

'REVOLUTIONARY' DIALOGUES

Venezuelan-Cuban relations under Castro and Chavez

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I testify that this dissertation has 11,936 words.

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Index

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

A bright Sunday in Caracas and Havana PAG 04

CHAPTER 1

From Antagonism to Cooperation PAG 09

CHAPTER 2

Two Flags, One Revolution PAG 19

CHAPTER 3

The Two Level Game PAG 29

CHAPTER 4

The ‘Bolivarian Matrix’ PAG 39

CONCLUSION

A new dawn for Cuban-Venezuelan? PAG 49

REFERENCES

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INTRODUCTION

A bright Sunday in Caracas and Havana

Fidel, I became... well, you made me some sort of messenger, a source of information. Those wishing to find out about Fidel are welcome here (in Venezuela). I will always tell the truth about what is happening: your recover, your example, your coherence.
(Hugo Chávez in a live chat with Fidel Castro on his Sunday TV and radio show, *Alo, Presidente*, February 25th 2007)¹

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has long been accused of ‘cubanising’ his country². The derogatory term, used by his critics even before Chávez announced his so-called ‘Socialism of the 21st century’³, supposes that the Venezuelan leader is attempting to shape Venezuelan society into a Cuban model, trying to curb freedom of expression and block rights to political opposition. The opposition accuses Chávez, for example, of creating Bolivarian Circles after the Cuban Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs), in order to keep an eye on civilians. For his critics, Chávez’s Bolivarian schools, by following the Cuban model, work like some sort of ‘laboratories of Marxism’; and his health programmes, particularly *misiones* directly supported by Cuban personnel, are

1 http://www.bbc.co.uk/portuguese/reporterbbc/story/2007/03/070228_fidel_chavez_dg.shtml

2 In Uchoa (2003:242, chaps 15 and 16) I further develop this idea, with accounts that seem to follow the best conspiracy theory school. Until 2003, for example, anti-*chavistas* accused the President of holding weekly secret meetings with Cuban leader Fidel Castro in Margarita Island, which could hardly be proved.

3 After his reelection for six more years, in December 2006, Chávez declared that the Venezuelan people had voted for ‘Socialism of the XXI century’, and announced ‘nationalizations’ in the energy and communications sectors, starting by forcing oil companies to establish mixed capital enterprises with government. But he denied plans to turn Venezuela into a Communist country.

allegedly an example of how Fidel Castro is ruling the country. One observer (Gall, 2006a:2) even pointed out the use of the term “Cubazuela” – also coined by the opposition – to illustrate synergies between the two nations.

Leaving aside the anecdotal part of the Chávez-Castro relations – reinforced by both leaders when Castro participates live by phone on Chávez’s Sunday morning show, for example – this dissertation will assess Cuban-Venezuelan relations in order to provide an initial look on how the new dynamics affect (and indeed reverse) previous foreign policies, with corresponding domestic effects.

Here, the term ‘initial’ is crucial. As much as Cuban-Venezuelan relations have been shallowly portrayed as merely ideological and based on Chávez’s personal admiration for Castro, the truth is that they are multisided and intense. Their effects can be observed at all levels: internationally, in the emergence of a new axis of countries, notably Cuba-Venezuela-Bolivia, the seeds of a possible new arrangement around the so-called ALBA (Spanish acronym for Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas), and the incipient comeback of Cuba to global arenas (the best example would be recent statements by Fidel Castro on global plans to produce more ethanol)⁴; domestically, in a stronger political support for Chávez in Venezuela, and in the economic revival of Cuba.

4 A good example is Castro’s article on Granma, 28/03/2007, “Condenados a Muerte Prematura por Hambre y Sed Más De 3 mil millones de Personas en el Mundo”.
<http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/2007/esp/f280307e.html>

Literature on Cuban-Venezuelan relations is scarce, and writings engaging both domestic and international aspects of them are virtually inexistent. Yet no political observer would deny the importance, for Chávez's domestic support, of about 20,000 Cuban doctors working in social programmes fostered by his government. Nor would anyone underestimate the value of Cuban technical help in Venezuela's educational programmes, which have taught basic reading to 1.5 million Venezuelan adults enrolled in *misión Robinson* between July 2003 and April 2006, therefore contributing to Venezuela becoming a country 'free of illiteracy', according to Unesco criteria⁵.

Sceptics about the Venezuelan figures may doubt their validity, but not their power within the context of political discourses. During the Presidential campaign in 2006, the *misiones* were widely pointed out as the main explanation for Chávez re-election with 62.84% of the votes.

A closer look would pinpoint that not only the *misiones*, but also other initiatives said to be Cuban-inspired, such as the Bolivarian Circles, were created by Chávez following his re-enactment as President, after the failed coup d'État that drove him out of power for less than 48 hours in April 2002. Significantly, Bolivarians in Venezuela are proud to say that their revolution "really started in April 2003", when *Misión Barrio Adentro* was launched with Cuban help⁶. As Chávez regained power, evidence shows that initiatives in partnership with Cuba allowed him to consolidate hegemony over political adversaries.

5 Data for this paragraph is widely available in official papers. All can be found in a speech by Cuban Minister Marta Lomas <http://www.granma.cu/espanol/2006/abril/domin30/ungenuino.html>

6 Data extracted in phone conversation with Caracas-based journalist Claudia Jardim.

On the other hand, the fact that the 2000 agreement between Cuba and Venezuela only started to be fully implemented after 2003 suggests that the deep integration schemes witnessed nowadays were only possible because of Chávez's consolidation of power, as opposition to projects weakened.

In order to explore the links between domestic and foreign policies, this paper will use as main tool of analysis the two-level game approach developed by Robert Putnam (1988), which regards international negotiations as two-level games played by negotiators simultaneously at the international (level 1) and domestic (level 2) arenas. Each level has what Putnam calls a "win-set" – a set of all possible agreements – and the puzzle for leaders is to find an intersection between "win-sets" so that deals reached at a certain level do not turn to be unpopular at the other level.

The scheme, simple in principle, can become quite complex when other factors are added, such as leaders' own "win-set" (in this case, Castro's or Chávez's own preferences for a deal), the role of third nations with stakes in the negotiations, and even "side payments to injured constituents" when there is no domestic consensus (LeoGrande, 1998:68).

Perhaps because both Chávez and Castro have long expressed their will to reach agreements – and therefore "leaders' win-set" at international level is assumed as automatic – few observers have noticed the hurdles blocking Cuban-Venezuelan initiatives. Those, as this dissertation expects to demonstrate, were at level 2 (domestic),

where Chávez faced fierce opposition until 2003 (the same cannot be said about Cuba, where Castro has long consolidated his power). It seemed that Chávez had to overcome domestic opposition before he could move on and strike the number of deals that characterise Cuban-Venezuelan relations nowadays. Once he accomplished that, deals with Cuba are helping him consolidate power over political opposition.

This author hopes to illustrate the process described above by analysing more closely the educational and health *misiones* fostered by President Chávez in Venezuela with Cuban help. The choice for narrowing the analysis owes to the fact that such programmes offer at least a minimum of objective data to scholars. This author is not interested in discussing whether or not Chávez is ‘cubanising’ Venezuela – whatever it means – although inferences can be made from this paper. Initiatives whose analysis would have to rely on subjectivity– such as the Bolivarian Circles – were left out.

It should be noted that the domestic effects of partnerships at the international level are much less predictable in the Venezuelan than in the Cuban case, since Chávez faces stronger domestic opposition than Castro, whose power has been consolidated long ago. A separate chapter will offer a hint of the benefits reaped by Castro’s regime – but, as will be noticed, benefits reaped at international level seem to be just as important as those reaped at domestic level.

From Antagonism to Cooperation

President Betancourt is prisoner to a regime that calls itself democratic. This regime, that could have been an example for Latin America, committed nonetheless the blunder of not using the *pardón* when time required. And now the democratic government of Venezuela to prisoner of the same economic interests familiar to Venezuela until recently, also familiar to Cuba and to the majority of Latin America.

(Che Guevara criticizing Venezuelan President Rómulo Betancourt for moving towards the US, during a speech at the Youths Congress, Havana, July 28th 1960)⁷

Putnam's two-level game approach is particularly suitable for analysing Cuban-Venezuelan relations because they have been to some extent 'domesticised' since the Cuban Revolution. Especially in the 1960s, Cuban-inspired guerrilla movements supported by Havana and active in Venezuelan countryside meant that Caracas had to define its policy towards the neighbour with an eye on the domestic balance of power – a situation that repeated itself in late 1970's and early 1980's. The fact that diplomatic ties were suspended throughout the 1960's and reached a low point in the 1980's does not mean absence of relations, but rather the existence of conflictive ones.

Research conducted by Romero (1983, 2001 and 2006) shows that the degree of mutual animosity between the two countries shifted up and down between 1959 and 1999.

⁷ <http://www.chequevara.com.ar/chequevara-article-164-thread-0-0.html>

Also using the metaphor of games, Romero (1983) describes relations between countries as of *cooperation* (“when there is no conflict of interests between the two unities”), of *conflict* (and here there are differences between relations of *existential conflict*, “in which unities try to eliminate, destruct themselves and their relations”, and of *agonal conflict*, “in which there is competition regulated by norms accepted by both, and both parts are interested in participating in a game”), or *mixed* (“in which both unities mix cooperation and conflict in order to achieve their interests; both want cooperative relations, but interests are not common”) (Romero, 1983:187).

Using these categories, he defined Cuban-Venezuelan relations until 1984 as following:

CUBAN-VENEZUELAN RELATIONS IN TIME				
Relations type	Mixed (Game)	Existential conflict (Frontal struggle)	Mixed (Game)	Agonal conflict (Zero-sum game)
Period	1959-1960	1960-1973	1973-1979	1979-?

Source: Romero (2001:279)

In Romero (2006), new information allows us to update the classification. The period of agonal conflict could indeed stretch from 1979 to mid-1980, after which, in the dusk of the Cold War, Venezuela and Cuba started normalizing ties. But relations would remain mixed until 1998, year of Chávez’s election and a turning point from which the two neighbours would engage for the first time in a “cooperative” or “constant sum” game.

A simultaneous analysis using the tools described by Putnam and Romero would prove to be very interesting, with turning points overlapping in both cases and indicating, in practice, that every time domestic concerns influenced bilateral issues involving Cuba and Venezuela, relations between neighbours deteriorated.

Domestic politics in both countries were intertwined even before the Cuban revolution, due to exchanges of ‘revolutionary experience’ between leftist movements in the island and the continent. Venezuelan leftists who overthrew Dictator Pérez Jiménez in 23 January 1958 – many of whom had been exiled in Havana – were so important during the revolutionary campaign against Fulgencio Batista one year later that Fidel Castro went personally to Caracas to express his gratitude only 22 days after victory (Portillo, 1981:35). In the early days of the Cuban revolution, when Havana still swung between moderation and radicalism⁸, the two neighbours shared the same desire for “stabilizing democratic governments in the Caribbean originated from civic-military action against personalistic and corrupt dictatorships” (Romero, 2001:278). The first democratic government in Venezuela even assumed consular duties on behalf of Cuba in countries with troubled relations with the Cuban regime (Portillo, 1981:35).

Yet Cuban and Venezuelan leaders would make opposite choices for their societies and set the two countries on a route to collision by late 1959. In Havana, Castro gradually moved towards a radical position that “urged far-reaching reforms that could only be implemented by revolutionary dictatorship” (Miller, 1989:61), thus isolating moderates.

⁸ See Miller, 1989

It has been argued that such move was undertaken at Moscow's instigation, but Miller suggests that domestic factors weighed more than international alignment. Castro's left turn, she argues, could have been the result of his own perceptions that even moderate changes – such as a “mild” agrarian reform – would not be tolerated by the Cuban elite and some members of his cabinet. The “domestic response”, says Miller, “may well have served to endorse Castro's conclusion that the social change which he wanted the revolution to effect in Cuba was incompatible with extremely powerful domestic and foreign interests” (Miller, 1989:66).

Similarly, President Betancourt's growing criticism of political executions in Cuba was not detached from domestic arrangements in Venezuela. In October 1958 he had co-signed on behalf of his party, *Acción Democrática*, together with leaders of two other centre/centre-right parties, *Copei* and *URD*, the Pact of *Puntofijo*, which set the rules for the following 40 years of Venezuelan politics⁹. Although the pact brought stability to the newly installed regime, it also excluded from the new institutional framework – not to mention from government itself – those Leftists regarded by the three mainstream parties as potentially ‘radical’. Many, like the Communists gathered around the *PCV*, were important in overthrowing Pérez Jiménez, and saw the fall of the dictator as a prelude for a revolutionary regime that would have preceded the Cuban. Betancourt ruled out this possibility by addressing the nation during his inaugural speech: “The philosophy of Communism is not compatible with development in Venezuela” (Uchoa, 2003:110).

⁹ See Gott (2005), Morón (1994), Uchoa (2003).

Accordingly, Betancourt's policies with regards to the island echoed domestic arrangements. Venezuela adopted the so-called "Betancourt Doctrine", under which it would not recognize Latin American governments born by force, a stance that made the US hail Caracas as a 'model for the continent' (Portillo, 2001:50). On the opposite side, Havana, now fully aligned with the Soviet Union, would mount political attacks on the governments of the Pact of Puntofijo, accusing them of serving US interests in the Caribbean¹⁰. More importantly, Havana financed guerrilla groups to overthrow the new Puntofijista regime, and in 1962 praised the newly created Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionario (MIR), a party born from the PCV to join the armed struggle (Romero, 2001:277; Portillo, 1981: 72). Throughout the decade, as military insurrections and guerrilla attacks shocked Venezuela, official relations with Cuba could not ignore the domestic results of its direct intervention in Venezuelan politics.

The two countries broke diplomatic ties in November 1961, Caracas becoming one of the strongest political enemies of Havana. Evidence presented by the Venezuelan government indicating official Cuban support to insurrectional movements within Venezuela added to the decision of expelling Cuba from the Organization of American States (OAS) in January 1962 and establishing economic sanctions against the island in July 1964 (Romero, 2001:277). For the rest of the decade, relations remained frozen, with Castro having stripped any power from moderates in Cuba and governments in Venezuela fearing radicalism and refusing to make concessions to radicals. By narrowing

¹⁰ As shown by the epigraph in this chapter.

domestic and international win-sets, both countries made impossible any intersection between them.

International and regional *détente*

The 1970's saw important changes both at the international and domestic levels. For Cuban-Venezuelan relations, the change from a 'hawkish' to a 'dovish' atmosphere (Putnam, 1993) in the international realm allowed Cuba to revise its policy of inciting revolutions in Latin America – a strategy that was already being deemed as failed by then. The death of Che Guevara in Bolivia in 1967 and the decline of armed struggle in Venezuela created incentives for the countries to thaw relations.

Both the communist and capitalist blocs were accommodating themselves to the new context of *détente*, an ease of tensions between the two Cold War superpowers. A less hostile international environment was being championed in the USSR by Leonid Brejnev, who took power in 1964 and vowed to halt the onerous arms race that eroded the Union's resources; in the US, President Richard Nixon and State Secretary Henry Kissinger expressed their will to co-exist with Communism¹¹. Kissinger publicly praised the rethinking of the "perpetual antagonism with Cuba" (Dominguez, 1989:227).

In Havana, what had been perceived as a less threatening US posture created further incentives for broadening international win-sets, allowing some space for moderation. The regime began accepting the possibility of different "forms of social struggle" as well

¹¹ LeoGrande, 1998; Romero, 2001; Portillo, 1982

as alternative ways to achieve power, such as the Chilean electoral way and the Peruvian military socialism (Romero, 2001:303). Not only Cuban-Venezuelan relations, but the island's relations in the hemisphere as a whole benefited from this new approach to foreign policy adopted by Havana. In 1975, collective inter-American sanctions towards the regime were lifted with U.S. support (Dominguez, 1989:227).

The importance of this 'dovish' international context in shaping Cuban-Venezuelan relations from 1973 onwards is illustrated by the fact that a man considered a 'hawk' – Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez, who had taken part in Betancourt's government – was responsible for orchestrating the convergence in Caracas. But it is true that also domestically the atmosphere was turning 'dovish' in Venezuela. Pérez's predecessor, Rafael Caldera, had 'pacified the country' by forgiving political detainees and former guerrilla fighters who agreed to quit the armed struggle. Years later, the Venezuelan Foreign Minister at the time, Aristides Calvani, would argue that "an internal peace process" was conceived with "an equivalent in foreign policy" (Portillo, 1981:92). In substitution to the Betancourt Doctrine, Caldera implemented the thesis of Ideological Pluralism, which pragmatically opened the doors for the country to resume relations with Cuba and other neighbours ruled by authoritarian regimes.

Cuba and Venezuela restored relations in 1974 in spite of fierce opposition by anti-Castrist groups that pressured the Venezuelan government. Like the US, the South American nation had in the 1960's opened its doors for anti-Castro exiles fleeing Havana, and the Cuban-Venezuelan community had been for years staging propaganda against the

island's regime. Activities following the rapprochement boiled to a point where Venezuelan officials had to dismiss the possibility of a serious destabilization in 1975. Over the following years, the Venezuelan government would denounce terrorist attacks against officials abroad and even reveal a plan to blow out a military airplane parked in Miami (Romero, 2001:307).

The worst episode involving the two countries and domestic radicals was a bomb explosion on board a Cuban airplane flying over the Caribbean, between Trinidad and Tobago and Barbados, in 1976. As soon as the explosion – which killed 73 people – was identified as an act of terrorism, Caracas issued a statement condemning the episode and expressing solidarity towards the Cuban people. Luis Posada Carriles, said to be the mentor of the plot, was found guilty and jailed in Venezuela¹².

Even under stress, relations between Venezuela and Cuba were not affected until the end of Carlos Andrés Pérez's government, in 1979. In January that year, an official delegation from the Venezuelan government even attended the 20th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution.

A 'hiccup' in bilateral relations would be felt in early 1980's, as international and domestic factors overlapped again and led to deterioration in Cuban-Venezuela relations. Internationally, the period of *détente* was coming to an end, with Ronald Reagan having

12 Carriles is still a delicate point in Cuban and Venezuelan international relations. He escaped jail in 1985 and fled to the US, where he served his term in a Texas prison. Despite President George W. Bush's 'war on terror', Washington refused to extradite him to Havana or Caracas. Carriles was released in April 2007.

arrived at the Presidency of the US and tensions rising again between the two Cold War superpowers. In Latin America, Cuba was decided to strengthen its ties with the USSR and guerrilla movements popped up in many parts of South and Central America, well illustrated by the arrival in power of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua in 1979. In Venezuela, fears that regional tensions could fuel domestic revolution led to a shift in foreign policy under President Luis Herrera Campíns', who came to power that year. He adopted what Romero (2006) calls Diplomacy of Protection, openly competing with Cuba in order to curb Cuban influence in the hemisphere. Even if the two countries never severed ties, says Romero, both governments halted for many years the exchange of ambassadors.

Campíns' Diplomacy of Protection indeed deserves a mention as, under it, Venezuela not only took an antagonistic stance toward Cuba, it also applied leverage in regional institutions such as the Pacto Andino to foster policies that promoted its own values of democracy and political system¹³. In spite of that, Campíns maintained cooperation by respecting a 1976 agreement signed by Carlos Andrés Pérez during an official trip to the USSR, by which Venezuela supplied the island 20,000 barrels of oil per day.

After 2-3 years of active regional diplomacy in opposition to Cuba and to Marxist initiatives regarded as a threat to the Venezuelan model, Campíns's Diplomacy of Protection reached exhaustion, in Romero's words, "because direct intervention by Reagan's government in Central American and Caribbean affairs had shown the limits of Venezuelan presence in the region" (Romero, 2001:333).

¹³ See Romero (2001:309-352).

By the time Jaime Lusinchi was sworn in, in 1984, the “second wave” of revolutionary activity in Latin America had lost momentum. Relations slowly began to thaw and regained impetus when Carlos Andrés Pérez came to power again in 1989. Pérez and Castro met secretly and officials from both countries paid visits that reached stellar point in an official trip to Havana by the Venezuelan Foreign Minister, Armando Durán, in 1991. Fidel Castro visited Isla Margarita during the second government of Rafael Caldera, in 1998.

The Cold War was over, the socialist bloc no longer existed, and Cuba experienced difficult times which required a more pragmatic approach towards the new world economic order. From a Venezuelan point of view, the focus was not so much on curbing Cuba’s influence in the hemisphere, but working on an agenda of transition from the island’s closed Communist regime to one that favoured internal democracy. Both unities in the ‘game’ of bilateral relations wanted cooperation, but objectives were still not common.

Two Flags, One Revolution

This is an island of rebels, and therefore I feel very much at home here, at home with the rebels, and we shall continue to be rebels.

(Chávez speaking in Havana in December 1994 after meeting Fidel Castro, four years before his election)¹⁴

When President Hugo Chávez came to power, in 1999, Cuba and Venezuela engaged in a “win-win” relationship for the first time ever. Variables at international level remained the same as in previous post-Cold War years; therefore the shift must be explained by factors within the domestic realm.

The redefinition of Venezuelan foreign policy followed much deeper changes within Venezuelan society that Chávez both represented and championed. Like his predecessors, he had rejected Communism as a model for Venezuela¹⁵, but pledged to rescue Communist Cuba from its isolation on the grounds of his Bolivarian, pro-regional integration foreign policy¹⁶. Chávez’s new approach toward Cuba came indeed as no surprise to observers who had been watching his steps since he appeared in Venezuelan politics, through a failed coup d’État in 1992.

14 Prensa Latina News Agency, 15/12/1994

15 In 1998, months before his election, he told Venezuelan historian Agustín Muñoz: “We are convinced that Communism is not the ideology through which the future of Venezuela will be conducted” (Muñoz, 1998)

16 See Romero, 2006; Gott, ch.21; Uchoa, ch.16; Neil, 2006.

Chávez's first visit to Fidel took place as early as December 1994, only months after he received Presidential pardon for serving two years in jail in Yare. Castro welcomed Chávez in person, and escorted the Venezuelan guest to a series of events and to the airport, a gesture normally reserved to heads of states. In turn, Chávez criticised, in a press conference, Latin American leaders who had excluded Cuba from a summit taking place in Miami: "In excluding Cuba they are simply demonstrating that this is not a democratic summit, because they are excluding Cuban people and Cuban people are Latin American people, Bolivarian people", he said, also sketching what would become the principle of his foreign policy for the region. "The solution for the people of our America is in our Latin America, our own integration"¹⁷.

From 1994 to 2006, Chávez visited Cuba and met with Fidel Castro thirteen times, with Castro visiting Venezuela four times during Chávez's government, including for the official ceremony in which the Venezuelan leader was sworn in (Romero, 2006)¹⁸. As President, Chávez soon started to pursue the goal of breaking Cuba's isolation since the collapse of its alliance with the Communist bloc.

During this period, relations went from warm and friendly to strategic, starting with the first comprehensive Cuban-Venezuelan agreement in October 2000. In exchange for 53,000 barrels of oil per day at preferential prices, Cuba agreed to provide Venezuela services in areas ranging from tourism to agriculture. The agreement established ten

¹⁷ Reuters, 15/12/1994

¹⁸ Visits during Fidel's illness, between mid-2006 and mid-2007, were even more frequent.

working groups that would become 26 by 2006, developing cooperation on issues ranging from sports to energy. As an illustration, the 2007 joint commission annual meeting, a sort of executive branch created to oversee and manage the agreement, gathered 483 official participants in Havana in February, who approved 355 bilateral projects just for the following year, totalling US\$ 1.5 billion.¹⁹

For our purposes, a brief description of some of the projects envisaged by the agreement is helpful, as it sheds light on their impact on Cubans' and Venezuelans' day-to-day lives, also giving a hint of their domestic effects. The most notorious examples are in the areas of health and education.

Only one month after the signature of the agreement, the first flight carrying 46 patients and 45 escorts from Venezuela to consultations with Cuban doctors landed in Havana. Six years later, the *Programma de Atención a Pacientes Venezolanos en Cuba* had provided appointments for over 3,000 Venezuelans just for the year 2006, with some 14,500 receiving medical attention during the period, according to official data disclosed in 2007²⁰.

Cooperation under the agreement reached an advanced level in April 2003, when the first brigade of 58 Cuban doctors arrived in the municipality of Libertador, the biggest and main district of the five that make up the Great Caracas. They had key role in the so-called *Plan Barrio Adentro*, the seeds of what would become one of the most notorious

19 Available in *Granma*, 1/3/2007: <http://www.granma.cu/espanol/2007/marzo/juev1/declaracion.html>

20 Ibid.

misiones of Chávez's government. Between March and December, they assessed the deficiencies in the health care provided to poor communities, first in Libertador and then in the rest of the country, and tested the adaptation of Cuban doctors to life in Venezuela²¹.

Misión Barrio Adentro kicked off in December 2003 with the goal of providing basic medical services, free treatment, and health education to poor communities with little or no access to them. In 2006, Cuban minister Marta Lomas stated that 23,600 Cubans had taken part in the initiative²². An official description of the project explains that “from the beginning it relies on the action of Cuban doctors, whose altruistic and humanitarian support has been the key to ensure the fundamental right of access to health care. This valuable group of men and women who left their country to help us has developed multiple and important activities in the area of disease prevention, visiting every household, following up after every consultation, in permanent touch with the community”²³.

The programme embraces a participatory approach, with popular health committees providing information about the specific needs of each community. In the following years, around 1,600 clinics were set up throughout Venezuela²⁴, providing 236 million free consultations to 34 million families by March 2007²⁵. Venezuelan officials claim

21 <http://www.gobiernoenlinea.ve/docMgr/sharedfiles/MisionBarrioAdentro.pdf>

22 Granma, 30/4/2006, *ibid*.

23 <http://www.mpps.gob.ve/ms/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=266>

24 <http://www.mpps.gob.ve/ms/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=238>

25 Granma, 1/3/2007, *ibid*.

they have since 2003 reached the initial goal of building 8,500 new clinics in poor communities and bringing Venezuela's rate of doctors per head to 1/1200²⁶.

Cuban-Venezuelan partnerships also made possible *Misión Barrio Adentro II*, launched by Chávez in December 2005 in the state of Monagas. The project aims to set up 1,235 advanced diagnostic and rehabilitation centres to provide what the Venezuelan government calls a 'second and more advanced level' in health services provision²⁷. *Misión Barrio Adentro III* consists in the modernisation of public hospital across Venezuela. A fourth stage of the programme was announced in April 2007, with the aim of building new hospitals.

Also visible is the role played by Cuba in *Misión Milagro*, which provides free eye treatment for poor citizens. Consultations and surgeries initially part of *Misión Barrio Adentro* became a separate programme in July 2004, reaching the landmark of 300,000 eye interventions in its first year and a half²⁸. Medical procedures were initially performed in Venezuelan patients who travelled to Cuba, but in August 2005 the so-called *Compromiso Sandino* agreement expanded *Misión Milagro* so that patients in neighbouring countries such as Bolivia, Brazil, Nicaragua, and others in the Caribbean could also have access to surgeries in Cuba or Venezuela. Its current target is now to reach 6 million Latin American and Caribbean patients within a decade²⁹.

26 <http://www.mpps.gob.ve/ms/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=236>

27 Less than a third of all planned works had been concluded by mid-2007, according to official data.

28 Granma, 1/3/2007, *ibid*

29 <http://www.misionesbolivarianas.gob.ve>

In addition to providing health services, Cuban experts were teaching medicine to around 20,000 Venezuelan students by mid-2007, with other 2,400 being taught in different institutions in Cuba, according to the joint commission³⁰.

With Cuban help, Chávez claims his *misiones* have transformed the health system in Venezuela, bringing it closer to what he understands as ‘revolutionary’. Such aspect is highlighted in a government-sponsored account of the so-called Bolivarian Revolution by Bonilla-Molina and El Troudi, who argue that the initiatives “empower citizens” by providing services “directly to poor households” (Bonilla-Molina & Troudi, 2004:229).

Chávez considers these schemes as examples of “participatory democracy”³¹. For the government, establishing a direct link with the communities was needed in order to improve the system’s efficiency: “[Before the *misiones*], existing public institutions were dominated by bureaucratic schemes incompatible with the democratic opening promoted through protagonistic participation of communities in public matters”, argue Bonille-Molina and El Troud. “[The *misiones*] achieve levels of efficiency never seen in tackling educational and health problems (...) and put in evidence the ineffectiveness of the public apparatus designed and reinforced in the years of the representative democracy (Bonille-Molina & Troud, 2004:230).

30 Granma, 1/3/2007, *ibid*

31 Chávez was elected promising to turn the Venezuelan representative democratic system into a “participatory democracy”, in which citizens would have more say in deciding over matters that affect their lives. By reaching communities directly, *Barrio Adentro* and *Misión Milagro* are a good example of the model championed by Chávez, as well as the *Circuitos Bolivarianos*, through which communities address local demands. For more on participatory democracy and the Bolivarian Circles, see Uchoa (2003:214).

Chávez's critics accuse him of using the *misiones* to bypass potential political opposition within the bureaucracy of the health system itself, where doctors and health officials from high and middle classes of Venezuelan society – many openly anti-*chavistas* – do have some leverage and could block the President's initiatives. By placing “brothers in ideology” Cubans between himself and the people, Chávez avoided a fierce power struggle he would have had to endure otherwise.

'Yo sí puedo'

Cooperation between Cuba and Venezuela is also strong in the Bolivarian government's educational programmes – the *misiones* known as Robinson I and II, Ribas and Sucre. Cuban educators may not be massively involved in these initiatives as Cuban doctors are in the health *misiones*, but they do contribute with invaluable assistance in helping Venezuelans apply the teaching method *Yo sí puedo*, developed and applied in revolutionary Cuba and recognised by Unesco³². In addition to training and pedagogical assistance, Cuba has donated thousands of books, manuals and teaching material for the projects to be carried out in the neighbouring country.

Because the method is conceived to facilitate the learning process of adult illiterates and semi-illiterates, basic reading and writing can be taught in just a few months (seven

32 The method uses numbers and letters in order to teach basic reading and writing to adult illiterates and semi-illiterates. Students relate elements already known to them (the numbers) to elements still unknown (the letters), making the learning process easier and faster. Classes are divided in three stages (basic training, reading-writing and consolidation), with support of audiovisual material. For more information: <http://www.misionrobinson.gov.ve/>

weeks in the Venezuelan experience), and, as a result of its extensive application in Venezuela, the Bolivarian country was declared “territory free of illiteracy” by Unesco in October 2005, meaning its illiteracy rate was lower than 4% of the population. Three months before Venezuela was awarded the title by the UN body, Chávez used his Sunday radio and TV programme *Aló, Presidente* to thank Fidel Castro and the hundreds of Cuban educators who had helped Venezuela achieve the “miracle of schooling 1.436 million compatriots” since the method *Yo sí puedo* started being applied in *misión Robinson I*.³³

Robinson I was launched on 1 July 2003 with the ambition of eradicating illiteracy in the country. By then, Venezuela counted around 1.5 million illiterate citizens, and had been able to teach basic learning and reading to only 20,000 in the first two years of Chávez’s government, according to the President’s own account and his Education Minister, Aristóbulo Istúriz’s.³⁴ In his speech at the 1st World Congress of Educators, in Havana, February 2005, Istúriz said Venezuela’s poor literacy performance were “the result of the traditional concept contained in the regular budget, both from the economic and operational point of view, [as well as] delays in the administrative structures, their bureaucratic apparatus, and the absence of massive popular participation”.³⁵

As in the health sector, Venezuela took advantage of Cuban help to create a sort of parallel bureaucracy to the traditional education system, carrying on from a previous

33 *Aló, Presidente*, 3/7/2005 <http://www.mre.gov.ve/Noticias/Presidente-Chavez/A2005/alo-227.htm>

34 For Chávez: *Aló Presidente*, *ibid.* For Istúriz : speech in the First Congress of Educators, Havana, February 2005: http://www.frenteinternacional.yosipuedo.com.ar/congreso-mundial/discurso_vene.htm

35 Istúriz, *ibid.*

civic-military initiative that resulted in over 3,000 Bolivarian schools being built between 2000 and 2004 through Plan Bolívar – the deployment of Army soldiers to infra-structure projects such as roads and schools.³⁶

Cuban experts – 400 according to Cuban Minister Marta Lomas³⁷ – helped Venezuela speed up the process by enrolling thousands of citizens in literacy programmes, including the jail population and 70,000 indigenous people who were educated in their native languages. Besides sending human resources to work with the so-called Venezuelan facilitators (*facilitadores*: teachers, monitors), Cuba donated to Venezuela 1.9 million textbooks, 200,000 teaching manuals, 80,000 teaching video-tutorials, 80,000 TV sets, 80,000 VHS video players and 1 million videos, according to Minister Aristóbulo Istúriz. It also donated over 300,000 pairs of glasses and helped Venezuela set up eye centres to provide ophthalmologic assessment to beneficiaries of the programme so they could follow classes.

After completing *misión* Robinson I, students have the option to go on to *misión* Robinson II, Ribas and Sucre, and finish their studies up to university level. Minister Istúriz acknowledged: “This [the achievements through educational *misiones*] would not be possible without Cuban people. Never. It would never be possible if we didn’t have in

36 Plan Bolívar 2000 was launched by Chávez in 1999 following a tragedy caused by heavy rains in the northern state of Vargas. Official numbers at the time counted 70,000 military troops working alongside 80,000 civilians in projects worth US\$ 950 million. See Uchoa (2003:190).

37 Available in Granma, 1/3/2007: <http://www.granma.cu/espanol/2007/marzo/juev1/declaracion.html>

America someone like Fidel Castro. And of course, if we didn't have in Venezuela someone like Hugo Chávez Frias".³⁸

Istúriz's words echo Chávez's own aspiration to foster what he calls "one revolution under two flags". Under the partnerships articulated at international level, Cubans and Venezuelans have grown increasingly present in each other's day-to-day lives. The health and educational *misiones* are just some – but perhaps the most illustrative – of the mechanisms through which that happened. They represent the social – in opposite to liberal, market-driven – alliance both leaders want to bridge in the continent. Ultimately, such initiatives will constitute the core of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), which so far also includes Bolivia and Nicaragua.

ALBA will be a topic for the final chapter. Before that, it is important to further understand how the seeds of Cuban-Venezuelan joint projects intertwine international and domestic politics.

38 Istúriz, *ibid.*

The Two-Level Game

I call on every man and woman of the revolution, anywhere they are, to deliver a battle against the cancer that the *puntofijista* model injected in this country.
(Chávez announcing more resources to social *misiones*, in April 2005)³⁹

August 15th 2004 was an important day for Chávez's consolidation of power in Venezuela, and thus for the strengthening of Cuban-Venezuelan relations. According to official figures from the National Electoral Council (CNE in Spanish), on that date almost 5 million Venezuelans voted for the President to remain in power, largely outnumbering the 3.6 million who backed the interruption of his mandate in a mid-term referendum included in the 1999 Constitution as a means to assess the government's performance.

When Chávez appeared in a red shirt and tennis shoes to celebrate his victory with 58% of the votes and speak to the crowd from the Balcony of the People, in Palácio Miraflores, the headquarters of the central Government, observers sensed that he was about to end a deep political crisis and take a step further into what he branded a “revolutionary” project for Venezuela.⁴⁰ In this new phase, initiatives such as the *misiones*, perceived as capable of generating deep social changes, were to perform a

39 http://www.mci.gov.ve/noticias-nacionales/1/3077/Presidente_chez_llama.html

40 Working as free-lance journalist during the referendum, and having been to Venezuela in 2000 and 2002 in academic research, this author was privileged to witness the events narrated in this section.

central role. The question was: why only then, four years after the Cuban-Venezuelan bilateral agreement that provided the scope for cooperation?

An answer suggests a link between those initiatives and the domestic context that had prevented Chávez from pursuing them before 2003/2004; in particular, the strong opposition he had to face since the early days of his government. In spite of that, Chávez managed to win a series of popular referenda to approve a new Constitution and promote institutional changes in all branches of power. He was re-elected in August 2000 with 59% of the votes, two months before he signed the bilateral agreement with Cuba⁴¹.

As the first shipments of oil were sent to Havana, opposition leaders and the media attacked the “controversial” deal with the Communist regime. Two years after the agreement began to be implemented, one of the main Venezuelan newspapers, *El Nacional*, denounced that “Venezuela protected the interests of Cuba” because the island was failing to pay for part of the oil received⁴². Another newspaper, *El Universal*, criticised the agreement under which Venezuela supplied 53,000 bpd of oil to Cuba whereas other Central American nations that benefited from energy agreements with Venezuela only received 7,400 bpd. The *Universal* claimed that Venezuela had by then supplied Cuba the equivalent of U\$ 127.7 million in oil at preferential prices⁴³. On the same day the newspaper reported on a judicial procedure initiated by one of Venezuela’s lawyers associations against the shipments, on the grounds that “the modern world can

41 For analyses, see Ellner & Hellinger (2003), all works by Julia Buxton, Gott (2005) and Uchoa (2003).

42 *El Nacional*, 27/7/2002.

43 *El Universal*, 29/7/2002

only accept legitimate methods of payment and adequate entities of trade; therefore Venezuela cannot ship oil to Cuba and receive people in change, which is similar to what medieval ages knew as slavery”⁴⁴.

Opposition to the Cuban-Venezuelan bilateral agreement was only part of the whole picture. Analysing the Venezuelan political situation since Chávez’s victory, Julia Buxton observed in fact that the country had been undergoing intense “political turmoil and violence between pro- and anti- government groups” (Buxton, 2005:328)⁴⁵. In the worst episode of institutional wreckage, Chávez was removed from power for about 48 hours in April 2002 by a group of top Armed Forces commanders with the support of dissatisfied businessmen, media groups and labour unions rooted in the regime of the Pact of Puntofijo⁴⁶. The businessman who took power for the brief period, Pedro Carmona, reversed important changes made during Chávez’s first years in power: he annulled the 1999 Constitution and dissolved the National Assembly. Carmona also halted oil shipments to Cuba.

Illustrative of that period, episodes of violence in the Cuban Embassy in Caracas provide an excellent picture of how issues concerning Cuba spark violent reaction in Venezuela, to the point where it is difficult to separate the international and domestic realms of the bilateral relation. In the morning after the April 2002 coup d’État, tens of demonstrators

44 El Universal, *ibid*.

45 In her analysis, Buxton (2005) seeks historical reasons for the crisis, challenging common views – widespread in the media, for example – according to which violence began with Chávez’s government.

46 Few works have provided a full account of the coup. A documentary called *The Revolution Will not be Televised* provides an insider’s perspective of the events, as well as, in Portuguese, Uchoa (2003), based on statements given to the Truth Commission set up later in 2002.

besieged the diplomatic building shouting “Cubans, out!” and accusing them of hiding important leaders of the Chávez’s government⁴⁷. They destroyed diplomatic vehicles parked outside the Embassy, cut energy and water supplies to the building, and threatened Cuban diplomatic personnel with hostile gestures and words. The violence was controlled only after local authorities were allowed to “search” the property, under protests by the Cuban Ambassador, who argued that the act was against international laws of sovereignty.

Chávez returned to power but had still a long way to go in battling opposition. His approval had fallen from around 70% when he was re-elected in 2000 to around 35% two years later, according to figures trumpeted by the local media at the time. Newspapers and TV programmes happily opened their microphones to voices in the opposition, as one interview published by *El Nacional* in July 2002 exemplifies. It headlined a quote from one of Chávez’s foes, Assembly member Andrés Velásquez: “We shall halt the country until Chávez is out”. In smaller lines, the *Nacional* ‘informed’: “Andrés Velásquez assures that the government is out by December”.⁴⁸

Opposition was indeed preparing another heavy attack on the government. It came in December 2002, when a private sector lockout was staged and lasted for around 60 days, the longest in the country’s troubled history. Private companies in all sector stopped activities, but most of all, the opposition managed to halt part of state oil giant PDVSA’s

47 For a full account, see Uchoa (2003:57-59). Following the violent episodes, Cuban-Venezuelan organizations also published a brochure denouncing the attacks on the Cuban Embassy: *Cuba Bajo el Asedio del Fascismo en Caracas*. Coordinadora Bolivariana de Solidaridad et al.

48 *El Nacional*, 29/7/2002.

operation. Oil production was cut from 3.5 million bpd to around 300,000 bpd and shipments to Cuba, shortly resumed in the end of July, were again interrupted. TV footages at the time showed long queues in petrol stations and supermarkets, and the country witnessed a shortage of food as it never had⁴⁹. The Venezuelan Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would plunge by 10% in the last quarter of 2002 and the national currency, the bolivar, would devalue from 750 per dollar to 1,500 per dollar, according to the Central Bank (Uchoa, 2003:280-283).

The end of the lockout was only possible after the newly elected President in Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, asked outgoing President Fernando Henrique Cardoso to ship an oil cargo to Venezuela. With Venezuela's economy saved from starvation, Brazil organised and led the Group of Friends of Venezuela, which also included Chile, Mexico, the US, Spain and Portugal. The group sit down separately with the opposition and the government, and provided a scarce dialogue that paved the way for an electoral solution – the 2004 referendum (Uchoa, 2003:280-284).

From crisis to hegemony

Between early 2003 and the 2004 referendum Chávez took a series of steps in an attempt to rebuild power and regain popular support in Venezuela. In his strategy, as an analyst

⁴⁹ A personal story is illustrative of those times. In January 2003, I called a friend in Caracas for his birthday. In a quote I reproduced in an article for Brazilian newspaper *Valor* in 17/1/2003, he told me: "People came to the party, but they are tired and unhappy. We thought of organizing a lunch with plenty of food and beer, but even the ingredients are missing in the supermarket. The lockout ruined Christmas and New Year's for all Venezuelans".

put it, the *misiones* were crucial for Chávez to “reconnect” with the people, helping him consolidate power; on the other hand, by consolidating power, Chávez curbed opposition to the *misiones*, in a mutual sum-sum two-level game. It is interesting to observe how the projects articulated at international level affected and were affected by fundamentally domestic processes.

Other pillars in his strategy to regain power bore essentially domestic character. Firstly, Chávez took advantage of a vacuum of power left by an opposition discredited after a year of pointless confrontation during which the country experienced the ups and downs of a coup d’État and a lockout that ended up ruining the economy⁵⁰. Secondly, the President was quick to restore his own authority within the Armed Forces, by promoting loyalist officials and retiring the ‘rebels’ in July 2002.⁵¹ A third “battle” was fought in PDVSA, regarded by Chávez as a “state within the state”, and a hotbed for powerful anti-government executives. By restructuring the company, the government regained control of it and “handed it back to the people”.⁵² Finally, an international factor – an upsurge in oil prices after a period of record lows – gave the administration more cash, thereby allowing Chávez to invest comfortably in social programmes. Figures from OPEC, the oil

50 By mid-2003, virtually every analyst on Venezuela would identify a loss of credibility among the opposition. At least twice – following the April 2002 coup d’État and the 2002/2003 lockout – this seems to have triggered a process of ‘internal cleansing’ in the opposition to remove its most radical elements. Unfortunately, this general impression of mine has not been fully developed in the literature, and remains a fascinating, if unexplored, topic for scholars.

51 On Chávez’s consolidation of power within the Armed Forces, see Quinto Día, 27/9/2002 and 5/7/2002, El Universal, 02/07/2002 and 06/07/2002, and el Nacional, 27/07/2002. In October, 14 military officers who took part in the April coup d’État staged a demonstration in Plaza Altamira, Caracas, urging civil disobedience against the government. With no result, the protest ended a few weeks later. See El Nacional, 24/10/2002; CNN en Español, 22/10/2002; Reuters, 22/10/2002; El Universal, 22/10/2002.

52 Parenti (2006) presents an excellent summary of the “battle for PDVSA”.

exporter cartel, show that in January 2002 the Venezuelan oil basket was worth US\$ 15.37. As prices recovered internationally, the average Venezuelan basket finished the year at US\$ 22.61, mounting to US\$ 26.97 in the following year and reaching US\$ 33.66 in 2004.⁵³

While all those factors tell us about the means through which Chávez managed to consolidate power, they say little about his strategies to “reconnect” with the people. Here the importance of the Cuban-Venezuelan *misiones* should not be underestimated. Figures from consultancy Datanálisis, one of the main institutes of political analysis in Caracas, demonstrate that between 2003 and 2006 Chávez’s levels of approval increased together with the levels of approval for his *misiones*.

In March 2004, for example, Datanálisis’ *Encuesta Nacional OMNIBUS* showed that 52% of the Venezuelans favoured *Misión Barrio Adentro*, while 27% were against it. In a country where poverty affects over 80% of the population, one point worth noting is how results varied according to social strata. Datanálisis discovered that the lower classes were the most enthusiastic about the programme: 62% of Venezuelans in class E and 51% of those in class D were in favour of the programme. On the opposite end, 56% of those in the upper classes (A/B) were against it (Datanalisis, 2004).

Results for educational initiatives repeated the pattern of sharp division. *Misión Robinson* was approved by 57% of Venezuelans, and rejected by 25% of them. Some 67% of

53 OPEC, 2004.

Venezuelans in class E and 56% of those in class D were in favour of the initiative whereas 56% of those in class A/B were against it (Datanalisis, 2004).

Misión Ribas, which allows students to finish high school, had a 55% approval rate and 26% disapproval rate. Approval reached 66% in class E and 55% in class D, whereas 64% of class A/B Venezuelans disapproved it (Datanalisis, 2004).

Misión Sucre, through which students finish undergraduate studies, had a 54% approval and 27% disapproval. Around 65% of Venezuelans in class E and 54% in class D approved the programme, whereas 61% of respondents from class A/B disapproved it (Datanalisis, 2004).

“Chávez connects himself emotionally with the people through the *misiones*”, summarised Luis Vicente León, director of Datanálisis in July 2005⁵⁴. Evidence suggests that he is right: in August 2004, when 30% of Venezuelans benefited from at least one of Chávez’s programmes, the President’s own rate of government approval was around 48%, technically the same as his disapproval. In May 2006, when the *misiones* reached virtually half of the Venezuelan population (48%), Chávez’s approval peaked to impressive 75% (against only 20% of disapproval). (Datanalisis, 2006a).

If we are to give credit to analysts and assume a link between the success of the *misiones* and Chávez’s rising levels of popular support, the next question would be: to what extent

54 Aporrea.org, 28/07/2005.

do the whole of the *misiones* owe their success to the Cuban-Venezuelan partnership? After all, Chávez's administration had by mid-2007 over 20 programmes. The answer is: a lot. At any given point, the Cuban-supported health and education *misiones* combined serve over half of Venezuelans who benefit from any *misión*, even if *Misión Mercal* (popular markets in which food is sold at discount prices) is still the single programme to reach more people, between 35% and 40% of the Venezuelans who benefit from *misiones* (Datanalysis, 2006a).

'Cheap gifts'?

More than stressing Cuba's importance as reference for Chávez's social programmes, such findings challenge the assumption (echoed in Corrales, 2006) that the Cuban-Venezuelan agreement simply provides 'cheap gifts' to Cuba. As this chapter has tried to show, this line of analysis risks overlooking the importance of Cuba's role in 'giving a hand' to Chávez in a crucial moment when he needed help in regaining popular support after years of intense political turmoil. Instead, it can be argued that the partnerships with Cuba were immensely valuable to Chávez not only as a way to foster his 'revolutionary' model, but also to bolster his own political position as the leader of such revolution. Presenting an official account of the facts, Bonilla-Molina and El Troudi say that, after Chávez's victory in the 2004 referendum, his supporters came up with slogans such as "The revolution is here to stay" (Bonilla-Molina and El Troudi, 204:291).

Barely two and a half months after Chávez's victory in the referendum, Venezuelans went to the ballot boxes again and voted in regional elections that gave the President's

allies victory in 20 out of 22 provinces in the country. “We are here to put bags of hot water on the cancer of the Old Republic. We did not come here to make concessions to the oligarchy. We came here to carry out an authentic revolution”, he said at the peak of his popularity, only ten days before polls opened⁵⁵.

In December 2004 he would reward the partnership with Cuba by extending and even broadening the bilateral agreement. From there on, analysts estimate that Venezuela has been shipping to Cuba some 90,000 bpd of oil in exchange for services in a wider array of fields, including technical help in *misiones* like *Barrio Adentro* II and III.

More significantly, on the 10th anniversary of their first meeting (in Havana in 1994), Chávez and Castro signed a new agreement which claimed in its 2nd article that “the Bolivarian process has been consolidated after the decisive victory in the referendum of 15 August 2004 and the regional elections of 31 October 2004”. The agreement officially created the Bolivarian Alternative to the Americas (ALBA), a springboard for Cuban-Venezuelan initiatives to reach other countries of the region. It seems that, having achieved his objective in the domestic realm, Chávez was taking the game back to international level.

55 Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias. http://www.minci.gov.ve/pagina/28/6932/resultados_de_elecciones.html.

The 'Bolivarian Matrix'

Do not doubt, Mr. Bush: I guarantee that you will never have Cuba!

(Fidel Castro criticises US President George W. Bush in the article *No Tendrán Jamás a Cuba*, Granma, 17/07/2007)⁵⁶

Domestic and international effects of the Cuban-Venezuelan partnerships can also be seen in Cuba. But here a two-level game approach may not reveal as much as it does in the Venezuelan case, simply because Fidel Castro is not engrossed in the same fierce power struggle with domestic opposition that Chávez is. In Cuba, because Castro consolidated his power decades ago, an important part of the effects of the Cuban foreign policy towards Venezuela is found at international level.

What assessment of the Cuban-Venezuelan projects can be made on the Cuban side? The economy is likely to offer the best clues to an answer. As early as the bilateral agreements started to yield fruits, Venezuela quickly became Cuba's most important economic partner, with petrodollars from Caracas irrigating the neighbour's economy. Between 2001 and 2006, according to official data, Venezuela increased its share in the Cuban trade with the world from around 15% to over 20%. Goods exchange went from

⁵⁶ <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/>

US\$ 973 million to US\$ 2.5 billion in the same period – totally, Cuba traded US\$ 12.2 billion with other countries in 2006.⁵⁷

Such an economic boost would not go unnoticed in the Cuban economy, and even if we are to challenge the official estimates that predict GDP growth of 11.8% for 2005 and 12.5% for 2006 – these double-digit figures are officially the highest since Castro took power in 1959 – conservative metrics used by *The Economist* magazine would still put growth at a healthy 5.2% for 2005 and 4.5% for the following year (Ritter, 2006:7).⁵⁸

Economic benefits originated from relations with Venezuela are particularly helpful to Cuba because of the privileged conditions Caracas grants Havana. The Cuban-Venezuelan agreement allows the island's government to pay for 25% of shipments over 15 years at interest rates of 2% with a two-year grace period.⁵⁹ Additionally, part of the debt can be paid with social services, such as those provided by Cubans in the Venezuelan *misiones*.

Adopting a practice also observed in Cuban-USSR relations during the Soviet era, Venezuela sends Cuba more oil than it actually needs, so that the island can make profits reselling the commodity in international markets – and at international prices. Adding to

⁵⁷ <http://www.one.cu/>

⁵⁸ In a research funded by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), one of the most respected scholars on Cuban studies, Mesa-Lago, criticized the “manipulation” of statistics by Cuban officials, who add the value of social services to GDP in order to artificially inflate it. He wrote that officials were willing to “show that declining rates in 1999–2002 have been reversed and the new Cuban centralization policies are generating an economic recovery instead of stagnation or decline.” (Mesa-Lago, 2005:3).

⁵⁹ *El Mundo*, 9/10/2000; Corrales, 2006

some 80,000 bpd of oil produced in Cuba, the 90,000 bpd of oil shipped from Venezuela greatly outnumber the domestic need of 120,000-150,000 bpd. Quoted in Corrales (2006), oil expert Gustavo Coronel calculates that “because payment terms are so favourable to Cuba, Venezuela is providing Cuba approximately 20,000 to 26,000 bpd of free oil, amounting to a ‘gift’ of US\$ 6 billion to US\$ 8 billion over the next 15 years” (Corrales 2006:24). This figure is about the same handled by Mesa Lago, who estimates that in the five years between 2000 and 2005 – the first years of the Cuban-Venezuelan agreement – Havana received around US\$ 2.6 billion in oil and proceeds from oil re-exports (Mesa-Lago, 2005:8).

In addition to that, PDVSA and Cuban oil company, Cupet, agreed in 2006 to jointly invest in the refurbishing of a refinery in Cienfuegos, Cuba, left idle since the demise of the Communist bloc. Officials have spoken of investments to reach between US\$ 800 million and US\$1 billion.⁶⁰

Scholars debate whether the Venezuelan aid has reached the same level as that provided by the USSR in the 1980’s. For Mesa Lago (2005:10), counting all oil-related initiatives, Caracas is “rapidly approaching” it. For Corrales, Cuba is actually “making more money” this time: “In 1989, the USSR sent Cuba approximately 260,000 bpd, of which Cuba used 200,000 bpd, and then resold the 60,000 bpd surplus. At US\$ 22.05 per barrel (the average world price for oil in 1989), Cuba was probably generating revenues of US\$ 1.3 million per day from the resale of unused Soviet oil. If today Cuba is reselling 40,000 bpd

60 FOCAL, 2006; BBC Mundo, 11/04/2006

of Venezuelan oil at the 2005 average price of US\$ 58.16, its revenue is near US\$ 2.3 million per day, almost twice what it made during the Soviet era.” (2006:26).

“We are giving the Cuban government more than 100,000 barrels of oil a day so Castro can maintain his tyranny”, criticised in August 2006 Manuel Rosales, Chávez’s adversary in that year’s election.⁶¹ Even if numerical data is not available to clearly establish a causal relation between partnerships at international level and political benefits at domestic level, it is reasonable to assume that Castro is reaping the rewards. Economic recovery has allowed the government to more than double wages in the last three years, increase subsidized monthly allotments of staples such as rice, eggs, and cooking oil – and, for the first time, chocolate – to citizens, and build or remodel 430,000 housing units in the year finishing on 30/09/2006.⁶²

Controversial as the Cuban figures may be, the discussion over their validity may still not change their power as political discourse. In a society surrounded by propaganda, the official line has been that of stressing the positive effects of the partnerships, presenting them as the utter example of the ‘humanitarian’ feature of the Revolution’s foreign policy. On the other hand, observers on trips to Cuba witness how another ‘revolutionary leader’, the Bolivarian Chávez, has become part of locals’ day-to-day lives. A journalist travelling to Havana noticed that Chávez is the “new face” in the city’s walls and outdoors: his quotes against US-led integration initiatives and in favour of ALBA are “in the walls of schools, depots, shops, markets”. Among the books sold in bookshops are his

61 The Globe and Mail, 31/10/2006

62 Ibid.

biography, texts about his country, writings by Simón Bolívar and Che Guevara”. According to her, “Chávez is considered the heir of the Commander (Castro). Cubans like him, and even wear clothes in the colours of the Venezuelan flag.⁶³

A legacy for Castro

Scholars also point out another benefit Cuba is reaping from its current relations with Venezuela – this time, at the international level: Havana’s new re-of insertion in the contemporary world and the international economy.

Pedro Monreal argues that in the decades under the protection of the USSR, Cuba’s foreign relations were “largely based on the understanding that direct international involvement in world capitalist markets was a fundamentally precarious endeavour”. Traditionally an exporter of sugar, minerals, other primary resources and semi-processed goods, the country did flirt with a development model based on import substitution industrialization (ISI) in its so-called Five-Year Plans; but especially between 1975 and 1990, Cuba’s entry into the international economy was facilitated by trade deals, preferential prices, credit and other mechanisms belonging to the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon), the organization of Communist states. Relations with the capitalist world were limited (Monreal, 2006:24-25).

In this context, the end of the Soviet era posed at least two Herculean challenges to Cuban officials: trigger convalescence of an economy that declined 35% between 1989

63 Jornal do Brasil, 02/03/2007.

and 1993 (worsened by the fact that investment levels fell from 28% to 5% of the GDP during the same period⁶⁴), and design a new strategy for the island's insertion in a new geopolitical order, in which direct international engagement "became no longer an option, but a necessity" (Monreal, 2006:24).

Havana's response was to place emphasis on products and services which intensively used the island's natural resources, such as sugar, mining and tourism. Tourism in particular performed a stellar role in this strategy: between 1990 and 2000 the number of foreign tourists to Cuba jumped from 370,000 to 1.78 million, increasing the activity's contribution to the balance of payments from 4% to 43% in the same period. Tourism is now the biggest income-generator activity in Cuba. Not only that, tourism has become a longer term "engine of growth", as it demands huge amounts of imported goods such as food and beverages that are now being produced locally, thus spurring modernization of the Cuban industry and a fresh, if limited, process of import substitution industrialization. (Brundenius, 2002:383-385).

The economic recovery of late 1990's and early 2000's was slow but steady, until natural and political events in 2001-02, such as the fall of nickel prices, hurricane Michelle and the Venezuelan crisis⁶⁵, highlighted the limits of this strategy in generating resources for deepening ISI. As Monreal argues, a second stage of Cuba's economic recovery would have to include a process of export substitution, one that improved the "added value" of Cuba's products and services sold abroad. That is when the island's vast pool of human

64 See Brundenius, 2002

65 See Mesa-Lago, 2003

resources gets a crucial role': they provide Cuba with the opportunity to move from an essentially primary export economy to one that provides medical and educational services to other countries in Latin America.

It is no coincidence that this new pattern of economic international insertion started to emerge in 2004-05, as the *misiones* were being expanded to reach more people in Venezuela. Chávez's programmes were – and still are – the main “market” for Cuban expertise services. In April 2005, officials estimated that Cuba was providing Venezuela the equivalent of US\$ 1 billion a year in medical and educational services⁶⁶. The importance of the Cuban-Venezuelan alliance in transforming the Cuban economy is such that Monreal named it “the Bolivarian Matrix”. “The Bolivarian Matrix offers Cuba the chance to move toward successive development-centred options”, he wrote. According to him, the Bolivarian Matrix “expands the ‘investment function’ of the economy by spurring the growth of more valuable exports”, and “reduces the cost of several imports (due to) the preferential rates and deferred payments on energy that Venezuela provides” (Monreal, 2006:25).

Analysing Cuba's economic reorientation, Ritter (2006) highlights the same elements, identifying on them some effects that transcend the economic dimension. According to him, this new development strategy has the potential to become part of Castro's legacy for the future. He argues that the Cuban leader envisages the idea of “building on Cuba's past successes in health and education to strengthen a ‘knowledge economy’ that will serve as the new source of Cuba's international competitive advantage” (Ritter, 2006:5).

66 FOCAL, 2005

For Ritter, the geopolitical context since 2002 has helped Cuba: on the one hand, the island can count on energy security from Venezuela, Chinese investments, and comparative advantage in providing health and medical services for Latin American neighbours; on the other hand, the US, which in the 1990's has tightened the four decades long blockade against Cuba⁶⁷, is more worried about its wars in the Middle East – notably in Iraq, which absorbs most of Washington's attention and resources (Ritter, 2006:6).

Is this economic reorientation of Cuba enough to become Cusastro's legacy? That remains unclear. The island has expanded its educational programmes and sought new markets for its services (ALBA is a golden opportunity for Cuba in this sense), but as Ritter reminds, university graduates, like anything else, can be overproduced, so that their average value to society declines (Ritter, 2006:11).

Monreal also adopts a cautionary approach to the question of whether Cuba has definitely jumped on some kind of "road to development". Even if the current pattern of insertion provides a good starting point for the Cuban economy, he argues, the country may still head toward a "worrisome direction": "an over-development and dysfunctional dependence on the 'tertiary', or service, sector". "A second stage may help correct some of Cuba's current imbalances – the disproportionate emphasis on services, for instance – while at the same time thwart potential pitfalls like the de-industrialization and over-tertiarization of the economy. But this will only be possible if a robust plan of re-

67 See Brenner and Jimenez, 2006

industrialization – one capable of producing new exports and, above all, capital goods – assumes the forefront of a development strategy.” (Monreal, 2006:26).

Highly critical of the Cuban strategy and alliance with Venezuela, Corrales believes that the Bolivarian matrix is hurting the island’s prospects of finding a sustainable model of development in the medium term: “By allowing the government to meet its energy and financial needs, the agreements (with Venezuela) are eliminating the incentives the Cuban government faced in the early 1990s to develop new sources of revenue”, he wrote. Corrales argues that the partnerships came just as Cuba was rethinking its economic strategy, identifying new areas for investment and export promotion (tourism, agro-exports, biomedical services, film/cultural production, energy exploration), new forms of business organization (joint ventures with international firms, some forms of self-employment, restructuring of state-owned enterprises, legalization of dollars), and new markets (the European Union). “For the first time in decades, Cuba was beginning to diversify its economic relations. To use present-day jargon, the Cuban state was finally managing (rather than eschewing) globalization. The alliance with Venezuela is eroding the incentives to stay on this path.” (Corrales, 2003:29)

He also warns against Cuba’s increasing debt toward Venezuela. In February 2005, the *Miami Herald* reported that it was as big as US\$ 2.5 billion. Corrales estimates that it may have reached US\$ 3 billion by mid 2006, making Venezuela Cuba's top creditor, followed by Japan and Argentina (Corrales, 2003:28).

The additional factor that analysts have left unexplored, and which this work tried to highlight, is the deep connection between Cuba's recent economic reorientation and Venezuela's domestic politics – the dynamic two-level game behind it. Chávez is the sole exception to Venezuelan leaders historically averse to the Communist regime in place in Cuba since 1959. After seven years in power, it is safe to say that he has managed to strip power from the opposition and finds himself in a privileged position in comparison to the troubled years of 2002-03 to foster his projects. However, instability is one factor hard to downplay in the volatile Venezuelan politics.

Time is a crucial factor in the analysis. How long for will Cuba be able to reap the benefits of the partnerships is something that affects its ability to accumulate and reinvest capital. Nonetheless, as the observers quoted in this chapter have already pointed out, strategy seems to be equally or more important than time, as the regime, in order to survive, will have to walk on its feet, and not on the steps of the man who is now the “new face” on Havana's walls.

CONCLUSION

A new dawn for Cuban-Venezuelan relations?

“ALCA [Spanish acronym for Free Trade Agreement of the Americas] is integration for the markets; ALBA is integration for the people. ALCA is based on the values of the capitalist society: selfishness, individualism, wealth at any cost and over any other human being; ALBA is based on the values of socialism: solidarity, brotherhood between people, a firm conviction that no human pain is tolerable, that in a fair society no human being can be left out.”

(Cuban Vice-President Carlos Dávila, during a ceremony for signing agreements between Cuba and Venezuela , January 24th 2007”)

Finally, any analysis of the Cuban-Venezuelan relations could not fail to mention the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), the integration initiative that became almost an icon of relations between Havana and Caracas. Launched by Chávez and Castro in December 2004 as an attempt to export what they regarded as successful experiences carried out in partnership between the two countries, ALBA proposes cooperation based “on the exchange of goods and services that result more beneficial for both countries’ economic and social needs”.⁶⁸

In the context of ALBA, Chávez and Castro went beyond the ‘oil for doctors and teachers’ exchange scheme, and announced in 2005 plans to establish joint ventures to operate in Cuba, Venezuela or third countries, such as Constructora Alba (to carry out

68 Acuerdo entre Venezuela y Cuba para la Aplicación de la Alternativa Bolivariana para las Américas.

<http://www.alternativabolivariana.org/>

infrastructure and social projects), PDVSA-Cuba (the Cuban representation of oil giant PDVSA, responsible for orchestrating cooperation in the energy sector), Astimarca (a ship building company to fix units and build small ones), and PDV-Cupet (to invest in the refinery of Cienfuegos).⁶⁹

With its clear aim of building cross-country ‘social corridors’, ALBA can be seen as a shift in the importance of roles played by international and domestic factors in the Cuban-Venezuelan relationship. As this work has tried to show, until 2003 domestic factors, such as opposition to Chávez’s initiatives, were crucial to halt advances in this bilateral relationship. However, as those factors were being overridden (partly due to effects of the international alliance), Chávez and Castro felt free to broaden the partnerships and take them to the international level.

One cautionary note would remind us that domestic factors cannot be underestimated. The “Bolivarian Matrix” is indeed established at the international level – but this work has suggested that the key for its success may lie in the domestic balance of forces within the countries, especially in Venezuela. Similarly, many observers have understood ALBA – also the Spanish word for ‘dawn’ – as nothing more than Chávez’s alternative to the US-championed Free Trade Agreement for the Americas (FTAA, known in the Spanish and Portuguese languages by its acronym ALCA). While it is true that ALBA fuels Chávez’s rhetoric in his battle against the US for the hearts and minds of Latin Americans, it might be just as important in his battle for the hearts and minds of

69 See Marta Lomas’ speech, Granma, 30/4/2006.

Venezuelans. Different domestic contexts can also explain why ALBA seems to have made achievements in a shorter period of time than the 2000 Cuban-Venezuelan agreement did.

Seven years after the signature of that first agreement, as this dissertation has pointed out, it becomes clear that the bilateral alliance was important firstly as a contribution for Chávez consolidation of power domestically; secondly, as a way of projecting his leadership and influence over the continent. From a Cuban point of view, its main achievement was to provide the island a new opportunity of insertion into the international economy. From a two-level game perspective, it is a shift from the domestic to the international end of the equation.

In April 2006 and May 2007, respectively, Bolivia and Nicaragua joined ALBA. In the framework of *Mision Milagro*, Cuban doctors have performed eye surgeries in Bolivian and Nicaraguan patients in La Paz, Caracas and Havana. Medical scholarships for studies in Havana are now available for citizens from any of those countries.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, not enough time has passed to allow us to develop a full analysis of the benefits those countries can reap for taking part in the initiative.

With ALBA, Chávez and Castro hope to broaden the reach of Cuban-Venezuelan partnerships. This dissertation hopes to have made its contribution in analysing those initiatives and their reach in the future.

⁷⁰ See Granma, 25/07/2007. *Hacia Venezuela más pacientes nicaragüenses de Operación Milagro*. Also Argenpress, 15/03/2007.

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