Fundación **Ideas para la Paz**

Siguiendo el conflicto: hechos y análisis de la semana
Número 53/ 1 de abril de 2008

The Sources of Chávez's Conduct

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George Kennan's classic work on US strategy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct", recently marked its 60th anniversary.[1] The text, which served as the theoretical underpinning for the West's containment policy for decades to come, is a clear example of a successful attempt to overcome the strategic bewilderment of American diplomatic thought when confronted with an ascending power that pursued unconventional foreign policy objectives with unorthodox methods. Thus, much of the Kennan's merit lies in his ability to propose a new line of thinking and a new course of action in response to an emerging international actor that required a novel political response.

After almost a decade of co-existence with the Bolivarian regime of President Hugo Chávez, it could be argued that an intellectual effort parallel to Kennan's is long overdue if Colombia is to understand the international behavior of its wealthiest and most important neighbor. This is not to suggest, of course, any similarity between Stalin's Russia and Chávez's Venezuela. Without a doubt, postwar Europe and 21st century Latin America are two very different scenarios. However, Kennan's text illustrates how the emergence of a State that is determined to radically modify the international status quo requires new foreign policy strategies, based on a careful examination of the said state's motivations and objectives.

With this in mind, two questions arise. First, how different is the Bolivarian revolution from the other governments that have traditionally dominated the Latin American setting? Second, how important is this to Colombian-Venezuelan relations? Both questions are of critical importance. Since Hugo Chávez took the reins of government, Venezuela's strategic importance for Colombian affairs has grown in every conceivable form. The volume of trade between the two countries has skyrocketed, with Caracas receiving close to 15 percent of Bogotá's exports, totaling over $5.2 billion in 2007. Likewise, President Chávez's visibility within the Colombian political arena has also increased, insofar as his Bolivarian discourse of Latin American integration accords a central place to the political association of Bogota and Caracas. Above all, however, the Venezuelan head of state was catapulted into a leading role on the Colombian domestic political scene in September 2007, when the Uribe administration authorized him to serve as a mediator with the FARC to get the "humanitarian exchange" moving again. This involved the release of military and political hostages held by the guerrillas in exchange for the release of a number of the terrorist organization's imprisoned militants.

The great paradox is that this growing involvement of the two countries was the prelude to the biggest crisis in the history of Colombian-Venezuelan relations, an empirical negation of the theories of "positive engagement" that underpinned the decades-long Colombian strategy of stimulating economic and social connections between the countries as the antidote to the revival of an old strategic rivalry. President Chávez saw his attempts to untangle the humanitarian exchange, a first step to the opening of peace negotiations with FARC, thwarted on three separate occasions. Each episode in the history of frustrated mediation was followed by an uproar that strained bilateral relations. The first such episode took place in mid-November, when Chávez's attempt to establish a demilitarized zone in Pradera and Florida (two municipalities in the Valle del Cauca state) by communicating directly with Colombia's top Army officer, caused Bogotá to cancel his role a mediator

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in the "humanitarian exchange". This was followed by Caracas' decision to "freeze" relations with Colombia. The second episode took place in late December, as Chávez attempted to regain some ground in the Colombian conflict by playing a role in the unilateral release of three hostages by FARC, including Emmanuel, a baby born in captivity that became a national symbol of FARC's kidnapping victims. That initiative failed after the Colombian government denounced the guerrillas for promising that they would release the minor when he was already in government hands, having been turned over to them by a peasant. The third episode took place in early March, when President Chávez announced his intention to present a peace proposal for the Colombian conflict during the summit meeting of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) planned for the end of the month in Cartagena.[2] The proposal never saw the light of day, as the death of a member of FARC's Secretariat, "Raul Reyes," led to a regional crisis.

The Ideological Roots of the Bilateral Crisis

The deterioration in bilateral relations during a period marked by a spectacular growth of bilateral trade and a multiplication of Venezuelan peace proposals appears to be contradictory. However, the explanation is not difficult to find if one accepts the importance of a factor that was said to be dead and buried in the rubble of the Berlin Wall on the international conduct of States. That factor is ideology. Put another way, the tumultuous period through which Colombian-Venezuelan relations have passed is an example in practice of the old principle according to which foreign policies of government tend to be a reflection of their domestic programs. The revolutionary character of a regime, then, implies a willingness not only to upset the domestic political equilibrium but also to change the international order according to its ideological propositions. So, a revolutionary government on the domestic front is also a revisionist government abroad, similar to Henry Kissinger's concept of a "revolutionary power."[3] Viewing the Bolivarian regime in Caracas from this perspective suggests that the unfolding crisis that has marred bilateral relations is not the result of bad luck or personal differences between the two heads of state, but rather the opposite: a structural conflict fed by the determination of President Chávez to expand his revolutionary project.

The question is defining up to what point Venezuela's conduct of international relations is determined by the ideological foundations upon which the political architecture of the regime has been erected. In principle, the rhetoric and international actions of Hugo Chávez are sufficient to argue that the entire Venezuelan foreign policy is at the service of the revolution. It would be difficult, then, to find any other reason than the most extreme anti-imperialist discourse to explain the overtures to the Ahmidinejad's Iran.[4] Likewise, only a determination to promote Latin American unity as a central piece of his ideological project could justify the launching of a massive program of economic aid to the government of Evo Morales in Bolivia.[5]

At least three arguments can be put forward to refute the weight of ideology in Venezuela's international conduct. First is the hypothesis that Chávez' political message is only a product of his eccentric character. Next, it is possible to affirm that the Bolivarian leader's discourse hides great doses of pragmatism. Finally, it can be argued that the ideas proposed by the Venezuelan head of state lack political coherence. However, none of these arguments in and of themselves contradict the revolutionary character of the Caracas foreign policy.

For starters, the general perception of a political leader as eccentric not only does not contradict his revolutionary nature but is often merely a symptom that the political establishment has not understood his intentions. Recall the disdain of many heads of state toward the discourse of a youthful Fidel Castro, who came to New York to speak to the UN General Assembly in 1960 and ended his visit sleeping in a hotel in Harlem. Neither does it appear that a dose of pragmatism is incompatible with some profound ideological convictions. Here we find the case of the Ayatollahs in Iran who accepted supplies of weapons from Israel to face the Iraqi invasion at the beginning of the 1980s. Finally, it is worth reviewing that ideological projects do not have to be coherent to determine the political behavior of those who defend them. In fact, the combination of socialism and Islamic principles espoused by Col Muammar al-Qadhafi in the Green Book was quite a jumble, but he defined key aspects of the Libyan foreign policy such as support for radical groups from Northern Ireland to the Philippines.

"Twenty-First Century Socialism"

If the influence of ideology on the behavior of President Chávez is accepted, it is essential to define at least the key features of his political scheme to be able to understand the guiding threads of his international actions.[6] It is possible to speak of a set of ideas that comprises the basis of what the Venezuelan head of state has baptized with the moniker "Twenty-first Century Socialism":

a) In terms of domestic policy, the Bolivarian project is based on the direct relationship of Hugo Chávez

as head of the revolution with the masses. This direct relation, however, allows for the mediating role of the revolutionary party articulating popular support and for the armed forces as the backbone of the State. The alliance of *caudillo* and people fuels a political project that encompasses everything that is good, from social justice to environmental protection, making it impossible for legitimate interests to exist that oppose the revolution. In this fashion, the absence of space for difference of opinion legitimates authoritarianism.

b) Speaking in economic terms, the *Chavista* project appears to be aimed at the construction of a State-controlled economy, which does not proscribe private property but subordinates business initiative and intervenes in markets in order to improve people's living conditions and defend national interests.

c) As for foreign policy, the regime is committed to building Latin American unity as a Bolivarian, socialist, and anti-imperialist program. This necessitates the extension of the call to revolution to the entire continent and requires that the United States and its allies in the region be confronted and defeated. In other words, the Bolivarian revolution is essentially a continental project that must transcend Venezuelan borders or fail.

Ideology and Foreign Policy

The ideological division between Colombia and Venezuela has made the convergence of interests between the two countries more apparent than real. Thus, Bogotá and Caracas have been able to agree on the need to grow bilateral trade or progress toward a humanitarian exchange, but they are pursuing disparate strategic objectives underlying these supposedly common goals. The Colombian government is viewing export growth as a strictly economic matter; however, the choice of a socialist-style project renders it impossible for the Bolivarian regime to view commerce in the same fashion. Instead, it is seen as a strategic instrument that has the potential to stimulate integration between the countries while offering a way to influence the domestic policy of its neighbor. The positions of the two governments during the successive bilateral crises are the best evidence of this divergent view of trade. While Bogota tried to protect economic ties from the political ups and downs, Caracas systematically used the pressure tactic of threatening to close the border.

Something similar can be said about the "humanitarian exchange." Both presidents doubtless had a genuine concern about the fate of the hostages held by the FARC. But the similarities end there. In fact, for the Uribe administration, the search for an agreement to obtain the release of the kidnap victims was a humanitarian matter that did not necessarily involve the commencement of a peace process with the guerrillas. Moreover, if the exchange worked as a prelude to some broader talks in the end, the Colombian government understood their sole purpose to be the demobilization of the guerrillas and an end to the violence.

President Chávez, on the other hand, viewed the "humanitarian exchange" as an initiative with a deeper political content that served the purposes of his revolutionary project. Thus, it was an opportunity to press for negotiations with the FARC in which the commitment to end the violence would be conditioned on radical modifications to the political and economic system of the country according to Bolivarian precepts, a process leading to the imposition of a "Twenty-first Century Socialism" in Colombia. This view of "humanitarian exchange" as merely an instrumental commitment serving a political project should not be considered surprising if the ideological closeness of the FARC and the revolutionary regime in Caracas are taken into account. The guerrillas have reiterated their sympathy for Hugo Chávez' plans for Venezuela on numerous occasions. In the same vein, the Venezuelan president has described the guerrilla movements as "insurgent forces that have a political project, that have a Bolivarian project, which is respected here." This affinity explains the determination of Chávez to award belligerency status to the FARC.

The Clash of Two Ideological Projects

What we have outlined thus far allows us to state that the deterioration in the Colombian-Venezuelan relations is the outcome of a clash between their political projects. Thus, the wave of crises in bilateral relations has not been caused by circumstances such as the individual personalities of those involved in decision-making or the errors committed by one of the parties. Factors present in the immediate situation can undoubtedly explain why an explosion of tension occurs at a given moment, but the motor of the successive bilateral crises is found in the inevitable clash between the thrust of Caracas to expand its revolutionary project to Colombia and the resistance from Bogota to being subjected to the dream of "Bolivarian unity."

This conclusion has decisive strategic implications for the future of bilateral relations. First, the current bilateral tensions cannot be seen as whimsical; they are, rather, a signal that the nature of the bilateral links has undergone a structural change. One of the terms of the equation -the Venezuelan State- is

no longer an actor that favors the *status quo* and has begun to behave as a revolutionary power. As a consequence, dialogues such as those held by Presidents Uribe, Chávez, and Correa at the last summit in Santo Domingo can reduce the tensions temporarily but will not resolve the essential antagonism that underlies the deterioration of the relations.

This situation promises to continue as long as the Bolivarian regime holds the expansion of the revolution to be the central axis of its foreign policy. Even prior to his rise to power, the political message used by Hugo Chávez to gain legitimacy and win social support in Venezuela was the promise of a continental movement devoted to building a unified and socialist Latin America. To renounce the propagation of the revolution would, therefore, be tantamount to accepting that the Bolivarian project is unfeasible. As a consequence, abandoning foreign revolutionary action and accepting the international *status quo* would be more than a defeat on the international front; it would represent an upheaval that could affect the foundations of the regime and put its survival at risk.

Crisis in the Revolution?

The Bolivarian revolution does not seem to be experiencing its most heady moments these days. The victory of the "no" side in the referendum last December, in which the transformation of Venezuela into a socialist state was put to the vote, was the first defeat for Hugo Chávez in nine consecutive elections.[7] This major setback has been accompanied by serious economic problems. The year 2007 closed with an inflation rate of 22.5 percent and some unofficial estimates place this year's January price increases at around 6 percent.[8] Meanwhile, the scarcity of basic products has continued to grow over the past months, with a perception of scarcity that oscillates between 70 and 80 percent in the most disadvantaged sectors of society.

In any case, these political and economic problems do not seem sufficiently critical to collapse the system in the short run. Despite the referendum defeat, the president's overwhelming popular support is undeniable. A total of 49.3 percent (4.5 million) of the votes were cast in favor of the government proposal; furthermore, a certain number of Venezuelans who chose to abstain in the consultation on the constitutional reform might well have supported the president if the vote had been on his continuation in power. With reference to the economy, Venezuela's income from petroleum provides a financial base that can stop the country from sinking into hyperinflation, at least in the short run. At the same time, the government's enormous purchasing power allows it to mitigate the shortages temporarily through massive purchases of consumer products abroad.

All this does not mean that the continuity of Hugo Chávez' government is guaranteed indefinitely. The reality is that prospects for the regime depend on the evolution of petroleum income, and this is a terrain where two critical uncertainties hold sway. First, the volatility in the price of a barrel, which has broken the $100 barrier but which is not immune to significant future declines. A second consideration is the deterioration of the infrastructure in the national energy sector, which has seen its capacity to extract crude drop by 30 percent as a result of the deficient management since President Chávez came to power.[9] In any case, while significant threats, neither the estimates on the price of crude nor the conditions of energy infrastructure seem to have reached a point that augers an immediate economic collapse.

Under these circumstances, the Bolivarian regime and its revolutionary foreign policy promise to remain around long enough to demand a review of Colombian foreign policy toward its most important neighbor. This reformulation of the strategy toward Venezuela is more urgent if one takes into account the inevitable impact that the ideological tensions between the countries will have on the evolution of Colombia's internal conflict. Six years of pressure from the Security Forces have pushed the activities of Colombia's illegal armed groups from the richer regions toward the border areas, where the government's military action is complicated by the option these groups have to take refuge in the territory of neighboring countries. As a result, the control of the borders promises to become a key challenge for efforts to pacify the country.

The problem is that it does not seem realistic for Colombia to expect the desired-for type and strength of commitment in the struggle against the guerrillas from Venezuela. President Chávez thinks that the FARC are worthy of political recognition and has made a strategic choice aimed at creating the conditions for the Colombian conflict to be brought to an end through a negotiated agreement and not through the total military defeat of the guerrillas. So, the ideological gap between the governments makes it impossible for Bogota to reply on Caracas when called upon to cooperate in the struggle against terrorism. Therefore, Colombia will have to devise a security strategy that takes into consideration the likelihood that the neighboring country will assume a stance toward

the guerrillas that oscillates between passivity and active complacency.

This challenge is more complex insofar as President Chávez has knit a network of effective alliances throughout the entire region. This is the main lesson that can be drawn from the recent crisis, during which Venezuela was able to set itself up rapidly as the leader of an anti-Colombia front that included Ecuador and Nicaragua. Certainly, this alliance was cemented in quite concrete interests and complicit associations. However, would it not be convenient to downplay the political coincidences that have brought Chávez, Correa and Ortega together. United by pragmatic interests, the three also share the nationalism and anti-liberalism of the Bolivarian message.

What Is To Be Done?

All these changes in the regional scenario have made it essential to review the strategic posture of Bogota. From this perspective, Colombia must prepare itself for a structurally-based, heightened conflict with Venezuela. This assumption should be the starting point for the design of a new line of action to make future bilateral tensions manageable and to promote some acceptable level of cooperation, given the differences that separate the governments.

Measures should be studied and implemented in three areas:

a) The security policy should be rethought in recognition of the fact that new challenges exist on the international stage. This effort should move in the direction of equipping the Military Forces with a minimum dissuasive capacity with the aim of preventing any neighboring country from having such an overwhelming military superiority so as to condition the political conduct of the State through the threat of aggression. At the same time, a program of Confidence-Building Measures should be put in practice among the regions' capitals in order to increase stability in the military balance of power in the Andean countries.

b) The trade strategy with neighboring countries must be reevaluated. Of course, the need to maintain a strong trade flow to Venezuela is undisputable, not only for its financial rewards but also for its value in stabilizing bilateral relations. In any case, it is also a priority to seek alternative markets that can reduce the vulnerability of Colombia's balance of trade to a market like the Venezuelan market that has shown itself to be excessively sensitive to political shifts. In this sense the importance of advancing toward the consolidation of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States can not be overstated, as well as the importance of seeking new trading opportunities for the country. It is also essential to look for legal and political mechanisms to improve the defense of Colombian investments in Venezuela.

c) Foreign policy should be modified with an eye to ending Colombia's isolation in the region. Beyond the axis Venezuela-Ecuador-Nicaragua, countries such as Peru, Chile or Mexico have positions that lie much closer to those of Colombia. In fact, the problem is not a lack of allies in the region but rather the lack of a strategy to form a counterweight to the Bolivarian Bloc. Therefore, two lines of action in foreign affairs should be used simultaneously. On one hand, the relationship with the United States should be consolidated giving greater stability in the long run to cooperation with Washington in political, trade, and security terms. At the same time, however, links with those Latin American capitals with similar political and commercial projects should be increased. The two diplomatic endeavors must be seen as complementary and not competing tasks. In fact, Colombia will have a weightier presence among its Latin American neighbors if a privileged relationship with the United States crystallizes and it becomes a bridge between the northern and southern hemispheres.

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*Notes

[1] X, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, Council of Foreign Relations, July 1947.

[2] President Chávez explicitly announced his intention to use the UNASUR summit to make a new proposal to promote talks between the Colombian government and the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] by pointing out that "I am going to go very respectfully of course, despite the things that have occurred. And at best to make a proposal there. Let's hope President Uribe doesn't get annoyed, but even if he does, I am already headed there," in "Chávez pide trasladar a Ingrid a lugar seguro," *El Universal*, (Caracas), 28 February 2008.

[3] Henry Kissinger, *Un Mundo restaurado* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1973). [In English: *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812-1822* (1957).]

[4] More details on the strategic alliance advocated by President Chávez are found in Benedetta Berti, "Iran Looks for Allies through Asian and Latin American Partnerships," Power and Interest News Report, November 2007, on http://www.pinr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=726&language_id=1.

[5] Although it is evident that the Venezuelan government has made massive disbursements of foreign aid to allied governments in the region and further afield, there are discrepancies as to the exact sum invested in this type of activity. In any case, some figures are available in Gustavo Coronel, "The Corruption of Democracy in Venezuela", PetroleumWorld.com, 9 March 2008, http://www.petroleumworld.com/sf08030901.htm

[6] For a more extensive analysis of the ideology of the Bolivarian regime in Venezuela, see Román D. Ortiz, "Venezuela una revolución en crisis," *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, no. 622 (April 2002). The ideological propositions found in the speeches of Hugo Chávez are collected in Agustín Blanco Muñoz, "Habla el Comandante," Pio Tamayo Lecture (Caracas: CEHA/IIES/FACES/UCV, 1998).

[7] For an analysis of the referendum results see Ana María San Juan, "Referéndum del 2D en Venezuela: Balance y Perspectivas," 22 December 2007, published on http://www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/Ana_Maria_Analisis_2D_en_Venezuela.pdf

[8] Matthew Walter and Steven Bodzin, "Venezuelan Inflation Quickens on Food, Tobacco Prices," Bloomberg, 2 January 2008, see http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601086&refer=latin_america&sid=acsGzdfh2Ztw; also "Preven un estancamiento del nivel de consumo este año", El Universal (Caracas), 23 January 2008.

[9] Joe Carroll, "Venezuelan Oil Output Undermined by Chávez, CERA Says," Bloomberg, 12 February 2008, http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601086&refer=news&sid=aR1myfZNWueI