

# La Amenaza de Chávez a la Seguridad Nuclear del Mundo

Successive U.S. administrations have proved unable or unwilling to slow Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's descent into authoritarianism.

With his authoritarian power, Chávez is working as a surrogate for Iran and Syria to help them gain nuclear weapons while at the same time working with Russia to gain Venezuelan nuclear weapons disguised, as usual, as “atom power for peaceful purposes” such as electricity.

In pointing out the above, John R. Bolton writes in the *Los Angeles Times* on September 17, 2010:<sup>1</sup>

Venezuela's Sept. 26 national parliamentary elections present a major opportunity for strongman Hugo Chavez to cement his grip on power. Despite a tradition of a free press and competitive politics, a cosmopolitan elite and extensive natural resources, Venezuela is increasingly a case study in how to lose political and economic freedom. The stakes are especially high in light of evidence consistent with an emerging Venezuelan nuclear weapons program. Ironically, Chavez's frequently clownish behavior protects him, camouflaging the seriousness of his potential threat to U.S. security and to democratic societies throughout Latin America.

Washington, under Republican and Democratic administrations, has proved unable or unwilling to slow Chavez's descent into authoritarianism.

Unlike coups by prior *caudillos* in the Americas, the situation in Venezuela today is like a slow-motion train wreck, which makes it all the more frustrating. A lack of international outrage is discouraging pro-democracy Venezuelans across the ideological spectrum. They worry they have been forgotten, especially by an Obama administration that finds foreign policy a distraction.

This month's elections, therefore, may be a last chance for change before Chavez completes his takeover. He has advanced his agenda since taking office in 1999 by fragmenting his domestic opposition, manipulating election rules, closing down opposition news sources and expropriating the considerable assets of businesses and entrepreneurs.

Chavez has materially impaired Venezuela's prosperous petroleum economy by failing to make prudent investments and improvements, while using substantial oil revenues to consolidate his hold on power.

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1. <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/sep/16/opinion/la-oe-bolton-chavez-20100916>

Even more disturbing are Chavez's international threats. While Latin American democracies have refrained from doing anything that smacks of "interference" in Venezuela's internal affairs, Chavez has felt no similar compunction. For example, it's clear he has sheltered, supplied and financed FARC guerrillas who seek to overthrow the government in neighboring, and still-democratic, Colombia. In decades past, accusations that the United States was engaged in such tactics would have brought millions into the streets shouting "*Yanqui* go home!"

Last year, Chavez led the charge against those in Honduras trying to prevent its fragile democracy (and one of the Western Hemisphere's poorest countries) from being subverted by Manuel Zelaya, a would-be *caudillo*. Chavez has poured money — openly or through suspected clandestine channels — into elections in Peru, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Ecuador to support leftist candidates of his ilk. To that same end, he questioned the legitimacy of President Felipe Calderon's election in Mexico and purchased much of Argentina's sovereign debt. One can only imagine what he might be doing to support the Mexican drug cartels, as with their cohorts in Colombia. For that reason, Venezuelan involvement in hemispheric drug trafficking should be a top U.S. intelligence priority.

On the world stage, Chavez's behavior is increasingly ominous. As Fidel Castro has aged and Cuba's relations with Russia have faded, Chavez has stepped forward. He has engaged in extensive military cooperation with Moscow, including major acquisitions of conventional weapons, from infantry rifles to sophisticated, high-end weapons well beyond any conceivably legitimate requirements of Venezuela's military. Chavez's purchases of advanced-model Kalashnikov assault rifles, some Venezuelan businessmen and former diplomats suggest, are meant to arm *campesino* "militias" that will rally to him if Venezuela's military ever threatens his regime, or the weapons may be destined for revolutionary or terrorist groups. In either case, the consequences would be profoundly negative.

Beyond enhancing his own swaggering reputation, Chavez's growing closeness with Russia and Iran on nuclear matters should be our greatest concern. For decades, after military governments fell in Brazil and Argentina, Latin America prided itself on avoiding the dangers of nuclear proliferation. The 1967 Treaty of Tlatelolco symbolized this perceived immunity, but the region's nuclear-free status is today gravely threatened.

Now, Venezuela is openly helping Iran evade international sanctions imposed because of Tehran's nuclear weapons program. Along with the refined petroleum products it supplies Tehran, Chavez allows Iranian banks and other sanctioned enterprises to use Caracas as a base for conducting business internationally and, reportedly, to facilitate Hezbollah's activity in the hemisphere.

Even more alarming, Venezuela claims Iran is helping develop its uranium reserves, reportedly among the largest in the world. Indeed, the formal agreement between

them signed two years ago for cooperation in the nuclear field could easily result in a uranium-for-nuclear-knowhow trade. In addition, Chavez has a deal with Russia to build a reactor in Venezuela. All of which may signal a dangerous clandestine nuclear weapons effort, perhaps as a surrogate for Iran, as has been true elsewhere, such as in Syria.

President Obama and other freely elected Western Hemisphere leaders at a minimum need to tell Chavez clearly that his disassembling of Venezuela's democracy is unacceptable. This is very nearly the exact opposite of current White House policy, which attempts to appease Chavez, Castro and other leftists, as it did by joining them against the democratic forces in Honduras.

Unfortunately, with our own elections approaching in November, it is hard to get Obama's attention directed to Latin American affairs, or foreign policy generally. But make no mistake, if Chavez can intimidate his domestic opposition, manipulate election laws and extend his authoritarian control, Venezuela will increasingly be a global menace.

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