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## 49. EPS- EconomiaPoliticaSocietà At the UN, a Latin American rebellion\*\*

Latin American leaders are reclaiming a right to differentiate their views from Washington's. This year's UN general debate became a forum for widespread dissent and anger at U.S. policies that seek to control a hemisphere that has clear aspirations for greater independence.



Evo Morales, President of Bolivia and Dilma Rousseff,  
President of Brazil

Without a doubt, the 68<sup>th</sup> UN General Assembly will be remembered as a watershed. Nations reached an [agreement on control of chemical weapons](#) that could avoid a global war in Syria. The volatile stalemate on the Iran nuclear program came [a step closer](#) to diplomacy.

What failed to make the headlines, however, could have the longest-term significance of all: the Latin American rebellion.

For Latin American leaders, this year's UN general debate became a forum for widespread dissent and anger at U.S. policies that seek to control a hemisphere that has clear aspirations for greater independence. In a region long considered the United States' primary zone of influence, Washington's relations with many Latin American nations have gone from bad to worse under the Bush II and Obama administrations. And judging by the speeches at the General Assembly, they may be nearing an all-time low.

One after another, Latin American leaders came to the podium to denounce the U.S. government and its policies. Most criticism was directed at the [espionage programs](#) revealed by former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden that made friendly nations such as Mexico and Brazil marks for political and industrial spying.

The other target for regional antipathy was the signature U.S. security policy in the Western Hemisphere: the drug war. Even formerly stalwart allies like Guatemala, Mexico, and Colombia came out against Washington's drug war and called for alternative approaches.

## The High Price of Spying on Your Neighbors

Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff led the charge against U.S. international surveillance activities on the first day of the general debate at UN headquarters in New York City. Information from the Snowden leaks revealed that the U.S. [spy program](#) in Brazil targeted President Rousseff's personal and governmental communications as well as the state-owned oil company, [Petrobras](#).

This understandably infuriated Brazil. One can only imagine the response in the United States if the tables were turned—"Brazil found spying on U.S. government and companies through private Internet and telecommunications companies."

Brazil is an ally with no intention whatsoever of attacking the United States. According to the Brazilian daily *O Globo*, Washington has been spying on Brazilian businesses and Petrobras to give a potential advantage to U.S. companies bidding for oil contracts. This month, Brazil is putting up a bid for oil development in the [Libra subsalt oilfields](#) in the Santos Basin, with a reported 12 billion barrels of recoverable oil. Chevron is reportedly in the running. Inside information fed to U.S. companies by the leaks could favor them in the bidding process.

Rousseff [called the program](#) a breach of international law and an "affront to the principles that must guide the relations among friendly nations." She added that the U.S. program constituted "a grave violation of human rights and civil liberties; of invasion and capture of confidential information concerning corporate activities, and especially of disrespect to national sovereignty." Rousseff vowed to take measures to protect Brazil from U.S. spying in the future.

The Brazilian president had previously cancelled a state visit to Washington over the revelation—to the chagrin of the State Department, which had been carefully courting Brazil as the economic leader in the region, as well as the most accessible member of the South American bloc that challenges U.S. political and military hegemony. The White House downplayed the incident, failing to seriously address the allegations—despite the fact that the Brazilian chill raises [some serious issues](#) about Latin American frustration with Washington.

Next up, Bolivian President Evo Morales not surprisingly [went even further](#), questioning the U.S. commitment to diplomacy and democracy as it spied on its allies. "What kind of democracy is it when espionage services of the United States violate the privacy and security of other nations, using private companies. It turns out they not only spy on democratic governments, but on their own allies, even on the United Nations itself. I think this shows a lot of arrogance," the indigenous leader told the Assembly.

Latin American countries recently rallied around President Morales when his flight from Russia was denied airspace over Europe and [forced to land](#) in Austria, supposedly by U.S. orders on the suspicion that Snowden could be on board.

[Ecuador echoed](#) criticisms of the spy program, saying that confidence had been seriously eroded by "the unlimited acts of the United States, through its spying on global communications" and demanding that the United States explain its surveillance programs.

Bolivia and Ecuador criticizing the United States is a common occurrence since leftist parties took power in their respective capitals. But even Mexico—normally submissive due to its high economic and geopolitical dependency on the United States since NAFTA—used part of its moment in the international spotlight to warn against violations of the "right to privacy." Foreign Minister Jose Antonio Meade stopped short of mentioning the United States, calling for a full investigation and insisting that "the parties responsible be held accountable." Mexico has been muted in its criticism, but

sent a diplomatic note when the leaks showed the NSA had targeted now-President Enrique Peña Nieto when he was running for office.

The U.S. media has kept Edward Snowden, who has been granted temporary asylum in Russia, out of public attention as much as possible. But the UN statements showed that Washington is paying a high price for spying on its friends and neighbors, and not just in the Western Hemisphere.

On September 30, Jesselyn Radack of the Government Accountability Office read [a statement](#) from Snowden to the European Parliament as it takes up the issue of mass surveillance. “The surveillance of whole populations,” Snowden wrote, “rather than individuals, threatens to be the greatest human rights challenge of our time.” As a sign of its indignation, the Parliament recently [nominated Snowden](#) for its highest human rights award.

### **Demands to End the Drug War**

Latin American leaders have grown increasingly discontent about more longstanding U.S. policies as well.

“Right here, in this same headquarters, 52 years ago, the convention that gave birth to the war on drugs was approved. Today, we must acknowledge, that war has not been won,” Colombian President [Juan Manuel Santos said](#), noting that his country “has suffered more deaths, more bloodshed, and more sacrifices in this war” than almost any other.

Santos, as he has done before, called for changing tracks rather than intensifying the war. He noted that he led the effort in the Organization of American States to study “different scenarios” (meaning alternatives to the drug war approach) and commissioned studies that will be made available to the public and evaluated in a UN Special Session in 2016.

He concluded with a jab at the U.S.-led drug war. “If we act together with a comprehensive and modern vision—free of ideological and political biases—imagine how much harm and how much violence we could avoid,” he said.

Central American nations repeated the need for a new model. Costa Rica’s Laura Chinchilla cited a regional agreement including Mexico and Guatemala “to reevaluate internationally agreed-upon policies in search of more effective responses to drug trafficking, from a perspective of health, a framework of respect for human rights, and a perspective of harm reduction.”

Guatemalan President Otto Perez Molina, a military man who has somewhat ironically assumed the mantle of drug reform champion, [told the UN](#), “Since the start of my government, we have clearly affirmed that the war on drugs has not yielded the desired results and that we cannot continue doing the same thing and expecting different results.” He called on nations to “assess internationally agreed policies in search of more effective results” and urged approaches based on public health, violence reduction, respect for human rights, and cooperation to reduce the flow of arms and illegal funds.

Perez Molina openly praised the “visionary decision” of the citizens of the U.S. states of Colorado and Washington to legalize marijuana, and heralded “the example set by [Uruguayan] President Jose Mujica in proposing legislation that regulates the cannabis market instead of following the failed route of prohibition.”

Mexico’s minister [used the same terms](#), quoting the regional agreement and placing a priority on prevention, arms control, and opening a global debate. Bolivia’s Morales noted that according to UN data, his country has made more progress on fighting drug trafficking “after liberating ourselves from

the DEA,” referring to his decision to expel the U.S. agency from Bolivia.

This onslaught of drug war opposition is not welcome in Washington. The Obama administration has been actively trying to divert or dilute Latin American calls to reduce its militarized counternarcotics operations, concerned more with maintaining and expanding the U.S. military presence in the region than eliminating drug trafficking, which a recent report again shows has [not diminished](#).

### **Listening to Latin America**

Spying and the drug war weren't the only criticisms. Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro cancelled his UN participation altogether, citing “provocations” against him and fears for his safety were he to visit the UN's New York City headquarters. His demand to move UN headquarters out of the United States was reiterated by other Latin American leaders.

Tensions have been high between the United States and Venezuela despite the death of U.S. nemesis Hugo Chavez. Maduro just [expelled U.S. chargé d' affaires](#) Kelly Kiederling and two others for allegedly encouraging acts of sabotage against the Venezuelan electrical system and economy in meetings with right-wing groups.

Criticisms of inaction on global warming were also aimed northward. Mujica of Uruguay lashed out at U.S. consumer culture, saying, “If everyone aspired to live like the average U.S. citizen, we'd need three planets.”

Amid all this, the mainstream media paid little attention to Latin America.

It's time to listen to what they're saying.

This is a bold new Latin America speaking. Not only are these nations reclaiming a right to differentiate their views from those of the global superpower and refusing to render it diplomatic tribute—whatever your views, a step forward in self-determination—they are also standing up in defense of rights we should all be defending far more vigorously.

Brazil and its allies sounded an alarm that should be heeded by all nations and by U.S. citizens especially: it is not acceptable to assume that in the modern age we no longer have the basic right to privacy. U.S. government eavesdropping on President Rousseff and others—thanks to the global reach of [ATT](#), Microsoft, and Google, and their unprincipled compliance with the unprincipled requests of the NSA and other spy agencies—affects everyone. The spy-versus-spy scenarios that made for intriguing novels have given way to a spy industry vs. common citizen reality on a global scale.

And once again, our generation is demonstrating a terrible willingness to sacrifice rights that our ancestors fought for and our children may never inherit.

The evident anger in the words of these Latin American heads of state shows just how far Washington's relations with the region have deteriorated. It demonstrates the growing gap between rhetoric and reality since Obama promised the region a relationship based on “mutual respect” and “self determination” at the beginning of his first term. Diplomacy, reaffirmed in the 68<sup>th</sup> Assembly, has been steadily eroding in U.S. relations with Latin America as the Pentagon dominates the agenda.

Does it matter for the United States to have good relations with Latin America, including the left-leaning leaders? Apparently, Washington has decided it doesn't. Its defensive response to the spy scandal, its efforts to pit its free-trade allies against countries that have turned away from neoliberal economies, and its use of regional allies like Colombia and Mexico as proxy militaries has sought to

create rifts rather than mend them.

The U.S. government continues to play the neighborhood bully long after the kids on the block have grown up. The flurry of state visits to the region have generally aimed to reinforce unpopular policies, including the drug war and free trade, rather than listen to the calls for change.

In-the-box Washington pundits view the hemispheric outburst in the UN as a PR problem. But the Obama administration doesn't need to work on its niceties or polish its Spanish. What it needs to do is ditch the offensive policies and practices that stirred up regional ire. The voices of outrage from the South brought an important lesson to the UN floor: Deception and strong-arm tactics eventually backfire.

Was anyone in Washington listening?

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