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Venezuelan Strategic Culture

by Harold Trinkunas
July 2009



1

FINDINGS REPORT

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The FIU-SOUTHCOM Academic Partnership Strategic Cultures Assessments

Florida International University's Applied Research Center (FIU ARC), in collaboration with the United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) and FIU's Latin American and Caribbean Center (LACC), has recently formed the FIU-SOUTHCOM Academic Partnership. The partnership entails FIU providing the highest quality research-based knowledge to further explicative understanding of the political, strategic, and cultural dimensions of state behavior and foreign policy. This goal will be accomplished by employing a strategic culture approach. The initial phase of strategic culture assessments consists of a year-long research program that focuses on developing a standard analytical framework to identify and assess the strategic culture of ten Latin American countries. FIU will facilitate professional presentations of the following ten countries over the course of one year: Venezuela, Cuba, Haiti, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Chile, and Argentina. In addition, a findings report on the impact of Islam and Muslims within Latin America will be produced.

The overarching purpose of the project is two-fold: to generate a rich and dynamic base of knowledge pertaining to the political, social, and strategic factors that influence state behavior; and to contribute to SOUTHCOM's Socio-Cultural Dynamics (SCD) Program. Utilizing the notion of strategic culture, SOUTHCOM has commissioned FIU ARC to conduct country studies in order to explain how states comprehend, interpret, and implement national security policy *vis-à-vis* the international system.

SOUTHCOM defines strategic culture as follows: "the combination of internal and external influences and experiences – geographic, historical, cultural, economic, political and military – that shape and influence the way a country understands its relationship to the rest of the world, and how a state will behave in the international community." FIU will identify and expound upon the strategic and cultural factors that inform the rationale behind the perceptions and behavior of select states in the present political and security climate by analyzing demography, history, regional customs, traditions, belief systems, and other cultural and historical influences that have contributed to the development of a particular country's current security rationale and interpretation of national security.

To meet the stated goals, FIU ARC will host a series of professional workshops in Miami. These workshops bring subject matter experts from all over the US and Latin America together to explore and discuss a country's specific history, geography, culture, economic, political, and military climates *vis-à-vis* strategic culture. At the conclusion of each workshop, FIU publishes a findings report, which is presented at SOUTHCOM.

The following *Venezuela Findings Report*, authored by Dr. Harold Trinkunas, is the product of a working group held in Miami on June 5, 2009, which included 11 prominent academic and private sector experts in Venezuelan history, culture, geography, economics, politics, and military affairs.

The views expressed in this findings report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the US Government, US Department of Defense, US Southern Command, FIU ARC, or Florida International University.

On behalf of FIU-ARC, we wish to acknowledge and thank all of the participants for their contributions, which made the Venezuelan Strategic Culture workshop a tremendous success.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	4
Introduction	8
Geographic Considerations in Determining Venezuelan Strategic Culture	9
Historical Antecedents for Venezuelan Strategic Culture	10
Keepers of Strategic Culture	16
Strategic Culture Among the Venezuelan Mass Public	22
Enduring Rivalries and Emerging Problems for the Chávez Administration	24
Continuity and Change in Venezuelan Strategic Culture	28
Conclusion	31
About the Author	33



Executive Summary

- Venezuela has not fought in an interstate conflict since its independence in 1830. Generally speaking, traditional strategic culture is inward looking, defensive, and prefers to avoid the use of military means to solve international disputes.
- The political-ideological orientation guiding the Chávez administration's foreign policy is misaligned with Venezuela's traditional strategic culture. This creates internal friction during international crises because a large majority of the Venezuelan population rejects war unless it is in the defense of the national territory.

Geographic and Historical Influences on Strategic Culture

- Venezuelans view their border with Colombia as the main area of vulnerability. The Amazon borders with Brazil and Guyana are viewed as remote, nearly impenetrable, and not conducive to military operations. The Caribbean Basin has not typically been viewed as a zone of threats, but rather an avenue for trade.
- Inspired by the example of Simón Bolívar, the liberator of northern South America, the national strategic culture supports an active role for Venezuela in shaping international and regional affairs.
- The violent civil wars that wracked Venezuela in the 19th century produced a strategic culture that privileges internal stability over external security.
- Since the twentieth century, Venezuela's access to resources from oil production has reinforced its preference for diplomatic and economic means to achieve its international objectives. It has also created an enduring dependence on imported technology and materiel, particularly in the defense sphere, which undermines its capacity to use military means to influence international affairs.

Keepers of Strategic Culture

- Strategic culture at the elite level in Venezuela has historically been the province of the armed forces, the national oil industry, and the traditional political parties. These elites share a concern for internal stability. Although there was disagreement over how best to take advantage of oil rents, all supported the international rules of the game and worked within the system to achieve positive change.
- Traditional elite keepers of national strategic culture in Venezuela have been sidelined, purged, or dismantled during the Chavez regime. They no longer pose a significant check to President Hugo Chavez *vis-à-vis* his decision-making process. Rather, foreign policy is guided by an anti-imperialist, anti-neoliberal economics, and anti-globalization vision that views the United States as the main threat to the Bolivarian revolution and Venezuelan sovereignty.
- Strategic culture at the mass level, as reflected by public opinion polls, has changed little during the Chavez regime despite a concerted effort to win adherents to the regime's ideology. The Venezuela public is still deeply pacifist and rejects the idea of the United States as a significant threat.

Enduring Rivalries and Emerging Challenges

- Venezuelan strategic culture still sees Colombia as the main peer-competitor. Venezuela traditionally seeks to create a regional balance of power that deters Colombia. This remains a challenge for the Chávez administration.
- Venezuela strategic culture has no historical element of anti-Americanism (unlike other Caribbean states). The Venezuelan public is a major consumer of American cultural products and generally favors good relations with the United States. This

runs counter to the Chávez administration's international orientation and its efforts to mobilize the population for national defense against the United States.

- The rapidly rising power of Brazil is a challenge to Venezuelan aspirations to assume a regional leadership role. However, it would be difficult to rally the Venezuelan public to address this challenge, given the political orientation of the Lula administration and the absence of any threat perception regarding Brazil.
- Holding together the Bolivarian alliance in moments of crisis will most likely generate domestic political difficulties for the Chávez administration. Reflecting an inward looking strategic culture, the public rejects the use of military force to support President Chávez's regional allies, and it is suspicious of large amounts of economic assistance to other countries.

Change and Continuity in Venezuelan Strategic Culture

- To the extent that it is confrontational, ideologically driven, or seeks non-traditional alliances, Venezuela's contemporary foreign policy is generally not reflective of its traditional strategic culture. However, contemporary policy does reflect a history of diplomatic and economic activism designed to improve Venezuela's international position.
- Among the general public, Venezuela's strategic culture has changed little under the Chavez regime. However, the breakdown of political and institutional checks on presidential power in Venezuela has allowed President Chavez to disregard traditional strategic culture at the elite level.
- The inability to significantly influence mass strategic culture represents vulnerability for the Chavez administration since the general public still overwhelmingly rejects a confrontational, hostile foreign policy. To the extent

that the regime still depends on electoral victories for legitimacy and power, this state of affairs acts as a check on President Chavez's foreign policy.

Introduction

At first glance, it is difficult to see the strategic culture of Venezuela in action since it has not fought a war with a foreign adversary since its independence from Gran Colombia in 1830. However, by looking at a broad concept of strategic culture that includes non-military sources of national power, we can detect a pattern across time in Venezuela's engagement with the international system. The essential elements of Venezuela's traditional strategic culture are an inward focus on political stability and an outward focus on peace. The legacy for Venezuelans of the wars of independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century, in which their troops played a key role across northern South America, is a sense of nationalism, a desire for an autonomous role on the international stage, and a conviction that Venezuela can be a positive force for regional integration and freedom.¹ Its role as a leading oil exporter contributes to a belief that Venezuela is a wealthy country that has the potential to accomplish great things. This sometimes produces an overestimation of its capabilities to accomplish change on the international stage. However, the legacy of political turmoil in the nineteenth century is a concern for both internal stability as well as the sense that the main threats to security are civil wars rather than external conflict.

Venezuela's strategic culture at the popular level is essentially defensive with a strong bias against war as a mechanism for solving disputes. This strategic culture has generally held at the elite level as well, where the key guardians of strategic culture within the armed forces, the established political parties, and the national oil company have preferred a policy of peaceful engagement with the international community. Venezuela's strategic culture also includes other tendencies, such as nationalism and Bolivarianism, which can be harnessed to support a more activist foreign policy.

This does not mean that the strategic preferences of the Chávez regime follow Venezuela's traditional strategic culture. In fact, this findings report argues that a key obstacle to the foreign policy of the current regime is that traditional mass and elite strategic cultures do not align with the regime's ideological preferences. This has led the

¹ The content of what is positive for the region has varied depending on the Venezuelan political leadership in charge at the time, from the highly anti-Communist agenda of General Marcos Perez Jimenez (1953-58) to the socialism of the 21st century of President Hugo Chávez. Marvin Astrada, "Statecraft & Venezuela: Strategic Culture and National Security Policy," paper prepared for Venezuela Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, June 5, 2009.

Chávez regime to engage in a systematic attempt to establish control over key state institutions to enforce an ideological orientation more in line with its activist international security interests and policy.

This report will first examine the geographical and historical antecedents that have shaped Venezuelan strategic culture towards its current orientation. This includes an examination of the formation of key institutions and features of the state that influence and sustain this culture. The report will then turn to an analysis of the current guardians of Venezuela's strategic culture and their attitudes towards the use of power in the international system. Finally, this report will look at the challenges posed by Venezuela's traditional strategic culture for the Chávez regime and the elements of continuity in Venezuela's strategic culture. It will argue that the Chávez regime has made progress in embedding its ideology into key state institutions as a way of overcoming the traditional strategic culture orientation, but this has not translated into significant changes in public opinion about strategic issues. The disconnection between regime ideology and mass strategic culture is a potential critical vulnerability for the Chávez regime in future international confrontations. This vulnerability may be mitigated by the progressively authoritarian cast the regime has taken from 2006 onward, but as long as elections remain an important feature of President Chávez's hold on power, Venezuela's strategic culture will inhibit some of the more radical dimensions of Chavista foreign policy.

Geographic Considerations in Determining Venezuelan Strategic Culture

The three key enduring geographic factors shaping Venezuela's strategic culture are its extended Caribbean maritime border, its historically impenetrable Amazon border with Brazil, and the relative vulnerability of its Colombian flank. In addition, emerging from the Spanish colonial period and the brief experiment with the Gran Colombia (Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador united in a single state until 1830), Venezuela has viewed its borders as poorly defined, insecure, and vulnerable to encroachment by neighboring powers. Geologically speaking, the abundance of oil and other mineral resources have been key elements in shaping Venezuela's twentieth century development as a state, and inform its population's views of the country's wealth and capabilities.

Taken together, Venezuela's key strategic preoccupation has been how to preserve, augment, and secure its autonomy and wealth, deter potential invaders, and prevent further loss of its national territory.

The physical impenetrability of its border with Brazil has led Venezuela to historically focus on threats by land from Colombia, which has been the main invasion route into Venezuela for most of its independent history. While there has not been a major state-to-state conflict with Colombia during this period, ongoing disputes over maritime boundaries in the Gulf of Venezuela provide a ready-made excuse for either government to increase international tensions. In addition, historically, most "invasions" by Venezuelan political exiles intending to change the regime in Caracas entered via the Colombia-Venezuela border, and the combination of state-to-state tensions and political as well as security concerns has, over time, led to the deployment of most of Venezuela's military assets and infrastructure along the axis between Caracas and the border. The ongoing territorial dispute with Guyana, where British influence is perceived to have led to the loss of a major and potentially very rich part of the national territory, illustrates another historical element of Venezuela's strategic culture, namely, the fear of being taken advantage of by and losing precious resources to great powers. Of all its borders, the Caribbean has been perceived as a highway for Venezuela's trade and as a natural area of influence for Venezuela rather than as a zone of threats. However, Venezuela has historically paid some attention to influencing international affairs in the Caribbean Basin. Taken together, Venezuela's historical geography has led it to consider the Colombia-Venezuela border as the main potential arena for military conflict, and to consider Colombia as the main peer-competitor against which it plans, equips, and trains.²

Historical Antecedents for Venezuelan Strategic Culture

Three key elements of Venezuela's history shape its strategic culture: the role of Simón Bolívar and the legacy of the wars for independence from Spain; the violent century of civil wars that followed independence; and the discovery and

² David J. Myers, "Venezuela's Pursuit of Caribbean Basin Interests," RAND Project Air Force report R-2994-AF, January 1985.

commercialization of oil during the twentieth century. Simón Bolívar's legacy entails a sense of nationalism, even national greatness, and of brotherhood with other Latin American republics. The violence of the nineteenth century has left an enduring conviction that the main threat in Venezuela stems from internal sociopolitical and economic factors. Oil has shaped Venezuela's strategic culture by strengthening the economic and diplomatic elements of power and weakening the development of an autonomous military capability. This section considers each of these arguments in turn.

Simón Bolívar and the Venezuelan epic view of its independence struggle are the best point of departure for understanding Venezuelan strategic culture. Since his death in 1830, Venezuelans have propagated a cult of personality around Simón Bolívar as the hero-leader-messiah of the wars of independence from Spain. The general population devotes little practical thought to Simón Bolívar's actual role in the independence of Spain's American colonies or the evolution of his political philosophy; he is simply considered a great man—indeed, an icon that symbolizes the idealism and other positive cultural traits of Venezuela as well as Latin America as a whole—with which only positive things are associated in the popular imagination. In part, this view stems from Simón Bolívar's very complex role in the multiple campaigns for independence across South America (which lasted almost two decades). During this period he adopted multiple political philosophies and military strategies that ranged from extremely radical to very conservative. For the general public, the details seem rather unimportant; what matters is the legend: Simón Bolívar as a great liberator is a centerpiece of civic education in schools, his portrait hangs in most public spaces, and nearly all cities name their significant public space after him. Simón Bolívar's legacy is not analyzed or understood by the general public, but rather is simply accepted as the founding of a meta-narrative of the republic's social and political identity.³

Certain key interpretations of the founding narrative of Simón Bolívar have been handed down through Venezuelan history and are embedded in strategic culture. The first message is that Venezuelans have a capacity for national greatness and can play an active role in affecting the course of history to a disproportionate extent. This is particularly true

³ "Continuidad y Cambio en la Cultura Estratégica Venezolana," paper prepared for Venezuela Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, June 5, 2009.

when it comes to intraregional politics in Latin America, where the legacy of Simón Bolívar leads Venezuelans to believe that their country should play a special and active role to forge regional consensus. This perspective frequently leads them to overestimate their country's relative capabilities. The second key interpretation is that Simón Bolívar was a genius by which every contemporary politician suffers in comparison. Bolívar liberated five countries, founded political systems, raised armies, wrote constitutions, and served as both a political and military leader across the region. Every Venezuelan leader since the founding of the republic has tried to live up to Bolívar's legend, feats, and significance. This has created a certain tendency for Venezuelan leaders to reference Bolívar ("What would Bolívar do?") when justifying their policies.⁴ The third element that affects strategic culture is a sense that Venezuelans only fight wars to liberate other peoples rather than to conquer; this mindset is derived from the consistent message in Simón Bolívar's philosophy favoring liberty and unity for the peoples of South America.⁵ The fourth key understanding is that other Spanish-speaking Latin American states are not enemies or potential enemies, but rather sister-republics that the great Liberator once tried to bring together for the common good. This reduces the competitive, potentially confrontational "us versus them" element in the way Venezuelans view other Latin American states, and it provides a foundation for public receptiveness to ideas of regional integration and cooperation.

Venezuela experienced a long, violent nineteenth century from the breakup of Gran Colombia (1830) to the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez (1908-1935). During this period, Venezuela had almost no discernible international policy or strategic outlook because it was constantly wracked by internal conflicts. Even before its independence from Spain, Venezuela's colonial government was one of the least prosperous and least secure from internal and external threats among the American colonies. The wars of independence had devastating demographic consequences for Venezuela, including the decimation of its educated elite classes. It very nearly devolved into a race war as Spanish and Criollo authorities competed to mobilize and incorporate traditionally excluded

⁴ However, given the overall length of and lack of coherence in the body of work and experience that Bolívar left behind, almost anything can be justified.

⁵ "Continuidad y Cambio en la Cultura Estratégica Venezolana," paper prepared for Venezuela Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, June 5, 2009.

classes (those of African or indigenous descent) into the war effort. This has led to consistent fear of instability and revolution among the elite classes.⁶ This state of affairs has been reinforced by a historical pattern of violent power transfers between leaders of succeeding generations. Since independence in the 1820s, every successive generation has witnessed some major civil war or political catastrophe that has wiped out the previous generation of elites, usually violently. This is driven by a center-periphery dynamic within Venezuela that concentrates wealth at the center and creates incentives for peripheral elites to seize the capital to gain control of resources. Different warlords within the national territory, generally either from the Andes, the plains in southern Venezuela, or the central region around Caracas, constantly fought for leadership and/or autonomy. This did not end until the dictatorship of General Juan Vicente Gómez who defeated local warlords and pacified the national territory and population.

The overall impact on the strategic culture of Venezuela's violent nineteenth century was to create a sense that internal security is more important than external security. It also left a long-standing distaste for violent conflict and civil war amongst Venezuelans. Another very important consequence of the Gómez dictatorship was to demilitarize the general population and concentrate military power in a new national army. Unlike many of their neighbors, this means that Venezuelans generally do not have either experience or the historical memory of using the military to solve political disputes by insurrection or violence (and the failure of the 1960s insurgency seemed to confirm that for most Venezuelans). The Gómez era has embedded into the national strategic culture an attitude that security and defense is the province of the military rather than that of average citizens.⁷

A more recent reinterpretation of the past provides a sense that the frequent bouts of internal instability, particularly during the nineteenth century, led Venezuela to lose control of its vulnerable borders and created a situation in which stronger outside powers such as Colombia and Great Britain (via its colony in Guyana) were able to encroach on its national territory. The major territorial dispute Venezuela has with Guyana is a legacy

⁶ Carlos Peñaloza, "La Geopolítica Cósmica," prepared for Venezuela Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, June 5, 2009.

⁷ Domingo Irwin and Ingrid Micett, *Caudillos, Militares y Poder: una historia del pretorianismo en Venezuela*, Universidad Católica Andrés Bello, Caracas, 2008.

of this period, although Venezuelan governments have preferred pursuing this dispute via international legal mechanisms rather than by force. The bottom line is that Venezuelans connect internal disorder with international vulnerability. However, this also leads Venezuelans to react in a jingoistic and nationalist fashion whenever they feel the territorial integrity of their county is threatened.⁸

The third important factor in the development of Venezuela's strategic culture is dominated by the discovery, exploitation, and commercialization of oil during the twentieth century. Oil, by its very nature, tied Venezuela into the international system in a particular way: it transformed Venezuela into a major exporter of energy as well as a major importer of technology, capital, and almost every other imaginable good. When oil was first commercially exploited during the 1920s in Venezuela, international oil companies (British, U.S. and Dutch) played a dominant role in setting up the rules of the game. The efforts of the international oil companies greatly empowered the state since they ensured that the central government would control the revenues from oil production. On the one hand, this reinforced the conviction among political elites that the shortest route to obtaining, retaining, and exercising political power was to seize control of the central government as the shortest route to access the nation's resources. On the other hand, the great increase in state revenue derived from oil made establishing mechanisms for a peaceful transfer of power between different elites extremely difficult. The results have been constant political turmoil, the perpetual renovation of national elites every generation through frequently violent episodes, and the perpetuation of a weak elite class in Venezuela.⁹

One major impact of the development of an oil-based rentier economy on strategic culture is an enduring concern with the international rules of the game. Specifically, the central strategic preoccupation of the Venezuelan government since the twentieth century has been how to extract more and more resources from the international

⁸ John D. Martz, "National Security and Politics: The Colombian-Venezuelan Border," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 30.4 (Winter 1988-1989): 117-138.

⁹ It is worth noting that even the democratic period of 1958-98 only saw the alternation of power within a political elite; the parties Accion Democratica (Social Democrat) and COPEI (Christian Democrat) had come to mutual agreement to exclude all other competitors for power. It is those very excluded competitors that eventually achieved power under President Hugo Chávez and have now marginalized the previously dominant political elite. See David J. Myers, "SOUTHCOM Project on Venezuelan Strategic Culture," prepared for Venezuela Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, June 5, 2009.

system, both through the sale of energy products and by redefining the rules of the game so as to produce greater rents for the state. Not by force, since Venezuelan elites have understood they could never contend with the great powers that controlled the system, but through diplomacy designed to produce strategic alliances with other developing states in similar positions, such as the states that eventually formed OPEC. In fact, the resources they derived from oil rents made it possible for political elites to influence the international system diplomatically, through the use of petrodollars, in a way that would not have normally been possible for a small state such as Venezuela.

The other major impact on Venezuela's strategic culture produced by oil is the undermining of the economic and technological base of the state and fostering of an import-based development pattern. Plainly put, oil is such a dominant source of wealth that it has a tendency to drown out almost all other productive endeavors. Beyond the almost trite reference to the impact of 'Dutch Disease' on the Venezuelan economy, the concentration of most wealth in the hands of the state has oriented the population towards access to the state as the main source of political power and personal enrichment. It also leads the population to perceive the state as wealthy and to overestimate Venezuela's national power. This has produced a predilection for populism and statism among citizens.¹⁰

When it comes to strategic culture, the development of a rentier political economy has meant that it is almost always easier to import a product, technology, or idea than to produce it domestically. This has extended even to the importation of people, with a large number of refugees and immigrants from Europe arriving in the wake of the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War (7% of the population was foreign born in 1961).¹¹ Periodically, the Venezuelan government has attempted to reverse this trend by investing in domestic industrialization, sponsoring study abroad for its youth, and expanding higher education. However, with the exception of some important technological research programs associated with the national oil enterprises during the 1980s and 1990s, Venezuela has been a net importer of technology. This is especially true in the military

¹⁰ Roberto Garcia Prince, "Origins of Strategic Culture," prepared for Venezuela Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, June 5, 2009. Also Astrada 2009. For more on Venezuela's rentier political economy, see Terry L. Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Booms and Petro-States*, University of California Press, 1997.

¹¹ Judith Ewell, "Venezuela since 1930," in *The Cambridge History of Latin America, Vol. VIII*. The Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 749.

arena. The national army founded by Juan Vicente Gómez in 1910 was originally trained and educated by a Prussian-influenced Chilean military mission. Since World War II, the dominant influence has been the United States and its NATO allies. Even under the Chávez administration, military doctrine and technology have been almost entirely imported from Russia, Cuba, and Iran.¹² The lack of an autonomous technological base and a dependence on imports is a major weakness for Venezuela and undermines its ability to develop a serious military capability. This has a profound effect on strategic culture in that Venezuela has a predilection to engage in an activist foreign policy, yet faces a number of impediments and shortcomings to supporting such a policy.¹³

The general tendency to import everything has accentuated the center-periphery tension within Venezuela and reinforced the fear of internal conflict. Given that the national government in Caracas controls most of the country's wealth, and the state tends to import almost everything, the tendency over time is for the center to develop a more cosmopolitan outlook than the rest of Venezuela. It is much more exposed to the international intellectual, technological, and cultural currents of modernity. This has produced a split between the countryside and the cities, with the countryside being considered the repository of authentic Venezuelan culture. Most of the generational leadership turmoil that Venezuela has experienced has been driven by center-periphery conflicts.¹⁴ The constant renovation of the national leadership has tended to prevent the formation of dominant elites in Venezuela and frequently interrupted the development of strategic culture or tradition that was more outwardly focused.

Keepers of Strategic Culture

Modern Venezuela has both a specific strategic culture that is embedded into key elite institutions, and a diffuse mass strategic culture that shares certain understandings about the use of force and the role of Venezuela in the world. The key state institutions

¹² Harold Trinkunas, "From Center Stage to Revolutionary Subordination?: The Fuerza Armada Bolivariana in the Times of Chávez," paper prepared for FLACSO Chile seminar, "Militares y Política," Quito, Ecuador, 26-27 October.

¹³ See Jorge I. Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1989).

¹⁴ One of the observers in this project noted that the Chávez administration publicly represents itself as more authentically Venezuelan than its opposition. Chávez himself comes from a peripheral area of Venezuela, the Llanos. It is worth noting that support for Hugo Chávez is stronger in rural areas than in Venezuela's main cities. See David Myers, 2009.

that have historically acted as guardians of strategic culture are the armed forces and Petroleos de Venezuela (PDV), the national oil company. Venezuela's formerly strong political parties, AD and COPEI, also had strong views on Venezuela's place in the international system, but their collapse has removed them from the cast of keepers of national strategic culture. The political movements affiliated with President Hugo Chávez have views of international affairs that are shaped by the national strategic culture, but they have adopted an ideological worldview that is quite distant from the national strategic culture and is instead attuned to the anti-imperialist views of the president.

On the other hand, some institutions that might act as keepers of strategic culture in other states are not relevant in Venezuela. The foreign and interior ministries, associated with borders, internal stability, and external security, have little to contribute to the national strategic culture since they have been traditionally quite politicized throughout Venezuelan history and thus reflected the strategic culture of whatever the ruling political class was at the time. The political opposition to President Chávez is so focused on the domestic political struggle for survival and is so new (emerging only since 1999) that the opposition's perceptions of strategic culture do not differ notably from that of the mass public. Economic elites, normally relevant to political culture in many states, have less of an impact on strategic culture in the Venezuelan case since the importance of oil in the national economy has made them largely dependent on the government for success. Venezuela's economic classes have therefore developed a very flexible and pragmatic worldview that generally accommodates changing ideologies.¹⁵

The armed forces have been one of the few modern institutions to think relatively consistently about strategic issues, and as such, they have acquired and reproduced a strategic culture, at least in modern times. The current armed forces were founded by General Gómez in 1911 with the creation of a modern military academy. He originally used them to establish the predominance of the central government and defeat regional warlords, thereby embedding within the Venezuelan military a deep concern for internal stability. The Venezuelan armed forces have traditionally considered themselves as

¹⁵ Garcia Prince 2009.

having close ties to the general public and its values, and this is reflected in their inward looking and defensive strategic orientation.¹⁶

To the extent that the Venezuelan armed forces have a traditional strategic competitor, that is Colombia, the military sees its main external role as preserving Venezuela's territorial integrity and defending its maritime claims against this traditional threat. The one area where the Venezuelan armed forces do see a justification for the use of force is in defense of national territorial integrity, and this is one of the few issues that they have been willing to "go to the mat" for historically, as occurred when the military blocked Venezuela politicians from ratifying a border treaty with Colombia in the late 1970s, and again when the armed forces mobilized for war against Colombia over a maritime border incursion in 1987 (the Caldas incident). From the perspective of the Venezuelan military, the best way to preserve territorial integrity is to maintain a regional balance of power that would dissuade Colombia from offensive operations. In other words, performing defensive preparations and using diplomacy to maintain a regional status quo is necessary, rather than strictly planning for offensive operations against their neighbor.¹⁷

The armed forces also see themselves in a heroic mold, contributing to the founding of the republic and the development of the nation. The Army's motto, "Forjador de Libertades" (Forger of Liberties), encapsulates their worldview. It also highlights the importance of the heroic independence struggle and the role of Simón Bolívar's actions and writings in their institutional mythology. The achievements of Bolívar set a high standard for the institution to be inspired by and, parenthetically, can be used to justify a broad degree of military engagement in Venezuela's internal affairs. It is worth noting that one of the sources of military discontent during the democratic period that preceded the Chávez regime was the shifting of the military away from internal development and security roles (where the military could work directly with the people) and toward conventional defense (since they were unlikely to fight a war). For this reason, the developmentalist role President Chávez assigned the military upon taking office made him initially popular among officers and soldiers.

¹⁶ See Irwin and Micett, 2008.

¹⁷ Felix Martin, "The Strategic Culture of Venezuela: Challenges, Continuity, and Change," paper prepared for Venezuela Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, June 5, 2009.

Venezuela's oil establishment also acted as a bearer of strategic culture, and one that in fact differed from that of other state elites and the strategic culture held by the general public. Venezuela's national oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), inherited the Anglo/Dutch/American strategic culture of the international oil companies Royal Dutch Shell and Creole (a Standard Oil subsidiary). Unlike Mexico, the nationalization of the Venezuela oil industry did not lead to the dissolution of the existing operating entities, merely their renaming and the substitution of foreign-led management with a Venezuelan board of directors drawn from the ranks of the next generation of managers within the local Shell and Standard Oil subsidiaries. Their strategic culture focused on making Venezuela a dominant oil producer through development of high volume of production, high levels of technical prowess, R&D, and efficiency. In other words, they wanted to out-compete the international oil companies from which they had sprung. However, this ran counter to the perspectives held by the political class, which saw oil as something that should be sold in low quantities at high cost to stretch out the benefit to the state (hence, OPEC). Similarly, the military viewed oil as a national strategic asset that should be used to benefit Venezuela rather than as an instrument for the PDVSA to attain international standing. These debates were finally settled when President Chávez fired nearly 20,000 managers and technicians from PDVSA in 2004 over their participation in a national general strike. Since then, PDVSA has ceased to be the bearer of a strategic culture that differs notably from that of other elites.¹⁸

The modern political parties that led Venezuela between 1958 and 1998, COPEI and Accion Democratica (AD), also reflected a version of the national strategic culture that focused on diplomatic engagement with the world, *viz.*, by leveraging petrodollars in a bid to win Venezuela outsized influence over decisions made by the international community. It is these parties (although each had a somewhat different perspective) that pursued a foreign policy that created OPEC, supported democratization across the world, and called for the reordering of the international system to favor the developing world through leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement. A snapshot of Venezuela's international activism can be seen by examining its role in Central America, where it

¹⁸ Harold Trinkunas, "Energy Security: The Case of Venezuela," in Daniel Moran and James A. Russell, eds., *Energy Security and Global Politics: The Militarization of Resource Management*. Routledge, New York, 2008.

funded the overthrow of Somoza in Nicaragua, funded the government of President Duarte against the FMLN in El Salvador during the 1980s, funded and led the Contadora group negotiating for peace in Central America during the same period, and then supported President Chamorro during her leadership of Nicaragua's transition back to democracy in the 1990s. These parties were not only seeking to translate Venezuela's oil production into international power, but they were seeking to do so in that context of a general strategic culture that favored a role for Venezuela in promoting liberty.¹⁹ Although these parties have largely disappeared in terms of their electoral influence, elements of the strategic culture they bore can be found threaded through the international strategies of both the Chavista and opposition political parties in Venezuela.

The coalescence of political movements around President Hugo Chávez is a relatively recent phenomenon (little more than a decade), but it is important to point out the ways in which the national strategic culture is reflected in the types of international policies such movements pursue. It is also important to distinguish between strategic culture (a shared national predisposition towards the appropriate uses of power in the international arena) and ideology (a more or less coherent or consistent body of ideas about how to solve social and political problems, including international ones). Venezuela's Bolivarian foreign policy defines itself as anti-imperialist, anti-neoliberalism, anti-globalization, and in favor of twenty-first century socialism and participatory democracy. It has both minimum and maximum objectives. The minimum objective is to defend the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela. The maximum objective is to work toward a multi-polar world in which US hegemony is checked and Venezuela leads one of the poles consisting of an alliance of Latin American states.²⁰ How does this ideological approach fit with the national strategic culture?

President Chávez and his political movement reflect the Venezuelan strategic culture to the extent that they appeal to heroic visions of a Venezuela that has outsized influence in Latin America, that critiques the present world order as unfair, that uses its petrodollars to achieve international objectives, and promotes political allies in Latin

¹⁹ Harold Trinkunas, "The Logic of Venezuelan Foreign Policy during the Chávez Period," paper prepared for conference, *Ten Years of Venezuelan Foreign Policy: Impacts on the Hemisphere and the World*, Florida International University, Miami, FL, May 29, 2008.

²⁰ Ibid.

America through the use of its diplomatic and economic power. These are elements of the Chavista worldview that are clearly in tune with the national strategic culture.

In other areas, it is clear that ideology trumps strategic culture. There are several areas where this can be observed. The first is the anti-imperialist dimension of Venezuelan foreign policy that challenges the status quo embodied in the international system. Venezuelan strategic culture has traditionally been defensive and inward looking, so challenging the status of the great powers that order the international system has not been one of its historical objectives. Rather, Venezuela has usually tried to work within the system to achieve the best economic and political deal possible for itself.

A second area (and a corollary to the first) has been to identify the United States as the most important external threat to Venezuela's sovereignty, self-determination, and potential for greatness. Having never been invaded by the United States, Venezuelans do not have a historic strategic culture tinged with anti-Americanism, and Chavismo has had to work hard to convince the general population (so far unsuccessfully) that the US was, and still remains, a real threat.²¹ President Chávez has even appealed to Simón Bolívar to justify this attitude (and the Liberator was suspicious of US intentions late in his life), but this is part of the Bolivarian philosophy that never had much cultural penetration in Venezuela. It is true that the US strategic posture during the 2000s and the war in Iraq were unpopular in Venezuela, which gave the anti-American message some traction during the first decade of the Chávez regime. However, the advent of a new administration in the United States and the winding down of the war in Iraq will most likely undercut this message further.²²

The third area where ideology has trumped national strategic culture has been that Venezuela under President Chávez has sought out non-traditional allies, frequently among autocratic states, to help counterbalance the power and influence of the United States. This is seen as a way to both deter any threat to the survival of the Bolivarian Revolution and to prevent the US from checking Venezuela's global influence. This policy includes arms purchases from Russia, economic deals with China, and strategic

²¹ "Continuidad y Cambio en la Cultura Estratégica Venezolana," paper prepared for Venezuela Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, June 5, 2009.

²² See "La 'cultura estratégica' en Venezuela," paper prepared for Venezuela Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, June 5, 2009.

partnerships with Iran and Cuba. Within Venezuelan strategic culture, none of these states are seen as natural allies, particularly those that fall outside the Latin American region. While President Chávez's efforts to seek greater Latin American unity or achieve leadership within the region resonate with the national strategic culture due to the legacy of Bolívar, these international alliances do not.²³

The fourth and final area where ideology has trumped Venezuelan traditional strategic culture is in the regime's perspective on popular participation in national defense. One of the fundamental principles of Bolivarian ideology is to create a civil-military union. This means that the armed forces should participate as an integral component of national development, and citizens and civil society should be co-responsible with the state for national defense and security.²⁴ Civilian governmental entities down to the level of the Consejos Comunales (sub-municipal level governing entities) have assigned defense responsibilities. President Chávez has also called for the creation of a multi-million person national militia, and ordered a series of military exercises that incorporate civilians in support of military units defending against foreign invasion.²⁵ While there has been some popular participation in these measures, there is by no means widespread enthusiasm, which is understandable given that the national strategic culture assigns responsibility for defense to the armed forces.

Strategic Culture Among the Venezuelan Mass Public

The strategic culture of the general public in Venezuela is much more skeptical about the wisdom of international entanglements than its elite culture. In fact, despite ten years of concerted effort by the Chávez regime to mold public opinion in favor of its anti-imperialist and activist Bolivarian foreign policy, there is little evidence of significant shifts in mass strategic culture that would support such a stance. Although cross-temporal polling data is not available on all the possible questions associated with defense and international affairs, what is available is highly suggestive and supports the conclusion that Venezuelan strategic culture is defensive, inward looking, and opposed to significant

²³ Javier Corrales, "Changes in Regime Type and Venezuela's New Foreign Policy," paper prepared for Venezuela Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, June 5, 2009.

²⁴ See Miriam Kornblith, "Principios y Guardianes de la Cultura Estratégica," paper prepared for Venezuela Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, June 5, 2009.

²⁵ Trinkunas 2009.

or expensive international commitments. This poses significant problems for Chavista foreign policy insofar as it wants or needs to have public approval for its actions.

One of the most important observations about the mass strategic culture is the rejection of war as a solution for international problems. Over 75% of the public in recent polls rejected the idea of preparing for war with the United States. Nearly 85% of the public reacted negatively to the proposal to use Venezuelan troops to defend the Bolivian government, as President Chávez has proposed. Over 60% of the Venezuelan public also rejects new military acquisitions, another indication that it does not favor war as a solution. Similarly, the Venezuelan public generally does not favor other states' wars either, with over 75% rejecting the U.S. war in Iraq. This reflects the view in the mass strategic culture that war is not the answer.

The general attitude of Venezuelans towards the United States (designated as threat #1 by Chavismo) is that it would be simply irrational to fight with the United States, and that the United States falls more into the category of a significant power with which Venezuela should have good relations. Historically, Venezuela has looked to the United States for assistance during key crises, and this is the attitude of many in the political opposition in their struggle with the Chávez regime. The general attitude towards the United States is supported by the finding that, in October 2008, only 20% of Venezuelans supported the idea of breaking diplomatic relations with the United States (as President Chávez periodically threatens to do).

Similarly, Venezuelan mass public opinion rejects foreign entanglements. The notion of hosting Russian or Chinese military bases was rejected by over 80% in recent polls (as was the idea of hosting US military bases). The use of Venezuelan funds for development purposes in other countries or to support the Bolivian military was also rejected by large majorities. Even President Chávez's frequent foreign travel was criticized, although this only by a bare majority of respondents.

In addition to the opposition to war and foreign entanglements, Venezuelans generally favor peaceful solutions to conflict, even those that involve their traditional rival, Colombia. It is worth noting that 60% of Venezuelans favor a role for their government in negotiating a peaceful settlement of the Colombian internal conflict,

although their sympathies are pretty clearly against the FARC, with only 18% opposing the label of the FARC as a terrorist organization.

Although these recent (2007-2008) polling data suggest that Venezuela's defensive and inward-looking strategic culture still prevails, we should keep in mind that 15-20% of the Venezuelan population does support the most controversial foreign policy proposals of President Chávez. This suggests that Chavista foreign policy plays well to the hard line partisans in the movement, but less well with the moderate supporters (45-55%) that consistently support the President on domestic policy issues and help him win elections.²⁶ However, the hard line component of the movement is important to the President's political success since these are the activists most likely to turn out to support political campaigns, participate in the "*misiones*," and defend the revolution in the streets, if necessary, as occurred during the 2002 coup attempt.

In addition, Venezuelan history suggests that, even though the general population is quite pacifist and inward looking, there have been strong popular reactions in cases where there is a foreign threat to national territorial integrity. The most recent event to spark such a reaction was the incursion of a Colombian corvette, the ARC Caldas, into Venezuelan territorial waters in 1987. The general public strongly supported the government's defensive measures along the border with Colombia, and there was a jingoistic tone to popular opinion about its neighbor. In other words, Venezuelans are pacifist to a notable extent, but quite passionate about defending their country's territorial outside power as noted previously.²⁷

Enduring Rivalries and Emerging Problems for the Chávez Administration

Venezuela's strategic culture poses a significant challenge for the Chávez administration in dealing with both the enduring rivalry with Colombia and the emerging challenges of confronting the United States. Other significant challenges involve dealing with the rapidly rising power of Brazil, and keeping the Bolivarian alliance together. In

²⁶ Statistics in this section drawn from "La "cultura estratégica" en Venezuela," in paper prepared for Venezuela Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, June 5, 2009.

²⁷ Martin 2009.

each case, Venezuela's strategic culture increases the cost, in terms of public opinion, of finding solutions acceptable to the Chávez regime for each of these issues.

The key international rivalry in Venezuelan strategic culture is Colombia. The armed forces have always seen Colombia as the peer-competitor against which to plan their strategies, acquisitions, and infrastructure. Venezuelans imagine Colombians to be much tougher, more violent, and more likely to use force than they are. They are also seen as having possibly predatory ambitions with regards to key areas of Venezuela's land and sea borders. This mindset persists despite decades of Colombian migration to Venezuela, considerable cross-border trade and integration, and a substantial degree of cultural similarity in the Andean regions of the two states. President Uribe's tough stance on insurgents and paramilitary actors, the attack on the FARC base in Ecuador, and the generally conservative, security oriented tenor of his government reinforce this image of Colombia as a state that is more prone to aggression and war than Venezuela.

On the one hand, this presents an advantage for President Chávez whenever he takes a hard stance *vis-à-vis* the Uribe government since Venezuelans are often prepared to think the worst of Colombians. Even his verbal and covert support for the FARC does not generate too much controversy, despite the average Venezuelan thinking less well of the FARC than they do of the rest of their neighbors. As long as Chávez publicly cloaks his relations with the FARC in terms of trying to achieve lasting peace in Colombia, this is generally acceptable to most Venezuelans since they do not believe that armed confrontation is a solution to their neighbor's internal conflict. However, the defensive strategic culture of Venezuelans does not support more overt aggressive moves against Colombia either, and the very sudden and negative public reaction to Venezuelan escalation against Colombia following the bombing of the FARC base in Ecuador is evidence of this. This suggests that by far the least politically costly way for President Chávez to oppose the Uribe administration's policies is covertly, through support for the FARC and other political actors hostile to the Colombian government.²⁸

Venezuelan strategic culture also poses a challenge to President Chávez's handling of relations with the United States. All the elite keepers of strategic culture except the Chavista political movement evaluate the US in a positive light. At the mass

²⁸ See Martin 2009.

level, Venezuelans are one of the largest consumers of US material and cultural products in the Western Hemisphere. The economic dependency of Venezuela on the US has deepened during the past decade, and no amount of fulmination by President Chávez against the United States has been able to reduce Venezuelan consumption of US culture in various forms through the medium of movies, television, baseball, music, et cetera. Traditionally, Venezuelans have been one of the least anti-American of Latin American societies, and while this sentiment has grown, particularly among the hard line supporters of President Chávez, it simply cannot get much traction within the general public. It is true that a larger number of Venezuelans held a negative evaluation of the Bush administration, but pollsters in Venezuela suggest that this almost entirely due to the Iraq war (i.e. Venezuelans are against all wars) than any growth in anti-American sentiment.

The positive image of the United States in Venezuela's strategic culture makes it very difficult for Venezuelans to take the notion of war between the two countries seriously. This means that President Chávez's generally confrontational line with the United States, complete with accusations of coup conspiracies, assassination plots, and the like, does not play particularly well with the general public. It also means that it is difficult to convince the keepers of elite strategic culture, particularly the military, to seriously prepare for a military confrontation with the United States.²⁹

The rising power of Brazil is also a challenge for President Chávez's ambitions for regional leadership in Latin America. Brazil's economy is growing steadily and diversifying rapidly. Brazil is more technologically autonomous, wealthier, and has a much broader range of capabilities than Venezuela. Moreover, Brazil is increasingly recognized by other great powers, particularly the United States, as a rising power that is generally supportive of the existing international order. President Lula's generally temperate and even-handed government, including foreign relations, contributes to this sense of Brazil as the most important player in Latin America's international politics. Moreover, Brazilian strategic elites do not take the notion of Venezuelan leadership in the

²⁹ "La "cultura estratégica" en Venezuela," paper prepared for Venezuela Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, June 5, 2009.

region seriously, and in fact, consider President Chávez's ambitions in this area either irritating or amusing.³⁰

This poses a problem for President Chávez since he would prefer for Venezuela to be the leading state in the region. However, he is unable to exert much leverage over Brazil, which is much too prosperous for Venezuela's petrodollars to make much difference, nor is Brazil's regional leadership considered a serious problem in Venezuela's strategic culture. Brazil is probably the only neighboring country with which Venezuelans do not associate a history of territorial disputes or border predation.³¹ The Amazon is seen as an impenetrable shield against Brazilian power in any event. So, if President Chávez wanted to rally Venezuelans against the rising power of Brazil, he would face an uphill climb against a strategic culture that does not consider Brazil a relevant threat.

The final obstacle posed by Venezuelan strategic culture for President Chávez's foreign policy is in the area of holding together the Bolivarian alliance he has created. On the one hand, the heroic strain in Venezuelan strategic culture does support an activist foreign policy, particularly as conceptualized by the elite keepers of strategic culture. On the other hand, mass strategic culture leads Venezuelans to be suspicious of foreign entanglements and to oppose the expenditure of too many resources on such relations. From this perspective, excessive spending on foreign adventures detracts from addressing pressing problems at home. This type of thinking is particularly prevalent whenever the price of oil drops or the economy turns sour. However, the recent coup in Honduras highlights another wrinkle posed by Venezuelan strategic culture, which is an aversion to conflict or to using Venezuelan troops abroad. Public opinion rejects the notion of using Venezuelan troops to defend President Evo Morales of Bolivia, and there is little reason to suspect that there would be a different view of the situation in Honduras. This means that, when President Chávez tries to use his military capabilities to support his foreign policy, as occurred during the Ecuador-Colombia border incident in March 2008, or threatens to do so, as occurred during the internal tensions in Bolivia over the approval of

³⁰ Some Venezuelan Presidents, such as Rafael Caldera (1969-74) have tried to rally Spanish-speaking countries in the region to check Brazilian power, but this proposal never amounted to anything. Myers 2009.

³¹ Occasionally, there have been irritants such as the environmental damage caused by wildcat Brazilian miners along the Amazon border that have attracted public attention, but there is no consistent history of territorial tension as has been the case with Colombia.

new constitution, he consistently runs into a roadblock on negative public opinion. Given the importance of elections for President Chávez’s strategy of staying in power, negative public opinion is a serious cost worth taking into account when crafting foreign policy.

Continuity and Change in Venezuelan Strategic Culture

In Venezuela today, strategic culture acts as a constraint, or a source of friction, on the policies of the Chavez regime. In a sense, strategic culture is a menu or repertoire of preferred international behaviors or policies available in a given state, and in Venezuela, this menu does not offer many options that fit President Chávez’s policies. Despite the best efforts of the Chávez regime to realign the national strategic culture to make it more compatible with its international ideology, Venezuelans continue to take a defensive, almost pacifist, attitude towards international affairs. They oppose war and are suspicious of foreign entanglements. Key elites favor a more activist policy, but most of them prefer the use of economic and diplomatic tools rather than military ones to achieve international objectives. The following table summarizes the high degree of continuity in the attitudes of key actors towards the use of national power in international affairs.

Table 1: Summary of Attitudes of Key Actors towards the Use of Power in International Affairs

	Use of Military Power	Use of Economic/ Diplomatic Power	Threat orientation	Main Threat	Satisfied with international order
Military (pre-2002)	Defense and development	Defensive	Internal	Colombia	Yes
PDV (pre-2003)	Defense	Achieve stability	Internal	Own government	Yes
Traditional Political Parties (pre-1999)	Defense	Activist, achieve nat’l objectives	Internal	Internal	Yes with revisions
Chavismo	Defense plus development plus support allies	Activist; achieve Venezuela leadership	External	US and domestic opposition	No
General Public	Defense plus development	Not supportive	Internal	Crime	Yes

By going against the grain of the national strategic culture, Chavista foreign policy runs the risk of misfires. The distance between mass strategic culture and the Chavista ideological preferences on international affairs is a major vulnerability because the regime risks losing support and losing popularity whenever it engages in radical foreign policy adventures. The negative public opinion impact of the Venezuelan escalation of the Ecuador-Colombia crisis in 2008 is a recent example of such the disconnection between the regime and mass strategic culture.

However, what is changing in Venezuela is the extent to which strategic culture, especially mass strategic culture, influences or places limits on the decision-making of the regime. Here, changes in the nature of the regime, the role of key state institutions, and the evolution of the party system are all moving in the direction that excludes the influence of non-Chavista actors and traditional keepers of strategic culture on defense and foreign policy. This is the product of a deliberate effort by the Chávez regime to eliminate checks and balances and bring the institutions that act as keepers of strategic culture under its control and remold them to support its foreign policy strategy.

While Venezuela retains an electoral regime, it has become progressively authoritarian over the last decade. The efforts by the Chávez administration to reverse opposition victories in the recent state and local elections by developing institutional mechanisms for defunding and disempowering newly-elected opposition figures, and harassing the opposition, are only the latest indication of this trend. Many of the papers submitted to the Venezuela Strategic Culture working group contain evidence of this authoritarian trend. The legislature and the judiciary no longer exercise significant powers to check the executive. The national electoral council is widely seen as biased towards the regime. The government has access to large amounts of off-budget funding that is spent in non-transparent and unaccountable ways. The routine ability of the President to issue decrees to accomplish his objectives, even those that have been rejected by voters in referenda, contributes to this sense of a lack of checks and balances on presidential power. This is especially true in the area of foreign policy, where there are literally no checks on what the President can do other than popular reaction. A lack of checks and balances reduces the impact of strategic culture as an explanation for foreign

policy decisions since these would naturally reflect the personal and ideological convictions of an individual rather than a political class as a whole.³²

In addition, President Chávez has deliberately undermined the autonomy of and taken control of the most autonomous institutions in the state, that is, the military and PDV, which also happen to be the main keepers of strategic culture. After the failure of the 2002 coups, the military lost all vestiges of autonomy, and the regime exercised increasing ideological control over the armed forces. Although the new military salute, “*Patria, socialismo o muerte*,” garnered the most publicity, the regime has also been able to enforce public compliance among officers with the ideological precepts of the regime. To this is added the increased funding for military activities and lucrative opportunities for self-enrichment through participation in acquisitions and development projects. Given its druthers, the contemporary military strategic culture would still prefer a defensive role focused on internal development and security, would favor Western rather than Russian equipment and doctrine, and would consider the idea of war with the United States ludicrous.³³ However, its preferences (and strategic culture) are no longer relevant to the decision-making of the regime. Similarly, the purge of the technical and managerial ranks of PDV following the 2003 general strike deprived the organization of the key leadership personnel that were the keepers of a world-class, highly competitive strategic culture centered on energy. The new leadership of PDV is entirely Chavista in its orientation, and PDV has become a major bankroller and executing agent for the regime. In this case, it is not possible to even speak of latent strategic culture as is the case in the military.

Finally, the evolution of the party system in Venezuela is such that it is impossible for the political class to place any checks on the regime. President Chávez is still the political hegemon of the Chavista movement, and no rivals have emerged from within these ranks that could possibly overshadow him or even check his policies. The political opposition in Venezuela remains disorganized and is correctly focused on figuring out how to win elections. Foreign policy is low on the opposition’s political agenda, and, given its low representation in elected offices and the successful Chavista

³² See Corrales 2009, Kornblith 2009, Garcia Price 2009, and Manuel Gómez, paper prepared for Venezuela Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, June 5, 2009.

³³ “Continuidad y Cambio en la Cultura Estratégica Venezolana,” paper prepared for Venezuela Strategic Culture Workshop, Florida International University, Miami, June 5, 2009.

efforts to undermine the power of elected opposition leaders, this is not a check to President Chávez's foreign policy objectives.³⁴

Conclusion

Venezuelan strategic culture remains defensive and inward-looking, despite President Chávez's rhetorical and institutional efforts to make it otherwise. The ideological orientation of Venezuela's Bolivarian foreign policy is a poor fit with the country's strategic culture. In addition, Venezuelan strategic culture does not support the use of military power *vis-à-vis* other countries, particularly the United States. While Venezuelans like to have the self-image of taking a leading role in regional affairs, this does not translate into support for significant economic or military commitments. This poses a challenge to President Chávez's international strategy, and it introduces friction in the form of negative public opinion whenever this strategy leads to confrontation.

President Chávez has made considerable progress in eliminating institutional checks and balances pertaining to his control over foreign policy. He has also dominated the institutional keepers of strategic culture in Venezuela, enforcing the Chavista ideological orientation on the military and petroleum sectors. The Venezuelan party system, particularly as regards the opposition, is so weak that it does not pose a significant obstacle to President Chávez's foreign policy ambitions. This means that, at the elite level, Venezuela's traditional strategic culture is not a dominant factor in explaining foreign policy decision-making.

There is a recurring phenomenon of caudillismo in Venezuelan history. By breaking down the institutional and political checks of the democratic period, President Hugo Chavez has liberated himself from many constraints and become the indispensable figure in the political movement he leads. However, the menu of preferred international policy options that makes up a strategic culture remains latent in the general population and among some elite keepers of the strategic culture, especially the armed forces. This will remain a recurrent source of friction in Venezuela. As long as the regime, no matter how authoritarian, continues to need electoral victories to retain power, negative public

³⁴ See Corrales 2009.

opinion about foreign policy adventures will remain a factor in President Chávez's political calculations.

About the Author

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