

VENEZUELA'S FOREIGN RELATIONS BETWEEN 1999 AND 2021: REMINDER, REFLECTION AND ENCOURAGEMENT

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Summary

This article examines the evolution of Venezuela's foreign policy from 1999 to 2021, identifying key changes in its strategic orientations. It analyzes how the government has redefined its international relations, favoring ties with authoritarian regimes and using economic resources for geopolitical purposes. Additionally, the study explores authoritarian resilience and democratic resistance in the international context. Finally, reflections on the lessons learned and prospects for democratic recovery are presented.

Keywords: Foreign policy, authoritarian resilience, democratic resistance, international relations, geopolitics.

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Introduction

It is very difficult to look back, to reconstruct a sequence, without thinking in the present. This reference to the present is, besides being inevitable, necessary to understand the current critical situation in Venezuela. Thinking in international terms, the sequence usually refers to governmental management, sometimes to the links that have favored authoritarian consolidation but not so much to those that have encouraged democratic recovery. Taking stock of the last twenty-two years is a necessary but unmanageable exercise within the limits of this essay, which barely attempts a panoramic view. In this attempt, it begins by recalling the changes in the basic orientations, continues with a reflection on what has facilitated or complicated the authoritarian impulses and the democratic in foreign relations and, finally, leaves signs of encouragement to the cause of democratic reconstruction.

These three approaches -remembering, reflecting and encouraging- will guide the brief journey that follows. They start from an initial conjecture that, based on recognized academic studies, has been argued in several previous texts by the author¹ on the relevance of the reorientation of

1 "Environment, ideas, strategies and institutionality: the role of international relations in the reconfiguration of the Venezuelan political system", in Diego Bautista Urbaneja, *Disarming the model. The transformations of the Venezuelan political system since 1999*, Caracas, ABC Ediciones - Fermín Toro Institute of Parliamentary Studies - Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2017; "democratization and authoritarian resilience: opportunities of challenge and risks of permissiveness", *democratization* (year 1, no. 3, 2019), pp. 87-115, available at: <https://redformaweb.com/ediciones/>; "The challenge of consolidating relations and democratic international incidence", in Benigno Alarcón Deza and Miguel Martínez Meucci (eds.), *Democratic transition or revolutionary autocratization. The Venezuelan Challenge II*, Caracas, UCAB Center for Political Studies, 2016 and "Venezuela: between authoritarian and democratic learning", *democratization* (year 2, no. 8, 2020), pp. 4-30, available at: <https://redformaweb.com/ediciones/>

relations with the world since the first steps of the so-called Bolivarian revolution: in the midst of international conditions that favored authoritarian resilience but also encouraged democratic resistance, in which learning in both directions was cultivated.

The conjecture in question is that the reorientation of foreign policy purposes and relations since 1999 not only involved changing State policies, but also taking advantage of and fostering international conditions and links to favor and protect changes in the State itself, that is, in the legal, political, economic, social and cultural regime that had shaped it, especially since 1959. The impulse and policies to ignore, distort and try to erase what democracy had built were manifested early on and in an undeniable way in foreign policy.

Remembering: the redefinition of the State

There is no need for a long and detailed account to recall, from the present and for the present, how Venezuela's insertion in international relations has been changing since 1999. The first thing to do is to note what, over the years, in various stages, has become increasingly evident and explicit. The fundamental aspects can be summarized in two directions: the abandonment or redefinition of the essence of the major foreign policy guidelines that had prevailed since the mid-twentieth century and the development of increasingly less democratic and more authoritarian links encouraged by the geopolitical use of economic resources and political influence. All this in an international environment that regionally favored the emergence or reappearance of leaders with nationalist, populist and, to varying degrees, illiberal banners. Indeed, globally, hemispherically and regionally, the effects of economic recessions, rejection of economic openness and deregulation programs, the slow development of Europe's foreign and security policy, the loss of prestige and influence of the United States, absorbed by the war against terrorism, and the defiance of regional powers -such as Iran and Turkey- alongside those of Russia and China, increasingly open in their global geopolitical competition, were all making themselves felt.

The abandonment of the main guidelines of Venezuelan foreign policy assumed or consolidated since the 1960s occurred at an increasing speed. The international orientation of a democratic country that had assumed diverse formulations but without abandoning the proximity and support to the regional and world democracies, not only disappeared from 1999 onwards from the constitutional preamble, where it was reformulated as an aspiration to democratize the international society. Moreover, despite the inclusion of a very broad catalog of rights with their guarantees and the commitment to their supranational protection, all this was increasingly openly ignored. It explicitly contributed to weakening international and non-governmental agreements, clauses and initiatives for the protection of human rights, democracy and, very significantly, international systems of scrutiny in these matters and electoral observation.

The condition of a developing oil-producing country, with no great power complexes, which had been outlined as an orientation in the 1960s and projected from then on, was redefined in

words and actions. This was done with a broadening of commitments and links in which the concentration on the domestic and foreign political instrumentalization of oil generated a very high dependence and at the same time the destruction of the extractive, processing and export capacity, in a heightened version of the petro-state syndrome. Internationally, energy cooperation became increasingly costly and undeniable as a geopolitical instrument of decreasing effectiveness after several years of insistence on projecting Venezuela from OPEC as a power in its regional neighborhood and even beyond. Thus, in the midst of the bonanza and anti-liberalism, the condition of a developing country was lost sight of and, magnified and reoriented, inclinations towards immoderation reappeared. This was evidenced by the challenge, disqualification and distancing from multilateral political, financial, trade and investment organizations.

Now, not only was the geopolitical agenda expanding in search of extra-oil approaches to OPEC partners, with insistence in the context of the US intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 and the beginning of the invasion of Iraq, two years later, by a coalition promoted by the United States. In the Middle East, to the promotion of Venezuela's relations and business with Iran -a country that generates international tensions due to its destabilizing regional impact and the development of its nuclear program- were added signals such as the declarations against Israel and the subsequent breaking of relations with that country, the denunciations of the Venezuelan government's links with Hezbollah and the closeness and agreements with the Syrian regime. Also in Africa, there was interest in expanding presence and diplomatic missions, especially with authoritarian regimes, among which the support to those led by Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe and Omar al Bashir in Sudan stood out. However, the most striking and challenging aspect -apart from the always opaque dealings with Iran and Turkey- was the priority given to the development of relations with Russia and China. The latter, with their particular strategies and styles, served the regime to openly demonstrate its distance from both the United States and multilateral principles and practices in political, legal, investment, trade in general and armaments in particular, as well as security, development and particularly human rights matters.

As an American country, which had been one of the traditional facets of foreign policy since the 19th century, the complements which, from the North-South perspective of the new international order, had been added to the foreign policy statements of democracy since the 1970s, no longer seemed to be enough. This was manifested in the slow but sustained distancing and defiant gestures towards the United States within the limits imposed by the importance of that oil market. Those limits became blurred, although they never completely disappeared, as exports to that market decreased and the autocratization of the Venezuelan regime accelerated. The ups and downs in the hemispheric facet of foreign policy were also felt in the cycles of regional relations.

With Latin America and the Caribbean, there was a profound change in the perspectives of democracy, geopolitics, cooperation and integration. From criticism and distancing, we moved on to the aforementioned abandonment of commitments to the protection of democracy and human rights and even of the Organization of American States itself. The same happened very quickly with the regional integration agreements, which were labeled as neoliberal: thus,

the agreements that made Venezuela part of the Andean Community and the Group of Three were denounced. In the same way, Mercosur was approached and joined, challenging its requirements and forcing its procedures, as well as supporting alternative regional and sub-regional forums such as the Bolivarian Alternative for the Peoples of the Americas -which would later be redefined as the Alliance-, the Union of South American Nations and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States.

Another distinctive feature of the foreign policy shift was the geopolitical instrumentalization of energy cooperation. This was not only due to its manifest cultivation of support for positions and actions outside the framework of institutional, hemispheric and subregional principles and rules. It was also different from previous experiences due to its opacity, especially evident in the agreements with Cuba, but also in the network of bilateral commitments of Petrocaribe, as well as in many other uses of petrodplomacy, within and outside the continent.

As a neighboring country of Colombia, Guyana and Brazil, the slow construction of instances to cooperatively address the demanding challenges of the agenda and the very lively border with Colombia, the pending tasks to comprehensively address the complexity of the border with Brazil and the legal-diplomatic coherence in the policy on the Essequibo claim were abandoned. In all four cases, the extreme ideologization typical of the search for closeness and unconditional solidarity prevailed, as well as the polarization between friends and enemies of the Venezuelan process: hence the abandonment, the tensions and conflicts in the border areas, the distancing and ruptures with democratic governments, but also the rapprochements and compromises with like-minded actors in the anti-liberal challenge, within the legality and, to a considerable extent, outside of it.

Against the backdrop of this set of reorientations, illustrated by some of the relationships and commitments that materialized them, the change of the State was projected internationally. Indeed, the accelerated transition from democracy to a hybrid regime, which incorporated authoritarian orientations and practices, was moving towards authoritarianism, as has been recorded in respectable international studies, reports and indexes. In this transition, the links, incidence and opening of international relations to like-minded or at least pragmatic or indifferent actors, have been fundamental for the international projection, sustainability and authoritarian stabilization. Also, on the other hand, such links, advocacy and openness on the part of democratic actors have served as counterweights and as encouragement for the Venezuelan democratic cause. These two registers will be taken into account in the reflection on the role of international relations: both in the persistence of the authoritarian regime and in that of the democratic cause.

Reflecting on authoritarian resilience and democratic resistance

Since 1999, the development of foreign policy, aimed at overcoming resistance and building international support for the change of the political regime, not only implied a reorientation of principles and purposes, but also, necessarily, changes in relations, commitments and means.

For the sake of a succinct and useful exposition, the changes in this balance on what internationally has favored authoritarian resilience and encouraged democratic resistance can be summarized in three phases in the foreign policy perspective: that of the movement from the “democratic refoundation” to the “Bolivarian revolution”, between 1999 and 2004; then that of redefinitions of the strategic map, until the adoption of the so-called “socialism of the 21st century” and, from 2012 to the present, that of the formulation and adoption of the “Plan for the Homeland”, the death of Chávez and the arrival and permanence of Nicolás Maduro in power. Each one has had a dominant tone in foreign policy, successively: seeking legitimacy and initiating reorientations avoiding confrontations and ruptures; offensive in strategic redefinitions and priority relations and, finally, the search for consolidation through offensive-defensive strategies in the face of growing pressures and loss of legitimacy, both nationally and internationally.

Parallel to the stages of autocratization and its manifestations in foreign policy are the changes in the orientations and actions of national and international actors in favor of the recovery of the rule of law, democracy and the protection of human rights. These, in the three periods already mentioned, correspond in terms of their international links with three phases: of concertation and initial construction of international links and of coordination and strategies to strengthen internal and external support; of reorganization, strengthening of legitimacy and external support links and, most recently, of national and international strategic adjustments around the Venezuelan democratic cause.

The following is an invitation to reflect through milestones in the three proposed stages, interweaving the incidence of international relations in favor of autocratization or democratic reconstruction.

From the first moment of his mandate, President Hugo Chávez assumed the direction and personal control of foreign policy, a fundamental piece to -beyond its legality- strengthen the international acceptance of his government. The projection of the model of participative and protagonist democracy and the role assigned to the links associated to oil marked the international steps of the first years. This was illustrated by the markedly geopolitical rapprochement with OPEC partners, the new terms of energy cooperation with Caribbean countries, the integral cooperation agreement with Cuba, the divergences before the proposal of the Inter-American Democratic Charter and the criticisms to regional integration agreements. A certain initial caution among democracies gave the benefit of the doubt to the regime presided over by a military man who had started his public political life with a coup d'état.

Corresponding to the stage of legitimization and initial reorientations of the regime, the organization and strategy of the opposition were structured very slowly. Weakened in their

legitimacy after the failed coup d'état of April 2002, the democratic actors coordinated and gained international attention especially through their participation in the Table of Negotiation and Agreements (Mesa de Negociación y Acuerdos). This, in the framework of the invocation of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, was facilitated by the Secretary General of the OAS and representatives of the Carter Center and the United Nations Development Program. The creation of the Coordinadora Democrática in July 2002, as a coalition of parties, civil associations and non-governmental organizations, not only achieved the concerted efforts around the realization of a recall referendum of the presidential mandate, but also a program for the democratic recovery and the development of international links already initiated in the negotiation experience: through spokespersons and advisors at the Table and extensive consultations in an international commission of national consultants.

The dissolution of the Coordinadora Democrática after the failed recall referendum, corresponds in time with the second stage of foreign policy under the mandate of Hugo Chávez, his "New Strategic Map" and the presidential reelection in 2006. In effect, the road to the referendum that finally took place in August 2004 was full of obstacles set by the regime, which was already revealing unmistakable traits of hybridization. The importance of the international approaches sought and cultivated by the government in the midst of its strategy to reduce the effectiveness of the political agreement reached in May 2003 before international facilitators also became very visible. Cuba strengthened its ties and influence as an ally of the regime in terms that were economically and politically very costly for the country in terms of its autonomy, while in the midst of the deterioration of relations with the United States, the doors were opened to ties with regimes that challenged it, such as Russia, China and Iran. These not only became part of the portfolio of influences, businesses, credits and investments, but also of a redefinition of the strategic situation -extensive to the security doctrine and its "war hypothesis"- and of the purposes and wide margins of international incidence of and on Venezuela.

The context of the so-called Latin American "pink tide", largely coinciding with the decade of increases in prices and export volumes of raw materials, was propitious for the development of the purposes and means of that strategic map of 2004 and to promote an "axis" of links with the Bolivarian revolution. This included related governments or with pragmatic motivations (economic or political), forums such as that of São Paulo and the Bolivarian Congress of the Peoples, and rapprochements and affinities with the guerrillas of Colombia and other violent extra-continental groups. The First Socialist Plan (2007-2013) belongs to this phase. Its geopolitical guidelines -in correspondence with the practical reorientation of foreign policy- placed Latin America and the Caribbean in the first circle of relations and Iran, Syria, Belarus and Russia in the second circle, followed by China and other Pacific countries, before Europe and North America.

During this phase, several democratic initiatives that gained international attention and support -such as in 2007 the protests against the shutdown and confiscation of RCTV's signal and equipment and the defeat of the constitutional reform submitted by the government to a referendum- did not count on the joint organization and projection of democratic actors, but

did encourage their recovery with the formation of the Democratic Unity Roundtable (Mesa de la Unidad Democrática) as a large alliance of parties that began in January 2008. This platform, due to its plurality, strategic agreement and organization of its interlocution, gave a new and more consistent international presence to the Venezuelan democratic cause. More coherent projection and more fluid international democratic links were achieved, based on a structure for the development of relations with governments, political parties, advocacy in international organizations, relations with non-governmental organizations and relevant individuals.

In a third stage, the illness and death of Chávez, the opacities and irregularities in the transfer of power to Nicolás Maduro, the disputed results of the 2012 presidential elections, the end of the oil bonanza, the growing evidence of the destruction of the economy and corruption, were intensifying and making the problems of efficiency and legitimacy of the Venezuelan regime more visible both nationally and internationally. To these problems, manifested in successive protest movements, was added in an already undeniable way the accumulation of human rights violations, especially since the repression of the 2014 demonstrations. Since then, the escalation of abuses began to be denounced and condemned by governments and international and non-governmental bodies, the most extensive and precise references being those of the reports published since 2017 by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and in 2020 the first Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission of the UN Human Rights Council. Since 2015, although with greater intensity as of 2017, the United States adopted sanction measures, mostly focused on individuals considered responsible for human rights violations, abuses of power, corruption and drug trafficking. In 2017, that country also imposed the first of a sequence of sectoral sanctions. That same year, the European Union decided to apply its sanctions regime to Venezuelan government officials for human rights violations in the repression of protests, to which were added sanctions for violations of the rule of law in the Constituent Assembly, presidential and legislative electoral processes. On the other hand, the search for and securing of support that would favor the stability of the government and the resilience of the regime made the rejection of sanctions a shared cause with its allies -Iran, Turkey, Russia, China- but the materialization of support, beyond votes and vetoes in international forums, became more costly, demanding greater guarantees and with less willingness to take economic and political risks.

Meanwhile, the unitary democratic strategy of accumulation of forces and pressure for free elections, with the encouragement and support of democratic governments, had borne fruit in the parliamentary elections of 2015. In those elections it achieved a qualified majority of seats in the National Assembly. The government's disregard of that result materialized in decisions, rulings and actions that hindered and ignored that instance. This provoked international reactions and initiatives of support from governments, international and non-governmental organizations. Democratic governments, in a particularly consistent manner from Europe, North America and Latin America, signed declarations and encouraged the creation of groups of governments more committed to the follow-up and search for solutions, such as the Lima Group since 2017 and the International Contact Group since 2019. In the Organization of American States, this concern was expressed in Resolutions of its Permanent Council and in the processing of the

four reports of the Secretary General presented between June 2016 and September 2017. However, in the convening of a Meeting of Consultation in 2017 and in the meeting of the members of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance in 2019, the concern of most countries was evident, but also the divergences and difficulties to achieve a qualified majority when defining specific measures, including the invocation of the Inter-American Democratic Charter at two critical moments: the unconstitutional convocation and election of the Constituent Assembly in July 2017 and the illegitimate presidential convocations and elections in May 2018 and parliamentary elections in December 2020.

After the swearing-in of Nicolás Maduro for a new term before the National Constituent Assembly in 2019 and his inauguration in January 2020, the vast majority of democracies did not recognize his mandate, while a few days later they recognized the swearing-in of the President of the National Assembly as Interim President. With such sum of support, the Interim Government not only deployed an international team and developed an intense foreign activity, but increasingly focused its strategy on foreign pressure on the regime. It is worth noting, however, the contradictory effects and consequences of this international concentration and, particularly, of the support of the U.S. government during the administration of Donald Trump, with its willingness to exert pressure for a short-term solution by insisting rhetorically on “all options on the table”. On the one hand, the importance of that support and its willingness to exert pressure and, in March 2020, to propose a path for democratic transition encouraged, step by step, with the lifting of sanctions, is unquestionable. On the other hand, it also had the undesirable effects of difficulties in reaching agreement with other democracies where there was no lack of misgivings and resistance to the rhetoric of intervention, encouragement of national expectations of short-term solutions dependent in the main on international action, as well as discouragement and neglect of political work and mobilization at the national level.

The year 2021 began in national and international circumstances of great complexity for the regime and also for the democratic cause. On the one hand, the legitimacy of the National Assembly elected without the fundamental conditions for a free and competitive election is not recognized. On the other hand, the formal and factual difficulties to keep in operation the National Assembly elected in 2015, support of the interim Government and institutional space for the organizational structure of the opposition and its international projection.

All this happened in the midst of a crisis described as multidimensional, reflected internationally in the succession and accumulation of respectable reports, declarations and initiatives towards Venezuela expressing concern about the loss of democracy and the material and institutional destruction on which the humanitarian emergency and its international overflows have grown. The latter include the exodus of millions of Venezuelans as well as illegal activities, facilitated by governmental action and omission, which favor the development of transnational criminal and subversive activities. The country currently ranks among the worst in terms of institutionalism, state fragility, governance, rule of law, corruption, competitiveness (including the oil sector) and environmental destruction. No less important are the increasingly serious allegations and dossiers on violation of the full spectrum of human rights with dossiers and

reports on crimes against humanity, including extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances, arbitrary detentions and torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment committed since 2014. The international legitimacy problem of the regime, which saw its international room for maneuver reduced, was no longer compensated by the support of related regimes or governments with specific interests. Hence the initiatives to offer economic advantages and its own framework of supposed legality, as illustrated by its name, the misnamed “Constitutional Anti-Blockade Law for National Development and the Guarantee of Human Rights”.

For the international links of the democratic cause, the challenge is not a minor one in a world environment of economic and democratic recession and of challenge to international liberal institutionalism. The conjunction of this environment with the emergence of the pandemic and its externalities -including the opportunistic advances of established authoritarianisms or those on the way to becoming so- slows down and restrains international support and initiatives.

Encouraging: international learning and democratic perseverance

In this context of tensions and complexities in international support for the regime and for the democratic cause, there have been international lessons learned in both directions. Although the former have received the most attention, the latter also count and should deserve further study. There are sources of encouragement for internal and external democratic perseverance.

On the one hand, the proximity to other authoritarian regimes, the assimilation of their experiences of political control and containment of international democratic advocacy have favored continuity. On the other hand, the proximity to democracies, the study of transition experiences and the development of links and articulation of initiatives reflect, as well as reinforce, democratic perseverance. This has persisted in upholding the general and fundamental purpose of recovering the rule of law within a framework of full respect for the Constitution. This has led to milestones in a road map, among which the support of democracies for the development of free elections stands out as politically critical. The means mobilized internationally in support of this path include declarations, debates on the Venezuelan case in multilateral forums, resolutions and reports, as well as political measures -preceded by warnings- such as the disavowal of the legitimacy of elections, the imposition of targeted and sectoral sanctions, as well as express conditions for their lifting and proposals to encourage the development, step by step, of the path towards a transition agreement.

As a synthesis of all this, of much present interest, it is worth recalling that between 2014 and 2020 there were four approaches between representatives of the majority democratic opposition and the government to reach agreements. They counted on various forms of international intermediation, each time more robust. In 2014, the dialogue meeting took place in Caracas accompanied by three foreign ministers of Unasur members -Colombia, Ecuador and Brazil- and the presence of the Apostolic Nuncio. Also in Caracas, in 2016, dialogues took



place with the accompaniment of a Vatican representative and three former presidents: Leonel Fernández, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Martín Torrijos. Between 2017 and early 2018, a negotiation process took place in the Dominican Republic with the good offices of the Dominican president and the accompaniment -very active, similar to a mediation- of the foreign ministers of Mexico and Chile. In 2020 there were several rounds of negotiations in Oslo and Barbados with the formal mediation of the Kingdom of Norway, which has not ceased to deal with the Venezuelan situation.

From the perspective of the actors and factors that encourage democratic resistance, the reading of these four attempts may well go beyond the verification of authoritarian resilience after critical moments, the asymmetries between the parties, the impossibility, blockage or non-fulfillment of commitments and the fundamental responsibility of the government in all of this. On the other hand, it is worth insisting on the encouraging signs and lessons learned from this succession of dialogues, useful for the future and for what is emerging at the time of writing these lines.

The succession of meetings has been beneficial for the democratic opposition: both in terms of international reaffirmation of its legitimacy as an interlocutor frankly committed to the peaceful and constitutional recovery of democracy, and in terms of strengthening its thesis on the need for respectable international mediation and means of international pressure and persuasion.

Since the 2016 dialogues in Caracas, the points contained in the letter of the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin became, with some subsequent additions, a common reference for international democratic support and for the negotiations that followed. This is what was reflected since then by the positions of governments of Europe, the American hemisphere and some others regarding the urgency of ensuring channels of access to humanitarian aid, the solution of the political crisis within the constitutional framework and through a demo-

cratic, peaceful and electoral path, the respect for the competences of the National Assembly elected in 2015 - which translates into the call to recover the full validity of the Constitution - and, since 2018, the common insistence on the need for free elections with independent international observation and the release of political prisoners, to which have been added measures to ensure the participation of disqualified leaders and the return of the cards and parties “confiscated” by the regime.

In the development of these meetings, as well as around and after them, analyses and lessons learned were developed, evidenced in the greater preparation and care in the procedures, as well as in the attention to the relevant international conditions and links.

The international support for the democratic cause -constant but diverse, measured and cautious- has manifested itself in different ways and with different emphases in the insistence on providing humanitarian assistance and vaccines, in encouragement to civil society, to the political leadership and its coordination and in support to the search for agreements through negotiations. The precision and conjunction of these supports encourages, but does not determine the possibility of a transition route, the key to which has never ceased to be Venezuelan.



