

NOREF Expert Analysis

Aiding Venezuela's transition

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Executive summary

In his second inaugural address President Obama pledged a more prudent, reasonable and constructive foreign policy. He suggested that Washington can or should be ready to adapt to the new dynamics of a rapidly shifting international political economy. How this potential new direction for U.S. foreign policy will work in practice will be demonstrated in the case of Venezuela. This South American country is expected to undergo an inevitable transition, owing to the health problems of the controversial President Hugo Chávez.

The example of Venezuela is likely to be an interesting test case of this potential new approach to world politics, in general, and inter-American diplomacy, in particular. The author situates the Venezuelan case in the broader context of U.S.–Latin American relations. It is time to evaluate how Washington and Latin America, separately or together, cope with the latest political experiences in the Americas.

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Introduction

In his second inaugural address President Barack Obama stated: "We will show the courage to try and resolve our differences with other nations peacefully – not because we are naïve about the dangers we face, but because engagement can more durably lift suspicion and fear ... We will renew those institutions that extend our capacity to manage crisis abroad, for no one has a greater stake in a peaceful world than its most powerful nation. We will support democracy from Asia to Africa, from the Americas to the Middle East, because our interests and our conscience compel us to act on behalf of those who long for freedom ... Peace in our time requires the constant advance of those principles that our common creed describes: tolerance and opportunity, human dignity and justice". His was a succinct and unmistakable call for prudent, flexible, reliable and constructive world engagement. Instead of demanding adjustment by others to whatever the United States wishes or decides, he is suggesting that Washington can or should be ready to adapt to the new dynamics of a rapidly shifting international political economy.

A test of this potential new approach to U.S. foreign policy is not far away, in either space or time: the capacity to transform words into deeds will be demonstrated in the case of Venezuela. In the coming days or weeks, or possibly months, this South American country will witness a process of leadership transition because of the physical or political demise of President Hugo Chávez. Therefore, it is time to evaluate how Washington and Latin America, separately or together, cope with the latest revolutionary experience in the Americas. In that context, the historical record may help understand the pressing need to alter Washington's long-time reaction to major attempts at profound and drastic transformation in the area.

From the end of the Second World War up to the present day, Latin America has known several radical regimes: some of them of a Marxist persuasion, such as the Cuban revolutionary government since 1959 and the Sandinista one in Nicaragua of 1978–1990; some of them leaning broadly to the left, such as the Allende government in Chile of 1970–1973; some of

them with a high-profile nationalism, such as the Bolivian experience of 1952–1964; some others of a more populist brand, such as the two Peronist governments in Argentina from the mid-1940s to the mid-1950s; and even others of a hybrid populist–socialist variety, such as the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela since the late 1990s. Hard-line containment, aggressive political and military roll-back and overt or covert promotion of regime change have been different means deployed by the U.S. in order to stifle revolution and suppress a potential domino effect in Latin America during the height of the Cold War. The end result was the postponement of Latin America democracy, the impossibility of channelling change by moderate reformism, an unhealthy stimulus to militarism and a growing anti-U.S. sentiment throughout the region. Needless to say, none of those radical challenges seriously affects vital U.S. national security interests. Even today, in the relations between Caracas and Washington, a nuanced, intricate and mercurial mixture of material *modus vivendi* – derived from the central importance of importing energy (for the U.S.) and manufactures (for Venezuela) – and political *modus pugnandi* – due mainly to relevant differences on foreign policy – has been, in fact, the norm.

What will be the case regarding Hugo Chávez's self-styled "socialism of the twenty-first century" showcase? How will Washington cope with his legacy? What is to be done in a global context and a continent-wide environment that is significantly different from the old days of the Cold War? Apart from privately and publicly repeating that Chávez is the new "bad guy" around the Americas, has anyone in Washington a sound proposal to manage a very complex spot at the heart of Latin America? When will Washington be serious and co-sponsor a constructive policy regarding a major issue in the inter-American agenda? Will Venezuela become the showcase or the basket case of U.S.–Latin American diplomacy?

One option that Washington may have with respect to events and dynamics in Caracas is to be plainly and completely passive. Civilians in the U.S. may be short of ideas and unable to act because of other major concerns, both domestic and foreign; bureaucratic inertia; lack of any innovation in the State Department and the

White House with regard to the region in general; and absence of key, influential individuals with strategic thinking on Latin America at the level of the executive in Washington. Such an eventuality will encourage, once more, the Pentagon and the U.S. Southern Command to become the “leading” agencies in dealing with Latin American affairs. Despite this, Washington’s hands-off attitude vis-à-vis Caracas may backfire if the Venezuelan transition degenerates into disorder and even chaos. The U.S., under Republicans and Democrats alike, abhors out-of-control situations, be they in the short or medium term, close to or distant from Washington. In that sense, sooner rather than later some important U.S. objectives in Venezuela, the Andean Ridge and South America as a whole will be affected by inactivity; that, in turn, may produce a blind overreaction on the part of some (civilian and military) policy-makers in Washington and, thus, make a potentially turbulent transition even worse.

Another option may be to develop a policy of soft pressure and mounting encirclement of Venezuela waiting for the death of the president and supporting any alternative (civilian or military) to *chavismo sin Chávez* (chavismo without Chávez). The underlying notion behind this option is that continuity within Venezuelan politics – something that Venezuela may actually need right now in order to avoid an institutional crisis – is considered harmful to the U.S. in the long term. However, this policy has two likely effects: it would, once again, prove Washington’s inability to handle radical change in the area and it would weaken the opposition groups, which would be seen, in Venezuela and many Latin American countries, as mere puppets of the United States. There may be varieties of *chavismo sin Chávez*, some (or even many) of which will not necessarily end up in apocalyptic diplomacy between Caracas and Washington.

A third option may be more hawkish: to initiate, with a little help from some friends in the neighbourhood, the old policies of containment plus roll-back. However, in reality, there are no longer any active anti-chavista proxies in the vicinity: Felipe Calderón is out of power in Mexico, President Ricardo Martinelli of Panama is facing considerable difficulties at home and President Juan Manuel Santos needs Venezuelan support

(particularly from the new leadership in Caracas) to finally achieve peace in Colombia, where a new round of bilateral negotiations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) is in motion. No major or small nation is willing to alienate Caracas diplomatically or to provoke Venezuela militarily; most countries in Latin America have benefited from the lavish purse of Hugo Chávez and they do not want to upset his successors. For most countries in Central America, the Caribbean, the Andean Ridge and the Southern Cone, these are good times not for “preventative” criticism of Venezuela but for prudent accommodation with Caracas. Even in the U.S. it is uncertain today who are the individuals and which specific agencies will openly sponsor a hard-line, consistent and active policy to manage a traumatic transition in Venezuela.

An additional option for President Barack Obama may be to rhetorically promote a “new beginning” for Venezuelans, using this particular case to stimulate a sort of right-wing “Western Hemisphere Spring” in the Americas. This will be a disguised and allegedly soft form of regime change. However, again, no country in the region – least of all Brazil – wants a new focus of instability in South America nor will any domestic constituency in the area back its own government’s endorsement of such a U.S. stratagem. In addition, this option is extremely dangerous; for example, an attempt to indirectly encourage or welcome a sort of “benevolent coup” – a repetition of the failure to remove the president by force in 2002 – would most probably end this time in a civil war. How can that scenario be beneficial to the Americas in general, and to Washington in particular? Why is a country out of control better than one with a modicum of stability? Only a small number of hard-core neoconservatives, obsessive military personnel with their own agenda or self-proclaimed morally righteous liberals can sponsor such a bankrupt alternative. The consequence of this course of action will quite possibly be Washington’s isolation in the inter-American system and the final breakup of institutions such as the Organization of American States.

Now, instead of waiting for containment or roll-back or regime change to work it may be time for the U.S. to rethink its overall strategy in relation to Chávez’s revolution and its aftermath. A practical

and quiet diplomacy of “peaceful coexistence” with the new phase of the Bolivarian Revolution, in which the U.S. combines valuable inducements and carefully formulated demands with respect for the genuine evolution of an imperfect democracy in Venezuela, is possible and viable. Politics should be handled by the State Department in Washington and not by the U.S. Southern Command in Miami. The United States must use the opportunity of leadership transition in Venezuela to re-assess the necessity of a genuine political dialogue with Latin America. There may be a room for concert diplomacy, involving, for example, the U.S., Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia and Cuba, in order to discreetly back the transition. A sound overall strategy can be designed and implemented if dogmatism, preconception and parochialism are set aside. All the parties mentioned have, to different degrees and extents, key interests in Venezuela, and most of these diverse interests may be managed in a positive manner. Neither Washington nor Latin America needs a source of disorder, polarisation and fragmentation in the Americas. There are too many hotspots in the world right now, while Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean are in the midst of severe stability problems due to the expansion of drug use, organised crime and daily violence.

A mixture of incentives and restraints should be planned over a lengthy period of time. The key to a successful transition in Venezuela is to avoid extremism; stimulate bargaining attitudes among various opposing key domestic actors; contribute to strengthening democracy; avoid calls upon the military to “do something” (which is a way of calling for a direct intervention in politics); and facilitate creative political schemes. A return to

liberal democracy is not easily attainable, nor perhaps desirable, for different reasons. First, Venezuela, like many other Latin American countries, has witnessed – especially during the 1990s – the manifestation of forms of illiberal democracy: even though there have been regular elections since 1958, the rule of law, the division of powers and a strong respect for basic civil rights have been very deficient. Neoliberal economics just exacerbated a tendency towards formal instead of substantive pluralism. Second, the high concentration of power in the executive and individuals with personal charisma, together with unprecedented oil revenues, state-sponsored social inclusion and active mobilisation of new social sectors, has become a stimulus – not without shortcomings and contradictions – for centrally controlled, participatory democracy: a mode of politics costly to reverse if the idea is to move backwards to the old Venezuela of the traditional bipartisan politics. Third, it is important to allow for experimentation in terms of how to improve social and material democracy without leaning towards authoritarianism: a thin line that Chávez has repeatedly crossed, and chavismo may again.

A balanced and thoughtful blend of pragmatism and principle instead of ideology and Cold War reflexes should be the general guidelines in dealing with post-Chávez Venezuela and aiding the transition in the country. In the end, in his new term of office President Obama has the chance to modify his country's typical policies vis-à-vis change, radicalism and volatility in Latin America: that is the breadth of the challenge to the U.S. (and the opportunity for Latin America) at this time.