NARCOGUERILLAS OF VENEZUELA:

Transshipment State, International Issues, and Persistent Problems with Colombia

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Hugo Chavez, President of Venezuela from 2002 to 2013, will surely be remembered (or recanted) for his stronghold over the people of a beautiful state in Latin America. Forever altering the course of history, Chavez produced an unprecedented influence. Throughout his political career, one can recall several instances in which the late president escalated situations; not only within Venezuela, but in regards to relations with neighboring states and global superpowers. Chanting the call for, what he called a Bolivarian Revolution, Chavez reconstructed the political infrastructure, in order to represent Venezuelans; internationally.

Yet, he centralized his political campaign on domestic issues, that still today threaten the very fiber of those who he swore to protect. “The political empowerment of the poor under President Chávez will likely be an enduring aspect of his legacy in Venezuelan politics for years to come. Any future successful presidential candidate will likely need to take into account how his or her policies would affect working class and poor Venezuelans. On the other hand, President Chávez also left a large negative legacy, including the deterioration of democratic institutions and practices, threats to freedom of expression, high rates of crime and murder (the highest in South America), and an economic situation characterized by high inflation, crumbling infrastructure, and shortages of consumer goods. Ironically, while Chávez championed the poor, his government's economic mismanagement wasted billions that potentially could have
established a more sustainable social welfare system benefiting poor Venezuelans.”1 Consistently devaluing democratic ideals, typically with a candid, negative critique of U.S. involvement in international affairs, Chavez was never ashamed to further his crusade; which highly involved counsel with well-known politicians, such as Vladimir Putin and Fidel Castro. He described himself as a Marxist.

More recently, information was unconcealed that established international clout. A strong source of his power traces back to drug trafficking. Utilizing Venezuela as a transshipment center, predominantly for international organized criminals in Colombia, Chavez profited from illicit drugs. The current article will articulate the debasement of Hugo Chavez’s reputation as a Venezuelan president, in order to explain exactly how drug trafficking has funded larger international issues, caused an expansive conflict with Colombia, and faltered Venezuela’s future. It will also provide recommendations to counter drug trafficking, internationally and domestically.

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“TRANSIT STATE”

The [drug] trafficking process generally consists of three locations: the production state, one or more states that serve as transshipment centers, and the consumption state. The mission of the traffickers is to get the drugs from the suppliers to the consumer as efficiently as possible without being detected. Their place in the chain is the most important and, therefore, the most lucrative.2

Venezuela has long played a role in trafficking drugs; such as cocaine, heroin and marijuana. Prior to recent years, Venezuela had attempted to align themselves with western international powers (i.e. the United States of America), in order to decrease the production, sale, and most importantly, trafficking across Venezuela’s borders; yet, Chavez’s successor, President Maduro has furthered tensions between neighboring states as well as the U.S.A. Intensifying the late president, Hugo Chavez’s regime, which was circumvented by world leaders for years, Maduro has also began to blame Colombia for a vast majority of domestic issues. Most recently, he has gone as far as to force immigrants back over the border to Colombia, and many

Colombian natives have also left due to the poor economy (the sections that follow will examine interstate conflict).

Yet, the economic concerns are only part of Venezuela’s larger problem. The stability of the state itself has come into question ever since Hugo Chavez’s initial rise to power. Although world leaders have timely questioned the political infrastructure, it has quickly became apparent that Chavez and Maduro’s leadership is the cause of such strife. As John Cox argued:

Venezuela is afflicted with the world’s highest inflation, its second highest murder rate and crippling shortages of food, medicine and basic consumer goods. Its authoritarian government is holding some 70 political prisoners, including the mayor of Caracas and senior opposition leader Leopoldo López, and stands accused by human rights groups of illegal detentions, torture and repression of independent media. All of that is now pretty well known, and it is finally beginning to gain some attention from Latin American leaders who for years did their best to appease or ignore Hugo Chávez and his “Bolivarian Revolution.” What’s less understood is the complicating factor that will make any political change or economic reconstruction in this failing state far more difficult: The Chávez regime, headed since his demise by Nicolás Maduro, harbors not just a clique of crackpot socialists, but also one of the world’s biggest drug cartels. Ever since Colombian commandos captured the laptop of a leader of the FARC organization eight years ago, it’s been known that Chávez gave the Colombian narcoguerrillas sanctuary and allowed them to traffic cocaine from Venezuela to the United States with the help of the Venezuelan army. But not until a former Chávez bodyguard defected to the United States in January did the scale of what is called the “Cartel of the Suns” start to become publicly known According to multiple news accounts, Leamsy Salazar has been cooperating with U.S. federal prosecutors who are developing criminal cases against a host of senior Venezuelan generals and government officials. Chief among them is the man Salazar began guarding after Chávez’s death: Diosdado Cabello, the president of the National Assembly and the second most powerful member of the regime after Maduro. The day after Salazar’s arrival in Washington, Spain’s ABC newspaper published a detailed account of the emerging case against Cabello, and last month, ABC reporter Emili Blasco followed up with a book laying out the allegations of Salazar and other defectors, who say Cuba’s communist regime and the Lebanese militia Hezbollah have been cut in on the trafficking. That was followed by a lengthy report last week in the
Wall Street Journal that said Cabello’s cartel had turned Venezuela into “a global hub for cocaine trafficking and money laundering.”

It goes without saying that drugs may only be an aspect of international organized crime, but without taking a closer look, academics lack the necessity of fully understanding the big picture. Again, yet argued by the Venezuelan government, Venezuela itself is not a producer or grower of drugs but a transit country.

Néstor Luis Reverol Torres (fue el Ministro del Poder Popular para Relaciones Interiores y Justicia venezolano y actual Comandante General de la Guardia Nacional de Venezuela) expressed that the fact they reside next door to the largest producer of cocaine and “across the street to the main consumer (the United States),” as the prime factor.

In addition, Reverol “hailed as a success the rising amounts of drugs seized: 30.2 tonnes in 2000, 39.4 in 2002, 43.2 in 2004, 60.6 in 2006 and 54.6 tonnes in 2008, of which 33.6 percent was cocaine and the remainder marihuana. So far this year, 23.4 tonnes of marihuana and 20.7 tonnes of cocaine have been confiscated, added Reverol. A total of 4,491 people have been arrested for drug-related offences, among them nearly 400 foreigners, including 272 Colombians. Asked by IPS for an estimate of the volume of drugs that actually passes through Venezuela in transit, Reverol declined to give what he called "a ceiling figure," because "those who try to

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calculate the gap between drugs seized and drugs that get through usually look at the ceiling and pick whatever number they fancy." According to Reverol, Colombia produced 438 tonnes of cocaine in 2008, of which only 10 percent was exported overland. The rest was shipped by air and sea, via the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea, to North America and other destinations, by routes far from Venezuela's borders.\textsuperscript{5} Equally vital, Venezuela has failed to comply with international counternarcotics agreements; thus, claims embellish authentic amounts.

\section*{DEVELOPMENTS IN U.S.-VENEZUELAN RELATIONS}

More so, the general relationship between the U.S. and Venezuela has also altered. The U.S. Department of State declares that U.S.-Venezuelan relations have become even more erroneous in recent years. Stating that “the President of the United States determined in 2014 that Venezuela had failed demonstrably to adhere to its obligations under international counternarcotics agreements, though a waiver allowing for continued assistance was granted in

the interest of national security.”

Venezuela’s faltering government with an inability to adhere to agreements is absurd, considering U.S. foreign assistance, and the fact that the U.S. is Venezuela’s number one trading partner. Bilateral trade in goods between both countries reached $41.4 billion in 2014. U.S. goods exports to Venezuela totaled $11.1 billion, while imports from Venezuela totaled $30.2 billion. U.S. exports to Venezuela include oil machinery, organic chemicals, agricultural products, optical and medical instruments, autos and auto parts. Crude oil dominates U.S. imports from Venezuela, which is one of the top five suppliers of foreign oil to the United States. About 500 U.S. companies are represented in Venezuela. U.S. foreign direct investment in Venezuela is concentrated largely in the petroleum and manufacturing sectors.

Venezuela’s significant issues (i.e. political tensions, state intervention in the economy, macroeconomic distortions, physical insecurity, corruption, and a volatile regulatory framework) have caused considerable insufficiencies for the U.S., as well as multinational companies, which resulted in reductions and shutdowns.

As of 2009, “Hugo Chavez's government, whose top officials have been named by the Treasury Department as actual traffickers and which in 2005 cut off drug cooperation with the Drug Enforcement Administration, is doing little to halt the flow of drugs. Gen. Hugo Armando

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Carvajal Barrios, who runs the police; Gen. Henry de Jesus Rangel Silva, who runs the DISIP spy service; and Ramon Rodriguez Chacin, the former interior minister -- were identified by the Treasury Department last September as aiding the drug trafficking activities of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) terrorist group. Venezuelan officials' ties with Hezbollah and the latter terrorist group's open activity in Venezuela these days point 15 significant drug trafficking.”8 Ties to organized crime have led the U.S. to impose sanctions, and goes as far as to restrict severely important assistance in areas (such as the defense of human rights, the promotion of a vibrant civil society, and the strengthening of democratic institutions).

More specifically, in the Department of State’s 2015 Country Report (U.S.-Venezuela Relations section), the U.S. government stated, “Venezuelan authorities do not effectively prosecute drug traffickers, in part due to political corruption. Additionally, Venezuelan law enforcement officers lack the equipment, training, and resources required to impede the operations of major drug trafficking organizations. In 2014, the Venezuelan government reduced what had been a year-long trend of growing bilateral law enforcement cooperation with the United States on drug seizures following the arrest and subsequent release of retired Venezuelan

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general Hugo Carvajal in Aruba, who was indicted in the United States in 2011 and 2013 for alleged drug trafficking. Situations that occur, similar to this particular example, illustrate the complete disregard of the Venezuelan government. Not only do Venezuelan leaders profit from drug-trafficking, they have come to embrace it.

**DISPUTING NEIGHBOR-STATES: COLOMBIA V. VENEZUELA**

"Venezuela's problems are made in Venezuela, they're not made in Colombia or other parts of the world." ~ Juan Manuel Santos (President of Colombia)

Colombia and Venezuela, neighbors in South America, have had their own domestic problems; to say the least. Venezuela has remained stagnant, although blessed with an abundance of crude oil. Colombia was confounded, receiving revenue from the selling of illegal drugs; seething with gangs. These states found themselves disputing with one another, escalating into an overwhelming amount of issues. This historic contention among the neighboring Latin states is best described by James F. Rochlin, stating:

The occasionally dangerous rivalry between Colombia and Venezuela can best be explained by the distinct developmental paths each country has pursued since independence, which has in turn resulted in ideological polarisation between the two countries. Significant factors in their trajectory of development include the array of productive forces in each country (eg oil in Venezuela versus illicit drugs in Colombia), the role of geographical features in relation to social forces and state structure, the extent of institutionalised conflict-resolution mechanisms, and the localised effects of a changing world order. The epistemological aspect is key here, since both countries have strived in

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vain to achieve a modernist project. That is, they have both strived towards a broad objective that includes a stable state complete with a Leviathan, the development of a sizeable middle class rather than populous extremes of poverty and extraordinary wealth, and the embrace of the nation-state as well as the cultivation of patriotism as the exclusive focus for political space and political identity. They have relied on an epistemic framework that emphasizes binary thinking, zero-sum competition, and absolutist conceptions of human nature upon which to construct political regimes. At either extreme of this 180 degree ideological spectrum, the ideological battles between Colombia and Venezuela are the epitome of the infamous ‘storms in a children’s paddling pool’ observed by Foucault in *The Order of Things*.

On many occasions, the leaders of both Venezuela and Colombia have lashed out at one another, blaming the other for their domestic issues. These arguments may have some authenticity, but outcomes are far too often distinguished by a heightened degree of aggression than any amount of resolve; resembling a backwoods conflict, alike the *Hatfield-McCoy Dispute*. Yet, the lack of cooperation between the states creates consequences that affect millions of people, not only those who attack one another with verbal threats; without providing an allowance of liability. “The drama along the border speaks to larger issues of poor security cooperation between the two countries. Paramilitary groups and other criminal gangs from Colombia undoubtedly pose a security threat to the region, given their involvement in cross-border smuggling operations. However, Venezuela’s tendency to blame Colombia for its security problems downplays the possibility that its own corrupt security forces might be contributing to the chaos along the frontier, and by and large stands in the way of actual cooperation and reform.”

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As Colombians continue to travel back to their native state, whether by force or choice, Juan Manuel Santos has promised to help them find work. “In a speech in Bogota, he [Santos] ran through a series of economic and crime statistics, everything from projections that Venezuela’s economy will shrink seven percent this year to widespread shortages comparable to those found in war zones like Syria, in a sharp retort to the aggressive rhetoric coming from Caracas in recent days.”¹² Maduro and Santos need to put an end to their hyperbolic bickering, as both leaders claim a higher level of responsibility for their own states domestic issues. “While about five million Colombians live in Venezuela, the security offensive has focused on a few towns near the border where Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro blames migrant gangs for rampant crime and smuggling that has caused widespread shortages.”¹³ It is apparent that Colombia and Venezuela will continue to have tension, but a higher level of concentration on cooperating would better benefit their own people; which has been the underlying problem for the two states.

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CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the most popular arguments to resolve the complicated issues that arise from drug trafficking is the legalization of drugs. Several countries have constructed a plausible plan to reduce the production, distribution, and consumption of marijuana. Most notably, Uruguay is implementing such a plan at the federal level of government, but it is too early to state how successful it will be. Yet still, for legalization to have a positive effect, it would be necessary for the law to reach an international level. “The concept of legalization entails legalizing every aspect of the drug trade, from production to consumption, worldwide. The immediate benefit of legalization would be a reduction in the violence associated with the drug trafficking aspect of the trade. Prohibition creates the opportunity for self-help violence in the drug trade by driving the market underground. Legalization would create a legitimate market for drugs, allowing conflicts to be settled in courts of law and attracting commendable market players rather than criminals, much like what happened after the prohibition of alcohol ended in the United States in the 1930s. Skeptics may argue that the violent drug trafficking criminals would not simply become peaceful after legalization occurs. This argument has some merit, but these violent criminals would be sifted out of the industry over time. They would most likely focus their attention on other closely linked illicit trade markets that still offer higher profits, like the arms trade and human trafficking. However, without the enormous income of the drug trade, these other illicit industries would also likely suffer.”

The debate has been a hot topic, and also are the reason for stagnation. Until a powerful democratic state can illustrate, by example, a

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purposefulness of legalization, international law will not consider implementing such a worldwide legislation.

In addition, the lack of cooperation from the government of Venezuela highly contributes to the dilemma. It does not appear that there is an amicable avenue for the U.S. government or IGOs to negotiate with Maduro at this time. The past ten years of communications demonstrate this lack in resolve. “Counternarcotics cooperation between Venezuela and the United States has been very limited and inconsistent since 2005, when Venezuela refused to sign a negotiated addendum to the MOU to improve anti-drug cooperation. The United States remains committed to cooperating with Venezuela to counter the flow of cocaine and other illegal drugs transiting Venezuelan territory. To advance cooperation, the Venezuelan government should sign the addendum to the 1978 Bilateral Counternarcotics MOU. Enhanced cooperation could increase the exchange of information and ultimately lead to more drug-related arrests, help dismantle organized criminal networks, aid in the prosecution of criminals engaged in narcotics trafficking, and stem the flow of illicit drugs transiting Venezuela.”

Contemplating the failed attempts of the U.S. government, which are met with hostility, the level of frustration has become overwhelmingly

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It raises questions regarding whether sanctions do indeed entice a government to adhere to international law, or if imposing sanctions leads to further resistance. Surely, it also depends on the particulars of the sanction, but as exemplified by Venezuela’s strengthened ties to Russia throughout the past decades, many times these sanctions simply create a greater divide as a state looks elsewhere for support and assistance. Pertaining not only to the economic benefits that the U.S. provides Venezuela, as their biggest foreign investor, issues of human rights and civil liberties have the greatest impact on the society and culture of all Venezuelans. By halting progress in the promotion of democratic institutions, human rights, and civil liberties, the U.S. further devastates the very people that the Venezuelan government has continued to demonstrate a sheer lack of interest for since Chavez’s first day in office. Perhaps these actions (i.e. sanctions and decrease in assistance) do not provide the correct message that the U.S. intends to communicate. It also has been an asset to Chavez and Maduro, in their bitter remarks, as they consistently damage the creditably of the U.S. throughout Venezuela. More incentives, as opposed to limiting opportunities, may be more helpful to all involved.

In regards to the issues among Colombia and Venezuela, the relationship that Colombia has with the U.S. has been detrimental.

“Colombia needs to end its isolation and strengthen relations with neighbours. The close alliance with the US, understandable giving the circumstances the country had to face, took its toll, raising suspicions throughout South America
about Colombian and US intentions for the region."\textsuperscript{16} Outlining a specific plan, independent of the U.S., it would be essential that Colombia works with neighboring states. Assuring the allocation of the source of power of the Colombian government will take some time, but forming dependable relationships with other Latin American states will continue to assist Colombia, as it is probable that the state will continue to flourish in the 21st century. The continent of South America is rich in resources, and throughout history, an extreme amount of exploitation has arisen from foreigners; and currently, those native to the region. Until the states establish strong democratic governmental structures, corrupt leaders will continue to associate with criminal organizations, in order to exploit weak states for their own personal gain.