

CONTRIBUTOR BIO



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By Barry Peelen

The United States' Pursuit of Regime Change in Venezuela

Robin Sawka

Abstract

Since its first mass protest in 2016, Venezuela has been in a state of crisis, facing public protest, inflation rates, and diminishing access to basic necessities. Many of these issues can be tied to the decline of Venezuela's once successful oil industry, which had created an economic-bubble until recent years. This paper uncovers the historical context of the issues faced by Venezuela's oil industry and analyzes the role the United States has played in promoting its own influence within it. Furthermore, this paper examines the specific methods the United States has used to assert this influence and the motives and incentives it has in doing so.

Introduction

On March 2, 2018, The Washington Post published an describing the Venezuelan diaspora into neighboring Latin American countries and throughout the Western Hemisphere.¹ Since political protests began in early 2016, Venezuelans have experienced food shortages, medical supply shortages, and a sharp increase in violence.² Additionally, the world has heard read news stories about prison inmates foraging rats for food, zoo animals starving, and mothers crossing national borders to secure medicine for their children.³ The world has also seen emotional selfie-styled videos of rebel fighters facing their last hours as they stand off against the Venezuelan military.⁴ In response, roughly 600,000 Venezuelans have fled to Colombia,

1 Ishaan Tharoor, "Venezuela's Maduro hollows out his nation," The Washington Post (March 1, 2018).

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Nicholas Casey, "Venezuela's Most-Wanted Rebel Shared His Story, Just Before Death," The New York Times (January 21, 2018).

40,000 to Trinidad and Tobago, 30,000 to Brazil, 20,000 to Aruba, and 5,000 to the Caribbean isle of Curacao since August of 2017.⁵ The Colombian border also continues to see up to 3,000 new migrants per day.⁶

The humanitarian crisis that faces Venezuela is the result of an intense ongoing political crisis. In the United States, media has painted the crisis as a one-sided affair – and President Nicolas Maduro as the malicious dictator -- while the United States fights to promote and support democracy in the country. Since the early 2000s, the United States has funded opposition forces in Venezuela, hoping to secure a political outcome that would create favorable business conditions in Venezuela. In addition to this, they have supported uprisings and protests, and have sanctioned Venezuela, hoping to revolutionize its political order. While establishment forces may argue that the United States is doing so only in support of developing a democracy, its involvement has contributed to political instability and to the development of a humanitarian crisis.

The events in Venezuela are relevant to the international community and to the discussion surrounding international law due to the role that other states have played in Venezuela's political upheaval. Venezuela, controlling a large supply of oil, is significant to the world's most powerful states who rely on imports of this resource to support their own infrastructures. The United States has enjoyed a long relationship with Venezuela based on their historical dependence on the country as a reliable oil supplier. As a different political order begins to emerge in Venezuela -- one which threatens the capitalist economic system established by the West -- the United States has begun pursuing regime change, hoping to disrupt this process. Questioning the role that the United States plays in Venezuela has led me to the following research question: How has the United States pushed for regime change in Venezuela, and for what reasons has it done so?

Conventional Wisdom

Both American and Latin American publics are skeptical of the United States' role in supporting democracy abroad. A 2013 poll conducted by CBS News / New York Times Poll indicated that almost 3 in 4 Americans believe America should not intervene in foreign dictatorships to install democracy.⁷ Another 2013 poll conducted by NBC News / Wall Street

⁵ Op. cit., fn. 1.

⁶ Op. cit., fn. 1.

⁷ "America's Role in World Affairs," CBS News / New York Times Poll (September 6-8, 2013).

Journal Poll indicated that only 22% of Americans believe America should continue promoting democracy abroad.⁸ Other polls which have studied the opinions of Latin American publics have found a similar disapproval for the United States' promotion of democracy abroad. A poll conducted by BBC World Survey indicated that while a majority of Latin Americans support democracy in their country, a large portion of them share a distrust for the role of U.S. actions in supporting such democracies.⁹

This conventional wisdom is misleading, however, as it fails to address ulterior motives for the United States' role in pursuing regime change. Current conventional wisdom views the United States' purpose as one of pure intentions to support fledgling democracies, but my analysis will create a more accurate picture of the United States' pursuits of regime change. I will analyze how the United States might stand to benefit from influencing Venezuelan politics, in addition to the methods they have used for doing so. This research paper will make the conventional wisdom more complete by framing regime change using the theoretical paradigm of realism to construct a more accurate portrayal of the United States' relationship with Venezuela.

Methodology and Evidence

I employ qualitative methodology to examine the theoretical paradigm of realism as it applies to my research and use three case studies to answer my research question. The first case study examines the culture surrounding oil in Venezuela, addressing how political leadership influences the Venezuelan oil market and who is able to invest in it. The second case study examines the U.S.'s pursuits of regime change under President Hugo Chavez and how Chavez's presidency threatened the U.S.'s access to oil. Lastly, my third case study examines the U.S.'s pursuits of regime change under President Nicolas Maduro and how Maduro's changing policies have further threatened the U.S., giving an advantage to its global competitors. I use primary evidence to research my case studies and secondary evidence to enrich my understanding of the context surrounding these sources. Examples of primary sources include U.S. State Department documents, C.I.A documents, presidential executive orders, congressional bills, fiscal reports by the N.E.D, U.S. energy statistics, and C.R.S reports. Examples of

⁸ "America's Role in World Affairs," NBC News / Wall Street Journal Poll (September 5-8, 2013).

⁹ "Latin American Publics are Skeptical About U.S. - But Not About Democracy," World Public Opinion (March 7, 2007).

secondary sources used includes news articles, publications from non-profit organizations like the NACLA, publications from universities like Columbia - SIPA, and scholarly articles from journals like Foreign Affairs.

Theoretical Paradigm

At first glance, it is understandable why the conventional view is that the United States' motives in Venezuela are aimed at promoting democracy rather than Venezuelan regime change. However, by using realism to analyze research, one can form a more complete understanding of the United States' ulterior motives. There are two core assumptions of realism that direct my research. The first of these is that, in the international system, there exists no higher actor than the state.¹⁰ This means that states are the highest actors, and that states are most loyal to themselves even if they appear to have strong alliances with other states. The second core assumption of realism is that the behavior of a state can best be understood by the relative power it stands to gain from its actions.¹¹ This means that states behave in order to increase their power in a global competition against others.

Realism best frames and explains the answer to my research question because by pursuing regime change in Venezuela, the United States is seeking to increase its own power. Realism allows us to see past the facade of 'democratic development' that U.S regime change takes on and is useful in understanding why such pursuits take place and the means through which they are executed. In understanding that states often behave in ways that will increase their own power, realism gives us the ability to detect disguised, realist grasps of power that permeate the international system for what they are.

Research Findings

To explain the United States' true motives in pursuing regime change in Venezuela, one must first have an understanding of the culture surrounding oil in Venezuela. Venezuela is a region that is incredibly rich in oil. Indigenous tribes are said to have used naturally flowing oil and asphalt for medicinal purposes centuries ago.¹² It was not until 1912, however, that Venezuela first began drilling for this oil, triggering many foreign companies

¹⁰ Sean D. Murphy, *Principles of International Law* (St. Paul, MN: Thomson/West, 2012).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Erik Bakke, "US-Venezuelan Relations," Harvard Model Congress (2014).

to begin investing in the country.¹³ The early 20th-century oil boom would completely rearrange Venezuelan society, as oil became the center of Venezuelan industrialization. Agricultural production became an afterthought almost overnight as it was overwhelmed by profits from the oil industry.¹⁴ The old elites of Venezuela who had become powerful through such agriculture lost their grip on politics, and the Democratic Action party rose to power, replacing Venezuela's old economic order with one centered around oil.¹⁵ This party was a populist party, and employed promises of land reform, democratization, and welfare expansion to create a supporter base among the lower and middle classes.¹⁶

The Democratic Action coalition became the dominant force in politics in 1958, focusing Venezuelan policies around the industrialization of oil for the following decades. It did so in an obsessive way, spending large proportions of its money developing oil infrastructures, while ignoring other parts of the economy.¹⁷ While this created an economic boom in Venezuela, the boom was concentrated in urban upper class involved with oil business.¹⁸ The rural poor, along with the majority of Venezuela's population, had little access to these new-found riches and had to face weakened infrastructures as oil drained funds from other sectors. This centralization of wealth also made the Democratic Action party very powerful, turning Venezuela into a one-party government.¹⁹ While enriching Venezuela, the country's economy and currency became dependent on oil, making it vulnerable to a volatile global market. Through its development of oil infrastructures, the Democratic Action party allowed Venezuela to become one of the world's largest oil producers, but did so in an unsustainable way, angering a large class of people who had not been able to access the economic benefits of Venezuela's oil boom.

The face of this populist movement was Hugo Chavez, elected in 1998 on promises to destroy Venezuela's system of oil centralization and

13 Ibid.

14 Gregory Wilpert, "The Economics, Culture, and Politics of Oil in Venezuela," *Venezuelanalysis.com*, August 30, 2013, , accessed March 23, 2018, <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/74>.

15 Op. cit., fn. 11.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Op. cit., fn. 11.

replace it with one that would fund social projects.²⁰ Chavez wanted to target Venezuela's policy of "Oil Opening" which had dominated oil policy since the early 1990s.²¹ Under this policy, transnational oil companies had been invited to invest in the industry in hopes that this would cheapen the development of oil infrastructures.²² "Oil Opening" diluted ownership of oil in Venezuela and made foreign interests powerful in influencing Venezuelan policy. It had also diverted oil profits away from the people and into foreign bank accounts. Because Chavez's reforms threatened a powerful, entrenched system, and because he had no political allies, he faced barriers for policy reforms. This prompted him to create a new constitution in 1999, giving the presidency stronger powers.²³ He used his presidential powers to pass three major reforms to Venezuela's oil industry meant to give the presidency more power over its ownership. Chavez strengthened Venezuela's role in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (or "OPEC") and targeted the enforcement of production quotas for all of its members.²⁴ He did this to increase the global price of oil barrels, which had reached a low of \$8.43 per barrel when he took office.²⁵

Chavez also passed reforms to the Energy Ministry, giving it stronger powers as an agency of the executive branch.²⁶ *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)*, Venezuela's state oil company, had directors with strong business and political affiliations that allowed them to establish a degree of independence in dealing with its structure and the transnational investments it received.²⁷ Reforms to the Energy Ministry were meant to disable PDVSA from continuing this path of independence and to reinstall control over the company. In seeking to obtain higher governmental profits, Chavez also replaced Venezuelan oil taxation with a system of royalties.²⁸ The tax system surrounding the oil industry had grown too complex and the government had

20 Luis Lander and Margarita Lopez-Maya, "Venezuela's Oil Reform and Chavismo," *NACLA*, September 25, 2007, , accessed March 23, 2018, <https://nacla.org/article/venezuelas-oil-reform-and-chavismo>.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*

begun to see weakening revenues based on its taxation of oil.²⁹ The collection of royalties was meant to be a more direct system of revenue collection that could end this problem.³⁰ Taken together, these reforms were meant to end the privatization of Venezuela's oil and push the country in the direction of oil nationalization so that Venezuela could utilize this wealth for social policies. While the reforms Chavez made created many benefits for his society, the way in which Chavez secured them would become a source of agitation for countries like the United States, who had profited off reliable access to Venezuelan oil.

When Hugo Chavez died in 2013, he was replaced by Nicolas Maduro to continue his legacy of the political ideology, Chavismo. Under Maduro, the mismanagement of PDVSA funds that began under Chavez continued, and this caused a crisis in the Venezuela's oil market. Under Chavismo, PDVSA began losing many of its profits to the funding of social programs. Because it was spending a majority of its funds on such programs, it was unable to invest in its own infrastructure.³¹ This led to a degradation of oil technologies in Venezuela which has caused the country to lose its competitive advantage against other exporters in OPEC. Now, Venezuela can only drill low-quality oil and must mix it with the higher quality oil from companies like B.P., to make its oil commercializable.³² This process has made Venezuela's industry especially uncompetitive-- when the government lacks the funds to pay for the importation of high quality oil to mix with its own, its oil industry is brought to a standstill as its oil is unable to be brought to the global market. Chavismo has also created a law which restricts the price of oil in Venezuela to stay under one cent per liter.³³ This policy was effective when Venezuela was still one of the world's largest suppliers of oil, but now that it is reaching its historically low levels of production, the policy forces PDVSA to run oil fields at a loss and thus contributes to a critical loss of funds.³⁴ PDVSA's massive debts have forced it to look towards international investors to help keep it running.³⁵ Maduro has created

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Lisa Viscidi, "Venezuela on the Brink: How the State Wrecked the Oil Sector--and How to save It," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 5 (September/October 2016).

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Antoine Halff et al., "Apocalypse Now: Venezuela, Oil, and Reconstruction," *Columbia - SIPA* (accessed March 23, 2018).

a cryptocurrency based around the value of a single crude barrel and has allowed China and Russia to invest billions in the company.³⁶ These policies allow foreign interests to gain influence in Venezuela's oil market, creating a strong source of friction for the United States who is being excluded from this opportunity.

The political crisis currently facing Venezuela is a direct result of the mismanagement of PDVSA by Chavismo. Venezuela has built an empire around its oil, basing its currency around the production of oil, and basing the success of its economy on the competitive advantage it has against other OPEC exporters. Despite this, mismanagement has allowed the company to lose access to funds that would go towards investment, resulting in a company which is incredibly indebted and yet must work within its unable-to-upgrade infrastructures to repay Venezuela's large debt. This process has halted the once supreme production of oil in Venezuela and has severely damaged the value of its currency. This has created a humanitarian crisis for Venezuelans and has prompted the United States to seek out regime change in the country.

When Hugo Chavez became President of Venezuela in 1999, the United States was immediately threatened. Chavez had grown famous in Latin America for his anti-American viewpoints, variously referring to then-President George W. Bush as a donkey, Mr. Danger, and the devil.³⁷ One of Chavez's sources for his anger towards the United States was his distaste of American companies' access to Venezuelan oil. When Chavez talked about removing foreign interests from Venezuela's oil industry, he was referring to foreign companies, many of which were American. This presented a clear threat to the United States' steady supply of Venezuelan oil, which accounted for a large portion of its imports.³⁸ Hugo Chavez threatened the United States' access to a resource it was becoming dependent upon, causing it to pursue regime change in order to install a leader that would continue a tradition of favorable economic conditions towards the U.S.

The United States attempted this coup primarily through the support of opposition political parties and the preparation of opposition military leaders. An unclassified State Department document entitled *A Review of*

36 Lesley Wroughton and Girish Gupta, "U.S. warns investors over Venezuela's 'petro' cryptocurrency," Reuters (January 16, 2018).

37 "Hugo Chavez: Memorable moments," BBC News (March 6, 2013).

38 "U.S. Imports from Venezuela of Crude Oil and Petroleum Products," U.S. Energy Information Administration (accessed March, 23, 2018).

U.S. Policy Toward Venezuela November 2001 - April 2002 reveals the ways in which these actions took place. The document reveals the non-governmental organization, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and its funding of opposition political parties that supported an overthrow of the Chavez regime.³⁹ While the NED is an NGO and should be unaffiliated with government, it receives all of its funding from Congress, has to report to Congress, and so should be considered an acting arm of Congress.⁴⁰ The NED's program spent over two million dollars in six months, funding political programs that were meant to politicize an uneducated citizen base and activate it against Chavez.⁴¹ The NED also coordinated communications between members of Congress and Venezuelan opposition leaders.⁴² Congress members were so comfortable with the idea of pushing for regime change that they even held dinners with media influencers to discuss the effects of creating anti-Chavez media.⁴³ The United States also spent close to one million dollars brining Venezuelan military officials to the United States to participate in military training programs and coordination of an estimated \$697 million in military consummations.⁴⁴

An unclassified C.I.A. document also reveals that the United States was aware of an upcoming coup attempt against Chavez. The document discusses an attempt being organized by disgruntled senior officers and a group of radical new officers who would create justification for Chavez's replacement by provoking military action in upcoming demonstrations.⁴⁵ The coup took place only five days after this report was published, installing Pedro Carmona, a prominent businessman, as Venezuela's new President. Despite the undemocratic ousting of Venezuela's President by the military, the United States quickly recognized Carmona's government and praised his actions. One of Carmona's first official meetings as President was also held with the United States ambassador to Venezuela, in which they discussed normalization of democracy in Venezuela.⁴⁶ Carmona's only actions as

39 "A Review of U.S. Policy Towards Venezuela November 2001 - April 2001," U.S. Department of State, July 2002.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 "Codel Ballenger 4/27 Dinner with Media Owners," U.S. Department of State, May 2002.

44 Et al, 29.

45 "Senior Executive Intelligence Brief," National Archives, April 6, 2002.

46 "Venezuela: Ambassador Shapiro Meeting With Carmona," U.S. Department of State, April 16, 2002.

President were to dissolve Venezuela's National Assembly and Supreme Court, destroying any democratic institution which held a check over his power. This caused an uproar to break out in Venezuela among civilians and the military, creating protests which reinstated Chavez only 48 hours later. Chavez would respond to the coup by blaming the United States as its organizer, further increasing tensions between the nations, resulting in the gradual decline of oil imports to the United States from Venezuela.⁴⁷

As of 2018, efforts by the United States to influence regime change in Venezuela had not yet ceased, and new developments had prompted a stronger reaction by the United States. In an attempt to seek out funds for Venezuela's struggling oil industry, Maduro has looked to outside investors to help bolster the industry.⁴⁸ Because the United States used to play the role of supporting Venezuela's oil industry with American investments, and no longer does, outside countries are seeing the Venezuelan oil industry as an opportunity to gain power that used to be held by the United States. One such country is Russia, which has provided Venezuela's capital of Caracas with up to \$10 billion in financial assistance geared towards the oil industry.⁴⁹ Not only do such investments give Russia influential power over the Venezuelan oil industry, but they also disrupt American pursuits of regime change, as the only source of funding Maduro receives is through Venezuela's oil industry, which has survived only due to outside investments.⁵⁰ Therefore, not only is Russia gaining power in a zero-sum game, but it is also preventing the United States from securing its desired outcome of a President who would promote favorable business conditions in Venezuela. Additionally, China has played a major role in supporting Maduro, issuing \$23 billion in loans to Venezuela in a matter of years.⁵¹ China has organized many of these loans to be paid back in the form of crude oil barrels, securing a steady source of oil for the future.⁵² Venezuela seems to be turning towards the world's Eastern sphere of influence -- dominated by Russia and China -- for help, leaving behind a long tradition of doing business with the United States. This has

47 Scott Wilson, "Chavez Raises Idea of U.S. Role in Coup," *The Washington Post* (May 5, 2002).

48 *Op. cit.*, fn. 34.

49 Clifford Krauss, "Russia Uses Its Oil Giant, Rosneft, as a Foreign Policy Tool," *The New York Times* (October 29, 2017).

50 *Op. cit.*, fn. 34.

51 Reuters Staff, "China says Venezuela can 'appropriately' handle debt load," *Reuters* (November 15, 2017).

52 *Ibid.*

threatened the United States' influence of power in the Western hemisphere and has prompted the United States to continue pursuing regime change in Venezuela.

To this end, the United States has continued its funding of the NED, streaming money into Venezuela. Since Maduro was elected, the NED has spent several million dollars per year undermining his presidency.⁵³ It continues to pursue regime change by attempting to agitate a populist civilian base and make it politically active against Maduro. Additionally, after rising political tensions, the United States has recognized Venezuela's opposition leader, Juan Guaido, as the country's legitimate Interim President, despite his failure to receive support from military leaders.⁵⁴ The NED has also funded the creation of political youth programs, media campaigns, and has even directly funded existing political parties and the creation of new ones.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the United States government has gone public in its denouncements of Maduro. In March of 2015, in a clear targeting of the Maduro regime, President Obama signed Executive Order 13692.⁵⁶ This executive order targeted specific individuals in office who had been found to be in "violation of democratic principles" and had their U.S. assets blocked, were prohibited from entering the U.S, and were no longer able to do business with Americans.⁵⁷ While this executive order did not directly impose sanctions on Venezuela, it laid out the framework for one of the few policy's Obama and his successor would agree on. In August of 2017, in response to the worsening political crisis in Venezuela, President Trump passed Executive Order 13808, a sterner version of Obama's 2014 order.⁵⁸

Executive Order 13808 prohibited the import of Venezuelan oil and prohibited American banks from creating any financial deals with PDVSA.⁵⁹

53 Eva Golinger, "The Dirty Hand of the National Endowment for Democracy in Venezuela," *Counterpunch.org* (April 25, 2014).

54 "Recognition of Juan Guaido as Venezuela's Interim President by Several European Countries," U.S. Department of State, February 4, 2019

55 "Venezuela 2017," National Endowment for Democracy (accessed March 23, 2018).

56 Barack Obama, "Executive Order 13692 - Blocking Property and Suspending Entry of Certain Persons Contributing to the Situation in Venezuela," Obama White House archives (March 8, 2015).

57 Ibid.

58 Donald Trump, "Executive Order 13808 - Imposing Additional Sanctions with Respect to the Situation in Venezuela," Treasury Department (August 29, 2017).

59 Ibid.

The purpose of this order was to cut financial support for the Maduro regime which was dependent on the funds it received from the export of its oil. The passing of this order triggered many laws to be proposed in Congress, also targeting Maduro. These laws called for the release of political prisoners, the authorization of humanitarian aid, for Venezuela to hold open elections, and for an increased amount of congressional appropriations to be set aside for Venezuela.⁶⁰ These pursuits are meant to increase pressure on Maduro in a way that attracts global attention, in hopes of evoking a response from this populist base. Through both sanctions and funding, the United States has succeeded in this effort, contributing to an intensifying political conflict which has been called a civil war by Maduro.⁶¹ While the United States argues that it wants to create democracy in Venezuela through these efforts, it is undeniable that this has only complicated political development in Venezuela and has created dishonest outcomes from illegitimate democratic processes.

Implications of Research Findings

To understand the conclusions that can be drawn from these research findings, one must analyze the United States' actions through the lens of political realism. Historically, the United States has relied on Venezuela as a steady, reliable supplier of oil. Oil is the lifeline of civilization in the 21st century and is a necessary resource for society to function. When populist Venezuelan movements began to push for the nationalization of this resource and for its control to be replaced back into the hands of Venezuela, the United States saw a threat to a source of oil it had held for a century. While the United States argues that the efforts it pursues in Venezuela are to support a developing democracy, it is hard to believe that the U.S would be so involved with Venezuela's politics if it was not so rich in oil. Furthermore, the pursuits of its efforts since 2000, have brought little to Venezuela but a continual intensification of political disruption. It has fueled protests and uprisings saying it supports the people but then has acted against them, creating sanctions that have harmed Venezuela's economy and forced people to migrate into neighboring countries.

Furthermore, by pursuing regime change, the United States has only weakened itself and given an advantage to its global competitors. Venezuelan

60 Clare Seelke and Rebecca Nelson, "Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service (March 9, 2018).

61 "Venezuela crisis: Maduro warns of civil war," BBC News (February 4, 2019).

elites have been aware of the outcome the United States seeks to pursue in Venezuela and has been pushed to create friendships with different countries. The United States believed that by creating a sanction on Venezuelan oil, it would ruin Venezuela's economy and force it into aligning its interests with the U.S. Instead, this has only pushed Venezuela to look towards China and Russia as new sources for its economic dependencies. China and Russia have happily complied investing billions in the country and making a new ally in the western hemisphere. Thus, the United States' attempt at regime change to create favorable politics in Venezuela has backfired, creating a Venezuelan government that looks to the U.S's enemies for support. Not only have U.S. pursuits of regime change In Venezuela contributed to a humanitarian crisis, but they have also weakened the United States against its global competitors.