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Iran's expanding alliance with Latin America must be nipped
By Lawrence J. Haas

WASHINGTON -- Henry Kissinger famously asked whether Iran sees itself as a “nation” with a role in the international system or a “cause” that seeks to overturn the system through a global populist revolution.

Iran’s activities not just in its own backyard but also south of our border – specifically, in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua – suggests the latter, and that poses a growing threat that the United States should counter quickly.

Those activities include growing cooperation among Iran and its emerging Latin American friends on matters of global concern, expanding state-level trade and financial ties, and increasing relationships among the military forces of these nations and the groups that they support.

Iran’s path to growing Latin American influence comes with an ironic twist. When President James Monroe enunciated the “Monroe Doctrine” two centuries ago, warning Europe to keep its hands off the region, it was Simon Bolivar and other revolutionaries who reacted warmly because it supported their efforts to emancipate their Latin American territories from the grips of Europe’s colonial powers.

Now, it is Iran and its allies in Venezuela and the other Latin American nations that cite Bolivar as they work to unseat the United States from its perch atop the world’s pecking order and create a post-American global order.

For the United States, Tehran’s support for Hezbollah and other terrorist groups, its efforts to destabilize states in the greater Middle East and its quest for nuclear weaponry raise great concern by themselves. They become ever-more frightening when considered in the context of an intercontinental alliance of revolutionaries with a shared agenda and growing working relationships.

This unlikely alliance is fueled most of all by a fervent anti-Americanism and driven by a desire to undermine U.S. influence across both the Americas and the world. They are the glue that holds the alliance together.

Anti-Americanism is the theme of public statements by Iran’s Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez, Bolivia’s Evo Morales, Ecuador’s Rafael Correa and Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega after their increasingly frequent visits with one another. Ahmadinejad says the alliance reflects “a large anti-imperialist movement” in the region, while the Latin leaders compare their ascents to power with Iran’s revolution.

Iran has what the Latin capitals want and vice versa, fostering a marriage of convenience that extends from trade, development and banking to the sharing of natural resources, to military cooperation.

Iran has tripled its investment in the region in the past several years, delivering hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to each of its Latin American allies. For Caracas in particular, Tehran has begun manufacturing operations in Venezuela and launched a joint venture to fund development projects in both countries.

Beyond economics, Iran is helping Venezuela build the infrastructure for its own nuclear program, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has trained Venezuela's secret services and police, and Iran-backed Hezbollah has expanded its operations in Venezuela and received financial and other support from Caracas.

In return, the Latin nations have rallied around Iran's quest for nuclear weaponry and sought to undermine efforts by the U.N. Security Council and the International Atomic Energy Commission to pressure Tehran.

Venezuela has gone further, letting Iran use its banking system to evade financial sanctions. In addition, with Iran dependent on imported refined petroleum, oil-rich Venezuela offered to send it up to 20,000 barrels of gasoline a day. And seeking to further enhance its nuclear capability, Iran is working with Venezuela to extract uranium within its borders – giving Tehran a potentially more important route to key materials to make its nuclear pursuit a success.

Iran's alliance with the Latin nations is helping all sides promote an agenda that is challenging the United States on the world stage and nearer to home. It's time for Washington to respond accordingly.

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