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Recommendations for a New Administration: Strategize the Relationship with Bolivarian States

By Douglas Farah | January 22, 2012

The challenges presented by the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas—having been led by President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, and including Presidents Evo Morales of Bolivia, Rafael Correa of Ecuador, and Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua as active leaders¹—are significant and often underestimated. Nor does Chávez's departure from the scene resolve the problem. The criminal corruption within these governments, their shared hostility toward the United States, the close links with Iran, their embrace of concepts of asymmetrical warfare against the United States, and the systematic assaults on the independent media, judiciaries, and other democratic institutions all continue to bode ill.

Over the past decade, there has been little sustained U.S. interest in the Bolivarian revolution, the significant inroads made in shaping the hemispheric agenda and organizations, the systematic undermining of U.S. objectives, and the creation of multiple regional and hemispheric bodies designed to specifically isolate or minimize U.S. influence. As a result, the second Obama administration starts at a disadvantage, while the Bolivarian leaders (even in Venezuela) consolidate their hold on power in the absence of viable opposition. To the extent possible, the United States can counter these effects by:

- Engaging allies more fully in the region,
- Strengthening efforts to combat transnational crime,

¹ Besides Venezuela, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas includes Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Suriname and Saint Lucia are guest members, while Haiti is an observer.

- Exposing Bolivarian ties to criminal groups, and
- Educating allies on Iran's intentions.

The most important short-term question, with significant long-term implications, is the future of the movement without Hugo Chávez. He has been the intellectual architect and chief funder of the alliance, as well as the group's chief interlocutor with Iran, Cuba, and nonstate armed actors like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—FARC*). As the group's undisputed leader, one might ask whether the entire project could collapse in his absence. While there are many variables, that outcome is unlikely. In fact, quite the opposite, a more militarized authoritarian government could emerge in Venezuela without the garnish of democracy. The Obama administration may have to deal with an increasingly radicalized and criminalized political landscape in Venezuela, where peaceful political transition is difficult and fraught with danger for opposition forces that are subject to harassment, imprisonment, or exile.

Before undergoing his latest surgery in Havana in late December, Chávez designated Vice President Nicolás Maduro as his chosen successor, to run in new elections should he not be able to complete his new term. In case Chávez does not survive, it is unclear that the military leadership, which wields much of the real power, would acquiesce to Maduro's leadership or to holding elections that might remove the president's United Socialist Party from power, as the constitution demands in case of his permanent absence.

Former defense minister Henry Rangel, one of several generals sanctioned for drug trafficking by the United States, once declared that the armed forces are “wedded” to the Chávez project, from which they derive enormous personal benefits. More recently, National Assembly president Diosdado Cabello, close to the military, reportedly said that *Chavismo* would be defended “knee on the ground, rifle at the shoulder, and bayonets drawn.” Chávez has formed an armed partisan militia of some



125,000 people whose loyalty is to him. In the case of a split among followers or an electoral loss in a new election, the military and militias may make any transition to a new administration potentially bloody. While that scenario is unlikely, it should not be discarded.

The panorama is further complicated by the extensive role of regional and extra-regional actors in Venezuela and the alliance, all with vested interests in the survival of the Bolivarian project and likely to undermine any efforts to replace it peacefully. On one hand, it encompasses some \$60 billion in loans from China, being repaid in oil, and tens of billions of dollars in loans from Russia to buy Russian weapons systems. On the other, it includes banking arrangements, joint ventures, and military exchanges with Iran. As time goes on, these interdependencies are likely to deepen and become more influential.

Perhaps no nation has more to lose than Cuba because of Chávez's willingness to provide the economically challenged government with oil well below market cost. Given the Cuban control of Chávez's military intelligence structures and control of voter ID registries,² its operatives will be uniquely positioned to thwart efforts to change the political direction of a post-Chávez Venezuela while protecting its interest in maintaining the status quo.

² “Venecuba, A Single Nation,” *The Economist*, February 11, 2010, <http://www.economist.com/node/15501911>.

In order to manage the relationship with the significant bloc of countries in close proximity and of strategic importance to the United States, several steps should be taken to defuse the David vs. Goliath narrative Chávez uses so effectively:

- Threats should be recognized and understood in their true dimension. They are real and have serious implications for both the United States and democratic governments in Latin America. Not to be cavalierly dismissed or ignored, responses should not reach the hysterical levels sometimes raised by those who view the region through the prism of Cold War ideology.
- The United States must engage more fully with its allies in the region—particularly Colombia, Brazil, Chile, and perhaps Peru—to articulate a common agenda based on democratic values, the rule of law, and respect for international charters signed by all Latin American nations regarding freedom of expression and political liberty. The debate should not be the United States vs. the Bolivarians, but a common voice in what might be termed a constructive majority demanding respect for human rights, independent judiciaries, clean elections, and the rule of law.
- The United States must make a much more forceful case in Latin America that Bolivarian ties to transnational criminal organizations pose a threat to all countries in the Americas, from Argentina to Mexico. Brazil is now suffering the effects of Bolivian cocaine production and Venezuela's trafficking activities and is more willing to work with the United States. In the past, principally Venezuelan support has extended to multiple nonstate armed actors engaged in criminal activities, primarily the FARC and including the Basque ETA separatists, Hezbollah, and smaller armed groups in Latin America.
- The United States must also ensure adequate intelligence collection on Iran, sharing and comparing information with regional allies as to its activities in the Americas, from sanction busting, opaque financial structures, seemingly irrational joint venture economic activities, possible

technology transfers to the threat a nuclear Iran would pose to the world. Currently, most of the region views Iran's presence as either benign or of little importance. This is best done through discreet, private diplomacy.

- Expand legal methods to combat transnational organized crime in the region, particularly state-sponsored activities. Where possible, the engagement of senior officials should be made public, as the ongoing "name and shame" efforts of the Treasury Department and Drug Enforcement Administration's cases have helped erode the romantic notions of Chávez and his allies, particularly in Europe.

Like any other country, the United States will always have allies and adversaries. Hostile influences will always be with us in one form or another. It will be important for the 2013–2017 White House team to be realistic and take actions to either minimize them, contain them, or defend against them. ■

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