

Analysis: A Global V.I.R.U.S of Instability

By Sean Goforth
April 9, 2010

Venezuela, Iran and Russia together post a serious threat to American objectives worldwide, writes FPA contributor Sean Goforth.



Ever since “axis of evil,” broad characterizations of geopolitical threats have been considered impolitic, if not ignorant. Certainly this had a lot to do with the intractable stance taken by the US government after President Bush's 2002 State of the Union, which led to the invasion of one country that didn't have WMD while speeding the development of WMD in at least one, if not both, of the other axis members. In some way though, the desire to get away from such labeling probably also had to do with lumping three nations together that had little in common except their pariah status and the ‘evil’ moniker. The hesitation to label a global threat as such is now sacrificing substance for political correctness. Venezuela, Iran, and Russia constitute a VIRUS of instability that threatens the United States and Western order. This recognition is needed, but the US should learn from past mistakes and avoid a hard-line path similar to the one that resulted from branding “axis of evil.”

Axis of (Imp)unity

Iran and Venezuela declared an “axis of unity” against the United States in 2007. A year later they signed a military pact, promising full material support and aid. Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau published a report on Iran and Venezuela's illicit ties last September. Tracking money transfers, Morgenthau's office highlighted suspicious activities that include: an Iranian bicycle factory in a remote part of Venezuela rumored to be a part of a covert nuclear program; Iranian banks operating in Caracas that have been sanctioned by the US Treasury Department for channeling funds to Iran's nuclear program; Hezbollah agents reported to be working with the Venezuelan

government...The list goes on. Given the extent of such anomalies Morgenthau calls for greater awareness before the alliance “bears poisonous fruit.”

In return for Iranian investment, the Chavez government has offered up Venezuela's financial system as a way for Iran to channel cash from abroad, and President Chavez has pledged 20,000 barrels of oil a day to Iran. Clearly these are attempts to dull the impact of UN sanctions. (Though Iran is a petroleum exporter it lacks refining capacity. If sanctions were to halt the inflow of oil Iran's economy would nosedive.)

The axis of unity is more menacing, and more impervious to Western opposition, because of Russia's backing. Last week Prime Minister Putin announced Russian arms sales totaling more than \$5 billion to Venezuela, capping a string of Russian arms deals over the past few years. Apparently Russia agreed to sell its advanced S-300 anti-missile systems to Iran in 2007, but it isn't clear if Iran has taken delivery of any S-300-calibre system, as American and Israeli pressure has lobbied for Russia to delay shipment. What is clear is that Russia is helping Iran to build at least one of its nuclear reactors.

Arguably more important than the arms, Russia, with China's help, has successfully watered down existing UN sanctions against Iran. As calls for tougher sanctions have grown, Putin has responded that, “There is no need to scare the Iranians.” President Medvedev appears to have warmed to the idea of tougher sanctions of late, but the likelihood of UN action “within weeks”, as President Obama wants, are unlikely. Thanks to Russia, Venezuela and Iran may well enjoy an axis of impunity.

The VIRUS Project

The VIRUS is a political pact that bolsters military capacity and extends diplomatic cooperation to magnify regional influence. Russia yearns to renew its superpower status, becoming once more a key variable in any international calculus. Iran and Venezuela seek regional preeminence with global relevance, allowing each to be a global powerbroker on a selective basis.

Until recently, each nation was handily checked by Western-backing, be it Israel, Colombia, or NATO. But in league, the threat posed by the VIRUS is greater than the sum total of its parts. Power centers emanating from Venezuela, Iran and Russia have expanded and fused, threatening the regional stability that Western allies have provided. The Andes, Middle East, and Eastern Europe have become powder kegs as a result, with cash, arms, and—between Latin America and the Middle East at least—insurgents flowing between regions.

By cloaking some ties in secrecy while celebrating others in grand fashion, the VIRUS alliance is playing a sophisticated game of brinkmanship. Venezuelan government documents suggest that Chavez hopes to get the US to perceive an immediate threat and overreact, igniting a series of events that will eventually collapse “the empire.” More realistically, if Colombia or Israel, key American allies, were to misstep and launch a limited-scale attack against Venezuela or Iran it would further boost anti-Americanism and add weight to claims of imperialism. A final objective appears to be presenting a dilemma that will drive a fissure between the US and Israel, a prospect that Iran's nuclear program may well realize.

Inoculation

Responding to the VIRUS needn't require one bold policy. Talk of regime change should be scuttled for sure—it only justifies more arms purchases and feeds anti-American rhetoric. And focusing just on Iran is feckless. Iran is embedded in an alliance that cobbles Russia's diplomatic protection with a network that spreads “business” investments across three continents to serve strategic purposes.

Instead of antagonizing the VIRUS the United States should seek inoculation through savvy diplomacy that breaks the bonds between its constituent members, which is a realistic objective because Venezuela, Russia, and Iran don't share deep-seeded cultural or economic ties. Luckily for Western security, the VIRUS' venom is being diluted by economic realities on the ground: unemployment is extremely high in all three nations, and Iran and Venezuela have the world's highest rates of inflation. If oil trades at moderate prices, Chavez and his “brother” Ahmadinejad will be left to account for their failure to bring development, though Putin's popularity seems assured no matter how badly the Russian economy sours.

American success will be evident when the US and its allies can tolerate Venezuela, Iran, and Russia each as a regional nuisance, and nothing more.

Sean H. Goforth teaches world politics and international political economy at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, SC. His research focuses primarily on US-Latin American relations, Latin American political economy and international trade. He contributes to the Foreign Policy Blogs on Mexico and Latin America.