

A parallel republic? The ELN's binational state

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There is nothing more criminal than indifference in the face of crime. Silence is the complicity of the timid, the alibi of those who know and do nothing, the fertile soil in which barbarism—once thought banished—flourishes.

There are moments when history accelerates—not as a torrent, but as a persistent drip that suddenly reveals its deeper logic. On July 25, 2025, the United States drew a line in the sand: the Cartel of the Suns—this criminal confederation embedded within the heart of Venezuelan state power—was formally designated as an international terrorist group. The presidential guise of Nicolás Maduro was stripped of any diplomatic veneer to be revealed, finally, as what he has always been: the head of a transnational criminal enterprise.

This act, encoded in a U.S. executive order under Title 50—legal bedrock for America's defense and national security, spanning war, intelligence, and response to domestic or global threats—was no declaration of war, yet far from symbolic. It was a palpable blow to reality. From that moment onward, all instruments of the American state—diplomatic, economic, judicial, military—became available to capture, neutralize, or eliminate members of the cartel.

What is unsettling is that this designation did not provoke open confrontation or internal retreat. Instead, it seems woven into a preexisting strategic response: the expansion of a zone of irregular power along the Colombia–Venezuela border. One week before the designation, Nicolás Maduro—tropical tyrant turned transnational operator—and Gustavo Petro—the neophyte sorcerer with Bolivarian nostalgia—secretly signed a memorandum to establish a joint border zone. Barely registered beyond the corridors of Colombia's political elite, this discreet document marks a tectonic shift in the continent's unfolding drama: act two in a geopolitical reconfiguration that is not fought in parliaments, but mapped onto territory. It is the establishment of a "binational zone" at the very heart of the Colombia–Venezuela frontier—a domain encompassing 7% of both nations' combined land, poised to become the geopolitical womb of a new armed Leviathan. No laws, no façade—just a dissolution of sovereignty, republic, and citizenship into the dark alchemy of organized crime.

Binational? The term, superficially benign, evokes symmetry, civility, institutional normality. Yet in the strip that crosses Venezuela's Zulia and Táchira states and Colombia's Norte de Santander, Cesar, and La Guajira departments, reconciliation is nowhere in sight. What takes shape there is a bastard child of chaos: a parallel republic. An entity devoid of constitutional legitimacy or popular accountability—but armed, with routes and banners. A territory surrendered not to the law or democratic will, but to the operational control of the ELN—for

years the shadow power in these zones. Now, under the veneer of an interstate memorandum, that de facto authority is granted diplomatic face, political legitimacy, and state cover. It is the legalization of crime as governance.

We are, as Albert Camus might say, facing “the power of killers”. But this is not guerrilla warfare, nor insurgency. It is a transnational criminal state—a forced mutation of power in response to international legality: deployed, territorialized, and surviving.

What was signed under the guise of an economic, health, and educational integration memorandum has in truth solidified an irregular architecture of power decades in the making. The FARC envisioned it in the 1990s as the “Independent Casanare Territory”. Today, under the aegis of Maduro’s regime and Petro’s government, it manifests as a border zone without law or frontier—but with command. An economy of narcotics, illegal mining, and contraband masked by a rhetoric of integration that hides the real aim: the consolidation of an enclave from which to project power at the margins of democracy.

The data is public. Half of the ELN’s troops in Arauca are Venezuelan, reports journalist Salud Hernández-Mora. In Catatumbo—spanning Colombia’s Norte de Santander and Venezuela’s Zulia—cocaine labs operate under the protection of the Venezuelan National Guard. In the Orinoco Mining Arc, exploitation zones are guarded by guerrillas, colectivos, and mafias with Albanian, Moroccan, and Mexican affiliations. In Caracas, the ELN has access to intelligence and mobility. In Cúcuta, capital of Norte de Santander, it is planning to establish its “binational capital”.

Therefore, this is not a bilateral agreement. It is a strategy of positional withdrawal—a enveloping maneuver rather than a frontal assault—aiming to strengthen control in the territorial periphery and fortify the power center’s continuity. In the fashion of ancient Asian warboards, the goal is not to defend the heart—i.e. Caracas or Bogotá—by attacking from the center; it is to occupy the margins, secure the corners, consolidate corridors. That creates a buffer zone that ensures the political-criminal project’s survival even in times of central crisis.

We are not witnessing a bilateral accord. We are witnessing a calculated mutation, cloaked in the language of diplomacy but governed by irregular war logic.

And therein lies the perverse intention of the plan: the designation of Maduro and Diosdado Cabello as terrorists did not halt their progress. While prosecutors in New York draft indictments, Maduro and Petro are constructing a new architecture of power at the border. While the DEA freezes assets, the ELN builds trenches. While Washington offers a \$25 million reward for Maduro and Cabello’s heads, Mexican cartels and the Cartel of the Suns are fortifying Caribbean routes.

It is no exaggeration to speak of a parallel republic. It is a strategic concept. A grey zone where power is neither fully state nor simply illegal—but a fusion of both. And where the aim is not merely to survive but to expand: funding political campaigns, influencing elections, guaranteeing impunity, and preparing a foundation for potential geopolitical resurgence in the case of transition in Caracas.

And Colombia? Petro presides over an ambiguous game. He praises Simón Bolívar, speaks of the Gran Colombia, declares heritage from the M-19. He signs agreements with Delcy Rodríguez while his ministers coordinate operations with Vladimir Padrino López. He professes peace while legalizing a war-torn territory governed by the ELN. In the name of development, he gives up sovereignty. In the name of peace, he institutionalizes chaos. In the name of progressivism, he provides sanctuary to the criminals of power.

Silence from Venezuelan institutions is deafening. But in Colombia, alarms are sounding. Retired generals, diplomats, intellectuals, and journalists are sounding the alarm. Álvaro Uribe—targeted by judicial attacks—warns that this binational zone is nothing more than a narco enclave dressed in the garb of integration. Retired General Jorge Mora López denounces the loss of sovereignty. Enrique Gómez of the National Salvation Movement calls it plainly: a criminal ecosystem.

And they are right. Because what is at stake is not merely a border, but a concept of republic. Not a geographic line, but the boundary between civilization and barbarism. What is at play in Catatumbo and Táchira is the very survival of legality as the organizing principle of power.

As the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy said, indifference is the complicity of the timid. In this case, silence is criminal. For what is being plotted along the Colombia-Venezuela border is not a mere regional aberration—it is the laboratory of a new form of post-state domination.

Like the ISIS Caliphate, this parallel republic combines structural elements with eerie similarity: messianic ideology (Bolivarian revolution), criminal economy (cocaine and gold), legitimized violence (ELN as a recognized insurgency), quasi-state structures (binational agreements, schools, hospitals, clientelist networks). Recognition is needless—what matters is functioning.

And as with ISIS, its defeat will not come by declarations or memorandums. It will come from reasserting sovereignty. Through the mobilization of democratic forces in both nations. Through breaking the siege of fear. Through the resolute, rational action of those who still believe that republic is not negotiable.

Yes—there are moments when history accelerates. This is one of them. The outcome is unwritten. But if the world remains silent, if Colombia resigns, if Venezuela fails to awaken, that



binational stretch will become the hemisphere's first politically legitimate territory controlled by organized crime.

And then, when it is too late, we will ask ourselves why we didn't see it coming. Or worse: why, even when we saw it coming, we did nothing.