

Chapter 9

U.S.-Venezuelan Relations after Hugo Chávez:

Why Normalization Has Been Impossible

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During the administration of former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez Frías (1999-2013), the United States and Venezuela became “mid-level security threats” to one another.¹ Both countries adopted policies that challenged each other’s security, but neither ever posed a lethal threat to the other, at least not in the way that conventional enemy-nations would. Each nation had tools at its disposal to hurt the other and very often used them to increase the costs or raise barriers to the other’s foreign policy, but neither took drastic punitive actions. In this chapter, we argue that there has been both continuity and change in U.S.-Venezuelan relations since the March 2013 death of President Chávez and the April 2013 election of his successor, Nicolás Maduro (2013-present).

The key trait in U.S.-Venezuelan relations that has carried through to the Maduro administration is the disparity between economic and political relations. Economically, the United States and Venezuela continue to maintain a lucrative, oil-based trade that has united the two countries since the 1920s, although this trade continues to decline in volume, mostly because of Venezuela’s decreasing production.² In contrast, relations in the political realm remain as contentious as ever. This dichotomy and economics and politics is as much a part of the Maduro administration as it was a part of the Chávez administration.³

But there are important departures from the Chávez era. With respect to Venezuela, the country has become more isolated diplomatically, more desperate economically, and more insecure domestically. The network of diplomatic alliances that Chávez cultivated in the region has been hard to sustain, in part due to Venezuela’s economic crisis, which has hampered its ability to dispense economic favors abroad, and in part because of the decline of *Chavismo*’s “soft-power” in the region since the mid-1990s.⁴ Moreover, the Maduro administration is facing unprecedented political challenges from within.⁵ As a result,

Venezuela's foreign policy has shifted, focusing less on expanding its model abroad and more on securing lifelines from as many countries as possible.⁶

On the part of the United States, the most important change has been Washington's declining concern about Venezuela's foreign policy, due to the perception that the country has become less of a threat, as well as a decreasing preoccupation with oil security. The United States also surprised the world in 2014 and 2015 by committing to normalizing relations with two of Venezuela's key allies, Cuba and Iran, reinforcing the idea that Venezuela's international ties are less worrisome.

Rather than Venezuela's foreign policy, the United States has become more concerned with Venezuela's domestic governance—specifically, its economic mismanagement, human rights abuses, and potential state collusion with drug traffickers.⁷ The United States has also become more apprehensive about preventing the “Cubanization” of Venezuela in U.S. domestic politics. As with Cuba, the normalization of relations with Venezuela is threatened by the vocal opposition of a minority of hardline legislators. As a result, the Executive has sought to prevent Venezuela from becoming a main attraction on the contentious, polarized stage of U.S. politics.

In short, in this era of normalizing relations with adversaries (e.g., Cuba, Iran, and the FARC in Colombia) that is characteristic of the Obama administration's last years in office, it is worth noting that normalization with Venezuela is nearly impossible. Factors stemming from both Venezuela and the United States stand in the way of better relations between these two countries.

U.S.-Venezuelan Relations under Chávez, 1999-2013

Under Hugo Chávez's 14-year rule, Venezuela became the nation with the most anti-American foreign policy in the entire hemisphere, at times even surpassing that of revolutionary Cuba. Chávez systematically opposed all important initiatives embraced by the United States in the region, such as expanding free trade and economic liberalization, isolating Cuba, protecting civil rights and liberal democracy, combatting drug trafficking, and supporting Plan Colombia. At times, the Venezuelan government even antagonized close allies of the United States in the region, including Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Mexico. Venezuela also promoted new regional cooperation arrangements that deliberately excluded the United States, for example, Petrocaribe, ALBA, UNASUR, CELAC, and Mercosur. Outside the Western Hemisphere, Chávez opposed every military intervention supported by the United States. Even popular initiatives in the United States and elsewhere, like the invasion of Afghanistan shortly after 9/11 and the interventions in Libya and Syria, were bitterly criticized. Chávez also established close alliances with direct enemies of the United States, some of which were listed by the United States as state sponsors of terrorism.⁸ Chávez also expanded military spending dramatically, always making sure that new weapons were acquired from non-U.S. sources, mostly Russia and China. The overall goal of this soft balancing was to combat U.S. influence both in the Americas and worldwide, and to increase the costs for U.S. foreign policy.⁹ In short, Venezuela's active hostility toward the United States come close to qualifying as "petro-aggression," a term coined by Jeff Colgan to describe the active, militaristic, and confrontational foreign policy that typically emerges when an "oil state" combines with "revolutionary leadership," as was the case of Venezuela under Chávez.¹⁰

Chávez's presidency also featured the development of an innovative form of "soft power."¹¹ Specifically, he cast his foreign policy, and especially Venezuela's generous, condition-free foreign aid, as a means to promote a new form of development and Chávez-

style participatory democracy abroad. This policy expanded the lure of *chavismo* as an ideology in Latin America and beyond. In 2008, for instance, there were *chavista* sympathizers governing Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and some Caribbean states such as Antigua and Barbuda. Additionally, by the late 2000s, most Latin American countries were trying to form more ties with Venezuela, especially economically: Brazil and Chile sought to expand investment in Venezuela, Argentina and Colombia desired to increase exports to Venezuela, and ALBA and Petrocaribe countries aimed to obtain Venezuela's oil-based subsidies. Venezuela, in turn, took advantage of its oil-driven economic boom to establish deeper economic relations with most countries in the region in return for diplomatic support.¹²

While Chávez utilized a hostile and confrontational approach in Venezuela's political relations with the United States, the two countries' economic relations were mutually beneficial and uninterrupted. The United States has mostly held a trade deficit with Venezuela, taking advantage of the vast supplies of oil that Venezuela supplies (see Table 9.1). While Chávez and now Maduro have no doubt reduced oil exports to the United States (a combination of declining production, increasing domestic consumption, expanding subsidies to Latin American oil importers, and greater efforts to expand oil exports to China), they have never stopped sending oil to the United States (see Table 9.2). Despite criticizing each U.S. military intervention, Chávez never once declared an embargo on the United States, nor did the United States declare an embargo on Venezuela.¹³

The relationship between the United States and Venezuela during the Chávez years supports one of the most important theories of International Relations: neoliberal institutionalism. The two countries' prioritization of economic over political concerns illustrates the concept that trade can restrain animosity. This is particularly the case given that Venezuela and the United States are both dependent on oil. Venezuela has no alternative

buyers capable of purchasing the volume of oil needed by the United States, while the United States, at least until the late 2000s, was facing an increased need to import oil from abroad. However, the U.S.-Venezuela relationship also challenges neoliberal institutionalism because the trading partnership ultimately did not prevent conflict. On the contrary, by the time of Hugo Chávez's passing in 2013, political relations between the two countries were possibly the most distant and antagonistic of the entire hemisphere.¹⁴

Table 9.1: U.S. Trade with Venezuela, 1999-2014				
(US\$ millions)				
Year	Exports	Imports	Oil Imports	Trade Balance
1999	5,353	11,354		-5,981
2000	5,550	18,650		-13,150
2001	5,976	15,094		-9,118
2002	6,007	10,853		-4,846
2003	6,840	9,175		-2,335
2004	7,905	11,665		-3,750
2005	6,879	33,978	31,473	-27,099
2006	9,325	37,133	34,909	-27,808
2007	10,199	39,896	37,716	-29,697
2008	12,611	51,423	48,879	-38,813
2009	9,360	28,090	27,071	-18,780
2010	10,661	32,774	31,634	-22,114
2011	12,350	43,253	41,971	-30,903
2012	17,517	38,724	37,471	-21,207
2013	13,201	31,997	30,933	-18,796

2014	11,138	30,219	29,053	-19,081
* Includes Crude oil, fuel oil, petroleum products, and liquid petroleum gases.				
Source: FTDWebMaster, Foreign Trade Division, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, D.C.				
www.census.gov/foreign-trade/statistics/product/enduse				

Table 9. 2: Venezuela Oil Production and Oil Exports to the United States		
(Thousand Barrels per Day)		
Year	Production	Exports to United States
1999	2,826	1,150
2000	3,155	1,223
2001	3,010	1,291
2002	2,604	1,201
2003	2,335	1,183
2004	2,556	1,297
2005	2,564	1,241
2006	2,510	1,142
2007	2,490	1,148
2008	2,464	1,039
2009	2,319	912
2010	2,216	988
2011	2,300	951
2012	2,300	960
2013	2,300	806

2014	2,501	789
Source: U.S. Department of Energy, U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) Statistics; Petroleum and Other Liquids/U.S. Imports by Country of Origin, www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/pet_move_impcus_a2_nus_epc0_im0_mbbldpd_a.htm ; IndexMundi, Energy/Venezuela Crude Oil Production by Year, www.indexmundi.com/energy.aspx?country=ve&product=oil&graph=production .		

Venezuela's Foreign Policy after Chávez: Context, Actors, and Inconsistent Preferences

After 2004, Venezuela reliably had the most aggressive policies toward the United States out of all of the Americas. Moments of appeasement were infrequent and seldom believable. In contrast, Nicolás Maduro's foreign policy has been dominated by irregularity.¹⁵ For instance, Maduro, the man who in 2013 offered asylum to one of the United States' most-wanted men, Edward Snowden, is also the same person who in 2015 asked the United States to engage in conversations.¹⁶ At times, Maduro's posture toward the United States is as belligerent and obstructionist as that of his predecessor, if not even more. However, at other times Maduro has also been pragmatic, low-key, and even conciliatory.

One way to explain Maduro's inconsistent foreign policy toward the United States is by examining the changing international and domestic context inherited by the Venezuelan president. External factors have incentivized Maduro both to embrace anti-Americanism and to treat the United States as being worth negotiating with.

The factors pushing in the direction of radicalism are the following. Internationally, Maduro, like Chávez, wants to capture the political spectrum in the region representing the most anti-American sentiments. He realizes that anti-Americanism has a long tradition in

Latin America and that there is a political market of voters, leaders, and intellectual figures embracing this ideology in almost every country. Maduro wants to be seen as the true heir to Fidel Castro's and Hugo Chávez's revolutionary tradition in all of Latin America. With Venezuela being the wealthiest country adhering to this revolutionary tradition, Maduro is well positioned to strive for that title.¹⁷ Domestically, another factor that pushes Maduro toward anti-Americanism is his ruling party, which is characterized by its leftist, anti-imperialist philosophy. In a climate of increasing tensions within the party, anti-Americanism serves as a unifying cry for *chavistas* post Chávez. Maduro also benefits from carrying on Chávez's soft-balancing foreign policy initiatives, some of which have resulted in enormous goodwill toward Venezuela. Petrocaribe, for instance, resulted in goodwill from many countries in the region, while Mercosur invited Venezuela to join, in part because Mercosur members preferred to have the wealthy, radical country on their side rather than against them.¹⁸ Maduro thus understands, as did Chávez, that within Latin America there is a demand for a radical, rich government eager to embrace an anti-American discourse, spend heavily on foreign aid, and serve as the importer-of-last-resort for the region.

While swayed toward an anti-American standpoint by numerous factors, changes in the international and domestic contexts have also created incentives for the Maduro administration to be more conciliatory toward the United States. The first of these changes is the decline of *chavismo* as an electoral force in Latin America. Since the election of Fernando Lugo as president of Paraguay in 2008, no new leaders in the *chavismo* tradition have risen to the presidency in Latin America, Venezuela aside. *Chavista*-like candidates have either been defeated or have had to temper their radical discourse. Only *chavista* incumbents have been winning elections (in Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and of course, Venezuela).

Another factor tending toward less confrontation is the growing interest on the part of many Latin American countries in deepening ties with the United States. The emergence of

the Alliance of the Pacific and the Trans-Pacific Alliance are evidence of this trend—these are nations that want more (rather than less) trade with the United States.¹⁹ Likewise, Central America and the Dominican Republic have entered into a free trade agreement with the United States, while the countries of the Central American Northern Triangle (Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador) are seeking closer cooperation with the United States to combat violence and organized crime.²⁰ Left-leaning Uruguay, a key member of Mercosur, has improved relations with the United States since the early 2000s, and even Brazil, which had a major disagreement with the United States following the Snowden affair, decided in 2014 to resume cooperative policies. But perhaps the most surprising example of warming relations with the United States is Cuba, which in December 2014 began the process of normalizing relations with its northern neighbor after 50 years of estrangement.²¹

A final factor pushing Venezuela away from anti-Americanism is the reconciliation process between Colombia and the Marxist guerilla group FARC undertaken in recent years. A successful conclusion of this effort will mean that the one actor in neighboring Colombia friendly to the Venezuelan regime will effectively become neutralized.²² This, along with the other international developments discussed above, has resulted in the decline of one of Venezuela's key foreign policies under Chávez—expanding the influence of *chavista* politicians and propagating anti-Americanism. Venezuela's headline-making anti-American discourse and policies have less resonance in the region in the mid-2010s than they did in the mid-2000s.²³

Domestically, the most important change causing Venezuela to soften its belligerent foreign policy toward the United States has been the country's internal crises. Domestic turmoil has forced Maduro to devote less attention to foreign policy, and especially to the complicated policy of balancing the United States. One of the internal crises preoccupying Maduro is the decline of *chavismo's* electoral competitiveness. Starting in the mid-2000s, the

Venezuelan opposition has made steady electoral progress against the ruling party, the United Socialist Party (PSUV). While Chávez obtained an impressive victory in his final election in 2012, PSUV candidates tended to fare less well in almost every election in which Chávez has not been on the ballot. Maduro's election to the presidency in 2013 was particularly dismal—he won by a meager 1.5 percent margin in an election that was never fully audited.

Another of Venezuela's internal crises is the increasing factionalism within the ruling PSUV. Under Chávez, the PSUV was highly obedient to the president's wishes. Following Chávez's passing and Maduro's non-consensual rise, the PSUV has developed a number of internal factions openly competing for power. As a result, Maduro has had to reach compromises with each of these factions, reducing the autonomy of the executive branch.

A third domestic crisis faced by Maduro has been Venezuela's descent into one of the worst governance crises in the world.²⁴ Even before the decline in oil prices beginning in July 2014, Venezuela faced severe economic woes characterized by RIDDS: recession, inflation, deficit, dwindling reserves, and shortages. Except for Cuba, which probably has worse shortages than Venezuela, no other country in the region has worse indicators in RIDDS. Added to this, the country suffers from one of the worst crime epidemics in the world.

On the domestic front, therefore, Maduro was thus facing possibly the most severe crisis confronting *chavismo* short of civil war. This crisis provided mixed incentives in terms of Venezuela's relationship with the United States. On one hand, Maduro benefited from having scapegoats and distractions, and this heightened the appeal of anti-Americanism. On the other hand, the crisis means that Maduro did not have the time and energy to engage in unnecessary battles abroad. Thus, the crisis created incentives to seek some sort of entente with the United States, or at least to lessen confrontation. The crisis also brought forth pressures, both within and outside *chavismo*, to try new approaches.

In sum, the international and domestic contexts were simultaneously pushing Maduro in opposing directions. Chávez's foreign policy was hyperactive, complicated, and expensive. Though Maduro would at times like to replicate Chávez's confrontational approach, international and domestic factors have forced him to rethink the merits of such a costly foreign policy. Unlike Chávez, Maduro did not have the luxury to seek clones abroad; he needed to focus on survival instead. As a result, Venezuela by 2015 became less interventionist abroad, both in attacking pro-U.S. governments and in providing political and economic support to its allies. Maduro has also tried to prevent the United States from becoming too involved in its domestic politics. These circumstances explain why Maduro's foreign policy has generally been more circumscribed than that of his predecessor, and why Venezuela's policies toward the United States have become irregular and unpredictable.²⁵

U.S. Foreign Policy toward Venezuela after Chávez: Avoiding the Trap

Circa 2007, the George W. Bush administration adopted a new policy toward Venezuela: "talk softly, sanction softly."²⁶ This policy differed from the approach adopted from around 1999 to 2003, which was to ignore or minimize threats stemming from Venezuela, and that of 2004 to 2006, which was to overreact. In contrast, under its new policy the United States would try to avoid major verbal spats and punitive actions against Venezuela. Apparently the United States had learned a lesson about relations with Venezuela, or any revolutionary regime for that matter. While Venezuela's foreign policy excesses needed to be contained, it was also important to avoid converting the bilateral relationship into a David-and-Goliath affair.²⁷ This policy was maintained without major modifications during President Obama's first term in office.²⁸

This talk softly, sanction softly policy had several implications. First, the White House tried to keep to a minimum the number and type of punitive actions levied against Venezuela. As of 2013, these punitive actions consisted of an arms embargo and sanctions against seven officials.²⁹ Numerous factors led to these measures, including: evidence that the seven sanctioned individuals, and as an extension the Venezuela government, had supported FARC's trafficking of weapons and drugs; Venezuela's refusal to cooperate with and obstruction of U.S.-led counternarcotic operations in Venezuela and Colombia; the support provided by three Venezuelan companies for Iranian military initiatives; and, financial assistance provided by an unspecified number of Venezuelan companies to Hezbollah.³⁰ But the key point was that punitive actions were limited and very circumscribed. There was, for instance, no drive to declare an embargo on the country as a whole.

One implication of the gentler approach toward Venezuela was the rise of two conflicting factions in Congress: one in favor of harsher sanctions against Venezuela, and another preferring more accommodation. The pro-sanction group was eager to publicly criticize the administration for being naïve and dismissive concerning the risks posed by Venezuela. Like the pro-Cuban embargo faction in Congress, the pro-sanctioners had some electoral appeal, which was mostly concentrated amongst newly arrived Venezuelan-Americans and more established Cuban-Americans in Miami-Dade County, Florida. But unlike the Cuban embargo, harsh sanctions against Venezuela would represent a costly decline in the oil trade for the United States, meaning that the group supporting these sanctions had less appeal than the pro-Cuban embargo faction in Congress. In contrast to the pro-sanctions faction, those in Congress supporting increased accommodation have proven to be less difficult to work with, as they are less adamant about their position.

Since Maduro's arrival in office, the talk softly, sanction softly policy has been both easier and harder for the White House to sustain in different respects. One factor that has

made the policy easier to sustain has been Venezuela's more tempered foreign policy. Additionally, certain areas in which Venezuela has meddled have begun to move in directions more amenable to U.S. interests: FARC and the Colombian government have commenced peace negotiations, Iran and the United States successfully negotiated a nuclear pact, and Cuba and the United States began to normalize relations.³¹

In late 2014, yet another area of Venezuela's foreign policy started moving in a direction more amenable to the United States: oil politics. During the Chávez years, Venezuela had adopted a policy of raising the price of oil as much as possible while offering substantial subsidies to potential allies. This policy of pushing for high oil prices clearly ran against the economic interests of the United States, which until the late 2000s was increasing its quantity of imported oil, causing concern about too much foreign dependence. However, starting in the 2010s, the United States' oil outlook began to improve as a result of various developments. First, oil production in the United States substantially increased due to improvements in fracking technology. Second, after peaking in the mid-2000s, oil consumption in the United States has been on the decline since 2008. Third, Canada became a major competitor of Venezuela in terms of oil sales to the United States. Fourth, Mexico, a reliable oil exporter to the United States, approved the liberalization of its oil sector, potentially leading to a greater supply and thus lower prices. Finally, starting in July 2014, worldwide prices of oil began to decline. Venezuela tried but ultimately failed to stop this secular trend. In short, even from the perspective of oil politics, the Venezuelan government under the Maduro administration has appeared a less serious threat than was the case under Chávez.³² In short, most areas of contention in Venezuela's foreign policy have become less worrisome for the United States. This made it easier for the White House to sustain the talk softly, sanction softly policy toward Venezuela.

Having said that, two issues continue to make cooperation with Venezuela thorny. One has to do with drugs. Venezuela has posed a growing threat to the United States in the area of drug policy. Venezuela stopped cooperating with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in the mid-2000s. Because of lax drug enforcement, Venezuela has become the most important transit point for drug traffic from South America to the Caribbean, Central America, North America, North Africa, and Europe.³³ The United States became concerned about not just the state possibly looking the other way, and thus allowing many high-level government and military officials to profit from the drug trade, but also that high-level government officials might be actively heading drug trafficking operations.³⁴

The other issue that makes the policy of talk softly, sanction softly harder to sustain has to do with Venezuelan domestic politics and the Venezuelan regime's evolution into a more repressive and failed state. This turn toward greater repression and economic ungovernability has galvanized two major pressure groups that want the White House to turn more punitive toward Venezuela: hard-liners in Congress (as mentioned), and hard-liners among the Venezuelan opposition. An important component of the White House's foreign policy toward Venezuela has been to try to contain these two pressure groups.³⁵

The first pressure group is the hardline faction in Congress. This pressure group became more vocal and active following Chávez's death. As was the case under Chávez, Venezuela continued to be an important topic in Congress. Between 2012 and 2014, the House's Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere held at least 1 hearing where Venezuela was a topic of some or major importance (see Table 9.3). In February 2014, one meeting was devoted exclusively to "supporting the people of Venezuela as they protest peacefully for democratic change and calling to end the violence." The hardline faction of Congress played a major role in scheduling and conducting those meetings, the effect of which is to increase

the sense of threat of the Venezuelan regime. In addition to criticizing Venezuela's anti-American foreign policy and engaging in some form of threat-inflation, this congressional faction increased human rights accusations on the Venezuelan government in their effort to justify a harsher approach. In addition, because this faction feels that the Venezuelan government is weak, it started arguing that with just a slight tightening of U.S. sanctions on Venezuela, they can provoke a serious enough division within the Venezuelan government to prompt a break from the Maduro administration. This conservative faction is strong in the Republican Party, and that party has increased its presence in Congress, becoming a majority in the House in 2010 and in the Senate in 2015.³⁶

Table 9.3: Venezuela in Congress: Hearings of the U.S House of Representative's Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

Year	Total	Venezuela Not Mentioned/Low Importance	Venezuela is Topic of Some or High Importance
2012	4	3	1
2013	8	5	3
2014	9	7	2

The second new pressure group is none other than parts of the Venezuelan opposition itself. Maduro's opposition has a complicated relationship toward the United States. On the one hand, the entire opposition wants the world to turn more critical of the Maduro government. On the other hand, it is less united about how punitive the United States should become. The most extreme sections of the Venezuelan opposition are aligned with the hard-

liners in Congress in calling for a tougher approach. Together, they constitute an important pressure bloc on the White House. This faction of the opposition is not necessarily the dominant faction—there are important groups in the opposition that do not want a David-and-Goliath confrontation—but it is also stronger than it ever was in at least a decade, making it hard for the United States to ignore.

Thus, the United States faces a political dilemma in its policy toward Venezuela. It wants to avoid provoking the Maduro administration, but at the same time, it must figure out a way to respond to rising new pressures from Congress and Venezuelan actors themselves to sanction the government too severely at the risk of giving Maduro a nationalist excuse to justify his excesses.³⁷

The United States Stumbles

In the period from December 2014 to April 2015, the United States stumbled in trying to manage this dilemma. The United States came very close to falling into the very trap that it was trying to avoid. In December 18, 2014, the White House announced that it would support a new bill from Congress imposing sanctions on seven Venezuelan officials, the so-called “Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014.” In March 2015, the White House officially announced the implementation of those sanctions. The announcement was made through a widely publicized executive order.³⁸

This executive order was the United States’ most controversial move against Venezuela since perhaps the 2002 coup, when the military overthrew Chávez briefly for two days in the context of massive street protests. The order had two major components. First, it had an element of what has come to be known as “smart sanctions.” Smart sanctions are those that target a few officials rather than the government as a whole. In this case, seven

individuals were targeted. All were accused of human rights violations, engagement in illicit activities, or both. Second, the decree used some of the most incendiary language that the United States has used since the mid-2000s. The decree declared a “national emergency” with respect to the unusual and “extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States posed by the situation in Venezuela.”³⁹

This phrasing was unfortunate for a number of reasons. First, it broke with the policy in place since the late 2000s of “sanctioning softly, and talking softly.” The words themselves (as opposed to the actions) contradicted the whole spirit of the “smart sanctions” approach, since the words target the country as a whole as posing a national security threat.

Second, the words contradicted recent White House statements about the type of threat Venezuela was posing. As mentioned, the White House had been downplaying the Venezuelan threat. In a July 2012 press interview, for instance, President Obama indicated that his “sense is that what Mr. Chávez has done over the past several years has not had a serious national security impact on us.”⁴⁰ Likewise, the then-head of the U.S. Southern Command, General Douglas Fraser, maintained that he did not see Venezuela as a “national security threat.” And as recently as October 2014, the United States did not oppose Venezuela’s election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, even though Venezuela was the only country at the UN Human Rights Council in 2013 to vote against holding Syria accountable for its brutal conduct of civil war. The Executive Order’s strong language of national security threat seemed to have come out of nowhere.

Third, the Executive Order gave Maduro the best political present he could have hoped for: the opportunity to divert attention from Venezuela’s crisis and instead focus on the how a great power was picking a fight with “harmless” Venezuela. Maduro thus responded exactly as most people predicted—seizing this event and converting it into a nationalist affair. It also drew enormous criticism from many Latin American governments, thus allowing them also

to divert attention away from criticisms that they themselves were ignoring Venezuela's domestic crisis. The decree, therefore, shifted attention from the Venezuelan government's wrongdoing s back to U.S. foreign policy.

Yet, despite the huge impact it had on U.S.-Venezuela relations, it is important not to lose sight of the context and scope of this Executive Order. The sanctions were fairly circumscribed. They were not a call to boycott Venezuelan business affairs abroad. They were not even sanctioning of the most powerful ministers, or even the president. Compare the embargo imposed on Russia for events in Ukraine: the decree does not sanction firms (energy, financial activities), and there was no effort to establish a multilateral system of sanctions. The order targets specific individuals, many of whom are not that high level.⁴¹

So why did the White House issue this executive order? There are three elements that demand an explanation: why the language, why the sanctions, and why the timing? The language is the easiest to explain. The mentioning of a national security threat, however hyperbolic, is there because U.S. law requires invoking national security in order to justify sanctions like the one that Obama was implementing. Although the wording could have been softer, or placed in a less salient part of the document, the truth is that the president had little option than to use this language.

Second, explaining the origins of the documents requires understanding the domestic politics of normalizing relations with Cuba. The first sign that the order was coming occurred on December 18 (when the White House announced it would not veto the bill from Congress). This announcement was made the day after Obama shocked the world announcing that he had been negotiating with Raúl Castro a possible new entente. The small but influential pro-embargo faction in Congress, comprised mostly of Cuban-Americans, was very unhappy with the new Cuba policy. These legislators had also been working on a set of sanctions on Venezuela that were not that different from the one that the White House ended

up adopting. When Obama announced his Cuba policy, he probably felt he needed a consolation prize for these legislators. And so, the president's decision to support Congress's policy toward Venezuela can be seen as his way of placating the very same faction in Congress that was trying to block change in U.S. foreign policy toward Cuba. In many ways, however paradoxical it might seem, the White House adopted this punitive policy toward Venezuela in order to make his conciliatory policy toward Venezuela's main ally all the more digestible in Congress.⁴²

Finally, the timing: critics have argued that Obama could have delayed implementing the sanctions until after this National Assembly elections or at least until after the April 2015 Summit of the Americas, so as not to give Maduro a chance to extract political benefits in either arena. This argument is reasonable, but there were reasons that Obama still decided to risk it by acting sooner rather than later. First, Maduro spent the entire month of February 2015 lambasting the United States, which in itself was explicable based on the fact that he knew that sanctions were coming. In late February, Maduro escalated the conflict with the United States by ordering the United States to reduce its embassy personnel to fewer than 30 to make it comparable to the Venezuelan delegation in Washington (which does not include all the consular offices), requiring U.S. citizens to have visas to enter Venezuela, and banning former president George W. Bush, Republican Senator Marco Rubio, and Republican Congress member Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (the last two both Cuban Americans) from ever entering Venezuela. Thus, Venezuela essentially declared the United States a national threat and imposed its own set of sanctions on the United States, compelling Obama to produce a tit-for-tat response.

Finally, the decree came on the heels of UNASUR's failure in Venezuela. UNASUR had sent a delegation in late February 2015 to persuade Maduro to release Antonio Ledezma, the mayor of Caracas, whom the government had unexpectedly arrested under suspicious

political charges. The UNASUR delegation yielded no results. Obama waited precisely until the official conclusion of the UNASUR visit to issue his decree. From the point of view of the United States, at least, it waited long enough to give diplomacy a chance. Once diplomacy failed, the United States acted. In short, the decree is the result, once again, of an instance in which the failure of multilateralism to solve a governance crisis prompts the United States to act multilaterally.

Venezuela Stumbles

Although Obama's executive order became widely condemned, not just by *Chavistas*, but even by many leaders of the opposition, the church, and civil society, all of whom called it a misguided and unhelpful exaggeration, in reality, the whole affair backfired more on Venezuela than on the United States. That is because the Venezuelan government's disproportionate response essentially yielded very few positive results for Maduro, if any. More than anything, the whole affair may have only served to remind Maduro how low his foreign influence had become.⁴³

Maduro unleashed both a domestic and international campaign to rally support around his anti-imperialist cause, not unlike what Chávez would have done in the heyday of *chavismo*'s popularity. Domestically, he requested (and got) special decree powers to "protect sovereignty." He called for "national unity against this foreign threat," but this didn't quite happen: his approval rating barely jumped 5 points. He promised to bring a document of condemnation, signed by 10 million Venezuelans, but he never managed to show proof of any signatures. Domestically, therefore, the anti-American rampage did not significantly improve Maduro's political standing.

Internationally, Maduro tried to mobilize public opinion against imperialism. The government even placed a full page ad in the *New York Times* attempting to ridicule Obama for describing Venezuela as a threat when in reality, Maduro argued, Venezuela is a country of peace (“*Venezuela no es una amenaza, es una esperanza*”). He promised to disrupt the April 2015 Summit of the Americas by calling for a widespread anti-American protest, not unlike what Chávez did during the 2005 Mar del Plata summit. These objectives fell short. While Cuba and ALBA did align fully with Venezuela (as expected) at the summit, and UNASUR offered a statement condemning the United States, Maduro was unable to demonstrate any form of region-wide solidarity during the summit.

One way to illustrate Venezuela’s isolation at the start of 2015 is to compare the number of countries that supported Venezuela’s request in 2014 by voting to keep María Corina Machado’s speech at the OAS in secret versus those that supported Venezuela at the summit by publicly condemning Obama’s during their official speeches: 21 vs. 12 in total. Furthermore, something unprecedented in the history of Inter-American affairs took place at the Summit of the Americas. A document condemning human rights and political abuses in Venezuela was drafted during the summit, the “Panama Declaration.” The declaration was eventually signed by at least 31 American and Spanish past presidents and heads of government. The main problem with this declaration is that it does not include a single incumbent president, reaffirming the reality that most Latin American governments officially have a policy of not upsetting Venezuela. There are also very few leftist leaders as part of this list. Nonetheless, this is one of the most high-profile forms of international condemnation that Venezuela (and any Latin American country) has received in the last 20 years. If one adds the number of international organizations that have condemned Venezuela by 2015 (the European Parliament, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, UN Committee Against Torture, Inter-American Press Association, International Press Institute, Reporters without

Borders, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Inter-American Courts on Human Rights), it is evident that Venezuela's international clout, in fact, its entire reputation, is a long way from the golden age of *Chavismo* ten years ago.

Lingering Tensions in the Era of Normalization

Perhaps because of this backfiring (and suffering perhaps from a bit of Castro envy, who seemed to have gained much from Cuba's normalization of relations with the United States in 2015), Maduro decided, once again, to retry rapprochement with the United States in the spring of 2015. At the request of the Maduro administration, the United States sent Thomas Shannon, special counselor to Secretary of State John Kerry, to meet with Maduro twice in Caracas and with Maduro representatives in Haiti once. For the Haiti meeting Maduro sent Diosdado Cabello, which took the United States by surprise since Cabello was seen by many in the United States government as the man responsible for many of the policies that the United States finds objectionable about Venezuela. Very little information about these meetings was divulged, except that both sides welcomed the effort. For a government that loves to tweet #ObamaYankeeGoHome, that Maduro would tweet to express his support for these meetings was no doubt a sign of interest in "easing tensions."

Maduro might have come to discover the benefits of easing tensions (or the declining payoffs of escalating tensions) with the United States. However, any form of solid rapprochement will still be difficult to achieve. Drugs, human rights, and governance are problems that will continue to draw a wedge between both nations.

Nevertheless, it is worth speculating about the possible consequences of these talks, especially if they make any headway. Of course, the U.S. government hopes that diplomatic overtures will lead to moderation in Venezuela. But it could also have the opposite effect.

Being on better terms with the United States might make Maduro feel he needs a new type of foreign conflict. Or maybe it could make him feel he has gained a new *carte blanche*.

This might explain why, at the same time that Venezuela was approaching the United States in spring 2015, he made two important foreign policy blunders with Venezuela's neighbors, Guyana and Colombia. Following a decision by the Guyanese government to give *de facto* concessions to foreign companies searching for petroleum in areas disputed by Venezuela, Maduro responded in a heavily antagonistic fashion. He issued presidential decree 1787, which not only restates Venezuela's own claim over these waters, but also quasi-militarizes the dispute by declaring the area a new "Integrated Defense Maritime Zone" to be defended by the armed forces. The decree seemed so disproportionate that Colombia, which also has maritime disputes with Venezuela in the Caribbean, issued a formal protest.⁴⁴

Clearly, the Maduro administration is not interested in deescalating conflicts with all parties. That in mid-2015 he started to pick fights with his own neighbors could very well be, paradoxically, an unintended result of his desperate need to get along better with the United States.

Conclusion

U.S.-Venezuelan relations after Hugo Chávez display continuities as, one would expect considering regime continuity, but also some surprising changes. From the point of view of Venezuela, the key continuity is its commitment to retaining the title as a world champion of revolutionary anti-Americanism. Venezuela under Maduro still wants to be seen as a Latin American David fighting a hegemonic Goliath, much as was the case under Chávez. This foreign policy goal continues to give Venezuela some soft-power, but mostly among the most radical leftists sectors abroad. Radical leftists are not a majority constituency in most

countries, but they are not an insignificant group either. There is therefore some demand, albeit circumscribed, for the type of international leadership role that Venezuela is competing for in the world stage.

The most significant difference in U.S.-Venezuela relations, again from the point of view of Venezuela, is the country's spectacular governance crisis: economic collapse, crime epidemic, public sector dysfunction, declining oil production, insatiable demand for dollars, capital flight, etc. This domestic crisis started under Chávez but has imploded under Maduro, hurting Venezuela's ability to conduct a coherent foreign policy (shrinking resources, inability to focus, and a sense of domestic political insecurity). The government's mishandling of both economic and political woes makes it hard to earn or retain international admirers.

Furthermore, the wave of anti-Americanism and radical leftism in Latin America has subsided since the heyday of Chavismo in the mid-2000s. This too has lessened the regime's ability to earn admirers appeal across the region. Venezuela does continue to benefit from the unwillingness of most other Latin American governments to criticize Venezuela, but its international fan base is at an all-time low, and the number of notable figures willing to criticize the Venezuelan government is at an all-time high. This latter list includes expresidents, elected leaders in the opposition from several countries, and leaders of international organizations. No other Latin America country since the transition to democracy has acquired such a vast collection of critics. Maduro has made the mistake of badmouthing some of these critics (in mid-2015, for instance, he accused Spain's former president of government, the socialist Felipe González, of being implicated in the drug trade, as a way to dismiss González's effort to advocate on behalf of Maduro's political prisoners). These excesses are costing the Venezuelan government huge amounts of international respect.

Because the payoffs from maintaining a radical anti-imperialist discourse seem to be declining, and the country's governance crisis has only expanded under Maduro, Venezuela since 2013 found itself unexpectedly ambivalent about the benefits of soft-balancing. No doubt, Maduro has shown obvious signs of fondness for vintage soft-balancing behavior, reminiscent of the most radical years of the Chávez era. But at times, he has also shown signs of willingness to be less antagonistic.

This ambiguity may have to do with the country's internal crisis as well as new developments in U.S. foreign policy. Venezuela's internal crisis incentivizes Maduro to engage in threat inflation, even fabricate threats. However, developments in U.S.-Cuba relations might be giving Maduro some type of "Castro envy," a yearning for reaching an understanding with the United States that could deliver some concessions for the regime without necessarily forcing Venezuela to compromise on its anti-Imperialist credentials. Maduro could conclude, for instance, that he would be better off focusing on alternative ways to display nationalism (e.g., accentuating its territorial disputes, or its petro-diplomacy, or simply focusing on attacking local enemies) than to continue to antagonize the United States as the centerpiece of his ideology.

From the point of view of the United States, the most important continuity is the persisting dilemma, well explained by Robert Pastor, of how best to respond to a revolutionary regime (in crisis) without overreacting. If the United States does nothing vis-à-vis the regime, it creates a carte-blanche environment that does little to advance U.S. interests or introduce possible fixes. But overreacting creates incentives for the target regime to rally the nationalist flag, divert attention from its internal problems, and in the end, make the target government more entrenched.⁴⁵

In trying to mediate this dilemma following Chávez's death, the United States has faced new opportunities and new challenges. On the one hand, the Venezuelan government is now

seen as posing a less serious national security threat than it did in 2000s on a number of fronts, so the United States can afford to pay less attention to the country. Key aspects of Chávez's foreign policy are no longer that relevant or that serious for the United States, as they were in the 2000s (see Table 9.4). On the other hand, new problems have surfaced or intensified. Some are now too serious for the United States to ignore: the country's internal governance crisis, the heightened violation of human and political rights, and of course, the continued spread of rampant crime at all levels of society. Furthermore, the United States is facing growing pressures to act aggressively, coming from Congress, the continued expansion of Venezuelan lobbyists living in the United States, and important sectors of the Venezuelan opposition. These new issues and new lobbying groups are not easy for the White House and the different branches of government to dismiss.

Table 9.4 : U.S. Security Concerns vis-à-vis Venezuela, Chávez vs. Maduro

Policy Area	Under Chávez (late 2000s)	Under Maduro (2013)	Explanation of change
Venezuela's Relations with Iran	High	Low	United States and several allies started talks with Iran about nuclear program in 2013.
Venezuela's Close Relations with the FARC	High	Low	On November 2012, Colombia launched peace talks with the FARC. The United States and Venezuela are on the same side supporting the peace talks.
Spread of Bolivarianism (<i>Chavista</i> ideology) in Latin America and the Caribbean	Medium	Low	No new <i>Chavista</i> leader has been elected in Latin America since the 2008 election of Fernando Lugo in Paraguay.
Strengthening of ties with ALBA and Cuba	Medium	Low	United States and Cuba started to normalize relations secretly in 2013 (shortly after Chávez's death) and publicly after December 2014.

Potential Oil embargo on the United States	Medium	Low	United States is less dependent on foreign and Venezuelan imports, in part because of the fracking revolution in the U.S. domestic oil industry.
Human Rights Abuses	Medium	High	The Government's 2014-15 crackdown of student and political leaders has been widely condemned by numerous human rights organizations.
Governance Issues	Medium	High	Venezuela has been exhibiting since 2014 one of the worst economic crises in the global South, in addition to having one of the worst homicide rates in the world (circa 70 murders per 100,000 inhabitants).
Drug Trade	High	Alarming	By most accounts, drug trafficking is increasing and the government continues to avoid cooperating with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA).

There is no question that the United States would welcome the return of economic and political stability in Venezuela, and especially, some cooperation on the drug war front. If Maduro were capable of delivering on these issues, the prospects for improving relations with the United States would increase dramatically. By the same token, we speculate that Venezuela would welcome resetting relations with the United States if that meant facing fewer criticisms from the giant in the North. The problem is that the Venezuelan state is in such crisis that it is impossible for it to deliver the type of governance results that the United States would welcome. Consequently, the United States is a long way from delivering the kind of accepting discourse that Venezuela yearns. The two countries are therefore each stuck in a type of policy that neither prefers, but also, that neither has full capacity to change.

(NOTE: Other chapter authors put acknowledgements in an endnote.)

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