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Passionate Politics: The Nature of Cuban-Venezuelan Relations

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Cubans and Venezuelans play the same sports, dance to the same rhythms, and fight for similar causes. They share a popular iconography of baseball heroes, *salsa* players, and freedom fighters. Like close partners usually do, Cubans and Venezuelans know well how to love and how to fight each other. Their history is a passionate relationship in which politics and ideology have led to affection or hate, but never indifference.

Two key elements characterize the history of Cuban-Venezuelan relations. First, politics and ideology, not economic interests, provide the music to which both countries have danced closer or moved apart. Because the relations are more political than economic, the dynamics are also very peculiar. Without economic constituencies playing a counterbalancing role, it has been easier to jump from love to hate. In other words, without economic interest, the political economy of a policy becomes purely political. Second, during the past forty years, Venezuela has enjoyed a multiparty democracy while Cuba became a Communist regime. Because of this divergence, relations between the two countries need to be analyzed on two levels. There has been a formal, government-to-government relation with ideological and political ups and downs. There have also been “informal” relations between the Venezuelan left (later the Venezuelan “democratized left”) and the Cuban government. Over the years, this informal relationship was maintained regardless of the ideological tendencies of any particular government in Venezuela. Formal and informal relations intersected dramatically in the past when the Venezuelan left provided a vehicle for Cuban intervention in domestic affairs.

The current situation is characterized by warm friendship between Presidents Hugo Chavez and Fidel Castro and a series of recent bilateral cooperation agreements that have shifted formal relations much closer. This shift has caused concern in different parts of the hemisphere and particularly in Washington. The key concerns are:

- that Venezuela and Cuba might promote political movements in other countries that would establish like-minded governments, and
- that Venezuela’s support of Cuba might weaken U.S. attempts to impose an effective embargo on the island.

The paper will evaluate the validity of these concerns based on the nature of the relationship between the two countries and the political context in which they have evolved from the 1940s to the present. The following section offers a historical overview.

DICTATORS AND DEMOCRATS

The Russian Revolution and the Great Depression changed the way Latin Americans thought about their own reality. As a consequence, new political movements emerged in the region and searched for new answers to old problems. In the Caribbean, two political parties with similar ideologies developed close ties during the 1940s: the Cuban Authentic Revolutionary Party (*Auténtico*) and the Democratic Action (AD) in Venezuela. After flirting with communism and rejecting it because of its advocacy of class conflict and disregard of individual liberties, both parties based their principles on nationalism, social justice, and democratic values. Both rejected U.S. interventionism as well. Both parties came to power in the mid-1940s. On 1 June 1944, Cuba elected *Auténtico* Dr. Ramon Grau as its president, defeating Carlos Saladrigas, the handpicked candidate of outgoing president Fulgencio Batista. In Venezuela, in October 1945, Democratic Action, collaborating with the military, overthrew General Isaías Medina Angarita, who had insisted on choosing a successor instead of holding democratic elections. Once in power, both governments were drawn closer together by a common agenda. Internally, they promoted similar sociopolitical reforms. In foreign affairs, they pressured the Organization of American States (OAS) to isolate Caribbean dictators like Somoza and Trujillo. Ideology and politics were the key pillars for this relationship, and the democratic example of the two governments provoked criticism from both the traditional right and the radical left in the region. Trade and economic concerns, common in most bilateral relations, were secondary while these two young and doomed democracies struggled for survival.

In November 1948, a military coup led by Marcos Perez Jimenez overthrew the democratically elected government of Romulo Gallegos in Venezuela. Immediately after, members of AD, including Gallegos, took refuge in Havana under the protection of the *Auténtico* government. The unconditional support for Venezuelan social democratic leaders by the Cuban government went so far as to defy the United States and allow AD exiles to engage in conspiracies to overthrow the military government in Venezuela. Cuba withheld recognition of the Venezuelan military junta, which increased tensions between the two governments. These tensions continued to grow until March 1952, when another military coup led by Fulgencio Batista in Cuba overthrew the *Auténtico* regime. Cuba and Venezuela were again under the control of right-wing dictators. In both countries, agrarian, labor and electoral reforms would have to wait for another seven years. Perez Jimenez and Batista developed a close relationship and collaborated in persecuting political exiles and in supporting like-minded regimes in the region.

Betancourt's election was seen as a victory for social democracy across the hemisphere.

DIFFERENT REVOLUTIONARY PATHS

The parallels between Cuban and Venezuelan political experiences continued. On 7 December 1958, after the fall of Marcos Perez Jimenez's dictatorship, Rómulo Betancourt returned from a decade in exile to be elected President of Venezuela. Betancourt's election was seen as a victory for social democracy across the hemisphere. Only a year later, in January 1959, Castro's revolution overthrew the Batista dictatorship with a similar sociopolitical agenda. Just twenty-two days after the triumph of his revolution, Castro traveled to Venezuela to thank that nation's people for their support. There was a strong sense of solidarity between Cuba and Venezuela as citizens of both countries saw Castro and Betancourt as leading similar uprisings against rightist military dictatorships.

After the fall of Perez Jimenez's dictatorship, Venezuelan elites and political parties banded together to consolidate democratic institutions and avoid further military intervention. As a result, transitional politics were marked by a series of pacts and agreements solely among non-communist parties which promised to respect each other's differences, adhere to the will of the voters, and ensure interparty consultation on relevant matters, all for the sake of maintaining democracy.

While the Cuban Revolution turned left as it confronted the United States in the Cold War, the Venezuelan Revolution moved to the center.

The left, some have argued, was shut out of the transitional process to reassure elements in business, the church, and the military. This exclusion led to frequent clashes between the left and the Betancourt government over what constituted "legitimate political means" in democracy. By excluding the communists, the three mainstream political parties—Democratic Action, the Christian Democratic Party of Venezuela (COPEI), and the Democratic Republican Union (URD)—were making a statement about what they considered to be valid democratic ideals. These ideas would also form part of Betancourt's foreign policy, which placed great emphasis on the collective defense of democracy. Meanwhile, inspired by the radicalization of the Cuban Revolution, Venezuelan leftists were less open to negotiation and came to believe that a similar revolution was possible in Venezuela. After 1960, they moved toward violent insurrection.

DIPLOMATIC RUPTURE

While the Cuban Revolution turned left as it confronted the United States in the Cold War, the Venezuelan Revolution moved to the center. Betancourt wanted to avoid what he saw as the mistakes of the past that had driven his Democratic Action party from power because it was too radical. Unfortunately for the stability of the

country, the faster Betancourt moved to the center, the greater the discontent of leftist movements. This led to a radical Communist movement which, through guerrilla warfare supported by the Cuban government, attempted to disrupt the path toward democracy in Venezuela. On 19 October 1961, a series of disturbances began to shake the nation. Such disturbances, called *insurrección popular* (popular insurrection), were designed to test the strength of the regime. Members of the Communist Party and the Movement of the Revolutionary Left held demonstrations in Caracas, robbed banks, and planted bombs, generating a state of emergency. President Betancourt publicly charged that the "outbreaks in Caracas . . . are a step forward in a plan which has been perfectly articulated by extremist organizations that I am going to mention by name: the Communist Party and the Movement of the Revolutionary Left. The objective of this plan is the overthrow of the constitutional government in order that a regime similar to that of Cuba can be established in Venezuela. . . ." On 11 November 1961, Betancourt formally broke off diplomatic relations with the Cuban government after Cuban Minister of External Relations Ernesto "Che" Guevara denounced the Venezuelan government as a "pawn of the United States" in a speech to a Congress of Latin American Youth. In response, Betancourt said,

What is impossible for us to accept, because what is at stake is the very dignity of the nation, are the recent statements from the Foreign Minister of that government [Cuba], in which he accuses our government and the Chief of State of acting under the rules and indications of external forces. The only honorable response that can be given to those who forego all the tolerable limits of international relations is the one the government over which I preside has given.

Betancourt also accused the Cubans of flagrant human rights violations and armed intervention in Venezuela's domestic affairs. The break in diplomatic relations led to the deterioration of

the weak economic links between the two governments. In 1958, Cuba had imported US\$66.5 million worth of goods from Venezuela, almost all of it crude and refined petroleum products. Political disagreements along with a 1960 oil accord with the Soviet Union allowed Cuba to cut off almost all of these trade ties with Venezuela.

CUBAN IMPORTS FROM VENEZUELA (1958-1963)

Year	Amount of imports (\$ millions)
1958	66.5
1959	48
1960	30.6
1961	na
1962	0.1
1963	0.05

Source: Carlos Romero M., *“Las relaciones entre Venezuela y Cuba desde 1959 a 1978,”* Fragmentos/ Centro de Estudios Romulo Gallegos (February 1980): 87.

As evidence of continuing Cuban interference in Venezuela’s internal affairs mounted, the two countries became bitter international enemies. To make things worse, proof of Cuban involvement in Venezuelan internal affairs led to Cuba’s expulsion from the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1962, after which Castro issued the “Second Declaration of Havana” calling for continued revolution at home and abroad. In 1964, Venezuela also supported OAS economic sanctions against Cuba.

Rifts in the Venezuelan Communist Party (PCV) also led to a worsening of relations between Cuba and Venezuela. Confrontation increased between the minority who supported armed struggle and the majority who opted for peaceful negotiations with the government. This continuing debate within the PCV caused a strong reaction from the Cuban regime. The

Cuban Communist Party and the government of Cuba announced support for the guerrilla factions within the PCV, even though they were to be expelled from the party. Commenting on the situation in Venezuela in a 1967 speech, Castro said, “The rightist tendencies of the [Communist] Party in Venezuela have caused it to take a position making it a practical enemy of the revolutionaries, an instrument of imperialism and of the oligarchy.” These comments led to a further deterioration in bilateral relations.

Cuba continued to support leftist guerrilla movements in Venezuela throughout the decade.

Amid the disruption of formal diplomatic relations, Cuba continued to support leftist guerrilla movements in Venezuela throughout the decade. Often members of the Venezuelan Communist Party and other radical parties would travel to Cuba for guerrilla warfare training. Because the Venezuelan education system provided public universities with budgetary, administrative, and security autonomy—which implied that police were not allowed to enter university campuses without authorization by university officials, even in situations of violence—the control of universities became a key strategic factor in the insurrection. Public universities, usually controlled by the left, turned into safe havens for terrorists and guerrillas. This was a period when formal government-to-government relations collapsed while informal connections grew stronger.

RAPPROCHEMENT

The 1970s marked a turning point in bilateral relations. The proliferation of right-wing military governments in the rest of Latin America introduced new political priorities in the region. As a result, Venezuela saw strategic benefit in friendlier relations with Cuba. The 1968 election of Rafael Caldera of the COPEI party in Venezuela coupled with a Latin American movement to reestablish ties with Cuba made better relations possible. Caldera reopened

channels of institutional participation for the parties of the left and encouraged a national dialogue. The *movimiento de pacificación* (pacification movement) sought to incorporate into the democratic process those guerrillas still fighting in the mountains. Venezuela also reestablished formal relations with the Soviet Union, resulting in improved relations with Cuba.

On the Cuban side, the failure of guerrilla warfare as a path to power in Latin America together with the deteriorating state of the Cuban economy meant that more resources had to be funneled to domestic uses rather than the internationalization of the revolution. At the same time, Cuba began to reestablish relations with other Latin American countries in the early 1970s (Peru, Bolivia, and Panama). Finally, the rise of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1970 gave Cuba another ally in the southern cone.

The election of Carlos Andres Perez to the Venezuelan presidency in 1974 was greeted with pessimism by Cuban authorities. Perez, from Democratic Action, had been Secretary for Internal Affairs under the Betancourt government and had directed actions against the guerrilla movement. Nevertheless, under the Perez regime, Venezuela would pursue friendlier relations with Cuba as part of a new set of international policies. As Carlos Romero observed in his book *Las Relaciones entre Venezuela y Cuba desde 1959 a 1978*, starting in 1974, Venezuela sought *rapprochement* with countries not aligned with OPEC, an appropriate climate for the nationalization of the petroleum and steel industries and a policy of support for the recently independent countries of the Caribbean.

Venezuela became a major proponent of reestablishing regional as well as bilateral relations with Cuba.

As a result of its new policies, Venezuela became a major proponent of reestablishing regional as well as bilateral relations with Cuba. Flights to the island were reinstated and Venezuela became the main advocate of lifting

sanctions against Cuba at an OAS meeting of foreign ministers. The efforts failed but on 29 December 1974, after thirteen years of political confrontation, the two countries reestablished formal diplomatic relations.

[T]he winding down of the oil boom left Venezuelans with a sense of frustration and failure. . . .

With the government-to-government conflict over, the Venezuelan left was able to broaden exchanges with Cuban academics and government officials, this time not for guerrilla training, as in the 1960s, but as exchanges between traditional ideological partners. Whereas in the rest of Latin America the left was crushed by right-wing dictators, Venezuelan democracy allowed and supported closer academic ties with Cuba. The decade was marked by a series of bilateral cooperation agreements in areas such as science, arts, sports, literature, theater, technology, and education. Formal relations also flourished in spite of activities by Cuban anti-Castro movements. In October 1976, two Venezuelan citizens of Cuban origin bombed a Cuban plane, killing all 74 passengers aboard. Rather than increasing tensions, this terrorist attack actually led to a greater normalization of ties. The Venezuelan government immediately denounced the attack and committed itself to finding those responsible. Despite extensive and sometimes even violent protest from Cuban exiles in Caracas, the two perpetrators, Orlando Bosch and Luis Posada Carriles, were arrested by Venezuelan authorities.

The democratized Venezuelan left also began to widen its influence inside the country. Capitalizing on growing discontent from different sectors of society, leftists began to work within democratic rules against the establishment. Younger generations—in universities and even in military academies—people like Hugo Chavez—were their targets. Once again the autonomy enjoyed by Venezuelan universities was key for the strategies followed by the left.

During the same years, Venezuelan democ-

racy started to show signs of fatigue. When traditional political parties failed to renew their leadership, younger generations felt shut out of the political game. In addition, the winding down of the oil boom left Venezuelans with a sense of frustration and failure as social demands went unattended.

As we will see in the next section, the Venezuelan left took power for the first time under the government of Hugo Chavez in 1999. The friendship between Chavez and Castro, if analyzed in this historical context, comes not as a surprise but rather the culmination of a long-term affair.

THE RISE OF HUGO CHAVEZ

As a result of larger geopolitical changes, the 1990s marked another period of normalization between the two governments. With the fall of the Soviet Union, which eventually cost Cuba 87 percent of its external trade, Castro sought to develop new alliances with Latin American countries. Even before, in February 1989, he had returned to Venezuela at the invitation of President Carlos Andres Perez, who asked the Cuban leader to take a stronger role in relations between Latin America and the developed world. Three years later, former paratrooper Hugo Chavez led two failed military coup. When Chavez left jail in 1995, he immediately visited Cuba, where he was received with honors by Castro, marking the beginning of the close relationship between the two leaders.

[Chavez] returned to Cuba, this time as president-elect and with a plan in mind.

Chavez won the presidential elections in December 1998 with the support of the left. In January 1999, he returned to Cuba, this time as president-elect and with a plan in mind. From Havana he declared that in Venezuela, “a revolution is on the march and no one and nothing will stop it,” referring to the so-called Bolivarian Revolution he had been offering to Venezuelans since his electoral campaign. He also promised that Venezuelans would soon be “swimming in Cuba’s

sea of happiness.” At the end of the century, formal bilateral relations between Cuba and Venezuela flourished for the first time since the 1950s. Then, two right wing dictators, Batista and Perez Jimenez, had led their countries along the same ideological path. Today, Castro and Chavez, sharing somewhat similar ideologies and old-fashioned revolutionary zest, have embarked both countries on an extraordinary era of bilateral collaboration. But for agreements to succeed, all parties need to win. Is that the situation in this case? The next section highlights the Oil Assistance Pact and its implications for both countries and their leaders.

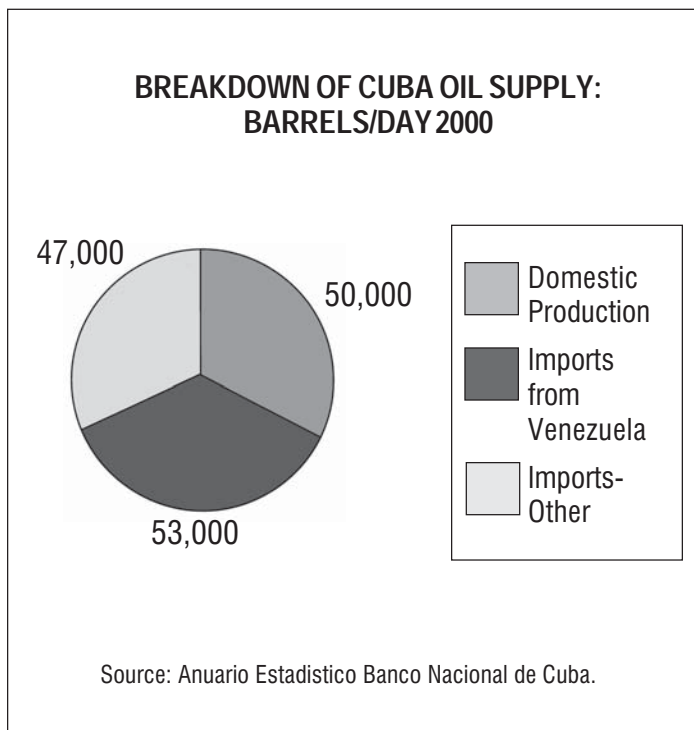
VENEZUELA AND CUBA TODAY

Since 1999, relations between the Cuban and Venezuelan governments have been in a honeymoon phase. United by ideology and chemistry, Castro and Chavez have signed numerous agreements to help each other and their countries. After multiple visits and exchanges, both countries signed the Oil Assistance Pact on 30 October 2000. The *Convenio Integral de Cooperación*, as it is known in Spanish, guarantees favorable terms on oil exports to Cuba for five years together with other exchanges in education, arts, and sports. To what extent does this agreement benefit both countries?

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba’s gross domestic product (GDP) dropped 40 percent. Even though its economy has grown steadily since 1994, a major constraint on that growth has been the lack of external financing. Mainly due to the U.S. embargo, Cuba gets little international credit and has to pay very high interest rates. Cuba’s foreign trade deficit has soared from US\$1.3 billion in 1995 to almost US\$3.0 billion, 50 percent of total trade, in 2000. While financing trade deficits with tourism and remittances, Cuba has also been making great efforts to substitute imports to ease the pressure on its balance of payments.

Oil has been a major economic problem for Cuba since 1989, when imports from the former Soviet Union began to dwindle. Oil shortages

shut down transportation all over the country. Since then, the Cuban regime has fought hard to develop domestic oil production and gain greater self-sufficiency. Economy Minister José Luis Rodríguez has said that over the next few years the country expects to meet as much as 70 to 90 percent of its electricity demand with domestic oil. Domestic production costs are only about a quarter of the cost of buying imported crude. Nevertheless, currently Cuba is only able to produce about 50,000 barrels of oil per day,



about one-third of its overall needs.

In this context, the agreement with Venezuela, which guarantees 53,000 barrels a day at favorable finance rates, has an obvious positive impact on the cash-strapped island. The cooperation agreement includes:

- a grace period of two years, instead of one;
- nothing that prevents Cuba from reselling oil to third parties at a profit;
- a discount based on the per barrel price, regardless of whether it is low-value crude or high value product that is being sold;
- an option for Cuba to acquire more than the 53,000 barrels/day face value of the contract, bartering goods and services for oil;

- a proviso that while Venezuela can cancel the agreement after five years, it cannot cancel barter agreements without Cuba's authorization.

The benefits for Cuba are obvious, especially if we compare this agreement with similar ones signed with other Caribbean nations. (See chart below.)

**VENEZUELAN SALES
BARRELS/DAY OF OIL TO CARIBBEAN AND
CENTRAL AMERICAN COUNTRIES**

Country	Barrels/day
Dominican Rep.	20,000
Guatemala	10,000
Costa Rica	8,000
Panama	8,000
El Salvador	8,000
Jamaica	7,400
Haiti	6,500
Honduras	5,000
Belize	600
Nicaragua	4,900
Cuba	53,000
Total	131,400
Total Exports	2,700,000

Sources: El Nuevo Herald 10/08/00, El Nuevo Herald 10/03/00, Globovisión 10/26/00, Boletín de Noticias 10/24/00, CubaNews October 2000, Globovisión 10/25/00.

For Cuba, 53,000 barrels a day may represent a generous financing of over US\$400 million in 2001, approximately the country's balance of payment deficit for the previous year. Until 2000, oil imports amounted to one-sixth of Cuba's US\$4.5 billion in total imports. The gains for Cuba are clear. What of the gains for Venezuela?

The first point is that these sales are quite insignificant for Venezuela. As we can see in the chart, Venezuela's sales to the Caribbean

countries including Cuba represent less than 5 percent of its daily production average of 2.7 million barrels.

According to the agreement, Venezuela accepts bartered goods and services in exchange for oil. The pact also provides for a series of joint initiatives in tourism, agriculture, transport, sports, and education. At Venezuela's request, Cuba provides a wide range of services in education, including teachers, software, and conferences. Since September 2001, Venezuela also pays cash salaries and/or living allowances for Cuban doctors sent to Venezuela to work in rural areas. (See box for update.)

In sports, the Venezuelan government has used the agreement to bring a variety of trainers, consultants, and athletes to the country. In the pact, Cuba promises to send three thousand physical education teachers and other technical professionals to help Venezuela extend the practice of sports and physical education to all its citizens. In the first such activity after the signing of the agreement in January 2001, Venezuela authorized a twelve-person Cuban mission to analyze the state of sports in each of the country's twenty-four regions. This caused frustration among Venezuelans employed in sports who argued that they would now be replaced by foreign workers. The government responded that there were not enough sports specialists in Venezuela.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN CUBAN-VENEZUELAN RELATIONS

Recent research conducted in Venezuela and Cuba suggests that the bilateral relationship has been somewhat strained by early 2002 political developments in the former nation. President Castro seems to have concluded that he will be in power longer than President Chavez and has maintained a cautious silence regarding Cuban-Venezuelan relations. While the barter agreement is officially still in place, leaders of Venezuela's state oil company are concerned that the firm has not been receiving hard currency payments from Cuba for oil. Reports that appeared in the press last fall, claiming that Cuba was requiring Venezuela to pay cash for some agricultural goods and services in sports and tourism previously paid for in oil, appear to be correct.

In education, the effect of exchanges with Cuba is increasingly visible. Government financing of new educational programs is carried out

through the Youth and Change Foundation, under the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sports. The Foundation, now known as *Patria Joven*, has a budget of close to US\$7 million and projects that include youth brigades, educational campaigns and conferences, marches, and leadership forums. On 6 October 2000, as part of its "examples to youth conferences," the Foundation held a conference honoring "Che" Guevara as the "political figure who had the greatest impact on the youth of the present century." The flyer for the contest stated that the example of "Che" provides the "historical reference for the formation of the identity of Venezuelan youth and provides an example and inspiration for the challenges of the future." Other similar government-sponsored activities, and statements made by Chavez himself, drew severe criticism from the nation's press organizations.

UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTIONS

Despite the government's defense of the exchanges, Chavez's critics argue that the agreement benefits Cubans more than it does Venezuelans. In January 2001, the president of the Association of Sports Coaches complained that payment for the Cuban consultants was too high relative to the quality of their work. He argued that the new pact could cost the National Institute of Sports (IND) up to 30 percent of its budget. The newspaper *El Universal* also published a list of twelve problems relating to earlier agreements with Cuba which could persist under the new *convenio*. Some of the problems include having to pay Cuban athletes in dollars for housing and food prior to their arrival.

Chavez's critics argue that the agreement benefits Cubans more than it does Venezuelans.

The new importance of relations with Cuba, a continuing influx of Cubans to Venezuela, and the emphasis on Cuban-style education have been termed by some as the "Cubanization" of Venezuela. A recent spate of protests against Fidel Castro outside the Cuban embassy gained

media attention after the Cuban diplomatic delegation started its own counterdemonstration. A 31 May 2001 editorial in *El Universal* protested, “it seems Fidel’s delegation in Caracas can do what it wants.... The message is clear, from now on, those who want to protest peacefully against the government will have to face gangs trained in Cuba and the indolence of the authorities.” Adding fuel to the fire was a recent call by Chavez to the Venezuelan people to form “Bolivarian circles” or Cuban-style neighborhood groups to support his reforms. The president said the purpose of the groups would be “the defense and support of the revolution.” Chavez supporters argue that the idea of *Cubanización* is a fallacy created by a frustrated oligarchy opposed to the president.

But the perceived threat of Cubanizing Venezuela is not new. In his January 1961 Message to the Nation, Rómulo Betancourt sounded an alert that seems strikingly familiar today:

It has been assumed by the ranks of the extreme left and by demagogues who have risen as would-be saviors of the people that Venezuela, and the whole of Latin America, could be Cubanized. As if these peoples and their governments were not ready to live and organize their own life...without having to copy alien experiences and comply with the dogmas of insolvent prophets who would like to make of the Andes a vast Sierra Maestra.

[I]deology and politics are the main forces driving the . . . love-hate relationship between Cuba and Venezuela.

If back in the 1960s the threat of Cubanization sounded realistic given the context of the Cold War and the presence of Cuban- and Soviet-trained guerrillas in the Venezuelan mountains, today it sounds foreign, old-fashioned, and simply unrealistic. Why is Chavez doing this? Why did he sign an agreement with Cuba with no economic benefit for Venezuela? How does he benefit from it? What are his real objectives?

If we search for economic explanations to understand Chavez’s behavior these questions will remain unanswered. Once again, ideology and politics are the main forces driving the long-lasting love-hate relationship between Cuba and Venezuela.

BENEFITS FOR CHAVEZ

In spite of criticisms, Chavez has shown that he feels politically stronger with Fidel Castro on his side. Why is the so-called Cubanization of Venezuela, condemned by the government of Rómulo Betancourt in 1961, now welcomed by the Chavez government? There are fundamental historical determinants in both cases that must be taken into consideration.

For Betancourt in the 1960s, it was important to *differentiate* his movement from communism. In the midst of the Cold War and the Cuban missile crisis, this political veteran was not willing to repeat the mistakes of his 1945 government. Back in the 1940s, his discourse had been too radical, too menacing for the establishment. He and his party had paid dearly. He was not going to let power go this time. His party’s sociopolitical reforms had to be carried out with less confrontation and more collaboration.

The situation for Chavez is dramatically different. He became president in a post-Cold War world, with a revolutionary discourse and a radical message. Confrontation was, and continues to be, his style. He achieved more public support as he claimed that his revolution was not open to negotiation. But given his own historical circumstances, Chavez’s Revolution has been more words than deeds. He gained power through a democratic process, and the country expects him to rule accordingly. Thus, to keep support from the left, Chavez finds legitimacy in Castro’s legendary revolutionary image. For Chavez so far, image is important to counterbalance his lack of results. In spite of the criticism from his opponents, the relationship allows him to borrow charisma and revolutionary aura from the legendary leader. He wants the world to believe that he is like Castro, but better. After all, he was democratically elected.

With this in mind, Chavez insists over and over on his “peaceful and democratic revolution.”

Thus, Castro serves Chavez in at least two ways. Internally, Chavez satisfies the demands of the Venezuelan extreme left, which continues to support him, and externally, his relation with Castro promotes and reinforces an alternative political alliance against the traditional parties in Latin America. He wants to portray a revolutionary image to the world; his alliance with Castro will help him to do so.

Chavez also believes that the oil agreement has important political benefits for his government. Cuba pays for oil with services in education, health, sports, and security that assist the consolidation of Chavez’s Bolivarian Revolution. In effect, Chavez is importing social and military technology from Cuba that would be difficult to produce internally in the short run.

For Castro, besides its economic benefits, the deal also has great political advantages. He consolidates an international position with his new ally; he buys Venezuelan oil with health, sports, education, and security—the flagship achievements of his revolution; and he appears as a moderating force in the international arena. From the political perspective, the pact seems to be a win-win situation for both presidents so far.

As for the concerns in Washington and the rest of the hemisphere that this alliance between Venezuela and Cuba could promote political movements in other countries that would “export the revolution,” the answer is that it could, but this looks increasingly unlikely. On the one hand, communism has failed as an economic system, and though Castro and Chavez argue that so has “neoliberalism” and the “Washington consensus,” they have failed to offer a credible alternative. In spite of his loyalty to socialist ethics, Castro is promoting foreign investment and capitalistic values to enable Cuba to survive. Chavez in Venezuela is also a revolutionary without a script for the times. After forty years of democratic tradition, Venezuela is clearly not buying Chavez’s “peaceful revolution.” His popularity has been dropping steadily since his election, while confrontation

increases between his government and the political parties, the church, labor unions, and the organized private sector. His efforts to develop an appealing radical script and to reach out to dissident groups and governments have so far generated more friction than results in the hemisphere. He sided with the rebels during the last military coup in Ecuador. He has been paying defense lawyers to liberate an internationally known terrorist. He has been in direct contact with the Colombian guerrillas, visited Libya’s Qaddafi and Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, and recently publicly expressed his disagreement with the war in Afghanistan. These actions have created frictions between Venezuela and Latin America, France, and the United States.

In other words, while Chavez’s aggressive and defiant tone could find some echo among disillusioned and frustrated masses in Latin America, his alliance with Castro so far has not had a political impact in the region. Moreover, since Cuba continues to face important economic problems, Castro is forced to maintain a pragmatic and realistic position in the international arena.

Nevertheless, the relationship between the two countries benefits both Chavez and Castro. It represents significant economic help for Cuba by undercutting U.S. attempts to impose an effective embargo on the island. It has helped Chavez project his desired image internationally. But unless Chavez and Castro develop an attractive script for their new revolution, their ability to promote like-minded governments in the region does not look like a serious threat.

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