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New U.S. strategy in Latin America: turn on the charm

By Pablo Bachelet

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WASHINGTON - The Bush administration has refused to talk to foes such as Iran, North Korea and Cuba, but it has no such qualms about some of its sternest critics in Latin America, including Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

Chavez relishes calling President Bush names like Mr. Danger and a donkey, and over the years the State Department has accused Chavez of various misdeeds, from undermining democracy to cutting ties with U.S. agencies fighting terrorism and drug traffickers.

Yet, less than two weeks after Chavez won re-election earlier this month, the U.S. ambassador in Caracas met with the Venezuelan foreign minister to ease tensions between the two countries.

Chavez responded by attacking U.S. counter-drug efforts, so it's unclear if the charm offensive will work. But the move is part of a broader effort by U.S. officials to court leftist leaders who just weeks ago were warily viewed as pro-Chavez populists. This includes President-elects Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua and Ecuador's Rafael Correa, who recently heralded the rise of a socialist Latin America.

The Bush administration has long sought out moderate socialists, such as Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, and relations with once-prickly opponents like Argentine President Nestor Kirchner have improved lately.

The thinking is that while these leaders don't see eye to eye with Bush, they were democratically elected and, unlike Iran or North Korea, their countries pose no obvious national security threats to U.S. interests, officials say.

Many observers welcome the diplomatic move.

"We have to really pursue a path of quiet pragmatism," said Eric Farnsworth, a vice president with the Council of the Americas, an organization that promotes more contacts with Latin American nations. "Stay out of the headlines, get out of the ideological debates."

The contacts are the Bush administration's adjustment to the results of a dozen elections this year. Nine of them were won by leftist leaders, ranging from moderates to far left, including several who declare themselves allies of Chavez and Cuba's Fidel Castro.

"One thing we've made clear as we deal with leaders across the region is that we don't care much if they're left, center or right, as long as they're committed to democracy and committed to working with us," Thomas Shannon, the State Department's top diplomat to Latin America, said recently.

The Bush administration changed its tone after Ortega won his election last month. Just a year ago, the State Department accused his Sandinista party of conspiring to topple a sitting pro-Washington government, and several top Sandinista officials had their U.S. visas stripped.

Last month, Shannon traveled to Nicaragua and met with Ortega, who in recent years had moderated his criticisms of U.S. policies.

Shannon described the encounter as "a really good meeting" in which Ortega expressed his support for the Central American Free Trade Agreement and several U.S. aid programs for Managua.

Ortega's friendly relations with Chavez and Castro weren't a problem, Shannon said.

"Our focus wasn't on how he relates to others," Shannon said. "Our focus was on how he's going to relate to us."

The Bush administration is also reaching out to Ecuador's President-elect Correa. On the campaign trail, the charismatic U.S.-educated economist called Bush "dimwitted," though he later toned down his rhetoric and held a meeting with the U.S. ambassador in Quito that was widely broadcast in the local media.

Correa opposes an agreement that lets the U.S. military use Ecuador's Manta air base for counter-drug operations, but the United States seems to harbor no ill feelings. Bush called Correa to congratulate him on his victory.

U.S. officials also have been courting Bolivia's feisty President Evo Morales, an Aymara indigenous leader who, like Chavez, often rails against Washington's "imperialism" and is a frequent visitor to Havana.

U.S. officials have been critical of Morales' reluctance to limit a crackdown on coca farming, which produces the raw materials to make cocaine. Coca is traditionally used by indigenous peoples for legitimate purposes.

In a goodwill gesture, the United States certified in September that Bolivia was doing enough to combat drug traffickers, even though Washington will take another look at Bolivia's efforts in March. The Bush administration this month pushed Congress to

include Bolivia and Ecuador among a group of Andean nations that obtained unilateral trade preferences from Washington.

William Brownfield, the American ambassador to Venezuela, characterized the Dec. 14 encounter with Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro as "very positive." But five days after the Brownfield-Maduro meeting and one day after Brownfield made a public call for cordiality, Chavez called Brownfield a liar for suggesting that drug trafficking in Venezuela was on the rise, and he reiterated his claims that Drug Enforcement Agency officials were spies.

"The battle against drug smuggling has been an excuse that imperialists have used for several years to penetrate our country, trample our people and justify a military presence in Latin America," Chavez said.