

U.S. is down, but not out, in Latin America

By Andes Oppenheimer
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Judging from the latest headlines, U.S. influence in Latin America has reached its lowest level in recent memory. So I was somewhat surprised when the top U.S. diplomat for the region told me that such a view is "significantly wrong."

Consider: Latin American leaders last week met in Costa do Sauipe, Brazil for the largest hemispheric summit to exclude U.S. representation. At the summit, they celebrated what many of them described as a new era of regional independence from Washington, and gave a hero's welcome to Cuban President Raúl Castro.

Meantime, the Russian Navy made its first stop in Cuba since the end of the Cold War, shortly after a visit by Russian President Dimitri Medvedev to Brazil, Venezuela and Cuba. Simultaneously, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was meeting in Tehran with Ecuador's President Rafael Correa, following a series of Iranian "strategic agreements" with Bolivia and Venezuela.

Thomas A. Shannon Jr., the top State Department official for Western Hemisphere affairs, told me in a telephone interview that he's not losing sleep over the Latin Americans-only summit in Brazil.

'BUILDING BLOCKS'

"We may not have been present physically, but we were certainly a major topic of the conversation," he said.

Referring to that and other Latin American summits, he added that "we have chosen to understand these different events as building blocks leading toward a larger summit, which is the [U.S.-backed] Summit of the Americas in April, where we will be present."

What about the Russian Navy returning to the region? I asked.

"The Russian thing needs to be understood more broadly," said Shannon, who is to visit Moscow this week. "The presence of Russian warships has allowed some people, especially the Venezuelans, to try to project the Russian presence as aimed at the United States. But in a strategic sense, the Russian presence may really be an effort to match China's presence in the region."

Asked about Iran's growing presence in Latin America, Shannon said: "The Russians and the Chinese we can deal with. But Iran, because of the sanctions it is under because of its nuclear programs, because of what Ahmadinejad says about Israel, and because of Iran's historic connection with terrorism in the Americas, especially [the 1994 Jewish community center bombing] in Argentina, is worrisome."

Are you doing anything about it? I asked.

"Yes, but we can't talk about it," he answered. ``The issue is not countries in the region having diplomatic relations with Iran. The issue is their willingness to push the Iranians to meet their international obligations."

Shannon said that most countries in the region are doing that, except Venezuela and Bolivia. Is he worried about Ecuador's growing ties with Iran? ``Not yet."

Shannon disputed the notion -- expressed often in this column -- that the Bush administration has not paid enough attention to Latin America. He said President George W. Bush has visited the region more often, and has invited more Latin American presidents to the White House, than any of his predecessors.

On whether the Brazil summit shows that the Washington-based Organization of American States has been totally eclipsed, Shannon said the OAS "has played an important role" in electoral observation missions and human rights panels, while it hasn't performed that well in solving border conflicts such as that between Colombia and Ecuador, or internal crises such as Bolivia's.

As for OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza's reported desire to run for president of Chile, Shannon said, ``Being OAS secretary is a full-time job, and the moment a secretary general believes he cannot address a job full-time, he needs to say so."

My opinion: Shannon is a smart diplomat, who does a great job putting the best face to a bad situation. Still, the current low point in U.S.-Latin American relations will most likely be a passing phenomenon, which may begin to reverse at the April U.S.-Latin American summit.

INFLUENCE DURABLE

The United States will continue to be the world's biggest economy for at least two or three decades, and Venezuela, Russia and Iran's oil troubles will make them significantly weaker players in the region. And with an incoming Obama administration that is not tied to the Iraq invasion, the United States will have a good chance to regain some of the ground it lost in the hemisphere over the last eight years.