

ELECTION 2008: COMMENTARIES

Monroe No More?

by Roberto Guareschi

Not since Franklin Delano Roosevelt has an incoming U.S. president inherited a situation as complex as the one that Barack Obama will confront. President-elect Obama will have to spearhead a reformulation of capitalism and a restructuring of the relationships among the world powers, and to top it off, he will have to put an end to, or at least contain, the wars being waged in Iraq and Afghanistan. And these three issues are all interrelated.

Clearly, Latin America will not be a priority for the Obama administration when it takes the White House this coming January.

That's nothing new. With the exception of the short-lived Cuban missile crisis, the U.S. has never tackled a serious conflict in our region, which it still views as its "backyard." For the United States, Latin America isn't the most significant part of the world in economic terms either. When Washington thinks of Latin America, only Mexico and Cuba come to mind and, more recently, Venezuela.

However, three current issues may change this longstanding perception:

1. The appearance (in some cases, the re-appearance) of other superpowers and emerging powers in the region, a phenomenon that Gabriel Tokatlian has described as the end of the Monroe Doctrine.
2. The threat of Balkanization in South America, which is latent in the political crisis in Bolivia.
3. The impact of the imminent global recession on our region, home to the some of the world's most extreme social inequities.

The Death of a Doctrine

After flexing its muscles in Europe (with the invasion of Georgia), Russia is now doing the same in Latin America at the invitation of Hugo Chávez. The Venezuelan president has been on a Soviet spending spree, purchasing tanks and MiG-19 fighter planes. Chávez has also confirmed that he's expecting an entire Russian fleet, complete with atomic sub, to visit Venezuelan waters and suggested that joint military maneuvers are on the table.

The President of Iran was warmly received in Venezuela, where he signed agreements on energy and trade, and will soon travel to Bolivia. And while the U.S.

Photo from Associated Press.

and Europe denounce Iran's intent to manufacture atomic weapons, Brazil and other countries from our region justify Iran's nuclear plan, which they insist is inspired by peaceful motives.

China has also signed broad trade agreements with Latin America; the region is a strategic provider of raw materials that the burgeoning economic power requires. Today, China is Latin America's third-largest trading partner. So why shouldn't it donate arms to Bolivia and sell radar equipment to Venezuela? India is also notching up economic relations with the region.

Such changes pose an economic and political challenge but not a military threat to U.S. hegemony in the region.

So why did the United States make the surprise move of reactivating the Fourth Fleet, a relic from World War II that had been deactivated in 1950? Shortly thereafter, Brazil

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joined with other South American countries to launch a regional defense council to resolve local conflicts without U.S. intervention. Well aware of its global importance and jealous of its sphere of influence, Brazil had already announced plans to strengthen its navy and build an atomic submarine.

Danger in Bolivia

Meanwhile, Bolivia's internal conflict continues to strain the power relations that have ensured territorial integrity and peace in South America for over 70 years — a noteworthy exception compared with the rest of the world. The cry for autonomy from the country's richest departments is the latest expression of the economic and racial conflicts that have always been part of Bolivian politics. Today, they are more visible and more important simply because the government of Evo Morales represents a sizeable portion of the country's indigenous population.

If the conflict and the struggle for autonomy lead to secession, a Balkanized Bolivia could destabilize the entire region:

- The direct participation of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in defense of his principal ally, Evo Morales, is to be expected. Chávez has already stated that he won't just sit back with his arms crossed.
- Bolivia and Peru still bear serious grudges against Chile, the victor in the War of the Pacific (1879-83), which left Bolivia landlocked. What sorts of alliances and agreements could spring up among these Andean nations and the eventual Bolivian factions?
- What action will Chávez ally Ecuador take, bearing in mind the past spats with Peru over national borders?
- And what of Colombia, which has fallen out with Venezuela and Ecuador for allegedly providing safe haven for Colombia's notorious FARC guerrillas? Regardless of what happens in Bolivia, the conflict between Colombia and Venezuela may still explode. These two countries were on the brink of war only months ago, when the Colombian army attacked and killed guerrilla troops in Ecuadorian territory.
- And what about Argentina? The ruling couple is feeling the double burden of corruption and the end of the economic boom. With its leftist rhetoric, the Fernández de Kirchner administration might be tempted to boost its legitimacy by scapegoating foreign enemies to inspire nationalist sentiment.

- Brazil's attitude will be decisive. The South American giant will use all its influence and leadership to avoid the Balkanization of Bolivia. With this objective in mind, Lula is promoting the South American Defense Council, made up of countries from the region, which would be able to take action in the event of intraregional conflict. This mechanism would be activated to institutionalize a collective intervention.

The Most Unjust Region

This global context combined with the region's socioeconomic conditions add up to a high-risk situation. According to the United Nations, Latin America suffers from the most severe social injustice in the world. It may not be the poorest region — Africa takes that "prize" — but Latin America is undoubtedly the region with the greatest gap between the haves and the have-nots. With very few exceptions, our societies are hugely divided and teeming with resentment. Decades of economic adjustment policies have so weakened the state that governments cannot be relied on to mitigate these tensions and inequities: 42 percent of the population lives in poverty and has merely seen the benefits of the commodities boom from afar. The global recession will only worsen this situation.

Such is the region that Obama will find when he takes office, and we haven't even discussed Mexico, the United States' closest neighbor, with its increasing narco-violence and tensions from illegal immigration.

For the reasons given at the beginning of this article, it is unlikely that the U.S. will be disposed to contemplate the situation in Latin America. Indeed, President-elect Obama has not even hinted that he perceives the need to improve the quality of policies towards the region and to rebuild dialogue in the hemisphere. Until this happens, the vacuum will be filled, by default, with the military actors and their political allies who have held sway with the Bush administration. These are the same people who encouraged the coup against Chávez in 2002.

It is cold comfort for Latin America that the excessive influence wielded by the military and its allies is one of the principal problems that the next president of the United States must resolve, regardless of what is best for the region south of the Rio Grande, if he really wants to achieve change.

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