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Defining Venezuela's "Bolivarian Revolution"

Harold A. Trinkunas, Ph.D.

FINDING A MOMENT in the history of U.S.-Venezuelan relations when tensions between the two countries have been worse than at the present time is difficult. Some in the U.S. Government perceive President Hugo Chávez Frias as uncooperative regarding U.S. regional policies on counternarcotics, free trade, and support for democracy. Venezuela's alliance with Fidel Castro's Cuba, its opposition to Plan Colombia, and its perceived sympathy for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and other radical organizations are further irritants to the relationship. On the other side, Venezuelan leaders in the Chávez administration believe the United States is fundamentally opposed to the success of the Bolivarian revolution and that U.S. hegemony in the current world order must be checked.

Although officials in both countries occasionally express hope that relations will improve, this is unlikely to happen given the perceptions each country's foreign policymakers hold of each other.¹

Since he was elected president in 1998, Chávez has transformed Venezuelan Government and society in what he has termed a Bolivarian revolution. Based on Chávez's interpretation of the thinking of Venezuelan founding fathers Simón Bolívar and Simón Rodríguez, this revolution brings together a set of ideas that justifies a populist and sometimes authoritarian approach to government, the integration of the military into domestic politics, and a focus on using the state's resources to serve the poor—the president's main constituency.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not purport to reflect the position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or any other government office or agency.—Editor

The Bolivarian revolution has produced a new constitution, a new legislature, a new supreme court and electoral authorities, and purges of Venezuela's armed forces and state-owned oil industries. These policies consolidated Chavez's domestic authority but generated a great deal of opposition in Venezuela, including a failed coup attempt in 2002. Even so, after his victory in a presidential recall referendum during the summer of 2004, Chávez seems likely to consolidate his grip on power and even win reelection in 2006.

Although the Bolivarian revolution is mostly oriented toward domestic politics, it also has an important foreign policy component. Bolivarian foreign policy seeks to defend the revolution in Venezuela; promote a sovereign, autonomous leadership role for Venezuela in Latin America; oppose globalization and neoliberal economic policies; and work toward the emergence of a multipolar world in which U.S. hegemony is checked.² The revolution also opposes the war in Iraq and is skeptical of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). The United States has worked fruitfully in the past with Venezuela when the country pursued an independent foreign policy, but the last three policies run directly contrary to U.S. foreign policy preferences and inevitably have generated friction between the two countries.³

Still, the geopolitics of oil make it difficult for the United States and Venezuela to escape their traditional economic and political partnership. The United States is Venezuela's most important consumer of its main export—oil. As a market, the United States possesses key advantages for Venezuela, such as geographic proximity, low transportation costs, and

an ever increasing demand for energy. Access to large Venezuelan oil deposits across short, secure sea lines of communication is undoubtedly a strategic asset for the United States. Also, the United States and Venezuela have often found common political ground after Venezuela democratized in 1958, particularly as the rest of Latin America moved away from authoritarianism during the 1980s and 1990s.

Nevertheless, friction between the United States and Venezuela on trade policies, human rights, and regional politics is not new. What is different today about Venezuela's Bolivarian foreign policy is that it seems to be increasingly at odds with the United States precisely in the areas that once brought the two countries together—oil and democracy.

Venezuela is increasingly ambivalent about its role as a key supplier of oil to the United States, reaffirming its belief in the importance of the U.S. market yet threatening to deny access to oil as a strategic lever against U.S. policies. Chávez has reinvigorated OPEC, which seemed moribund during the 1990s, and he has sought to build direct ties to other non-OPEC oil producers, such as Russia, and new markets, such as China.

Ironically, just as U.S. President George W. Bush's administration has become more vocal about advocating democratization globally, Venezuela and the United States have fallen out of step. Increasingly, Venezuela espouses an alternative vision of participatory democracy that emphasizes mass mobilization and downgrades the role of institutions. Venezuela also views U.S. support for representative democracy in Latin America as thinly disguised meddling.

To what extent does Venezuela's Bolivarian foreign policy represent a historic break with the past? Does it represent a threat to U.S. interests? In some ways, current friction between the two countries is a replay of earlier disagreements over oil and democracy. What is new about Chávez's Bolivarian foreign policy is that it has moved beyond Venezuela's traditional efforts to maintain an independent foreign policy and maximize oil revenue to one of explicitly seeking out allies in a bid to check U.S. power and influence in Latin America. From the perspective of U.S. policymakers, this goal might seem unfeasible for a country with Venezuela's limited power and resources. Nevertheless, it is the main axis of Bolivarian foreign policy.

Cooperation and Conflict

The strategic importance of Venezuela to the United States only truly emerged after the discovery in 1914 of major oil deposits in Venezuela. In a sense, the United States was present at the creation of the Venezuelan oil industry. American oil companies and the Royal Dutch Shell Corporation created the physical infrastructure for Venezuela to become the largest oil exporter in the Western Hemisphere. They also were key in shaping Venezuelan oil legislation and the role this natural resource would play in politics. The strategic importance of Venezuelan oil to the United States was confirmed during World War II and reconfirmed time and again during each political or military crisis of the Cold War and beyond.

Despite or perhaps because of these close ties, friction arose between Venezuela and the United States over the U.S. preference for private ownership of the oil industry in Venezuela, led by international corporations, and Venezuela's preference for policies that maximized national control over this strategic asset. Beginning in the 1940s, Venezuelan democratic governments sought greater access to a share of the oil profit, initially through higher royalties and taxes but, eventually, by state control of the industry itself. Venezuela also promoted its views regarding the importance of national control of oil production in developing countries through its leading role in the creation of OPEC.⁴

To the credit of both governments, disagreements over oil policy were always resolved peacefully. Venezuela developed a reputation as a reliable supplier of oil to U.S. markets, particularly in moments of international crisis. One historic missed opportunity, at least from the Venezuelan perspective, was that the United States never appeared to be interested in institutionalizing a special relationship with Venezuela over oil, which they blamed on opposition by American oil companies.⁵

Oil wealth generated during the 1970s allowed Venezuela to pursue a more assertive foreign policy that often irritated the United States. Venezuela's leading role in OPEC gave it a new prominence during the oil crises of the period. Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez also promoted a Venezuelan leadership role in the nonaligned movement, which was often critical of U.S. policies.

In 1974, Venezuela reestablished diplomatic relations with Cuba.⁶ Venezuelan support for

the overthrow of dictator Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua in 1979 showcased a willingness to actively subvert governments once considered U.S. allies. Venezuela also sought to contain and change U.S. Central American policies during the 1980s through its leadership role in the Contadora group, promoting confidence building and regional peace negotiations as alternatives to a more confrontational United States stance with Nicaragua and Cuba.⁷

Certainly Venezuelan influence in the region during the Cold War, especially when backed by abundant oil money, occasionally frustrated U.S. designs. But these actions did not preclude frequent cooperation between the two countries. After the 1958 transition to democracy, Venezuela's political leaders were firmly convinced of the importance of supporting like-minded governments in the region and opposed the Cuban revolution model on both ideological and pragmatic grounds. U.S. Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson cooperated with the Venezuelans in defeating a Cuban-backed insurgency in Venezuela during the 1960s. United States and Venezuelan militaries developed strong mutual security and defense links through this experience.

Venezuela's first leader of the democratic period, Rómulo Betancourt, promulgated a doctrine of nonrecognition of both leftwing and rightwing dictatorships in the Americas. With respect to rightwing dictatorships, this was a step too far for the United States, which often saw rightwing authoritarian regimes as strategic partners in the Cold War.⁸ Venezuela and the United States found common ground in El Salvador during the 1980s when both provided political support to President José Duarte's Christian Democratic Government. Venezuela also provided funding and security assistance to assure the survival of the elected government of Violeta Chamorro in Nicaragua after the Sandinista Government ended in 1990. More important, the United States cooperated extensively with Venezuelan political leaders after the 1992 coup attempts to ensure the continuity of representative government.⁹

Until 1998, leaders in both the United States and Venezuela understood they had important common economic interests that required sustaining a generally positive bilateral relationship. In addition, both countries were democracies that valued freedom and individual liberty, placing them on

the same side of the Cold War divide. During this period, Venezuela essentially sought to maintain an autonomous and sovereign foreign policy, promote like-minded democratic governments in the region, and moderate U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. However, it was also careful not to place itself on a collision course with any core U.S. foreign policy interests.

Bolivarian Foreign Policy

The current distance in U.S.-Venezuelan relations is greater than any gulf between the two countries during the 20th century. Even on a superficial level, the tone of current government exchanges is often unfriendly, personalized, and frequently characterized by the use of derogatory language.¹⁰ This cannot be attributed entirely to U.S. policy toward Venezuela or Latin America, which differs only at the margins from the parameters established by U.S. administrations during the 1990s.

At its core, U.S. policy toward the region has pushed for free elections, open markets, and free trade. The steady trend toward the election of center-left governments in Latin America during the 2000s has produced little reaction from the Bush Administration other than a commitment to develop friendly working relations while mostly adhering to its basic policies on democracy, markets, and trade.¹¹ Even the greater willingness of the Bush administration to employ military force in support of foreign policy and GWOT has not translated into much of a difference for Latin America. The growing U.S. involvement in Colombia is only the continuation of a trend established long before the 2000 elections in the United States. In fact, the great reduction in the use of U.S. military force in the region since the end of the Cold War is notable when recalling previous U.S. efforts during the 1980s in Grenada, Central America, and Panama.¹²

The changing pattern of Venezuela's foreign relations since Chávez's election, particularly its growing closeness to traditional U.S. adversaries such as Cuba and Iran and such potential challengers as Russia and China, disturbs many in the U.S. foreign policy establishment. At the same time, the Chávez administration is completely convinced the United States is hostile to the success of its revolution, pointing to the April 2002 coup attempt as evidence, correct or not, of U.S. designs

on its survival. This begs the question: What are the aims of Venezuela's Bolivarian foreign policy, and are they the source of the growing political distance between the two countries?

Chávez's first foreign policy objective was revitalizing OPEC, and he has succeeded completely, although he did benefit from burgeoning demand for energy in China, India, and the West. Such an objective represents a return to Venezuela's 1970s policy of strong support for OPEC. Chávez has reached out to all other OPEC members whatever their politics, even those on Washington's short list of least favorite regimes, such as Libya, Iran, and Iraq (before the overthrow of the Hussein dictatorship).¹³

Chavez has also invested a great deal of time in building relations with Russia and China, the former because of its important oil production capacity, the latter because it is perceived as a major potential consumer of Venezuelan exports. Beyond oil, these two countries are key partners in Venezuela's Bolivarian foreign policy because they represent alternative sources of technology and military equipment, and their decisions to cooperate with Chávez are unlikely to be influenced by U.S. objections. The logical objective of this policy is to reduce Venezuelan political, economic, and military dependence on the United States. We should remember that Venezuela will find it difficult in the short term to escape its connection to the U.S. oil market because the refineries most capable of processing the particular variety of heavy crude oil increasingly produced in Venezuela are almost all located in the United States.¹⁴

In Latin America, Venezuela has sought to achieve a position of leadership and to rally support for regional policies and institutions that exclude the United States. One particular area of friction has been the U.S.-sponsored Free Trade Area of the Americas, to which Chávez has proposed an alternative—the Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America and the Caribbean.¹⁵ He also called for an alliance of state oil companies in Latin America,



Venezuelan officers seated with a U.S. major look over an operations order during a U.S. Southern Command exercise in 2001. Venezuela has since severed all military-to-military links with the United States.

US Army

called Petrosur, to foster stronger regional integration in the energy sector. At a hemispheric defense ministerial meeting in 2000, the Chávez administration unsuccessfully proposed integrating Latin American militaries and creating a regional defense alliance without U.S. participation.¹⁶ These proposals fit the Bolivarian theme of regional integration and suspicion of the United States.

The Chávez administration has also dissented from the regional political trend toward institutionalizing international policies that defend representative democracy in the region, such as the Organization of American States (OAS) Democratic Charter. Instead, it has showcased its own "participatory democracy" as a superior alternative. The election of Chilean José Miguel Insulza as secretary-general of the OAS with Venezuelan backing is a limited victory on this issue for Chávez.¹⁷ Chile has been one of the regional countries most supportive of representative democracy and resistant to Venezuela's Bolivarian foreign policy, particularly after Chávez's comments supporting Bolivian access to the Pacific Ocean at Chile's expense. However, the OAS may lower the profile of its democracy-promotion activities in the future.

In relation to security measures, Venezuela has suspended all military-to-military links with the United States and has sought alternative sources of military expertise and equipment from Brazil, China, and Russia. Given the central role the

military plays in supporting the Chávez administration in Venezuela, the United States takes the loss of these military-to-military contacts seriously. Clearly, Venezuela wants to reduce its dependence on the United States in security and foreign policy and develop an alternative network of allies.¹⁸

Chávez is now focusing on communicating his message more effectively internationally. As part of an effort to increase its regional political and communications reach, the Venezuelan Government is developing a regional alternative—Telesur—to U.S.-owned media outlets such as CNN. Telesur is also seen as an important mechanism to circumvent the role of privately owned Venezuelan media companies, which are perceived as actively hostile to the revolution.¹⁹

The Venezuelan Government has also provided support to sympathizers across the Americas, in the United States, and throughout the developed world, often sponsoring local *Círculos Bolivarianos* (Bolivarian circles) to bring together its supporters overseas.²⁰ This has provoked friction with a number of neighboring states, which suspect that the Chávez administration has aided political groups that are either semi-loyal (Bolivia) or disloyal (Colombia) to local democratic regimes. In particular, they worry that the boom in Venezuelan oil revenues might translate into substantial material support for forces opposed to the current democratic order in the politically volatile Andean Ridge.

Since Chávez came to office, U.S. policymakers have expressed concern about Venezuela's relations with Colombia and Cuba. Venezuela has always had a tense relationship with Colombia because of border disputes and spillover effects of its neighbor's multiple violent insurgencies. Tensions have worsened since Chávez became more vocal in his opposition to Plan Colombia.

Colombian accusations of Venezuelan material and moral support for the FARC have found a sympathetic ear among U.S. policymakers.²¹ One of the most salient indications of how much relations between the two countries have worsened is the case of the kidnapping of FARC leader Rodrigo Granda on Venezuelan territory in 2005. The Colombian Government paid a reward, allegedly to members of the Venezuela security forces, for the delivery of Granda to its territory. This led to weeks of tensions between the two countries and a border trade embargo by Venezuela against Colombia. Mediation efforts by Brazil and other regional powers

resolved the standoff, but not before revealing the lack of sympathy in the region for Colombia and its ally, the United States.²²

Venezuela also entered a de facto alliance with Cuba. Cuban leader Fidel Castro is an important political ally for Chávez, and Cuba is a source of technical expertise to support the Bolivarian revolution. The influx of Cuban doctors, educators, sports trainers, and security experts into Venezuela helps Chávez's administration meet the demands of its key constituencies. In particular, Cubans provide politically reliable personnel to staff new government poverty alleviation programs. For example, Barrio Adentro places Cuban medical personnel in many poor neighborhoods. In return, Cuba receives nearly 60,000 barrels of oil a day, either on favorable payment terms or as a form of trade in kind.²³ Given the longstanding hostility between Washington and Havana, it is not surprising that the new Caracas-Havana alliance has generated suspicions in the U.S. foreign policy establishment.

The Bottom Line

Venezuelan and U.S. national interests have never been identical. We should expect disagreement even in a relationship historically characterized by the mutual interdependence generated by oil, but when it comes to Chávez's Bolivarian foreign policy, politics trumps economics. Chávez seems likely to win reelection in 2006, and it appears he will be around for a considerable period of time, which puts the United States in a bind when it comes to dealing with the Bolivarian revolution.

A policy of engagement, which is what the U.S. Government attempted in the first 2 years of Chávez's administration, appears unlikely to generate a solid working relationship given Venezuela's Bolivarian foreign policy objectives. The United States' efforts to work with Venezuela since 1998, even on such noncontroversial issues as disaster relief, have met with rejection. However, there appears to be little sympathy, in Latin America and internationally, for a policy of confrontation with the Venezuelan Government. International reaction to the 2002 coup in Venezuela and the reaction in Latin America to the Venezuela-Colombia crisis over Granda's kidnapping confirm this. If Washington pursues such a diplomatic policy toward Chávez, he has already demonstrated that the likely

outcome would be the isolation of Washington and its regional allies—not of Venezuela.

Washington's dilemma does not mean Venezuela's Bolivarian foreign policy is likely to succeed to any great extent. Venezuela has achieved its minimum foreign policy objective—the defense of the revolution. However, its leadership role in Latin America is still limited at best, and its efforts to construct alternative regional institutions have failed. Brazil still remains South America's leading power with long-established ambitions of its own.

Venezuela has succeeded in revitalizing OPEC, although worldwide demand for energy in the 2000s was likely to provide this opportunity even in the absence of Chávez's leadership. Venezuela's alliance with Cuba serves mostly to strengthen the Chávez administration in domestic rather than international politics. Despite Venezuelan opposition to Plan Colombia, the Colombian state has become stronger and better prepared to deal with violent nonstate actors within its territory, and the FARC has lost ground since Chávez came to power.

Venezuela's new alliances with Russia and China are unlikely to produce much in the way of military advantage for this country vis à vis

its neighbors, particularly in light of Colombia's growing strength. Even the development of alternative markets for Venezuelan oil exports seems difficult to justify on anything other than political grounds since the economics of oil so strongly favor a U.S.-Venezuelan trade relationship.

A final question remains. Will Venezuela's new political model be emulated across the region? This seems unlikely. The Bolivarian revolution, which is not a coherent ideological model that can be replicated in other countries, depends on Chávez's personality, charisma, and drive. The Bolivarian revolution increasingly depends on distributing large amounts of oil income to serve key constituencies in Venezuela. Other Latin American countries lack such resources, and in the past have not had much success at redistributing wealth. This does not mean, however, that the underlying sources of political volatility in Latin America, such as poverty, extreme income inequality, and poor economic policies, will soon disappear. Much to the consternation of Washington, governments that sympathize with some elements of the new Venezuelan foreign policy will emerge, particularly in the Andean region where democracy seems most vulnerable. **MR**

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