

## **Latin America: Terrorist Actors on a Nuclear Stage**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the steadily growing concern of terrorist activity in Latin America and argues that the US must take on a stronger role in Latin American counterterrorism efforts. Because of the region's proximity to the US geographically and politically any domestic terrorism, or involvement with terrorist states, must be met with close US scrutiny. The changing dynamics that this paper investigates range from worrisome internal political changes to disconcerting political alliances abroad. The connections of local terrorist groups with international terrorist networks, coupled with state sponsored terrorism and the disconcerting relationship some states have adopted with Iran and Russia have caused the US to reevaluate the amount of support the given to the region. The paper concludes that it is vital for the US to continue providing anti-terrorism training to key Latin American states, offer economic assistance and encourage mutual cooperation and information sharing within the region.

**Key words:** International terrorism, Latin America, nuclear weapons, national security

### **Introduction**

In light of Central and South America's proximity to the United States, both geographically and politically, more attention must be placed on them in the current War on Terror. Central and South America, which shall hereto be referred to as Latin America, are no strangers to terrorist activity on their soil. On the surface, Latin America does not seem as though it is a region that would have to struggle with such subversive activity. After all, Latin states do not have significant Muslim populations for international terrorist networks such as Al Qaida to blend into. Furthermore, unlike Middle Eastern States, their democratically elected leaders will not hesitate to engage them in military confrontations. Lastly, their economies are not as easy to establish faceless financial networks as they are in Europe or the Middle East. However, beneath the surface, Latin America is a porous region, ideal for terrorist activity to flourish.

These factors fall in line with the current administration's policy of keeping nuclear weapons out of the hands of terrorists. It has stated that although the threat of a nuclear attack by sovereign states has gone down, the threat of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists has gone up. Latin America has not only a history of terrorist activity and stratocracy, but nuclear activity as well. Although the region is known internationally as a nuclear-free zone, recent developments have demonstrated that a renewed interest in nuclear weapons development may be on the rise. This will mean a risk of nuclear materials falling into the hands of domestic or international terrorists is now a real concern for the US in the region itself.

Terrorism in Latin America is almost completely characterized by domestic, guerrilla insurgents. These insurgents channel their terrorist activity against the authoritarian democracies they live under. Groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) and the United Self-Defense Forces of Columbia (AUC) implement similar tactics to those of international terrorist groups. These tactics include car bombings, kidnappings and, according to the Congressional Research Service, "murders of elected officials and attacks against military and civilian targets in urban and rural areas."<sup>1</sup> However, although it has tactical similarities to international terrorist groups, they differ quite profusely in their purpose. Whereas other groups maintain religious differences as the premise for their activity, domestic Latin American groups have Marxist political and economic ideologies underlying their activity.

Their livelihood comes from the most profitable market they are capable of exploiting, drug trafficking. This poses a significant and immediate threat to the United States. The initial threat is the fact that many of these drugs find their way to the US border. The greater danger lies in what this market is being used to fund, domestic attacks on key leaders of Latin American states who are key allies of the US and supporters of the GWOT. In many cases, these groups are further supported by neighboring states who seek to undermine US interests as well as US allies in the region. These neighboring states have supported terrorist groups more and more in recent years as a result of a leftward political trend across the region.

### **Tactics and Political Trends in Latin America**

Although every Latin American state is run by democratic governments and all of their leaders come to power via the ballot box, some are still authoritarian democracies. In recent years there has been a shift to the left in key states like Nicaragua, Venezuela and Bolivia. Some of them have even become unapologetically Marxist. The terrorist activity in these states is typically political in nature. It is mostly domestic, but the goal of all of these groups is a violent, Marxist revolution in the governments of each of these states. When leftists like Evo Morales of Bolivia, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua empathize with the ideology of these groups there arises the possibility of state support of this terrorist activity. There also arises the risk that one of these groups will be successful in their mission.

Although there is not as strong of a presence of international terrorist groups like Al Qaida or Hezbollah, the activities of the domestic groups in Latin America adopt the same practices as the groups the US has fought for the last decade. This fits these groups into the classical understanding of terrorism. For instance, they target politically or economically relevant targets. More often than not, they will target important figures in these realms but sometimes attack inanimate targets such as oil facilities in Columbia.

Their tactics in general, are indicative of their terrorist identities. Groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the United Self-Defense Forces of Columbia (AUC) have deteriorated in power, but the political uncertainty of the region coupled with the strong support of certain states leaves the potential for another flood of violence.

Over the last ten years or so, a series of significant electoral victories took place which ushered in a new leftward shift in Latin American politics that was impenitently anti-US and powerfully supportive of these groups and enemies of the US in the GWOT. This trend was termed the "pink tide" by the media. It was a drastic change from the decades of dictatorships and neoliberal restructuring. These political developments have left the region with many

challenges. For instance, the New Leftist governments have developed their own factions that distance the populous from the 20<sup>th</sup> century status quo in different ways. These factions which are embodied in populism and moderate social democracy seek a complete restructuring of the entire political fabric. Jon Beasley-Murray, a writer for the Third World Quarterly described the pink tide by stating that “the left turns are best described as a multiplicity of disparate efforts to reopen or re-found the constitutional order or social pact.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, these new leaders are not primarily concerned with making meager policy changes to better the people they are responsible to, but are dedicated to the complete undoing and overhaul of the very political and social fabric of their society.

This has captured the imagination of the region’s populous with pledges of greater redistribution of wealth and a rectification of past injustices. However, with this restructuring comes a political and social challenge that may render these states vulnerable to a domestic terrorist echo. Murray elaborates on this trend by outlining that “Dichotomizing the left into radical populists and social democrats conveniently reproduces the old cleavage between revolution and reform within the new context of democracy and globalization.”<sup>2</sup> This means that although the leaders of these leftist regimes are not actively calling for an anti-capitalist revolution, they are still not acting responsibly within the confines of the electoral democracies which they owe their political existence to.

These states provide support and comfort to the great terrorist presence in the region. This contrasts with the policies of legitimate Latin American allies to the US that have not succumbed to the pink tide and continue to suppress the Marxist violence that plagues their society. With the help of the US they have amped up the counterterrorism capabilities of their federal departments. For the most part it has been rather successful. Yet, local terrorist groups still manage to flourish regardless.

The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) and the United Self-Defense Forces of Columbia are two of the most prominent resistance groups in the region. The FARC, the more well-known of the two is described by the National Counterterrorism Center as “Latin America’s oldest, largest, most capable and best-equipped insurgency of Marxist origin.”<sup>3</sup> Its operations are primarily carried out in Columbia with a heavy emphasis on activities such as extortion, kidnapping, weapons sourcing and logistics in surrounding states. They are notorious for their heavy involvement in drug trafficking. Their elaborate activities in this market include taxation, cultivation and distribution. This factor in and of itself is of interest to the US, but its significance to US interests goes far beyond a mere illegal trade market. Although this is a primarily Columbian terrorist group, its leaders consider US civilians and non combatants as legitimate targets because the US is a strong ally to the Columbian government.

Fortunately, in recent years, FARC has experienced some very significant setbacks. This is partially due to internal dissention and partially due to increased efforts by the Columbian government to combat FARC activities with the aid of the US. According to the 2009 annual country report, the Columbian government continued to cooperate closely with the US government to control the financial assets of terrorist groups like the FARC. This is particularly why the US must continue to work intimately with Latin American states in any way it can to repress these groups.

In Columbia’s case it specifically worked with the US Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) to nullify the drug trafficking circuit as a profitable market for local revolutionary groups. Administratively, Columbia worked with the OFAC to implement sanctions investigations to target specific networks of money exchange businesses that laundered

narcotics earnings for the FARC. Out in the field, Columbia aggressively carried out aerial and manual eradication of illegal drugs in different regions which were vital to targeting terrorist group finances.

Another very effective provision implemented by the Colombian government is its new and innovative "Democratic Security" policy. The US State Department's country report on terrorism in the Western Hemisphere illustrates this strategy as "combin[ing] military, intelligence, police operations, efforts to demobilize combatants, and the provision of public services in rural areas previously dominated by illegal armed groups."<sup>4</sup> As a result of these and other effective strategies in 2008, recruiting has gone down and there have been a record number of deserters in the FARC's chain of command. This trend was especially prominent among the group's mid-level leaders. There were even reports of desertions by high-level leaders such as FARC commander Nelly Avila Moreno in May of 2008.

The purpose behind highlighting such successes is to demonstrate that unless there is a concerted effort among all Latin American states, local and effective policies will not be able to hamper these movements. The State Department report goes on to say that "despite the ongoing campaign against the FARC, the group continued tactical-level terrorism, kidnapping for profit and maintained 28 political hostages including former Meta Governor Alan Jara and Valle del Cauca Assemblyman Sigifredo Lopez."<sup>5</sup> These violent acts were made possible due to a lack of cooperation among the intelligence apparatuses of various Latin states.

Further tactical level terrorist acts included attacks on electrical towers in Narino and Cauca, a bombing in Ituango and attacks on public officials, teachers and even humanitarian caravans. Furthermore, in March of 2009, the FARC garnered enough strength to amass an organized offensive against the Colombian Government itself. This offensive was aimed at various military and civilian targets. Although the security forces sent in by the Colombian government were rather successful in thwarting much of the attack, the group remains a significant threat today. The resources at their disposal have also shown to be highly lethal and dangerously advanced. One manifestation of this trend arose out of a July raid on a FARC camp after the offensive. It was discovered that the FARC possessed several man-made portable antitank missiles which had previously been in the hands of the Venezuelan government before they reached the terrorist group.

The FARC has undoubtedly served as a detrimental presence in Colombian affairs. And it is not the only group with an appetite for destruction as evidenced by bombings on Jewish sites in Latin America by small groups of local Al Qaida operatives. However, it is by no means the only form of terrorist threat in the region. Other groups that once possessed a numerous, unified and hostile following dedicated to violent terrorist tactics resorted to other means of influencing Latin American societies.

As a result of the increased efforts of Latin American states to combat all insurgent groups, a majority of domestic terrorist groups have diminished greatly. Like Al Qaida they have splintered off into factious groups acting independently of one another and embedding themselves heavily in the drug trade. Yet, like Hezbollah they have also decided to turn to politics to achieve their means. The United Self-Defense Forces of Columbia (AUC) is an example of such a group. The AUC was originally a group that organized illegal paramilitary groups to oppose leftist guerrillas. As the umbrella organization for these groups, it progressively veered toward heavy activity in the drug trade, empowering the sub-groups it controlled with the knowledge of effective drug trafficking. By 2007, the centralized military edifice of the AUC had been dismantled by intensified efforts by the Colombian government to

demobilize it. Over 31,000 paramilitary members had disbanded as a result. Yet, the developments that ensued proved to be just as problematic as the organized AUC that proved problematic for Columbia in the first place.

According to the Naval Post-Graduate School, "Columbia now faces criminal gangs formed by demobilized paramilitaries and other individuals, and one minor paramilitary group that refused to disarm [they are] more clearly criminal enterprises focused primarily on drug trafficking, other lucrative illicit activities and influencing local politics to facilitate their criminal ventures."<sup>6</sup> Over 70% of their paramilitary operations are funded by their involvement in the drug trade. The rest comes from "donations" from sponsors or from contributions by corrupt politicians.

This trend is seen elsewhere in Latin America as groups, now realizing that they cannot win with military tactics alone must exploit the drug trade as the most lucrative tool of the local economy. In Peru, security forces continue to struggle against the Shining Path (SL), a brutal and dedicated group that was once the most ruthless terrorist group in the Western Hemisphere. Now, it has all but disappeared. In the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century SL resorted to drug trafficking as its primary criminal activity. However, as the State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism states, "SL has conducted indiscriminate bombing campaigns, ambushes and selective assassinations" a recent increase in SL attacks against Peruvian security forces and counter-narcotics personnel during Fall 2008 underscored that the SL remained a threat."<sup>7</sup>

The tendency of terrorist groups to fluctuate in their potency from year to year depends on the resolve of the government and its people. It also can be reinforced by the strength of Marxist leaders in neighboring states coupled with the porous borders of certain areas. Therefore, it is appropriate to examine the dynamics of weak areas in Latin America that seek an end to terrorist activity on their soil and strong regimes that seek to embolden terrorist activity if it suits their interests.

### **Tri-Border Area (TBA)**

The TBA is a small area in Latin America where the borders of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay meet. This small region has historically been used for "arms and drugs smuggling, document fraud, money laundering and the manufacture and movement of contraband goods in the border region where their three countries meet."<sup>8</sup> Lately, the region has not been plagued with this activity as it normally is. This came as a result of the 3+1 policy between the US and the TBA nations. It was a concerted effort by all four parties to thwart all money laundering and other terrorist funding activities in the region. However, the US congress has expressed great concern that Hezbollah and Hamas sympathizers from the area's large Muslim population continue to raise funds for these groups. This remains a concern despite the fact that no operational Hezbollah or Hamas presence has been confirmed there.

There have been, however, two significant terrorist bombings in the area caused by Hezbollah, both Jewish targets. The first was a 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires and the other was a 1994 bombing of the Argentine-Israeli Mutual Association (AMIA) in the same city. The US congress in 2007 passed H.Con. Res 188 which commended the Argentine government for its proactive efforts in the AMIA investigation and called on the General Assembly of Interpol to issue red notices for five Iranian nationals indicted for the bombing. The congress went even further and passed H.Con.Res. 385 in 2008 which officially

condemned the AMIA bombing and called on Western Hemisphere governments to take actions to curb activities that supported Hezbollah and other Islamist terrorist organizations.

The actions taken by the US in regards to this area is demonstrative of an increasing trend that it is closely monitoring lest the activities undermine US interests in the entire region. These activities are not exclusive only to the TBA. There are specific Latin American states that are causing great concern to the US, particularly Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua. This comes in light of the pink tide, but is reinforced by the Iranian government's increased interest in influencing the region because of its geographic location to the United States border.

## **Cuba**

Although Cuba is the only state in Latin America that is officially on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism, there are other sources of aid domestic terrorists can turn to. For instance, Venezuela provided key support to the FARC. Caracas supplied some logistical, financial and lethal aid to the FARC.<sup>9</sup> Hugo Chavez has publicly praised FARC leaders, calling for them to be classified as belligerent forces, not terrorist groups. Although the report does not say that the Venezuela has provided anything on the same line as safe haven, the FARC has found a willing supporter in Cuba. The Cuban government provided safe haven in addition to some medical care and some vital political consultation. This is not only the case with FARC. Members of the Basque Fatherland, Liberty ETA and National Liberation Army (ELN) also remained on Cuban soil for the bulk of 2008. Some of these members arrived in Cuba on official business, some in connection with peace negotiations with the Spanish government and others with the Columbian government. This asylum came coupled with public support from Cuban officials, particularly for the FARC.

This type of activity is not exclusively tied to support for domestic terrorist groups. The Cuban government was also reported to have permitted US fugitives legal residence in Cuba. These groups included members of Boricua Popular, or Macheteros, and the Black Liberation Army. These unabashed acts demonstrate the threat that leftwing governments can and have posed to the US. Cuba has proven to be the oldest and most trying state in the region.

Although Cuba is the only state in the region that is on the US's list of state sponsors of terrorism, it is hardly the only state that threatens the US by sustaining terrorist activity. Many Latin American states have not only shown that they do not intend to fully cooperate with US efforts to combat terrorism, but they also establish and strengthen ties with enemies of the US, particularly Iran. President Ahmadinejad has made no secret of his intentions to exude Iranian influence in Latin America. The US government has already taken note of this trend.

One specialist in Latin American Affairs, Mark P. Sullivan, stated in his Congressional Research Service Report for Congress that "In the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, the house approved H.Res. 435 (Klein) in November 2007, which expressed concern about Iran's efforts to expand its influence in Latin America, and noted Venezuela's increasing cooperation with Iran."<sup>10</sup> The Congress went even further and passed other resolutions in March of 2008, which never became law, which would have called on the Bush administration to designate Venezuela as a state sponsor of terrorism. These apparent concerns, coupled with the fact that terrorists find it easy to obtain Venezuelan citizenship, identities and travel documents makes Venezuela a significant threat to US interests as well as its counterterrorism efforts.

## Venezuela

The government of Venezuela led by Hugo Chavez was brought into power democratically but exudes behavior reminiscent of revolutionary leaders like Muhammad Qadhafi. Indeed, Chavez is the Qadhafi of Latin America. He may not have the luxury of a non-democratic, authoritarian government to manipulate as Qadhafi did, but the pink tide in Latin America demonstrates a rise in Marxist ideology and Chavez is not immune from this trend. Both Qadhafi and Chavez are highly ideological leaders. In order to embellish their ideologies and spread it throughout their nations and regions, they solidified their political powers and changed their regimes to give them more power over their populations. In Chavez's case, he is attempting to dramatically change the Venezuelan constitution.

Chavez was a revolutionary since the early 1990s just as Qadhafi was a revolutionary in the late 1960s. Both men are Marxists. They came to power claiming they were going to utilize their own form of Marxism to transcend the evils of their day. In Qadhafi's case, it was Western colonialism that he was saving Libya and the Middle East from. In Chavez's case, he seeks to save Venezuela from capitalism itself, calling its influence on any people a curse.

In the pursuit of the demise of these systems, both Qadhafi and Chavez have supported local terrorist groups in their respective regions. Qadhafi was considered the scourge of the international community. Chavez may very well acquire that mantle in the coming years. For now he is careful not to involve himself too deeply in terrorism, but is greatly supportive of groups like the FARC. Additionally, he refuses to cooperate with the United States in combating terrorism. To begin with, he does not see terrorism as any significant threat worthy of being addressed. In 2009 Venezuela was re-certified as not cooperating fully with US antiterrorism efforts under Section 40A of the Arms Export and Control Act. In January of 2008, in the Venezuelan National Assembly, Chavez approved a resolution calling for "international recognition of the FARC and ELN as belligerent forces, not terrorist groups."<sup>11</sup> This and other instances where Chavez offers significant support to terrorists is his indirect method of opposition to the US and the international community without foolishly opposing and undermining the US as Qadhafi did. However, Venezuela has not only been prone to offer aid and comfort to domestic terrorists. International terrorist groups have also found favor in Venezuelan courts.

In June of 2008, the US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) classified a top Venezuelan diplomat, Ghazi Nasr al Din and his travel impresario Fawzi Kan'an as Venezuelan supporters of Hezbollah. This trend is no doubt connected to its growing relationship with Iran since Hezbollah is an Iran-based terrorist group. Their joint relationship is publicly advertised as an attempt to overhaul the international financial system. Whenever they are together in public, they always talk about the economic progress they help each other achieve. At the same time they criticize the capitalist practices of the United States. Although Venezuela is not the only Latin American state to develop warm relationships with Iran, Chavez has been the most frequent Latin American visitor to Tehran. This growing relationship has caused great concern for US officials. Venezuela is riding the line between state sponsor of terrorism and simple non-compliant regime in the war against terrorism. Therefore, although it does not exude behavior which would place it on the list of state sponsors of terrorism, it is acting like a clear enemy in the GWOT. Therefore, the actions of Hugo Chavez must be paid close attention before he becomes the brazen enemy of the US as he appears to be when he speaks in public.

## Nicaragua

The Republic of Nicaragua is not as brazen as other Latin American states in its support of domestic terrorism. It provides neither logistical nor financial support. However, it maintains already existing ties with certain groups and provides identity cards to their leaders. The Nicaraguan president, Daniel Ortega continues to maintain close relations with the FARC. The country reports on terrorism recounts the fact that the Ortega regime has made ño substantive progress towards establishing a Financial Intelligence Unit or on a counterterrorism bill first proposed in 2004.<sup>12</sup> The close ties seen between Nicaragua and the FARC have caused some discontent between the Colombian and Nicaraguan governments. In fact, Nicaraguan-Columbian diplomatic relations were broken for 24 hours in the aftermath of Columbia's March 2008 raid against a FARC base in Ecuador. Even though the diplomatic relations were restored, the relationship itself continued to sour after Nicaragua publicly hailed various survivors of the raid and granted them asylum, subsequently calling the raid ñstate-sponsored terrorism by Columbia.ö

Nicaraguan support of domestic terrorism even began to take a more personal role as the government offered aid and needed documentation to specific leaders of the FARC, not just generalized support to members whom the government believed was a part of the group itself. It was discovered that in late 2007, an official from the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) supplied a Nicaraguan national identity card (cedula) to FARC emissary Alberto Bermudez, aka ñCojoö. It was given under the pseudonym of Rene Alberto Gutierrez Pastron. From that time Cojo used that identity card to frequent Nicaragua as a safe haven from Colombian forces. This act was directly counter to all counterterrorist policies of the US and the international community, demonstrating Nicaragua's absolute refusal to cooperate with international initiatives.

## Policy Implications

The policy implications for the United States are that of close surveillance and even closer diplomacy. Latin America has historically been an area of relative hostility for the US. It is an area prone to authoritarianism and is an ideal environment for violent ideologies to take root. Because of these factors, it is potentially susceptible to influence from the enemies of the US. Although it has made great strides in the last few decades, its tendency toward disunion has made it particularly difficult to fully mobilize it against terrorist activity. It also means the US cannot afford to ignore Latin America as a potential battleground in the GWOT.

The dramatic pink tide in Latin American politics has commanded the attention of US foreign policy. If the US does not continue to engage Latin America with anti-terrorist support, it will quickly become a manifestation of the type of terrorism that has exploded in the Middle East and the political-revolutionary type of terrorism that has exploded in Africa.

The US must continue to demonstrate to Latin American states that it fully supports their struggle against leftist guerrillas. It must do this also as delicately as possible. For instance, the US provided economic and military assistance to El Salvador in its struggle against a leftist guerrilla insurgency. If the US does not continue to support Latin states who call out for help in their time of need, they will either be overcome by the revolutionaries that threaten their existence, or they will be heavily influenced by the more leftist Latin American regimes, spreading their militant ideologies across the region.

The first thing that must be done is the US must pass stronger legislation which hampers illegal immigration. At the same time it must build the much debated fence along its southern border. In doing so, it will constrain the illegal drug market that originates in Latin America, making leftist guerrillas just about incapable of financially sustaining their violent operations. It will also hamper their efforts to enter the US to exploit any other market that it could potentially live off of.

In the meantime, the US must continue to maintain a presence in every Latin American ally. It must continue to train Latin governments to conduct better airport security, counterterrorism measures and law enforcement cooperation. In providing military, and even economic, support, the goal of the US should be increased cooperation amongst all Latin American states. That way, Latin American allies will be able to overcome the leftist trends taking place in the region and, most importantly, overcome the influences of the belligerent states of the region, namely Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela.

### **Nuclear Proliferation in Latin America**

The close relationship the US must maintain with Latin America is not only vital in the fight against domestic and international terrorism, but also in the fight to curtail nuclear proliferation in the region. Although there is no immediate risk of Latin America in becoming a haven for a nuclear arms race, it could pose a serious threat of pursuing nuclear weapons in the coming years if the civilian-run governments of these states fall victim to leftist revolutionaries. Another factor to consider is the fact that Latin America has historically been active in both nuclear weapons development and nuclear power development. And given Latin America's tendency toward military junta regimes (stratocracy), the US cannot turn a blind eye to the possibility of nuclear activity in Latin America.

All Latin American countries are party to the NPT. Not all are members of international conventions such as the Vienna Convention on Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage and not all adopt an Additional Protocol (AP) to their safeguards agreements with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The region itself has been declared a nuclear-free zone according to the Treaty of Tlatelolco. It entered into force in 1969 and did not have all 33 Latin American states sign onto it until Cuba added its name in 2002. However, the treaty itself has not served as an absolute ban of nuclear weapons in the region. Brazil, for instance, has not let the Treaty of Tlatelolco stand in the way of its own weapons development program in the late 1970s. And Venezuela today is not letting it stand in its way either. The most significant weakness of the treaty is the fact that it permits parties of the treaty to develop nuclear explosives for peaceful purposes. Therefore, Latin America has served as battlefield in the fight for non-proliferation.

According to Ken Berry, the research coordinator for the International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament (ICNND), "Three countries from the Latin American region are known to have at one time or another harbored desires to acquire nuclear weapons: Argentina and Brazil, particularly during the years of military dictatorship there, through indigenous programs of their own, while Cuba intended to allow the deployment of Soviet missiles with nuclear warheads on its territory."<sup>13</sup> With the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba has abandoned any hope of permitting nuclear warheads on its soil despite the fact that it still possesses a nuclear research reactor from the Soviet era. Both Argentina and Brazil cancelled their nuclear programs after their governments transferred from stratocracies to civilian-run governments.

## Argentina

Argentina in 1978 began to seriously pursue a secret program to acquire nuclear weapons while it still bore the burden of the military rule of marshal law. The program was not even revealed to the international community until civilian rule was restored in 1983 and Argentina became a significant US ally. Argentina possesses a significant amount of uranium deposits. It also has two active nuclear reactors, one in Buenos Aires and one in Cordoba. The significance of Argentina's brief nuclear past is the fact that it was more than capable of masking a genuine attempt to acquire nuclear weapons. Part of this was due to the military government and part of it was Argentina's tropical terrain. Other states such as Libya and Iran find it much more difficult to hide facilities being developed in their primarily desert-like terrain.

The Argentina of 1978, very much a terrorist state at the time, did not have to fear close scrutiny by the United States because it was preoccupied with other issues such as the Cold War, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the rising tensions in Iran. This lack of attention by the US was yet another significant factor in the ease of proctoring such a program. Therefore, the US must work closely with Argentina lest it run the risk of someday getting overthrown and reverting back to the military rule it has known all too well in past years. It must additionally ensure that the current Argentine government does not embrace Iran's desire to expand relations with Latin American states. With the current international financial recession Argentina does not have the means necessary to mine its uranium deposits. However, it is certain that Iran would have no qualms with fitting the bill to import that uranium for itself.

## Brazil

Brazil possesses a similar nuclear profile, but with ongoing activity. It also began a secret nuclear program in 1978 under military rule. Civilian rule was not restored until 1985, at which point subsequent leaders revealed these programs. However, unlike Argentina, Brazil's military remains as a powerful and autonomous force and extensive military nuclear development have continued since 1985. According to the nuclear weapon archive, "Brazil has maintained a two track nuclear program, an open civilian program and a secret military program (which undoubtedly draws on the technology and expertise of the civilian component)."<sup>14</sup> Although Brazil is currently a US ally in the GWOT, the US-Brazilian relationship must be carefully maintained. If it succumbs to the pink tide in the region it may eventually open up a market with Iran to export Uranium or Thorium, both important elements in developing nuclear capabilities and two resources that Brazil is rich with. In fact, Brazil is already negotiating with Iran over its nuclear program. It was not a negotiation for Iran to aid in Brazil's development of a nuclear program. It was, instead, an attempt by Brazil as a US ally to keep Iran from receiving further sanctions.

According to a May 16, 2010 New York Times article, Brazil held a tri-lateral meeting with the leaders of both Turkey and Iran. The article stated that, "the Brazilian and Turkish leaders have been trying to revive a deal reached last October in which Iran would ship much of its stockpile of enriched uranium abroad for further processing; the uranium would then return as fuel rods for a medical research reactor."<sup>15</sup> If these negotiations are successful, it will mean that Iran will be able to use nuclear materials for peaceful purposes under the checks and balances of the international community.

This would affirm Brazil's paramount position as a serious player in international diplomacy. It also further confirms the fact that the US cannot ignore Brazil or Latin states like it. Leftist guerrillas have always been a serious threat to all states in Latin America. If Brazil fell to a leftist revolution, it would become a detrimental player against the United States in the GWOT. The fact that it already has a strong enough position in the global community to initiate high level negotiations speaks volumes about its political and strategic development in the nuclear weapons debate. Fortunately, the actions that Brazil is and has taken on the issue have been in favor of US interests. The interactions it has had with Iran has been as an impartial mediator rather than a malicious cohort with the enemies of the US. This is more than can be said for states like Venezuela who have openly voiced opposition to what the US does and who it is.

### **Nuclear Aspirations of Venezuela**

Venezuela, in addition to openly supporting domestic terrorism has openly expressed its desire to acquire nuclear materials. Although nuclear weapons, as opposed to standard nuclear materials, has not been something he openly advocates for, the US is paying close attention to his activity because, as we have learned from the Argentine and Brazilian examples, secrecy is always the name of the game. The Carnegie Endowment estimates that Venezuela will require at least fifteen years to develop all necessary physical and intellectual infrastructure to safely establish its first plant. Furthermore, with the struggling international economy, Venezuela will have great difficulties paying for such projects. Hugo Chavez has sought help from both Brazil and Argentina for technology and aid in developing that technology. However, with Venezuela's Iranian connections, they refused out of fear of a US reaction.

Nevertheless, this has not stopped Venezuela from seeking aid outside of its borders. It has become gradually more congenial with Iran, China and Russia. Russia in particular has become particularly close with Venezuela on this issue. In April of 2010, Vladimir Putin made a trip to Venezuela for the first time. His intent was to discuss a Russo-Venezuelan agreement on bilateral nuclear cooperation in a minor attempt to "make the world more democratic, [and] make it balanced and multipolar."<sup>16</sup> The results of the meeting began the first of what may be many plans to develop a nuclear power plant to be built with Russian help, a goal of Hugo Chavez since 2005. Additionally, Russia will continue to sell weapons to Venezuela. For five years already, Venezuela has already spent \$4 billion worth of weapons, to include helicopters, fighter jets and Kalashnikov rifles. Such developments have caused great concerns for the US due to the fact that Venezuela could quickly become the same threat in Latin America as Iran is in the Middle East, or Qaddafi was in Libya.

This Russo-Venezuelan agreement reinforces a relationship that primarily empowers Venezuela itself. The Iranian-Venezuelan relationship causes much different concerns for the US. In this relationship Venezuela is not the benefactor, Iran is. The concern is the transfer of uranium, which Venezuela possesses. Chavez has personally helped Iran establish diplomatic and economic ties for similar reasons he solidified ties with Russia. It is likely that he will begin trading Venezuelan uranium for Iranian nuclear technology.

## Conclusion

The policy implications for the United States are to maintain the role of a guiding figure in Latin American developments. The stakes for the US have never been higher. In a region that has a strong history of domestic terrorism and stratocracy, strong oversight is warranted. The current US administration's policy on nuclear deterrence is that the threat of a nuclear attack from a sovereign state has gone down, but the threat of nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists has gone up. No region of the world is closer to the US or has a greater ease of access to the US border than Latin America. Therefore, it is vital that the US continue providing anti-terrorism training to key Latin American states, offer economic assistance and encourage mutual cooperation and information sharing among allied states. Once this is accomplished, Latin American nuclear proliferation will cease to be a factor in the terrorist activity that threatens each state to this day.

The mutual cooperation will help to diminish the activities of groups like the FARC and the AUC. Furthermore, international groups such as Al Qaida and Hezbollah will not be able to acquire nuclear weapons should they develop a stronger presence in the region. A blind eye should also not be turned towards states that overtly refuse to cooperate in the GWOT. States like Venezuela and Nicaragua should not be left to their own devices. The relationships that are being built with Russia and Iran must also be carefully monitored. Venezuela may not be very close to a nuclear weapon, but the technology and applied sciences it receives from both Iran and Russia has the potential to speed up its development. It has already failed to acquire technology from its neighbors, so the US must continue to solidify its relations with states like Brazil and Argentina and discourage any relations with Iran. If its leaders and diplomats can continue to press that issue, it can curb the increase in trade between Latin America and Iran and end the political and diplomatic connections Iran has been forming in recent years.

Above any other measure, the US must ensure that every Latin American nation knows that it cares about the development and defense of the region. If that region is secure, the US is secure; and as long as the region struggles with terrorism and nuclear proliferation, the US will be there to support it in every way possible.

## End Notes

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- <sup>3</sup> The National Counterterrorism Center. (2009). *Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia*. Washington DC: <http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/farc.html>
- <sup>4</sup> US Department of State. (2009). *Chapter 2. Country Reports: Western Hemisphere*. Washington, DC: Office of the Coordinator For Counterterrorism. pp. 9.
- <sup>5</sup> US Department of State. (2009). *Chapter 2. Country Reports: Western Hemisphere*. Washington, DC: Office of the Coordinator For Counterterrorism pp. 10.
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- <sup>9</sup> US Department of State. (2009). *Chapter 2. Country Reports: Western Hemisphere*. Washington, DC: Office of the Coordinator For Counterterrorism. pp. 6-7.
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- <sup>11</sup> US Department of State. (2009). *Chapter 2. Country Reports: Western Hemisphere*. Washington, DC: Office of the Coordinator For Counterterrorism. pp. 15-16.
- <sup>12</sup> US Department of State. (2009). *Chapter 2. Country Reports: Western Hemisphere*. Washington, DC: Office of the Coordinator For Counterterrorism. pp. 17.
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- <sup>15</sup> Barrionuevo, Alexei (2010 May 16). *Brazil and Turkey Near Nuclear Deal with Iran*. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/17/world/middleeast/17iran.html?scp=4&sq=Nuclear%20Weapons%20Summit&st=cse>
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