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Andrés Gaudán

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NSA Spying Damages U.S. Relations with Latin America

by Andrés Gaudín

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A wave of indignation spread through the region following revelations by former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor Edward Snowden that the US spied on Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and other South American leaders. In response, on Sept. 17, the Brazilian president postponed indefinitely her planned October official visit to Washington. A week later, in her speech at the opening session of the UN General Assembly in New York, Rousseff had harsh words regarding US foreign policy and President Barack Obama, saying, "In the absence of the right to privacy, there can be no true freedom of expression and opinion, and therefore no effective democracy."

In an almost natural consequence of the general condemnation, Ecuador's Foreign Minister Ricardo Patiño spoke for the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR) to say that the regional organization's political leadership had entrusted its Consejo de Defensa to analyze the possibilities for "confronting US espionage." Ecuador has the pro tem presidency of UNASUR.

In Washington, Michael Shifter of the Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue talked about the "strong political impact" of the suspension of Rousseff's visit, and, in Rio de Janeiro, Paulo Sotero, director of the Brazil Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, said that the NSA spying had been a serious setback for the US's bilateral relations with Brazil, "which had deteriorated under [former President] Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva but were being rebuilt under Rousseff."

The always-difficult relations between Latin America and the US once again led to situations like the "Yankees-go-home" days of the last half of the 20th century, nuanced with sarcastic statements and denunciations from several countries. Patiño derided Obama's speech to the UN General Assembly. "The Nobel prize winner," he said, "justified all the killings of all US military interventions in the world."

In President Rousseff's speech, prior to Obama's, she said, "The arguments that the illegal interception of information and data aims at protecting against terrorism cannot be sustained. ... Brazil, Mr. President, knows how to protect itself. We reject, fight, and do not harbor terrorist groups. We are a democratic country surrounded by nations that are democratic, pacific, and respectful of International Law."

In his address at the UN, Bolivian President Evo Morales lamented, "The host, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate, speaks as a patrón, as if he were the master of the world." After pointing out that "the US harbors terrorists, criminals, and the corrupt," Morales proposed "creating a peoples' tribunal to judge the Obama government for committing crimes against humanity and interventionism."

Since October 2003, Bolivia has been requesting the extradition of former President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada and three of his ministers, who are in exile in the US and accused of genocide for ordering the repression of popular demonstrations in 2003 that killed 64 people (NotiSur, June 24, 2005, and Oct. 26, 2007).
Spying revelations recall other US misdeeds

Amid the tide of anti-US sentiment, in Paraguay, a study by historian Natalia Viana was republished. It provides abundant documentation on the participation of US Ambassador James Thessin and the local office of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in the events of June 22, 2012, that resulted in the removal of democratically elected President Fernando Lugo (NotiSur, July 13, 2012).

Unrelated to the spying, and for reasons that remain unclear, on Sept. 30, Venezuela declared three high-ranking diplomats from the US Embassy in Caracas personae non gratae and expelled them.

When Patiño said that UNASUR had tasked its Consejo de Defensa with exploring possible ways to confront US aggressions, besides explicitly calling for designing an independent communications network, it was clear that he was not speaking in military terms. He spoke along the same lines as the Brazilian president had done nine days earlier, on Sept. 17, when she announced plans to develop an independent communications system, "establish a civilian multinational framework for the governance and use of the Internet, and ensure the effective protection of data that travels over the Web." The majority of the world's electronic data passes through the US.

An analyst with the Brazilian Web site Operamundi says that Brazil, as a member of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) group, knows that in a few years those five emerging countries will represent 40% of the world's population and have a GDP of US$35 trillion, about 25% of the world GDP and much greater than the combined GDP of the US and Europe.

"The authorities are not mistaken in seeing the target of the NSA's spying not as Brazil but as BRICS. Thus, Russia and China, as permanent members of the UN Security Council with veto power, blocked all western attempts at intervention in Syria," said the online publication.

Independent electronic-communications network in process

Creating an independent Internet is not merely wishful thinking thrown out for propaganda purposes by governments indignant at the violation of their privacy. With the competition of superior US technology, such an announcement only produces results if it is plausible. And in this case, it is.

With the means that those emerging nations already possess, within a year the BRICS countries could create a "Bricsnet," using Russian and Chinese technology with Indian, South African, and Brazilian IT developers. The Rousseff administration could incorporate Argentina and Uruguay, two of its associates in the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), which has globally recognized IT experts. The independent network will operate via a cable going from Vladivostok, Russia, through Shantou, China, Chennai, India, and Cape Town, South Africa, to cross the Atlantic and arrive in Fortaleza, Brazil. Its 34,000 km of fiber optic cable with 12.8-terabyte capacity will have a unique characteristic: it will not touch nor even come close to US territory or coastline.

In those tension-filled days, a posting on the Web that went viral had nothing new for experts but startled others in South American societies. It points out that an electronic message sent between two relatively close cities in Brazil and Peru—Rio Branco, the capital of the Brazilian state of Acre, and Puerto Maldonado, across the border in the Peruvian department of Madre de Dios—travels a circuitous route before arriving at its destination. Leaving Rio Branco, the message goes to Brasilia
and on to Fortaleza to then travel north to the US via cable in the depths of the Atlantic Ocean. It enters the US at Miami, goes to California, then heads south through the Pacific Ocean to arrive in Lima and from there makes its way to Puerto Maldonado, less than 300 km from where it started.

The other key piece of information in this matter is that 80% of Web traffic originating in Latin America goes through the US, which uses that fact to justify its spying as being in its own territory and not outside it. "What it hides is that it is spying on matters that are not its internal affairs. It is as if they examine the documents of a messenger in transit who had no option but to make a stopover in New York, arguing that the person was in US territory," said an analyst with the Uruguayan daily La República.

In Washington, the White House and the State Department did not comment on the plans of Brazil and UNASUR. "This is certainly not a good time for the Obama administration, which suddenly found itself with open fronts in all latitudes," said Argentine political analyst Hernán Brienza. He was alluding to the extraordinary situation that Snowden's revelations opened up at a unique time for South America.

In Latin America, Sept. 11 has a special significance. On that date in 1973, the democratically elected government of Chile, headed by President Salvador Allende (1970-1973), was overthrown. This year marked the 40th anniversary of that coup that ushered in a bloody dictatorship and the end of a socialist experiment until then unparalleled in the world. The commemoration renewed questions about the role of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and especially the then head of US diplomacy, Henry Kissinger, who just months earlier had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Brienza also referred to the "succession of disagreeable incidents that obliged the president of the world's number-one power to twice call Dilma Rousseff to urge her to not suspend her state visit to Washington, to call Iranian President Hassan Rouhani several times to try to resume bilateral relations, and to accept Russia's 'salvation' plan, which, so far, has prevented the craziness of a military intervention in Syria. A series of misfortunes culminating on Oct. 1 when Republican irresponsibility ended with the declaration of a government shutdown."

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