

POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Transnational Identity Politics in the Americas: Reshaping "Nuestramérica" as Chavismo's Regional Legitimation Strategy

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This article suggests that transnational motives have remained key components of legitimation strategies for regional realignment in Latin America. Specifically, we assess the legitimation strategy of the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez and the associated political movement, Chavismo, as a recent case of transnational identity politics. Studies of Chavismo have stressed its role in the changing balance of power in early twenty-first-century Venezuela and the redrafting of global alliances, through a series of organizational moves and petrodollars. Combined with these political and economic boosters, Chavismo's impact was sustained through a strategy that sought legitimation by drawing on earlier narratives of the solidarity of "Nuestramérica" (Our America), used in reshaping transnational networks within the region and beyond. This identity layer provided a basis for regional and international realignment and organizational creation, even if more recently it lost traction and became criticized for its unfulfilled promises and growing gap between rhetoric and implementation.

Este artículo sugiere que la dimensión transnacional es un componente clave de las estrategias de legitimación para el realineamiento de estados y movimientos sociales en América Latina. Analizamos la estrategia de legitimación del expresidente venezolano Hugo Chávez y de los movimientos políticos aliados como un caso reciente de política identitaria transnacional. Previos estudios del chavismo se han enfocado en el cambiante equilibrio de poder en Venezuela a principios del siglo XXI y la elaboración de nuevas alianzas globales, a través de una serie de acciones institucionales y el uso de petrodólares. Combinado con tales catalizadores políticos y económicos, su impacto fue sustentado a través de una estrategia que construyó sobre la base de narrativas preexistentes un discurso de Nuestramericana solidaridad, utilizado para la remodelación de redes transnacionales dentro y fuera de la región. Dicho estrato identitario sirvió para el realineamiento regional e internacional y la construcción institucional, si bien recientemente ha entrado en una etapa de desaceleración a medida que perdió tracción y fue criticado debido a promesas incumplidas y su creciente brecha entre retórica e implementación.

This article assesses the regional legitimation strategies of the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez and the political movement associated with him, analyzing it as a recent case of transnational identity politics in Latin America. It claims that transnational themes, grievances, and expectations have continued to play a key role in identity politics and international relations in the region. Focusing on the case of Chavismo—that is, the political project, movement, and regime led by Chávez and his regional allies and successors—it reconstructs the rise and partial erosion of an encompassing narrative of transnational, "Nuestramerican" solidarity and its political implications for regional dynamics.

Although much has been written about the political history and structure of Chavismo (Ellner 2005; Gott 2011; Hellinger 2004; Roberts 2006) and its use of petrodollar-based diplomacy (Cala and Economides 2012; Corrales 2009; Corrales and Penfold 2015; Gratius and Fürtig 2009; Penfold-Becerra 2006; Shifter 2006; Weyland 2009), less attention has been devoted to an equally crucial aspect of its soft-balancing strategy: how the discursive strategies used to enhance legitimacy and pursue a regional and global

agenda have followed a transnational optic. When a discourse-oriented perspective has been applied on the Chavista populist style, its focus has been mostly domestic and, less frequently, comparative (Capriles 2006; Freidenberg 2007, 186–190; Laclau 2006; Zúquete 2008; Hawkins 2009; López-Maya 2013).¹ Our work stresses the transnational impact of identity politics, focusing particularly on the projection of ideas of macroregional solidarity that played a legitimizing role in the push for an international realignment.

In that sense, this article aims to contribute theoretically to current debates on transnational identity politics. This literature has mainly focused on the political struggles of social transnational groups whose identities were at stake by analyzing the development of their historical processes of identification (Ignatow 2007; Yashar 2007), their forms of political organization and mobilization (Smith and Guarnizo 1998; Tarrow 2001), and how they interacted globally (Brysk 2000). Less effort has been devoted to the strategic use of transnational identities by other political actors who engage in what Butler (2010) defines as “performative re-making” and intersectionality. The existing work on these directions has addressed the shaping of transnational identities as a dependent variable, as part of either national identities (Radcliffe and Westwood 1996; Smith 1999) or regional identities (Fossum 2001; Herrmann, Risse-Kappen, and Brewer 2004), while overlooking its possibility of constituting the independent variable—for instance, by influencing the legitimation strategies used by states so to gain greater influence in regional and global arenas.

The theoretical contribution of this article lies in exploring the strategies adopted by key regional actors to shape an all-encompassing “identity” meta-narrative (Whitehead 2009) to gain legitimacy abroad among regional and global audiences. Departing from the hindsight of works on transnationalism (Vertovec 1999; Iriye 2013), and more specifically regarding transnationalism in Latin America (Roniger 2011; Bokser-Liwerant 2015; Preuss 2016), this study addresses the implications of empowering crisscrossing identities as legitimation strategies at the regional level, claiming that this is a domain of growing importance in contemporary global politics. Transnationalism refers to the “multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states” (Vertovec 1999, 447), ranging from less institutionalized to highly institutionalized forms (Faist 2000, 189). It can generate regional and transregional dynamics, captured by the notion of transnational politics as applied to the study of regionalist projects like the one analyzed in this case.

Moreover, we connect this analytical perspective with the hindsight of studies on legitimation in international relations (e.g., Clark 2005; Goddard 2015; Hurd 2008), which has mostly downplayed a focus on regions as the political scenario of states’ legitimation strategies (see Wajner and Kacowicz 2018). As a social practice, based on intersubjective understandings, there is an agreement that the notion of legitimacy implies the validation of an actor and his or her actions (Hurd 2008, 8). By “international legitimacy,” we refer to an attribute resulting from the approval bestowed on members of the international society by their peers, regarding their existence and/or actions (Clark 2005, 2–5). International legitimacy is built into structural power but is maintained or challenged via strategic interaction through legitimation strategies (Clark 2005, 3; Hurd 2008, 15; Goddard 2015, 108–110). This work also engages with the vast literature that has focused on the question of the legitimacy of regional and international organizations (e.g., Coicaud and Heiskanen 2001), and it addresses the hectic pace of regional institutional construction in the 2000s–2010s by connecting it with the political and discursive initiatives of Chavismo.

The article starts by discussing the idea of transnational solidarity among Latin American nations, condensed in the notion of *Nuestramérica*. Based on this identity-oriented metanarrative, the background of multilateral hemispheric strategies, including those led by the United States, is then discussed, followed by the strategies of Chavismo to shape a posthegemonic regionalism and redraft transnational networks. Chavismo’s appeal in Latin American multilateral politics and international relations in the 2000s resulted from the combined use of petrodollar diplomacy and discursive strategies. Analysis also identifies the boomerang effects of those legitimation strategies in the form of political pressures on state governments close to Chavismo, which cast doubts on the fate of the *Nuestramérica* project.

Nuestramérica Solidarity at the Service of Chavismo’s Regional Legitimation

The late president Hugo Chávez (1954–2013) was a figure who both galvanized supporters and generated fierce opposition in Venezuela, throughout the Americas, and globally. With his down-to-earth style of leadership, he both replicated old polarizing tendencies and reshaped the popular imaginary in the

¹ The transnational projection of Latin American politics stands out when compared to Asia-Pacific politics. See the cases of Thailand’s Thaksin Shinawatra, South Korean Roh Moo-hyun, or Australia’s Pauline Hanson, whose strategies and discourse did not convey such commitments beyond the national realm (Moffit 2015).

direction of ideas that, until his ascension to power in 1999, had seemed to have gone out of favor in Latin American politics for at least a generation. Highlighted by many as a paradigmatic case of “radical populism,” his leadership style, highly personal, charismatic and close to the popular masses, certainly did not lack authoritarian overtones (Ellner 2005; Hawkins 2009; Panizza 2005; Wajner 2019). While stressing representation of the sovereign people, once in power, such leadership also challenged the separation of powers and constrained the operating space for autonomous institutions, opposition forces, and free media (Mainwaring and Pérez-Liñán 2015, 116–118; Roniger 2013; De la Torre 2018).

Likewise, his ideological positions have been characterized as “hybrid” and tense (Vargas-Llosa 2013). On the one hand, Chávez claimed to be committed to a Bolivarian Revolution geared toward enhancing people’s rights, attaining social justice, and constructing a sovereign and democratic nation (Harnecker 2010; Trinkunas 2010). These themes and ideas have been part and parcel of Western political thought at least since the nineteenth century. Chávez adopted the concept of twenty-first-century socialism put forward in 1996 by Heinz Dieterich, a German sociologist living in Mexico, and he launched it widely in a speech delivered in January 2005 at the Fifth World Social Forum, generating vast academic traction in Latin American and European intellectual and political circles. The definition was purposely vague, or, in Ernesto Laclau’s (2005) characterization of populist discourse, an almost “empty signifier,” which allowed it to be projected and interpreted in multiple ways by different publics without being called out for theoretical contradictions.

Legitimizing his political project, Hugo Chávez claimed to address the expectations of an entire continent, whose voice he was interpreting and expressing. Chávez soon became praised as the “Comandante de Nuestra América” (Carroll 2013). In its contracted form (Nuestramérica), or fully spelled out (Nuestra América), once again the concept became widely used throughout Latin America. Multiple presidents, trade unionists, artists, intellectuals, journalists, and teachers used this new notion when referring to the region, summoning together or referring to “the peoples of Our America” (Quebracho 2013b); calling the governments of Our America into action (Quebracho 2013a); defending “the sovereignty of Nuestramérica” and “planning the future of Nuestramérica” (Chávez and Prado Reyes 2014); or reinforcing the “Nuestramerican unity” (Portal Alba 2014). A Google search for *Nuestramérica* brings up over eighty-three thousand results. Although not exclusively rooted in Chavismo, the term’s renewed spike in the 2000s speaks of the latter’s impact on the imagination of many living in the region and beyond. There is a plethora of cultural centers, literary and artistic contests, radio and television programs, academic chairs, Facebook sites, and massively popular hashtags on Twitter, all of which carry the name of *Nuestramérica*.

The metanarrative of Nuestramérica is not new. Without necessarily using the exact wording, the idea of creating solidary ties in the region has long historical roots and can be traced back to Simón Bolívar and his ideal of attaining Spanish American unity. The same notion appears also in the famous *Nuestra América* by the Cuban José Martí in 1891 (see Martí [1891] 2005) or the essays *Temas de nuestra América* by the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui in the 1920s. In *Nuestra América*, Martí engaged in historical analysis and called on the peoples of the region to unite to retain their independence and deter the emerging North American power (“the tiger out”) and rival European powers (Belnap and Fernández 1998). Martí wanted to strengthen transnational Latin American solidarity, opposing *Nuestra América* to the other America, the United States, with which it was potentially in conflict. With great lyricism, he called on the sister nations to know and recognize one another—that is, to begin a process of joint identity formation toward political integration. Nonetheless, Martí maintained some ambiguity about how this pan–(Latin) American nucleus of nations would be integrated (Hatfield 2010).

Similarly, in “Temas de nuestra América,” Mariátegui alluded to the solidarity of destiny of the peoples of the region, making a call to recognize the unity of Indo-Americans who, in his view, were “not only brothers in rhetoric but also in history” (Mariátegui 1986, 33). Recognizing the threat of balkanization of “our America,” as on the eve of the imminent confrontation between Bolivia and Paraguay, in December 1928 Mariátegui called for Latin American intellectuals to mobilize public opinion to prevent “tiny provincial quarrels” from escalating into war. “A war between two Latin American countries—Mariátegui argued—would be a betrayal of the destiny and the mission of the Continent” (Mariátegui 1986, 22).

Since then, for more than a century, the notion of Nuestramérica was understood as a call to encourage anti-imperialist resistance and strengthen a specific Latin American cultural and political path (Mignolo 2009). With the goal of legitimizing regionalist political projects, on multiple occasions the notion was summoned to vindicate various transnational projects, though not necessarily in converging lines, as the variegated ideas of Panamericanism, Latin Americanism, Iberoamericanism, Indoamericanism, or Afro Americanism indicate. Other projects also made use discursively of the notion of “we the (xxx) Americans” to legitimize messages, ranging from the classic populist leaders to the authoritarian rulers of the Cold

War dictatorships and, more recently, the subregional projects of the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR), the Andean Community of Nations (CAN), the Central American Integration System (SICA), and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM).

However, it was only with the advancement of the political project of Chavismo that the massive and systematic use of the concept of Nuestramérica as a legitimization strategy appeared to be foundational. More precisely, its adoption seemed deliberate and officialized when, at its extraordinary summit of Maracay in June 2009, the regional organization then called “Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas” (ALBA, which also means “dawn” in Spanish) changed its official name to the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America: Treaty of Commerce of the People (ALBA-TCP).

The Nuestramerican legitimization strategy resonated regionally. It called for transnational unity and summoned the figures of the heroes of independence for legitimization while resorting discursively to the revolutionary and moral legacy of the historically marginalized ethnic sectors. Particularly, the collective identities of indigenous peoples and Afro-Americans, which had been often ignored by pan-Americanism, Iberoamericanism, and subregional integration projects (except for movements such as APRA or Katarismo in the Andean area), would be integrated by Chavismo into the process of macroregional identity construction (Ellner 2012, 107; Gott 2011, 199–201). A clear example of this combination of distinct historical legacies into a mutually reinforcing narrative can be found in the speech of Chávez expelling the US ambassador from Venezuela on September 11, 2008, following the actions of the United States during a crisis in Bolivia:

The Yankee ambassador in Caracas has 72 hours to leave Venezuela. [We take this decision] in solidarity with Bolivia and with the people of Bolivia and the government of Bolivia! When there is a new government in the United States, we will send an ambassador! A government that respects the peoples of Latin America, [that respects] Simón Bolívar’s America, fuck! Go to hell, shitty yankees, here is a decent People! Here we are, the sons of Bolívar, the sons of Guaicaipuru, the sons of Túpac Amaru! And we are determined to be free!²

The symbolic appeal to figures of indigenous resistance turned recurrent in Chávez’s discourse. It was projected in foundational texts as the Venezuelan Bolivarian Constitution of 1999; in the decision of 2002 to name the celebration of October 12 as the Day of Indigenous Resistance; and in the choice of names for the *misiones bolivarianas* and *círculos bolivarianos* both in Venezuela and beyond (Hawkins and Hansen 2006; Penfold-Becerra 2006). At the beginning of his career, Chávez used to invoke as examples of national heroes the local figures of Simón Bolívar, Simón Rodríguez, and Ezequiel Zamora, but with the passage of time he increased the scope of references to regional figures of divergent identity origins as Túpac Amaru, Túpac Catari, or Augusto César Sandino. He thus mirrored the discourse adopted by Bolivia’s president Evo Morales, Nicaragua’s president Daniel Ortega, and Ecuador’s president Rafael Correa in an apparent diffusion effect. Indeed, the discursive use of indigenous and ethnic elements as part of a transnational identity was emphasized even more in those allied countries because of the strong presence of an indigenous population in their countries. For instance, a few months after assuming the presidency, Morales gave a popular speech in which he proposed the indigenous refoundation within the framework of Nuestramerican regionalism: “The Latin American indigenous movements are moving forward not only to free ourselves but rather to walk along with the other peoples and liberate them ... Whatever they say, solidarity among Our peoples [“Nuestros pueblos”] stands above anything else, and in Latin America, we indigenous peoples and peoples in general are a great family” (Lucas 2006).

The statement by Correa is also illustrative of the combination of identity appeals: “Por estos senderos de la patria grande está caminado nuestro Simón Bolívar, con todas las canciones y los cambios profundos ... por América Latina está flameando el grito de Túpac Catari, acertando que después de la muerte vuelve en millones; de Túpac Amaru, que se levanta y convoca para que los pueblos ancestrales rompan el silencio de siglos y sean parte sustancial de estos procesos libertarios” (MINCI 2013).

Hence, following Venezuelan’s reforms, those countries recognized the “plurinational character” of their states, gave official status to the indigenous languages, and incorporated indigenous concepts such as the Pachamama or Sumak Kawsay (“good living”) in their foundational texts. Chavismo’s adoption of the notion of Nuestramérica enabled to integrate the variegated groups and narratives into an organic whole, without

² VTV, “Hugo Chávez expulsa al embajador estadounidense,” posted by justobazan, April 24, 2010, min. 1:00–2:24, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xS6Moav5M-g>.

generating contradiction, by emphasizing a collective horizon to which the indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants could claim a part.

Moreover, Chavistas argued that the peoples of the Americas should recognize one another as sharing a common past and destiny. This theme received a boost from the strong resonance of transnational ideas and identities in the region. Throughout the process of state formation in Latin America, transnational contacts, cultural traditions, historical memories, and movements of migrants and exiles continued to proliferate (Roniger 2011, 6–14; Preuss 2016, 1–13). Transnationalism remained alive in interactions, social networks, and political practices that were projected into infranational levels and connected with supranational spaces, not always harmoniously.

Based on popular support, Chavismo adapted the preexisting discourse of transnational reconnection for political legitimation. In that regard, public opinion polls conducted in the 2000s showed greater support for Latin Americanism as designed by Chavismo than for Chávez himself (Latinobarómetro 2008), a strong indicator of the persistence of such transnational sense exceeding the nation-state structures of Latin America. Regardless of whether Chávez and the movements allied with him resorted to transnational solidarity as a result of conviction or mainly as a tactic of popular legitimation, the fact is that its mere use had intended and unintended implications that deserve to be studied. To engage such study, we analyze hereafter its legitimizing effects on regional and international arenas.

Legitimizing Independence from the Hold of Extraregional Powers

Chavismo was not the first project of Latin American regionalism that attempted to empower transnational identities and promote joint interests to possibly result in integration. It is common to recall the pioneering Congress of Panamá convened by Simón Bolívar in 1824, a key antecedent. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, already under the hegemony of the United States, there were several multilateral projects. The main one was Pan-Americanism, which began with the First American International Conference held in Washington, DC, from October 1889 to April 1890, in the spirit of the Monroe doctrine (1823). No less important, however, was the US role as mediator in early twentieth-century Central America, with the goal of overcoming the tensions arising from the region's fragmentation into separate, belligerent states. Efforts to reconstruct a confederation of Central American countries ultimately failed, but delegates created the International Central American Office and developed a corpus of international law as part of the US-led policy of Pan-Americanism (Roniger 2011, 87–93). In the Southern Cone, as well, multiple transnational projects and practices initially proliferated, such as the Argentine-Brazilian-Chilean, or ABC, league (Preuss 2011). The multilateral connectivity deepened even more a generation later, still under the aegis of the United States. Faced with the imminent and effective military confrontation with the Axis nations, the United States promoted multilateral military agreements and created the Organization of American States (OAS) in the aftermath of World War II with the Economic Agreement of Bogotá in 1948.

Later, a first wave of Latin American economic integration that would not include the United States as leader began, along with the progressive imposition of protectionist industrialization. Illustrative was the Montevideo Treaty of 1960, which led to the Asociación Latinoamericana de Libre Comercio. In parallel, in the 1950s and 1960s the first wave of subregional processes proceeded, starting with the creation in 1951 of the Organización de Estados Centroamericanos and continuing in 1960 with the establishment of the Mercado Común Centroamericano, the signing of the Asociación de Libre Comercio del Caribe in 1965 that would lead in 1973 to CARICOM, or the signing of the Cartagena Agreement in 1969 that started the Comunidad Andina. One of the high points of this process of multilateral cooperation, and also the beginning of its momentary nadir, was Operation Condor, a multilateral framework of coordination of transnational repression of the radical left carried out by the Southern Cone dictatorships in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Despite lacking either a US or European formal leadership, extraregional powers were behind these diverse enterprises.

Once the process of transition to democracy was under way, subregional integration frameworks were reshaped under the open regionalism that prevailed in 1980s, with the primary vision of opening trade channels (Fawcett and Serrano 2005). That paradigm promoted regional integration as a stepping-stone to globalization, not a stumbling block, unlike the previous processes marked by protectionism. The re-creation of the Asociación Latinoamericana de Libre Comercio (Latin American Free Trade Association, or ALALC) as the Latin American Integration Association (1980–), and the establishment of the MERCOSUR in 1991, the renewed CAN starting in 1987, the G-3 since 1989, and SICA since 1991 all were processes to form common markets, with less emphasis on identity formation. In all these cases, the associated countries adopted a transnational discourse as the basis for the functional operation of harmonization of trade and customs

policies; nonetheless, this narrative did not exclude relationships with extraregional powers. Rather, most of these frameworks started negotiations with both the United States and the European Union in search of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA, or ALCA in Spanish) and the Association Agreement, respectively (Grugel 2004).

Toward the late 1990s the model of open regionalism entered decline, mainly because of the financial and economic crisis, as well as the enormous delays of integration. It is in this scenario that Hugo Chávez reached power in Venezuela, proclaiming the Bolivarian Revolution. In this new stage, Chavismo went back to the theme of Nuestramericana solidarity. Chavismo's frameworks of regionalism were the first to propose both rhetorically and practically a transnational identity that totally disconnects the regional ambitions of Latin American integration from the links with extraregional powers.

The high point of the symbolic impact of Chavismo on transnational politics took place at the Fourth Summit of the Americas in Mar del Plata, on November 4–5, 2005. There, Chávez and his allies achieved diplomatic success in halting the advance of the FTAA agreement. This was accompanied by massive social mobilization and a powerful media campaign that projected posthegemonic regionalism in terms of a colossal confrontation of hemispheric visions. To that end, Chavismo made use of the resonating rhetoric of saving Nuestramérica. The process was presented as a popular struggle against the FTAA (“No al ALCA”), which was imbued with calls for Nuestramericana solidarity, enshrining regional heroes and fighting against the “conspiring enemy of the North” and its “transnational shoe-shiners” (Cueva 2005, 88–89; Fernández-Bolaños 2011). Chávez and his allies promoted the organization of an *anti-cumbre* to the summit of the Americas. The countersummit was coordinated by a transnational network of civil-society organizations, including trade unions, social movements, as well as ethnic, environmental, and human rights organizations (Saguier 2007). Attending a massive march were popular icons such as Diego Armando Maradona, Nobel Prize laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, Evo Morales (then a union leader of indigenous background), leaders of Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, artists like Silvio Rodríguez and Manu Chao, and hundreds of social, labor, and student delegates from the region. At the final event at World Cup Stadium in Mar del Plata, surrounded by tens of thousands of participants and with Argentine president Néstor Kirchner present, Chávez gave an impassioned speech calling for the FTAA to go to hell (“El Alca ... al carajo”) (Patrone 2013).

Meanwhile, at the negotiating table in Mar del Plata, only the United States, Mexico, Panama, and Trinidad and Tobago showed clear willingness to move forward on the path of the FTAA, whereas Venezuela, along with the four MERCOSUR countries, exerted strong opposition. While the attempt to isolate the Venezuelan government failed, the tone imposed by the anti-FTAA coalition became an increasing deterrent in many countries in the region. The final documents suggested the possibility of reaching future agreements on free trade agreements but also indicated that conditions at the time were not suitable. In practice, the lack of clear deadlines for moving ahead signaled the end of the free-trade-agreement project (Fernández-Bolaños 2011). In the popular imaginary, Mar del Plata became a symbol of the spirit of Nuestramericana resistance “against the Empire”; Chavistas stressed that by defeating the FTAA, “the South started walking toward the future” (Cueva 2005, 82). The anniversary of the defeat of the FTAA soon became a day of commemoration and remembrance for social movements associated with Chavismo.

The external reaction to the domino effect that hinted at possible Venezuelan regional hegemony was soon evident, and to some extent this fed back into the Chavista discourse. After the failure reach agreement on the FTAA in 2005, the United States tried to regain a role of protagonist by promoting bilateral free-trade agreements designed to solidify a camp distinct from the Chavista alliance (Boniface 2010). This strategy was called FTAA light, or *alquitas*, in the words of Chávez himself and was finally successful in Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, and Peru. However, in other cases the United States lost ground, for example, Uruguay's rejection of a potential agreement with the United States. Throughout 2006 there was a profound debate in Uruguay about the possible agreement. In 2005, for the first time in modern history, the left-wing coalition known as the Frente Amplio had come to power. Some of its factions were interested in a free-trade agreement that could improve the country's economic prospects, but those who were against this prevailed, arguing that it would betray anti-imperialist positions and impair regional integration (Porzecanski 2010). Finally, the government agreed to sign the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement with the United States, which carried fewer political costs for the ruling Frente Amplio coalition. In any case, the situation made clear that the United States had limited leverage in implementing an effective comprehensive counterstrategy to Nuestramericana solidarity (see Ellner 2012, 111). The fight against the FTAA and the bilateral free-trade agreements produced a joint regional work, as argued at the final declaration of the Sixth Hemispheric Meeting to Fight FTAs and for the Integration of Peoples in Havana, on May 5, 2007, which claimed to bring

together “all the peoples of Nuestramérica” under the banner “For the integration of the Peoples, another America is possible” (*América Latina en Movimiento*, 2007).

Spain was another external actor vying for influence in the region through the strengthening of the alleged Iberoamerican Community of Nations, supported by summits that had taken place since 1991, and a General Secretariat (*Secretaría General Iberoamericana*, or SEGIB), active since 2005. Willing to strengthen an alternative framework of cooperation, SEGIB promoted Iberoamericanism, a close relative of Spanish Americanism (*hispanoamericanismo*) but including Portugal and Brazil as well. This integrative project also managed to clash with Chavismo. Probably the best example of Spain’s attempt to disqualify Chávez’s leadership was the intervention of King Juan Carlos I of Spain during the Seventeenth Iberoamerican Summit of Heads of State in November 2007, when he interrupted the unending interventions of the Venezuelan leader by asking, “Why don’t you shut up?” (“*¿Por qué no te callas?*”) (Corrales 2009, 108–109). The wave of reactions that this clash of temperaments generated, and that Chavismo deliberately exploited to reinforce its own identity discourse, foreshadowed the exclusion of Spain from a reimagined leading role in Latin America, discredited in the eyes of its opponents by memories of the colonialist past.

Legitimizing New Regional and Subregional Frameworks of Integration

Despite the strengthening of his leadership and the first signs of complicity with Kirchner and Brazilian president Luiz Inácio (Lula) da Silva, by 2004 Chávez realized the low probability that the South American countries of the “moderate left” would join the Bolivarian regional project. The Castro-Chavista alliance was far from hegemonic in Latin American politics, and a “cautious” approach to Chávez’s Venezuela existed in the region, mostly led by Lula’s Brazil (Burgess 2007, 1353; Levitsky and Roberts 2013). Drawing on the discourse of Nuestramerican solidarity, the Chavista strategy then shifted to an even more active role within already-existing frameworks of South American integration, appealing to their transformation while also creating new regional and subregional frameworks (Riggirozzi and Tussie 2012).

In April 2006, Chávez announced that Venezuela would leave the CAN, where he faced strong opposition from Colombia and Peru. He also confirmed Venezuela’s withdrawal from the G-3. To counter these moves, Chávez undertook the public launch of his own regional project. The election of Morales in Bolivia, Ortega in Nicaragua, and Rafael Correa in Ecuador in 2006–2007 particularly signaled the shift and joined ALBA, together with several Caribbean islands, including Dominica, Antigua and Barbuda, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Chávez also indicated willingness to join MERCOSUR. By July 2006, Venezuela had already signed the protocol of accession, although the cumbersome ratification process was completed only in 2012 upon the suspension of Paraguay following the overthrow of President Fernando Lugo.

The Venezuelan presence in MERCOSUR strengthened the path adopted before its incorporation concerning the discourse of social and cultural integration in the region, parallel to a search for “productive integration” (Gil and Paikin 2013, 18–23; Tussie 2009). The deepening of the identity-related discourse of Nuestramerican solidarity was evident in a series of moves: the beginning of Somos MERCOSUR, a program promoting the participation of civil society; the first meetings of Social and Productive MERCOSUR; the launch of social summits; and the program MERCOSUR Cultural. Although all these projects attempted to incorporate indigenous and ethnic peoples into the regional agenda, its peak occurred on October 2013 with the creation of the MERCOSUR Indígena under the pro-tempore presidency of Venezuela. Before an audience of indigenous delegations from twelve countries, and within the framework of celebrating the Day of Indigenous Resistance, MERCOSUR representatives declared their commitment to implement a grand plan for the indigenous populations (MERCOSUR-CMC 2014). On that occasion, Venezuela’s foreign minister Elías Jaua greeted the indigenous resistance and their “current victory,” reminding them that the late president, “Chávez the Indian ... vindicated us and taught us to do it as Indians and as afro-descendants of this Latin American and Caribbean land.... With Hugo Chávez we learned to feel deeply proud of being Indians and we began to leave behind the ethnic shame that was imposed on us. [This is how] we all started to reclaim our indigenous origins” (Silva 2013).

As for the creation of new regional frameworks, starting with the Third South American Summit in Cuzco in December 2004, Brazil pushed the idea of creating the Community of South American Nations, and Venezuela tried not to be left behind. Initially launched under the acronym CSN, and then CASA, the idea was finally reborn as the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas, or UNASUR, at the summits of Margarita Island (2007) and Brasília (2008). The project emphasized integration at the subregional level mainly in the areas of infrastructure, finance, and energy, excluding the United States and Canada while seeking to assume a leading role in security, which until then had been the realm of the OAS (Legler 2010, 12–17; Weiffen, Wehner, and Nolte 2013).

The emphasis on identity (Nuestramericana) politics was very present in the discourse and practices of UNASUR, particularly when the pro-tempore presidency fell to governments in the Chavista sphere. The clearest example was the Declaration of Cochabamba of December 2006, part of the second meeting of CSN heads of state, which indicated that the organization “recognizes the multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual character of our people ... the role of indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and contracted labor migrants and the social struggles of the region” (UNASUR 2006).

The foundational chart of UNASUR (Brasília, May 2008) highlighted this encompassing character and, albeit diluting much of the concrete commitment agreed on in Cochabamba (due to Brazil’s diplomatic action), it reaffirmed the symbolic alignment of UNASUR with the Nuestramericana line. For once, dozens of indigenous and Afro-descendent associations not only received funding but also achieved a discursive endorsement of their collective claims and a major push for their recognition, which had not occurred since the 1970s. Chavismo contributed to such empowerment no less than the transnational advocacy networks, as it provided their leaders with new experiences and resources as part of an ongoing process of internationalization of those minorities that had begun in the 1980s and 1990s (see Brysk 2000; Yashar 2007).

Despite the steps taken by Chavismo in the regional sphere, by 2009 it became clear that the strategic goal that Chávez wanted could not be fully achieved within MERCOSUR or UNASUR, which had limited geographical coordinates. Moreover, the organizations were equally dominated by other subregional pivots such as Brazil, Chile, and Colombia. Likewise, neither the OAS nor the Iberoamerican community could provide a way to integration in the way that Chavismo expressed the regional identity, as these were controlled or sponsored by extraregional powers. Finally, ALBA, where membership was minor, appeared stagnant.

Such a constellation of forces led Chávez to try to establish a new organization in which his regional vision could prevail and enjoy greater internal and external legitimacy in addressing common issues. By 2010, Chávez started working toward the creation of the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC), heir to the Group of Rio, among whose objectives was promoting integration and regional development, while also strongly moving into galvanizing transnational social support (Serbin 2012). The participation of allied countries such as Cuba and Nicaragua, as well as the control Chávez gained through PetroCaribe in CARICOM, which provided half the countries’ votes, assured him of greater political influence (Sanders 2007, 1). Since its launch and the second summit in Havana in January 2014, the Chavista-led CELAC strongly highlighted the Nuestramericana discourse, particularly indigenous and Afro-American inclusion (CEPAL 2014). The idea was to implement such commitment, as shown in its action plan and cultural plan for 2015–2020 on the collective and individual rights of indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, and diasporas, a line also promoted in various UN commissions (see CELAC 2015).

In parallel, the regionalist turn was also reflected in the launching of multilateral projects, usually linked to development areas. Examples of such projects that aimed to achieve financial or energy sovereignty in the region were the ALBA Bank and the Bank of the South, the Trans-Caribbean Pipeline, and the Southern Gas Pipeline. In all these projects, Chavismo’s regional soft-hegemony strategy was combined with the use of petrodollars. As the then Venezuelan chancellor Nicolás Maduro argued in 2012, through these regional projects a process of autonomous consolidation of “Nuestramérica” was under way: “Nuestramérica finds the path of Our *Libertadores* consolidating systems such as ALBA, UNASUR and CELAC ... In the meetings of OAS, both in Cochabamba and Cartagena, the existence of two Americas is expressed. Nuestramérica, looking for a path in diversity [that respects diversity, while defining] common economic, cultural and political projects, and the other America, that was hegemonic and dominated the continent for almost 100 years, and begins its decline” (Ministerio del Poder Popular para Relaciones Exteriores 2012).

Legitimizing a Redrafting of International and Regional Networks

The role assigned to the Bolivarian Circles for organizational or electoral purposes and for constructing collective commitments (Gott 2011, 213, 222; Hawkins and Hansen 2006; Roberts 2006, 141–143) was extrapolated to promote grassroots activism across Latin America. Indeed, the notion of people’s power (*poder popular*) was at the center of Chavismo, even more so after Venezuela’s middle class abandoned Chávez and he turned to mass mobilization of popular sectors as his base (Agulló 2009, 108–109). In this regard, the Chavista project found common ground with other movements such as the Mexican Zapatistas, the Bolivian coca growers, the Brazilian landless peasants, and the Argentine *piqueteros*, all based on the key role of protest and a heterodox political steering by charismatic leaders. Also, the exaltation by the

people's leader against the "oligarchy" and a moral national front against foreign conspiracy reproduced and enhanced similar patterns of discourse (Laclau 2006; Zúquete 2008, 91–93).

Chávez blended ideas about an encompassing Nuestramericana solidarity that also enabled regional and international alliances of strange bedfellows. This was part of an amorphous "peripheral" commitment that, in the past, was associated with the idea of non-aligned countries and *tercermundismo*, and more recently, with notions of South-South cooperation and the Global South (Hellinger 2006). Coming together under that rubric are a plethora of antiglobalization movements, anarchist groups, Marxist associations, and movements representing ethnic minorities. What has tended to unite these grassroots networks' agendas was their contestation of key power players in the global system. The various nodes seem united in their call to resist imperialism, colonialism, and (at least rhetorically) capitalism, thus gathering appeal across a wide spectrum of cross-ethnic, religious, and political Southern forces (Capriles 2006, 81–83; Ellner 2012, 104). During a meeting with Ortega, Maduro eloquently explained the symbiotic relationship between the regional and the global position: "Venezuela has a key position in regional geopolitics, in world geopolitics. [It will mark the route of] what will be the process of independence, of the definitive union of Our Brunette America, of Our Mestizo America, of Our Beloved America!" (*El 19 Digital* 2017).

While Venezuela was not part of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) or IBSA (India, Brazil, South Africa), and it certainly applied a more aggressive and confrontational approach, the goal was similar: to achieve an international presence and become a key player in the emerging multipolarity of the international system. A vigorous diplomatic activism, sustained by high revenues from rising oil prices, initially seemed to bear fruit. The constant visits between Chávez and Ahmadinejad and his successors led to more than three hundred agreements between the two countries, covering a spectrum of cooperation in energy, industry, and social and financial sectors (Corrales 2009, 99–100; Ellner 2012, 111). Venezuela also allowed some connectivity between Colombia's FARC and armed groups connected to Iran, including Hezbollah, allegedly including money laundering, passport forgery, and arms and drug trafficking (Rog 2014, 4–5; Walser 2010, 8–15; CNN 2017).

Strategic partnerships with Russia and, to a lesser extent, China were also set to counterbalance the political and economic weight of the United States and the European Union (Gratius and Fürtig 2009, 3–4). In addition to cooperating with Russia in energy areas, in 2008 Venezuela purchased a multibillion-dollar arsenal from that country and even discussed the possibility of installing Russian missiles in its territory (Corrales 2009, 97–98, 104–105; Sanders 2007, 7–9). Venezuela also maintained ties with other regimes openly hostile to the West, such as North Korea, Sudan, Libya, and Syria. In the words of Chávez, these ties were cemented by their interest to defeat the "[American] empire and its lackeys" (Walser 2010, 1). Similarly, Venezuela sought to play an active role in organizations such as the Organization of Petroleum-Exporting Countries (OPEC), the Non-Aligned Movement, and various antiglobalization summits, such as the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth (Muhr 2012, 743). In the words of a Venezuelan analyst who assessed "the legacy of Nuestramérica to the World": "Esta política rupturista de carácter liberador ha sobrepasado los límites de Nuestra América para consolidarse de igual manera entre los pueblos de África y Asia" (García 2013).

Bilateral alliances, as with Cuba, also allowed Chávez to inherit and benefit from a wide network of activists mobilized in support of the Bolivarian Revolution abroad (Azicri 2009, 99–110; Naim 2014). Social movements from regimes associated with Chávez's political project focused on enhancing transcontinental ties through representation at global events like the World Social Forum. Likewise, various groups and organizations throughout the world organized special events and meetings that Chávez and his representatives attended. Similarly, delegations were organized to visit Venezuela, where they attended seminars and filed reports. All this "grassroots networking" helped shape a common discourse. The meetings for the strengthening of such networks and their discursive alignment were constant, as reflected in the declaration of the Third International Meeting for the Integration of Peoples in April 2013 in Olmué, Chile, under the objective of "to know, discuss and develop political parameters of joint action of the peoples of Our America to strengthen the construction of the Great Homeland and the restoration of the Abya Yala, within the framework of the ALBA-TCP" (Quebracho 2013b).

Similar terms were expressed by representatives from twenty-one countries of Nuestramérica, which met as part of an ALBA meeting of social movements in Caracas on April 4–8, 2014. In their statement, they called "por una integración popular de Nuestramérica": "Our motto is 'The unity and integration of Nuestra América is our horizon and our path.' The legacy of Comandante Hugo Chávez Frías reaffirms our task and commitment to advance toward the integration of our peoples."

Glocal Connections and the Use of Petrodollars for Regional Soft Hegemony

Chavismo had previously used petrodollars for political purposes, but never before was such power geared toward energizing the social bases of allies with a belligerent political rhetoric to the point that it was the center of foreign policy. Chavismo transformed the revenues of the oil giant *Petróleos de Venezuela* into a substantial tool of activism to obtain political support, ideological influence, and discursive resonance on a regional scale (Cala and Economides 2012). Chavista petrodollars were essential to Nuestramerican solidarity: each could exist on its own, but they needed each other to develop optimally.

The example of Petrocaribe is clear in this regard. Through it, Venezuela allowed the sale of oil to much of the Caribbean and Central America at reduced prices and better financing. At its peak, around 2008, nearly two hundred thousand barrels of oil per day were delivered, earmarked at an annual subsidy of US\$1.7 billion (Corrales 2009, 99–100; Sanders 2007, 2–3). Bilateral corporations funded through that source developed projects in education, health, and agriculture and became very popular among the poor sectors of the population (Muhr 2012, 773–774). Chavismo tried to advance a similar project with the Southern Cone countries, Petrosur, but, despite its loaded rhetoric, this never entered a phase of substantive implementation.

Chavismo also produced a revolution regarding the development of joint projects in terms of trade, investment, finance, infrastructure, and culture. It is estimated that the amount Venezuela allocated for development projects between 1999 and 2007 was about \$17 billion (Corrales 2009, 102). Cooperation projects varied and did not necessarily have a common thread, except for Cuban professional support, which provided a strong base for the Chávez administration, internally and externally. A clear example was the financing of Operation Miracle by Cuban doctors, who offered free eye surgery for cataracts, glaucoma, and other vision problems; as of 2009, the program had served more than two million people from thirty-three countries. Another program with a wide reputation throughout Latin America was the campaign against child illiteracy “Yes I Can!” which used a Cuban audiovisual teaching method (Azicri 2009, 101; Muhr 2012, 774–775). Other highlights were the installation of two hundred “ALBA house” in rural Peru to provide education by Cuban teachers or the aircraft fleet sent to Haiti during hunger protests in 2008, which provided the population with 364 tons of food.

Focused on strengthening the perception of transnational solidarity, Chavismo was successful in identifying problems that weighed heavily on the collective consciousness of countries, problems for which governments had institutional or financial difficulties in providing solutions. Examples include the 2003 offer of relocating a failing Brazilian plastic factory to Venezuela or the check payments from the Venezuelan embassy in Bolivia to local governors who ran out of state funds. Another example was the purchase of millions of dollars in Argentine treasury bonds when that country was negotiating an agreement with its international creditors, thus enabling it to maneuver in negotiations. Something similar occurred with Ecuadorean bonds and investments in an oil refinery in Nicaragua. It is estimated that, at its peak, the amount allocated as direct state investment to allies was about 8 percent of the Venezuelan budget (Corrales 2009, 102).

The use of petrodollars as part of a project of regional hegemony transcended the mere delivery of favors for support. Because the investments were meant to solidify a shared agenda, they gave substance to the vision of Nuestramerican transnational solidarity. Policy making, speech, and identity converged in a strategy of legitimation. With that background, countries that opposed the Chavista path faced increasing criticism. Chile, which kept its distance from Chavismo, suffered heavy criticism for not allowing Bolivia access to the sea; Peru’s president Alan García was called a “puppy of imperialism” (Corrales 2009, 108–109). Likewise, while supporting rival political groups, Chávez clashed with Colombian president Alvaro Uribe.

Moreover, the funding of means of communication at the service of the Chavista project was central to the purposes of conveying information and mobilizing support, shaping discourse and defaming the opposition throughout Latin America. The direct communication that, in Venezuela, Chávez arranged through his weekly TV program *Aló Presidente* was projected regionally by Telesur. Cofounded by Venezuela, Cuba, Argentina, and Uruguay in 2005, Telesur presented itself as a regional alternative to global satellite channels like CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera, with the goal of “breaking the paradigms of domination” (Dinneen 2012, 45–46; Zúquete 2008, 103). In the words of a cofounder of Telesur, the channel aimed to elude the “permanent conspiracy against Venezuela conducted for 15 years,” enabling a Latin American communications platform “to confront the media war” against Venezuela (MINCI 2014).

Petrodollars were also used to cover the fees of lobbyists who projected a positive image in the United States to counter the negative image projected by the US administration (Clark 2009). In Spain, the newspaper *El*

País even reported that Chavismo had invested more than \$4 million in supporting Podemos, considered a sympathetic political force (Montaner 2014). Such huge drainage of resources had long-term consequences for the workings of the Venezuelan economy.

The Collapse of Nuestramérica?

When Chávez was still alive, symptoms began to appear that the strategy of Chavista legitimization through the political imaginary of transnational solidarity began to suffer setbacks, decelerating so much that a collapse was imminent.

A first symptom appeared in the economic area. It is important to consider the contextual circumstances that allowed Chavismo to promote its discourse of transnational solidarity and carry out its regional policies consistently. Chavismo could generate significant projects of transnational cooperation in the mid-2000s due to the increase in prices for its main export commodity. Despite a drop in the productivity of oil extraction of about 22 percent by 2008, revenues had increased by more than 250 percent (Corrales 2009, 103–107). However, analysts still warned that the foreign policy based on oil revenues would not be efficient in the long term, a fact that became apparent as oil prices fell (Sanders 2007, 7–9; Weyland 2009, 159). The fact that since 2014 Venezuela has had to import oil reflected the difficulties of its cooperation model in the long term (Oppenheimer 2014). Moreover, the arrival of Chávez coincided with the rise to power in the region of several actors who, having resisted neoliberalism through dramatic mass mobilizations, had been demanding a return to the central role of the states as regulators and promoters of income redistribution (see Ellner 2004; Roberts 2014). Hence, once the resources for regionalist cooperation were declining alongside the collapse of the Venezuelan economy, this strengthened the skepticism regarding the economic model adopted, the nature of such transnational solidarity, and the convenience of such alliances.

Another symptom of the identity setback is that the groups whose rights were being represented transnationally by Chavismo became increasingly vocal critics of the disjuncture between rhetoric and practice. As an unintended consequence, the recognition of cultural and political ethnic rights under the call for reconstructing “Our America” forced states to respond to increasing demands for the recognition of territorial rights under the principle of people’s self-determination. Indeed, on the potentiality of such an “identity boomerang,” Laclau (2006, 60) warned of the potential tensions between the “moment” of popular participation and the “moment” of the leader. Cases of such identity-related boomerang have developed in Bolivia since 2011 as a result of strong clashes between police and indigenous movements following massive strikes, in Argentina after marches of indigenous peoples to Plaza de Mayo to bring a petition in favor of territorial recognition, and in Ecuador since stoppages of indigenous confederations in 2009–2010 and 2015. Often, development priorities have continued to clash with demands of territorial and environmental protection. Disenchantment has been growing among social movements in several countries ruled by left-wing governments, which, facing internal opposition, have opted to criminalize protest (Ross and Rein 2014). Moreover, this kind of indigenous activism demanding greater accountability and practical outcomes has also transferred to the regional level, targeting regional organizations that had previously recognized those autonomous rights in their documents (Servindi 2014).

Likewise, while the images, rhetoric, and mythology of Chavismo continued to be potent, new macroregional developments cast shadows on the Chavista regionalist program, whose new or renewed institutions increasingly began to be perceived as weak and irrelevant—more so, after the death of Chávez and Castro, whose charisma has since been lacking. This, despite constant attempts to eternalize the presence of Chávez, bordering in certain cases on the idea of reincarnation, as illustrated by Ortega’s speech during his visit to Venezuela for the fourth anniversary of Chávez’s “immortality”; he claimed that “Chávez lives throughout Nuestramérica” (*Nueva Ya* 2017).

Yet even in the last years of Chávez’s life, along with the new regionalist wave, a certain fatigue was increasingly palpable among citizens and key political actors regarding the multiplication of overlapping organizations and bids for leadership based on a discursive resonance that was limited in its pace of implementation (CEPAL 2014; EFE 2013). The multiple regional alliances and the accusation of alleged problematic “official tourism” by those attending summits (*cumbritis*) generated calls to move from a formal to a more substantive regionalization (Heine 2012; Legler 2010, 26). Even among rulers of the Chavista alliance some voiced concerns, such as Correa, who warned of the possible danger “when people get tired of these summits and see no concrete accomplishments” (Malamud 2014).

In the past, the politics of transnational identity of Chavismo was reinforced by the progressive disenchantment with the United States and its allies Britain and Spain on the part of many of the elites and the intelligentsia, especially after the International Monetary Fund’s role in the 1998–2002 economic crisis

and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. But a decade had passed since that moment, and the attitudes toward the United States improved under Obama's strategy of nonintervention (or, as some even argued, indifference) in Latin America and the difficulty of championing "Afro-American" anti-imperialism. As a result, recent years have witnessed a gradual return to focus on interregional trade agreements. Since April 2011 there was a parallel development of the Pacific Alliance, a block of countries that had free-trade agreements with the United States (Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Mexico). The neoliberal bloc emerged as a conservative counteroffensive that appealed to a return to US presence in the Americas (Naim 2014). Another example were calls to resume negotiations with the European Union, concretized both in the CAN and SICA in 2012 and convened by MERCOSUR to undertake them. Both political paths were strengthened by 2015, when a new policy turn began at the regional level, with electoral results giving power to the center-right in Guatemala, Argentina, and Brazil and major institutional crises developing in Venezuela and Nicaragua (Wajner 2016). Indeed, the role that MERCOSUR and UNASUR have adopted since 2016 criticizing Maduro's repression of social demonstrations and institutional breakdown, along with strong activism under the US-led OAS, reveal that parts of the regional context started to display much less "regional solidarity" toward the Chavista project.

The calls of the Chavista network to demonstrate Nuestramérica's unity given the so-called destabilization attempts was particularly illustrative of the instrumental use of identity for legitimation purposes. In a demonstration of regional support held in Caracas on March 2017, Raúl Castro claimed: "In Venezuela, today we wage a decisive battle for the sovereignty, emancipation, integration and development of Nuestra América" (de Llano 2017). Daniel Ortega even expressed this through a presidential decree: "That in the Bolivarian Venezuela, the Revolutionary, Chavista, Socialist and Antiimperialist Venezuela, fundamental battles have been waged on the path of liberation of the peoples of Nuestramérica and the Caribbean ... That the *compañero* Nicolás Maduro Moros reincarnates and embodies the life ideals and work of all the teachers, guides, heroes and heroes of the Patria Grande [the Great Fatherland]" (PSUV 2015, Decreto 49-2015, in Tercera-Información).

Rallies regarding the situation in Venezuela have been periodically organized by the Chavista networks since 2016 with appeals to Nuestramericana solidarity, such as rallies under the names Por la Paz y la Soberanía Popular de Nuestramérica and Venezuela: Corazón de Nuestramérica. Likewise, advocacy activities were held, such as in the debate "Venezuela and the future of Nuestramérica" in July 2017. Among further grassroots activity in the region, particularly illustrative is a statement of the Communication Forum for the Integration of Nuestramérica, made up of social organizations and communication networks of Latin America and the Caribbean, rejecting the threats made by foreign countries and calling for dialogue through "sovereign settlement mechanisms such as CELAC, ALBA or UNASUR."

Conclusions: Empowered Transnational Identities and Tensions

Our analysis draws attention to the key role of transnational motifs in Latin America as a source of legitimation strategies at the regional, interregional, international, and glocal spheres. Focusing on the case of Chavismo, we followed a series of dramatic changes in the reorganization of existing integration frameworks and the emergence of new regional organizations, which adopted the vision of Nuestramericana solidarity. Parallel to intergovernmental cooperation, the remodeled frameworks and the new organizations reflected the pull of discourses of transnational solidarity that pervaded wide sectors of the populations.

Rhetorically, in Venezuela, Chavismo constantly appealed to the reenactment of a visionary past, evident in the abundant references made by Chávez to the independence movement and the figure of Simón Bolívar; yet when talking to regional and global audiences, what was more strongly emphasized was the relevance of reshaping "the American nation," as Martí called for. Assuming a revisionist attitude toward the neoliberal policies of the 1990s, and with a strong discursive emphasis on transnational unity, Chávez also put the proceeds from the sale of oil to the service of regional objectives. His strategy was likely the first major demonstration of a Latin American country that not only summoned others to implement a vision of regional integration but also was willing to assume the costs involved, unlike Brazil, Argentina, or Mexico (see Malamud 2011). The perception that Venezuela was willing to give up resources even more directly and flexibly than those offered by the United States or Europe was a powerful incentive to join, or at least tolerate, the Chavista regional advance.

Chavismo appealed from the beginning to sectors of civil society throughout Latin America, which explains why it managed not only to build alliances with sympathetic governments in the region but also to engage opposition groups, local elites, and social groups that collaborated in electoral campaigns and social mobilization. Once forces sympathetic to its political project reached power, Chavismo intended to

establish intergovernmental cooperation at a pace unprecedented in Latin American history. This was to be accomplished with the declaration of megaprojects and millions of petrodollars in subsidized resources. Chávez used a Bolivarian “checkbook shock” to become a focus of soft hegemony by appealing to strategic goals of development throughout the region.

However, Chavismo’s regionalist political project never succeeded to fulfill complete regional hegemony, and symptoms of the decline of its discursive narrative and activist solidarity based on the Nuestramericana identity began to strengthen. This indicates that this strategy of identity legitimation lost much of its transnational appeal both in Venezuela and other countries such as Nicaragua, where the authoritarian turn of those in power has led to cycles of popular protest, contestation, repression and international condemnation.

In any case, the struggle over claims to represent the region is still under way. To attribute all the influence of Chavismo at the regional level to its cultural-ideological weight would be insufficient, but to dismiss it would be futile. To understand how Chavismo changed the terms of reference of millions of people in the Americas, one must recognize the conjunction between the material assistance used to advance a political agenda and the rhetorical reliance on a preexisting but redesigned Nuestramericana transnational solidarity. It was the combination of both dimensions that was key to the popular appeal of Chavismo and its consequent political legitimation in the regional arena. This layer of legitimacy also provided the basis for Chávez’s global realignment and served the foreign policy of defying the hegemony of the United States and its allies. Two centuries after political independence, transnational themes, grievances, and expectations have continued to reverberate in the minds of people and still play a key role in Latin American politics and international relations. The impact of the fabled conspiracy story of URSAL on the recent Brazilian presidential debates and campaign is further proof of the lasting presence of transnationalism in the imaginary of our region (Senkman and Roniger 2019).

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