

Honduras: A Victory for “Smart Power”

By [Eva Golinger](#)

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Henry Kissinger said that diplomacy is the “art of restraining power”. Obviously, the most influential ideologue on US foreign policy of the twenty first century was referring to the necessity to “restrain the power” of other countries and governments in order to maintain the dominant world power of the United States. Presidents in the style of George W. Bush employed “Hard Power” to achieve this goal: weapons, bombs, threats and military invasions. Others, like Bill Clinton, used “Soft Power”: cultural warfare, Hollywood, ideals, diplomacy, moral authority and campaigns to “win the hearts and minds” of those in enemy nations. The Obama administration has opted for a mutation of these two concepts, fusing military power with diplomacy, political and economic influence with cultural penetration and legal maneuvering. They call this “Smart Power”. It’s first application is the coup d’etat in Honduras, and as of today, it’s worked to perfection.

During her confirmation hearing before the Senate, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton remarked that “we should use what has been called “smart power”, the complete range of tools that are at our disposal – diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal and cultural – choosing the correct tool, or combination of tools, for each situation. With “smart power”, diplomacy will be the vanguard of our foreign policy.” Clinton later reinforced this concept affirming that the “wisest path will be to first use persuasion.”

So, what is intelligent about this concept? It’s a form of politics that is difficult to classify, difficult to detect and difficult to deconstruct. Honduras is a clear example. On one hand, President Obama condemned the coup against President Zelaya while his ambassador in Tegucigalpa held regular meetings with the coup leaders. Secretary of State Clinton repeated over and over again during the past four months that Washington didn’t want to “influence” the situation in Honduras – that Hondurans needed to resolve their crisis, without outside interference. But it was Washington that imposed the mediation process “led” by President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica, and Washington that kept funding the coup regime and its supporters via USAID, and Washington that controlled and commanded the Honduran armed forces, involved in repressing the people and imposing a brutal regime, through its massive military presence in the Soto Cano military base.

Washington lobbyists also wrote the San José “agreement”, and in the end, it was the high level State Department and White House delegation that “persuaded” the Hondurans to accept the agreement. Despite the constant US interference in the coup d’etat in Honduras – funding, design, and political and military support – Washington’s “smart power” approach was able to distort public opinion and make the Obama administration come out as the grand victor of “multilateralism”.

What “smart power” achieved was a way to disguise Washington’s unilateralism as multilateralism. From day one, Washington imposed its agenda. On July 1st, spokespeople

for the Department of State admitted in a press briefing that they had prior knowledge of the coup in Honduras. They also admitted that two high level State Department officials, Thomas Shannon and James Steinberg, were in Honduras the week before the coup meeting with the civil and military groups involved. They said their purpose was to “impede the coup”, but how, therefore, can they explain that the airplane that forcefully exiled President Zelaya left from the Soto Cano military base in the presence of US military officers?

The facts demonstrate the truth about Washington and the coup in Honduras, and the subsequent successful experiment with “smart power”. Washington knew about the coup before it happened, yet continued to fund those involved via USAID and NED. The Pentagon aided in the illegal forced exile of President Zelaya, and later, the Obama administration used the Organization of American States (OAS) – during a moment at which it was on the border of extinction – as a façade to impose its agenda. The discourse of the Department of State always legitimated the coup leaders, calling on “both parts...to resolve the political dispute in a peaceful way through dialogue.” Since when is an illegal usurper of power considered a “legitimate part” capable of dialogue? Obviously, a criminal actor who takes power by force is not interested in dialoguing. Based on this Washington logic, the world should call on the Obama administration to “resolve its political dispute with Al Qaeda in a peaceful way through dialogue, and not war”.

The Obama/Clinton “smart power” achieved its first victory during the initial days of the coup, persuading the member states of the OAS to accept a 72-hour wait period to allow the coup regime in Honduras to “think through its actions”. Soon after, Secretary of State Clinton imposed the mediation efforts, led by Arias, and by then, so much space had been ceded to Washington, that the US just stepped in and took the reigns. When President Zelaya went to Washington and met with Clinton, it was obvious who was in control. And that’s how they played it out, buying more and more time up until the last minute, so that even if Zelaya returns to power now he will have no space or time to govern.

The people were left out, excluded. Months of repression, violence, persecution, human rights violations, curfews, media closures, tortures and political assassinations have been forgotten. What a relief, as Subsecretary of State Thomas Shannon remarked upon achieving the signature of Micheletti and Zelaya on the final “agreement”, that the situation in Honduras was resolved “without violence”.

Upon signature of the “agreement” this past October 30th, Washington immediately lifted the few restrictions it had imposed on the coup regime as a pressure tactic. Now they can get visas again and travel north, they don’t have to worry about the millions of dollars from USAID, which hadn’t even been suspended in the first place. The US military in presence in Soto Cano can reinstate all their activities – oh wait, they never stopped in the first place. The Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) of the Pentagon affirmed just days after the coup that “everything is normal with our armed forces in Honduras, they are engaging in their usual activities with their Honduran counterparts.” And Washington is already preparing its delegation of elections observers for the November 29th presidential elections – they are already on their way.

Forget about Cold War torturer Billy Joya who was scheming with the coup regime against the resistance; or the Colombian paramilitary forces sent in to help the coup regime “control” the population. Don’t worry anymore about the sonic warfare LRAD weapon used to torture those inside the Brazilian embassy in an attempt to oust Zelaya from the building.

Nothing happened. As Thomas Shannon said, “we congratulate two great men for reaching this historic agreement”. And Secretary of State Clinton commented that “this agreement is a tremendous achievement for the Hondurans.” Wait, for who?

In the end, the celebrated “agreement” imposed by Washington only calls upon the Honduran Congress – the same Congress that falsified Zelaya’s resignation letter in order to justify the coup, and the same Congress that supported the illegal installation of Micheletti in the presidency – to determine whether or not it wants to reinstate Zelaya as president. And only after receiving a legal opinion from the Honduran Supreme Court – the same one that said Zelaya was a traitor for calling for a non-binding poll vote on potential future constitutional reform, and the same one that ordered his violent capture. Even if the Congress’ answer is positive, Zelaya would not have any power. The “agreement” stipulates that the members of his cabinet will be imposed by those political parties involved in the coup, the armed forces will be under the control of the Supreme Court that supported the coup, and Zelaya could be tried for his alleged “crime” of “treason” because he wanted to have a non-binding poll on constitutional reform.

Per the “agreement” a truth commission would supervise its implementation. Today, Ricardo Lagos, ex president of Chile and staunch Washington ally, was announced as the leader of the Honduran Truth Commission. Lagos is co-director of the Board of Directors of the Inter-American Dialogue, a right wing think tank that influences Washington’s policies on Latin America. Lagos also was charged with creating a Chilean version of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), la Fundación Democracia y Desarrollo, to “promote democracy” in Latin America, US-style. Upon leaving the presidency in 2006, Lagos was named President of the Club of Madrid – an exclusive club of ex presidents dedicated to “promoting democracy” around the world. Several key figures involved in currently destabilizing left-leaning Latin American governments are members of this “club”, including Jorge Quiroga and Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada (ex presidents of Bolivia), Felipe González (ex prime minister of Spain), Václav Havel (ex president of the Czech Republic) and José María Aznar (ex prime minister of Spain), amongst many others.

In the end, “smart power” was sufficiently intelligent to deceive those who today celebrate an “end to the crisis” in Honduras. But for a majority of people in Latin America, the victory of Obama’s “smart power” in Honduras is a dark and dangerous shadow closing in on us. Initiatives such as ALBA have just begun to achieve a level of Latin American independence from the dominant northern power. For the first time in history, the nations and peoples of Latin America have been collectively standing strong with dignity and sovereignty, building their futures. And then along came Obama with his “smart power”, and ALBA was hit by the coup in Honduras, Latin American integration has been weakened by the US military expansion in Colombia, and the struggle for independence and sovereignty in Washington’s backyard is being squashed by a sinister smile and insincere handshake.

Bowing before Washington, the crisis in Honduras “was resolved”. Ironically, the same crisis was fomented by the US in the first place. There is talk of similar coups in Paraguay, Nicaragua, Ecuador and Venezuela, where subversion, counterinsurgency and destabilization increase daily. The people of Honduras remain in resistance, despite the “agreement” reached by those in power. Their determined insurrection and commitment to justice is a symbol of dignity. The only way to defeat imperialist aggression – soft, hard or smart – is through the union and integration of the people.

“The illegal we do immediately. The unconstitutional takes longer.” – Henry Kissinger

Eva Golinger is a Venezuelan-American attorney from New York, living in Caracas, Venezuela since 2005 and author of the best-selling books, "[The Chávez Code: Cracking US Intervention in Venezuela](#)" (2006 Olive Branch Press) and "[Bush vs. Chávez: Washington's War on Venezuela](#)" (2007, Monthly Review Press). Since 2003, Eva, a graduate of Sarah Lawrence College and CUNY Law School in New York, has been investigating, analyzing and writing about US intervention in Venezuela using the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to obtain information about the US Government's efforts to destabilize progressive movements in Latin America.

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