

Foreign Policy of Bolivarian Venezuela

Carlos A. Romero

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the rationale and evolution of Venezuela's foreign policy since 1999. Its main premise is that Venezuela's foreign policy reflects the internal and external tensions associated with a power elite in pursuit of a political and economic development model designed to break with the past and construct a socialist society.

The arguments presented are essentially critical in their intent and point to the difficulties associated with reconciling the normative aspects and empirical data of a policy that is projected regionally, and to a certain degree, globally, through a series of material and symbolic resources. In this particular case, the current political model is premised on the construction of a world vision in which a "friend-enemy" approach to politics, the indiscriminate use of the "will of the majority" premise, and the desire to promote a radical "ideological package," mesh with national traditions of international activism and presidentialism to produce an offering imbued with powerful rhetoric and a capacity for public spending that includes important social programs.

In our view, Venezuela is immersed in a "revolutionary situation" and consequently, the foreign policy of the Chavez administration is not the same as what went before. Essentially, Venezuela's foreign affairs policy operates at three levels: bilateral, multilateral, and transnational relations.

This new context is shaped by at least four key markers. The first is the growing leadership of President Chávez, which limits the institutional solidity of Venezuelan diplomacy, while raising

questions about the nature of its foreign policy as State policy. The second is a system of alliances that the political leadership regards as a network of loyalties, commitments, affinities and subordinations based on the existence of a progressive camp and an international left. This network has been consolidated at the regional level in the form of the Bolivarian Alliance of Peoples [Alianza Bolivariana de los Pueblos] or ALBA. To this, we must add the growing politicization of Venezuelan's actions abroad, in which the professional and bureaucratic conduct of Venezuelan diplomats is understood as a commitment to the revolutionary cause, and its positions at international forums and in its bilateral and regional relations have become increasingly confrontational. Finally, at the transnational level, it is important to note its associations with groups, movements and initiatives that oppose capitalism worldwide.

Venezuela continues to espouse and promote its theory of 21st century socialism and an "ideological package" based on conceptions of the meaning of democracy, development and foreign policy that diverge from those held by most countries in the region and have spurred controversy over the extent of Caracas' frequent meddling in their internal affairs. Indeed, the notion of regional "Bolivarianism" and worldwide anti-imperialism inform an anti-liberal discourse against United States hegemony designed to weaken the latter's power. Venezuela's position creates conflict with CAN and MERCOSUR member countries and poses particular challenges for Brazil, given its leadership role in the region.

The first chapter of this essay offers an introduction to the issue, and the second outlines the current international context, covering such issues as Venezuela's insertion at the regional and international levels, the various stages involved, its image abroad, new approaches to the concept of national interest, the internationalization of the Venezuelan case and of its energy company Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), the role of multilateral and nongovernmental organizations and the media, and the policy of alliances. The third chapter examines four specific cases in the hemisphere as examples of Venezuela's bilateral relations with other important countries. Similarly, a fourth section explores three cases of specific bilateral relations at the international level. Finally, the fifth chapter summarizes and offers some predictions about a foreign policy that has caught the attention of the region and the world and that is backed by the resources necessary to sustain its principles and aims.

By way of conclusion, we cannot leave this overview of Venezuela's current foreign policy without commenting on a few possible scenarios:

1) The first is that Venezuela's domestic and foreign policy continues down the same track it has followed since 1999: a "revolutionary situation," 21st century socialism, community power, promotion of the "ideological package," anti-capitalist international alliances, a radical and anti-U.S. foreign policy and the temptation to export revolution.

2) In a second scenario, the Chávez administration tones down the ideological profile of its foreign policy in favor of a more pragmatic approach, in view of the real obstacles it faces in achieving its present aims and objectives. This would entail cooperation and incentives for Venezuela on the part of the international community to promote a stronger opposition and a dialogue with the government.

3) The confluence of a hostile domestic environment and a contrary foreign one compels Venezuela to change its international profile. This would require open support from the international community in favor of a political reconstruction effort different from the one that Caracas has offered and pursued in recent years.

In any of the scenarios described, governments and other international stakeholders in the region and worldwide must remain vigilant to the behavior of a small country with an active bifrontal and internationalized foreign policy that seeks an unconventional two-pronged transition (towards less democracy and less market) based on a radical Bolivarian ideological platform and a temptation to export its revolution, all of this buttressed by its energy reserves in a context of high prices for raw materials and expanding international trade.