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Forced Detour of Bolivian President Evo Morales' Plane Causes International Incident

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An incident that played out in the theater of the Global North and whose actors are from there unexpectedly spilled over to the Global South and coalesced a group of countries that, in recent years, with greater or lesser intensity, has challenged US policies in the region. It all began in the third week in June, when Edward Snowden, a US National Security Agency (NSA) contract analyst, revealed that the intelligence service used a software program that allowed it to spy on US citizens and especially on diplomats and official agencies of its allies in the European Union (EU).

After 10 days during which the White House was unable to dodge questions from its Western European allies, chagrined to learn that they had been spied on, a huge intelligence error convinced the US on July 2 that Snowden was secretly traveling on the plane of Bolivian President Evo Morales. Morales was returning to La Paz that day from Moscow. His small French-made Falcon 900EX plane with limited unrefueled flight range needed to make a technical landing at a Spanish airport, and Bolivia had arranged this with authorities in Madrid. However, without explanation, the government of conservative Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy refused to allow the plane to land at its terminals or enter its airspace. As if in synchrony, Portugal, France, and Italy repeated the same abusive refusal, putting the South American president's safety at extreme risk.

After flying for almost two hours without a definite destination, and with fuel running low, the official Bolivian plane received authorization to land at the Vienna, Austria, airport. After waiting 14 hours at a site some distance from the airport, the plane was allowed to take off for La Paz.

While this was happening in the European skies, the US diplomatic mission in Bolivia asked the Morales administration to extradite Snowden, who was not in Bolivia and therefore had not received asylum there.

"The strange, unfounded, and suggestive request for extradition of a person who is not in the requested state's territory will be returned to the US government immediately," said a communiqué from the Bolivian Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores.

Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca said that the US request for extradition "explains the decision of the European governments to block their airspace," fearing that the presidential plane was carrying Snowden. "It is not a coincidence, the note arrived at our ministry because the US thought that that person [Snowden] was on the plane that was bringing the president, and that is why the European countries acted in concert," said Choquehuanca.

Incident gives Morales gets big solidarity boost

If its pressure caused the aggression against the Bolivian president, the US would have to concede that things did not go well or, more precisely, that everything went badly. Internally, Morales received the solidarity of even his most bitter enemies from the racist ultraright, which cannot bear the idea of being governed by an indigenous person but still has a vestige of nationalist dignity.
Regionally, the US press, especially the establishment press, ran stories that it might not have published if an incident like this had not occurred. Stories widely disseminated by international news agencies showed the darkest side of Washington diplomacy and the operational shortcomings of its intelligence services. Globally, the incident laid bare the European allies' subordination to US interests; it exposed them to scorn and uncovered the precariousness of a diplomacy that could not explain the act of violence and unnecessary arrogance toward a small country.

Since midnight on July 3, when the presidential plane finally landed in Bolivian territory, demonstrations of solidarity with Morales and his delegation have been constant. The same reaction was seen in other South American cities. All countries involved in the aggression were repudiated, without violence—except for burning their flags—and even with humor.

Given the situation, the US Embassy in Bolivia postponed some of the events with which it celebrates July 4. "Be informed that the Independence Day reception and the celebration on July 6 is postponed until further notice," said the text released along with a reason that added confusion rather than clarity—the postponement was because of "technical problems."

"France, go to hell!" said a large banner hung in front of the French Embassy. "France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, miserable shits," said a sign that mixed French and Quichua. "It's not Latin America or Africa, it's Europe that's the backyard of the US," read other signs.

Even ultraright Gov. Rubén Costa of the secessionist department of Santa Cruz and conservative businessman Samuel Doria Medina, leader of the opposition Frente de Unidad Nacional (UN), criticized the US and its European allies.

**Critics point to European hypocrisy**

Rightist South American newspapers, such as Uruguay's El País and Chile's El Mercurio, published stories that under other circumstances might not have appeared on their pages. Both reprinted the Agence France-Presse (AFP) story in which it interviewed Michael Scheuer, a professor at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, who was a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agent for 22 years. Scheuer, who participated in the CIA's program of black sites in Europe, criticized the double standard of US allies, "who, during this entire episode, acted in the [US] service and now deny it."

Scheuer said that, "while the CIA planes went all over Europe, taking suspects back and forth and entering the airspace of all these countries that now denied permission to the plane of the Bolivian president, the governments of those countries were aware of what was happening." He went on to say, "The results of the harsh interrogations of suspects were passed on to the European allies, but when everything came to light they expressed their surprise and even condemned us for what we had done. One might say that those are the rules of the game, but they could have done better."

The European governments came out looking very bad—those that Scheuer and other sources quoted by AFP and Deutsche Press-Agentur (DPA) called "servile" or "subordinate" to the US. And where they really looked bad was in Latin America, especially South America, a region where they had always been treated as good friends.

"As Westerners, we collaborate on security issues that are within our purview, and we spy for economic reasons, that's what this game of the intelligence services is like," said an anonymous NSA source in a story in the Brazilian daily O Globo on July 3.
A French diplomat living in Washington added, "While it's true that everyone spies on everyone else, what most concerns us is the mass effect of the systematization of US electronic espionage and the untenable pressures that Washington puts on its allies and others that are not so much allies, like Russia."

Those pressures, said the AFP source, were evident on July 1 when Russian President Vladimir Putin offered Snowden Moscow's protection but warned, "If he wants to stay here, there is a condition, he must cease his actions that cause harm to our US partners."

In a column published in various Latin American and European dailies, Argentine political analyst Atilio Borón was especially harsh on the European countries, saying, "They authorized and were complicit in the secret CIA flights that brought people who had been disappeared to the black sites where they were tortured and killed. They are toady governments, without dignity, that accept that their master spies on them and monitors the communications of their NATO and UN missions, while they go after Julian Assange [head of the organization WikiLeaks] and Snowden for the 'crime' of having made public the US's massive violations of individual rights. The White House acted with those governments like an unscrupulous master, and the French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese governments acted like the Whore of Babylon, 'With whom all the kings of the earth have committed fornication,' —that is, the big shots in Washington—'and who has made all the populations of the world drunk with the wine of her adultery.' (Revelation 17:2)."

By July 9, the situation had already caused an uproar around the world, and, with the understandable exception of the EU, the world's large regional organizations had condemned the incident. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon took the side of the Bolivian government and said, "Under any circumstances, a head of state and his or her aircraft enjoy immunity and inviolability."

In Washington, the Organization of America States (OAS) Permanent Council called a special meeting and approved a strong resolution condemning the actions of the European countries. OAS Secretary-General José Miguel Insulza, a good friend of the US, was even harsher than the final statement from the meeting, saying he feels "a great indignation and immense solidarity in response to the aggression suffered by a leader of Latin America and the Caribbean. What happened on July 2 cannot be qualified as a commonplace incident. It is a serious offense to a democratic president of this region. ... There is a serious matter here that has not been clarified."

After Venezuelan Ambassador to the OAS Roy Chaderton's statement that Europe had "gone back to its worst history, that of the darkness, the Inquisition, the Nazi barbarity, the racist contempt," the Permanent Council voted on the final resolution. All countries, with the exception of the US and Canada, voted to "condemn" the actions of the four European countries.

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