

*San Diego Union-Tribune*  
April 11, 2008

**IS HUGO CHÁVEZ A THREAT  
TO STABILITY OF LATIN AMERICA?**

**Yes: Venezuelan wreaks havoc throughout region**

**By Lawrence J. Haas**

After Colombia bombed a FARC camp early last month, killing a key leader and 20 followers of the notorious terrorist group, Colombian officials said a computer they found at the site showed that FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) had recently received \$300 million from Venezuela's Hugo Chávez.

Chávez's reputed largesse, and his long-standing links to FARC that also came to light, explain his threatening behavior after the bombing, which included a strong denunciation of Colombia leader Alvaro Uribe and threats to move 10,000 troops to Caracas' border with Bogota.

Tensions have since eased among Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador, the nation where the raid occurred. But Chávez's bluster provides only the latest evidence that the Venezuelan strongman presents a growing danger to regional peace and stability, and a thorny challenge to the United States.

In the region, Chávez hopes to build a multinational counterweight to the United States and its allies by spreading his socialist vision, strengthening his ties to like-minded states such as Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua, and providing aid to terrorists that target Western interests.

More broadly, he is strengthening his ties to the outlaw regime of Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, defending its pursuit of nuclear weaponry, cutting business deals with Tehran and promising to use oil as a weapon if Washington confronts Tehran more aggressively.

Unfortunately, U.S. officials cannot agree on how to respond. President Bush promotes trade between the United States and key South American nations, such as Colombia, to strengthen U.S. ties to our allies and reduce chances that Chávez will coax any of them to his side.

Congress, however, won't pass the U.S.-Colombia Trade Partnership, citing lingering human rights problems – even though President Uribe is making progress on human rights, reducing corruption, fighting terrorists and paramilitary forces, and building a prosperous free-market economy.

In fact, the House recently voted to bolster Chávez's oil power by raising taxes on the largest U.S.-based oil companies while leaving others, including Venezuela's state-owned Citgo, exempt.

This will not do. Chávez is too great a danger to regional peace and stability to become an unlikely beneficiary of polarizing politics between a Republican president and a Democratic Congress.

The Venezuelan's ties to FARC date back at least to 1992, when the group gave him \$150,000 while he served prison time for an attempted coup, according to computers found at the bombed FARC site.

Investigators also found evidence that Chávez worked with FARC to destabilize Uribe's government and to build global legitimacy for the terrorist group, which specializes in launching attacks, massacring citizens, taking hostages, recruiting minors and trafficking in cocaine.

Were that not threatening enough to hemispheric peace, Chávez's "axis of unity" with Iran's Ahmadinejad – as the leaders call their relationship in a retort to Bush's inclusion of Iran in his "axis of evil" – adds another ingredient to the toxic stew. Their alliance gives Tehran, its terrorist minions and its anti-Western ideology a footprint by America's back door.

Iran's key terrorist client, Hezbollah, has worked in Latin America since the 1990s, using the "tri-border" area alongside Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina to launch some of the decade's most spectacular attacks against Jewish sites. Now, evidence suggests Hezbollah is growing its presence in Venezuela.

Chávez is also teaming with Ahmadinejad to make trouble for the United States in Iran's neck of the world. Late last year, the duo tried to persuade OPEC not to price its oil in U.S. dollars anymore.

The Saudis shot down the idea, but failure did not humble Chávez. He predicted oil would hit \$200 a barrel if the United States attacked Iran or Venezuela, making clear that he will remain a threat to hemispheric stability and a challenge to U.S. interests in this vital region.

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