

LATIN AMERICA

Diplomatic maturity

Opinion
The Miami Herald
By Juan G. Tokatlian
Sep. 16, 2006

The possibility of a new Latin American political embarrassment is looming around the U.N. headquarters. The struggle between Guatemala and Venezuela for a two-year seat at the Security Council may end up repeating one of the most bizarre and appalling diplomatic experiences in U.N. history.

At the end of the '70s and in the midst of a contentious, global Cold War, Cuba and Colombia competed for a seat at the Security Council. Cuba was, by 1979, the only likely candidate: There was a tacit regional acceptance of its proposed membership on the council. Suddenly, Colombia -- stimulated by the United States -- introduced its unexpected candidacy. After four months of balloting, which meant an unprecedented 154 rounds of futile voting, neither country was able to reach the two-thirds needed to gain access to the U.N. body. Finally, due to the intervention of the secretary general, both parties stepped down and Mexico was elected as the Latin American representative. Washington was able to obstruct Havana's ambition, and Latin America was unable to find a single, consensual alternative.

This history may replicate itself in the coming weeks. By 2002, Guatemala -- which has never been elected for the Security Council -- introduced autonomously its candidacy for the 2008-09 period. In 2004, Venezuela -- which has already been on the body four times -- began its campaign to win a seat again. A replay of the Western Hemisphere Cold War exercise began anew: Washington decided to block Caracas' aspiration, even as Hugo Chávez seeks to consolidate Venezuela's image as a regional and world challenger to U.S. hegemony.

Independent of U.S. fears and obsessions, it is fundamental for Latin America to avoid the shameful episode of 1979 and to show diplomatic maturity. Thus, instead of becoming paralyzed by the ideological U.S.-Venezuela clash and the potential repetition of a series of fruitless votes, the region should decide, in advance, to agree on compromise candidate.

A perfect candidate may be Uruguay, a member of the MERCOSUR economic bloc that also includes Venezuela and a country governed by a progressive coalition with impeccable credentials in terms of domestic democracy, respect for international law and support for assertive multilateralism.

A Uruguayan seat at the Security Council can be promoted both by Argentina and Brazil in South America; Mexico and Canada in North America, the European Union, and even China and Russia as part of a concerted diplomatic effort. This may happen if there is a stalemate after some initial rounds of voting. The United States should avoid taking part in this arrangement -- in the end, most parties involved will gain if a new ideological fight over the Security Council is averted. The international community needs a functioning United Nations, not an endlessly argumentative, hopeless world institution.

Juan G. Tokatlian is a professor at the University of San Andrés in Argentina and the author and co-author of several books on Latin America.