

Washington Seeks to Destabilize Venezuela: The Empire Strikes Back (and Loses)

US Policy of Armed Confrontation and Intervention

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Introduction

US policy toward Venezuela has taken many tactical turns, but the objective has been the same: to oust President Chavez, reverse the nationalization of big businesses, abolish the mass community and worker based councils and revert the country into a client-state.

Washington funded and politically backed a military coup in 2002, a bosses' lockout in 2002-03, a referendum and numerous media, political and NGO efforts to undermine the regime. Up to now all of the White House efforts have been a failure - Chavez has repeatedly won free elections, retained the loyalty of the military and the backing of the vast majority of the urban and rural poor, the bulk of the working class and the public sector middle class.

Washington has not given up nor reconciled itself to coming to terms with the elected government of President Chavez. Instead with each defeat of its internal collaborators, the White House has increasingly turned toward an 'outsider' strategy, building up a powerful 'cordon militaire', surrounding Venezuela with a large-scale military presence spanning Central America, northern South America and the Caribbean. The Obama White House backed a military coup in Honduras, ousting the democratically elected government of President Zelaya (in June 2009), a Chavez ally, and replacing it with a puppet regime supportive of Washington's anti-Chavez military policies. The Pentagon secured seven military bases in eastern Colombia (in 2009) facing the Venezuelan frontier, thanks to its client ruler, Alvaro Uribe, the notorious narco-paramilitary President. In mid 2010 Washington secured an unprecedented agreement with the approval of right wing President Laura Chinchilla of Costa Rica, to station 7000 US combat troops, over 200 helicopters, and dozens of ships pointing toward Venezuela, under the pretext of pursuing narco-traffickers. Currently the US is negotiating with the rightist regime of President Ricardo Martinelli of Panama, the possibility of re-establishing a military base in the former Canal Zone. Together with the Fourth Fleet patrolling off shore, 20,000 troops in Haiti, and an airbase in Aruba, Washington has encircled Venezuela from the West and North, establishing jumping off positions for a direct intervention if the favorable internal circumstances arise.

The White House's militarization of its policy toward Latin America, and Venezuela in particular, is part of its global policy of armed confrontation and intervention. Most notably the Obama regime has widened the scope and extent of operations of clandestine death squads now operating in 70 countries on four continents, increased the US combat presence in Afghanistan by over 30,000 troops plus over 100,000 contract mercenaries operating

cross border into Pakistan and Iran, and provided material and logistical assistance to Iranian armed terrorists. Obama has escalated provocative military exercises off the coast of North Korea and in the China Sea, evoking protests from Beijing. Equally revealing, the Obama regime has increased the military budget to over a trillion dollars, despite the economic crises, the monstrous deficit and the calls for austerity cuts in Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security.

In other words, Washington's military posture toward Latin America and especially toward the democratic socialist government of President Chavez is part and parcel of a general military response to any country or movements which refuse to submit to US domination. The question arises - why does the White House rely on the military option? Why militarize foreign policy to gain favorable outcomes in the face of decided opposition? The answer, in part, is that the US has lost most of the economic leverage, which it previously exercised, to secure the ousting or submission of adversary governments. Most Asian and Latin American economies have secured a degree of autonomy. Others do not depend on US-influenced international financial organizations (the IMF, World Bank); they secure commercial loans. Most have diversified their trading and investment partners and deepened regional ties. In some countries, such as Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Peru, China has replaced the US as their principal trading partner. Most countries no longer look to US "aid" to stimulate growth, they seek joint ventures with multi-national corporations, frequently based outside of North America. To the extent that economic arm twisting is no longer an effective tool to secure compliance, Washington has resorted more and more to the military option. To the extent that the US financial elite have hollowed out the US industrial sector, Washington has been unable to rebuild its international economic levers.

Major diplomatic failures, resulting from its incapacity to adapt to basic shifts in global power, have also prompted Washington to shift from political negotiations and compromise toward military intervention and confrontation. US policymakers are still frozen in the time warp of the 1980's and 1990's, the heyday of client rulers and economic plunder, when Washington secured global support, privatized enterprises, exploited public debt financings and was relatively unchallenged in the world market. By the end of the 1990's, the rise of Asian capitalism, mass anti-neo-liberal uprisings, the ascendancy of center-left regimes in Latin America, the repeated financial crises and stock market crashes in the US and the EU and the increase in commodity prices led to a realignment of global power. Washington's efforts to pursue policies attuned to the previous decades conflicted with the new realities of diversified markets, newly emerging powers and relatively independent political regimes linked to new mass constituencies.

Washington's diplomatic proposals to isolate Cuba and Venezuela were rejected by all of the Latin American countries. The effort to revive free trade agreements, which privileged US exporters and protected uncompetitive producers, were rejected. Unwilling to recognize the limits of imperial diplomatic power and moderate its proposals, the Obama regime turned increasingly toward the military option.

Washington's struggle to re-assert imperial power, via interventionary politics fared no better than its diplomatic initiatives. The US-backed coups in Venezuela (2002) and Bolivia (2008) were defeated by mass popular mobilizations and the loyalty of the military to the incumbent regimes. Likewise in Argentina, Ecuador and Brazil, post-neo-liberal regimes, backed by industrial, mining and agro-export elites and popular classes were able to beat back traditional pro-US neo-liberal elites rooted in the politics of the 1990's and earlier. The

politics of destabilization failed to dislodge the new governments' pursuing relatively independent foreign policies and refusing to return to the old order of US supremacy.

Where Washington has regained political terrain with the election of rightist political regimes - it has been through its ability to exploit the 'exhaustion' of center-left politics (Chile), political fraud and militarization (Honduras and Mexico), decline of the national popular left (Costa Rica, Panama and Peru) and the consolidation of a highly militarized police state (Colombia). These electoral victories, especially in Colombia, have convinced Washington that the military option, combined with deep intervention and exploitation of open electoral processes, is the way to reverse the left turn in Latin America - especially in Venezuela.

US Policy to Venezuela: Combining Military and Electoral Tactics

US efforts to overthrow President Chavez's democratic government borrow many of the tactics applied against previous democratic adversaries. These include border incursions by Colombian paramilitary and military forces similar to cross border attacks by the US sponsored "contras" against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua during the 1980's. The attempt to encircle and isolate Venezuela is similar to Washington's policy over the past half century against Cuba. The funneling of funds to opposition groups, parties, media and NGO's via US agencies and "dummy" foundations is a repeat of the tactics applied to destabilize the democratic government of Salvador Allende of Chile 1970-73, Evo Morales in Bolivia 2006-2010 and numerous other governments in the region.

Washington's multiple track policy, in its current phase, is directed at escalating a war of nerves, by constantly raising security threats. The military provocations, in part, are a 'testing' of Venezuela's security preparations, probing for weaknesses in its ground, air and maritime defenses. These provocations also are part of a strategy of attrition, to force the Chavez government to put its defense forces on "alert" and mobilize the population and then to temporarily reduce the pressure until the next provocation. The purpose is to discredit the government's constant reference to threats, in order to weaken vigilance and when circumstances allow making an opportune strike.

Washington's external military build-up is designed to intimidate Caribbean and Central American countries who may be looking toward closer economic relations with Venezuela. The show of force is also designed to encourage the internal opposition toward more aggressive actions. At the same time the confrontational posture is directed at the "weak links" or "moderate" sectors of the Chavista government who are nervous and anxious for "reconciliation" even at the price of unprincipled concessions to the opposition and the new Colombia regime of President Santos. The increasing military presence is designed to slow the internal radicalization process and to preclude Venezuela's growing ties with Middle Eastern and other regimes, adverse to US hegemony. Washington is betting that a military build-up and psychological warfare linking Venezuela with revolutionary insurgents like the Colombian guerrilla will result in Chavez's allies and friends in Latin America putting distance toward him. Equally important Washington's unsubstantiated accusations that Venezuela is harboring FARC guerilla encampments, is meant to pressure Chavez to lessen his support to all social movements in the region, including the landless Rural Workers of Brazil as well as non- violent human rights groups and trade unions in Colombia. Washington wants a military "polarization": US or Chavez. It rejects the political polarization existing today which pits Washington against MERCOSUR, the organization of economic integration involving Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay with Venezuela in line for membership or ALBA (economic integration involving Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua,

Ecuador and several Caribbean states.

The FARC Factor

Obama and now ex-President Uribe accused Venezuela of offering sanctuary for Colombian guerillas (FARC and ELN). In reality this is a ploy to pressure President Chavez to denounce or at a minimum demand that the FARC give up their armed struggle on terms dictated by the US and Colombian regime.

Contrary to President Uribe and the State Department's boasts that the FARC is a declining, isolated and defeated fragment of the past, as a result of their successful counter-insurgency campaigns, a recent detailed field study by a Colombian researcher La guerra contra las FARC y la guerra de las FARC demonstrates that in the last 2 years the guerrillas have consolidated their influence over one-third of the country, and that the regime in Bogota controls only half the country. After suffering major defeats in 2008, the FARC and ELN have steadily advanced throughout 2009-2010 inflicting over 1300 military casualties last year and probably near double this year. (La Jornada 8/6/2010). The resurgence and advance of the FARC has crucial importance as far as Washington's military campaign against Venezuela. It also affects the position of its "strategic ally" - Santos regime. First it demonstrates that despite \$6 billion plus in US military aid to Colombia, its counter-insurgency campaign to "exterminate" the FARC has failed. Secondly, the FARC's offensive opens a "second front" in Colombia, weakening any effort to launch an invasion of Venezuela using Colombia as a "springboard". Thirdly, faced with a growing internal class war, the new President Santos is more likely to seek to lessen tensions with Venezuela, hoping to relocate troops from the frontier of its neighbor toward the growing guerilla insurgency. In a sense, despite Chavez misgivings about the guerrillas and outspoken calls for ending the guerrilla struggle, the resurgence of the armed movements are likely a prime factor in lessening the prospects of a US directed intervention.

Conclusion

Washington's multi-track policy directed at destabilizing the Venezuelan government has by and large been counter-productive, suffering major failures and few successes.

The hardline toward Venezuela has failed to "line up" any support in the major countries of Latin America, with the exception of Colombia. It has isolated Washington not Caracas. The military threats may have radicalized the socio-economic measures adopted by Chavez not moderated them. The threats and accusations emanating from Colombia have strengthened internal cohesion in Venezuela, except among the hard-core opposition groups. They have also led to Venezuela's upgrading its intelligence, police and military operations. The Colombian provocations have led to a break in relations and an 80% decline in the multi-billion dollar cross border trade, bankrupting numerous Colombian firms, as Venezuela substitutes Brazilian and Argentine industrial and agrarian imports. The effects of the policies of tension and the "war of attrition" are hard to measure, especially in terms of their impact on the forthcoming crucial legislative elections on September 26, 2010. No doubt, Venezuela's failure to regulate and control the multi-million flow of US funds to its Venezuelan collaborators has made a significant impact on their organizational capability. No doubt the economic downturn has had some effect in limiting public spending on new social programs. Likewise, the incompetence and corruption of several top Chavista officials, especially in public food distribution, housing and public safety will have an electoral impact.

It is likely that these “internal” factors are much more influential in shaping the alignment of Venezuela’s electoral outcome, than the aggressive confrontational politics adopted by Washington. Nevertheless, if the pro-US opposition substantially increases its legislative presence in the September 26 elections – beyond one-third of the Congress people – they will attempt to block social changes and economic stimulus policies. The US will intensify its efforts to pressure Venezuela to divert resources to security issues in order to undermine social-economic expenditures which sustain the support of the lower 60% of the Venezuelan population.

Up to now, White House policy based on greater militarization and virtually no new economic initiatives has been a failure. It has encouraged the larger Latin American countries to increase regional integration, as witnessed by new custom and tariff agreements taken at the MERCOSUR meeting in early August of this year. It has not led to any diminution of hostilities between the US and the ALBA countries. It has not increased US influence. Instead Latin America has moved toward a new regional political organization UNASUR (which excludes the US), downgrading the Organization of American States which the US uses to push its agenda. Ironically, the only bright lights, favoring US influence, comes from internal, electoral processes. Rightist candidate Jose Serra is running a strong race in the upcoming Brazilian Presidential elections. In Argentina, Paraguay and Bolivia the pro-US right is regrouping and hoping to return to power.

What Washington fails to understand is that across the political spectrum from the left to the center-right, political leaders are appalled and opposed to the US push and promotion of the military option as the centerpiece of policy. Practically all political leaders have unpleasant memories of exile and persecution from the previous cycle of US backed military regimes. The self-proclaimed extra-territorial reach of the US military, operating out of its seven bases in Colombia, has widened the breach between the centrist and center-left democratic regimes and the Obama White House. In other words, Latin America perceives US military aggression toward Venezuela as a “first step” southward toward their countries. That, and the drive for greater political independence and more diversified markets, have weakened Washington’s diplomatic and political attempts to isolate Venezuela.

Colombia’s new President Santos, made out of the same rightist mold as his predecessor Alvaro Uribe, faces a difficult choice – continuing as an instrument of US military confrontation and destabilization of Venezuela at the cost of several billion dollars in trade losses and isolation from the rest of Latin America or lessening border tensions and incursions, dropping the provocative rhetoric and normalizing relations with Venezuela. If the latter takes place, the US will lose its last best instrument for its external strategy of “tensions” and psych warfare. Washington will be left with two options: a unilateral direct military intervention or funding of political warfare through its domestic collaborators.

In the meantime President Chavez and his supporters would do well to concentrate on pulling the economy out of recession, tackling state corruption and monumental inefficiency and empowering the community and factory-based councils to play a greater role in everything from increasing productivity to public safety. Ultimately Venezuela’s long term security from the long and pervasive reach of the US Empire depends on the strength of the organized mass organizations sustaining the Chavez government.

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