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Tillerson Makes Venezuela a Target During Latin American Tour

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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While Nicolás Maduro's government and the opposition Mesa de la Unidad Democrática de Venezuela (MUD) slowly advanced toward a laborious agreement to allow presidential elections in Venezuela, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, during his first Latin American trip in February, worked to bring friendly governments to back Washington's anti-Venezuela policies ([NotiSur, Sept. 15, 2017](#), and [Jan. 12, 2018](#)).

Tillerson's tour, which included Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Colombia, and Jamaica, crowned a process in Venezuela framed by a violent and critical domestic situation, the constant zigzags of a divided opposition that, in the long run, has benefitted the ruling party, and by US President Donald Trump's vacillating strategy. That strategy has evolved, from a threat of direct, armed intervention made on Aug. 11, 2017, to an exhortation to the Venezuelan military to intervene in civil matters, overthrow Maduro, and send him off to Cuba, which came on the eve of Tillerson's trip. In addition, there have been sanctions imposed by the US and the European Union (EU) against both individuals and institutions, and the persistent threat of an anachronistic blockade similar to that which Cuba suffered in the 20th century. It is a situation for which the great power of the West seems unable to find a satisfactory solution.

On the eve of departing for Mexico, his first stop on his first Latin American tour as secretary of state, Tillerson met with students at the University of Texas in Austin. There he suggested that the Venezuelan military should stage a coup d'état and send Maduro to a golden exile in Cuba.

"I'm sure that he's got some friends in Cuba who can give him a nice hacienda on the beach, and he can have a nice life over there," Tillerson said in response to a question about a possible US role in regime change in Venezuela.

Secretary Tillerson made it explicitly clear that this would be the focus of his tour. This call for military intervention was judged as a serious error, even by the most loyal allies, including Argentina and Brazil. But in addition, Tillerson's trip to the region, began with a major setback: On the same day, Feb. 2, Thomas Shannon, a diplomat with solid prestige in Latin America, resigned as undersecretary of state for political affairs. Just three weeks earlier, Shannon had been Trump's man in Madrid, there to negotiate new sanctions against Venezuela with the conservative government of Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and, through him, with the European Union.

"It seems there's a lot of improvisation in this tour," Javier Tolcachier, an academic researcher at the Centre for Humanist Studies, said of Tillerson's trip.

To begin with, the US did not try to sound out its allies before encouraging the Venezuelan military to overthrow the government. Second, it ignored the internal reality of the State Department, where Shannon is the fourth of five high-level diplomats to resign since last September, when Ambassador William Brownfield departed. Third, the US threw controversial issues on the table at a time when it should be smoothing out the red carpet in preparation for Trump's first visit to the region for the

VIII Summit of the Americas in Peru in April. Fourth, the imposition of an oil embargo on Venezuela was proposed as the strongest action against Venezuela, when Tillerson knows, given his long history in the field, that the impact of an embargo would be more symbolic than real.

"The agenda chosen to address in the five countries doesn't seem to be the best one," Tolcachier said.

Geoff Ramsey, assistant director of the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) for Venezuela, told the German radio-television agency Deutsche Welle, "Tillerson's discourse is a serious error, seemingly based on ideas from the Cold War or the United States' colonial era in Latin America, and the only thing it accomplishes is to spark national feelings around Maduro ... The armed forces are not interested in overthrowing the government as Tillerson hinted."

Venezuelan Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino read a press release that reaffirmed Ramsey's opinion. "Attempts to interfere are not going to intimidate us. They will find the fiercest resistance here," he said. "The soldiers of Bolívar and Chávez are armored with a thick layer of dignity, love of country, and liberty." Padrino was referring to Latin American independence hero Simón Bolívar, and to Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), the late Venezuelan president ([NotiSur, April 5, 2013](#)).

Aloysio Nunes Ferreira, the foreign relations minister of Brazil, a country excluded from the tour, reacted with unexpected force: "Tillerson is proposing a coup? That does not make sense. If Venezuela were a regime destined to change, it would be the Venezuelan people who would say so, not Mr. Tillerson."

Following Tillerson's comments, Deutsche Welle consulted international analysts. Maureen Meyer, who specializes in US-Mexico security at WOLA, answered with a rhetorical question: "Is Washington trying to return to the 19th century, to the Monroe Doctrine that established that America was for the Americans [meaning the people of the US]? This posture worries us, especially when the military option he spoke of doesn't refer to Venezuela alone, but to other countries where military intervention would be supported in the case of any instability. It is of concern that the White House tries to justify or to imply it does not oppose the expansion of militarism into the civilian life of democratic countries."

Meyer, an anthropologist at the University of Arizona, pointed out that the secretary of state's tour began in Mexico where, since Dec. 22, 2017, "a domestic security law gives the Army discretionary power to design security policies, a job that belongs to civilians in democracies" ([SourceMex, Dec. 6, 2017](#), and [Jan. 10, 2018](#)).

US firearms enter Mexico illegally

Security was one of the four basic points in the agenda for Tillerson's visit. The visit to Mexico came after allegations were made that the devastating illegal flow of firearms from the US is the main reason for the spike in homicides in Mexico, which peaked to their highest point in 20 years: 20.5 per 100,000 people. According to a study published by the Center for American Progress (CAP) on Feb. 2, the same day Tillerson arrived in Mexico City, around 213,000 firearms enter Mexico each year and between 2014 and 2016 alone the police recovered more than 74,000 rifles, pistols, and other lethal devices that originated in the US and are prohibited for civilian use. Considering crime rates in 15 countries of North, Central, and South America, CAP estimated that US weapons are used in a murder every 31 minutes.

Oil embargo more damaging to US

In Argentina, Tillerson received a request “to apply sanctions capable of drowning the Venezuelan economy.” Among these measures, President Mauricio Macri called for an old idea that had already been presented to European countries: applying an embargo on oil, Venezuela’s economic engine. Like Vice President Mike Pence, who visited various countries in the region last August after Trump had threatened direct military intervention, Tillerson, who was the CEO of Exxon Mobile Corp. for the 10 years before his appointment as secretary of state, noted, “We are studying applying sanctions on oil, prohibiting its sale in the United States, or prohibiting refining products originating in Venezuela ... but we must act prudently to avoid causing consequences for the [Venezuelan] population.”

In reality, “it’s not about taking care of the population, because the same should be considered when promoting a military intervention in civilian life,” Venezuela’s ambassador to Russia, Carlos Faría, told the Russian agency Sputnik last July. “A possible embargo is more damaging to the US economy, which would have to deal with processing crude because its refineries are prepared to process heavy crude,” of the type that comes from Venezuela, Faría said. He explained that crude is divided into categories and that refineries are set up for specific types.

“Our crude is heavy and these refineries are adjusted for this. With time, it will work out, but [meanwhile] they will have problems and huge costs,” he said.

A major figure is gone

Losing Shannon is a blow for the State Department, wrote Nora Gámez Torres, a reporter at El Nuevo Herald in Miami, but at the same time, it “paves the way for implementation of hardline policies against Cuba and Venezuela.” Some analysts have suggested, she wrote, that Shannon’s decision to resign could have been the result of a mutual agreement with administration officials “because the diplomat was an obstacle for the hawks in the government.”

According to El NuevoHerald’s sources, Shannon has always been “soft” on Cuba and Venezuela.

“When I have spoken with people at the State Department and I have asked why they are not harder on Cuba and Venezuela, the answer was always the same: Shannon. Now perhaps this will change,” said an unnamed former diplomat quoted by Gámez Torres in her Feb. 2 story. Shannon is the fourth of five career ambassadors, the highest Foreign Service rank, to resign in the past year. With his departure, the diplomatic service could lose heft, and also ground, in the design of Latin America policies to other federal agencies.

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