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Washington's "Two Track Policy" to Latin America: Marines to Central America and Diplomats to Cuba

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Everyone, from political pundits in Washington to the Pope in Rome, including most journalists in the mass media and in the alternative press, have focused on the US moves toward ending the economic blockade of Cuba and gradually opening diplomatic relations. Talk is rife of a 'major shift' in US policy toward Latin America with the emphasis on diplomacy and reconciliation. Even most progressive writers and journals have ceased writing about US imperialism.

However, there is mounting evidence that Washington's negotiations with Cuba are merely one part of a two-track policy. There is clearly a major US build-up in Latin America, with increasing reliance on 'military platforms', designed to launch direct military interventions in strategic countries.

Moreover, US policymakers are actively involved in promoting 'client' opposition parties, movements and personalities to destabilize independent governments and are intent on re-imposing US domination.

In this essay we will start our discussion with the origins and unfolding of this 'two track' policy, its current manifestations, and projections into the future. We will conclude by evaluating the possibilities of re-establishing US imperial domination in the region.

Origins of the Two Track Policy

Washington's pursuit of a 'two-track policy', based on combining 'reformist policies' toward some political formations, while working to overthrow other regimes and movements by force and military intervention, was practiced by the early Kennedy Administration following the Cuban revolution. Kennedy announced a vast new economic program of aid, loans and investments – dubbed the '*Alliance for Progress*' – to promote development and social reform in Latin American countries willing to align with the US. At the same time the Kennedy regime escalated US military aid and joint exercises in the region. Kennedy sponsored a large contingent of Special Forces – 'Green Berets' – to engage in counter-insurgency warfare. The '*Alliance for Progress*' was designed to counter the mass appeal of the social-revolutionary changes underway in Cuba with its own program of 'social reform'. While Kennedy promoted watered-down reforms in Latin America, he launched the 'secret' CIA ('Bay of Pigs') invasion of Cuba in 1961 and naval blockade in 1962 (the so-called 'missile crises'). The two-track policy ended up sacrificing social reforms and strengthening military repression. By the mid-1970's the 'two-tracks' became one – force. The US invaded the Dominican Republic in 1965. It backed a series of military coups throughout the region, effectively isolating Cuba. As a result, Latin America's labor force experienced nearly a quarter century of declining living standards.

By the 1980's US client-dictators had lost their usefulness and Washington once again took up a dual strategy: On one track, the White House wholeheartedly backed their military-client rulers' neo-liberal agenda and sponsored them as junior partners in Washington's regional hegemony. On the other track, they promoted a shift to highly controlled electoral politics, which they described as a '*democratic transition*', in order to 'decompress' mass social pressures against its military clients. Washington secured the introduction of elections and promoted client politicians willing to continue the neo-liberal socio-economic framework established by the military regimes.

By the turn of the new century, the cumulative grievances of thirty years of repressive rule, regressive neo-liberal socio-economic policies and the denationalization and privatization of the national patrimony had caused an explosion of mass social discontent. This led to the overthrow and electoral defeat of Washington's neo-liberal client regimes.

Throughout most of Latin America, mass movements were demanding a break with US-centered 'integration' programs. Overt anti-imperialism grew and intensified. The period saw the

emergence of numerous center-left governments in Venezuela, Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, Honduras and Nicaragua. Beyond the regime changes, world economic forces had altered: growing Asian markets, their demand for Latin American raw materials and the global rise of commodity prices helped to stimulate the development of Latin American-centered regional organizations – outside of Washington's control.

Washington was still embedded in its 25 year 'single-track' policy of backing civil-military authoritarian and imposing neo-liberal policies and was unable to respond and present a reform alternative to the anti-imperialist, center-left challenge to its dominance. Instead, Washington worked to reverse the new party- power configuration. Its overseas agencies, the Agency for International Development (AID), the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and embassies worked to destabilize the new governments in Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Paraguay and Honduras. The US 'single-track' of intervention and destabilization failed throughout the first decade of the new century (with the exception of Honduras and Paraguay).

In the end Washington remained politically isolated. Its integration schemes were rejected. Its market shares in Latin America declined. Washington not only lost its automatic majority in the Organization of American States (OAS), but it became a distinct minority.

Washington's 'single track' policy of relying on the 'stick' and holding back on the 'carrot' was based on several considerations: The Bush and Obama regimes were deeply influenced by the US's twenty-five year domination of the region (1975-2000) and the notion that the uprisings and political changes in Latin America in the subsequent decade were ephemeral, vulnerable and easily reversed. Moreover, Washington, accustomed to over a century of economic domination of markets, resources and labor, took for granted that its hegemony was unalterable. The White House failed to recognize the power of China's growing share of the Latin American market. The State Department ignored the capacity of Latin American governments to integrate their markets and exclude the US.

US State Department officials never moved beyond the discredited neo-liberal doctrine that they had successfully promoted in the 1990's. The White House failed to adopt a '*reformist*' turn to counter the appeal of radical reformers like Hugo Chavez, the Venezuelan President. This was most evident in the Caribbean and the Andean countries where President Chavez launched his two 'alliances for progress': '*Petro-Caribe*' (Venezuela's program of supplying cheap, heavily subsidized, fuel to poor Central American and Caribbean countries and heating oil to poor neighborhoods in the US) and '*ALBA*' (Chavez' political-economic union of Andean states, plus Cuba and Nicaragua, designed to promote regional political solidarity and economic ties.) Both programs were heavily financed by Caracas. Washington failed to come up with a successful alternative plan.

Unable to win diplomatically or in the 'battle of ideas', Washington resorted to the 'big stick' and sought to disrupt Venezuela's regional economic program rather than compete with Chavez' generous and beneficial aid packages. The US' 'spoiler tactics' backfired: In 2009, the Obama

regime backed a military coup in Honduras, ousting the elected liberal reformist President Zelaya and installed a bloody tyrant, a throwback to the 1970s when the US backed Chilean coup brought General Pinochet to power. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, in an act of pure political buffoonery, refused to call Zelaya's violent ouster a coup and moved swiftly to recognize the dictatorship. No other government backed the US in its Honduras policy. There was universal condemnation of the coup, highlighting Washington's isolation.

Repeatedly, Washington tried to use its 'hegemonic card' but it was roundly outvoted at regional meetings. At the Summit of the Americas in 2010, Latin American countries overrode US objections and voted to invite Cuba to its next meeting, defying a 50-year old US veto. The US was left alone in its opposition.

The position of Washington was further weakened by the decade-long commodity boom (spurred by China's voracious demand for agro-mineral products). The 'mega-cycle' undermined US Treasury and State Department's anticipation of a price collapse. In previous cycles, commodity 'busts' had forced center-left governments to run to the US controlled International Monetary Fund (IMF) for highly conditioned balance of payment loans, which the White House used to impose its neo-liberal policies and political dominance. The 'mega-cycle' generated rising revenues and incomes. This gave the center-left governments enormous leverage to avoid the 'debt traps' and to marginalize the IMF. This virtually eliminated US-imposed conditionality and allowed Latin governments to pursue populist-nationalist policies. These policies decreased poverty and unemployment. Washington played the 'crisis card' and lost. Nevertheless Washington continued working with extreme rightwing opposition groups to destabilize the progressive governments, in the hope that 'come the crash', Washington's proxies would 'waltz right in' and take over.

The Re-Introduction of the 'Two Track' Policy

After a decade and a half of hard knocks, repeated failures of its 'big stick' policies, rejection of US-centered integration schemes and multiple resounding defeats of its client-politicians at the ballot box, Washington finally began to 'rethink' its 'one track' policy and tentatively explore a limited 'two track' approach.

The 'two-tracks', however, encompass polarities clearly marked by the recent past. While the Obama regime opened negotiations and moved toward establishing relations with Cuba, it escalated the military threats toward Venezuela by absurdly labeling Caracas as a '*national security threat to the US*.'

Washington had woken up to the fact that its bellicose policy toward Cuba had been universally rejected and had left the US isolated from Latin America. The Obama regime decided to claim some '*reformist credentials*' by showcasing its opening to Cuba. The '*opening to Cuba*' is really part of a wider policy of a more active political intervention in Latin America. Washington will take full advantage of the increased vulnerability of the center-left governments as the

commodity mega-cycle comes to an end and prices collapse. Washington applauds the fiscal austerity program pursued by Dilma Rousseff's regime in Brazil. It wholeheartedly backs newly elected Tabaré Vázquez's "Broad Front" regime in Uruguay with its free market policies and structural adjustment. It publicly supports Chilean President Bachelet's recent appointment of center-right, Christian Democrats to Cabinet posts to accommodate big business.

These changes within Latin America provide an 'opening' for Washington to pursue a 'dual track' policy: On the one hand Washington is increasing political and economic pressure and intensifying its propaganda campaign against 'state interventionist' policies and regimes in the immediate period. On the other hand, the Pentagon is intensifying and escalating its presence in Central America and its immediate vicinity. The goal is ultimately to regain leverage over the military command in the rest of the South American continent.

The Miami Herald (5/10/15) reported that the Obama Administration had sent 280 US marines to Central America without any specific mission or pretext. Coming so soon after the Summit of the Americas in Panama (April 10 -11, 2015), this action has great symbolic importance. While the presence of Cuba at the Summit may have been hailed as a diplomatic victory for reconciliation within the Americas, the dispatch of hundreds of US marines to Central America suggests another scenario in the making.

Ironically, at the Summit meeting, the Secretary General of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), former Colombian president (1994-98) Ernesto Samper, called for the US to remove all its military bases from Latin America, including Guantanamo: "*A good point in the new agenda of relations in Latin America would be the elimination of the US military bases*".

The point of the US '*opening*' to Cuba is precisely to signal its greater involvement in Latin America, one that includes a return to more robust US military intervention. The strategic intent is to restore neo-liberal client regimes, by ballots or bullets.

Conclusion

Washington's current adoption of a two-track policy is a '*cheap version*' of the John F. Kennedy policy of combining the '*Alliance for Progress*' with the '*Green Berets*'. However, Obama offers little in the way of financial support for modernization and reform to complement his drive to restore neo-liberal dominance.

After a decade and a half of political retreat, diplomatic isolation and relative loss of military leverage, the Obama regime has taken over six years to recognize the depth of its isolation. When Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Roberta Jacobson, claimed she was '*surprised and disappointed*' when every Latin American country opposed Obama's claim that Venezuela represented a '*national security threat to the United States*', she exposed just how ignorant and out-of-touch the State Department has become with regard to Washington's capacity to influence Latin America in support of its imperial agenda of intervention.

With the decline and retreat of the center-left, the Obama regime has been eager to exploit the two-track strategy. As long as the FARC-President Santos peace talks in Colombia advance, Washington is likely to recalibrate its military presence in Colombia to emphasize its destabilization campaign against Venezuela. The State Department will increase diplomatic overtures to Bolivia. The National Endowment for Democracy will intensify its intervention in this year's Argentine elections.

Varied and changing circumstances dictate flexible tactics. Hovering over Washington's tactical shifts is an ominous strategic outlook directed toward increasing military leverage. As the peace negotiations between the Colombian government and FARC guerrillas advance toward an accord, the pretext for maintaining seven US military bases and several thousand US military and Special Forces troops diminishes. However, Colombian President Santos has given no indication that a '*peace agreement*' would be conditioned on the withdrawal of US troops or closing of its bases. In other words, the US Southern Command would retain a vital military platform and infrastructure capable of launching attacks against Venezuela, Ecuador, Central America and the Caribbean. With military bases throughout the region, in Colombia, Cuba (Guantanamo), Honduras (Soto Cano in Palmerola), Curacao, Aruba and Peru, Washington can quickly mobilize interventionary forces. Military ties with the armed forces of Uruguay, Paraguay, and Chile ensure continued joint exercises and close co-ordination of so-called 'security' policies in the '*Southern Cone*' of Latin America. This strategy is specifically designed to prepare for internal repression against popular movements, whenever and wherever class struggle intensifies in Latin America. The two-track policy, in force today, plays out through political-diplomatic and military strategies.

In the immediate period throughout most of the region, Washington pursues a policy of political, diplomatic and economic intervention and pressure. The White House is counting on the '*rightwing swing*' of former center-left governments to facilitate the return to power of unabashedly neo-liberal client-regimes in future elections. This is especially true with regard to Brazil and Argentina.

The '*political-diplomatic track*' is evident in Washington's moves to re-establish relations with Bolivia and to strengthen allies elsewhere in order to leverage favorable policies in Ecuador, Nicaragua and Cuba. Washington proposes to offer diplomatic and trade agreements in exchange for a 'toning down' of anti-imperialist criticism and weakening the 'Chavez-era' programs of regional integration.

The '*two-track approach*', as applied to Venezuela, has a more overt military component than elsewhere. Washington will continue to subsidize violent paramilitary border crossings from Colombia. It will continue to encourage domestic terrorist sabotage of the power grid and food distribution system. The strategic goal is to erode the electoral base of the Maduro government, in preparation for the legislative elections in the fall of 2015. When it comes to Venezuela, Washington is pursuing a '*four step*' strategy:

- (1) Indirect violent intervention to erode the electoral support of the government
- (2) Large-scale financing of the electoral campaign of the legislative opposition to secure a majority in Congress
- (3) A massive media campaign in favor of a Congressional vote for a referendum impeaching the President
- (4) A large-scale financial, political and media campaign to secure a majority vote for impeachment by referendum.

In the likelihood of a close vote, the Pentagon would prepare a rapid military intervention with its domestic collaborators – seeking a ‘Honduras-style’ overthrow of Maduro.

The strategic and tactical weakness of the two-track policy is the absence of any sustained and comprehensive economic aid, trade and investment program that would attract and hold middle class voters. Washington is counting more on the negative effects of the crisis to restore its neo-liberal clients. The problem with this approach is that the pro-US forces can only promise a return to orthodox austerity programs, reversing social and public welfare programs , while making large-scale economic concessions to major foreign investors and bankers. The implementation of such regressive programs are going to ignite and intensify class, community-based and ethnic conflicts.

The ‘*electoral transition*’ strategy of the US is a temporary expedient, in light of the highly unpopular economic policies, which it would surely implement. The complete absence of any substantial US socio-economic aid to cushion the adverse effects on working families means that the US client-electoral victories will not last long. That is why and where the US strategic military build-up comes into play: The success of track-one, the pursuit of political-diplomatic tactics, will inevitably polarize Latin American society and heighten prospects for class struggle. Washington hopes that it will have its political-military client-allies ready to respond with violent repression. Direct intervention and heightened domestic repression will come into play to secure US dominance.

The ‘*two-track strategy*’ will, once again, evolve into a ‘*one-track strategy*’ designed to return Latin America as a satellite region, ripe for pillage by extractive multi-nationals and financial speculators.

As we have seen over the past decade and a half, ‘one-track policies’ lead to social upheavals. And the next time around the results may go far beyond progressive center-left regimes toward truly social-revolutionary governments!

Epilogue

US empire-builders have clearly demonstrated throughout the world their inability to intervene and produce stable, prosperous and productive client states (Iraq and Libya are prime examples). There is no reason to believe, even if the US *'two-track policy'* leads to temporary electoral victories, that Washington's efforts to restore dominance will succeed in Latin America, least of all because its strategy lacks any mechanism for economic aid and social reforms that could maintain a pro-US elite in power. For example, how could the US possibly offset China's \$50 billion aid package to Brazil – except through violence and repression.

It is important to analyze how the rise of China, Russia, strong regional markets and new centers of finance have severely weakened the efforts by client regimes to realign with the US. Military coups and free markets are no longer guaranteed formulas for success in Latin America: Their past failures are too recent to forget.

Finally the *'financialization'* of the US economy, what even the International Monetary Fund (IMF) describes as the negative impact of *'too much finance'* (Financial Times 5/13/15, p 4), means that the US cannot allocate capital resources to develop productive activity in Latin America. The imperial state can only serve as a violent debt collector for its banks in the context of large-scale unemployment. Financial and extractive imperialism is a politico-economic cocktail for detonating social revolution on a continent-wide basis – far beyond the capacity of the US marines to prevent or suppress.