venezuela's prolonged political turmoil, extending beyond the Maduro administration, has led to the increased securitisation of the Colombia-Venezuela border. Decades of political instability and economic challenges have led to an exodus of Venezuelans, forcing Colombia to implement strict border controls and increase security measures. Consequently, the Colombia-Venezuela border highlights the broader impact of Venezuela's internal problems on regional dynamics.

SECURITISATION THEORY

Securitisation is a valuable model of national security developed by scholars such as Wæver and Buzan as part of the Copenhagen School of Security Studies (Buzan et al., 1998). Securitisation uses speech acts by authoritative state officials to define existential threats against referent objects. Hence, a state's goal in securitising an issue is to ensure that it is addressed expeditiously, since the survival of the state and its people depends on the urgent implementation of extraordinary measures to curtail the threat. Securitisation is inherently a discursive practice, and in the execution of securitisation it functions as a speech act aimed at achieving a socially significant result. The securitisation process involves using speech acts to label threats, accepting the threat rhetoric by the audience to whom the speech is directed and using and legitimising extraordinary measures designed to secure referent objects from the threat. Moreover, the securitisation process relies on the interpretation of a social situation by the political actors, the authoritative figures, and the audience, which is either the citizens of a particular state or the general international community.

As a theoretical framework, securitisation was originally developed in Europe and has since become a central tool for

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understanding state responses to migration. It posits that states employ extraordinary measures to frame migration and migrants as an existential threat to the security and well-being of citizens, particularly in economically prosperous European nations. As elucidated by scholars like Huysmans (2000), securitisation theory provides lenses through which to examine how political actors strategically construct narratives around migration, casting it as a security issue rather than a purely social or economic phenomenon.

This theoretical framework has led to a substantial body of literature focusing on the role of political actors in the securitisation of European migration. Researchers have examined how these actors use rhetoric and policy to elevate migration to a matter of national security, thereby justifying extraordinary measures such as heightened border controls, stricter immigration laws, and increased surveillance. This approach has significant implications for understanding the intersection of migration, politics, and security in the European context. The usefulness of securitisation theory goes beyond its Euro-centric origins. While it was developed to address specific phenomena in European states, its application is not geographically confined. The framework can be effectively applied to the study of migration in developing countries, geographically distant from Europe. In these contexts, securitisation theory assists in analysing the extent to which non-European states frame migration as a security concern, often influenced by their unique socio-political and economic conditions.

In developing countries, the securitisation of migration can be driven by factors different from those in Europe, such as internal conflicts, economic instability, or regional geopolitical dynamics. The theory provides a valuable tool for examining how these states manage complex migration issues and the implications of securitisation strategies on migrants and host countries. By applying this theory globally, scholars can better understand how migration is securitised across different political and cultural landscapes, highlighting the universality and adaptability of the securitisation framework in global migration studies.

Later, the securitisation theory is used to explain the cross-border flow of migrants across the border between Colombia and Venezuela, two states located in the Global South far from Europe, where this theory originated.

METHODOLOGY

This case study on Colombia-Venezuela border relations and migration is based on a secondary research approach. This methodology involves the analysis and synthesis of existing literature, including academic journals and books, reports by international organisations, government documents, and media articles. The primary objective of this methodology is to collect, review, and interpret existing data and studies related to the securitisation of the Colombia-Venezuela

border, thereby providing a thorough understanding of the topic without the need for primary data collection. A wide range of sources was carefully selected to represent different perspectives and to ensure a robust and unbiased analysis. Academic journals and articles were chosen based on their relevance, credibility, and scholarly recognition, with priority given to peer-reviewed sources to ensure the reliability and accuracy of the information. Reports from international organisations such as the United Nations, Human Rights Watch and the International Organisation for Migration provided critical insights into the humanitarian and socio-political aspects of the border dynamics. Government documents and official statements offered perspectives on the policies and security measures implemented by the Colombian and Venezuelan authorities. Additionally, articles from reputable news outlets were included to capture the contemporary public discourse and real-time developments. The use of multiple media sources helped researchers to better understand public perceptions and media representations of border issues.

DEFINING BORDERS

Borders are demarcations between nations and people (Donnan & Wilson, 2021). These boundaries can be geographical or man-made. Geographical boundaries, such as rivers or mountains, are physical separators of a nation's territory. Borders are also defined as institutions because they serve specific functions and set rules for human behaviour and interaction (Donnan & Wilson, 2021). Borders and border controls may create access or barriers to territory in political, legal, spatial and socio-economic terms. Border controls determine the legitimacy of people or goods seeking access to a territory (Donnan & Wilson, 2021). As a barrier, borders serve a useful dual protective role in restricting goods deemed harmful and people who might threaten the state (Donnan & Wilson, 2021). Law enforcement and policing strategies have recently become a priority for state border control, shifting from military protection and economic regulation to the main instruments of border regulation. Border policing aims to deny territorial access to non-state actors, including terrorists and drug traffickers (Donnan & Wilson, 2021). Newman (2003) noted that borders serve to regulate trans-border movements. State-non-state dynamics are often used to define and implement border policies to regulate such activities. These include cooperative roles in the border-making process of combined state and legitimate non-state entities, such as the nation-state, multinational corporations and international organisations (Donnan & Wilson, 2021).

Borders mean different things to different people. They unite and foster greater interaction while imposing barriers that restrict the mobility of people and goods. They are zones of cooperation on the one hand and zones of conflict on the other. Baud and Van Schendel (2005) refer to this dual nature as 'the paradoxes of borders' or the Janus-faced nature of borders

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as they often represent two opposing views. Borders are also zones of contestation for those who cross them and those residing in bordered regions. The outcome of states' political bordering process is usually the implementation of border controls–intended to protect. Border controls are circumvented, manipulated and challenged by some non-state actors. Borders and border controls are therefore structures and institutions that, because of their dividing nature, are not always welcomed by those who deal with and interact with them. However, the bordering process and border regulations are the state's social construction that have become normalised over time. Borderlands are, therefore, shaped by the social construction of various state and non-state actors who interact in the production and maintenance of borders. These involve state actors' political and geographic discourses and the actions of ordinary people living within bordered regions and those residing outside the particular zone of sovereignty. Rumford (2014) referred to the work of ordinary people within bordered spaces as contributing to the construction and the destruction of borders. In what he termed 'border work', the actions of community members became a priority in shaping border-making rather than an agenda set by the state.

The following section delves into the critical role of the Colombia-Venezuela border in fostering commerce and improving the day-to-day lives of the inhabitants in the border region. This exploration serves as a bridge, transitioning from the conceptual and theoretical frameworks previously discussed to a more focused examination of the case study at hand. It highlights how the theoretical concepts of border dynamics and international relations manifest themselves in the real context of this particular region. Historically a hub of vibrant trade and cultural exchange, the Colombia-Venezuela border, has had a significant impact on the economic and social fabric of the region. Interaction between residents on both sides of the border, through trade and cultural exchange, has been instrumental in shaping a unique borderland culture. This section highlights the contribution of these interactions to regional development and the shared experiences of those living in the border region. By examining the practical implications of border policies and their impact on trade and daily life, this section provides a tangible illustration of the theory discussed earlier. This approach contextualises the theoretical aspects and provides a seamless transition to the in-depth analysis of the Colombia-Venezuela border as a case study. It emphasises the significance of borders as not mere political demarcations but as dynamic spaces that profoundly affect the livelihoods and interactions of those living within their influence.

THE VENEZUELA-COLOMBIA BORDER

The border between Colombia and Venezuela stretches across 2,220 kilometres. The escalation of political instability in Venezuela, marked by economic decline and social unrest, has led to an unprecedented wave

of migration into neighbouring Colombia (Tarver, 2018). In response, Colombian authorities have significantly increased security measures along the border. These measures include an increased military presence, strict controls and the implementation of more rigorous immigration policies. The primary aim of these measures is to manage the influx of Venezuelan migrants and refugees due to a demographic surge that has placed a significant strain on Colombian resources and infrastructure. This increased securitisation of the Colombian border reflects the challenges posed by large-scale migration and the concerns of state authorities about potential cross-border security issues. The situation has further been complicated by diplomatic tensions between the two nations, exacerbating the adversarial nature of the border crossings. The evolving dynamics of this border region, especially in the context of the Venezuelan crisis since the mid-2010s, presented a complex scenario that merits detailed examination, particularly in light of the historical ebb and flow of migration between Venezuela and Colombia (Tarver, 2018).

The vast border region of the nations covers seven Colombian departments and four Venezuelan states (Ávila Hernández et al., 2023). In the north, it includes the Guajira Peninsula, parts of Zulia and Cesar and the Catatumbo region of Norte de Santander. It also includes Táchira and Cúcuta. From the south, the borderlands include Apure, Arauca, a part of Boyacá, Vichada and Guainía. The Orinoco River basin, vast plains and remote areas make up the southern borderlands. Here, the departments of Vichada and Guainía in Colombia border the Venezuelan state of Amazonas. This area is part of the tropical grasslands of the Llanos, which stretch across both countries. The region's ecological richness includes parts of the Amazon rainforest and is renowned for its biodiversity.

The Arauca River is an important natural border marker between Colombia and Venezuela, forming part of the international border separating the two countries. The river originates in the Andean highlands of Colombia and flows eastward for approximately 1,000 kilometres (about 620 miles) before joining the Orinoco River, one of the longest rivers in South America. As a border, the Arauca River delineates the frontier between the Colombian department of Arauca and the Venezuelan state of Apure. This river is more than just a territorial divide; it has ecological, economic and strategic importance for both nations. The river basin is home to diverse ecosystems, including wetlands that are critical for local biodiversity. These areas are home to various species of flora and fauna and are crucial for conservation efforts in both countries. The Arauca River region is economically important due to its agricultural and livestock activities. The river has historically been a means of transport and trade, although cross-border trade has faced challenges due to varying political tensions between Colombia and Venezuela.

In terms of security and geopolitics, the Arauca River border has seen its share

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of challenges, including issues with illegal armed groups, smuggling and the movement of refugees and migrants due to the recent economic and political instability in Venezuela. Despite these challenges, the Arauca River also represents a lifeline for the communities living along its banks, providing water for irrigation, fishing and everyday life. Cross-border cultural exchange is also a feature of life along the Arauca river, as families and ethnic groups, such as the Wayuu, have historically lived and moved across what is a political border to the nations but a shared territory for people. Natural geography -from mountains to rainforests- plays a crucial role in shaping the interactions between Colombia and Venezuela, whether it is through facilitating or impeding trans-border connectivity. However, the shared border regions between Colombia and Venezuela have often been sparsely populated and have historically had limited state presence, which has implications for border control and security (Tarver, 2018). As such, the Colombia-Venezuela bordered region is perhaps one of the most problematic border regions due to the violence of armed criminal groups and the limited state presence.

The decade from 1980 to 1990 witnessed the Venezuelan military launching border operations to curb violence emerging from Colombian armed groups in the Venezuelan zone of sovereignty (Tarver, 2018). In 1989, Colombia and Venezuela established the Neighbourhood Watch to combat the violence from the non-state armed groups within the border area, followed by the Binational Border Commission in 1994 to exchange information on criminal organised groups (Ávila Hernández et al., 2023). These joint initiatives helped to reduce violence across the Colombia-Venezuela border. However, in 1999, with the rise to power of president Hugo Chavez, there was a change in the political perception of the problem. President Chavez viewed the violence from Colombia's guerrilla groups as Colombia's security problem that should be addressed by Colombia rather than Venezuela (Tarver, 2018). The shift in the policy on this matter affected Colombia-Venezuela border cooperation as Colombia accused Venezuela of tacitly supporting the guerrilla groups, namely the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN).

The Venezuelan authorities became aggrieved over Colombia's accusation that they were allowing armed groups to use Venezuelan territory and therefore suspended diplomatic relations with Colombia (Ramírez, 2011). The Binational Border Commission was one of the joint Colombia-Venezuela initiatives that was suspended (Malamud, 2004). Initiatives such as the Presidential Commission on Integration and Border Issues were maintained amidst heightened tensions between Venezuela and Colombia despite the change of Colombian President to Álvaro Uribe in 2002 (Labrador et al., 2009). Later, in 2009, security cooperation between the Colombian National Police and the police forces of the Venezuelan Border continued, but by 2010, Venezuela had severed diplomatic

relations with Colombia. The breakdown in cooperative security measures between Colombia and Venezuela coincided with a noticeable increase in the operations of guerrilla groups, paramilitaries and organised crime syndicates in the border areas. The re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Colombia and Venezuela during the presidencies of Juan Manuel Santos in Colombia and Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela marked a significant turn in the bilateral relations between the two countries. The rapprochement was seen as a hopeful sign for increased cooperation, especially in terms of border security and the contentious issue of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and their access to the border regions of Venezuela.

Despite the restoration of diplomatic relations, the issue of the FARC's presence in Venezuelan border regions remained a point of contention. Reports and accusations from various sources, including the Colombian government and international observers, suggested that FARC members had found refuge and even support in Venezuelan territory (Martínez, 2017). This posed a complex challenge for Colombia, which was engaged in a protracted internal conflict with the FARC. Hence, Colombia viewed their potential safe havens across the border as a threat to its national security and an obstacle to lasting peace within its borders (Malamud, 2004).

From 2015 to 2022, Venezuela's deepening political and economic crisis significantly influenced the border dynamics between Venezuela and Colombia (Ávila Hernández et al., 2023). In 2015, the Venezuelan government unilaterally closed the border, citing security concerns and smuggling issues. This closure disrupted the economic and social interdependence that had historically characterised the border regions. In the years that followed border policies fluctuated, with sporadic re-openings and closures, often creating chaotic conditions for cross-border movement. The situation was further exacerbated by the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, which led to a massive exodus of Venezuelans into Colombia. By 2022, Colombia had received more than 1.7 million Venezuelan migrants, profoundly impacting its social and economic systems. Colombia's response evolved from emergency assistance to integration policies, highlighting the shifting nature of the border dynamics. The border region witnessed increased security challenges, including armed groups exploiting the porous border for illicit activities (Ávila Hernández et al., 2023). These complex dynamics underscored the border as a zone of humanitarian concern and strategic importance for both countries, reflecting broader regional political and economic trends.

Security concerns have heavily influenced the institutional bordering processes along the Colombia-Venezuela borders. Each border region – Arauca-Apure, Norte de Santander-Táchira, Cesar-Zulia, and La Guajira-Zulia – presented unique challenges.

Arauca-Apure Border Region T2

The border region between Arauca in Colombia and Apure in Venezuela has

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consistently been a centre of geopolitical tensions, mainly due to its strategic importance in Colombia's ongoing internal conflicts and its role in the global narcotics trade. This region has witnessed the presence of armed groups, notably factions of the FARC, particularly post-2016 dissident groups, and the ELN, who have exploited the accessible crossing points along the Arauca-Apure border and the historically weak security measures in the area for drug trafficking and other illicit activities (Tarver, 2018).

The debate over the existence and nomenclature of Las Águilas Negras, or The Black Eagles, remains a contentious topic within academic circles. Las Águilas Negras was identified as a key player in Colombia›s illicit activities, including drug trafficking, extortion and violence between 2004 and 2006. However, the reported death of its leader in 2007 raised questions regarding the continuity and operational structure of this group. Critics have argued that Águilas Negras' formidable network of figthers and criminal organisation have significantly fragmented, leading some local observers to regard the group as a demobilised entity (Ávila & Guerra, 2012). Despite this perceived dissolution, in 2011 the name Águilas Negras continued to evoke fear and has been appropriated by various criminal groups seeking to use its notorious legacy to assert control over territories and intimidate communities.

Some advocates have argued that Las Águilas Negras has effectively adapted to the evolving socio-political landscape of Colombia by changing into a dispersed network of cells that continue to partake in unlawful activities, though lacking a cohesive command structure (Ávila & Guerra, 2012). This transformation exemplifies the dynamic nature of organised crime in Colombia, illustrating how such entities can alter their structures in response to both internal developments and external pressures, such as law enforcement actions and changes within the illegal economy.

Conversely, skeptics have claimed that The Águilas Negras have ceased functioning as a coherent entity following the reported demise of its leadership. They have argued that the label has become a convenient umbrella term used by disparate groups to instil fear and claim undue legitimacy. This argument assumes that the original organisation no longer exists; instead, its identity has been co-opted by others seeking to exploit its fearsome reputation.

The geographical challenges and minimal state control in the Arauca-Apure border region have exacerbated the difficulty of monitoring and governing these areas, enabling illegal armed factions to establish zones of influence. This has often resulted in severe repercussions for local communities, including violence and human rights violations. Since 2004, the landscape of armed presence in this region has evolved (Tarver, 2018) towards the control of parts of communities. The demobilisation of the FARC in 2016 marked a significant shift, leading to the emergence of dissident groups and a reconfiguration of power dynamics among these factions.

In a historic move, the Colombian government established the Caño Limón-Coveñas oil pipeline project through a public-private partnership to combat the region's instability. Despite its early inception, insurgent groups consistently targeted the pipeline, leading to a series of challenges over the years. This persistent targeting of the pipeline required a robust response from the Colombian government. As detailed by Human Rights Watch report (2022), Colombia's Consolidated Plan involved deploying thousands of troops to protect the pipeline and its surrounding areas. This militarised strategy was a direct response to the ongoing attacks and was designed to secure the pipeline and stabilise the region as a whole. The implementation of this measure demonstrates the strategic significance of the pipeline and the complexities involved in maintaining its operation against a backdrop of internal conflict and insurgent activities.

The lived experiences of residents in the Arauca-Apure borderlands have been heavily influenced by the dynamics of guerrilla warfare, particularly between the FARC and ELN, with the warfare intensifying significantly between 2005 and 2010. Efforts to address the illegal activities within the region, such as Venezuela's implementation of a fuel control system in 2012, underscore both governments' ongoing challenges in managing cross-border flows of illicit goods. Ultimately, securing the Arauca-Apure border region requires deeper measures beyond military intervention, including socio-economic initiatives and a strengthened legal framework aimed at reducing the influence of illegal armed groups and ensuring the protection of human rights (Piñeiro, 2012).

NORTE DE SANTANDER-TÁCHIRA BORDER REGION

The Norte de Santander-Táchira border region, straddling Colombia and Venezuela, has become a notorious corridor for smuggling activities, including the trafficking of drugs and gasoline. These criminal operations often resulted in violence, with armed groups such as the FARC and ELN heavily involved. Various paramilitary factions exerted influence in urban centres, while the FARC and ELN dominated the rural landscapes. Historically, this area was marred by 'La Violencia' in the 1970s, which was characterised by violent confrontations between local farmers, state forces and guerilla groups in Norte de Santander. Two decades later, the dynamics in the region shifted, particularly in the Medio and the Bajo Catatumbo, adjacent to the Catatumbo river basin. Here, farmers began cultivating the coca bush extensively, a shift which led to the production of cocaine and entangled local agricultural practices with transnational organised crime, including arms trafficking, drug smuggling and money laundering (Martınez, 2017).

The municipality of Ocaña, which boasts the second-largest population in Norte de Santander, has become an essential link in the drug trafficking chain. Illegal drugs are moved from mainland Colombia to Venezuela's border near the

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Catatumbo area and onward to the Caribbean. Conversely, the Venezuelan town of Coloncito, located in the Táchira state, is a known pathway for drugs moving from Venezuela's coast to the Caribbean islands, eventually reaching markets in the USA and Europe. The border area of Puerto Santander in Colombia, in proximity to Coloncito, is particularly vulnerable to the illicit smuggling of Venezuelan gasoline. This gasoline is a critical component in the cocaine production process, as it is used to convert coca paste into pure cocaine.

The situation remains tense and conflict-ridden within the broader region of Catatumbo, which lies on the northern border adjacent to Venezuela's Zulia state to the south. A significant military presence characterises the area due to ongoing security concerns. In 2008, the municipality of Tibú, in Norte de Santander, was particularly noted for daily acts of homicide. Moreover, an operational alliance between the FARC and the Águilas Negras was observed, which facilitated the expansion of illicit arms and drugs trafficking in the area (Ávila Hernández et al., 2023).

These issues illustrate the complex security and socio-political challenges facing the border regions of Colombia and Venezuela, where illegal armed groups contest state's presence and smuggling routes are deeply intertwined with local economies.

CESAR-ZULIA BORDER REGION

The Cesar Department, which connects the Departments of Bolívar, Magdalena, La Guajira, Norte de Santander, and neighbouring Venezuela, is geographically pivotal, largely due to the Sierra de Perijá mountain range which is located west of the Cesar Department thus forming a natural border with Venezuela. This mountain range extends along the eastern side of the department of Cesar. It is part of the Andean system, serving as the northern extension of the Eastern Andes in Colombia before they taper off into Venezuela. Indigenous groups and criminal organisations alike have utilised the natural barrier presented by the mountain range as a refuge from law enforcement and a covert conduit for crossing between Colombia and Venezuela (Molano, 2004; Ramírez, 2011).

During the 1970s, the FARC and the ELN sought refuge in the Sierra de Perijá, where they kept a low profile. By the 1980s, these groups had entrenched themselves in the region, consolidating their presence through a sustained diet of violence and manipulating the political system (Leech, 2011). However, the conflict landscape significantly shifted in 1995 when paramilitary forces made inroads into the Cesar Department, leading to the fragmentation of guerrilla factions within the local area (Schwam-Baird, 2015). By 1999, violence between the guerrillas and paramilitary forces spread to the Caribbean coast, particularly between the Gulf of Urabá and La Guajira. The increased rates of violence in the region resulted in an alliance between the Northern Bloc of the paramilitaries of the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia or United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia

(AUC) and the local political elites (Kline, 1999).

By the end of the year 2000, the region was marred by severe human rights violations as the civilian population endured a surge in murders, kidnappings, and forced displacements (UNCHR, 2002). This period of turmoil was further complicated by the para-politics scandal, which exposed the illicit and extensive collaboration between the AUC and several Colombian political figures. By 2006, the scandal led to several Congressmen and local politicians being indicted for their involvement with the Northern Bloc of the AUC paramilitary group (Europa Press International, 2008). This history of the Cesar-Zulia border region underscores the complexities of Colombia's internal conflict, where the interplay of geography, indigenous rights, and political corruption has profoundly affected the social fabric of border regions and shaped the nation's struggle for peace and stability.

LA GUAJIRA-ZULIA BORDER REGION

The Guajira Peninsula, spanning both La Guajira in Colombia and Zulia in Venezuela, has long been exploited as a strategic area by drug trafficking syndicates. These organisations harness maritime routes across the Caribbean and Central America, with the ultimate destination often being the United States. Additionally, this area is a critical juncture for illegal drugs destined for European markets via Venezuela and West Africa. The open sea facilitate these

illicit networks, with traffickers utilising the expansive maritime geography to their advantage. In San Cristóbal, for instance, small aircraft are often employed to ferry drugs to coastal areas, from where high-speed boats then transport them to various Caribbean destinations (UNODC, 2020).

The La Guajira-Zulia border region is the traditional homeland of the Wayúu indigenous people, who have established their own political and judicial order to manage internal disputes and governance. Certain acts, including retributive violence, are customarily settled within this framework. Trade — licit and illicit — is a cornerstone of economic activity here, with gasoline smuggling from Venezuela to Colombia considered a customary practice rather than a criminal one (Rincón-Ruiz et al., 2016). The 1980s saw La Guajira operating as a hub for marijuana cultivation and trade, which intensified territorial disputes and drew the Wayúu's private militias into alliances with organised drug trafficking entities (Avila et al., 2013; Peralta et al., 2011). Urban centres like Riohacha, Maicao, and Valledupar have subsequently emerged as critical transit points for the movement of illegal drugs.

Examining the Colombia-Venezuela borderlands reveals a complex tapestry of shared and divergent characteristics between the two nations. These attributes offer insights into the border's significance for the local population and the respective state apparatuses. For example, while the border is a site of economic exchange and cultural intersection, it is also a zone of contestation

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where non-state actors often challenge state authority. To understand the criticality of this border, one must consider the socio-political and economic dimensions that influence cross-border interactions and the persistence of smuggling and trafficking networks.

COLOMBIA-VENEZUELA BORDER: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Colombia and Venezuela share similarities in language, history, politics and geography, which are key factors for establishing cross-border cooperation. Located in South America, both states share a common language. Spanish is the dominant language, and geographically, they share a border. However, Colombia also borders Panama, Brazil and Ecuador; while Venezuela borders Brazil and Guyana. Colombia's territorial location allows it to consolidate its linguistic relations with Panama while extending opportunities through its connections with Brazil. The same is true for Venezuela, as its border with Brazil fosters its influence in the Portuguese language. On the aother hand, its border with Guyana allows its English influence to flourish.

Geo-strategically located with sea routes, Colombia can be accessed from the Caribbean and the Pacific oceans. On the other hand, Venezuela is located on the coast of the Caribbean Sea. It comprises forty islands, with Margarita being the largest island.

The historical trajectories of Colombia and Venezuela are deeply intertwined with the legacy of European imperialism, particularly that of Spain, which left an indelible mark on the cultural, linguistic and political landscapes of these countries. The Spanish conquest and colonisation brought about significant transformations within indigenous civilisations, effectively reorienting them towards European modes of governance, belief systems and linguistic practices. Spanish remains the dominant language in both nations, a testament to the lasting influence of the colonial era. The reach of the Spanish Empire also extended to the institutionalisation of Catholicism, which became the official and dominant religion, influencing societal norms, rituals, and the calendar of celebrations. This religious homogeneity was, in turn, mirrored in the cultural sphere, where Spanish traditions influenced the development of diverse forms of artistic expression. Colombia and Venezuela's music, dance, and literature bear the hallmarks of Spanish artistic genres and themes. However, they have evolved to incorporate indigenous and African elements, reflecting the complex demographic make-up of these societies.

The colonial impact was not limited to Spain's direct rule over these territories; but it also included the broader geopolitical influences exerted by other European powers. For example, the Dutch presence in Brazil and the British involvement in Guyana introduced a mix of cultural and economic dynamics that shaped the geopolitical contours of South America. These external influences contributed to the diversity of colonial experiences and the subsequent

trajectories of post-independence nation-building in Colombia and Venezuela.

Moreover, the legacy of European colonialism has left Colombia and Venezuela with shared yet distinct national identities, each forging a path that reflects both a common heritage and the unique adaptations to their particular historical contexts. While the Spanish colonial legacy provides a unifying backdrop, each nation's postcolonial reality has diverged, influenced by a variety of factors, including regional inequalities, indigenous and African contributions and their interactions with neighbouring states and global powers. These dynamics have, over time, resulted in a rich cultural tapestry, showcasing a blend of resilience, adaptation and creativity in the face of historical upheavals and transformations.

Colombia operates as a constitutional republic based on the principles of separation of powers between its three branches: the executive, led by the President; the legislative, which includes a bicameral Congress; and the judiciary, which is independent of the other branches. This structure ensures that regulatory mechanisms are established to prevent the centralisation of power (The World Factbook, 2023). On the other hand, Venezuela functions under a presidential system where the President of Venezuela is both the head of state and the head of government, with significant executive power. The Venezuelan government's structure is akin to federalism, with the country being divided into 23 states, a Capital District that corresponds to the city of Caracas, and the Federal Dependencies, which consist of offshore islands and islets in the Caribbean Sea (Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 1999).

Colombia's administrative divisions consist of 32 departments, each with a significant degree of autonomy which are further subdivided into municipalities. The country's administrative regions are not a tier of government but are used for planning and coordination (National Administrative Department of Statistics [DANE], 2023). In Venezuela, the states are semi-autonomous and have their constitutions, but these must align with the national constitution. The country is also subdivided into municipalities. The metropolitan district, formerly known as the District Capital and now part of the Capital District, represents the region encompassing Caracas and is a unique administrative unit due to its size and significance (Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 1999). The concept of administrative regions in both countries reflects their efforts to decentralise and effectively manage their respective territories thus providing a regional development and governance mechanism that aligns with their political structures and constitutional provisions.

Colombia and Venezuela, two nations with rich histories, have experienced significant political and social turmoil which have shaped their modern-day societies. Colombia's landscape was scarred by an internal armed conflict that spanned over half a century, a confrontation that has had profound effects on the country's human and environmental resources. This

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prolonged strife, involving various armed groups, resulted in countless human casualties and substantial displacement, with an extensive toll on the nation's development and security (World Bank, 2023). Meanwhile, Venezuela has been grappling with a profound political crisis that became particularly acute in 2019, marked by disputed presidential elections and widespread social unrest. This instability triggered an economic collapse, leading to shortages of basic goods and hyperinflation, which sparked a mass exodus of Venezuelans. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that millions had fled the country, seeking refuge in neighbouring states, with Colombia receiving the largest number of Venezuelan migrants (UNHCR, 2023).

The consequences of both internal and external migratory pressures have had a profound impact on the social structures of these countries. Migration, particularly to rural areas, has put pressure on basic social services, such as healthcare and education. This has led to social marginalisation, a lack of opportunities and added strain on economic resources. Colombia and Venezuela have valuable natural resources such as oil, minerals, and fertile agricultural land. In the midst of the countries' rich natural resources, their exacerbated poverty rates have widened the income inequality gap and increased social exclusion, placing additional strains on the social fabric and infrastructure. Although both Colombia and Venezuela have made strides over the years

in reducing overall poverty rates, significant segments of their populations continue to live in poverty. Income inequality remains a pressing issue, with wealth concentrated in the hands of a few. At the same time, many still struggle with inadequate access to basic services and opportunities (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2021).

Like Colombia, Venezuela is an agricultural and industrial country with a developed oil production industry. Over the past eight years, Venezuela has suffered an acute economic crisis precipitated to astronomical levels due to a reduction in global oil prices coupled with adverse weather conditions affecting the supply of electricity and sectors reliant on the power supply. Venezuela declared an emergency as some citizens experienced food shortages and political upheaval over the legitimate authority to lead the state.

Although Colombia and Venezuela share certain historical and cultural ties, they exhibit significant differences, particularly in terms of economic performance, poverty reduction and income inequality. Over the past sixteen years, Colombia has demonstrated a remarkable improvement in these areas, in contrast to the trajectory observed in Venezuela. Colombia's progress in poverty reduction is evidenced by the decline of its poverty rate from 37.2% in 2002 to 27.8% in 2018 (De Corso, 2023). This reduction is a testament to the effective implementation of social and economic policies aimed at poverty alleviation. In

comparison, Venezuela has faced economic challenges characterised by hyperinflation and a decline in oil revenue, which adversely impacted its poverty rates.

Colombia's success in reducing income disparity is reflected in changes in the Gini coefficient, a measure of income distribution. According to Knight and Tribín (2023), Colombia's Gini coefficient decreased from 0.59 in 2002 to 0.51 in 2018, indicating a significant reduction in income inequality. This contrasts with the situation in Venezuela, where economic crises and political instability have exacerbated income disparities, leading to increased social tensions. Additionally, Colombia's economic growth patterns have diverged from those of Venezuela. Colombia has experienced steady economic growth, driven by diversification of its economy and foreign investment.

In contrast, Venezuela's economy has been heavily reliant on oil exports, making it vulnerable to fluctuations in oil prices and contributing to economic instability. Such differences between Colombia and Venezuela highlight the two countries' divergent paths in recent years. While Colombia has made strides in reducing poverty and improving income equality, Venezuela has faced important economic challenges, leading to a widening gap in the socio-economic landscape of the two neighbouring nations. In addition, Venezuela has recorded a sharp economic decline, resulting in a significant increase in its poverty rate. The poverty rate rose from 23.6% in 2014 to 96% in 2020

(Masullo et al., 2021). The economic crisis and political instability in Venezuela have fueled the large-scale migration of Venezuelans to Colombia in recent years.

The socio-cultural landscape of Venezuela and Colombia, while sharing historical and geographical ties, exhibits distinct differences contributing to complexities in managing their mutual border. Venezuelan culture is deeply influenced by the legacies of Bolivarian socialism, which emphasises state control and social welfare, whereas Colombian society leans more toward a market-driven economy, which is influenced by diverse regional cultures including Andean and Caribbean ones (Ramirez, 2018). The Venezuelan emphasis on Bolivarian ideals often contrasts with Colombia's more diverse socio-political landscape, where democratic liberalism and economic liberalism play a significant role (Kozloff, 2008). These socio-cultural differences are manifested in different governance styles, economic policies and societal values, which are reflected in the challenges of border management between the two states. The contrasting approaches to the economy, governance and social policies have made bilateral cooperation complex, often leading to tensions rather than collaborative border management (Buxton, 2018).

The following section discusses migration between Colombia and Venezuela from 2015 onwards, driven by Venezuela's political crisis. It also examines the governmental responses and securitisation of the border.

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VENEZUELA-COLOMBIA CROSS-BORDER MIGRATION AND GOVERNMENTAL RESPONSES

Since 2015, the cross-border migration of Venezuelans to Colombia has been unprecedented due to Venezuela's political crisis, which has fueled economic, social and humanitarian migration. From 2015 to 2022, approximately 7.1 million Venezuelans left their country and migrated to neighbouring Latin American countries. In 2022, there were approximately 2.9 million Venezuelan migrants in Colombia (Frontera y sociedad, 2022). Colombian migration to other countries, particularly the United States, Spain and Venezuela, has been a significant phenomenon, especially in the context of the internal armed conflict and economic instability that spanned from the 1980s to the early 2000s. According to recent estimates, there are about 4.7 million Colombians residing abroad. Within this group, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has classified approximately 1 million as forcibly displaced and over 500,000 as refugees. This migration trend, as analysed by Rossiasco and De Narváez (2023), was primarily driven by the socio-political and security challenges during Colombia's prolonged internal conflict. However, it is important to note that this period of migration, spanning several decades, differs markedly from the more recent Venezuelan migration crisis, which has escalated significantly in 2015. This distinction is crucial for comparative analysis, as the Venezuelan migrations represent a more compressed timeline of mass displacement. In contrast, the Colombian migrations span over a longer period of time with varying intensities and causes.

Venezuela's socio-political and economic crises have precipitated one of the largest mass migrations in the recent history of the Western Hemisphere, with significant numbers of migrants seeking refuge across seven key departments in Colombia as well as in its capital, Bogotá (Ávila Hernández et al., 2023). The Colombian government's management of this unprecedented migratory wave illustrates a dynamic understanding of borders as more than mere physical dividers but as complex institutions shaped by policies and practices. Colombian authorities have adopted a coordinated approach to regulate and manage the migration flow, thereby exercising sovereignty and extending humanitarian aid. The institutionalisation of Colombia's borders in response to Venezuelan migration is a testament to the nation's efforts to balance control and compassion. It highlighs the adaptive nature of border policies in humanitarian crises and reflects Colombia's role in the regional response to Venezuelan displacement.

The approach of Colombia towards the institutional management of its border in response to the influx of Venezuelan migrants has been structured into two distinct phases: an initial period from 2014 to 2018, followed by a subsequent phase stretching from 2019 to 2023.

COLOMBIA-VENEZUELA BORDER RESPONSE 2014-2018

La Guajira, Norte de Santander and Arauca are the Colombian border areas witnessing the greatest number of migrants due to their geographic and socio-cultural proximity to Venezuela (Masullo et al., 2021). For this reason, they have tighter combined institutional controls from national and local Colombian authorities. Furthermore, Colombians who had opted to move to Venezuela's side of the border returned to Colombia. To facilitate this return migration, Colombian authorities implemented Law 1565, which was signed in 2012 (Tarver, 2018). This law made it easier for Colombians living abroad to return home by extending incentives for their return. This was complemented by the processing of birth certificates for Venezuelans of Colombian descent. *Jus sanguinis*, part of Colombian law, allows Colombian citizenship to individuals born to Colombian parents, irrespective of where they were born.

In 2014, the border was closed at night to reduce crime across the Colombia-Venezuela border. The Venezuelan government implemented this closure order without the cooperation of the Colombian authorities (Masullo et al., 2021). For instance, the Tachira municipality of the Colombia-Venezuela border was closed for three days in 2015 by Venezuelan authorities (Tarver, 2018). This was in response to allegations that Colombian paramilitaries assaulted Venezuelan forces. Later, in 2015, the Venezuelan authorities declared a state of emergency for the Táchira state, which was extended to other states in the border region. Some Colombians were also deported from Venezuela (Ordóñez & Arcos, 2019).

Colombian authorities implemented the Migration Card for Border Transit and the Border Mobility Card. The former allowed Venezuelans entering Colombia's bordered regions permission to stay up to 7 days. The latter entered into force in 2017 as a more permanent arrangement. The Venezuelan authorities reopened the Colombia-Venezuela border after establishing the Migration Card for Border Transit in 2016. In July 2017, the Colombian authorities established the Special Stay Permit for Venezuelans (Tarver, 2018). This permits regularised Venezuelans to stay in Colombia for up to 90 days with the possibility of renewal for a maximum of two years. Colombia's Special Stay Permits also grants Venezuelans residing in Colombia services geared towards community welfare, including healthcare provision and educational opportunities. As a reaction to the intricate difficulties presented by the large-scale migration from Venezuela, in February 2018, the Colombian government established a coordinated inter-agency task force known as the Border Management Unit and the Migration Special Group. This entity brought together representatives from various agencies, including Migration Colombia, the Colombian Institute for Family Welfare (ICBF), the National Police, and the National Department for Taxes and Customs (DIAN). The primary mandate of this unit was to effectively regulate and

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oversee the movement of migrants through the Colombia-Venezuela border, ensuring an orderly and humane process. However, by March 2018, the efficacy of the Border Mobility Card, designed to facilitate the controlled movement of people across the border, had been compromised due to misuse. This led to its temporary suspension, reflecting the ongoing challenges of border management in the face of a humanitarian crisis.

Nevertheless, recognising the necessity of such a mechanism, the Colombian government reinstated the Border Mobility Card in November 2018 after implementing measures to prevent further misuse. In a further effort to manage the situation, Colombian authorities initiated a registry of Venezuelan migrants. This registry aimed to gather accurate data on the demographic and socio-economic profiles of the migrants, thus enhancing the government's ability to plan and deliver services. The collection of such data was crucial for informing policy decisions and tailoring social services to meet the needs of the migrant population (Cubides et al., 2022).

Additionally, the Colombian government took a proactive step in publishing a policy document that served as a guideline for Venezuelan migrants wishing to enter Colombia. This document outlined the legal procedures, rights and obligations of migrants, as well as the support and services available to them upon arrival. It was an important step towards establishing a structured migration management and integration framework. These measures highlight Colombia's strategic and humanitarian approach to migration governance, balancing the need for security and order at its borders with the obligation to protect and assist vulnerable populations. The above-mentioned mechanism has helped Venezuelan migrants integrate into Colombia until 2018. The following section addresses Colombia's efforts to assimilate Venezuelan migrants after 2018.

COLOMBIA-VENEZUELA BORDER RESPONSE 2019-2023

In 2019, the Colombian government established an income integration generation strategy aimed at the socio-economic integration of the Venezuelan migrant population into the Colombian economy. This public-private partnership strategy prioritised increased training, employment and support for entrepreneurs and business projects. A strategy for migrant children was also implemented in 2019. It enabled the transition of migrant children and their families from emergency care and for them to be included in the welfare programs of Colombia's Institute for Family Welfare. These programmes covered childhood and adolescent support, nutrition and child-rights plans.

In 2019, Colombia's Great Integrated Household Survey included Venezuelan migrants and implemented mechanisms to generate, access and monitor information on Venezuelan migration. In this regard, the Migrant Integration Index and the Migration Statistics Information System

(Sistema de Información de Estadísticas de Migración) provided data on Venezuelan migration for public access and to design appropriate programmes to integrate migrants. Agencies, such as the Colombian Observatory on Venezuelan Migration and the National Observatory on Migration and Health from the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, were instrumental in collecting data and monitoring of Venezuelan migration.

In 2021, the Colombian government partnered with the World Bank to implement a social inclusion and public communication strategy for Venezuelan migrants. This strategy created a narrative about migrants and migration for the government to use. It also comprised a social media campaign and public discourses on Venezuelan migration, including contributions from ordinary Colombian citizens and celebrities. Later, in 2021, the Colombian government adopted a more sustained integration strategy for Venezuelan migrants. This strategy entered into force in 2023 and involved the Temporary Protected Status for Venezuelan migrants (Estatuto de Protección Temporal para Migrantes Venezolanos). This status granted greater protection to Venezuelan migrants by reducing their time to register and regularise their standing in Colombia. It also fostered a legal pathway for migrants to regularise their status and integrate them into the Colombian society. To this end, Temporary Protected Status for Venezuelan Migrants offers a permit for working and staying in Colombia for a maximum of 10 years, allowing access to basic services and

the labour market. It is estimated that by the end of 2023, 2.4 million Venezuelans will have obtained legal status through the Temporary Protected Status pathway (Rossiasco & de Narváez, 2023).

While Colombia has made progress in assimilating Venezuelan migrants, there are persistant concerns about the adequacy of state protection during periods of heightened influx. The subsequent analysis explores the characteristics of the securitisation theory as a framework for conceptualising migration as a security issue. Furthermore, it examines the relevance and implementation of this theory along the Colombia-Venezuela border, particularly concerning the Venezuelan migration crisis in Colombia.

COLOMBIA-VENEZUELA BORDER AND SECURITISATION

In the case of the Colombia-Venezuela border, the securitisation framework can be employed to understand how both nations have framed border issues as policy challenges and existential threats that necessitate urgent and often militarised responses. Historically, the Colombia-Venezuela border has been a zone of economic and cultural exchange. However, recent political and economic upheavals in Venezuela and longstanding conflict in Colombia have transformed this border into a hotbed of security concerns (Tarver, 2018). Faced with a surge in Venezuelan migrants and refugees fleeing crisis conditions, the Colombian government has increasingly securitised the

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border. This is evident in the deployment of military personnel, the establishment of stringent border controls and the portrayal of the influx as a threat to national security and social stability.

The securitisation of this border is not unilateral. Venezuela, amidst its internal turmoil, has also engaged in securitising rhetoric and actions (Tarver, 2018). The Venezuelan government has periodically closed the border, citing threats of smuggling, paramilitary activities and even allegations of conspiracies against its sovereignty. These closures, often justified under the guise of national security, have significantly disrupted the lives of border communities and bilateral relations. The securitisation process is further complicated by the presence of non-state actors, such as guerrilla groups and drug trafficking organisations, which operate in the porous and often lawless border region. Both governments have portrayed these groups as posing security threats to the state and communities, further legitimising a militarised approach to border management. This narrative has been supported by international actors, including the United States of America, whose interests and regional foreign policy objectives often align with the securitisation agenda.

The humanitarian crisis resulting from the Venezuelan exodus has added another layer to the securitisation narrative. The massive flow of migrants has been portrayed by certain political factions and media outlets as a source of economic strain and social unrest, thereby framing the humanitarian aspect itself as a security issue. This has justified extraordinary measures, such as strict asylum policies and reinforced border patrols. However, the securitisation of the Colombia-Venezuela border has significant implications. It affects the humanitarian response to the crisis, often prioritising security over human rights and the needs of vulnerable populations. It also impacts bilateral relations, with both countries using the border as a tool for political manoeuvring, further entrenching the narrative of insecurity and threat.

Border crossings and border operations between the states have sometimes led to militarisation, hostilities and heightened tensions. In 2003, there was a dispute between the Colombian and Venezuelan authorities over who refused to stop at a border post (Tarver, 2018). Venezuelan authorities argued that firearms were used against right-wing paramilitaries because they did not stop at a Venezuela-Colombia border checkpoint. However, Colombian authorities disputed that claim, and argued instead that Venezuelan troops had crossed into Colombia's territory. The securitisation of this border incident culminated in the death of seven Venezuelan national guards. The tensions across the Colombia-Venezuela border were further heightened given the view held by some Colombian security forces that the Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez was sympathetic and supportive of Colombia's Marxist guerrillas, some of whom had established camps on Venezuela's side of the border (bbc News, 2003).

In 2008, a FARC rebel leader was killed near Colombia's southern border. President Hugo Chavez, in his broadcast to the Venezuelan nation, said:

"Mr. Defence Minister, move me ten battalions of tanks to the border immediately. We will not permit the North American empire, its puppy President Uribe and the Colombian oligarchy to divide us, to come here and make us weak" (Ingham, 2008, p. 4).

Before this, President Uribe of Colombia had said that he would take a severe stance against the FARC guerrilla movement for attacking the state, which had resulted in years of murder and kidnapping of Colombians. How the FARC group should be characterised became a significant dividing feature between presidents Chavez and Uribe. For President Chavez, the FARC group had legitimacy in its political goals. It hence, should be treated as an insurgent group, while for President Uribe, this group was a terrorist group. This was reinforced by FARC defectors who had pointed to Venezuelan support in the form of shelter, weapons and finances. Likewise, Venezuela's opposition leader, Manuel Rosales, has referenced Venezuela's connections. He said:

"The guerillas go in and out of our national territory [Venezuela], kidnap people and make alliances with criminals, who they train in kidnapping and extortion" (Ingham, 2008, p. 16).

In 2007, the Colombian authorities invited President Chavez to officially join negotiations between Colombia and the FARC to resolve the issue of the release of hostages held by FARC members imprisoned in Colombia. However, President Chávez was excluded from the negotiations over president Uribe's claim that he had violated a prior agreement not to communicate with the Colombian army. The 2008 escalation, which led to a military build-up along the Colombia-Venezuela border, demonstrated the deterioration of relations between the states and the use of political actors' words and actions in securitising the border. In de-escalating the Colombia-Venezuela tension surrounding this matter, states such as Peru, Chile and Argentina expressed their concern. This was followed by an emergency meeting of the hemispheric regional grouping, the Organisation of American States (OAS), with the intention of preventing a war and alleviating the Colombia-Venezuela diplomatic tension.

In 2009, two bridges on the Colombia-Venezuela border in Colombia's Norte de Santander region were blown up allegedly by the Venezuelan army (Frattali, 2022). Colombia's Defence Minister at the time, Gabriel Silva, argued that dynamite was used by the Venezuelan army to destroy the bridges. However, Venezuelan authorities indicated that an illegal improvised bridge had been destroyed. Mr. Alexis Balza, the Venezuelan frontier director for the Táchira State, said:

"The Venezuelan army took down a sort of walkway, put up by the people who pass from Venezuela to Colombia" (BBC News, 2009, p. 8). These bridges were heavily used by citizens walking across both states' territories. As such, the bridges were

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central to citizens crossing the border and to the daily lives of people in the border region.

The signing of the 2009 US-Colombia Security Agreement increased Venezuela's fears and led to further border tensions between Venezuela and Colombia. The US-Colombia security agreement was designed to curtail drug trafficking and FARC activities within Colombia by allowing the US complete access to Colombia's military bases. However, Venezuela's fears heightened and it argued that the US was orchestrating attacks on its territory by its involvement in this Security Pact. President Chavez urged Venezuela to increase its war preparation apparatus (BBC News, 2009). In 2010, following President Juan Manuel Santos' succession to President Uribe, the dynamics along the Colombia-Venezuela border became a focal point of diplomatic tension (BBC News, 2010). Colombian authorities reported that approximately 1,500 members of the FARC and the ELN were operating from the Venezuelan side of the border (BBC News, 2010). This revelation strained diplomatic relations, and led Colombia to sever ties with Venezuela over these security concerns. In response to this escalating situation, a meeting of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) was convened in the same year, 2010, to address the burgeoning crisis. The meeting occurred in Quito, Ecuador, which provided a neutral ground for discussions. President Santos was committed to repairing and strengthening diplomatic ties with Venezuela at this summit, signalling a potential shift towards more amicable relations. This meeting was a critical step in addressing the border tensions and represented an effort to re-establish diplomatic communication and cooperation between the neighbouring nations.

The Colombia-Venezuela border has undergone a significant securitisation process, with both countries framing border issues as existential security threats, that require extraordinary measures. This securitisation is evidenced by increased military presence, strict border controls, and the portrayal of migrant influx and non-state actors' activities as major security concerns. The humanitarian crisis stemming from Venezuelan migration has further intensified this narrative, leading to a prioritisation of security over humanitarian needs. This approach has altered the traditional dynamics of the border, impacting bilateral relations and the lives of communities in the border region.

The subsequent section discusses desecuritisation within the context of migration and drug trafficking across the Colombia-Venezuela borders.

DE-SECURITISATION

Buzan et al. (1998) have argued that securitisation ultimately leads to militarisation and loss of human lives. For this reason, desecuritisation is preferred to securitisation. De-securitisation, Buzan et al. (1998) explain, removes the securitisation label from an issue based on lack of communication about the issue in terms of security.

Further, Buzan et al. also noted that desecuritised issues are returned to normal politics through communication. For Behnke (2006), however, de-securitised issues wither away due to silence, and not by placing those issues in normal politics based on speech acts.

In the context of the Colombia-Venezuela border, desecuritisation of migration issues along the border would require strategies to convince the Colombian public that Venezuelan migrants are not a threat to their state. Huysmans (1998) referenced three de-securitisation strategies: objectivist, constructivist and deconstructivist. The objectivist strategy relies on the notion that security is objective; hence, this strategy would have to convince the Colombian audience that migration and cross-border activities are no longer significant security threats. Such speech acts may persuade citizens regarding the positive impact that Venezuelan migrants could bring to Colombia. Still, they may not resonate with the audience given issues of cross-border activities, such as gasoline smuggling, drugs and arms trafficking in the border regions.

Huysmans' constructivist approach to de-securitisation provides a unique perspective on the securitisation process, particularly relevant to the Colombia-Venezuela border scenario. This approach posits that the securitisation of issues is not only a political manoeuvre but also a process that mobilises resources, shapes public discourse and ultimately influences policy-making. In the context of the Colombia-Venezuela border, securitisation is evident in the allocation of resources and policy development aimed at managing Venezuelan migration to Colombia and curtailing the illicit flow of drugs and people across the bordered regions. The transition to de-securitisation in this context would involve a shift from viewing these issues purely through a security lens to adopting a more holistic approach. This shift requires concerted governmental efforts and the active involvement of local communities. However, it is crucial to recognise that the border regions between Colombia and Venezuela are diverse, with varying socio-economic and political landscapes. Consequently, the process of desecuritisation cannot be uniformly applied across all border regions.

In some areas, the Venezuelan authorities have taken steps to integrate migrants into the Colombian society, but these efforts vary considerably from one region to another. In regions with a higher concentration of migrants or more acute security challenges, such as those with a strong presence of armed groups, the process of integration and de-securitisation faces greater complexities. Conversely, regions with more stable conditions may see more effective integration efforts. Additionally, the role of local communities in the de-securitisation process is crucial and equally varied. In some communities, there may be a strong willingness and capacity to support integration efforts, while in others, resource constraints or local resistance may pose significant challenges. Therefore, while the move towards de-securitisation is a critical step in addressing the challenges along the

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Colombia-Venezuela border, it is essential to acknowledge the heterogeneity of the border regions. Tailored approaches that consider each region's specific needs and conditions are essential for the successful integration of migrants and the overall de-securitisation of cross-border issues. Finally, the authorities may use the deconstructive strategy to de-securitise the issue. In the case of the Colombia-Venezuela border, the migration issue could be addressed internally with a narrative that portrays migrants as important members of society and integrates them into government programmes designed to improve their lives as they settle in the territory. In this case, the re-labelling of the issue is done using milder and more acceptable language, thereby supporting the case for its return to the normal political process.

CONCLUSION

The border regions between Colombia and Venezuela present a complex and multifaceted situation, that highlights the need for a de-securitised approach to migration. Despite their historical, and linguistic similarities, socio-economic and environmental differences have widened these two nations' borders. The current political crisis in Venezuela has led to further securitisation of migration across the border in order to protect national security but has increased the vulnerability of the Venezuelan migrant population.

In the context of the securitisation of migration across the Colombia-Venezuela border, it is important to consider the role of various actors as identified in Buzan's (1998) securitisation theory. Buzan posits that securitisation is primarily driven by 'securitising actors,' who have the authority and power to define a particular issue as a security threat. These actors typically include state officials and government leaders. However, the concept of 'local actors' and influential non-state actors playing a role in the securitisation process, especially in the context of border migration, adds a nuanced dimension to this theory.

While high-level state actors and institutions are traditionally seen as the primary drivers of securitisation, the situation along the Colombia-Venezuela border illustrates how local actors – such as local government officials, law enforcement agencies, and even community leaders – can contribute to the securitisation narrative. Through their policies and practices, these local actors can criminalise migration and create an atmosphere of confrontation between Venezuelan and Colombian communities and law enforcement officials. They may not have the overarching power of national leaders but can significantly influence public perceptions and policy implementation at the local level.

Despite this, Colombia has undertaken considerable efforts to counteract the securitisation trend by working to regularise and integrate Venezuelan migrants. These includes providing legal status and access to health care, education and employment opportunities, which are crucial steps in de-securitising the issue of migration. Such

measures shift from a security-centric view to a more humanitarian and inclusive approach. This shift in Colombia's approach highlights a critical aspect of Buzan's theory – the potential for 'counter-securitisation' or 'de-securitisation,' where an issue previously framed as a security threat is reframed in more neutral or positive terms. In this case, the Colombian government's actions represent a move towards de-securitisation, challenging and changing the narrative set by local actors.

Sustained national, bilateral, regional and global collaborations can promote integration agreements in protecting migrant rights while addressing the underlying causes of migration. Relations between Venezuela and Colombia have improved, and in 2019, the border between Colombia and Venezuela was reopened (Wordliczek, 2023). In addition, relations between the countries improved with the rise to power of Colombia's President Gustavo Petro in August 2022.

Finally, fostering cross-border cooperation in the Colombia-Venezuela border region is perhaps the best way to increase inclusiveness for the people in the border regions and to make the regions safer from drugs, crime and the influence of organised criminal networks. In addition, continous cooperation is ultimately required to benefit the current and future generations of those living or expected to live in the Colombia-Venezuela border regions.

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