

Sharing the Same Demons: The Venezuelan-Iranian Alliance and Their Anti-U.S. Ideology

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Abstract. The Venezuela—Iran alliance had the power to stir up controversy and generate worry within the U.S. Despite differences in type of government, economic system, religion, and culture, both countries established a successful strategic coalition. How can we account for the formation of this strong partnership that provoked adoration and revulsion in equal measure? How did Chavez and Ahmadinejad benefit from their strategic cooperation? In addressing those two questions, my research examines the ideological and the economic factors that brought both countries together. It posits that the relationship between Venezuela and Iran was the manifestation of the joint efforts toward a common enemy, the “American empire.” My research focuses on the economic solidarity and political discourses as sources to promote their common anti-U.S. sentiment, sustain their popularity, and prevail in power. It is important to explain how despite domestic and foreign opposition against Chavez and Ahmadinejad, both leaders prevailed as heads of state throughout all these years. As such, by evaluating their past activities and opaque maneuvers, it is possible to understand how they were able to bypass international sanctions, consolidate their power, suppress political opponents, and forge regional and foreign partnerships.

Introduction

“The Devil is in the house... the devil came here yesterday and it smells of sulfur still today . . . As the spokesman of imperialism, he came to share his nostrums to try to preserve the current pattern of domination, exploitation, and pillage of the peoples of the world. An Alfred Hitchcock movie could use it as a scenario. I would even propose a title: *The Devil’s Recipe*” (UN General Assembly 61st Session 2006). Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez tore into his U.S. counterpart, likening George W. Bush to the devil. “The American empire,” according to Chávez, pursues the consolidation of its system of domination and world dictatorship.

Defiant rhetoric against imperialism characterizes not only leftist governments in Latin America, but also in the Middle East (Dorraj and Dodson 2009). Iran’s former leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad points to the U.S. accountability for Iranian afflictions by evoking past rhetoric such as Ayatollah Khomeini’s speech after becoming the supreme leader of Iran in 1979. Khomeini accused the U.S. of seeking global hegemony and control over Iran while affirming, “America is the great Satan, the wounded snake” (quoted in Buck 2009: 136). Ahmadinejad embraces

Khomeini’s dualistic worldview, dividing the world into oppressors and the oppressed.

No image could be more evocative than the characterization of the U.S. as the great Satan or the devil in countries such as Venezuela and Iran, where governments exalted the anti-imperialism sentiment (O’Connor 2002; Gratus and Furtig 2009; Goforth 2012). It did not take long before Chávez and Ahmadinejad started to cooperate with each other as they found something in common. Their shared ideology consisted of the rejection of economic dependency on the U.S. and opposition to its interference in domestic affairs (Higgins 2006; Sweig 2006).

Besides oil, Venezuela and Iran have little in common. Venezuela is a federal republic with a secular government that pushes toward socialism. Ninety-six percent of the population follows the Roman Catholic faith, and women play a key role in the national government (Haggerty 1990; Keramati 2006). On the other hand, Iran is a theocratic republic based on Sharia law. The religious supreme leader and the country’s president share the executive branch. Ninety-eight percent of the population follows the Muslim faith, which values the traditional submissive role of women in society. Iran has not pushed socialism to the same extent as Venezuela (Chapin 1987; Haggerty 1990; Keramati 2006). What drives these two

nations to form an alliance?

The idea that two countries with more differences than similarities came together to create a coalition offers a puzzle. Therefore, to understand the basis of the Venezuela-Iran alliance, I present a history of the relationship since the election of Chávez in 1999. I next detail the leaders' diplomatic visits to Caracas and Tehran by explaining the circumstances of those events and exposing their defiant rhetoric against the U.S. I then evaluate the economic links between the two countries, utilizing timely and comparable statistics on exports and imports. By combining this data, I explain how their ideological alliance led to economic cooperation.

Through the analysis of the public diplomacy, it is possible to determine the tendency of Venezuela and Iran to reunite and embark in joined ventures every time both countries' interests conflicted with the American ones. To this end, the study of the economic activities offers insight into the development of cooperation between both leaders throughout the years. Likewise, the assessment of the leaders' presidential visits and public events reveals the sense of solidarity between Chávez and Ahmadinejad while their negative and bellicose discourse exposes the tension levels between the countries and the U.S.

Besides examining how both leaders found it advantageous to foster a strategic alliance, which later led to efforts in banking, energy, commerce, and military cooperation (Karami 2007; Morgenthau 2009; Johnson 2012; Luxner 2013), it is also important to explain how despite domestic and foreign opposition against Chávez and Ahmadinejad, both leaders prevailed as heads of state throughout all these years. As such, by evaluating their past activities and opaque maneuvers, it is possible to understand how they were able to bypass international sanctions, consolidate their power, suppress political opponents, and forge regional and foreign partnerships.

Literature Review

Two schools of thought explain the causes for the establishment of the coalition. One theory posits that

the increase of international sanctions on Iran forced the country to associate with Venezuela (Carswell 1981; Chubin and Litwak 2003; Torbat 2005; Morady 2009). An alternative theory postulates that a shared foreign policy based on anti-imperialist sentiment brought both countries together (O'Connor 2002; Gratius and Furtig 2009; Goforth 2012). The following literature review illustrates and supports these two theories.

Iran Turned to Venezuela to Bypass International Sanctions

Sanctions against Iran arose after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini became the supreme leader of the country in 1979 (Abrahamian 2008). Khomeini's Islamic Revolution not only put an end to the Shah's pro-U.S. regime, but also moved the Iranian domestic and foreign policy to an extreme anti-U.S. orientation. As such, throughout time, sanctions by the international community and the U.S. increased—especially after Iran reduced its cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 2006, creating global concern over the country's nuclear program (IAEA 2005; Yazdani and Hussain 2006; CIA 2012; U.S. Department of the Treasury 2012).

The increase of sanctions hurt Iran as they reduced the access to products needed for the oil and energy sector, and prompted businesses as well as oil companies to withdraw from the country's market (Torbat 2005). All of those detrimental effects undermine the development and progress of the country because the sanctions target the Iranian energy sector, which provides about 80% of government revenues (Carswell 1981). The effects also reach citizens by increasing the cost of goods and decreasing services (Morady 2009). Because of its damaged government and economy, Iran had to turn to Venezuela to bypass the growing list of sanctions and to overcome diplomatic isolation (Chubin and Litwak 2003).

Ideology Based Alliance

A second school of thought argues that a foreign policy based on the anti-imperialism sentiment drove Venezuela and Iran to forge a cooperative alliance (Gratius and Furtig 2009; Goforth 2012). Chávez and Ahmadinejad perceived the U.S. as a threat to their countries' sovereignty. Therefore, they worked on limiting economic dependency on the U.S. and spreading their ideology, which rejected the culture, values, policies, and interna-

¹ See table 1

² See table 1

tional role of the U.S. (O'Connor 2002). Antagonism toward the “American empire” has deep roots in the history of countries such as Venezuela and Iran.

The Islamic Revolution in 1979 established a theocratic rule in Iran, with Khomeini as a supreme leader. He denounced the American ambitions of global supremacy and control over Iran (Abrahamian 2008). Khomeini’s attitude against the U.S. strengthened during the climax of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) when the U.S. supported Iraq by providing intelligence and military aid (Slavin 2007). American actions during the war and the growing sanctions on

Iran increased resentment among the citizens who regarded the U.S. as accountable for the society’s afflictions.

Ahmadinejad evoked past resentments and accused the U.S. of using the alleged Iranian attempts to build nuclear weapons as an excuse to isolate Iran at the regional and international levels (Yazdani and Hussain 2006). Despite ongoing sanctions that resulted in economic distress, Ahmadinejad remained defiant and continued to assert the Iranian sovereignty right to acquire nuclear technology for peaceful uses (Goforth 2012; Erlanger 2013). Because of its concerns with national security, Iran refused

Table 1 - Diplomatic Relations between Venezuela and Iran and UNSC Resolutions

Source	Date	Number of Times Leaders Meet	Circumstances	Security Council Resolutions ¹
HACER Hispanic America Center for Economic Research	2012	1	Ahmadinejad visited Venezuela. Chávez accused the U.S. and its allies of demonizing Iran and using false claims about the nuclear issue.	2049
Aljazeera	2010	3	Chávez’s visit to Tehran was part of an international tour that aimed at strengthening Venezuela’s economic ties with Easter Europe and the Middle East.	1984 (2011) 1929
New York Times	2009	4	Ahmadinejad was in Latin America to boost ties with supporters of Iran’s nuclear program. Chávez traveled to Tehran just after Ahmadinejad won a second term in office.	
Washington Post	2007	4	The Venezuelan leader made an official visit to Tehran after an OPEC’s summit in Saudi Arabia. On a trip to strengthen ties with leftist in Latin America, Ahmadinejad stopped in Caracas. In Tehran, Chávez launched the construction of a joint petrochemical plant with Ahmadinejad.	1803 (2008) 1747
Foreign Policy in Focus	2006	3	Ahmadinejad made his first trip to Caracas. During his two-day visit, Chávez and Ahmadinejad signed over 20 agreements and inaugurated the Iranian petroleum drilling operation of Petropars. Chávez arrived in Tehran after his Iranian counterpart won the presidency of his country.	1737 1696
LADDO Latin America Democracy Defense Organization	2005-2001	8	Before Ahmadinejad took office in 2005, Chávez traveled to Tehran five times. Mohammad Khatami made three official visits to Caracas.	

¹ The U.S. imposed sanctions over Venezuela in 2011.

The U.S. issued the following sanctions against Iran for proliferation activities and terrorism support: Executive Order (EO) 12170 (1979), EO 12613 (1987), EO 12957 (1995), EO 12959 (1995), EO 13059 (1997), EO 13382 (2005), EO 13553 (2010), EO 13574, 13590 (2011). The U.S. Congress passed the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act of 1996 and the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010 (CIA 2012; U.S. Department of Treasury 2012).

1

³Juan Vincente Gomez (1922-1929 and 1931-1935) and Perez Jimenez (1952-1958)

to abandon its nuclear program, which is a point of national pride and a deterrent against American and Israeli potential attacks (Newman 2011). Ahmadinejad emerged as a survivor of the Imperialist powers and showed solidarity with Chávez and his struggle to limit American interference in his country.

In Venezuela, for decades, the U.S. strongly supported brutal dictators who facilitated the American oil ambitions in the country (Keramati 2006). Friction between the U.S. and Venezuela arose when Chávez came into power in 1999. Actions such as the visit of Chávez to Iraq in 2000 created strong opposition from the U.S. (Sharma, Tracy, and Kumar 2004; Goliger 2006). Other events that drew international attention included the Venezuelan obstruction to the FTAA (Dye 2011), revocation of the 50-year old bilateral military collaboration agreement with the U.S., and lack of cooperation on the Drug War (Goliger 2006). Such policies created alarm within the U.S., which led to the American support for the 2002-failed coup against the Venezuelan leader (Goliger 2006). Chávez perceived the U.S. as an enemy that, by trying to advance its interests, undermined the development of Venezuela and other nations. As such, he blamed American foreign policy and capitalism for much of Latin America's social ills.

Research Question

Whether their shared ideology or the increase of sanctions on Iran resulted in Chávez's and Ahmadinejad's solidarity divides scholars in trying to explain the establishment of this partnership (Carswell 1981; O'Connor 2002; Chubin and Litwak 2003; Torbat 2005; Gratius and Furtig 2009; Morady 2009; Goforth 2012). How can we account for the formation of this strong alliance that provoked adoration and revulsion in equal measure? How did Chávez and Ahmadinejad benefit from their strategic cooperation? In addressing those two questions, my research examines the reasons that drove Venezuela and Iran together, as well as the activities that the coalition engaged in to advance their interests. By combining data on ideological and economic factors, my work concludes that the relationship between Chávez and Ahmadinejad was related to their anti-U.S. ideology but not to

economic benefits (O'Connor 2002; Gratius and Furtig 2009; Goforth 2012). Their common enemy thus drove the relationship to forge cooperation, strengthen their ties, and spread their beliefs (Sharma, Tracy, and Kumar 2004; Morgenthau 2009).

Data, Findings, and Analysis

Despite Venezuela's extensive oil exports to the U.S., Chávez stood as a vocal critic of the American government (Romero 2011; Martinez and Yuan 2012). The Venezuelan president proved to be controversial not only by his stance, but also by his verbal attacks against the U.S. (Farah 2009). Similar to Chávez, Ahmadinejad became a divisive figure in world affairs by his lack of cooperation with the IAEA over the Iranian nuclear program (Yazdani and Hussain 2006) and by his hostility toward the U.S. (Worth 2009). Sharing common worldviews resulted in signs of evolving partnership between both countries (Morgenthau 2009).

With the purpose to strengthen their alliance and further their ideology, both heads of state engaged in numerous diplomatic visits to Caracas and Tehran (Alavi 2007). Chávez and Ahmadinejad soon realized that their frequent diplomatic trips not only created concern in the U.S., but also attracted large international attention (Warren 2006), which they used to wage an oral war against the American government.

Diplomatic Relations

Chávez and Ahmadinejad's strategic visits to countries around the world aimed at gathering solidarity to further their interest in confronting to what they considered U.S. global hegemony (Varner 2006). To illustrate, in 2006, Chávez engaged in a world tour throughout countries of Latin American, Europe, and Asia to generate support for his plan to seek a UN Security Council (UNSC) seat (Warren 2006; Romero 2006). Although Venezuela received the backing from most of the states Chávez visited, it decided to withdraw from the contention due to 47 rounds of deadlocked voting (Goforth 2012). His close race candidacy proved Chávez's ability to create worry in the U.S., which promptly lobbied to halt the Venezuelan victory (Romero 2006).

A turning point against Venezuela's effort to win a UNSC seat came during a speech by Chávez earlier that

year at the UN General Assembly when he ridiculed President Bush as the devil (Romero 2006). Chávez's comments affected his candidacy, yet they played well with people in Venezuela and Iran, where disapprov-

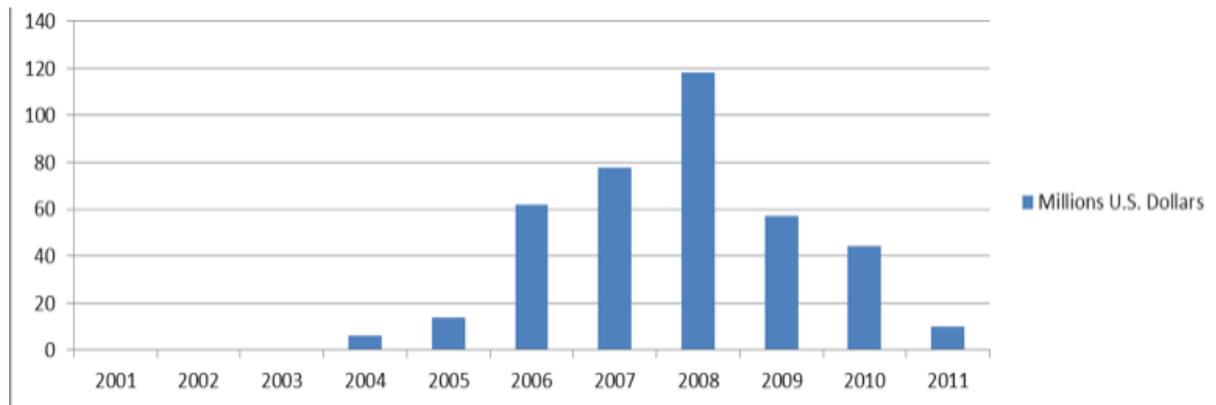
Chávez and Ahmadinejad acknowledged that confronting U.S. hegemony and overcoming dependency required a collective strategy (Ellner 2008; Goforth 2012). The establishment of the Venezuelan-Iranian bloc allowed the

Table 2 - Total Venezuelan Exports and Imports to/from Iran (2001-2011)
Total of all Products
Unit: millions of U.S. Dollars

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Imports	0.572	0.318	0.28	4	14	52	38	68	57	43	9
Exports	0.002	0.11	0.048	2	0	10	40	50	0	1	1
	0.574	0.428	0.328	6	14	62	78	118	57	44	10

Source: ITC, 2012 Annual Trade Report and IMF, Direction of Trade Statistics (DOTS) 2001-2011.

Figure 1 - Total Venezuelan Exports and Imports to/from Iran (2001-2011)



Source: ITC, 2012 Annual Trade Report and IMF, DOTS 2001-2011.

al against the Bush administration and its invasion of Iraq reinforced the anti-imperialist sentiment (Golinger 2005). Over time, Chávez's stance increased his popularity, which he used to advance his diplomatic relations with Ahmadinejad through frequent trips to the Islamic Republic.

By the time Chávez arrived in Tehran in 2006, he enjoyed the effusive welcome of the crowd while receiving Ahmadinejad's greetings: "Chávez is my brother and a friend of the Iranian nation, seeking freedom around the world. He is a worker of God and a servant of the people" (quoted in El Universal 2006; Warren 2006). Strategic visits to Tehran and Caracas became key factors for the formation of the Venezuela-Iran alliance. Chávez perceived both countries as under attack from "U.S. imperialism" (Holland 2006). Promoting the creation of a bloc to counter American threats became the primary goal of their meetings.

leaders to push strongly for their common interests (Goforth 2012). The proposal to have a basket of currencies rather than just the dollar for the pricing of OPEC oil provides an example of their joint efforts. Although their proposal failed to pass, both heads of state refused to take the OPEC summit's outcomes as a failure, but as an opportunity to emphasize that "with the fall of the dollar, the deviant U.S. imperialism will fall, too" (quoted in Lawler 2007; Hulbert 2009).

The concern of the American government and public grew as both leaders' contentious discourses kept increasing in provocations (Karimi 2007; Hakinmzadeh 2009). In 2007, Ahmadinejad's address to the UN General Assembly caused public uproar when he denounced Israel for displacing Palestinians from their land and the U.S. for the occupation of Iraq under false excuses (UN General Assembly 62nd Session 2007). Public repudiation arose against Ahmadinejad's statements, yet they

received approval from people in Venezuela, where discontent against the U.S.-backed coup that failed to remove Chávez (from power in 2002) still prevailed in the country (Hakinmzadeh 2009). Ahmadinejad, according to Chávez's statements, represented "one of the greatest anti-imperialist fighters and one of the great fighters for true peace" (quoted in Karimi 2007; Hakinmzadeh 2009).

Both presidents proved successful in supporting each other, especially in times of crisis (Gerami and Squassoni 2008; Romero 2009). To illustrate, over time, sanctions on Iran unbalanced the country's economy, so by 2009, Ahmadinejad's popularity decreased considerably. Consequently, the reelection of the leader produced mass mobilization from his rival's supporters as they claimed irregularities at the polls. The Iranian government rapidly crushed the demonstrators while accusing the West to sponsor the revolt (Erdbrink 2009). In these circumstances, Chávez showed his solidarity by traveling to Tehran, where the Venezuelan president praised Ahmadinejad for his reelection and "for standing up to attempts by Western forces to destabilize Iran" (quoted in Romero 2009).

The fact that both leaders possessed the capacity to stir up controversy and cause worry within the U.S. through their defiant stance and provocative rhetoric demonstrates the strength of their alliance (Neuman and Romero 2012). Chávez and Ahmadinejad gathered global attention, and by using the world media, they advanced their ideology and increased their popularity. As such, throughout the years as heads of the state they seized control of their own oil industry, consolidated government authority under the presidency, allowed basic government functions to weaken, oppressed political opponents, and courted regional and foreign alliances (Karimi 2007; Gerami and Squassoni 2008; Romero 2011; Martinez and Yuan, 2012).

Venezuelan and Iranian Economic Links

Working from the little documentation available, as the governments of both Venezuela and Iran did not report precise figures on their commercial activities nor were members of international economic organi-

zation, it is yet possible to shed light on what the countries share with each other. Data from the International Trade Center (ITC) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) provide ample information on the bilateral trade between the countries. Statistics on exports and imports offer the means to analyze the phenomenon of how political ties result in economic cooperation. The comprehensive, timely, and comparable data demonstrates that besides diplomatic visits, Chávez and Ahmadinejad fortified their alliance through bilateral economic activities. Table 2 details the economic relationship between these countries.

The data in Table 2 exhibits the rapid increase of economic activities right after Ahmadinejad won the presidency of Iran in 2005. From \$1 million in 2004, bilateral trade surpassed \$50 million by the end of 2006. The amount registered that year doubled in 2008, when bilateral trade stood out at above \$100 million. Even though figures reached their highest point during 2008, they decreased slightly during the subsequent years (IMF Direction of Trade Statistics 2006-2012). A possible explanation for the decline of the commercial activities might be the result of Chávez's deteriorating health, which drove Venezuela into political uncertainty and internal conflicts (Neuman 2013). Figure 1 displays the rise and fall of the economic relationship over time.

Even though trade activities declined after 2008, both countries continued their endeavors of challenging the U.S. through their economic and military solidarity (De-Shazo and Forman 2010; Luxner 2013). Cooperation in mining and energy projects helped Iran to obtain components and strategic materials for its uranium enrichment efforts. In 2008, the Venezuelan mining company CVG Minerven granted the Iranian firm Impasco rights to a gold mine concession. Iran also became a major investor in the Ayacucho oil field project, and Venezuela agreed to invest in Iran's South Pars gas field (Johnson 2012).

With regard to cooperation in financing, Venezuela agreed on the formation of a bilateral banking system in Caracas, which allowed Iran to channel resources for its nuclear activities and its Defense Ministry (Johnson 2012; Goforth 2012). The establishment of the joint airline route between Caracas and Tehran and the relaxed custom protocols with Venezuela benefited Iran as they allowed the transport of suspicious passengers and cargo

(Noriega and Cardenas 2011). Through his friendship with Chávez, Ahmadinejad not only advanced his military interest but also found strategic avenues to boost his economy, uplift his government, and further diplomatic relations. On the other hand, Chávez found in Ahmadinejad not only a political ally within the OPEC for his efforts to keep oil prices high, but also an ideological ally that provided support and legitimacy to Chávez's anti-U.S. sentiment (Rubin 2008; Farah 2011).

Iran's economic development deteriorated in part because of the growing list of sanctions, which started during Khomeini's mandate; yet cooperation with Venezuela was minimum (Forero 2013; Luxner 2013). Ties between both countries increased only after Ahmadinejad took office (ITC 2006-2012; IMF Direction of Trade Statistics 2006-2012). Chávez perceived the political orientation of his Iranian counterpart as appealing to his cause, and thus forged a partnership with Iran to join efforts for reducing American intrusiveness (O'Connor 2002; Gratius and Furtig 2009; Goforth 2012; Johnson 2012). Over time, such alliance resulted into economic cooperation (Lalander 2003; Raby 2007; Beasley-Murray, Cameron, and Hershberg 2009).

The deteriorating health and subsequent death of Chávez this year created a state of tension within Iran; yet, the election of Nicolas Maduro, politician of Chávez's inner circle, provided assurance of no change in the relations with the Islamic Republic (Neuman 2013). Chavistas, even without Chávez, work on maintaining a status quo in the government as doing so will result in the continuation of the regime (Neuman 2013). Similarly, changes in the government relates not only to Venezuela, but also to Iran. Hassan Rouhani replaced Ahmadinejad in office this August. Although Rouhani appears as a pragmatic and moderate politician, it is yet early to assume a potential improvement in relations between Iran and the West.

Conclusion

By willingness to speak their mind, Chávez and Ahmadinejad stirred up controversy, attracting massed international attention. The leaders' political dis-

courses not only built support, but also created distraction from deeply rooted problems at home, like high inflation and soaring crime (Romero 2011; Martinez and Yuan 2012; Neuman 2013). Through verbal attacks against the U.S. at presidential visits and public events, the leaders produced favorable reactions from leftist governments and population that felt the necessity of reducing dependency on the U.S. and promoting regional integration (Farah 2009; Worth 2009).

The rise of the electoral left in Latin America that represents a trend against neoliberalism favored the Venezuelan socialist and integrationist measures as well as the Iranian capital in their economies (Beasley-Murray, Cameron, and Hershberg 2009). Apart from the symbolism of defying the West, leftist-inclined governments found in the Venezuela-Iran strategic relationship a defensive initiative against American intrusiveness in the region (Borbon 2009; Sullivan 2008; Colonel 2005; Harris and Azzi 2006; Morgenthau 2009). Even without Chávez and Ahmadinejad, Latin American countries might find it advantageous to form a regional alliance, under which socialist initiatives have a chance to develop.

Stepping back from the collected data, one can see that the Venezuelan-Iranian alliance originated from the fact that Chávez and Ahmadinejad shared the same ideology-driven foreign policy (O'Connor 2002; Gratius and Furtig 2009; Goforth 2012). Both heads of states perceived the U.S. as a threat to their regime and national sovereignty. As such, they saw the formation of a strategic partnership beneficial to reducing American interference in their countries (Kellogg 2007; Saguier 2007; Suarez 2006; Noriega and Cardenas 2011; Johnson 2012).

The Iranian economic hardship did not constitute the sole reason for Venezuela and Iran to establish a coalition. My research exposes that international sanctions on Iran started years prior to Ahmadinejad's government, yet cooperation between both states showed as minimum (ITC 2006-2012; IMF Direction of Trade Statistics 2006-2012; Forero 2013; Luxner 2013). After 2005, these circumstances changed with the growth of their economic activities and with the rise of the presidents as divisive figures in world affairs. Their common enemy and anti-imperialist ideology thus drove the relationship to forge economic cooperation and strengthen their ties (Sharma,

⁵The data gathered in Table 2 is a combination of ITC and IMF (DOTS)

Tracy, and Kumar 2004; Morgenthau 2009). Using public diplomacy and political rhetoric as means to sustain their popularity and maintain their regime (Yazdani and Hussain 2006), Chávez and Ahmadinejad overcame domestic and foreign opposition, which seemed desperate to discredit their governments and to force them from power (Serbin 2008; Luxner 2013; Forero 2013).

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