Chapter 10

Imperialist Dynamics of US-Venezuela Relations

US relations with Venezuela illustrate the specific mechanisms with which an imperial power seeks to sustain client states and overthrow independent nationalist governments. By examining US strategic goals and its tactical measures, we can set forth several propositions regarding (i) the nature and instruments of imperial politics in Venezuela; (ii) the shifting context and contingencies influencing the successes and failures of specific policies; and (iii) the importance of regional and global political alignments and priorities (Petras & Veltmeyer, 2013a).

A Historical-Comparative Approach

A comparative historical approach highlights the different policies, contexts and outcomes of imperial policies during two distinct Presidential periods: the ascendancy of neoliberal client regimes (Perez and Caldera) of the late 1980s to 1998; and the rise and consolidation of a nationalist populist government under President Chávez (Ellner, 2009).

During the 1980s and 1990s, US successes in securing policies favourable to US economic and foreign policy interests under client rulers, in the mind of Washington fixed the optimal and only acceptable model and criteria for responding (negatively) to the subsequent Chávez nationalist government (Petras, 2006).

US policy toward Venezuela in the 1990s and its successes were part and parcel of a general embrace of neoliberal electoral regimes in Latin America. Washington and its allies in the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) promoted and supported regimes throughout Latin America, which privatized and de-nationalized over five thousand public enterprises in the most lucrative economic sectors (IMF, 1998; World Bank, 1991–2001). These quasi-public monopolies included natural resources, energy, finance, trade, transport and telecommunications. Neoliberal client regimes reversed 50 years of economic and social policy, concentrated wealth, deregulated the economy, and laid the basis for a profound crisis, which ultimately discredited neoliberalism. This led to continent-wide popular uprisings resulting in regime changes and the ruse if nationalist populist governments.
A historical-comparative approach allows us to analyze Washington's response to the rise and demise of its neoliberal clients and the subsequent ascendency of populist-nationalism and how regional patterns and changes influence the capacity of an imperial power to intervene and attempt to re-establish its dominance.

A Conceptual Framework

The key to understanding the mode and means of imposing and sustaining imperial dominance is to recognize that Washington combines multiple forms of struggle, depending on resources, available collaborators and opportunities and contingencies (Petras, 2010a).

In approaching client regimes, Washington combines military and economic aid to repress opposition and buttress economic allies by cushioning crises. Imperial propaganda, via the mass media, provides political legitimacy and diplomatic backing, especially when client regimes engage in gross human rights violations and high level corruption.

Conversely when attempting to weaken or overthrow a nationalist-populist regime, the empire will resort to multiple forms of attack including (Gollinger, 2006; Petras, 2010b): (i) corruption (buying off government supporters); (ii) funding and organizing opposition media, parties, business and trade union organizations; (iii) organizing and backing disloyal military officials to violently overthrow the elected government; (iv) supporting employers' lockouts to paralyze strategic sectors of the economy such as oil production; (v) financing referendums and other 'legal mechanisms' to revoke democratic mandates; (vi) promoting paramilitary groups to destabilize civil society, sow public insecurity and undermine agrarian reforms; (vii) financing electoral parties and NGOs to compete in and to delegitimize elections; (viii) engaging diplomatic warfare and efforts to prejudice regional relations; and (ix) establishing military bases in neighbouring countries, as a platform for future joint military invasions.

This multi-track strategy with its multi-prong tactics is implemented in sequence or combined depending on the opportunities and results of earlier tactical operations. For example, while financing Capriles Radonski’s electoral campaign in April 2013 Washington also backed violent post-election assaults by rightist thugs attempting to destabilize the government in Caracas (Petras, 2012b, 2013). And while pursuing an apparent effort to re-open diplomatic relations via negotiations Secretary of State John Kerry simultaneously backed the inflammatory declarations of Samantha Power, a United Nations