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## **The United States hegemonic challenge in Latin America: Assessing United States hegemony in Colombia and Venezuela in the post-Cold War period**

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# **The United States hegemonic challenge in Latin America**

Assessing United States hegemony in Colombia  
and Venezuela in the post-Cold War period

Masters Thesis

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MA in International Relations with specialisation in Global Conflict in the  
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Since the Spanish-American War of 1898, the US has worked to enforce unrivalled hegemony across the western hemisphere. The geographical proximity of Latin America means that stability and prosperity in the region are central considerations in US domestic security (Sen 2017). Victory in the Spanish-American War led to an openly imperialistic era for US-Latin American relations, with the US utilising their military and economic power to intervene in Latin American domestic politics, attempting to spread western democratic norms and shape the continent in a direction that was congruent with their ambitions (Bulmer-Thomas & Dunkerley 1999 p. 5, Smith 2005). These policies were continued during the Cold War, but with an increased centralisation of ideology within American hegemonic policy (Bulmer-Thomas & Dunkerley 1999 p. 33). While the US faced challenges to its unipolarity, it openly utilised intervention to assert its hegemony and prevent the encroachment of the Soviet Union into its 'backyard'. From the end of the Second World War to the close of the Cold War, the US was directly and indirectly involved in twenty-five instances of regime change in twelve different Latin American states (Coatsworth 2005). This interventionism was combined with an emphasis on free markets, neoliberal reform, and governmental change to counter the communist 'threat' (Chodor 2015).

But a growing body of literature contends that since this peak of hegemonic control during the Cold War, there has been a steady yet significant decline of US hegemony in Latin America. The most obvious change in hegemonic imposition is a drastic decline in the number of US interventions (Coatsworth 2005). Perhaps more importantly, a series of developments in US-Latin American relations, including the failure of neoliberal reforms in enhancing development, the spread of the 'Pink Tide', shifting US focus towards the Middle East and a growing power challenge from states such as China, Russia, and Iran, has led authors to suggest that US hegemony is irreversibly on the decline, which would have ramifications on both a hemispheric and global level. Latin America is still seen as vitally important for maintaining US security and as a reliable base for the projection for US power globally. As such, a failure to impose US hegemony in Latin America could mean issues not only for US interests in the hemisphere but may also be indicative of wider changes in US unipolarity. This thesis consequently aims to investigate whether US hegemony in Latin America is declining and if so, why.

While US relations have generalisable characteristics across Latin American borders, their level of hegemonic power over specific states varies. As such, this thesis will use the case studies of Venezuela and Colombia. These two cases are utilised due to the connections they

share but also the differing relations they maintain with the US. The two states border each other and have a shared identity and history with experiences of US hegemony, but since the end of the Cold War, the two states have maintained radically different relations with the US (Coatsworth 2005). Whilst Colombia has maintained closer relations with the US thanks to the War on Drugs and Plan Colombia, Venezuela has conversely employed a hostile, anti-neoliberal and anti-American stance. These cases can consequently provide further insight into the case of US hegemonic decline for two reasons: Firstly, at a basic level, they highlight how US hegemony has declined or maintained since the 2000s. Secondly, by looking at the similarities and differences in US hegemony regarding the two cases, they provide insights into the ways in which differing state relations with the US have influenced the US' hegemonic power. Through the investigation of states that have dichotomous relations, representing both ends of a US-relational spectrum, predictions can then be made regarding the wider state of US hegemony by generalising to other Latin American states.

This thesis aims to utilise the empirical examples of Colombia and Venezuela to provide insight into two aspects of the debate surrounding declining US hegemony. Firstly, what do the two cases demonstrate regarding changes in US hegemony since the end of the Cold War and how has US policy, Latin American domestic policy, regional initiatives, and extra-hemispheric relations served to influence US hegemony in these states? Secondly, how do these two examples demonstrate the variations of US hegemony across Latin American states? As such, this thesis presents the question: Has US hegemony declined in Venezuela and Colombia since the end of the Cold War and what factors have been most influential in dictating US hegemonic change?

This thesis is composed of four chapters and a concluding section. The first chapter will cover key definitional issues regarding what constitutes US hegemony, before looking at the areas of US hegemonic change and the current debate regarding US hegemonic decline. Chapters two and three will focus on the empirical case studies of Colombia and Venezuela. Both sections will look at changes in US policy towards these states since the end of the Cold War, before looking at domestic, regional, and extra-regional policy emanating from these states and understanding how these factors have served to influence US hegemonic decline. The fourth chapter and the conclusion will aim to sum up the thesis so far and draw conclusions about what the examples mean for US hegemonic power on a larger scale.

# Chapter 1

## Hegemony, Power, and Influence

Before analysing the cases of Venezuela and Colombia, it is necessary to first establish a conception of hegemony as well as establishing the wider academic debate surrounding the supposed decline of US power in Latin America. This section will first cover a conception of hegemony, before looking at the factors that have influenced US hegemony. It will then cover the current arguments within the literature surrounding US hegemony in Latin America and the potential decline of said hegemony as well as the counterargument to this narrative.

### 1.1 Power and influence: assessing the concept of hegemony

Conventional definitions of hegemony emphasise the ability for one state to take certain actions with the goal of controlling the conduct of others (Nye 1990 p. 177). Within international relations, definitions of hegemony focus on international actors who possess greater power resources than other actors and thus have an overwhelming capability to shape the international system through both coercive and non-coercive means (Schmidt 2018 p. 3, Ougaard 1988 p. 199). Many definitions within international relations also place emphasis on a willingness to exert this power to exercise leadership within a given area, vis-à-vis other actors, and claim authority over key issues (Schenoni 2019 p. 6, Schmidt 2018 p. 3).

Power capabilities are typically a central focus of definitions of hegemony, particularly from neorealist perspectives, with hegemony usually equated with overwhelming material power, or hard power (Schmidt 2018 p. 4). Hard power is identified through quantifiable national attributes including military expenditure, gross domestic product, or population size (Hart 1976 p. 289). John Mearsheimer, for example, defines hegemony as a “state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system”. He adds, “no other state has the military wherewithal to put up a serious fight against it.”. Hegemony, for Mearsheimer, “means domination of the system”. (Mearsheimer 2001 in Schmidt 2018 p. 5). From this realist perspective, hegemony is thus about a predominance of hard power that allows a state to dominate a given system through exertion of this power.

While material capabilities and hard power are a central aspect of hegemonic relations, they do not encompass all aspects of a hegemonic power and neglect the integral nature of soft power. Joseph Nye (1990) states that soft power is more difficult to measure than hard power but is no less important in establishing hegemony. He placed ‘soft power’ into three main categories: cultural, ideological, and institutional (Li 2018). Nye (1990 p. 182) covers the importance of these three aspects, stating that:

“If a state can make...its culture and ideology attractive, others will more willingly follow. If it can establish international norms that are consistent with its society, it will be less likely to have to change. If it can help support institutions that encourage other states to channel or limit their activities in ways the dominant state prefers, it may not need as many costly exercises of coercive or hard power”

Neo-liberal and neo-Gramscian perspectives maintain similar conceptions of hegemony, seeing it as a synthesis of both hard and soft power. Neoliberal interpretations highlight the structures and institutions that allow hegemons to dictate international relations (Dirzauskaite & Ilinca 2017). Neo-Gramscian conceptions additionally emphasise structures alongside norms, institutions, and mechanisms of international relations, stating that this allows a hegemon to implement rules that dictate the behaviour of other states existing within its zone of power (Cox 1983 p. 172). Alongside dictation of behaviour, hegemons must also dictate the goals and outcomes of relations among states. The ability for a state to control outcomes within a given system and ensure that these outcomes are primarily beneficial for a particular state, is a signifier of hegemonic relations (Ougaard 1998 p. 200). So while material capabilities are often an indicator for hegemony, neo-liberalist and neo-Gramscian conceptions of hegemony suggests that hard power alone cannot account for the intricacies that form the encompassing power of a hegemon. As such, hegemony within this thesis includes both a focus on hard power measurements of hegemony (e.g. US military and economic power) but also soft power indicators (e.g. ideological and institutional power) and how these sources of power impact the US’ ability to dictate outcomes. Conceptualising hegemony in this way allows for an encompassing definition of US hegemony in relation to its Latin American neighbours from which an analysis of change over time can be drawn and will also provide insights regarding the evolution of US hegemony, potentially towards more reliance on soft power rather than hard power.



Ougaard 1998 (p. 205) states that changes in this hegemonic influence can come from several sources, including changes in the common interests that bind the hegemon to other states in the region, as well as changes in the interests of a hegemon and the states under its control. As such, this thesis will look at changes within US policy and interests since the end of the Cold War and will also look at changes in domestic, regional, and international policy and attitudes emanating from Colombia and Venezuela. Focusing on these two areas of change will allow for an analysis of US hegemony both in terms of hard power relations, but also the more subtle forms of soft power domination.

## **1.2 US hegemony: declining or maintaining?**

The current body of literature on US hegemony in the wider Latin American region since the end of the Cold War can be split into two general arguments. Some authors argue that there has been a noticeable decline in US hegemony since the end of the Cold War, while others argue that US decline has been overstated and their hegemony remains strong.

### *1.2.1 The decline argument*

The declinist argument presents several contending causes for diminishing hegemony. While some place emphasis on US policy, others suggest the actions of Latin American or extra-hemispheric powers has been more instrumental in the decline of US power. Estep (2014) highlights that since the early 2000s, US focus has shifted from the Western hemisphere towards Middle and Asia-Pacific region. Youngers (2003) argues that this ‘neglect’ of Latin America has been combined with a securitisation of what little foreign policy focus remained, with Latin America no longer viewed as a destination for constructive international engagement but instead as a source of security threats. The US identified the Latin America ‘axis of evil’ – Colombian ‘narcoterrorists’, Cuba’s Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela – and consequently took a securitised stance to relations with the entire region. The impact of this securitised foreign policy was compounded by US support of Venezuela’s 2002 coup, which led to increasingly negative attitudes towards the US from Latin America, particularly from the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) states (Azpuru and Shaw 2010). Chodor (2015) expands on this, stating that this resulted in growing

anger in Latin America regarding the failures of neoliberal policies in advancing equality and development, which were worsened by US refusals to address the problems inherent to the foreign policy prescriptions, instead doubling spending for regional security between 2001 and 2007, and elevating neoliberalism and free markets to a “status of moral principle” (p. 164).

Urdinez et al. (2016) support this narrative of US neglect but argue that extra-hemispheric forces have heightened the decline of US hegemony. They conducted research into China’s influence in Latin America and found that China is investing in states which have the weakest ties with the US (p. 12). They argue that China’s strategy in Latin America centres on ‘filling the void’ left by the US in states which have mutual hostility with the US (p. 24). Williams (2012) also presents China as a threat to US hegemony in the region, highlighting that Chinese imports from Latin America grew from \$5.1 billion to \$46.7 billion between 2000 and 2007 and have continued to increase since. Williams (2012) and Chodor (2015) argue that this perspective is deficient as it fails to recognise the agency of Latin American actors, with both highlighting key developments within Latin American politics since the turn of the century which aim to increase Latin American independence and power in relation to the US. Williams (2012) recognises the War on Terror and neoliberal policies as a driver of US decline, but suggests that the means of decline came from Latin American reactions to these policies, rather than the policies themselves. He highlights the Venezuelan coup in 2002 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq as turning points for Latin American cooperation for US policies (p. 323). These developments coincided with the dissemination of the ‘Pink Tide’ throughout Latin America, which Chodor argues was a clear rejection of US-prescribed neoliberalism and was an exemplification of growing anti-Americanism that has been integral to the decline of US hegemony (Chodor 2015). Finally, Williams (2012) argues that the rejection of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), combined with the proliferation of regional integration through institutions such as Mercosur and ALBA are examples of soft power balancing against the US through collective opposition to institutional hegemony (p. 336).

### *1.2.2 A contested decline*

An increasing body of literature has argued against what they deem to be the exaggeration of US hegemonic decline. Long (2016) provides a foundation for this argument based in quantitative analysis of US hard power. Through measurements of military and economic

power, he finds that in 2014 the US spent seven times as much as all Latin American countries combined on military and had a gross domestic product (GDP) nearly three times greater than the rest of the Western hemisphere's collective GDP. Milani (2008) additionally challenges the notion that the War on Terror led to a decline in US hegemony in the region. Rather than seeing the militarisation of the hemisphere as a catalyst for worsening relations and weakening hegemony, she sees the militarisation as a strengthening of US power, with the categorisation of 'narcoterrorists' through the War on Drugs allowing for the establishment of non-permanent military bases in Panama and Ecuador and an increased US influence in Colombia as well as on the triple border region between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay (pp. 124 and 139). Mercille (2011) also highlights the importance of militarisation in Central America, with the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP) and the Merida Initiative allowing for \$1.5 billion in military training and equipment to Mexico for counter-narcotics operations. Petras and Veltmeyer (2015) expand upon this, finding that militarisation has been combined with an overall shift from hard power towards soft power and what they describe as 'economic imperialism'. They argue that US soft power and economic hegemony has spread via the Washington Consensus and this power has been continually asserted, particularly in Latin America, through organisations such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund which are 'operational units' of US economic soft power (p. 87). Baker and Cupery (2013) also argue against the notion that anti-Americanism is proliferating throughout Latin America, suggesting that the US maintains soft power through opinions of citizens in the region as the US is primarily viewed through a lens of economic opportunity, rather than as a threat or former imperialistic power (p. 126)

Paz (2012) argues that there is limited threat from extra-hemispheric powers in Latin America. He highlights that the US has experienced hegemonic challenge several times previously, from actors including Japan, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union. Yet despite these instances of hegemonic challenge, Paz argues that none were successful in challenging the US hegemonic dominance. Paz argues that China is even less likely to challenge to US hegemony, as they have consistently acted in a non-confrontational manner and have maintained open dialogue, allowing the US to be relatively certain of their future actions.

Finally, other authors have argued against the suggestion that shifts in Latin American domestic politics and regionalism present any real challenge to US hegemony. Long (2018) argues that despite the attempts of Brazil to challenge US hegemony through regional organisations such

as Mercosur, there remains an insurmountable amount of asymmetry between the two states, citing examples such as US GDP being ten times greater than Brazil's in 2015 (p. 119). Outside of Brazil, Weeks (2014) argues that while the 'Pink Tide' led to a shift to the left for several states in Latin America, these states have more recently shifted back to the right or the centre. Additionally, Weeks argues that regional institutions within Latin America that exclude the US are ineffective due to their competition and failure to properly address conflicts in places such as Bolivia, Colombia, and Ecuador.

This thesis will build upon this current debate through analysis of two empirical cases in South America and a comprehensive conception of hegemony that recognises the importance of soft power in combination with hard power. Previous work has tended to place too much emphasis on the imbalances of hard power, without recognising the intricacies US-Latin American relations. Previous research has also typically only focused on hegemonic influences emanating from one direction, whether this be from the US itself or from the actions of Latin American states. This thesis aims to combine both measures of soft and hard power in conjunction with a recognition of hegemonic influence emanating from both the US and Latin America to develop a holistic understanding the hegemonic relations between the two. Additionally, there has been a lack of investigation into the variation of US hegemony on a state-to-state basis and particularly how domestic ideology and established relations with the US impact hegemonic change. As such, this thesis will use the case studies of Venezuela and Colombia, representing contradictory ends of a US relational spectrum, to understand how this can influence US hegemony. The following two chapters will focus on the case studies of Colombia and Venezuela, looking at both the impact of US foreign policy, before highlighting the domestic, regional, and extra-hemispheric relations that have influenced US hegemony.

## **Chapter 2**

# **Colombia: Militarization, neoliberalism, and a US hegemonic ally**

With the third largest population in Latin America, the fourth largest economy and some of the largest oil reserves, Colombia is invariably important to the US and is one of its closest allies (Schwam-Baird 2015 p. 127). More importantly, Colombia has also been the single largest supplier of cocaine for the past several decades, producing over sixty percent of the world's supply (ibid p. 129). Colombia is therefore vital to US security objectives, providing a threat through its drug production, but also a potential base of support. The centrality of Colombia to US policy has been demonstrated by the post-Cold War expansion of hegemony, based on the militarisation of relations through the War on Drugs, Plan Colombia, and the War on Terror. This chapter will cover the changes in US-Colombian hegemonic relations since the end of the Cold War by first analysing the militarisation of US policy towards Colombia as well as changes in its economic, ideological, and institutional power. The second half of this section will focus on policy emanating from Colombia and its influence on US hegemony, including their close alignment the neoliberal Washington Consensus as well as their relations with extra-hemispheric powers.

### **2.1 The militarisation of US-Colombia relations and US soft power control**

US Colombian post-Cold War cooperation has its roots in the Cold War itself, with the signing of intelligence-sharing agreements alongside a counterinsurgency campaign in the 1960s (Petras 2000 p. 4617). But the initiation of Reagan's War on Drugs laid the groundworks for a new post-Cold War militarised era (Nieto and Stoller 2007 p. 112). The end of the Soviet threat led to an inevitable reconfiguration of US policy as drug trafficking dethroned the USSR as the principal threat to US national security (ibid). The potential for economic growth, combined with an upswing in cocaine production and the presence of guerrilla movements made Colombia the perfect destination for the advancement of US hegemony through 'Plan

Colombia', introduced in 1999 (ibid). With the US being the world's largest consumer of illicit drugs, and Colombia the largest supplier of cocaine, Plan Colombia was introduced to eradicate the sources of drug production (Bulmer-Thomas and Dunkerley 1999). The increased US involvement and militarisation through Plan Colombia was clear, with the US providing \$1.3 billion in military aid (Stokes 2003 p. 578). Plan Colombia was publicly an initiative to eradicate the production of drugs, but also benefitted the expansion of US hegemony by establishing a militarised presence which allowed the US to surround anti-neoliberal forces within and around Colombia, helping to maintain "the mystique of invincibility of empire and the irreversibility of neo-liberal policies." (Petras 2000 p. 4617 & 4619). This militarisation continued even as Plan Colombia dwindled in importance, with many of the militarised policies being absorbed and reframed into wider US War on Terror (Stokes 2003 p. 579). As part of the War on Terror, the US designated three Colombian groups, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), as terrorists (Nieto and Stoller 2007). The War on Terror consequently allowed for a transition of US hegemony away from the War on Drugs and Plan Colombia, into a new era of hegemonic militarisation.

Although the urgency provided by the War on Drugs and the War on Terror at the beginning of the century has abated, the militarisation of Colombia has not. Many of the same policies endure, irrespective of less Colombian domestic tension thanks to the peace agreements signed between FARC and the Colombian government in 2016 (Dyer 2019). For example, although aerial spraying of coca crops was suspended in 2015 due to its damaging environmental and health impacts, Trump insisted that Colombia resume the practice in 2020 (BBC News 2020a). The US also continues to fight drug production, providing \$400 million alongside frequent military exercises and officer exchange programmes (BBC News 2020a, Seligman 2019). Colombia has also become an increasingly important tool in the tensions between the US and Venezuela, being the largest recipient of Venezuelan migrants, accepting almost 1.4 million as of June 2019 (Marczak and Hernandez 2019 p. 46). In response, the US provided more than \$344 million in economic support as well as intensifying militarisation through the provision of 15 new F-16 fighter jets (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs 2020, Seligman 2019). The continued provision of support demonstrates that Post-Cold War relations have continually been characterised by deep militarisation based on evolving justification surrounding drug production and the presence of guerrilla forces.

### *2.1.1 Economic and institutional connectivity and Colombian dependency through US soft power*

US hegemony has also been bolstered by US soft power through from economic and institutional interconnectivity. An exemplification of US economic soft power comes in the form of the 2012 US-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (TPA). The TPA was introduced to exploit the ‘massive opportunity for mutually beneficial trade’ between the two countries and eliminated export tariffs for over eighty percent of US exports (Marczak and Hernandez 2019 pp. 10 & 19). Estimates suggested the deal would increase US exports by \$1.1 billion and US GDP by \$2.5 billion (Office of the United States Trade Representative 2012). The impacts upon Colombian trade are clear, with 31% of all exports and 26% of imports coming through exchanges with the US (Trading Economics 2021). With the US as both its main importer and exporter, Colombia is inherently dependent on US goods and services for economic growth and stability.

Colombia also maintains economic ties with the IMF, who are often seen to come under the US’ soft power umbrella. In May 2020, the IMF approved a two-year arrangement for Colombia under the Flexible Credit Line (FCL) of \$10.8 billion, with approval coming as a result of their “strong institutional policy frameworks and track record of economic performance” (IMF 2020). By making loans to Colombia dependent on their economic policy, the IMF enforces a belief in the benefits of a free market economy. Additionally, by utilising bilateral trade agreements as well as institutional organisations such as the IMF to reduce trade barriers, the US can enforce its form of economic hegemony by increasing dependence on US goods and services. US institutional hegemony is also bolstered by Colombia’s involvement in NATO. In 2013, Colombia signed an agreement with NATO allowing it to cooperate on peacekeeping as well as exchange classified information on organised crime and terrorism, becoming the only Latin American NATO partner (Flemes and Castro 2016, Marczak and Hernandez 2019). While NATO is independent of direct US rule, the power that they hold in directing the objectives of the organisation are not insignificant. As such, Colombia’s inclusion, especially as the sole Latin American partner, demonstrates the close ties that the two states maintain.

These examples demonstrate the evolving forms of hegemony that the US enforces through its policy towards Colombia. By utilising the War on Drugs as well as the War on Terror, the US was able to militarise its involvement in Colombia, creating a justification for an increase in

hard power. As the publicly perceived threat of drugs and ‘narcoterrorists’ decreased, the US utilised the diverse range of economic, institutional, and ideological power capabilities to adapt and evolve its policy to maintain hegemonic control. US hegemony in Colombia since the Cold War is thus characterised by both a widening and deepening of both the hard and soft power measures of control and the US’ disposal.

## **2.2 The influence of Colombian domestic, regional, and extra-hemispheric policy on reinforcing US hegemony**

Alongside US policy, Colombian domestic and foreign policy has also served to enhance hegemonic relations. Through their domestic and regional policy, as well as their interaction with states outside of Latin America, they have consistently maintained policies that follow the neoliberal US model, and which serve to bolster the hegemonic initiatives emanating from the US.

### *2.2.1 Colombia’s steadfast commitment to the Washington Consensus*

As several states in South America turned towards the left at the beginning of the century, Colombia pushed in the opposite direction, committing to neoliberalism. This commitment came from a recognition of the benefits that could be provided through close relations with the US (Kat 2021). As their neighbours elected left wing leaders as part of the Pink Tide, Colombia elected Alvaro Uribe, a strong supporter of neoliberalism who consolidated the US counternarcotic position (Salazar 2018). This domestic policy evolved in conjunction with evolutions in the militarisation of US policy throughout Uribe’s presidency, particularly regarding anti-FARC militarisation (Kat 2021).

After Uribe, the presidency of Juan Manuel Santos saw a decrease in the hostile stance towards neighbouring states in the region. Santos sought alternatives to the methods utilised by Uribe, banning the use of crop spraying despite significant US pressure and securing a historic peace accords with FARC in 2016 (Salazar 2018, Dyer 2019). Whilst Uribe heightened tensions with left-wing neighbours by bombing a FARC camp located along the border with Ecuador as well as publicly denouncing Venezuela at the Organisation of American States (OAS) and breaking



of diplomatic ties, Santos took a more level-headed approach, increasing Colombian participation in regional institutions and presenting Colombia as a reliable business partner striving for peace (Flemes and Castro 2016 p. 6). But Santos' less hostile policy did not see a drastic movement away from US hegemony. His attempts to normalise relations with neighbours came more from a desire to alter Colombia's image of Colombia and open the country to trading partners in Europe and Asia (Flemes and Castro 2016). Santos consequently took a differing approach but maintained the emphasis on neoliberal economic policy to advance development, as prescribed by the US. The election of Iván Duque in 2018 saw a return to the aggressive stance seen under Uribe and a greater push for Colombian militarisation practices (Salazar 2018). Duque supports many of the same policies prescribed under Plan Colombia, including a recriminalisation of minor drug offenses, a return to spraying of coca crops, increased partnerships between the private sector and the government's educational branch and the continuation of mining and drilling operations (Salazar 2018).

Colombian domestic politics have therefore been generally characterised by a devotion to neoliberal economic policies and a voluntary dedication to the militarisation of its domestic battle with coca production and 'narcoterrorists'. These domestic politics is indicative of Colombia's voluntary embrace of US hegemony, recognising that sticking to the policies prescribed by the US allows them to garner increased security by willingly accepting subjugation and protection from the US.

### *2.2.2 Opposing neighbours regionally and the Pacific Alliance*

Colombia's regional relations follow in a similar vein. Colombia is a member of 'status-quo' regional agreements such as the OAS The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and the Pacific Alliance (PA) but have also distanced themselves from organisations that lean towards a subversion of typical regional models. Most notably, is the absence of their membership of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and switch to The Forum for the Progress and Development of South America (PROSUR), led by Brazil. This movement along with several other South America states to PROSUR is again explained by their allegiance with the US. Upon withdrawing from UNASUR in 2018, President Duque announced that the bloc had become an accomplice to the "Venezuelan dictatorship" (Reuters 2018). Colombia has often stood in defiance of the actions and politics of neighbouring

Venezuela, previously denouncing them at the OAS and breaking diplomatic and trade relations (Flemes and Castro 2016 p. 79).

But Colombia has repeatedly distanced themselves from other regional attempts to counter US hegemonic influence. Colombia's refusal to fully involve themselves within Mercosur exemplifies this, as Brazil had attempted to utilise regionalism to boost their status as a regional hegemon (Lima 2018). Colombia has increasingly resisted these regionalisation attempts, firstly to prevent an increase in Brazilian power, but also counter the impetus of these agreements that push for shared infrastructure, security, public health, and conflict resolution (Briceño-Ruiz 2018 p. 577). Colombia has instead favoured regionalism alongside Mexico, Peru, and Chile through the PA (Flemes and Castro 2016). The PA has focused deepening the neoliberal economic doctrine by removing barriers to free trade and investment between these like-minded states (Flemes and Castro 2016). Colombia's regional alignments consequently demonstrate an extension of the domestic alignment with the US whilst rejecting that which aims to present a collective challenge to US hegemony.

### *2.2.3 The threat of growing Sino-Colombian relations*

Extending beyond Latin America, China's increasing engagement with Colombia poses interesting questions for US hegemony. Colombia is South America's fastest growing economy and so it is no surprise China is interested and the establishment of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) gave China the opportunity and impetus to further their involvement in Colombia (Grattan 2020). Despite not officially being including within the BRI, China is still expanding its relations with Colombia, investing \$4 billion to build a metro system in Bogota and purchasing a gold mine, as well as expanding its cultural and social connections through student scholarship exchanges (ibid). The opportunity for Chinese expansion was further enhanced by the stance that Trump took towards Colombia, stating that Colombia had "done nothing for (the US)." and threatening to "decertify" them as a partner in the War on Drugs (Jaramillio and Fieser 2020). Consequently, in the four years of Trump's presidency, the number of Chinese companies in Colombia increased from 20 to 80 and despite US pressure, Colombia also refused to pre-emptively exclude Chinese company Huawei from its plans to establish a 5G network in the country (Grattan 2020, Stuenkel 2021). The coronavirus pandemic has also seen a deepening of relations, with China providing its Sinovac vaccine to Colombia, along with a

message from Xi Jinping that stressed the “deep friendship between the peoples of Asia and South America” (Alsema 2021).

Despite these developments, Chinese involvement is not a death sentence for US hegemony. There is little evidence to suggest that China is trying to actively challenge US hegemony in Latin America, particularly in states allied closely with the US (Jenkins 2010). China has repeatedly stated its intention to engage with Latin America economically, but in a way that does not harm US interests and has also consistently maintained open dialogue with the US (ibid). More importantly, the deeply ingratiated militarised relations between the US and Colombia, as well Colombia’s own domestic leanings makes it unlikely that China has the opportunity or capability to fully ‘push’ into Colombia (Paz 2012, Jenkins 2010 p. 834).

Given this analysis of US-Colombia relations, this case suggests a maintenance, or even an increase, in US hegemony since the end of the Cold War. Their relations have been unequivocally intertwined with the production of drugs and the presence of guerrilla forces. The intense militarisation of US relations with Latin America are exemplified by the implementation of Plan Colombia as part of the War on Drugs and the eventual inclusion of Colombia within the War on Terror. These militarised relations led to a significant (and often voluntary) increase in US hegemonic power over Colombia. With the reduction in civil tensions, the election of Donald Trump in the US and increasing Chinese involvement on the continent, it may appear that US hegemony is on the decline. Yet Colombia is still of essential importance to US policy in the region. The extensive hegemonic power that the US developed through the militarisation of Colombia at the turn of the century, alongside the insurmountable soft power that the US wields makes it unlikely that hegemony can or will decline significantly soon. The election of President Iván Duque in 2018 demonstrated Colombia’s steadfast commitment to neoliberal politics and signifies their unwavering support of the Washington Consensus. If Colombia continues to provide a stable base of support and the US continues to provide incentives to Colombia, it is unlikely that US hegemony will decline to a level that can be considered significant.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Venezuela: Economic sanctions, the Bolivarian movement, and the open challenge to US hegemony**

Before the election of Hugo Chávez, the US and Venezuela maintained amicable relations. The US viewed Venezuela as an ‘exceptional nation’ due to their provision of oil, stable politics, and commitment to democratic elections (Jacques 2005 p. 82). But the failure of neoliberalism in curbing inequality in Venezuela led to the election of Chávez in 1999 alongside other left-wing leaders across Latin America as part of the ‘Pink Tide’. Chávez attempted to reconstruct Venezuelan identity by distancing the government from the previous neoliberal system and by promoting an identity that drew on the ideas of Simón Bolívar (Hermann 2015 p 133). US-Venezuelan relations under Chávez were not initially hostile, but a refusal by Chávez to support the War on Terror and his open criticism of their foreign policy led to escalating tensions and an attempt to undermine US hegemony in Latin America (Hermann 2015 p. 133). This chapter will focus on Chávez’s ‘challenge’ to US hegemony, firstly looking at US attempts to enforce their power before covering how Venezuela has attempted to spread anti-Americanism and undermine US hegemony.

#### **3.1 Coups, sanctions, and imposing power**

The breakdown of relations between the US and Venezuela was triggered not only by US policy, but also by Chávez’s openly hostile attitude. Chávez, driven by the legacy of Bolívar and his vision for a united South American front against US hegemony, based much of his domestic and regional policy on anti-hegemonic positions, becoming openly antagonistic towards the US, referring to President Bush as “the devil” in a 2006 speech at the United Nations (Lima 2018, Stout 2006) This open hostility, as well as Chávez’s ‘radical’ left-wing ideology pushed US foreign policy towards a more hostile and interventionist stance, exemplified by the alleged involvement of the US in a coup attempt in 2002 as well as more recently in 2020 (Weyland 2018 p. 149, BBC News 2020b). Despite the failure of both attempts

and a lack of true connection to the government in Washington, the utilisation of US hegemony to overthrow a government within a Latin American state harks back to the Cold War strategy. The US has also attempted to use its power to support Venezuelan governmental opposition. In 2004, the US backed a referendum organised by Colombia opposition through its National Endowment for Democracy but were defeated by the Chávez government (Petras and Veltmeyer 2015 p. 164). In 2006, the US backed a boycott of Congressional elections in Venezuela, but once again failed (ibid). In both 2012 and 2013, US-backed presidential candidates were beaten by both Chávez and his successor, Maduro (p. 165). Most recently in January 2019, the US threw the full weight of their support behind Presidential candidate, Juan Guaidó and ceasing their recognition of Maduro as the legitimate president (Nelson et al. 2021).

Increasingly, the US has utilised its economic might to force change in Venezuela. Sanctions have steadily ramped up, firstly being imposed on individuals (Nelson et al. 2021). The most stringent sanctions have been placed on the Venezuelan government directly, particularly targeting the oil sector. These sanctions have included bans on the production and sale of Venezuelan oil, blocking all US assets and transactions with the Maduro government and the threat of further financial sanctions on any non-US persons who assist the Maduro government (Eaton and Cohen 2019, Nelson et al. 2021 p. 19). With Venezuela relying on oil sales for ninety-five percent of its export revenue, the impact of the sanctions are clear, with oil exports down 40% in the first month of sanctions alone (Eaton and Cohen 2019). The Trump presidency combined this intense economic pressure with a revitalisation of Cold War discourse towards Venezuela, with Trump's National Security Advisor, John Bolton referring to Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua as the 'Troika of Tyranny' and stating that the United States would take "direct action against all three regimes to defend the rule of law, liberty, and basic human decency in our region." (National Security Council 2018).

Despite the years of US efforts, they have failed to change the situation domestically. In January 2021, Maduro even increased his by taking control of the National Assembly, the last independent branch of government, with US sanctions serving as a scapegoat for the countries' economic woes (Nelson et al. 2021 pp. 1 & 20). So does the failure of the US to drive Venezuelan politics towards the Washington Consensus highlight the downfall of US hegemony? Unfortunately for Maduro, probably not. Venezuela simply doesn't have the means to threaten the US militarily and the recent economic collapse has further reduced the threat (Corrales and Romero 2012). The US has certainly attempted to impose its hard power to remove Chávez and Maduro and initially saw it as a potential source of destabilisation in South

America, but recognises that an imminent shift in domestic politics is not essential. This is in large part due to the soft power, subtle control that the US maintains over Venezuela.

### *3.1.1 US economic power and the political-economic dichotomy*

US-Venezuela relations since Chávez's election have been based on a relationship of economic and energy interdependence that coexisted alongside political polarisation (Bonfili 2010 p. 683). Unlike traditional enemies, relations between the two were never fully broken, with the US relying on Venezuela for the provision of oil and Venezuela relying on the massive income providing by exports to the US (Corrales and Romero 2012 p. 4). But as relations have worsened, the economic relations have become more fraught. Thanks to the extensive economic soft power that the US maintains, they have been able to diversify and survive the disruption of oil flows, but the same cannot be said for Venezuela. Venezuela produces 'heavy' crude oil, meaning only a limited number of facilities can refine the oil into a usable substance (Weyland 2018 p. 147). Most of these facilities are in the US, meaning Venezuela is heavily reliant on them for production. Venezuela's national oil company, the PdVSA entered into a refinery agreement with the US based company Citgo, in which they purchased half of the company in 1986 and the other half in 1990 (Nelson et al. p. 10). During recent sanctions Venezuela has consequently been unable to control oil refining, with Citgo being based solely in the US. Whilst the US can turn to many of its other partners in its global oil network, including Colombia, Venezuela is unable to do the same (Eaton and Cohen 2019). India, China, Russia, and Iran have been increasing their imports of Venezuelan oil, but this cannot account for the huge loss of the US market and the economic impacts are clear, with Venezuela's economy contracting more than 75% since 2014 (Nelson et al. 2021 p. 8). The US also combines this with attempts to undermine support for the Maduro government. The US has provided more than \$1 billion in humanitarian assistance to Venezuela since 2017 and has increased the presence of USAID and the NED in Venezuela to provide democracy-related assistance (Nelson et al. 2021). As the Venezuelan pushes the people away with their increasingly harmful domestic policy, the US can use the provision of aid to cultivate positive attitudes towards themselves.

From the US foreign policy perspective, the rise of the Pink Tide and uncertainty regarding Venezuelan oil imports created an uneasy tension regarding the certainty of the hegemonic power. The US recognises the harm that the factors could play and have consistently utilised hard power measures to force Venezuela in a subservient direction. The failure of these measures to enact any real domestic change may be highlighted as a clear indication of a diminishment in US hegemony from the Cold War heights in which intervention and governmental change was a cornerstone of their Latin American strategy. But as demonstrated by their stringent use of sanctions and extensive use of soft power measures, the threat of Venezuela was potentially overstated. Venezuelan dependence on US oil exports meant that sanctions were able to effectively diminish the threat that they posed. As such, the measures seen during the Cold War of direct intervention were less necessary, as the US at that time was battling for both hard and soft power on a global scale with the Soviet Union. The failure of their actions to enact domestic change is therefore seen as less important to the US, because the soft power hegemony that they maintain on a hemispheric and global level diminishes the threat to internal security. Unfortunately for Chávez, the potential for a challenge to US hegemony was lessened further by the domestic, regional, and extra-hemispheric relations of Venezuela.

## **3.2 Venezuela's challenge to hegemony on a domestic, regional, and international level**

Whilst US policy has worked to weaken Venezuela's challenge to US hegemony, it does not completely undermine the work done by Venezuela domestically, regionally and on a global level to cultivate anti-US sentiment and challenge US hegemony.

### *3.2.1 The threat of Chávez and Venezuela's economic downfall*

The domestic politics of Venezuela since the end of the Cold War is invariably linked to the spread of Chávez's Bolivarian vision and the wider Pink Tide throughout Latin America in the early 2000s. The neoliberal 'crises' in Mexico in 1994, Brazil in 1999 and Argentina in 2001 were initial indicators of a turn away from the Washington Consensus (Sader 2009 p. 172,

Tussie 2014 p. 109). As the Pink Tide spread across Latin America, states began restoring social policies, ending privatisation and neoliberal policies aimed at weakening the power of the state (ibid). The left-turn of the Pink Tide was also simultaneously combined with a further push by Chávez to spread a more ‘radical’ form of left-wing politics, based on anti-American ideology and Latin American socialism, with the aim of establishing a socialist community of allied states in Latin America inspired by the legacy of Simón Bolívar (Hermann 2015 p. 133). Chávez facilitated this through the utilisation of oil profits to expand social spending, raising the minimum wage and lifting millions of Venezuelans out of poverty (Bulmer-Thomas 2013, Roa 2016 p. 22). The threat of Chávez’s socialist domestic politics his regional Bolivarian vision came from its fierce anti-American rhetoric as well as its extensive social policies aimed at providing for those neglected by the neoliberalism, which increased the appeal of the movement.

Yet the picture presented today of Chávez’s Bolivarian stands in stark contrast to that of the early 2000s, with most states moving away from their left-wing stance. Almost all states involved in the wider Pink Tide have reverted to more central stances and within the Bolivarian alliance only Venezuela’s closest allies remain, including Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Cuba. The limitations of this left turn, particularly in its emanation from Venezuela, were two-fold. Firstly, the Cold War history of left-wing politics within Latin America meant that for the most part, socialist ideologies were isolated and repressed and faced inevitable backlash (Roa 2016 p. 17). This was compounded by a failure of the governments within the Pink Tide and the Bolivarian community to introduce structural change within their politics. Whilst many of them conceptually and ideologically turned to the left, they still had to operate within the neoliberal US system (Rojas 2017). The impacts of operating within a world dominated by US neoliberal soft power are clear today, with Maduro handing over control of commodity prices to the private sector and stating that he saw “nothing wrong” with the dollarization of the Venezuelan economy (Batmanghelidj and Rodriguez 2020). This in turn led to the second problem that Chávez’s politics faced, which was its over reliance on oil exports. Venezuela’s social spending was heavily dependent on oil production, which accounted for more than 90% of exports (Nelson et al. 2021 p. 9). As such, when world oil prices crashed in 2014, the beginning of Venezuela’s economic spiral was triggered (ibid). The reliance on the US as a destination for these exports only served to worsen the impacts. The result was that the welfare models provided by Venezuelan, upon which the left-wing populist politics of Chávez was built, was



fundamentally unsustainable. Venezuela did not use the opportunity to diversify development policies, but instead deepened their reliance on oil (Rojas 2017 p. 74).

These two factors demonstrate the undermining of the threat that Chávez's socialist, anti-American vision presented to US hegemony in Latin America. Despite initially challenging the neoliberal order of the US, the failure to address key underlying issues meant that the life span of the left-wing, anti-neoliberalist turn was inherently limited.

### *3.2.2. Failures in establishing a Bolivarian community*

Venezuela has also attempted to utilise regionalism to project domestic power, create connections with like-minded states and re-politicise the region (Tussie 2014 p. 111). This re-politicisation is exemplified by the rejection of the FTAA. As the US pushed for regional integration driven by free markets and neoliberal economics, Venezuela and Brazil utilised the new unifying ideology provided by the Pink Tide to block the establishment of the FTAA in 2005, symbolically marking the breakdown of the neoliberal hegemonic consensus (Tussie 2014 p. 114). Venezuela instead used the platform as a means of providing alternative regional integration based on Bolivarian principles, emphasising a social, anti-hegemonic and anti-American agenda (Lima 2018 p. 344).

Venezuelan-backed regionalism is exemplified by ALBA, with the core initiatives reflecting Venezuelan goals and focusing on undermining US hegemonic consensus through regional initiatives. The initiatives included social programmes in health and education, a soft loan scheme for energy dependent states in the Caribbean, a virtual currency permitting interregional trade without the use of the US dollar and a regional development bank (Cusack 2018 p. 5). Venezuela promoted ALBA as a means by which to expand the positive populist impact felt by domestic social programmes in health and education, but also to provide alternatives to US economic hegemony. The establishment of a virtual currency separate from the US dollar was a direct attempt to provide alternatives to the neoliberal model. So, in theory, the organisation of ALBA provided a genuine alternative to US-led neoliberal development and established a community of link-minded, anti-neoliberal states.

Despite this theoretical undermining of US hegemony, the regional initiatives of Venezuela never reached their practical heights. ALBA was reliant on Venezuela to act as a regional

hegemon and the maintenance of left-wing sentiment and the Pink Tide. With increasing US pressure on Venezuela and key states such as Ecuador faltering in its commitment to the Bolivarian vision, ALBA's efficacy diminished significantly. Attempts to implement a new trade agreement were hindered by scarce human and material resources, structural blockages, and domestic divisions in Ecuador regarding the acceptance of Venezuela as the 'new lead' for development (Cusack 2018 p. 20). The initiative for an interregional virtual currency was hampered by an overreliance on Venezuela, combined with the dollarization of Ecuadorian economy, entirely undermining the purpose of the currency (page. 22).

Venezuelan regionalism in the post-Cold War era and its relation to US hegemony is a replication of domestic experiences. Initial hope arising from undermining the FTAA and the spread of the Pink Tide, combined with the establishment of a community of like-minded, left-wing states under ALBA, suggested a potential for regional cooperation aimed at establishing a united front against US hegemonic power. The initiatives proposed by ALBA certainly served to undermine the economic stranglehold that the US maintains as a hegemon and potentially paved the way for new regional hegemony led by Venezuela. But as with the domestic case, these initiatives left Venezuela isolated. Tensions with Ecuador, trepidation from other states within South America regarding ALBA and the eventual ebbing of the Pink Tide severely hindered the vision of Venezuelan-led regionalism.

### *3.2.3 The increased involvement of China, Russia, and Iran in Venezuela*

The worsening relations with the US have provided one concrete benefit for Venezuela – an increased willingness for extra-hemispheric powers to engage with Venezuela. As Venezuela has distanced itself from the US, several states have recognised the opportunity to expand their influence in the region.

As with most Latin American states, the involvement of China has become increasingly important in Venezuela. In 2015, Chinese loans to Venezuela totalled more than \$64 billion, with China also signing commitments to build 20,000 homes and a new \$7.5 billion high-speed railway (Rendon and Fernandez 2020 p. 4). Trade between China and Venezuela is typically based on the export of primary products from Venezuela, namely oil, and the import of Chinese manufactured products (ibid). So, the rapid expansion of the oil industry under Chávez presented an opportunity for the expansion of Sino-Venezuelan relations, as oil was essential

to China's economic expansion. But Chinese involvement follows a similar story as much of the surrounding discussion around Venezuela. China has little interest with domestic politics, focusing on the economic benefits of Latin American engagement. China's desire to maintain distance between its economic engagement and political involvement is exemplified by their support of Juan Guaidó, with whom they held informal conversations in case of a transition in government (Rendon and Fernandez 2020 p. 5). The political turbulence under both Chávez and Maduro has also severely disrupted Chinese engagement. Many of the planned projects, including the high-speed railway, have been halted and stalled by "red tape, corruption and dwindling technical expertise inside Venezuela" (ibid). Whilst Venezuela received 64% of Chinese loans to Latin America in 2012, by 2015 it received only 10% (ibid).

Russia's strategy of engagement with Venezuela contrasts with China's. Whilst China works with over ninety political parties and organisations across most Latin American states, Russia places their emphasis on Venezuela, Cuba, and Bolivia, utilising engagement as a means of challenging US unipolarity with its 'backyard' (Jeifets et al. 2018 p. 223). Economically, Russian engagement increased under Chávez, with turnover in Latin America rising from \$2.2 billion in 2000 to \$18.6 billion in 2013 (Jeifets et al. 2018 p. 222). One of Russia's top energy firms, Rosneft, invested \$9 billion into Venezuelan oil and gas projects in 2010 (Rendon and Fernandez 2020 p. 3). But the military realm is where relations have thrived. Venezuela has continually supported Russia, backing them during the Russian conflict with Georgia and again during Russia's annexation of Crimea (Jeifets et al. 2018). Russia's response has been military support, sending a squadron of Russian naval ships to Venezuela in 2008 for joint exercises, as well as providing nearly \$11 billion in arms to Venezuela between 2001 and 2014 (ibid). Most recently, Russia has also utilised the Covid pandemic to increase their soft power both in Venezuela and the wider region signing deals with at least nine countries, including Venezuela, for the provision of its Sputnik V vaccine (McCluskey et al. 2021). But the cooperation between Russia and Venezuela is once again limited by domestic insatiability. Despite the \$9 billion investment by Rosneft, the company has yet to break even, and Venezuela still owes Russia at least \$10 billion for jets purchased between 2009 and 2014 (Rendon and Fernandez 2020). Latin America also continues to fall outside of the focus of Russian foreign policy, as exemplified by Russia's 2013 Foreign Policy Concept which placed Venezuela below North Korea, Mongolia, and Afghanistan for international engagement; put simply, Venezuela remains beyond Russian foreign policy priorities (Jeifets et al. 2018 p. 217)

Iran also presents a unique case of extra-hemispheric engagement. Iran and Venezuela find themselves in very similar conditions, both under heavy US sanctions and reliant on oil exports. Yet Iran has been able to circumvent sanctions far more effectively; in 2020 Iran generated \$41.3 billion of export revenue from nonoil goods (Batmanghelidj and Rodriguez 2020). Iran is consequently seen as a model that Venezuela can replicate to survive the US economic pressure and as such, has reached out to Venezuela, providing support in several ways, including the provision of 1.53 million barrels of oil in 2020 to relieve Venezuela's fuel crisis (Rendon and Fernandez 2020 p. 9). However, the efficacy and sustainability of these relations can be questioned. The relations receive widespread media, but such attention fails to recognise that commercial and diplomatic relations between the two have been active for decades (ibid p. 8). Under Chávez, Iran and Venezuela signed an estimated three hundred agreements, including the establishment of a joint development fund under the structure of Iran's Export Development Bank, a car factory that Chávez said would manufacture 25,000 cars per year and a cement factory announced to open in 2005. Yet the car factory produced less than 2,000 cars per year and the cement factory did not start production until 2012, suggesting that relations between the two states often generate provocative headlines without producing tangible results (ibid). Having two of the US' biggest enemies collaborate is certainly not ideal, but the real-world potential is limited. Whilst Iran has demonstrated their ability to circumvent US sanctions, the unstable political situation in Venezuela, combined with their deeper reliance on oil makes the likelihood of this being replicated unlikely.

At the very least, the potential for Venezuelan hegemonic challenge was once there. With the spread of the Pink Tide in the early 2000s, the potential for wider anti-American sentiment that undermined US power was certainly there. The rejection of the FTAA and the establishment of alternative methods of regional organisation were also indicative of an increasing awareness of alternative development models. The economic boom experienced by the exportation of oil under Chávez and his utilisation of this boom to bolster his left-wing populist ideology through comprehensive social programmes served to present Venezuela's model as a challenge to the conventional US way. Yet Venezuela's social policies and their reliance on oil were precisely what led to their downfall. The production and exportation of Venezuelan oil was so dependent on global oil prices and a willingness from the US to ignore political rivalries that it was doomed to failure. With the vast hegemonic power that the US wields, it was able to undermine Venezuelan power. Once the US almost entirely cut off oil exports, Venezuela was no longer able to provide the domestic and regional alternative that threatened to challenge US

hegemony. As such, the US has transitioned away from a status of initial panic in which they perceived Chávez as a security threat, into a form of somewhat acceptance, working to undermine the Venezuelan government but recognising the limited threat they present (Corrales and Romero 2012 p. 12). This attitude is exemplified by their reaction to Venezuela's extra-hemispheric relations. Whilst they do not maintain neutrality and certainly condemn Venezuela's interaction with states they regard to be the 'enemy' they recognise that the hegemony they maintain over Venezuela means that they need not worry extensively about the threat that these external powers may present.

## **Chapter 4**

# **Comparing Colombia and Venezuela: the outlook for US hegemony**

The cases of Colombia and Venezuela paint a picture of varying and evolving US hegemony which is dependent on the interaction of US policy, the domestic and regional policy of individual states as well as the involvement of international actors. The utilisation of two cases which employ radically different policies demonstrates the varying interactions that the Latin American continent maintains with the US. But what do the similarities and differences between these two cases suggest about the wider state of US hegemony and how it may develop into the future? The following chapter will review the convergence and divergence of these two cases to shed light upon this to extrapolate lessons to the wider Latin American region. It will first consider how US policy has evolved since the Cold War to adapt to these differing cases and maintain hegemonic control, before highlighting the impact of the varying domestic and regional politics. Finally, it will cover the role of foreign powers up to this point and highlight how the current dynamics may serve to influence US hegemony further in the future.

### **4.1 The evolution, expansion, and diversification of US foreign policy and hegemony**

The main argument for decreasing US hegemony is that the absence of direct military intervention and a shift of US attention towards other regions are clear indicators of a reduction in the ability of the US to enforce its hegemony (Drezner 2015). Authors have argued that this could provide a source of optimism for Latin America, being indicative of a reduction in the power of the US (ibid). But as covered in chapter 1, to view US hegemony through the narrow lens of hard power military interventionism reduces US power to one element of what is a broad and wide-reaching phenomenon that has been deeply entrenched by years involvement.

Here, the similarities and differences in US policy towards Venezuela and Colombia can shed light on the diverse ways in which the US imposes its hegemony and the adaptation of power across differing contexts. Both cases have seen a movement away from direct military intervention (as has the rest of the continent) although both Venezuela and Bolivia have been subject to what they believe are US supported coup attempts (Weisbrot 2020, BBC News 2020b). But the differences in US policy towards the two states helps to highlight why this reduction in intervention should not be associated with a reduction in hegemony. In a state such as Colombia, who voluntarily embrace US hegemony, the US utilised this opportunity to militarise their relations, increasing interdependence and using the state as a base of hemispheric power projection. For Venezuela, their hostility led the US to take a more aggressive stance, utilising economic sanctions to pressure Venezuela into a policy position that was more congruent with US interests.

These two examples consequently demonstrate a quality that is often lacking in analyses of US hegemony; namely that it is not a unitary, static bloc. The states who come under US hegemonic control have diverse domestic politics and as such, US foreign policy diversifies accordingly to cater to the needs of each state. For states that have typically been more aggressive towards US hegemony since the end of the Cold War, such as Venezuela, Bolivia and Cuba, the US must utilise its vast array of powers including sanctions and the support of domestic opposition. But in states such as Colombia and Mexico, the US can advance their hegemonic grip through mutual engagement and use states to project power further afield. An overemphasis on the primacy of US military intervention (in part due to the centrality of this tactic during the Cold War) leads to an overestimation of this aspect in US hegemony and consequently a greater emphasis on US 'decline' once this aspect of power is no longer needed. States do not always fit neatly into categories of 'hostile' or 'ally' and frequently move between these categorisations. Ecuador, for example, was a key player in Venezuela's Bolivarian alliance alongside several other states but has since returned to a more central stance. The fact that the US can diversify and adapt its foreign policy and the tools at its disposal to be pressure certain states suggests a strong and far-reaching hegemony.

Another defining feature of a hegemon is the ability to dictate the actions and objectives of a system to achieve their personal goals. US objectives in Latin America focus on military, economic and political aspects; they aim to check security threats, maintain economic power through free market, neoliberal trade and to ensure the politics of nations are broadly based on democracy, open trade, and the rule of law (Coll 1997). The examples of Colombia and

Venezuela suggest that broadly, the military and economic desires of the US remain largely unchallenged thanks to the huge military budget and economic might that they maintain. The political objectives are where Colombia and Venezuela diverge. Here is where US policy has faced the greatest challenge and is consequently also indicative of where they are most likely to use hard power to enforce domestic political change. The US has rarely been able to universally impose its political will, as demonstrated by the presence of communism in Latin America during the Cold War. But ultimately, ideological contestation is mostly confined to states such as Venezuela and Bolivia, and most other states exist and operate within the US neoliberal system, demonstrating the extent of their hegemony.

In analysing collective US power, the cases show that the suggestion of a reduction in US hegemony thanks to the absence of military intervention, or ‘neglect’ because of the War on Terror is undermined by US policy in both Colombia and Venezuela. Despite differing approaches, the US has been able to maintain its main interests in the region, and therefore its hegemony, by taking a diverse approach to different nations and utilising all the means of power at its disposal.

## **4.2 Differing domestic trajectories and the alleged threat of Venezuelan anti-Americanism**

Another key argument presented by the declinist debate was that the Pink Tide and the spread of Chávez’s anti-Americanism demonstrated the lack of control that the US had. This argument is rooted in the *potential* threat of the Pink Tide and left-wing politics to undermine the deep-rooted hegemonic control of the US. But here, the divergence in Colombian and Venezuelan domestic politics and their resultant trajectories since the 2000s undermines the argument of that this ‘threat potential’ was ever truly actualised. Venezuela, fuelled by economic mismanagement and intense US pressure, has fallen into economic collapse whilst Colombia has increasingly be seen as a ‘success’ story thanks to its tackling of FARC and drug production (Weyland 2018 p. 137, Marczak and Hernandez 2019 p. 14). These contending images of left-wing failure and neoliberal, anti-drug success suggests that alignment with US hegemony and acceptance of US power has served to create more beneficial outcomes than hostility.



It is important to acknowledge that both cases are particularly unique in their interactions with the US. Venezuela has been the focal point of left-wing, anti-American sentiment since then turn of the century and the central figure in the spread of the left-wing politics. Colombia conversely had the prerequisite conditions of mass drug production and the presence of ‘narcoterrorists’ to successfully implement militarisation. As such, many of the conditions that led to Colombian ‘successes’ and Venezuelan ‘failure’ are unique to these countries. However, generalisations can still be made. Colombia embraced US hegemony, consequently leading to enhanced domestic stability for Colombia, whilst hostility led to turmoil for Venezuela, suggests a general strength in US hegemony and their ability to control the outcomes of states within Latin America.

So in a practical sense, the domestic politics of Venezuela, its Bolivarian vision and the wider Pink Tide had limited success. However, questions remain over the normative and ideological impacts that the Pink Tide had upon US hegemony. Did the fact that the Pink Tide undermined the ubiquitous acceptance of neoliberalism and the Washington Consensus provide the potential for a diminishment of US hegemony or at the very least, highlight some of the cracks in their hegemony? Although the US has been able to counter the threat from anti-neoliberal sentiment, the mere presence of such sentiment indicates the potential for cracks within US hegemony. The existence of anti-hegemonic politics that both originated in Latin American states (rather than being ‘imported’ from the USSR during the Cold War) and spread widely suggests that these sentiments at least have some backing and presence across Latin America.

### **4.3 - The threat and limitations of Latin American regional organisation**

These dynamics are demonstrated further by regional organisations in Latin America. Again, Colombia and Venezuela vary in their approaches to regionalism. Whilst Colombia has taken a more neutral stance, Venezuela have utilised the opportunity to attempt to create a Latin American community aimed enhancing independence from US oversight. The rejection of the FTAA and the establishment of increasing numbers of Latin American regional organisations, particularly ALBA, signified a new era of Latin American regionalism which rejected attempts by the US for the expansion of NAFTA and free trade, instead favouring a new kind of ‘Pan-Americanism’ based on Latin American led initiatives (Salazar 2012 p. 184).

But again, whilst these initiatives had the potential for undermining US hegemony, they fell short. Here is also where Colombian and Venezuelan positions on regional initiatives converge. Both states, alongside their regional counterparts, are supportive of Pan-American regional initiatives, following the legacy of Simón Bolívar and inspired by the concept of Latin American union as a force for the containment of imperial expansion (Castro-Klarén 2003 p. 47). Yet the concept of individual state sovereignty has also been central to the Latin American regional ideology thanks to years of domination during the 20<sup>th</sup> century under the Spanish colonisers and US rule (Keller 2013 p. 538). Consequently, regional initiatives that go beyond standard economic integration and infringe too heavily on domestic politics are resisted. These dynamics of Pan-American unity clashing with sovereign concerns are exemplified by the united opposition to the FTAA but the consequent failure of states to establish affective alternatives. The similarities between Colombia and Venezuela extend to the rest of Latin America, because whether it be the Venezuelan-led ALBA or the Brazilian-led Mercosur, there is a generalised reluctance to go beyond economic initiatives thanks to internal divisions and a strong emphasis on state sovereignty (Kennedy and Beaton 2016 p. 69).

Certainly, it should be recognised that at the very least, some states in Latin America (as typified by Venezuela and the rest of the Pink Tide), attempted to find alternatives to the hegemony of the US. Whilst these changes in politics weren't necessarily novel or unique, they were innovative in that they originated from Pan-American ideas emphasising anti-neoliberalism and anti-US sentiment. While they never fulfilled their goals in terms of subverting US hegemony, their presence suggests potential issues within the hegemony of the US.

#### **4.4 China on the rise and the role of Russia and Iran in undermining hegemony**

A final component of the declinist argument is the emphasis on external powers threatening US hegemony, but here, the threat potential has so far been overemphasised. China's increasing presence in Latin America is most often highlighted in the literature as the signifier of this, but the similarities of Chinese engagement with both Colombia and Venezuela suggest the potential for impact is overstated. In both these states, as well as the rest of Latin America,

Chinese engagement is focused almost entirely on economic engagement (Jenkins 2010 p. 834). Whilst this increasing economic engagement and ‘threat’ to US economic hegemony could potentially be an issue, for the time being China is not enforcing its military or political interests in the region (Urdinez et al. 2016). China is also shying away from engagement that could be viewed as hostile from the US perspective, exemplified by their continued engagement with Colombia but their increased from Venezuela.

Where Colombia and Venezuela differ most drastically in their foreign policy is with states that are more hostile towards the US, namely Russia and Iran. The focus of states like Iran and Russia on Venezuela, but not other countries like Colombia, could potentially be worrisome for US hegemony. The tightening of relations between the US’ ‘enemies’ could suggest that the US no longer maintains the hegemony needed to prevent states within Latin America from engaging with other hostile states outside the continent, thereby showing the limits of their control in preventing security threats. But as covered these relations garner a lot of attention due to the fear of American ‘enemies’ collaborating, but in practice lack the substance to cause major issues for US hegemony, due to the inhospitality of engaging with Venezuela under extreme US economic pressure.

The most threatening aspect of international engagement, particularly from China, is its potential to grow in the future. Whilst Chinese engagement is currently contained through a hesitancy to challenge the vast expanse of US hard and soft power in Latin America, the increasing economic interconnectivity and China’s ability to present itself as a viable alternative for development could present problems in the future. If they are to become the largest trading partner for the continent, then the threat potential could increase. However, this is likely to be largely dependent on their ability to challenge US global hegemony more fundamentally as the vast distance between China and Latin America as well as the greater cultural difference means that the challenging US hegemony will not be simple.

#### **4.5 The current debate and the state of US hegemony in Latin America**

So what do the cases of Venezuela and Colombia suggest about the condition of US hegemony in the two countries, but also in the rest of Latin America? As covered previously, whilst only

providing a snapshot of the wider relations between Latin America and the US, the variations and comparisons of the Venezuela and Colombia can aid in making generalisations to the rest of the continent. As such, it these cases demonstrate that the argument for US hegemonic decline has been overstated. At one end of the spectrum, Colombia's friendly relations and willing acceptance of hegemony allowed for the expansion of militarised relations and a base from which US hegemony could be projected further afield. At the opposite end, despite arguments that the inability of US direct intervention and increasingly hostile politics of Venezuela was an indication of declining hegemony, this thesis has highlighted that this fails to recognise the vast expanse of US power and the current issues faced by Venezuela.

The argument for US hegemonic decline consequently has two issues. Firstly, US hegemony is considered on a unitary basis, with Latin America being treated as a single unit. US hegemonic power is seen to increase or decrease unitarily for the entire region, meaning there is a lack of recognition for variations in hegemony between individual states. Secondly, the declinist debate places too much emphasis on hard power and military intervention as the main form of hegemonic control. As shown by the variations in US relations and approaches between Colombia and Venezuela, the US has a wide variety of sources of power. A greater recognition of the more subtle, non-military aspects of US hegemonic control demonstrates that their hegemony persists in places such as Venezuela even in the face of a lack of ability to oust political enemies.

One caveat that should be made is that the example of Venezuela demonstrates that the potential for US hegemonic decline at least exists. At the start of the century, the spread of the Pink Tide and the growing anti-neoliberal, anti-US sentiment certainly was not taken lightly by the US. The rejection of the FTAA and the switch of several governments to left-wing stances was undoubtedly the signal of potential US hegemonic decline. Whilst unsuccessful in their attempts on this occasion, with enough disillusion from US policy, combined with viable alternative initiatives, it is certainly possible that Latin America would be able to push back against US power (Lima 2018 p. 354). Through collective action, it is more likely that US soft power and economic incentives could be undermined (Youkee 2020). As demonstrated by the case of Venezuela, without this unification and regional support, states are isolated and targeted by US power. Perhaps then, the declinist debate can be reframed to emphasise the *potential* that exists to undermine US hegemony, whilst simultaneously recognise the current limitations in actualising this threat.

Additionally, US hegemony is more likely to decline in the future if a foreign power such as China can capitalise on global trends of power to advance their interests in the region. Whilst the geographical proximity of the US to Latin America is certainly beneficial, it is not out of the question that China could make inroads like that of the Soviet Union during the Cold War. China is paying greater attention to the region as a whole and sees further opportunities in the current pandemic, with their rapid response meaning they have been able to maintain economic growth whilst other economies have faltered, placing them in position for enhanced engagement (Barrozo et al. 2020). Chinese investors have already set their eyes on a water sanitation project in Brazil, an energy transmission opportunity in Argentina and mining projects in Peru (ibid). The incursion of Russia and Iran into US' backyard may also be a signal of further things to come. Although both are still currently limited to engaging with specific states such as Venezuela, Bolivia and Cuba, their presence and engagement with even a limited number of states on the continent could signify a diminishment in US ability to keep them out.

So while currently the decline of the US hegemony has generally been overstated, this is not to say that the potential for decline in the future is not there. The Pink Tide gave a glimpse into the threat that a collective turn away from the US can have on their interests in the region and if China is to continue to grow, it's not out of the question that they may begin to confront US power in Latin America.

## Conclusion

Increasingly, literature on US-Latin American relations argues that the decline of US hegemony in the region is either imminent or has already occurred. Whilst interpretations vary, a growing body of literature is arguing for the presence of a 'post-neoliberal', 'post-hegemonic' order in Latin America. Several sources of hegemonic challenge are presented, ranging from US foreign policy neglect, to the threat of anti-Americanism and the Pink Tide and finally the growing presence of international actors on the continent. This thesis has analysed these arguments and the current debate of US hegemonic decline through the dichotomous cases of Colombia and Venezuela and analysis of US policy towards each state, as well as their own domestic, regional, and international policies. To comprehensively analyse changes in hegemony, this thesis has also gone beyond common conceptions that focus too heavily on hard power, instead highlighting the more subtle forms of US domination.

Through analysis and comparison of these cases, this thesis presented two main arguments regarding the alleged decline of US hegemony. Firstly, the decline of US hegemony has been overstated due to a misrepresentation of the extent and diversity of US hegemony as well as an overestimation of the individuality of states such as Venezuela and their ability, alongside external powers, to fundamentally undermine US hegemony. The current literature lacks a wider recognition of the way US hegemony has evolved since the end of the Cold War to acclimatise to the shifting context within which they operate and to diversify their hegemonic strategies to fit the country with which they are engaging. Secondly, although US hegemony has not seen a significant decline, the comparison of the cases of Colombia and Venezuela demonstrate that states which have been most resistant towards US hegemony (Venezuela in this case) have had the greatest potential for undermining hegemony. The US has been able to quell the resistance from states such as Venezuela at this time, but the potential for the spread of anti-US sentiment as demonstrated by the Pink Tide, as well as the increasing involvement of states such as China and Russia, could potentially lead to hegemonic decline in the future. So whilst the US was able to prevent damage to its hegemony in this instance, the presence of internal hegemonic resistance and external pressure suggests that the necessary conditions for hegemonic decline are not absent.

This thesis has utilised the case studies of Colombia and Venezuela to analyse both ends of the US relational spectrum. Whilst each case within Latin America is unique in its engagements

with the US, this thesis has utilised these cases to generalise findings to the rest of the hemisphere. By looking at these dichotomous states, it has been demonstrated that regardless of political stances or regional and international policy, the US has been able to diversify and evolve its foreign policy to ensure hegemonic control. As such, this thesis argues that the lessons from the cases of Colombia and Venezuela are representative of the wider dynamics within Latin America as the rest of the states fall within this ‘spectrum’ of US relations, of which Colombia and Venezuela represent the opposite poles. However, further analysis of individual cases and the ways in which other states’ domestic and regional politics serve to influence US foreign policy could enhance the current debate further.

The importance of US hegemony in Colombia, Venezuela and Latin America has implications that reach far beyond the hemisphere. As the US’ ‘backyard’, Latin America is central to US power. If there were indications that US hegemony was to decrease in Latin America, this would invariably spell issues for wider US unipolar global power. The loss of their closest subservient region would likely mean that other less accessible regions are also more resistant to US hegemony. The dynamics experienced in Latin America and in the individual cases studies are not isolated to these examples, with increasing awareness and resistance of US hegemony on a global scale as well as a rising threat from China across the globe. The individual cases of Venezuela and Colombia consequently help to shed light on the wider regional dynamics of Latin America, which in turn acts as a useful barometer for the strength of US hegemony on a global level.

But while the case of decline in the future may spell trouble for US hegemony, this thesis has focused on the contemporary debate surrounding hegemonic decline in Latin America. Through analysis of Colombia and Venezuela, this thesis has demonstrated that while US hegemony is not infallible and faces challenges on multiple fronts, the current literature tends to underestimate the vast and deep reach of US hegemony and its ability to utilise all forms of power to diversify and enforce its control over states in the region.

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