

Bush Down South

Bush plans to tackle growing Venezuelan influence in Latin America

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US President George W Bush – biting the dust in Iraq, contested at home, despised around the world – is taking a break and heading south on a five-stop tour of Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico. He is not visiting the 100,000-hectare family ranch his daughter Barbara bought last autumn in the Paraguayan *chaco*. He might be tempted to stay in.

The Bush reception won't be exactly of the Rolling Stones variety. Massive protests are scheduled everywhere – even in countries where he is not showing up. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez – Bush's continental nemesis – will address a huge crowd in Buenos Aires, probably in a soccer stadium, as US Secret Service paranoia turns Sao Paulo into an immense Green Zone.

This had to be, fundamentally, a Bush-against-Chavez tour. Inevitably, it is also a Bush-against-Ahmadinejad tour. Last month, strengthening ties with Latin America, the Iranian president visited Venezuela, Ecuador and Nicaragua, which in the neo-con scheme of things qualify, along with gas-rich Bolivia, as the southern “axis of evil”.

For the Bush visit, the White House/State Department tactic is once again imperial “divide and rule”. Mercosur – the South American common market that is evolving as a true, indigenous integration model – will be actively bombarded, via different strategies targeting Brazil and Uruguay. Venezuela became a full Mercosur member last year.

Brazil is the big prize. The White House/State Department dream is semi-officially to crown President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva as a “moderate reformist” capable of representing a continental alternative to the revolutionary Chavez. The masses all over South America are not buying it.

The ethanol OPEC

Chavez' active proposal of South American integration via, among other projects, the giant Gasoducto del Sur (Gas Pipeline of the South) will be counteracted by Bush's proposal of an energy deal related to biofuel production and trade. Seventy percent of global ethanol production is divided between Brazil and the US. The rural United States is delirious. Even Bill Gates wants to invest in ethanol. With global warming and the oil-and-war syndrome, this is the inevitable way of the future. Patriotic US entrepreneurs ready to make millions have already coined the slogan “our crop, our fuel, our country”.

For their biofuel, the US uses corn (maize); Brazil uses sugarcane. Because of the gentler climate, Brazil's crops are 50% more efficient. Brazil has the largest plantations in Latin

America, millions of hectares controlled by a small, powerful oligarchy eager to do business with global capital and now dreaming of drowning the US in biofuel. But there's a huge problem. Brazilian alcohol is taxed in the US at a heavily protectionist 54 cents a gallon (14.27 cents a liter).

Even with this tax, in 2006 Brazil exported 10 times as much alcohol to the US than in 2005. No wonder huge US conglomerates and investment funds – many of them no different from robber barons – are frantically searching for land and partners to invest in Brazil. In some regions in the rich Brazilian state of Sao Paulo, sugarcane harvest is fast displacing citrus and soy cultivation.

Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns, in meetings early last month to prepare for the Bush visit, went straight to the point. He said Brazil is “the most powerful country in South America”, and added that the US did not want to depend on oil from “countries such as Iran and Venezuela”. Burns was fascinated by Brazil's high-tech expertise in biofuel production, stressing that in the future biofuels will be “the main link between Americans and Brazilians”.

Burns conveniently forgot to mention that paramilitaries in Colombia's northwest are violently evicting or even killing Afro-Colombian and peasant communities to the benefit of huge companies – of which the paramilitaries are shareholders – exploiting palm oil to process biofuel.

In theory, the White House/State Department would like the setting up in South America and the Caribbean of a multinational system of biofuel production. But there won't be an ethanol cartel like the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. For all the warm rhetoric, the ultra-powerful US corn lobby will never allow any president to open US markets to Brazilian ethanol.

Lula will ask, and Bush will change the subject. The State Department adviser on energy, Greg Manuel, made it clear that tariffs will remain the same. What the Bush administration is aiming at, medium-term, is a modest 5% contribution of biofuels to the United States' energy needs. Former Saudi ambassador Turki al-Faisal nailed it when he said that the United States' independence from oil is a “political myth”.

The streets have voted

The political strategy of the White House southern offensive is much more complex. It involves changing tack in the combat against dreaded “radical populism” – this is how Washington views the current nationalist-revolutionary wave in Latin America. US right-wing think-tanks are now noticing that downright hostility against popular-elected governments in Latin America only make Bush and the US even more detested. The hostility will continue, of course, but the White House/State Department is still looking for the new, “softer” formula.

With Bush totally discredited and under siege at home, nothing is more refreshing than taking a break by courting client right-wing regimes such as Colombia, Mexico and Guatemala, as well as pseudo-center-left, progressive-turned-conservative governments in Brazil and Uruguay. The propaganda value cannot be underestimated – as the meetings will be mercilessly spun by the White House as evidence of “support” in South America for the Bush-engineered Iraq tragedy and the possibly imminent attack on Iran.

Fragmentation is the name of the game. Bush will provide separate, one-on-one deals, always trying to prevent any alliance/composition of these governments with Venezuela's Chavez, Bolivia's Evo Morales and Ecuador's Rafael Correa.

Thus bombarding Mercosur is key in Washington's strategy. Lula was forced to fly to Uruguay late last month to meet with President Tabare Vazquez and offset the risk of Uruguay abandoning Mercosur and signing a free-trade agreement with the US. A flagrant Mercosur asymmetry is that giants Brazil and Argentina do not open markets for Uruguayan exports. Lula promised that the asymmetry will be corrected. Uruguay will sign deals with the US, but not an asymmetric, US-corporate-friendly, comprehensive free-trade agreement.

Whatever Washington's designs, Valter Pomar, secretary of international relations of Brazil's Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or PT), has already set the tone: "Brazil may be a mediator [in the event of any US-Venezuela discussions], but without opening space to imperialist pretensions. Don't count on Brazil to put pressure on Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia or Ecuador."

Whatever cozy deals with Alvaro Uribe in Colombia and Felipe Calderon in Mexico, and polite reception by Lula in Brazil and Vazquez in Uruguay notwithstanding, the fact is that all along South American streets Chavez is king and Bush is - in the words of Brazilian union leaders - the No 1 "terrorist".

Lula and Argentina's Nestor Kirchner have introduced no financial or monetary reform and are still implementing the neo-liberal, Washington Consensus agenda. On the other hand, the popular appeal of the Bolivarian Revolution is enormous - with its socially minded welfare state, a mixed economy based on a strong state sector, and real, direct democracy based on neighborhood councils.

The masses all over South America have already compared these advances with the abject failure of neo-liberalism. There may be flagrant polarization - but that concerns the absolute majority of national populations, along with most governments, against discredited former progressives, client regimes and small but powerful supporting oligarchies. In a nutshell, this spells doom for Bush's proposed anti-Chavez coalition.

So many evildoers

The road, anyway, is tortuous. Since September 11, 2001, as far as its relations to South America are concerned, Washington has lost ideological control, soft power and the remaining credibility of the supposedly neutral International Monetary Fund, World Bank, World Trade Organization and Organization of American States. The Iranian president and the Chinese president straddle South America at will, forging new alliances. The crisis of US hegemony couldn't be more serious. But worrying trends remain.

Spanish foreign policy in Latin America is now somehow aligned with the United States'. It's all about a blind neo-colonial approach in both Washington and Madrid that sees Latin America only as a compound of fabulous natural resources and markets. Huge populations continue to be submitted to varying degrees of coercion, economic pressure, information control, cultural manipulation, spying and even (in the case of Venezuela) military threats.

For the Pentagon's Southern Command, Latin America is a dangerous powder keg of illegal aliens, dispossessed peasants, smugglers, subversives (anybody say "communists"?),

alterglobalizers, narco-traffickers and Islamic sympathizers – so the one and only way to deal with all these “evildoers” is by “full-spectrum dominance”.

Thus the ongoing, \$2-million-a-day intervention in Colombia (the Trojan horse now that Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador are out of US control), the spying and destabilization attempts on Venezuela, the Manta military base in Ecuador (equipped with a \$1 billion, ultra-high-tech spy station charmingly named the Sensitive Compartmentalized Information Facility).

And then there’s sinister death-squad expert John Negroponte as Condoleezza Rice’s No 2 at the State Department. Rice knows absolutely nothing about Latin America, so Negroponte may soon be in charge of the region. This will mean renewed merciless war against Chavez, Morales and Correa.

It’s not coming from Lula, Vazquez or even Kirchner. Millions in South America – and millions all over the world – have already noticed that the shock of the new is coming from Chavez, Morales and Correa. Much more than Asia or Africa, South America, politically, is now the most progressive and hopeful region in the world – forging, in a messy, imperfect, even utopian but always exciting way a compound of real alternatives to the ravages of neo-liberalism while Washington, from the peaks of its unrivaled full-spectrum dominance, has nothing to offer but war, death and devastation.

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