

Latin America: no longer the USA's backyard

By [Boris Volkhonsky](#)

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Hugo Chavez. Photo: EPA

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has in his usual outright manner rejected the pressure from Washington trying to impose the candidacy of a new US Ambassador to his country. The ambassador-to-be, whose choice is supported by the State Department but whose confirmation by the Senate is still pending, is Larry Palmer. Hugo Chavez' objections rise from the comments Mr. Palmer made earlier this year at Senate hearings when he said that morale is low in Venezuela's military and that Colombian leftist rebels from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) are finding refuge in Venezuela.

It is true that the relations between Venezuela and Colombia are at a very low level with the two countries balancing on the brink of an open military conflict. But it is hardly acceptable when a nominee for the highest diplomatic posting makes public comments on the internal policy of the country he is supposed to be posted in. At least, it could be appropriate some 15 or 20 years ago when Latin America was universally accepted as a kind of backyard of the US. But the situation has changed drastically since then.

During the late 1990s and 2000s quite a number of Latin American countries elected leaders who no longer agree to a passive role of "yes-leaders" in regard to whatever orders come from the north. Hugo Chavez of Venezuela is probably the brightest of them, but not the only one. Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and, to a great extent and to Washington's greater disappointment, Brazil which is economically and politically the strongest player on the continent, can no longer be regarded as Washington's backyard.

Much of the fault for this lies with the previous US administration, when George W. Bush, preoccupied with affairs in the Middle East and South Asia, largely neglected Latin America taking for granted that there is no real threat to US monopoly in the region. But it seems that Barack Obama has not learned the lessons and inherited the legacy from his

predecessor.

While China, following the policy of “soft power” has penetrated the Latin American economies to an extent that presents it as a real threat for American businesses, the countries themselves are realizing their increased role in international politics that does not demand following the guidelines set by the US. The emergence of BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) as a prominent player on the international arena is one example, the Russian-Venezuelan Navy maneuvers of November 2008 is another, out of the many.

It should not, however be understood that the US’ role on the continent has become irrelevant. Traditional strategic and economic ties still remain important. Venezuela, for example, is the chief supplier of oil to the US, and severing ties between the two countries would be harmful for the US and probably disastrous for Venezuela. But the changing overall situation suggests that the lingo of force is no longer acceptable even by the countries that by and large rely upon economic ties with their northern neighbor.

It is a sovereign right of any national leadership not to give agreement to a candidacy of any other country’s ambassador. The fact that the State Department is insisting on Mr. Palmer’s candidacy only shows that the US have not abandoned blackmail as a language of their diplomacy.

“If they’re going to cut diplomatic relations, let them do it!” said President Chavez. “Now the U.S. government is threatening us that they’re going to take reprisals. Well, let them do whatever they want, but that man will not come.”

And Chavez is not alone in his evaluation of the present administration’s policy towards Latin America. Brazil’s outgoing President Lula da Silva recently stated that Obama’s policy reflects the old “imperial” vision. And that despite the fact that in the early days of Obama’s presidency, there was much hope that the relations between Latin America and its northern neighbor would improve, and Barack Obama even hailed Lula da Silva as “the most popular politician on earth”.

“I would like the relationship of the United States with Latin America to be different to what it is today,” said Lula da Silva. “In the United States they should understand the importance of Latin America. The Americans don’t have an optimistic vision of Latin America. They have always related as an empire to poor countries. This vision needs to change.”

Whether Washington politicians will lend their ear to these words or not, is for the future to show. But insisting on an ambassador’s candidacy when a country’s leadership shows obvious disagreement and threatening Venezuela with possible retaliations, shows that they are not eager to give up the old imperial policies towards a continent they still regard as their backyard what it definitely is not.

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