

Putin “plays poker” in Venezuela

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26/Jun/2019

Last Thursday, June 20, the Atlantic Council discussed the “Russian Influence in Venezuela: What should the United States do?”. The panelists concluded that Putin’s interest in Venezuela is political. Also, they affirmed that if the United States Congress, the Executive, and the Trump Administration do not have a common security and defense policy in Venezuela, Russia will take the initiative, even though Venezuela is not in the same category as Ukraine (historical ties) and Syria (military assets). So, Putin could agree with a transitional government that has Chavism members to watch over Russian interests because Putin knows that from a logistical and economic point of view, he cannot guarantee his position in Venezuela.

Ambassador Paula J. Dobriansky stressed that the main strategic lines in the foreign policy of the regime in Moscow are: diminish or eradicate the power of the United States at the international level; undermine the democratic values and institutions that ensure the stability, security, and peace of the world order created after the Second World War; restore the power of Russia as it was in the era of the Soviet Union; and be a global player, expanding its sphere of influence in the world.

Dobriansky said that the foreign policy of President Vladimir Putin makes it possible to avoid the severe economic situation that Russia is going through, being a key actor in a multipolar world. She added that in the case of Venezuela, the Kremlin is striving to undermine the influence of the United States in the Caribbean country, without underestimating the investment it has in Venezuela. “I would highlight the fact that it is not the capital invested that matters here; it is the political link with Venezuela. The geographical proximity to the United States is what motivates Putin to continue to supporting Maduro”. Besides, the relationship between Russia and Venezuela in the last twenty years is a given since the time of Chávez-Putin (2000).

Ambassador John Herbst and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine, Eurasia of the US Department of Defense, Evelyn N. Farkas, shared the view that Putin rejects civil disobedience or nonviolent resistance. “He does not want to see the authoritarian regimes overthrown by the peaceful uprising of the people on the street. So, he has been against the so-called colour revolution near its border: Georgia, Ukraine, Serbia, and Kyrgyzstan. He was also very concerned about what happened during the Arab Spring”.

Farkas argued that Putin sees Venezuela from this perspective, Maduro’s output by a “nonviolent movement”.

Russian journalist Konstantin Von Eggert asserted that Putin is a poker player who takes the opportunities that arise. The Russian president thinks that until now his defense in Venezuela has been successful because Donald Trump has played publicly with the idea that he would somehow use military force in Venezuela to tip the balance in favor of Juan Guaidó. So, Putin immediately sent his defense forces. He played his cards by sending the navy, air force, and

Wagner's mercenaries. Probably, the Russian leader believes that it helped to persuade Washington to suspend the use of the humanitarian intervention in Venezuela. Putin looks like the winner in Venezuela. However, it does not have the resources or enough political capital to prevent Maduro from leaving, which would make him a loser. Moscow does not want failure. Besides, in Russian society, there is no appetite to fight against the United States for the survival of Maduro.

For this reason, Maduro gives part of the patrimony of Venezuelans to Rosneft: the gas fields of Patao and Mejillones in the north of the Paria peninsula, Sucre state. He gives Russia the right to develop and produce gas reserves in Venezuela for 30 years, without giving a cent to the National Treasury, since Rosneft is Putin's petty cash, according to the journalist Von Eggert. As a result, Maduro takes hold of the Russian Federation president, an opportunity that Putin cash out as a poker player, for his support.

The other bet that Putin hopes to make effective is in the relationship with the United States, leveraging his influential position in the Bolivarian country, which could not be ignored in a solution for Venezuela by the Trump government. Therefore, Venezuela's issue will be on the agenda of the bilateral meeting between Trump and Putin in Osaka, Japan, this week.

Consequently, the parties seeking a negotiated solution for Venezuela in Norway, Sweden, Venezuela, Cuba, Rome, Canada, Bogota, and the United States should consider that Russia plays "poker" in Venezuela.