

Vysoká škola ekonomická v Praze
Recenzované studie

**Working Papers
Fakulty mezinárodních vztahů**

29/2008

**Motivation and Implications
of Chávez Politics in the Field
of Security and External Policy**

Mariana Nachtigallová

**Faculty of International Relations
Working Papers**

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Volume II



Vysoká škola ekonomická v Praze
Working Papers Fakulty mezinárodních vztahů
Výzkumný záměr MSM6138439909

Tato studie byla vypracována v rámci grantového projektu GAČR č. 407/08/0097 „Typologie levicových režimů v Latinské Americe“. Studie procházejí recenzním řízením.

Název: Working Papers Fakulty mezinárodních vztahů
Četnost vydávání: Vychází minimálně desetkrát ročně
Vydavatel: Vysoká škola ekonomická v Praze
Nakladatelství Oeconomica
Náměstí Winstona Churchilla 4, 130 67 Praha 3, IČO: 61 38 43 99
E 17794
Evidenční číslo MK ČR: 1802-6591
ISSN tištěné verze: 1802-6583
ISSN on-line verze:
ISBN tištěné verze:
Vedoucí projektu: Prof. Ing. Eva Cihelková, CSc.
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Motivation and Implications of Chávez Politics in the Field of Security and External Policy

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Summary:

Before Hugo Chávez became President of Venezuela not much attention was paid to this country. Since that Venezuela has been often on the political agenda and worldwide news. The reason is Hugo Chávez very contradictory politics. This article is devoted to present external and security politics of Venezuela that raises many questions and influences not only Venezuela and its closest neighbors. The article is structured in three sections – analysis of Chávez politics in the field of security and external policy, analysis of Chávez possible motivation explaining his politics and assessment of possible implications his politics may have for Venezuela, the whole region and global situation.

Keywords: Venezuela, Chávez, security policy, external policy

Motivace a důsledky Chávezovy bezpečnostní a vnější politiky

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Abstrakt:

Před tím, než se stal Hugo Chávez prezidentem, nebylo Venezuele věnováno příliš pozornosti. Nyní je Venezuela často předmětem politických jednání a na programu zahraničních zpráv. Důvodem je Chávezova velmi kontroverzní politika. Tento článek je věnován současné vnější a bezpečnostní politice Venezuely, která vzbuzuje mnoho otázek a neovlivňuje pouze Venezuelu a její nejbližší sousedy. Článek je strukturován do tří částí – analýza Chávezovy vnější a bezpečnostní politiky, analýza možné Chávezovy motivace vysvětlující jeho politiku a vyhodnocení možných důsledků, které tato politika může mít pro Venezuelu, region a celý svět.

Klíčová slova: Venezuela, Chávez, bezpečnostní politika, vnější politika

JEL: F50, F51, F52, F53, H56, N46

Content

Introduction	7
1. Today's framework	8
2. Chávez politics in the field of security	9
2.1 Military cooperation.....	9
2.2 Military expenditures	10
2.3 Colombian conflict	11
2.4 Partners across the world.....	11
3. Possible Chávez motivation.....	11
3.1 Strengthening internal position	11
3.2 Strengthening external position	12
3.3 The Colombian Case	13
4. Possible implications on security policy and international relations.....	14
Conclusion.....	16
References	17

Introduction

Since 1958 Venezuela has been considered as the most stable democracy in South America. At the end of 90's the imbalances of the political system were evident and articulated in the party system break down and election of Hugo Chávez Frías for President. First step of the Chávez administration was the adoption of the new Constitution that among others had strengthened Presidential powers. Re-elected for President under the new Constitution¹ in 2000 he launched the Bolivarian Socialist Revolution project. Since 1998 Chávez and his allies won all elections and referendums taking place till December 2007. Re-elected for President at the end of 2006 he proceeded with even more determination and energy in the Bolivarian revolutionary path including nationalizations, extensive social programs and preparation of another constitutional reform strengthening further position of the President. This time Venezuelans refused the suggested changes aiming at concentrating power in the President hands.

Besides strengthening the position on domestic level Chávez is performing an aggressive and provocative external policy including military build up. Since 2004 he visited China, Iran, Syria, Russia, Belarus. Outcomes of these visits were contracts for new military equipment (Russia), transfer of technologies (Iran, China). Venezuela's military build up may ravel out arms races in the region that is historically the least armed subcontinent in the world (SIPRI yearbook 2008). Chávez verbal, political support to FARC and other Latin-American guerilla movement is another very sensitive point influencing the security of the region. No conflict on the subcontinent is managed without Venezuela involvement (e.g. Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia). Chávez doesn't stop at regional level his ambitions are high. He suggested to his Latin-American counterparts to create an alternative to NATO – South American SATO and within the project of ALBA² he repeated the need for ALBA Joint Military Force. By suggesting military cooperation to Russia he stepped to the global arena articulating clearly that Venezuela wants to be global player.

Are the Venezuelan ambitions in the field of external and security policy only part of populist and provocative style of the Venezuelan leader with the aim of strengthening its internal position? Or is the Chávez politics motivated by the ambition of playing more important role in the Latin-American region? Or is Chávez aiming even higher to the global arena? Will Venezuela become one of the important country in the new world multi-polar order? These are FAQs of today political, media and academic circles.

¹ The New Constitution was approved in a referendum in 1999 and came into force in 2000.

² ALBA – Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America and the Caribbean (Alternativa Bolivariana para América Latina y el Caribe) – integration initiative founded by Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba and joint later by Nicaragua, Dominica and St. Vincent and Antigua.

The goal of this article is to analyze Chávez rather strict and strong attitudes and politics in the field of external and security policy. Assess and try to predict possible implications his politics may cause.

1. Today's framework

There exist in the region of South America unsettled border disputes between different states (e.g. Venezuela vs. Guyana, Equator vs. Peru, Bolivia vs. Peru, Chile) but there hasn't been active pressure to solve the dispute in either way recently. The far most serious vivid internal conflict with strong external implications is the civil war in Colombia and its fight with guerilla and paramilitary organizations. Drug trafficking, internal refugees, hostages, military actions carried out on the neighbor territory, all these aspects are influencing the stability of the Andean region. Venezuela as a neighbor doesn't want to stand apart. Chávez shows strong intention to be an active partner in the resolution of the conflict.

Roots of political instability of the Bolivian Government are certainly of internal nature³. But at the moment the Bolivian President Evo Morales accused the U.S. of orchestrating the opposition activities and riots in Eastern Bolivia and supporting the opposition Governors it became an international issue. The Venezuelan President did not wait long to get involved in the conflict. It seems that Hugo Chávez doesn't want to miss any opportunity to show the strong position of Venezuela, demonstrate the fellowship of Latin American countries and to support any of them against the U.S.

South America is historically the least armed region in the world. Following the data of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI yearbook 2008) the military expenditures in the region are steadily growing. Some voices fear the arm racing in the region fueled mainly by Brazil, Venezuela and Colombia.

³ Since 2006 when Evo Morales won the Presidential election as the first indigenous President there is strong opposition against his left oriented politics in the rich Eastern part of the country. Eastern regions of Pando, Beni, Santa Cruz, Tajina rich in natural resources expressed their discontent with the prepared constitutional reform that centralizes power in President's hands, promotes land reform and nationalizing of industry. In September 2008 the opposition protests became violent and 27 people were reported dead September 15, 2008 (www.bbc.com).

2. Chávez politics in the field of security

2.1 Military cooperation

Chávez is a very active Latin-American military cooperation promoter. He is initiating and promoting different military agreements and cooperation platforms. Chávez is promoting not only the idea of military integration of the Latin American region but unification on political and economic level. Ideologically he is referring to Bolívar's heritage (Harnecker 2005:120-121) who tried to unify LA states on federative bases⁴. This aspect of his external politics is very visible on the military cooperation level.

South American Defense Council. Regional military integration had been discussed in the past and Chávez was always big supporter of the idea. The topic was put back on the table recently by Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in relation to the diplomatic crisis sparked by Colombian military incursions into Ecuadorian territory in March this year. Venezuela and Brazil discussed the topic and put it on the program of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR)⁵ summit. At the summit of in May 2008 the member states agreed on proceeding with the topic within next six month and meet in the second half of the year in order to form officially the Council. From the signatory states only Colombia anticipated that it would not participate fully in the Council given the terrorism threats related to the country's civil war.

Chávez and Lula are the main promoters of the military cooperation. Chávez in his rhetoric went even further and suggested: "If a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) exists," he postulated, "why can't a SATO exist, a South Atlantic Treaty Organization?"⁶. Brazil is more moderate and stresses the defense nature of the newly created Council. Beside joint military training and defense bases, a "military industrial integration" should be part of the cooperation. It is quite understandable that Brazil promotes military industry through the agreement as the only producer of military equipment on the subcontinent is the Brazilian EMBRAER.

ALBA Joint Military Force. In January 2008 Chávez with the Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega proposed the Joint Military Force within the ALBA initiative. All ALBA members would participate. This is more ambitious military

⁴ In 1821 Colombian Republic including Colombia, Venezuela and later Ecuador was founded. This republic existed only till 1829 when Venezuela separated and Ecuador separated one year later (Dorazil 1995:346).

⁵ Members of UNASUR are Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Surinam, and Uruguay.

⁶ Chávez said to the press after meeting the Brazilian Defense Minister Nelson Jobim on the April 14 2008 in Caracas, Venezuela news, views and analysis, www.venezuelanalysis.com.

project that the exclusively defense oriented South American Defense Council including joint intelligence, air force, and navy. Chávez talks about the solidarity as the main principle of ALBA, „ ...any member state is attacked all members must act...“ (meeting of Chávez and Ortega in January 2008). Bad news for Chávez came up in June 2008 when the Ecuadorian President Correa refused the possibility to join ALBA.

Military cooperation agreement with Bolivia. In May 2008 Chávez with the Bolivian President Evo Morales signed the “Memorandum of Understanding in the Area of Security and Defense”. This cooperation agreement includes cooperation in training, capacity-building and logistics. The agreement also includes the possible construction of a naval base in Bolivia with Venezuelan assistance.⁷ Chávez has already talked about meeting of the two countries armed forces and supported Bolivian army by providing helicopters to Bolivia and promised to provide up to \$22 million to build 20 military bases in Bolivia (News 2008).

Strategic alliance with Russia. Hugo Chávez visited Russia in July 2008 and called for a strategic alliance with Russia in energy, industry, technology and military sector. After talks held with President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin Chávez announced “...If Russia's armed forces want to be present in Venezuela, they will be given a warm welcome...”. Shortly after the Venezuelan administration denied these words saying that there is no way Russia could have a military base in Venezuela. Article 13 of the Constitution⁸ forbids the possibility to host any military base on its territory – “*No foreign military bases or facilities having purposes that are in any way military shall be established within such space by any power or coalition of powers.*” The military cooperation is at the moment having a shape of joint military exercises taking place in Venezuela.

2.2 Military expenditures

Chávez is investing into the military build up. Experts are worried about starting arms races in the sub-continent. Following the SIPRI Yearbook 2008 the extent is not so big to ravel out arm racing. It is rather updating of the existing military capacity. Spending on military equipment is steadily growing (with exception 2002, 2003) during ten years of Chávez government (SIPRI yearbook 2008). Percentage of GDP is rather stable varying between 1.2 to 1.3 % of GDP (SIPRI yearbook 2008). Russia is the biggest supplier of military equipment to Venezuela. Russia is supplying fighters, helicopters, submarines and anti-aircraft defense system. In July 2008 a new 4 years contract for military supplies was signed in Moscow the figures were not made public yet. Unofficial numbers talk

⁷ Bolivia lost its Pacific Ocean coastline in a conflict with Chile between 1879 and 1883, it still has a navy with its own academies and maneuvers in lakes And revers (Riedl 2007).

⁸ Constitución de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela 2000.

about 30 billion over the 4 years period. The obsolete military equipment was given to Bolivia and Nicaragua.

2.3 Colombian conflict

Chávez is very active in the Colombian conflict. In 2007 he assumed the role of official mediator of the hostage release negotiation. President Uribe retrieved him from the position at the end of the year after Chávez declared political support to FARC. During the military incursion of the Colombian army to the Ecuadorian territory he was very loudly criticizing the step and deploying Venezuelan troops to the Venezuela-Colombian boarder. More information about the situation in Colombia as a case example is given in the next chapter.

2.4 Partners across the world

Last point concerns his visits and signed accords that are questionable. Agreements, military contracts and technological cooperation with countries such as Iran, Belarus, Syria, Libya are provoking the U.S. and Europe. Beside the proclaimed political sympathy there is a big share of pragmatism in his behavior. As the relations with the U.S. are frozen since 2002 Chávez needs to find another supplier of technologies and military equipment.

3. Possible Chávez motivation

3.1 Strengthening internal position

One reason for strong and visible security policy and military cooperation may be the improvement of internal image. His ideology is based on Bolívar's heritage and the military cooperation and integration is perfectly in line with Bolívar's ideas about League of Republics with one unified army (Harnecker 2005: 120). His integration initiatives are strengthening the image of Venezuela as a key player in the international relations within the region. Plus the military build up is certainly helping his relations with the army elites that were rather ambivalent after the April 2002 coup⁹. Bearing these aspects in mind his politics in the security policy and military level may bring him political capital. The military build up may have also economic motivation steadily rising oil prices ensure high budgetary surplus. The Venezuelan economy is facing overheating problems. Social spending is immense, development projects in the region are boosted by the Venezuelan oil money, military may be another sphere where to direct money with the most political capital and little contribution to economic performance¹⁰. Last but not least in the Latin American context, simple U.S.

⁹ In 2002 Chávez was for 2 days removed from the office after a coup of the opposition supported by part of the army elites.

¹⁰ Venezuela has no military industry, all military equipment is imported.

opposition may bring him many points on the domestic level. And all his steps in the security and military field are strongly oriented against the U.S. and Bush administration politics.

Provocation is part of his political style. He wants the world to talk about him and it seems to bring fruits as well. Venezuela is in the headlines of the world news.

3.2 Strengthening external position

Chávez presents Venezuela as the Latin American key player and even global player. He is talking about multipolar world order as an optimal new global order. He wants to be a serious partner in the international relations. Chávez opposed very clearly the reality of the passed 20 years hegemony of the U.S. in the international relations. He knows very well that the global situation is at a crossroads and he wants to seize the opportunity opening for countries like Venezuela that want to have their say on global issues.

Although the Russian military base proposal was denied the alliance with Russia is a very important sign. President Chávez proved his ambitions to become a global player. For the first time he influences the global international relations substantially by giving an opportunity to Russia to extend its military activities closer to the U.S. boarder on a territory that is historically considered the U.S. sphere of influence. Clear message for the U.S. – Russia pays back extension of the U.S. defense system in Central Europe. Chávez motivation may be various, strengthening position of Venezuela on global level as well as on the regional, opposing the U.S. policy under any circumstances and position and economic cooperation with Russia. Venezuela needs technologies and military equipments, foreign investment is steadily falling down under the Chávez mandate and to persuade Russia to create a natural gas cartel organization like OPEC would be an important step causing rise of natural gas prices worldwide.

Chávez fights for being an equal partner to Brazil on the sub continent. The leading position of Brazil is given by its size and strength and Venezuela can hardly alternate Brazil on the leading position. On the other hand Brazil must react to Chávez'z activities on the subcontinent. Shortly after Chávez announced the idea of creating the ALBA Joint Military Force, Lula declared the willingness to proceed with the South American Defense Council as the platform for military cooperation. Brazil will not leave the leading position to Venezuela and balances Chávez geopolitical ambitions.

The Bolivarian image as liberator and unifier is a strong aspect of his external politics. He is bringing the alternative to the FTAA¹¹ that is not welcomed with

¹¹ Free Trade Area of the Americas – FTAA is a initiative with the aim to create a single free trade area on the continent. Latin-American states are opposing the initiative as an unequal

too much enthusiasm among the South American countries. At the moment he has money to initiate and run an alternative to the U.S. orchestrated FTAA. The aim is to lower the U.S. influence on the subcontinent.

U.S. rhetoric accusing Venezuela of being the danger for the region and its stability may motivate Chávez to proceed quickly in the military cooperation. He seems to be worried by the reactivation of the U.S. Forth Fleet in the Caribbean.

3.3 The Colombian Case

Framework of the situation

Years 2007 and 2008 were significant for the over 40 years lasting conflict. Biggest guerilla movements Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – FARC*) and National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional – ELN*) originally founded as Marxist organizations fighting for transformation of capitalist state and equal redistribution of wealth got since the 70's ever more involved in the drug trafficking, kidnappings¹², “war taxing”¹³ and forcing peasants to leave their homes. To protect the local business, local politicians contra movement – groups of *paralimitares* were founded with the consent of the army and the government (Zázvorková 2004). In 1997 paramilitaries united in sort of federation called United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia – AUC*). Paramilitaries got involved in the drug and guns trafficking very soon and are considered by the U.S. and EU terrorist organizations as well as the guerilla organizations.

Present Colombian government and the President Álvaro Uribe negotiated with the AUC to disarm and promised to pardon the crimes if they do so. He did not reach such a consensus with the guerilla. The attitude towards guerilla organizations is stronger – disarm, release all hostages and we can negotiate. Many American and European states and organizations proposed to facilitate and intermediate the negotiations with more or less success. Venezuela as directly involved neighbor is one of them.

Hugo Chávez is eager to play an important role in the mediation of the conflict. Last year he officially intermediated the release of FARC hostages. After proclaiming that FARC should be considered rather as a legitimate political player than a terrorist organization Uribe terminated his official mediation role, stating that Chávez overstepped his responsibilities.

project bringing more commercial advantages and opportunities to the North. Currently the FTAA seems not to be achieved because of the lack of interest of the Southern countries.

¹² Colombia is known as the "kidnap capital of the world", with one person a day, down from 10 a day in 2002, being snatched either for ransom or political bargaining. www.bbc.co.uk

¹³ Guerillas are forcing local businessman to pay „war taxes“.

Chávez motivation for a strong position in the conflict resolution

Some arguments were given already above for the general motivation but this chapter tries to analyze the motivation in one specific situation the Colombian conflict. There are several explanations for Chávez motivation to play a key role in the mediation of the conflict. His politics certainly reflect the willingness to become an important player in the international relations. Image of the “peacemaker” of the region would bring him domestic support and improve his international image. In this regard he doesn’t want to let the “arena” to Brazil. It is not very clear yet in which aspects Chávez recognizes Brazil as the regional power and where ends his ambitions to be an equal partner. The field of diplomatic missions with the capacity of a possible military mission in solving world crisis and conflicts is one of his goals.

Another reason is to support the idea of regional defense and military cooperation. Colombian over 44 years lasting conflict is an argument to support the military integration initiatives. U.S. strategy to support the Colombian government called “Plan Colombia” has proved too much orientation on the armed solution and coca supply side without considering the social and economic complexity of the conflict (Zázvorková 2004: 99-102).

The alleged connections to FARC may be also a reason for eminent interest in solving the problem. If Chávez was supporting the FARC he may have strong motivation to orchestrate the resolution of the conflict. Here we must point out that there are no proofs about financial support provided to FARC by Venezuela. The Interpol Report released in May 2008 on the ceased FARC computers was over-interpreted by the international media talking about proofs about supporting FARC. The report only brings evidence that the computers were not tempered after the seizure and the data not manipulated after that day (INTERPOL 2008).

Another motivation aspect may be simple opposition to the U.S. Chávez is very militant opponent to the U.S., especially after the coup in 2002. The U.S. in his rhetoric represent the malfeasance. Chávez want to show that U.S. solution is not working in Colombia and that Venezuela is the one with an alternative solution.

4. Possible implications on security policy and international relations

Chávez politics have already an impact on the international relations and global situation. Presence of Russian military forces even under the form of joint military exercises for the moment it is an important aspect of interference in the U.S. sphere of influence. The global order is changing and Venezuela wants to have its say in the new international relations system. Chávez proved it by

clearly articulating its position in all recent conflicts (e.g. Colombia, Bolivia, Georgia, the U.S. defense system).

Chávez politics may fasten the military cooperation in the region. Brazil's reaction to the ALBA Joint Military Force initiative proves it. It is not acceptable for Brazil as regional power to stand aside from such an important tendency. That is why shortly after the ALBA initiative Lula with Chávez proceeded in the South American Defense Council. The question is the real operation potential of the agreements and initiatives. The most chances to succeed has the South American Defense Council as it is a large platform (except Colombia all UNASUR countries want to accede), internationally recognized initiative and its ambitions are limited to defense purposes. Chávez ideas of joining the military forces with Bolivia or within the MERCOSUR pact¹⁴ announced in the past are unrealistic and doubtful. Following military experts opinion Venezuela has no capacity and finances to do so. Not neglecting the political aspects and consequences. In Bolivia there is no political support to do so, Morales has very uncertain position for such a step and in Venezuela it would raise strong opposition as well. Also other interests are interfering in the integration e.g. Ecuador refused to join ALBA that was an unpleasant decision for Chávez. But strictly pragmatic, as the U.S. are the biggest commercial partner to Ecuador the President Correa can't afford to freeze the relations.

Some voices are warning that Chávez politics will provoke arm racing in South America. Chávez is investing resources in the military build up but following the SIPRI experts it does not yet resemble to arm racing. Venezuela is updating its topical military equipment. There are no data available for this year as Chávez signed important contracts for military equipment in Russia. Without those figures it is difficult to analyze if he is significantly unbalancing the arms stock in the region. On the other hand if one of the military initiatives is successfully accomplished it would implicate higher investment to the military material, probably mainly produced in Brazil as promoter of the initiative.

If Chávez proceeds in the ALBA military initiative and Brazil parallelly with the South American Defense Council and both steadily increase the investment in the military material it could change the balance of powers in the region. Venezuela would be leading the ALBA bloc and Brazil the UNASUR countries. That would split and destabilize the South American region. This is pure speculation and both Brazil and Venezuela leaders have interest in one functioning defense organization instead of competing each other.

¹⁴ Chávez expressed the idea of joint military forces of MERCOSUR while the ex-Argentinian President Nestor Kirchner and the Bolivian President Evo Morales watched the military parade in Caracas in 2006. www.venezuelanalysis.com

If Chávez wants to play a role in the Colombian conflict he must reach a consensus with the Colombian government. He is potentially good mediator of the conflict as he is recognized by FARC and ELN representatives but he would have to reconcile the Colombian Government and be very careful with steps that are not in line with the official Bogota politics in this matter. Without mutual recognition and trust the mediation can not work.

Conclusion

Chávez politics is certainly motivated by strengthening both – internal and external position. Regionally he wants Venezuela to become the leader and Brazil will have to follow very closely in order to balance his sometimes very extreme ideas and initiatives. Venezuela under Chávez is definitely a country the world must count with. This year Chávez proved he wants to have its say on the global level as well. Under his Presidency Venezuela will take clear attitudes in unsettled disputes and it won't be in favor of the U.S.

Venezuela military expenditure is rising and some military agreements and suggestions are doubtful and provocative. On the other hand functional regional defense initiative may increase the stability of the region. And a recognized regional platform to intervene in critical situations is missing. Brazil seems to balance Chávez extreme ideas quite well for the moment.

At the moment no arm racing is raveling out in the region and the military cooperation initiatives are in the very initial stage. Only the following years will show if Venezuela is only modernizing its military equipment or increasing the military potential. If Latin America succeeds in creating a joint functioning defense organization it would change the world balance of powers and the region would strengthen.

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Tisk: Vysoká škola ekonomická v Praze
Nakladatelství Oeconomica

Tato publikace neprošla redakční ani jazykovou úpravou

ISSN 1802-6591