

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 3198  
March 18, 2011

## President Obama in Latin America: Put Hugo Chavez on the Agenda

*Ray Walser, Ph.D.*

President Obama undertakes his March 19–23 trip to Latin America at a time when the international scene is in enormous flux. In three stops—Brazil, Chile, and El Salvador—the President will send an upbeat message of equal partnership and offer broader U.S. engagement in Latin America.

President Obama will meet with three leaders whose views count when it comes to the state of democracy in the Americas. White House strategists claim to see connections between the democratic transitions that occurred in Latin America in the 1980s and the current aspirations for democracy in the Arab world. There is a danger, however, that the President will overlook the imminent threat to democracy and security posed by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Raising the Chavez threat while in Latin America may not be on the President's agenda, but it should be.

**Missing: A Chavez Strategy.** In 2008, Dan Restrepo, then an analyst at the Center for American Progress, advised Washington policymakers to cease “obsessing” about Chavez.<sup>1</sup> Today Restrepo, senior director for Latin America at the National Security Council, argues that Chavez's influence is on the wane and optimistically predicts that the President's visit will make life harder for Chavez and those “who try to make a living on an anti-American sentiment.”

Despite an unscheduled and friendly encounter between Chavez and Obama at the April 2009 Summit of the Americas, relations between the two countries continue to sour. Since 2009, Chavez has

worked overtime to marginalize, silence, exile, or jail political opponents. He has virtually obliterated all traditional checks and balances, concentrating power in his own hands.

The September 2010 legislative election in Venezuela demonstrated the strength of Chavez's opposition, however. It shattered the illusion that Chavez governs with a consistent majority. Following the election, Chavez moved further to constrain customary democratic practices by employing decree laws. A polarized Venezuela faces growing domestic challenges that range from mounting crime and inflation rates to curtailments of fundamental freedoms. Chavez has engineered what Council of the Americas expert Chris Sabatini labels “an anti-institutional revolution that leaves behind a lawless black hole” that concerns the entire region.

Although the Administration restored relations at the ambassadorial level in 2009, they have again deteriorated following the withdrawal of U.S. Ambassador Patrick Duddy. Chavez very publicly rejected the Obama Administration's nominee Larry Palmer for making comments that the Venezuelan leader deemed disrespectful. In December 2010, the State Department revoked the diplomatic visa

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
<http://report.heritage.org/wm3198>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting  
the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to  
aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

of Venezuelan Ambassador Bernardo Alvarez, creating the current diplomatic impasse.

**Chavez Uses Soft and Hard Power.** Chavez has poured billions of dollars of Venezuela's substantial oil wealth into advancing "socialism of the 21st century." He has bankrolled an assortment of leftist anti-American leaders who belong to his Bolivarian Alternative for Our America (ALBA), an alliance committed to socialism, nationalism, populism, authoritarianism, and anti-Americanism.

Chavez was the intellectual architect of the political confrontation that resulted in the removal of Honduran president Manuel Zelaya from office in June 2009 for his Chavez-like attempt to alter constitutional rules. He is the primary backer of Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega, who moves to claim an irregular extension of his rule in November. In tandem with Fidel and Raul Castro, Chavez has constructed a tighter alliance that helps the Cuban dictators preserve their outdated revolutionary credo and disastrously underproductive command economy. Chavez's assistance lacks transparency and is politically directed to influence potential voters in the region.

Chavez's quest for hard power is reflected in his continued acquisition of an arsenal of Russian-made weapons in the range of \$7 billion to \$10 billion. While security relations have thus far been symbolic—warship and bomber visits—the potential for a Venezuela–Russia tandem in the event of a flare-up adds to tension between the U.S. and Russia. Russia has also offered to help Venezuela start a nuclear program.

**Libya and Iran.** In recent years, Chavez has drawn closer to Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Qadhafi. With the onset of the recent protest and civil war, Chavez and the ALBA camp were quick to align with the Libyan tyrant. As the civil war worsened, Chavez offered mediation rather than condemnation or censure. Driven by his intense

anti-Americanism, Chavez claims that U.S. relations with Libya reflect nothing more than interventionist American ambitions that will lead to \$200-per-barrel oil and a Vietnam-like conflict.

Chavez's support for Iran has long been a central focus of Venezuelan foreign policy. Iran is a vital ally for Chavez in his efforts to weaken U.S. global power and influence. There are serious allegations that Venezuela's national oil monopoly, *Petróleos de Venezuela S.A. (PDVSA)*, is selling refined petroleum products to Iran in violation of the U.S. Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act, an act that is drawing key congressional attention.

**Support for Terrorism and Drug Trafficking Continues.** Chavez's stance on international terrorism has long invited sanction.<sup>2</sup>

In July 2010, the government of Colombia presented a substantial body of proof regarding the presence of Colombian narcoterrorists on Venezuelan soil. While new Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos has pursued a more conciliatory policy toward Venezuela, most security experts believe access to Venezuelan territory and the presence of senior Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) leaders as well as foot soldiers on Venezuelan soil still prolong Colombia's internal conflict.

The 2011 International Narcotics Strategy Control Report notes that Venezuela had "failed demonstrably" to adhere to its obligations under international counternarcotics agreements. It further states that Venezuelan government officials, armed forces, and police are either negligent in the enforcement of anti-drug laws or complicit in narcotics trafficking.

**Time to Speak and Act on Chavez.** The Obama Administration has the ability to highlight Chavez's misdeeds. President Obama should do so in the following ways:

1. Daniel Restrepo, "US–Venezuela Policy: A Reality-Based Approach," Center for American Progress, December 22, 2006, at <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2006/12/pdf/venezuela.pdf> (March 18, 2011).
2. Ray Walser, "State Sponsors of Terrorism: Time to Add Venezuela to the List," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2362, January 20, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/01/State-Sponsors-of-Terrorism-Time-to-Add-Venezuela-to-the-List>.

- **Diplomacy.** The President must raise the issue of Chavez with his democratic counterparts. Before trying to enlist their support for a Middle Eastern democratic revolution, he should keep the focus on the Western Hemisphere, particularly on the perilous state of democracy in Venezuela and the need for a democratic transition in Cuba.
- **Democracy.** With the approach of the 10th anniversary of the signing of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, President Obama must use the upcoming event and the June General Assembly of the Organization of American States to focus on defending the full range of democratic rights guaranteed by the regional body and the Democratic Charter.
- **Sanctions.** President Obama must commit to a full investigation of Chavez's support for Iran and international terrorism. He must be prepared to put legal teeth into the actions needed to preserve security and peace in the Americas.

Counting on Chavez and company to lose influence or self-destruct is wishful thinking. It is time for the Obama Administration to take on Chavez, and the time and place to do it is during the Latin America trip.

—Ray Walser, Ph.D., 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.