

WAR OF WORDS

THE RHETORIC AND REALITY
OF IRAN'S "COUNTER LASSO"
AND BID FOR INFLUENCE IN
LATIN AMERICA

MICHAEL C. NICONCHUK
MOLLY DOW

Michael C. Niconchuk is a junior at Tufts University majoring in International Relations with a concentration in International Security. For the past two years, Michael has served as co-director of Building Understanding through International Learning and Development (BUILD), an Institute for Global Leadership program, which has raised more than \$25,000 in local and national grants and prizes for its current work with resettled refugee and ex-combatant populations in rural Guatemala. In addition, Michael was one of the recipients of the 2008 Anne E. Borghesani Memorial Prize.

Molly Dow is a junior at Tufts planning to major in International Relations, with a concentration in International Security, and to minor in Music. At Tufts, she has co-coordinated an on-campus ESL program for the university's janitorial staff through the Leonard Carmichael Society as well as participated in several musical ensembles. Outside of school, she spends time volunteering, working with organizations such as Amnesty International.

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On the side of the road, a lone worker in a blue jumpsuit stood bent over a pile of unmixed cement. Although the air was cold, he was sweating in the sunlight. As far as he could see in either direction, brown fields speckled with hay-roofed homes extended into the azure horizon. The wind whipped about plastic bags, thrown out of passing trucks driven by men who are likely unaware of the controversy of this blue suited worker and the high red walls he was building. Welcome to Achacachi, Bolivia.

“It is the Iranians [who are building this],” said the blue-suited worker, wiping his brow and nodding to the building next to him. He swirled his shovel in the soupy concrete. “They are coming back next week, I think.”

It is difficult to see what lies behind the high walls that protect this factory. Signaling us towards him, the worker offered to go back to town to ask for the keys to the facility so that we could see inside. He seemed unaccustomed to foreign visitors, but our presence had clearly aroused his interest. Quickly, he hopped on his bike and peddled down the knife-straight road towards the center of Achacachi. In his absence, we wandered the walls, speculating and hypothesizing as to what lay beyond the bars and concrete.

Minutes later he returned with the gatekeeper.

“No outsiders allowed in.” The gatekeeper seemed confused and suspicious, undoubtedly surprised that we had found this tiny milk factory, and even more surprised that we wanted to go inside.

“We have permission from Mayor Rojas,” we added. “Fine.” His key turned and we stepped into the courtyard

that shields this plant from the dusty road. Once inside, the red faded into stainless steel, and our footsteps rang heavily against the scuff-free white floors.

“Only one of them speaks Spanish,” the gatekeeper reflected, referring to the Iranian engineers who came each month to install the processing equipment and train local workers. Farsi letters and numbers were scribbled across the instruction panels of the yogurt-bagging machine. The gatekeeper scoffed, admitting his total incomprehension of the language. “And they would not try *las hojas de la coca*.”

As we left the facility and walked back towards the bus station, we passed a large sign announcing the town limits, welcoming us once again to Achacachi, home to one of Bolivia’s most radical populations, shimmering Lake Titicaca, and this new dairy factory paid for and installed by the government of Iran. Some may find that strange. Many in Washington agree, and policymakers’ next steps have serious implications.

While an in-depth study of Iran’s economic and political relations with all Latin American countries is important, this article will address one case study: Bolivia.

From a Duo to a Trio: the Effects of Deteriorating U.S.-Bolivia Relations

In current discussions of national security, one rarely hears arguments centered on the concept of development aid. Control of weapons sales, the prevention of terrorism, and the promotion of democratic ideals consume most of the debate, yet it is increasingly important to recognize the significance of development aid as a tool for security-building and influence. Today, the Middle East and South Asia remain the most publicized spheres of conflict and strategic concern to the U.S., but over the past decades a new bloc of countries has been growing stronger in its opposition to the United States.

For decades in Latin America, U.S. hegemony was rarely contested. Recently, however, Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez initiated a “Bolivarian Revolution,” a leftist movement

deriving its inspiration from Simon Bolívar—leader of northern South America’s independence movements—and intent on defying U.S. influence in Latin America and the Caribbean. Chavez is a growing preoccupation for Washington, and the extent of his ideological appeal has been demonstrated in recent elections in Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Ecuador, as well as in the political upheaval in Honduras. While U.S. influence in the form of military and development aid has arguably contributed to healthy economic development in many countries in the region, this aid has often brought with it a number of unwanted consequences, including coups d’état, military support for repressive regimes, and multinational corporations and contractors with undue influence. That is, at least, the impression left on local populations; an impression which has compelled them to react. In attempts to purge their borders of this undesired company, states like Venezuela and Bolivia have now grown distrustful of even the slightest hint of U.S. development aid, assuming all of it is tainted.

As regions across the globe express anti-Americanism via terrorism, lack of cooperation, and strained diplomatic relations, Latin America has quickly and quietly risen to the forefront of such political expression. This became apparent two years ago when Bolivia’s president, Evo Morales, initiated diplomatic talks and negotiations with a surprising new confidant, Iran’s president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Since the end of 2007, Bolivia and Iran’s relationship has blossomed proportionally to the deterioration of relations between Bolivia and the United States.

In late 2008, Morales declared U.S. Ambassador to Bolivia Philip Goldberg *persona non grata*.¹ According to the Bolivian government, Goldberg, embassy officials and other U.S. entities had been “realizing activities which we [Bolivians]

consider insulting,”² including allegedly aiding anti-Morales movements and financially supporting the autonomy movement of the oil-rich Santa Cruz lowlands. The details surrounding the ambassador’s expulsion have been fiercely contested and remain unclear, mired in rumor and speculation.

Three months prior to the ambassador’s removal, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was asked to leave the Chapare region of Cochabamba in central Bolivia, the hotbed of illicit coca cultivation. Coca syndicate vice president and national congressman Asterio Romero claimed that, among other things, USAID warranted removal because its mission in Bolivia had been fundamentally inappropriate, working to “destabilize democracy and the [Morales] government.”³ In Cochabamba, the director of the *Centro de Desarrollo Andino* (Center for Andean Development) described USAID’s Chapare model as “cooperation with conditions,”⁴ and alluded to widespread discontent over the alternative development program the agency had been promoting. In addition, the director told of a recent confrontation in which coca farmers who had switched to banana cultivation under USAID’s program grew so frustrated by mid-2008 that they marched on the Cochabamba office and threw their rotting fruit at the building in demonstration of their inability to access markets for their new crops.⁵ Today, even a brief visit to the villages of Chapare is enough time to grasp the fierce anti-USAID climate. Along the roads, several signs reading “Free from USAID!” collect rust, graffiti, and additional layers of slander in the sweltering Amazonian heat.

Perhaps most frustrating to many in Washington was Morales’ suspension of all U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) activities in the country in November 2008, less

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than two months after the removal of Ambassador Goldberg. As of October of 2009, the DEA was still banned from conducting any counternarcotics work in Bolivia. This continued prohibition represents a major change from the status-quo, anti-drug presence the United States has held in the region. Vice Foreign Minister Hugo Fernández Aráuz commented that as far as the government is concerned, Bolivia fully intends to continue counternarcotics programs; however without U.S. technology. He said, "We are most interested in negotiating with those who put the fewest restrictions [on counter-narcotics aid]."6 According to Fernández, the Bolivian government originally wished to purchase Czech planes constructed with U.S. parts for coca eradication programs, but were told by Czech officials that they had to ask the U.S. government before signing any deal. "It was the same cycle...a colonialist scheme,"7 Fernández lamented, and this caveat led Bolivia's government to pursue counternarcotics cooperation with Russia, originally scheduled to begin in February 2009. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev was quoted by the British Broadcasting Company as saying, "We hope that very soon we will begin carrying out the first big contract to deliver Russian helicopters to Bolivia."8 The exact number of helicopters remains unknown.

During the 2007-2008 period of souring relations between La Paz and Washington, Morales signed two aid packages with Ahmadinejad's government, one totaling \$1.1 billion signed in 2007 in La Paz9 and a subsequent deal signed in Tehran in September 2008 concerning bilateral economic and agricultural ties.10 According to dozens of U.S. newspapers and blogs, these aid packages included Iranian investment in Bolivia's oil and gas sector, the construction of health clinics, the construction of dairy and cement factories, lithium and uranium speculation, telecommunications infrastructure, the installation of an Iranian embassy in La Paz, and the lifting of certain visa restrictions for Iranians wishing to enter Bolivia. While the types of projects associated with Iran's aid to Bolivia differ from those seen in Venezuela, Ahmadinejad's and Morales's relationship does somewhat mimic the relationship between the Iranian President and President Chavez, who was directly responsible for introducing the two leaders to each other in 2007. In Venezuela, relations with Iran have deepened to include joint banking ventures, direct airline service, and military cooperation11, all of which were built upon basic deals similar to those Iran signed recently with Bolivia. In this sense, Bolivia—alongside Ecuador and Nicaragua to a certain degree—has followed Venezuela's example with Iran. The country has become the newest pledge in Chavez's fraternity of non-alignment and has succeeded in gaining the "brother"12 status Ahmadinejad had previously extended to Chavez.

Mainstream journalism articles as well as blogs discussing Iranian-South American relations have increased in number recently, concurrent with the colorful rhetoric from Chavez, Morales, and Ahmadinejad. Indeed, the United States has begun to take notice. In May 2009 US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued a statement, saying that Iran's "visible penetration" into America's own hemisphere was "quite disturbing."13 While many online sources have fanned rumors and hysteria surrounding said "penetration" of the Americas, there has been little legitimate investigation into Iran's relations with any country in the region. This lack of serious investigation was made most obvious when Secretary Clinton claimed that "the Iranians are building a huge embassy in Managua [Nicaragua]...and you can only imagine what that is for."14 Numerous Nicaraguan civilians and government officials counter-reported that such a structure simply does not exist and that there is no evidence of any Iranian embassy, large or small, under construction in the country. *The Washington Post* confirmed that the Managua embassy does not exist.15

The Logic and Politics of Iran's Latin American "Counter Lasso"

While the relationship among Venezuela, Bolivia, and Iran may seem a recent phenomenon, it is important to note that Iran has been active in Latin America for decades. The relationship extends as far back as the Iran-Contra dealmaking in the 1980s, and today old ties between Nicaragua and Iran are reemerging with the 2006 election of Daniel Ortega. The impetus for Iran's involvement in Bolivia, however, has little to do with history but rather with diplomatic nudging from Hugo Chavez. As noted, relations between Iran and Bolivia have come to mimic the solidified ties between Caracas and Tehran. Oil, trade, development aid, and diplomatic talks in Caracas all provided for the beginnings of a "counter lasso" effect that Ahmadinejad expressly desired in his foreign policy.16 Amir Taheri, an Iranian-born author and journalist, argues that "Ahmadinejad's analysis is simple: America is trying to throw a lasso around Iran with the help of allies in surrounding regions. So Iran should throw a counter lasso...

in the United States' South American backyard."17 Taheri makes a valid theoretical argument. Iraq and Afghanistan comprise the majority of Iran's border, and both states are currently home to tens of thousands of U.S. troops and are run by comparatively U.S.-friendly governments. Pakistan's Baluchistan province forms another large swath of the border; the incessant insurgency and separatist situations there are yet another source of volatility for Tehran. A quick glance at Iran's other neighbors—Azerbaijan, Turkey, and the Persian Gulf—lends support to Taheri and many others' assessment that there is a pro-U.S. lasso hanging much like a noose around Iran, whose leaders additionally face massive international pressure and speculation in regards to their nuclear ambitions. While Iranian leadership likely understands that there is no possible comparison between their ability to project power versus the ability of the United States, they nonetheless have chosen a counter-balancing (i.e. counter-lasso) strategy standard in their theoretical groundwork.

It is commonly accepted that "states, especially small states, often cannot achieve security on their own," whether their security be objective or perceived.18 In the case of Iran, a country currently surrounded by (at least nominal) allies of an enemy, the government clearly perceives a lack of security. The logical next step therefore is to "flock together to form balancing coalitions,"19 whether the coalition be regional, hemispheric, or global. Tehran, in an attempt to mimic U.S. lassoing in the Middle East and Southwest Asia, deliberately sought balancing partners geographically close to the United States. Venezuela was stop number one, followed soon after by Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. But given Iran's long-standing economic and diplomatic ties with other South American countries such as Argentina and Brazil, what accounts for the member composition of the Iranian-South American bloc?

Michael Barletta and Harold Trinakus point out that "[a]ctors' identities are of causal significance because they orient actors' understandings of themselves, others, and the world. These understandings enable actors to identify their interests, so that they can take action to pursue their objectives."20 Here we find the more theoretical basis of the alliance. Perceived identity—something inherent, some

perception of self that can be mirrored in politically, socially, and religiously dissimilar states—can define state interests and policy goals. Washington, as such, is confronting an interesting bloc, a group of states fundamentally oriented and united by their perceived identity as victims of U.S. ascendancy and hegemony. Composed of leaders like Ahmadinejad, Chavez, Morales, and to some extent, Ecuador’s Rafael Correa and Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega, this balancing coalition is not forming based on *ideals*, as their respective leaders claim, or any commonality other than their shared self-perception engendered by United States policy.

On May 25, 2009, an article in Iran’s Press TV online demonstrated that the issue of Iranian-Latin America relations and the “counter lasso” strategy had reached the highest levels of political debate in Tehran. The article portrays the issue as one of the areas of disagreement between recent “runner-up” Mir Hossein Moussavi and the now re-elected Ahmadinejad leading up to the June 2009 presidential elections. Moussavi is quoted as saying, “Instead of investing in Iran’s neighboring countries, the government has fixed eyes and poured money into Latin American states. The President has obviously failed to get his priorities right.”²¹ Alaedeen Boroujerdi, head of the National Security and Foreign Policy Commission of the Iranian Parliament and an Ahmadinejad supporter, replied to Moussavi’s criticism, saying, “Thanks to the [Ahmadinejad] government’s foreign policy and investment in Latin America, Iran has built a secure footing in Washington’s strategic backyard.”²² Boroujerdi’s defense of Ahmadinejad is clear.

Moussavi and the Ahmadinejad camp are advocating what are essentially theoretical opposites: Loosen the lasso around Iran (via aid to and alliances with neighboring states) or make a new lasso around the U.S. It is an easily analyzed game and a sort of security dilemma, deeply rooted in the states’ self-perception and interpretation of the strength of the other’s “lasso.” The extent of escalation, then, should be of primary and critical concern to Washington, as Iran’s second move has already been made clear in Latin America.

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Iran’s “Subversive Activity”²³

On January 27, 2009, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee that he was “concerned about the level of, frankly, subversive activity that the Iranians are carrying on in a number of places in Latin America.”²⁴ His statement neither reflects reality nor encourages appropriate public reaction. Nonetheless, Gates elaborated, “They’re opening a lot of offices and a lot of fronts behind which they interfere in what is going on in some of these countries.” He fell short, however, of offering any specific examples of offices or even types of alleged interference, be they political, economic, or ideological. Many view Gates’ statement as bold, especially those who accuse the United States of being guilty of historically similar behavior. Others agreed with Gates. Any “subversive activity” in America’s “strategic backyard” naturally attracts the attention of strategists and democracy advocates across the U.S. For the U.S.’s most ardent ideological henchmen, the current debate over Iran in Latin America has become reminiscent of the Cold War, during which several Central and South American states felt the damaging force caused by the American reaction to real and perceived Soviet collusion. Examples include 1950s Guatemala, 1970s Chile and 1980s Nicaragua. Today, as it should have been in the 1950-1980s, the U.S. government must be vigilant with information and must ensure sound underpinnings of any policy that attempts to respond to what Secretary Gates or his colleagues deem “subversive activity.”

Forging Ahead: Bolivia and Iran

Bolivia, of all the countries currently engaged with Iran, provides an interesting case study for numerous reasons. It is South America’s poorest nation and has remained perpetually low on Washington’s foreign policy agenda, barring limited occasions such as World War II when Bolivia’s few resources were highly coveted.²⁵ As established, recent years saw tremendous growth in anti-American, “anti-imperialist” sentiments coming from the country, yet despite this blatant and fierce political battle it was not until Iran’s involvement in the country that U.S. officials began to question the Bolivia policy. The fears caused by Iran’s growing presence have forced some academics and policymakers to reexamine the United States’ hemispheric role, but more than Iran’s growing presence, Bolivia’s increasing importance as an energy-provider should be what arouses Washington’s interest.

Already known to be home to South America’s second-largest natural gas reserves, Bolivia now has a new carrot to dangle. It was recently publicized that Southwestern Bolivia’s *salar de Uyuni* region holds an astounding 60-70 percent of the world’s known lithium reserves²⁶ in an increasingly lithium-powered world. In March 2009, President Obama pledged \$2.4 billion in Department of Energy grants to support the manufacturing of electric vehicles and their components,²⁷ which includes lithium-ion batteries. Given the amount of money being channeled into alternative energy research and development, it would seem logical, even crucial, that the U.S. President and State Department seek to rebuild ties with Morales. Yet even to the surprise of Bolivia’s state mining company, COMIBOL, the United

States has not sent a single delegation to participate in the international scientific committee²⁸ that is conducting tests with this “very strategic resource.”²⁹

Iran, in contrast, has not sat idly by. According to Evert Villena, public relations director of COMIBOL’s Evaporates Division, Iran has not submitted a formal proposal for lithium speculation and extraction but has asked that part of their recent €240 million aid package be given to the industrialization phase of Bolivia’s lithium production. *El Diario*, one of Bolivia’s most popular newspapers, publicized in June that the government of Iran was more than simply funding lithium research and infrastructure, claiming that Iran intended to open offices in La Paz and eventually in Uyuni for lithium exploration.³⁰ However, when our field research was conducted in August 2009, COMIBOL officials in both cities claimed no knowledge of this.

Lithium is not Bolivia’s only underground resource garnering attention on the international scene. In May of 2009, an Israeli government report accused Venezuela and Bolivia of supplying Iran with uranium, an accusation that if proven, could greatly alter U.S. and European relations with all three states. While Bolivia does indeed have several uranium deposits, it does not have an active uranium-mining infrastructure. In response to the accusation, Vice Minister Fernández admitted, “I understand that the Israelis are somewhat worried that Iran could be developing nuclear weapons,” but he adamantly insisted that “there is no registered exportation [of uranium]. They made it up. [It is] totally false.”³¹ Like this accusation, much of the published information on the issue of Iranian-Bolivian relations is highly speculative, and Fernández concluded his remarks on Israel by saying, “We know that in today’s world, lies are part of the information war.”³²

Several other news articles on the issue of Iran in Latin America, all published in 2008, highlighted one Iranian project in Bolivia in particular—the construction of a series of dairy processing facilities in the western highlands. Journalist Tyler Bridges reported, “90 Bolivians are building [an] Iranian-financed milk factory in Achacachi, a town two hours west of La Paz, the capital.”³³ The location selected for the inaugural plant does appear strategic, perhaps con-

trived by Morales and his Middle Eastern “brother” to capitalize on local sentiments. Achacachi is internationally known for its vocal criticism of foreign intervention. Eugenio Rojas, the town’s mayor, was open about their reputation, ““We have taken a critical view”³⁴ of U.S. policy,” he said. At the same time, he praised his municipality, bragging that Achacachi ranks number one of Bolivia’s 300 municipalities as far as investment in development projects compliant with the U.N. Millennium Development Goals. In their 2008 Annual Operation Plan (POA), Achacachi’s municipal council requested the installation of a dairy processing factory, 70-80 percent federally funded, 20-30 percent funded by the municipal government.³⁵ La Paz’s response to the POA was LACTEOSBOL, a government-run dairy company created by Decree No. 29727 in October 2008³⁶ and set to establish the first of six national processing plants in Achacachi. While the town is undoubtedly one of Bolivia’s most radical, it also happens to be the most productive herding zone, which provides logical justification for the plant’s location.

In regards to USAID and North American development aid in general, Mayor Rojas shrugged, saying “we didn’t get much”³⁷ from USAID or other American groups when they operated more freely in Bolivia. “It was more of a political impact” than an economic impact, he added, also citing USAID’s alleged involvement in anti-Morales campaigns. While he noted that some German NGOs had been doing work in the region, Mayor Rojas explained the situation of Achacachi in very simple terms, confirming that the people of his municipality would take help from anyone who would give it so long as the proposed projects were truly of value to the community. “I have no idea as far as ‘why Iran?’”³⁸ he added.

At the LACTEOSBOL site, about two kilometers outside of Achacachi, the guard explained with pride that this factory will, by the beginning of 2010, create many new jobs and produce milk to be distributed among local schools for children’s breakfasts. Strangely absent was any indication of Iranian sponsorship, barring the Farsi scribbles on the sides of the stainless steel equipment—no flag, no logo, no trace of ownership. Additionally, both the guard and Mayor Rojas explained that the facility would soon be fully transferred to the control of Bolivian technicians.

Tamayo made certain to note, however, that the Bolivian government maintains a very strong alliance with Iran. He added, “[It is] more ideological and symbolic discourse” than palpable cooperation.

Yet another area of suspected Iranian cooperation is Bolivia’s public health industry. *The Denver Post*, among other U.S. newspapers, published in October 2008 that Iran “will open two low-cost public health clinics” in La Paz and Cochabamba and “plans to use Bolivia as a base for future Red Crescent medical programs across the continent.”³⁹ These plans were the subject of dozens of other articles in U.S. and Iranian media. Fox-News stated that the clinics will “employ Bolivian staff but be managed by Iranians,”⁴⁰ and that in addition to the clinics, an Iranian non-governmental organization was sponsoring a \$2.5 million hospital in the poorer El Alto suburb.⁴¹ Surprisingly, neither workers at the Ministry of Health nor local pharmacists knew of any Iranian clinics. At the Bolivian Red Cross, Project Coordinator Dr. Carlos Tamayo indicated that his office had received a very informal proposal from the Iranian Embassy regarding the construction of clinics, but the idea never materialized.⁴² Tamayo made certain to note, however, that the Bolivian government maintains a very strong alliance with Iran. He added, “[It is] more ideological and symbolic discourse” than palpable cooperation.⁴³

At the Bolivian Ministry of Health, the doctor in charge of international collaborations was, like the rest of the workers interviewed, skeptical of the possibility of construction of the clinics that were outlined in several articles, as well as the October 2008 agreement signed between Iranian charge d’affaires Hojjatollah Soltani and Bolivian Health Minister Ramiro Tapia. In regards to the supposed \$2.5 million hospital in El Alto, both the Red Cross and the Ministry of Health said that they had never heard of the idea, commenting that they could only hope for such a high-quality facility in such a poor area. Both organizations agreed that if the clinics outlined in U.S. newspapers were to come to fruition, it would still be quite a long time before land was purchased and construction could begin.

What was perhaps the most vocalized information obtained about Bolivia's public health system was not the surprising lack of Iranian involvement, but rather the overwhelming distaste for USAID's general comportment in the health sector. Tamayo described a privatized healthcare network, PROSALUD, which USAID created and which he says has greatly complicated and frustrated the public programs.⁴⁴ Additionally, Tamayo criticized USAID's unnecessary expenditures, making a comparison that for the same project, Red Cross directors were receiving \$100 per month for a specific job in the Eastern lowlands, whereas USAID employees were earning thirty-five times that amount for the same job. Both Tamayo and Red Cross Director Dr. Abel Lillo y Peña though did acknowledge that hundreds of families have been hurt by President Morales' recent prohibition of USAID funding in the health industry, and that too many in Bolivia are too quick to judge USAID based on the single issue of coca.^{45,46}

What Is the Iranian Presence?

Besides a few strategically placed Iranian flags at popular tourist sites, Iran's "subversive" investment is quite subtle, the general population knowing little if anything about Iran and its involvement in their country. As Tamayo stressed, there is a definite alliance between the governments of Iran and Bolivia, and the government in La Paz is not ashamed to admit it; however, the primary source of this South-South alliance rhetoric has been President Morales, not the Bolivian people. Since the first meeting between Ahmadinejad and Morales in 2007, Bolivia has, along with Venezuela, advocated that Iran be allowed to pursue peaceful nuclear development⁴⁷ in an attempt to save Ahmadinejad from becoming a total international pariah on the issue. More recently, Morales exhibited his solidarity with the Caracas-Tehran bloc by severing diplomatic ties with Israel over the December 2008 Gaza invasion.⁴⁸ The subsequent Israeli accusation of uranium exportation has further complicated relations between the two states. Observing the nature of this diplomatic rhetoric and action, it could be said that the "counter lasso" thrown by Iran seems to be little more than words and photo-ops among the highest echelons of political leadership.

Conclusion: A War of Words

Iran is no Russia. Starting in the 1950s in the United States, there was a hypersensitivity to any mention of Soviet influence. In that time, even a hint of Red became a call to arms for Washington officials eager to keep their hemisphere and far-off lands free from Communism. In many cases, the spread of communism was used as a call to action, whether it was true or not, such as in Iran with the overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1953. During that era of panic and suspicion, the American banner was also an anti-Soviet banner, via both military dictatorship and puppet democracy. Across Central and South America, the United States began to assert a tighter relationship with nascent capitalist economies and modern political structures through 1989.

With arms crossed in unwavering assuredness, Vice Minister Fernández observed, "The U.S. does not object to Iran's relations with Argentina. Iran has had relations with Uruguay for years, as well as with Brazil...So what is the problem with Bolivia?"

NAFTA, CAFTA, and Plan Colombia were three of the relatively few Latin America policies emerging from Capitol Hill in the post-Cold War era, as the majority of national attention had switched to an increasingly problematic Middle East. Over time, sentiments sharpened, and Latin Americans began to question the status quo of their governments. What began in Venezuela—leftist cries with more than a hint of bitterness—has now become a trend in much of the hemisphere.

As oil-rich "rogue" Venezuela began to aggravate Washington, its leader Chavez did what many leaders would do: He clutched Iran's lasso as it became available so as to provoke some attention and even perhaps a response from the U.S. In 2007 Chavez extended the rope to Evo Morales. Thus emerged the Global South Alliance, now increasingly and without precedent jeopardizing U.S. control over its own backyard.

Bolivia's government is aware of its rank on the U.S. foreign policy to-do list, although given their new diplomatic maneuverings, this position is in flux. With arms crossed in unwavering assuredness, Vice Minister Fernández observed, "The U.S. does not object to Iran's relations with Argentina. Iran has had relations with Uruguay for years, as well as with Brazil...So what is the problem with Bolivia?"⁴⁹ Like Iran, the United States has healthy relations with Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil as well.

We are not in a climate similar to the Cold War, where states must choose between one state or the other, between Iran and the United States. Neither are we living in a climate in which states fall into black and white ideological camps. What binds Iran to Bolivia, or to Venezuela, or Ecuador, or Argentina?

The United States is both the glue and the enemy of this Global South bloc, and a proper tempering strategy must take into account both the reality of past policy failures and the facts of this bloc's relationships. Washington cannot politically afford to continue creating Iranian embassies. Undoubtedly such rhetoric, if left unchecked, will have the doubly dangerous effect of exposing intelligence weaknesses and encouraging the resurgence of Soviet-era paranoia.