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NEGOTIATIONS: New alliance attempts to bridge North-South gap in U.N. climate talks (Tuesday, January 22, 2013)

Lisa Friedman, E&E reporter

A small group of Latin American countries has quietly been shaking up the U.N. climate process. They're not the wealthiest group of nations, nor the poorest. None are among the world's top greenhouse gas emitters, and there's not an existentially threatened country in the bunch. But Colombia, Costa Rica, Peru, Chile, Panama and Guatemala have carved a niche that some are calling the "revolt of the middle."

Over the past few years, each has embarked on ambitious clean energy or climate adaptation plans. Their U.N. negotiators have avoided the toxic "North-South" disputes that have long hindered the global talks. And they have consistently pushed for countries -- all countries -- to step up their commitments to decarbonization.

Now they have got a name -- the Association of Independent Latin American and Caribbean states (AILAC) -- and members say that as a formal negotiating bloc, they expect to have a major hand in building a new global climate change agreement by 2015.

"We do see ourselves as a group that is bridging the North-South divide," said Isabel Cavelier Adarve, economic adviser in Colombia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "We think we can show the world that we are developing countries, we have a lot of problems at home, but we are ready to act. If we can show that we can take the lead, and we're not waiting for the rest of the world, then we can [set] an example." Those working with AILAC say the coalition's story is a uniquely Latin American one. Though they were officially designated as a group at last year's talks in Doha, Qatar, the countries have been working together and making joint statements since 2007. But with no overarching Latin American negotiating group in the U.N. climate system with which they could align, leaders said they often felt ignored.

Meanwhile, officials said, as their economies grew -- and in some cases, as their democracies strengthened -- their governments also developed an appetite for spending domestic dollars on projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Rhetoric backed up with money

Colombia, for one, has invested millions of dollars in a bus rapid transit system to accommodate its growing population and exploding car culture. Chile, the first country in South America with a renewable energy standard, is already talking about exceeding it. President Sebastián Piñera has pledged to deliver 20 percent of the country's energy needs from renewables by 2020.

And Costa Rica -- whose former president, José Maria Figueres, now leads the Carbon War Room while his sister, Christiana Figueres, commands the U.N. climate talks -- has long been an environmental leader, pouring more than \$400 million into its environmental services program.

"When you do this work on the ground, you begin to see the benefits and I think that's what's happening," said Ned Helme, president of the Center for Clean Air Policy who has been working extensively with Colombia and Chile on various mitigation programs. Striving domestically on clean energy, he said, translates indirectly but significantly to positions at the U.N. negotiations.

"It means you can feel safer stepping up on climate when you know the kinds of things you'll need to do mean not just more costs. They'll bring benefits, economic benefits to your country," he said.

"Never in the history of Latin America did we have so many middle-income countries that have created space for ambition," said Monica Araya, an adviser to the Costa Rican Climate Change Directorate. But while diplomats throw the term "ambition" around U.N. halls aplenty, few in the maddening geopolitical game of high-emissions poker are actually willing to commit to major action until they see each other's cards.

"It's almost as if, in the [U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change], ambition is a concession," Araya said. "We need to reverse that idea. We want ambition to be framed in terms of self-interest." The coalition's development is an important one, both for Latin America and for the talks as a whole, experts say. Timmons Roberts, a professor of environmental studies at Brown University who is writing a book about the Latin America region, said the group's role is unique.

'A third way in Latin America'

"Out of the blue, this region, in some ways, can become a leader," Roberts said. "They've never really acted as a region. They're totally fragmented. You'd think Brazil would be the leader of the region, and in ways it wishes it was, but in reality, it's kind of a Lone Ranger."

"It's another sign of the G-77 splitting up," said Ned Helme, president of the Center for Clean Air Policy which has been working with Colombia and other Latin American countries on emissions mitigation plans and said it has translated into a more progressive approach in the climate talks. "Over time, that lockstep march of the G-77 has really changed. I think it's very positive, and I think you're going to see more of it."

While Brazil primarily aligns itself in negotiations with China and a bloc of other major emerging countries called BASIC, many noted that the other major grouping of Latin American countries -- the left-leaning coalition of Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Cuba -- is better noted for high-profile opposition to the United States than for domestic ambition. Caribbean islands, meanwhile, tend to throw in their lot with the group of tiny islands with outsized voices known as the Alliance of Small Island States.

That left the progressive Pacific coast nations to gravitate toward one another. Paula Caballero Gómez, who directs the environmental department in Colombia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, noted that the group works together on other fronts, too, like trade and mining. And when it came to the U.N. climate talks, she said, it became quickly clear that they shared the belief that any new climate agreement should include all countries, developed and developing.

Now, she and other said, AILAC's goal is to become a group that helps build momentum in the talks to design a new global agreement that will show the world that every country is working to its best ability to rein in carbon emissions.

"We are a strong voice within Latin America, and a different one," Colombia's Cavalier-Adarve said. "It's a third way in Latin America."

The group already has flexed its muscles. At 2009 talks in Cancun, Mexico, when Bolivia tried to upend the final agreement, it was Colombia that took the floor to push for passage. And a year later, the group banded with vulnerable islands and least-developed countries to form an alliance with Europe. That alliance, in turn, forced the United States, China and India to agree to a legally binding-for-all agreement come 2015.

Said Caballero-Gómez, "We're not the BASICs, and we're not the U.S., but by gosh, we've demonstrated that we can change the course of the negotiations at critical moments."