

Democratization



Year 3, Issue 11

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and the Middle East since 1999

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a challenge for democrats
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Introduction

In the last 20 years, Venezuelan foreign policy has been characterized by seeking allies and building blocks that can counterweight democratic alliances in the region. Since 1999, the Bolivarian Revolution has woven a network of ideological and economic alliances that help it maintain power. With Hugo Chávez, Venezuela's international relations began to be more personal than institutional. This allowed him to build alliances with some governments in the Middle East and Latin America that shared one or two fundamental aspects: they were autocracies and/or ideologically left-winged.

Chávez remained comfortable in the international scene for a long time, in fact, many relationships were inherited by Nicolás Maduro when he assumed power, to the point that today the main allies of the Venezuelan regime are eastern countries, especially Syria, Iran, China and Russia. These relations have allowed the Bolivarian Revolution to counterbalance criticism from democratic nations, circumvent some sanctions imposed by the United States and keep certain economic sectors afloat. The alliances that the Bolivarian Revolution has woven have helped it remain in power.

This edition seeks to analyze various aspects of Venezuela's role in the global scene: the nature of the Revolution's relations with the Middle East, how autocracies are strategizing internationally to remain in power, characteristics of Venezuelan foreign policy since 1999, and the challenges that democracies face in order to maintain freedom and respect for Human Rights in the world.

In the first article of this 11th issue, Adriana Boersner Herrera delves into the *Relations between Venezuela and the Middle East since 1999*. This article not only describes the economic and oil-related reasons for the alliances that Chávez forged during his government with the countries of the Middle East, but also analyzes the ideological character that was present in these relations, both in the agreements signed during this period, as well as in the speeches and actions carried out during his government and continued by Nicolás Maduro. These actions and others, such as the Palestinian cause or the defense of Iran against sanctions for its nuclear program, have only one purpose: to get allies willing to ignore the systemic crisis in Venezuela for economic and geopolitical interests and that help maintain the Bolivarian Revolution in power.

On the other hand, Elsa Cardozo, in her article *Autocratization of the world order: a challenge for democrats and democracies*, takes an in-depth look at another extremely important factor in world order: how autocracies have come together in blocks to legitimize each other. In this article, Cardozo journeys through the relationship of liberal ideas with the potential of Western powers, with the purpose of alerting about the growth of the influence of other nations, such as China and Russia, in the world order and in the protection of autocracies.

The last article in this edition is authored by Rosa María Pérez. The piece titled *Venezuela's political situation: a study from a global perspective* delves into Venezuela's foreign policy since 1999, mainly highlighting the relationship with the United States. This article illustrates the reasons why the Bolivarian Revolution has drawn closer to some nations than others and how Venezuela's foreign policy has been marked by political personalism in the

last 20 years. All this with the objective of suggesting that there is a new reality and seeking to identify how this reality could influence Venezuela-US relations in recent years: the victory of Joe Biden.

Isabella Sanfuentes

Relations between Venezuela and the Middle East since 1999

Adriana Boersner Herrera

Since the creation of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960, Venezuela established diplomatic and economic relations with several countries in the Middle East¹ based on a shared interest: oil production². However, the intensification of relations with these countries so distant from Venezuela evolved into two important stages during the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century.

The first stage responds to the foreign policy established between 1958 and 1998, which emphasized principles such as solidarity and cooperation with developing countries; the principle of non-intervention; and the defense and promotion of democracy among nations. These principles characterized the Venezuelan foreign policy conditioned by the internal situation,

1 In this essay, the Middle East includes Persian Gulf countries and comprises Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Syria, Turkey and Yemen.

2 It must be considered that beyond the shared interest between the governments of Venezuela and several governments of Middle Eastern countries, the historical links between nations date back to, at least, the 19th century onwards with significant and different migratory waves of Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians and Turks to Venezuela.

the criteria contained in the National Constitution of 1961, and the international dynamics of the Cold War and post-Cold War³. During this stage, the Middle East was an important region for Venezuela due to its international oil policy and its objective of defending the strengthening and development of developing countries⁴.

The second stage occurs after 1999 under the government of Hugo Chávez, during which bilateral and multilateral cooperation with Middle Eastern countries occupied an important place in Venezuela for various reasons. Some of those reasons are shared ideologies; an anti-American speech; counteracting neoliberalism and capitalism through aligned positions in multilateral instances; attempting to overcome underdevelopment; strengthening relations with groups of developing countries through South-South exchange; and establishing relations of solidarity between peoples.

In the following pages, this second stage of Venezuelan foreign policy will be discussed, as well as two points of interest to understand the relations between the so-called Bolivarian Revolution with countries of the Middle East. Firstly, the elements that underlie the narrowing of this relationship between Venezuela and the Middle East. Secondly, how these elements were materialized through different means and instruments. In this section, the analysis focuses on understanding which countries have been important to Venezuela and why, and which geostrategic sectors have been important in this relationship between Venezuela and Middle Eastern countries. Finally, a

3 See María Teresa Romero, *Política Exterior Venezolana. El Proyecto Democrático, 1958-1998*, El Nacional, 2002.

4 See Demetrio Boersner, *Venezuela frente a la Geopolítica de Asia Occidental y el Norte de África*. ILDIS, 2012.

conclusion is reached, emphasizing the current state of this relationship and the differences in Venezuelan foreign policy today compared to the previous ones in reference to the Middle East region. The analysis presented in this essay aims to contribute to the discussion about the importance that the Middle East has had for the so-called Bolivarian Revolution.

I. Elements that marked the relations between Venezuela and the Middle East from 1999

As of 1999, the foreign policy of the so-called “Fifth Republic” or “Bolivarian Revolution”⁵ progressively began a transition to a new foreign policy model, which consolidated itself after 2004⁶. Hugo Chávez shaped Venezuelan foreign policy and all political initiatives carried out towards other nations, both in Latin America and with nations in more distant geographic regions. This became more evident after his brief removal from office in April 2002 and after winning the recall referendum in August 2004. On the one hand, relations between the United States and Venezuela became more conflictive. On the other hand, Venezuela’s relations with other developing nations became more dynamic and stronger. In particular, the most important elements that defined Hugo Chávez’s policy towards the Middle East were (1) the precepts of Arab socialism and the non-aligned movement; (2) the Palestinian cause; (3) oil; and (4) anti-imperialism.

5 See Daniel Mora Brito, “La política exterior de Hugo Chávez en tres actos (1998-2004)”, *Aldea Mundo* 8, no. 16 (2004): 76-85; and Serbin, Andrés, and Andrei Serbin Pont, “Quince años de política exterior bolivariana: ¿entre el soft-balancing y la militarización?”, *Pensamiento propio* 19, no. 39 (2014): 287-326.

6 See Carlos A. Romero, “Dos etapas en la política exterior de Venezuela”. *Politeia* 30 (2003): 319-343; Urrutia, Edmundo González, “Las dos etapas de la política exterior de Chávez”, *Nueva Sociedad* 205 (2006): 159-171.

Arab socialism and the Non-Aligned Movement

Among some of the variables to take into consideration when evaluating the relationship of the government of Hugo Chávez with a large part of the countries of the Islamic world, the ideologies and the promotion of leaders that dominated the Arab regional scene in the middle of the 20th century stand out. For example, Gamal Abdel Nasser and his project of Arab socialism in Egypt.

In reference to Egypt, Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo, Venezuelan founder of the OPEC, recalled in 1966⁷ the firmness with which Gamal Abdel Nasser opposed the power of England and other countries after the nationalization of the Suez Canal, and how Egypt was able to demonstrate to other developing countries its power to control its own resources. The example of Nasser would serve in Latin America, according to Pérez Alfonzo, to work on the possibility of developing nations to liberate themselves economically from the centers of power, such as the United States, Western Europe and the Soviet Union.

The notion of socialism was viewed as a socio-economic practice that was perfectly compatible with Islam. However, parallel to this option was the revolutionary path crystallized in the Algerian National Charter of 1964 or in the Tripoli Program of 1962, addressing not only the assumption of socialism but also the commitment to leave behind the option of reformism to commit to the social revolution.

During the 1960s, the movement of Non-Aligned Countries (NAM) was formed. This movement sought to establish a position

7 See Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo, "Organización de Países Exportadores de Petróleo (OPEP)", *Política: Ideas para una América Nueva* 45 (1966): 8-9.

different from that of the United States and the Soviet Union as well as to be considered relevant actors of the international community⁸. However, in the 1990s, the movement had to face a unipolar world in which the United States and the capitalist model were the engine to re-drive and analyze the role of the movement.

Starting in 1999, Chávez revived the historical connection between the Arab world and Latin America, as well as Nasser's ideals of Arab socialism and the reactivation of relations between Venezuela and other countries on the South-South axis. In the National Economic and Social Development Plan (2000-2007)⁹, created in the first years of his government, it is stipulated that

The strengthening of relations between the Latin American, African and Asian countries will be possible to the extent that the bodies of consultation and agreement, such as the G-15, the G-77, the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, and the Rio Group perfect their mechanisms of action. Venezuela will offer strong support to make this possible.

It is from then on that Chávez had a greater role on the international scene and a rapprochement with developing countries in the Middle East as well as in Africa and Latin America. In 2002, Hugo Chávez assumed the presidency of the Group of 77. He expressed his solidarity with countries such as Iraq and Iran before multilateral bodies such as the United Nations Human Rights Commission, and he rejected sanctions against Iran for

8 See Carlos E. Pérez Llana, "América Latina y los países no alineados", *Estudios Internacionales* (1973): 43-65.

9 See Ministerio del Poder Popular de Planificación. República Bolivariana de Venezuela, September 2001. <http://www.mppp.gob.ve/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Plan-de-la-Naci%C3%B3n-2001-2007.pdf> (Author's translation).

its nuclear program. These alliances and the activism of Hugo Chávez with NAM countries between 1999 and 2013 procured Nicolás Maduro the presidency of the organization during the summit of the movement that took place in Venezuela in 2016.

The Palestinian Cause

The history of the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis would take many pages and an additional essay to understand the nuances and positions of each party to the conflict. Over time, a peaceful and practical solution to the conflict has been made impossible for various reasons. The truth is that the difficulty of creating (and recognizing) a Palestinian State is what has led countries like Venezuela to ally and defend the Arab-Palestinian cause. As early as the 1990s, several Latin American governments decided to normalize their relations with both Israel and Palestine. But it was not until the 2000s that Venezuela openly used the Palestinian cause as an element of its foreign policy to counter its relationship with the United States and reach out to important allies in the Middle East.

In this regard, Hugo Chávez decided to host and promote relations and cooperation of the Palestinian National Authority in the country and in Latin America, to the detriment, in parallel, of relations with the State of Israel¹⁰. This defense of the Palestinian

10 Venezuela and the Palestinian National Authority formalized the establishment of diplomatic relations with the establishment of a Palestinian legation in Caracas in 2009. This occurred after the expulsion of the Israeli diplomatic corps in Caracas, following the events that occurred in the Gaza Strip in December 2008-January 2009. Israel also expelled, as a reciprocal measure, the Venezuelan diplomatic corps accredited in Tel Aviv.

cause lead Venezuela to experience anti-Semitic incidents¹¹ starting from 2004 that began with the harassment of people from the Jewish community in the country. Internationally, Chávez condemned the actions of Israel and the United States, and strengthened his commitment to Palestine starting from 2009 during the conflict in the Gaza Strip. For example, Chávez accused Israel of genocide in the Gaza Strip. That same year, Israel and Venezuela severed diplomatic relations and Venezuela established new ones with Palestine in April. Between 2008 and 2013, Venezuela, along with more than fifteen Latin American countries, recognized Palestine as a State.

Oil

The strategy of ensuring large inflows of money from oil was fundamental in Venezuelan foreign policy, not only because of the political capital that it generated for the government internationally, but also because of the large profits that resulted in ensuring social programs or missions domestically. In the Simón Bolívar National Project 2007-2013, OPEC constitutes a point of interest for the government's international geopolitics, emphasizing the objectives of strengthening ties with the organization's countries, expanding commercial and technological exchange with the Middle East region, and increasing relations with other oil-exporting countries¹². This is how Chávez undertook

11 See Margarita Figueroa Sepúlveda, "La emergencia y aumento del antisemitismo en los gobiernos de Hugo Chávez y su relación con la profundización de las relaciones entre Venezuela e Irán (2005-2013)", *Revista de Relaciones Internacionales, Estrategia y Seguridad* 13, no. 1 (2018): 239-268.

12 Proyecto Nacional Simón Bolívar. Líneas Generales del Plan de Desarrollo Económico y Social de la Nación. 2007-2013. (2009). Sección VII Nueva Geopolítica Internacional. Ministerio del Poder Popular para la Comunicación y la Información. Caracas, Venezuela.

a presidential tour in 2000 through at least nine OPEC member countries to exchange ideas and seek support for OPEC in order to assume a more political role.

However, the idea of catapulting Venezuela as a country-energy power with global influence, supported by the country's energy reserves, was an idea only visible in the context of Latin American and Caribbean integration; the alliances with some countries in the Middle East and Africa did not truly serve that purpose. What was in fact promoted with countries like Iran or Libya was the consolidation of common positions in international organizations and the unsuccessful attempt to create parallel instances that would allow breaking with certain hegemonic nuclei, including OPEC. Likewise, Chávez's idea of politicizing OPEC did not materialize due to the rejection of other members of the organization, such as Saudi Arabia.

Anti-imperialism

The structure of Chávez's foreign policy with the Middle East focused largely on the critique of the neoliberal globalization model, the capitalist system, the unipolar international structure and the role that the United States plays in the international system¹³. However, anti-imperialist ideas are not new, nor were they born with Hugo Chávez. By the mid-1950s, countries like Egypt led an anti-Western front, rejecting allies such as Israel while supporting the Palestinian cause and Arab nationalism.

13 It should be noted that autonomy with respect to the United States is not a new objective in Venezuelan foreign policy. See Daniel Mora Brito, "La política exterior de Hugo Chávez en tres actos (1998-2004)", *Aldea Mundo* 8, no. 16 (2004): 76-85; Carlos A. Romero, "Venezuela: su política exterior y el Caribe", *Revista venezolana de economía y ciencias sociales* 10, no. 3 (2004): 243-259.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the weakening of the unipolar hegemony of the United States in the early 2000s, critical voices and anti-imperialist doctrines and symbols re-emerged. This included several leftist governments in Latin America¹⁴ and regimes in the Middle East. During this stage, the Chávez government allied itself with ideologically similar rulers and began to criticize not only the position of the United States in the global scene but also states like Israel. This was an important contrast to the foreign policy prior to 1998 since Venezuela was initially one of the countries that favored the creation of the State of Israel and then went on to maintain a position of impartiality in multilateral bodies such as the United Nations in reference to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The Chávez government was not the only one to reject Israel's positions and existence. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) threatened Israel's territorial integrity and cast doubt on the veracity of the Holocaust.

Based on this anti-imperialist element, the government of Hugo Chávez used frequent confrontations both rhetorical and practical towards the United States, particularly after 2003¹⁵. For example, rejecting the then-President Bill Clinton's offer to help during the December 1999 floods in the Vargas state, the FTAA project promoted by the United States at the Summit of the Americas in Quebec (2001), and the flight of North American planes in Venezuelan airspace as well as the possibility of establishing a US base on the border with Colombia; cataloging the then US president, George W. Bush, as a terrorist; and finally

14 See Soledad Stoessel, "Giro a la izquierda en la América Latina del siglo XXI", *POLIS Revista Latinoamericana*, no 39 (2014).

15 See Steve Ellner, "La política exterior del gobierno de Chávez: la retórica chavista y los asuntos sustanciales", *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales* 15, no. 1 (2009): 115-132.

expelling US diplomats and military attachés from Venezuelan soil.

II. Means and instruments of Venezuela's foreign policy towards the Middle East

After discussing the fundamental elements underlying Venezuelan foreign policy towards the Middle East after 1999, the instruments that the Venezuelan government has used at both the intergovernmental and subnational levels in the Middle East region will now be reviewed. These instruments have been primarily diplomacy and oil. In this section, the analysis will be limited to the most important allies of Venezuela in the Middle East such as Iran, Lebanon, Palestine and Syria.

Among the first international outposts of the government of Hugo Chávez to confront the international position of the United States was the presidential visit to Iraq in August 2000. This rapprochement with the government of Saddam Hussein did not prosper due to the attacks of September 2001, the war on terrorism waged by then-US President George W. Bush, and the subsequent invasion of Iraq in March 2003.

Iran

In the 1970s, Venezuela and Iran established ambassadors and a bilateral relationship that had ups and downs. It was not until the end of the presidency of Muhammad Khatami that Iran sought rapprochement with Venezuela¹⁶, as with other Latin

16 Preferably through the OPEC and the G-15. See Isaac Caro e Isabel Rodríguez, "La presencia de Irán en América Latina a través de su influencia en los países del Alba", *Atenea (Concepción)* 500 (2009): 21-39.

American countries¹⁷. With the triumph of Hugo Chávez in the 2004 referendum and the arrival of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, these diplomatic approaches reinforced the alliance between Iran and Venezuela¹⁸, growing in two areas.

On the one hand, in the bilateral sphere, instruments such as diplomacy and oil were used to finalize cooperation agreements, among which the creation of the joint Iranian-Venezuelan bank in 2010 with an initial capital of \$200 million stands out, as well as the creation of a binational oil company VENIROC, the creation of the binational company VENIRAUTO –which would manufacture Centauro and Turpial car models on Venezuelan soil–, the creation of a Veniran Tractor tractor factory, gold mine concessions, trade route between Caracas and Tehran, among others¹⁹.

On the other hand, in the multilateral sphere, Iran and Venezuela established a common front and alliance as of 2005. An example of this is when during a session at the International Atomic Energy Agency in 2006 Venezuela was one of the countries that opposed the resolution against Iran's nuclear program. Similarly, Venezuela rejected the imposition of sanctions against Iran due to its nuclear program.

The government of Nicolás Maduro (2013-) has held several meetings and has reinforced several cooperation agreements with Iran. However, the most outstanding aspect of this relationship is not the continuation and follow-up of the agreements signed

17 Ver Paulo Botta, "Irán en América Latina: Desde Venezuela hacia Brasil", *Ágora internacional* 4, no. 9 (2009).

18 Formal relations between Iran and Venezuela were established in 1947. See Elodie Brun, "Irán-Venezuela: hacia un acercamiento completo", *Politeia* 31, no. 40 (2008): 19-40.

19 See Adriana Boersner, "13 años de Diplomacia a espaldas de los venezolanos", *Venepolicy*, enero-marzo (2012).

during Chávez's rule, but the aid that Iran has extended to Venezuela while both countries have been financially sanctioned by the United States²⁰: in 2020, Iran sent Venezuela gasoline –defying US sanctions–, spare parts and experts to repair a refinery, as well as ships with food.

Lebanon

The relationship between Venezuela and Lebanon is primarily based on close cooperation with groups like Hezbollah, which is also supported by Iran. This group, which is considered terrorist by several countries in Latin America, Europe and North America, has strengthened its connections with the Maduro government, turning Venezuela, for some, into a space for transnational organized crime²¹.

Speculation regarding connections between members of the Nicolás Maduro government and groups like Hezbollah have increased over the years. The instruments used in this relationship range from diplomacy to illegal economy. In return, the Lebanese terrorist group has supported Maduro not only in the face of the sanctions imposed by the United States on Venezuela but also during 2019 when Juan Guaidó, the then-president of the National Assembly, was sworn in as interim president of Venezuela.

20 See Francisco Rodríguez and Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, “Las sanciones están llevando a Irán y Venezuela a los brazos del otro”, *Foreign Policy* (2020).

21 See Joseph M. Humire, “The Maduro-Hezbollah Nexus: How Iran-backed Networks Prop up the Venezuelan Regime”, *Atlantic Council* (2020).

Palestine

Nicolás Maduro has been a critic of Israel and, like Hugo Chávez, has supported Palestine and its recognition as an independent state. The defense and support of the Palestinian cause have been the main engine of the relationship between the two countries. In 2016, the headquarters of the Palestinian Embassy in Caracas was inaugurated and since then bilateral agreements and alliances have been reached in cultural, educational and climate matters, as well as in the areas of energy, trade and health. In 2014, for example, 119 Palestinian students came to Venezuela to study medicine in Caracas²². These alliances have been sealed by various visits to Caracas by senior Palestinian officials, including the 2018 visit of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Likewise, the connection between the Venezuelan government and Palestine includes relations with the Palestinian group Hamas. These relationships have earned Maduro tacit support in the face of economic sanctions and the presidential dispute in Venezuela since 2019.

Syria

Like the relationship with Iran, the Syrian-Venezuelan relationship was strengthened after 2005. As of 2006, various cooperation agreements were signed, among which the creation of a parliamentary friendship group stands out; as well as agreements in sectors such as customs and construction; the creation of trade routes and joint ventures; a direct weekly flight between Caracas and Damascus; the construction of a refinery in Syrian territory, and joint financing funds. During Chávez's government, Syrian

²² See Jorge Rueda, "Venezuela reciben a 119 estudiantes palestinos", *Associated Press* (november, 2014). <https://apnews.com/article/3e99bea939fc4c798f3c1a994d4a7a72>

President Bashar al-Assad visited Caracas, marking the first time that a Syrian president visited Venezuela. Chávez traveled to Syria at least three times. The relationship between members of the government of Nicolás Maduro and Syria extends particularly to the likes of Tareck Zaidan el Aissami, Tareck William Saab Halabi, and Haiman El Troudi. Tareck el Aissami has been accused of illegally providing Venezuelan passports to terrorist members and of being connected to members of the Hezbollah group.

After 2010, when the so-called Arab Spring broke out, the government of Hugo Chávez supported the protests in Egypt and Tunisia, which demanded greater freedom and rights from the governments of these countries. However, the Chávez government further promoted relations with governments such as the Iranian or Syrian, ignoring the struggle and the claims of civil society groups in these two countries²³.

III. Conclusions

There is no doubt that Hugo Chávez reactivated the interaction with countries of the Middle East and other countries of the so-called South-South axis. This reactivation was possible thanks to the reforms undertaken nationally by the so-called “Fifth Republic” or “Bolivarian Republic” but also to the global changes that took place at the beginning of the 21st century. Among the internal changes are a progressive departure from foreign policies prior to 1998, a clear personalization of foreign policy, and a state that responded to the programmatic and personalist apparatus of Hugo Chávez. As for international changes, among

23 See Elsa Cardozo, “Crisis y cambios en el Norte de África y el Medio Oriente. Implicaciones para Venezuela y su política exterior en el contexto latinoamericano”, *Instituto Latinoamericano de Investigaciones Sociales (Ildis)* (2012).

other things, a less unipolar world with more economic centers of power, financial crises and concern about global terrorism.

Chávez's international activism and his relationship with Middle Eastern countries were so significant that post-2013 relations between Venezuela and the Middle East have lasted because of his activism. Today, countries such as Iran and Syria are among the most important allies for the government of Nicolás Maduro due to an international context different from that experienced by Chávez and unfavorable for the current government of Venezuela. Although Venezuelan foreign policy has not been as proactive under the government of Nicolás Maduro, the Venezuelan government has won the support of Iran and Syria due to the economic sanctions applied by the United States and an international community that has increasingly rejected the authoritarian nature of Nicolás Maduro's regime. The elements of the foreign policy initiated by Hugo Chávez such as the Palestinian cause, oil, and anti-imperialism remain with the Maduro government. Of the means and instruments, intergovernmental diplomacy has been maintained but has not changed substantially. Cooperation with terrorist groups has been strengthened, particularly after 2013.

An alliance that has been the product of Maduro's foreign policy has been established with Turkey²⁴. Starting in 2016, Turkish-Venezuelan relations strengthened after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan suffered a coup. Since then, Turkish-Venezuelan bilateral cooperation has been based on geopolitical interests and

24 See Irmak Ekin Karel, "Política exterior de Turquía en Venezuela: ¿Cuáles son los factores que pueden explicar el recién acercamiento acelerado de Turquía con Venezuela en los últimos años?", *Relaciones Internacionales* 92, no. 1 (2019): 1-29; Omner, Imdat. "Turkey and Venezuela: An Alliance of Convenience." *Wilson Center* (March 2020).

common economic ties, including the sale of Venezuelan gold as an instrument of Venezuelan foreign policy. These gold sales, such as the 24 tonnes of raw gold that were transported to Turkey, are under investigation by agencies in Europe to determine if it is blood gold.

The autocratization of the world order: a challenge for democrats and democracies

Elsa Cardozo

Across a range of international fora, today's authoritarians are using their influence not only to insulate their regimes from criticism, but also to actively reshape international legal standards in ways that advance their interests. No longer content to approach international law from a defensive posture, authoritarians view international law as a means of fostering their own illiberal projects, extending new authoritarian legal norms that exist alongside and compete with democratic principles¹.

For two centuries the influence of liberal ideas was –more than we would like to think– linked to the dominance of Western power. Now the influence of liberalism is fading as the agenda of world politics is increasingly set by great powers that are not part of a traditionally determined West or those that, like Russia, are ambivalent about whether or

1 Thomas Ginsburg, "How Authoritarians Use International Law", *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 4 (2020): 44-58, available in: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/766183>.

not they belong to the West. By far the most important state of those is China, already a superpower².

In September 2020, an extensive and documented report on extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances, arbitrary detentions, torture, and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment committed in Venezuela since 2014, was released. The Independent International Mission which was assigned to this investigation by majority decision of the United Nations Human Rights Council³ carried out its work meticulously. In response, the Venezuelan regime published its own report, where it tried to disqualify –amid the absence of reliable data, accusations of interference and reasons of sovereignty– not only the document substantiated by the International Mission, but the very legitimacy of international scrutiny⁴.

In February 2021, this time invited by the regime, the Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Human Rights Council on the negative impact of unilateral coercive measures on the enjoyment of human rights visited the country. The preliminary report focused on arguing the need to lift general and individual sanctions, stating these are decisive in the material and human

2 Timothy Garton Ash, “El futuro del liberalismo”, *Letras Libres*, no 267 (marzo 2021), available in: <https://www.letraslibres.com/mexico/revista/el-futuro-del-liberalismo>. This quote, as well as those that follow taken directly from texts in Spanish, are the author’s translation.

3 *Misión Internacional Independiente de determinación de los hechos sobre la República Bolivariana de Venezuela*, available in: <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/HRBodies/HRC/FFMV/Pages/Index.aspx>

4 *La Verdad de Venezuela contra a la infamia. Datos y testimonios de un país bajo asedio*, available in: <https://albaciudad.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/La-verdad-de-Venezuela-contra-la-infamia.-Datos-y-testimonios-de-un-pais-bajo-asedio.pdf>

rights devastation in which Venezuela finds itself⁵. There were few references to the crisis prior to the application of sanctions, characterized in detail in its human rights dimension by the reports of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner since 2017 regarding the responsibilities of the government and by the mentioned Independent Mission.

Here are two illustrations of the complexity of the authoritarian challenge to the international legal-political order in general and, very specifically, to advances in monitoring, scrutiny and international demands on human rights, the rule of law and democracy. No longer is it only an attempt to block and disqualify international scrutiny in matters that reveal abuses of power that ignores institutional, internal and external limitations; it also joins strategies aimed at using legal resources, redefining principles and altering international norms and practices.

Besides the global advances of authoritarianism for almost three lustrum⁶, serious setbacks which under the facade of the 2020 pandemic have registered respectable rates have also taken

5 *Conclusiones preliminares de la visita a la República Bolivariana de Venezuela de la Relatora Especial de las Naciones Unidas sobre el impacto negativo de las medidas coercitivas unilaterales en el disfrute de los derechos humanos*, available in: <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26747&LangID=S>

6 “The research strongly supports the hypothesis that the COVID-19 pandemic is exacerbating the 14 years of consecutive decline in freedom. Not only has democracy weakened in 80 countries, but the problem is particularly acute in struggling democracies and highly repressive states –in other words, settings that already had weak safeguards against abuse of power are suffering the most”. Freedom House, *Democracy under Lockdown. The Impact of COVID-19 on the Global Struggle for Freedom*, available in: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-report/2020/democracy-under-lockdown>

place⁷. It is no exaggeration to say that “the covid-19 pandemic may represent one of the most serious challenges to global democracy since before the “third wave” of democratization began in the mid-1970s”⁸. In this context, it is not incorrect to state that the post-pandemic world has already begun, because we have crossed a crucial threshold, with costs and challenges of all kinds. These include encouraging nationalist impulses and impeding genuine cooperation⁹. Not only is the acceleration and diffusion of the democratic regression critical in this international moment, but also the adaptation and diffusion of policies and practices that either by action or omission favor the maintenance and consolidation of autocratic regimes.

Without overlooking the particularity of each experience and transition in authoritarian adaptation to new times, many common features have developed since the end of the Cold War. This is the case of protection strategies in the face of international monitoring, scrutiny, evaluation and pressure initiatives in matters such as human rights, trade and finance, environmental issues and, of course, security in its traditional and new aspects: from territorial expansion to cyber attacks.

7 “The average global score in the 2020 Democracy Index fell from 5.44 in 2019 to 5.37. This is by far the worst global score since the index was first produced in 2006. The 2020 result represents a significant deterioration and came about largely –but not solely– because of government-imposed restrictions on individual freedoms and civil liberties that occurred across the globe in response to the coronavirus pandemic”, p. 4. The Economist Intelligence Unit, *Democracy Index 2020: In sickness and in health?*, available in: <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020-download-success>

8 Editorial note, *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 4 (October 2020): 74-75, available in: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0056>

9 Fareed Zakaria, *Ten lessons for a post-pandemic world* (sl: W.W.Norton & Company, 2020).

Authoritarian resilience, its use of mutual support strategies and of sharp power resources, as well as spreading and disseminating knowledge for its advance and stabilization, are part of the approaches which the authoritarian challenge and its international support have been characterized for¹⁰. This has turned autocratic advances into a major challenge for democracies, nationally and internationally. As summarized by the initial references by Thomas Ginsburg and Timothy Garton Ash, the principles, norms and procedures that have shaped the international system as we know it are being strongly challenged. Authoritarianism no longer only seeks to isolate itself from and evade them, but also promotes the transformation of global systems. This impulse has become especially intense and notable with the Covid-19 pandemic, amid the exacerbation of geopolitical competition and advances in policies of internal repression, territorial expansion and disavowal of international obligations.

Cooperation initiatives are not excluded from this, as reflected in mask-wearing diplomacy, the vaccine war or the controversies around autonomy, contributions and efficiency in the World Health Organization. In this and other areas, it should be noted that, democracies, some fragile and others institutionalized, have contributed both by action and omission to weaken the capacity and legitimacy of multilateral agreements and their institutional framework. This has been happening under the banners of national-populism in Europe and Latin America, Brexit or the

10 Introduced in three previous articles published by the author in this journal: "Democratización y resiliencia autoritaria: oportunidades del desafío y riesgos de la permisividad", *Democratización* 1, no. 3 (2019): 87-115; "Authoritarian resilience and the Venezuelan democratic cause: resources and asymmetries", *Democratización* 2, no. 5 (2020): 4-30, and "Venezuela: Between authoritarian and democratic learning", *Democratización* 2, no. 8, (2020) : 4-30; available in: <https://redformaweb.com/ediciones/>

abandonment of agreements and unilateralism of the foreign policy of the United States especially –but not only– under the mandate of Donald Trump¹¹.

All the tensions and inconsistencies of the so-called liberal world order, fundamentally transatlantic, institutionalized after the Second World War, have become more and more visible. Since then, international orders or regimes have been defined as sets of agreements around principles, rules and procedures¹² sustained on different proportions of power and legitimacy. On a world scale, the objective is the “the practical application of these concepts [power and legitimacy] to a substantial part of the globe – large enough to affect the global balance of power”, while in regional regimes or issue-specific regimes, it is to apply “the same principles to a defined geographic area”. In both cases they are recognized as “a set of commonly accepted rules that define the limits of permissible action and a balance of power that enforces restraint where rules break down, preventing one political unit from subjugating all others”¹³.

In the broadest geographic domain and thematic scope, the development of international law accelerated since the 1940s, which gave legal and political support to the world order in dimensions that have multiplied over time: conflict management

11 Among the studies on the fragility of democracies in the face of national populist challenges considered from different angles, those of Yascha Mounk, *El pueblo contra la democracia. Por qué nuestra libertad está en peligro y cómo salvarla* (trad. A.F. Mosquera, Barcelona, Paidós, 2018), and Anne Appelbaum, *The Twilight of Democracy* (New York, Doubleday, 2020), are of special interest –the first being more conceptual and the second hinging on specific experiences.

12 Robert Keohane, “The Demand for International Regimes”, *International Organization* 36, no.2 (Spring, 1982): 325-355.

13 Henry Kissinger, *The World Order* (Nueva York, Penguin Books, 2015).

and security, economic, social and cultural issues, extended to unavoidable matters of a global nature, for instance and among many others terrorism, communications, control of epidemics, climate change.

In essential matters to a liberal conception of world order, development was slower and more rugged: the effective enforcement of the legal framework for the protection of human rights, the protection of democracy and the rule of law encountered recurring obstructions in authoritarian regimes. It cannot be ignored that these were also found in the democratic powers that, in the context of the Cold War, considered that autocratic stability was preferable to the risks of democracy. Similarly, suspicions were maintained in other democratic States, not powers, about agreements that implied concessions of sovereignty and acceptance of supranationality, as has been the historical case of Latin America.

The increasing necessity, or at least convenience, to have international credentials of democratic legitimacy after the Cold War has been lost. Simultaneously, there has been a lack of knowledge and resignification of international principles, norms and procedures that hinder authoritarian purposes and performance.

What follows is just an exploration of the subject. The argument is developed in three parts. First, an introductory overview at the state of world order, from challenges to its institutionality and liberal dimension in various fields. Then, the central argument based on the exploration of international affairs and relations where the authoritarian incidence on international institutions has been outlined in two aspects: on the one hand,

the initiatives of the Russian and Chinese regimes as “gravity centres of authoritarian rule”¹⁴, particularly in the area of human rights, and, on the other hand, its significance for the resilience of the Venezuelan regime. Finally, brief reflections on fundamental challenges for democracies and for the construction of Venezuela’s transition to its recovery from the perspective of the authoritarian impulse to change the world order.

I. A fragile and challenged world order

Autocratic impulses and democratic actions or omissions that favor an order in which power prevails over legitimacy is not new. By changing what is changing, it has manifested itself in cycles in which one or the other has prevailed¹⁵.

In perspective, the progress made in the second half of the 20th century in fundamental areas of the international legal-political order and its institutional framework cannot be denied. In the mid-1990s, this was celebrated by one of its most ardent defenders: “Fifty years after its founding, the Western liberal democratic world is robust, and its principles and policies remain the core of

14 Marianne Kneuer & Thomas Demmelhuber, “Gravity centres of authoritarian rule: a conceptual approach”, *Democratization* 23, nro. 5 (May 2015) : 775-796, available in: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1018898>

15 Richard H. Steinberg & Jonathan M. Zasloff, “Power and International Law”, *The American Journal of International Law* 100, no. 1 (January 2006): 64-87, available in: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3518831>; Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Will the Liberal Order Survive? The History of an Idea”, *Foreign Affairs* (January-February 2017), available in: January/February 2017 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-12-12/will-liberal-order-survive>

world order. The challenges to liberal multilateralism both from within and from outside the West have mainly disappeared”¹⁶.

Many advances contributed to that order which, even demystifying it¹⁷, accumulated a favorable balance of institutionalization that at different scales and spheres cultivated liberal political norms and practices.

Now, at the close of the first twenty years of the 21st century, both the de-globalizing impulses that selectively feed on negative aspects and effects of globalization, as well as the weaknesses of a liberal international order whose most essential legal support has been less and less disguisedly object of non-compliance by democratic governments and of instrumentalization or resignification by authoritarian governments, are evident.

In a nutshell, this fading is not easily identifiable on a cursory reading of the very frequent statements that often praise and defend international law, multilateralism and the United Nations. An example of this is the Declaration of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China¹⁸ on the Promotion of International Law. Then, the discursive nuances and the undeniable abyss between rhetoric and actions: there is a step back towards notions of sovereignty and the limitation of the international responsibility

16 G. John Ikenberry, “The Myth of a Post-Cold War Chaos”, *Foreign Affairs* (May-June 1996), available in: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1996-05-01/myth-post-cold-war-chaos>;

17 Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Will the Liberal Order Survive? The History of an Idea”, *Foreign Affairs* (January-February 2017), available in: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-12-12/will-liberal-order-survive>

18 *The Declaration of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the Promotion of International Law*, 25.06.2016, available in: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/position_word_order/-/asset_publisher/6S4RuXfeYlKr/content/id/2331698

of States that weaken essential aspects of the liberal international order, its institutions and practices developed since 1945 on many fundamental issues, both institutional and thematic.

Institutionally, multilateralism –as an international legal and political formalization of the coordination of interests– is undoubtedly a central piece for global governance. It is so in different scopes, global and regional, and international, transnational and supranational matters. Its liberal institutionalism continues to be globally fundamental as a system of rules and procedures in economics (i.e., commercial, monetary and financial), in politics (with international security as the central issue), in matters of transnational nature (e.g. health, climate change) and supranational nature (especially in human rights). This institutionality in each of its dimensions is no longer only under pressure to strengthen its capacities and protect the legitimacy of liberal principles based on human rights, it is also challenged by initiatives aimed at limiting or changing its scope.

II. International autocratization and Venezuela

The essence of Venezuelan foreign policy since 1999 has been, visibly, the effort to protect itself from democratic international influence. It began with debates around the approval of the Inter-American Democratic Charter and continued with the initiatives to disqualify it, distort it, limit its scope, and promote the regional adoption of other clauses¹⁹. It continued with the disqualification

19 A text and an interpretation focused on the unconditional defense of democratically elected governments, relegating autocratization in their performance, was accepted in the democratic clause of the South American Union of Nations. This view has thus prevailed in the regional interpretation in situations such as those in Honduras in the face of complaints about the unconstitutional initiatives of President Manuel

of the reports and the non-authorization of missions of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the non-compliance with judgments of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the withdrawal from that instance with the denunciation of the American Convention on Human Rights in 2013 and the departure from the Organization of American States effective in 2019. The disqualification of independent international electoral observation which the regime has rebuffed since 2006 was accompanied by the adoption of the figure of accompaniment, with minimal competencies and independence, while still trying to manipulate the observation systems of the European Union and the United Nations for its own purposes.

This effort was increasingly visibly accompanied by disqualifications and isolation from agreements and institutions of liberal essence, both commercially and financially as well as politically. In terms of integration, the Venezuelan government quickly manifested itself in opposition against the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) and stated an express antiliberal sense with the joint creation of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas with Cuba –signed in 2004 but proposed to the Caribbean by Hugo Chávez in 2001–, later renamed the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America. The abandonment of the Andean Community and the Group of Three in 2006, the forced entry into Mercosur effective in 2012 with the intention of modifying it, as well as the promotion of bilateral energy agreements with Petrocaribe in 2005 have since followed. The latter were geopolitically fundamental to foster affinities, support and votes for Venezuelan positions and proposals in international forums.

Zelaya prior to the 2009 coup, and Ecuador in 2010 with President Rafael Correa's denouncement of an alleged coup attempt by the police.

With an express interest in displacing the influence of the Organization of American States, and taking advantage of the regional political approaches of the “pink tide”, the creation of the Union of South American Nations was encouraged in 2008 and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States between 2010 and 2011.

The search for extra continental references and alliances was privileging coincidences with authoritarianism that challenged the advances of liberal principles, rules and procedures within the global picture of autocratization and recession of democracy that was emerging. Among them, China and Russia are of particular interest. They are so because of their willingness and resources to instrumentalize legal-political principles, rules and procedures for their own benefits and, not least, because of the impact of their international initiatives on the resilience of the Venezuelan regime.

Among others, Russia and China

It is convenient to reinforce that the global illiberal impulse is not only caused by the Russian and Chinese regimes: it is encouraged by other authoritarian regimes, as well as, on its own scale, fragile democracies, and strategic weaknesses and inconsistencies in democracies with better institutional support. Whichever it may be, in times of populist nationalism –and more recently of pandemic emergency and economic recession–, it is difficult for them to escape the defensive temptation of isolation, geopolitical competition and the postponement, if not abandonment, of international responsibilities. The list of bilateral and multilateral commitments abandoned to varying degrees by the United States government under the presidency of

Donald Trump is a fundamental piece of information, not just a mere example²⁰. So are, in the opposite direction, both the express geopolitical reorientation of the European Union Commission and its Common Foreign and Security policy, as well as the shift towards concerted and multilateral action by the new US government.

Among the regimes related to Venezuela, Cuba is, without a doubt, an extremely influential actor in foreign and domestic policy of all areas. But China and Russia are the two authoritarian actors whose drive to abandon, reorient or redefine principles, rules and procedures has the greatest influence, means and willingness to use them worldwide. While recognizing the difference in their capacities and motivations, the two regimes have in common their dissatisfaction with the world order and their willingness to move within it in what is convenient for them: to reorient or stop initiatives from others, to gain support and legitimacy for their own, and to influence the definition or reinterpretation of rules²¹. The right to veto in the United Nations Security Council gives them a fundamental advantage. Furthermore, creating their

20 Oona Hathaway, *Reengaging on Treaties and Other International Agreements (Part I): President Trump Rejection of International Law*, Just Security (s.f.), available in: <https://www.justsecurity.org/72656/reengaging-on-treaties-and-other-international-agreements-part-i-president-donald-trumps-rejection-of-international-law/>. Regardless of the success of the 2017-2021 period in finance, trade, security, health, climate change and human rights, there had already been notable ambivalences before, such as in the procedure for the invasion of Iraq or, like China and Russia, in the non-acceptance of the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court.

21 The most significant references of this common orientation are drawn by Thomas Ginsburg, op. cit. and Thomas Ambrosio, "Authoritarian Norms in a Changing International System", *Politics and Governance* (ISSN: 2183-2463). (vol. 6, no. 2, 2018), pp. 120-123, available in: DOI: 10.17645/p.v6i2.1474.

institutional spaces, they have also set aside some principles and rules and given a central role to others.

Among the agreements that both have promoted in their areas of influence and that contribute to the creation of their own references in the fields in which they act –economy and security–, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (2001) applies to both and other Central Asian states. Russia has promoted the Collective Security Treaty Organization (since 1994, renewed in 2002) and the Eurasian Economic Union (2015). As for China, with a broader scope and including democratic actors, the most relevant agreements are the Belt and Road Initiative (since 2013), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (2014), the Comprehensive Regional Economic Association signed in mid-November 2020 together with other fourteen Asia Pacific countries –the world’s largest trade pact with almost a third of the world’s economic production–, and the Investment Agreement signed with the European Union at the end of December 2020, negotiated since 2013.

Russia and China have violated principles and agreements in matters as diverse and important as respect for territorial integrity (e.g. Ukraine and the “Asian Mediterranean”, and the Pacific respectively) as well as self-determination (as is the case of Russian interference in elections and consultations of other countries or Chinese disrespect for the transfer agreement of Hong Kong and the principle of one country two systems). The challenge is also manifested in the areas of trade and investment, with little or no transparency and with the imposition of conditions that violate or are alien to international regimes and agreements on these matters. This is complemented by the agreements between the two powers, as reflected in their energy

alliance for the construction of the world's longest gas pipeline for supplying China, amid tensions with the United States and the sanctions imposed by them together with the European Union to Russia. In fact, the Sino-Russian rapprochement amounts to more than five years and has resulted in a succession of statements and a range of agreements in which, with a high dose of pragmatism and caution, the mutual interest in protecting and projecting their power is present.

Their insistence on a multipolar world order based on equal rules for all must be interpreted considering their efforts in adjusting those rules to their own interest, for which they not only promote and influence agreements and forums but also participate very actively in the multilateral system. They do it in the Security Council with the exercise of the veto –which stops scrutiny and sanctions–, in the Human Rights Council, and also in the General Assembly with an authoritarian majority, as well as in spaces and specialized agencies on issues such as health and climate change, corruption and telecommunications. As for China's case, the amount of contributions the nation makes renders it the second largest contributor to the UN budget and it has increased its participation and competition for the direction of specialized agencies, including those dealing with telecommunications, corruption or intellectual property.

Liberal and authoritarian multilateralism

In its most general sense, the definition of multilateralism as a system of world governance rules is valid for any state, but only until clarifications are made. The structure, relationships and procedures of multilateral governance always combine power and law. In its authoritarian conception, power prevails

centered on the State as a support and limit to institutionality. In its liberal form, international legal institutions prioritize norms and regulate force based on principles of democratic self-determination and international responsibility. With the advances of the authoritarian conception, there is an expanding gray area in which the multilateral is reduced to the exercise of the power of influence (and veto) in the midst of the criticism of unilateralism while it is practiced and while it calls for the democratization of international organizations.

The praise for multilateralism and the expressions on the need to democratize and strengthen it, as well as expressions of appreciation and interest in strengthening international law, are expressly present in the aforementioned June 2016 declaration signed by Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin in support of the promotion of international law. A specially interesting precedent is the 1997 Joint Declaration on the Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order²², and the 2005 Joint Declaration of China and Russia on International Order in the 21st Century²³.

Since 2014, after the Russian annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol, in the midst of the Chinese geopolitical turn under the presidency of Xi Jinping and in the face of the growing unilateralism of the United States under the presidency of Donald Trump, there have been a succession of meetings, declarations and

22 *International Legal Materials* (vol. 36, nro. 4, Cambridge University Press, julio 1997), pp. 986-989, available in: https://www.jstor.org/stable/20698707?read-now=1&refreqid=excelsior%3Aa7d0b16d5ba795592354da6a92dee260&seq=3#page_scan_tab_contents

23 Joint Declaration of China and Russia on International Order in the 21st Century (February 2005), available in: <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/esp/zjt/hjtfwelshsk/t202164.htm>

agreements in which, from different trajectories, strategies and interests, the aspirations to recover the recognition of Russia as a power with its areas of influence and the deployment of China as a geopolitical power have converged. This approach has been described as the pragmatic conjunction of the Primakov doctrine –in its dimension of recovery of spaces and geopolitical projection of Russia– and the principles of Peaceful Coexistence proclaimed by China: respect for sovereignty and integrity, no mutual aggression, no interference in internal affairs, relationships of equal and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.

The aforementioned distancing of the United States from multilateral agreements and forums during the Trump administration encouraged the vindication of international law and multilateralism by China, Russia and other autocratic regimes on their own terms. Before the United Nations General Assembly in the commemorative sessions of the 75th anniversary of the World Forum and the end of the Second World War, Xi Jinping²⁴ spoke of the persistence on the path of multilateralism and defending the international system centered on the UN and the need to sustain global governance on the principle of consultation, cooperation and benefits for all, and to promote equal rights, opportunities and rules among all countries so that this system would respond to world politics and economy which were already different from those of 1945.

During the same forum, the President of Russia established as principles, “in the clearest and most unambiguous terms by the founding fathers of our universal Organization”, equality of

24 Xi Jinping Pronuncia Importante Discurso en el Debate General del Septuagésimo Quinto Período de Sesiones de la Asamblea General de las Naciones Unidas (22 de septiembre 2020), available in: <http://cl.china-embassy.org/esp/zldt/t1817749.htm>

sovereign States, non-intervention in their internal affairs, the right of the people to self-determination, the condemnation of threats or use of force, and the political settlement of disputes. Regarding the Security Council, after defining it as a fundamental piece of global governance, he reiterated that it cannot dispense with the veto power of the five permanent members, victorious powers of the Second World War, which he still considered representative “of the current balance of political and military power”²⁵.

On international law, the starting point of the Sino-Russian declarations of 2005 and 2016 is the centrality of the principle of sovereign equality for the stability of international relations. This sounds very good until, returning to its classic notion, it’s found that the principle of non-intervention is insisted on every issue, be it political, conflict resolution, economic or security, referencing UN Charter and some resolutions of the world forum²⁶. This principle becomes a clear limit to the scope of international law. Hence the separation that was already so expressly included in the joint declaration of 2005: “The affairs of countries must be decided independently by their own peoples, and the affairs of the world must be determined on a multilateral and collective basis and through dialogues and consultations”²⁷. It is also the case that the violation of well-established principles and norms (e.g., respect for territorial integrity) are considered matters of sovereign national decision.

25 Address to the 75th United Nations General Assembly (September, 2020), available in: <https://spain.mid.ru/de/noticias/-/a>

26 Especially Resolution 2625 (XXV). *Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations* (24.10.1970), available in: <http://www.un-documents.net/a25r2625.htm>.

27 See note 23.

This vision of international law and multilateralism, which insists on its instrumental aspects but also on the global weight of China and Russia –with their right to veto– in the definition of political guidelines, norms and procedures, has also been assumed by other authoritarian regimes. This has been manifested in coincidences in international forums on international law and multilateralism, in general, and on human rights and democracy, trade and investment, and security. This last concept is extremely plastic for authoritarian regimes, and not only serves to repress freedoms within borders but also to disqualify external scrutiny and weaken its legal-political support: as hegemonic, undemocratic, and violating sovereignty.

Multilateral spaces are diverse, not only because of the aforementioned distinction between those promoted by authoritarianism and those linked to the liberal order. They are especially so because multilateralism with a global scope, which brings together democracies and autocracies, also includes diverse issues: international issues (e.g., security and conflict resolution, which manifest national interests and geopolitical competition more explicitly and with greater force); transnational issues, in which interdependence makes coordination especially necessary, although geopolitical constraints limit it in practice (e.g., trade and finance, health and climate change); and finally, those that are conceived and have been slowly institutionalized as supranational, which is the case of human rights²⁸.

Although generally authoritarian regimes are constitutionally compliant proclaiming their adherence to the defense of

28 Thorsen Benner: “What is left of Multilateralism” (Global Public Policy Institute- Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2019), available in: <https://www.gppi.net/2019/11/04/whats-left-of-multilateralism-putting-six-hypotheses-to-the-test>, and “Competitive Cooperation: How to

human rights, they do so in a way always subjected to the test of facts. Consider the vast catalog of rights contained in the 1999 Venezuelan Constitution²⁹. In practice, these rights are not promoted or protected effectively; instead, duties are imposed and the guarantees of all rights are dismantled in the name of defending the regime. In authoritarianism, national law prevails over international treaties and tribunals: be it contrary to what is constitutionally stipulated, as in the case of Venezuela, or in line with the national legal framework –such as the one in the Russian constitutional reform of 2020– or as implied by the fundamental law of China. The most important thing is that the rhetoric is not only accompanied by arguments that justify the ignorance of the universality and interdependence of all rights, but by open violations and elaborate proposals to reorient the institutions that watch over them and to modify the way of serving them. An example is the responses of the Russian and Chinese regimes to the criticism they received during the Universal Periodic Assessments for 2009, 2013 and 2018³⁰. China's 2018 response included an initial section which expresses interest in promoting the healthy development of the international cause of human rights on the basis of equality and mutual respect, but giving increasing importance to economic, social and cultural rights and

Think About Strengthening Multilateralism", (Global Public Policy Institute-Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2020), available in: <https://www.gppi.net/2020/10/28/competitive-cooperation-how-to-think-about-strengthening-multilateralism>

29 Title II contains 109 articles that cover the broad spectrum of civil, political, socioeconomic, cultural and environmental rights, with express reference in articles 19 and 23 to the supranationality of the international regime that protects them.

30 For the Popular Republic of China, available in: <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/CNindex.aspx>; for the Russian Federation, available in: <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/RUindex.aspx>

the right to development, which focus the interest of developing countries and promote the comprehensive development of human rights of all kinds³¹.

In the case of Russia's response that same year, there is no explicit conceptual differentiation on the human rights protection regime, but the distance between rhetoric and practice is abysmal. Among the statements about specific agreements to which the Federation is a party or has decided not to be, and the detailed responses to the comments received, there is a gap between the discourse and the reality on civil and political rights. The gap between what has been reported and the increase in the centralization of power and political control is also notable. This is reflected in the statement about its follow-up to a systematic policy of strengthening a constructive and depoliticized dialogue on current issues on the international human rights agenda and its position contrary to the use of the issue of human rights as a pretext to interfere in the internal affairs of sovereign States³².

However, criticism of the scrutiny criteria has not resulted in the abandonment of the Human Rights Council, but in participation from the very selection of its 47 members in the General Assembly, the promotion of Resolutions and Special Rapporteurships on matters of interest and convenience as well as participation in the Universal Periodic Evaluations.

31 China, National report submitted pursuant to paragraph 5 of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 16/21 (August 20, 2018): 3-4, available in: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/254/65/PDF/G1825465.pdf?OpenElement>

32 Russian Federation, National report submitted pursuant to paragraph 5 of the annex to Human Rights Council resolution 16/21 (March 1, 2018): 5, available in: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/254/65/PDF/G1825465.pdf?OpenElement>

Venezuela and the unavoidable scrutiny

The disqualification and rupture of hemispheric and regional agreements and forums have prevailed throughout the current Venezuelan regime, as well as the encouragement of those promoted by it, although increasingly limited by their ineffectiveness and loss of legitimacy. In the multilateral system of the United Nations, it has cultivated in all its instances the proximity and support of related regimes –more so in the midst of its loss of regional support. They have not stopped competing to have a presence as a non-permanent member in the Security Council, achieved in 2015, where on the eleven occasions the Venezuelan case has been dealt with –formally and informally– since 2017 Russia and China have provided their decisive support to the regime. Venezuela was voted into the Human Rights Council between 2020 and 2022, in an election that revealed 105 votes in favor from all 193 member states, which proportionally corresponds to the undemocratic regimes of the world³³.

Since 2014, the acceleration in the loss of democracy and the rule of law in Venezuela has not only been accompanied by initiatives to entrench itself with the banners of offended sovereignty and threatened national security. With the decline in the legitimacy and effectiveness of the regime and those of the regional forums and agreements promoted by the government of Hugo Chávez, the need to join the initiatives of other authoritarian governments increased, bilaterally and in multilateral forums.

It is remarkable that despite the initiatives of the Venezuelan regime to disqualify and obstruct the scrutiny of human rights, it has not been able to stop it. The reports of the Office of the High

³³ Thus registered in the aforementioned Democracy Index of the Intelligence Unit of *The Economist*. See *supra*, note 7.

Commissioner for Human Rights since 2017, and particularly since July 2019³⁴, gave rise to steps to allow the establishment of an Office in Venezuela. Although the latter is dependent on strict official control of its efforts, it has managed to keep the High Commissioner informed.

It has also not been possible to reduce attention to the Venezuelan crisis in the Human Rights Council. A recent example worth remembering is that two draft resolutions on Venezuela were approved in the September 2019 session of the Human Rights Council: one to strengthen cooperation and technical assistance in human rights, whose list of promoters anticipated the intention to limit the scope of the scrutiny³⁵; and another of more precise purpose on the human rights situation in Venezuela³⁶ that gave rise to the Independent Fact-Finding Mission mentioned at the beginning of these pages.

This last mission, after a year of complex and meticulous work from abroad since it did not obtain government permission to enter the country despite repeated requests, produced an extensive and documented report³⁷. This was officially answered with three sets of arguments: the illegitimacy of the mission

34 Available in: <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/Countries/LACRegion/Pages/VEReportsOHCHR.aspx>

35 Promoted with the support of Algeria, North Korea, Nicaragua, Syria, Turkey and Palestine- Available in: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/G19/285/63/PDF/G1928563.pdf?OpenElement>

36 Supported by Albany, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgari, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Chequia, Denmark, Georgia, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Iceland, Israel, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Monaco, Germany, New Zealand, Paraguay, Peru, Slovenia, and the UK. Available in: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/LTD/G19/284/21/PDF/G1928421.pdf?OpenElement>

37 Detailed Findings of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (September 15th, 2020), available in:

“which demonstrated and evidenced its deep connection with a group of international actors that have carried out a series of programmed attacks aimed at undermining its sovereignty and denying its right to self-determination”; the vindication of Venezuela’s right “to defend its sovereign rights and prevent such acts, acting in accordance with international human rights law”, and, finally, the exaltation of the virtues of the legal framework and the national practice of protection of the human rights, always from the complaint of “a multiform aggression that threatens their right to development, peace and self-determination”³⁸. It is the defense of the regime that justifies all the means, while the statement on rights related to development, peace and self-determination reveal the recurrent deviation of human rights in authoritarian regimes. Considering the Latin American context, it recalls the old national security doctrines of the military regimes of the southern cone and Brazil: the thesis of external siege and internal-external enemies that justify internal repression.

Thus, the attempt to limit the scope of the supranational regime for the protection of human rights and to promote the divisibility and non-universality of these rights does not cease: prioritizing socio-economic rights conceptually –not in practice–, and disregarding the obligation of accountability. This is how it reads in the reports with which the Venezuelan regime has responded to the Universal Periodic Evaluations in 2011 and 2016³⁹. So, it joins the attempts to delegitimize the regulations and weaken the procedures for scrutinizing civil and political rights.

https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/FFMV/A_HRC_45_CRP.11_SP.pdf

³⁸ See *supra*, note 4

³⁹ Available in: <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/HRBodies/UPR/Pages/VEindex.aspx>

The ineffectiveness and growing internal and external illegitimacy of the Venezuelan regime have limited its ability to maneuver abroad, and joining the strategies of other countries in challenging international institutions has its costs and consequences. To the willingness to vote and support all the positions and proposals of these countries, the terms of commercial and financial agreements signed with them are added. Clauses and secret agreements, guarantees and extreme conditionalities, opacity and corruption in the execution of agreements, are some of the characteristics of bilateral deals with autocratic allies, particularly with China⁴⁰ and Russia⁴¹, but also, on their own scales, with Cuba, Iran, Turkey, among others. Meanwhile, the links and the destination of the resources related to the evasion of sanctions remain in total opacity, opacities to which will be added those anticipating the application of the misnamed and unconstitutionally formulated and approved Constitutional Anti-Blockade Law for National Development and the Guarantee of Human Rights⁴². All this makes Venezuela part of extremely unequal relations that weaken the international norms and procedures of transparency, trade and investment, while complicating the solution of the national crisis in all its dimensions.

40 Transparencia Venezuela, *Negocios Chinos. Acuerdos que socavaron la democracia en Venezuela* (September 2020), available in: <https://transparencia.org.ve/project/informe-negocios-chinos/>

41 Transparencia Venezuela, *Pese a acuerdos mil millonarios con Rusia en materia petrolera, la producción venezolana está en mínimos históricos*, available in: <https://transparencia.org.ve/pese-a-acuerdos-mil-millonarios-con-rusia-en-materia-petrolera-la-produccion-venezolana-esta-en-minimos-historicos/>

42 Approved by the Constituent Assembly in October 2020, *Gaceta Oficial* N° 6583 Extraordinario (12.10.2020), available in: <https://es.scribd.com/document/480258214/GOE-6-583>

III. Finally: democracy and democrats also count

There is insistence from within and outside of Venezuela on how national effort is essential to recover democracy, without underestimating the great relevance of the role international actors play, although it may be complementary. Likewise, emphasis must be placed on how essential it is to coordinate international liberal agendas in all groups, forums, organizations and initiatives to contribute to this indispensable complementary effort.

Both from within and outside, it is essential to attend and expand the democratic agreement in the international, transnational and, especially, in the supranational. The contents of these agreements are many and very diverse, and the task begins by recognizing it, even in the limited sense of these pages. This is the case in each of the aforementioned topics and, crucially, in the one here highlighted: human rights in the integral conception that reports such as those of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights have reflected.

Based on the general aspiration of recovering the validity of the effective guarantees of all human rights, the strategy both for the immediate protection of those who present themselves with critical humanitarian urgency and for their deeper institutional recovery requires an agenda drawn up nationally with international advice and cooperation. The democratic challenge is to cultivate support and prevent the priorities set by authoritarian-socio-economic regimes from hindering comprehensive liberal actions.

It is not in the benefit of Venezuelan democrats, in the socio-political sphere –specially the media–, to disqualify and become

isolated from multilateral international initiatives, judging them to be sub-optimal or limited in scope. The proactive attitude from the democratic agenda, on the other hand, should provide a way to take advantage of and contribute to reorienting international initiatives. This seems an opportune moment, despite the complexity of national and global circumstances.

From abroad, the return of the United States to various international agreements and multilateral action –including the United Nations Human Rights Council– adds to the provision and proposal of a multilateral⁴³ and transatlantic⁴⁴ agenda by the European Union. This conjunction of efforts has been expressly linked to the multilateral attention to the Venezuelan crisis –from the Council of the European Union and by various spokespersons for the government chaired by Joe Biden– in what is emerging as an international effort of pressure and persuasion, which is more efficient and less counterproductive.

Finally, moderating or managing the incidence of China, Russia and other authoritarian actors on international institutions and their willingness to challenge it is a major issue for powers such as the United States and Europe. It is up to the Venezuelan democrats to study in detail their incidence in Venezuela, to identify what needs to be countered, which can be reoriented in the interests of democratic recovery and, especially, to cultivate and expand related international support that counterbalances democracy in multilateral spaces.

43 A renewed multilateralism fit for the 21st century: the EU's agenda (February 17, 2021), available in: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_622

44 EU-US: A new transatlantic agenda for global change (December 2nd, 2020), available in: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_2279

Venezuela's political situation: a study from a global perspective

Rosa María Pérez Larez

The main objective of this article is to describe the current context of Venezuela in the global scene. To understand it, it is necessary to define the main guidelines that have characterized foreign policy from 1999 to the present, emphasizing relations with the United States. Subsequently, the elements that define the country's position in the current regional and international dynamics are determined, influenced by the growing social-institutional deterioration of the Venezuelan State and the marked polarization between the political actors involved. A repositioning of the country will depend on finding a consensual political solution to the crisis, which has worsened due to the consequences and challenges imposed by Covid-19, together with the expectations generated by the new democratic government of the North American nation.

Keywords: Venezuela, foreign policy, United States, crisis, regional dimension, global scene

In order to understand the position of Venezuela in this international dynamic, fundamental aspects of its foreign policy should be addressed, which must be derived from National Interest, attending to the instruments and purposes of the State,

based on domestic and international demands. Until 1999, foreign action in Venezuela encompassed a set of objectives, actions and permanent rules of the game of a transnational nature. Certainly, the circumstantial changes that occurred at a systemic level, both nationally and internationally, gave a distinctive mark to each presidential term. These marks were also influenced by the management of identities and perceptions by decision-makers in this area.

With the arrival of Hugo Chávez (1999), there were substantial transformations for this area in terms of orientations, speech, as well as the search for interlocutors who were different from the traditional ones. From the beginning of his administration, he was prone to the idea of the multipolar world, as well as the need to defend sovereignty as the founding idea of his political proposal. According to Ellner:

The Venezuelan president foresaw the transformation of nations linked by alliances into powerful political blocs (...) In the case of Venezuela, the blocs included OPEC, the Caribbean community of nations, and Mercosur, to which Caracas applied for membership during the first months of the Chávez administration¹.

Thus, the foreign policy of Venezuela during this stage was oriented towards the design of new geopolitics with particular guidelines, among which the creation of regional mechanisms that would serve as a counterweight to the influence of the

1 Steve Ellner, "La política exterior del Gobierno de Chávez: La retórica chavista y los asuntos sustanciales" *Revista Venezolana de Economía y Ciencias Sociales* 15, no.1 (April 2009) available in: [www. http://ve.scielo.org/scielo](http://ve.scielo.org/scielo). This quote, as well as those that follow taken directly from texts in Spanish, are the author's translation.

United States (US) for the region stands out. Initiatives such as the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAC) are representative examples of integration that responded to this principle, with oil as a vector of politics and power. However, the economic premise considered at the time of the formulation of the international agenda conditioned the viability of the project.

In this sense, relations with the US procured special importance. It must be said that they have undergone through different nuances. Despite the fact that during the first years the government emphasized the defense of a nationalist position, at the same time it manifested the possibility of recognizing the interests of this nation and, in some cases, adapting to them. However, by 2003, the interaction between the two countries was at a time of tension, amid a climate of accusations. In fact, the Venezuelan president would call the Bush administration imperialist and genocidal. Romero warns:

The expectations are not at all flattering for a regime that presents itself to the hemisphere with a new national project based on a different idea of democracy (...) Venezuela has the issue of relations with the United States on the foreign policy agenda. But, in the era of global changes, Venezuelan governments cannot expect Washington to continue treating this country as something detached from Latin America (...) Mutual respect is imposed, which for Venezuela means a policy of "concerted autonomy" in a changing world².

2 Carlos Romero "Venezuela y Estados Unidos: Una relación necesaria", *Revista Uniandes*, no. 56-57 (2003), available in www.revistauniandes.com

Thus, a foreign policy strategy based on an anti-American policy was conceived, despite the fact that economic relations were maintained. However, from being Venezuela's first trading partner, total imports from the US have declined until currently falling at their lowest level. In short, relations between Caracas and Washington have been complicated. Since the arrival of the Bolivarian Revolution to power in Venezuela in 1998, first with Hugo Chávez and then with his political successor Nicolás Maduro, there have been periods of tension, distension and grievances that have disrupted diplomatic relations and have sharpened the discursive tone. For Colmenares,

Maduro has wanted to imitate the radical and anti-American tone of the late Chávez's speeches. They are harangues with a very different tone from the ones he used when he was Chancellor. However, after Trump's victory, a change of course began to be evident in the speech of the head of the Venezuelan government. Those incendiary proclamations in which Maduro accused the northern country of being an imperial power that seeks to crush the progressive movements of Latin America and the world changed for a more conciliatory and favorable discourse³.

In general terms, Venezuela's foreign policy is framed in a context characterized by the approach to other poles of power such as China and Russia, as well as links with an international left and states with non-Western values, such as the case of Iran, in which economic interests weigh in. Romero considers:

3 Alexis Colmenares, "Las relaciones de Venezuela con Estados Unidos en la era de Trump. Mucho ruido, las mismas nueces", *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2018), available in: www.fal.itam.mx

Iran also fulfills the function of being a trading partner with little involvement from the private sector. Venezuela and Iran have signed around 270 instruments of cooperation between memorandums of understanding, contracts and agreements in areas such as energy, education and technology, transportation, agriculture, manufacturing of plants and cars, health matters, and the construction of houses, highlighting the Iranian thesis that Venezuela could be a bridge for that country's relations with the rest of Latin America⁴.

From the domestic level, not only is the lack of consensus between the different sectors in charge of formulating foreign policy crucial, but the existence of an increasingly politicized foreign service is evident, and public opinion is increasingly divided among the different internal debates around this policy. It is, clearly, a complex scene. Additionally, there is a marked economic and social crisis hand in hand with total polarization, in which the opposition loses centrism. This situation makes the country a topic on the international agenda and allows us to outline some ideas about its situation on the global scene.

The role of Venezuela

By 2019, Venezuela has become an issue of growing importance not only for Latin America—as it is the epicenter of regional contradictions— but also for international politics. Institutional weakening, as well as emigration resulting from the growing economic and social collapse since 2013, have led

4 Carlos Romero, “La Política Exterior De La Venezuela Bolivariana”, *Working Paper*, no. 4 (July 2010), available in: <http://www.plataformademocratica.org>

the country to become a point of conflict between the US, China and Russia. The Venezuelan situation is framed by a region with severe governance problems and deep political divisions, which has hindered a homogeneous response to this situation, beyond the modest efforts of the Lima Group and the questioned position assumed by non-continental actors, such as the European Union.

It should be remembered that the former US president, Donald Trump, recognized Juan Guaidó, representative of the opposition and president at that time of the National Assembly. This recognition deepened the situation of conflict with the government of Nicolás Maduro, leading to the breakdown of diplomatic and consular relations. Malamud and Núñez consider:

We are facing a continental and international crisis due to the political and geopolitical consequences of the existence of two leaders (Nicolás Maduro and Juan Guaidó) who serve before Venezuelans and before the world as legitimate presidents. Each one with their respective international support (...), Guaidó has received other important support, such as Israel, Morocco and Australia, with a good relationship with the United States (...) Maduro has significant international support (...) To these, the classic extra-regional allies in the fight against “imperialism” are added, including Iran and Turkey and two emerging powers with very dissimilar interests and attitudes such as China and Russia⁵.

The previous statement shows the nature of the support for Venezuela on the global scene. However, it must be assumed that the capacity for action of international support is limited.

5 Malamud & Núñez, *La crisis de Venezuela y el tablero geopolítico internacional*, Real Instituto Elcano. Available in <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org>

The possibility of a military intervention by the US has been discussed, but it must be recognized that the consequences would overwhelm regional political stability. It is a scenario with clear contradictions and disagreements, in which the multilateral initiatives that have emerged –the Lima Group, the International Contact Group and the Montevideo Initiative– have wavered in coordination in terms of their mechanisms and objectives.

The rising internationalization of the Venezuelan conflict is palpable, in the midst of a debate that moves between the counterweights of the US, its Latin American allies, and the construction of alliances of the Venezuelan government with intermediate powers and countries such as China, Russia, Turkey and Iran. On the contrary, this internationalization has made it difficult to reposition the region on the global scene, leading to greater fractures.

Difficult times are on the horizon, not only globally but also in the hemisphere: Latin America (LA) has lost prominence and has been impacted by economic situations, political fragmentation and social deterioration. If the arrival of Covid-19 and its consequent effects is added to the above, it is a not very hopeful scenario for the countries that make up the region, each with its own realities and projections.

On the other hand, the new democratic administration has expressed the convenience of cementing a relationship with LA based on topics such as governance, corruption and human rights, with the aim of exerting pressure on some countries. Likewise, it has recognized the relevance of the migration issue. The real problem for the US continues to be on the border with Mexico and although drastic changes in this matter are not expected at

the moment, President Biden wants to promote measures in this regard that would also favor Venezuelans. Precisely in relation to Venezuela, it is still early to detail a specific policy, and despite the fact that there have been certain gestures, such as enabling some operations in ports and airports, it is far from being the beginning of the end in terms of sanctions directed to the Venezuelan oil sector, while it leaves out activities of exporting diluents to refine oil.

A study regarding the global scene implies recognizing that the international community can play an important role in the resolution of the national political situation. However, the handling of internal disputes and the respective decision-making translated into strategies aimed at a firm dialogue between the government of Venezuela, the opposition and organized civil society are decisive. Only in this way can an inclusive and plural exit be favored.

Conclusions

The 11th issue of *Democratización* was dedicated to analyzing Venezuela and autocracies at the international level. This edition had three articles by three women who analyze the same phenomenon from different points of view: Adriana Boesner Herrera, Elsa Cardozo and Rosa María Pérez. The conclusions that bring together their main ideas will be shared below:

- 1. Inherited alliances:** In the article *Relations between Venezuela and the Middle East since 1999*, Adriana Boesner Herrera concludes that most of the alliances that Hugo Chávez made through personalism and the programmatic apparatus that characterized his government endure and serve for Maduro to continue in power. In addition, most of these alliances have something in common: an anti-imperialist ideology and the economic interests of Venezuela's mineral resources. For Maduro, relations with the Middle East are an escape route to circumvent economic sanctions and maintain his hold to power.
- 2. Autocracies take care of each other:** In an increasingly unipolar world, Elsa Cardozo reflects that powers such as China and Russia, with ever larger spaces of power within multilateral international organizations, promote their own versions of human rights and sovereignty, which does not imply the improvement of the freedoms of the peoples, but does protect the actions of other autocracies within each of its borders. In conclusion, it is the duty of the democrats and democracies of the 21st century to counterbalance these ambiguous versions of freedom and

alliances of autocracies that have been taking more and more spaces in the world.

3. **Venezuela as a player:** Venezuela is a matter of importance internationally. The US, China, Russia and Latin America are in conflict over the role it plays in the game of the greater scheme of the world. For Latin American nations, Venezuela is a migratory and organized crime risk. For the other three powers, Venezuela has a privileged geopolitical position. Everyone agrees that, today, Venezuela is the protagonist of an international conflict. Rosa María Pérez concludes that this will continue to be the case. In other terms, the change in the administration of the US government and other governments in Latin America will have an impact on the relations of the continent and on the conflict with other powers. However, it is a developing phenomenon that must be closely followed in order to understand the Venezuelan situation from an international point of view.

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