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Washington's Hemispheric Headache: Authoritarian Populism

Ted Galen Carpenter - Global Issues - 4/8/2011

European political and policy elites fret that the United States, confronted by a growing array of economic woes, may be tempted to turn "isolationist." That fear is simplistic and overblown; there is very little sentiment in the United States for making the country a hermit republic and ignoring international affairs. There is, however, a growing realization within the policy community and the general public that Washington needs to do a better job of setting priorities in its approach to both domestic policy and foreign affairs. A major new headache--the increasing number of rabidly anti-U.S. radical authoritarian regimes in Latin America--highlights the urgency to pay greater attention to that region.

A key consequence of that development will be to relegate Europe to a lower level of priority than it has occupied at any time since World War II. Europe's generally quiescent security environment (especially compared to other regions), combined with the continent's declining relative importance economically to the United States would have pushed matters in that direction even absent other factors. But growing security problems in Washington's own geopolitical backyard intensify that tendency.

The burgeoning drug violence in Mexico and Central America is the principal concern in the Western Hemisphere for U.S. policy makers. Not far behind, though, is the proliferation in recent years of left-wing regimes that are openly hostile to Washington's political and economic values and objectives.

The emergence of President Hugo Chavez in Venezuela in 1999 was the first sign of trouble. His election signaled that the surge of capitalist democratic regimes in Latin America, which began in the mid-1980s and seemed to be an irresistible tide throughout the first post-Cold War decade, might be coming to an end. That fear among U.S. leaders has intensified as allies and disciples of Chavez have gained power in Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and other countries.

Chavez's predictions of a "Bolivarian revolution" throughout the hemisphere have not come to pass. Indeed, several countries have continued to elect staunchly pro-capitalist governments, most notably in Colombia, Mexico, and Chile. And even in cases where apparent Bolivarian soul mates came to power, they sometimes turned out to be considerably less radical than Chavez. That was certainly true of President Luiz Lula da Silva in Brazil and appears to be equally true of his successor. It may also prove true of

the new president of Peru, Ollanta Humala, although moderate and conservative Peruvians remain suspicious of the one-time avowed admirer of Chavez.

Despite such setbacks, a sufficient number of radical populist regimes have emerged to create worries in Washington. It is not merely that such governments pursue economic policies that U.S. leaders regard as anathema, or even that Latin populists denounce the United States in terms reminiscent of Fidel Castro's early years in power. Two other trends alarm U.S. officials far more.

One is the blatantly authoritarian ruling style of the leftist regimes. Chavez has systematically eroded Venezuela's democratic foundations—bypassing the legislative branch, ruling by decree, closing or taking over media outlets critical of his conduct, and harassing political opponents and leaders of the business community. Similar abuses have occurred with regard to Correa in Ecuador and Morales in Bolivia.

Washington would have been upset at this blow to its hopes and expectations for a continuation of healthy democratic trends in any case. But the extent of determined opposition to the excesses of the Bolivarian populists is raising the prospect of armed revolution or civil war in some of those countries. That danger is most pronounced in Bolivia where conservative opponents of the Morales government are heavily concentrated in the more prosperous eastern portion of the country. They have already mounted one serious effort at secession, and there remains a significant risk that the country could fracture or be convulsed by an internecine conflict. Dangerous instability is a growing prospect in Ecuador, Venezuela, and Nicaragua as well.

Perhaps even more troubling, evidence has emerged that both Venezuela and Ecuador have provided weapons and funds to radical leftist insurgents in Colombia that Bogotá has been battling for more than three decades. There are also indications (although less definitive) that the Chavez government may be cooperating with violent drug trafficking organizations.

The last thing Washington wants to see is turmoil in the hemisphere—already a danger because of the powerful drug cartels in Mexico and Central America—erupt because of ideological disputes. Yet that has become a possibility.

The second characteristic of the populist regimes that alarms the United States is their flirtation with outside governments that U.S. leaders do not trust. Chavez has been the chief offender in that regard, developing a cozy relationship with Russia, and even worse, with Iran. In recent years, Venezuela made multi-billion-dollar weapons purchases from Moscow and conducted joint naval maneuvers with Russian forces. Russian generals even hinted that discussions about establishing military bases in Venezuela might be underway.

Washington also is keeping a wary eye on China's relationship with the populist regimes. The recent \$4 billion loan that Beijing extended to Caracas was just the latest sign that the PRC might be fishing in troubled political waters.

It is the increasingly close relationship between Chavez and Iran that troubles U.S.

leaders the most, however. Chavez has occasionally hinted that his country might have nuclear ambitions (albeit, he insists, of a purely peaceful nature), and Tehran could certainly be a source of both expertise and technology on that front.

Some U.S. opinion leaders have a tendency to overstate both the extent and the severity of the populist surge in Latin America. The trend is likely to prove more of an annoyance than a serious security challenge to Washington over the long run. And the recent revelation that Hugo Chavez is seriously ill with cancer may hasten the decline of Bolivarian populism.

Nevertheless, the phenomenon remains significant enough to make U.S. leaders turn their attention to the immediate geopolitical neighborhood. That requires a shift in America's policy priorities, and Europe is likely to be one region that will feel the adverse ramifications of such a change. It will not be the manifestation of a new American isolationism, but many Europeans may view that as a distinction without a difference.

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