

Venezuela's Post- Chavez Foreign Policy

Is there a Maduro Doctrine?

By Víctor M. Mijares

Former President Hugo Chávez' ambitions outstripped the confines of petroleum-rich Venezuela. When he assumed power in 1999, the self-proclaimed revolutionary was blessed with soaring oil prices, a shift toward global multipolarity, a regional backlash against the neoliberal model of the past century—and personal charisma. In a pattern that fit into Venezuela's diplomatic history, Chávez converted his economic windfall into regional—if not global—leadership. While some of his early success was based on ideological affinity with newly elected governments in the region and with autocratic governments such as China and even Iran outside the hemisphere, a good portion of it rested on the oil patronage lavishly doled out from Miraflores, the presidential palace.

JUAN BARRETO/AFP/GETTY



Larger than life:
Venezuelan President
Nicolás Maduro
stands in front of
an image of Hugo
Chávez in July 2014.



President Nicolás Maduro inherited a dramatically changed country—and economic situation—when he came to power following Chávez' death from cancer in 2013. Within a year of Maduro's election in March 2013, oil prices had started a steady decline. And as investment in the industry also dropped, production fell to 2.62 million barrels per day (bpd) from 3.48 million bpd when Chávez was sworn in to office.¹ To complicate matters, the rapidly deteriorating economy, combined with Maduro's lack of charisma and narrow margin of victory in the election—1.49 percent—were further domestic constraints on Chávez' handpicked successor.

While Maduro has continued to espouse the same aggressive, revolutionary rhetoric, the deterioration of both his domestic standing and of Venezuela's international economic and diplomatic leverage raises the question of whether the former bus driver-turned-president will pursue a more isolationist, even pragmatic, foreign policy. And perhaps just as critically, it has raised doubts about whether the internationalization of the Bolivarian Revolution started by Chávez will continue.

There is a long history of foreign policy activism in Venezuela. The president's domestic political power and his corresponding ability to assert executive autonomy in pursuing his definition of the national interest abroad are two of the determining factors for assertive foreign

policy. A third is the scope for action provided by objective international conditions. When these conditions are not in place, Venezuela lowers its foreign policy profile.

Three distinct phases illustrate this: the Betancourt Doctrine under President Rómulo Betancourt (1959–1964); The Great Venezuela under President Carlos Andrés Pérez' first term (1974–1979), and the Bolivarian Revolution under President Hugo Chávez (1999–2013).

Venezuela's Foreign Policy in Historical Perspective

In all three moments of presidential foreign policy adventurism (Betancourt, Pérez and Chávez), the domestic and international conditions were similar. In each case, the executive had substantial domestic latitude and scope for international action. Those conditions stemmed from the president's control over oil revenue, his dominance in the Congress and over the party system, and structural conditions in the international order that permitted greater freedom of action for a smaller power.

For example, Betancourt's presidency came as a result of the democratic transition from former dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez, who had been eased out of power by an agreement among the major political parties. That agreement—the 1958 Punto Fijo Pact—and the constitutional framework it established, created a broad political consensus among the political class, leaving out only the hard-line Castro-supported communists.

This consensus gave Betancourt a relatively free hand to set the course of policy—including international policy—for Venezuela's new democratic era. Moreover, the expansion of petroleum production under state control gave the executive extraordinary discretion in the distribution of oil rents, both facilitating the president's domestic political base and providing a source of oil-based patronage for his foreign policy.

At the same time, the Cuban Revolution had forced a profound recalculation of U.S. policy in Latin America, giving birth to President John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress



Venezuela's past foreign policy entrepreneurs: Former President Rómulo Betancourt in Caracas (left). Former President Carlos Andrés Pérez (right).

and a greater focus on working with non-democratic but pro-U.S. governments in the battle against communism in the hemisphere. The newly democratic Venezuela became closely allied with the new U.S. diplomacy in the region, an alignment that afforded Betancourt latitude to carve out separate relations with neighboring governments. The result: even as the Betancourt government aligned itself with Washington, it was able to develop into an autonomous regional player.

This foreign policy autonomy enabled the Betancourt administration to confront authoritarian regimes. Diplomatic ties were cut with Spain, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Argentina, Peru, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Haiti, even though these same governments were considered U.S. Cold War allies.²

Pérez faced a much more complex world during his first presidential term. But the charismatic center-left president was also blessed with record oil prices, thanks to the OPEC oil embargo, and continuing control over the oil industry, thanks to the creation of the state oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)* in late 1975 and the nationalization of the energy sector by early 1976. That control gave Pérez, like Betancourt, an almost unlimited supply of political patronage, which he could distribute domestically and internationally. At the time of Pérez' first administration, Venezuela's bi-party power-sharing system remained strong, aided by his predecessor Rafael Caldera's peace agreement with the defeated Castroist guerrilla fighters.

International conditions created an opening for greater action, the result of growing assertiveness among developing countries distancing themselves from the bipolar Cold War to pursue a Third World agenda. As a result of the favorable political and economic tailwinds and the emerging non-aligned movement, Pérez drove Venezuelan foreign policy as a "leader of the Third World."

Taking advantage of the relative U.S. decline after the Vietnam War and the energy crisis, Venezuela followed an assertive policy in Central America. Pérez kept the Caldera administration's framework of "political plurality," staying close to then-President Jimmy Carter's agenda on human rights, but also supporting Panamanian leader Omar Torrijos' demands for autonomy over the Panama Canal. Venezuela at the time also extended friendship to Nicolae Ceausescu's regime in Romania, established diplomatic relation with Mao Zedong's China—recognizing China's sovereignty over Taiwan—and re-established ties with Spain (emerging from the Francisco Franco dictatorship) and Cuba. At the same time, it broke off dip-

lomatic ties with Augusto Pinochet's Chile.³ Pérez was the first Venezuelan president to visit the Soviet Union, where he signed an industrial cooperation agreement with Leonid Brezhnev and endorsed Moscow's Third World policy, especially in Latin America.⁴

These conditions favoring a more assertive foreign policy would not be repeated until the rise of Chávez. But with Chávez came one powerful twist: the fire of revolutionary doctrine embodied by Chávez' self-proclaimed Bolivarian Revolution.

The Chávez Doctrine

Once elected in 1998, the former lieutenant colonel—who had attempted a coup during Pérez' second term—gave unprecedented priority to foreign policy. Under Chávez' revolutionary presidential diplomacy, Caracas became a protagonist on the world stage to an extent never envisioned under the Betancourt Doctrine or Pérez' "Third Worldism."⁵

Although the early years of his rule were marked by domestic turmoil, Chávez was inarguably a strong president. A series of strikes and protests, including a general oil strike between early 2002 and early 2003, and even the brief ouster of the president in April 2002, failed to dampen his charismatic appeal to a large segment of Venezuelan voters.⁶ Nor did these events deflect his efforts to remake the Venezuelan state and extinguish checks and balances to executive authority. Under his rule, the executive and his party enjoyed almost unfettered dominance over politics and the state. The country's constitution was rewritten in 1999, replacing a presidential system with a hyper-presidential system. This was followed by successful efforts to undermine the independence of key institutions, such as the central bank, independent media, the judiciary, and regional and local governments.

Chávez also built a heterogeneous but powerful party around his leadership and his distribution of oil rents, first through *El Movimiento V República* (Fifth Republic Movement—MVR) and later with *El Partido Socialista Unida de Venezuela* (United Socialist Party of Venezuela—PSUV). Those party machines helped him balance competing factions for power and also enabled him to extend his power to the local level.

But the Chávez government was helped more than anything else by the spike in oil prices from \$9.80 per barrel shortly before his 1998 election to \$133 per barrel by mid-2008. The petroleum revenue and resources that Chávez enjoyed were the highest and longest lasting for any Venezuelan president, thanks both to the surge in



The end of an era? A Cuban woman reads coverage about the death of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in the Communist Party newspaper, *Granma*, in Havana, Cuba.

the price of crude and to Chávez' control and politicization of PDVSA (which had been established as a semi-independent, technocratic and para-statal organization by Pérez' second term in the 1990s). This allowed Chávez to divert oil revenue directly to his domestic political projects—including his famous *misiones* (social) assistance programs for the poor—and both revenue and petroleum to his ambitious foreign policy project: the promotion of multipolarity by leveraging high commodity prices and exploiting growing discontent with the perceived failure of neoliberal economic reforms and values, such as representative government.

The rise of a multipolar system was especially fortuitous. Chávez' long presidency coincided with the emergence of China as a global economic player, whose demand for oil and other raw materials drove a global commodities boom. Other aspiring global powers (or gadflies) also emerged on the stage, such as Vladimir Putin's Russia, Mahmud Ahmadinejad's Iran and the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* in Brazil with the election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2011) and Dilma Rousseff (2011–2015) as presidents. These presented the Chávez government with an opportunity to develop economic and political partnerships outside the influence of its declared nemesis, the United States.

Chávez' strategy was in some ways a sharp departure from his predecessors. First, despite the high levels of

foreign autonomy from the U.S., Betancourt's and Pérez' Venezuela never confronted Washington directly and had come to share common liberal democratic values. The Bolivarian Revolution openly called those into question and sought to break them. America's relative decline—or what some political scientists call “the rise of the rest”—created optimal conditions for a policy of new alignments. Thus, Venezuela became an interested outsider in the Eurasia great game, establishing political, economic, and military ties with Iraq, Iran, China, Russia, Belarus, Algeria, Libya, and Syria.⁷

Second, Venezuela's traditional role as a reliable oil supplier to the U.S. underwent a dramatic transformation. While the oil kept flowing to the north, the U.S. was no longer the privileged client. By 2011, the last year of Chávez' active presidential foreign policy, Venezuela exported to China 460,000 bpd of crude, one-fifth of its total production.⁸

Third, since the first years of the past decade, one of Venezuela's most important tactical goals has been the construction of a new regional institutional architecture. The *Plan de la Patria* (National Plan), the last strategic document from the Chávez era, could be the best summary of the formal objectives pursued by the Bolivarian Revolution. One of its most important premises was releasing Venezuela from “[...] international mechanisms of imperial dominance.” Venezuela's effort to de-link from the inter-American structure built around the Organization of American States (OAS) was a major example, as has been Venezuela's consistent challenges to and denunciations of the inter-American system of human rights.

The other face of the tactic was the reinstitutionalization of regional governance. The *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América* (Bolivarian Alliance for the People of the Americas—ALBA) and its economic component, PetroCaribe, were launched to increase the regional influence of Venezuela through oil.⁹ Building regional al-

liances and using oil to sustain them was nothing new to Venezuelan foreign policy. But these new efforts at regional self-promotion were driven by the goal of reorienting the regional landscape and brought Venezuela into conflict with more established groupings. For example, Chávez moved Venezuela away from the Andean Community and toward Mercosur (Southern Common Market), though it took six years for Venezuela to gain access, despite Chávez' desires. At the same time Caracas also promoted the *Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños* (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States—CELAC) as an alternative to the OAS, with the former pointedly excluding the U.S. and Canada.

ber 2014—with little help from fellow OPEC members, who had voted in November not to slow production to boost prices. Maduro now confronts a yawning public sector deficit and a rapidly deteriorating economy. The massive public spending that served as a central tool in Chávez' political arsenal is no longer available to Maduro because of the weakening of oil revenues.¹⁰ According to a 2014 World Bank report, the ratio of public debt to GDP was about 26 percent by 2012, and the Venezuelan economic research firm Ecoanalítica has calculated that the 2013 fiscal deficit reached 11.5 percent.¹¹

The Maduro Doctrine can be summarized as the change from proactively seeking international influence

The Maduro Doctrine can be summarized as the change from proactively seeking international influence to a policy of reacting to international conditions.

The Maduro Doctrine

Chávez left Maduro with an ambiguous legacy. The new president's ability to exploit the institutional advantages created by his predecessor was hamstrung by the increasingly problematic oil economy both at home and overseas. China's slowing growth reduced the demand for oil imports, and newly exploitable U.S. energy reserves (propelled by shale gas technology) transformed the international oil market.

As a result, much to the distress of the fiscally strapped Venezuelan government, the price of crude oil had dropped from \$133 per barrel at its height during the Chávez government to around \$65 per barrel by Decem-

ber 2014—and a need to attend to the economic needs of the country and his own political weaknesses within *chavismo* and vis-à-vis the opposition. An aggressive process of revolutionary internationalization has been replaced by a less flashy model of entrenchment. Diplomacy is asserted through a propaganda machine in which rhetoric compensates for the lack of action and the weakening influence of *chavismo*.

In practical terms, Maduro's administration has experimented with new bureaucratic configurations. The first example is a ministry of international communication for the "global defense of Venezuela"—which Mad-

uro proposed in April 2014 to promote the official image of the Venezuelan government abroad. It has not yet been formally created. Second, by recently appointing the so-called czar of oil, Rafael Ramírez—once Chávez' principal emissary in OPEC negotiations and president of PDVSA for 10 years—to be foreign minister, Maduro has effectively fused the Ministry of Foreign Relations with the Ministry of Energy and Oil and PDVSA, guaranteeing a more active foreign policy in matters of petroleum, including recovering oil prices.

The system of political control that Chávez built is also beginning to fray under his handpicked successor. This system, strengthened by the alliance between military and civilian socialists and control of most mayoral and gubernatorial administrations, enabled Chávez to

Chávez' revolutionary political program was strongly influenced by Havana, in which the ideological and strategic "software" of the Castros found material expression in the oil and revenue-based "hardware" of Venezuela under Chávez. Among Chávez' inner circle, Maduro was considered the closest to the Cuban regime. But although his political agenda is no different than his predecessor's, his political abilities are considerably weaker. The protests, repressions and arrests of early 2014 hurt the government's international image, even as they exposed the opposition's internal differences.

The system of alliances and alignments forged by Chávez is the basis of the Bolivarian Revolution's projection abroad. Maduro is likely to continue to rely on these in the future. With no access to Western military

The system of political control that Chávez built is beginning to fray under his handpicked successor.

take the type of rapid, unilateral actions that allowed resources to be mobilized for the foreign demands of the Bolivarian project. That is now largely unavailable to Maduro, who must instead negotiate each decision to ensure the cohesion of the governing group.

Although Maduro is attempting to create his own base within the party, the bureaucracy and the armed forces, he does not enjoy anything close to the undisputed power of his predecessor. Attaining influence over the armed forces would be a challenge for any civilian commander-in-chief stepping into the footsteps of Chávez, a charismatic former army officer. But it's further complicated by the growing influence of other officers, such as former army lieutenant Diosdado Cabello. At the same time, just two years after his election, Maduro is at a nadir of popularity, with less than 25 percent popular support.¹³

technology, Caracas will deepen ties with the Russian arms industry (with sales now totaling around \$6.6 billion). Having rejected multilateral controls over its finances, Venezuela must maintain and broaden its financial ties with Beijing (with a debt of around \$45 billion and a line of credit based in oil reserves).

Despite these constraints, barring a major economic or political shock, ALBA subsidies through PetroCaribe are likely to continue. These instruments are not only fundamental to Venezuela's ideological principle of international solidarity, they are also the regime's tools of power projection, especially in the main sub-region of historical Venezuelan influence: the Caribbean Basin.

Maduro's legitimacy and political credibility depend on demonstrating that he has not departed from the goals of *chavismo*. The *Plan de la Patria* (2013–2019), passed by the National Assembly, was defined by the



Cuban President Raúl Castro (left) and his Venezuelan counterpart Nicolás Maduro (right) attend the special ALBA summit about Ebola in Havana in October 2014.

president as the political will and testament of Chávez; and he clings to this to reinforce his status as legitimate heir. The document defines its principal foreign policy objective as: “[Contributing] to the development of a new international geopolitics in which the multicentric and pluri-polar world takes shape, which allows the balance of the universe to be achieved and guarantees planetary peace on the planet [sic].”¹⁴ The other sub-objectives correspond to redrawing the Bolivarian Revolution’s foreign policy goals in the terms defined by Chávez, which tells us that, at least in theory, the transformative project lives on—though without a strong president to see it through.

Much depends on Maduro’s ability to leverage Venezuela’s relationship with China. So far, the relationship hinges on the credit line afforded by Venezuela’s oil reserves and the Chinese demand for natural resources. Yet, in the past two years, the international system has moved at an accelerating pace toward an era of military resecuritization, with tensions growing among large military powers. This undermines the relatively high degree of autonomy that countries like Venezuela carved out for themselves based on asymmetric and selective commitments. If Russia-U.S. tensions remain high—thus reintroducing the sort of international polarity that crowds out small and medium powers—Venezuela’s autonomy

may shrink even further, leaving Maduro little room for foreign policy maneuvers.

But there are still foreign policy cards Maduro can play. Venezuela’s election as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) signals a diplomatic triumph that eluded Chávez and that will continue to give the Maduro government an international platform. The appointment of Chávez’ daughter, María Gabriela Chávez, as a possible representa-

tive on the Security Council suggests that the family and Havana retain power in diplomatic decision making.

In the next two years, Venezuela’s militant but less ambitious foreign policy will use international platforms such as the UNSC, the UN Human Rights Council and OPEC to assert its voice on the world stage, even if economic constraints limit more aggressive initiatives. In this, Venezuela will likely follow Beijing and Moscow’s positions in issues of international security, promoting non-interventionism and challenging human rights discussions and standards, counting in particular on the veto power wielded by the two permanent UNSC members, China and Russia.

Finally, despite the price setback suffered by Venezuela at the November OPEC meeting, the oil czar and foreign minister, Ramírez, is bound to keep pushing for higher prices, along with petrostate allies Iran and Russia. Anything less would jeopardize the future of *chavismo* at home as well as abroad, and hobble Venezuela’s international image—even Maduro’s more modest foreign policy goals. Chief among them will be the regime’s, and his, survival.

Victor Mijares is assistant professor of political science at the Simón Bolívar University in Caracas, Venezuela.

FOR SOURCE CITATIONS, VISIT: WWW.AMERICASQUARTERLY.ORG/MIJARES