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# EXPLORING THE NEXT GENERATION OF PROLIFERATORS

## Why Venezuela Is Not the Next Iran

**Patrick Homan**

*This theoretical analysis explores which countries might constitute the next generation of nuclear proliferators, using Venezuela as a case study of one of the possible next nuclear weapon states. Three alternative theoretical frameworks or models are used to analyze the preconditions that might or might not drive Venezuela to pursue nuclear weapons in the near future. This study finds that there is little evidence to support the alarmist claims surrounding a future Venezuelan nuclear weapons program. These findings are important for both devising an accurate US national security strategy for identifying and combating the next generation of proliferators and also for implementing effective policies for the future of US-Latin American relations.*

KEYWORDS: Proliferation; Venezuela; Iran; Latin America

Which country will be the next to develop nuclear weapons? For the United States, the spread of nuclear weapons is often considered to be the greatest threat to both national and international security. Consequently, combating the proliferation of nuclear weapons has been a top US national security priority since 1944, with the efforts to keep nuclear materials from falling into the hands of Germans or Soviets during World War II.<sup>1</sup> However, despite the efforts of the United States and its international allies, the “nuclear club” continues to grow. North Korea has built and tested nuclear weapons and Iran is on the threshold of becoming the world’s tenth nuclear weapon state. How to respond to Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons is frequently debated as one of the most difficult national security challenges facing the Obama administration.<sup>2</sup> Yet, some argue that it is likely too late to reverse the nuclear ambitions of Iran, believing that its program is too far along to be stopped.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, instead of fixating on hopeless negotiations with Iran, the United States and its allies should shift their focus to preventing the next wave of nuclear states.

For policy makers, preventing the next generation of nuclear proliferation is not just a matter of finding nuclear facilities but also understanding the motives, interest groups, and deliberations that could lead a state to go nuclear.<sup>4</sup> This type of analysis also includes the domestic and regional environment that can cause a country or the leader of a country to start a nuclear weapon program. The demand for nuclear weapons must also be measured as a product of the many useful purposes that they can serve for states. As analysts Josef Joffe and James Davis have written, “They are good for blackmail (North

Korea), they intimidate the enemy next door (India and Pakistan), they deliver the ultimate life insurance (Israel), they devalue conventional superiority (every case), and they support hegemonic ambitions, whether regional or global.<sup>5</sup>

With the success of the North Korean program and estimates that Iran will have enough nuclear material for a weapon in a few years, the United States and its allies face a significant problem: how to identify the states that might make up the next generation of proliferators. What conditions should the United States look for in trying to determine which countries may be next? Preventing the next wave of proliferation will certainly have a heavy focus on containing the regional effects of North Korea's and Iran's programs. The ramifications for regional security in both East Asia and the Middle East could be enormous as historical rivalries and religious differences could lead states such as Saudi Arabia, Japan, and South Korea to pursue their own nuclear weapon programs.

However, the United States should resist focusing on preventing proliferation in just a few countries or regions of the world. In fact, the history of proliferation efforts shows that no region of the world, including Africa and Latin America, is exempt from the lure of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, from a US national security perspective, a Latin American state with nuclear weapons may pose a particularly significant threat. Not only would a such a state pose a substantial risk due to sheer proximity, but there are a number of radical leaders in the region—including Fidel and Raúl Castro in Cuba, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador—who currently have hostile relations with the United States. With that in mind, this paper analyzes Venezuela, a state that shares some uncommon characteristics with other recent proliferators. Do these similarities suggest that Venezuela could be the next country to pursue nuclear weapons in the near future?

The following section provides some background to the debate surrounding Venezuela and the possibility it could pursue nuclear weapons. The next segment briefly outlines this study's research design or methodological approach. The subsequent segment offers an analysis of the findings that follow from three theoretical models. The conclusion provides some implications that this analysis might have on US foreign and national security policy.

### **And Venezuela Makes Eleven?**

Why might Venezuela be the next proliferator? Firstly, Venezuela has shown a desire to develop nuclear energy. Although it has not been reliably evaluated, former Venezuelan officials estimate that Venezuela could have 50,000 tons of uranium.<sup>6</sup> Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez first announced his intentions to pursue a nuclear energy program in 2005. While Chávez has claimed that Venezuela is not interested in nuclear weapons, there is some debate about the true intentions of Venezuela's quest for nuclear energy. Driving much of this concern are Venezuela's close nuclear relationships with Russia and, more notably, Iran. During a state visit to Moscow in October 2010, Chávez and Russian President Dmitri Medvedev announced a deal in which Russia will build the first nuclear power plant in Venezuela.<sup>7</sup> Atomstroyexport, the Russian company that

constructed the Bushehr reactor in Iran, confirmed its participation in negotiations for an agreement of nuclear cooperation with Venezuela. However, in March of 2011, after the disaster at the Fukushima nuclear power plant in Japan, Chávez announced a freeze in plans to develop nuclear power in Venezuela.<sup>8</sup>

Venezuela's close ties with, and similarities to, Iran are also cause for concern. During his time in office, Chávez has developed extremely close ties with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, another anti-American populist leader of a major oil producing country. Chávez has visited Iran nine times since taking office in 1999, and Ahmadinejad has made five trips to Venezuela since 2005. In one of their most recent meetings in January 2012, the two leaders mocked the United States and joked about having a "big atomic bomb" at their disposal.<sup>9</sup> The increasing political and economic ventures between Iran and Venezuela have resulted in hundreds of cooperation agreements—none more contentious than their nuclear ties.<sup>10</sup> The United States fears that Iran may help Venezuela develop nuclear capabilities without international verification, or vice versa. Although nuclear arms cooperation between the two countries has not been confirmed, it has not been ruled out, either.<sup>11</sup> In September 2008, the State Department sanctioned sales from Venezuela's state-controlled defense firm, *Compañía Anónima Venezolana de Industrias Militares* (CAVIM), that could be used to help Syria, Iran, or North Korea to develop weapons of mass destruction or cruise or ballistic missile systems.

Recognizing their shared hostility towards the United States, Chávez has been a fierce public defender of Iran's controversial nuclear program. Venezuela supported Iran's dispute with the United Nations regarding its nuclear program and was the only country to twice oppose the resolutions adopted by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) sanctioning Iran in September 2005 and February 2006. Like Iran, Chávez claims that Venezuela's nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. However, his antagonistic role in the Americas, defiance of international norms, and efforts to cultivate a closer Venezuelan-Iranian relationship, leave many policy makers wondering what his true intentions might be.

For right wing foreign policy figures in the United States, the danger posed by the budding Iran-Venezuela relationship (or "Mullah-Caudillo Axis," as the American Enterprise Institute once labeled it in 2010)<sup>12</sup> has been called "the biggest threat to regional stability since the Cold War."<sup>13</sup> Roger Noriega, a former assistant secretary of state for the western hemisphere under President George W. Bush, has openly suggested a very dark picture of Iranian-Venezuelan nuclear cooperation. He claims that in November 2008, Iran and Venezuela signed a secret "science and technology" agreement formalizing cooperation "in the field of nuclear technology."<sup>14</sup> Noriega maintains that Iran is illegally assisting Venezuela in the detection and testing of uranium deposits found in remote areas of Venezuela. He also asserts that Venezuela itself has been developing a clandestine nuclear weapons program for years.<sup>15</sup> From Noriega's perspective, the threat from Venezuela looms larger because President Barack Obama has not paid enough attention to the growing Iranian influence in Latin America.

Despite Venezuela's energy deals with Iran and Russia, the United States has privately dismissed Chávez's nuclear ambitions as empty bluster.<sup>16</sup> US diplomats in Venezuela have downplayed Chávez's plans to build nuclear reactors, saying the

government is too disorganized and cash-strapped. A confidential June 2009 cable, since made public by Wikileaks, from John Caulfield, the deputy chief of mission at the US embassy in Caracas, said there was little reason to fear Venezuelan plans to exploit uranium with Iran and build a nuclear reactor with Russian help. "Although rumors that Venezuela is providing Iran with Venezuelan-produced uranium may help burnish the government's revolutionary credentials," wrote Caulfield, "there seems to be little basis to the claims."<sup>17</sup>

The cable details the report of a Venezuelan nuclear physicist who told Caulfield that the rumors that Venezuela is helping third countries, such as Iran, develop nuclear weapons are unfounded. The physicist said that Venezuela is currently unable to provide such assistance not only because of its shortage of labs and technology, but also because the Chávez administration "does not trust scientists."<sup>18</sup> The scientist also described how the Venezuelan government's financial difficulties have left it with little interest or technical capabilities to explore or exploit its uranium concentrations. He concludes by claiming that Venezuela's nuclear cooperation with Russia on the development, design, construction, and operation of nuclear reactors has no real substance and is pure political theater.

### **The Multicausal Roots of Proliferation**

Given these two very different perspectives, this paper seeks to establish a clearer idea of what sort of threat, if any, Venezuela poses when it comes to the spread of nuclear weapons. The academic literature on nuclear proliferation and nonproliferation provides a foundation for examining the crucial questions about Venezuela's capabilities and motives for building nuclear weapons. In the literature, the technical capability to develop nuclear weapons is called the "supply-side" aspect of proliferation, while a government's motivation to develop nuclear weapons comprises the "demand-side" aspect.<sup>19</sup> This paper incorporates both sides of the proliferation literature, with a heavy focus on the demand-side.

Over the past two decades, there has been a great deal of scholarly debate about the different motivations for proliferation. In the past, many US policy makers and most international relations scholars have had a clear and simple answer to the proliferation puzzle: states will seek to develop nuclear weapons when they face a significant military threat to their security that cannot be met through alternative means and if they do not face such threats, they will willingly remain non-nuclear states.<sup>20</sup> Others argue that the most important constraint or incentive for proliferation stems from domestic political and economic interests.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, some constructivist scholars believe proliferation can be linked to normative constraints and changing identities of individual leaders and governments.<sup>22</sup> These three strands of the literature demonstrate the utility of using international relations theories to derive alternative testable hypotheses for explaining proliferation. Accordingly, in order to capture as much explanatory power as possible, this study adopts the methodological approach of Stanford University scholar Scott Sagan,

which employs a multicausal framework that utilizes all three of these theoretical perspectives.

Sagan's 1996 article, "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons?," compared the influence of security threats, domestic political interests, and international norms while examining the historical record of proliferation. His analytical approach included three "models" for why states decide to build or refrain from developing nuclear weapons: the first focused on military and security motivations, the second emphasized domestic political actors or bureaucratic coalitions that form to support or oppose nuclear weapons for parochial reasons, and the third concentrated on norms and prestige considerations that can encourage or discourage acquisition of nuclear weapons.<sup>23</sup> In his study, Sagan found the strongest support for the security model, but he also concluded that domestic interests and normative concerns about prestige were "sufficient, but not necessary" conditions for proliferation in a limited number of cases. According to Sagan, "nuclear weapons, like other weapons, are more than tools of national security; they are political objects of considerable importance in domestic debates and internal bureaucratic struggles and can also serve as international normative symbols of modernity and identity."<sup>24</sup>

This article adopts Sagan's argument that different causal models are necessary in order to explain or account for the multicausality that lies at the heart of nuclear proliferation.<sup>25</sup> Using Sagan's three models methodological approach, this analysis will examine the current conditions in Venezuela in order to determine the likelihood that it will pursue nuclear weapons in the near future.

### *The Security Model*

For many policy makers and international relations scholars, national security is the most common and most parsimonious explanation for why states build nuclear weapons. According to Sagan's security model, the key variable for explaining why states seek to develop nuclear weapons is whether they face a significant military threat—nuclear or conventional—that cannot be met through alternative means.<sup>26</sup> Due to the enormous destructive power of nuclear weapons, any state that seeks to maintain its national security must balance against any rival state that develops nuclear weapons by gaining access to its own nuclear deterrent.<sup>27</sup> In the case of Venezuela, it is important to note that nuclear weapons can also serve either as a deterrent against overwhelming conventional military threats from the United States or as a coercive tool to compel changes in the regional status quo, vis-à-vis Brazil and Colombia.

Throughout the history of proliferation, most states have pursued nuclear weapons as a response to a neighbor or rival. For instance, after China developed a bomb in 1964, India, which had just fought a war with China in 1962, quickly followed suit. After India successfully detonated a weapon in May 1974, Pakistan moved to develop its own nuclear capability. From a Venezuelan national security perspective, Argentina and Brazil are the only nearby countries which could be seen as relevant nuclear threats. However, this is largely a byproduct of Brazil and Argentina being the only states in South America with

nuclear energy capabilities. Otherwise, Venezuela's location in Latin America, one of the most denuclearized regions in the world, presents a negligible proliferation threat.

While Brazil's recent economic and political emergence may threaten Chávez's goal of Venezuela becoming the regional leader of Latin America, neither Argentina nor Brazil should be considered a "rival" of Venezuela's. In fact, Venezuela has very strong ties, based heavily on trade and common ideologies, with both Argentina and Brazil. Furthermore, both Argentina and Brazil have demonstrated numerous signs of nuclear restraint. Argentina and Brazil began active programs in the 1970s that could have eventually produced nuclear weapons. However, the onset of democracy during the 1980s reshaped their intentions toward nuclear power and both countries demilitarized their programs in 1990.<sup>28</sup> As part of their denuclearization efforts, they created the Brazilian-Argentine Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials (ABACC), a successful binational nuclear inventory and mutual inspections agency. In 1994, both states signed the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean, (also known as the Treaty of Tlatelolco), creating the Latin American nuclear weapon-free zone. They also acceded to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1994 and 1997. Brazil even went as far as enshrining its renunciation of nuclear weapons in its 1988 constitution.

Despite Argentina's and Brazil's signs of nuclear restraint, there are other recent developments which Venezuela could interpret as a threat. In 2006, Brazil, which houses the sixth largest uranium reserves in the world, opened its first uranium enrichment facility. In fact, Brazil is one of only a select group of countries to have mastered the complete nuclear cycle.<sup>29</sup> The dilemma—from a Venezuelan national security perspective—is that the same Brazilian facilities that enrich uranium for nuclear power reactors can enrich it further for nuclear weapons, thereby making Brazil a "latent nuclear weapons state." Brazil, like Venezuela, has also been a defender of Iran's nuclear program. In May of 2010, Brazil's foreign minister said that Iran has a right to a "full nuclear fuel cycle, including enrichment."<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Brazil and Argentina are the only members of the Nuclear Suppliers Group that have refused to adopt the Additional Protocol, which gives the IAEA broader access to a state's nuclear activities, including the right to inspect undeclared locations as well as locations where no nuclear material is located.

Similar to the threat of a nearby nuclear rival, Venezuela's conventional military threats are also open for interpretation. Over the years, one of the main conventional threats to Venezuela's national security has come from neighboring Colombia. The two countries share a porous 1,300-mile border and a long history of tension, marked by periodic border and diplomatic disputes. Colombia has also long accused Chávez of covertly backing leftist guerillas inside Colombia known as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (or FARC). Tensions increased in early 2008 when Colombia bombed a FARC rebel camp just outside its border with Ecuador. Chávez, an ideological ally of Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, quickly jumped to Ecuador's defense by sending Venezuelan forces to the Colombian border and expelling Colombia's ambassador. Despite their historic feuding, there have been recent signs of détente between the two countries. Since taking office in August 2010, new Colombian President Juan Manuel

Santos has led a considerable turnaround in Venezuelan-Colombian relations and Chávez has reciprocated much of his efforts.<sup>31</sup>

Colombia's status as the United States's top Latin American ally also plays a role in the conventional military threats that Venezuela faces. Over the last decade, relations between the United States and Venezuela have dramatically deteriorated and much of this stems from the April 2002 attempted coup against Chávez. The effort to overthrow Chávez was swiftly condemned by other Latin American governments but not by the United States. Chávez's anti-American rhetoric and erratic behavior were major irritants for the United States and the George W. Bush administration. As a result, the United States became increasingly supportive of the Venezuelan opposition. This development led Chávez to assert that the coup had been dreamed up in Washington and manufactured by the Central Intelligence Agency. While there is no evidence to support Chávez's claims, 2002 was a watershed year in the disintegrating ties between the United States and Venezuela. Relations between the two countries have changed relatively little under the Obama administration. In fact, Venezuela has been without a US ambassador since July 2010, after Chávez refused to accept President Obama's appointee.

While US-Venezuelan relations were deteriorating, Colombia's relationship with the United States grew increasingly friendly during the Bush administration, thanks to the administration's foreign policy focus on counterterrorism. Under President Bush, Plan Colombia, a US-Colombian agreement originally aimed at drug eradication, was expanded to include fighting terrorism. As a result, hundreds of American troops, federal drug-enforcement agents, and contractors operate from several bases within Colombia to assist the local security forces in counterinsurgency and antinarcotics operations. US military engagement with Colombia has included more than \$6 billion in military assistance since 2000.<sup>32</sup>

The US presence in neighboring Colombia has long been interpreted as a national security threat by Chávez. His rhetoric often includes prophecies that the United States will invade Venezuela from Colombia.<sup>33</sup> In September 2008, Chávez alleged that the Venezuelan government had foiled a US-backed conspiracy to assassinate him and expelled the US ambassador to Venezuela.<sup>34</sup> In August 2009, after the United States completed a deal that would have increased its access to Colombian military bases (which has since been scrapped after being ruled unconstitutional by the Colombian Constitutional Court), Chávez said that US imperial aggression had loosed the "winds of war" in Latin America.<sup>35</sup>

Chávez's accusations and rhetoric about US intentions in the region serve mostly as propaganda to retain his image amongst his followers. As a result, Venezuela's foreign policy towards the United States is based more on talk than concrete actions. While his words have been empty, Chávez has been acting to counter the conventional military threat that he sees from the billions in US military aid to Colombia. Throughout the last decade, Chávez has allocated extraordinary sums for weapons procurement. From 2005 to 2007, the Venezuelan government spent close to \$4.4 billion on weapons imports.<sup>36</sup> In 2008, Venezuela was the eighth largest arms importer in the world (up from the thirty-ninth spot in 1999).<sup>37</sup> During a military parade in April 2009, Chávez said that "we don't want war with anyone, but we are obligated to prepare."<sup>38</sup>



Over the last few years, a number of South American countries have joined Venezuela in building up their conventional military forces by buying foreign arms. Ecuador recently purchased twenty-four Brazilian warplanes and six Israeli drones in order to monitor its borders.<sup>39</sup> Bolivia opened a \$100 million line of credit with Russia to buy weapons.<sup>40</sup> In 2009, Brazil agreed to buy four attack submarines from France.<sup>41</sup> According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, in 2009, military expenses in South America reached nearly \$52 billion, more than twice the 1990 figure.<sup>42</sup>

From a security perspective, there is little evidence to support the claim that Venezuela will pursue nuclear weapons in the near future. Venezuela does not face a significant military threat, nuclear or conventional, that would require the development of a nuclear deterrent. Venezuela also does not face a neighbor or rival that is pursuing nuclear weapons. Given these conditions and the recent improvements in Venezuelan-Colombian relations, it seems that Chávez finds it much easier and less expensive to continue to build up his conventional military capabilities.

### *The Domestic Politics Model*

A second model for explaining nuclear weapons proliferation focuses on the domestic actors who encourage or discourage governments from pursuing the bomb. The key variable in the domestic politics model is whether acquisition of nuclear weapons is likely to serve the parochial bureaucratic or political interests of at least some individual actors within the state.<sup>43</sup> According to Sagan, three kinds of actors commonly appear in historical case studies of proliferation: the state's nuclear energy establishment, important units within the professional military, and politicians in states in which individual parties or the public strongly favor nuclear weapons acquisition.<sup>44</sup> It is these bureaucratic actors who can create the conditions that favor weapons acquisition by encouraging extreme perceptions of foreign threats, promoting supportive politicians, and actively lobbying for increased defense spending.<sup>45</sup> Addressing domestic political concerns rather than countering international security threats is paramount within this model.

From a domestic politics perspective, there is no constituency for a nuclear program in Venezuela outside of Chávez's inner circle.<sup>46</sup> There is a sense of deep skepticism amongst Chávez's political, economic, and military advisers, all of whom doubt the political, economic, and technical feasibility of going nuclear, not to mention the military utility of fielding nuclear weapons so close to the United States.<sup>47</sup> In fact, there are no bureaucratic structures in Venezuela that promote the acquisition of nuclear power. As was previously mentioned, there is no scientific community in Venezuela to advocate for a nuclear program, and there is also no constituency within the armed forces that seeks to acquire nuclear weapons.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, there is no public support amongst Venezuelans for developing nuclear technology as a means to deter external aggression, as has occurred in Iran.<sup>49</sup> The lack of support from critical bureaucratic constituencies and the Venezuelan public could be the byproduct of Chávez's stranglehold on power and his highly corrupt and inept regime.

The current domestic political situation in Venezuela can be characterized as being a case of "delegative democracy."<sup>50</sup> Delegative democracies rest on the premise that

whoever wins election to the presidency is thereby entitled to govern as he or she sees fit. In other words, citizens “delegate” all effective authority-making and decision-making power to the chief executive. Therefore, the president is taken to be the embodiment of the nation and the main custodian and definer of its interests. In this case, as the most salient figure in the political system, President Chávez has come to personify or embody the Venezuelan state. During his fourteen-year reign, Chávez has transformed Venezuela into a deeply politicized state where there is little oversight and many decisions are personally motivated by Chávez himself. Chávez’s near-complete control over the legislature has allowed for him to operate with a rubber stamp while gutting Venezuela’s institutions and laws. In December 2010, Chávez had the outgoing National Assembly grant him the authority to rule by decree for eighteen months. This “enabling law” allowed him to pass laws of his choice on social and economic policy and matters of national security. In sum, given the delegative nature of Chávez’s regime, the absence of bureaucratic support for pursuing nuclear weapons is not surprising because these other necessary constituencies or institutions have been stripped of their power and influence.

The lack of a political constituency for pursuing nuclear weapons may also be a reflection of Chávez’s falling domestic support. It began in December of 2007, when Chávez’s proposed constitutional amendment package was defeated by a close margin in a national referendum. For opposition parties, the rejection of these reforms was a turning point, a demonstration that they could oppose the Chávez government in elections and actually win. In November 2008, the opposition parties won several key contests in state and local elections, including governorships in three of Venezuela’s most populous states.<sup>51</sup> The biggest blow to Chávez came during the National Assembly elections in September 2010, when the opposition won a majority of the overall vote. Despite their victory, Chávez’s government was able to manipulate the electoral rules so that the opposition’s votes only translated into sixty-seven seats in the legislature (compared to ninety-eight seats for Chávez’s party).<sup>52</sup> Chávez’s declining popularity was also evident in the October 2012 elections, when he was re-elected for his fourth term in a closely contested race. With only 55 percent of the vote, it was Chávez’s least convincing electoral victory, considerably closer than in 2006 when he won by a 26 percent margin.<sup>53</sup>

Chávez’s recent waning political support can be attributed to a number of domestic problems that plague Venezuela. Chávez’s drive to control the distribution of food and his government’s management of state-owned farms and food companies has pushed Venezuela into a perilous food war. Persistent shortages and soaring inflation caused food prices to rise by 21 percent during the first five months of 2010.<sup>54</sup> Venezuela’s housing shortage has also worsened since Chávez took office. Private construction of housing has virtually ground to a halt in Venezuela, given fears of government expropriation.<sup>55</sup> The government itself has built little housing for the poor. The result has been a growing housing crisis where more than one million of Venezuela’s estimated twenty-eight million inhabitants do not have adequate housing and millions more live in slums.<sup>56</sup>

Venezuela is also struggling with an unprecedented decade-long surge in crime, especially homicides. Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, is almost unrivaled among large cities in the Americas for its homicide rate, which, in 2010, stood at around 200 per 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>57</sup> In a local poll in June 2010, 55 percent of respondents held Chávez

directly responsible for their most urgent problems, with crime at the top of the list.<sup>58</sup> These issues not only provide significant reasons for why there is little support within critical constituencies for pursuing nuclear weapons, but they are also a reflection of Venezuela's dire economic situation.

Chávez's stewardship of the economy has placed Venezuela in a financial position where pursuing nuclear energy or nuclear weapons would be extremely difficult. Despite being the world's eighth-largest oil producer, Venezuela faces a host of economic issues. After recovering from a recession that began in 2009, the Venezuelan economy grew consistently from 2010–12, including 5 percent growth in 2012.<sup>59</sup> However, much of this growth can be attributed to public spending, as Chávez's main short-term solution to his country's economic woes has been borrowing. As a result, net public debt rose from 14 percent of GDP in 2008 to 29 percent in 2010.<sup>60</sup> In 2011, the International Monetary Fund reported Venezuela's public debt as 45.5 percent of GDP.<sup>61</sup> Much of Chávez's borrowing has been from China. Between 2008 and 2010, China lent Venezuela \$12 billion and is being repaid in oil shipments, which cuts even further into government revenues.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, inflation in Venezuela during 2012 was near 20 percent; as a result, the Venezuelan currency traded on the black market for a third of the official rate.<sup>63</sup> While Chávez's near-term future seems safe with oil prices around \$100 a barrel, there are growing long-term risks within the Venezuela economy. Any future decline in oil prices would send the Venezuelan economy into a tailspin and lead to a default on its obligations.

Chávez's handling of his country's oil sector is the chief cause of Venezuela's economic problems. Chávez pillaged *Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)*, the state-owned oil firm, by packing it with pro-Chávez loyalists, starving it of much needed investment, and using its profits for social spending. As a result, PDVSA's output has gone from 3.3 million barrels per day (b/d) in 1998 to its current level of around 2.25 million b/d, according to recent industry estimates.<sup>64</sup> Of that, some 1 million b/d is sold at subsidized prices at home or to regional allies (such as Cuba), leaving just 1.25 million b/d for full-price exports.<sup>65</sup> The declining state of its oil sector is having a large impact on the overall Venezuelan economy, as petroleum now accounts for 92 percent of its export revenue.<sup>66</sup> This is an extremely troubling development for Chávez's government because its domestic support relies heavily on petrodollars for providing government subsidies and funding social welfare programs.

Meanwhile, Chávez's harassment and hostility towards businesses and the private sector has devastated the rest of the Venezuelan economy. In his pursuit toward state socialism, Chávez nationalized hundreds of companies, seizing everything from steel companies and bottle makers to housing schemes.<sup>67</sup> When workers have resisted, he has deployed the National Guard against them and trumped up charges against their owners. His efforts to "accelerate the revolutionary process" caused much of Venezuela's private sector to close or flee. The results are a significant amount of capital flight and a need to import many goods that it previously produced.

The current domestic political environment in Venezuela shows little evidence of the necessary political, economic, and technical feasibility for pursuing nuclear weapons. No bureaucratic structures within Venezuela are lobbying for the development of nuclear

weapons. While Chávez's recent re-election puts him six years closer to his stated goal of ruling Venezuela until 2031, there are underlying uncertainties about the country's political future. Most uncertain is Chávez's health. In June of 2011, Chávez announced that he had been battling an unspecified "pelvic" cancer and has since undergone a number of operations. Despite making claims that he was cured in October 2011, Chávez announced in early 2012 that the cancer had returned and required more surgery.<sup>68</sup> In early December 2012, before undergoing an emergency operation, Chávez designated his vice president, Nicolas Maduro, as his successor, should Chávez prove unable to continue to lead Venezuela.<sup>69</sup> This was the first time that Chávez publicly identified a preferred successor, suggesting that his condition is extremely serious and raising doubts that he may fully recover. During his surgery in December 2012, Chávez encountered complications, including bleeding and a lung infection, preventing him from attending his own inauguration on January 10, 2013, sparking debates about the legality of his rule *in absentia*.<sup>70</sup>

### *The Norms Model*

The third model focuses on norms concerning weapons acquisition, wherein nuclear decisions serve important symbolic functions in both shaping and reflecting a state's identity. According to Sagan, within the norms model, state actions are determined not by leaders' perceptions about national security threats or their own parochial political interests, but rather by deeper norms and shared beliefs about what actions are legitimate and appropriate in international relations.<sup>71</sup> From this sociological perspective, nuclear weapons are symbolically similar to flags, national airlines, or Olympic teams. They are part of what modern states believe they have to possess in order to be seen as legitimate, modern states.<sup>72</sup>

For the case of Venezuela, it is important to note that a shift in nuclear norms has emerged as a result of the NPT regime. In the 1960s, nuclear testing or the notion of joining "the nuclear club" was deemed prestigious and legitimate.<sup>73</sup> This posture has since been replaced by the norms of the NPT, which now consider nuclear acquisition to be illegitimate and irresponsible. Under the NPT, the best route for states to enhance their international standing has been to renounce nuclear weapons. South Africa, Brazil, Argentina, and Libya are all examples of states that realized the benefits of joining the NPT regime and ended their pursuit of nuclear weapons. (Similarly, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan all renounced the nuclear weapons they inherited after the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequently ratified the NPT.) Furthermore, the strength of the NPT regime has also created a new norm or identity in which the most recent examples of new or potential nuclear states, such as North Korea, Iraq, and Iran, are considered outlier states.<sup>74</sup>

On paper, Venezuela's nonproliferation credentials signal some adherence to the norms of the NPT regime. Venezuela signed the Treaty of Tlatelolco in 1967, acceded to the NPT in 1975, and ratified the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty in 2002. Venezuela has not, however, joined the Convention on Nuclear Safety, the Vienna Convention on Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage, the Convention on the Physical Protection of Nuclear Material, and, most importantly, has not adopted an Additional Protocol, the strengthened safeguards agreements with the IAEA to further ensure compliance with the NPT.<sup>75</sup> By not

adopting an Additional Protocol, Venezuela has grouped itself with states such as North Korea, Syria, and Iran, raising doubts in the international community that it only has peaceful intentions for nuclear energy (Iran has signed the Additional Protocol but is not implementing it). However, it is worth noting that Venezuela is not alone in this distinction; Brazil and Argentina have also refused to sign an Additional Protocol.

Under Chávez, Venezuela's foreign policy has increasingly embraced the norms and international notoriety associated with both being an outlier state and having close ties with other outlier states. Over the years, Chávez developed strong relations with countries with strong anti-American foreign policies such as North Korea, Syria, Cuba, Libya, Belarus, and Iran. As previously mentioned, Venezuela lavishly supports Cuba with subsidized oil. In early 2012, while the rest of the international community was pressuring Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down during his bloody crackdown on the uprising in his country, Venezuela shipped fuel to help prop up the embattled leader.<sup>76</sup> Venezuela has taken positions on proliferation issues that run directly against the mainstream of international public opinion, supporting both Iran's right to pursue nuclear technology without constraints and North Korea's July 2006 large-scale missile tests.<sup>77</sup> In 2006, when Venezuela supported Iran's nuclear program in a vote at the IAEA, Syria and Cuba were the only other countries to follow suit.

Chávez was long one of the strongest supporters of Libya's former leader, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi. During Qaddafi's ouster, Chávez came to his defense by contending that the United States and European countries were planning to invade Libya in order to control its oil fields.<sup>78</sup> Chávez also forged close ties with Belarus, calling Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko "a new friend."<sup>79</sup> Lukashenko is known as "the last European dictator" and has been the target of multiple rounds of sanctions by the United States and the European Union for his repressive crackdown on the opposition after elections in 2006 and 2010.<sup>80</sup> Chávez's warm embrace of rogue leaders is just one example of his disregard for international norms.

During his time in office, Chávez's behavior and rhetoric rarely respect diplomatic norms, rules, and decorum. Most famously, he called President George W. Bush "the devil" in a speech before the UN General Assembly. Chávez also openly insulted the Secretary General of the Organization of American States by calling him an "idiot."<sup>81</sup> In order to receive Russian loans (for buying Russian weapons) and to rebuff the efforts of the United States, Venezuela is one of the few states that recognized the independence of the breakaway Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As mentioned previously, one of Chávez's favorite diplomatic tactics is to expel the ambassador of countries with which he is at odds. Chávez's government has also sought to undermine the international normative structure for human rights and the defense of democracy by its frequent challenges to the hemispheric human rights system under the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights.<sup>82</sup> Within the norms model, these are all clear examples of how Chávez does not embrace accepted and shared beliefs about which actions are legitimate and appropriate in international politics.

From a normative perspective, there seems to be some evidence that Chávez could lead Venezuela to pursue nuclear weapons in the future. Throughout his time in office, Chávez has identified himself more with proliferators and outlier states than with the

norms of the NPT. Given his track record of behavior, the threat of being labeled irresponsible or illegitimate will unlikely dissuade Chávez if he decides to push Venezuela down the path of proliferation.

### Conclusions and Policy Implications

From a national security standpoint, there seems to be little, if any, significant nuclear or conventional military threat that could provide the impetus for a Venezuelan nuclear program. The only neighbors of Venezuela that have the capacity to pursue nuclear weapons, Brazil and Argentina, have shown little evidence that they are likely to do so in the near future. Restarting its nuclear weapons program could both severely damage the improved international reputation that Brazil has developed in recent years and also prove detrimental in achieving one of Brazil's top foreign policy goals—acquiring a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. Argentina is also unlikely to resurrect its pursuit of nuclear weapons after suffering through repeated economic crises during the 1990s and 2000s. Furthermore, as a member of the Board of Governors of the IAEA, Argentina has maintained a consistent and high-profile stance on issues related to nonproliferation, in line with most of the positions adopted by the United States.<sup>83</sup> As one observer concluded, “For the foreseeable future, Argentina and Brazil are committed to the peaceful use of nuclear technology within the region, and they are unlikely to resume efforts to acquire nuclear weapons without some revolutionary change in the international system that would lead them to perceive an existential threat to the state.”<sup>84</sup> While there is some evidence that South American states have increased their foreign arms purchases in recent years, military spending in the region is still low relative to other parts of the world.<sup>85</sup> In fact, the conventional military threat to Venezuela may actually be decreasing due to the recent détente in relations with Colombia. Despite Chávez's political rhetoric, the United States does not pose a threat of invading Venezuela, either. In fact, with the United States as the single most important customer of Venezuelan exports, most importantly, oil, and with Venezuela being one of the top suppliers of oil to the United States (fourth largest in 2011), the likelihood of war between the two countries is unlikely. Furthermore, as recent military purchases show, it seems that Chávez finds it much easier and less expensive to counter any conventional military threats by strengthening his own conventional deterrent.

An analysis of Venezuela's domestic politics also fails to provide strong evidence of interest in a nuclear weapons program. Perhaps recognizing the many problems that plague Venezuela, none of the critical bureaucratic constituencies has shown any signs of advocating for nuclear weapons. The Venezuelan people, who have increasing concerns about the terrible domestic conditions within their country, have shown no support for developing nuclear weapons.<sup>86</sup> There is essentially no scientific community within Venezuela that could advocate for a weapons program. Furthermore, the Venezuelan military may see little reason for pursuing nuclear weapons, given its current situation: Chávez buys the military establishment's loyalty with billions of dollars to replenish its aging forces and by allowing them to carve up Venezuela into fiefdoms by which they

enrich themselves through narcotics trafficking.<sup>87</sup> In the end, Chávez and his inner circle seem to be the only ones within Venezuela who might support the pursuit of nuclear weapons. However, having to deal with a number of growing domestic problems and a resurgent opposition, their support may be hard-pressed.

Of the three approaches, the norms model provides the only compelling indication that Venezuela could pursue nuclear weapons at some point in the future. Chávez's disregard for established international norms and close ties with recent proliferators and outlier states are reasons for concern. Chávez has also shown that many of his decisions are personally motivated; therefore, he could see nuclear weapons not only as a way to challenge the United States, but also as a means to earn prestige both in Latin America and amongst the outlier states with whom he associates.

This analysis provides some valuable insight for how the United States should approach Venezuela as a candidate within the next generation of proliferators. While there is a lack of strong evidence to indicate that Venezuela will pursue nuclear weapons in the near future, the United States should not completely overlook Chávez's possible intentions for nuclear power. Historically, a number of scholars have described US policy towards Latin America as a "neglect-panic cycle" in which the pattern is to largely ignore Latin America until some sort of crisis situation develops.<sup>88</sup> If the United States wants to prevent Venezuela from becoming the next Iran, it must end the "neglect-panic cycle" and adopt a more active, pragmatic approach.

Since Venezuela is in the earliest phases of its nuclear energy program and has shown no intentions of developing nuclear weapons, negotiating with it does not make a lot of sense. However, the United States and its allies do not want to allow Venezuela to develop nuclear capabilities and infrastructure to the point where there is a problem, as was the case with Iran. To prevent this development, the United States and the NPT regime should push Venezuela to adopt an Additional Protocol. With an Additional Protocol in place, the United States and the IAEA would have greater insight into the development of Venezuela's nuclear energy program. The United States should appeal to Russia to make its nuclear contract with Venezuela contingent upon Chávez signing an Additional Protocol. If Venezuela is reluctant to adopt an Additional Protocol because Brazil and Argentina are not participants, then the United States and its allies should push for all three countries to join. The United States and the international community should be willing to offer economic and political incentives—a small price to pay to prevent another possible regional nuclear arms race.

The United States must also address Venezuela's ties with other nuclear outliers. In order to prevent the spread of nuclear technology and know-how, the United States and the IAEA will need to continue their tight surveillance of the Iranian and North Korean nuclear weapons programs. This will increase the probability that any such partnership between these countries and Venezuela would be quickly exposed to the international community. Within these efforts, the United States should work closely with states in Latin America to help contain any future ambitions that Venezuela may develop. Despite having good relations with many of his neighbors, nobody in the region has any desire to see Chávez with nuclear weapons. Argentina and Brazil have shown no interest in developing nuclear weapons or helping Venezuela with its nuclear energy ambitions. If Venezuela refuses to sign

an Additional Protocol, then the United States should push Argentina and Brazil to try and include Venezuela within its successful binational nuclear inventory and mutual inspections agency, ABACC. Mexico and Colombia are also two important regional allies that the United States could collaborate with to pressure Venezuela.

Most importantly, within its active approach, the United States should make sure not to overreact to the recent developments surrounding Venezuela's interest in pursuing nuclear energy. In the end, there is an enormous contrast between Chávez's "great pronouncements" and modest concrete actions.<sup>89</sup> Venezuela's close relations with Iran and agreements with Russia could have more to do with Chávez's foreign policy goals and anti-US stance than with any actual need or plans to develop nuclear power—or nuclear weapons. Developing nuclear energy is an extremely difficult and costly process which requires not only time and money, but also science, technology, and infrastructure, which, as has been mentioned, Venezuela largely lacks, particularly while run by an administratively incompetent government with unpredictable economic policies. In the end, an alarmist response would only play into the hands of Chávez, who thrives on spinning attention from the United States to rally his supporters. Therefore, the United States would be wise to continue its five-year policy of carefully avoiding conflict with Chávez while cooperating with other states and organizations to closely monitor the seriousness of the developing nuclear situation in Venezuela.

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