

Venezuela and Its World Role

A Conversation with President Carlos Andrés Pérez

Gregory F. Treverton

In March the Venezuelan government of President Carlos Andrés Pérez celebrated its second anniversary. I was in Caracas that month, posing questions about Venezuela's role in hemispheric and world affairs to a variety of Venezuelans—government officials, opposition politicians, journalists, and people from the private sector. At the end of my stay I spoke with President Pérez—often referred to in the Venezuelan press by his initials, CAP—and asked similar questions of him. I have grouped my questions and his responses around several major themes.

Economic Relations Between "North" and "South"

Only in the last few years has Venezuela been a significant force in international affairs. Its new prominence is symbolized by the part it is playing in two efforts to alter the pattern of economic relations between the industrial nations of the "North" and the poorer nations of the "South"—the "Third World" by popular label. One endeavor is regional, the other global.

In 1975 Venezuela and Mexico were the prime movers in the creation of the Latin American Economic System (SELA by its Spanish acronym). The twenty-five-member organization is, by design, *Latin American*, not *inter-American*: Cuba is a member, while the United States is not. It seeks to promote economic cooperation in the region through concrete projects, negotiated by interested members. That represents a break with previous Latin American emphases on formal negotiations aimed at mutual tariff reduction or on agreed rules to govern economic intercourse.

Venezuelan statesman Manuel Pérez Guerrero is the Third World's spokesman at the North-South economic discussions in Paris. His selection underscores Venezuela's recent importance in Third World councils and its determination to create a new international economic order. I asked the President about SELA and the Paris discussions, and their importance to Venezuela:

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CAP: ...the fortunes of developing countries, today more than ever, are bound up with international politics. It is for this reason that I give so much importance to Venezuela's foreign policy. Our luck is not determined by the little or much we can do internally; rather, it depends on the position we can attain in forums wherein the crucial questions are debated by the world's great powers. Today we find ourselves in an exceptionally favorable situation because a dialogue has begun between the developing and the developed countries.

The United States has been quite reluctant to enter this type of dialogue. It has always preferred bilateral dealings. The visit of Secretary of State Kissinger [to Latin America in February, 1976] was important because for the first time he expressed his support, openly and categorically, for a Latin American initiative of great portent: the Latin American Economic System. This was a result of my discussions with him....I considered this a very positive and affirmative development, one which implied a shift in the orientation of the United States.

But even more important is the great shift in United States policy produced by the acceptance of what we call today "the North-South dialogue," and which the United States was very wary of in the beginning.

The United States and the Third World

While the United States frequently expresses sympathy for Latin American or Third World positions on economic questions, it is criticized for seldom being ready to follow kind words with concrete actions. That criticism was applied to Secretary Kissinger's February trip to Latin America. I asked President Pérez about it.

CAP: We have to recognize that at present the United States is in the middle of its electoral process. That makes it difficult to give a definitive judgment about the sincerity of what Secretary Kissinger affirmed. But what is evident is that the United States has accepted the dialogue in Paris, and that it is participating in that dialogue with interest, demonstrating that it believes there is no other approach. I use the words "no other



approach'' because it is very important to begin any commentary on the world politics of our time with the observation that the bipolar world has ended. It may exist in the military sense, but today weapons cannot be used as once they could. In all other senses, every nation has its own voice and its own interests, and all of them at least aspire to the right to be heard by the rest of the world. This is a reality that is completely different from the situation that existed as recently as ten years ago. So that...I believe that, for the moment, the attitude of the United States is sincere. Once the elections are over, surely the position of the United States will have to be clarified further. If this does not occur, needless confrontations will arise and damage the reputation of the United States. Eventually, very unfortunate situations might arise, because it is evident that even Europe would not then support the United States.

I asked the President if he saw the possibility of conflict between Venezuela's role as champion of Third World positions and its close relations with the United States, the preeminent consumer of Venezuelan oil.

CAP: Our position is perfectly clear and leaves no room for doubts. We are not suggesting confrontations with the United States or with other industrial nations; on the contrary, we realize how closely our fortunes are tied to the progress of the great nations that, until now, have managed the global economy. Ours is a struggle to end discrimination and to attain a fair position within what we call the economic "duties and rights" of nations as approved in the United Nations agreement. It is worth emphasizing one fact of extreme importance in our world: Until the present time the preoccupation always has been *political* rights. The United Nations issued its declaration of human rights, which considers in a masterful way all of what might be called the "political" rights of states and of the citizens of each state. But the idea that there are also *economic* rights and responsibilities of states never was foreseen or accepted. However, now the United Nations has proclaimed such rights and duties.

And that declaration specifically supports the position being taken by the nations of the Third World. We are demanding that our rights be recognized, so that we may truly be incorporated in the science and technology of our time and in a pattern of relations governed by those rights and by a genuine spirit of cooperation;...at no time have we felt ourselves to be assuming an attitude which might signify any sort of hostility toward any nation. I think that it is in the interest of Venezuela and of the other nations of Latin America to maintain the best possible relations with the United States, a country which today, and always, will have much to do with our possibilities of developing....

The Circumstances of Venezuela's Leadership

The bases of Venezuela's recent prominence in international affairs are easy to find. Oil riches are the most obvious, but there are others: Venezuela's political stability, the legitimacy Venezuelans feel accrues to their nation as one of very few functioning democracies in Latin America, the leadership vacuum in the region, and the President's own personal force. Yet its prominence is unusual for a country of but eleven million inhabitants, and it is slightly discomforting. As one senior Cabinet minister expressed it: "When I go to an international meeting, I don't like to sit at the head of the table. I would prefer to share leadership." Other Venezuelans with whom I spoke described Venezuela's current leadership as "circumstantial"—hence, perhaps, transitory. I asked the President if he thought so.

CAP: ...throughout its history Venezuela has been universalist in orientation. *Before* petroleum made us relatively rich, when we were merely a captaincy general in the Spanish colonies, Venezuela was a leader in the fight for the liberty of Latin America. A Venezuelan of that time, Francisco de Miranda, fought in the French Revolution...and was in Philadelphia for the Declaration of Independence. Throughout our history we have been interested in Latin American integration—in 1826 Bolívar convened the congress of Panama. This has been a constant in our national life.

Now that petroleum and our participation in OPEC have increased our possibilities, we have taken advantage of that situation. We do not aspire to a unilateral leadership; rather, we seek to be *one* of the spokesmen for Latin America and for the Third World. Thus, there is nothing *circumstantial* about the current position of Venezuela. It is not a position of isolation but is part of a leadership we are seeking for Latin America as a region. It is part of a solidarity, part of a shared presence in the struggle of the nations of the Third World. We have a much different conception than the older nations of Europe or the great powers; we believe in neither unilateral leadership nor the politics of blocs. Instead, we seek to share ideas and objectives with other nations of the region and, more generally, with other nations like ourselves, who are battling for a new pattern of economic relations, for a new international economic order.

Oil as "Weapon" or "Instrument"

Venezuelan officials consistently have promised not to use oil as a weapon for political purposes. Their nation did not participate in the 1973 oil embargo and even increased its exports to the United States during that period. At the same time, Venezuelans, including the President, have frequently expressed their determination to use oil as an "instrument" in restructuring the international economic order. President Pérez spoke to the distinction between "weapon" and "instrument."

CAP: I believe that what seated the developed and developing countries at that conference table in Paris was petroleum. That is a demonstration that oil is an instrument of negotiation and not of confrontation. Venezuela has no interest in further increases in the price of petroleum; still less has it an interest in a continuation of global inflation, because that hurts our nation as well. In this inflation, while our petroleum goes up in value, so also does the cost of the manufactured and capital goods we must import. What we want are relations in which there will be an equilibrium between the value of our nations' primary products—petroleum, iron, coffee, sugar, and the like—and what we must pay for capital goods and technology....

Petroleum is the vanguard of the developing countries' struggle to create new economic relations—what is today called "the new international economic order."

Brazil

While in Brazil during his February trip, Secretary Kissinger committed the United States to yearly formal consultation with the Brazilian Government at the foreign minister level. It was the first such agreement concluded with a Latin American nation. To many observers in the Hemisphere the agreement seemed yet another sign that the United States had admitted Brazil to the club of world powers and had bestowed upon it the mantle of regional domination that formerly belonged to the United States. I asked the President his reaction to the agreement.

CAP: I expressed surprise over the repercussions the agreement has had. I discussed the subject with the Secretary of State and made clear to him that Venezuela would never feel obliged to support a position taken by the United States if Venezuela has not been consulted or informed in advance of the decision. But it has never seemed necessary to me to sign an agreement of that sort, because I believe the right to be consulted is inherent in national sovereignty. Thus, what the United States and Brazil have expressed publicly should not surprise us; still less should it make us think that our sister republic is receiving a privilege. Apart from that, when it is said that Brazil is a great nation, *that* is evident, and we cannot deny it. What cannot be said is that Brazil stands apart, or can stand apart, from the global interests of Latin America.

Is Brazil now acting as a "proxy" for (or even a "subimperialist" of) the United States in Latin America, at least with regard to issues of internal and external security? The charge has been frequently made and just as frequently denied by the Brazilian government. I asked the President about that in the context of the Brazilian-American agreement. Might that agreement signify, at some level, a U.S. interest in exercising direct influence over Brazilian foreign policy or, at a minimum, encouraging Brazilian aspirations to independent greatness as a means of frustrating Latin American integration? He responded first to the suggestion that there might be a kind of fascination with Brazil in the United States.

CAP: It is very difficult to penetrate the prejudices which may be important in the international policy of a great power. But I would say...that the United States cannot have pretensions to controlling or directing the foreign policy of Brazil along certain lines....On the contrary, for us to think that is possible is to fall into the trap of Latin American disunity, for it could provoke fears and suspicions of Brazil in Latin America. For this reason I have thought that if that were the United States intention—and I don't believe it was—and if the Latin American countries react to it, then we are falling into the trap. Our interest is to affirm our desire for good relations with Brazil within the context of efforts toward Latin American integration.

Cuban Policy After Angola

Venezuela was the target of a Cuba-sponsored guerrilla insurgency in the 1960's, yet a decade later it was at the forefront of the group of Latin American countries pressing for the abolition of mandatory Organization of American States (OAS) sanctions against Cuba. By the 1970's those countries had concluded that, rhetoric notwithstanding, Cuba had no intention of providing significant assistance to internal dissidents in Latin America. I asked the President if he worried that the Angola intervention might portend a return to more active Cuban support for armed revolutionaries, even in Latin America.

CAP: In speaking about this subject, I don't want to cite specific cases because that might lead to consequences different from those I intend. But I will say that whatever intervention—by small countries, by medium ones, or by great powers—in the internal affairs of another country constitutes, today, a grave threat to peace. We are as concerned about the Cuban intervention in Angola as about the South African intervention in Angola as about the recruitment of Cubans in Miami to go there. Speaking of the two blocs, both were so involved in Angola that neither can complain about the actions of the other. Both acted in the same way. That is what the developing countries protest. That is why I have spoken in the name of Venezuela to demand once again a strict interpretation of the principle of nonintervention.

Panama and the Canal

In 1974 the United States and Panama signed an agreement in principle committing the United States eventually to return the Canal to Panamanian control. Negotiation of a new treaty began but was suspended with the beginning of the American Presidential campaign. Now former California Governor and Presidential aspirant Ronald Reagan has seized on the issue, fueling hardline sympathies in the United States; while the Latin American countries, Venezuela among them, remain committed to the Panamanian position. I asked President Pérez for his assessment.

CAP: I said very clearly on my first day in office, in

my inaugural speech, that the Panama question is the most important issue in our region today. Not to solve it would threaten a most dangerous confrontation between the United States and Latin America. Speaking frankly, the issue in Panama is not that the United States occupies a military base by virtue of an agreement between two sovereign nations. Rather [the Canal Zone] is a colonial enclave that cuts Panama in two. Let me give you an example: What would the people of the United States think if the Mississippi River and its banks belonged to another power? Half measures will not suffice. Panama must regain complete sovereignty over the Canal Zone. Then, of course, it would be possible for Panama, as a sovereign nation, to negotiate an agreement with the United States over the security of the Canal and other installations there.

I suggested how difficult the Panama issue is for the United States. It is often misunderstood. And it excites nationalist passions in North as well as Latin America; for the United States those passions—in Congress, among the “Panama lobby,” and among the public at large—are laced with nostalgia for simpler, happier days in American diplomacy. The President responded.

CAP: That is true. But I believe the United States government is coming to understand that a nation...that is celebrating its two hundredth birthday this year, that was the first country to fight against colonialism, cannot now maintain the colonial status [of the Canal Zone].