

Venezuela: The Chosen Path to National Defense. A Critical Perspective of Its Domestic and Regional Impact

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In this article, the author performs a detailed analysis of the path chosen by the Bolivarian Revolution in terms of security and national defense since its promoter, Lieutenant Colonel Hugo Chávez Frías, assumed the Presidency of the Venezuelan Republic. It takes us through his twelve-year (12) walk in office, and through the consequences it had Regional Security towards the 21st century.

Judging by the nature of the legislation and the official documents that emerged from these last years of exercise of power in Venezuela, the primary players' key decisions, and the developments described in the course of action, the author warns about the serious problems which are faced by country in terms of security and national defense due to the de-institutionalization of the State, the operation of illegal armed groups, and the migratory, fiscal, sanitary, and customs vulnerabilities.

Introduction

Since 1999, Venezuela lacks a National Strategic Concept¹, which was approved by the National Defense Council "...on the bonding basis of the contents found in the core principles established in the Republic's Constitution and Laws, with a gradual progress that addresses the current scenario and in conformity with the national interests"²: and this allows and guarantees the utmost purposes of national security.

During the first decade of the 21st century, this situation has generated in

the South American country a lack of functionality as to the conception, planning, decision-making, and execution of public policies related to national security and defense. These are starting to become noticeable and will have an unavoidable impact on regional security.

By 1999, upon the approval through a referendum of the new Constitution, a hope of an assertive directionality for the Venezuelan State was emerging concerning national security. It was the first time in the country's constitutional history, that an entire section regarding National Security was incorporated in the Constitution³, which –among other issues– highlighted that it was imperative to legislate on unprecedented topics and –in some other issues– to amend current laws and to adjust them to the requirements the constituents of the late 20th century, as outlined for the country. Unfortunately, the balance after ten years of the Constitution being in place reports that the following laws, among others, are still pending approval: National Mobility Law, Law for an active Engagement of the National Armed Force in the National Development; Document Classification and Declassification Law, National Intelligence and Counterintelligence Service Law, Weapons and Explosives Law, National Armed Forces' Social Security Law, Military Discipline Law, Organic Boundaries Law.

On the contrary, laws such as the National Armed Forces Law, have been under permanent amendment over the last five (5) years. Three (3) reforms have occurred. The first was conducted in 2005⁴, and the others in 2008⁵ and 2009⁶. A new reform is expected for the ongoing year, 2011, which will include, among others, the incorporation of the new National Bolivarian Militia Commanding Officers who are being currently trained for that purpose. This is undoubtedly a controversial issue, since the Militia is not considered in the composition formula of the National Armed Forces which is specifically mentioned in the Constitution, and since the creation of the Militia in 2005 was ascribed to President Hugo Chávez Frias, interested in establishing a Praetorian Guard at the service of the so called Bolivarian Revolution. Regrettably, because of the lack of political will, another important law, the Disarmament Law of 2002⁷, has not been enforced in any of the sections.

Other key laws and political decisions that might have fostered national security and extend its benefits to the region, have not made any progress in their execution either, such as the Organic Law for the National Police Service and Enforcement⁸, the Organic Law against Organized Crime, and a strengthened national decentralization and integration with neighboring countries in terms of security cooperation. Just recently, with the new Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos' taking office on August 7, 2010, cooperation has been incipiently re-established in regard to mutual border security between Venezuela and Colombia, after 10 years of complex mutual relations. It must be recalled that President Chávez's first action regarding his government's foreign policy in 1999, was that he declared himself a neutral party in view of the Colombian domestic conflict, a situation that entailed its own consequences.

The leap transition from the 20th to the 21st century, instead of becoming a challenge to call upon the best to formulate the path towards the future, has been used by the political leaders for more than 10 years to keep a polarizing ideological discourse, in many cases,

with no adherence to the rule of law. This formula has been kept to maintain power, thus preventing Venezuela to outline the toolbox necessary to face a safe and prosperous future for the State's constitutive elements: its people, its territory, and its legal-political system.

Integral National Defense

By 2004, the Bolivarian Revolution's military doctrine known as: "Integral National Defense", (Dieterich, 2004) was born in Venezuela. It was frequently mentioned in official speeches, but remained inaccessible as no official publication is made available.

This plan emerged as the government's answer to the destabilization plans attributed to the opposition, judging by the events of 2002 that held Chávez's government at bay, ousting him from power for more than 48 hours on April 11 that year and also as a response to the results of the presidential referendum held on August 15, 2004. "The new doctrine emerges as a response to the US military threat, and as such, reflects the structural traits of every defense doctrine, intended to deter or defeat a numerically and technologically far superior aggressor" (Dieterich, 2004).

The new doctrine seems to be based on the co-responsibility between the State and the civil society and remains oriented toward three strategic directions or lines (Dieterich, 2004):

- Strengthening of military power
- Deepening the civic military union
- Strengthening of national defense and the people's involvement thereto

In this doctrine, nothing refers to the fight against drug trafficking, organized transnational crime, human trafficking, or arms/minerals trafficking, all of which are easily feasible, given the extraordinary geographical location that makes Venezuela an essentially borderline country, adjoining 14 States, at the Caribbean, Andean, Amazon, and Atlantic regions.⁹

Military Power Strengthening

The first strategic line intended to strengthen military power includes maintaining and developing the physical infrastructure of the military, increased contingency forces, the creation of new military units, and the execution of a re-equipping plan encompassing both the procurement of new weaponry systems, as well as the recovery of existing ones. In terms of equipment, it a priority to seek alternative arms supply sources and to develop a domestic defence industry in conformity with a domestic development model.

However, so far the strengthening of military power has not meant an increase of the military manpower. As a matter of fact, the military staff in the National Armed Forces has transitioned from 163,364 members, as set forth by the National Budget Act of 2008, to 117,400 members anticipated by the National Budget of 2010, which includes the so called Bolivarian National Militia that was officially enabled as of 2005 through an amendment performed to the National Armed Forces' Organic Law. In turn, training provided to military staff has faced two hindrances to be properly addressed: on one hand, a screening of



trainers in the military schools which has been performed since 2004 to date, and which was resulted in excluding those faculty members considered to belong to the “opposition” or those who, because of their request of the presidential revoking referendum held in 2004, had been included in the so called Tascón List¹⁰; This meant a decrease of quality in the military staff training, where critical thinking was suppressed. The other hindrance has been a deterioration of the weapon systems functionality, due to two circumstances: Failure in making key decisions during the 5-year period (2000-2005) regarding new investments and plans in view of a foreseeable uselessness of the weapon systems; and the aftermath of the US resolution that banned the sale and transfer of weapons and military technology to Venezuela, which was enacted on October 1, 2006, although its actual implementation began one year before that date. Both circumstances had a deep impact, which we undoubtedly consider as the “lost decade in sustaining the National Armed Forces’ functionality”.

Investment in maintenance and development of the physical infrastructure of the military has been intermittent, although noticeable in some instances because of its amounts, but also notorious in other respects due to the contrary effect, because of the shockingly abandoned state of some of the infrastructure. Lacking an official infrastructure plan for the middle and long term, the National Armed Forces do not have any real outcomes concerned with the improving their staff members’ quality of life, improving of the conditions of those facilities which are used for military training, upgrading of those facilities requiring new weaponry, or improving of the environmental conditions and in seeking to reduced the impact on the environment.

a. Military Equipment

In terms of military equipment, there are various items to highlight: “During Hugo Chávez’s first presidential period of 5 years, among other equipment, military materiel was acquired from multiple Western countries: tactical vehicles from Austria, Brazil, and Switzerland; administrative airlift units from France; an elevation trailer, radars, and fire steering systems for air defense missiles from Holland; hovercrafts from the United Kingdom; missiles and mobile air defense launchers from Sweden. In addition, the United States continued supplying spare parts for the US systems currently used by the Venezuelan Armed Forces, such as the F-16 fighter aircraft, the C-130H Hercules airlift plane, and the OV-10 Bronco tactical support aircraft”ⁿ (Civil Association “Citizens’ Control”, 2011, p. 4).

Within the last 5 years, (2005-2010), 14 State sources supplied weaponry to Venezuela, some of them mentioned below: Austria, Belarus, Brazil, Canada, China, Spain, the USA, Holland, Iran, Italy, United Kingdom, Russia, Sweden, and Switzerland. (Ibid., p. 4-16).

Among the features of those supplies the following ones are highlighted: 1) The State’s lack of transparency in reporting of the received quantities. 2) Frequent lack of information regarding the branch (Army, Navy, Air Force, or National Guard) within the National Armed Forces as recipient of the supplies. 3) An information gap in terms of the official announcements of new acquisitions and the final condition after their reception. Following the same pattern, according to a survey conducted by the research and analysis team of the “Citizens’ Control” Civil Association (Ibid.), there is no data available concerning the quantity of: 6-ton, 4x4 Steyr4 L-8 anti-riot trucks (Whales) acquired from Austria for the National Guard; Imbel MD1 9x19mm handguns acquired from Brazil; campaign equipment (tents and kitchens), communication equipment, and anti-riot/anti-disturbances equipment and material acquired from China; anti-riot equipment and materiel acquired from Spain; radar, electronic systems, fire steering systems acquired from Holland; or of 2S23 Nona –SVK self-propelled gun-mortar systems, 2S12 Sani 120-mm mortars, ZU-23-2 23-mm air-defense twin-barreled guns, BAL-E Coastal Defense missile systems, 9A52 Smerch 300-mm 1x12 mobile multiple rocket launcher systems, 2S19M1 Msta-S 152-mm self-propelled howitzers, 9K51 Grad 40x122-mm mobile multiple rocket launcher system, S-300 mobile air-defense missile systems, S-125 Pechora 2-M mobile air-defense missile systems, 9K37 Buk self-propelled air-defense missile systems, all of which have been acquired from Russia and are expected to be delivered to Venezuela within this year (2011) or in 2012. Also, there is no available data concerning the status of the Belarus project for the establishment of an Air Defense Command and Control Center and an Electronic Warfare Command and Control Center announced by the Venezuelan government. Venezuelan military personnel have been sent to Belarus by their government and are training at this time. There is no accessible data regarding the status of the announced project for the construction of a night combat system for an air base powered by solar and AC energy acquired from a US-Canadian entrepreneurial consortium, nor about the status of the communications equipment acquisition project to be obtained from China.

Based on the investigative task conducted by the aforementioned research and analysis team of the “Citizens’ Control” Civil Association, it is notable how Russia, the largest supplier of weapon systems to Venezuela —due to the quantity and amount of sales carried out— has

also been its most mentioned supplier when announcing new acquisitions within the last 5-year period, and the purpose of many of these acquisitions have not been disclosed yet. In this regard, the following equipment should be highlighted: S-125 Pechora 2-M Air-Defense Missile Systems; 9K37 Buk self-propelled air-defense missile systems; Ilyushin Il-476 strategic airlift planes; Ilyushin Il-78 aerial refueling tankers; Mi-28N Night Hunter attack helicopters; Tor-M1 9M330 mobile air-defense missile batteries; Project 636/class Varshavyanka submarines (NATO code: Improved Kilo); Project 677E/Amur class 1650 submarines; Beriev Be-200 amphibious planes; Antonov An-74 airlift planes, and Antonov An-74P maritime patrolling aircrafts. A list of presidential announcements, most of them for projects that have not been submitted to the public eye, and which show to a great extent the tactical and strategic needs of the National Armed Forces that have not been satisfied yet, especially if we add to this situation the pending construction or manufacturing deliveries from multiple countries, the following standing out: a gunpowder manufacturing plant contracted to Iran, and currently under construction in Moron, province of Carabobo; the Russian helicopter crew training center currently being set up in San Felipe, province of Yaracuy; the Su-30Mk2 planes Service Center, whose purpose and status is unknown; and the construction status of the project for the last of 4 Avante 1400/class Guacamacuto heavy coastal surveillance patrol ships acquired from Spain, which was expected to be built at the Venezuelan State-owned Embankment and Shipyard Company Diques y Astilleros Nacionales CA de Venezuela (Dianca) facilities. This has not been materialized yet.

b. A Dysfunctional Conceptualization of the National Military Defense.

Venezuela is not involved in an arms race, as has been frequently highlighted by the international media. Venezuela is facing probably the largest historical dysfunctionality regarding the conceptualization of the needs required to the Nation's military defence. Thus, acquisitions are being projected and executed as compartmentalized components development plans, in an attempt to overcome obsolete equipment, insufficient logistics, the consequences from the US embargo and the pressures exerted by the US over its allies and third-party nations who manufacture arms systems and technology with US components, in order to prevent weapons to be sold to Venezuela. The National Armed Forces face a challenge on whether to project its operational readiness for a hypothetical conventional conflict or for a hypothetical "protracted people's war", as part of the new Bolivarian military thought that identifies the US American imperialism as the primary permanent threat of military aggression, based on its estimation of a war threat in two axes: one relates to the very existence of the Bolivarian Revolution that is perceived by this thought as to undermine the US interests in the region, given its socialist, solidarity-based approach toward the Latin American and Caribbean region; and the other axis has to do with the traditional military aggressiveness of the Yankee Imperialism and its hunger for Venezuela's abundant oil reservoirs.

This hypothesis does not exclude –as the Venezuelan government has frequently pointed out— the threat of a conflict with Colombia² and the US interest thereto³ as an excuse to invade Venezuela, an issue that, by the way, is present in the new Venezuelan military thought since the unrest reigning in the Venezuelan-Colombian borderlands and the tensions which emerged within the last decade as a constant factor between the Nariño Palace and the Miraflores Palace.

Since 2004, the possible scenarios of conflict threat for the Venezuelan National Armed Forces were defined on a doctrinaire basis. In fact, during an exposition made by the former Commanding General of the Army, Gen. Raúl Baduel, in occasion of the 51st Anniversary of the Infantry School, those scenarios were outlined as follows: “1. A 4th-Generation war, intended to create unrest in the country as a first step towards the execution of operations targeted to disrupt and finally destroy the Nation State; 2. Coup d’états, subversion, and actions conducted by separatist groups, promoted by transnational political organizations known as “corporate predators”; 3. A regional conflict, and 4. A military intervention like the one presently conducted by the coalition in Iraq, developing combined operations whether or not under the OAS-UN mandate. The transnational goals of a conflict would be as follows: 1. to punish nationalist ideology; 2. to ensure the unlimited, safe, and cheap access to important energy sources; 3. to consolidate the globalist ideology, and 4. to extend the Anglo-Saxon dominance throughout the world, at least for the next century.” (Dieterich, 2004).

To this date, the periodicity theory, regarding the appearance and development of wars that the national government has pronounced in 2004 remains unchanged, and will come true if a Colombian-US American alliance launches a military assault on Venezuela, as inferred from the official statements and actions arisen during the peak moments of tensions with Colombia, bearing continental repercussions; in 2008, with the deployment of ten (10) battalions on the borders, as ordered by President Chávez¹⁴, without an apparent motive of threat against the Venezuelan sovereignty, and supposedly grounded on political-ideological reasons when the Colombian military attacked a Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) camp located in Ecuadorian territory, with which President Chávez holds a “strategic alliance”. The events occurred in August 2009 in rejection to the agreement subscribed between Colombia and the United States regarding the US use of Colombian military bases¹⁵ and the agreement of 2010 regarding Colombia’s complaint about the existence of more than 1500 guerrilla members of both the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) in Venezuelan territory, equally sheltered by the national government. Chávez interpreted this accusation as formulated by the Colombian government as a threat of war.¹⁶

c. Consolidated and Intensified Civic-Military Union and the Strengthening and Involvement of the People in National Defense.

The second and third strategic lines known as “a consolidated and intensified civic-military union” and “the strengthening and involvement of the People in National Defense” are worthy to be jointly analyzed, due to their deep future impact on national and regional security. Based on a mistaken concept of co-responsibility between civil society and the National Armed Forces as to the nation’s military defense¹⁷, they encourage citizens to turn into fighters. Hence the emphatic contents of the current Bolivarian National Armed Forces Organic Law related to the Bolivarian National Militia, which is directly subordinated to the President of the Republic (Article 43) and is comprised by the “Combatant Corps” (Article 50) composed by citizens working for public or private institutions who are voluntarily enlisted, organized, and trained by the General Command



of the Bolivarian Militia with the purpose of assisting the National Armed Forces with the total defense of the nation; and the “Territorial Militia” (Article 51) composed by citizens that get voluntarily organized to fulfill integral duties to defend the nation; both structures are allocated with functions to collect, process, and disseminate information regarding community councils, public and private institutions (Item 8, Article 46); as well as contribute and advise on the integration and consolidation of the integral defense committees of the community councils, in order to strengthen a civic-military unity (Item 7, Article 46), all of which has translated –in some cases– into the conduction of social intelligence and coercion missions targeted to capture votes in favor of the official party throughout the countless voting processes carried out in Venezuela, with this aggravating factor: the training of new combatants in a country that lacks transparent public policies that ensure a control over lawful weaponry and in which the figures of illegal weapons in the hands of civilians are extremely high.

d. Ideologization and Politicization Process of the National Armed Forces.

Two events in 2002 serve as benchmarks in the politicization process of the National Armed Forces. Chávez’s ousting from power for more than 48 hours on April 11 that year through a “coup d’état”, as the national government has sustained since then, or due to his “abandonment of office”, as the opposition has recounted this episode. The other event: the pronouncement made at the Altamira square, by a group of active National Armed Forces service members on October 21, 2002. Both undoubtedly triggered the accelerated ideologization and politicization process in the National Armed Forces, driven

by President Chávez, with the purpose of establishing a socialist regime supported by the military sphere and as a method to spot the so called “institutionalist” officials, opposed to the politicization process.

In his discourses and lectures directed towards military service members throughout the entire hierarchy, Chávez encourages them to defend his political process and urges those who dissent with socialist ideology to leave ranks¹⁸. High-ranked National Armed Forces (FAN)¹⁹ members and government officials, such as the Executive Vice-President of the Republic, should do likewise²⁰.

One of the more controversial issues within the sphere of FAN’s political ideologization process has been the presidential order to include the motto “Socialism, Fatherland or Death. We will triumph!” in the military protocol, which besides being part of the military salute, can be observed in facilities, ships, aircraft, and military documents²¹. There are documented cases of officials who opposed to the use of such motto and have been sanctioned²².

Following the National Armed Forces’ open politicization approach, it is usual that –conforming with of office ceremony– any official belonging to a military unit expresses the commitment of deepening the socialist, anti-Imperialist Bolivarian revolution.

Another National Armed Forces’ emblematic event of this politicization process is the accusation made by the Citizen’s Control organization on May 2010 about the existence of high-ranking active officials associations with the united socialist party of Venezuela, thus Articles 328 and 330 of the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela were infringed by: Major General (MG) Francisco José Ortega Castillo, National Guard’s Chief of the 7th Regional Command,; Major General (MG) Luís Alfonso Bohorquez Soto, National Guard’s Chief of the 4th Regional Command ; and Rear Admiral Gilberto Pinto Blanco, of the extended high command of the National Bolivarian Guard.²³

But the most significant part of the National Armed Forces’ politicization process has undoubtedly been the statements issued by Gen. Henry Rangel Silva on November 2010, regarding the fact that the National Armed Forces are married to President Chávez’s socialist project and that they will not accept an eventual electoral victory of the opposition. These statements triggered an immediate reaction from all national²⁴ and international voices, but resulted in no sanction against this important officer who was immediately promoted to Commanding General by the President of the Republic, as a reward to his unconstitutional statements.²⁵

e. Proliferation of Weapons in the Hands of Civilians.

Between 9 and 15 million illegal weapons were circulating freely in Venezuela by 2009, according to statements issued by the official party’s congressman Juan José Mendoza, Chairman of the Defense Commission of the National Assembly²⁶, with more than three thousand gun shops indiscriminately existing by 1998 with no control at all²⁷. By now, there is no official data available regarding the status of the “lawful weaponry in the country”, the number of municipal police officials –which could reach 335 based on the

political-territorial division–, or the number of state police officials –which could reach 24– with arsenals and their supply status. Also, there is no official data regarding the number of private security providers whose members are authorized to carry weapons, or about the number of gun shops authorized to sell them.

The accepted standards to acknowledge an existing epidemic account for 10 homicides per 100 thousand inhabitants. According to the World Report on Violence issued by the World Health Organization, homicides in Latin America and the Caribbean were the death cause for an average of 22.9 individuals per 100 thousand inhabitants in 2002. In Venezuela, according to non-official data, homicide reports reached 60 per 100 thousand inhabitants by the end of 2009²⁸.

Unfortunately, the Venezuelan drama does not circumscribe to that simple but horrendous figure. More than 19,000 homicides were committed in Venezuela in 2009²⁹ and more than 340 long-term kidnappings in that year, according to figures handled by the National Cattle Breeders Association of Venezuela (FEDENAGA)³⁰. It should be highlighted that over the past 5 years, the national government has not disclosed any homicide-related figures. According to data provided by the Venezuelan Violence Observatory, there are 9 detentions per 100 homicides. This reflects an impunity rate of at least 91% for this crime³¹.

f. Parallel, Illegal Armed Groups.

A proliferation of illegal armed groups would seem, in turn, to be a constant factor which in some remarkable cases is encouraged by the State. In Caracas, within a 12-km radius around the Miraflores Presidential Palace and around the National Bolivarian Militia headquarters, armed social groups operate illegally and embrace the process led by President Chávez. These armed groups have shown their heavy weaponry in public and through the mass media, and have threatened to commit crimes –some have been actually committed– without the Venezuelan State taking any legal action so far. Among other, we can mention the following groups: Coordinadora Simón Bolívar, La Piedrita³², Carapaica, Colectivo Montaraz, Tupamaros, Alexis Vive, Venezuelan Popular Unity party (UPV), and the “Bolivarian Forces for Liberation” guerrilla group, which have shown heavy weaponry manifestly in public and through the mass media, as well as committed crimes against other citizens.

A list of these groups may easily include ten illegal armed groups, which hold an ideological/ economic relation with the Bolivarian Revolution as social groups; some of them, like the Bolivarian Forces of Liberation, have been accused by the United States to be terrorist groups³³.

The leader of La Piedrita, Valentín Santana, has even stated: “*We are a group that performs social activities, but –as expressed by our Commander Hugo Chávez– we are also armed and willing to defend this revolution by the use of weapons*” (...)³⁴.

It is clear that in Venezuela, armed ‘social’ groups and organized crime coexist with the militias who are loyal to the fatherland and to the country’s revolutionary process.

Using the National Armed Forces to launch the “Bolivarian Revolution” and to intervene in third countries.

President Chávez has continuously used the FAN for missions other than those set forth in the National Constitution since he took office in February 1999.

Chávez has been accused of using the FAN to launch his “Bolivarian socialist revolutionary” process in other American nations; to threaten and try to disrupt regional governments that dissent with his political project; and to support political movements and irregular armed groups which attempt to replace or oust lawful governments of Latin American countries to impose a socialist regime. The facts and documents supporting those accusations are many. We will however refer to four scenarios: El Salvador, Bolivia, Colombia and Honduras.

On April 2001, the government of El Salvador requested Venezuela to withdraw a Venezuelan civic-military brigade that provided humanitarian assistance in the village of Comosagua. Venezuelan military officials were accused of serving in disguise as civilians in order to conduct political proselytism activities in favor of the ultra-left opposition movement “Farabundo Martí for National Liberation Front” (FMLN, for its acronym in Spanish)³⁵.

In Bolivia, as of Evo Morales’ assumption of office, relations with Venezuela have been strengthening considerably. The Venezuelan government has contributed with multi-million financial and material resources to strengthen the Bolivarian Armed Forces and law enforcement institutions. In addition, as of 2007 and according to official sources, military and naval missions have been established in Bolivia, with the goal of providing education as well as humanitarian and civic assistance. Regarding civic assistance, a group of members of the Venezuelan military engineering corps carries out joint operations with their Bolivian peers in that country’s Northern region.

However, Venezuela’s military presence in Bolivia has become the target of even violent rejection demonstrations that emerged on the part of multiple sectors in that country, like the events of December 2007, when a C-130H airplane of the Venezuelan Air Force that had just landed at an airport in the Amazon region, was attacked by a group of inhabitants and compelled to take off again and seek refuge in Brazil³⁶. Moreover, Bolivian sectors have alleged –among other issues– the presence and the involvement of Venezuelan troops in their country and in the armed suppression of protests against the Morales government; the delivery of both armament for the regime’s defense and anti-riot materiel to suppress members of the opposition³⁷. Likewise, they have warned about the –alleged– political-ideological activities ascribed to a group of Venezuelan military engineers operating in Northern Bolivia³⁸.

According to a study carried out by the Citizens’ Control association in 2010, a review conducted on the acquisition and destination route of the Super Puma helicopters purchased by Venezuela from France derives in the following³⁹:

- In 1989, the Venezuelan Air Force (FAV) receives eight (08) AS-332B1 “Super Puma” helicopters from France.

- In 1999, the FAV receives (08) “Cougar” aircraft units with the following characteristics: six (06) AS-532AC units for tactical employment, and two (02) AS-532UL units for presidential flights. The AS-532AC aircraft units, along with the AS-332B1, are assigned to the 10th Special Operations Air Group and the two AS-532UL units to the 4th Airlift Group.
- On May 28, 2006, the President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Commander Hugo Chávez Frías, during his radio broadcast, Hello, President, from Tiahuanaku, Bolivia, orders Secretary of Defense acting at that time, Admiral Orlando Maniglia Ferreira, to send “both ‘Super Puma’ helicopters” to provide support to the Bolivian air force”.
- On June 4, 2006, two (02) “Super Puma/Cougar” helicopters, withdrawn from the flight fleet of the FAV’s 10th Special Operations Air Group are presented at the El Alto air base in Bolivia, showing the flags and number plates (FAB-50 and FAB-751) of the Bolivian Air Force. The aircraft units remained at President Evo Morales’ service as an “indefinite loan”. Shortly after, those helicopters got the FAV’s flags and number plates replaced, but kept the Bolivian ones (double ID and nationality).
- On July 20, 2008, the AS332B1 “Super Puma” helicopter identified with the number plates FAV-7425/FAB-752 of the FAV, at Bolivian President Evo Morales’ service, crashed in the village Colomi, province of Cochabamba. FAV members Maj. Rodolfo Rivas, Lt. Daniel David Bustillos, Sgt. Carlos Jatar, and Aeronautical Technician César Bastida, as well as FAB’s Maj. Raúl Paz Céspedes died in the accident.



- On September 2, 2008, the Air-Force Attaché of the Venezuelan Embassy in Bolivia, Brigadier Gen. (Av) Manuel Silva Lugo, reports that President Hugo Chávez ordered the transfer of another “Super Puma” to Bolivia as a replacement of the one that crashed in the Bolivian territory on July 20, 2008.
- On September 10, 2010, a press release published in the Bolivian Air Force website unfortunately proves that the AS-332 Super Puma “Bolivian presidential helicopter”, which was currently undergoing a technical inspection in the facilities of the Aeronautical Maintenance and Development head office (DIMADEA) at the “El Libertador” air base, province of Aragua, “did no longer belong to the Venezuelan fleet”.

In the case of Colombia, Chávez and Uribe have generated extreme tense situations referred to as *supra* conflicts, as a consequence of ideological solidarity openly expressed by the Venezuelan government with the Colombian guerrilla groups.

Finally, Chávez threatened to militarily intervene in Honduras in order to reconstitute the ousted President Manuel Zelaya⁴⁰. The Ad-interim Honduran government has denounced the engagement of Venezuelan Army officers in disrupting actions on Honduran territory⁴¹. During the Honduran political crisis, the unauthorized landing of Venezuelan military aircrafts at the San Salvador, El Salvador, and Guatemala City airports was reported. And it is a fact that Zelaya travels in planes with Venezuelan plates and Venezuelan military crews⁴².

Conclusion

Venezuela entered the 21st century with a heavy burden for its society in terms of political polarization, de-institutionalization, lack of independence among the state branches, and a shattered legality, without any option of real power.

The current government –by means of an ideology presented as “protective” against an alleged international threat– has been gradually assuming a series of harmful practices for national security under an extortive scheme for society, damaging state constitutive elements –the population and the legal political system– thus causing massive gaps in the jurisdictional control of the Venezuelan border areas, permeable to international trafficking activities of all kinds, generating threats to regional security.

The Integral National Defense doctrine implemented in Venezuela as of 2004, although not derived yet in an arms race, could generate suspicions within the region, basically due to a lack of transparency related to budget, expenditures, and definite armament procurement. On the other hand, the Venezuelan military perception still prevails as of the threat of an armed conflict with Colombia, a country that would be used –according to this hypothesis– as the route used for an imperialist invasion of the national territory. This hypothesis has created a permanent source of instability between Venezuela and Colombia for the last three years: 2008, 2009 and 2010, with consequences for the whole region.

The consequences of the activation and operation of the Bolivarian National Militia still have to be verified, in regard with their direct and functional dependence on the President

of the Republic, and the risks this poses given hypothetical domestic tensions of becoming a Praetorian Guard. High levels of politicization and lack of professionalism in the National Armed Forces are also another source of concern, because they influence directly the discipline, obedience, and subordination of that institution, vital for the country.

Using the National Armed Forces to launch the “Bolivarian Revolution” and intervene in third countries has found a breeding ground not only in the Alba countries (basically, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua). The involvement in other countries has irritated spheres close to the armed conflict (Colombia) and will undoubtedly generate discrepancies within the region, where Venezuela is deploying economic resources to leverage its allies and intervene in domestic affairs. This could cause a rupture in the mutual confidence shared by some bordering countries, such as Bolivia and Paraguay, or Ecuador and Colombia, among others.

Venezuela experiences a spiral of unprecedented violence in its history linked to civil insecurity. Factors such as the state’s permissiveness to the existence of illegal armed groups and the high impunity with which they act, place the country in a state of lawlessness that reflects the profound institutional decay in every sphere of the nation. This scenario, which might be the most dangerous of all due to its middle and long-term consequences for the country, has undoubtedly become a threat for the region as well. Seeing Venezuela from an oil-supplier standpoint, this region has not become aware of the distinctively dangerous direction that the so called Bolivarian Revolution is threatening with.

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- ⁹ Venezuela adjoins the following countries: Dominican Republic, Kingdom of the Netherlands, the United States of America, France, Trinidad and Tobago; Colombia, St. Christopher & Nevis, Great Britain, Dominica, St. Lucie, St. Vincent, Grenada, Guyana, and Brazil.
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