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MERCOSUR Could Sweep in Cuba

by LADB Staff

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While President George W. Bush attempts to increase enforcement of sanctions against Cuba, recent elections elsewhere in the region have brought to power leaders who are moving quickly to reincorporate Cuba into the Latin American community. In the face of a great southern revolt against the US-sponsored Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), neoliberalism, and US interventionism, the Bush administration has clung to its demand for capitalism and US-style electoral democracy in Cuba. Cuba is the only country excluded from the FTAA because the US has made democracy a condition for participation.

However, the trend among Cuba's neighbors is to link free trade with fair trade and not with the Washington version of political and economic correctness. Argentina restores diplomatic relations with Cuba After more than two years of tension, Argentina has restored full diplomatic relations with Cuba. Relations soured in 2001 after Argentina voted with the US in the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva to condemn Cuba for its human rights record. President Fidel Castro responded with verbal attacks calling Argentina's foreign minister "a boot licker" for the US (see NotiCen, 2001-05-03).

But recently elected President Nestor Kirchner sent a new ambassador to Havana in October with instructions to patch things up. Ambassador Abraham Teleb said, "We are under a strict directive that Cuban-Argentine relations deepen and bear fruit." Argentine Foreign Minister Rafael Bielsa and his Cuban counterpart Felipe Perez Roque have already signed several agreements on trade and political and cultural exchanges.

Brazilian president visits Cuba

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva visited Cuba Sept. 26 and 27, arriving with some 50 high-level government officials and business leaders ready to make deals. Elected last year as a populist reformer, Lula nevertheless quickly won respect, even in Washington, for his relatively moderate policies, including his refusal to reject the FTAA outright. The concrete results of the visit were various economic agreements reached between the two leaders. The agreements covered tourism, fishing, health, education, sports exchanges, agriculture, and literacy campaigns.

Another agreement restructures Cuba's US\$40 million debt with Brazil. Under the new arrangement, Cuba pledges a portion of its earnings from exports to Brazil to pay down the debt. The talks also covered an expansion of Brazil's activities in Cuba's oil industry. Brazil's state-owned Petroleo Brasileiro (PETROBRAS) is expected to reach an agreement with Cuba to begin deep-water exploration in Cuba's zone in the Gulf of Mexico. This is an important development for Cuba's oil industry because PETROBRAS is one of the few oil companies that has technology and experience in deep-sea exploration.

Visit raises concerns in US

The Miami Herald and other US media maintained that the key question regarding Lula's visit to Cuba was whether the Brazilian president would meet with Cuban dissidents. Herald columnist Andres Oppenheimer suggested that failure to meet with them would erode Lula's international credibility. "It could be a sign of political cowardice" and "an endorsement of Cuba's dictatorship," he wrote.

The Los Angeles Times also set its own agenda for Lula in Cuba. In an editorial, the Times defined Lula's visit as a test. "If he desires real hemispheric stature, he must tell Castro that the times have passed him by and underscore just how much the region has embraced democracy....Most important, Lula should dramatize Castro's repression of his people. Lula should meet with relatives of Castro opposition members who were jailed recently for disagreeing with the regime," said the editorial. The Mexico City daily El Universal saw the visit in larger terms, saying it gave Castro "a political triumph, rescuing the island from its international isolation."

To some extent, the meeting had to do with reversing the US policy of forced isolation. Jose Tilder Santiago, Brazil's ambassador in Havana, told reporters before the visit that Lula thought it important to counter US and European Union (EU) pressure against Cuba. "Lula...is convinced that it is important not to leave Cuba out of the concert of nations," he said. Lula refuses to meet dissidents Responding to requests from dissidents that Lula meet with them,

Ambassador Tilder Santiago said there would be no such meetings. The president, he said, "does not favor such a course." He added that Lula had enough credibility in the international community that expressing solidarity with Cuba would do nothing to hurt Brazil's relations with the US. Nevertheless, Lula later announced that he had spoken privately for two hours with Castro about human rights in Cuba. In an apparent gesture of good intentions, Castro announced that a commission would study the death penalty and make recommendations and that, meanwhile, the use of the firing squad in capital cases would be abolished. But Ambassador Tilder Santiago cautioned that were Cuba to abolish the death penalty, the US would have to reciprocate with a pledge to charge Cuban hijackers as criminals instead of treating them as heroes.

Lula outlines agenda at UN

The tendency to judge the visit by ritualistic meetings with dissidents shows a misreading of Lula's intentions, expressed only weeks earlier in his UN address. Following Bush's Iraq speech at the UN in September, Lula's speech was mostly ignored in the US media. But anyone reading the text would have realized that the Cuba trip one month later was not a public-relations gesture to prop up Castro. It was but one of many state visits on Lula's itinerary throughout Latin America as well as to South Africa, India, and other countries. The trips have helped establish Lula as the leader in resistance to the FTAA and US economic domination in the developing world (see NotiSur, 2003-10-24).

Lula also declared a kind of independence from US policies, lacing the speech with obvious reproaches of Bush for military unilateralism, destructive free-market globalism, and protective

tariffs. Cuba has already joined with Brazil, Argentina, and 10 other Latin American states in the recently formed Group of 22 (G-22), organized to represent the interests of developing nations confronting the rich nations' protectionist trade policies (see NotiSur, 2003-10-10). Lula presses for new MERCOSUR formula While the floundering FTAA was supposed to go into effect in 2005, Lula and Kirchner are talking about achieving a viable Latin American organization next year.

What now confronts the US's static Cuba policy is a movement that could sweep Cuba into a trade bloc positioned to negotiate with the US on more equal terms. Compared to such an eventuality, US insistence on supporting Cuban dissidents and securing votes against Cuba in Geneva appears out of touch.

Foreign Minister Bielsa said in October that Argentina and Brazil had proposed a 4+1 membership formula for MERCOSUR, adding Cuba to the current full members Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay. A major holdout is Uruguay.

President Jorge Batlle has said that the 4+1 plan was "inapplicable" because Cuba does not have a democratic government. However, his concerns about the formula appear to be more technical than political since Uruguay would have to re-establish diplomatic relations with Cuba before any negotiations could take place. And in contrast to his position regarding Cuba and MERCOSUR, Batlle has favored Cuba's participation in the FTAA even without democracy. MERCOSUR negotiations are expected to begin in January 2004.

US worried about Cuba joining Latin America

The wave of interest in a southern trade bloc that would include Cuba threatens the FTAA but also US Cuba policy. In August, the Bush administration sent Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega to Buenos Aires to ask that Kirchner play a leadership role in taking action against the Cuban regime, which the Bush administration has recently taken to calling "Stalinist." Suggesting that Kirchner wanted good relations with the US, Noriega said Kirchner would be judged by the results of his actions, a statement that sounded like a threat. Noriega's pressure on Kirchner was a continuation of US State Department efforts to get Argentina and other leading states to side with the US against Cuba in the Organization of American States (OAS) [see NotiCen, 2003-06-05].

Noriega told local newspapers that the US wanted to continue its "discrete dialogue" with Argentina about the OAS and the "transition after the dictatorship" in Cuba. In mid-October, US Ambassador to the OAS John Maisto was in Montevideo urging support for the FTAA and declaring that trade with Cuba was bad business.

Referring to the 4+1 plan, he said the US did not think it was a good idea "to contribute to a Stalinist system." While US officials are keenly aware of the danger the integrationist movement holds for the FTAA, they have offered few concessions while maintaining the focus on isolating Cuba. In Buenos Aires, Noriega continued fighting the battle of Geneva, telling the press that the US wanted Argentina's support against Cuba in the next round of human rights votes in April 2004.

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