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Andrés Gaudán

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Progressive Ties Wither in Southern Cone

by Andrés Gaudín

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The process of regional integration, which blossomed in the last half of the last decade as South American countries created effective and powerful regional organizations, has stagnated, admit progressive leaders in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Uruguay who had supported cooperation. Although many blame the resurgence of right-wing governments for the backsliding, some analysts say that it’s no surprise that the reversal happened in the wake of the deaths of former Presidents Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) of Argentina in October 2010 (NotiSur, Dec. 3, 2010) and Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) of Venezuela in March 2013 (NotiSur, April 5, 2013). Both leaders were driving forces behind efforts to get South American countries to work together.

Key UNASUR post vacant

As the 12-member Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR) struggles to fill the key post of secretary-general, "There are forces acting to destroy this organization that has defended regional democracy," said Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa (NotiSur, May 30, 2008). When Surinam took charge of UNASUR’s pro tempore presidency at the Paramaribo summit last August there was no consensus on selecting a candidate to replace Alí Rodríguez whose term had expired at that time.

In a similar vein to Correa’s comments, Bolivia’s Evo Morales spoke directly about a "conspiracy from the North [United States] to break mechanisms that unify us." Both Correa and Morales also decried UNASUR’s inability to respond in unison to the news that US intelligence services had spied on Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff (NotiSur, Oct. 11, 2013).

Correa, the first to warn that the integration process had stagnated, pointed to three organizations his country belongs to: UNASUR, the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA), and the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC) [NotiSur Jan. 6, 2012, and April 5, 2013]. During a visit to Bolivia, the Ecuadoran president on Oct. 3 denounced a "great conservative counteroffensive" and "a rebuilding of the right (NotiSur, Nov. 1, 2013)."

"We must recognize this new reality in order to get back on track with more energy and intelligence," Correa said. He later spoke of backward forces identified with countries in the Alianza del Pacífico (Colombia, Chile, Mexico, and Peru). He said it’s no coincidence that the five coup d’état attempts of the 21st century—whether successful or not—"were carried out against progressive governments:" Venezuela in 2002; "the chaos and violence to destabilize President Evo Morales in Bolivia" in 2008; attempts to overthrow President Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009) in Honduras in 2009 (NotiCen, Aug. 13, 2009) and the government in Ecuador in 2010 (NotiSur, Oct. 15, 2010); and the overthrow of President Fernando Lugo (2008-2012) in Paraguay in 2012 (NotiSur, July 13, 2012).

Ten days later, Morales addressed the issue, directly accusing Alianza del Pacífico countries of "conspiring to prevent UNASUR from advancing toward definitive freedom."

 Presidents Sebastián Piñera of Chile and Ollanta Humala of Peru made timid defenses of the Alianza while Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia and Enrique Peña Nieto of Mexico remained
noticeably silent. "There shouldn’t be talk of an internal war in Latin America because no one is against anyone else," Piñera said. "We simply have different ways of approaching the world," he told a Spanish news agency EFE correspondent.

Humala said, "In UNASUR, as well as in the Alianza del Pacífico, we are united by our diversity, a diversity that we should respect in order to work together."

A few days after the UNASUR summit last August, foreign ministers in New York for the UN General Assembly were unable to reach consensus on a statement of support for Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro after he protested that the US had blocked him from participating in the global forum.

On his return trip to Bolivia, Morales stopped in Caracas to discuss the lack of a strong candidate for UNASUR secretary-general with Maduro. In a joint declaration, both pointed to "the necessity to elect a secretary-general as soon as possible to provide the weight and relevance that the bloc requires today more than ever in the face of the imperialistic temptations to intervene."

Despite calls for action, proponents of regional integration have not able to move forward. A report in the Uruguayan weekly Brecha said it is clear that Maduro is not Chávez, adding, "Venezuela has economic difficulties, and the efforts of the last decade to promote integration through the sharing of resources—such as preferential oil prices or solidarity donations—has come to an end. This will have repercussions throughout the entire region."

Although Correa, Morales, and other progressive South American leaders blame the decline in the spirit of cooperation on conspiring forces, what is certain is that, beyond ideological differences, UNASUR members—Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Surinam, Uruguay, and Venezuela—are unable to take a united stand on important issues nor have they found a candidate willing to assume the post of secretary-general. What is needed is a leader with prestige and continental presence. And there aren’t many of them.

**Lugo and Lula possible candidates**

Possible candidates are former Presidents Lugo of Paraguay or Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010) of Brazil. Lugo has said he needs to stay in Paraguay to continue leading the opposition. Lula—who perhaps wishes to continue his role in Brazilian politics—has not made any comment about a possible role in UNASUR. He did, however, comment about what to do and how to do it.

"What’s pathetic and what we all should be concerned about," Pablo Vilas, a political scientist who directs Casa Patria Grande, wrote in the Argentine daily Tiempo, "is that we don’t have a prestigious and upcoming figure available who would be capable of running the organization as we did when Kirchner and Chávez drove the integration process." Casa Patria Grande is an agency of the Argentine Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Culto.

In line with Ecuadoran President Correa, Kintto Lucas, a journalist who was Ecuador’s vice minister of foreign affairs and currently directs UNESCO’s International Media Center for Advanced Studies in Latin American Communication, said the culture of silence imposed by civil-military dictatorships of the past quarter-century "created a symbolic foundation for the integration of repression, exemplified by the Operación Cóndor dictatorships of the Southern Cone, but not for democratic integration."
"Even if they slowly leave that past behind, some mainstream media continue to play the same role and support disintegration, attacking the processes of integration and demanding those processes that strengthen the rule of the market," Lucas said. Without expressively pointing his finger, he, like Correa and Morales, blamed the Alianza del Pacífico.

Lula spoke almost as if he were a spectator. But—judging by the impact of an interview published in the Argentine daily Página 12—South American governments agree with Lula or at least take his opinions under consideration.

"As much as the conservatives try to deny it," Lula said on Oct. 14, "South America made much progress in the last ten years. All our countries live in democracy and have grown and developed with better income distribution. Social inclusion has given the region greater sovereignty and world respect. Despite detractors, the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), [formed by Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay] is alive and well, and we have created UNASUR and CELAC. Nevertheless, it is clear that our integration can and should be deeper and broader."

The former Brazilian president later made a statement that was well-received by organizations interested in regional integration such as the Instituto de Integración Latinoamericana (INILA) of Argentina’s Universidad Nacional de Cuyo, which reproduced the interview on its Web site. "Short-term views are not adequate," Lula said. "We need truly strategic thinking that addresses structural-integration problems (fuel, production, labor, culture, environment, and finance). We have to go beyond governments."

Lula presented a new perspective, saying, "We should look for ways of involving civil society, unions, employers, academics, and youth because what we’re trying to do is build regional integration supported by the popular will.

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