

RELEASE IN PART  
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**From:** Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Friday, August 21, 2009 8:47 AM  
**To:** H  
**Subject:** FW: Washington Post editorial: An Open Hand That Weakens Chavez

FYI

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**From:** Kelly, Craig A  
**Sent:** Friday, August 21, 2009 8:35 AM  
**To:** Mills, Cheryl D; Sullivan, Jacob J; Macmanus, Joseph E  
**Subject:** FW: Washington Post editorial: An Open Hand That Weakens Chavez

I think S will like this piece about our policy in the region. We backgrounded extensively for it, but Schumacher-Matos leans this way in any case. Best, ck

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**From:** Mangiaracina, Sara A  
**Sent:** Friday, August 21, 2009 8:32 AM  
**To:** Kelly, Craig A  
**Subject:** Washington Post editorial: An Open Hand That Weakens Chavez

Editorial

An Open Hand That Weakens Chavez

Edward Schumacher-Matos

21 August 2009

The Washington Post

A25

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is a liar and a troublemaker. Congressmen and columnists can say this, but President Obama is correct not to do so, even though his critics want a tougher U.S. policy against the Venezuelan.

A testament to the success of diplomatic finesse is that Chavez and his pan-regional socialist dreams have been losing ground in Latin America since the inauguration of Obama and his appointment of Hillary Clinton as secretary of state.

In the past week alone, two Chavez allies have broken ranks. Ecuador and Venezuela were teamed against neighboring Colombia over a guerrilla war there. But Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa has just accepted an olive branch offered by Colombian President Alvaro Uribe.

Ecuador's vice president went so far as to add that his country would not let Chavez drag it into war with Colombia, and its defense minister snubbed a renewed Venezuelan attempt to classify Colombia's FARC guerrillas as legitimate state actors. The minister said that Ecuador had "zero tolerance" for the FARC. While Venezuela clearly harbors and funnels arms to the FARC -- despite Chavez's patently false denials -- American and Colombian officials say that Ecuador has been cracking down on the guerrillas along its border. A Colombian raid of a FARC camp inside Ecuador in 2008 led to a rupture in relations between the two countries.

Meanwhile, the Paraguayan Congress forced leftist President Fernando Lugo to withdraw a bill that would have allowed Venezuela to join the Mercosur trade pact that also includes Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay. Brazil had rejected Venezuelan membership last year.

In Honduras, the Chavez-led move to restore his friend Manuel Zelaya as president has been losing steam as much of the rest of the continent has come to grudgingly accept that Zelaya was at least partly to blame for forcing a constitutional crisis. His ouster was hardly a standard coup. The military sent him out of the country after the Supreme Court ordered his arrest for violating the constitution. Zelaya was attempting to follow Chavez's demagogic example of using plebiscites to gut the country's democratic institutions. The de facto civilian government there continues to insist that it will allow Zelaya's return only to stand trial.

Chavez's allies in Argentina, President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and her husband, recently lost congressional elections and are now minority lame ducks in that country. This reduces Chavez's greatest influence to two small countries -- Bolivia and Nicaragua. Further limiting him is that Venezuelan economic ills and mismanaged oil reserves have sharply curtailed his largess. He has provided only \$6 billion in foreign assistance this year, compared with \$79 billion last year.

A crucial test of Chavez's influence will come when Unasur, a new Brazilian-led association of South American presidents, meets next week in Buenos Aires. The emergency session was called to respond to the expanded use of Colombian military bases by American forces that was agreed to in principle this week.

Chavez condemns the agreement as a threat to him and the region, citing past American interventions. The final details are still being negotiated, but Obama, Clinton and Uribe insist that the 10-year agreement is merely an extension of the existing training and intelligence-gathering to fight drugs and guerrillas under Plan Colombia. There will be no offensive U.S. weapons such as F-16 fighter aircraft or combat units stationed in Colombia, and no change in the current force cap there of 1,400 Americans, they say. By clumsily working in secrecy, however, the negotiators allowed leaks to frame the project as an American plan, and not as the Colombian idea it largely was.

The administration has been winning over the Brazilians and other key players, though just how much remains to be seen. Still, the declining influence of Chavez and possible regional acceptance of the Colombian agreement are due in large part to the administration's adept ability to extend an open hand and attentive ear to all, even Chavez, and thus not play into Latin fears of a Yanqui bully. It has won influence by going along with the rest of the hemisphere in condemning Zelaya's ouster and in making overtures to Cuba, while staying true to American democratic values.

Critics who demand bellicose policies that might lead to a break in relations with Venezuela should look at the failure of such policies to sway events in Cuba, Iran, North Korea and prewar Iraq. Chavez is a nuisance but not a threat to the United States, and he has to be treated with the hemisphere in mind. So far, Obama and Clinton are doing just fine.

The writer is syndicated by the Washington Post Writers Group . His e-mail address is

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