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Diplomacy

U.S. reaching out to Argentine, other Latin leaders
President Bush, the vice president and others are employing more
personal diplomacy to woo Latin American leaders.

by Pablo Bachelet

WASHINGTON - The Bush administration, often accused of ignoring Latin America, has embarked on a charm offensive with Argentina's left-of-center President Nestor Kirchner and other regional leaders, diplomats and analysts say.

President Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and three Bush Cabinet members have participated in five contacts with their Argentine counterparts in the past two months, including one 20-minute phone chat between Bush and Kirchner last week.

Venezuela has figured prominently in most of the contacts, with the U.S. side expressing Washington's concerns over President Hugo Chavez's plans to purchase new weapons, his clampdown on internal dissent and his alleged meddling in neighboring Colombia's civil strife.

"We've kept in touch with a number of countries in the region to call attention to those matters and to encourage all people in the region to work to persuade the Venezuelan government to change its policies," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

Two days after Bush's phone call, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with Argentine Foreign Minister Rafael Bielsa in Washington.

But the outreach goes beyond Argentina. Jose Dirceu, chief of staff for Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, met with Rice in early March and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld traveled to Brazil and Argentina last week to touch base with officials there. Bush and Rice also met with Mexican leaders last month.

BEGAN IN FEBRUARY

The spate of contacts was kicked off in February, when Cheney met with his Argentine counterpart, Daniel Scioli. Treasury Secretary John Snow also has contacted Roberto Lavagna, Argentina's economy minister, several times. So many encounters are unusual for an administration whose senior officers have traditionally focused on trouble spots in the Middle East and Asia.

Latin America, critics say, needs U.S. attention because it suffers from rising street violence, weak institutions and a growing perception that democratic governments are too weak or corrupt to improve the lot of citizens. The region is the source of most illegal drugs consumed in the United States.

Most Latin American observers are pleased with the recent spate of outreach. The Bush administration is "beginning to understand that a multilateral approach to Latin America makes sense," said Riordan Roett, with the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. "The critical goal is to have Argentina and Brazil 'contain' Chavez."

UP-AND-DOWN TIES

Bush and Kirchner established a good rapport when the Argentine visited the White House in July 2003, shortly after taking office. But relations chilled as Kirchner improved ties with Cuba and kept his distance from Bush's efforts to promote free trade in the hemisphere.

Now Kirchner has successfully negotiated a massive restructuring of the country's defaulted debt, and the country participated in efforts to resolve the crises in Haiti and Bolivia.

"It's a recognition of Argentina's influence on regional affairs," said Peter DeShazo, with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think-tank.

Argentine officials underscored the warm nature of the 40-minute meeting between Rice and Bielsa when they discussed Venezuela, Bolivia, Haiti and the restructuring of the U.N. Security Council. Bielsa spokesman Oscar Feito described it as a "pleasant, thorough meeting."

Cuba, a point of friction between the two, did not come up, Feito added. Bielsa visited Cuba in 2003 and irritated Washington by not meeting with anti-Castro dissidents.

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