

Latin Beat

Fears of an invasion in South America: Unfounded or possible?

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

While the possibility of a U.S. invasion of Venezuela or Cuba may seem laughable to many North Americans, some of our neighbors to the south are taking the concept seriously.

Just before Christmas, four million Cubans practiced putting on gas masks, looking for shelter and conducting first aid classes. Meanwhile troops and reserves spent a week launching grenades and practicing drills with civilians.

The exercise was billed as preparation for any eventually during the second Bush administration. But, in fact, Cubans expressed fear about the possibility of an invasion long before George W. Bush took office.

While many observers wrote off the events as part of Cuba's continuing paranoia with the United States and just another effort to distract domestic attention from political and economic problems, a similar fear from Venezuela may be harder to dismiss.

Relations with the world's fifth-largest supplier of petroleum and the fourth largest source of U.S. oil imports continue to worsen since the U.S. supported an aborted coup of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez in 2002.

The United States has repeatedly denied ever trying to overthrow Chavez, but the leftist leader accuses Washington of being behind the failed coup and of funding opposition groups seeking a recall referendum on his presidency.

Since then, Chavez has used his win in the failed recall vote to strengthen his position and spread his fiery brand of what he calls a "Bolivarian revolution" to neighboring countries.

Now, with President Bush in his second term, the increased saber rattling over Iran along with the necessity of U.S. officials downplaying the perceived threat of invading several other nations, Venezuela is voicing its concern about potential hostile action from the north.

In late January, the Venezuelan ambassador to Paraguay, Elmer Nino, charged that the United States is preparing a future invasion of his country to control its petroleum. Nino said a recent diplomatic crisis between Venezuela and Colombia was created by the United States as part of its plans for an invasion.

His comments followed a resolution in the Colombian senate calling on the Organization of American States to invoke the regional body's "Interamerican Democratic Charter" which allows intervention in any country where democracy is threatened. Some Venezuelan officials charge that the resolution was inspired by the United States to give it an excuse to invade and bring about a regime change as well as to secure a steady supply of Venezuelan oil.

In response, Chavez vowed that any military action would start “a 100-year war.” He also has threatened to cut off any oil deliveries to the United States should an attempt be made against his life. Venezuela provides about 15 per cent of U.S. oil imports, but relations between the two countries are rocky over Chavez's friendship with Cuban President Fidel Castro, his criticism of U.S.-led negotiations for a free trade zone in the Americas and his opposition to the war in Iraq.

Meanwhile, some exiled Venezuelan generals have actually called on the U.S. to invade their country and remove Chavez by force. And, the Venezuelan military command is reported to be studying the scenario of a U.S. invasion.

For those who ridicule the idea as unlikely, consider why Latin Americans see a U.S. invasion as within the realm of possibility:

- The United States has a long history of military intervention in Latin American countries, including adventures in Panama, Haiti and Grenada in recent years as well as in Nicaragua, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Cuba and Mexico over the past century and a half. In addition, the U.S. has been involved in indirect military intervention in recent decades in Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, Panama, Guatemala, Chile and Colombia among others. Many Latin Americans assume that if they have done it in the past, they can do it again.
- In general, Latin Americans have been overwhelmingly opposed to the “unilateral” invasion of Iraq. Looking at perceived U.S. threats against North Korea, Iran and other countries, they fear what they see as a “military globalization” in which the world’s remaining superpower can and will extend its will where ever it wants. The military posturing over Iran and rising tensions with Syria add to the perception that there is a military threat hanging over any country that doesn’t go along with U.S. policy.
- Chavez is seen as a leftist who is meddling in other countries and forming alliances with other left-leaning Latin governments, especially Cuba. He has been accused of harboring Colombian guerrillas and providing them financial and military support. His denials were not helped by the recent arrest in Caracas of a leading Colombian guerrilla leader by a Colombian government-hired hit squad. Analysts say that the Bush administration would like to have him removed from the scene, something the majority of voters in his country obviously aren’t inclined to do.
- Venezuela is a major supplier of oil. Recently Chavez signed a major agreement to supply China with petroleum products, joining his long-term program of helping Cuba make up its fuel shortage. With Venezuela at odds with the U.S. and supplying oil elsewhere, many fear that the Bush administration might want to secure its nearest and up-to-now, most reliable supply of oil.

An invasion in South America? It may sound preposterous to North Americans, but the prospect keeps many Latin Americans from sleeping well at night and is further contributing to a Latin American feeling of alienation and independence from the United States.

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