

Dec 1 2010

Insights into US-Latin American relations through Wikileaks

LSE Ideas

By Guy Burton

Much of the recent attention to the leaked American diplomatic cables has involved gossip and various unflattering pen portraits of world leaders. In the case of Latin America this has already emerged in relation to Argentine President [Cristina Kirchner's mental state](#). Today there is the exposure of Bolivia's President Evo Morales and his [tumour treatment](#) which will doubtless be seized upon.

However, what has been overlooked is the extent to which much of the dispatches that have been published to date between Washington and its Latin American missions confirm what we already know – namely its primary concern with regional security and the ambiguous relationship that exists between Washington and much of Latin America.

First, in the case of regional security the US arguably relies on the regional power, Brazil – which itself is the subject of most of the cables so far released. The relationship between the US and Brazil is also significant since it illustrates the scope of American engagement. There is a strong recognition by American officials that there are limits which may be summarised as ['Friendly Cooperation. But Not Strong Friendship'](#). This is due to a tension between the more sceptical position towards the US at the top of the Brazilian government and the willingness and level of cooperation within it at the operational level. In January 2008, for example, the US embassy in Brasilia notes the tussle between the defence and foreign affairs ministries over whether to sign a [defence cooperation agreement](#) with Washington. Similarly, although the embassy comments that [Brazil's National Defence Strategy](#) and the decision to restructure its armed forces does coincide with American interests at greater regional security and peacekeeping and offers opportunities for [American businesses and armed forces](#) and their counterparts, it has to deal with a publically ambivalent Brazilian government. This is made explicit in the discussion between the American ambassador and [Brazil's defence minister, Nelson Jobim](#), that the US-Colombian agreement over American airbases and an Air Force budget memo 'showed "a complete lack of understanding" of Latin America and said that [Jobim] had to discuss the issue with the President to urge "moderation" from Lula.' By contrast the ambassador ends with the comment that Brazil's 'insistence on painting [Colombian President] Uribe as the primary source of Andean tensions may limit the [Government of Brazil]'s effectiveness'.

American concern with security is also apparent in its preoccupation with regional rivals. First (and not surprisingly) Venezuela features prominently in American communications. For example, in May 2005 the US ambassador to Brazil complains about the role that Venezuela's president, [Hugo Chavez](#), is playing in preventing Brazilian leadership in the region. In response, his interlocutor, the Minister for Institutional Security, General Jorge Armando Felix, reminds the ambassador that Chavez is 'very much a part of the "Latin American" reality.' But while Latin Americans have accept Chavez as part of the scene, it is not apparent that the US is comfortable with this. By 2008 Brazil was proposing to contain Venezuela 'exporting instability' by bringing the country into a South American Defence Council, an approach which the embassy commented on as ['impractical.'](#) At the same time, the State Department was seeking information on the attitudes of the [Paraguayan presidential election candidates](#) towards Venezuela and Cuba and the level of domestic intervention being played by the two in that country.

Second, Washington has become increasingly concerned with [external actors in the region](#), both state and non-state. In terms of state actors, American officials at the State Department have been specifically requesting information on Chinese and Iranian involvement in the region, including military cooperation and communications in Paraguay. With regard to non-state actors, although a number of transnational issues such as the drug trade, arms smuggling and money laundering have been problems in the Tri-Border Region (TBR) between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay since the 1990s, there has been a shift in focus. This reflects a change in American priorities from tackling these transnational issues to countering radical Islam over the past decade, following the 9/11 attacks.

US officials are actively seeking information on the involvement of radical Islamist individuals and organisations, such as Hamas and Hezbollah and their respective links, support networks and funding. At the same time the cables recognise that the issue is no longer contained to the TBR. Instead efforts have to be made to the wider Muslim population in the continent. In Brazil, for example, the US embassy reports greater attention being paid to [counter-terrorism measures](#). These include [greater cooperation](#) to tackle illicit financial transactions and other activities taking place between American and Brazilian law enforcement agencies even while official government rhetoric remains relatively distant.

Despite this involvement, American officials cannot contain their criticism. The American response to the Brazilian government's lack of concern with passing anti-terrorism legislation is broadly negative. In an April 2008 cable the embassy notes that the [proposed bill](#), which would have treated the participation, financing and support of terrorist groups as a crime,

was shelved by Lula's chief of staff, Djilma Rousseff, on the grounds that it might be used against social groups and movements that support the government. This has promoted the Americans to seek alternative ways to engage the issue, including the use of [outreach activities](#) between its São Paulo consulate and moderate Muslim leaders in the city.

More generally, the nature of American attitudes towards their Latin American counterparts demonstrates a critical, partial and equivocal stance. For example, American analysis of Argentina reveals not only a [lack of knowledge](#) about Cristina Kirchner – despite having been in office for nearly two years – but it also echoes the opposition's criticisms, namely that it is '[extremely thin-skinned and intolerant of perceived criticism](#).' In addition, the US maintains a reputation for being equivocal. The dispatch from its embassy in Honduras a month after [last year's coup](#) illustrates this point neatly. Following the enforced exile of the then president, Manuel Zelaya, the embassy recommends a search to 'provide a face-saving "out" for the two opposing sides in the current standoff'. On the one hand, this presents the US as standing above the fray. Indeed, at the time of the coup the American position was extremely vocal, with Barack Obama condemning it swiftly. The embassy too criticized Zelaya's forced exile and the assumption to the presidency of Congress's speaker, Roberto Micheletti.

On the other hand, the American position was not as virtuous as it appears. That Zelaya was an ally of American rivals such as Venezuela's president Hugo Chavez and his peers in Ecuador, Cuba and Bolivia may have discouraged more extensive American support. Indeed, the embassy claims that Zelaya may have been partly to blame, by having 'committed illegalities and may have even violated the constitution.' This is based on the embassy's decision to seek out legal advice regarding the constitution and the grounds for presidential removal. Its recommendation to find a solution amenable to both did not therefore mean a return to the presidency for Zelaya, but rather one that removed both Micheletti and Zelaya from the picture. That "out" was achieved at the end of the year when the scheduled presidential election took place, resulting in quick American acceptance of the result even as other Latin American governments continued to protest.

That Washington was looking for a solution in the latter part of last year was no secret. In this regard, along with the detail of the other dispatches so far published does not shake up our fundamental assumptions about American interests, attitudes and actions in Latin America over the past few years. If anything, they merely confirm that Washington pursues its interests throughout the region – regional security, radical Islam, external threats, drug trafficking, arms smuggling and money laundering – and making common cause with those who share them. At the same time, they are extremely useful at revealing the limitations of American influence and that Washington is not able to impose its will on individual countries – even small ones such as Honduras. Finally, the leaked documents are fascinating at providing a contemporary insight into the way that American policymakers view their priorities and concerns in the region, along with their own estimation of their Latin American counterparts. With the publication of further dispatches from the region, the opportunity to analyse the role of Washington and others in the region in greater detail is certainly one not to be missed.

Guy Burton is a research associate for the Latin America International Affairs Programme at the LSE Ideas Centre.

This entry was posted in [2009](#), [Argentina](#), [Brazil](#), [Honduras](#), [Latin America](#), [Paraguay](#), [US-Latin American Relations](#), [Venezuela](#), [wikileaks](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).