The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
In-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

Latin America and Asia are Breaking Free of Washington's Grip

The US-dominated world order is being challenged by a new spirit of independence in the global south

By Noam Chomsky

The prospect that Europe and Asia might move towards greater independence has troubled US planners since the second world war. The concerns have only risen as the "tripolar order" - Europe, North America and Asia - has continued to evolve. Every day Latin America, too, is becoming more independent. Now Asia and the Americas are strengthening their ties while the reigning superpower, the odd man out, consumes itself in misadventures in the Middle East.

Regional integration in Asia and Latin America is a crucial and increasingly important issue that, from Washington's perspective, betokens a defiant world gone out of control. Energy, of course, remains a defining factor - the object of contention - everywhere. China, unlike Europe, refuses to be intimidated by Washington, a primary reason for the fear of China by US planners, which presents a dilemma: steps toward confrontation are inhibited by US corporate reliance on China as an export platform and growing market, as well as by China's financial reserves - reported to be approaching Japan's in scale.

In January, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah visited Beijing, which is expected to lead to a Sino-Saudi memorandum of understanding calling for "increased cooperation and investment between the two countries in oil, natural gas and investment", the Wall Street Journal reports. Already much of Iran's oil goes to China, and China is providing Iran with weapons that both states presumably regard as deterrent to US designs. India also has options. India may choose to be a US client, or it may prefer to join the more independent Asian bloc that is taking shape, with ever more ties to Middle East oil producers. Siddharth Varadarjan, the deputy editor of the Hindu, observes that "if the 21st century is to be an 'Asian century,' Asia's passivity in the energy sector has to end".

The key is India-China cooperation. In January, an agreement signed in Beijing "cleared the way for India and China to collaborate not only in technology but also in hydrocarbon exploration and production, a partnership that could eventually alter fundamental equations in the world's oil and natural gas sector", Varadarjan points out. An additional step, already being contemplated, is an Asian oil market trading in euros. The impact on the international financial system and the balance of global power could be significant. It should be no surprise that President Bush paid a recent visit to try to keep India in the fold, offering nuclear cooperation and other inducements as a lure.

Meanwhile, in Latin America left-centre governments prevail from Venezuela to Argentina. The indigenous populations have become much more active and influential, particularly in Bolivia and Ecuador, where they either want oil and gas to be domestically controlled or, in some cases, oppose production altogether. Many indigenous people apparently do not see any reason why their lives, societies and cultures should be disrupted or destroyed so that New Yorkers can sit in their SUVs in traffic gridlock.

Venezuela, the leading oil exporter in the hemisphere, has forged probably the closest relations with China of any Latin American country, and is planning to sell increasing amounts of oil to China as part of its effort to reduce dependence on the openly hostile US government. Venezuela has joined Mercosur, the South American customs union - a move described by Nestor Kirchner, the Argentinian president, as "a milestone" in the development of this trading bloc, and welcomed as a "new chapter in our integration" by Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the Brazilian president. Venezuela, apart from supplying Argentina with fuel oil, bought almost a third of Argentinian debt issued in 2005, one element of a region-wide effort to free the countries from the controls of the IMF after two decades of disastrous conformity to the rules imposed by the US-dominated international financial institutions. Steps toward Southern Cone integration advanced further in December with the election in Bolivia of Evo Morales, the country's first indigenous president. Morales moved quickly to reach a series of energy accords with Venezuela.

The Financial Times reported that these "are expected to underpin forthcoming radical reforms to Bolivia's economy and energy sector" with its huge gas reserves, second only to Venezuela's in South America. Cuba-Venezuela relations are becoming ever closer, each relying on its comparative advantage. Venezuela is providing low-cost oil, while in return Cuba organises literacy and health programmes, sending thousands of highly skilled professionals, teachers and doctors, who work in the poorest and most neglected areas, as they do elsewhere in the third world.

Cuban medical assistance is also being welcomed elsewhere. One of the most horrendous tragedies of recent years was the earthquake in Pakistan last October. Besides the huge death toll, unknown numbers of survivors have to face brutal winter weather with little shelter, food or medical assistance. "Cuba has provided the largest contingent of doctors and paramedics to Pakistan," paying all the costs (perhaps with Venezuelan funding), writes John Cherian in India's Frontline magazine, citing Dawn, a leading Pakistan daily. President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan expressed his "deep gratitude" to Fidel Castro for the "spirit and compassion" of the Cuban medical teams - reported to comprise more than 1,000 trained personnel, 44% of them women, who remained to work in remote mountain villages, "living in tents in freezing weather and in an alien culture", after western aid teams had been withdrawn.

Growing popular movements, primarily in the south but with increasing participation in the rich industrial countries, are serving as the bases for many of these developments towards more independence and concern for the needs of the great majority of the population.

Noam Chomsky, the author, most recently, of Imperial Ambitions: Conversations on the Post-9/11 World, is a professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. For a guide to Noam Chomsky's writings see www.chomsky.info

This article appeared in Khaleej Times on March 10, 2006 and in slightly revised form in The Guardian, March 15, 2006. It appears at Japan Focus on March 15, 2006.