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“The Venezuela Crisis: Malicious
Influence of State and Criminal Actors”
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“Deep Down, Just One Single Government”

On Sunday, October 14th, 2007, then President Hugo Chávez made a startling statement. The president was holding his famous *Aló, presidente* TV show from Santa Clara, Cuba. Addressing Fidel Castro, who was in attendance, directly, he said, “deep down, yes, we are just one single government. [...] Venezuela has two presidents, but we are one single government. We are advancing towards a confederation of republics[...].”

On one level Chávez’s statement, almost exactly one decade ago, is an obvious overstatement: Venezuela and Cuba had and continue to have separate legal systems, administrative traditions, political cultures and economic outlooks. But the fact that such a statement could be made by one head of state to another underlines the extraordinary closeness of the Cuban-Venezuelan relationship.

What Venezuela and Cuba have is not a mere alliance: it goes much deeper than that. When we think about external influence on Venezuela, we should be clear: though other international players certainly have influence in Venezuela, no other external actor comes close to the Cubans. It’s not even close.

Built on the basis of the extraordinary personal fondness between Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro, the relationship has outlived both men to become a kind of ideological fusion. Remarkably, the smaller, weaker, poorer country in the relationship has long played the leading role in this relationship, with Cuban intelligence and Cuban political mentorship guiding much of Venezuelan statecraft, and successive Venezuelan leaders being careful to consult Havana before making policy decisions of any consequence.

In Cuba, Venezuelan socialism has found a model for how to retain political power indefinitely, how to demobilize opponents and how to keep a measure of international credibility and ideological sympathy abroad in the process. The two countries’ leaders agree on the ‘what’ —keeping power no matter what — while the Venezuelans look to Cubans for the how.

Four years after Chávez’s startling declaration, he was diagnosed with the colorectal cancer that would eventually take his life. In a startling demonstration of ideological devotion, Chávez rejected offers of treatment at some of the leading oncology centers in the world —including the world-famous, high-tech Syrian-Lebanese Hospital in Sao Paulo, Brazil— in favor of far less sophisticated treatment in Cuba. Hugo Chávez believed in the Cubans enough to gamble his life on them — and it’s a wager he lost.

Holding the terminally ill patient physically in their grasp gave the Cubans a decisive influence over his successor. It was while he was in Havana that Chávez annointed Nicolás Maduro as his successor. While we cannot know for a fact that role Cuba played in that choice, it *is* clear that Havana could not have hoped for a more pliant replacement.

Maduro as Pro-Cuban Radical

Indeed, it's difficult to overstate the weight the Cuban revolution had on crafting the worldview of Venezuela's current governing clique. President Nicolás Maduro's entire worldview was crafted in Cuba. Maduro was still a teenager when he joined Venezuela's "Liga Socialista" — a fringe, militantly pro-Cuban Marxist Party. As is well known, Maduro never went to university. Instead, as a 24 year old, he spent a year in 1986 and 1987 at the "Escuela Nacional de Cuadros" — the Cuban Communist Party's indoctrination and training school. There, alongside far left political activists and organizers from throughout Latin America, he received a year-long course to master party dogma.

In power, Maduro has surrounded himself largely with pro-Cuban extremists. The ruling clique is top heavy with activists who came up through the Liga Socialista in the 1980s, including the husband and sister team of Jorge and Delcy Rodríguez, now mayor of Caracas and speaker of the National Constituent Assembly respectively. The Rodríguez's father, Jorge, was one of the founders of the Liga Socialista, and one of its martyrs, having died under torture at the hands of the security services in 1976 as they attempted to extract information over the whereabouts of an American businessman the group had kidnapped.

Cuban influence in Venezuela now reaches into every neighborhood, town and village through the so-called Frente Francisco de Miranda, a nationwide network of state sponsored political activists organized into some 14,000 cells. Frente Francisco de Miranda activists perform key "ideological work" — indoctrination and surveillance— all around the country, closely modeled on the Cuban ideological playbook. The head of the Frente Francisco de Miranda, pro-Cuban extremist Erika Fariás, is perhaps the most powerful figure in the Venezuelan regime few people have ever heard of. Her modest official title (Minister for Urban Agriculture) and discrete media profile disguise her status as both head of one of the government's most influential mass organizations and a member in good standing of Maduro's inner circle.

But Cuba's engagement in Venezuela is also changing. Five years ago Cuban intelligence agents had a physical presence in virtually every unit of Venezuela's armed forces. That kind of unit-by-unit monitoring generated strong resentment from the Venezuelan officer corps: such close monitoring was an affront to many of them. The Cubans themselves came to see this approach as both unnecessary and counterproductive. Since Chávez's death, Cuba has recalibrated its approach, using its extreme closeness to president Maduro to focus its engagement on the top leadership level.

Today, Cuban intelligence assets run two separate "situation rooms" at Miraflores Palace, where agents process and evaluate intelligence produced by both Cuban and Venezuelan intelligence agencies. Cuban intelligence plays a central role in advising President Maduro, helping him evaluate the political moment and think through strategy and tactics. Top Venezuelan officials frequently travel to Havana to consult over especially transcendent policy decisions. In short, Cuban intelligence used to be everywhere in Venezuela, but these days it's mostly at the top.

Cuba and the Venezuelan Military

Cuba long ago identified the Venezuelan military as a strategic threat to the regime. It's important to grasp that the men and women who serve as Generals and Admirals in the Venezuelan Armed Forces today joined the military as cadets in the early 1980s, long before the rise of chavismo, at a time when the Armed Forces were dedicated to fighting

the communist threat. While many of them have been co-opted through corruption, a level of uncertainty hangs around their ultimate loyalties.

Cuba has been central in developing and implementing chavismo's response to this latent threat. Cuban influence has been crucial in designing and implementing a system to indoctrinate younger recruits and instill a sense of duty to socialist ideals first, and the constitution a distant second. But beyond that, Cuba has helped reorganize the Armed Forces to guarantee ideological conformity.

In 2006, on Cuban advice, Hugo Chávez announced the creation of the so-called Bolivarian Militia. The force was portrayed as a fifth service branch, alongside the four traditional branches: Army, Navy, Air Force and National Guard. The Bolivarian militia was to be an avowedly partisan body: an adjunct to the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela with no pretense of political neutrality.

For propaganda purposes, the Bolivarian Militia was portrayed as a response to the threat of a U.S. invasion. In fact, the Militia was created to raise the perceived costs of a traditional coup d'état on the part of the other service branches. The knowledge that tens of thousands of civilian government partisans would be armed, trained and organized along military lines to defend the regime was designed to dissuade any secret waverers in the military from attempting a coup.

For years, the Bolivarian Militia was derided as a "granny army" — a force made up of out of shape amateurs more interested in the food and other handouts the militia offered than in any serious military training. The derision stung. In 2015, again in response to Cuban advice, President Maduro launched a plan to upgrade the capabilities of the Bolivarian Militia, strengthening its training and upgrading its weaponry.

The Bolivarian Militia as a Proliferation Threat

Militia weaponry and preparedness have improved, but still lags substantially behind other service branches. Made up of civilian part timers rather than professional soldiers, it should be seen as much as a proliferation threat as a security threat. Amid Venezuela's deepening economic depression, the reality is that thousands of increasingly poor and often hungry militia members now have access to sophisticated weapons worth many multiples of their yearly income.

Of particular concern is the thousands of Russian-made Man-Portable Aerial Defense Systems (MANPADS) in the regime's possession. Reuters reported in early 2015, Venezuela has bought more than 5,000 of these sophisticated heat-seeking shoulder-mounted missiles, which are able to bring down aircraft at up to 20,000 ft. altitude.

Sources in Venezuela's intelligence services say President Maduro is moving forward with a plan to transfer as many as 1,000 MANPADS systems from the Army to the Bolivarian Militia. The proliferation concerns involved in this plan are obvious. While the Venezuelan army has problems of its own, and army weapons do sometimes end up in the hands of criminal gangs, it at least has tracking systems in place to allow the diversion of weapons to be noticed and registered. The Bolivarian Militia has neither the experience nor the capabilities to safeguard its most sophisticated weapons.

Just last month, when the Bolivarian Militia decided to hand out AK-103 rifles in preparation for "an imminent U.S. invasion", many militia members were instructed to take the weapons home with them. It is not outside the realm of possibility that

MANPADS systems could be distributed in a similar way following any new episode of diplomatic tensions.

A number of Bolivarian Militia officers in the western state of Zulia are currently being investigated for smuggling sophisticated Dragonov sniper rifles to buyers in Colombia. Even before the most dangerous weapons are transferred to Militia control, weapons diversions is already taking place.

The proliferation threat from MANPADS systems under Militia control is made especially dire by the existence of established illicit smuggling routes between Venezuela and Colombia and the United States. To put it bluntly, it would be relatively straightforward to hide a MANPADS system among the tons of cocaine already being smuggled to the United States from Colombia through Venezuela.

With Militia members increasingly facing outright hunger, just like the rest of the Venezuelan people, any MANPADS buyer in Venezuela is likely to have his pick of willing sellers once those weapons are transferred to the militia.

But proliferation concerns touch the Venezuelan army as well. There are already established contacts between arms sellers in the Venezuelan security services and armed criminal gangs in Aragua State as well as in Western Caracas. Large criminal gangs, known locally as “megabandas” typically seek weapons in order to commit crime, but sometimes sell them on to buyers in Colombia or “rent” them to smaller criminal gangs in non-competing territories that they associate with. Such networks have already obtained grenade launchers, grenades and plastic explosives from Venezuelan army units. Venezuelan intelligence agents are aware of this traffic and seek to monitor it, though they cannot always control it.

To the best of my knowledge, the plan to shift MANPADS systems from the Venezuelan Army to the Bolivarian Militia has been approved but has not yet been implemented. The proliferation threat the plans implies should not be underestimated.