

Tehran-Caracas Axis

An important factor in geopolitical balance

By Matija Šerić
Journalist

ANALYSIS

The strategic partnership between the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and the Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the most intriguing alliances that have emerged in recent times. Undoubtedly, it is an extraordinary geopolitical phenomenon that connects two different continents, Asia (the Middle East) and South America, with the aim of achieving political, economic, and military interests. This alliance is not just a product of current political circumstances, but the result of excellent diplomatic, economic, and political relations that have developed over the past quarter-century.

Caracas and Tehran are more than 11,000 kilometers apart by air, but the distance has not hindered their partnership. The political systems of the two countries are very different. Venezuelans are mostly Catholics, and Iranians are Shia Muslims; the former are Latin Americans, and the latter are Indo-Europeans. It could be said that these differences have facilitated their connection.



Venezuelan children gather in front of a poster of the Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei at the Venezuelan-Iranian Culture and Friendship International Fair in Caracas in March 2023.

IRNA

Beginnings

The era of Venezuelan-Iranian friendship began in the early 2000s when the controversial leftist president Hugo Chavez came to power in Venezuela. During his tenure, he visited Iran numerous times. The first visit took place in 2001, when he stated that he had come to Iran to "prepare the way for peace, justice, stability, and progress for the 21st century". The then Iranian president Mohammad Khatami visited Venezuela three times. During a visit in 2005, Chavez awarded him the Order of the Liberator and called him "a tireless fighter for the right causes in the world".

The rapprochement of the two nations, imbued with strong anti-imperialist, i.e., anti-American rhetoric, did not go unnoticed by Wash-

ington, causing significant concern within the Bush administration. With Mahmoud Ahmadinejad coming to power in Iran, bilateral relations began to gain specific features based on the friendly relationship between the two leaders. Both became icons of the struggle against the aggressive foreign policy of the USA in the period following the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. America's intentions were to undermine the governments of numerous states that did not want to submit to a unipolar world order and refused to relinquish sovereignty over their natural resources. Both Iran and Venezuela had a crucial resource: oil, which American companies were keen to acquire, and they also held important geostrategic positions on their continents.

Vanguard of 21st century anti-imperialism

In May 2006, it was announced that Caracas was ready to sell its 21 F-16 fighter jets (American-made) to Tehran. That same month, Chavez expressed support for Iran's intention to produce nuclear energy. In July 2006, Iran faced Western criticism for developing its nuclear program and supporting the Lebanese Hezbollah in its fight against Israel. It was during this time that Chavez visited Tehran and committed Venezuela to "stand by Iran at any time under any conditions. We are with you and Iran forever. As long as we remain united, we can defeat imperialism, but if we are divided, they will push us aside." "I feel that I have found a brother and a fighting friend after meeting with Chavez. We believe that Iran and Venezuela

should share all experiences with each other, stay by each other, and support each other," Ahmadinejad responded. During that visit, Chavez made the legendary statement at the University of Tehran: "If the US succeeds in consolidating its dominance, then humanity has no future. Therefore, we need to save humanity and put an end to the US."

In the mid-2000s, the Iranian-Venezuelan alliance was the vanguard of a new transregional anti-American (anti-imperialist) alliance that today is led by China and Russia.

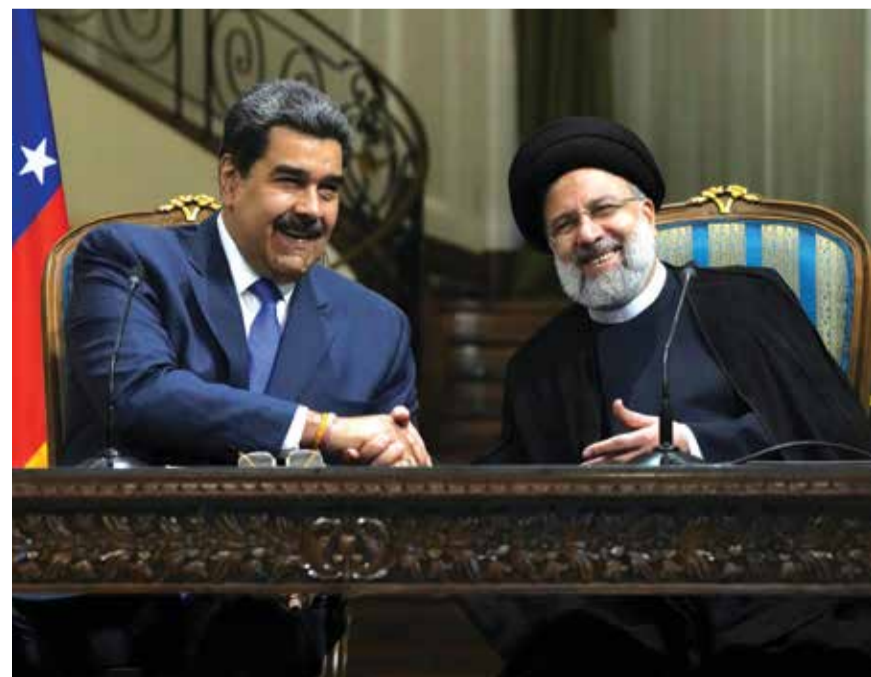
In January 2007, the two presidents announced that they would use money from the previously announced Anti-American Fund of \$2 billion to invest in the fight of other countries against American imperialism. In March of that year, Chavez

stated that he disagreed with Ahmadinejad's call to wipe Israel off the map, but that did not prevent them from declaring an "Axis of Unity" against American imperialism in July. In 2009, during the G20 Summit in London, Ahmadinejad and Chavez held a separate meeting they called the G2 Summit. During this meeting, the formation of a joint Iranian-Venezuelan development bank with an initial capital of \$200 million was announced.

During Chavez's visit to Tehran the following year, the continuation of the strategic alliance was announced with the aim of "establishing a new world order based on humanity and justice," as stated by the Iranian leader. Delegations agreed to deepen cooperation in the fields of oil, natural gas, textiles, trade, and public housing. Iran

thus became Chavez's main ally in the Middle East alongside Gaddafi's Libya and Assad's Syria, which would soon be engulfed by the Arab Spring.

In 2011, the Obama administration imposed sanctions on the Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA for opposing US sanctions and sending two oil tankers to Iran. In September, the two countries signed agreements on factory production, energy, construction, and agriculture during talks in Caracas. The then Venezuelan foreign minister Nicolas Maduro stated: "While imperialism and its criminal elites have declared war on the Muslim people for over ten years, we in the Bolivarian Revolution, led by president Chavez, declare our love for the culture of the Muslim people, their entire history, and proclaim our eternal brotherhood."



Iranian late president Ebrahim Raisi (R) and his Venezuelan counterpart, Nicolas Maduro, shake hands after signing a roadmap for their 20-year cooperation agreement in Tehran on June 11, 2022.

AP

Great words, but also deeds

After Chavez's death in March 2013, Maduro became the new president, continuing to foster excellent relations with Iran. The day after Chavez's death, Ahmadinejad paid tribute to his late friend, writing that Chavez would "return on the Day of Resurrection" along with religious figures such as Jesus Christ. At that time, annual trade between the two countries was estimated at hundreds of millions of dollars. This was a significant increase from 2001, when trade exchange amounted to only around \$189,000.

From 2001 to 2013, the governments of Tehran and Caracas signed nearly 300 agreements on numerous projects, including housing construction, cement factories, car manufacturing, the construction of hospitals, department stores, dairy farms, and seafood production companies. The value of Iranian company investments in Venezuela is estimated between \$15 and \$20 billion.

Chavez's death and Ahmadinejad's departure from power in June 2013 did not mark the end of the Iranian-Venezuelan friendship, which continued. Each country remains a crucial ally to the other. Presidents Maduro and Hassan Rouhani continued in the footsteps of their predecessors. By August 2014, the two countries had signed 265 agreements stemming from 58 projects in industry, ecology, trade, energy, culture, and more. During that month, during a meeting between Venezuelan foreign minister Elias Jaua and president Rouhani, Iran supported Maduro's government, which was beginning to face significant challenges: shortages of consumer goods and mass anti-government demonstrations that included violence from both protesters and police. Both expressed support for the Palestinian state and refused to legitimize the "State of Israel". Maduro visited Iran the following month.

During Maduro's next visit to Iran in January 2015, the topics were dom-

inated by global low oil prices. Both sides blamed the US for the low prices. Rouhani confirmed that Iran and Venezuela would join forces to "foil the strategies of world powers... and stabilize oil prices at a reasonable level".

The drastically low oil prices severely impacted Venezuela's economy, as oil makes up 90% of its exports. In June 2015, a series of intergovernmental agreements were signed in economic, financial, technological, and scientific fields, with Iran promising Venezuela medicines and medical equipment. In November 2015, Maduro visited Iran again, where continued cooperation was promised. In August 2016, Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif visited Caracas in a live broadcast on state television. The meeting was a political show to demonstrate that Venezuela was not internationally isolated, defying the US, which it claims to be in an economic war with, but also served Iran, whose minister toured Latin America.