

Soft Balancing the Titans: Venezuelan Foreign-Policy Strategy Toward the United States, China, and Russia

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This article analyzes Chavist Venezuela's foreign policy toward three major powers, the United States, China, and Russia. Based on neoclassical, peripheral, and subaltern-realism theories, it considers the Latin American duality between alignment and autonomy as strategic alternatives, and uses congruence analysis to consider the coherence between Chavism's geopolitical objectives and concrete actions in its foreign policy with the three powers. Venezuela's foreign-policy strategy consists of three overlapping triads. In Venezuela–U.S.–China relations, Caracas assumes the power-transition theory, aligning economically with the Asian rising power and serving as a gateway to Latin America. In Venezuela–U.S.–Russia relations, Chavism is politically and militarily aligned with Putin's Russia, taking advantage of the Russian–U.S. geostrategic rivalry. The most-interesting and novel finding is in Venezuela–China–Russia relations, where the Bolivarian Revolution exploits a favorable economic relationship with China but aligns to Russian geostrategy, conducting a “softer balancing” against China to hold on to the partnership and to autonomy.

Este artículo analiza la estrategia de la política exterior de la Venezuela chavista hacia tres grandes potencias: Estados Unidos, China y Rusia. A partir de presunciones realistas neoclásica, periférica y subalterna, este trabajo acoge la dualidad latinoamericana entre alineamiento y autonomía como alternativas estratégicas, y emplea un análisis de congruencia para considerar la coherencia entre los objetivos geopolíticos de la gran estrategia chavista y las acciones concretas en su estrategia de política exterior hacia las tres grandes potencias. Esta investigación resultó en una caracterización de la gran estrategia venezolana en tres triadas superpuestas. En las relaciones Venezuela–Estados Unidos–China, Caracas asume los principios de la teoría de transición de poder, alineándose económicamente con la potencia asiática ascendente y sirviéndole de puerta de entrada a América Latina. En las relaciones Venezuela–Estados Unidos–Rusia, el chavismo está militar y políticamente alineado con la Rusia de Putin, aprovechándose de la rivalidad geoestratégica ruso-estadounidense. Pero el hallazgo más interesante y novedoso está en las relaciones Venezuela–China–Rusia, en las que Revolución Bolivariana explota una relación económica favorable con China, pero se alinea con la geoestrategia rusa, llevando

a cabo un “más suave contra-balance” hacia China en aras de mantener tanto la relación como la autonomía.

本文分析了查韦斯主义时期委内瑞拉对美国、中国和俄罗斯采取的外交政策。基于新古典主义理论、边缘理论和次现实主义 (subaltern-realism) 理论, 本文认为委内瑞拉在联盟和自治之间转化的二重性是一种战略选择, 同时本文使用一致性分析 (congruence analysis) 考量查韦斯主义地缘政治目标和实际行动 (对三国采取的外交政策) 之间的连贯性。 委内瑞拉的外交政策由三个相互交叠的部分组成。在委内瑞拉-美国-中国这三者关系中, 加拉加斯采取权力转移理论, 在和亚洲崛起国建立经济联盟的同时又作为通往拉丁美洲的入口。在委内瑞拉-美国-俄罗斯这三者关系中, 查韦斯主义在政治和军事上和普京的俄罗斯结盟, 以利用俄罗斯和美国之间的地缘战略竞争。委内瑞拉-中国-俄罗斯这三者的关系则最有趣 发动玻利瓦尔革命的委内瑞拉利用其与中国的有利经济关系, 却与俄罗斯的地缘战略结盟, 对中国采取“软制衡”, 从而保持自身的伙伴关系和自治。

Key words: foreign policy analysis, grand strategy, soft balancing, Chavism, Venezuela, United States, China, Russia

Introduction

This article seeks to answer two related questions, what is the logic behind Venezuela’s Chavist foreign-policy strategy, and are Venezuela’s diplomatic actions since 1999 congruent with the Chavist master plan?

The Chavist phenomenon has generated significant political and intellectual interest in Venezuela. The convergence of structural factors such as the rise of China, the geostrategic reorientation of the United States toward Eurasia, and the boom in commodity prices, together with the discrediting of traditional political parties, the rejection of liberal macroeconomic adjustments, and the emergence of charismatic leadership, facilitated the development of Chavism and its assertive foreign policy. The positioning of a petro-state under a centralized, charismatic leadership like Hugo Chávez’s has prompted research in Latin America and elsewhere. The Chavist challenge to the unipolar order that emerged at the end of the Cold War led to a search to understand what Chavism is and how it affects U.S. interests in a period of redefinition of U.S. primacy. This attention was not confined to the United States. Awakening at the beginning of the 21st century, China also set its sights on the small, defiant oil-rich power. The gap that Chávez’s Venezuela opened was an opportunity for China to project its influence and to get access to raw materials in Latin America. Meanwhile, Russia, emerging under Vladimir Putin—a leader with a classic and realist geostrategic conception—saw Venezuela as an opportunity to return to the game of establishing a beachhead strategy in its U.S. rival’s natural sphere of influence.

Although there are abundant studies on Chavism, it is important to continue to analyze it, especially its foreign policy, because it has endured and evolved and because it is specific to Latin America. Its durability has taken it through different evolutionary stages, which has meant a gradual and constant tactic mutation to maintain the core of its strategic objectives, especially internationally. Chavism’s constant adaptive evolution has manifested itself in its resilience as a political regime (Anselmi, 2016; Mijares, 2017) and has meant continuities and changes in its foreign policy (Romero, 2016; Romero

& Mijares, 2016). In addition, the specific nature of Chavism in Latin America is related to Venezuela's character as an archetypal petro-state (Karl, 1997), which in some ways helps it relate more to its Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) partners than to its Latin American neighbors. These traits make Chavism a dynamic, timely topic that requires political and academic attention. This article covers an important part of the Chavist agenda, foreign policy with three major powers—the United States, China, and Russia.

The article presents a comprehensive view of Chavist Venezuela's relations with some of the most-important international actors, covering Hugo Chávez's many years in power and the first 4 years of the Nicolás Maduro administration. The theoretical approach offers new approaches to the study of the Venezuelan foreign policy (VFP). The theoretical framework takes from neoclassical realism the notion of centralization of power for the mobilization of resources (Schweller, 2009; Taliaferro, 2006). From subaltern (Ayoob, 1997), and peripheral (Escudé, 1995; Schenoni & Escudé, 2016) realism, it considers the hierarchical orientation of the international system and the authoritarian tendency to mobilize resources for autonomy objectives. From the theory of the Latin American autonomy, it considers the duality between alignment and autonomy as possible logics within grand strategies (Russell & Tokatlian, 2013).

Using a realist theoretical approach to study a Latin American state is not controversy free. Gian Luca Gardini (2011) argues in favor of an analytical framework that considers pragmatism and ideology in the analysis of Latin American foreign policy. Meanwhile, Peter Lambert (2011) explains how pragmatism and ideology are combined in Latin American state relations with great powers, based on the study of Paraguayan foreign policy. Samuel Barkin (2003) raises the possibility of integrating interests (realism) and ideas (constructivism) into the international analysis, in a formula that he coined as "realist constructivism." Although the valuable contributions of these authors are appreciated, this article uses a theoretical framework based on neoclassical, subaltern, and peripheral realisms. As Gardini (2011) and Lambert (2011) note, neoclassical realism attempts to understand the domestic reasoning and ideas that drive foreign policy, beyond international structural conditions. In addition, subaltern realism privileges a classic approach to Westphalian sovereignty, which is a paramount principle in the Global South and must be considered in the study of self-proclaimed revolutionary regimes in regions such as Latin America. In addition, this article uses aspects of peripheral realism, because they allow for the analysis of the foreign-policy strategy of smaller powers (rule takers or rebels) versus the great powers of the international system (rule makers). This approach allows for a parsimonious analysis combining interests and ideas.

The method for this article is based on a congruence analysis of Chavism's proclaimed international geopolitical objectives, and the concrete actions of its foreign policy. This congruence analysis considers qualitative and statistical-data analyses of energy and financial relation trends, weapons supply, and Venezuela's degree of diplomatic alignment according to its voting behavior in the United National General Assembly (UNGA) and the United National

Security Council (UNSC). Unlike content-analysis or critical-discourse analysis, this contextual-document analysis allows for the straightforward connection of the evolution of texts with political processes that make up their historical framework (Bowen, 2009). An analysis is carried out on the continuities and changes in the interpretation of reality reflected in Chavism's documents, based on a need to respect the revolutionary ideological background that combines the need for the regime to survive with the goal of making a difference on the international scene.

The article is divided into four sections. The first part mentions the sources and quantitative and qualitative data that were analyzed and outlines the theoretical and methodological approaches for an analysis of congruence between what the Chavist model says and what its foreign policy has been. The second section defines Chavism's grand strategy, from a contextual-document analysis of its main texts, the Bolivarian Alternative Agenda (AAB, 1996–2001) (Chávez, 1996), the Economic and Social Development Plan of the Nation (PDES, 2001–2007) (Chávez, 2001), the Simon Bolivar National Project–First Socialist Plan (PPS, 2007–2013) (Chávez, 2007), and the Homeland Plan–Second Economic and Social Development Plan of the Nation (PDP, 2013–2019) (Chávez, 2012a). The third section gives a qualitative interpretation of quantitative-data analysis, to establish consistency in relations with the United States, China, and Russia. Finally, the last part presents a characterization of the foreign policy of Chavist Venezuela in its relationship with these three major powers, covering the evolution of these relations and potential lines of projection from 1999 to 2016.

Theoretical Framework and Research Design

As has been the case with the study of international politics, foreign-policy analysis has seen complex theoretical debates (Hudson, 2005). Although there is some agreement, such as in Robert Putnam's (1988) classic observation of the two levels of analysis in foreign policy, disagreements about the preeminence of the international structure in domestic factors, and vice versa, as well as the role of the ideas, identities, and perceptions, remain in dispute. This article follows a realist theoretical framework, considering the characteristics of the case, but this framework is far from strictly structuralism, or neo-realism. It considers contributions to International Relations from the Global South to understand the foreign-policy strategies of weak states. This article references Carlos Escudé (1992, 1995; see also Schenoni & Escudé, 2016), who describes the international order as hierarchical rather than anarchic, thus avoiding the distortions inherent in the presumption of anarchy in the international system (Milner, 1991).¹ This contribution to peripheral realism puts into perspective the conditions the least-developed states face in their relations with major powers.

Adding to the peripheral-realist assumption about the inherent asymmetry in a hierarchical world, Mohammed Ayoob's (1997) subaltern realism claims the need to consider Hobbesian notions in the study of foreign policy in the Third World. It recommends rescuing lessons from the history of the European powers, particularly regarding sovereignty. The sovereign zeal in its

broadest conventional or Westphalian (Krasner, 1999) sense is rigid, particularly in less-consolidated, less-powerful states, and especially in states with vast natural resources. Petro-states (Karl, 1997) are prone to fit this profile of defenders of national sovereignty, even at the cost of the freedoms of their own citizens. Subaltern realism, articulated with explanations about the central role of sovereignty in the Third World (Clapham, 1999) and the category of petro-state, was useful in the initial approach of the grand strategy that Chávez proposed for Venezuela. It was also useful to characterize foreign policy toward the great powers, especially the United States, which fills the role of (neo-)colonial power.

Peripheral realism not only describes the evident asymmetry in international relations but also poses in a predictive and prescriptive sense what expected or desirable foreign behavior is, depending on the convenience of the population of the state in question. Also, this “realism of weak states” contributes to the field of autonomy in foreign policy. Escudé (1995) proposes a simple but forceful formula that allows for the interpretation of the freedom of action of Chavism’s foreign policy, despite asymmetries; the authoritarian character of the Chavist governments—sometimes more competitive electorally, and other times less so (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Mijares, 2017)—enabled it to take advantage of changes in the international system in the early 21st century, and to play with complex balancing maneuvers within the great powers’ international subsystem.

This resource mobilization has been important to Venezuelan rulers over the last few decades, because of its decision-making centralization and because of the electoral legitimacy and partisan politicization of foreign policy. According to Guy Emerson (2015), strong Venezuelan presidentialism is key to understanding the country’s foreign policy. Terry Lynn Karl’s (1997) thesis on deinstitutionalization in petro-states explains the weakness of its counterweight institutions. During the Chavist era, and after the oil boom of 2004–2009, this presidentialism has been exacerbated, facilitating foreign-policy maneuvers without significant internal controls. Here, there are elements of neoclassical realism, particularly in extracting and mobilizing resources from domestic society in the face of international objectives. Jeffrey Taliaferro (2006) discusses power centralization and resource mobilization, and Randall Schweller (2009) covers the politicization of foreign policy in collectivist regimes, central operating mechanisms in the Chávez regime. Neoclassical realism explains the role of political regimes and ideas in foreign-policy strategy (Rathbun, 2008; Rose, 1998), especially in a minor power dealing with superpowers.

This article acknowledges that Venezuela’s relationship with these superpowers has not been stable, as occurs in any bilateral relationship. Authors such as Carlos Romero (2003, 2016), Rafael Duarte Villa (2004), Edmundo González Urrutia (2006), Adriana Boersner and Makram Haluani (2013), and Carlos Romero and Víctor Mijares (2016) have remarked on the tactical discontinuities of these relations, but this article focuses on the concept of great strategy, considering the strategic logic behind the actions carried out by Chavist Venezuela.

This article begins as a diachronic case study, applying a congruence analysis to confirm the decoupling orientation of Venezuela with the United States, as well as its alignment to China and Russia. The diachronic study seeks to define the direction that VFP was taking in every stage of the Chavist era, following the evolution of its relations with the three major powers in the international system. The congruence-analysis approach is applied to strategic public propositions in guidance documents for international action. These propositions are assumed to be grand strategy lines, a revolutionary foreign policy in Kissingerian terms (Kissinger, 1964), or a grand strategy under the “logic of autonomy” (Russell & Tokatlian, 2013, pp. 160–161). Documentary sources were selected and processed, and quantitative data were gathered to confirm the hypothesis. There is also a novel conclusion about Venezuela’s “soft-balancing” policy against the United States in its relationship with the two major Eurasian powers. In the context of this article, soft balancing should be understood as a foreign-policy strategy that does not use force, as opposed to balancing in the traditional sense (hard balancing). Whether due to self-restraint or to impotence, a government that chooses the soft-balancing strategy relies on commercial, diplomatic, or institutional links, or a combination of the three, to undermine, frustrate, and increase the cost of unilateral actions from a stronger state (Pape, 2005).

The first source reviewed is documentary in nature and presents the national plans for Chavism, the original AAB of 1996, which served as the basis for the establishment of Chavism and whose national objectives lacked a global reach. The 2001–2007 PDES was Chavism’s first reaction to what it considers structural changes in the international system. Next, the 2007–2013 PPS was the first official document that included an international vision geared toward the country’s participation in the “major leagues.” Finally, the latest 2013–2019 PDP is considered as the political testament of Hugo Chávez and as guidance for his official successor, Nicolás Maduro. The review and analysis of these documents allows for a definition of the framework within which the international system is diagnosed and defines the grand strategy of Chávez’s Venezuela. The period studied runs from 1999 to 2016, defining Hugo Chávez’s swearing in as president until the last year for which data are available. In 2017, political events in Venezuela have generated significant domestic political upheaval that threatens to produce considerable changes, although difficult to predict, in Chavist foreign policy. The continuity of the political project has been put to the test.

After documents are analyzed contextually, quantitative analysis and interpretation are carried out on three types of data, energy–financial, military trade, and diplomatic alignment. The energy–financial data are for crude-oil exports from Venezuela; for petro-states, crude-oil exportation may be an accurate indicator of potential political alignment or interest in exercising influence. The analysis in this article shows the congruence between the objectives set out in the Chavist grand strategy and the steps taken to place growing importance on the Chinese market, at the expense of traditional exports to the United States. Loans from China are also considered, which strengthen China’s role as Venezuela’s major creditor. In the military field, the special relationship with Russia is highlighted. The approach is

accompanied by gestures of defense diplomacy and stand out because Russia has apparently returned to a geostrategic position in the Caribbean. Finally, in diplomatic matters, correlation analyses are done of voting by Venezuela and the three powers in the UNGA from 1999 to 2014, and in the UNSC when Venezuela was a member, from 2015–16.

Chavism's Grand Strategy

The first part of this section follows closely the work of Russell and Tokatlian (2013) on grand strategy in Latin America, because Venezuela has a certain character as a Latin American state, as do many other states in the so-called Global South. Grand strategy is understood as defined by Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth (2012), "a set of ideas to deploy the resources of a nation to achieve their long-term interests" (p. 11). This idea is adjusted to the study of Chavism's grand strategy, with a series of documents that give accounts of where and with what objectives Venezuelan resources have been deployed. The guidelines are attributed to Hugo Chávez in the mid-1990s and are the best evidence of grand strategy as defined above.

The grand strategy in Latin America oscillates between alignment and autonomy (Russell & Tokatlian, 2013, p. 160).² Following the thesis of Escudé's (1995) peripheral realism, these parameters respond to the inherent tensions in weak states that must choose between expensive balancing and convenient bandwagoning.³ The decision rests with each government's conception of sovereignty. According to Ayoob's (2002) subaltern realism, in the Global South⁴ there is a latent attachment to sovereignty in classical terms, given the difficulties in political legitimacy and control, a typical feature in states with a history different from the West (pp. 42–45). It generates a zeal that is particularly strong in governments and movements self-defined as anti-imperialists, and even more so when these governments manage vast natural resources, such as Venezuela's oil wealth. It leads to a grand strategy coupled with the logic of autonomy, in the words of Russell and Tokatlian (2013), and can be seen in the documents of Chavism.

Contextual Document Analysis

The first document in Chavism as a movement that sought to govern Venezuela is the 1996 AAB. It emerged in a unipolar international context and a national crisis of the political parties that had forged Venezuelan democracy. Unipolarity, derived from the end of the Cold War, led to hegemonic stability, similar to what the West had imposed after World War II (Gilpin, 2016), but at a global level. In the name of the inherent stability of unipolarity (Wohlforth, 1999), the so-called "Washington Consensus" was born, embodying the liberal paradigm of development once the triumph over the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had been consolidated (Gore, 2000). In the Venezuelan political system (VPS), there was a depletion of the political economy of what Juan Carlos Rey (1991) calls the "populist system of elites' conciliation." The high dependence on oil, the strong public and private indebtedness, the growing social complexity, and the uncontrolled growth of the urban population were problems that the new and old political parties

were unable to handle in the 1990s (Kornblith, 1998). The *Caracazo* in 1989, and the two coup attempts in 1992, would be the preamble to the removal and subsequent prosecution of President Carlos Andrés Pérez (López Maya, 2005). As Luis Salamanca (1997) notes, the Venezuelan political-party system succumbed to a crisis of modernization for which it was not well prepared.

Much of this inability was due to the loss of the institutional framework that began with the oil nationalization and the boom in oil prices during the energy crisis of the 1970s (Karl, 1997, p. 69 et seq.). This typical weakness of petro-states led to a failure of Venezuelan democracy, its institutions, and its economy. Unable to face the challenge of modernization, Venezuela made no macroeconomic adjustments like other countries did, such as the neighboring Colombia (Hausmann, 1990; López et al., 2002; Ocampo et al., 1998). Far from solving the fiscal imbalances, truncated macroeconomic reforms led to limited economic growth, high inflation, and increasing poverty levels (López Maya & Lander, 2000). The situation was fertile ground for a political-contestation movement in alliance with part of the discontent military. Hugo Chávez led a movement when he was released from prison in 1994 (Martínez, 2007). The AAB emerged as a response to the Venezuela Agenda (AV) of Rafael Caldera's government, an attempt at macroeconomic stabilization that included a process of "oil opening" to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) (González, 2001; Mora, 1998).

The foreign-policy strategy of the AAB focused on development issues and on autonomy, to prevent Venezuela from being dragged into neoliberal adjustment measures once again.

...with the structures, defects, and inability of the current Venezuelan state, it is absolutely impossible to implement the project and the measures announced here.

It is therefore essential [to avoid] ...the simplistic, neoliberal measure of "reducing the size of the state"; rather, we must undergo a complete restructuring and transformation of the current state into a truly democratic, popular one, with a great capacity to lead—together with the society of which it must be an expression—the new future of the nation. (Chávez, 1996, p. 32)

In the AAB, criticisms of the international order are few compared to criticisms of the management of socioeconomic development. This apparent timidity can be attributed to a pre-electoral political imperative that operated on two levels, on the one hand, putting pressure on an unpopular government and a fragile political system to prepare the ground for a future ruling project, and on the other, not confronting any power directly, focusing instead on challenging the institutions of hegemonic stability led from Washington, especially the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The AAB is the least-explicit Chavist document on foreign policy and grand strategy, but it develops the principles of autonomy and presents the goal of full recovery of the state as the central economic actor, which is the basis of the Chavist grand strategy in its relationship with the major powers. This programmatic basis was the foundation of the early years of the Chávez government, which turned later toward the diversification of foreign relations.

The PDES deepens and specifies the grand strategy, as Chávez and his political movement—a civil-military amalgam—moved forward from 1996 to 2001. Due to the Asian financial crisis in 1997, oil prices collapsed to U.S.\$8/barrel of Venezuelan crude. This crisis affected the 1998 elections, when the Fifth Republic Movement (MVR), supporting Chávez, clinched the victory over Henrique Salas Römer, the governor of the industrial state of Carabobo and the candidate for a rugged coalition of young and traditional political parties. The Chavist victory led to immediate changes and political shocks when Chávez called for a national constituent assembly (ANC). The ANC not only drafted in record time the 1999 Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (CRBV) but also dissolved the constituted powers and led to a new stage of the VPS. In the 2000 general elections, Chávez beat his former comrade-in-arms and comrade in the coup attempt of 1992, the governor of the state of Zulia, Francisco Arias Cárdenas. The real opposition to Chávez began with the drafting of Presidential Decree 1011 (República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 2000), which regulated basic education and faced rejection from parents.

In the field of foreign affairs, during the period prior to the PDES, relations were opened with extra-hemispheric powers. The most-striking aspect was Chávez's visit to Baghdad in August 2000, which broke with the international isolation of Saddam Hussein and shaped a diplomatic confrontation with the United States. Other notable visits were Chávez's trips to China in October 1999, and to Russia in May 2001. The trip to China meant the first time a Venezuelan president had visited the Asian power and set the stage for contacts that would lead to China's being the second importer of oil from Venezuela two decades later.

Although the China trip seemed to show an ideological affinity, experts believe the real framework was geopolitics (Ellis, 2009; Garrido, 2005; Jilberto & Hogenboom, 2012; Romero, 2006). Even more noteworthy was the trip to Russia, when the geopolitical objectives of balancing against the United States were more exposed (Boersner & Haluani, 2013; Cohen & Walser, 2008; Katz, 2006). In China, Chávez met with Jiang Zemin, the leader of a corporation highly bureaucratized in the Chinese Communist Party, while in Moscow he met with a figure with whom he would maintain a close relationship, thanks to shared geopolitical objectives and identities, Vladimir Putin (Katz, 2006; Sitenko, 2016).

As part of an acute sociopolitical polarization and a new disruptive diplomacy, the PDES was made public in September 2001. It coincided with the change to U.S. national-security policy after the 9/11 attacks and with the first U.S. attacks against the Taliban in Afghanistan. It was the first guidance document for Chavism that included a section dedicated exclusively to foreign policy, called "International Equilibrium." The PDES defines Venezuela's general objectives of strengthening national sovereignty and promoting a multipolar world (Chávez, 2001, p. 155). There is an internal and external source of autonomy generation. The internal, referred to as "the strengthening of national sovereignty," fits with the definition of sovereignty that Ayoub (1997) makes based on subaltern realism, and other authors based on the political sociology of international relations (Jackson, 1993). This definition of

sovereignty coincides with the historic European tradition, but in a different context, in which the colonial past grants natural rights to the Global South's states (Jackson, 1993, pp. 82–85), where national autonomy means autonomy through the development of capabilities.

The second source to achieve autonomy complements the first and corresponds to autonomy through the diversification of foreign relations (Russell & Tokatlian, 2013; Vigevani & Cepaluni, 2007). Instead of taking a passive role to navigate and take advantage of “multipolarity,” between 2001 and 2007, the grand strategy of Chávez's Venezuela was to take an active role and promote a multipolar international structure.

The international equilibrium will be geared to stimulate the rise of multipolar spaces to confront the unipolar and globalizing dynamic resulted from the abrupt termination of the bipolar era. In fact, in spite of the overwhelming power of globalization, we are in the midst of a world order, where there is potential for shifting the international system into more democratic channels and greater participation for all states in global decisions that affect them all.

This will be possible through the pluralization of international relations, both in terms of the number of countries with which Venezuela maintains active relations, such as the diversity and quality of those relations. (Chávez 2001, p. 159).

The evidence suggests that Chavist diplomacy encouraged the rise of other poles of power, particularly outside the Western Hemisphere, which is stated in the PDES.

The strategy outlined in the PDES covered the period from 2001 to 2007 and preceded the PPS. It was an unstable time but the most-interesting period of Chavism thus far. Venezuelan foreign relations were expanded, and situations arose that put the political movement led by Hugo Chávez against the ropes. Between 2001 and 2004, Venezuela entered what could be called the recall cycle. The partisan politicization of the state-owned oil giant *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)* triggered the largest protests in the country (López Maya, 2002). The polarization reached its paroxysm in April 2002, when in 72 hours the country experienced the effects of two coups from the military high command, one against Chávez, and another in favor of his restitution. The period immediately following what are called the “April events” led to the intervention of the Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), César Gaviria, and the installation of an ad hoc figure called the “Table of Negotiation and Agreements,” which ended with the announcement of a Presidential Recall Referendum (RRP) in 2003, to be held in August 2004.

The RRP was preceded by the implementation of the so-called Social Missions, direct social assistance plans from the executive branch, in an obvious example of “parallel institutions” (Ramos Pismataro & Ito, 2016). In the end, they contributed to the victory of Chávez and the consolidation and centralization of his power (Martínez Meucci, 2016), even with reasonable evidence of fraud (Carriquiry, 2011; Delfino & Salas, 2011; Hausmann & Rigobón, 2011; Jiménez, 2011; Martín, 2011; Prado & Sansó, 2011). This centralization helped Chávez to conduct a more-assertive foreign policy from 2004 on (Romero,

2006), which fits into the neoclassical realism explanatory model (Schweller, 2009; Taliaferro, 2006). The 2001–2007 period was the takeoff for oil diplomacy.

The structural factors of increasing energy consumption in China and India, and the energy appetite of other states in the Global South led to upward pressure on oil prices. In 2003, the triggers for the oil super cycle were the U.S. war and occupation of Iraq, the separatist revolts in the Gulf of Niger, and the oil strike in Venezuela. Once Chávez had consolidated his victory in the RRP, a period of expansion began that strengthened ties with extra-hemispheric powers, particularly Iran, China, and Russia. Venezuela reached important energy agreements with China, and Russia became the main provider of weapons, highlighting the controversial Sukhoi SU-30 and Kalashnikov AK-103 assault rifles (see Table 2). Relations with the United States deteriorated during this period, to the point that there were accusations of a military conspiracy by the U.S. Embassy in Caracas (Lapper, 2006). The Bush administration was the target of the anti-imperialist rhetoric. U.S. unilateral actions within the doctrine of preventive and preemptive war strengthened Chávez's arguments, as well as those of his minister of foreign relations from 2006, Nicolás Maduro. At the regional level, the relationship with Lula da Silva's Brazil and Néstor Kirchner's Argentina made it possible to give impetus to the South American Community of Nations' project in Cuzco, Perú in 2004, which would later become the Union of South American Nations, in Margarita, Venezuela in 2007.

The PPS is the first official and explicit declaration of the socialist character of the Bolivarian Revolution. The document highlights the outstanding performance of PDES and the relaunching of Venezuelan diplomacy after an alleged period of passivity, but the most- important aspect is that it reaches higher levels of accuracy of grand strategy, especially regarding relations with great powers. The text defines a "new phase in world geopolitics."

Is the strategy of the multipolar driving of world politics, which is applied through the diversification of political, economic and cultural relations for the creation of new power blocs on the basis of the specific characteristics, according to the establishment of geo-strategic areas of interest.

The construction of a multipolar world implies the creation of new centres of power that represent the break of the hegemony of American imperialism in the pursuit of social justice, solidarity and guarantees of peace under the deepening of the fraternal dialog among peoples, respect for the right to freedom of thought, religion and the self-determination of peoples. (Chávez, 2007, emphasis added).

This explicit balancing posture toward the United States is elaborated later in the same document, which specifies that the objectives in relations with Russia are (1) to consolidate the emerging, full-fledged political alliance based on common antiimperialist interests, (2) to encourage the creation of productive areas of technological exchange and for the *strengthening of the national defense*, and (3) *to consolidate a common position in international organizations* (emphasis added).

While with Russia the goals aim for a politico–military relationship, with China they highlight an economic–political nature, with (1) the intensification

of economic, social, cultural, scientific, and technological cooperation, (2) the building of a new framework of world trade that would break with the hegemonic cores of commercial exchange, (3) the *deepening of the attraction of investments and capital*, and (4) the *creation of binational development funds to leverage projects* (emphasis added).

In 2012, the year of Chávez's final election, the last national plan was presented, the PDP, which would also be in force under the Maduro administration and was different from the PPS. Whereas the PPS was drafted in a moment of growing international prominence for Chávez's Venezuela, the PDP was written during a downward turn characterized by setbacks and contradictions. The first setback was the loss of the referendum for constitutional reform in 2007. Although Chávez was reelected in the electoral amendment referendum of 2009, the 2007 elections had shown the electoral boundaries of the Chavist movement. The 2010 parliamentary elections returned some balance to the VPS, but not as much as had been expected, because Chávez's Organic Law on Electoral Processes dominated the National Assembly and altered the electoral circumscriptions, allowing for a disproportionate representation of Chavist votes (Rachadell, 2010).

In the economic realm, the effects of the temporary drop in oil prices on the Venezuelan economy were acute. The increase in the dependence on oil income as percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) went from 9.6% in 1999, to 23.8% in 2005, and then plummeted to 7% in 2009 (World Bank, 2017a). Between 2006 and 2012, Venezuela's international reserves as a percentage of the country's total external debt fell from 81.3% to 22.6% (World Bank, 2017b).

In this period, prior to the publication of the PDP, relations with the United States reached their lowest point. The U.S. ambassador in Caracas, Patrick Duddy, was expelled in September 2008, on charges of espionage and of instigating a coup through contacts with military officers. Meanwhile, the 2008–2009 global financial crisis affected world oil demand, with the price of crude oil dropping from U.S.\$112 to U.S.\$35 in only 9 months (Energy Information Administration, 2017). At the same time, relations intensified with extra-regional powers, not only China and Russia but also Iran, increasing the political distance from Washington, although Barack Obama's arrival to the White House allowed for a *détente*, with a brief encounter between the two presidents at the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago in April 2009.⁵

The ultimate setback came in June 2011, when Chávez announced that he had cancer. For almost a year and a half, secrecy engulfed the presidential figure. He organized his campaign for the 2012 elections early, allegedly to allow him to make it to the elections alive. On December 8, 2012, Chávez, reelected but never sworn in, issued his final radio and television address. He made known his fragile state of health and appointed his vice president, Nicolás Maduro, as his successor within the Chavist movement in the case of his death. He also listed the achievements of the Bolivarian Revolution since 1999, which included, "...the process of strategic alliances (...), Venezuela in Mercosur (...). Venezuelan strategic alliance with China, Russia, and with many other countries of the world. (...) these are things that have happened,

that have been taking place, step by step, as a product of this revolution that broke out in Latin America" (Chávez, 2012b).

The PDP stresses five "historical, national, strategic, and general objectives." (Chávez, 2012b, p. 7). The fourth objective is "to contribute to the development of new international geopolitics in which a multi-centric and pluri-polar world takes shape that allows for the achievement of universal equilibrium and ensures planetary peace." Objectives 1, 3, and 5 cover the preservation of national independence, Venezuela's conversion into a "power country" in Latin America, and the preservation of life on the planet and human salvation (Chávez, 2012a).

This contextual-document analysis sheds light on the existence and evolution of the grand strategy of Chávez's Venezuela. Two factors stand out, one, a clear trend toward the internationalization of the Chavist project, and two, a progressive identification of actors and objectives in the framework of this grand strategy. The internationalization of the Chavist project responds to the national interest interpreted by Chávez but depends on the capabilities available for the mobilization of resources. This internationalization is assumed as a necessary step in the defense of Venezuela's autonomy, through revolutionary political change. In addition, it is exposed as a natural evolution of the revolution's humanistic content. The United States is increasingly identified as the main threat to the Bolivarian Revolution and to the diversification of Venezuelan political and economic relations, expressly with Eurasian great powers such as China and Russia, in pursuit of higher margins of autonomy. The grand strategy of Chavist foreign policy has been established as a way to reach the goals of autonomy.

The driving force behind these documents is power centralization. The evolution of the Chavist grand strategy in its documents provides an overview on the process of deepening the political project. Competitive authoritarianism served as the optimal formula of domestic politics for the projection of this assertive foreign policy. This form of authoritarianism allows for the concentration of power while offering a cover of electoral legitimacy that gives stability (Levitsky & Way, 2010, pp. 5–20). The deterioration of Venezuelan democracy under Chavism came about through the process of centralization of power, and this centralization permits a larger margin in foreign-policy maneuvering, as peripheral realism describes. Figure 1 shows the evolution of democracy in Venezuela from 1991 to 2015.

As Venezuelan politics became more authoritarian and the power of the president became more centralized, the Chavist grand strategy developed a wide-ranging foreign-policy autonomy. This process explains its progressive international ambitions, at least in declarative terms. The asymmetry in the international system led the Bolivarian Revolution to cling increasingly to the concept of "independence" and to compensate for its relative weakness through internal authoritarianization and external diversification.

The following section provides evidence of this second strategy in the framework of foreign policy, external diversification through the deepening of relations with China and Russia in detriment to the relationship with the United States. These documents are interpreted and compared with energy and military-trade data, and multilateral diplomatic patterns to confirm the

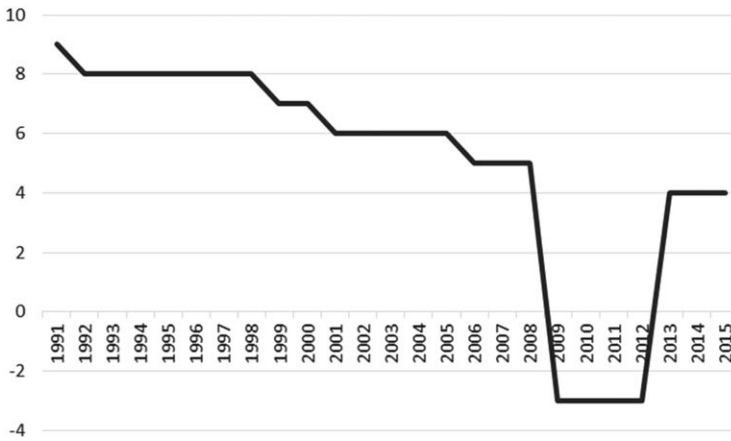


Figure 1. Evolution of Democracy in Venezuela Polity Index

Source: Polity IV Project (2016).

The data in the Polity IV Project do not cover the entire period studied in this article. More recent data, although measured differently, broaden the outlook. For 2016, The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index assigns the Venezuelan regime a score of 4.68 on a scale of 0–10; it averaged 5.16 between 2006 and 2015 (EIU, 2017). Freedom House gave the country a score of 30 out of 100 on freedom, and 2016 as the first year, since 1999, in which the country went down from the category "Partly Free," to "Not Free" (Freedom House, 2017).

degree of congruence between the Chavism-based documents and Chavism's foreign-policy strategy toward the three major powers chosen for this study.

Chavism's Grand Strategy Toward the Great Powers: Congruence Analysis

Once Chavist Venezuela's grand strategy has been identified, the next step is to determine whether it has behaved according to its own guidelines. One of the main problems in a foreign-policy analysis is the link between words and action (Goldstein & Keohane, 1993). As a revolutionary-styled government, Chavist Venezuela has set global targets beyond its material capacities and may have trouble fulfilling its promises of contributing to change in the international system. The legitimacy of Chavism as an international-order-transformation movement has rested on an apparent consistency between its international discourse and its foreign policy, but is it only discourse? What is the logic behind the Venezuelan Chavist foreign policy strategy? Is there congruence between what has been shown as the Chavist master foreign-policy plan and Venezuela's diplomatic actions since 1999? To answer these questions, a congruence analysis is used, which confronts theories or propositions with empirical evidence to establish the degree of correspondence between them (Blatter & Haverland, 2012, pp. 144–146). In this case study, the empirical evidence is processed through qualitative interpretation and statistical analysis of three variables—oil trade, supply of military technology, and degree of alignment in the UNGA and the UNSC.

The first part of this congruence analysis is on the oil trade and financial links. For more than a century, Venezuelan crude-oil exports went mainly or

Table 1. Growth in U.S. and China Crude-oil Imports

	1999–2001	2002–2007	2008–2012	2013–2016
U.S.	7.00%	7.60%	–15.40%	–7.00%
China	87.70%	104.90%	34.30%	19.50%

Source: Energy Information Administration (2017).

solely to the United States. In Chávez's grand strategy, this high dependence had to be mitigated through market diversification. The only market able to absorb part of the Venezuelan oil production was China.⁶ Table 1 shows the growth rates of crude-oil imports by the two powers in the periods of the documents that depicted the Venezuelan grand strategy.

Responding to structural trends on the world energy market, Venezuela has redirected its efforts to gain access to Asia-Pacific, especially China. The initial official thesis gives economic reasons for this change, but an analysis of the documents shows an emphasis on the geopolitical importance of market diversification. Time confirmed this trend, even though it has now reached its limits, with the slowdown in Chinese demand and the loss of productive capacities of the state oil giant PDVSA.⁷ Despite the physical distance between Venezuela and China, Venezuelan crude-oil export rates to China have grown 39%, while, each year from 1999 to 2016, Venezuela exported 3% less crude oil on average to the United States (Energy Information Administration, 2017). Figure 2 shows oil data that is consistent with the Chavist grand strategy of autonomy through diversification.

This tendency to favor the Chinese market to the detriment of the U.S. market has been an edge in Venezuela's economic relationship with China, but not the only one. PDVSA partitioned the Oil Orinoco Belt (OOB) into four exploitation fields—Boyacá, Junín, Ayacucho, and Carabobo—which in turn

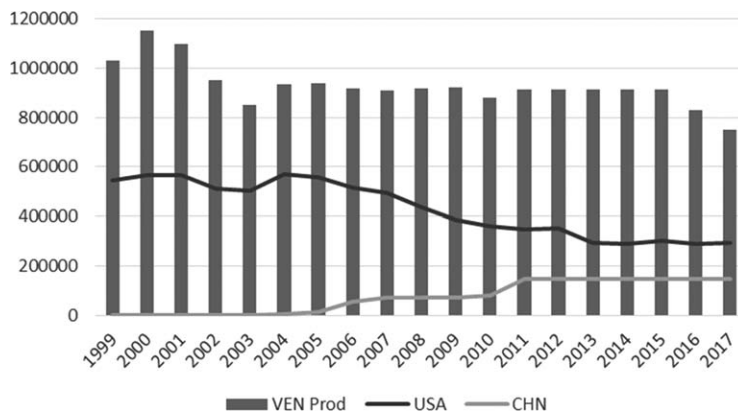


Figure 2. Venezuelan Oil Production and Exports to the United States and China (Thousand Barrels)

Source: Energy Information Administration (2017).

are divided into 29 blocks. China, represented by the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), is the only participant country positioned in more than one exploitation block, controlling three in Boyacá, Junín, and Ayacucho fields (Nava, 2014). In addition, China has become Venezuela's main creditor. Between 2007 and 2016, Venezuela received on loan from China almost U.S.\$57 billion, through the Joint Chinese–Venezuelan Fund (Hsu, 2016). This fund, fed with resources from the Chinese Development Bank and the Venezuelan National Fund for National Development (FONDEN), has created financial dependency on China but has increased the margin of maneuver with multilateral credit institutions.

The diversification of Venezuelan foreign relations can also be seen in defense. The embargo on parts for the fleet of F-16 Fighting Falcons that the United States imposed on Venezuela at the beginning of the Chávez administration pushed Caracas to other suppliers. The West's high technological influence in the military industry meant that few weapons systems in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) area did not contain components with patents owned by the United States. This situation led Chávez's Venezuela to renew its weapons systems through two new suppliers, Russia and China. The Soviet technological heritage allowed for the development of a military industry far from U.S. influence. Caracas and Moscow underwent a rapprochement, which was key to a relationship that was included gradually in oil-cooperation agreements. Adriana Boersner and Makram Haluani (2013) note that,

Developing a “military diplomacy,” Moscow has sold significant quantities of military equipment to Venezuela and other Latin American countries (...). Venezuelan–Russian relations became more dynamic since 2004, following the signing of bilateral documents linked to economic and technological cooperation, including new projects for the creation of companies in petrochemical, oil and gas, [and] technology transfer from Russia to boost Venezuelan companies, and trade in armaments. (pp. 75–76, author's translation)

Politicians and academia have warned about the geopolitical and security implications of Chinese involvement in Latin America, especially in Venezuela (Ellis, 2009), but the only extra-continental military presence in the region has been Russian. In September 2008, the nuclear cruiser *Peter the Great* and the submarine destroyer *Admiral Chabanenko* visited Venezuela's main port, La Guaira, and carried out joint exercises with the Venezuelan navy (El País, 2008). Also in September 2008, two strategic bombers, *Tupolev Tu-160* and *Blackjack*, of NATO denomination, were on exhibition in Venezuela (FOX News, 2008). Five years later, the same bombers visited Venezuela and Nicaragua, causing an incident when crossing Western Caribbean airspace in a zone disputed by Nicaragua and Colombia (Noticias RCN, 2013). Also in 2013, a Russian flotilla, headed by the flagship cruiser *Moscow*, visited Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela (El Nuevo Herald, 2013). These types of interactions in defense have strengthened ties arising from the acquisition of Russian weapons, which has been accompanied by the constant flow of Venezuelan military personnel to Russia to receive training. Table 2 compares the equipment purchased by Venezuela from China, Russia, and the United States since 1999.

Table 2. Venezuela Arms Acquisitions from China, United States, and Russia (1999–2016)

Recipient/ Supplier (S) Or Licensor (L)	No. Ordered	Weapon Designation	Weapon Description	Year Of order/ License	Year(s) Of Deliveries	No. Delivered/ Produced
Venezuela S: China	(3)	JYL-1	Air search radar	2005	2006–2007	(3)
	(7)	JYL-1	Air search radar	(2006)	2008–2009	(7)
	(3)	JY-11	Air search radar	2008	2010–2011	(3)
	18	K-8 Karakorum-8	Trainer/ combat ac	2008	2010	18
	(100)	PL-5E	SRAAM	(2008)	2010	(100)
	8	And-8	Transport Aircraft	2011	2012–2014	8
	(18)	SM-4 81mm	Self-propelled mortar	2012	2014–2015	(18)
	(18)	SR-5	Self-propelled MRL	(2012)	2014–2015	(18)
	(40)	Type-07P /VN-1	Vfd	2012	2014–2015	(40)
	(121)	VN-4	Vct/APC	2012	2013–2015	(121)
	(25)	ZBD-05 /VN-18	Vfd	(2012)	2015	(25)
	(25)	ZTD-05 /VN-16	Light tank	2012	2015	(25)
	9	K-8 Karakorum-8	Trainer/ combat ac	(2014)	2016	9
	1	Mi-26	Transport Helicopter	2005	2007	1
	3	My-35M	Combat Helicopter	2005	2006	3
	5	My-35M	Combat Helicopter	2005	2006	5
	(6)	Mi-8MT /Mi-17	Transport Helicopter	2005	2006	6
	(200)	KAB-500 /1500	Guided Bomb	(2006)	2007–2008	(200)
	(50)	Kh-29 /ACE-14 Kedge	ASM	2006	2008	(50)
	(50)	Kh-31A1 /AS-17	Anti-ship missile / ARM	(2006)	2008	(50)
(50)	Kh-59Ovod /I-18	ASM	2006	2008	(50)	
2	Mi-26	Transport Helicopter	2006	2007–2008	2	
2	My-35M	Combat Helicopter	2006	2008	2	
(14)	Mi-8MT /Mi-17	Transport Helicopter	2006	2008–2009	(14)	
(18)	Mi-8MT /Mi-17	Transport Helicopter	(2006)	2009–2010	(18)	
(100)	R-27 /AA-10	BVRAAM	2006	2007–2008	(100)	
Russia						

Table 2. Continued

Recipient/ Supplier (S) Or Licensor (L)	No. Ordered	Weapon Designation	Weapon Description	Year Of order/ License	Year(s) Of Deliveries	No. Delivered/ Produced
	(150)	R-73/AA-11	SRAAM	2006	2006-2008	(150)
	24	Su-30MK	FGA aircraft	2006	2006-2008	24
	(2000)	Igla-S/SA-24	Portable SAM	2008	2009-2010	(2000)
	(11)	S-125 Pechora-2M	SAM system	(2008)	2011-2014	(11)
	(550)	V-601/SA-3B	SAM	2008	2011-2014	(550)
	(48)	2S19 Msta-S 152mm	Self-propelled gun	2009	2011-2013	(48)
	(13)	2S23 Nona-SVK	Self-propelled mortar	2009	2011	
	(1000)	9M117 Bastion/AT-10	Anti-tank missile	(2009)	2011-2013	(1000)
	(250)	9M317/SA-17 Grizzly	SAM	(2009)	2013	(250)
	(75)	9M82M/SA-23A	SAM	2009	2013	(75)
	(150)	9M83M/SA-23B	SAM	2009	2013	(150)
	24	BM-21 Grad 122mm	Self-propelled MRL	(2009)	2011	(24)
	(12)	BM-9A52 Smerch	Self-propelled MRL	(2009)	2013	(12)
	(123)	BMP-3	Vfd	2009	2011-2013	(123)
	(114)	BTR-80A	Vfd	2009	2011-2014	(114)
	(12)	Buk-M2/SA-17	SAM system	(2009)	2013	(12)
	(3)	S-300VM/SA-23	SAM system	(2009)	2013	(3)
	92	T-72M1	Tank	2009	2011-2013	92
	24	2B11 120mm	Mortar	(2010)	2011-2012	(24)
	(2000)	Igla-S/SA-24	Portable SAM	(2011)	2012	2000
United States	4	Bell-412	Helicopter	1997	1999	4
	2	HS-7	ASW sonar	1998	2002	2
	2	Caterpillar-3616	Diesel engine	1999	2001	2
	(3)	Bell-412	Helicopter	(2001)	2003	(3)
	4	F-28	Light helicopter	2001	2002	4
	16	TH-28/480	Light helicopter	2014	2015	(16)

Source: SIPRI (2017).

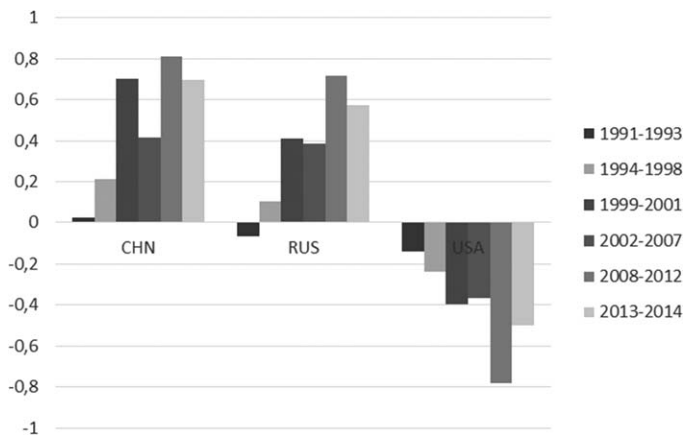


Figure 3. Venezuelan Voting in the UNGA (Correlation Coefficient)

Source: Voeten and Merdzanovic (2009). Author's calculations.

To establish control cases, the votes from Carlos Andrés Pérez's administration were included—since the dissolution of the USSR, 1991–1993—and from Rafael Caldera's administration, 1994–1998. Systematized data available on UNGA voting are until 2014.

The third part of this congruence analysis is diplomatic, covering Venezuela's degree of alignment to the three powers in the UNGA and the UNSC from 1999 to 2016. This analysis uses Erik Voeten and Addis Merdzanovic's (2009) database of the UNGA, updated through 2014. For the 2 years that Venezuela was in the UNSC (2015–2016), when Maduro was president, the author created a database for this research. The data-analysis method used was the correlation coefficient. The analyzed data for the votes in the UNGA were divided into periods corresponding to the various stages of Chavist administration plans, and only on votes on matters that the U.S. Department of State considered as important.

Figure 3 shows that Venezuela aligned increasingly with China and, to a lesser extent, with Russia, and decreasingly with the United States. Curious to note is that in the control periods (1991–1993 and 1994–1998), there is no significant alignment with any power. In fact, although not significant, Venezuela did not align with Washington on important voting. This pattern was maintained, although it was statistically significant only from 2008 to 2012. That same period shows a highly significant alignment with China and Russia. It was also the period of greatest regime authoritarianization (see Figure 1). The data show the differences in the autonomy strategies of the Chavist governments and its predecessors; while the governments of traditional leaders of Venezuelan democracy were in favor of autonomy based on nonalignment, Chavism followed a strategy of polarizing alignment in the name of extreme diversification.

Table 3 shows the behavior of Chavist Venezuela in the UNSC. Once again, the shift toward Sino-Russian positions is evident, but two considerations must be made. On the one hand, it is polarized with the United States. Although there is still a distance from Washington's vote, it is evident that in international security matters, Chavism under Maduro decided not to

Table 3. Venezuela and the Major Powers Votes in the UNSC, 2015–2016 (Correlation Coefficient) N = 144

	Venezuela	China	Russia	U.S.
Venezuela	1			
China	0.722*	1		
Russia	0.781*	0.818*	1	
U.S.	0.115**	0.193**	0.110**	1

Source: United Nations (2017). Author's calculations.

*A strong uphill (positive) linear relationship; **A very weak uphill (positive) linear relationship. For votes in the UNSC, an analysis was run with all resolution proposals taken and vetoed. The period covers Venezuela's two years on the UNSC—the only period in which Chavism has succeeded in sitting one of its representatives on this Council—, analyzing statistically the votes on the 144 draft resolutions.

confront the United States as much as it had in earlier periods in the UNGA. It may be due to the very nature of international security and to the great consensus among major powers or to the interests of regime survival, since Venezuela no longer had a charismatic leader and had gone into economic recession (Mijares, 2017). On the other hand, there is a slight inclination toward the Russian vote over the Chinese, which is contrary to the pattern seen in the UNGA. It suggests the increasing proximity between Caracas and Moscow on international security matters that can be supported by considering related events.

Venezuela has become involved in Russian geopolitics, supporting Russia's diplomatic and military actions in its conflicts with Georgia and Ukraine. During and after the Russia–Georgia war of August 2008, Caracas diplomacy not only supported Moscow but also recognized the republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2009 (Euronews, 2009). The same happened in 2014, when during the Russia–Ukraine crisis, Venezuela took the Russian side and accused the West of plotting against Russia (Russia Today, 2014).

Inferring Grand-Strategy Congruence

From this review, it can be inferred that there is congruence between the Chavist grand strategy and its implementation in foreign policy. According to the guideline documents behind Venezuela's international action since 1999, diversification is an intermediate paramount objective, seeking a multipolar world order in which the Bolivarian Revolution could have more maneuvering room. The gradualness exposed in documents of the Chavist grand strategy is confirmed by its concrete decisions made between 1999 and 2016, particularly in its relationship with the United States, China, and Russia. The idea of strengthening ties with the two Eurasian powers to weaken the link of dependency on the U.S. superpower is seen in the three types of indicators selected for the congruence analysis.

Regarding economic relations—finances and energy—the evidence is crystal clear on what guidance documents say about the Venezuela–China relation. It is not surprising or original, because with the rise of China over the

last two decades, there has been a trend in the Global South to get closer to this Asian power. There are economic and political reasons, including Chinese tolerance of authoritarian regimes, so different from liberal Western principles. This tolerance has been studied under the label of “Beijing consensus” (Halper, 2010; Ramo, 2004). The novelty was that Venezuela, located in the historically U.S. economic sphere of influence and international financial system, used its oil resources to challenge Washington in a clearly asymmetric struggle, with disastrous potential outcomes for the Venezuelan people (Schenoni & Escudé, 2016, p. 10). To assume the role of “rebel state” (Schenoni & Escudé, 2016, p. 7), Chavist Venezuela took a calculated risk in which protection from other great powers was a central factor, similar to the security strategy of Southeast Asian minor powers that link to the United States to balance China (Acharya, 2004).

The role played by Russia in this game of soft balancing against the United States has been predominantly military. Although the degree of Russian involvement in Latin American affairs—through Venezuela—is far from the military ties that Washington has held with former Soviet republics and satellites in the post-Cold War period, the approach has no precedent in the Western Hemisphere since the collapse of the USSR. The preference for Russian and even Chinese weapons systems over U.S. arms is a contestation to Washington. This trend is an indicator of the political rift with the United States and of Venezuelan interest in strengthening its autonomy with respect to the hemispheric superpower. It responds to the expressed purpose of “fostering the creation of areas of productive and technological exchange for the strengthening of the national defence,” as is written in the PPS. Another factor that confirms the consistency of Venezuelan policy is the hosting of Russian warships and aircraft visits. It is remarkable that these contacts took place at critical moments in Russian relations with the West regarding former Soviet space, especially in the wars and crises with Georgia and Ukraine, former Soviet republics that have developed a special relationship with NATO. Venezuela tried to merge its strategy of soft balancing against the United States with Russian interest to counteract the presence of a rival in its own region, through its own presence in the rival’s region.⁸

Finally, there is the international political-alignment analysis. The application of a correlation coefficient test is new in the study of VFP. This type of test does not establish causality per se, but in the case of this research it is employed within the context of a congruence analysis, using the correlation coefficient to confirm Chavism’s strategic propositions. On the one hand, the growing alignment with China and Russia, which is a significant deviation with respect to U.S. positions in the international system, is described in the documents of Venezuelan grand strategy toward major powers. On the other hand, the congruence analysis explores the latest available data on Chavist Venezuela’s behavior at the United Nations (UN), specifically in the UNSC. During the Chávez years, Venezuela did not have the regional support to occupy a seat on this Council. Paradoxically, it achieved a seat during a period of weakness and lower international effects of Venezuelan diplomacy. The analysis reveals new alignment with China and Russia but provides an additional factor that shows a slight tilt toward Moscow. The reason for this

pro-Russian tilt is Syria, since the Russian and Venezuelan governments maintain close ties with the ill-fated regime of Bashar al-Assad.

Congruence is shown in the Chavist foreign-policy strategy, turning VFP toward the great powers to undermine the international influence of the West and its system settings. This policy is framed within a grand-strategy logic of autonomy through diversification. For that purpose, Caracas has aligned with (re)emerging grand powers enough economic, military, and diplomatic might to challenge U.S. primacy. In addition, the alignment coincides with powers that have authoritarian regimes—bureaucratic in the case of China, and personalist in the case of Russia—, suggesting an ideological link beyond geopolitics. The results of the congruence analysis show consistency between the grand strategy and tactics, confirming the initial assumptions of this the research.

An interesting finding of this research not contemplated in the neoclassical-realism approaches on balancing policy is the assignment of roles to the great powers in the context of Venezuelan international goals. While the U.S. role as a hegemonic or imperialist power is clear, the roles assigned to China and Russia are more specific than as generic offshore balancers. The roles that Caracas assigns to China and Russia are differentiated clearly by capabilities and tasks. While China fills mainly the role of financial and commercial balancer, Russia plays one of military and technology provider, as well as geo-strategic balancer. Recently, Moscow has also been a partner in Venezuelan oil strategy with OPEC (despite Saudi–Russian tensions). In the field of diplomatic alignment, Venezuela’s slight proclivity to Russia over China is also striking. Recent literature in the field of diplomatic alignment in multilateral forums suggests the political leverage of loans and FDI (Kersting & Kilby, 2016; Strüver, 2016; Wu, Fu, & Pan, 2016), but Chavist Venezuela has been slightly closer to its Russian partner, sharing geopolitical visions and regime characteristics, following a more Latin American pattern (Neto & Malamud, 2015).

Soft Balancing Against the Titans: More than One Game in Town?

The congruence analysis confirms that the strategic logic of Chávez’s Venezuela has been autonomy by diversification, especially in the expansion of the range of relations with Eurasian great powers. According to Russell and Tokatlian (2013), diversification, “...seeks to multiply the external links in order to counteract and compensate for the dependence of a single counterparty highly endowed with resources and with a great capacity for influence” (p. 162). The dominant thesis on the assertive foreign policy of the Bolivarian revolution is confirmed, since alternative geopolitical ties are established for soft balancing against the United States (Boersner & Haluani, 2013; Giacalone & Briceno-Ruiz, 2013; Romero, 2006; Serbín & Serbín Pont, 2014). It is the first and foremost great game in Venezuelan grand strategy, strengthening ties with China and Russia and soft balancing against the United States, the same relationship that Beijing and Moscow have with Washington (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010).

Venezuela's relationships with China and Russia vary. First, they vary in the type of bond—predominantly financial–energy or predominantly technological–military. Second, they vary in the specific objectives pursued by the two powers. The Venezuela–China relationship has revolved around a financial–energy link that has primarily responded to the imperative of energy security for an emerging great-power industrial boom (Downs et al., 2000; Kreft, 2006; Shaofeng, 2011). Through its position in Latin America, China has triggered alarms for U.S. national security (Ellis, 2009; Mearsheimer, 2014a), and the “Pacific rise” thesis has gained ground in recent years (Buzan & Cox, 2013; Zhang, 2015). Brzezinski's expression about China, “Make business, not war” (Brzezinski & Mearsheimer, 2005) is key to this great power relationship with Caracas, at least *prima facie*. Chinese interest in soft balancing against the United States in the historical U.S. region of influence seems difficult, as is evidenced by the political alignment of votes in the UNGA and the UNSC. Consequently, in the Venezuela–U.S.–China triad, soft balancing is primarily—but not exclusively—of an economic nature, but still undermines U.S. influence on Venezuela. This triad shares the complex characteristics of the U.S.–China dyad.

On the other hand, the characteristics of the Venezuela–U.S.–Russia triad have been typical of the U.S.–Russia dyad in the last decade. The central feature is geostrategic rivalry (Stent, 2012), derived directly from the end of the Cold War and U.S. primacy. This apogee led to NATO's expansion to the East, with the subsequent geopolitical cornering of Russia (Mearsheimer, 2014b). The expansion of the West into former Soviet space has thwarted the development of the Russian Eurasian Economic Union project (Tarr, 2016). The possibility of establishing technological–military ties with an oil-revolutionary state in the U.S. periphery was an imperative geopolitical tactic for Putin's Russia. The Venezuela–Russia relationship does not have the financial stature of the Venezuelan–Chinese one, given the evident economic dimensions; China's GDP is more than eight times the size of Russia's, but this relationship includes a geostrategic and military element, less important in the relationship with China. Furthermore, the intergovernmental relationship has developed a special bond in both cases, since there are competitive authoritarianisms (Corrales, 2015; Levitsky & Way, 2010).⁹

The two triads are part of the dominant narrative on the contemporary rivalry among the major Eurasian powers (East) and the U.S. superpower (West) (Brooks et al., 2012; Brzezinski, 1998; Layne, 1997; Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016). Using Brzezinski's (1998), terms, in this rivalry, Venezuela is a “geopolitical pivot,” while the three great powers are “geostrategic players,” but the relationship between these three powers is more complex than the Eurasian–U.S. rivalry narrative suggests. In spite of the diplomatic proximity between China and Russia and the institutionalization of this relationship (Ambrosio, 2017), the great power relations in border areas are susceptible to friction and competition (Alexseev & Hofstetter, 2006; Garnett, 2000; Tremin, 2012), so there is the possibility of a sub-game in VFP toward the great powers. This assumption leads to a third triad, Venezuela–China–Russia, that would be a tactic of “softer balancing” against China through a special

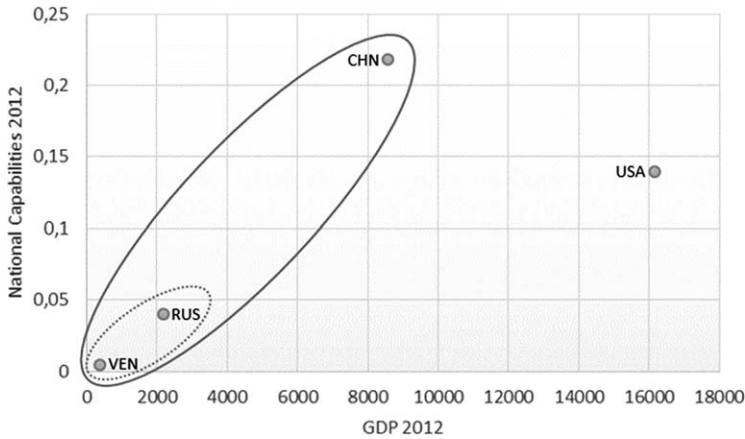


Figure 4. Soft Balancing and Softer Balancing Policies

Sources: World Bank (2017c); Singer, Bremer, and Stuckey (1972).

relationship with Russia. Figure 4 shows soft balancing and softer balancing policies in a power-coordinate system.

The analysis in this article suggests a slight Venezuelan tilt toward Russia, especially in recent years. It does not imply a move away from Beijing but a policy of greater engagement with Moscow. This claim is sustained by the slight but striking tilt of Venezuelan votes toward Russia in the UNSC. Unlike general issues on the international agenda covered in the UNGA, matters in the UNSC pose a higher loyalty test, because the issues discussed are security-related, a key factor in international politics and foreign-policy agendas. In the UNSC between 2015 and 2016, Venezuela was consistent in the defense of the Bashar al-Assad regime, accompanying Russia in the protection of its Syrian ally.

Additionally, the role of China as Venezuela's main creditor must be examined. Before the collapse of oil prices and the governance crisis that Maduro has faced, exacerbated in 2017, financial experts claimed that China had lost interest in continuing to finance Venezuela, at least at the pace that it had been doing so (Gillespie, 2016). The fragility of the Venezuelan economy seems to have discouraged the Chinese, but not so the Russians. The Russian state oil company Rosneft promised an injection of capital into PDVSA, through the creation of a new joint venture. In this way, and in triangulation with the Central Bank of Venezuela, the country could cope with the heavy debt payments in 2017—of approximately U.S.\$10 billion (Reuters, 2017). These events occurred before the delays and China's reluctance in response to the uncertain financial and political future in Venezuela. Moreover, Russia has become Venezuela's main partner in the exploitation of its oil, in compliance with the provisions from the former Venezuelan energy and oil minister, Rafael Ramírez. According to Ramírez (O'Donnell, 2016), Russia would be Venezuela's first partner in exploitation in 2021. At the beginning of 2013, it did not seem plausible, but by the end of 2015, Venezuelan-Russian joint ventures produced 209,000 barrels per day, while the Venezuelan-Chinese

joint ventures extracted only 171,000 (O'Donnell, 2016). Also, the economic role of China in Latin America is being reconsidered in the region, now that China's demand for raw materials is no longer growing (Wise, 2016).

A third argument is linked to the foreign-policy pattern of Chávez's Venezuela in other spaces and levels, such as in South America. According to Flandes and Wehner (2015), revolutionary Venezuela maintained complex relations of soft balancing against its giant southern neighbor, Brazil, as well as with other secondary regional powers, Argentina, Chile, and Colombia. The competition with Brazil for regional ideological leadership made more evident Chavism's resistance to a potential Brazilian regional primacy. The result was a policy of soft balancing against Brazil, although the two countries had common interests in the construction of South American regionalism and in soft balancing against the United States in the Western Hemisphere. An expert in South American international politics, Andrés Malamud (2011) remarks on the competition for regional leadership, quoting Sean Burges' (2007) work on the relationship between Lula in Brazil and Chávez in Venezuela, "[Brazil is] not competing for the leadership of South America... [However, it is] engaged in a contest for leadership... [with Venezuela] each offering a different vision of how the regional geopolitical, geo-economic, and ideological space should be organized and directed" (p. 1343). This pattern of conduct in South America fits with the maneuver of softer balancing against China, probably with the intention of not developing greater dependence, especially financial, on the Asian grand power.

Conclusions

This article seeks to explain and confirm the lines and general principles of Chavist Venezuela's foreign policy toward three great powers, the United States, China, and Russia. Strategic documents are analyzed, considering the national and international context in which they were written. Minimum criteria are established on the dominant logic in Bolivarian Venezuela's great international strategy. To confirm Chavism's strategic purpose, a congruence analysis is applied, considering several criteria that test the correspondence between aims and actions. The results of the analysis confirm not only the congruence of Chavism in its proposals and decisions but also the dominant academic thesis on the strategic orientation of VFP since 1999. Additionally, the research yields as an unexpected result a new subhypothesis, because the Venezuelan soft-balancing game against the United States through its relations with China and Russia comes with an appended secondary game of softer balancing against China through a progressive improvement in Caracas–Moscow relations.

In light of this finding, a question arises about the potential implications of these complex relations with major powers. This secondary game confirms the first, because it confirms Venezuela's interest in preserving its autonomy, even from nations with whom it has forged special relationships. It falls under the context of asymmetric relations referred to by peripheral realism. From this perspective, China and Russia remain as great powers with superior military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities. In Carlos Escudé's words,

in the international system, China and Russia remain as “rule-maker” powers, even when close to Venezuela (Schenoni & Escudé, 2016, p. 7). The preferential treatment toward them is mediated by an interest in reducing dependency on and the influence of the United States, even though geography may mitigate the direct effects, since both are extra-hemispheric powers. The asymmetry of the relationships leaves Venezuela in a vulnerable position, even with the great powers that are its partners, which it seeks to reduce with a greater diversification of relationships and commitment.

In sum, in relations with what are considered major powers, Venezuela has been playing soft balancing on a board that takes full advantage of the rivalry among the great Eurasian powers and the U.S. superpower. The search for greater autonomy in the Western Hemisphere has been fulfilled by the diversification of relations with extra-regional powers. The congruence analysis confirms the dominant hypothesis on Venezuelan grand strategy since 1999. In addition, the research results in a sub-thesis, that Venezuela has been playing on a secondary soft-balancing board with its two major powerful allies, with the same purpose as on the main board (albeit with less intensity), to mitigate its dependency, diversify its relations, promote multipolarity, and preserve its autonomy and its political regime.

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Notes

¹For differences between anarchy and hierarchy in international politics, see Lake (1996, 2009).

²The authors refer to the “logic of acquiescence” versus the “logic of autonomy.” In this article, we replace acquiescence with alignment as a concept that permits going beyond Venezuela’s relationship with the United States and covering foreign policy maneuvers that reach out to the other two powers in this study, China and Russia.

³On the decision between balancing and bandwagoning, see Randall L. Schweller’s (2010) contribution on Neoclassical realism.

⁴Ayoob (1997) uses the term “Third World.” This article shall use “Global South.”

⁵In the early stages of this summit in Port of Spain, Chávez approached Obama, saying, “I want to be your friend” (Nejamkis, 2009).

⁶One of the features of the Venezuelan regime is the opacity of its figures. They are even more opaque than in the authoritarian regimes of political allies and business partners, so the oil-trade figures between Venezuela and China should be taken as references and not as reliable data.

⁷This drop in productivity has led to an unprecedented increase in oil imports from the United States to Venezuela since 2012, an average of 30,000 barrels per day (Energy Information Administration, 2017).

⁸Since 1999, Vladimir Putin has been showing transparent preference for classic geopolitics and an offensive realist approach à-la-Mearsheimer (Mearsheimer 2001).

⁹The Venezuelan regime under the presidency of Nicolás Maduro is heading rapidly toward all-out authoritarianism, which recent work by Alarcón and Martínez Meucci (2017), and Mijares (2017) has shown.

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