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Two Decades of Imperial Failure: Theorizing U.S. Regime Change Efforts in Venezuela from Bush II to Trump

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Two Decades of Imperial Failure: Theorizing U.S. Regime Change Efforts in Venezuela from Bush II to Trump

Abstract

Former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez ushered in the Pink Tide and the rise of the left in Latin America at the turn of the 21st century. Chávez initially won presidential elections in 1998 based on the promise of participatory democracy and tackling economic inequality, and thereafter by championing 21st Century Socialism. From the beginning, Chávez challenged U.S. global leadership by condemning its vision for the world and by cultivating an anti-imperial nexus of allies. This pattern has continued under current President Nicolás Maduro. In response, the U.S. has opposed the Venezuelan socialists throughout three successive presidential administrations: Bush II, Obama, and Trump. Taking influence from Michael Mann's IEMP model of social power, we detail the ideological, economic, military, and political strategies these administrations have used to undermine the Venezuelan government and assist right-wing opposition parties and civil society groups in Venezuela. While Bush II and Obama primarily sought to depose Chávez by bolstering right-wing political parties and groups that aimed to unseat Chávez at the ballot box, Trump has recognized a parallel government open to an extra-legal change of government and openly called for coercive regime change through a military coup d'état.

Keywords

Venezuela; socialism; U.S. Empire; imperialism; Hugo Chávez

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Introduction

Since nearly the inception of the U.S., the country has maintained an imperial relationship with Latin America. Early U.S. leaders envisioned the Western Hemisphere as their unique sphere of influence and believed it was their God-given responsibility to safeguard the region from European influence and intervene when necessary to ensure that Latin American leaders behaved correctly, a policy enshrined in the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 (Go 2011; Grandin 2006; McPherson 2016). Though U.S. leaders cloaked their imperial behavior in the language of anti-colonial solidarity, the U.S. practiced formal colonialism in Cuba and Puerto Rico, among other places, and dispatched U.S. Marines to continually invade and occupy regional lands, illustrating the tenuous reality of territorial sovereignty (Grandin 2006; Mann 2013; McPherson 2016). The use of formal colonialism, however, dissipated after World War II, and, although the U.S. has continued to use military force and to provide aid for particular militaries throughout Latin America, U.S. imperial strategies have taken alternate forms since the days of the Monroe Doctrine.

U.S. imperial ambitions in the region have long contained a mix of objectives, and we can assort and examine these objectives and the strategies used to achieve them, utilizing the IEMP social power framework designed by Michael Mann, with the acronym referring to ideological, economic, military, and political forms of power. According to Mann (1986, 2013), the exercise of social power involves multiple bases, and no one group or state agency necessarily possesses control over all bases of power. Some groups can effectively wield power in one realm in order to ultimately exercise domination in another realm. Military members, for instance, have at times mobilized their arms capabilities to overthrow existing governments and capture political power. Some political leaders have sought to garner control over economic resources as a result of their institutional position, and vice versa. As a result, Mann (1986, 2013) points out that various crystallizations of power can emerge, and, depending on the conjuncture, groups with an inordinate share of one set of resources can use them to dominate society writ large.

In the contemporary world, Mann (2013) sees globalization as characterized by the extension of these four forms of power into the broader world. Indeed, although imperialism has long been a feature of modernity, it too has taken on different forms in Latin America at the turn of the 21st century. Yet, we can still analyze and assess U.S. foreign policy objectives and strategies along these same four lines. First, at the ideological level, the U.S. has long championed a liberal democratic vision of how societies should operate (Bulmer-Thomas 2018; Go 2011; Immerman 2010). These ideas are rooted in the writings of politicians and thinkers such as John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, and Adam Smith. Despite the realities of who and what governments U.S. leaders have actually promoted, they have at least rhetorically embraced a vision that champions individual rights, civil liberties, and freedom from government intervention. This involves free-market economic policies, but it is not entirely reducible to it. For instance, it also involves a strong emphasis on freedoms of speech and religion, and the right to bear arms. It is an encompassing view of how societies should operate.

Second, economic objectives exist, and have surely often shaped and sometimes determined the direction of U.S. foreign policy. Indeed, economic objectives sometimes directly clash with broader ideological visions of what the U.S. allegedly stands for, including current U.S.

diplomatic support for the Saudi monarchy. U.S. leaders have remained interested in economic issues, such as the assurance of loan collection, expropriations of U.S. business, the creation of markets for U.S. products, and access to labor and resources. Broadly speaking, U.S. leaders have wanted to ensure that Latin American leaders service their loans, respect U.S. property, and allow entry into its markets and access to cheap labor and resources. Such interests have at times lent themselves to the usage of force or, Mann's third base, military power. Even before the Cold War, Marines routinely invaded and occupied the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Nicaragua to ensure that U.S. property was respected, loans were repaid, and, in the instance of Nicaragua, that they did not build an interoceanic canal with the British (McPherson 2016). U.S. force, though, has also been deployed for additional reasons, such as to ostensibly stop Serbian forces from ethnically cleansing Kosovar Albanians and to capture terrorist groups responsible for the 9/11 attacks on the U.S.

Finally, on the political end, U.S. administrations have continually demanded that Latin American leaders broadly align with the U.S. and its national security interests before the interests of any other country. For example, when former Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz as well as the Sandinista government in Nicaragua began to work with the Soviet Union, U.S. leaders sought to overthrow these governments (Go 2011; Grandin 2006; Mann 2013; McPherson 2016). Both Arbenz and the Sandinistas took control over formerly U.S.-owned industries. However, they were far from the only governments during the 20th century to exert such control. The Venezuelan government took control over the oil industry in the 1976, and the Bolivian government nationalized mining and tin industries in 1952. The difference, however, lay in how they cast these takeovers, and how extensive their ties with the Soviet Union were. While the latter governments did not align with the Soviet Union and explicitly made their allegiance with the U.S. clear, Arbenz and the Sandinistas embraced a more radical form of politics and explicitly insisted on their autonomy from the U.S.

In more recent years, concerns with socialism/communism have broadly given way to concerns with terrorism. Yet, since the turn of the 21st century, Latin American citizens have elected several leaders who have once again embraced socialism and challenged U.S. hegemony. Though there has been an ebb and flow of such leaders coming to power over the last two decades, we have seen them elected in places as diverse as Bolivia, Brazil, Nicaragua, Uruguay, and Venezuela. The most outspoken and controversial set of such leaders has emerged in Venezuela. Though some statespeople in the aforementioned countries have criticized neoliberal capitalism, no set of leaders has more directly confronted the U.S. than former President Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) and now Nicolás Maduro (2013-). Beginning with Chávez, the Venezuelan government limited military relations with the U.S., condemned the War on Terror, sought control over several formerly U.S.-owned businesses, aligned with U.S. foes such as China and Russia, and routinely portrayed the U.S. as bent on undermining its socialist revolution.

There is no question that recent U.S. administrations have opposed the Chávez and Maduro governments. Indeed, Bush II, Obama, and Trump not only opposed the Venezuelan government but also worked to destabilize Chávez and Maduro, and bring right-wing opposition groups into power, who have generally embraced the U.S. as a hegemonic power as well as its liberal democratic vision (Clement 2005; Cole 2017; Gill 2019; Golinger 2006). These tactics have evolved over the years and changed to fit existing circumstances on the ground. Under Trump,

however, the U.S. has explicitly greenlit military efforts to overthrow the socialists and shown support for other undemocratic measures. He has also clearly found willingness among contemporary opposition leaders, such as Juan Guaidó and Leopoldo López, to embrace such interventionist policies.

The Bush II and Obama administrations surely supported right-wing opposition parties and civil society groups, and regularly denounced Venezuela, sanctioned the government, and, in the instance of Obama, labeled the country a national security threat. Yet, Obama opened several avenues of dialogue and never openly supported military efforts to depose the government. This is not to suggest that the Obama administration never covertly encouraged a coup d'état, but only that such displays were not customary. Allegations certainly persist that the Bush II administration encouraged the 2002 coup d'état that deposed Chávez for several days, but a U.S. congressional inquiry found that this was not the case (OIG 2002). The key difference between these early administrations and the Trump administration is how bluntly Trump has sought to assist in the overthrow of the Venezuelan government by military force and how intensively his administration is willing to use economic strategies to destroy an already devastated country.

In the space below, we further detail these imperial policies, describing how the U.S. has aligned with right-wing parties and civil society groups and, at times, dissident military members to depose the Venezuelan government. Similar to Mann (1986, 2013), we break these strategies down by their ideological, economic, military, and political content, in order to show the range of tactics deployed by successive U.S. administrations. Lastly, we conclude by discussing the outstanding question of why these efforts have failed in Venezuela. We argue that China and Russia have played active roles in aligning with Venezuela. In doing so, these governments have provided crucial economic and military support, and, for many years, they have ensured that U.S. moves to isolate the country have not had as deleterious effects as they might have otherwise. We also argue that Chávez and to a much lesser extent Maduro have received support from many segments of the Venezuelan populace. Chávez himself was routinely elected in generally free and fair elections. Maduro clearly secured victory following Chávez's death in 2013. As the economic crisis has intensified, though, Maduro has taken a heavy-handed approach to ensuring he remains in power, including banning some of his opponents from running for office, enacting onerous new registration requirements, and sidelining citizens' ability to recall him from power. Likewise, he has also faced increasingly diminishing levels of support from Venezuelans.

U.S. Imperialism: Coercion and Beyond

U.S. leaders have long understood Latin America as “the backyard” of the U.S. and have embraced the Monroe Doctrine up until the present: a paternalistic approach to the region premised upon U.S. primacy and the ability to intervene when desired (Bulmer-Thomas 2018; Go 2011; Grandin 2006). Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson even explicitly referenced this policy in a speech delivered at the University of Texas-Austin in February 2018. In the space below, we recount the types of strategies used by recent administrations with an eye towards how these strategies have intensified or not, in order to draw out the differences between administrations. We begin with economic strategies, and thereafter move into ideological, military, and political strategies.

Economic Strategies

Throughout the course of the Bush II and Obama administrations, economic relations between the U.S. and Venezuela remained unchanged in some ways. Venezuelan oil continued to flow into the U.S., and many U.S.-based corporations continued to profit from economic endeavors within the country. Yet, some serious changes did ensue. Chávez exerted greater control over the oil industry; expropriated some businesses and nationalized some industries; and sought to diversify the country's economic relations away from the U.S. On all three counts, the Venezuelan government initially succeeded: it received more revenue from oil ventures, took over many businesses and industries, and established stronger relations with countries all throughout the world, but namely China and Russia.

These moves infuriated domestic and U.S. political and economic elites. Given that under Chávez, Venezuela became a donor instead of recipient nation, though, the U.S. could not use any of the leverage it has traditionally exerted through bilateral economic assistance programs or through international financial institutions (IFIs), such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, and the multilateral aid it has provided to some countries. Indeed, these are two mechanisms through which the U.S. has historically sought to alter the political-economic landscape in countries abroad (Bulmer-Thomas 2018; Mann 2013). Alongside disbursement of economic assistance, the U.S. – on its own or through IFIs – has conditioned assistance on reforms, namely privatization, trade liberalization, and other neoliberal policies (Harvey 2007).

If the U.S. could not directly alter political-economic policies within Venezuela, though, it could seek to limit the economic influence of Venezuela abroad. Though the Venezuelan economy is now in shambles, Venezuela initially provided an alternative model for many Latin American countries in the region seeking autonomy from U.S. domination. Following Chávez's success at the ballot box and following his success in developing social programs, several Latin American leaders emerged who took clear influence from Chávez, including Evo Morales in Bolivia and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. Outside of Venezuela, Chávez also sought to project power and influence. In doing so, the country initiated several development programs focused on countries within the Western Hemisphere, including with, for example, PetroCaribe, a program which has offered low-interest, subsidized oil to allied countries, such as Grenada, Haiti, and Nicaragua (Smilde and Gill 2013).

Under Obama, for instance, former Vice President Joe Biden explicitly discouraged hemispheric nations from entering into such economic relationships with the Chávez government. In 2015, he told a group of leaders from fourteen Caribbean countries in a thinly veiled reference to Venezuela that “no country should be able to use natural resources as a tool of coercion against any other country” (White House 2015). U.S. leaders, however, realized there was little they could do to stop small and poor countries within the region from accepting subsidized oil and aligning with Chávez. What is more, though, administrations previous to Trump never pursued the heights of the sanctions we see today. The Obama administration did, however, take steps towards formally identifying Venezuela and President Maduro as adversaries of the U.S. In 2015, Obama signed an executive order declaring Venezuela a threat to national security citing

human rights abuses, persecution of political opposition, and public corruption for this designation. Additionally, seven state members were sanctioned due to their ties to violence and political oppression.

Although Obama set the stage for economic sanctions against Venezuelan state members, the Trump administration has greatly accelerated their usage and intensity. At earlier moments, there was continual reference from both Chávez/Maduro and U.S. leaders concerning whether oil would ever be cut off from the country. Such a strategy, however, was never pursued under Obama and Bush II. Under Trump, however, the U.S. has initiated a policy of “maximum pressure” to depose Maduro. Most intensively, the U.S. has banned the government from profiting from any sales of products to the U.S. Given that the Venezuelan government controls its oil industry, this means that only those U.S. corporations that have received waivers from the country have been allowed to continue operating there. As a result, the government has been unable to send oil to the U.S. in order to acquire foreign exchange. Such a move has been economically disastrous for the country as it faces an existing economic crisis. This is not to suggest that U.S. sanctions caused the current crisis. However, it is true that such a move has limited the earnings of the government, limited access to foreign exchange, and contributed to hyperinflation.

Finally, while the U.S. has banned economic transactions with the Venezuelan government, it has also sought to pressure foreign governments to cut their ties with the country, including Russia and China. In the last year, the U.S. imposed sanctions on a joint Russian-Venezuelan state company owned bank (Evrofinance), as well as a Russian energy trading company (Rosneft), as these units facilitated the trade of Venezuelan oil. As a result, the Russian government itself has purchased Rosneft’s oil stakes in direct confrontation with the U.S. and set up a new company named Roszarubezhneft. In addition, the U.S. has targeted China in order to further bottleneck the trade of Venezuelan oil. Namely, the U.S. has warned that sanctions on Chinese companies purchasing Venezuelan oil are on the table. All of this, of course, comes as the U.S. has engaged in an ongoing trade war.

Ideological Strategies

As a result of limited economic leverage over the past two decades, U.S. leaders sought alternative ways to promote free-market economic ideas in Venezuela. Instead of using economic aid to shape policy, U.S. state agencies funded think-tanks and civil society organizations focused on lobbying National Assembly members and influencing debate within the country. Under the auspices of democracy assistance, the U.S. has funded such groups across the world in order to promote the same liberal democratic vision that U.S. leaders possess. Democracy assistance is provided by a range of U.S. state agencies, namely the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and its associated entities. Among the entities associated with NED is the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), which also acts as the international arm of the U.S. Chambers of Commerce (Gill 2020). CIPE has as its mandate the promotion of free-market capitalist policies across the world, and it remains the one U.S. state agency specifically and solely focused on promoting free-market economic ideas abroad. On its website, CIPE plainly

asserts that “countries need to build market-oriented and democratic institutions simultaneously, as they are essentially two sides of the same coin. Without a functioning market system, democracies will remain weak. Likewise, without a democratic process, economic reforms are unlikely to succeed.”

Elsewhere, Timothy M. Gill (2020) discusses how amid this situation the U.S. primarily sought to promote free-market capitalist policies by continually funding a think tank titled el Centro de Divulgación del Conocimiento Económico para la Libertad (CEDICE). Through CIPE, the U.S. funded CEDICE to, for example, publish op-eds in newspapers with national distribution condemning Chávez government policies, to bring opposition oriented groups together in order to devise a political-economic plan, and to host workshops all throughout the country with business leaders who opposed the Chávez government (Gill 2020). In addition, CEDICE developed policy documents for the opposition in the aftermath of the 2002 coup d'état that temporarily deposed Chávez from office. The group sought to bring opposition members together – business leaders, church leaders, opposition politicians, who had aligned under the heading of the Democratic Coordinator (CD), and to provide them with policy guidance. The group commissioned primarily economists to devise policy papers urging neoliberal economic policy reforms, such as privatization and trade liberalization, in order to push the country, in their view, in the appropriate direction. All the while, the U.S. financed these projects and even allocated funding for everything from salaries to offices and computers. Lastly, although the documents that Gill used in his analyses do not extend into the present, relatively recent investigative reporting has revealed how the U.S. has continued to fund CEDICE (*Associated Press* 7/14/2014). In addition, U.S. agencies like the NED continue to invite and host their representatives to Washington for public events.

Military Strategies

While Trump has periodically threatened the Venezuelan government with “a military option,” U.S. administrations have stopped short so far of militarily intervening in the country. Though this might seem a farfetched possibility to some, there is certainly precedent for U.S. military intervention in the region, such as in Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989 (McPherson 2016). Short of a military intervention, though, the U.S. has sought to militarily frustrate the country, primarily, once again, through sanctions on sales of military arms to the country. This, in turn, has pushed the Venezuelan government to ever rely upon Belarus, China, and Russia for arms and their periodic servicing and upgrading. Venezuela has aligned so closely with Russia, for instance, that the two countries have even engaged in periodic joint military exercises, much to the consternation of both the U.S. and neighboring Colombia (Smilde and Gill 2013).

In 2006, under the Bush II administration, the U.S. first sanctioned the Venezuelan government with regards to military weapons sales. The State Department's rationale for the arms sanctions included Venezuela's close relations with Cuba and Iran, their lack of support for anti-terrorism efforts, and the claim that they were harboring Colombian terrorist groups, specifically the FARC. On the other hand, Chávez criticized the Bush II administration for inciting terrorism themselves, especially with regard to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. These sanctions have persisted into the present under Trump.

Outside of banning such sales, the U.S. has also continually worked with Venezuela's neighbor and foe over the past several decades, Colombia. At several points over the last few years, the two countries have closed the border and recalled their respective diplomats. Venezuelan government leaders have recurrently claimed the U.S. has worked with the Colombian government to devise strategies to overthrow their government. On the Colombian end, leaders have claimed that the Venezuelan government has assisted or at least given safe haven to FARC and ELN members. These claims have continued into the present. At a recent meeting with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó and Secretary of State Pompeo himself asserted that the Venezuelan government continues to host Colombian guerrilla fighters, in addition to Hezbollah members. Hezbollah remains an organization with ties to the Iranian government, which the U.S. has designated as a terrorist group. In the current climate, following the assassination of Iranian military leader Qasem Soleimani in January 2020, such a linkage could potentially provide a justification for further interventionist tactics, a move that Guaidó and other Venezuelan opposition members surely remain aware of.

Although the U.S. has not itself militarily intervened into the country, U.S. leaders have encouraged Venezuela's own military members to rise up against the Maduro government. Under Bush II, it has been alleged that U.S. leaders worked with dissident Venezuelan military members to overthrow the Venezuelan government, most particularly during the 2002 coup (Golinger 2006). And indeed, the U.S. acknowledged that its own Department of Defense had previous contact with some of the individuals who participated in the 2002 coup (OIG 2002). However, the same U.S. inquiry also found that the Bush administration never encouraged or gave any green light to this coup (OIG 2002). The same cannot be said for the Trump administration, which has brazenly called upon Venezuelan military leaders to align with the opposition and depose the Maduro administration from power. Former National Security Advisor John Bolton, for instance, asserted that "Maduro will only use this military support to further repress the people of Venezuela; perpetuate the economic crisis that has destroyed Venezuela's economy; and endanger regional stability. We call on the Venezuelan military to uphold its constitutional duty to protect the citizens of Venezuela" (White House, 3/29/2019). Pompeo has also continually tweeted out similar calls to the Venezuelan military.

What is more, the U.S. has directly worked with opposition leader Juan Guaidó to devise schemes in which Venezuelan military members might side with him and the opposition, and publicly renounce the Maduro government. In February 2019, for example, USAID set up stations alongside the Colombian border with Venezuela and proposed to bring medicine and food supplies across the border to assist Venezuelan citizens suffering amid the economic crisis facing the country. Given its long history of intervention throughout Latin America and more specifically Venezuela (see Political Strategies for a wider discussion of USAID in Venezuela over the past two decades), the Maduro government rejected working with USAID. Maduro also rejected the U.S.'s attempt to portray itself as a benevolent actor in the region all the while enacting sanctions against the government and, in doing so, exacerbating the economic crisis (see Economic Strategies above). At the outset of the U.S. announcement, Maduro stated he would not allow USAID to bring supplies into the country. In response, Guaidó welcomed the supplies and called on supporters to come to the border to help him to bring them into the country. The expectation was that this would create a dilemma among military members, who

had received orders to prohibit the supplies from entering the country. In the end, although some few Venezuelan military members defected from the country, the scheme failed to bring supplies into the country, and it failed to cause a serious disruption in state-military relations. Maduro, if anyone, ended up looking more powerful.

As the first term of the Trump administration nears its end, U.S. military intervention appears off the table. However, we cannot entirely rule out its prospect. Trump is currently preparing for the 2020 electoral race and has also faced impeachment. His government has assassinated an Iranian government leader and heightened tensions with both the Iraqi and Iranian governments. It is clear that many in the Venezuelan opposition welcome U.S. military intervention and other extra-legal moves to displace Maduro, especially as U.S. political-economic strategies have failed to unseat him. There appears little left that the Trump administration can do with regards to the country, short of such intervention. Should the Maduro administration imprison Juan Guaidó, this might provide justification for intervention. What is more, Guaidó recently traveled the world in an effort to draw attention to alleged Hezbollah influence within the country. Hardly any serious analyst agrees that Hezbollah maintains any influence or serious presence in Venezuela. However, as we saw in Iran, the Trump administration is not averse to taking forceful and shocking measures abroad.

Political Strategies

Over the past two decades, U.S. administrations have largely combated the Venezuelan government on what we might understand as the political terrain. U.S. agencies have funded opposition political parties and civil society organizations, U.S. leaders have sought to limit Venezuelan participation in global institutions, and U.S. administrations have recurrently condemned Venezuelan state policies (Cole 2005; Clement 2007; Gill 2019, 2020; Golinger 2006). All the while, the Venezuelan government has grown closer with U.S. foes, such as, for example, Belarus, China, Iran, and Russia. China and Russia, most specifically, have become primary allies of the country – investing in key industries, lending funds for development projects, and trading with the country.

Given the lack of economic dependency upon the U.S. and the unwillingness to invade the country, the U.S. has predominantly relied upon political strategies to combat the Venezuelan government and to enfranchise right-wing political groups in the country. In doing so, U.S. democracy promoting agencies have led these efforts, including USAID, and the NED and its associated groups, including the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), CIPE, and the Solidarity Center. Before Chávez took office, the NED maintained little presence in the country. Following his election, however, the Bush II administration substantially increased funding for the organization, and the NDI established a field office in the country (Clement 2007; Golinger 2006). Though the IRI formerly worked with some youth organizations, both NDI and IRI directed their efforts towards bolstering the capabilities of right-wing political parties in the country (Clement 2005; Cole 2017; Gill 2019; Golinger 2006). In an interview with one IRI contractor, for instance, the individual told Gill, one of the authors of this paper, that the purpose of IRI activity in the country was to help the opposition “get [their] shit together so they could defeat Chávez” (Gill

2019). Putting these activities more formally, the IRI hosted workshops and held presentations in order to teach right-wing opposition party leaders from the country's most prominent center-right and right-wing political parties, such as Acción Democrática, Un Nuevo Tiempo, Primero Justicia, and Proyecto Venezuela, about how they might best garner voter support, reach out to youth voters, develop political platforms, and speak with journalists. The IRI, in addition to U.S. diplomatic leaders, also encouraged opposition parties to unify against Chávez and his allies in electoral contests so that they might not splinter their votes (Gill 2019). In 2006, for instance, the IRI encouraged opposition members to rally around opposition presidential candidate Manuel Rosales, from the political party Un Nuevo Tiempo, and even provided him with technical specialists to support his campaign.

In more recent years, the IRI, and other state agencies, have linked up with newfound political parties Primero Justicia and Voluntad Popular. Indeed, current opposition leader and self-proclaimed president Juan Guaidó remains a member of VP, which also includes additional opposition leader Leopoldo López. Though different opposition parties and their members have become more prominent than others over the course of the last two decades, opposition leaders and parties have generally aligned against Chavez/Maduro policies and the extent of government intervention into the economy (Cannon 2014, 2016). Though many in the opposition do not believe that the government should be entirely absent from the lives of the citizens, they believe that the Socialists have intervened too heavily, and that less intervention into the oil industry, and other areas, such as health and education, are required for the Venezuelan economy. The NDI, for its part, has also largely linked up with members from many of the same parties that the IRI worked with in Venezuela. However, in addition to bolstering the capacities of opposition groups, they have also worked on issues of electoral observation. In Serbia, in earlier years, U.S. support for groups documenting voter fraud helped bring down the Milosevic government (Spoerri 2015). In Venezuela, however, these efforts only served to demonstrate the legitimacy of the Chávez government and the fact that he truly received support from a majority of the voting population.

Outside of the NED and its associated groups, USAID has worked with groups in the country to ultimately depose the Chávez and Maduro governments. Though USAID worked in the country in earlier decades during the mid-20th century, they maintained little presence in the country in the immediate years before the Chávez government. In the aftermath of the 2002 coup, however, the Office for Transition Initiatives (OTI) opened an office in the country amid much criticism (Golinger 2006). While USAID works in many countries, OTI, a particular unit of USAID, operates in often war-torn and conflict-ridden countries, such as Syria and Ukraine. Among the projects that USAID/OTI devised and supported included the development of a program throughout poor Venezuelan neighborhoods where contractors worked with opposition party activists to develop community groups (Gill 2019). Though the groups professed to have a focus on vague issues such as community development and participatory democracy, the objective of the groups was to put Chávez-supporters into contact with opposition party activists in an effort to turn them away from the government. In doing so, these groups organized breakfasts and other community events to bring community members out to meet with them, and, subsequently, to put them into contact with opposition supporters. The hope was that these supporters might be able to incrementally and subtly bring them over to the right-wing opposition.

Chávez, however, continued to win elections amid this support, and USAID/OTI eventually shifted much of its focus towards burgeoning student groups that were in the streets protesting against Chávez government policies. Indeed, this is where Juan Guaidó initially got into public politics, as he worked within such student groups and together with student group leaders protested against the Chávez government. In interviews that Gill (2019) has written about elsewhere, USAID/OTI members revealed how they held workshops for right-wing student groups and provided supplies for them in order to better disseminate their messages and protest against the government. One USAID/OTI contractor referred to such student leaders-turned-government leaders as her children, demonstrating how strongly some of these individuals felt about those they worked with.

Into the present, USAID and the NED and its associated groups continue to finance groups within the country. In recent years, U.S.-Venezuela relations have plummeted well beyond what existed when Chávez remained in office. As a result, we can be sure that USAID and NED continue work with right-wing opposition groups that remain intent on deposing the Venezuelan government, namely Guaidó and his allies. Indeed, the Trump administration has been quite transparent about its increased funding for Guaidó and his allies. After cutting aid for Central American countries, the Trump administration openly redirected this aid towards Guaidó and his domestic allies. In doing so, Trump tripled the amount of support provided to him and the opposition in the years prior, that is, from \$15 million to \$52 million. If the U.S. buttressed the right-wing opposition through various state agency funding in earlier years, Trump has now went all out in his overt financial support for the opposition.

Conclusion: Theorizing Regime Change Efforts

U.S. regime change efforts have taken various forms in Venezuela over the past two decades, as laid out above. While the U.S. has worked on many fronts, its influence has been limited by the global, political-economic positioning of Venezuela. Venezuela has remained a middle-income country that has not relied upon foreign aid in the same way that many other countries throughout the world have relied upon the U.S. and foreign assistance. In addition, Venezuela possesses vast energy resources that much of the world itself relies upon. As a result, U.S. economic leverage within the country has remained rather limited. Of course, the U.S. could have always cut off trade with the country and/or banned the Venezuelan government from profiting from oil sales or any other transactions with U.S. citizens. This latter option was only exercised, though, in recent years by the Trump administration, an exceptionally undiplomatic administration that has sown chaos in many parts of the world.

Short of military intervention into Venezuela, then, the U.S. has largely used political strategies to confront the Venezuelan government and the challenge it has posed to U.S. global hegemony. In doing so, U.S. state functionaries have worked primarily through democracy promoting agencies, such as USAID and the NED, and its associated groups, in order to enhance right-wing opposition groups and assist them in potentially defeating the Venezuelan government at the ballot box or through extra-legal maneuvers. Through these groups, U.S. state functionaries have counseled opposition leaders, hosted workshops assisting them in their campaign efforts, and sought to encourage Venezuelan citizens to embrace the opposition. While the opposition has not

been without some successes over the past two decades, they have ultimately failed to dislodge the socialists from power.

Across U.S. administrations, the main difference between the Bush II/Obama administrations and the Trump administration revolves around the primary strategies that the U.S. has embraced alongside the right-wing opposition in Venezuela. During the Bush II/Obama years, the opposition largely pursued an electoral path to defeat Chávez and Maduro, that is, with the exception of the 2002 coup (Cannon 2014). In doing so, these two U.S. administrations supported these endeavors as detailed above and provided guidance and funding for the opposition. Under the Trump administration, though, the opposition has largely pursued an extra-legal path towards deposing Maduro, and the Trump administration has been more than willing to assist in leading calls for the overthrow of the Venezuelan government. As of September 2020, Maduro remains in control of the country. Nevertheless, the situation has become all the more intense with the rise of COVID-19 and with the U.S. Department of Justice indicting Maduro for drug charges and offering a \$15 million award for any information leading to his arrest.

Indeed, the global, political-economic positioning of Venezuela for most of the past two decades explains the U.S. reliance upon political strategies to undermine Venezuela in lieu of primarily economic strategies. Yet, the question remains as to why such strategies have yet to depose the Socialists. First, both China and Russia have been willing to support the country, and they have refused to back down from their support amid U.S. confrontation. There were moments during the Cold War, where the Soviet Union aligned with countries challenging the U.S. In some ways, then, Russia continues the legacy of the Soviet Union in terms of its support for some countries that also challenge U.S. global hegemony. Of course, Russia and its rulers remain motivated by far different objectives than Soviet leadership. However, the desire to needle the U.S. and project global power remains quite similar.

This is a pattern that we also see with regards to China. Amid U.S. sanctions and criticism of the country, the Chinese government has not abandoned Venezuela. There is no doubt that should China have desired a political transition in Venezuela, it would be made all the more easy. Though Maduro might paint China as a co-participant in an ideological struggle, it is also possible that Chinese leaders fear that should the right-wing opposition come to power, they might not honor existing deals that the Socialists have made with the country. If that were to happen, China might lose some of its preferential access to some of the largest oil supplies in the world. Either way, China and Russia have become critical allies that Venezuela has been able to economically and militarily count on amid its struggle with the U.S. and its escalating economic crisis.

Second, Chávez received the support of the populace throughout his time in office. It is true that citizens did not agree with every government move that he took, including a 2007 set of reforms that they voted down in a referendum. However, he decisively bested all his opponents in presidential elections across fifteen years. Maduro initially benefited from his attachment to Chávez and won a presidential election in the wake of his death. However, as the economic crisis intensified within Venezuela, it became clear that citizens were unhappy with his style of governance. As a result, Maduro jailed political opponents, jailed political protesters, altered the

playing field for elections, and removed the possibility of a recall election against him. Taken together, Maduro has taken a heavy-handed approach to ensuring that he remains in power.

Finally, not many high-ranking military members or state/government members have defected from Maduro. It is true that some citizens have turned against the government, possibly in an attempt to ensure they are not jailed by any future opposition government, but these defections have been few. Critics assert that the Maduro government has relied upon Cuban support to maintain order among the ranks of the military. Some also claim that high-ranking military members believe their safest guarantee is to remain close to Maduro, given the possibility of prosecution should they defect. Nonetheless, what remains is a military and state that is loyal to the Maduro government. Guaidó also currently claims the presidency, but he controls little if anything within the country itself. Over the past year, the Trump administration has forcefully and overtly sought to depose Maduro. In the last few months, though, he has seemingly come around to the fact that, in his words, Maduro remains “a tough cookie.” Amid claims that Maduro works with Hezbollah, and with the 2020 election on the horizon, we can be sure that Trump has left no option off the table to depose Maduro, including military action.

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