The Good Sailor Policy
The Return of the US Fourth Fleet and the South American Reaction by Khatchik DerGhougassian

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Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, along with Cuba’s Fidel Castro and Bolivia’s Evo Morales, denounced the “imperialist” and “interventionist” character of the re-deployment. Photo courtesy ¡Que comunismo!/flickr.com

After 58 years of absence, the US Fourth Fleet went back to business on July 1, 2008 in the southern West Hemisphere. If the event had occurred in 1990s, the Argentine government would probably have welcomed the initiative and even anticipated further enhancing the “special relationship” that the Carlos S. Menem administration had with the United States. But times have changed. Since the so-called “left turn” in Latin America after the 2001-2003 social and economic crises and the subsequent political turmoil in Argentina, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and other countries, almost every US move in the region has been received with skepticism, concern, and criticism. Such has been the case with the return of the US Fourth Fleet.

The decision of re-deployment was made public on April 24, and although Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Gary Roughead made an announcement assuring Latin America that the move does not imply new military assets in the region, the leaders of South American countries were not convinced, with the exception of Colombia. Cuba’s Fidel Castro, Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, and Bolivia’s Evo Morales denounced the “imperialist” and “interventionist” character of the re-deployment, whereas Brazil’s Defense Minister, Nelson Jobim, declared that his country would not allow the fleet to operate in Brazilian waters without authorization. Jobim’s Argentine colleague, Nilda Garré—whom Admiral James Stavridis, the head of the Southern Command (SouthCom), visited on May 7 during his South American tour to personally explain Washington’s decision—was also not convinced. Brazil and Argentina did not take any immediate steps against the US decision, but the issue of the Fourth Fleet is on their defense and foreign policy agendas and is being widely discussed and debated in both official and unofficial circles. In the South American press, an uncritical perspective towards the US military move is rare.

Same Concern, Different Reactions

On July 1, 2008, the day of the Fourth Fleet’s arrival, the leaders of Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay—the four founding members of the Southern Common Market (Mercado Común del Sur—MERCOSUR)—as well as Venezuela, Bolivia, and Chile, met for a summit in the city of San Miguel de Tucumán in Argentina. Although the two main issues on the agenda were the world food crisis and the European immigration policy, Venezuela’s Chávez referred to the re-deployment of the Fourth Fleet and proposed that his colleagues ask Washington for an official explanation of the move. Brazil and Argentina were the first countries to take action. The Brazilian Senate debated the issue while Lula rushed his Foreign and Defense Ministers, Celso Amorim and Nelson Jobim, to Washington to meet separately with their American counterparts. At the same time, Argentina’s Cristina Fernández de Kirchner demanded explanations from the US Undersecretary of State for Hemispheric Affairs, Thomas Shannon, during his visit to the country on July 10. Even Chile, which has signed a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States, raised the issue at a bilateral meeting.

None of the explanations that represent the representatives of the Pentagon, the State Department, or the commanding officers of SouthCom and the Fourth Fleet have provided officially have satisfied South Americans. Yet, neither Brazil nor Argentina went beyond an official demand for explanation. Moreover, during his visit to Argentina in the second week of September, Brazil’s newly appointed Minister of Strategic Affairs, Roberto Mangabeira Unger, denied any relation between the re-deployment of the Fourth Fleet and his country’s ambitious decision to raise the defense budget from 1.5 to 2.7 percent of the GDP. “We do not work based on enemies or threats; only on capacities we need,” he said. During the VIII Conference of the Defense Ministers of the Americas with US Defense Secretary Robert Gates in Banff, Canada, Nilda Garré maintained that bilateral cooperation between Argentina and the United States would...
continue despite her concern about the reactivation of the Fourth Fleet, which she described as “a military move for which we do not see any convincing explanation.”

Argentina and Brazil’s rather prudent reaction can be explained first by a realist approach to the issue; historical experience has shown that confrontation with the United States never has a positive outcome. Second, there is at least one country in South America, Colombia, that is aligned with the United States, and Brazil, the leading country in the process of the regional integration, does not want to alienate any member of the Union of the South American Nations (UNASUR). Third, there is a widespread conviction in Brazil and Argentina that the defense and exercise of sovereignty are basically a function of strengthening national and regional institutions to face any direct or indirect attempt of foreign intervention in the region.

Venezuela, however, did not hesitate to go further and raise the stakes with the United States. Barely a month after the Fourth Fleet became operative in the waters of the South Atlantic, President Chavez seized on the opportunity of renewed Russian-American tension in the aftermath of the Georgia crisis and announced that Venezuela and Russia would hold joint naval exercises in the Caribbean. On September 8, Moscow confirmed the visit of the nuclear warship Piotr Veliki. Later that same week, Chávez expelled the US Ambassador in Caracas as a gesture of solidarity with Bolivia’s Evo Morales’ decision to expel the US Ambassador in La Paz. At the heart of Venezuela’s and Bolivia’s hawkish position lies not only an ideological factor but also the conviction that the United States is indeed intervening in their internal affairs. Moreover, both Chávez and Morales have experienced direct hostility from Washington: in April 2002, the former US Undersecretary of State Otto Reich rushed to legitimize the failed military coup against Chávez; in Bolivia the US Ambassador publicly repudiated Evo Morales while he was still a leader of the coca-growing peasants and a candidate for the presidential elections. Both leaders came into power with an agenda of radical reforms violently opposed by entrenched minority sectors, which after historically holding power are now facing threats and have been displaced and marginalized. Chávez and Morales have accused Washington of maintaining ties with the opposition, providing its leaders with financial aid, and even arming them. Hence, an emerging Russia is seen as a potential ally to balance the US hegemonic drive in the region.