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Hugo Chávez Eyes Colombia

Ray Walser

On December 2, 2007, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez suffered his first electoral setback. By a slender margin, voters rejected a package of constitutional reforms that would have essentially granted him indefinite tenure in office and consolidated his already ample executive powers. Seemingly sobered, Chávez promised a period of “revision, rectification, and re-launching.”

Yet, Chávez shows no signs of pausing on the foreign policy front. His spat with Colombia and its president, Álvaro Uribe, has deepened. Speaking at a January 26 “summit” in Caracas before leaders from Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Dominica, Chávez accused the United States and Colombia of plotting “military aggression” and urged a run on the U.S. dollar. On January 27, Chávez praised Iran as a “trusted friend” and called for the creation of a military alliance against the U.S. Despite the December 2 defeat, Chávez continues to thrive on the oxygen of confrontational rhetoric and crisis behavior. The United States should strengthen ties with Colombia to prevent Hugo Chávez from realizing his dream of a socialist South America united against the U.S.

Eyes on Colombia, Visions of *Gran Colombia*.

A 24/7 master of the media, Chávez has exploited the hostage situation in Colombia, where hundreds of Colombians, including political figures such as former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt and three American citizens, are being held by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Despite certain missteps, freedom came at last for two hostages—Clara Rojas and Consuelo Gonzalez—on January 10. After a stopover in Caracas to

thank Chávez, the freed hostages were allowed to return to their homes in Colombia. For an instant, Chávez the humanitarian beamed hope into a tragic situation.

On January 11, still riding high from the hostage release, Chávez applauded the FARC’s gesture. He urged Europeans and others to remove the FARC and another Colombian guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), from the ranks of international terrorist organizations. “The FARC and ELN are not terrorists,” Chávez claimed. “They are genuine armies occupying territory and fighting for the Bolivarian cause.” Without diplomatic consultations and in complete disregard of the opinions of the Colombian majority, Chávez attempted to bestow new legitimacy on the discredited narco-terrorists of the FARC.

Mostly overlooked were Chávez’s remarks regarding Colombia. The Venezuelan President waxed eloquent, citing a passage from Nobel Prize-winning Colombian Gabriel Garcia Márquez, confessing to being Colombian at heart, and evoking the memory of *Gran Colombia*.

Most Americans likely think *Gran Colombia* is either a brand of coffee or some tropical luxury

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resort. In fact, it was the short-lived union of the former Spanish colonies of Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela that was wrested away from Spain by the Great Liberator Simón Bolívar in the 1810s. The 1831 break-up of *Gran Colombia* remains a key example of Latin America's fragmentation and its failure to sustain political union.

Through his rhetoric, President Chávez tries to bridge the past and the present. While he calls for the creation of "socialism of the 21st century," he is also advocate and architect of the Bolivarian Revolution, a political and economic appeal for Latin Americans to overcome centuries of fragmentation in order to unite against the hegemonic "imperialism" of the United States.

When it comes to Bolívar, Chávez's admiration appears boundless. Whether renaming his country the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, keeping an empty chair at the cabinet table for Bolívar, or ordering exhumation of the Liberator's bones to determine if he was poisoned, Chávez demonstrates a fixation with his hero's legacy. "We will," Chávez announced in Cuba on December 21, 2006, "make [José] Martí's and [Simón] Bolívar's dreams true, with several republics united into a single nation."

Does Chávez Have a Plan? Skeptics ask whether Chávez's ambition to recreate *Gran Colombia* is just a flight of fancy; idle rhetoric. But Chávez has already taken several steps in what appears to be his plan to become a player in Colombia's internal politics. Other steps, as noted below, would follow between now and 2010.

1. ***Whitewash the FARC and ELN so they appear to be legitimate contenders in a civil conflict.*** Gloss over the FARC's murderous past, its kidnapping and hostage-taking, its acts of extortion, and its deep involvement in cocaine trafficking. Minimize discussion about the FARC's forced recruitment of minors and its extensive use of land mines and terrorist attacks. Focus on emotional, humanitarian issues. Make it appear that the Colombian government rejects compromise and wants to wage an endless war against a legitimate political force. Convey the image that the FARC and ELN are "peoples' armies," Bolivarian forces fighting against foreigners—Green Berets and DEA agents—and an out-of-control Colombian Army.
2. ***Keep up a steady drumbeat aimed at discrediting Colombian President Álvaro Uribe.*** Denounce him as "the sad pawn of American imperialism." Encourage the belief that Colombia is governed by a rightist clique with unbreakable links to paramilitaries, that the war on drugs is a failure, that Colombia's conflict is hopelessly militarized, and that the defeat of the guerrillas is a military impossibility. Argue that the path to stability and true peace requires a negotiated outcome, perhaps granting territorial guarantees and even power-sharing concessions to the FARC and ELN in exchange for entry into the political arena.
3. ***Undermine U.S. efforts to bolster security and prosperity in Latin America.*** Pronounce Plan Colombia a failure because it has militarized the conflict but failed to curb cocaine production sufficiently. Continue to denounce U.S.-style free trade pacts as advancing "savage capitalism" and harmful to the interests of the American and Colombian people. Seize upon the sentiments of Americans that the current administration has gone too far in exporting jobs. Encourage the U.S. Congress to ignore or refuse to ratify the Trade Promotion Agreement (TPA) with Colombia.
4. ***Portray the U.S. as an unreliable strategic and trade partner.*** Capitalize on the fallout from the U.S. Congress's failure to pass the U.S.–Colombian TPA. Keep up the pressure on Colombia to join with Venezuela in regional economic integration by offering trade and energy deals. By playing the peace card and winning further hostage releases from the FARC, build momentum behind a unified peace candidate of the Left for the 2010 presidential elections.
5. ***Utilize secret sources of political funding and the illicit proceeds from the narcotics trade to influence political outcomes in the 2010 Colombian elections.***
6. ***In the aftermath of the Left's electoral victory in Colombia, urge the creation of a new political entity; an Andean confederation or, as a concession to the Colombians and in memory of Simón Bolívar's immortal legacy, Gran Colombia.***

Conclusion. Chávez has argued that the road to South American integration runs through Colombia. Consumed by the fires of his passion and conviction, he is not afraid to speak what he thinks, even if others are hesitant to listen. The setback of the December constitutional referendum appears to have only intensified his foreign policy ambitions. Armed with substantial oil resources and a “bully pulpit,” helped by fresh uncertainty about the U.S. economy and the strength of the dollar, Chávez is

poised to up the ante in a geo-political poker contest. The United States, especially Congress, must respond by strengthening its bonds with the Colombian people and solidifying trade and security ties with its important Andean partner.

—Ray Walser is Senior Policy Analyst for Latin America in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.