

Argentina's Fernández strategy on Venezuela is doomed to fail

In his first steps as president of Argentina, Alberto Fernández has begun to deploy a strategy as predictable as unrealistic with respect to Venezuela's crisis. Predictable in the sense that a closer approach to the dictatorship of Nicolás Maduro was expected, mainly due to political and ideological affinities. But at the same time the strategy is not realistic and doomed to fail. That in relation to the illusion of supporting a solution to the Venezuelan crisis through dialogue and the establishment of a 'third position' within the region's international framework.

The 'dialogue' between Fernández and Venezuela began immediately after the Argentinean was elected president. The Caribbean dictator celebrated Fernández's victory and overwhelmed him with praise. The Argentine thanked Maduro, although he added a soft-toned warning, very ambiguous, about the need for 'full validity of democracy'. Previously, Fernández had explained that he does not consider that there is a dictatorship in Venezuela, contrary to the majority opinion in Latin America and the rest of the world. Maduro's massive human rights violations and abuses of power have been constant and well documented. Even so, Fernández has minimized them.

The warmth and ambiguity towards the Venezuelan regime took the form of a foreign policy strategy as the days went by. By November, Fernández announced that he would not leave the Lima Group, but at the same time would seek to activate the so-called 'Montevideo Mechanism', with Mexico and Uruguay. However, after being elected president of Uruguay, Luis Lacalle Pou announced that Uruguay will not continue in that forum, adhering to the majority stance within the Lima Group.

It should be noted that Argentina and Mexico also have remained quite alone in Latin America's politics in relation to the support provided to Bolivian former president Evo Morales. After a short stay in Mexico, Morales is currently in Argentina enjoying a controversial 'refugee' status, granted by Fernández.

On December 10th, on the occasion of his presidential inauguration, Alberto Fernández was involved in a huge international embarrassment because of Venezuela. Although banned from entering the country, Venezuelan Communication Minister Jorge Rodríguez arrived in Argentina and was even received at Casa Rosada.

After noticing about the bizarre presence of Rodriguez and other Venezuelan banned officials in the country, the two top representatives of the US delegation slammed the door without saying goodbye and came back to Washington, before Fernandez's inauguration. After just one day in office, Fernandez had already crossed a 'red line' established by Donald Trump on Venezuela.

This January, Maduro perpetrated a new coup to the National Assembly. Fernández again reacted with ambiguity and insisting with his vague call to 'dialogue'. According to the Argentine government, Venezuela would still be a democracy, although it continues to accumulating problems and becoming more authoritarian. Just that. In that sense, Argentina refused to sign the last document of the Lima Group, which condemned with a remarkably harsh tone Maduro's actions. By doing so, Fernandez virtually withdrew Argentina from the Lima Group.

Guaidó's failed experiment

It must be acknowledged that Fernández is right about something on Venezuela: The new Argentinean president considers 'part of the past' the failed experiment of Juan Guaidó, current 'president in charge' of Venezuela. The strategy to overthrow Maduro, backed by the US and several countries in the region, has not worked.

In spite of the enormous diplomatic pressure, financial blockade and the huge mobilizations in the streets asking for his resignation, Maduro has managed to survive. It can even be said that the dictator is looking stronger than a year ago, when Guaidó's operation was launched. Of course, this frustration has been at the expenses of more human lives lost and more misery for Venezuela. In an increasingly hostile and repressive context, Guaidó barely subsists as the opposition leader because there is no better alternative. Meanwhile, Maduro pretends to rule, at least until 2025.

The 'dialogue' with Maduro jeopardize our relations with the US and Brazil

Fernández is convinced that the only way out in Venezuela is by negotiating with Maduro and accepting that he is the acting president, whoever likes it or not. And Fernández has eloquently showed that he has no problem to collide with the US in this matter, even though the enormous importance of the US for Argentina, in a very delicate economic time.

The other key relationship that Fernández jeopardizes for his position on Venezuela is Brazil. Our big neighbor has aligned firmly with the US in foreign policy, even

endorsing the assassination of Chief Commander Qasem Soleimani in Iran. In fact, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro is afraid that Argentina may "become Venezuela". For the former military man, Fernández's "doomed to fail economic policy" could result in a massive exodus of Argentines to his country.

In another dissonant movement regarding the shared US and Brazil position on the region, Argentina will likely support the candidacy of Ecuadorian María Fernanda Espinosa to lead the Organization of American States (OAS). She is very close to the former president Rafael Correa, currently fugitive in Europe. Fernández's opposes the nomination for re-election of the incumbent secretary of the OAS, Luis Almagro, who has been a decisive figure to unveil the scandalous fraud carried out by Morales in Bolivia's October elections. Precisely, Espinosa supports a 'dialogist' approach on Venezuela. The OAS's election will be held on March 20th. Certainly, the outcome will have a strong impact on regional politics.

Why Fernandez's strategy is unrealistic and doomed to fail

Fernández's stance on Venezuela is totally unrealistic. In the first place, because there is no doubt that Venezuela is a dictatorship. Maduro, heavily supported by the military and security forces, has demonstrated a great ability to remain in control, not showing the slightest intention of giving in power. In which institutional framework could one talk with a ruthless dictator who abolished all democratic institutions in his country? And that dialogue would be behind the bulk of the countries in the region?

Secondly, the search for a 'third position' in foreign policy is pure Peronist nostalgia, which refers to a world, a region and a country that no longer exist. Although today we are also facing two great powers competition, as in the times when Juan Perón outlined his 'third position', we also have a very unstable and shaky world, with multiple power poles. As for the region, Latin America has its multilateral organizations virtually paralyzed and Fernández's ideological approach represents a tiny minority. In addition, the region is economically stagnated, sunk in the world's periphery.

Regarding Argentina, we are too far from being that regional power that emerged intact and strong after World War II. Argentina is today one of the countries with the worst economic performance in the world. Definitely, we are not a political reference for anyone in Latin America.

In conclusion, Argentina is not in a position to establish an alternative and dialogist stance on Venezuela, which at the same time would not solve the crisis and will put in serious danger our diplomatic relations with key and irreplaceable allies, such as the US and Brazil. To make matters worse, Fernández only has a devalued Mexico as a relevant partner, among the scarce allies for his 'dialogist' position on Venezuela.

Finally, let's bear in mind that on the other side of the table is Trump, a resolute man of action, who will not hesitate to eventually punish Argentina in terms of finance and investments. The surprising reestablishment of steel tariffs can be taken as a warning from him. And what if emboldened by his recent strike on Iran, Trump now decides to harden even more his stance on Venezuela? Are we prepared for that possible scenario? Fernandez needs to review his strategy on Venezuela, clearly doomed to fail and to provoke a greater international isolation for Argentina.

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