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US Sanctions in Latin America

A New Dawn in US Foreign Policy or Hypocrisy as Usual?

by ALAN MacLEOD

March 13-15, 2015

Glasgow, Scotland.

The Obama administration's easing of sanctions against the small island nation of Cuba was met with a mixed response at home, to say the least. Could this be the beginning of a new dawn in a more humane foreign policy? Many establishment figures welcomed the move. John Kerry was one of them, stating "it is time to try something new" to give "the best opportunity for the people of Cuba to improve their lives and to take part in the choices about their lives." Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird agreed, "The more American values and American capital [my emphasis] that are permitted into Cuba, the freer the Cuban people will be," he said.

However, many po-faced articles attacked the President as a spineless leader, guilty of faulty logic. There was also a good deal of concern about the fate of "free speech advocates" and "human rights campaigners" in Cuba. One Washington Post editorial laments that "with no consequences in sight, Cuba continues to crack down on free speech" while one Times article gives voice to another dissident's opinion: "This is a blank check for the Castros and their heirs in power." President Obama himself explained the embargo thus: "This policy has been rooted in the best of intentions...it has had little effect."

Many, even on the left, have hailed the decision as a historic shift in US foreign policy.

While there does appear to be considerable debate among the elite on the subject, a number of key assumptions remain unchallenged and unexplored in the debate and many crucial facts remain unspoken. Firstly, the notion that United States is an honest broker, and its foreign policy has always been designed to improve the freedom and standard of democracy of those in foreign countries is apparent in virtually every article. No opinion column that this author has found challenges the concept of the United States' ethical foreign policy. Remarkable, considering the US props up some of, if not most of, the world's most violent dictatorships. Among these being Saudi Arabia, where beheadings are common and women are not allowed to drive a car, Egypt, which has seen "unprecedented state violence" to "quash dissent", according to Amnesty, and Israel, currently carrying out the world's longest-running occupation of another country. Indeed, as far back as 1981, Lars Schoultz found that the more a Latin American country tortured its own population, the more US foreign aid it would receive.

Another key assumption underlying the mainstream commentary is that the United States has the right to interfere in the internal affairs of other sovereign nations. As William Blum has chronicled, the United States has overthrown more than 50 foreign governments since 1945. Yet, it is Cuba's record with regard to its history of human rights abuses and state-sponsored terrorism that is under scrutiny.

This is a shocking reversal of the facts. For one thing, the greatest human rights abuses on Cuba occur at US-controlled Guantanamo Bay, where hundreds of political prisoners have been tortured. Furthermore, no mention is made to the fact that the United States has been waging a unilateral terrorist war against Cuba for more than 50 years. This is a war that has included widespread use of banned bio-chemical weapons resulting in a trillion dollars of damage to the island, according to the United Nations.

The embargo is almost unanimously opposed in the international arena. A resolution demanding the immediate end to the blockade of Cuba has been passed 23 times in a row at the UN. In 2012, the vote was 188-3, with the US picking up only Israel and Palau as support while managing to buy only abstentions from the Marshall Islands and Micronesia, apparently too embarrassed to vote against it.

These discarded facts notwithstanding, what makes the situation more extraordinary is that at the same time as lifting sanctions against Cuba, the US is currently placing sanctions on Venezuela for alleged human rights violations. These "human rights violations" include arresting political leaders, funded by the United States government through USAID who tried to overthrow the government last year. The White House went further this week, declaring a "national emergency with respect to the extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States posed by the situation in Venezuela." The absurdity of such a statement needs no comment. Suffice to say, Americans will not be panic-buying groceries and going down into their bunkers. Older readers may remember similar outbursts from the Reagan administration, which claimed that Nicaragua "constituted an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States and hereby declare a national emergency to deal with that threat." However, when US officials talk of threats to national security and foreign

policy, what they mean is the threat of any country taking matters into its own hands and possibly “threatening” to bar the US government to do whatever it likes around the world.

It is commonly said that the US has taken its eye off Latin America in recent times, particularly since the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions. Therefore you will be forgiven for not following what has happened in the region since 2000. Venezuela was the first of eighteen countries to elect (and re-elect) progressive political parties into power. While far from perfect, the so-called “pink tide” has begun to address the shocking problems in their countries, such as poverty, inequality and national sovereignty. Venezuela in particular has been at the forefront of creating new regional institutions designed to replace the US-dominated Cold War organizations. For 500 years many Latin Americans felt the region had been under foreign domination, first European, later American. The continent, which was described by US officials as “America’s backyard” and “our little region over here that has never bothered anybody” has begun to free itself from US domination with alarming- or exhilarating depending on your political persuasion- speed. There is a general agreement among these nations that a precondition to genuine independence and integration was freeing themselves from US interference by setting up their own, independent institutions.

ALBA, a Venezuelan-inspired alternative to the US-backed Free Trade Agreement for the Americas, was launched in 2004. In contrast to the FTAA, which promoted free trade, trickle-down economics and investor rights, ALBA was specifically designed as a complimentary, South-South organization based upon the principles of solidarity, social development and cultural protection. Brazilian sociologist Emir Sader described ALBA as “a system of exchange in which each country gives what it has and receives what it needs, according to the capacities and necessities of each participant. It is the only example of this kind of commerce in the world and is quite different from the market-based criteria of the WTO.” It has since expanded to 11 countries, mainly in the Caribbean region. ALBA focuses not only on trade in goods but also in programmes to help the disadvantaged. By 2011, it claimed it had lifted 11 million people out of poverty.

UNASUR, the Union of South American Nations, was inaugurated in 2008 and CELAC, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, followed in 2011. These are regional organizations not unlike the EU. CELAC consists of every single Western hemisphere country *except* the United States and Canada, who were deliberately barred from entering. One of the goals of these organizations is to replace the US-dominated Organization of American States (OAS). Venezuela pioneered the Bank of the South, opened in 2009, and endorsed by Nobel Prize-winner Joseph Stiglitz. It is a regional bank designed as an alternative to the Washington-based International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. It has proven successful. Today, every country in South America, bar US-ally Colombia, has rid itself of the IMF once and for all. To go with the bank a new currency, the SUCRE, has been established, designed to replace the US dollar in international business. Trade between Latin American countries has greatly increased, and the United States has lost ground to China in trade in the region. South American governments have also launched their own TV channel, Telesur. The Venezuelan government created Petrocaribe in 2005 in order to promote solidarity with and development for the poorest countries in the region. Under the programme, countries can defer payment for discounted fuel,

thus hastening their economic development. The US is known not to agree with the project and has pressured states not to join.

American power and prestige in Latin America has seriously declined since 2000. The US now does not have a permanent military base in South America, the only continent in the world where that is the case. South America was also the only continent where no country cooperated with the US rendition programme. South American countries are willing to grant asylum to Western dissidents like Julian Assange, Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning. Uruguay has granted asylum to victims of Guantanamo Bay torture. In 2009, no South American nation recognized Palestine. Today, all, bar Colombia, have done so. So much for “America’s backyard.”

The situation in Latin America and the Caribbean is as follows: Venezuelan initiatives are leading countries to turn their backs on the United States. Its threat to the US is much the same as the Nicaraguan threat in the 1980s: the threat of a good example. The real threat to US hegemony in the region is not Cuba anymore: it comes from the potential of Venezuelan-led regional institutions. Hence détente with Cuba and hostility with Venezuela.

By 2006, conservative analysts like Jorge Castaneda recognized the US Empire in Latin America was crumbling and the best way to preserve it was to separate good countries from bad. By 2009, the same analyst lamented the Empire was all but over. It is in this light we should see the recent decisions to lessen the blockade of Cuba and ramp up sanctions against Venezuela. Cuba is simply not geostrategically important any more. Progressives all over the world look to South American states such as Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador as examples, rather than Cuba. Today, both Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece openly declare their admiration of and links to the Venezuelan government. By softening their stance towards Cuba, the US hopes to regain some influence in the Caribbean.

In his biography of Chilean President Salvador Allende, Oscar Guardiola-Rivera stated that Washington always saw the democratically elected socialist as a far greater threat than the military dictator Castro precisely because he was an avowed democrat and won elections. Thus Hugo Chavez and now Nicolas Maduro pose a greater threat to US power. Venezuela is now enemy number one in the region. Therefore the lessening of sanctions against Cuba, while simultaneously imposing sanctions on Venezuela under the pretense of protecting human rights, is nonsensical.

Far from isolating Venezuela, however, the US has succeeded only in isolating itself. Attempts at sowing division between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ countries of Latin America have largely failed. Even allies like Colombia cannot be counted on to consistently toe the line. CELAC, representing all Western hemisphere nations except the US and Canada, condemned the new sanctions, with Ecuador’s President Correa labeling them “a bad joke.” Even American journalists find it funny. This week, as State Department spokesperson Jen Psaki explained that the US has a “long-standing policy “*against* backing coups in Latin America, journalist Matt Lee could not contain his laughter (video).

President Correa is correct. Ending sanctions on Cuba in the name of a new foreign policy while at the same time imposing sanctions on Venezuela because of supposed government repression is

indeed laughable. It makes absolutely no sense if we take seriously the narrative on human rights and democracy peddled by the White House and echoed in the media. But it makes perfect sense if we view it as a cynical, realpolitik attempt to undermine the threat of a good example and a way of reestablishing American influence in the Caribbean through an increased presence in Cuba. Taking into account these factors, we can see there is no new, enlightened dawn in US policy, rather a switching of targets. It is, lamentably, business as usual.