

U.S.-Venezuela Relations in the 21st Century: Sanctions against Venezuelan Officials

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the processes and structures that have generated the 2014 U.S. decision to introduce a sanctions bill against Venezuelan officials guilty of violating human rights in Venezuela. It specifically examines the historic U.S.-Venezuela relationship that led to the sanctions bill with special attention to the presidency of Hugo Chávez and Nicolas Maduro, and how opposing political forces in Venezuela and the United States have influenced domestic as well as foreign policy making. It also studies the Venezuelan and U.S. interest in Latin America, and the impact of regional blocs on U.S.-Venezuela foreign policy changes.

Moreover, this thesis assesses the impact of realism, and specifically Mearsheimer's offensive realism, on explaining what prompted the United States to impose sanctions on Venezuelan officials. In order to enhance the analytical process of finding valid explanations, the theoretical foundation include concepts from international political economy, geopolitics, and the international society tradition. These different theories and concepts have been chosen because they have added to a broad and nuanced study of the fact that diverse structures determine the actions of the U.S. and Venezuelan states, as well as their state officials, in international politics. The world is not only one of anarchy and conflict, but also one where states may collaborate despite differences to reach an objective.

The conclusion is that the introduction of the sanctions bill was caused by several changes in the U.S.-Venezuela relationship since the presidency of Chávez. By investigating the context behind the sanctions bill, the reached results highlight how U.S.-Venezuela relations are marked by competition through soft-balancing measures in the Latin American region. Venezuela's government wants less U.S. interference in Latin America through increased regional integration and autonomy, processes that Venezuela has influenced through its oil wealth. In contrast, the United States strives to support a political regime change in Venezuela friendlier towards U.S. interests, a pressure that the sanctions bill adds to, though it also is a strategy to renew U.S. regional hegemony in Latin America. However, the legitimacy behind the bill is highly contested, and though international concern, such as by the UN, about Venezuela's human rights violations is understandable, no findings support a U.S. right to interfere in the domestic affairs of Venezuela nor to punish Venezuelan officials through targeted sanctions.

Contents

Abstract	3
Contents	4
Abbreviations and Translations	6
1. Introduction	7
2. Theoretical Background	10
2.1. Liberalism.....	10
2.2. Realism.....	10
2.2.1. Neorealism.....	11
2.2.2. Offensive Realism.....	12
2.2.3. The Regional Hegemon.....	14
2.3. Additional Theoretical Concepts.....	15
2.3.1. International Political Economy.....	15
2.3.2. Geopolitics.....	16
2.4. The International Society Tradition.....	18
2.4.1. An Independent Paradigm.....	18
2.4.2. Three Concepts of the International Society Tradition.....	18
2.4.3. Fundamental International Society Values.....	19
2.3.4. Human Rights and Interventionism.....	20
3. Methodological Considerations	23
3.1. Choice of Topic and Structure.....	23
3.2. Philosophical Discussion.....	24
3.2.1. Critical Realism.....	25
3.3. A Researcher’s Objectivity.....	25
3.4. Theoretical Considerations.....	27
3.5. Collecting Data and Information.....	29
4. Historical Background	32
4.1. Venezuela before Chávez.....	32
4.2. U.S.-Venezuela Relations before Chávez.....	33
5. Analysis	35
5.1. Venezuela’s during the Presidency of Chávez and Maduro.....	35
5.1.1. Changing Venezuela.....	35
5.1.2. Venezuela’s Military Power.....	37
5.1.3. Venezuelan Oil as a Geopolitical Tool in Foreign Affairs.....	38
5.1.4. Maduro Facing Opposition, Social Unrest, and an Economic Crisis.....	40
5.1.5. Maduro against the United States.....	43
5.2. Venezuela’s International and Regional Collaboration.....	45
5.2.1. Venezuela and OPEC.....	45
5.2.2. Regional Collaboration.....	47

5.3. The United States and Latin America.....	50
5.3.1. Historic U.S. Interference in Latin America.....	50
5.3.2. U.S.-Venezuela Tensions before Obama.....	51
5.3.3. Obama Becomes President—A Change in Foreign Policy?.....	53
5.3.4. Domestic Opposition and the Sanctions Bill.....	55
5.4. The Legitimacy of the Sanctions Bill.....	57
5.4.1. The Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014.....	57
5.4.2. U.S. Hypocrisy or Sound Reasons behind the Sanctions Bill?.....	58
5.4.3. Regional Protests.....	61
5.4.4. Venezuela as a National Security Threat?.....	62
6. Conclusions.....	66
Bibliography.....	69
Appendix S.2142 “Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014”	

Abbreviations and Translations

ALBA	Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America (<i>Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América</i>)
CELAC	Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (<i>Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños</i>)
CNE	National Electoral Council (<i>Consejo Nacional Electoral</i>)
COHA	Council on Hemispheric Affairs
EO	Executive Order
EU	European Union
GOP	Grand Old Party
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPE	International Political Economy
IR	International Relations
IST	International Society Tradition
MUD	Democratic Unity Roundtable (<i>Mesa de la Unidad Democrática</i>)
MVR	Movement for the Fifth Republic (<i>Movimiento V [Quinta] República</i>)
NED	National Endowment for Democracy
OAS	Organization of American States
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
OIT	Office of Transition Initiatives
PdVSA	Petroleum of Venezuela (<i>Petróleos de Venezuela Sociedad Anónima</i>)
PSUV	United Socialist Party of Venezuela (<i>Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela</i>)
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNASUR	Union of South American Nations (<i>Unión de Naciones Suramericanas</i>)
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
VP	Popular Will (<i>Voluntad Popular</i>)
WB	World Bank
WoD	War on Drugs
WW1	World War 1

1. Introduction

Bilateral relations between the United States of America and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela are rather enigmatic. The two countries are close trading partners, with the United States being the most important importer of Venezuelan oil and the largest exporter of goods to Venezuela (U.S. EIA, 2015; Trading Economics, 2015a). Though trade relations seem favorable for both countries and they have close ties historically, the diplomatic relationship has deteriorated especially during the former presidency of Hugo Chávez Frías (1999-2013), but also today under current President Nicolás Maduro (2013-present) (Sullivan, 2014: 24).

Chávez made vast changes in Venezuela during his presidency, focusing primarily on aiding and educating the poor of society, regaining control of an economy in recession, and in revamping all sectors of political life. At the same time, he adopted an anti-U.S. rhetoric (Williamson, 2009: 594-596). Chávez and his Bolivarian Revolution¹ have also been a driving force behind the rise of the left across Latin America² and a promoter of Latin American regional integration and autonomy from U.S. interference, a constant force in the region for centuries. This detachment from the United States has been growing through the rise of regional blocs such as UNASUR, ALBA, or CELAC, which Venezuela has fuelled through its oil wealth, and at a national level, Venezuela has increased international trade with countries such as China (COHA, 2013; BBC, 2015a).

The United States, wanting to maintain a favorable political and economic relationship with Latin American countries, has opposed Chávez and his *chavismo* since his ascension to presidency. The CIA supported the coup d'état against Chávez in 2002 and Washington has financially supported Chávez's political opposition in Venezuela for years (Chodor, 2014: 171-172). U.S. antagonism against Chávez may also be based on the friendly Venezuela-Cuba relations given Venezuela's support of Cuba during its Cold War stalemate with the United

¹ Bolivarianism refers to Simón Bolívar, the Venezuelan general renowned for his fight to secure independence for many Latin American countries. Today, Bolivarianism is associated with Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution as his vision for Latin American regional integration. It is "*a fledgling attempt to construct a counter-hegemonic alternative to neoliberalism and global capitalism. [It] represents a fundamental challenge to the neoliberal project not only within its own borders, but also regionally.*" See Chodor, 2014: 134, and more on Bolivarianism in i.e. Larrabure, 2013; Ciccariello-Maher, 2007; and Furshong, 2005.

² Latin America's turn to the left, or the "pink tide", has been visible especially under Presidents such as President Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva in Brazil, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Néstor Kirchner in Argentina, and Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay. More on the leftist governments and their differences in Castaneda, 2006; and Stone, 2009.

States until the reopening of diplomatic relations on December 17, 2014 (Birns & Doleac, 2014).

When Chávez passed away on March 5, 2013, vice president Nicolás Maduro continued Chávez's legacy as the new leader after a close presidential race on April 14, 2013 (a vote majority of 1,49%) against rightwing opposition leader, Henrique Capriles Radonski (Sullivan, 2014: 9). Maduro won a more convincing victory during the municipal elections in December 2014, but the political milieu has since then turned critical for the ruling government, especially with Venezuela's economic crisis caused by a critical drop in international oil prices. Venezuela's economy is dependent on oil as a trade commodity, thus Venezuela is currently struggling with a severe economic crisis. In January this year, the international oil price per barrel was only \$38 USD compared to \$96 USD in September 2014 (Neuman, 2015). Though the price slowly is rising, it is still very low, promising a hard economic 2015 for Venezuela (LatinNews, 2015). With soaring inflation rates, all of Venezuela is subjugated to the outcome of low oil prices, and a major issue is the shortage of basic consumer goods such as toilet paper, corn flour, and milk. Even though Maduro went on a journey in January to find economic assistance from international allies from OPEC, Russia, and China, the situation has yet to improve (Neuman, 2015).

The Maduro administration is facing strong right-wing opposition nationally, which is supported by international actors, especially the United States (Carasik, 2014a & 2014b; Weisbrot, 2014; Birns & Mills, 2015). The politically charged situation has worsened since the 2013 presidential elections, especially in 2014 where 42 people were killed during violent demonstrations (Robertson, 2014). The losses were from the police and the opposition, and the incident awoke international concern for the internal conflicts and escalating violence in Venezuela. Additionally, the United States and international institutions like the UN have expressed concerns about Venezuelan officials having violated human rights.

On May 28, 2014, the U.S. House of Representatives presented a sanctions bill against Venezuelan officials accused of violating human rights, based on the 2014 demonstrations having turned violent, but the bill was met domestic resistance including from the White House (Mills & Højen, 2014). However, on December 8, 2014, the House again passed a vote on the sanctions bill and this time, the Senate met it with approval too. On December 10, Congress passed the so-called S.2142 "Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014" and President Obama signed it into law on December 18 (Appendix, Congress.gov, 2014;

Carasik, 2014a). Despite the stated wish to protect human rights in Venezuela, critical voices, including Maduro and regional bodies like UNASUR, ALBA, and CELAC have criticized the bill. They see the sanctions as an unjustified way for Washington to interfere and undermine Venezuelan sovereignty, as well as a U.S. tool to gain renewed influence in the entire Latin American region (Dutka, 2015). This contrasts sharply with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's promise in 2013 to end the Monroe Doctrine in Latin America (Congress.gov, 2014; Carasik, 2014a). Hence, despite the claim that the U.S. sanctions bill was imposed based on violence and human rights violations in the 2014 Venezuela demonstrations, it would appear that there are other explanations too, which, create the foundation for this thesis' research question:

Why did the United States introduce a sanctions bill in December 2014 against Venezuelan officials accused of human rights violations?

To answer this question, it will be imperative to look into the domestic political situation of both countries in question and their historical ties, all of which have an influence on their current foreign relations. This should provide an explanation as to why the United States chose to introduce the sanctions bill on December 18, 2014. Perhaps it is because Venezuela poses a threat to U.S. national security, as so stated by President Obama on March 9, 2015 (Mason & Rampton, 2015). Maybe the United States wishes to defend and promote human rights violated by Venezuelan officials, or it is possible that the Obama administration simply saw an opportunity to pressure Maduro's government into political change after announcing the normalization of U.S.-Cuban relations on December 17, due to its positive response across Latin America. Moreover, the sanctions may have been imposed during a vulnerable political and economic moment in Venezuela to endorse political change within the country in order to renew U.S. influence and hegemony in the Latin American region. The introduction of sanctions may also be a result of all the aforementioned explanations.

This paper will analyze different possible explanations as to why the sanctions bill was introduced on December 18, 2014. There will be an empirical chapter presenting a brief historical foundation for understanding the importance of Hugo Chávez for Venezuela and the country's development as well as U.S.-Venezuela relations before Chávez. This will lead to the analytical chapter before a conclusion can be reached to answer the stated research question.

2. Theoretical Background

Different International Relations (IR) theories and concepts will be presented. To understand realism better, there will be a brief introduction to liberalism and its core values. Realism and neorealism will be presented with focus on offensive realism. International political economy (IPE) and geopolitics will then be presented as important theoretical concepts. Lastly, the international society tradition will be investigated with attention to human rights as a value. These theoretical currents and concepts will be discussed in Methodology, but they have been chosen to provide a nuanced foundation for analyzing and answering the research question.

2.1. Liberalism

Liberalism is one of the traditional IR current, together with realism. Liberalism became significant in the United States especially after WW1, with focus on man as being capable of change and perfectible towards a global system of peace. Throughout the 20th century, liberalism is linked intrinsically with “*the emergence of the modern constitutional state [and] that modernization is a process involving progress in most areas of life*” (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 101). A core aspect of liberalism is the positive view of man as rational and therefore able to overcome the natural fear and mistrust among individuals, as well as among states. This is because of progress. Progress is understood as generating the most happiness for a majority of mankind, which, linked with man’s rationality, explains why individuals and states are able to collaborate and engage in social action: they share mutual interests based on progress (Ibid: 100-101). These underlying values and belief in historic progress also promote the idea of Immanuel Kant that mature, liberal democracies are more peaceful than other political systems because they have fewer incentives to go to war against one another. Moreover, democracies are more inclined to collaborate economically than with other types of states, like an authoritarian regime, and that will also promote peaceful relations (Ibid: 113-115).

2.2. Realism

Realism is the other classical theory of IR. Realism can be divided into several underlying schools, though they share some basic assumptions of the world: man is a rational being, human nature is selfish, greedy, competitive, power seeking, and incapable of change. This

unchangeable nature of man is similarly portrayed among states in international relations that are conflictual and solvable through war, making international politics a continuous issue of power politics. The world is anarchic with no 'government of governments' as a higher ruling authority, which means that the international system of rivalry and conflict makes international peace impossible. Peace is only achievable on domestic terms within a country by obtaining national security and state survival –two normative core aspects of Realism (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 66). It is the state's foremost responsibility to secure state survival according to the realist paradigm. Due to the unchangeable selfish nature of man and state rivalry in an anarchic world, progress is impossible. In other words, because of the anarchic system, conflict is bound to recur throughout history. Thucydides (460-395 B.C.), among others through the centuries, emphasized this in his famous work, *The Peloponnesian War* (Crawley, 1903) as one of the first examples of the realist paradigm. Machiavelli (1469-1527), Hobbes (1588-1679), and Morgenthau (1904-1980) are other classical realists who have exemplified the repetitive nature of conflict in international relations, adding legitimacy to the realist tradition and its arguments (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 66-75).

2.2.1 Neorealism

Realism has developed into a new paradigm, neorealism, though it keeps classical realism as its point of departure, including the understanding of the world as anarchic (Jørgensen, 2010: 84). The largest break from classical realism is that neorealists believe that state behavior is not determined by man's unchangeable competitive, power-hungry nature. Instead, states seek more power in IR because of a security motivation: they must obtain national security by being more powerful, influential and with a stronger military than other states (Snyder, 2002: 151). Neorealism is mainly associated with Kenneth N. Waltz. He is a structural realist, who determines that man's, and states', actions are given and predictable due to the anarchic structure of the international system. The only change in the structure of international relations happens when the balance of power shifts between powerful states. The Cold War represented a bipolar world order with the United States and the Soviet Union as the two most powerful states in the world keeping the balance of power (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 82). Afterwards, the United States was the sole superpower in the world and the world was considered a unipolar world. Of all structures, Waltz argues that a bipolar world is the most stable system for securing peaceful IR. The multipolar system is much more complicated because as the number of strong

states and their comparative power capabilities grow, so does the complexity of calculating on another's strengths and weaknesses (Waltz, 2000: 5-6).

The anarchic structure of international politics means that states live in a self-help system, and though collaboration among states is possible, states form alliances solely to advance their own interests, national security and power position in an anarchic world. Furthermore, they keep the incentive to exploit one another due to the fear of being exploited, making any alliance fragile and ruled by egoistic competition (Mir, 2014: 164-166). Despite the possibility for forming alliances, a state will generally use force to attain its goals, and because any states may use force at any time to do so, all states have to be ready to “*counter force with force or to pay the cost of weakness*” (Waltz in Weber, 2014: 20-21).

John J. Mearsheimer, like Waltz, believe that state behavior is shaped by the anarchic world structure, and that compared to a multipolar system, the bipolar system is the most stable system with a prolonged period of peace and security. With only two superpowers at play, the amount of international conflicts is limited, and that lessens the risk of a global war caused by two opposing superpowers. However, Waltz and Mearsheimer disagree on the limitations of states seeking power. Waltz, as a so-called defensive realist, believes that states procure security and survival as a necessity, but to obtain an excessive amount of power is counterproductive, as the accumulation of too much power will make other states afraid and more prone to engage in hostile alliances (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 83-84). In that sense, a state would be wrong to amass too much power because a balance of power must be upheld. Mearsheimer, an offensive realist, see states differently from Waltz. States are aggressive in nature and the anarchic world structure forces them to try to maximize their relative power compared to other states. As a result, states are rarely satisfied with the existing world order and wish to shift the balance of power (Mearsheimer in Dunne et.al, 2010: 73).

2.2.2. Offensive Realism and Mearsheimer

John J. Mearsheimer takes his departure in the structural realist principles of Waltz but has reformulated and developed them into his offensive realism. However, where Waltz believes that states preserve power only to maximize national security, Mearsheimer states that:

“[T]he international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of rivals, and to take advantage of those situations when the benefits outweigh the costs” (Mearsheimer, 2001: 21).

Thus, the international balance of power was most stable when it was bipolar but such structure is impossible to keep due to states' enduring power incentive in offensive realism. As states seldom are satisfied with the existing world order, they will act to obtain national security when it strategically becomes possible to maximize power at a low cost. This continued quest for more power is also based on the fact that states cannot trust one another completely despite cordial relations (Mearsheimer, 2001: 31). All states want to be secure, but they cannot all amass their relative power at the same time, which is why the international system will remain anarchic and one of competitive conflict until there is a hegemon, a government of government to rule it (Mearsheimer in Toft, 2005: 383). Especially powerful states want to control the anarchic system. An example would be a superpower like the United States that wants enough power to counter any foreign threats to its superiority, or hegemony³.

State power, according to Mearsheimer, is divided into two different kinds. Latent power capabilities relate to socio-economic capabilities that constitute a state's military power, like economic wealth and population size. Actual power capabilities equals military power, which largely depends on the size and strength of a state's army, that is, its land forces (Mearsheimer, 2001: 55-56). Moreover, it is the military's size that determines how dangerous one state is compared to another (Ibid: 30). Especially military power is vital in order to secure land power. Land power means the control of territory, though Mearsheimer himself has admitted that territorial expansion is not the only way for a state to exercise and gain power: its latent powers are also very important (see more in Toft, 2005: 383-384). For example, there are limits to how big an army can become, depending on the size of the state's population, and the army is unlikely expand if there is no economy to fund it. Both latent and military power is important in international affairs as Mearsheimer believes that since basically all states have the military capacity to hurt and possibly destroy one another, "*the most efficient way to guarantee survival in anarchy is to maximize their relative power with the ultimate aim of becoming the strongest power — that is, a hegemon*" (Ibid: 383).

³ Hegemony is a widely discussed theoretical topic. Andreas Antoniadis (2008: 2-4) lists approaches to hegemony within the realm of IR, such as the Gramscian approach, which states that "*there are two types of political control: domination that is based on coercion, and hegemony that is based on consent. [Essentially,] hegemony equals the establishment within the sphere of the international of universally accepted values – a commonsense.*" Another is the conventional approach, which also is the one that Mearsheimer's offensive realism addresses: "*a condition of disequilibrium of power in the international system, in which one state becomes so powerful that can exercise leadership in or dominance over the international system*" as described by Robert Gilpin.

2.2.3. The Regional Hegemon

As aforementioned, though a bipolar world structure is the most stable and peaceful, superpowers still strive to amass as much power as possible. However, global hegemony is virtually not possible because a state cannot hold sufficient power to ensure it. Power in international politics is by Mearsheimer largely understood as military power, which primarily is based on land forces. Due to the natural barriers of the world, the oceans between regions, projection the military capabilities of a state against other states then becomes exceedingly difficult (Mearsheimer, 2001: 83). Hence, the oceans render it impossible for one state to exercise enough power to control the entire planet. That means that though a state might aspire to become the world hegemon, it will never happen, leaving the world structure one of anarchy forever. It is possible to become a regional hegemon, though, as a state can reach other states in a region through land territory (Ibid: 84).

According to Mearsheimer, the United States is the only state in the world to become a regional hegemon in the world. It has become the hegemon of its system, the Western hemisphere, since introducing the Monroe Doctrine of 1823⁴. The United States used the Monroe Doctrine to dictate how specifically European powers were not allowed to interfere in the affairs of the newly independent Latin American region. It allowed the United States to control foreign influence in the entire region and therefore the rise of any potential regional hegemon threatening U.S. interests (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 84). Though a state becomes a regional hegemon, like the United States of the Western hemisphere, it is not sufficient to satisfy the state's desire for more power. Even if a regional hegemon is not able to become a global hegemon, it can still have the power to prevent the rise of a regional hegemon in other regions of the world (Mearsheimer, 2001: 41). This fight to obstruct the rise of another state as a potential regional hegemon in different part of the world is based on the fear that this rivaling state may become powerful enough to compete with the existing regional hegemon. Therefore, the ideal world would be one where there is only one regional hegemon at all, which currently seems to be the United States of the Western Hemisphere (Ibid: 40-41). Despite the regional hegemon's potential military power, it is also possible to apply soft balancing strategies (see more in section 2.3.2.).

Nonetheless, states are to be cautious before attempting to become regional hegemons. It can be costly and so Mearsheimer argues that states only attempt it when the benefits clearly

⁴ For more knowledge on the Monroe Doctrine, see the page 48.

outweigh the costs, which is why there in the past has been so few attempts, and even fewer successful attempts (Snyder, 2002: 153). Historically, several powerful states have accumulated immense power and continuously wanted more power. Germany, the Soviet Union, Japan, and Great Britain (GB) are Mearsheimer's prime examples that failed to succeed (Mearsheimer, 2001: 168-170). GB and the United States are distinct cases. GB's failure to become a regional hegemon is because of its natural barriers—the ocean that separates GB from the rest of Europe. The United States, on the other hand, is the only state that managed to become a hegemon of its region, the Western Hemisphere, but its capabilities are limited to this region because it is separated by the oceans (Ibid: 170).

2.3. Additional Theoretical Concepts

2.3.1. International Political Economy

International Political Economy (IPE) is yet another current of IR, and it conceptualizes the importance of economy and the inseparability of an economic system from a political framework in IR (Hettne, 1995: 224). The concept of IPE developed mainly after WWII into three dominating theoretical branches: Economic Liberalism (Neoliberalism), Mercantilism (Realism, Economic Nationalism), and Structuralism (Marxism) (Balaam & Dillman, 2013).

Specifically related to the realist IR tradition, realist IPE conceptualizes that states are the most important actors in the world, and determines that a state's purpose is to establish national security through the accumulation of both economic and political power. While political decisions influence on the economy, economic power is likewise necessary for acquiring political power (Ibid: 10). Additionally, Waltz (2000: 16) emphasized that power may not be very fungible for weak states, but it certainly is for strong states. For example, “[t]he history of American foreign policy since World War II is replete with examples of how the United States used its superior economic capability to promote its political and security interests” (Ibid). Therefore, economic power is imperative for a state to be politically strong, as exemplified by the United States. It also explains why strong states have incentive to become even more powerful.

Waltz has also been integral to the development of four levels of analysis in IPE research through his understanding of different images, or stages, presented in his *Man, The State, and War*: The individual level, the state/societal level, and the interstate level. The fourth stage, the

global level, is a more recent development⁵ (Waltz, 2000: 13-14). The interstate level emphasizes the importance of balance of economic, political, military powers, etc. between states, and how these relations affect the probability of collaboration, but it is also determined by the anarchic structure of the international system. The state/societal level, in contrast, looks into a country's social forces and how they affect state foreign policy. This level also determine how state leaders and different types of governments influences a state's interaction with others, i.e. how Venezuela's former President Chávez has affected the Venezuelan State affairs with the United States (Balaam & Dillman, 2013: 13-14).

2.3.2. Geopolitics

Geopolitics is both an important IR concept and a theoretical branch in itself. It covers the study of “*international economic, environmental, diplomatic, and security relationships between nation-states, international governments, and non-governmental organization*” (Chapman, 2011: 2). Though geopolitics has been a factor for states throughout history, Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellén (1864-1922) was the first to introduce the concept of geopolitics in 1899 (Ibid: 16).

There are several branches of geopolitics, though specifically classical geopolitics is connected to the realist IR tradition. Classical geopolitics put special emphasis geography as determining the limits and opportunities in international politics, with states existing in geopolitical competition. What is important for a state is economic and political power, free movement across the geographical borders, such as the ocean, as well as the military and strategic capacity to prevent other states from growing too powerful and threaten national security. Strong states need to use the geopolitical possibilities they have or fall victim of other strong states (Ibid: 2-3). Two dominant classical geopolitical theorists are Halford Mackinder (1861-1947) and Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914). Mackinder was very influential for British geopolitics, just as Mahan was for U.S. geopolitics⁶. However, geopolitics gained a negative connotation when it was associated with Hitler's Nazi Germany, which was influenced specifically by the Nazi adherent Karl Haushofer (1869-1946) (Chapman, 2011: 7-8). The field

⁵ Focus is on the levels that will be important for the analysis of interstate relations between Venezuela and the United States, as well as the internal affairs and their effect on foreign relations. Therefore, this paper will not present the other two levels further. For more information, see Waltz, Kenneth N. 1969. *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis*, New York: Columbia University Press. See also Balaam, David N. and Bradford Dillman. 2013. *Introduction to International Political Economy*. 6th Ed., Pearson.

⁶ More information on Halford MacKinder and Alfred Thayer Mahan in Chapman, 2011.

received renewed interest again during the Cold War, but it has been important for IR for a long time.

As Toft (2005: 389) points out, geopolitics has been present in the realist tradition for centuries. As national security is a key aspect of offensive realism, geopolitics has a prominent role in Mearsheimer's offensive realism too. Moreover, geography is part of the core of geopolitics and covers aspects such as a state's location, population, and natural resources in comparison to other states. Other factors are economy, politics, and diplomacy, which means that geopolitics determine a state's position, and therefore behavior, in the global power hierarchy. This links geopolitics and offensive realism with IPE too since economy is such an important aspect of a state's position in international politics (Dunne et. al., 2010: 72-73). Military and strategic power is also relevant for a state to procure national security, which depends on specific geographical features of a state, that is, population size, technological development, and wealth. As geopolitics affects state behavior, it is linked to the international balance of power as well. Mearsheimer gives an example of how geopolitics influence state behavior: he believes that China in the near future is likely to rise in the world system because of its growing economy and massive population that create the basis for a potentially formidable military force. China will therefore be the next emerging power with the ability to threaten and intimidate U.S. power and influence in the anarchic structure of international politics (Dunne et. al., 2010: 72-73, 82-86).

Soft balancing is a newer aspect introduced to balance of power theory, though also relevant to geopolitics. Soft balancing describes state actions that are not directly military in action. Instead, they are used by weaker states to undermine the power of a stronger state by delaying, frustrating, and undermining the foreign policies of that state. This can be done through international institutions, economic decisions, and diplomatic arrangements (Pape, 2005: 9-10). The state wanting to equalize the power balance only uses nonmilitary means to do so, though it aims to affect the military capacity of a stronger state. This is why "*[m]echanisms of soft balancing include territorial denial, entangling diplomacy, economic strengthening, and signaling of resolve to participate in a balancing coalition*" (Ibid: 36-37).

There are many more aspects relevant to the theory of geopolitics, but the characteristics in this particular section have been chosen to emphasize the overall importance of geopolitics in relation to Mearsheimer's offensive realism.

2.4. The International Society Tradition

2.4.1. An Independent Paradigm

The international society tradition (IST) is another, newer current within IR based on notions from both realism and liberalism. It is also called the English School because of its leading theorists such as Martin Wight (1991) and because the tradition originally was centered on a European international society, not a global one (Linklater, 2010: 4). In IST, IR is understood as a society of states that mutually recognize other states' sovereignty, which differs from the realist paradigm's understanding of the world as an anarchic system solely inhibited by competing states (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 133). IST also diverges from liberalism's idealistic view on human nature and the world's inevitable path towards perpetual peace. IST accepts that conflict is recurring and that military intervention in the affairs of other states is necessary in some cases. State officials are furthermore seen as very important players in IR, as they are the ones behind a state's foreign affairs decisions, including policies of trade, diplomacy, military force, intervention such as humanitarian relief, spying, etc. (Ibid: 133-134). The IST also regards international institutions, organizations, and corporations as important in IR, though they are subordinate to states as the world's principal players, not international institutions. Realists also conceptualize international institutions this way, as they are seen as both "*shaped and limited by the states that found and sustain them*" (Waltz, 2000: 18). Thus, their independence is limited from the states that constitute them.

2.3.2. Three Concepts of the International Society Tradition

Realism, revolutionism, and rationalism are three different conceptualizations of the relations between states in IST. Wight determined in his 1991 work *International Theory: The Three Traditions* (1991: xi-xii) that from a realist tradition, all sovereign states coexisted in relationships of pure conflict, or a war against all, in a cyclical anarchic world structure. This world structure or the conflictual inter-state relations cannot change before states stop being responsible for their own security (Linklater, 2010: 1-2). Nonetheless, states and the state-responsible have a duty to protect and ensure the well-being of its citizens, and that includes national security (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 145).

Revolutionism can be traced into three different waves, and great thinkers such as Karl Marx and Gandhi have inspired its development. According to revolutionists, international

politics are only superficially concerned with the role of states and more focused on the interrelations between human beings and international morality. It means that humanity has the moral capability to move beyond geopolitics to live amicably in a world without the incentive to participate in conflict (Linklater, 2010: 1-2). International morality obligates all humankind to respect human rights not just within their own borders but also in the rest of the world. This is imperative for facilitating the rise of a community of mankind, though it is not yet in existence (Wight, 1991: xii).

The third understanding of inter-state relations is that of rationalism, and Wight calls it a middle-way between realism and revolutionism. According to rationalism, based on Grotius, states have an international responsibility to act according to international law and mutually respect one another as sovereign states to ensure that the world not only is one of conflict but also collaboration (Ibid). This makes diplomacy and dialogue intrinsic parts of inter-state affairs and human beings are seen as rational and able to live alongside one another despite differences such as not sharing a common government (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 135, 137-138). This coexistence is based on international values, or institutions, such as diplomacy, international law, and the balance of power (Wight, 1991: xii). All three concepts are used through IST to understand IR, though the middle-ground rationalist approach has more followers than realism and revolutionism.

2.3.3. Fundamental International Society Values

Hedley Bull is a scholar renowned for raising attention to two fundamental values in the IST: international order and international justice. International order is a fundamental value shared by states because they recognize the fact that their security and survival largely depend on mutual respect of sovereignty, which then controls the use of military power and the principle of non-intervention. Therefore, upholding international order becomes the norm, and states must respect international law and engage in diplomatic relations to protect the international society and individuals within it (Linklater, 2010: 3-4). International justice is a second fundamental value. It refers to morality that imposes both rights and duties upon states, including the right to self-determination and non-intervention in national affairs, and the duty to respect those rights of other states. International order and justice are closely linked to international law as norm setting for all human beings. In this context, rationalists take a middle road in the discussion of international law, between revolutionists, and realists. According to

rationalists, international law derives from both natural law as well as existing practice and mutually consented agreements among nations, i.e. treaties (Wight, 1991: 233-236).

John Vincent takes his departure in two other fundamental values, though they are similar to those of international order and international justice: state sovereignty and human rights (Gonzalez-Pelaez & Buzan, 2003: 2). State sovereignty refers to states' right to self-determination, to security, and to mutual respect of these rights. However, IR is not determined solely by states but by human beings, and everyone in the world has human rights notwithstanding the state they belong to (Linklater, 2010: 8). By respecting and protecting human rights, Vincent believes that state relations will progress due to the respect of fellow states' sovereignty and states protecting human rights of the individuals including that of freedom to not be tortured (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 135-136). However, Bull argues that states must engage in an exercise of judgement: states are the main actors in foreign affairs, and morally difficult situations will appear occasionally, including the controversy of respecting either human rights or state sovereignty (Ibid: 133). However, when is it acceptable for a state to violate another state's right to sovereignty by intervening?

IST offers two approaches to solve the dilemma: the pluralist and the solidarist approach. Broadly explained, pluralists believe that state sovereignty must be respected at all times and never be violated, and that human beings have no international rights such as human rights, only the rights given to them by their state. Bull is a theorist who generally promotes this approach (Ibid: 136, 139). Contrarily, solidarists find the protection of human rights to be more vital than the right to state sovereignty, justifying state-intervention such as military intervention in severe cases of human suffering within a country. This approach embraces the notion of universal human rights as promoted by the United Nations. Solidarists thus make intervention an outright duty for states to protect human rights (Ibid: 136). These are but the absolute core aspects of pluralism and solidarism, and focus will be on the solidarist approach with the promoted notion of universal human rights.

2.3.4. Human Rights and Interventionism

Human rights as a concept is imperative in the international society tradition and specifically in determining a state's moral duties of humanitarian responsibility and intervention. Human rights, particularly from a solidarist perspective, are generally associated with the universal human rights as put forth by the UN: all human beings have the same fundamental human rights

notwithstanding where they come from, their culture, or their social status in society. The rights include, among others, that everyone is born free and equal, that no one should be subject to slavery or torture, and all human beings have the right to freedom of thought and expression. The UN has introduced these human rights into international law since 1948 through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (UN, 1948). The UDHR is often used as the foundation of human rights as a concept in international politics, and it adds important human rights principles into international law by promoting a state's humanitarian responsibility and the question of rightful intervention in the affairs of a sovereign state. Moreover, various human rights treaties have been introduced since 1948 that are monitored through the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), as well as the treaty bodies established after the passing of each new human rights treaty (OHCHR, 2015). Nonetheless, these treaties are based on the original UDHR.

If the UDHR and other UN treaties generally constitute the international law of human rights, then it is strange from an IST perspective that the UDHR does not mention anything about justifying armed intervention on behalf of human rights violations. In fact, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 2131(XX) in 1965, which declares the universal inadmissibility of intervention in the affairs of other sovereign states' affairs, turning military intervention into a taboo (UN, 1965). This represents a pluralist approach to humanitarian intervention, not a solidarist as otherwise associated with the UN. Moreover, despite the UN Resolution 2131(XX), the UN has approved armed humanitarian intervention several times, when some states have grown into threats to international peace and security, such as Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, and Libya (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 148-149). From an IST perspective, intervention is also possible since the UDHR has never been an officially signed treaty.

Nonetheless, the UN is revealing a somewhat unclear approach to humanitarian intervention in the affairs of other sovereign states. Despite the 2131 (XX) Resolution, which is completely pluralist in nature, the UN still promotes a solidarist approach to justify intervention in the name of protecting human rights. The danger of a pure pluralist approach is that it could be exploited to justify the rise of dictatorships and genocide, if states are to respect international law and state sovereignty at all times. On the other hand, a pure solidarist approach could be utilized to justify dubious cases of state-intervention, which from an IST perspective is acceptable in a state's self-defense. In that sense, both pluralism and solidarism have some weaknesses.

Additionally, a weakness of the IST approach is that it is so open and inclusive of different strong points of other IR theories such as liberalism and realism. Though it makes it an inclusive theoretical approach with many possibilities for analysis, this openness also increases the risk of incoherence in the IST's arguments, such as concerning state intervention, and adds to the complexity of analysis (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 136-137). Nonetheless, there has been interesting developments like Vincent's argument of the emergence of international legitimacy as an increasingly essential part of interventionism in the IST tradition. At present, international legitimacy may be reached through the international consent about the UN UDHR as a foundation for human rights (Ibid: 155).

3. Methodological Considerations

This part of the thesis will present and discuss the methodological considerations of approaching an answer to the research question. First, a remark about the choice of research topic and paper structure, then a philosophical discussion of the chosen methodological approach to the topic, and a brief discussion on whether a researcher can be truly objective in research. Finally, there will be a part focused on collecting data and information relevant to answer the research question.

3.1. Choice of Topic and Structure

The thesis' research focus was chosen because of my own interest in the topic that arose during my internship at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) in Washington, D.C. from October 2014 to February 2015. COHA has a very critical view on the U.S. sanctions bill, and already during the course of the internship, I wanted to investigate the topic further and write an article on U.S.-Venezuela dynamics. This foundation of existing interest and knowledge on a topic is also an important part of the general background for conducting research (Bryman, 2012: 5). Moreover, the research topic is highly relevant for International Relations and Latin American Studies. It represents a contemporary enigma of current U.S.-Venezuela relations, making it highly relevant as a research topic, and the results can be linked with the existing literature on U.S.-Venezuela relations (Ibid: 8). To reach these results, it will be necessary to investigate many aspects related to the U.S. sanctions bill. The aspects include: U.S.-Venezuela historical relationship, the oil-crisis affecting Venezuela's economy and political life, historical U.S. interventionism in Latin America, the impact of regional blocs on foreign policy decisions, the question of threats to U.S. regional hegemony, and the legitimacy of intervening in Venezuelan affairs concerning violations of human rights.

The structure of the paper (see Contents) is as chronologically organized as possible to create an analysis that leads from past to present. Hence, the historical background leads to a natural transition into the analysis. However, the analytical chapter is divided into four parts with the first two parts specifically dedicated to Venezuela, whereas the two last parts of the analysis keep focus on the United States. Within these parts, the structure of the analysis is more or less chronological concerning first Venezuela, and then the United States. This order

has been chosen to make the analysis more structured and fluent to more easily understand the reasons behind the U.S. sanctions bill against Venezuelan officials. The next sections of the methodology will look into different research methods, if an author can remain objective in research, the theoretical choices in this paper, and finally the collection of sources.

3.2. Philosophical Discussion

In methodology of social science, the meta-theory, the theory behind IR theories, is understood through epistemology and ontology. Ontology is concerned with reality: the existence and essence of objects, i.e. material or mental in nature, and therefore relates to how one perceives the reality of the world (Jørgensen, 2010: 16, 263). Epistemology means “*the theory of knowledge*” and functions as a determining force behind what knowledge is valid to study the world, what the limits to do so are, and how one obtains the valid knowledge (Ibid: 16-17).

In ontology, Alexander Wendt and Raymond Duvall are two newer influential meta-theorists who believe that though approaches within ontology do not dictate the theories of IR, they still influence how researchers are to approach the phenomena of reality that they wish to explain (Ibid: 16). The two most prominent approaches on how to perceive, how to view, reality, are objectivism and constructionism (often referred to as constructivism). Objectivism determines how a phenomenon of reality can have a reality external to social actors, in other words, that social actors such as researchers may view the reality, though they are not able to actually influence it (Bryman, 2012: 32). That they do not have access to reality does not mean that it does not exist. According to constructionism, on the other hand, reality and social phenomena are determined by social actors, such as researchers, making reality socially constructed through social actors’ interaction and understandings of the world (Ibid: 33). A researcher’s works, or accounts of reality, will therefore always present his/her own specific version of reality instead of one definitive reality (Ibid). Therefore, a true objectivist reality is not possible though desirable according to constructionism.

Epistemology determines what knowledge is valid to study reality, what the limits are, and how it is possible to obtain valid knowledge (Ibid: 16-17). James Frederick Ferrier first introduced the concept of epistemology in the 19th century and has written extensively on the subject of ontology-epistemology relations (Thomson, 1967: 52). Within epistemology, different views exist on what is valid knowledge. Again, two approaches stand out: positivism and interpretivism. Positivism is a natural science epistemology but it is not a scientific

approach. Positivism instead determines that only knowledge that can be “*confirmed by the senses*” can truly be regarded as valid knowledge, or as reality (Bryman, 2012: 27-28). This opposes the aforementioned notion of not being able to depict reality unbiased. The other prominent epistemological approach is interpretivism. It often is related to the concept of hermeneutics, which represents a clash with positivism according to Von Wright in the 1970s. Hermeneutics is a concept from theology “*concerned with the theory and method of the interpretation of human action*” (Ibid: 28). Instead of explaining human behavior, as positivists do, hermeneutists approach social science by trying to understand human behavior, that is, their actions and how reality they see the social reality. Max Weber advocated the notion of understanding (and in his case, also explaining) human behavior through his concept of *Verstehen*, which means ‘understanding’ in German (Ibid: 28-29).

3.2.1. Critical Realism

From an ontological point of departure, critical realism present a middle ground between constructionism and objectivism. Critical realism takes the view that the “*social world is reproduced and transformed into daily life*” (Bhaskar in Bryman, 2012: 616). Roy Bhaskar first introduced the concept of critical realism in the 1970s, and he developed it from realism, which is an epistemological basis for the natural sciences such as positivism, but it remains different from both interpretivism and positivism. Realism is often referred to as either empirical realism or naïve realism, because its theorists often assume that the conceptualization of realism can explain true reality, or very close to perfect. Bhaskar labels this realism “superficial”, since it fails to recognize that reality consists of underlying structures and generative mechanisms that produce observable social phenomena and events (Bhaskar in Bryman, 2012: 29). This describes critical realism, but where positivists’ conceptualization of reality directly reflects that reality, critical realists’ conceptualization of reality is simply a way of knowing that reality (Bryman, 2012: 29). Therefore, an external reality exists, but it is separate from how we are able to access it and describe it (Ibid).

Social phenomena and events of daily life are produced by generative mechanisms and structures. However, it is not possible to view these mechanisms and structures specifically as they act independently outside of the empirically accessible world, that is, the social world. Therefore, it is only possible to observe their effects. Critical realists furthermore believe that it only is possible to understand the social world, if the structures that generate the events of the

social world, or daily life, are identified. According to Bhaskar, the only way to observe these structures is to identify them through the practical and theoretical work of the social sciences (Bryman, 2012: 29). This makes Bhaskar's critical realism structural determining, since the structures of the world then determine the events of reality. I will use this structural determinism as a way to understand the world that is to be analyzed in this thesis. Focus is on the realist tradition throughout the paper, which determines that the structure of the world is one of anarchy. However, as argued by Bhaskar, it is not possible to view the structure of anarchy directly, only its effects. Moreover, I am aware of the fact that this is just one structure that may characterize the world, which makes my point of departure subjective because I have chosen to use this specific determining world structure.

As reality and its mechanisms exist independently of our knowledge of it, and humans are the only way to access the social world when they identify the aforementioned structures and events, the social world is at all times subjective (Ibid). In other words, reality is real but humans only have a subjective understanding of it and its events, because it is based on experiences, or collected empirical knowledge, which makes it subjective.

This subjectivity also applies to the author of this paper. Moreover, according to Bhaskar, generative mechanisms consist of entities and processes that produce social phenomena. In this thesis, the phenomena of interest is the U.S. sanctions against Venezuelan officials (Ibid). In order to understand it, important entities to scrutinize will be the political leaders of Venezuela and the United States such as Hugo Chávez, Nicolás Maduro, and Barack Obama. The processes of the generative mechanisms will be the domestic politics in both countries and their changes because they also influence foreign policy and relations. It will not be possible to understand the foreign policy agendas of neither Venezuela nor the United States, if one does not comprehend their internal political milieus, and is why the national situations of each country will be so important in the upcoming analysis. The sanctions bill was introduced in Venezuela recently, which makes it imperative to analyze and understand the events and processes that led to this phenomenon.

3.3. A Researcher's Objectivity

Objectivity is a widely debated subject. According to the ontological objectivism, "*social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of social actors,*" and it hence is possible to be objective in social research (Bryman, 2012: 713). The same applies to

positivism, since a researcher's conceptualization is a direct reflection of reality, which makes objectivity possible. However, it is the opposite for both constructivists and interpretivists. As critical realism emphasizes, reality exists but a researcher is not able to stay objective as his/her access to the social world always will be subjective, based on experience.

This research subjectivity is similarly found in historical research methodology. Here, objectivity comes into conflict with the historian's moral judgement. Although a historian is not obligated to make moral judgements, "*the very nature of history and its terminology are found to involve unavoidable moral judgement. This is because the historian deals with a live concern – human life – and has to deal with it using imperfect evidence.*" (Sreedharan, 2007: 127-128). All evidence in research is imperfect because it originates from human beings, and if people are unable to stay objective without any moral judgements, then how could their evidence ever be objective? This is why Sreedharan calls history value-impregnated based on human nature itself as subjective (Ibid: 128).

The historical research understanding is akin to that of critical realists, since the understanding of the social world can never be objective. Moreover, everyone is bound to have predisposed ideas about the outcome of research, as well as why a certain research topic is chosen in the first place. A researcher will also be affected by his/hers former experiences. For example, I lived in Washington, D.C. and completed an internship in the progressive think tank COHA. This experience is uniquely linked to me and constitutes a fundamental part of my existing knowledge, and therefore point of departure, on working with the topic of U.S.-Venezuelan relations. Thus, completely unbiased research is impossible, but one can still strive to make it as neutral as possible by showing various sides of a topic to appear as neutral as possible. Even though objectivity is impossible, impartiality in conducting research should still be emphasized. Impartiality is not the same as objectivity. Impartiality refers to a researcher putting forth as much, if not all, available information on a topic and not withholding specific parts that will create biased research results (Ibid: 128-129). Nonetheless, I would still argue that it is possible to maintain a certain level of neutral language in writing.

3.4. Theoretical Considerations

The theories used in research to interpret phenomena in the world have a direct influence on the research topic and how the collected data and information are being analyzed. Therefore, an author's theoretical point of departure is very important for the analytical chapter (Bryman,

2012: 5). This author has chosen IR theories to analyze the reasons behind the U.S. sanctions against Venezuelan officials. Focus will be on Mearsheimer's offensive realism with two supporting theoretical concepts, international political economy (IPE) and geopolitics. Though they will be important for the entire analysis, they will be used specifically in the first three parts of the analytical chapter. The international society tradition (IST) is particularly important for the fourth and final analytical chapter, though it also will be used in the second part. However, the theoretical chapter begins with a brief presentation of the liberalist paradigm in IR, which is there not only to give a better understanding of the opposing realist paradigm, but because it emphasizes that states are not the only actors in the world of IR, but also individuals such as Hugo Chávez or Barack Obama.

The chosen theories and concepts will be used together to analyze the structures that, according to critical realists, generate the social world and its events and discourses. This is the only way to gain understanding of the social world. For IR realists, the general structure of the world is anarchic, which has a direct influence on how states act and shape the world, mostly through conflict. IPE and geopolitics will be imperative concepts to understand the U.S.-Venezuela relations as well as foreign policy making. IPE emphasizes the importance of economy in the realm of politics, both domestic and foreign policy making, which is why economy has an impact on what events and discourses constitute the social world. The same applies to geopolitics, because factors such as geography, population, and natural resources also affect the social world as understood by researchers. IST sees the world as a society of states and this is conceptualized in three different ways but the one that will be used in the analysis is the rationalist approach. The anarchic world structure already is emphasized in offensive realism, and revolutionism is generally focused on human beings, not states. Rationalism offers middle ground and sees the world as one where states respect each other as sovereign states, while at the same time accept that conflict is a recurring phenomenon. Moreover, as focus will be on the pluralist perspective of human rights as universal, which gives states the right to intervene in the affairs of sovereign states to protect human rights, the chosen international institution that will be emphasized in the analysis is the UN given its primacy for promoting universal human rights. As universal human rights usually are associated with the UDHR, this will be the point of reference in the analysis and not the many treaties established by the OHCHR. Pluralism and solidarism are not discussed further in this paper, since it is the core concepts of these approaches that are interesting for this thesis, and specifically that of

solidarism to investigate reasons behind the U.S. sanctions bill. Additionally, IST concepts and values, such as diplomacy, human rights, and international justice, are generally opposing those of offensive realism, and this will add different angles to the upcoming analysis of the research topic.

Offensive realists such as Mearsheimer strive to avoid normative analysis of world politics because it is not scientific and hence not objective (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 76). However, the author argues that it is no problem to use a subjective method such as critical realism because all theories are creations of human beings, which makes them subjective by default. Though they strive to reflect reality and are based on historical patterns and events, theories can only generate a subjective understanding of the social world, including the structures that generate its social phenomena, such as the U.S. sanctions bill. Critical realism is also apt as meta-theory for IST, since it is a value based IR theory with focus on values such as international justice, international order, human rights, state sovereignty, and humanitarian intervention. In order to stay open-minded for various explanations as to why the U.S. sanctions were imposed against Venezuelan officials in the first place, the authors does not work out from specific hypotheses. It creates the danger of making this paper and its analysis too open, which in turn can generate flaws in the reasoning obtained from the analysis.

3.5. Collecting Data and Information

This thesis will be based on the use of secondary sources. Despite the attempt to conduct qualitative interviews with Venezuelans, it did not work out. Instead, the information comes primarily from secondary sources such as books, journals, online newspapers, reports, and websites of the U.S. government and different institutions and organizations. The variety of secondary sources with different points of departure will enhance the validity of research results by giving different perspectives to the analysis. They will ensure a higher degree of impartiality and therefore credibility of this paper, despite the paper being subjective (Bryman, 2012: 8).

Both for the historical background, and to analyze the circumstances surrounding the research topic, the author will collect secondary quantitative and qualitative data. Access to statistical data i.e. the Venezuelan *Datanálisis* or Gallup will be important to underline statements in the analytical chapter, though statistics should be approached carefully since they can present biased results depending on how one analyzes them. Secondary qualitative data will

include interviews that have been conducted with U.S. government officials and past interviews with Hugo Chávez.

Other secondary sources for the analysis will include the official U.S. sanctions bill against Venezuelan officials (see Appendix), documents and information from the official website of the U.S. Department of State, research papers, books, online mass media, and movies. Most information will be found online through the library page of Aalborg University, www.aub.aau.dk, from where research papers and articles from different journals can be found in databases such as SAGE Journals, JSTOR, and Cambridge Journals Online. In the methodology, the chosen book as foundation for this part is Alan Bryman's *Social Research Methods* from 2012. For the empirical background and analysis, they will generally be contemporary and by different authors focusing on specific topics such as U.S.-Venezuela relations, Hugo Chávez, or Venezuela's oil diplomacy. Important authors include Gregory Wilpert, Nikolas Kozloff, and Tom Chodor, who possess expert knowledge on the topics. Online newspapers and magazines include Al-Jazeera, BBC, The Huffington Post, El Universal, El Tiempo, and TeleSUR. Other sources will be from Venezuelanalysis.com, the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA), Human Rights Watch (HRW), and the Council on Foreign Relations. Most sources will be in English, but some in Danish and Spanish. In the sections of the analysis that deals with the sanctions bill, most sources will be recent online newspaper articles, interviews, blogs, and reports. This is due to the newness of the topic.

Given the intended use of secondary qualitative and quantitative data and information, the approach towards information and data in this paper will be based on the documentary method. Through this method, one must analyze various types of sources with specific information about the chosen research topic (Mogalakwe, 2006: 221). The documentary method is very often used at universities given the sometimes limited access to primary quantitative and qualitative data. Perhaps this is why its applicability is underestimated among many researchers of social science (Ibid). Given the subtle strengths of this method, though, since this thesis will be based on secondary sources, the documentary method appears suitable for analyzing the reasons behind the U.S. decision to introduce a sanctions bill against Venezuelan officials accused of human rights violations. In fact, the documentary method does not hinder this paper from being able to procure accurate results. Moreover, by applying different types of methods and sources of information to conduct in-depth research, this thesis will use the research concept of triangulation. It means that an author uses various sources of data, theoretical perspectives,

and methods in studying social phenomena (Bryman, 2012: 392). The social phenomena of this paper is the U.S. sanctions bill, and triangulation will be used to approach this. As aforementioned, throughout the thesis, various sources of data, both secondary quantitative and qualitative in nature, as well as different theoretical perspectives, as introduced in the theoretical chapter. Triangulation has developed into being used as a way of “*cross-checking findings deriving from both quantitative and qualitative research,*” which is what the plan for this thesis is (Deacon in Bryman, 2012: 392).

4. Historical background

4.1. Venezuela before Chávez

Oil has dominated Venezuela's economy since its discovery in the beginning of the 20th century, though foreign companies controlled the entire industry until the nationalization in 1976. This year, Venezuela's national oil company PdVSA (*Petróleos de Venezuela Sociedad Anónima*, Petroleum of Venezuela) was founded, which became a national pride for Venezuelans (Kozloff, 2006: 9). With oil dominating the economy, the industrial and agricultural sectors could not keep up the needed level of production to satisfy the demand for consumer goods⁷. To solve the issue, Venezuela imported the needed goods, and has up until today become a net importer of food since the agricultural sector more or less has vanished (Wilpert, 2007: 10-11). Politically, Venezuela has been very stable, especially throughout the second half of the 20th century with the *Punto Fijo* Pact, which was signed in 1958 by the three largest political parties in Venezuela (Ibid: 12). It was established as a sort of oligarchy to keep power solely among the political elite (Williamson, 2009: 593). It was officially a democracy, but the integrity of the system was dubious, since specific political parts of society were repressed. Nonetheless, the political system was more stable than before, and the economy was striving too until the 1980s, the "lost decade", where Venezuela suffered economically alongside the rest of Latin America. In 1989, to solve the economic recession, President Carlos Andrés Pérez (1989-1993) decided to accept IMF loans and implement neoliberal reforms, which worsened the situation for the poorer parts of the population specifically. In the end, demonstrations and riots against the government spread and President Pérez invoked a state of emergency. This led to the bloody "*El Caracazo*" on February 27 in 1989 where up to 10,000 people were killed in violent clashes with the police and military due to anti-government demonstrations (Bülow, 2010: 41-44).

At that time, Chávez was a military officer, a lieutenant coronel, and he was a great admirer of Simón Bolívar, an important independence leader against the Spanish empire in the 19th century. Chávez became increasingly politically active during the 1980s, and Gregory Wilpert as has summarized his political agenda, his revolutionary Bolivarianism as "*an emphasis on the importance of education, the creation of civilian–military unity, Latin*

⁷ This issue is also called the Dutch Disease. It refers to the rapid expansion of one sector of a country's economy while the rest of the sectors struggle to do the same, which create problems. This is what happened in Holland when gas in the North Sea was discovered (Wilpert, 2007: 11).

American integration social justice, and national sovereignty” (Wilpert, 2007: 16). However, his coup against the government failed in 1992 and he was incarcerated until 1994. Nonetheless, he became increasingly popular among the population, especially the poorer classes of the country, as social inequality kept rising until the elections in 1998, with 81% of the population living below the poverty line and 48% in extreme poverty (Fernandes in Chodor, 2014:143). With Chávez’s new party MVR, (*Movimiento V [Quinta] República*, Movement for the Fifth Republic), he won the presidential elections in 1998 with 56,5% of the votes (Bülow, 2010: 32-35).

4.2. U.S.-Venezuela Relations before Chávez

Historically, Venezuela and the United States had good relations, and they share bonds all the way back to the independence wars, since both nations were striving for autonomy from European colonial powers in the late 18th century (Kelly & Romero, 2002: 6-7). However, where the United States took off as a growing international power, Venezuela fell behind. Still, cordial relations remained, and oil came to characterize their relationship until present day. Oil was first discovered in Venezuela in 1914 and the geographical proximity to the United States ensured easy access to build up Venezuela’s future oil industry. Although the two countries shared common interests, Venezuela was also struggling to come to terms with its lack of power as a state compared to the United States. Moreover, it was difficult to grow in power since Venezuela was facing economic and political difficulties throughout the 20th century similar to the rest of Latin America, though Venezuela’s economy generally prospered due to its vast oil reserves (Ibid: 10, 12).

During the Cold War, Venezuela kept a firm anticommunist stance, and did not object much to U.S. intervention in the region such as the U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965. The fierce anti-U.S. position was not developed until Chávez entered the political stage (Ibid: 18-19). However, despite this almost placid acceptance of U.S. intervention in the region, Venezuela began nationalizing the oil and iron ore industries in the 1970s. It was a sign of the whole region’s growing wish for more autonomy from the United States, who did little to counteract such attempts during the 1970s. At that time, during the Cold War, the United States was more focused on more severe situations such as the Vietnam War and the Watergate crisis, which both led to social unrest within the United States at that time (Ibid: 20). Nonetheless, good relations persisted, and the United States generally gave little attention to Venezuela

because it was democratic, supportive of the U.S. government, and had a stable economy in no need to be rescued by neither the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) nor the World Bank (WB). Venezuela was “peaceful” (Kelly & Romero, 2002: 29). Nonetheless, Venezuela began to show increased opposition against U.S. interventionism in the Latin American continent, such as when the small Caribbean state Grenada was invaded by U.S. troops in 1983 (Ibid: 24).

Moreover, though President Pérez in 1989 accepted foreign loans with neoliberal conditions from the IMF, supported by the United States, the country was not behind him. This caused the subsiding U.S.-Venezuela relations throughout the 1990s until 1998 when Chávez won the presidential elections. He won completely democratically, hence the United States could not rightfully object to the regime change (Ibid: 33-38). Where Venezuela and the United States formerly shared good relations, both economic and diplomatic, Chávez’s election initiated a new turn in their inter-state affairs.

5. Analysis

5.1. Venezuela during the Presidency of Chávez and Maduro

5.1.1. Changing Venezuela

When Chávez became president, he made Venezuela into a key player in his Bolivarian Revolution against the United States, which he saw as an imperialist power. At the same time, he promoted Latin American integration in the spirit of Simón Bolívar and even held his speeches in front of a big Bolívar painting to draw comparisons between the two (Kozloff, 2006: 3). Chávez arose in Venezuela as a critic of the former elitist governments, the lack of social welfare, and an economic recession when he became president, which all shaped his own agenda. He wanted to change Venezuela by empowering the poor people and through a civil-military alliance, which integrated the military into a part of society both by participating in politics, the oil industry, and by aiding the many popular social programs introduced by Chávez (Ibid: 77). Chávez also wanted to establish a more participatory and just society based on democracy, and incorporated these values into his political agenda. His many followers were soon known as *chavistas*.

The economy grew under the leadership of Chávez and he began to pour government resources into social programs. In fact, his economic model for Venezuela was built on the vast oil resources and the revenue from Venezuela's national oil company PdVSA (Corrales & Penfold, 2011: 89). PdVSA spent more than \$23 billion USD on social programs from 2003-2008, which significantly helped reduce the number of poor households with approximately 50% and extremely poor households with 72% (Weisbrot et. al., 2009: 9). Chávez's social programs financed "*start-up community-level cooperatives to provide primary health care, road construction, or office-cleaning services, or to produce foodstuffs and simple manufactured goods*" (Corrales & Penfold, 2011: 83). Moreover, PdVSA financed the construction of *Barrio Adentro I* and *II* as elaborate preventive health-care centers offering more advanced health care. *Barrio Adentro I* and *II* also managed medical relations with Cuba to secure Cuban doctors and medical equipment at the centers (Ibid).

Chávez's popularity among the poor and marginalized parts of society gave him the power make significant political changes too. In 1999, he held a referendum, which he won

with 88% of the vote, to set up elections for an assembly to draft a new constitution. Chávez won 119 out of 131 seats, and when the new constitution went to the population in a new referendum in December 1999, it was approved with 71% of votes (Williamson, 2009: 594). The new constitution gave Chávez the power to revamp all centers of politics so the former governing elite lost much of its power and influence on state matters (Wilpert, 2007: 20-23). The constitution expanded the presidential term to 6 years, and the former discredited two-chamber Congress, popular during the *Punto Fijo* system, was turned into a unicameral National Assembly with 165 seats. All states in Venezuela received the right to have three representatives notwithstanding the state size. Other significant changes include the creation of a new independent electoral commission, and a restructuring of both the Supreme Court and judicial system to avoid their future interference in politics and the subsequent corruption (Williamson, 2009: 595). Under the new constitution, presidential elections were held in July 2002, which Chávez won with 59% of votes, and his supporters won 55% of all seats in the new National Assembly (Ibid). It was through these democratically made changes, that Chávez secured the support of Venezuela's ruling political body of the government to legitimize his future state decisions.

The elite, having lost much political power, rose to oppose Chávez. They explicitly used mass media to launch a critical campaign in order to try to turn the middle class against him. In regards to the media, it is noteworthy to mention that the majority of mass media is privately owned in Venezuela, which is why it often has been used to be critical of Chávez during his presidency (Búlow, 2013: 107-108). Moreover, the economic recession in 2001 caused by a drop in oil prices after the 9/11 attack, forced Caracas to make economic adjustments, which made unemployment rates climb and stirred opposition against Chávez's government. Between June 2001 and January 2002, his popularity ratings dropped from 60-70% to 30-40%. This escalated into the opposition stating a coup against Chávez in April 2002, but the poor forced the new government to step down and hand power back to Chávez. Another opposition-led act was to instigate a shutdown of the oil industry to hit the country's economy and Chávez's political foothold. When this too failed, the opposition made a recall referendum against Chávez in August 2004, but he won the referendum convincingly with 58% of the vote (Wilpert, 2007: 23-26).

As mentioned in the methodology, individuals are important in both domestic and international politics, and Chávez is a keen example of this, as it was through him that the entire

government was changed. Moreover, the population's support also gave Chávez the authority to decrease the elite's power. It would therefore make sense that the opposition, when criticized Chávez through mass media, indirectly criticized his government and supporters too. This opposition remained throughout Chávez's presidency and it some argue that it was their continuous pressure as well as U.S. antagonism that pushed Chávez to radicalize his political agenda until he began to embrace socialist values (Chodor, 2014: 151-152). This became known as 21st century socialism dedicated to participatory democracy and to put decision-making into the hands of the people through localized committees (Williamson, 2009: 595).

In 2006, Chávez had strong support, but the presidential elections appeared controversial because the opposition largely abstained from voting and several parties refused participation: they argued that the National Electoral Council (CNE, *Consejo Nacional Electoral*) was not impartial (Freedom House, 2013). This boycott of the elections was likely done to delegitimize Chávez's victory. If so, it is no surprise that Chávez won a landslide victory with his new party, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV, *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela*) against the opposition candidate, Manuel Rosales (Wilpert, 2007: 27-28). He won with a total of 62,8% against the 36,9% to Rosales (CNE, 2006). However, despite the opposition's fraud accusations, Chávez's approval ratings were high before the election: 61% of the population approved of his performance as president according to statistics from Gallup (Crabtree, 2009). Despite some approval fluctuations, Chávez and the support for his government stayed powerful throughout his entire presidency. He won a referendum with 55% of the vote in 2009, after a narrow loss in 2008, to legalize unlimited runs for presidential reelection, which allowed him to run for, and win, his third presidential term in 2012 against Capriles (Sullivan, 2014: 5).

5.1.2. Venezuela's Military Power

Chávez was a lieutenant coronel in the military before the failed coup attempt in 1992, and his military background has been visible in changing Venezuela. Not only did Chávez desire to empower the poor and create a more just, democratic society, he wanted a “*civil-military alliance*” as stated by Kozloff (2006: 77). It meant that the military's role in Venezuela's social and political life was enlarged, and thousands of soldiers worked in the streets, working in public transportation sector and distributing consumer goods to the poor. Chávez not only restored public faith in the military and the government, military officers began to enter other

sectors of society such as the political scene and the economy through the PdVSA (Kozloff, 2006: 85).

Military U.S.-Venezuela ties, formerly close, were terminated in 2005, and Chávez turned to new security partners such as Cuba, but also Russia and China in order to amass military power by importing weaponry (Corrales and Penfold, 2011: 100-101). Though Venezuela is focused on maintaining a strong military, it has generally exhibited a soft-balancing strategy in its foreign policy towards the United States under both Chávez and Maduro, aimed at frustrating and limiting U.S. power through anything but direct military action (Ibid: 102). This is a natural strategy in offensive realism, since it would be too costly for Venezuela's national security to attack the United States directly since the U.S. military power is larger than Venezuela's. Even so, with good military Cuba-Venezuela relations and arms purchasing from China and Russia, some argue that Venezuela's foreign policy strategy towards the United States more resembles hard-balancing through the direct build-up of military power, despite the lack of a direct attack (Ibid: 103).

Regardless of Venezuela's economic crisis, it remains the top weaponry importer in the entire Latin American region, and between 2011-2014 imported arms for \$2.6 billion USD. Moreover, Maduro stated on April 1, 2015 that he had made new agreements with both China and Russia (Lee, 2015). On one side, the population is angry over this expenses and would rather see the money invested in importing some of the goods that Venezuela so lacks, and on the other hand, Maduro's government appears to be acting from a realist principle simply in order to strengthen military capabilities and national security.

5.1.3. Venezuelan Oil as a Geopolitical Tool in Foreign Policy

Venezuela has the largest oil reserves in the world, which was an estimated 298 billion barrels in 2014 (Sullivan, 2014: 38). This natural resource richness greatly affects Venezuela's economy and is hence a part of the state's political power in international politics. This also correlates with the IPE perspective that a country's economy is intertwined with its policymaking. The use of oil as a political and economic instrument in foreign relations as well as nationally to aid the population has revealed Venezuela's economic leverage in international politics, something that Chávez emphasized even before he became president in 1998: oil is an important geopolitical weapon (Kozloff, 2006: 7). For example, Venezuela has earlier influenced international oil prices through OPEC in order to raise its annual oil revenue (Ibid).

Aside from Venezuela's dependency on oil, 96% of all exports by 2014, to secure the national economy and various social policies, it has also been imperative in Venezuela's foreign affairs. The country's oil richness has repeatedly legitimized it as a powerful international player able to affect the geopolitics of the Latin American region, specifically through oil-diplomacy. Oil has been the most important instrument in Venezuela's foreign policy to "*build a network of alliances with Central American, Caribbean, and South American States [and] to forge new economic ties with China, Iran, and Russia*" (Trinkunas, 2011: 26). Thus, Chávez also used oil to spread his vision of the Bolivarian Revolution to empower Latin American autonomy from the United States: it enabled Venezuela to secure regional initiatives, including under-writing debt for several Latin American countries as well as offering strategic amounts of capital to aid them. For example, Ecuador and Argentina received economic aid from 2005 and onward (Riggiozzi, 2011: 13-14; Baribeau, 2005). Chávez also aimed at other regional projects such as the creation of a joint energy policy in Latin América through *Petro-América* as a regional OPEC, but also through the Caribbean integration project *PetroCaribe* from 2004 to assist 17 Caribbean countries (Kozloff, 2006: 106; Maingot, 2011: 102-103). Moreover, Chávez kept strong ties with Cuba by trading subsidized oil for doctors and teachers through the "Oil for Doctors" program. Cuba, in return, has aided Venezuelan social programs focused on health care and education (Riggiozzi, 2011: 15). These are just some examples of how oil has been crucial for Venezuela's foreign policy as well as its power to affect Latin America's geopolitics (see more in section 5.2.).

As Venezuela, under the banner of Chávez, increased regional collaboration (see more in section 5.2.), the foreign policy towards the United States also changed radically by turning increasingly hostile, especially during the Bush presidency (2000-2008). The enmity never turned military with the fear of open war between the two states, but Chávez used several soft balancing techniques to challenge the United States during his presidency. Aside from using Venezuela's economic oil power to further regional integration, Chávez also endorsed Fidel Castro's Cuba and other anti-U.S. regimes such as Iran, Iraq, and Libya. Moreover, he repeatedly criticized the U.S. war in Iraq and the U.S. war on drugs in Latin America, increased taxes for U.S. oil companies present in Venezuela, and increased imports of weaponry from both China and Russia (Trinkunas, 2011: 20-21; Kozloff, 2006: 3). However, these soft balancing measures were carried out due to Washington's antagonistic foreign policy against Chávez until his death in 2013 such as revealed in secret documents exposed by Wikileaks in

2014. They show how the Bush administration greatly endorsed the 2002 coup against Chávez, and this is but one hostile incident out of many (Chodor, 2014: 171-172).

Chávez increasingly became a regional provocateur against the United States and openly criticized the United States for wanting full access and control over Venezuelan oil. In an interview with Oliver Stone in the 2009 documentary “South of the Border”, Chávez explains that the United States supported the 2002 coup solely to gain access to Venezuela’s oil reserves, and that the 2003 intervention in Iraq against Saddam Hussein was a mere excuse to access Iraq’s oil (Stone, 2009). Oil is without doubt a powerful geopolitical instrument, and it is not unlikely to believe that the United States would like to control as much of it as possible since it has such great impact on international politics. According to Mearsheimer, latent state capabilities include economic power, and the United States could use that to strengthen its position in regional affairs. This accumulation of economic power would also strengthen U.S. national security from an IPE and realist perspective.

Despite unfriendly U.S.-Venezuela relations, their oil trade has not diminished: Venezuela has remained the fifth largest U.S.-oil exporter, and Venezuela a big market for U.S. goods (U.S. EIA, 2015; Trading Economics, 2015). Moreover, the United States has largely remained passive to Venezuela’s soft balancing tactics, which might be because of a fear of losing access to the oil (Corrales & Penfold, 2011: 100). On the other hand, Venezuela has been careful not to threaten the United States directly, despite its large-scale import of weaponry from Russia and China, former U.S. enemies. This is most likely because Venezuela’s economy is so deeply dependent on oil as an export commodity, and the closest country geographically with refineries technologically equipped to process Venezuela’s type of oil is the United States (Trinkunas, 2011: 24).

5.1.4. Maduro Facing Opposition, Social Unrest, and an Economic Crisis

When Chávez passed away on March 5, 2013, vice president Nicolás Maduro, also from the PSUV party, continued Chávez’s legacy as the new president. He won a close presidential race on April 14, 2013 (a slight vote majority of 1,49%) against the rightwing opposition leader, Henrique Capriles Radonski. He is the leader of the opposition’s coalition party, Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD, *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática*), and was the opposition’s candidate during the presidential elections in October 2012 too (Sullivan, 2014: 9). Before the post-Chávez election, there were great speculations on whom would become the new president:

Capriles, governor of the Miranda state, supported social policies similar to those of Chávez; but Maduro was associated directly with the Bolivarian Revolution, despite his lack of Chávez's charisma, and he could draw on the state-run media (Kozloff, 2013). However, when Maduro took over the presidency, Venezuela was already approaching an economic crisis, which would turn out to have a direct effect on domestic politics.

In 2013, Venezuela's economy was in decline due to decreasing foreign investment, general hoarding, and a shortage of U.S. imported goods, which was caused by a lack of funds and the sale of USD on the black market, otherwise meant for buying imported goods (Chodor, 2014: 173). The shortage of goods included primary items and food products such as toilet paper, rice, coffee, and corn flour, and the inflation rate rose to 56,2% on January 1, 2014 (Lopez, 2013; Trading Economics, 2015b). The situation has continuously deteriorated until today with people desperately standing, even sleeping, in lines outside supermarkets due to the ongoing national shortage of goods and the international oil price crisis driving inflation rates up. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) calculated Venezuela's inflation rate to be the world's highest in January 2015 with 68,5%, and as of today, it lies close to 97% (elEconomistaAmérica.com, 2015; Trading Economics, 2015b). Maduro initially tried to shift the economic decline in 2013: he raised the import of primary goods, struck down hard on hoarders, and managed to lower the inflation rate slightly by bringing down the black market dollar rate (Chodor, 2014: 173).

Until today, Maduro has fiercely stated that the food shortage and sale of USD on the black market are direct features of an "economic war" waged against him to destabilize his government. Moreover, the culprits, according to Maduro, are the private business sector and the opposition, mainly led by the richer classes of Venezuelan society, and supported financially by Washington (Ibid; Lopez, 2013). The opposition has refuted this assertion and instead labelled Maduro as too incompetent to handle the economic recession since 2013. What the opposition most likely did not expect was the continued popular support for the Maduro government during the municipal elections in December 2013 when the PSUV party gained almost 10% more of the votes than MUD did (Chodor, 2014: 173-174). Clearly, Maduro's public support at that time was still solid, suggesting that the chavistas were willing to give him a chance to show his worth. Nonetheless, several events in 2014 would change Maduro's image among the population, specifically based on his political decisions, both nationally and internationally. However, 2014 began as a critical year for Maduro's government. The growing

inflation, an increasingly high crime rate, and general food shortage led to numerous demonstrations. Initially, they were triggered by a call for better domestic security after the attempted rape of a female student at her university campus but they soon escalated into covering other matters too (BBC, 2014a). From student protests to peaceful hunger strikes and political demonstrations, opposition leaders quickly became active, which led to an instant government reaction: Leopoldo López, leader of the pro-opposition party Popular Will (VP, *Voluntad Popular*), was arrested on February 18, 2014, accused of instigating violent demonstrations. Since then, he has been in jail together with 89 other political prisoners, despite national as well as international criticism and calls for their release (Ordoñez & Caruso-Cabrera, 2015). Capriles had urged the population to demonstrate peacefully, but the demonstrations turned deadly in 2014, and the total death toll reached 43 citizens of both the government's supporters and the opposition (Watts, 2014). The deaths during the anti-government demonstrations were one of the main U.S. arguments to impose a sanctions bill, both in May and in December 2014, against Venezuelan government officials accused of human rights violations (Ibid).

The protests were centered in the upper neighborhoods of society, with the elite opposing Maduro and trying to “*push him out of power*” (Chodor, 2014: 177-178). However, the middle and poorer classes of society generally did not demonstrate, showing that a significant part of society still supported Maduro during this time of crisis, similar to the support of Chávez during the 2002 coup. An interesting fact, since the poorest parts of the population were struck hardest economically in 2013-2014 (Ibid). Nonetheless, the critical economic situation did not improve, and with inflation at 68.5% at the end of 2014, and consumer prices rising with an average 5.3%, the poor became further pressured economically (Ellworth, 2015). The 2014 economic failings severely affected Chávez's popular approval rate. It dropped to 24,7% in November 2014 from approximately 55% in April 2013, while Capriles' approval rate rose to 45,8%, the highest of any opposition candidates, according to numbers from the national pollster *Datanálisis* (in Reuters, 2014; von Bergen, 2015). In 2015, Maduro's approval rate has fallen even more: in January, he was close to a mere 20% and though it by March had risen to 25%, it still reveals the scarce support Maduro has left in Venezuela (Ulmer, 2015).

When Chávez was president, his radicalization of politics into 21st century socialism was blamed on domestic and U.S. opposition, and Maduro is facing similar opposition but is also under a lot of pressure due to the economic crisis and the U.S. sanctions, imposed on

Venezuelan officials for violating human rights (Watts, 2014). So far, Maduro has not weathered the economic, political, and societal pressure as well as Chávez did. Instead, Maduro has increasingly become more fanatic about the domestic political opposition and has fiercely criticized the United States for interfering in national affairs. Since the introduction of the sanctions bill in December 2014, inter-state tensions have only increased so far (BBC, 2015b).

5.1.5. Maduro against the United States

The strong U.S. antagonism has been consistent since Maduro became president, and specifically the sanctions bill from December 2014 has been a foreign policy issue. President Obama signed the sanctions bill on December 18, and seven government officials were targeted in March 2015 (Mason & Rampton, 2015; see more in 5.3.3. and 5.3.4.). The strained U.S.-Venezuela relation is also based on Maduro's accusations of Washington making targeted foreign policy decisions to support his opposition, including the already known financial support to the opposition through U.S. aid agencies. According to a 2013 Wikileaks cable, the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has financially supported anti-government subversion in Venezuela from, at least, the 2002 coup against Chávez until 2010, indicating that Obama has well aware of U.S. interference in Venezuela from the beginning of his first presidential term (2008-2012) (Beeton, 2014). Moreover, Obama allocated \$5 million USD to "*support political competition-building efforts in Venezuela*" in 2014, and though this is somewhat ambiguously worded—and much lower than the money earmarked for other countries such as Cuba or Mexico—it seems to imply that the money is meant for supporting Maduro's opposition (Department of State, 2014: 126).

With the historical economic support to the chavista government's opposition, it is no wonder that Maduro has viewed the U.S. sanctions as but another endorsement of the opposition. At the end of January 2015, Maduro decided to try to curb the situation by hurting those of the opposition participating in demonstration: he made regulations for security officials, such as the military, to legally use deadly force on civilians during demonstrations (Agencies in Cristóbal, 2015). This already questionable decision, criticized both nationally and internationally, backfired even further when a 14-year old boy was shot dead during an anti-government demonstration on February 24, 2015. Though the government condemned the incident and went to prosecute the culpable officer, it did not appease nor intimidate the

population, but fuelled the existing discontent with the Maduro administration (Brodzinsky, 2015).

On March 14, Maduro came with a new dubious move. His government staged a 10-day military exercise drill by deploying 80,000 soldiers and 20,000 civilians throughout the country “*to march, man shoulder-fired missiles and defend an oil refinery from a simulated attack*” (Ulmer & Buitrago, 2015). This show of Venezuela’s military capacity came as a response to Obama’s statement on March 9 that Venezuela represented a national security threat to the United States. The military drill was sharply criticized by the opposition, and this provocative move by Maduro seems to reveal a state leader under pressure from all sides (Ibid; Mason & Rampton, 2015). As a result, the two nations are still locked in a hostile relationship, and it is unclear what it will take to solve it to the satisfaction of both sides.

As discontent continues to grow in Venezuela, despite a slight upswing in public approval rates, Maduro is losing his political foothold in the country. Especially because he does not have the same economic means to satisfy the population’s needs as Chávez did when he was president. Moreover, it is a severe blow to the credibility of Maduro’s anti U.S.-position that 62% of Venezuelans in 2014 had a favorable view of the United States, an increase since 2013 with 9% (Pew Research Center, 2015). However, though Maduro is not the same leader as Chávez, he still represents a leading state in Latin American integration. Thus, Venezuela’s strong role in regional integration projects, regardless of internal turmoil and U.S. pressure, has secured regional support to Maduro in condemning U.S. sanctions and interference in Venezuela’s domestic affairs (see more in 5.4.2.).

5.2. Venezuela's International and Regional Collaboration

5.2.1. Venezuela and OPEC

The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) was founded in 1960 by Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela, and has since then expanded to consist of 12 members. OPEC regulates the international output of oil on the world market in order to control oil prices through quotas. However, when Chávez became president in 1998, the OPEC countries were in crisis because Venezuela's former PdVSA chairman and CEO, Luis Giusti López, had violated OPEC quotas and produced an excess of 800,000 barrels per day (b/d) (Kozloff, 2006: 11). The oil revenue largely ended in the hands of Venezuela's elite, and the international oil price was at a historical low of \$8.43 USD per barrel. Chávez lowered the national oil production to affect the international prices and his decision led to OPEC managing to regain control over the international oil output and price (Ibid: 24-26).

From 2010 to June 2014, the international oil price was at a stable average of \$110 USD per barrel but prices began to drop rapidly, and when all OPEC nations met in Vienna at the end of November 2014, the international oil price was below \$70 USD per barrel (Bowler, 2015; Petroff, 2014). Several OPEC members felt the economic repercussions of falling oil prices, including Venezuela. Maduro was therefore one of the members interested in lowering the international oil production per day to diminish the surplus of oil on the international market in an attempt to raise oil prices. However, especially the Gulf countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates refused to change the daily quota of 30 million b/d, something they could afford given their combined financial savings of \$2.5 trillion USD to cushion low oil prices for a time (Petroff, 2014). As prices continued to drop to a mere \$38 USD per barrel in January 2014, 53% lower than in 2013, Venezuela was facing what promised to be a critical year (Neuman, 2015; LatinNews, 2015).

Venezuela was at odds with Saudi Arabia already after the 2008 economic crisis because Chávez at that time also demanded a price maximization of oil (Corrales & Penfold, 2011: 100). However, former differences did not stop Maduro from going on a world tour in January to plead for economic aid from trading partners and to make OPEC members such as Saudi Arabia reconsider the daily oil production. Maduro went to China, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran, and Algeria among others (Lansberg-Rodríguez, 2015). Opposition leader Capriles criticized Maduro and called his trip both unproductive and expensive, but though Maduro did

not manage to convince any of the Gulf nations to reconsider the daily oil output but he still reached various positive agreements during his trip (Marín C., 2015). China agreed to provide \$20 billion USD through investments, aid the construction of 1,500 new schools, and modernize public transportation. Saudi Arabia promised to fuel investments in Venezuela's oil industry and food industry. Qatar promised to establish direct flights to increase tourism between the two countries, and Qatari banks agreed to aid Venezuela with several billion dollars to cover import needs and to support development projects. Iran, despite its own economic issues, committed to build more than 20,000 homes to poor families in Venezuela (Hinterlaces, 2015). Still, the opposition has criticized Maduro for not achieving more sound results: no specifics of any of the financial agreements have been discussed, and in the agreement with China, it is still unclear in which sector the \$20 million USD will be invested (Lansberg-Rodríguez, 2015).

The Gulf countries are very important OPEC members, and they decided to keep the daily oil quota at a steady 30 million b/d to not lose their market share to the growing U.S. oil producers. This suggests that OPEC, the ruling cartel to manipulate the world's oil prices, now is losing influence to an emerging strong geopolitical oil power: the United States (Krauss, 2015). This growing U.S. independence from OPEC and overseas oil exporters could prove to become fatal for Venezuela in the future since its largest oil importer is the United States. This situation must present a dilemma for Venezuela's Maduro. On the one hand, he is a fierce U.S. critic and would surely like to keep the United States dependent on Venezuelan oil, which is why he should support the OPEC decision to maintain the daily output of oil. On the other hand, the current oil surplus on the global market is aggravates Venezuela's economic crisis, which is why Maduro has demanded lower oil quotas. Apparently, there is no satisfactory solution to this situation, though Maduro has engaged in a new initiative to blend Venezuela's heavy crude oil with light oil from Algeria in order to produce an oil more cheaply refined and more competitive on the global market (Cawthorne, 2015).

Since January 2015, the international oil price has slowly been recovering: on May 20, 2015, the price had grown to \$60.91 USD per barrel, though it is still far from the needed price, a minimum of \$90 USD, to salvage Venezuela's economy (OPEC, 2015; Petroff, 2015). Some of the more pessimistic OPEC predictions are that the international oil price will stay at an average \$76 USD for at least the next decade (Bogner, 2015). With no immediate economic reliefs in sight for Venezuela and continued resistance to change the present OPEC oil quotas, Maduro is facing far worse issues than the economic crisis. Oil is still an important geopolitical

weapon, but Venezuela clearly does not have the economic nor political power to make OPEC members change their mind. In that sense, Venezuela's position in international politics is currently diminishing but Maduro will likely try to renegotiate oil outputs at the upcoming OPEC summit on June 5, 2015.

5.2.2. Regional Collaboration

As presented in 5.1.2., Venezuela has directly used its oil wealth to influence regional geopolitics and to foster regional integration and collaboration, increasingly autonomous from the United States. Specifically under the banner of Chávez, Venezuela's meddling in regional affairs has been based on his vision of a Bolivarian Revolution, inspired by Simón Bolívar, to forge a "*continental union, a federation of Spanish American republics*" (Williamson, 2009: 589).

Cuba and Venezuela have had warm relations since the beginning of Chávez's presidency (Kozloff, 2006: 40-41). They have been important factors in creating and strengthening regional forums aside from being trading partners, for example through the "Oil for Doctors" program exchanging subsidized oil to Cuba, and doctors and teachers to Venezuela (Riggiorozzi, 2011: 15). Even after Raúl Castro, Fidel Castro's brother, took over Cuban presidency in 2008, relations have remained strong, and Cuba has been supportive of Venezuela in 2014 during the economic recession and the bloody demonstrations (Chambraud, 2014). This loyalty may stem from the history of close ideological ties, but it is also economic in nature. Venezuela is a strategic economic partner for Cuba, providing 80,000 barrels of oil every day, though exports fell 20-30% from 2013 to 2014, and it was therefore in Castro's best interest to support Maduro's government. Had Venezuela gone bankrupt, Cuba would have lost its most important economic foundation in a situation equal to what happened when the Soviet Union ceased to exist in 1991, which threw Cuba into a severe economic crisis (Ibid, 2014). Today, the situation looks different after the restoration of diplomatic U.S.-Cuba relations on December 17, 2014. This groundbreaking announcement took place after 18 months of secret negotiations, initiated just after Chávez died and continued while Maduro took office and struggled with Venezuela's economy (Gupta, 2014). Unsure of Venezuela's ability to continue economic funding to Cuba, it is likely that Castro feared a relapse into an economic crisis similar to 1991 and therefore chose to engage in U.S.-negotiations, since a normalization of relations would open up new economic possibilities for Cuba (Ibid). Despite what may seem like waning trust

between Cuba and Venezuela, Cuba still offered clear verbal support in regional forums of Maduro's government facing U.S. sanctions. Nonetheless, Cuba's economy-based decision to normalize relations with the United States, given the circumstances, indicates that Cuba cannot trust Venezuela. Cuba's actions also fit the neorealist paradigm of states living in a self-help system based on the anarchic structure of the world.

As aforementioned, Chávez was integral to the wave of promoting regional integration and collaboration in Latin America in a milieu comparable to a society of states where all respect each other's sovereignty. Specific regional initiatives include: the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR, *Unión de Naciones Suramericanas*) from 2008; the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America (ALBA, *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América*) from 2004; and Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC, *Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños*) from 2011. These blocs all promote Latin American autonomy free from U.S. influence, though several countries still maintain good relations with the United States such as Colombia and Chile, who are active members of regional forums like UNASUR (Cancillería, 2015). Several other regional forums exist but these three are very important for Venezuela, and Chávez was an important factor for specifically ALBA and UNASUR.

Both ALBA and UNASUR promote the formation of regional politics and integration in areas such as trade, education, social policies, security, and health. Both blocs also endorse social investment and regional cohesion free from U.S. interference (Riggirozzi, 2010: 8-12). ALBA was forged in 2004 by Cuba and Venezuela as a regional bloc promoting Latin American and Caribbean integration with member states from both the Caribbean, South America, and Central (Portal ALBA, 2015). ALBA has a strong anti-hegemonic position against U.S. neoliberalism, much influenced by Chávez and Fidel Castro's leftist ideological values. ALBA also stimulates social welfare through regional integration of solidarity and cooperation, in which Venezuela has been a key player by contributing with its oil wealth to create less economic dependence on international players such as the United States (Ibid: 9-10). UNASUR consists of all South American states except French Guiana (UNASUR, 2015). This focuses on South American integration and identity to strengthen Latin America and the Caribbean as a region. Moreover, UNASUR acts as a regional stabilizer through its three bodies: the Council of Heads of State and of Government, the Council of Delegates, and the Council of Foreign Ministers. Again, this bloc has been influenced by Chávez's anti-U.S. rhetoric, though several

countries maintain good relations with the United States (Cancillería, 2015: UNASUR, 2015). ALBA has made a positive impact on issues concerning education, health, and humanitarian aid, for example by educating thousands of doctors, several member countries have been declared free of illiteracy with millions of people now able to read, and ALBA aided Haiti with \$2.42 billion USD after the 2010 earthquake (TeleSUR, 2015). UNASUR was originally created to maintain regional trade agreements and to become a counter to foreign powers like the United State and the European Union (EU). However, it has also been dedicated to promoting regional integration through democracy building, social development, and regional defense, for example by creating the South American Defense Council to deal with interregional conflicts (Riggirozzi, 2011: 12-13). Since both blocs represent efforts to empower regional autonomy, they can also be viewed as conscious soft-balancing means to counterbalance U.S. interference in regional geopolitics. The same applies to the newest regional initiative in Latin America: CELAC from 2011. It represents a political forum for all 33 Latin American and Caribbean states to further regional integration while at the same time maintaining respect for the political diversity among each member state (SELA, 2015). CELAC also functions as a collective body in foreign relations with international players, such as the EU, Russia, China, and the Gulf countries (Ibid).

All three regional forums have been very important for Venezuela in supporting Maduro's government against U.S. sanctions. All of them have condemned the U.S. sanctions bill and they are pressuring Obama to lift them immediately (see more under 5.4.2).

5.3. The United States and Latin America

5.3.1. Historic U.S. Interference in Latin America

The United States has historically had a strong interest in Latin America, not only Venezuela and its oil. In 1823, President James Monroe (1817-1825) formulated the Monroe Doctrine, which turned into a central part of U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America to influence the region's geopolitics. At that time, Washington was concerned that imperial European powers such as the United Kingdom would interfere in the development of the newly independent Latin American region. The United States also wanted to *“increase United States influence and trading ties throughout the region to their south”* and European powers posed the greatest threat to that (U.S. Department of State, 2015a). The Doctrine was extended through the Theodore Roosevelt Corollary from 1904, also categorized as the “Big Stick” policy, and it came to justify future U.S. intervention in Latin America. According to the Roosevelt Corollary, the United States *“increasingly used military force to restore internal stability to nations in the region [and] Roosevelt declared that the United States might “exercise international police power in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence”*” (U.S. Department of State, 2015b). This indicates that the United States since then has used both initiatives to amass more power in international politics and to secure a more prominent role in the Western Hemisphere, and to become the regional hegemon as specified by Mearsheimer (2001: 41). However, in 1933, there was a break from the usual U.S. foreign policy: President Franklin Roosevelt (1933-1945) introduced the “Good Neighbor Policy” to improve relations with the entire Americas through non-intervention and increased collaboration. This eventually led to the creation of the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1948 to be a forum for all nations in the Americas emphasizing non-intervention and cooperation (Muno & Brand, 2014: 381).

This softer approach to Latin America changed again during the Cold War where U.S. foreign policy turned to values stressed by the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary. Washington gave its support to different authoritarian governments in Latin America during the Cold War and it was clear that the United States had the power of a regional hegemon to intervene in Latin American at that time without repercussions from the rest of the region (Muno & Brand, 2014: 382-383). Although the United States generally did not intervene with direct military action during the Cold War, it deployed other harming methods, very similar to the ones today: funding, covert operations, and the use of media to praise targeted governments

(Muno & Brand, 2014: 382-383). Moreover, the United States would mark countries as being anticommunist and U.S. supporters or as supporters of the Soviet Union and communism. Consequently, the United States would often ignore or directly support authoritarian regimes throughout Latin America during the Cold War, as long as they stayed anticommunist (Kelly & Romero, 2002: 16-17). However, revealed recordings of former President Nixon's private conversations in 1971 indicate that Washington used communism simply as an excuse to interfere in the affairs of Latin America states, even when they did not represent a genuine national threat to the United States:

“[W]e are going to get along with any country that behaves well towards us. Our judgement about countries is not based on their [political] systems, but on what kind of relation they have with the United States. I don't give a fig for what that son of a b—— Castro does [in Cuba], the problem is what he does with us” (Ibid: 25).

Hence, as long as Latin American countries stayed supportive of the United States, their political orientation did not matter: the U.S. government did not care about the domestic situations in Latin America. Even though international politics have changed since then, Chávez and Maduro are accurate modern examples of how U.S. foreign policy continues to be inspired by those viewed as threats to national security and regional hegemony.

5.3.2. U.S.-Venezuela Tensions before Obama

The historic relationship with Venezuela was close during the 20th century as the United States invested heavily in the Venezuelan oil industry. However, this good neighbor relation was based on a self-seeking U.S. interest in maintaining access to the flow of Venezuelan oil. A strong economy is a latent power capability, as conceptualized by Mearsheimer, and the United States has used its economic capabilities strategically in several Latin American countries, because of a historical U.S. tendency to “*develop its relationships with Latin America according to a regional definition of its own goals*” (Kelly & Romero, 2002: 12). Even during their time of collaboration, Venezuela has always opposed some policies of the United States, especially the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary. In fact, Venezuela has consistently followed a nationalist agenda, promoted South-South relations along with alternative international forums, and sought good relations with countries of different political orientation, even those at odds with the United States. For example, Venezuela is a founding member of OPEC, who

controls international oil prices and therefore can add pressure on the U.S. economy, and Venezuela has strong ties with Cuba and the Castro brothers (Corrales & Penfold, 2011: 102).

Chávez was elected president of Venezuela during the U.S. presidency of Bill Clinton (1993-2001). Relations started out cordially but deteriorated quickly, especially after George W. Bush from the Republican Party (GOP, Grand Old Party) became president (Wilpert, 2007: 168-170). Under the Bush administration (2001-2009), U.S. foreign policy turned more aggressive, particularly after the 9/11 attack, and tensions arose between Chávez and Bush. In a later interview, Chávez stated that the U.S. decision to enter Iraq in 2003 was based not only on the want for revenge but also because of a geopolitical interest in Iraq's oil reserves (Stone, 2009). Chávez also claimed that this was the case of the 2002 coup in Venezuela, as the United States could have gained renewed influence in Venezuela's increasingly nationalized oil sector had the political takeover not failed (Ibid).

Intergovernmental tensions also grew during the Bush presidency since millions of dollars were allocated to Chávez's opposition in Venezuela. The money went through U.S. agencies such as USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a non-governmental foundation. In 2003, funds reached almost \$10 million USD (Wilpert, 2007: 169-174). This U.S. foreign policy strategy has been consistent up until the introduction of the Sanctions bill in December 2014, though many chavistas in Venezuela were convinced that the United States eventually would decide on a military invasion of Venezuela just like it had done in the case of Iraq in 2003 (Ibid: 179). However, this would have been counterproductive for U.S. objectives. Had Bush decided to generate a regime change in Venezuela through direct military action, it would likely have caused fierce regional protests. Moreover, though the United States, as the hegemon, has the largest military force in the Americas, many soldiers were engaged in the Middle East during the presidency of Chávez, and the remaining force would likely not be sufficient to take over Venezuela without severe losses (Ibid). The price of direct intervention in Venezuela to remove a popular Chávez was therefore too costly. Instead, Washington kept to soft-balancing tools such as the use of the media to discredit Chávez. Especially the popular CNN and Fox News channels have been highly critical of Chávez, and other leftist governments in Latin America, openly calling Chávez a dictator or that he was a more dangerous man than Osama Bin Laden (Stone, 2009).

5.3.3. Obama Becomes President—A Change in Foreign Policy?

When Barack Obama, from the Democratic Party, won the U.S. presidential elections in 2008, he promised to “*restore American leadership in Latin America*” while creating “*a new partnership for the Americas*” (Obama in Muno & Brand, 2014: 376). In his presidential campaign, he emphasized the need to change the U.S. role as a leader in the Americas from what it had been during the Bush administration. He advertised the need to stop intervention in the affairs of other sovereign states and instead create new partnerships in line with the “Good Neighbor Policy” from 1933. For example, Obama wanted to strengthen U.S. foreign relations with Cuba (Erikson, 2008/2009: 103). Since then, he has also repeatedly expressed his intention of shutting down the Guantánamo Bay prison, located at the U.S. naval base South of Cuba, which has been criticized internationally for human rights abuse (Siddiqui, 2015).

Latin America generally favored Obama over his opponent, Senator John McCain, and there were big hopes for improving U.S.-Latin American relations when Obama won (Ibid: 101). After the election, Chávez also opined his hopes for the new U.S. president by stating that “*We don't ask him to be a revolutionary, nor a socialist, but that he rise to the moment in the world [...] we hope the next government will end that savage embargo and aggression against Cuba*” (Ibid: 102). This 2008 statement is interesting because it is suggestive of what would become the core of the future regional bloc CELAC (2011), which is based on collaboration and progress between states that respect each other’s political differences. Obama appeared ready to respect the political differences between the United States and Venezuela too, since he at the beginning of his presidency emphasized his vision of a new partnership with Venezuela, including a promise not to engage in new destabilizing acts against Caracas and generally not interfere in Venezuelan affairs (Stone, 2009). Introducing a different approach than Bush towards Venezuela surely was on Obama’s agenda since Venezuela was a substantial power in Latin American regional geopolitics, and therefore could prove to be an obstacle to his foreign policy for the region. Moreover, Venezuela had fortified good relations with unfriendly U.S. states such as Russia and Iran (Erikson, 2008/2009: 106-107). With Chávez’s significant role in regional affairs, reestablishing a diplomatic relationship between the two nations was necessary if Obama wanted overall U.S.-Latin American relations to improve. However, until today, Venezuela has faced neoliberal pressure from the United States, and relations have gradually turned even worse than before. This is not surprising given the leaked Wikileaks cable from 2006, showing that the U.S. government’s strategy for Venezuela has consistently been

to “*strengthen democratic institutions; penetrate Chávez’s political base; divide Chavismo; protect vital US business; and isolate Chávez internationally*” (Wikileaks in Chodor, 2014: 172). So far, relations have not improved under Obama, and Chávez opposed the U.S. government and its foreign policy until he died from long-term cancer on March 5, 2013, a position shared by his successor, Maduro.

Though Obama likely had good intentions towards Latin America from the beginning of his presidency, the reality is that he was fighting many obstacles. In 2008, the United States faced an austere economic crisis caused by the private sector in the United States itself, and Obama’s administration struggled with regional issues such as the 2009 coup d’état in Honduras, where the democratically elected Manuel Zelaya was removed from power. The coup was condemned across Latin America, and by the OAS and Obama (Muno & Brand, 2014: 386-387). However, Obama changed his statement later in 2009 and no longer recognized the Honduran situation as the result of a coup. Hence, the United States was not forced to impose sanctions against a nation that Republicans, including then Senator Jim DeMint from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, saw as a close U.S. ally (Ibid: 387). Interestingly, Zelaya was leaning towards the left during his presidency and supportive of Chávez before the government change (Ibid). Honduras can therefore be seen as a recent representative example of Nixon’s 1971 statement of how the U.S. government respects states, notwithstanding what takes places domestically, as long as they stay supportive of the United States. It indicates that U.S. foreign policy has not changed by much since the Cold War, as the undemocratic ouster of Zelaya then should have stirred a more serious response from the United States (Milne, 2009).

Obama has also been criticized for the infamous War on Drugs (WoD) in Latin America especially targeted at the region’s large-scale cocaine and marijuana production⁸. Obama’s WoD approach towards Latin America has been described as a typical example of U.S. “*unilateral, hegemonic policy, [...] not considering positions from Latin America. This unilateral policy stands in the tradition of the Monroe/Roosevelt narrative of hegemonic thinking in the USA*” (Muno & Brand, 2014: 386). The critical view on U.S. foreign policy affairs continued in 2013, which turned out to be a very critical year for Obama’s administration due to the Edward Snowden scandal⁹, angering several Latin American leaders like Brazilian

⁸ For more knowledge on the War on Drugs in Latin America and criticism of it, see more in Oliver and Cottle, 2011 (special focus on Colombia).

⁹ Edward Snowden is responsible for revealing several clandestine espionage and surveillance programs of the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA). Information on these programs spread in media across the world from June

President Dilma Rousseff (BBC, 2014c). The diplomatic crisis might be why U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, at the OAS summit in October 2013 promised that “*the era of the Monroe Doctrine is over*” and that all states in the Americas would need to deepen relations in order to promote further progress in the hemisphere (Kerry, 2013). However, Latin America has clearly not seen the end of U.S. intervention in the affairs of sovereign states, which became obvious over the course of 2014 and 2015.

5.3.4. Domestic Opposition and the Sanctions Bill

The U.S. political system carries an immense weight in U.S. foreign affairs, and Obama has met strong opposition from the right-wing GOP since the beginning of his presidency. The U.S. Congress consists of the Senate and the House of Representatives, two bodies that hold significant amounts of power in domestic politics. For example, in 2010, there was a majority of Republicans in the Senate, hampering the progress of several of Obama’s political priorities such health care, climate change, and increased college funding (Murray et. al., 2010). In 2012, Obama was reelected president in a close race with 49,8% of the votes over his Republican rival Mitt Romney with 48,6%, which has given him the opportunity to show his commitment to improved U.S.-Latin American relations during his last presidential term ending in 2016 (Espo, 2012). Though Democrats won the majority of seats in the Senate in 2012, Republicans won the most seats in the House, and it is perhaps not very surprising then that the House on May 28, 2014 approved a sanctions bill against Venezuelan officials in opposition to Maduro’s presidency (Mills & Højen, 2015). However, the White House at the time criticized the bill for undermining regional attempts to find peaceful solutions to the violent situation between Maduro’s supporters and the opposition in Venezuela in 2014 (BBC, 2014b).

The political milieu in the United States changed drastically over the course of 2014, as did U.S.-Venezuela relations. On October 16, 2014, Venezuela won the election to hold one of the five seats in the UN Security Council from 2015-2016. The United States opposed Venezuela’s last attempt in 2006 but made no public condemnations in 2014, perhaps because of a disbelief in the possibility that Venezuela would be elected given its issues with violent demonstrations, political tensions, and economic struggles. Consequently, Venezuela’s new entry into international politics and security matters must have been alarming for those who

6, 2013 and have since then caused serious diplomatic tensions between the United States and countries around the world (BBC, 2014c).

oppose Maduro, since it displayed international support for his government despite its problems (Anna, 2014). This approval of Venezuela in international politics, combined with an overwhelming Republican victory in the 2014 mid-term elections¹⁰ in both the Senate and House, may very well be the reason why sanctions against Venezuela returned as a topic in December 2014. Republican Senators Robert Menendez and Marco Rubio wrote the bill, S.2142 “Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014”, which quickly was approved by both the House and the Senate. On December 10, Congress approved it and Obama signed the bill by into law on December 18, 2015, not even one day after normalizing U.S.-Cuba relations (Mills & Højen, 2014; Congress.gov, 2014). Since then, U.S.-Venezuela relations have gone even further downhill, and the Obama administration has been met with regional condemnation for introducing the sanctions bill, though it also has been endorsed for finally restoring diplomatic relations with Cuba.

¹⁰ The Republicans won 54 out of 100 seats in the Senate and 246 out of 435 seats in the House of Representatives. Moreover, out of the 50 U.S. states, 31 elected Republican Governors (The Guardian, 2014).

5.4. The Legitimacy of the Sanctions Bill

5.4.1. The Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014

The sanctions bill was officially drafted as a response to the deaths caused during Venezuela's 2014 demonstrations: Venezuela's domestic crisis was the main argument to impose a sanctions bill against Venezuelans accused of human rights violations (Watts, 2014). The bill begins by listing several findings on why Venezuela is in crisis and why the bill has been created as an important part of U.S. foreign policy (Congress.gov, 2014: 1-2; see Appendix).

Overall, the bill describes how Maduro's government during the 2014 demonstrations, but also in other cases, has broken human rights and continued impunity for those who have violated them (Ibid). The high level of crime, repression of press freedom, and the shortage of basic goods are also noted with concern. As is the economic crisis and the rising inflation, which is blamed on the Central Bank of Venezuela and Maduro's government specifically because of their currency control as impeding foreign economies from trading with Venezuela. However, though the currency control has not helped Venezuela out of its economic recession, it was not installed to hinder the possibility of new trading partners. Instead, Maduro's government hoped it would counter the black market's negative influence on the economy, which also had a deteriorating effect on the shortage of basic goods in Venezuela; another point on the sanctions bill agenda (Congress.gov, 2014: 1-2; Chodor, 2014: 173). Moreover, Maduro's government is criticized for corruption, a sentiment shared by Venezuela's population: in 2013, 75% of Venezuelans believed that corruption was a widespread phenomenon in the government, and in 2014, International Transparency (2015) ranked Venezuela as no. 161 of 175 out of the most corrupt countries in the world (Gallup in Torres & Dugan, 2014).

Several parts of the bill point out sound arguments as to why the U.S. government has felt entitled to be concerned about Venezuela's human rights situation and the need to stop violence in the country. For example, Venezuela is already one of the most dangerous countries in the world with the second highest homicide rate just after Honduras (Tapia, 2014). In section 4.(1). of the bill, the U.S. government claims that it only wishes to aid the Venezuelan people in fostering an environment of "*peace and representative democracy as defined by the Inter-American Democratic Charter of the Organization of American States*" (Congress.gov, 2014: 3). From an IST solidarist point of view, this is an admirable reason for targeting the Venezuela officials responsible for human rights violations. Moreover, Obama's decision to sign the bill

into law can be seen as an exercise of judgement as determined by Hedley Bull (see page 18). According to Bull, states—specifically state officials like Obama—are the main actors in foreign affairs, and they will at times face morally difficult situations such as the controversy of protection human rights or respecting the sovereignty of other states.

This disrespect of Venezuela’s state sovereignty is exemplified in the penalties of the sanctions bill as it specifically targets any “*foreign person, including any current or former official of the Government of Venezuela or any person acting on behalf of Government,*” who is found guilty of human rights abuses in Venezuela. Foreign person relates to a person that is not a “*United States person*” (Congress.gov, 2014: 3). In essence, the Obama administration has declared itself to be responsible for imposing changes in Venezuela’s government through sanctions without conferring with the Maduro administration. Moreover, it robs Venezuela from handling the situation on its own and punish those who violate human rights.

The penalties of the U.S. sanctions are economic in nature. The bill is focused on asset blocking of those Venezuelan officials found guilty of human rights violations, their access to foreign economic assets such as owned property and economic interests in property will be blocked or frozen, as will their travel access to the United States (Congress.gov, 2014: 3-4). However, there is a clause installed in the bill, though. A waiver under section 5.(4) (c) specifies how the U.S. president may renounce the sanctions on a Venezuelan official if it “*is in the national interest of the United States*” (Ibid: 4). Another “interest” is stated under Section 3.(1), explaining how “*the United States aspires to a mutually beneficial relationship with Venezuela based on respect for human rights and the rule of law and a functional and productive relationship*” (Ibid: 2). This positive statement implies that the two states can improve relations and collaborate instead of continuing their past of conflicts. However, actual U.S. actions point toward the opposite: U.S. funding of Maduro’s opposition still exists, and after half a year with the sanctions bill, the U.S.-Venezuela relationship has far from improved. This also adds to the question of the sanction bill’s legitimacy, which has been criticized from the beginning by not only Maduro but also Latin American regional blocs.

5.4.2. U.S. Hypocrisy or Sound Reasons behind the Sanctions Bill?

Several questions arise when considering the U.S. legitimacy for imposing targeted sanctions against Venezuelan officials in the first place. The U.S. government strongly advocates the protection of human rights and the end of violence in Venezuela, and from a pluralist IST

perspective, this justifies U.S. intervention in the affairs of Venezuela. However, given the U.S. government's own gross human rights violations, both in the past and at present, the United States displays a hypocritical approach to human rights. On August 1, 2014, Obama admitted that human rights violations occurred under President Bush after the 2001 9/11 attack by publicly stating that “we [the United States] *did some things that were wrong [...] we tortured some folks,*” (CNN on YouTube, 2014). He refers to CIA's rendition program, which was launched after the terror attack in 2001 to handle interrogations of terrorism suspects either in the United States or abroad where several incidents of abusive and torture took place (Fisher, 2013). This program repeatedly violated human rights, and was supported by 54 governments worldwide in North America, Africa, Australia, the Middle East, and in several European countries (Ibid). Even during Obama's presidency, there has been several allegations of the U.S. intelligence service continuing the use of rendition techniques, though it is difficult to ascertain their accuracy (Whitlock, 2013). As the United States appear to continue several human rights violations, one may wonder how Venezuela will be able to enter in a “*mutually beneficial relationship [...] based on respect for human right and the rule of law*” as stated in the bill (Congress.gov, 2014: 2).

Following the neorealist paradigm, the U.S. government has violated human as a means to hinder the rise of national security threats, just as Maduro's government has done. Consequently, it explains why Venezuela's government applied violence on demonstrators and incarcerated opposition leaders: it was done to protect itself and national security from internal threats. Another U.S. case, which also is clear evidence of the world as one of conflict and egoistic self-help is the 2013 Snowden scandal. Given the massive U.S. espionage and surveillance programs on other states, it is obvious that the U.S. government does not trust other governments around the world (BBC, 2014c).

From the perspective of the solidarist IST, the United States has had a moral duty to intervene in Venezuela, which would have justified military intervention. Instead, Obama's administration chose a soft-balancing measure by introducing sanctions on Venezuelan officials. This more peaceful approach gains further strength because the U.S. government has chosen only to target those culpable and not the entire government. Moreover, according to an IST perspective, international institutions and organizations, such as the UN, are important in international politics, and the UN voiced concerns about the excessive use of violence in

Venezuela against civilians during 2014 (Colville, 2014). These reasons arguably adds to the U.S. legitimacy for imposing its sanctions bill.

There is a problem with this reasoning, though. Human rights are most often associated with the UDHR from 1948 (UN, 1948). From a rationalist IST point of view, international law derives partly from existing practices and mutually consented agreements among nations such as treaties (Wight, 1991: 233-236). Existing practices across the world include the general acceptance of international institution like the UN as important in international politics as well as an international consensus on respecting human rights. This partly gives the U.S. government the moral right to interfere in Venezuela's internal affairs, but the main issue with this sentiment is that, the UN UDHR is *not* a treaty signed by UN member states. This fact severely robs the U.S. government of its legitimacy behind the sanctions bill from an IST point of view, though it does explain why the United States has been able to abuse human rights too (Jackson & Sørensen, 2013: 155).

According to John Vincent, an IST scholar, state sovereignty is a state's right to self-determination, national security, and that other states must respect these rights (Linklater, 2010: 8). By imposing targeted sanctions on Venezuelan officials in the name of human rights violations, the United States has officially intervened in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state by stressing the protection of human rights as more important in foreign affairs than the right to state sovereignty and non-intervention (Wight, 1991: 236). Though some might view the United States positively for making the protection of human rights an outright state duty, the U.S. government's morality becomes highly dubious when considering its own severe human rights violations. Moreover, both the IST and realist approach make a key point concerning how international institutions cannot provide a state with legitimacy: all international institutions, such as the UN, IMF, OAS, etc. will always be subordinate to states since states are the ones constituting the institutions in the first place. Moreover, Waltz argues that strong states are able to "*use institutions, as they interpret laws, in ways that suit them*", which means that states, at least strong ones like the United States, have a certain control over them in international affairs (Waltz, 2000: 24).

The United States has clearly lost credibility because of the sanctions bill, and even members of Obama's own party is denouncing the bill. 16 Congress members, all from the Democratic Party have signed a letter to Obama on May 15, 2015 where they urge the President to reconsider the sanctions (Planas, 2015b). Though Venezuela's population has a high

approval rate of the United States' positive influence in the region, 82% in 2014, by imposing sanctions the U.S. government might end up alienating the population's past goodwill (Ramani, 2015).

5.4.3. Regional Protests

Though international institutions like the UN and the UDHR cannot legitimize the Obama administration for introducing the sanctions bill, this support have been sought out in other foreign relations. Section 4.(2) of the bill emphasizes the need of international collaboration to end the human rights abuses in Venezuela (Congress.gov, 2014: 3). The U.S. government wants to collaborate with the OAS and the EU on finding a peaceful solution to the “*current situation [...] of violence against antigovernment protestors*” (Ibid).

By bringing the EU into play in affairs in the Western Hemisphere, the United States is hinting that what John Kerry said in 2013 about ending the Monroe Doctrine is true. Otherwise, the U.S. government would not be inviting European states to have a say in Latin American affairs. It is possible that the U.S. government stated this aim of overseas participation in solving the conflict to give the sanctions bill more credibility. However, given the previously given examples of U.S. foreign policy, a more likely explanation is that the Obama administration does not view any EU power as a threat to its regional hegemony from an offensive realist's point of view, and that the stated wish for collaboration with the EU is a formality to give the bill credibility.

If the apparent wish for collaboration with the OAS on reaching a peaceful solution to violence and human rights abuses in Venezuela is genuine, then the Obama seems to have made a grave error, since Latin American and Caribbean countries make up the majority of members in the OAS. After December 18, 2014, several Latin American regional blocs have publicly supported Maduro's government and criticized the bill. ALBA has been a firm critic of the sanctions against Venezuelan officials and has offered its regional assistance in solving the diplomatic U.S.-Venezuela crisis that has escalated since the sanctions bill was introduced (ALBA, 2015). CELAC, consisting of all Latin American and Caribbean states, has also been a sound critic of the sanctions. At the end of the CELAC summit in Costa Rica on January 29, 2015, a clear statement was made to reject U.S. sanctions against Venezuela because they are “*a violation of international law and a threat to peace in the region*” (TeleSUR, 2015). UNASUR has also shown its solidarity with Venezuela by denouncing the sanctions and in

March 2015, they demanded that the U.S. government should terminate the sanctions immediately because they presents a *“threat to sovereignty and the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other states”* (UNASUR in Planas, 2015a). Moreover, UNASUR already over the course of 2014 made efforts to create dialogue between Maduro’s government and the opposition and find a peaceful solution to the problems (Dutka, 2014). Unfortunately, they failed, which may present another argument for the United States to impose targeted sanctions since diplomatic efforts already had failed (Ibid). During the OAS seventh summit on April 10-11, 2015 in Panama City, OAS leaders clearly resisted the sanctions bill, something that Obama likely had not anticipated before signing the bill in 2014. According to an article in *The World Post*: *“Any soft power accrued or goodwill derived from the opening of relations with Cuba has been severely diluted by the Obama administration's decision to impose sanctions on Cuba's primary regional patron, Venezuela”* (Ramani, 2015).

With this regional support of Maduro, at least when it comes to the sanctions bill as a manifestation of renewed U.S. intervention in the region, Latin America is yet again striving to maintain and promote regional autonomy. This collaboration and support can be understood from an IST perspective by emphasizing the value of international justice by Bull and the value of state sovereignty by Vincent. Referring to these values, the regional support is an example of how Latin America and the Caribbean in international politics are collaborating based on a reciprocal recognition of state sovereignty while trying to impose the same sentiment on the United States since the sanctions bill represents U.S. attempts to undermine Venezuelan sovereignty (see theory section 2.4.). This is also how UNASUR has criticized the sanctions (Planas, 2015a). From an offensive realist perspective in contrast, the Latin American region is supporting Venezuela to counter and soft-balance U.S. hegemony in the region, because the benefits override the costs of alienating the U.S. government (see theory section 2.2.3. and 2.2.4.). Matters worsened for the U.S. government after March 9, 2015, when Obama declared a U.S. national emergency of Venezuela as a national security threat (The White House, 2015).

5.4.4. Venezuela as a National Security Threat?

On March 9, 2015, Obama made a national emergency declaration and gave the Executive Order (EO) of Venezuela posing an unusual and extraordinary national security threat, and imposed targeted sanctions on seven Venezuelan government officials accused of violating human rights and being behind violence against civilian demonstrators in 2014 and political

opposition leaders such as Leopoldo López. Those accused were targeted based on the following human rights violations:

- *“actions or policies that undermine democratic processes or institutions;*
- *significant acts of violence or conduct that constitutes a serious abuse or violation of human rights, including against persons involved in antigovernment protests in Venezuela in or since February 2014;*
- *actions that prohibit, limit, or penalize the exercise of freedom of expression or peaceful assembly; or*
- *public corruption by senior officials within the Government of Venezuela”* (The White House, 2015).

The EO specifically implements the “Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014” but goes even beyond that (Ibid). Obviously, Obama has made a sharp change in his Latin American foreign policy compared to his first presidential term, though progress in U.S.-Cuba relations was on the program for his first presidential term, which was reached on December 17, 2014 (Birns & Doleac, 2014). However, the signing of the sanctions bill just one day after has revealed a somewhat strange strategy in addressing Latin America.

The turn in U.S.-Venezuela events is perhaps not so strange when considering U.S. historical intervention in Latin America and Nixon’s 1971 secretly taped conversation of not caring about the political orientation of other governments, as long as they do not oppose U.S. interests (Kelly & Romero, 2002: 25). After all, Venezuela not only has a different political orientation than the United States, but has been undermining its role in Latin American geopolitics through regional integration blocs for years. Nonetheless, this is the first time that Washington has imposed sanctions against Venezuela, despite its long-time opposition against Chávez’s Bolivarian Revolution. It is also understandable that the U.S. government did not choose to impose economic sanctions on all of Venezuela through a trade embargo similar to Cuba’s. From a realist perspective, it makes sense that Washington never has imposed economic sanctions on all of Venezuela and still declines from doing it because it would be counterproductive to national interests in Venezuelan oil. In fact, given the U.S. dependence on Venezuelan oil, an economic embargo would cause problems domestically for the U.S. economy too.

Still, Venezuela clearly appears an annoyance for the United States as its oil wealth has allowed it a certain leverage in soft-balancing U.S. influence in the region, and the

government has increased taxes on U.S. oil companies in Venezuela (Trinkunas, 2011: 20-21). However, since it has been revealed repeatedly how the U.S. government has interfered in one way or another in Latin American affairs, including support of Maduro's political opposition, then this leverage visibly has its limits (Chodor, 2014: 171-172). For example, from 2002-2010, the United States *"spent more than \$100 million on 'democracy promotion' programs and initiatives to foster organic intellectuals who promote a discourse that labels Chávez and now Maduro as dictators and disputes their achievements, while engaging in destabilising actions meant to engender regime change"* (Golinger in Chodor, 2014: 172).

Moreover, declaring Venezuela an exceptional national security threat to the United States is no new U.S. foreign policy strategy, but is looked upon as a mere formality before introducing sanctions. An unnamed senior administration official explained in a phone interview on March 9, after Obama's EO, that the United States currently has *"between 20 and 30 sanctions programs [...] that are based on these same types of national emergency declarations"* (Senior administration official, 2015). Formality or not, the EO has been criticized throughout Latin America but so far, Obama has not withdrawn it. The decision to declare Venezuela a national security threat is, however, easily understood from an offensive realist approach, since it then is a natural U.S. response to stop Chávez's and Maduro's attempts to counterbalance U.S. regional hegemony and to restore U.S. national security.

The recent development in U.S.-Venezuela relations clearly shows how much Obama has changed since his first presidential term. His administration has not been able to embrace a new "Good Neighbor Policy" but instead continued the conventional response of interventionism in Latin American affairs when encountering, what can be interpreted as threats to U.S. national security. However, as the U.S. government has emphasized the importance of human rights and called Venezuela a national security threat, one may wonder why Mexican government officials under President Peña Nieto have not been targeted with sanctions. Peña Nieto has done very little to solve the internal crisis from September 2014 of the 43 disappeared students in Iguala, who the population believes have been killed by local authorities (HRW, 2015). No U.S. sanctions have been issued despite the raging social crisis in Mexico with corruption allegations against both local and state authorities. The difference between the Mexican and the Venezuelan case, though, is that Maduro is a fierce U.S. opponent, and Nieto has warm relations with the United States. This example but emphasizes that Nixon's 1971 U.S. foreign policy still exists today.

It remains unclear if the sanctions bill will be lifted in the near future, but it has been denounced even by the Latin American countries that have good relations with the United States. The regional opposition against U.S. sanctions express how the region keeps struggling for self-determination and autonomy outside of U.S. influence and intervention. Moreover, the legitimacy of the sanctions bill is also questionable, and Obama might come to regret his decision to sign the bill. In the end, it might overshadow his administration's positive results of rebuilding relations with Cuba. Still, it is possible that Venezuela and the United States will be able to find a peaceful solution to the tense foreign relations, perhaps with the aid of regional blocs such as CELAC or the OAS.

6. Conclusions

The objective of this thesis has been to understand why the United States introduced a sanctions bill in December 2014 against Venezuelan officials accused of violating the human rights of civilians and opposition leaders. Despite the official reason, specifically based on the 2014 violent demonstrations in Venezuela but also other human rights violations, it is clear that there are multiple reasons behind the U.S. decision to impose sanctions.

As argued in the methodology, it has been imperative to analyze the domestic contexts of both countries; especially Venezuela's, to understand the processes at the national state level that have generated the phenomena of the U.S. sanctions bill. Clearly, Venezuela has been a powerful critic of U.S. foreign policy ever since Chávez became president in 1998, and Maduro has continued this critical sentiment since his presidential election in 2013. Chávez has also been a driving force behind the Bolivarian Revolution and its project of encouraging regional collaboration and integration through regional blocs to promote Latin American autonomy free from U.S. interference. Furthermore, Venezuela has imported weaponry from China and Russia for years. Overall, these decisions of Venezuelan foreign policy has been a challenge to U.S. national security and its role as a regional hegemon of the Western Hemisphere from an offensive realist perspective, which provides a good explanation to the sanctions bill. Though Venezuela is an unlikely contender to throne, it would still make sense for the United States to obstruct Venezuela's potential ascent, and to undermine a state that has been a driving force behind Latin American autonomy projects.

On December 17, 2014, Obama normalized U.S.-Cuba relations after more than half a century of enmity, an event that was approved throughout the Latin America, also by Maduro, and signing the sanctions bill merely a day later has probably been a strategic U.S. decision. In the aftermath of renewed U.S.-Cuba relations, the United States received positive feedback from Latin American countries, and this could have been used specifically to dilute the following regional criticism of introducing the sanctions bill on December 18. Moreover, U.S. interests in Venezuela's oil reserves have most likely also been a part of the decision to impose sanctions against government officials important for Maduro's presidency, since it is possible that the United States would gain renewed access to the oil industry if Venezuela had a more U.S. friendly government. Imposing sanctions also make sense when considering the critical

political and economic situation in Venezuela right now: Maduro has low approval rate, the population wants an end to the shortage of consumer goods, the opposition wants a new government, and the economy is critical because of the low international oil price. Venezuela's domestic situation has seemingly presented a perfect moment for the United States to impose sanction on an already unpopular government in the hope of supporting a political regime change more U.S. friendly.

The United States likely did not expect the severe the regional disapproval, which could have prompted Washington to reconsider introducing the sanctions bill. Regional blocs like CELAC, UNASUR, and ALBA have denounced the sanctions bill from the very beginning. They insist on both finding a peaceful solution to the disputes Maduro's administration and its political opposition without U.S. meddling, and to solve current differences between the United States and Venezuela. The United States initially believed that the OAS would support the sanctions, but this bloc has also condemned the U.S. sanctions too. It would seem like the United States has made a mistake in moving ahead with sanctions against seven government officials as well as by labelling Venezuela as a national security threat, formality or not.

Has the United States merely tried to protect human rights in Venezuela? After all, the sanctions have been targeted solely on government officials behind human rights violations. However, the United States is guilty of its own severe human rights violations, which makes its supposed role as an international human rights defender somewhat arbitrary. The UN is a powerful international institution worried human rights violations in Venezuela, but it does not legitimize the U.S. decision to impose sanctions on government officials of a sovereign state. If so, why has no sanctions been imposed against Mexico given the government's human rights abuses against the population? An interesting difference between Mexico and Venezuela is that Mexico is a U.S. friendly nation and Venezuela is not. Perhaps it is a matter of time before Washington decides to impose sanctions against Mexican officials but so far, it seems unlikely.

As a result, though the introduction of U.S. sanctions against Venezuelan officials clearly does not have a single explanation, the different reasons add up to give a nuanced understanding of the processes that have generated the U.S. sanctions bill in December 2014. There is not one theory of IR that truly has a foundation for a full analysis of all aspects of U.S.-Venezuela relations. Thus, though this paper has based most of its argumentation by following the realist tradition, with special attention to offensive realism, it has included important aspects from the

liberalist tradition, geopolitics, IPE, and IST to analyze various explanations behind the U.S. sanctions bill against Venezuelan officials accused of violating human rights. This thesis tries to be as encompassing as possible to cover as many different reasons behind the sanctions bill, as the time and space frame has allowed, but it does not mean that it is conclusive. U.S.-Venezuelan relations are intricate, and there are many facets that have not been investigated or could have been expanded, but the author still hopes that this paper supplements new aspects to the existing knowledge on why the sanctions bill was introduced in the first place.

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