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INTRODUCTION

Last August a responsible Venezuelan magazine ran an article entitled "War with Colombia?" That same month the Venezuelan Foreign Minister, in Bogota for the inauguration of President Pastrana, said in answer to a reporter's question that war was absurd and unthinkable. "It would be a crime against our people," he said. Responsible officials in both countries were speculating on the possibility of war and, like the Venezuelan Foreign Minister, decrying the very speculation as an absurdity.

An observer, surprised by the need to deny the possibility of war, could conclude that such talk was indeed mere absurdity. Yet, the fear was not hysteria. If it did not come from an immediate threat, it came from certain knowledge that beneath a surface tranquility deep problems troubled the relations between Venezuela and Colombia.

In answer to another question from the same reporter, Foreign Minister Aristides Calvani said: "The word 'conflict' is inappropriate. I use the word 'difficulties'." The current round of difficulties between Venezuela and Colombia came to the surface in October 1968, when the Colombian congress debated a proposal to extend Colombian territorial

waters to a two hundred mile limit. The proposal was interpreted by the Venezuelan press as an effort to take over a group of barren, uninhabited Venezuelan islets called Los Monjes off the Colombian part of the Guajira Peninsula. Colombia soon set Venezuela at ease on this point, reaffirming its acknowledgment of the islets as Venezuelan. Out of this incident, however, came a renewed interest in defining the boundaries of the continental shelf. Secret negotiations had been going on since 1965, when Venezuela protested Colombia's granting concessions for oil exploration in the Gulf of Venezuela. President Lleras asked congress to suspend debate on the two hundred mile proposal until the two countries reached agreement on the continental shelf.

Relations were further strained in May 1969, when Venezuela refused to join the Andean Pact, a major interest of Colombia. President Caldera, who had assumed office in March, tried to mend fences by accepting a Colombian invitation to offer good offices in mediating the Salvadoran-Honduran border war and by going to Bogota in August for the hundred and fiftieth anniversary celebration of Colombian independence. Caldera and Lleras met again in December, this time on the border to inaugurate an international bridge.

Underlying tensions were again stirred, however, when the Capriles chain of periodicals in Caracas began a series of anti-Colombian articles in February 1970. The articles asserted that as many as a million Colombians resided

illegally in Venezuela, many of them criminals, prostitutes, smugglers, and military reservists and retired army officers. These Colombians were said to be ruining the land, taking the best jobs, stealing cars, illegally importing cattle and coffee, and spending their Venezuelan money in Colombia. Most ominously, the reservists and former military officers were settling in the border areas forming a "Colombian Sudetenland" and a potential fifth column.

While most thinking Venezuelans rejected these allegations as commercially-motivated sensationalism, there was a grain of truth in what the Capriles newspapers said, enough to focus public attention on the witches brew of Colombian-Venezuelan difficulties. As discussion continued President Caldera once again tried to calm the situation. He said that the problem of illegal immigration is one of continuing conversations between the two governments. Indirectly chastizing the Capriles chain, he said that Venezuela's relationship with Colombia is based on solid friendship and mutual interest.

Earlier governments had taken a leisurely attitude toward the two countries' problems with each other; but Presidents Caldera and Lleras agreed that a more vigorous approach was necessary. Venezuelan and Colombian representatives sat down in March to begin serious discussion of the continental shelf problem. They quickly agreed on the terms of reference for a future meeting, which they scheduled for June.

Meanwhile, tension increased in Venezuela as a result of the attention focused on Colombia by the continuing Capriles attacks and the uncertainty of the April election in Colombia and the disturbances following them. The Venezuelan National Guard was put on alert in border areas and ranking Venezuelans, including the president, expressed serious doubts about the maintenance of order and the durability of democracy in Colombia.

Negotiators at the June session of the continental shelf talks were unable to reconcile the widely divergent claims of Colombia and Venezuela, and the two delegations were able to agree only on another meeting, which they scheduled for September. The June meeting apparently ended with a hardening of positions on both sides.

Underlying the Venezuelan position was Venezuela's other border problem, Venezuela's claim to the Essequibo region of Guyana. Less than a week after the continental shelf talks ended, Venezuela signed an agreement with Guyana that in effect put a twelve-year moratorium on Venezuela's claims against Guyana. That, in addition to the fact that in past negotiations with Colombia the latter had won large areas claimed by Venezuela, made it politically necessary for Caldera to appear to be a staunch defender of Venezuela's interests on the continental shelf. The probability of rich oil deposits in the Gulf of Venezuela further stiffened Venezuela's position.

The Capriles press continued its campaign with reports of Venezuelan children in the border area being taught by Colombian teachers using Colombian textbooks, of Colombian troops patrolling within Venezuela, and of the Colombian flag being flown in Venezuelan border towns. The reports led to widespread feeling that Colombia is dominant in much of the border area. For their part, Colombians viewed such charges with alarm, seeing in them evidence of Venezuelan aggressiveness and a threat to their compatriots on the Venezuelan side of the border.

The military in both countries were caught up in the tension and began giving serious thought to the defense of their national territory. Both sides made studies, wrote contingency papers, and took preliminary steps toward improving their military posture on the border.

After the inauguration of Colombian president Pastrana in August, Colombia asked for a delay in the continental shelf talks to permit the new government to familiarize itself with the problem. The delay, coupled with efforts by both sides to quiet the issue, has resulted in a slackening of interest for the time being. With the renewal of talks in late October, however, feeling is sure to regain at least the heat of last summer, as Colombia and Venezuela once more try to come to grips with the issues.

THE ISSUES

Definition of the Border

From 1550 until 1777 Venezuela and Colombia formed the Kingdom of New Granada. In the latter year Venezuela was separated to form the Captaincy General of Venezuela. In 1820, following the War of Independence the two countries were once again joined, together with Ecuador, to form New Granada. That arrangement lasted only ten years. In 1830 it was agreed that the boundary between the two countries would be the line where administration had stopped before 1820. Since much of the border area was unsettled, however, little of it effectively administered, and none of it demarcated, it was often difficult to draw precise lines between the two countries. [In 1833 the Michelena-Pombo Treaty was drawn up. The treaty was rejected by the Venezuelan congress, however, because the northern terminus of the frontier ended at ^{Cabo de} Chichibacoa, on the Guajira Peninsula, instead of at ^{Cabo de (?)} La Vela, where the Venezuelan congress believed it ought to end.]

The boundary was not specifically delimited until 1891, when the king of Spain acted as arbiter. In 1941 Colombia and Venezuela signed a treaty settling a boundary dispute arising from differing interpretations of the 1891 award.

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Since then the land boundary has been considered settled, except for an area in the Perija mountain chain west of Maracaibo. Venezuela recently raised this dispute on the basis that a supposedly single mountain crest defining the boundary was actually divided. Discussion of this problem has so far been confined to diplomatic channels and is not yet public knowledge.

The remaining dispute is over the definition of the territorial sea and continental shelf boundaries in the Gulf of Venezuela. Discussion between the two countries has been carried out since 1965 with added impetus in 1970.

The point at issue is what principle, among the several recognized by international law, should be used to delimit the extension of the land boundary between Colombia and Venezuela into the territorial sea area and the continental shelf. Each country expounds the principle that would be most advantageous to itself. Colombia bases its claim on the median line principle. In applying that principle, Colombia would draw an equidistant line -- a line equally distant at all points from the shores of the two countries -- extending twelve miles out for delimitation of territorial sea and going half way to the closest point on the Venezuelan side of the Gulf. The half-way mark is twenty-seven miles from each shore. From that point a line would be drawn to the open sea, defining the continental shelf boundary as

being equidistant from the eastern and western shores of the Gulf. Colombia discounts Los Monjes Islands, asserting that the insignificance of the islets precludes considering them as an entity with a twelve-mile territorial sea. Instead, Colombia maintains that each islet should be treated individually, each with its own minimum of territorial sea.

The Colombian claim would give Colombia a considerable portion of the Gulf of Maracaibo, both as territorial sea and as continental shelf. Venezuela stoutly resists the Colombian claim, maintaining that the principle to be applied is the principle of Historic Bays. Venezuela asserts that this principle is applicable because the Gulf of Venezuela is an internal sea bounded by Venezuelan shoreline in uninterrupted, undisputed use by Venezuela since the discovery of the country. Venezuela maintains that the sea boundary should be determined by a direct linear extension of the land boundary between the two countries in the Guajira Peninsula. The Monjes Islands should be treated as an entity with their own territorial sea, and a median line should be drawn between the islands and the Colombian shoreline. Thus, except for a twelve-mile strip off the Colombian coast, all of the Gulf of Venezuela would be Venezuelan territorial sea and Venezuela's continental shelf would stretch east and north of the Monjes Islands.

The juridical positions are taken, of course, in defense of national interests. The national interests involved are nationalistic pride and economic considerations. For their part Colombians feel that international law is on their side and that it would not be proper to give up a justified legal claim. Venezuelan nationalism is more complex and more emotional. Venezuelans feel that in the 1891 award and the 1941 treaty they lost or gave away large parts of what were truly Venezuelan territory. They point to the Michelena-Pombo Treaty as proof of Colombia's acceptance of the entire coastline of the Gulf of Venezuela and of half of the Guajira Peninsula as rightly Venezuelan. As they demonstrated in their negotiations with Guyana, Venezuela maintains that in international disputes equity overrides purely juridical considerations. On this basis, many argue that the matter is already settled and that there should be no negotiations at all. The June agreement with Guyana reinforces the sentiment that there must be no more surrender of national territory.

Economic considerations strengthen nationalistic feeling. Not only is the Gulf of Venezuela essential to the shipment of Venezuelan oil but it is also rich in shrimp. Venezuela's economic interest in the gulf is greatly sharpened by the probability that the floor of the gulf is rich in oil. Venezuelan officials estimate that in an area

south of a straight line from the Venezuelan-Colombian border on the Guajira Peninsula to the northern tip of the Paraguana Peninsula there are 126 billion barrels of oil, three times the estimate for the rich Bolivar Coastal Field in Lake Maracaibo.

Nor is Colombia immune to the lure of oil. While Colombian domestic demand for petroleum products is increasing, oil production is expected to decrease, and there is little exploration activity at present. The Colombian state oil company estimates that Colombia will be a net importer of oil by 1975. The Colombian officials have noted that loss of potential petroleum areas in negotiations with Venezuela would have a severe economic impact on Colombia. The loss of export revenue and the use of foreign exchange for the purchase of oil would be compounded by the Colombian government's policy of supplying the domestic market with low-cost oil products. Texaco-Gulf, the most important foreign oil company operating in Colombia, is even more pessimistic than the state oil company. Texaco-Gulf estimates that Colombia will have to begin importing oil in 1971 and that it will be a net importer by 1974.

Colombians residing illegally in Venezuela

By most estimates there are from 200,000 to 400,000 indocumentados--Colombians residing illegally in Venezuela. This is in addition to a large number of legal immigrants and a large number of visitors. Colombians go to Venezuela to seek work, largely as farm laborers, urban workers, or domestic servants. Many fail in that and turn to crime or prostitution.

The most serious problems stemming from the indocumentados are in the economically poor Andes region of the States of Tachira, Merida, and Trujillo and in parts of Zulia. The [?] [?] ILLEGIB Colombians create burdens on public and health services, add to unemployment problems, and participate in contraband across the border. In some areas Colombians outnumber Venezuelans four to one. Venezuelans also believe that in certain areas, especially in sparsely populated parts of Zulia, Colombian influence is dominant on Venezuelan soil.


Venezuelan dislike of the Colombians is aggravated by the fear that in the event of war the indocumentados would form a potential fifth column. Indeed, there is some evidence that Colombian strategic thinking takes the indocumentados into account for just that purpose in the event of a Venezuelan invasion.

The problem is as serious for Colombia as it is for Venezuela. Both sides remember that the Salvadoran-Honduran conflict of 1969 hinged largely on the large number of Salvadorans in Honduras. Colombia fears for the well-being of its nationals in Venezuela. The threat of mass expulsion hangs over Colombia's head, and alleged cases of mistreatment of Colombians by Venezuelan national guardsmen or landowners receives considerable publicity in the Colombian press.

Because of the long border, much of it isolated and sparsely populated, it is impossible for either country to control the migration. So long as Colombians believe they can raise their standard of living by going to Venezuela they will go. So long as Venezuelans find in them a source of cheap labor they will be admitted. For example, many land-owners in Western Venezuela advertise for them. Coffee growers, in particular, point out that Colombian labor does not compete with Venezuelan in harvesting the annual coffee crop and that without the Colombians the coffee crop would be lost.

(Tachirva)

The circumstances differ somewhat on the Guajira Peninsula. This arid region is inhabited primarily by nomadic Indian tribes who pasture flocks of goats and scrawny cattle. The Guajira Indians have traditionally moved freely about the peninsula, with little regard for the international boundary.


Smuggling

Contraband is a continual source of friction, but it is not a serious problem because it is beneficial to many persons on both sides of the border. For example, although the Venezuelan Cattlemen's Federation and the Colombian government protest the illegal and large-scale shipment of large numbers of Colombian cattle to Venezuela, no serious efforts have been made to stop this contraband because it lowers the price of beef in Venezuela and is an important source of revenue for Colombian cattlemen.

Similarly, the economy of many border towns depends on contraband. Venezuelans buy inexpensive farm products, clothing, and processed food from Colombia, and Colombians buy appliances, electrical equipment, and wheat flour from Venezuela. Colombian coffee is illegally imported in large quantities but still not enough to permit Venezuela to fill its export quota.

The Paper War

An irritant in the troubled relations between Colombia and Venezuela has been the campaign carried out by the Capriles press chain in Venezuela. Fifty-five year old Miguel Angel Capriles has boosted his group of newspapers and magazines into a powerful political force and the most influential press force in national politics through sensationalism, sex and crime, and high-powered crusades in the best tradition of yellow journalism.

Since early February 1970 the Capriles chain has been carrying on an intense anti-Colombian campaign. Although much of the campaign consists of gross distortion and most thinking Venezuelans consider it self-serving sensationalism, many of the press accusations touch sensitive Venezuelan nerves. It is likely that the campaign has added to the tension in both countries by arousing deep-seated fears and resentments among Venezuelans and by creating resentment among Colombians and doubt as to what the Venezuelans are up to. By raising these fears and doubts it is possible that Capriles is contributing to a hardening of positions on both sides.

There is little likelihood that the campaign will be called off. The Capriles chain is too powerful to yield to government pressure, and freedom of the press is too touchy a subject in Venezuela to permit strong-handed government efforts to restrain the campaign. Further,

President Caldera is to a degree obligated to Capriles. The two made a deal during the 1968 election campaign of 1968 by which Capriles supported Caldera in exchange for a number of positions on Caldera's party ticket. Capriles' support probably played a significant role in Caldera's narrow victory. In addition, Capriles parliamentary group still supports Caldera on most issues in congress. Although Capriles' campaign is in abeyance at the moment, there is little doubt that it will pick up again when Colombia and Venezuela resume negotiations on the continental shelf. As long as the campaign sells newspapers and furthers the ambitions of Miguel Angel Capriles it will be carried on.

The military

Neither the Venezuelan nor the Colombian military harbor aggressive designs against the other, but both are highly conscious of their responsibility to defend their nation's frontiers.

The immediate concern of the Venezuelan military is to strengthen the frontier by establishing effective socio-economic sovereignty over the area. The Colombian military, on the other hand, fear a Venezuelan attack through the Guajira Peninsula on the Maicao-Riohacha axis. The Colombians reason that the attack would be facilitated by the high-speed macadam-surfaced highway between the two Colombian cities and that it would bring all of the Guajira

Peninsula under Venezuelan control.

Both sides have carried out studies, and to a limited extent reconnaissance, of the border area, and both have convinced themselves that they are in a weak defensive position. Neither so far has carried out a troop buildup along the frontier. Colombia has given serious thought to defending its frontiers and apparently has come to the conclusion that it is too weak in materiel and in logistics to defend the frontier successfully. For its part, the Venezuelan military are frustrated by their lack of resources for maintaining an effective Venezuelan presence along the frontier, and they doubt their ability to cope with the large number of Colombians.

Thus, psychological factors are present which could result in a limited arms race and troop buildup on both sides of the border. For over a year Colombia has been considering purchasing more modern aircraft to replace the T-33's that now comprise its fighter inventory. If the Colombians go ahead with their plans there will certainly be strong pressures in Venezuela to purchase new aircraft to maintain air superiority. Colombians are also considering means of offsetting Venezuela's superiority in tanks.

Both countries have attempted to limit military spending, but if tension continues to rise defense spending will likely receive increased attention in both Venezuela and Colombia.

Economics

The two countries are not seriously economic competitors. The most important economic problems between them are the previously discussed issues of the Gulf of Venezuela and smuggling along the border.

Since 1966 Venezuela and Colombia have carried out efforts at economic integration of the border. Two bridges have been built and roads improved. Radio and telephone communications have been improved. Maicao, in Colombia, has been supplied with electricity from Venezuela. Irrigation projects have been carried out, and complementation agreements, such as for a chemical fertilizer installation at Barranquilla, have been signed. In general, economic integration of the border has been carried forth smoothly, if piecemeal and slowly, and without serious friction.

A residue of bitterness does remain, however, over Venezuela's failure to join the Andean pact, a prime interest of Colombia. In May 1970 Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, and Colombia signed an Accord for Subregional Economic Integration within the framework of the Latin American Free Trade Association. Venezuela refused to join because of high production costs in Venezuela and because of the opposition of Venezuela's powerful Federation of Chambers of Commerce, which was reluctant to relinquish a comfortable status quo.

Venezuela's reluctance, after nearly three years of discussions, was looked at by the Colombians with considerable displeasure. For their part, the Venezuelans felt that the Colombians were unreasonable and that they were shabbily treated at the final conference in May. The treatment Venezuela received prompted President Caldera to say: "If this is courtship, what would marriage be like?" The Venezuelan government has also had to face domestic repercussions at its failure to join the Andean Pact, including recriminations about losing important commercial opportunities and questions about the negotiating ability of the government.

Conclusions

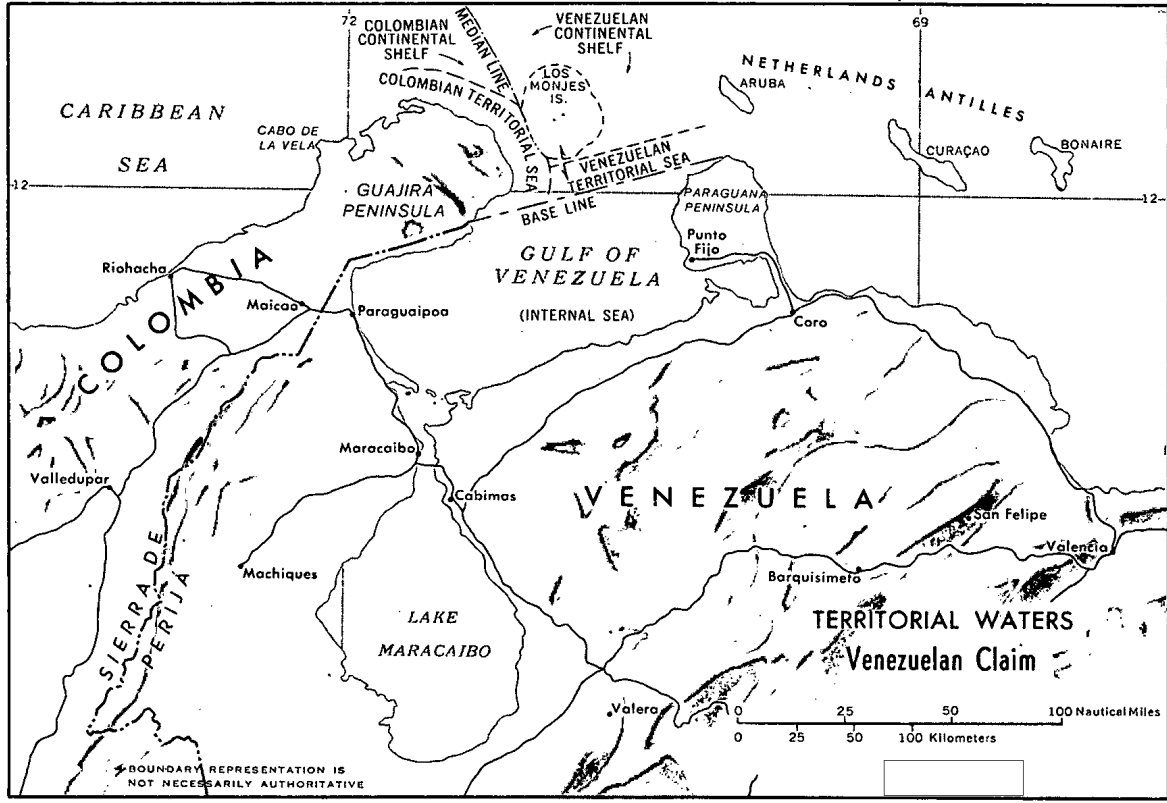
Colombian and Venezuelan presidents have met seven times in the past five years, including one visit by Lleras to Caracas before his election and one between his election and inauguration. Such traveling back and forth is indicative of the continuing interest at the highest level on both sides of maintaining good relations. This interest is reflected throughout the governments of Venezuela and Colombia. Even the two countries congresses, often a platform for self-serving nationalism, have tried to keep relations on an even keel. In July the two congresses passed conciliatory resolutions extolling Colombian-Venezuelan friendship and urging a peaceful solution to their problems.

Yet, despite the bonds of the shared language, religion, racial origins, and the common Bolivarian background, despite the efforts of leaders of the two countries to keep the differences in diplomatic channels, the underlying problems are never far from the surface and the governments of the two countries are responsive to forces beyond their control. When President Lleras felt obliged to say in July that Venezuela has never before claimed nor could it claim that the Gulf of Venezuela is an interior sea, President Caldera had no choice but to reassert Venezuela's claim.

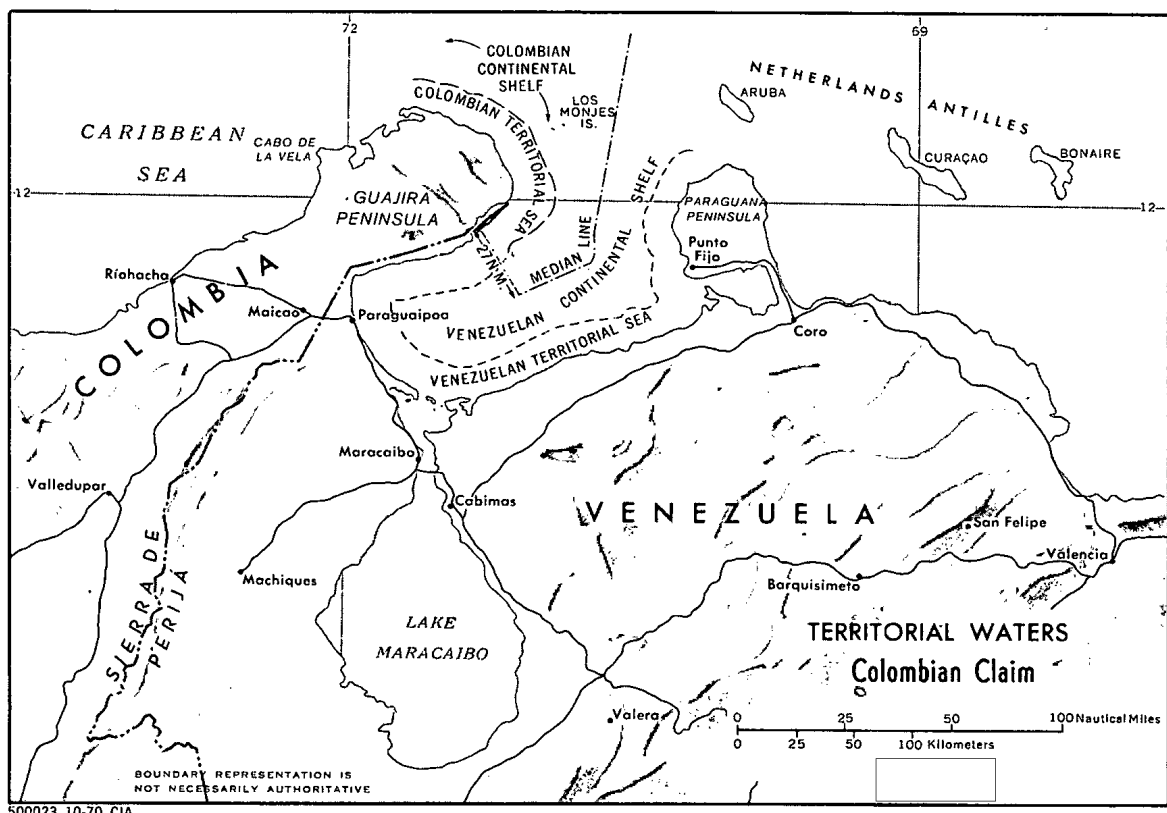
Thus, although Colombia and Venezuela certainly want cordial relations with each other, their maneuverability is severely circumscribed by deep-rooted, powerful, and emotional nationalistic and economic pressures.

The differences between Colombia and Venezuela will not yield easily to solution, even with the greatest good will on both sides. As the continental shelf negotiations drag on, as Capriles keeps up his sniping, tempers may become frayed and a high degree of tact and diplomacy will be required to substantiate a statement made by President Caldera last February: "Relations between Venezuela and Colombia are as they should be: Excellent, cordial, cooperative, fraternal."

Colombia and Venezuela - Territorial Conflicts



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