



**THE STRATEGIC REVOLUTIONARY
THOUGHT AND LEGACY OF HUGO CHÁVEZ
TEN YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH**



Dossier n° 61
Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research
A collaboration with the Simón Bolívar Institute
February 2023

The images in this dossier are from the third Continental Assembly of ALBA Movements in Argentina in 2022, gathering over 300 delegates from 20 countries. The [video](#) for which these images were initially produced features a montage of people at the conference holding up 'Chávez eyes' in front of their faces. The famed image first appeared in 2012, during Hugo Chávez's final presidential campaign: a set of stylised eyes placed against a red background, with his signature and a black star in the corner, no election slogans in sight. Chávez's eyes affirm his presence amongst the people, protection of the country, and vision for the future. The iconic image has since been reproduced on posters, t-shirts, building façades, and street graffiti, becoming a popularised symbol of Chavismo that has endured beyond his own lifetime. Like in the video (produced by Comuna AV), people continue to hold up this image even a decade after his departure to collectively declare that Chávez lives in the people.

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Prologue

Simón Bolívar Institute for Peace and Solidarity Among Peoples

Hugo Chávez emerged in the history of Venezuela, the Global South, and the international revolutionary movement when the thesis that ideological disputes throughout the world had ended was most entrenched. History had reached its end, as Francis Fukuyama decreed, and the only path forward for the progress of humanity was the one paved by US-imposed unilateralism. Far from being over, however, history had an important task for the Venezuelan people, who rose up against neoliberalism in 1989 and who continue to build a project of twenty first-century socialism today.

Reflecting on the importance of the leader in a revolutionary process, historian E.H. Carr pointed out that Lenin won the support of the Bolshevik Party not through rhetoric, but through his ability to persuade and present arguments clearly and to have a ‘unique mastery of the situation’.¹ He also highlighted Lenin’s clarity of vision, pointing to his ability to internalise the interests of the working class and trust its potential to take power. It could be said that Hugo Chávez’s role in the Bolivarian Revolution was precisely that: he used his ability to interpret the needs and aspirations of the Venezuelan masses and trusted their creative powers.

Chávez led a social process that not only vindicates its own anti-colonialist tradition by renewing the ideas of Simón Bolívar

(1783–1830) – the struggle for independence, the struggle for the unity of the Latin American nation, and the struggle for social justice – but also rescues the people’s historic struggles of the twentieth century against U.S. imperialism. Based on its Monroe Doctrine, the United States intended to make *Nuestra América** – ‘Our America’ – part of its domain. Under the guidance of Hugo Chávez, the popular Latin American process defies the neoliberal avalanche by:

1. Calling for the recovery of sovereignty over the nation’s resources and decisions;
2. Promoting regional unity and integration to jointly confront the challenges of history;
3. Putting into motion a pedagogical process to counter the manufactured consent of the mainstream media and to democratise communications;
4. Putting into a place a democracy where people have direct participation and are leading agents of their own transformation; and
5. Consolidating the popular character of the armed forces within the revolution to guarantee the project’s comprehensive defence through civil-military unity.

* **Translator’s note:** *Nuestra América*, or ‘Our America’, is a phrase that refers to a political project to unify the territory of Latin America against first European and then US-led imperialism. The concept was first introduced by José Martí in 1891.

Chávez strengthened the Venezuelan revolutionary project, whose roots lie, above all else, in the Bolivarian premise of independence; the Robinsonian concept of the ‘originality’ of America, that is, the need to find formulas of our own – not imported or imposed ones – to govern our society; and the egalitarian principle of popular democracy, embodied by Ezequiel Zamora’s slogan, ‘Free Lands and Men! Terror to the Oligarchy!’. Having rebuilt the path to defend national interests and the struggle against neoliberalism, Chávez took the course of ‘twenty-first-century socialism’, bringing together elements of the current Venezuelan and Latin American reality and elements of the historical struggles of the working class in the twentieth century to build a process that is feminist, ecological, and led by the working class, with a sense of spirituality rooted in ancestral traditions and liberation theology.

In practice, Chávez undertook a political process that recovered and brought new meaning to its own identity and seized its ample resources to demonstrate that it is possible to build another society where the basic aspects of human life are not commodified. Healthcare, food, housing, and access to technology, to sports, and even to culture, within the framework of the social missions that Chávez created, gave a new meaning to Venezuelan social life and a new hope to the popular forces. This allowed for the creation of communes as the horizon of a concrete and achievable utopia at the local level and of a pluripolar world where cooperation and complementarity, rooted in a respect for diversity, could organise international relations and promote what Bolívar called the ‘balance of the universe’.

Chávez became a strategic target for the forces of imperialism and international finance capital. Under the Bill Clinton administration, the US government tried to co-opt him. Once they understood the strength of his convictions and his leadership, the George W. Bush administration attempted to overthrow him through a classic coup d'état that failed to materialise because the Venezuelan people came to his rescue, putting everything on the line. An Obama administration that sought to whitewash the bloody War on Terror opted for more covert destabilisation mechanisms, trusting that his physical disappearance would mark the end of his leadership.

However, part of Chávez's legacy was to leave the Bolivarian Revolution with a collective leadership that, under Nicolás Maduro and the revolutionary and popular forces of Venezuela, has, for over a decade, resisted the strongest aggression that the country has been subjected to both economically and socially in its entire history. The maximum pressure strategy implemented by former US President Donald Trump, aimed precisely at destroying all the social welfare gains that the revolution had built, collided with the resilience and revolutionary conviction of the Venezuelan people, who remain inspired by the leadership of Hugo Chávez.

The Left faces enormous challenges on a global level. When the Berlin Wall collapsed, faith in the transformative capacity of the people also collapsed in many organisations and structures. Chávez's strategic legacy was to have understood that crisis; to have trusted in the transformative capacity of the people; to have undertaken direct communication with them, from his program ¡Aló, Presidente! to his Twitter account; and to have woven together, through his thought,

his actions, and his words, principles, empathy, solidarity, and courage in the face of the great challenge of saving humanity and the only planet we have. Hugo Chávez showed that history is made by people taking power and overcoming dogmatism, sectarianism, and pessimism.





The Origins of Hugo Chávez's Strategic Thought

Hugo Chávez was born in Sabaneta, Barinas state, in the heart of the Venezuelan plains. The son of two primary school teachers, Chávez was a soldier who shook the continent, promoting the transformation of Venezuela from the bottom up and building a Bolivarian Revolution and ideological structure that continue to march forward a decade after his death in 2013.

Chávez's Entry into the Army and the Emergence of the MBR-200

In order to understand Chávez's strategic thought, we must first understand his roots and those who shaped his worldview. At the age of twenty-eight, already a soldier in the national army, Chávez and a group of his comrades formed the Bolivarian Revolutionary Army 2000, named after the new millennium that was approaching and the possibilities it held to break the cycles of poverty. A year later in 1983, the group was renamed to the Bolivarian Revolutionary Movement 200, also known by the Spanish acronym MBR-200.¹ The number 200 referred to the 200th anniversary of the birth of Simón Bolívar (1783–1830), known as 'the liberator' for his role leading the region to independence and seeking to unify the South

American continent into a single, integrated nation. Inspired by his legacy, the MBR-200 aimed to reform the army and start on the path towards building a new republic in Venezuela.

From the outset, in the words of Chávez, the movement sought to bring about ‘a revolution, a political, social, economic, and cultural transformation inspired by Bolívar’s approach’.² The movement grew until it had consolidated its ideological basis through the Ezequiel-Bolívar-Rodríguez (EBR) System. This system is outlined in detail in *The Blue Book* (2013), which brings together the main historical, ideological, and political theses of the process that was now underway:

Thus, my fellow compatriots, there is only one powerful project that is truly suitable, that truly corresponds, to the socio-historical nature of the Venezuelan being, who cries out once again for space to be sown in the national soul and lead its march towards the twenty-first century: it is the project of Simón Rodríguez, the master; Simón Bolívar, the leader; and Ezequiel Zamora, the general of the sovereign people.³

These three fundamental ideological axes of the Bolivarian project, he explains, are like the ‘three roots’ of a single tree.

Simón Rodríguez and the ‘Robinsonian Root’

Born in Caracas, Simón Rodríguez (1769–1854) was an educator, a philosopher, and Bolívar’s tutor. He accompanied Bolívar during the historic Oath of Monte Sacro^{*} and was fundamental in shaping Bolívar’s thought. Rodríguez, also known by his pseudonym Samuel Robinson, was more than just a teacher: departing from the rote learning and pedagogical limits that were predominant among tutors of traditional methods at the time, he instilled in his students an urgency to create original thought.

Rodríguez’s main concern was the creation of the Latin American republics. For this, the creation of the new citizen was fundamental, and education played a central role in this process. With this in mind, Rodríguez developed a method that centred work as a pedagogical tool and approach based on the notion of equality as a core principle in this new society. Each person’s experience played a formative role in this pedagogical process and in the creation of new knowledge that would lie at the foundation of the new republics.

Rodríguez developed a vision of education as a human right that must be guaranteed in the future republics. Here, education would play the role of moulding citizens who were not only ready to create new republics, but also to do so in a new way, freed from the European precepts that would only reproduce the logic of

* **Translator’s note:** The Oath of Monte Sacro refers to a vow Simón Bolívar made during his visit to the city of Rome on 15 August 1805, when he swore to fight for the freedom of the Americas from Spanish colonialism.

colonialism. In Rodríguez's view, the pedagogical process had to be imminently creative and original, as his maxim makes clear: 'either we invent, or we make mistakes'.⁴

Simón Bolívar and the 'Bolivarian Root'

The hero and liberator Simón Bolívar (1783–1830) led the continent's most extensive emancipation project from the Spanish crown. It is therefore no surprise that the Bolivarian project lies at the heart of Chávez's thought and of Venezuela's revolution. In particular, Bolívar's vision for independence and continental unity to break free from the Spanish Empire shaped Chávez's approach. Freedom and equality remained key principles, inherited from, but extending well beyond, the Haitian Revolution's fight to abolish slavery. The main goal of the struggle led by Bolívar, which remains central to the Venezuelan project, was the transformation of the anti-colonial struggle for independence into a revolutionary process that included democratic changes that would transform the material and concrete conditions of the masses and that would allow for the construction of independent states of free women and men.

Ezequiel Zamora and the 'Zamoran Root'

The Zamoran ideology, anathema to the Venezuelan oligarchy, shook the social structure of the nineteenth century, identifying the root of the fundamental social conflict in Venezuela and exposing the inequality and exclusion that the vast majority of the population

suffered. Ezequiel Zamora, born in 1817 in Cúa, in today's Miranda state, was a leader in numerous peasant actions, such as the insurrection of 1846, when he coined the historic slogan 'Free Lands and Free Men' and was appointed 'general of the sovereign people'.⁵

He fought against the oligarchy in the Federal War (1859–1863) for the right of the peasantry to an equitable distribution of land and demanded the general distribution of wealth, without which there could be no real emancipation of the people or social equality. In the words of President Nicolás Maduro, 'Chávez brings the general of the sovereign people to the present in order to give continuity to the social struggle, the battle for equality, and the fight for a genuinely and truly equal country'.⁶

From the MBR-200 to the Movement of the Fifth Republic and the Refounding of Venezuela

On 4 February 1992, with the MBR-200 and the 'tree with three roots' informing how he carried out his duty to the country, Chávez planned an attempted coup that would pave the way for a new phase in Venezuela's political history. Though the coup was unsuccessful, after being released from prison Chávez redoubled his commitment to transform Venezuela. To that end, in 1997, he led the creation of the Movement of the Fifth Republic (MVR), a coalition of left-wing parties that would act as an electoral vehicle to get him to the presidential office in Miraflores Palace.

Ever faithful to the principles of the EBR System, Chávez's priority always remained the transformation of his homeland. Venezuela had always had a constitution that guaranteed inequality and exclusion and that had caused the crisis of representation that characterised the country in the 1980s and 90s, a crisis that peaked with the *Caracazo* of February 1989.* From the outset, Chávez proposed a national constitutional assembly as a way to refound the country. As soon as he was sworn in as president in April 2002, he convened the assembly, and, once it had been approved in a consultative referendum, began a year of debates in factories, universities, neighbourhood spaces, with peasants, and in popular assemblies, among other spaces of popular democracy.

* **Translator's note:** The Caracazo was an uprising that began on 27 February 1989. Sparked by the sudden spike of gas prices and, subsequently, bus fares, people took to the street in Caracas, and soon across the country, to protest the harsh impact of neoliberal austerity measures. This moment would be a turning point in Venezuelan history and eventually play a key part in the election of Chávez.



Chávez's Strategic Thought (1992–2013)

By looking at the three roots of the EBR system, we can see that Chávez's strategic thought reveals a dialectical, complex movement that recognises and builds on the concrete reality of the Venezuelan people. It represents neither a recipe nor a set of dry academic reflections, but rather something alive and entirely revolutionary that aims to move forward step by step and overcome practical difficulties. Chávez's thought can be understood along three axes: political, socioeconomic, and regional strategies.

Political Strategy: A New Republic Can Only Be the Product of a New Type of Democracy

The neoliberal model in Venezuela led to a profound crisis of representation whereby the people, burdened with increasing levels of poverty and inequality, were not represented by the democratic structures in place. Chávez identified this crisis as a motor that would drive forward the process to create a new constitution. As Rodríguez had pointed out, and as Bolívar and Zamora put into practice, there was an urgent need to create something new, sovereign, independent, and popular.

The debate about the constitution and the charter that were to give birth to the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela proposed a radical

transformation of the way democracy was understood. No longer would Venezuela's democracy be merely representative: it would now be popular and participatory. In this model, it is the people – latent, living leaders – who are the true and original constituent power. Within this framework, the institutional structures and the government must always be democratic, participatory, and decentralised.

Following the Zamoran and Robinsonian visions, the constitution proposed a new type of relationship between what had until then been the dominant and the dominated sectors of society, as well as a new type of state and society no longer based on the subordination and exploitation of the majority. In this new conception of the state – which would later be proposed as a 'communal state' – the state's institutions walk alongside the organised population. This principle is integral to the new democratic proposal: there are no institutions without the people, and it is the people who are the true protagonists in the process to build a new democracy.

The role of the state institutions is then to facilitate, open channels, and take the necessary steps to guarantee the development of processes that improve people's lives. The role of the primary constituent – the people, as a collective body – is not merely to stand by and applaud or else criticise the actions of an élite, but instead to design and make collective decisions about the use of their own capacities and their own destiny, a destiny that is *original*, as Rodríguez called for, *sovereign*, as Bolívar called for, and *popular* as Zamora called for. Many years later, Chávez would baptise this a socialist process.

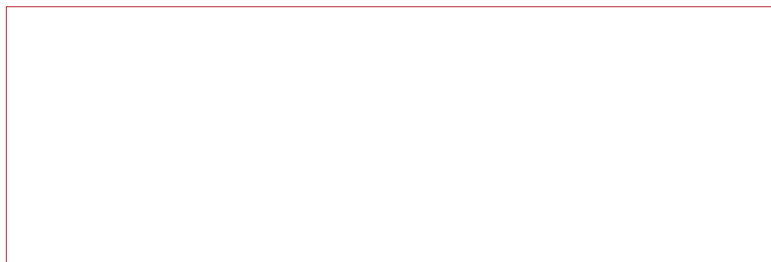
With the development of the new constitution and the creation of the Bolivarian Republic in 1999, the principles of the EBR system began to take shape in a series of concrete initiatives that emanated from the democratic processes in the popular sectors. These sectors now found themselves dealing with structures and possibilities that were inherent to their new relationship with state institutions. An example of how this system works is the ‘missions’ set up between the state and the organised sectors of society in working-class neighbourhoods to respond to the needs of residents. Some of the best-known are Mission Robinson, whose goal is to eliminate illiteracy at the national level, and Mission Barrio Adentro (‘Mission into the Neighbourhood’), with doctors from international brigade teams (many of them from Cuba) helping put in place the preventive model of medicine that is now promoted by Venezuelan health professionals.

Another step in this transformation was the Organic Law of Communal Councils (2006, amended in 2009), which proposed a state that differed starkly from the bourgeois state and would establish a series of administrative structures (communal councils, communal city councils, and councils of workers, students, peasants, and women) that could ‘directly exercise the management of public policies and projects aimed at responding to communities’ needs and aspirations’ in order to build a ‘society of equity and social justice’.⁷

Socioeconomic Strategy: from Radical Humanism to Communal Socialism

Through both his thought and his actions, Chávez – acutely aware of the need for social change in the country since his years in military school – created a programme of social, economic, political, and cultural changes. The very formation of the MBR-200 movement brought about a vision of social justice alongside the expansion of rights that responded to the needs of the people, which the reigning neoliberal ideology had no means to address. Chávez's contribution to economic and social development strategy can be understood in four stages: the anti-neoliberal stage, the radical nationalist stage, the stage of twenty-first century socialism, and, finally, the stage of communal socialism.

The first stage (anti-neoliberalism) coincides with Chávez's systematic reflections during the years when he began his postgraduate studies in political science. As Chávez acknowledged in a dialogue with Ignacio Ramonet, his need for further education came from his already developed understanding of the neoliberal policies being implemented in Venezuela by Carlos Andrés Pérez, who was the president from 1979 to 1979 and then again from 1989 to 1993. The plan known as the Great Turnaround (*El Gran Viraje*), implemented by Pérez in 1989, expressed for Chávez 'what world hegemonic capitalism and the International Monetary Fund had imposed through a severe structural adjustment plan that ended up provoking popular protest and the explosion of the Caracazo'.⁸



In this context, Chávez held a series of discussions about the transition from neoliberalism, the planning that would be necessary, possible development models for the country, and the strategy of civil-military unity that would allow his programme to be implemented. To a large extent, these elements were included in the Simón Bolívar National Project of 1992, which would only later be implemented. It included, among other elements, reducing the cost of living; creating productive employment through housing construction, reforestation, environmental sanitation, agriculture, and so on; achieving self-sufficiency in food production; and integrating the solidarity economy through a network of cooperatives within a scheme of new economic forms.

The subsequent development of Chávez's strategic economic and social planning (especially during his years in Yare Prison following the attempted coup in on 4 February 1992) would continue to advance these proposals, preparing for a transition that was both necessary and possible based on the concrete conditions in Venezuela. This first stage of Chávez's strategy regarding the economic-social programme flatly rejected neoliberalism and, in doing so, was inextricably tied to the working-class rebels of the Caracazo, embodying its thought and action, its strategy and reading of the concrete historical process.

After Chávez's years in prison, with his growing popularity as both a figurehead and a leader, he began to develop the second stage of his strategic thought in the economic-social field: the stage of radical nationalism. Unlike under bourgeois nationalism, the development of the radical nationalist stage was part and parcel of Chávez's goal

to build alliances between the countries of the South, particularly in Latin America, to successfully transition to an anti-neoliberal model. This period of thought and strategic action was influenced by Chávez's meeting with Fidel Castro in Havana in 1994, as well as by the development of an increasingly interwoven fabric of working-class organisation in Venezuela, where his importance as leader was growing rapidly.

From those intense days in Havana to his first days in office, Chávez expanded, in increasing detail, on an economic and social agenda of a radical nationalist nature that would become the basis for the next stage of the radicalisation of his strategic thought. On 22 July 1996, Chávez released the *Bolivarian Alternative Agenda*, which set out the full gamut of his strategic thought, as Serrano Mancilla pointed out, and would become the basis for his 1998 electoral platform.⁹

The *Bolivarian Alternative Agenda* connected the previous (anti-neoliberal) stage with the new (radical nationalist) stage. 'How could anyone think that solving the fiscal deficit could be more urgent than ending the hunger of millions of human beings? Faced with the neoliberal offensive, a weapon for the total counteroffensive is emerging here and now', Chávez wrote.¹⁰ The agenda addresses not only the exit from the neoliberal project, but also the construction of an alternative 'through a humanistic, comprehensive, holistic, and ecological approach'.¹¹ Furthermore, it emphasises the need to draw on constituent power in order to rebuild national power in all its facets. The historical necessity for Chávez and the popular movement sprung from the fact that the government of Rafael Caldera (1994–1999) had advanced the general line of the Washington Consensus

and its ten commandments, even going above and beyond its earlier promises to so. The most evident results of this continuation of neoliberalism were the growth of poverty and inequality as well as the foreign ownership and denationalisation of the economy. In response, the radical nationalist programme laid out in the *Bolivarian Alternative Agenda* aimed to build, as the sociologist Luis Wainer wrote, ‘a new common sense for the new epoch based on the strengthening of the state in communion with permanent popular mobilisation, while seeking to develop a narrative that could account for the sharpening of social conflicts under neoliberalism’.¹²

In more concrete terms, the development of the agenda, which differed starkly from the proposal promoted by the Global North, is based on a series of key points that would be furthered radicalised in later years:

1. A strong, democratised state that regulates market power.
2. State ownership and control of oil production.
3. Humanistic and self-managed economic development based on five sectors: strategic industries under state-owned ownership, essential consumer goods under mixed ownership, banking and finance under mixed ownership, and large-scale industries essentially under private ownership.
4. Education, culture, science, and technology as part of an autonomous and independent programme, in line with the ideas of Simón Rodríguez.

5. A renegotiation of external debt, allowing higher levels of national sovereignty to be achieved.
6. Macrosocial balances that allow for the comprehensive human development of Venezuela's population.
7. A proposal for productive development with a shift towards greater economic democratisation.¹³

This programme is fundamentally opposed to neoliberalism as well as the tepid options that had been proposed a few years earlier as part of the so-called 'Third Way'. Here, we see the pillars of a new moment that would be developed from 2005–2006 and then clearly laid out in both the national social and economic development programme Plan for the Homeland (*Plan de la Patria*, 2007–2013) and in communal socialism. The period following Chávez's electoral triumph in 1998 was characterised by the formation of a 'state of missions' as well as other economic and social policies implemented by the Bolivarian government. Driven by his great desire to address the people's most pressing needs, Chávez developed the proposal for social missions, taking into account the bureaucratic limitations inherited from the pre-revolutionary state. In 2004, the National System of Missions began to address problems of poverty, extreme poverty, illiteracy, health, culture, training, and housing, among others. This comprehensive, participatory, and solidary response was able to put great stress on the centralised and bureaucratic structure of the bourgeois state. In Chávez's words, the missions are:

fundamental components of the new social state, the new social state of law and of justice, whereby all those who had been excluded are now included alongside everyone else. They are studying, training, organising, and working with a new culture and a new conscience because the missions are creating a new reality in the cultural, psychological, ideological, and philosophical order, even as they are creating a new concrete and practical social, economic, and educational reality.¹⁴

It is precisely such reflections on the missions and the strategic development plan's ability to meet the needs of the people that, following the unsuccessful recall referendum that attempted to remove Chávez from power on 15 August 2004, led him to continue to advance the radical transformation not only of Venezuela but of Latin America as a whole.* At the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2005, Chávez stated clearly that the alternative to the imperial project of neoliberalism is twenty-first century socialism, managing once again to overcome the limits of postmodern views and propose a concept that unified the strategy to build an uncharted path towards a just and egalitarian society.

* **Translator's note:** A recall referendum was introduced in the 1999 Constitution, where a popular majority vote could effectively remove a sitting president. In an attempt to halt the advance of the progressive agenda led by Chavez, the country's conservative opposition called for such a referendum to take place on 15 August 2004. With the 70% voter turnout resulting in 59% against the recall, the right-wing attempt was ultimately unsuccessful. See Mette Eriksen, *Venezuela*, 1-4.

Among the core components of Chávez's proposal for twenty-first century socialism, which went much further than anything else being proposed at the time, is the popular and solidarity economy. As Chávez said:

Here we have started experiments such as promoting cooperatives and associations, collective property, popular banking, and internal development nuclei, etc. This is all about leaving behind the logic of the perverse functioning of capitalism. Experiments in such matters as self-management and co-management, cooperative and collective ownership, etc., are all valid. We are launching a trial of social production companies and community production units.¹⁵

Finally, the most radical stage, the stage of communal socialism, deepens the elements of the twenty-first century socialist strategy into a long-term socialist development programme laid out in the Plan for the Homeland. Each and every one of the factors that inform comprehensive human development are included in this plan. The plan identifies five strategic objectives:

1. 'Defend, expand, and consolidate our most precious asset, now recaptured after 200 years: national independence'.
2. 'Continue building twenty-first century Bolivarian socialism in Venezuela as an alternative to the destructive and savage system of capitalism, and thereby ensure the

“greatest amount of social security, the greatest amount of political stability, and the greatest amount of happiness” for our people’.

3. ‘Transform Venezuela into a socially, economically, and politically powerful country within the great rising power of Latin America and the Caribbean, which will guarantee the formation of a zone of peace in the region’.
4. ‘Contribute to the development of a new international geopolitics in which a multicentric and pluripolar world takes shape and allows universal equilibrium to be achieved, thereby guaranteeing planetary peace’.
5. ‘Preserve life on the planet and save the human species’.¹⁶

These five points lie at the heart of the strategic political legacy of Hugo Chávez. In particular, the communes – a proposal for a new territorial, economic, political, and military organisation – are of the utmost importance as a key milestone of the socialist radicalisation that Chávez constructed through his thought and actions. The transformation of the bourgeois state from below using that state’s own structures constituted a novel and far-reaching commitment to thinking about emancipatory projects on a national scale.



Regional Strategy: Patria Grande and the Integration of Governments and Peoples through Twenty-First Century Socialism

For us, the coming century is the century of hope. It is our century. It is the century of the resurrection of the Bolivarian dream, of the dream of Martí, of the dream of Latin America.

– Hugo Chávez, speech delivered at the University of Havana, 14 December 1994.¹⁷

Hugo Chávez's foreign policy was clear from the beginning of his administration, though, in truth, this perspective had been present at least since Bolivarian project emerged on an international scale in the late twentieth century.

On 14 December 1994, at the cusp of the neoliberal decade – before the effects of the adjustment policies had begun to show signs of exhaustion on the continent – Fidel Castro welcomed Chávez at the University of Havana. In this meeting, the analyses underpinning the diagnoses and ideas that would later become state policies were already present. For this reason, over the years, it has come to be known as a key moment in the region's history.

The meeting would prove to be fundamental in cementing the relationship between the two countries. As Chávez recounted:

Last night, when I received the immense and very pleasant surprise of being met at José Martí International Airport by Fidel himself, I told him: 'I don't deserve this honour. I aspire to deserve it one day in the months and years to come'. I say the same to all of you, my dear Cuban-Latin American compatriots: one day we hope to come to Cuba in a position to extend our arms and in a position to work together in a Latin American revolutionary project, imbued, as we have been, for centuries, with the idea of a Hispano-American, Latin American and Caribbean continent, integrated as the single nation that we are.¹⁸

Three days earlier, the first Summit of the Americas had just ended in Miami, with the historical objective to consolidate and extend US dominance through the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Only one nation in the region was absent from the summit: Cuba, which had been expelled from the Organisation of American States in 1962, accused of not respecting Western liberal democracy (of course, Cuba also did not respect the US-backed military dictatorships in power in Latin America at the time). While the tour organised to recolonise the continent was beginning in Miami, Fidel and Chávez were meeting in Havana in what was almost a mirror image. Perhaps only they could imagine what lay ahead.

This political moment was marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise of the United States as the sole superpower after its victory in the Cold War and the ideological offensive against socialism. As Fidel said:

there was no doubt that for a personality like Hugo Chávez, accepting our invitation was an act of courage, because today there aren't many brave people in this world who dare to accept an invitation to come to Cuba. There are many who used to come to Cuba and are now doing pirouettes to make them forget that they were once friends of the Cuban Revolution, or even to forget that they were once people of the Left.

We saw the mere fact of his accepting our invitation as an act of great courage.

...

[T]he head of a Bolivarian revolutionary movement – or revolutionary Bolivarian movement, which is the same thing, here the order of the factors multiplies the product – visiting us here, in the Great Hall of the University of Havana, talking about his patriotic, national, and international projects [to build] Latin American and Caribbean unity. And at what a time! At a time when, perhaps more than ever, the ideas of Bolívar and Martí are needed. At a time when, as never before in this world of unipolar hegemonism, our peoples are threatened with being devoured, totally devoured, by the empire. At a time when they want to tear apart the principle of independence and popular sovereignty, in the name of that great democracy that is North American democracy, where barely thirty-something percent of the people vote.¹⁹

It is worth reviewing Fidel's analysis of the historical significance of that meeting with Chávez, especially as it relates, in strategic terms, to the first Summit of the Americas, which was almost simultaneously taking place in the US four years before Hugo Chávez came to power and in the midst of what at least appeared at the time to be one of the moments of greatest weakness on the continent. As Fidel said:

Symbolically, Chávez's arrival in Cuba on 13 [December 1994] coincided with the famous Miami summit that had just taken place. Nobody planned it that way, but, by chance, 90 miles from Miami, a meeting was taking place between the people of Cuba and the Bolivarian revolutionary movement of Venezuela and Latin America.

It is impossible to talk about Bolívar without thinking of an entire continent, without thinking of all of Latin America and all of the Caribbean, of which we and other Spanish-, French-, and English-speaking countries are all part.

There was going to be a summit of ideas – of Bolivarian ideas and of Martí's ideas. And it is hard not to wonder what Martí and Bolívar would have had to say, what they would have thought, if they had been able to witness the Miami summit. If they had heard the words of the president of the United States, cited by Hugo Chávez, trying to present that summit as the realisation of Bolívar's dreams – which [the president] could just as easily have said was also

the realisation of Martí's dreams – what would Martí and Bolívar have thought of that type of 'partnership for prosperity' – I think that is what the thing is called now – that are they proposing? So, we see another great symbolic coincidence – that between that summit and the ideas of that summit, and the ideas of Bolívar and the ideas of Martí.²⁰

In his reply, during a period of crisis for socialism, during Cuba's Special Period, Chávez agreed with Fidel's optimistic outlook, stating that:

Without a doubt, we are in an era of awakenings, of resurrections of peoples, of strength and of hope. Without a doubt, President, this wave that you are announcing or that you announced and continue to announce in that interview that I referred to earlier, 'A Grain of Corn', can be felt throughout Latin America.²¹

Then, Chávez laid out the central elements of his historic programme, which he would pursue with dedication over the next eighteen heady, creative years rebuilding the nation:

In the first place, we are committed to raising an ideological flag that is relevant and conducive to our Venezuelan land, to our Latin American land: the Bolivarian flag.

But in this ideological work of reviewing history and the ideas that were born in Venezuela and on this continent 200

years ago, ... in immersing ourselves in history as we look for our roots, we have designed and put the idea of drawing inspiration from a tree with three roots in the sphere of national and international public opinion. [One of these roots is the root] that Simón Bolívar called for, for Latin American unity to be able to build a developed nation as a counterweight to the pretensions of the North, which was already preparing to sink its claws into our Latin American land.²²

These words powerfully summarise the essence of the internationalist and Americanist policies promoted by the Bolivarian Revolution. On that night in 1994, Chávez was already speaking of Latin American and Caribbean unity and integration as a condition of liberation. In Chávez's words:

the passion that moves me tonight is a long-term strategic project in which Cubans have and would have a lot to contribute, a lot to discuss with us. It is a project, a sovereign economic model, with a 20 to 40-year horizon. We do not want to continue being a colonial economy, a complementary economic model.

Venezuela has immense energy resources, for example. No Caribbean or Latin American country should have to import fuel from Europe. Why should it? If Venezuela, with its immense energy resources, is part of Latin America...



A project in which it is not risky to think, from the political point of view, of an association of Latin American states. Why not think about that, which was the original dream of our liberators? Why remain fragmented? In the political arena, this project is neither ours nor original; it is 200 years old, at least.

...

For us, the coming century is the century of hope. It is our century. It is the century of the resurrection of the Bolivarian dream, of the dream of Martí, of the dream of Latin America.

Dear friends, you have honoured me by sitting down tonight to listen to the ideas of a soldier, of a Latin American devoted completely and forever to the cause of the revolution of this America of ours.²³

This early meeting between the two leaders is directly linked to political initiatives that gave shape to a decade of growing sovereignty in foreign policy for Latin America and the Caribbean. Among them is the formation of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) in December 2004. Ten years later, also in Havana, the ALBA* of the people began to take shape in opposition to the FTAA, that object of North American desire

* **Translator's note:** *alba*, the acronym of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America in Spanish (ALBA), also means 'dawn'.

that also launched ten years ago. ALBA would later be renamed the ALBA-TCP (the Peoples' Trade Treaty) with the gradual incorporation of other countries: Bolivia (2006), Nicaragua (2007), Dominica (2008), briefly Honduras (2008, until the 2009 coup), Antigua and Barbuda (2009), Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (2009), Ecuador (2009, withdrew in 2018), Saint Lucia (2013), Saint Kitts and Nevis (2014), and Grenada (2014).

A few months later, in June 2005, PetroCaribe (an initiative that provides discounted oil to Caribbean nations) was launched, becoming the most substantial energy integration mechanism among states in the Caribbean. Almost two decades after its launch, eighteen countries in the region remain part of this agreement. This initiative is fundamental for emancipation. As Mario Sanoja and Iraida Vargas put it in their monumental work on the Bolivarian Revolution, 'The creation of a South American-Caribbean system of energy integration is decisive to definitively defeat the imperial hegemony of the US oligarchy'.²⁴

During the fourth Summit of the Americas in Mar del Plata, Argentina in November 2005, just a few months after the launch of Petrocaribe, the ALBA bloc, in strategic coordination with the emerging progressive bloc in South America and then Presidents Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Néstor Kirchner, was able to defeat the FTAA, marking a failure of historic proportions for US diplomacy on the continent.

Chávez thought of ALBA and Petrocaribe as ‘instruments for the unification of our peoples’.²⁵ In the same vein, it is important to mention ALBA-TCP’s recounting of its historical roots:

The roots of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America-Peoples’ Trade Treaty (ALBA-TCP) lie in the Jamaica Charter of 1815, when Simón Bolívar established the doctrine of unity and sovereignty of the countries that had achieved independence from colonial power.

The alliance is based on the thought of Bolívar, Martí, San Martín, Sucre, O’Higgins, Pétion, Morazán, Sandino, Garvey, Túpac Katari, Julián Apaza, Bartolina Sisa, and many other heroes whose struggle has served as a political and ethical model for the new consciousness and emancipatory force of our homelands. The alliance vindicates the ideas of these heroes who favoured the strategic consolidation of the unity of our peoples and governments, the preservation of our historical, social, and economic interests, through joint, autonomous, democratic action, our Latin American identity, and our common interest.²⁶

This eminently political space promoted practical linkages in the fields of economy, education, health, and culture, becoming the strategic platform from which it would attempt to build even higher levels of unity.

With the same desire for unity and integration, Chávez promoted, together with his strategic allies, two equally relevant institutions:

the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), founded in 2008, and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), founded in 2010. This latter was the first entity in history to bring together the 33 states of Latin America and the Caribbean – in other words, all of America except the United States and Canada. For this reason, it is strategically important and the natural antagonist of the Organisation of American States, which has been led by the United States since its foundation just after the end of the Second World War.

During this journey, Chávez became aware of the importance of the ideological, cultural, and communications battle. Therefore, in 2005, he founded the multi-state channel teleSUR, a television station that set out to present the news from the point of view of the people of Latin America and the Caribbean.

The development of a policy of unity and integration of Latin America was the cornerstone of the Bolivarian State, a premise enshrined in the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela that is approved by popular vote in 1999. This has not been to the detriment of, but rather in support of an active international policy towards the rest of the world and was also driven by, as Article 152 of the Constitution states:

the principles of independence, equality between states, self-determination and non-intervention in their internal affairs, peaceful resolution of international conflicts, cooperation, respect for human rights, and solidarity among

peoples in the struggle for their emancipation and the well-being of the humanity.²⁷

Chávez intervened in all international arenas to promote the establishment of a fairer international order and, to this end, repeatedly called for the reorganisation of the United Nations system. As Chávez put it:

Peoples of the world, the future of a peaceful multipolar world lies with us bringing together the majority of the peoples on the planet to defend ourselves from the new colonialism and achieve a universal equilibrium that neutralises imperialism and arrogance.²⁸

Chávez's voice warned against the consequences of capitalism for the future of the world. 'If the climate were one of the biggest capitalist banks, the rich governments would have already saved it', he said at the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 15) held in Copenhagen after identifying himself with the slogans of the environmental movement, declaring: 'Don't change the climate, change the system! And, in doing so, we will begin to save the planet'.²⁹

Chávez was an implacable defender of peace, not 'the peace of cemeteries, in the ironic words of Kant', he said, 'but peace based on the most zealous respect for international law'.³⁰ To do this, he clearly identified what he called 'the greatest threat that hangs over our planet' at the UN General Assembly in September 2006:

The hegemonic claims of North American imperialism put the very survival of the human species at risk. We continue to warn about this danger and call on the people of the United States and the world to put a stop to this threat, which is like the sword of Damocles itself.³¹

Chávez's imprint was also written into collective political programmes, which essentially aimed at 'the diversification of political, economic, and cultural relations for the creation of new power blocs', with the aim of achieving 'the breakdown of the hegemony of the North American empire', as the 2007–2013 Plan for the Homeland notes.³² Internationalism was also expressed in the key documents of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, including its Declaration of Principles:

The United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) must frame its internationalist praxis so as to contribute to the union of all peoples fighting to establish emancipatory and liberatory projects in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the other continents of the world in the search to provide the greatest possible degree of sovereignty, independence, self-determination, well-being, and happiness for their citizens.

The Bolivarian Revolution, given its anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist character, will create mechanisms to consolidate alliances with similar political and social movements worldwide, with the aim of achieving a new pluripolar international order.³³

In Chávez's way of thinking, the global vision is not separate from the national project. That is why, as the party states, 'the fundamental purpose of the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) is the construction of Bolivarian Socialism, the anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist struggle, and the consolidation of Bolivarian, participatory, and people's democracy through the recognition and strengthening of popular power'.³⁴ This linkage of domestic to foreign policy, founded on democratic participation, runs through all of Chávez's work and is one of his fundamental legacies, a strategic guide for revolutionaries to come.



Strategic Thought Ten Years After Chávez's Death: A Renewed Strategy for a New Regional Moment

More than ten years have passed since Chávez's last public speech, when he called on the people of Venezuela and the *Patria Grande*, his great homeland, to continue the great feat of independence: 'In the face of new difficulties, of whatever size they may be, the response of all patriots, revolutionaries, those of us who can feel the country in their guts, as Augusto Mijares would say, is unity, struggle, battle, and victory'.³⁵

The death of Hugo Chávez in 2013 coincided with the increased aggression of the imperial offensive across the continent. As the United States is immersed in a global confrontation with weighty rivals such as China and, to a lesser extent, Russia and hit by a succession of failures in its strategy of intervention, its foreign policy has become oriented towards recovering the ground lost in the first decade of the twenty-first century, when Chávez's drive, along with that of the peoples of America, made hitherto seemingly impossible dreams come true.

In that context, Venezuela became the object of an intense hybrid war within the framework of a new Condor Plan (a CIA-backed plan to install right-wing governments in Latin America), no longer with the sole aid of force.³⁶ Without disavowing hard power, the

imperial strategy began to focus on developing a combination of tactics centred on soft power. Especially in the 2015–2020 period, this siege was relatively successful and managed to land blows to the Bolivarian Revolution and paralyse its initiatives for unity and continental integration. But it has failed to defeat Chávez’s dream.

With advances and setbacks, ten years after Chávez’s death on 5 March 2013, the struggles of Latin America and the Caribbean are still very much alive. Dreams of economic independence, political sovereignty, and social justice prevail. No future is written in advance, and everything depends on the activity and creativity of the people. To this end, the peoples of this region and the world have a tradition of key tenets, which encapsulate a possible history and perspective of the future. Part of that fundamental legacy – this strategic direction – is the work of Chávez.





Notes

Prologue

1 E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, 82.

1 Harnecker, *Venezuela: Militares*, 118.

2 Cabieses, 'Venezuela', our translation.

3 Chávez, *El libro azul*, 43, our translation.

4 Rodríguez, *Inventamos*, 138, our translation.

5 Cordero Negrín, *Ezequiel Zamora*, 34.

6 Chávez, *El libro azul*, 26, our translation.

7 Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, 'Ley Orgánica', 373.839, our translation.

8 Ramonet, *Hugo Chávez*, 325, our translation.

9 Serrano Mancilla, *El pensamiento*.

10 Chávez, *Agenda*, 23–24, our translation.

11 Chávez, *Agenda*, 23, our translation.

12 Wainer, 'El Proyecto', 56, our translation.

13 Serrano Mancilla, *El pensamiento*.

14 Chávez, 'Acto del desfile', 5, quoted in Hurtado Briceño and Zerpa De Hurtado, 'Misiones Sociales', 51, our translation.

- 15 Vidal-Molina, Ansaldo-Roloff, and Cea-Madrid, 'Hugo Chávez', 238, our translation.
- 16 Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, *Plan de la Patria*, 4–5.
- 17 Ron, de los Santos, and Prashad, eds., *Our Own Path to Socialism*.
- 18 Chávez, 'Primera vez', quoted in Elizalde and Báez, *El encuentro*, 110, our translation.
- 19 Castro, 'Nos sentimos', quoted in Elizalde and Báez, *El encuentro*, 121, 126, our translation.
- 20 Castro, 'Nos sentimos', quoted in Elizalde and Báez, *El encuentro*, 126, our translation.
- 21 Chávez, 'Primera vez', quoted in Elizalde and Báez, *El encuentro*, 111, our translation.
- 22 Chávez, 'Primera vez', quoted in Elizalde and Báez, *El encuentro*, 112–113, our translation.
- 23 Chávez, 'Primera vez', quoted in Elizalde and Báez, *El encuentro*, 118–120, our translation.
- 24 Sanoja Obediente and Vargas-Arenas, *La revolución bolivariana*, 240.
- 25 Chávez, *Memoria y cuenta*, 90, our translation.
- 26 ALBA-TCP, *Historia*, our translation.
- 27 Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, *Constitution*, 225–226, our translation.
- 28 Chávez, *Nuestro compromiso*, 42, our translation.
- 29 Chávez, *No cambiemos el clima*, 11–12, our translation.
- 30 Chávez, *Nuestro compromiso*, 22, our translation.
- 31 Chávez, *Discurso de Hugo Chávez Frías*, 9, our translation.
- 32 Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, *Proyecto Nacional*, 55–56, our translation.

- 33 PSUV, *Libro Rojo*, 34–35, our translation
- 34 PSUV, *Libro Rojo*, 50, our translation.
- 35 Chávez, Transcripción, our translation.
- 36 For more on hybrid wars, see Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research’s publications [*Venezuela and Hybrid Wars in Latin America*](#) and [*CoronaShock and the Hybrid War against Venezuela*](#).

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