



Citizens for Global Solutions

Pragmatism or Ideology: Will Congress Lead the Revival of U.S. Relations with Latin America?

By Raj Purohit and Golzar Kheiltash

At a Capitol Hill hearing this week foreign policy pragmatists finally had something to cheer as the Senate Foreign Relations Western Hemisphere Subcommittee started examining the strategic costs of the Bush Administration's ideologically driven opposition to the International Criminal Court. Although some participants at the hearing continued to put forward straw man concerns regarding the ICC, for the first time there was a public acknowledgement of the harm caused by the Administration's unswerving quest for these Bilateral Immunity Agreements (BIA's). The agreements, which fail to increase protections for U.S. troops, are opposed by ICC supporters who believe they are legally flawed.

We now stand at a cross roads as the House and Senate Armed Services Committees are both likely to tackle this issue later in the week. Unfortunately as Jackson-Diehl noted in the Washington Post on Friday, Bolton has worked hard to maintain the status quo in the past and may be a stumbling block going forward. We should be clear that the status quo does not cut it.

Foreign policy strategists have observed on numerous occasions that the anti-ICC American Servicemembers Protection Act and Nethercutt Amendment, which cut military and economic funding respectively if a country refuses to sign a BIA, are blunt instruments that harm U.S. interests in service of an ideological goal, namely the undercutting of the ICC. It has also been clear that the division caused by the pursuit of these agreements allows other countries, often hostile to the U.S., to step into the gap.

For instance, in Latin America, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has sought to utilize his "Petroamerica" initiative to strengthen his appeal at a time when the Bush Administration is increasingly unpopular because it has cut critical military and economic aid in pursuit of BIA's. The US Administration's closest allies in the region, President Alvaro Uribe of Colombia and President Alejandro Toledo of Peru, have rightly noted that the US should be deepening its engagement in, and economic support of, Latin America to offset the appeal of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. They have urged US policy makers to act as good neighbors, recognize the importance of strong regional alliances, and engage with Latin America. Further more, it is important to note that the western hemisphere strategic threat is not just confined to Venezuela. As Gen. John Craddock, Commander, U.S. Southern Command stated on behalf of Southcom last year, the sanctions under these legislative acts are "restricting our access and interaction [with our allies]" thereby "hampering the engagement and professional contact that is an essential element of our regional security cooperation strategy." He expressed concern that "extra-hemispheric actors"—aka China—"are filling the void."

These consequences are finally rising to the surface and Senator Coleman should be credited for recognizing the unintended consequences of this flawed policy. On the eve of the hearing he noted that "We need to take a close look to make sure we are not cutting off our nose to spite our face. Provisions restricting American military training to many of these nations could result in the loss of U.S. diplomatic influence in the region."

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Our elected leaders need to seriously question why we are pursuing policies that would see Mexico lose \$11.5 million earmarked for anti-corruption programs, Peru lose \$8 million to combat narco-trafficking and terrorism and Paraguay lose \$2.25 million for counter corruption and terrorism programs. At a time when the foreign policy focus of the Administration seems to be centered on fighting terrorism, surely it makes good sense to provide funds that assist neighboring countries working to tackle terrorism and the scourge of narco-trafficking. The link between terrorism and drugs has been made in policy circles, the example of Afghanistan comes to mind, and the US does not need to see an escalation of this linkage on its doorstep. Furthermore, as Administration officials have noted transparent and effective governments are more likely to earn the respect of their citizenry and therefore be more stable, the US should be doing all that it can to encourage counter-corruption efforts in the hemisphere.

Let us hope that Congress can legislatively push the Administration to cultivate allies in Latin America and across the globe by putting pragmatic considerations before a quest for agreements that are not needed and frankly are a byproduct of an era where we inaccurately accepted that U.S. foreign policy could be driven by parochial domestic political considerations.

The United States needs a 21st Century Foreign Policy that emphasizes regional engagement, not alienation, in Latin America.

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