

Ibero-America Wants Integration, Not War

by Valerie Rush and Gretchen Small

Even as U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Roger Noriega threatened on March 2 that the Bush Administration “expected” Venezuela’s neighbors to join the U.S. drive for regime change in Venezuela, the Presidents of Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela were announcing the formation of a “trilateral strategic alliance” premised on economic integration. Our alliance excludes no one, they said, but serves as a model of the concrete steps needed to turn the “South American Community of Nations,” agreed upon last December by all the nations of the region, into a reality.

Presidents Nestor Kirchner, Lula da Silva, and Hugo Chávez met in Montevideo, Uruguay, following the inauguration of the new President of Uruguay, Tabaré Vázquez. Four ministerial meetings of the three nations are now scheduled to be held in the next 30 to 40 days to flesh out the integration projects needed to address poverty and foster industrial development, before the three Presidents meet again on the sidelines of the extraordinary May 10-11 Arab-South American Heads of State Summit in Brasilia. Under discussion is the formation of a South American Development Bank, the development of the maritime industry, a common electricity supply system, the peaceful use of nuclear energy, and a regional oil industry.

The final communiqué adds the tantalizing statement that such integration processes are necessary to permit the three nations to go before the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other multilateral bodies with a common position, “to strengthen the voice of our countries more than when they are expressed individually.”

No ‘Axis of Evil’ Here

Neo-con Bush Administration officials who point menacingly at this emerging alliance as a new “red wave” imperiling the hemisphere, have a problem: The moves to bring about this long-desired economic integration are supported across the board in South America. As the Bush Administration has discovered, that includes the government of Alvaro Uribe in Colombia, which the Bush Administration had assumed was safely in its hip pocket, because of Colombia’s dependence on U.S. financial aid to battle the narco-terrorist armies ravaging the country.

On Feb. 15, Uribe and Chávez, along with their respective Foreign Ministers, met for five hours in Caracas, to reach a diplomatic resolution to the crisis triggered last December, when the Colombian government financed the capture of narco-terrorist FARC leader Rodrigo Granda on Venezuelan soil, where he was being hosted by the Chávez government. That incident, which triggered accusations of “violation of sovereignty” by the Venezuelans, led to a rapid and dramatic escalation of tensions and a break in both diplomatic and trade relations between the neighboring countries, which, if allowed to continue, could have led to a war.

It was only through diplomatic interventions by the governments of Brazil, Peru, and Cuba, in particular, that the Feb. 15 rapprochement was able to take place. The traditional venue for mediating such a conflict is usually the Organization of American States, and yet that U.S.-dominated entity was entirely ignored by every Ibero-American government involved in the episode, for the simple reason that those governments smelled a trap of the Bush regime’s making, and were determined to sidestep it.

Washington had seized upon the Granda caper as a made-to-order pretext to impose on Venezuela’s neighbors the U.S. decision to go for “regime change” in Venezuela.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made the policy official in her Jan. 18 confirmation hearings, when she pronounced that “we know the difficulties that that [Chávez] government is causing for its neighbors.” Other governments in the region have little love for the Jacobinite Chávez government, but they know acutely that the destruction wrought by the IMF neoliberal policies has handed Chávez a significant following among millions of poor people across the region, and that a U.S.-run overthrow of Chávez would guarantee a continental war.

U.S. statesman Lyndon LaRouche issued a timely warning against the Bush Administration’s intentions, in a Nov. 12, 2004 radio interview. LaRouche noted that the situation is “complex,” given that: “Chávez, essentially, comes from a background which is the same background that fascism came from in former times, that tradition. He also represents a peculiar left-wing spin on that; he’s very close in some respects to Fidel Castro.” But, LaRouche stated: “I don’t believe that the United States has any business going in to orchestrate regime change in countries, by military force. That’s a wrong policy. I think we have to deal with countries—we’re past the point we should be going to aggressive war anyway—but we have to deal with these countries with a certain amount of understanding, and sometimes, a sense of humor, even about very bad situations. . . .

“My approach is what we should have done a long time ago: Reverse the effects of 1971-72 and ’82, and go back to helping these countries below our borders come into a new kind of system, where they can reindustrialize, redevelop their agricultural strength, and let the benefits of economic and

related progress induce these countries to decide, themselves internally, to evolve their systems in a better direction.”

Sidestepping the Warhawks

The successful Ibero-American effort to bypass Washington in resolving the Colombian-Venezuelan crisis, proved an important first step in that “better direction.” On Jan. 19, a long-scheduled meeting between Uribe and Lula da Silva was held in the Colombian border city of Leticia, where the dispute with Venezuela was quietly added to the top of their pre-set agenda on economic cooperation. That same day, the Foreign Ministers of Colombia and Peru met, after which Colombian Foreign Minister Caroline Barco issued a statement saying that a diplomatic solution to the Colombo-Venezuelan crisis was being fine-tuned. In his capacity as rotational head of the Andean Community, Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo had deployed his Foreign Minister Manuel Rodríguez to meet with his counterparts in both Colombia and Venezuela, to test the waters for a “constructive solution.”

Colombian President Uribe’s intervention proved decisive. Although considered Bush’s number-one regional ally, Uribe refused to play his assigned part in the Bush team’s war drive. He personally called on Cuba’s Fidel Castro to facilitate a face-to-face meeting between himself and Chávez. That meeting, held in Caracas on Feb. 15, brought about an immediate cooling down of the situation, and a joint communiqué in which the Presidents reaffirmed “the importance of strengthening bilateral relations for both countries, overcoming any obstacle that could affect the historic understanding these brother nations have always had.”

Uribe and Chávez also set up a high-level Binational Commission, headed by their Foreign Ministers, to facilitate open communications on all issues affecting the state of relations between their countries, “and especially actions necessary to strengthen the processes of integration between Colombia and Venezuela within the framework of the very necessary integration of South America.”

It is in precisely such a “strategic alliance” for economic integration and collaboration, based on commonality of interests, and expanded across the region, that the end to border conflicts, separatist insurgencies, and narco-terrorism lies. While the Bush-Cheney team raves about a continental “axis of evil,” a very different viewpoint was expressed editorially on Feb. 15 by the leading Colombian daily *El Tiempo*—certainly no great friend of Chávez. “The leadership of Venezuela, Brazil, and Argentina in the signing of agreements is beginning to lay the foundation of integration: a South American Community of Nations,” wrote *El Tiempo*. “Lula moves further away from ideological slogans, and is guided more today by the guiding principle of economic pragmatism. . . . Lula has as good relations with Fidel Castro, Chávez, and Kirchner, as he does with Alvaro Uribe and had with José María Aznar. Further, Brazil never had such fluid relations

with the United States as he has built with George W. Bush. . . . That is why it is illusionary to imagine Brazil as part of a left-wing axis.”

Ibero-American diplomacy short-circuited—at least temporarily—the Cheney/Rumsfeld agenda for chaos and “un-governability.” Diplomatic relations between the two countries are now fully restored, trade relations are returning to normal—including the resumption of Venezuelan gasoline sales to the energy-starved towns on the Colombian side of the border—and a \$200 million joint gas pipeline is back on the front burner. A leading FARC terrorist, facing charges of terrorism, murder, drug- and arms-trafficking, was reported to have been arrested by Venezuela’s National Guard on Feb. 25.

Integration Is Key

Most significantly, Chávez announced at the conclusion of his meeting with Uribe that he, Lula, and Uribe would meet in March to work out a “trilateral oil” arrangement, among other integration initiatives in the works. This came on the heels of a summit that had just been held between Chávez and Lula one day earlier, for which Lula set the tone by declaring: “The integration of South America is priority number one of my government’s foreign policy. . . . South America’s solution does not lie in the North nor on the other side of the Atlantic.” The Brazilian and Venezuelan Presidents signed an impressive series of bilateral proposals which established political dialogue, the expansion of goods and services, and the integration of infrastructure, energy, and science and technology as the “three pillars” of a Brazilian-Venezuelan “strategic alliance,” which he hoped would “serve as a model of the integration we wish to implement with other countries of the region.”

Fourteen of the 20 Brazilian-Venezuelan agreements signed deals concerning oil. They cover the construction of oil platforms and ships, a joint project of the two state oil companies (Pdvs and Petrobras) in the Orinoco region, Petrobras exploration in the Gulf of Venezuela, joint business ventures between the two countries, and fertilizer and petrochemical projects. Other agreements included: an announcement that the two countries will form a joint company “Carbo-Suramerica,” to promote coal mining, an agreement that Brazil’s giant CVRD company and the (still-state run) Venezuelan Corporation of Guayana (CVG) should establish a mining and metallurgical industrial complex, an agreement for Venezuela to refurbish its Air Force with the Brazilian aircraft manufacturer Embraer, joint military exercises in defense of the Venezuelan-Brazilian Amazon region, and more.

It is these bilateral agreements, and similar agreements between Venezuela and Argentina, which the Presidents of Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela agreed upon March 2, that must be expanded into trilateral accords—and, from there, extended to the rest of South America.