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# **Continuity and Change in the Venezuelan Strategic Culture**

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If we understand “strategic culture” as the set of predispositions, trends and beliefs of a society and its leadership, regarding the legitimacy and effectiveness of the use of force as a political tool, it is reasonable to assert that this term is useful when examining the Venezuelan case. As I will attempt to demonstrate, several predispositions, trends and beliefs, which have historically and currently predominated in Venezuela, constitute the nucleus of a clear and define strategic culture. This strategic culture is shared by broad social sectors, including predominant groups among the political and military elites of the country. Nonetheless, this “traditional” strategic culture is presently subjected to a systematic and coherent transformation deliberately conceived and executed by the President of the Republic with the support from important international allies and the apparent submissiveness and acquiescence of the military sector. Drawing from this argument, I will formulate the following key questions regarding the Venezuelan case: Is the strategic culture of our society changing? Is the President of the Republic being successful in achieving this change?

**What is the nature of this change, how does it take place, and is the future perspective of the country on this matter?**

I will address three themes in the following pages. First, I will identify the main characteristics and explain the origins of what I call the Venezuelan “traditional strategic culture.” Secondly, I will analyze the project of cultural change led by Chávez and his “Bolivarian Revolution.” I will also study the diverse methods and channels of action employed to achieve this change, as well as its main goals. Moreover, I will argue that the change supported by the current political regime is not producing the expected success by its supporters.

I will also provide some explanations for this failure. Finally, I will offer some ideas about the future political and cultural evolution of the country.

The traditional strategic culture in Venezuela is the result of our historical evolution, more specifically of the impact of four fundamental factors on the collective conscience: First, the heroic view of Independence and the “mandate” that allegedly the mythical legacy of Bolívar imposes on the collectivity; second, the violence and backwardness of our 19<sup>th</sup> century, with its civil wars, anarchy, strong men, rebels, lootings and how it left the country exhausted until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and third, the “oil effect” on society and its values, and lastly, the democratic experience from 1958 until 1998.

The heroic view of Independence, according to the predominant perception of it in collective imagery, indicates that we Venezuelans only make war to liberate other people, not to oppress or take advantage of them. The legacy of Bolívar, also according to collective imagery, calls for Latin American unity, liberty and equality and therefore, condemns despotism. At the same time, the myth of Bolívar reinforces the Independent epic, as the manifestation of a “peaceful vocation” because Independence made us free to live in peace, according to collective imagery. In other words, we Venezuelans will only wage war to defend ourselves and to protect what is ours.

Secondly, our ominous 19<sup>th</sup> Century, which somehow could be extended until the death of the dictator Juan Vicente Gómez in 1936, left an imprint on the national collective soul that can not be minimized. Perhaps, few know the details about what took place back then, but it is that past of barbarism and destruction that possibly lives on in people’s minds creating fear of tyranny and civil war.

Oil exponentially increased the romantic and idealistic view of the history between the people and Venezuelan elites since it reinforced Messianism, meaning *the sense of power that one has to do good*” and *“save” others*, through a marked activism in international relations seeking to achieve “international social justice” (Caldera), a “new international economic order” (Carlos Andres Pérez) or a “multipolar world” through the “defeat of imperialism” (Hugo Chávez). Oil, as it has occurred with other Third World countries that own it in abundance, has undermined the “sense of reality” of the Venezuelans, by breaking the link between work and wellbeing. As a consequence, the traditional strategic culture (as well as the “revolutionary” one) shows a permanent gap between objectives, aspirations that are made public (always enormously ambitious), and the vulnerability and limitations of a single commodity producer country and its military apparatus, which fully depends on imported weapons.

In relation to the fourth factor, the democratic experience strengthened some predispositions and beliefs among Venezuelans which favor the non- violent resolution of domestic and international conflicts and the co-existence between diverse social groups and nations. Although it would be an exaggeration to pretend that a democratic culture and rule of law, as mature and solid as those in North America and Europe, exist in Venezuela, the degree of predominant repudiation against the use of force as a political tool is not underrated. In addition, Venezuelans reject collective oriented models, and in a significant way there is a broad rejection of the Cuban model, rooted in the experiences of the 1960’s when Castro sent Cuban military groups to the country seeking to support the left wing oriented guerrilla organization.

We could add one more element that should not be underestimated: Venezuela, in contrast to other Latin American countries, has not experienced military aggression by the United States. Feelings of resentment or hidden desires for revenge are not present in Venezuela,

but perhaps they do exist in other countries of the region. Although a widely shared idea prevails about the country's loss of territory in the western and eastern boundaries (to Colombia and Great Britain), it has been explained in terms of the greed of some and our excessive generosity, and also by the incompetence of some governments. Nonetheless, relatively few people have attempted to recover these lands through the use of force.

The already mentioned components of the traditional strategic culture have currently been subjected to a deliberate and systematic process of change, launched by the President of the Republic, who counts with the support of new allies to conquer his goals. Among these allies are Cuba, Iran, Russia, the Colombian guerrilla organizations, and a group of left wing countries and political movements who act in a well coordinated way in Latin America. Chávez's plan is ambitious and in fact goes against some key aspects because the "Bolivarian" leader's goal is to transition from anti-Communism to Socialism, and from a positive attitude towards the United States, to perceiving it as the worst enemy of the supreme interest of humanity.

Chávez also has minimized territorial disputes with Colombia (on the Gulf of Venezuela) and Guyana (on the zone of Esequibo) which have been traditionally seen by the military and the public in general as *the most significant and urgent national security issues at the international level*. In response to these issues, the military developed their "war hypothesis" and planned the purchase of weapons, logistic deployment and operational training for decades. Moreover, Chávez has demonstrated that these territorial disputes do not make sense within his revolutionary view at the continental level and several of his decisions show that he is willing to leave things as they are and if it is necessary, for his ultimate goals, to make important concessions with Colombia in the Gulf zone and abandon any Venezuelan complaints against Guyana.

In addition to the above-mentioned, Chávez has closely allied Venezuela to nations that are both culturally very different and extremely foreign to our historical and immigrant experience, such as Iran and Russia. Also, his close links with the Castroite dictatorship have been questioned by the majority of the Venezuelan people, although that has not translated into a decline in terms of political supporters. Here we encounter a case of “cognitive dissonance” which signals to another area in which Chavez’s Neo-Marxist ideological project clashes with the deep-rooted predispositions, trends and beliefs of Venezuelan society and generates growing tensions.

It is worth mentioning additional components of Hugo Chavez’s strategic view, which contrast with the general Venezuelan political culture, with obvious impact on the strategic aspects. On one hand, I refer to Chavez’s marked fondness toward the Colombian guerrilla organizations (FARC and ELN), which have been considered irreconcilable enemies by the Venezuelan military for decades. In fact, the Colombian guerrilla groups, as well as the Venezuelan guerrilla organization supported by Cuban militias in the 1960’s, have been responsible for the death of soldiers and officers of the Venezuelan army and the memory of these deaths has constituted the subject of a cult or symbol by the Armed Forces. By radically twisting this image that forms part of the Venezuelan military mythology, Chávez touches very sensitive psychological cords. Moreover, we could add the exponential increase in drug trafficking throughout the Venezuelan territory, and the reports on the alleged interest of the President of the Republic that such traffic reaches the US coasts to contribute to the social deterioration of the “Empire.”

Finally, it is important to make reference to the idea of anti-Semitism encouraged and promoted by the revolutionary regime in connection with its Iranian ally and linked to a vision of

the global struggle of the oppressed (in this case, the Palestinians) against the “oppressors” (Israel and its North American partner) . Anti-Semitism is culturally foreign and almost unknown in Venezuela, or at least it was until Chávez placed it as one of the ingredients of his efforts directed to transform the strategic culture of the society through a broader cultural change, meaning that of the *political culture* as a referential framework for the rest of the values and social principles.

Now it is relevant that I point out that Chávez incarnates a trait of the traditional strategic culture, which is *Messianism*. In that sense, it could be linked to a tradition that began with Bolívar and found significant expressions during the democratic period. However, the problem with the Messianistic will of Chávez derives itself from the contents of its political program, its *substance*, which we saw how it contrasts in themes and basic perceptions with the previous components of the national strategic culture. Thus, if the *Messianistic style* remains in Chavez’s project, its components give a very different connotation and sense of direction.

How are the regime and its leader carrying out the program of cultural change? What methods is he using and with what results?

Basically, the regime is using four methods to produce the expected cultural change. The first one is the indoctrination of the population in general, through the media controlled by the government and its constant use by the Head of State, in a proselytizing work which could be described as “evangelist” (without the religious connotations of the term.) **This work of indoctrination in favor of a new meaning of things is applied with a special tenacity on the military sector, through an educational system of various levels, both for the officers and the rank and file.** Professors, readings, study guides, etc., have been gradually adapted to

contribute to Chavez's expected goals of transformation. It consists of a constant and relentless task of revolutionary propaganda to which the President devotes many hours.

Secondly, we have new strategic alliances with Cuba, Iran and Russia which are equally used as tools to send officers to be trained in those countries, by learning the language and assuming, at least it is expected, the prevailing ideas of these countries. In turn, these allies provide useful security, vigilance and control services inside Venezuela in favor of stability and endurance of the regime.

Thirdly, the purchase of new arms for the military sector in Russia and Iran contributes to strengthening the change in links, training possibilities, organizational and management systems, operational practices and strategic ideas that are no longer shared, as it was in the past, with the United States, France and Israel, but instead with the ideological partners of Chávez in his "Anti-Imperialist" campaign. Lastly, the President has articulated and promotes daily a new interpretation of the heroic myth of the Independence and the Bolivarian legacy, adjusting them to his revolutionary stance and view.

The notable effort carried out throughout a decade to change the traditional paradigm of our strategic culture and replace it with another framework, has not produced the expected results. Regarding this failure, I wish to explicitly pose the following hypothesis: *the traditional strategic culture continues to be predominant in Venezuela and the revolutionary paradigm has not succeeded in imposing itself nor has it penetrated the psychological roots that feed our predispositions, trends and beliefs.* This argument is supported by the findings of recent public opinion poll surveys which reveal that the fundamental aspects of the traditional political culture of Venezuelans (the one that grew and strengthened during the democratic phase between 1958 and 1998), have remained unchanged and continue to determine the predominant views of the

population on the political terrain. According to this study, “After ten years of governmental indoctrination, the Venezuelan citizen has not changed his/her way of thinking: 96% continues to be tolerant and pluralist, and 82% points out that private property of the means of production should be maintain...”<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, a regime that promotes the so called “socialism of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” increased the purchasing power of the poor sectors, while the high prices of oil lasted, and with it strengthened their aspiration to become property owners: For this reason “81% of the population, including Chavez’s supporters, reject President Chavez’s statement that being rich is bad.”<sup>2</sup>

These facts allow me to argue that the traditional strategic culture continues to predominate also inside the Venezuelan military sector, although maybe the military sector has some characteristics, regarding certain ingredients of political culture, that to some extent distinguished itself from the rest of the population. Perhaps Venezuelan military officers have an exaggerated opinion about themselves regarding their alleged management skills, efficiency and integrity which is not shared by the rest of the population, particularly by the professional middle class who has witnessed how numerous active and retired officers, placed in positions of power by the Head of State, have shown broad and evident examples of incompetency and corruption in the last ten years. In any case, it is difficult to imagine that Venezuelan military officers, who essentially share the perceptions and values of the population in general, would accept the visceral anti-Americanism of Chávez or prefers the Russian arms to the American and French which they have used for decades and gave them the sense of power and technological superiority over neighboring countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Read the lengthy report published on the “Siete Dias” section of **El Nacional** newspaper, Sunday June 21, 2009, p.3

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

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Neither can we imagine our military officers pleased with the Iranian connection nor with the penetration and espionage that the Cuban secret service carries out over their behavior and that of their relatives. To the above mentioned, we must also add the orders that are now giving in an attempt to oblige them to accuse their comrades in arms if there is a suspicion of them having views against the regime, and needless to say about the aggravations derived from the obligation to perform the military salute by saying the following phrase out loud: “Fatherland, Socialism or Death.” The history of the last fifty years show that Venezuelan military members, who have the same common sense as the rest of their compatriots, have been willing to sacrifice their lives for very few causes and Socialism, Castro style is not one of them.

The Venezuelan case shows some interesting evidence on the question of what are the requirements needed for a radical and deep transformation from strategic culture to another. In other words, what does Chávez need to do in order to achieve his goal of changing the traditional strategic culture to a revolutionary one?

In theory, we could assume that a systematic and massive indoctrination effort could show results in the long run, but it is difficult to determine how long it will take. It seems that the historical examples, specially the traumatic experiences of Japan and Germany in the past century, are the ones that basically determine the passage from one strategic culture to another. During the past decade, Venezuela has experienced turbulent times, but if you put aside Chavez’s ongoing violent discourse and the threats of some of his most radical supporters, what we have witnessed is the paroxysm of populism and not a real profound revolution like the ones experiences by Cuba under Castro and China under Mao. In fact, as suggested above, the “socialist” regime has confirmed, to a certain extent, Max Weber’s thesis on the unintended

consequences of political action. According to this thesis, on numerous occasions, the results of political action contrast with the expected goals of the actors who initiated it.<sup>3</sup>

Along these ideas, we could speculate about the possible negative effects of the effort to change the strategic culture which could lead to Cuban and Iranian intervention in Venezuelan internal affairs, as well as in President Chavez's pledge to impose the limitations and poverty, that inevitably accompany a socialist economic model, on a materialistic and consumer oriented population like ours.

It is also important to point out the following: During these ten years, the Venezuelan revolutionary regime *has not been attacked from abroad in an assertive way by any power or adversary*. Washington's foreign policy toward Chávez has been cautious and most Latin American countries have acted with crude pragmatism by seeking to take advantage of Venezuela's petrodollars. Colombia under Uribe has followed a more prudent path. The only moment when a major encounter could have unraveled, as a result of Chavez's aggressive reaction to the death of the Colombian guerrilla leader Raúl Reyes, ended in a sort of farce. The "mobilization" of Venezuelan troops to the border, impulsively ordered by Chávez, exposed not only the serious deficiencies of the military apparatus which look worn out and without operational capacity, but also officers and soldiers lacking motivation since, most probably, they could not understand the possibility of declaring a war due to the death of the leader of FARC. This point is important because it is possible that future external challenges, if they were to take place, prove that the Venezuelan strategic culture has essentially remained stable. For this reason, Chávez should be prudent and not request that the Venezuelan military to carry out

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<sup>3</sup> "It is a tremendous truth and a basic fact of History...that frequently or generally a final result of a political action has no correlation, and frequently is paradoxical, with its original intention." (My translation). Max Weber, **El político y el científico** (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1988), p. 156

actions in search of heroic illusions for the “continental revolution” that move away from traditional parameters.

To a certain extent it could be argued that the aggressive and delirious Messianism of Chávez is part of a Venezuelan tradition since Bolívar’s time. Nonetheless, and as I previously stated, the *contents* of Chavez’s Messianism are excessively radical and do not fit the paradigm of the benevolent utopian past. They are similar in terms of style, but not in substance. The Venezuelan strategic culture, with a special reference to its military expression, is still cautious and not war oriented. By paying exclusive attention to Chavez’s rhetoric, his official discourse, the efforts to reorganize the Armed Forces, to create ideologized militias and change the legal framework of the military institution, we could assume that we are witnessing a perceptible and clearly observable change in the strategic culture in Venezuela. However, I have argued in this essay that such change fundamentally affects only *the surface* of things because *deep inside* they remain significantly stable.

What is undeniable is that the Venezuelan military institution has suffered a loss of its prestige in the eyes of the most modern, lucid and productive sectors of civil society. The image of the military as alleged “guardians of the nation” has deteriorated and its pretensions of technocratic efficiency have also been severely eroded. Looking at the future and depending on how the unraveling of Chávez revolutionary project takes place, a project which faces a good portion of the society’s passionate rejection, the Venezuelan military will have to do a deep self examination and explicitly retake the principles of the traditional strategic culture without including any pretention of political power.