

NEWS ANALYSIS

Voices of Discontent: Anti-U.S. Leaders Seek Allies

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Left, Matt Campbell/European Pressphoto Agency; center, Mary Altaffer/Associated Press; right, Stephen Chernin/Getty Images

Speaking at the United Nations this week, from left, Presidents Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran and Omar Hassan al-Bashir of Sudan. They criticized positions taken by Washington.

[UNITED NATIONS](#), Sept. 22 — The podium of the [General Assembly](#) has long been a platform for the world's strongmen to prove their anti-American credentials.

[Fidel Castro](#) did it in 1960, as did Idi Amin in 1975. And this week [Hugo Chávez](#), [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) and Omar Hassan al-Bashir — of [Venezuela](#), [Iran](#) and [Sudan](#), respectively — took up the mantle left by their predecessors, presenting themselves as Davids of the third world seeking to slay the American Goliath.

American officials were quick to dismiss the speeches as chest thumping, noting that all three men were from countries with vast oil reserves and other resources, well able to thumb their noses at Washington but hardly representative of the poorer countries that rely on American aid.

“I think it’s important frankly for people to hear this, because I do think it’s a reflection of what some of these governments think,” said John Bolton, the American ambassador to the United Nations.

But others here wondered whether they might be witnessing the birth of a new anti-American bloc, something that may eventually succeed the Nonaligned Movement, which originated in the cold war.

The aggressive steps the Bush administration has taken on national security, as well as more general resentment against the world's strongest power, have made the United States vulnerable to charges of racism, hypocrisy and imperialism, particularly in the non-Western world, diplomats here said.

"Wherever he looks, he sees extremists," Mr. Chávez said Tuesday about President Bush to a roomful of General Assembly delegates, most of them from Africa, Latin America and Asia. "And you, my brother — he looks at your color, and he says, 'Oh, there's an extremist.' Evo Morales, the worthy president of Bolivia, looks like an extremist to him."

When Mr. Chávez says Washington sees imagined enemies in darkskinned people, he is capitalizing on international anger over issues like secret [C.I.A.](#) prisons and the Bush administration's attempts to reinterpret the Geneva Conventions.

"Things like Guantánamo make people question whether we believe our own values, and whether what the president says about protecting civil liberties is actually true," said Edward Luck, head of the Center on International Organization at [Columbia University](#). "That gives people like Chávez an opening that they can exploit."

Sarah Stephens, director of the Center for Democracy in the Americas, says that when Mr. Bush and American officials talk about " 'the axis of evil,' saying, 'You're with us or against us,' that rubs people the wrong way, and Chávez knows how to capitalize on that."

A survey by Latinobarómetro, a Chilean opinion research firm, found that the percentage of people in Latin America with a positive image of the United States fell to 61 percent in 2005 from 68 percent in 2000.

"Although good opinions gained ground between 2000 and 2001, due to the Sept. 11 attacks and sympathy for the people of the United States, the region's general opinion worsened again in 2003 and has since remained at around 60 percent," the survey found. From 1,000 to 1,200 people took part in the poll in each of 18 countries, with a margin of sampling error of about three percentage points.

So while there was official outrage over Mr. Chávez calling Mr. Bush "the devil," there was also a lot of applause and giggling, from dignitaries including the

president of the General Assembly herself, Haya Rashed al-Khalifa of Bahrain, who was caught chuckling from her seat on the dais behind Mr. Chávez.

“Most unseemly,” one United Nations official said with mock seriousness, then started laughing himself.

Officially, most diplomats here were quick to frown on the Venezuelan leader’s remarks. But in quieter moments officials and diplomats said they feared that he was reaching a receptive audience of poor countries that felt exploited and bullied by the United States.

The Nonaligned Movement emerged during the cold war among countries that were trying to escape the orbits of the Soviet Union and the United States. But rather than build on that, Mr. Chávez and Mr. Ahmadinejad seem to be going in another direction: to build a coalition of countries aligned against Washington.

Some of that was on display last week in Havana at a meeting of leaders and diplomats from 118 countries in the Nonaligned Movement. The Times of London joked: “America might well call it the Axis of Evil summit.”

The host of the Havana meeting was Mr. Castro — who was too sick to attend the actual meetings — and among those attending were Mr. Ahmadinejad, Mr. Chávez and officials from North Korea, Belarus and Syria. Raúl Castro, who took over from his brother as acting president of the movement, criticized what he called Washington’s “irrational pretensions for world dominance.”

The question now, though, is whether the Castros, Chávèzes and Ahmadinejads of the world will succeed in wooing more countries to their camp. United Nations officials said member countries were becoming increasingly frustrated that the five permanent members of the Security Council — Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States — call all the shots, a point that Mr. Chávez and Mr. Ahmadinejad made repeatedly.

A movement to increase the number of permanent seats on the Council seemed to have died last year amid wrangling over who supported whom, but officials say the issue may now be resurrected. “It’s very interesting that after everyone declared Security Council reform over, it’s one of the top issues raised by heads of state this year,” a senior United Nations official said.

A secret ballot next month to fill the 10 nonpermanent seats on the Council may provide an early indicator of the influence of the anti-American bloc. Five seats are up for change every year, and Venezuela is in a battle with Guatemala for the Latin American one. Needless to say, the United States is backing Guatemala.

Venezuela has received the backing of Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and several other countries, while Guatemala can count on the United States, Mexico and Colombia, among others. If the Latin American countries cannot reach a consensus — and they have not yet — the General Assembly will hold a secret ballot among its 192 members.

A win by Mr. Chávez, United Nations officials said, would not only mean livelier debate in the Security Council. It might also signal potential trouble for many Americansponsored issues before the Council, from putting a peacekeeping force into Darfur to efforts to reining in Iran's nuclear ambitions.