

Cables bare US operations in Brazil

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Scores of cables between the US State Department and the American embassy in Brasilia released by WikiLeaks have laid bare the ruthless pursuit of US imperialist interests in Latin America's largest country.

What emerges from the messages sent from the embassy in Brasilia to Washington is a policy aimed at subordinating Brazil to US interests by promoting "counter-terrorism" as the decisive issue and by pursuing back-channel relations with Brazilian military and security officials.

This orientation, the cables indicate, is based on a barely concealed contempt for civilian control. In a country that was ruled for two decades by a military dictatorship backed by Washington, the implications of these relationships are sobering.

Speaking before an audience of lawyers in São Paulo last week, US Ambassador to Brazil Thomas Shannon condemned WikiLeaks' actions as "very dangerous," while comparing their impact on US-Brazilian relations to problems in a marriage.

"If someone were to knock on your door and tell you that they have tapes of all of your conversations with your wife and that they are prepared to publish them, would you think that this transparency is something useful or something harmful?" Shannon said.

Media reports of Shannon's speech gave no indication of how his audience reacted to the Brazilian government being portrayed as Washington's "wife."

One of the more revealing cables among those released by WikiLeaks describes a luncheon meeting between then-US Ambassador John Danilovich and Gen. Jorge Armando Felix in May 2005.

General Felix, who rose through the officer corps under the dictatorship, is now the chief minister of the Institutional Security Cabinet (known by the Portuguese acronym GSI) of the presidency, a position that is roughly equivalent to the US national security adviser. He is also chief of the Brazilian National Intelligence Agency. He personifies the continuity of the National Information Service or SNI, the hated secret police of the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985.

The document, which was marked "secret," details a discussion that began on the so-called "tri-border region" where Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay meet. It has been an obsession of US foreign policy in the region for the last decade, with Washington's claims that it is a hotbed of terrorism.

While the Brazilian government has publicly rejected the US view of an alleged threat, "General Felix admitted that there were serious problems in the region and that the illegal movement of arms, money, drugs and the like through the region was of concern to the Brazilian Government," the cable states.

The US ambassador then turned the discussion to Venezuela and the government of President Hugo Chavez, Washington's other major

obsession in the region. Danilovich "noted that Chavez was disrupting Brazil's efforts to play a leading role politically and economically in South America," the cable recounts.

It continues: "General Felix nodded his head and appeared to be very carefully measuring his response. He then said that he had his own personal opinions about Chavez (which he did not share) that were different from the Brazilian Government's position."

The cable concludes: "General Felix has always been a straightforward interlocutor, and his term at GSI has been highlighted by very cooperative, joint CT [counter-terrorism] operations.... All in all, his continued presence at GSI bodes well for U.S. interests."

Such is the confidential diplomacy that Washington wants to conceal. A right-wing American ambassador elicits a brief statement from a leading military and intelligence official that his position and that of the elected government do not coincide. On that basis, a conclusion is reached that this is man who can serve Washington's interests.

Ironically, when General Felix was asked by the US ambassador what assistance he might need from the US, the general responded that the Brazilian government "was falling behind in protecting its own classified and unclassified computer systems. Felix said that he would welcome any assistance (courses, visitors, etc.) in this area." This was, of course, five years before hundreds of thousands of classified US cables were delivered into the hands of WikiLeaks.

Many of the subsequent cables also centered on the issue of terrorism and complaints by US officials over the alleged failure of the Brazilian government to treat it with due importance.

One chief grievance expressed by the US diplomats has been the Brazilian government's failure to enact anti-terrorism legislation.

General Felix's Institutional Security Cabinet had initiated a move toward creating such legislation in 2004, but it has been repeatedly shelved.

A November 2008 cable from Ambassador Sobel cites a conversation between the embassy's "poloff," or political officer—generally a cover for the CIA—and an individual identified as "Soloszyn," a strategic intelligence analyst at Brazil's Superior War College. The real name of the individual in question was Maj. André Luis Woloszyn, a Brazilian officer who underwent advanced training in the US.

Woloszyn told the US official that "there was little chance that this particular government, stacked with leftist militants who had been the object of military dictatorship-era laws designed to repress politically-motivated violence, was going to put forth a bill that would criminalize the actions of groups it sympathizes with, such as the Landless Movement (MST)."

The Brazilian officer insisted that "there is no way to write an anti-terrorism legislation that excludes the actions of the MST," which has led land occupations that have ended in violent confrontations.

The brief report provides a window into the mindset of the Brazilian military, which upholds the savage repression unleashed by the dictatorship against the Brazilian left, the unions, students and peasant movements in the name of combating “terrorism,” and which views movements of social struggle and opposition today through a similar prism.

While Brazil has no specific anti-terror law—and has publicly opposed Washington’s branding of political movements like Hamas and Hezbollah as “terrorist”—its security forces have surreptitiously introduced their own means of dealing with alleged terror suspects, according to the cables.

A secret cable sent by Ambassador Sobel to Washington in January 2008 spells out this frame-up technique employed by the Brazilian security forces.

“The Federal Police will often arrest individuals with links to terrorism, but will charge them on a variety of non-terrorism related crimes to avoid calling attention of the media and the higher levels of the government,” the cable states. “Over the past year, the Federal Police has arrested various individuals engaged in suspected terrorism financing activity but have based their arrests on narcotics and customs charges.”

The statement that these frame-up methods are employed to avoid calling the attention of “higher levels of the government” would suggest that elements in the military-police apparatus are secretly collaborating with the US anti-terror campaign directed at individuals whom the Brazilian government officially does not consider terrorists.

Another key concern reflected in the cables was Washington’s campaign to win an \$8 billion contract to provide 36 new fighter planes to Brazil’s Air Force. The US government was acting as the agent for the aerospace giant Boeing, which was trying to sell its F/A-18 Super Hornet, in competition with the French firm Dassault, which was selling its Rafale jet. After a year of intense competition, outgoing President Lula has announced that no decision will be made before he leaves office in January, and it is widely believed that the planned purchase will be scrapped.

The cables provide insight into the way in which the US embassy sought to work through figures in the Brazilian military establishment to promote the Boeing sale. In particular, Brazil’s Defense Minister Nelson Jobim and the chief of the Brazilian Air Force, Brigadier Juniti Saito, were seen as in Washington’s camp. In one cable sent by then-Ambassador Clifford Sobel last January, Saito was described as “a key ally in our FX2 [fighter jet] bid.” Jobim is referred to as “one of the most trustworthy leaders in Brazil.”

Jobim apparently earned this trust by providing inside information on his colleagues in the Brazilian government. He is quoted in one of the cables as confiding to Ambassador Sobel that Samuel Pinheiro Guimarães, the former secretary-general of Brazil’s foreign ministry and current minister for strategic affairs, was someone who “hates the United States” and “creates problems” between the two countries.

Similar financial calculations were expressed in cables dealing with the Brazil’s plans for the exploration of the pre-salt reserves off the country’s Atlantic coast. The embassy’s concerns were the same as those of Chevron and Exxon-Mobil that the rules for the participation of foreign corporations would be more restrictive and less lucrative.

Another thread that runs through the cables, despite their revelations of the maneuvers with the military and other officials seen as more amendable to Washington’s demands, is Washington’s view of the ruling Workers Party (PT) as posing no threat to capitalist interests in Brazil and elsewhere in the hemisphere.

This is spelled out in one of the earliest cables dating from November 2002, which details meetings in Brasilia between then Assistant Secretary of State Otto Reich and President-elect Lula da Silva and his principal advisors.

Reich, an extreme right-wing anticommunist Cuban exile, takes the measure of these supposed “workers’ ” representatives and clearly sees them as people with whom he can do business.

“We are not afraid of the PT and its social agenda,” Reich told Lula.

The cable quotes Lula as saying how eager he is to meet then-President George W. Bush and that he is sure that “two politicians like us will understand each other when we meet face to face.” He and his advisers stressed to Reich that they would uphold all agreements between previous governments and the US, the IMF and other international financial institutions.

Subsequent cables build upon this initial understanding, with Brazilian officials making it clear that the US should not take any stray left rhetoric from the Workers Party seriously.

Thus, a cable from November 2006, after Lula’s election to a second term as president, cites a discussion with his personal chief of staff Gilberto Carvalho who “asked for the ambassador’s understanding if rhetoric during the election campaign had occasionally seemed critical of the US.”

A September 2009 cable chronicles a frank exchange of views between top Brazilian officials and the visiting US national security adviser, Gen. James Jones.

The visit followed the announcement that the US had obtained several new bases in Colombia, giving it the capacity to deploy military forces throughout the hemisphere.

Dilma Rousseff, then the president’s chief of staff and now the president-elect, was the first to speak. She told General Jones that the Brazilian government “finds it disconcerting to be faced with questions from the press regarding why the United States needs such bases.”

The cable continues, “According to Rousseff, issues such as this open the door for radicals who want to create problems in the region.”

She was followed by Defense Minister Nelson Jobim, who sounded a similar theme, saying that issues like the Colombian bases became a problem when the Brazilian government “learns of them through the press.” Jobim added, however, that the PT government “is often surprised by the sensitivities of ‘Spanish America’ regarding issues that would be considered innocuous elsewhere.”

Jones responded by urging Jobim to call him if he had any “doubts about US intentions.”



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