Iran in Latin America: A Robust and Long-lasting Rapprochement?

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Abstract

Relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and various Latin American governments have been revived during the last decade. This rapprochement was first based on a closed partnership between the former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez (1998-2013) and his Iranian counterpart, President Mahmud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013).

These new links with the Islamic Republic have not received a unanimous welcome in the region. Even the Lula administration in Brazil (2003-2010) seemed dubious before 2008. And the subsequent positions taken by Dilma Rousseff’s government confirm this hesitation.

The objective of this paper is to assess the foundations and motivations (ideological, economic, and multilateral) of this transregional relation during the last decade and the potential future.

As I will argue, relations between Iran and Latin America may survive the disappearance of this symbolic duo of Chávez and Ahmadinejad. Further, these relations might also adopt a different profile according to the diplomatic strategy that the new Iranian government will choose.
Introduction

An important rapprochement between the Islamic Republic and various Latin American countries took place during the last decade. The two main symbols of that phenomenon are the close partnership between Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) and Mahmud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) around an anti-imperialistic rhetoric, development cooperation and oil, and the timelier but just as controversial Tehran Declaration signed between Brazil, Iran and Turkey in May 2010 on the nuclear program of the Islamic regime. These two examples illustrate the diversity of bi-regional ties in their chronology and content.

Relations between Iran and Latin America are not new, however. For instance, formal diplomatic relations with Brazil date back to 1903. Later, oil was the most important factor that brought Latin American oil producers, mainly Venezuela, closer to Iran through the creation of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960. The Islamic Revolution in 1979 led to a renewal in Iran’s Latin American partners. The breaking of diplomatic links with the United States in the wake of the hostage crisis changed Iran’s international insertion, as it became an enemy of the leaders of the Western camp. As a consequence, ties with US allies decreased, such as in the case of Venezuela, but links with anti-US countries, like Cuba, developed.

This “anti-imperialist” profile of Iranian diplomacy is still in force, as well as the search for alternative partners all around the world due to the isolation imposed by Northern powers and most Arab countries linked to them, above all after the nuclear issue that emerged in 2002.

That is why relations between Iran and Latin America should not appear as an incongruity, as they have some historical background. What seems newer is the intensity of bi-regional links during the last decade. For instance, President Mahmud Ahmadinejad travelled more to the region than President George W. Bush.

Deciding to develop a partnership with contemporary Iran is not innocent, as it generates a specific, almost disproportionate, international visibility. This trend is due to two main factors: first, the Iranian regime itself, an Islamic Republic of Shiite ascendance, whose main authority is the Supreme Guide, currently Ayatollah Khamenei. After 9-11, every political phenomenon that is associated with radical Islam draws significant attention, particularly in Western political and media circles. Secondly, Iran is defined by the United States State Department as one of the major global threats, the last denomination being its belonging to the “Axis of Evil” as denoted by the Republican administration of George W. Bush after 9-11. The lack of formal relations since 1979 and the nuclear issue since 2002 have reinforced this dominant perception about the Iranian political authorities.

As a consequence, whether a government wants to develop a critical and radical foreign policy or not, establishing ties with Iran catapults the initiative to the core of Western attention, especially in the USA. Apart from the Venezuelan-Iranian strategic partnership that receives important coverage, we may mention the Peruvian votes against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 2009 that was largely diffused, unlike other Peruvian positions on different issues.
Because of the tense Iranian relations with Western powers, the rapprochement with Latin America tends to be seen through the “anti-imperialist” argument. Even if it certainly plays a significant role in most cases, I argue that this mono-causal explanation is insufficient to understand the development of interregional ties. Economic interest, exchanges of savoir-faire and global aspirations also have to be taken into account, with variable configurations according to each Latin American foreign policy.

In this perspective, my main questions will be the following: How to explain the fact that various Latin American leaders decided to get closer to the Islamic Republic during the last decade? And how to expect the future of the interregional relation?

In order to answer them, we will refer to Charles Hermann’s work on foreign policy decision-making (Hermann, 1990). The application of his proposal to Latin American cases does not represent an innovation. The fundamental work of Tullo Vigevani and Gabriel Cepaluni on Lula’s diplomacy (2003-2010) is also inspired by Hermann’s investigation (Vigevani and Cepaluni, 2007). It is indeed quite interesting for us that Hermann’s work is considered as a useful tool to study the foreign policies of developing countries. It allows us to go beyond the current tension between concepts forged in Northern countries and for Northern realities, and the realities of Southern countries.

Charles Hermann proposes two levels of analysis. First of all, the degree of change is to be determined, from minor adjustment to program-goal changes and in the last configuration, fundamental changes in a country’s international orientation. The study of the agents of change helps us respond to the first level of analysis. The author determines four main agents or explanatory variables: leader-driven; bureaucratic advocacy; domestic restructuring; and external shock (Hermann, 1990).

Based on the theoretical framework, this paper’s thesis defends that ties between Iran and Latin American countries are deeply dependent on the political will of the head of the Executive power on each side, but that they may be multifaceted, and not only adopt an “anti-imperialist” echo.

The analysis of the durability of these interregional ties will be based on a diachronic method: we will try to compare the situation between 1999 and 2011, which corresponds to the dynamization of the rapprochement, with the period beginning in 2011 experiencing various changes in the “agents” that may produce a reorientation of the links between Latin America and Iran. The presentation is structured according to the four variables of Charles Hermann.

1/ The Crucial Role of Latin American Presidents

2/ Latin American Bureaucratic Silence on Iran

3/ A symbolic Domestic Political Issue in Latin America

4/ The Potential Consequences of a Hypothetical International Reinsertion of Iran