

Democratization



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Relations between Venezuela
and the Middle East since 1999

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Autocratization of the world order:
a challenge for democrats
and democracies

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

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

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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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