

Defusing Venezuela

By Julia Buxton

INTRODUCTION

Venezuela, location of the world's largest crude oil reserves, sits in the increasingly congested category of 2018 global flashpoints alongside geographically distant countries such as Syria, North Korea, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, and Iran. The perceived risk factors are multiple: state collapse, civil war, humanitarian crisis and, as suggested by U.S. President Donald Trump in August 2017, the possibility of an externally instigated military intervention to remove sitting President Nicolas Maduro.¹ This, in turn, could lead to civilian casualties, add to the flood of Venezuelans who have already left the country, and fragment patterns of organized crime. These scenarios are all equally likely if Maduro and the ruling *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela* (PSUV) remains in power.

After decades of close diplomatic and commercial ties, bilateral relations between the U.S. and Venezuela have been brittle since Hugo Chávez was first elected president of the South American country in December 1998. Tensions have ratcheted up as the “Bolivarian Revolution” has evolved. Initially, a relatively modest ambition to make sclerotic institutions less corrupt, a profoundly unequal society fairer, and a dependent country more autonomous, the Bolivarian Revolution was repositioned as a quest to build “Twenty-First Century Socialism” in 2005.²

Under Maduro, who succeeded Chávez in April 2013, advancing this ideological project has relied on manipulation and violation of the constitutional and legal order and constraints on free and fair elections. The economy has been haplessly mismanaged, offsetting all gains in human development made during the early 2000s and fuelling hyperinflation and shortages of basic goods and medicine.³

The political and social situation in Venezuela is critical. It is argued here that current foreign efforts to isolate and dislodge the Maduro government led by the U.S. and supported by the European Union (EU) and some member countries and the General Secretary of the Organization of American States

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(OAS), are counterproductive. The use of sanctions targeted at government and party officials appear to have strengthened, not ameliorated the *esprit de corps* of the ruling clique. Financial sanctions introduced by the U.S. in August 2017 and which prohibit U.S. institutions and citizens from handling new Venezuelan debt issues are at best fuelling the Maduro government's anti-imperialist rhetoric; at worse they are exacerbating the economic crisis and social suffering.⁴

Venezuela's status as a conflict flashpoint can only be defused by concerted dialogue and negotiation efforts. However, there are obstacles to a peaceful exit. The "Venezuela issue" became problematic and will remain so because the U.S., as well as the OAS, are out of configuration with the seismic political shifts experienced in South America in the 2000s. The U.S. is a key actor in maintaining hemispheric peace and security, but it has remained locked in traditional, ideological, diplomatic security perspectives and responses. Framed during the Cold War, these are inappropriate for the challenges of the post-Washington Consensus period.⁵ Inter-American relations require pluralist modes of exchange and engagement, less not more militarized "solutions" to social and political problems, and recognition that China and Russia have heightened financial and political stakes in the region's political economy.

THE SALIENCE OF VENEZUELA'S CRISIS

In the 1970s, Venezuela was one of the twenty wealthiest countries in the world.⁶ It enjoyed democratic stability and political party consensus during periods of brutal right-wing military dictatorship on the continent.⁷ Save for the inflow of an estimated 3 million refugees and migrants from neighboring Colombia, it was also largely insulated from that country's protracted civil war, paramilitary violence and \$10 billion per year trade in cocaine. Relations with the U.S. were close, underpinned by strong cultural and commercial ties framed by the oil sector.⁸

Venezuela's "high risk" status today relates to the country's calamitous economic situation, the breakdown of its constitutional order and the alleged infiltration of drug money in senior government and military ranks.⁹ On current trajectories, the need for humanitarian assistance and the potential for civil disturbance, violent social conflict and a default on the \$130 billion external debt are all high, with reverberations for neighboring countries, oil and financial markets, and for all three global powers: the U.S., China, and Russia.¹⁰

China has lent Venezuela an estimated \$65 billion through the framework

of its R4I (Resources for Infrastructure) policy since Chávez first began to cultivate ties in the early 2000s.¹¹ Courting China, and other emerging powers such as Russia was seen by Chávez as a means of diversifying the country's trade and commercial dominance by the U.S. Russia and China now have a high level of contract and debt exposure in the country, particularly in the hydrocarbons sector.¹²

At the regional level, South and Central American states and Caribbean countries are impacted by outflows of an estimated 2 million migrants, Colombia must additionally insulate its peace process from the risk of cross-border weapons, drugs, illicit goods, and paramilitary movement while for Cuba, a change of government in Venezuela brings the prospect of perilous isolation.¹³ Canada and European countries have significant private commercial concerns in Venezuela, including ongoing litigation over assets expropriated by the Venezuelan state, as well as hosting Venezuelan migrants.¹⁴ For the Dutch and British governments, considerations extend to the security implications for Commonwealth and territorial dependencies such as Aruba, Curaçao, and Trinidad of their proximity to a highly unstable Venezuela.

The dimensions and divergence of interests in Venezuela are multiple and global. Many countries are impacted by the continuity of the Maduro government, and also by the prospect of regime change. The Venezuelan presidential election scheduled controversially by the National Constituent Assembly for April 2018¹⁵ (subsequently put back to May) will be a focus of intense international attention, with the process and outcome opening up the possibility of an intensification or modest alleviation of the crisis.

OPTIONS FOR CHANGE

In an attempt to overcome the chronic political polarization that has driven Venezuela's deterioration, former Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, led efforts to bring together representatives of the Maduro government and opposition political parties.¹⁶ The dialogue meetings were fraught, hesitant and convened in the face of strident hostility from a range of domestic and external interests. They achieved limited progress since first initiated with the support of the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in May 2016, but had the potential to forge agreement around humanitarian assistance, electoral transparency and restoration of the rule of law before the opposition pulled out, allegedly under pressure from the US.¹⁷

An alternative approach put forward by U.S. President Donald Trump

is “a possible military option,”¹⁸ a reiteration of the position of Admiral Kurt Tidd, Commander of the U.S. Southern Command. In April 2017, Tidd presented his view to the Senate Armed Services Committee that “the growing humanitarian crisis in Venezuela could eventually compel a regional response.”¹⁹ This narrative of externally led and militarized regime change was echoed in a January 2018 article by Ricardo Hausmann, a former minister of planning in Venezuela²⁰ and which accused Maduro of being: “willing to starve millions to remain in power.” Hausmann urged consideration of the “once inconceivable option” of military intervention in order to “free Venezuela” of the Maduro government.

Criticism that Maduro was causing an “unimaginable level of suffering and humiliation” was simultaneously made by Rafael Ramírez, a senior figure not only in the Maduro government but also Chávez’s administration. After the Venezuelan Attorney General launched an investigation into corruption in the state-owned oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)* in October 2017, Ramírez, its former president and minister for energy issued a scathing attack on Maduro’s leadership of the revolutionary process:

“If our Commander were with us, standing in line for food, or walking the streets of Caracas seeing children looking through garbage, what would he do? And what would you tell him?”²¹

This critique of Maduro’s authoritarianism echoed former senior figures around late-president Chávez who had been pushed out or expelled from the PSUV, including former Attorney General Luisa Ortega²² and Minister of Planning Jorge Giordani.²³ From this critical *intra-Chavista* perspective, Maduro’s tenure has seen a constriction the circle of influence around the president. Where Chávez once promoted a civil-military union for national renewal and held together a diversity of trade unions, grassroots, popular, youth, cultural and left of centre movements, Maduro has built his authority around the support of the Venezuelan armed forces.²⁴ Serving and retired military officials dominate positions in the government, state administration, and PDVSA, and the armed forces have responsibility for the distribution of food as well as internal security — the latter with negative consequences for human rights observation and the right to peaceful protests.²⁵

The suffering of ordinary Venezuelans is perverse, but proposals for military intervention — whether instigated by a domestic rebellion of lower level officers, or by foreign forces, marginalizes the reality of a weak and fragmented political opposition that lacks program of governance or widespread national support.²⁶ There is no popular and competent

alternative waiting. Addressing the grave economic situation, (re-) establishing legitimate and functioning institutions and confronting the grotesque problems of insecurity that have propelled Venezuela into the top five countries with the highest violent death rates, requires a minimum of national policy and political consensus.²⁷ This cannot be achieved by perpetuating the “zero-sum” and polarized political framework that has emerged in the country.

Overthrowing the Maduro government by force ignores the president’s democratic mandate from the April 2013 election and the reality that the ruling PSUV party still draws votes and loyalty from a quarter of the electorate.²⁸ In this context, any external military intervention will face resistance; from Venezuela’s armed forces, from grassroots and community militias loyal to *Chavismo* and even possibly from sympathetic insurgent groups from the wider region — notably Colombia. Ultimately the use of external force to exact a change of national government risks setting precedent, more acutely where the deposed administration and its supporters believe they held electoral, popular and sovereign legitimacy. In this context, why would aggrieved *Chavistas* not employ violent force to overthrow some future opposition-led administration?

In the particular context of South and Central America, the suggestion that the security sector play a role in political affairs is sensitive, and specifically when seen to be at the urging of the U.S. This is a legacy of the Cold War, which played out as a brutal, violent effort by national militaries to prevent encroachment by Soviet or Cuban communism in the US “backyard.” Most notoriously, Operation Condor co-ordinated between the right-wing military dictatorships of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency in the 1970s and 1980s led to the murder of over 50,000 people, the disappearance of a further 30,000 and the incarceration of 400,000 people.²⁹ In Central America, civil war and genocide against indigenous populations accounted for the murder and disappearance of an estimated 200,000 people in Guatemala and 75,000 in El Salvador. In contemporary Mexico, where the military have been deployed to fight a domestic “war” on drugs since 2006, there have been over 150,000 homicides, human rights violations and “disappearances” and yet no receding of drug production and trafficking.³⁰ For these reasons and many more, military intervention should remain inconceivable. It is a simplistic solution to deeper structural problems.

THE 2000S: FLUX AND CHANGE IN THE AMERICAS

Following transitions to democracy from authoritarian military rule in South America and peace accords in Central America, the early 1990s were a period of optimism for the Americas. National militaries were reoriented toward external peace and security missions under the architecture of United Nations peacekeeping operations, while the Organization of American States, the 35 country member regional body was proactive in institutionalizing hemispheric advances in peace, security and development cooperation.³¹³² The administrations of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton forged hemispheric market integration and liberal democracy with the “carrots” of trade deals and financing for democracy assistance, and the “sticks” of decertification and tariff walls.³³ There was strong economic growth of 3.2 percent in South America, and liberal democratic institutions and norms appeared to be consolidating after decades of military dictatorship.³⁴

Despite the assumptions of the transitology literature, the Americas were not on a smooth and linear trajectory towards free markets, liberal democracy and amicable co-existence within the U.S. sphere of influence.³⁵ Nascent ideological challenges to the centre-right consensus were emerging from non-traditional political movements rooted in trade unions, indigenous and human rights, land reform, and other grassroots issues. They articulated popular disenchantment with the new “democratic” arrangements. The political compromises deemed necessary to guarantee a transition from military governance, generated an outcry over impunity for egregious human rights abuses; political parties were seen as unrepresentative of social interests, and national governments were perceived as technocratic, elite and remote from the social impacts of market adjustment, which were severe.³⁶

There was a strong regional economic performance, but this growth was not pro-poor. Per capita income fell below the levels of the 1970s, while long-standing historical problems of “excess inequality” were deepened by economic stabilization and structural adjustment policies.³⁷³⁸ Informal sector employment increased from 25 percent of the economically active population in the region in 1980, to 32 percent by 1990.³⁹ And while the share of wealth concentrated in the top ten percent increased, middle-class sectors were in particular impacted by the new free-market orientation that followed from the “lost decade” of hyperinflation and the balance of payments crises in the 1980s. It was this experience that served as an entry point for the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank into the region’s economic policy making and the ensuing adoption of orthodox economic prescriptions of privatization, public spending cuts and currency devaluations that galvanized such popular hostility in the 1990s.⁴⁰

Despite deepening problems of social, political and economic exclusion

and rising popular protests, the direction of national and regional policy remained one of state retreat from social provision and political engagement, and a “locking in” of unpopular free trade strategies through bi- and multilateral agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) signed between Canada, Mexico and the U.S. in 1994 and the Common Market of the South (Mercosur) established between Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay in 1991.⁴¹⁴²

The U.S. and the region’s governing elite failed to read a changing political tide that was gaining momentum in the Southern Cone countries of Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil, and the Andean states of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador. In this context, Venezuela became the focus of retroactive and *ad hoc* U.S. efforts to contain the threat of liberal reversal.

THE “THREAT” OF VENEZUELA-

If Venezuela constitutes a foreign policy problem for the U.S. today, it is very much one of America’s own making. The strategies pursued by Democratic and Republican administrations have aimed to discredit and isolate the Venezuelan government. This reflects a limited tolerance for a more plural and intellectually diverse landscape in South America, and a continuity with Cold War concerns of socialist and communist infiltration of the hemisphere. This positioning has minimized the legitimacy of demands for political change in Venezuela, and has failed to engage with the depth of popular alienation and grievance in other South American countries.

Despite intense popular antipathy to neoliberal economic policies that were adopted in Venezuela in 1989, Hugo Chávez did not frame his 1998 presidential campaign around a strident anti-free market, or anti-American discourse.⁴³ Echoing Anthony Giddens, who was frequently cited by Chávez, the presidential candidate urged a balance between the market and the state, the latter correcting and attending to the distortions and social needs neglected by the former.⁴⁴ There was a critique of privatization, but this was focused on the sale of key strategic assets, in particular, the controversial partial privatization of the national oil company PDVSA. Chávez maintained a pro-business rhetoric, both during the election campaign and following his presidential victory; Chávez and his officials continued to reach out to investors including through business promotion tours in the U.S. and Europe.

Hugo Chávez also did not contest the 1998 presidential election on the basis of a “Cuban” or communist ideological agenda. His platform was articulated as a staunchly nationalist program theorized in his publication

Libro Azul: Árbol de las Tres Raíces as the “EBR system”, influenced by Ezequiel Zamora (1821-1860) leader of the federalist forces during Venezuela’s *Guerra Federal* (1859-1863), Simón Bolívar the hero of the independence movement from Spanish colonialism (1783-1830) and Bolívar’s teacher Simón Rodríguez.⁴⁵

The objective of the Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200 (MBR 200) that Chávez founded as a serving military officer in 1982, and the Movimiento V (Quinta) República (Fifth Republic Movement, MVR) established in 1997 to contest the presidency, was to revive Venezuela in order to fulfil the goals of sovereignty, Southern hemisphere integration, social justice, and cultural pride, which were read by Chávez as the frustrated ambitions of Bolívar. Most importantly, the MBR 200 / MVR critique was configured around hostility to the Fourth Republic (1958-1998) and the two centrist political parties AD and Copei, that had established the so-called *Puntofijo* state following democratization in 1958.⁴⁶

Chávez’s electoral proposition prioritized constitutional change to overhaul the *Puntofijo* state, establish mechanisms for popular empowerment (in contrast to the restrictive model of two-party dominance), and to institutionalize state responsibility for social and economic provision necessary to overcome the country’s profound inequalities. Elected with 56 percent of votes, Chávez moved immediately to convene a constituent assembly, setting in motion a series of referenda and election processes that culminated in the Bolivarian Constitution of 1999, and the political dominance of MVR in executive and legislative branches in the 2000s.⁴⁷

The U.S. eschewed early opportunities to cultivate ties with the new government. Even before Chávez was elected, U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright denied him a U.S. visa on the grounds of MBR 200’s role in a coup attempt in 1992 against President Carlos Andrés Pérez, whose administration had negotiated an IMF economic adjustment package.⁴⁸ This narrowed U.S. options for managing the perceived, if ill-defined threat that Chávez posed — be this to Venezuela’s own flailing and discredited political system, democracy in the wider hemisphere, or to U.S. commercial and energy interests. Around 40 percent of Venezuelan oil exports were shipped to the U.S., and the country maintained a network of oil refineries and gas stations across the U.S. through its CITGO arm.⁴⁹

The visa denial additionally made the US vulnerable to claims of double standards in its diplomacy, as highlighted in a question put to Albright at a press conference in Caracas in June 1998:

“Secretary Albright, the United States has denied a visa to Hugo Chavez, the former coup leader here, who’s leading the presidential race. Yet, the U.S. has

*also granted a visa to Emmanuel Constant, a leader of the paramilitary squads in Haiti who were accused of torturing and murdering several thousand people. He's now living openly in Queens, New York. Also the U.S. has granted visas to Salvadorian military officials who have been accused of covering up the rape and murders of US churchwomen in El Salvador in 1981. How do you explain this?"*⁵⁰

The administration of Bill Clinton did grant the new president a visa on the recommendation of John Maisto, the U.S. ambassador to Caracas⁵¹ Maisto's view, which was echoed in European capitals, was that it was less Chávez's populist narrative and more his policy actions that should determine U.S. engagement. This positioning changed with the accession in 2000 of George W. Bush and as Venezuela's legal framework was revised in line with the 1999 Bolivarian Constitution.⁵²

THE AXIS OF SUBVERSION

According to interviews conducted by Anderson, the incoming Bush administration did not have a position on Venezuela.⁵³ One official explained: "Hell, we don't have a policy in Latin America. The policy is not to have a policy, because we don't know how to rein Chávez in without breaking the crockery. And he sort of carries the crockery closet around with him." But this was a period of intensifying polarization within Venezuelan society, and domestic opponents of Chávez were looking to the U.S. government and high-level contacts for support.⁵⁴

For critics, the polarization following Chávez's election resulted from his flouting of the constitutional order, his government's manipulation of elections and placement of partisan loyalists in the judiciary, military, electoral administration and other high-offices of state. This reflected an authoritarian lurch that risked a domino effect across the region. Land and wealth redistribution programs were claimed to portend a revival of Cuban communism, a fear that brought the U.S. anti-Castro lobby led by congressional representatives, Marco Rubio and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, into alliance with Venezuelan opposition groups. But it was the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. that prompted a more assertive position on Venezuela from the Bush government.⁵⁵

In the context of the new Manichean world order created by the "war on terror", the Bush presidency was receptive to the message that *Chavismo* was a slide into dictatorship and that the new legal framework for the exploitation of Venezuela's hydrocarbons sector threatened U.S. energy security. These concerns were elevated by Chávez's overtures to oil-producing states in the Middle East, a move that aimed to lift the international oil price through

OPEC negotiated production cuts, and by his criticism of the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003.⁵⁶

Subsequently, pursuing strategies intended to promote a return to the *status quo ante* in Venezuela, including the funding of opposition groups through the Department of State and National Endowment for Democracy (NED), receiving opposition leaders in Washington DC and condoning a coup attempt against Chávez in April 2002, the Bush administration identified with actors and interests that had limited popular support in Venezuela.⁵⁷ This positioned Chávez to tap a deep seam of nationalist and anti-American sentiment not only in Venezuela, but across the wider South American region.

U.S. promotion and support of opposition groups were also counter-productive in further disconnecting Venezuela's traditional political parties from the electorate, with financial disbursements enabling opponents of the Chávez government to short-circuit the arduous but necessary process of reconnecting with the grassroots and developing party platforms and policy proposals that responded to popular concerns.⁵⁸ By contrast, U.S. partiality and reluctance to engage with the Venezuelan government served to radicalize Chávez — specifically after the 2002 coup attempt. Policies were introduced to accelerate economic redistribution, and Chávez adopted a more aggressive class narrative to consolidate the government's support among the poor.⁵⁹

The assumption of a more bellicose position during the Bush presidency, placed the U.S. on the outside of major political, economic, and geostrategic shifts that conversely boosted President Chávez. Three are significant here. Firstly, left of centre governments were elected across the region in what was termed “the Pink Tide.” Starting in Brazil with the election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva January 2003, this political shift extended to Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, and Ecuador. This reversed U.S. led efforts to isolate Venezuela, while catalysing new regional alliances cohering around opposition to neoliberalism, the IMF and the dominance of the U.S.⁶⁰

Pink unity translated into a more assertive stance against U.S. policy in the region. U.S. ambitions to extend NAFTA to a wider Free Trade Area of the Americas were blocked, and there was pushback on the presence of U.S. military and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) bases and operations.⁶¹ These government alliances worked proactively to establish a new regional architecture that excluded the U.S., and which was intended to serve as an alternative to the OAS, which was criticised as a tool of U.S. imperialism.

New regional groupings that included the *Alianza Bolivariana para los*

Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) initially constituted by Venezuela and Cuba in 2004, the 12 member state *Unión de Naciones Suramericanas*, (UNASUR Union of South American Nations) founded in 2008, and the 33 member state *Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños* (CELAC Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) established in 2010, aimed to institutionalize a new continental unity and promote regional political and economic integration on the basis of complementarities, resource interdependence and social solidarity.⁶²

The strong surge in international oil prices in the mid-2000s was a second factor in the weakening of the U.S. position. It enabled Venezuela to assume a central role in regional integration initiatives, and to extend economic co-operation agreements to Caribbean and Central American countries through projects such as Petrocaribe.⁶³ This project supplied Venezuelan crude exports on preferential payment terms to 17 countries in exchange for imports of goods, services and in the case of Cuba, medical personnel. On the domestic level, the oil price increase positioned the Venezuelan government to roll out an expansive raft of social welfare initiatives or “missions” in education, health, housing, employment, and microcredits. These programs served to reduce poverty, extreme poverty and social immobility in Venezuela, in turn cementing popular loyalty and support for Chávez.⁶⁴

The Bush administration maintained a critical stance during this period of intense cultural and nationalist reawakening in South America. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, criticised Chávez as a negative force in the region during her 2005 confirmation hearing, indicating limited openings for dialogue.⁶⁵ There was no meaningful engagement on issues of poverty, inequality, and perceptions of U.S. imperialism that had fuelled the Pink Tide. Anti-communist narratives, first raised by the Venezuelan opposition, were resurrected by State Department officials who had previously served during the Cold War pushback against the left in South and Central America in the 1970s and 1980s. Otto Reich, the U.S. ambassador to Venezuela during the presidency of Ronald Reagan and Roger Noriega, his successor as Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs claimed that the Pink Tide represented an “axis of subversion”, while academics and media commentators framed a “good” and “bad” left in symmetry to the “for us” or “against us” polarity of the war on terror.⁶⁶

A third area in which the U.S. was diplomatically and politically negligent relates to the expansion of Russian, and particularly Chinese investment and lending in South America. As the U.S. focused on the Middle East, China

rapidly expanded trade relations with South America, with the value of trade flows between South America and China increasing from \$10 billion in 2000 to \$270 billion by 2012.⁶⁷ The growing multipolarity of the world order reconfigured the foreign relations of South American countries, reducing dependence on, and consequently the leverage of, the U.S.

DENOUNCEMENT

Leaked e-mails and diplomatic cables of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, demonstrate that the government of President Barack Obama concurred with the Bush administration's strategy of isolating Venezuela. Diplomatic overtures from Chávez were pushed back, with ongoing hostility contributing to the suspension of diplomatic ties between the two countries. There was a move away from the Cold War rhetoric and unilateralism of the Bush presidency: Obama pursued political rapprochement with Cuba, a move read by Venezuela as a divide and rule strategy, and the US sought to engage the OAS as the regional interlocutor with the Chávez administration.⁶⁸

There was continuity with the strategy of financing, meeting with and endorsing the Venezuelan opposition movement, but where Bush officials had supported the opposition's strategy of boycotting election processes, there was a push for a more participatory and unified approach.⁶⁹ The Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD) alliance made important gains in the 2010 National Assembly election, eliminating the PSUV's 2005 supermajority in the legislature, and favorably positioning the opposition for the critical presidential elections in 2013, following the death of Chávez from cancer.⁷⁰ In the legislative assembly elections held in 2015, the MUD won a majority, ending the electoral hegemony of *Chavismo*.⁷¹

The factors that enabled Chávez to resist isolation dissipated for his successor Nicolás Maduro who won power by a wafer-thin 1.5 percent of the vote.⁷² The Pink Tide receded with right-wing election victories and impeachment proceedings that removed presidential allies from power. The oil price fell to a third of the mid-2000s boom, making social welfare commitments and regional cooperation models unsustainable.⁷³ Exchange and price controls initially introduced to stabilize the economy after the 2002 coup attempt against Chávez were still in place, contributing to distortions in the macro-economy, inflation, and a rampant dollar black market.⁷⁴

There were also other problematic legacies. Corruption and bureaucratization were as endemic in the Fifth Republic as they had been in the Fourth; and violent crime, homicide, and insecurity had reached record high-levels following an almost annual turnover of officials in the Justice

and Interior ministries.⁷⁵ Rather than liberalizing or reversing the policy course, the Maduro years have seen a deepening of economic controls and constitutional manipulations to bypass the National Assembly. This included Maduro's convening of a new, pro-government and sovereign National Constituent Assembly in July 2016.

At these moments of weakness for the government, radical opposition factions that led the election boycott strategies of the 2000s, have sought to accelerate regime demise. Strategies of violent street protest in 2014 and 2017 failed to galvanize popular support and were suppressed by the security sector.⁷⁶ This in turn positioned the Obama presidency - and the anti-Cuba lobby in Congress and Senate, to reframe the critique of Venezuela around a human rights discourse — a narrative that has allowed alliance building with Canada, the EU and the OAS to address the Venezuela “problem”.

In 2014, on the initiation of Marco Rubio, the U.S. Congress passed legislation to freeze the assets and ban visas for Venezuelan officials accused of human rights violations. Sanctions against seven officials were introduced in 2015, alongside an executive order that determined Venezuela an “unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States.”⁷⁷ The US sanctions on financial transactions introduced in 2017 have sharply eroded the Maduro government's room for maneuver and its ability to sustain an artificial economy. Importantly though, despite sanctions the Maduro government remains in power. With the accession of Donald Trump, there is the temptation, and proclivity, for a final push to remove the Maduro government from power. This repositioning by the U.S. has served to bolster those factions of the Venezuelan opposition that reject any form of compromise with Bolivarianism, undermining the viability of May's presidential contest as a mechanism for pacific regime change.

Examined over the *longue durée*, it can be argued that U.S. strategy defeated the Bolivarian Revolution by forcing Venezuela towards a series of grave miscalculations, overextending the state economically and increasing dependence on oil revenues. But the legacy of the 2000s, of the Chávez government and the Pink Tide more broadly, is of a new pluralism and a new political consciousness. In this context, a reverse to US unilateralism, dominance in inter-American relations and support to right-wing governments in the region will be neither legitimate nor sustainable. It also risks putting the US on a conflictual footing with other global powers whose interests must be accommodated.

NOTES

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