



Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to the U.S.

POLICY UPDATE:**NEW U.S. ATTACKS COMPLICATE VENEZUELA'S EFFORTS TO IMPROVE RELATIONS**

Throughout 2011, Venezuela has been subjected to a number of political attacks and aggressions from the U.S. government and conservative sectors within the U.S. This increasingly aggressive attitude toward the government of President Hugo Chávez has imposed additional complications on what is already a difficult relationship between the two countries, and seems to indicate a reversal from President Barack Obama's initial promises for open and respectful dialogue with countries that may not share U.S. ideology. These new aggressions also come in the lead-up to presidential elections that will take place in both Venezuela and the U.S. in 2012, which suggests the attacks may only increase as campaigning in the U.S. heats up.

Venezuela has been the target of aggressions and attacks before. During President George W. Bush's two terms in office, the U.S. tacitly endorsed the 2002 coup against President Chávez and sided with opposition sectors that sought to sabotage the country's oil industry. (It also provided funds to "civic" organizations that eventually participated in both the coup and oil sabotage.¹) Additionally, in 2006 it imposed sanctions on Venezuela limiting its ability to buy military goods made by U.S. companies or with U.S. parts – even if those goods were going to be used to hunt drug traffickers or provide humanitarian assistance during emergencies.

SANCTIONS AGAINST PDVSA

In late May 2011, the U.S. announced that it was imposing sanctions on a number of countries and companies for allegedly trading with Iran. Among those companies was Venezuela's state-owned oil company, PDVSA, which was accused of selling gasoline to Iran in violation of a U.S. law.²

In the wake of the announcement of the sanctions, which would limit any business that PDVSA could do directly with the U.S., Venezuelan officials noted that the oil company had not had a direct oil contract with the U.S. government since 2005, nor had it depended on any aid or assistance from the U.S. Export-Import Bank. (In a political move orchestrated by the Bush administration, the Export-Import Bank pulled out of Venezuela close to a decade ago.)

*President Chávez and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2011*

Venezuela's Minister of Energy and Oil, Rafael Ramírez, questioned the purpose of the sanctions: "We have to ask [the U.S.] what the scope of their measures is, because we have only received information from very-low-level authorities. We believe that they are making a political point more than an economic one."³

The political point was further exposed by the fact that the sanctions were imposed under a unilateral U.S. law that sought to punish countries that have independent and sovereign international policies, including relationships with the U.S. Ramírez and Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro questioned how the U.S. could impose its laws upon the actions of other countries, notably Venezuela, which had maintained open diplomatic relations with Iran for over 50 years. In the wake of the political announcement of the sanctions, Maduro announced that relations between the U.S. and Venezuela were "frozen."⁴

HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND OTHER REPORTS

Shortly after, in late June 2011, the U.S. State Department released its annual report on global efforts to stop human trafficking, once again singling out Venezuela for allegedly failing to take action and moving its designation up from a Tier 2 country to a Tier 3 country, a move that carries additional sanctions against Venezuela.⁵



The report continued a trend that began under the Bush administration of using “technical reports” to make political points against countries that the U.S. disagreed with.

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In 2004, when the U.S. first added Venezuela to its blacklist for human trafficking, a Washington-based policy analyst (who is openly critical of Chávez's government) decried the move, writing in a *New York Times* op-ed that it was irresponsible to use issues as important as human trafficking to score political points against Venezuela: “There are... serious questions about the motives behind the decision. The trafficking rationale seems particularly odd... [it] risks trivializing, and politicizing, one of Latin America's most critical problems. Independent human rights experts say that Venezuela's record...is no more egregious than many other countries that have somehow managed to escape similar treatment,” wrote Michael Shifter, president of the Inter-American Dialogue.⁶

The reports on human trafficking consistently fail to recognize Venezuela's efforts to address this important problem, including its adherence to international norms such as the 2000 UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Sanction the Traffic of People, Especially Women and Children and national laws such as the Organic Law for the Protection of Children and Adolescents and the Law of Violence Against Women and Families.

This same approach has been seen in other “technical reports” dealing with human rights and efforts to fight drug trafficking, all of which have ignored substantial internationally recognized gains and efforts by Venezuela in an attempt to antagonize and isolate the country.

The annual Threat Assessment Report delivered to Congress by U.S. security agencies also regularly levels unfounded accusations against Venezuela, accusing it of links to terrorist groups that don't exist.⁷ In 2010, the political underpinnings of the report became clear when it claimed that countries that don't agree with U.S. prescriptions for “representative democracy” and “economic liberalization” could be seen as actual threats to U.S. interests.⁸

In August 2011, another terrorism report released by the State Department made similarly unfounded accusations.

These claims of alleged support for terrorists are even more surprising given the fact that the U.S. has consistently refused to extradite Luis Posada Carriles despite repeated requests from Venezuela to do so. Posada, a Cuban-Venezuelan dual national, has been linked to the 1976 bombing of a Cuban airliner that killed 73 innocent civilians. After having escaped prison while awaiting trial in Venezuela in 1985 and participating in a number of other terrorist acts, he surfaced in South Florida in 2005. To date, the U.S. has not responded to Venezuela's extradition requests, despite statutory and international obligations to do so.

CONGRESSIONAL “HEARINGS”

Also in late June 2011, the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere in the U.S. House of Representatives held a “hearing” on “Sanctionable Activities in Venezuela,” in which Florida Republican and strident opponent of Venezuela, Rep. Connie Mack, again publicly demanded that Venezuela be added to the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism.⁹ (The request has been made annually since 2008.¹⁰)

Despite the severity of such a request – it could threaten the commercial relationship between the two countries, worth \$43 billion in 2010, along with Venezuela's standing as the U.S.' fourth-largest oil supplier – State Department official Kevin Whitaker refused to close off the possibility of such an extreme and political move.¹¹ “No option is off the table and the Department will continue to study any further action as may be necessary in the future,” he said.¹²



Many of these congressional hearings are fueled by conservative commentators and their increasingly politicized, ideological, and aggressive line on Venezuela. Former Bush administration officials Otto Reich and Roger Noriega regularly demand that the U.S. take a hard line against Venezuela, similar to that which the U.S. has held against Cuba for the last 50 years. In a recent op-ed on Fox News, for example, Noriega repeated allegations of Venezuela using a commercial airliner to import terrorists from the Middle East, failing to admit that no proof has ever been offered for such allegations and that the flight is no longer in operation.¹³ Noriega is currently a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, which was a central element in driving the U.S. war against Iraq.¹⁴

THE PALMER AFFAIR

Some of the existing difficulties in the relationship between Venezuela and the U.S. date back to 2010 and the appointment of Larry Palmer as U.S. ambassador to Venezuela. When the Obama administration proposed Palmer for this post, the Venezuelan government quickly gave its approval within 24 hours. But in written responses to questions posed by the U.S. Senate, Palmer made a number of questionable comments about Venezuela's internal affairs, including comments on morale within Venezuela's armed forces.¹⁵

In the wake of the responses, the Venezuelan government was careful in evaluating the situation but was left with no option other than to state that Palmer could not serve in the post. In a statement, the Venezuelan Foreign Ministry called Palmer's statements "unacceptable."¹⁶

Considering his overtly political responses – especially those that touched on sensitive internal matters – there was little hope that Palmer could serve as a trusted interlocutor for the complex relationship between the two countries. Regardless, in January 2011, President Chávez stated that he welcomed another nominee to be appointed for the post.¹⁷ In late July, *The Washington Post*, which admitted that Palmer was "not confirmable," noted that a replacement was being sought.¹⁸

THE 2012 ELECTIONS

This recent aggression from sectors in the Obama administration and the U.S. legislature coincides with presidential elections in 2012 in both the U.S. and Venezuela. During past U.S. presidential campaigns, candidates have taken increasingly aggressive positions on Venezuela, and it seems likely that the trend will continue to deflect pressure coming from extremist sectors and Cold War-minded politicians such as Mack.

Additionally, the elections in Venezuela – Chávez won in 1998, 2000, and 2006 – provide another opportunity for the U.S. to interfere in the country's internal affairs. According to U.S. embassy cables published by Wikileaks, throughout 2009 the U.S. embassy in Caracas was requesting and distributing millions of dollars to opposition political groups throughout Venezuela.¹⁹ In one particular cable, Charge D'Affaires in the U.S. embassy in Caracas John Caulfield requested an additional \$3 million to "increase outreach efforts to newly elected state and municipal governments, as well as to continue programs to strengthen civil society and prepare for the next round of elections in 2010."

These revelations verified complaints long made by the Venezuelan government that the U.S. was interfering in its internal affairs.²⁰ It seems that this is still the case: the 2012 budget submitted to Congress by Obama went so far as to request \$5 million for "civic organizations" in Venezuela.²¹

A COMPLEX, YET MANAGEABLE RELATIONSHIP

Over the last decade, Venezuela and the U.S. have had a complex yet manageable relationship – at least when the U.S. did not attempt to test it with politicized reports, sanctions and meddling in internal affairs.

While the Obama administration initially offered positive words that gave hope for normalized relations, recent actions such as those described above have again hindered progress on repairing the relationship.



Despite positive moves from Venezuela – such as the quick acceptance of Palmer when he was first proposed – actions in 2011 show that elements within the U.S. government stuck in a Cold War mindset are leading the charge in establishing U.S. policy toward Latin America and, particularly, Venezuela.

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This is regretful considering the vibrant people-to-people links that have long animated the relationship between the U.S. and Venezuela. In 2010-2011, over 50 Venezuelans played on Major League Baseball teams in the U.S., second only to the Dominican Republic in terms of foreign-born players on U.S. teams. Over 200 have played in the U.S. since 1949. Additionally, prominent Venezuelans occupy important cultural positions throughout the U.S., such as Gustavo Dudamel, the Venezuelan-born director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.

Venezuela has also played a vital role as a consistent supplier of oil to the U.S. Venezuela provides the U.S. with 1.5 million barrels of oil per day, and the Citgo Petroleum Corporation owned by Venezuela's state oil company runs three refineries that produce 117 million barrels of gasoline per day that are distributed at over 13,000 retail locations. Citgo has also provided discounted heating oil to approximately 500,000 individuals every winter since 2005, when a group of U.S. senators asked big oil to do so. Among the recipients of that assistance are more than 250 tribal communities and 234 homeless shelters across 25 states and the District of Columbia.

Just as Venezuela and Colombia have forged close and mutually beneficial ties despite ideological differences between President Hugo Chávez and President Juan Manuel Santos, nothing more than mutual respect and sensitivity toward internal matters is needed for the U.S. to begin improving its relations with Venezuela.

Sources: Links to sources can be found by clicking on footnoted numbers.

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