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## Rogue Relations under Max-Pressure: Iran-Venezuela Bilateral Engagement 2013–2020

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JOSH CHANG, MAR 8 2021

Iran and Venezuela have maintained a strong “strategic alliance” from the earliest days of the administrations of Presidents Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hugo Chávez.[1] The alliance has included shared rhetoric of solidarity between both states in opposition to a mutual adversary in the form of the United States, as well as extensive cooperation in economic, diplomatic, and energy spheres.[2] The strong ties between both states, despite the substantial geographic distance between them, are illustrated by odd moments and declarations within the relationship. Iranian airliner Mahan Air reestablished a direct flight to Caracas in April 2019 in defiance of Western sanctions on the firm’s operations and expressed hopes that the company could maintain this air route to Venezuela.[3] The Iranian Navy also announced in December 2018 that it could deploy its new stealth destroyer and a small flotilla of warships to Venezuela to carry out a five-month expeditionary mission.[4]

Assessments of the Iran-Venezuela relationship have largely focused on the partnership during the Chávez and Ahmadinejad presidencies in the early 2000s. Furthermore, these evaluations have mainly revolved around two viewpoints. One perspective portrays the alliance as a provider of practical, strategic benefits that enables both states to circumvent international sanctions and gain economically from mutual cooperation. The other perspective frames the relationship as an ideological one exclusively rooted in anti-Americanism that enables both states to amplify their opposition to the United States.[5] However, the current literature on the relationship lacks an updated evaluation of the alliance under the present-day administrations of President Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela and President Hassan Rouhani in Iran.

This paper seeks to fill this gap by presenting an updated assessment of the Iran-Venezuela alliance from 2013 (when Maduro and Rouhani both assumed power in their respective countries) to 2020. It seeks to answer the following question: to what extent can the persistence of current Iran-Venezuela relations into the Maduro-Rouhani era be explained by the anti-American sentiment that originated during the Chávez-Ahmadinejad period? This paper postulates that the intensification of U.S. maximum pressure campaigns against both states have maintained the alliance’s orientation around an ideologically-driven anti-Americanism. It seeks to test this hypothesis by comparing the occurrence of high-level bilateral meetings between both countries’ leaders with the imposition of U.S. sanctions from 2013 to 2020.

This paper is divided into several segments. It will first explore the literature on theories of alliance formation in international relations and previous analyses of the Ahmadinejad-Chávez era of the Iran-Venezuela alliance to determine underlying motivations for both countries’ alignment. The paper will then explore the methodology that it employs to assess the Iran-Venezuela alliance under Rouhani and Maduro. It will outline the main hypothesis, define the scope and variables of the study, and explain how the investigation will test this hypothesis. It will then describe the results of the analysis and draw conclusions regarding the alliance in the Maduro-Rouhani era as well as implications for U.S. policy towards both countries.

### Literature Review

The literature on the Iran-Venezuela alliance has established a collection of theories and interpretations for the

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partnership's creation; however, this paper seeks to contribute to it by gauging whether these works' findings continue to hold true even in the Maduro-Rouhani era. It seeks to explore whether the alliance extends beyond the personalities of Ahmadinejad and Chávez and relies on deeper structural factors that go beyond any one individual leader.

## *Theories of Alliance Formation*

Theories of alliance formation in international relations broadly explain the persistence of the Iran-Venezuela relationship. In order to understand the theoretical basis for this alliance's creation, one must examine the rationale and drivers behind the formation of alliances in international relations. The study of the literature on alliance formation may yield useful theoretical insights on why Iran and Venezuela have chosen to align with each other.

Stephen M. Walt presents a framework for alliance formation in his effort to clarify and improve upon preexisting literature on neorealist theory in international relations. In international relations, states can choose to either align with other weak partners to balance against a more powerful threat or bandwagon with this rising hegemon for self-preservation.[6] Walt, however, claims that traditional viewpoints in international relations have framed this decision solely in accordance with states' consideration of relative power. Walt opposes this framework and argues that states make these decisions according to the most pressing threats to their survival rather than just pure assessments of the distribution power in the international arena. In his view, a state could ally with a more powerful one to contain a relatively weaker adversary if the latter posed an immediate threat to the state at hand.[7]

Walt goes further to outline four factors that influence a state's threat perception of potential adversaries: aggregate power, proximate power, offensive power, and offensive intentions. Aggregate power refers to a potential adversary's total resources at the economic, demographic, military, and technological levels. Proximate power refers to the adversary's threat based on its distance from the state. Offensive power refers to an adversary's military capability to directly threaten a state's security, while offensive intention refers to an adversary's appearance as a threat based on some ambitious foreign policy.[8]

Ultimately, Walt argues that between balancing and bandwagoning, states prefer the former because a balancing coalition is less susceptible to defection as members would naturally seek to resist a threatening adversary for their own security.[9] Furthermore, membership in such a coalition preserves a state's independence, whereas bandwagoning completely subjects the state to the whim and preferences of a hegemon, which could change at any time.[10] With his emphasis on balancing, Walt prefers to frame the establishment of alliances in terms of a "balance of threat" model rather than a balance of power paradigm.

Michael N. Barnett and Jack S. Levy present an alternative angle to Walt's framework by examining motivations for alignment on the basis of a regime's desire for self-preservation at home. In contrast to Walt's explanation of a state's alignment with others based on external threats, Barnett and Levy argue that regimes often prioritize their own survival domestically first before considering the state's outside environment. These regimes can either form alliances with other states to obtain the resources they need to protect them at home or prepare their own domestic assets to meet challenges to their rule.[11] The shift to external alliances for internal security is attractive to these regimes for different reasons.

Alliances provide the regime financial aid and military resources from its external partners that it could not readily procure on its own, as well as prestige if the allies have a renowned ideological reputation.[12] In addition, reliance on external support compensates for a regime's weak military apparatus and enables the government to concentrate its resources on domestic spending and elite patronage, which allows it to remain in power. The regime would not have to reallocate these resources to defense expenditures and risk the loyalty of its clients and supporters.[13]

Walt's work on the balance of threat and the Barnett and Levy piece on domestic sources of alliance creation are both significant because they form the general outlines for the schools of thought on the Iran-Venezuela alignment mentioned in this paper's introduction. Walt's arguments broadly conform to the "ideological" school, which emphasizes both countries' fierce resentment towards the United States and points to a banner of revolutionary anti-

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Americanism unifying the partners. Barnett and Levy's arguments, on the other hand, set the foundation for the "pragmatism" school, which suggests that both states' cooperation offers economic incentives to one another and the means to avoid international sanctions.

Both Caracas and Tehran oppose the threat posed by the United States to their countries, given Washington's considerable global reach, extensive military resources, and its widespread economic influence that enables sanctions against Iran and Venezuela. However, the regimes in these countries, which seek to preserve their rule, also perceive the external threat of the United States as a direct challenge to their own survival in addition to the domestic opposition that these governments already face. Iran and Venezuela could be said to have merged their interest in external defense against Washington with the regime interest in self-preservation, creating a unique overlap between state and regime's interests. This overlap potentially explains the Iran-Venezuela alignment but raises questions about the alliance's utility and the practical benefits it provides its members for the preservation of regime security and state defense.

## *The Iran-Venezuela Alliance under Ahmadinejad and Chávez*

This paper argues that the current iteration of the alliance under Maduro and Rouhani is still defined by an ideological anti-Americanism due to intense U.S. sanctions campaigns against both countries. In order to fully evaluate this argument, one must examine previous studies of the relationship under the two leaders' predecessors, Chávez and Ahmadinejad. The findings from these studies will establish the directions and benefits that the alliance has already enjoyed and can outline possible continuities or changes that can appear in the period of study. In addition, they can also verify the motivations for alignment outlined in the articles on alliance formation.

One of the most widely cited scholars on the relationship is Elodie Brun, who presents a balanced account of the alliance that caters to both schools of thought and explains the potential benefits that an alignment with Iran brought Chávez's foreign policy. Brun argues that the Iran-Venezuela alliance enabled Chávez to pursue an independent foreign policy that rejected cooperation with major powers such as the United States and encouraged developing states to emulate this same course of action.[14] She goes further to state that both Chávez and Ahmadinejad's foreign policies converged around opposition towards the United States and that the two countries' sought interdependence with one another in four categories: political, military, economic, and cultural.[15] One of the most prominent examples of the two countries' cooperation occurred in 2005. Venezuela, under Chávez, vocalized diplomatic support for Iran's nuclear program and was the only country to vote against an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) resolution that condemned Iran for its violation of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).[16]

Ultimately, Brun argues that these different interactions show that Chávez's Venezuela admired Iran for its status as an independent oil-exporter that fostered camaraderie with other developing countries. Both countries found common ground on a desire to oppose the U.S.-dominated international order and sought to emulate the non-alignment of the Third World that existed during the Cold War.[17] Other scholars on the Iran-Venezuela alliance elaborate further on the findings in Brun's analysis by presenting their own interpretations of the partnership's formation and maintenance, which can be grouped below according to the school of thought. While a large number of analyses exist on the Ahmadinejad-Chávez era of Iran-Venezuela relations, this literature review includes only a select sample of these works due to similar overlapping conclusions and interpretations that these pieces make with one another.

## *Arguments of the Pragmatist School*

Sean Goforth argues that the alliance's formation is a response to Iran and Venezuela's conclusion that neither country could confront the United States alone. Goforth states that the alliance aims to make U.S. action against either country costly and reduce Washington's pressure on the two partners. He argues for this claim by pointing to Venezuela's oil exports to Iran in defiance of Western sanctions, Iranian financial aid to Venezuela, and the alleged presence of Hezbollah in Venezuela to carry out attacks against U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere.[18] Goforth's analysis corresponds with the pragmatic school's belief that the mutual economic gains that Iran and Venezuela acquire from the relationship also help both countries dodge international sanctions against them.

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While Brun and Goforth broadly highlight the partnership's economic and political advantages, Luis Fleischman analyzes its benefits from a strategic political-military perspective. Fleischman states that Iran sees Venezuela as an entry point into Latin America for Tehran to expand its military and political influence in the region and find other like-minded partners to minimize its isolation.[19] He also claims that Venezuela values the relationship because it could learn asymmetric warfare from Iran's experience in this area, given Tehran's record of sponsoring sub-state groups across the Middle East to promote its influence in the region.[20] Fleischman's arguments frame the relationship from a security standpoint and highlight its clandestine, gray-zone components.

## *Arguments of the Ideological School*

Kavon Hakimzadeh argues that the alliance is driven by both countries' desire for partners in the midst of international isolation and the personalities of Ahmadinejad and Chávez. However, Hakimzadeh largely dismisses the threat or significance posed by the partnership. He points to a series of unfulfilled trade agreements between both countries in light of their economic incompatibility with each other as well as the ideological differences between their regimes. He ultimately concludes that the alliance will mainly revolve around anti-U.S. rhetoric but will not threaten Washington in any substantial way.[21] Hakimzadeh's analysis is significant in the study of Iran-Venezuela relations because his piece is one of the most critical on the alliance's lack of utility, highlighting the ideological school's pessimism towards the significance of the partnership.

The most recent study on the relationship by Carmen Pereira Stallaert frames the alliance under Chávez and Ahmadinejad through the lens of peripheral-realism, an alternative model of the realist school of thought in international relations.[22] Stallaert sees Venezuela and Iran as rebel states whose primary motivation is to reject the U.S.-led international order based on their shared ideology of anti-Americanism.[23] This shared ideology is manifested in their diplomatic cooperation in multilateral bodies such as the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA). Her article also delves briefly into the future of the alliance under Maduro and Rouhani, but her analysis summarizes a list of bilateral meetings rather than assess the relationship's trajectory. As a result, Stallaert's piece underscores the need for an in-depth analysis of the Maduro-Rouhani era of the alliance since its inception in 2013, which this paper seeks to cover.

## **Main Hypothesis and Observable Implications**

This paper has now outlined the relevant literature on the Iran-Venezuela alliance and broadly discussed the two schools of thought on the bilateral relationship. It will now establish the hypothesis that this study seeks to broadly test. This paper argues that the Maduro-Rouhani iteration of the alliance is explained by the ideological school and that both countries' mutual opposition to the United States gives the partners an incentive to deepen their ties. This hypothesis broadly assumes that the enhancement of U.S. sanctions against both countries, particularly under the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump, gives both states common ground to rally around.[24] This study suggests that under the conditions of this hypothesis, it would be common to see a higher proportion of bilateral meetings between both states' leaders to jointly denounce U.S. aggression, reaffirm the value of the strategic alliance, and support the domestic positions of each other's regimes.[25]

The pragmatic school of thought argues that the Maduro-Rouhani partnership is motivated by strategic cooperation for mutual gains in areas such as trade, international petroleum markets, technology, and diplomacy. These gains would be used to help both states avoid sanctions. Under this school's conditions, this study also expects bilateral meetings in which both countries' high-ranking officials sign memorandums of understanding on economic cooperation, announce trade deals, and pledge strategic cooperation in multilateral forums.[26] This trend is important to note because it is possible that not every meeting examined by this study necessarily involves an overt anti-American message. The paper examines both the timing of Iran-Venezuela meetings with U.S. sanctions as well as the topics discussed during these events.

## **Research Methodology**

To test the main hypothesis, the study examines high-level bilateral meetings between Iranian and Venezuelan

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officials between 2013 and 2020 and compares their occurrence with the imposition of U.S. sanctions against both countries. The paper tracks the number of occasions both countries hosted a meeting in the wake of the announcement of a U.S. sanction against either Iran or Venezuela. In addition, it also keeps track of the topics discussed in each meeting. The logic of this approach, in accordance with the hypothesis that Caracas and Tehran's anti-Americanism drives the alliance, suggests that hardline U.S. behavior towards both countries would compel them to meet frequently to discuss these provocations and reaffirm the relationship.

This study used the Iran Project, a website managed by independent Iranian journalists to collect Iranian media news releases, to track Iran-Venezuela meetings that occurred between 2013 to 2020. The website contains a search tag labelled "Iran-Venezuela Ties" that compiles all Iranian news reports related to the bilateral relationship.[27] This paper reviewed all of the content within this category, selected any reports that described a high-level bilateral meeting between both countries' officials and proceeded to find the press releases from their original Iranian media sources.[28] The Iran Project constitutes the most suitable source of information for this investigation because Western outlets such as the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal sporadically cover the Iran-Venezuela relationship. Because the Iran Project reports on topics related to Iranian domestic and foreign policy, the existence of an Iran-Venezuela category in its archives demonstrates its commitment to a reliable, consistent source of information on the bilateral relationship.

The majority of the high-level bilateral meetings comprised physical meet ups between significant government officials from both countries in either Caracas or Tehran or during the course of a larger international conference such as the United Nations General Assembly. This paper defines a "high-level meeting" as any in-person function involving the heads of state of either country, foreign ministers, chiefs of various economic agencies or industries, and other miscellaneous ministry officials. In these meetings, the officials would often discuss general topics such as the enhancement of bilateral relations, pledges of economic cooperation, and joint denunciations of the United States.

The study excludes public statements issued by government spokespersons or high-level officials in either country outside of the context of a meeting, such as a press conference or social media post, for two reasons. First, the conveyance of such statements verbally or digitally without a meeting would be a common response by either country to any sanction imposed by the United States.[29] It is highly likely that a majority of sanctions from the United States would already be met with critical public statements from either country. This study assumes that a public statement outside of a meeting is a constant variable with no significant bearing on how the bilateral relationship can be characterized. For the second reason for these statements' exclusion, a high-level meeting entails a considerable amount of energy and resources to set up and would not be as frequent as the delivery of a public statement. Leaders from both countries would travel long distances to meet with one another, while preliminary working-level discussions and planning would probably occur weeks before the actual meet up to establish an agenda, determine a location, and schedule a time. The substantial effort behind this setup implies that both countries' officials would value the relationship to the point of meeting physically despite long distances and international pressure.[30]

This study expects that most of the Iran-Venezuela bilateral meetings would take place within one month of any U.S. sanction levied against either country, given these assumptions that the procedures to establish the meetings would take a significant amount of time. To account for extraneous variables such as time-zone differences, logistical difficulties with meeting arrangements, or delays in reporting on the meetings, the paper added a period of one to three days to this month-long period.

Once the study tracked all of the possible Iran-Venezuela meetings that took place between 2013-2020, it proceeded to look for U.S. sanctions brought against either country before each meeting occurred, using the one-month gap to narrow the search. The study looked through sanctions timelines and reports from sources such as the United States Institute of Peace, the Congressional Research Service, the U.S. State Department, and Econ Americas.[31] It identified sanctions occurring in this seven-year period and compared them against these meetings. Examples of these elements include asset freezes of state companies such as *Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)*, restrictions on these countries' major exports and imports, and sanctions targeting specific regime officials in both countries, among others. This study largely included both primary and secondary sanctions to cover the full spectrum of possible

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designations that could potentially prompt an Iran-Venezuela meeting.

This paper largely excluded sanctions that target Iran's various proxies. While the Trump administration does not discriminate between the actions of Iran's proxies and those of Tehran,[32] this paper did not include anti-proxy sanctions because of the notion that some clients retain some degree of autonomy vis-à-vis Iran.[33] Not every action carried out by an Iranian proxy may necessarily stem from a direct command from Tehran, suggesting that these clients possess their own agendas when conducting activities.[34] As a result, a potential link between an Iran Venezuela meeting and sanctions against one of Iran's proxies would not be likely because of an official level of deniability between Iran and its clients.[35]

After researching information about all possible Iran-Venezuela meetings and U.S. sanctions between 2013-2020, the paper found a total of twenty-five meetings within this period. It then divided all of the meetings broadly between those that took place within one month of the imposition of a U.S. sanction and those that did not. For all meetings that occurred within the one month time frame, it also tracked the main topics discussed by the attendees, such as enhancement of bilateral ties, joint declarations against the United States, and economic cooperation.[36] In this way, the study hoped to find whether some connection existed between the topics discussed at the meetings and the U.S. sanctions. The full timeline of all of the bilateral meetings, as well as the corresponding sanctions that potentially triggered the ones that occurred within a month of a sanctions enactment, can be found in the appendix at the end of this paper.

A higher number of meetings occurring within one month of enactment would suggest a possible trend between U.S. sanctions and the desire of both countries to meet physically, potentially supporting the ideological school hypothesis. More meetings centered on dialogue about joint opposition to the U.S. or augmentation of the bilateral relationship would also seem to lend credence to this trend. The overall research methodology primarily focused on testing the ideological school hypothesis, but the study also hoped to briefly examine whether a select few economic agreements at some of these meetings were fulfilled. Any realization of these agreements could potentially suggest the validity of the pragmatic school's hypothesis.

## **Investigation Results**

The graph below summarizes the findings of the investigation. Figure 1 charts the number of bilateral meetings that occurred anytime within a month of a U.S. sanctions announcement.

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## Analysis

Out of the twenty-five bilateral meetings that occurred between 2013 to 2020, sixteen took place within one month of any U.S. sanction levied against either country, marking 64% of all these meetings. Within these sixteen meetings, a near-even split developed between all three categories (denunciation of the U.S., economic cooperation, and increase in bilateral ties). Six of these sixteen meetings broadly focused on the enhancement of bilateral ties, while the remaining two categories of economic cooperation and anti-U.S. declarations each constituted five meetings.

These findings highlight a few general trends with regards to Iran-Venezuela relations. At first glance, it appears that around three-fifths of the meetings in the 2013-2020 period occurred within a month of U.S. sanctions implementation. While this proportion may seem significant, it is mainly coincidental and correlational. None of the Iranian press releases report officials from either country explicitly stating their intention to gather because of the specific U.S. sanction that happened to occur prior to the meeting. Even during meetings that specifically denounced U.S. aggression, the officials present in these gatherings made these bellicose remarks without reference to a particular sanction.

For example, on June 30, 2018, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza met with Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Morteza Sarmadi in Caracas, where Arreaza expressed sympathy for Iran's struggle with the United States and pledged Venezuela's support for Tehran against U.S. sanctions.[37] About a few days prior, on June 27, 2018, the United States Office of Foreign Assets Control stripped away commercial licenses that would have permitted companies to sell airliner equipment and tools to Iran.[38] At least according to the corresponding press report, at no point during the July 1 meeting did Arreaza or Sarmadi mention these particular sanctions restricting airliner exports to Iran. This scenario shows that while the occurrence of a meeting only day from a particular sanction's implementation is suspect and notable, there is no direct causal evidence to connect these two events. While 63% of all of the available Iran-Venezuela meetings occurred within relative time proximity of a U.S. sanction, this trend tentatively suggests a possible relationship between the enactment of a U.S. sanction and the decision for Iranian and Venezuelan leaders to meet physically.

### *Alternative Analysis: Follow-Up Agreements*

To explore the relationship further and dive into the assumptions of the pragmatist school of thought, which assumes that Iranian and Venezuelan leaders fulfilled any economic agreements reached at a meeting on a later date, the paper selected a few bilateral meetings to ascertain the status of agreements from these meetings. One case revolved around two meetings found within the sample of gatherings that occurred within one month of U.S. sanctions. On April 7, 2018, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza and Iranian Minister of Health Dr. Seyyed Hasan Ghazizadeh signed a memorandum of understanding in which Iran would export pharmaceuticals to Venezuela and help train Venezuelans in this field.[39] On February 23, 2019, Iran's Food and Drug Administration Chief Mehdi Pirsalehi announced in a meeting with Venezuelan Deputy Foreign Minister Ruben Dario Molina that Iran was now prepared to export medicine and other medical supplies to Venezuela as part of the earlier memorandum in April 2018.[40] This paper tried to find other news releases that confirmed that these exports had begun but found very little follow-up information on this matter. It could only find one Iranian news release that stated that the chairman of Iran's Food and Medicine Organization had verified that the country was exporting pharmaceuticals to Venezuela.[41] However, because this particular news release occurred only two days after Pirsalehi's original announcement contained ambiguous language, it was unclear if these exports had actually occurred.

This particular scenario with the April 2018 and February 2019 meetings show that both countries are capable of following up on economic agreements and discussing issues outside of the sphere of anti-Americanism. It lends some credence to the pragmatist school of both countries finding mutual gains economically or materially. However, additional studies would have to be conducted in the future to extensively explore the ultimate outcomes of memorandums or agreements from these meetings and further validate this hypothesis.

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Overall, the findings presented in this study do not definitively confirm the main assumption that U.S. sanctions necessarily trigger meetings between Iranian and Venezuelan leaders. Although nearly 60% of these meetings coincided closely with the imposition of a U.S. sanction, this study can only suggest this trend as strictly correlational since state officials at these gatherings may not explicitly state their true intention for gathering. More studies would have to be carried out to monitor future Iran-Venezuela bilateral meetings and their topics of discussion, as well as any corresponding U.S. sanctions, in order to establish clearer relationships between the variables involved.

## Conclusion: Implications for U.S. Policy in Latin America and Beyond

Despite questions surrounding the true relationship between U.S. sanctions and Iran-Venezuela meetings, the existence of twenty-five of these events throughout the Maduro-Rouhani era shows that the relationship is still relatively active even beyond the administrations of Chávez and Ahmadinejad. The meetings' discussions of a wide variety of topics from economic cooperation to anti-U.S. sentiment suggest that both countries find some purpose in their engagement and that there is a basis for the relationship beyond leadership personalities.

The Iran-Venezuela relationship is an important one to study relative to broader U.S.-Iran competition because Iran believes that its outreach to “peripheral” states allows the country to find allies that share in Tehran's anti-Americanism and back Iran economically and diplomatically in its struggle with Washington.[42] Brandon Fite and Chloe Coughlin-Schulte state that Venezuela is Iran's most ardent ally in this regard,[43] while Norman Bailey labels Venezuela as Iran's “beachhead” in Latin America for Tehran to establish deeper economic and diplomatic ties with countries of the region.[44]

Iran finds itself surrounded in its immediate home region by pro-U.S. adversaries such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, which spend more on their militaries than Tehran.[45] Furthermore, around three dozen U.S. military bases are situated around the country, adding additional pressure on the Islamic Republic.[46] In the midst of Iran's military mismatch with its adversaries in its own neighborhood, it will be interesting to observe how Iran turns to geographically distant allies like Venezuela to cope with growing diplomatic, economic, and military pressure from Washington. Such outreach implies further Iranian entrenchment in Latin America as the Islamic Republic ironically turns to an area within the traditional U.S. sphere of influence for support to counter U.S. containment in Tehran's own geographic locale. Washington generally fears the opening provided to extraterritorial adversaries in Latin America by the decay of the rule of law and stability in the area.[47] As a result, the United States should continue to monitor the Iran-Venezuela bilateral relationship and its future trajectory for a better understanding of Iran's overall ambitions in Latin America and its counter-sanctions strategy abroad.

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## Notes

[1]See “Iran and Venezuela Deepen ‘Strategic Alliance,’” *BBC News*, October 21, 2010, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-11593197>. During a two-day visit to Iran, Chávez and Ahmadinejad pledged to consolidate the Iran-Venezuela “strategic alliance” and challenge the U.S.-led international liberal order.

[2] For more information on Iran-Venezuela cooperation in different spheres of interest, see “Factbox: Venezuela’s Ties with Iran,” *Reuters*, January 7, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-iran/factbox-venezuelas-ties-with-iran-idUSTRE8060DO20120107>

[3]BozorgmehrSharafedin, “Iran’s Mahan Air Launches Direct Flights to Venezuela,” *Reuters*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/iran-venezuela-airlines/irans-mahan-air-launches-direct-flights-to-venezuela-idUSL8N21Q11T>.

[4] Antonio Maria Delgado, “Will Iran Warships in Venezuela Cause Alarm? This is Going to Bother Neighboring Countries,” *Miami Herald*, December 8, 2018, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/venezuela/article222843240.html>

[5]See Silvia Calderon and Mirya R. Holman, “Sharing the Same Demons: The Venezuelan-Iranian Alliance and their Anti-U.S. Ideology,” *Faurj3*, no.1 (Spring 2014): 48-49. The article’s literature review broadly outlines the two main schools of thought in the Iranian-Venezuelan relationship. This paper will use these two schools as the basis for the hypotheses it will test later in the study.

[6]See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), 126-127. Waltz’s work outlines the major ideas and principles of the neorealist school of thought in international relations.

[7]Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security* 9, no. 4 (Spring, 1985): 8-9.

[8] *Ibid.*, 9-12.

[9] *Ibid.*, 13.

[10] *Ibid.*, 15.

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[11]Michael N. Barnett and Jack S. Levy, "Domestic Sources of Alliances and Alignments: The Case of Egypt, 1962-73," *International Organization* 45, no. 3 (Summer, 1991): 373-374.

[12]Ibid., 374.

[13]Ibid., 374-376.

[14]Elodie Brun, "Iran's Place in Venezuela's Foreign Policy," in *Iran in Latin America: Threat or 'Axis of Annoyance'?*, ed. Cynthia Arnson, Haleh Esfandiari, and Adam Stubits (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2009), 36.

[15]Ibid., 38-39.

[16] Ibid.,40.

[17]Ibid., 45.

[18]Sean Goforth, *Axis of Unity: Venezuela, Iran, and the Threat to America* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 148-149.

[19]Luis Fleischman, *Latin America in the Post-Chávez Era: The Security Threat to the United States* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 114-115.

[20] Ibid., 134.

[21]Kavon Hakimzadeh, "Iran and Venezuela: The 'Axis of Annoyance,'" *Military Review* 89, no. 3 (May-June 2009): 83-84.

[22] See Escudé, Carlos. *Realismoperiférico: fundamentos para la nuevapolítica exterior argentina*. Planeta, 1992. Escudé outlines a theory of international relations called Peripheral Realism, which partitions the international system between three classes: rule-makers, rule-takers, and rebels. Rule-makers are powerful states that generate the norms and laws of the international system. Rule-takers are states that conform to these precepts. Rebels are states that refuse to accept the system established by the rule-makers and actively seek to undermine it.

[23]Carmen Pereira Stallaert, "The Strategic Alliance Between Chávez and Ahmadinejad, and its Impact on International Institutions, from a Peripheral-Realist Perspective," *Portuguese Journal of Social Science* 17, no. 2 (2018): 184.

[24] See Adam Taylor, "What Coronavirus? With Indictment of Venezuela's Maduro and Sanctions on Iran, Doubles Down on 'Maximum Pressure,'" *The Washington Post*, March 27, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/maduro-indictment-maximum-pressure-coronavirus-trump-venezuela/2020/03/26/82809364-6f86-11ea-a156-0048b62cdb51\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/maduro-indictment-maximum-pressure-coronavirus-trump-venezuela/2020/03/26/82809364-6f86-11ea-a156-0048b62cdb51_story.html). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration tightened sanctions on states such as Iran and Venezuela despite criticisms of these policies' effects on these countries' public health responses, demonstrating the administration's commitment to an unrelenting sanctions campaign against both countries.

[25] See Parisa Hafezi, "Iran, Venezuela in 'Axis of Unity' Against U.S.," *Reuters*, July 2, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-venezuela/iran-venezuela-in-axis-of-unity-against-u-s-idUSDAH23660020070702>. When Chávez visited Ahmadinejad in Iran in 2007, the Venezuelan leader declared that Caracas and Tehran would jointly "defeat the imperialism of North America." Iranian media labelled the Iran-Venezuela relationship as an "axis of unity" throughout the visit. Such rhetoric may be commonplace in bilateral meetings between both countries in the Maduro-Rouhani era.

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[26] See Iran-Venezuela Factbox article on citation 2.

[27] “Iran-Venezuela Ties,” *The Iran Project*, <https://theiranproject.com/blog/tag/iran-venezuela-ties/>. The Iran Project was highly useful because it gathered and referenced all Iranian news releases, from both state and independent agencies, regarding Iran-Venezuela meetings in one place. The study proceeded to look for the original news releases in their respective sources, but the Iran Project pointed to the existence of these reports and narrowed the search for this information considerably.

[28] Some of the original Iranian news releases reported on the Iran Project could not be found because of internet firewalls banning access to these media sites or their unavailability throughout the web. In these cases, the paper cites the report posted on the Iran Project website.

[29] See Farnaz Fassihi, “Iran Greets Latest U.S. Sanctions with Mockery,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/24/world/middleeast/iran-sanctions-response.html> and “Venezuela Denounces New US Sanctions as ‘Threat’ to World,” *Al Jazeera*, August 6, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/08/venezuela-denounces-sanctions-threat-world-190806161739416.html>

During a period of intense U.S. sanctions against Iranian oil exports, Tehran responded with scathing criticisms of these actions via state-controlled media and statements from government spokespersons. Similarly, Venezuelan Vice-President Delcy Rodríguez criticized U.S. sanctions against Venezuela in August 2019 as a “global threat” in her own public statement against Washington.

[30] See “Trump Imposes Travel Ban on ‘Senior Iranian Officials’ and Family Members,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/trump-travel-ban-iranian-senior-government-officials/30184344.html>. While the Trump administration’s travel restrictions on Iranian officials only applied to any hypothetical travel to the United States, the symbolic gesture behind these sanctions highlight the intense pressure that Tehran’s officials face regarding their movement abroad.

[31] Sources include Paz Gómez, “A Timeline of US Sanctions on the Venezuelan Regime,” *Econ Americas*, June 3, 2019, <https://econamericas.com/2019/06/us-sanctions-venezuela/>; Jason Starr and Helialghani, “Timeline of U.S. Sanctions,” *United States Institute of Peace: Iran Primer*, updated September 2019, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/timeline-us-sanctions>; Clare RibandoSeelke, “Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions,” *Congressional Research Service*, updated February 21, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10715.pdf>; “Iran Sanctions,” *U.S. Department of State*, <https://www.state.gov/iran-sanctions/>; “Venezuela-Related Sanctions,” *U.S. Department of State*, <https://www.state.gov/venezuela-related-sanctions/>.

[32] Michael R. Pompeo, “Confronting Iran: The Trump Administration’s Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 6 (November/December 2018): 66. Secretary of State Pompeo stated that any attack by Iranian proxies on U.S. personnel or interests throughout the Middle East would be regarded as an act of aggression by Iran itself.

[33] Becca Wasser and Ariane Tabatabai, “Iran’s Network of Fighters in the Middle East Aren’t Always Loyal to Iran,” *The Washington Post*, May 21, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/05/21/how-do-irans-proxies-actually-work/>. The authors state that Iran’s proxies are not a uniform, cohesive group with unwavering allegiance to Tehran, claiming that the country does not have sweeping, tight control over all of its proxies.

[34] *Ibid.* The authors also claim that the ambiguity surrounding Iran’s support to its proxies prevents policymakers from determining whether a proxy-led attack was directly mandated by Tehran or promoted by Iran.

[35] SirwanKajjo, Mehdi Jedinia, and EzeelSahinkya, “Why did Iran’s IRGC, Not its Proxies, Attack US Bases in Iraq?,” *Voice of America*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/why-did-irans-irgc-not-its-proxies-attack-us-bases-iraq>

[36] In a few of these bilateral meetings, more than one topic was discussed at the same time. This paper sought to

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maintain consistency in its findings by categorizing each of these meetings by one topic. For multi-topic meetings, the study considered any discussions about anti-U.S. sentiment as taking highest priority than other topics. One of the multi-topic meetings featured discussions about economic cooperation and enhancement of general bilateral ties. In this case, economic cooperation was favored above general bilateral ties since the latter is often discussed extensively throughout most of the meetings.

[37] “Venezuela Hails Iran’s Fight Against US’ Hegemony,” *Iran Front Page News*, June 30, 2018, <https://ifpnews.com/venezuela-hails-irans-fight-against-us-hegemony>

[38] See Jason Starr and Helialghani, “Timeline of U.S. Sanctions,” *United States Institute of Peace: Iran Primer*, updated September 2019, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/timeline-us-sanctions>

[39] “Iran, Venezuela Ink Pharmaceutical MoU,” *Mehr News Agency*, April 8, 2018, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/133217/Iran-Venezuela-ink-pharmaceutical-MoU>

[40] “Iran Ready to Export Medicine, Medical Equipment to Venezuela,” *Mehr News Agency*, February 23, 2019, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/142811/Iran-ready-to-export-medicine-medical-equipment-to-Venezuela>

[41] “Iran Exports Medicine to Venezuela,” *Iran International*, February 25, 2019, <https://iranintl.com/en/iran-in-brief/iran-exports-medicine-venezuela>

[42] Brandon Fite and Chloe Couhglin-Schulte, “U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition: The Impact of Latin America, Africa, and the Peripheral States,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies, Burke Chair in Strategy*, July 9, 2013, 2, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/120404\\_Iran\\_Chapter\\_XIII-Peripheral\\_States-Revised.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/120404_Iran_Chapter_XIII-Peripheral_States-Revised.pdf)

[43] *Ibid.*, 5.

[44] Norman A. Bailey, “Iran’s Venezuelan Gateway,” *The American Foreign Policy Council*, February 2012, 1, <https://www.afpc.org/uploads/documents/ISB5.pdf>

[45] Dragan Stavljanin and Pete Baumgartner, “Persian Might: How Strong is Iran’s Military?” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/persian-might-a-look-at-tehran-s-military-capability-amid-the-u-s-iranian-conflict/30368967.html>

[46] Vakkas Dogantekin, “Iran Surrounded by Dozens of US Bases as Tensions Grow,” *Anadolu Agency*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/iran-surrounded-by-dozens-of-us-bases-as-tension-grows/1696692>

[47] Department of Defense, *United States Southern Command Strategy: Enduring Promise for the Americas*, May 8, 2019, 3, [https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/SOUTHCOM\\_Strategy\\_2019.pdf?ver=2019-05-15-131647-353](https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/SOUTHCOM_Strategy_2019.pdf?ver=2019-05-15-131647-353)

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