

Peculiarities of US Imperialism in Latin America

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Understanding imperialism as a general phenomenon loses sight of its modus operandi in any specific and meaningful context. While the exercise of imperialist power is a common strategy, its motives, instruments, objectives and engagement vary, depending on the nature of the imperial ruler and targeted country.

Venezuela, the current target of US, President Donald Trump, is a case illustrating the 'peculiarities' of imperialist politics. We will proceed to outline the background, techniques and impact of the imperial power grab.

Historical Background

The US has a long history of intervention in Venezuela primarily to gain control of its oil wealth. During the 1950's Washington backed a military dictatorship –led by Perez Jimenez— until it was overthrown by mass alliance of revolutionary socialist, nationalist and Social Democratic parties. Washington could not and did not intervene; instead it sided with the center-left Democratic Action (AD) and center-right COPEI parties which proceeded to declare war against the radical left. Over time US regained hegemony until the economy went into crises in the 1990's leading to popular uprisings and state massacres.

The US did not intervene initially as it felt that it could co-opt Hugo Chavez because he was unaffiliated with the left. Moreover, the US was militarily committed to the Balkans (Yugoslavia) and the Middle East and preparing for wars against Iraq and other nationalist countries which opposed Israel and supported Palestine.

Using the pretext of a global terrorist threat Washington demanded subordination to its declaration of a world-wide 'war against terrorism'.

President Chavez did not submit. He declared that 'you do not fight terrorism with terrorism'. The US decided that Chavez's declaration of independence was a threat to US hegemony in Latin America and beyond. Washington decided to overthrow elected President Chavez, even before he nationalized the US owned petroleum industry.

In April 2002, the US organized a military-business coup, which was defeated within forty-eight hours by a popular uprising backed by sectors of the military. A second attempt to overthrow President Chavez was set in motion by oil executives via a petroleum lock-out. It was defeated by oil workers and overseas petrol exporters. Chavez national-populist revolution proceeded to nationalize oil corporations who supported the 'lock-out'.

The failed coups led Washington to temporarily adopt an electoral strategy heavily financed via Washington controlled foundations and NGO. Repeated electoral defeats led Washington to shift to electoral boycotts and propaganda campaigns designed to illegitimatize the electoral success of President Chavez.

Washington's failed efforts to restore imperialist power, boomeranged. Chavez increased his electoral support, expanded state control over oil and other resources and radicalized his popular base. Moreover, Chavez increasingly secured backing for his anti-imperialist policies among government and movements throughout Latin America and increased his influence and ties throughout the Caribbean by providing subsidized oil.

While commentators attributed President Chavez mass support and influence to his charisma, objective circumstances peculiar to Latin America were decisive. President Chavez's defeat of imperialist intervention can be attributed to five objectives and conditions.

1. The deep involvement of the US in multiple prolonged wars at the same time – including in the Middle East, South Asia and North Africa distracted Washington. Moreover, US military commitments to Israel undermined US efforts to refocus on Venezuela.
2. US sanctions policy took place during the commodity boom between 2003 – 2011 – which provided Venezuela with the economic resources to finance domestic social programs and neutralize local boycotts by elite allies of the US.
3. Venezuela benefited by the neo-liberal crises of the 1990's-2001 which led to the rise of center-left national popular governments throughout the region. This was especially the case for Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Bolivia and Honduras. Moreover, 'centrist' regimes in Peru and Chile remained neutral. Furthermore Venezuela and its allies ensured that the US did not control regional organization.
4. President Chavez as a former military officer secured the loyalty of the military, undercutting US plots to organize coups.
5. The world financial crises of 2008-2009 forced the US to spend several trillion dollars in bailing out the banks. The economic crises and partial recovery strengthened the hand of Treasury and weakened the relative influence of the Pentagon.

In other words, while imperial policies and strategic goals remained, the capacity of the US to pursue conquests was limited by objective conditions.

Circumstances Favoring Imperial Interventions

The reverse circumstances favoring imperialism can be seen in more recent times. These include four conditions:

1. The end of the commodity boom weakened the economies of Venezuela's center-left allies and led to the rise of far-right US directed client regimes as well as heightening the coup activities of US backed opponents of newly elected President Maduro.
2. The failure to diversify exports, markets, financial and distributive systems during the expansive period led to a decline in consumption and production and allowed imperialism to attract voters, especially from middle and lower- middle class consumers, employees, shop keepers, professionals and business people.
3. The Pentagon transferred its military focus from the Middle East to Latin America, identifying military and political clients among key regimes – namely Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Peru and Chile.

4. Washington's political intervention in Latin American electoral processes opened the door to economic exploitation of resources and the recruitment of military allies to isolate and encircle nationalist, populist Venezuela.

Objective external conditions favored Washington's imperial quest for domination. Domestic oligarchic power configurations reinforced the dynamic for imperial intervention, political domination and control over the oil industry.

Venezuela's decline of oil revenue, the elite mobilization of its electoral base and its systematic sabotage of production and distribution had a multiplier effect. The mass media and the self-proclaimed electoral-right embraced the US led far-right coup which manipulated democratic and humanitarian rhetoric.

Washington heightened economic sanctions to starve the low income Chavista supporters, and mobilized its European and Latin American clients to demand Venezuela's surrender while planning a bloody military coup.

The final stage of the US-planned-and-organized military coup required three conditions:

1. A division in the military to provides the Pentagon and coup planners a 'beachhead' and a pretext for a US 'humanitarian' invasion
2. A 'compromising' political leadership which pursues political dialogues with adversaries preparing for war.
3. The freezing of all overseas accounts and closing of all loans and markets which Venezuela continues to depend upon.

Conclusion

Imperialism is a central aspect of US global capitalism. But it cannot accomplish its goals and means whenever and how it wishes. Global and regime shifts in the correlation of forces can thwart and delay imperial success.

Coups can be defeated and converted into radical reforms. Imperialist ambitions can be countered by successful economic policies and strategic alliance.

Latin America has been prone to imperial coups and military interventions. But it is also capable of building regional, class and international alliances.

Unlike other regions and imperial targets, Latin America is terrain for class and anti-imperialist struggles. Economic cycles accompany the rise and fall of classes and as a consequence imperial power advances and retreats.

The US intervention in Venezuela is the longest war of our century- (eighteen years) - exceeding the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. The conflict also illustrates how the US relies on regional clients and overseas allies to provide cover for imperial power grabs.

While coups are frequent, their consequences are unstable - clients are weak and the regimes are subject to popular uprising.

US coups against popular regimes lead to bloody massacres which fail to secure long-term large-scale consolidation.

These are the 'peculiarities' of Latin America coups.

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