

Showdown with Chavez?

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In an era of growing anti-Americanism in our hemisphere, President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela is leader of the pack. His acrimonious rhetoric cannot simply be pushed aside anymore. As the Bush administration focuses on Middle East problems, our own backyard has significant issues exacerbated by a political swing to the left and disintegration of democracies throughout the region.

The strategic resources of oil and other products in Venezuela allow Mr. Chavez to put meaning to his words. Indeed, rising prices of oil give him added monetary strength. Recent events, like Mr. Chavez's picayune confrontations with our ambassador there, prove he is readying for a face-off with the United States.

In business terms, his country's energy deals with India and China will substantially divest his country's economic ties with America, enabling Mr. Chavez to affect America's economy adversely via the option of severely reducing oil exports to the United States.

Furthermore, to make this a reality, Colombia and Venezuela have agreed to build an oil pipeline that would give Venezuela easy access to Pacific markets. The United States currently receives 14 percent of its imported oil from Venezuela, and nearly half of Venezuela's oil goes directly to the United States. If Mr. Chavez continues his crusade against "Bush's America," Venezuela's current reverse dependence on America's oil imports will be a thing of the past. In essence, he will cut off his American "addict" client, as he goes to other markets.

The American public has lost sight of our deteriorating relations with South and Central American countries. Mr. Chavez has built much of his political campaign by condemning U.S. policies. However, the propaganda spewed by Mr. Chavez is slowly gaining traction throughout Central and South America. Even Fidel Castro has sent political and security advisers to Venezuela to ensure Mr. Chavez's viability as he goes through his tirade.

Unfortunately, the Bush administration has overlooked and underestimated the significant, across-the-board threat posed by Venezuela. Mr. Chavez is striving to become firm allies with nearly every state at odds with America, as partly reflected in his travels to member states of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. Venezuela's worldwide stature has only increased in the eyes of countries and groups like Iran and Hamas since these entities have openly defied America too. Illustrative of Venezuela's defiance, is its recent purchase of numerous attack helicopters and 100,000 Kalishnikov rifles from the Russian government, another entity subtly hostile to the U.S.

All these various social, political, security, and economic alliances show Mr. Chavez's intends to undermine American power. Sun Tzu states that, "If the enemy's condition and deliberations are unknown, we cannot establish allies," illustrating our disadvantaged position.

To his credit, Mr. Chavez has been able to keep many of his alliances secret or at least out of the focus of the United States. The Bush administration needs to deal with the problem now before Venezuela has a greater strategic advantage and closer economic friends.

America simply cannot risk losing its oil imports from Venezuela, the fifth-largest producer of oil. We are not doing enough to isolate or neutralize Mr. Chavez from the rest of the world. Underestimating and not seeking favorable world opinion has left us few bargaining chips.

Anti-American resentment will continue costing us blood, money and oil, and will only worsen, until the president makes a concerted effort to reverse this trend. He must either firmly deal with the likes of Mr. Chavez or move against him and his kind.

Of course, these first attempts should be aggressive diplomatic efforts. In this regard, we need to ensure specifically that Hugo Chavez does not become our next Fidel Castro. It is absolutely necessary for the United States to solidify and improve its political and economic alliances with South and Central American states by ensuring it is not in any states' interest to ally themselves with a pseudo-democratic Mr. Chavez.

Sad to say, it may already be too late for the Bush administration to garner favorable public support from South and Central Americans, but laying the groundwork now could be a necessary and worthy effort to be carried over to future administrations.

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