

A Geopolitical Analysis of Venezuela: China's, Iran's and Russia's Defiance of the United States

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Abstract

This article amounts to a geopolitical analysis of Venezuela, considering relations between China, Iran and Russia with this Latin American country along with the implications of all this, mainly in relation to the U.S. This work addresses the stated aspects, while highlighting the presidencies of Chávez and Maduro. In this piece, media warfare and psychological warfare also warrant noteworthiness in geopolitical terms.

This article results from both bibliographical research and an exclusive interview with Professor Esther Mobilia, Director of the Central University of Venezuela's International Relations Department.

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Keywords: Geopolitics; Latin America and the Caribbean; media warfare; psychological warfare; Venezuela.

Introduction

(To draft this article, bibliographical research was conducted, along with an exclusive interview with Professor Esther Mobilia*, Director of the Central University of Venezuela's International Relations Department (*Esther Mobilia*).

This work addresses a few geopolitical aspects of Venezuela under the presidencies of Hugo Chávez (from 1999 until his death in 2013) and Nicolás Maduro (from 2013 to the present). This latter politician

was handpicked by Chávez to be his successor as Venezuelan head of state (Buxton August 27, 2019, p. 1383).

Chávez's first presidential victory is regarded as a political revolution (Buxton August 27, 2019, p. 1371), giving rise to the Pink Tide, that is, the surge of the Left in Latin America (Guan, Hongying March / April 2023, pp. 100-101). This means a rejection of neo-liberalism and hostility toward U.S. hegemony in said region (Marshall 2021, pp. 33 / 35). Nicolás Maduro is also considered a Pink Tide leader (Grattan, October 31, 2022). With regard to Venezuela, this article highlights three countries currently in strategic competition with the U.S.: China, Iran and Russia.

Another aspect addressed in this piece is the relationship of the media and psychological warfare / influence operations to geopolitics, considering Venezuela's context. Recently, General Laura Richardson (March 12, 2024, p. 30), as Head of the U.S. Southern Command, acknowledged that, on the part of the organization she directs, there are information teams working incessantly to spread, in the region under analysis, narratives favorable to the U.S., for the purpose of countering that which she called disinformation and malign narratives disseminated by adversaries. However, this article is not aimed at determining to what extent and with what consequences Venezuela is the target of influence operations / psychological operations organized by foreign powers; rather, it seeks to emphasize how said operations, with their geopolitical component, have been publicly stressed in official statements from senior members of the Venezuelan Government, including Presidents Chávez and Maduro. This is somehow related to the importance, in international relations, of rhetoric and narratives, disseminated through the media.

Geopolitical context of Venezuela / Latin America and the Caribbean

With Hugo Chávez's election to the Presidency of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, in 1999, this country ceased to align itself with the U.S., having forged relations with China, Cuba and Russia (Creutzfeldt, Alvarado February 16, 2024). From the days of Chávez's presidency to the present, with Maduro, China has been a key ally for Venezuela (Deri November 13, 2024). The way current Sino-Venezuelan relations are regarded, in the U.S., is reflected in the following title of a "Georgetown Security Studies Review" article: A Dangerous Alliance: China, Venezuela, and the Twilight of Democracy in Latin America (Deri November 13, 2024).

Countries such as China, Iran and Russia are considered adversaries of the U.S. and supporters of current Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro (*Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* February 5, 2024, pp. 5 / 29). General Laura Richardson (March 12, 2024, p. 2) stated that China and Russia strategically competed with her country in Latin America and the Caribbean. In this regard, General Richardson (March 12, 2024, p. 2) specifically mentioned Venezuela.

According to Isbell (March 10, 2008), from the dawn of this century, Latin America's geopolitical relevance has asserted itself, mainly due to its energy resources. Proof positive is that, in 2023, Venezuela had the world's largest crude oil reserves (*Country Analysis Brief: Venezuela* February 2024, p. 5). Venezuelan natural resources also include natural gas, gold, diamonds, iron, bauxite, among other minerals (*Venezuela: Facts and Figures*).



1. Venezuela is a member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC)

In Latin America, which is known as the backyard of the U.S., the Russians, Chinese and Iranians have been more welcome than the Americans (Isbell March 10, 2008). This is a situation that the U.S. has been unable to reverse (Isbell March 10, 2008). With the end of the Monroe Doctrine, this nation turns its gaze toward Asia, chiefly to China (Isbell March 10, 2008). When it comes to rivaling China and Russia, this reduced U.S. interest and lack of action relative to Latin America and the Caribbean is a strategic error that needs to be urgently corrected, according to some analysts (Kroenig, et alii February 12, 2024). To this end, a Rand Corporation study recommends that the U.S. carefully monitor what's going on in Latin America and the Caribbean and that it get ready to deal with a variety of emerging threats from countries hostile to the U.S., such as Venezuela (Chindea, et alii 2023, p. vi).

From the early 21st century, compared to the period subsequent to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's interest in Latin America has grown, for several reasons, among them relations with the U.S. taking a downturn (Jutten October 2024, p. 2). Russia also exploits, in its favor, the left's political triumph, in several countries in said region, including Venezuela, along with anti-American discourse from various Latin-American political leaders (Jutten October 2024, p. 2). Venezuela can be regarded as a country which engages in anti-American diplomatic initiatives in the region's organizations to which it belongs (Carothers, Feldman December 13, 2023).

Since 2016, Latin America has been present in Russia's Foreign Policy Concept (FPC) (Jutten October

2024, p. 2). In 2023, while mentioning Venezuela, the FPC highlights the forging of ties between Russia and Latin America and the Caribbean, together with various regional political and economic organizations (*The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* March 31, 2023). This is related to Russia's goal of setting up a multipolar international system, while prioritizing doing away with remnants of dominance from the U.S. and other non-friendly States in global affairs (*The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation* March 31, 2023).

Russian President Putin is committed to diminishing U.S. global influence, even in the Americas. This is why Venezuela is particularly relevant (Vicenzino February 2, 2019). Recently, while directly addressing Venezuelan President Maduro, in Kazan, Russia, Putin underscored the lasting and solid relations between their two countries (Meeting with President of Venezuela Nicolas Maduro October 23, 2024). On that same occasion, Maduro reaffirmed Venezuela's willingness to keep on cooperating with the Russian State in many areas (*Meeting with President of Venezuela Nicolas Maduro* October 23, 2024). A few days later, on November 7, 2024, Russia strengthened ties with Venezuela in the spheres of intelligence, counter-espionage and energy (*PVDSA and Rosneft Monopolize the Bulk of New Venezuela-Russia Agreements* November 8, 2024). Russian Deputy Prime Minister Chernyshenko regarded Venezuela as a strategic partner and powerful ally of Russia in Latin America (*PVDSA and Rosneft Monopolize the Bulk of New Venezuela-Russia Agreements* November 8, 2024).

From the standpoint of various experts, the Primakov Doctrine has guided relations between Russia and countries in Latin America and the Caribbean: Russia needs to get involved with the U.S.'s neighbors in response to American interference in nations Moscow considers to be in its sphere of influence (Ziemer, et alii July 25, 2024). Said response includes the military domain, for instance in the context of the armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine (Ziemer, et alii July 25, 2024). There are those who regard a Russian warship moored at a Venezuelan port, in August 2024, as a reciprocal measure relative to U.S. support of Ukraine (Levaggi, Rouvinski August 15, 2024). In several aspects, including military ones, Russia's backing of Maduro can not only remain in place but even further strengthen, despite Russia's being committed in an armed conflict with Ukraine (Levaggi, Rouvinski August 15, 2024). In Ellis' view (September 15, 2024), Russia's current power-projecting capabilities are not as pronounced as they were during the Cold War years, with military limitations due to the conflict with Ukraine. However, Putin decided to send military resources to Latin America and the Caribbean, so that, along with its partners, such as Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, Russia can show its adversaries in that part of the world that it constitutes a threat to regional security (Ellis September 15, 2024).

As part of Latin America and the Caribbean, a significant aspect of Chavism is the creation of regional organizations, such as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) and the Union of the South American Nations (UNASUR), for the purpose of minimizing U.S. influence in that geographical area (Creutzfeldt, Alvarado February 16, 2024). This was regarded by China as an opportunity to start wielding greater influence in said region (Creutzfeldt, Alvarado February 16, 2024). According to Margaret Myers (May 7, 2020), China's success in Latin America depends on its relations with regional organizations and their ability and efficiency. With both Chávez and Maduro, Venezuela has contributed toward China's involvement in those organizations (Creutzfeldt, Alvarado February 16, 2024). In 2023, China's President Xi Jinping asserted his nation's backing of regional integration of Latin American and Caribbean countries (Barrios, Rio June 23, 2023). In June 2024, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stressed that Venezuela can rely on China to have a greater role in Latin America (Arain June 5, 2024). China attributes a high degree of importance to its ties with Venezuela (*Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Lin Jian's Regular Press Conference on July 29, 2024*). China's Belt and Road Initiative

includes Latin America, which has the U.S. worried (Chiodi, Anh March 18, 2022).

China's military ties with several Latin American countries and, particularly, with Venezuela are a reality (Roy June 15, 2023). China is referred to as a major supplier of military hardware to Venezuela (Vidarte, Díaz August 1, 2024). However, according to a Rand Corporation study, China does not start off by raising the military aspect of its cooperation with Latin America, for several reasons, including a limited Chinese expeditionary capability and lack of resources, namely on the part of the Navy, to operate in the Western Hemisphere, even for a reduced period of time (Chindea, et alii 2023, p. 40).

Iran seeks to strengthen its ties with various Latin American countries, including Venezuela (*Iran Congratulates Venezuela on Successful Presidential Election July 29, 2024*). Venezuela's relations with Iran, which date back to before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, stepped up with President Chávez, enabling Iran to establish a diplomatic and commercial expansion in Latin America (Rendon, Fernandez October 19, 2020). Currently, Iran counteracts U.S. pressure to overthrow President Nicolás Maduro (Rendon, Fernandez October 19, 2020). The alliance between Iran and Venezuela aims to overcome the difficulties experienced by these two countries, due to U.S. sanctions imposed upon them (*Iran Congratulates Venezuela on Successful Presidential Election July 29, 2024*). In 2023, then-Iranian President Raisi stated that his country's relationship to Venezuela is a strategic one, as he underscored that the two States have common interests and enemies (Gamba, Mehdi June 13, 2023). According to Amal Mokhtar (April 2024, p. 64), Iran is looking to forge alliances against the U.S. In the military sphere, Iran has provided missiles, drones and other equipment to Venezuela, thereby contributed toward increasing this Latin American country's power-projecting capabilities in its region (Prince October 24, 2024). In Mokhtar's view (April 2024, p. 64), Latin American countries' growing interest in engaging in military cooperation with Iran has left the U.S. concerned.

Media / psychological warfare

Influence operations can be regarded as instruments that governments use as part of strategic geopolitical competition (Sin, et alii December 2021, p. 3). These operations can be carried out by both state and non-state actors (Rasheed April 2024, p. 5). Influence operations include psychological, political, subversive, economic and technological means, for the purpose of affecting the security and governance of a given targeted country (Rasheed April 2024, p. 5). Said operations, comprising many common aspects with both psychological and information operations, amount to a sphere of intelligence that is currently an essential tool for pursuing certain geopolitical goals, without directly involving military force (Rasheed April 2024, p. 5). Faruk Hadzic (February 11, 2021) even uses the expression "psychological geopolitical warfare".

The title of an article by Pühr and Kupfer (January 17, 2023) reveals that which is at issue with the subject matter under analysis: *Media in the Geopolitical Crossfire*. Psychological operations can include conveying a message, via specific media, so as to influence a target audience (Kaprisma 2020, p. 225). The latter can comprise a large number of people or a single individual; in order for a certain message to reach them, the sender can use traditional media and, in the Internet age, social media, text messaging and email, with a great deal of precision. In part, the power of psychological operations results from progress in the field of information and communication technologies, chiefly from the start of this century (Rashi, Schleifer May 9, 2023).

According to Parezanovic and Prorokovic (2024, p. 43), psychological operations and international relations are currently inseparable. Political warfare encompasses psychological warfare (Coombs April 21, 2021). This type of activities, which seeks to discredit political adversaries and sway foreign affairs

through disinformation, for instance, can take place even under circumstances not regarded as warfare (Uppal August 2, 2020).

In 2007, then-President Chávez stated that the U.S. was using psychological warfare for the purpose of overthrowing his government (*Chavez Warns of 'Resistance War' Against U.S.* June 25, 2007). Hugo Chávez added that his country was also being the target of both media and political warfare (Carroll June 26, 2007). Specifically, Chávez asserted that the U.S. television station CNN was part of that nation's psychological warfare, in order to create instability on Venezuelan soil (*Venezuela Chávez: CNN May Be Instigating My Murder* November 28, 2007). (Said TV station considered their journalism pieces to be objective (*Venezuela Chávez: CNN May Be Instigating My Murder* November 28, 2007)).

Ernesto Villegas, Venezuela's Information and Communications Minister in 2012-2013, pointed out that, by taking the topic of then-President Chávez's health, transnational media mounted a psychological war bent on destabilizing his country (Fraga January 7, 2013).

In 2014, President Nicolás Maduro threatened legal action against the local and international press, on the grounds that such media were involved in psychological warfare that sought to create political instability in Venezuela (Wyss September 18, 2014). Some two years later, Maduro went on a Venezuelan public television station to announce that he was considering the possibility of legal action against Spanish media, accusing them of setting up ongoing psychological war against his government (Scharfenberg June 2, 2016). Venezuela's current President stated that, presumably, the U.S. was vested in psychological warfare to try to remove him from power (*US 'Childish' in Conducting Foreign Policy, Says Venezuela's Maduro* January 30, 2019).

On September 25, 2024, in New York, at the United Nations General Assembly, Venezuela's Minister of People's Power for Foreign Affairs stated that the U.S. sparked psychological wars against countries such as his own, for the purpose of causing instability (*Statement Delivered by H.E. Mr. Yvan Gil Pinto* September 25, 2024). In that same regard, recently, as reported by Xinhua, China's news agency, Venezuelan President Maduro gave a speech as part of the 19th Anniversary of the Strategic Operational Command of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces, giving rise to news under the following headline: *U.S. Resorts to 'Psychological Warfare' Against Venezuela: Maduro* (September 27, 2024). This head of state stressed that the main component of the hybrid war affecting Venezuela is psychological in nature, and that its power goes by way of not only traditional media but also social media (*U.S. Resorts to 'Psychological Warfare' Against Venezuela: Maduro* September, 27 2024).

Professor Esther Mobilia's analysis

In an exclusive interview for this article, Professor Esther Mobilia, Director of the Central University of Venezuela's International Relations Department, pointed out that Latin America is currently not a foreign policy priority for the U.S., especially considering the Trump Administration. The interviewee thinks that, during the presidential campaign, said region was relevant only as concerns domestic policy and national security. Mobilia asserted that, under President Joe Biden, the U.S. administration sought to resume ties with Latin America, without ceasing to disseminate democratic values or antagonizing Venezuela. In this regard, Esther Mobilia added, however, that relations between the U.S. and Venezuela were guided by a sort of coexistence without significantly escalating tensions but under prevailing rhetorical pressure.

Professor Esther Mobilia highlighted the following Venezuelan foreign policy interests: in the economic sphere, closer relations with China; in the geopolitical domain, cooperation with Russia; furthering the anti-American agenda. However, these keystones may vary. This is because, according to this expert,

Venezuela's foreign policy is influenced by this nation's need to seek international backing, following the July 28, 2024 elections, and to obtain international recognition of Maduro's victory. Mobilia underlined that Venezuela's priority, on the international stage, is to see Nicolás Maduro recognized as President. In Professor Mobilia's view, relative to the international acceptance of Venezuela's latest presidential election results, for the Biden Administration, more than U.S. pressure on President Maduro, it would be preferable for Latin American countries, such as Brazil and Colombia, to wield influence instead of the U.S. This way, according to the interviewee, the U.S. would avoid narratives that include an aspect known to Latin American republics in the past: American interventionism.

Esther Mobilia stated that, in October 2024, Venezuela made a heavy-handed attempt to join BRICS, since, relative to said organization, it aimed to gain support from one of the fastest-growing economies, in the last few years. This scholar explained that Brazil was against Venezuela joining BRICS because, regarding the latter's last presidential election, Brasilia does not recognize the results pointing to Maduro as President.

As for Brazilian President Lula da Silva and Venezuela's President possibly vying for leadership in Latin America, Mobilia emphasized that Caracas does not have the resources to rival Brazil and that, in terms of political leadership, Nicolás Maduro lacks charisma to stir up the masses.

From Esther Mobilia's standpoint, Venezuela's territorial aspirations / claims regarding Essequibo (Guyana) serve to draw the community's attention away from the issue of presidential elections, including disqualifying certain significant opposition candidates. This expert considered that, with said aspirations / claims, the idea is also to promote the national sentiment of Venezuelans: that which has always been regarded as being at issue is the loss of a territory that has historically belonged to Venezuela. Mobilia pointed out that Guyana chooses a narrative in which it appears as the weaker side, whereas Venezuela is portrayed as the interventionist State. The way this scholar sees it, the issue of legitimacy and the lack of recognition of the results of Venezuela's recent presidential election will restrict any type of Venezuelan claim regarding Essequibo.

Esther Mobilia feels that, with Donald Trump's upcoming presidency starting in January 2025, the issue of Taiwan and rivalries with China will be more present in U.S. foreign policy. From this interviewee's standpoint, the U.S. will use public diplomacy instruments to keep constraining Venezuela; however, in relation to this Latin-American country, the interests of U.S. oil companies can lead to careful management of the situation. Still, as Mobilia underlined, recent statements from some members of Trump's new cabinet point to the possibility of Venezuela being even more pressured with new sanctions.

Professor Esther Mobilia's analysis also concerned media-related aspects. In this expert's view, Venezuelan public diplomacy mechanisms currently try to portray the government as being dynamic, inclusive and democratic and showing an alternative face relative to that which can be considered traditional Chavism while in power until 2013. Mobilia noted that, within the context of public diplomacy, Venezuela not only uses television networks (for instance, Telesur) but also hired personalities to bolster a certain image, through paid advertising and social networks. At media level, while this amounts to strategies that various governments put into practice, its effectiveness, as concerns Venezuela, according to Mobilia, is not as great as Caracas would like. As per Professor Esther Mobilia, this discrepancy is due to disseminating news and reports from reputable international organizations that paint a different picture of the Venezuelan administration.

Conclusion

Venezuela's current geopolitical positioning is linked to a crucial development: in 1999, Hugo Chávez's victory in presidential elections. This President was against U.S. hegemony in Latin America and the Caribbean, until his death in 2013. This opposition to the U.S. somehow continued with Venezuela's next President, Nicolás Maduro, from 2013 to the present.

Another aspect currently influencing Venezuelan foreign policy is the issue of international recognition of Maduro's victory in the last presidential elections, on July 28, 2024. However, there are those who maintain that U.S. pressures in relation to the results of said elections are managed in order for Venezuela to keep the door from completely closing off to U.S. companies interested in Venezuelan crude oil reserves. On top of the geographic location, Venezuela's natural wealth, including energy and mineral resources, is attractive to several foreign powers. In reality, countries' interests are present in international relations.

Countries strategically rivaling the U.S., such as China, Iran and Russia, back a number of Latin-American and Caribbean nations, in the political, economic and military spheres, assigning Venezuela considerable importance. Said foreign powers also show interest in regional organizations. All this is certainly taken into account by the U.S., even though Washington's attention may possibly be geared more to the Far East, particularly to China, than to Latin-American and Caribbean countries. This could end up still taking place with the next U.S. Administration, led by Donald Trump, despite not ruling out more sanctions on Venezuela in the future. Nevertheless, the U.S. is actually not keeping still, and, as such, it monitors and is active in Latin America and the Caribbean, for the purpose of countering the negative effects resulting from ties forged by adversary powers with countries in said region. As part of this, the U.S. may, for example, turn to several kinds of actions that are interrelated: influence operations / information warfare / political warfare / psychological warfare. All this can be carried out by state and non-state actors, in order to pursue certain geopolitical goals, through various instruments, such as traditional and social media. This subject matter takes on greater importance in international relations. In publicly disseminated narratives, with a rhetorical component, several senior Venezuelan political officials, such as Presidents Chávez and Maduro, maintained that the U.S. has intended to destabilize Venezuela using both media and psychological warfare.

Through a number of instruments, such as traditional media and social media, Venezuelan public diplomacy currently attempts to portray that nation's government with an alternative face to traditional Chavism and with an image of dynamism and a democratic nature. The efficiency of said public diplomacy depends on its ability to override a different image of Venezuela that is disseminated by reputable international organizations. Strategic communication is an essential aspect in the sphere of geopolitical competition.

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Interview

*This interview was conducted, via email, on November 22, 2024

Photo by: Jorge Marinho