

Original Article

Resource Politics in International Relations: Oil as a Factor in USA-Venezuela Tensions

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Abstract

The importance of oil in Venezuela-U.S. relations and the tensions these relations face in the context of resource politics is explored in this study. Venezuela is a key player in the international energy sector for its huge oil reserves, and for the United States, energy security has long been a foreign policy priority. The study examines the impact of oil on bilateral relations in relation to nationalization of the Venezuelan oil industry, political and ideological differences, economic sanctions and energy security concerns. It also examines the effects of these on the diplomatic relationship, geopolitics in the region, and the world oil market. The study is built on a theoretical perspective of realism, which suggests that struggles for strategic natural resources have been an important factor in both countries' policies and relations. The results show that oil continues to be a primary driver of U.S.-Venezuela tensions despite the fact that political and governance issues have been a catalyst for the conflict. In conclusion, the study suggests that resource politics remains a critical aspect of international relations, highlighting the importance of energy resources in shaping state actions, economic dynamics, and geopolitical competition.

Keywords: Resource Politics, International Relations, Oil, United States, Venezuela, Energy Security, Geopolitics.

Introduction

Natural resources have always been a major determinant in the context of international relations in terms of the political, economic and strategic relationships between states. Of these resources, oil is of particular significance not only for industrial development, transportation, military defence and development and national security, but also for global economic growth. Those nations with a rich supply of oil can assume greater geopolitical importance, whereas larger oil-importing nations may attempt to gain the assurance of reliable energy supplies. This competition for energy resources has led to the development of the idea of resource politics, an approach to studying the influence of natural resource control, ownership, and distribution on foreign policy, international cooperation, and conflict. Venezuela is a prime example of how resource politics plays a significant role in international relations with the United States. Venezuela has the world's largest proven crude oil reserves, and for many years, petroleum exports have been the backbone of its economy. For years, the United States was a big trading partner and a significant importer of Venezuelan crude oil. Despite good economic relations, however, political differences, differences on ideology, changes in Venezuela's energy policy, and problems with the management of the country's oil sector have led to a deterioration in bilateral relations. A crucial moment in U.S.-Venezuela's relationship was the election of President Hugo Chávez in 1998. Chávez implemented policies to boost the state's oversight of the oil industry, boost the power of PDVSA—the national oil company—and use oil funds for social welfare. These policies clashed with foreign oil companies, and were paralleled by a growing criticism of the U.S. foreign policy. President Nicolás Maduro's government was accused of democratic regression, economic mismanagement, and violation of human rights, which fuelled the tensions. The US, meanwhile, responded with a battery of economic and financial sanctions, especially against Venezuela's oil sector, which continues to aggravate relations between the two nations and has helped to deepen the economic crisis in Venezuela.

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Oil is thus no longer just an economic product for the relationship between the two countries, but a political tool of power and diplomacy. But the struggle for control of the oil resources and the larger geopolitical and ideological differences have made the relationship one of the most important resource-based political conflicts in the Western Hemisphere. Meanwhile, shifting energy market dynamics and the influence of an external player like China, Russia and Iran have given the conflict a new dimension, turning it into a global issue. The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of oil on the political, economic, and diplomatic relations between the United States and Venezuela using a resource politics approach. It covers the historical evolution of bilateral relations, the strategic value of Venezuela's oil in the world, the effects of the nationalization and economic sanctions and the wider implications for international relations. The study aims to provide insight into contemporary state behavior, foreign policy choices, and geopolitical competition in the international system, in light of the theoretical approach of realism and resource politics. Finally, the study concludes that, although ideological disputes and domestic political events have played a major role in the conflict, oil continues to be the major strategic issue in U.S.-Venezuela relations. Having an understanding of this relationship provides important insights into the wider dimensions of natural resource politics in international relations and highlights the ongoing significance of energy security for the twenty-first-century power politics.

Objectives of the Study

General Objective

To examine the role of oil as a strategic resource in shaping the political, economic, and diplomatic tensions between the United States and Venezuela within the framework of resource politics in international relations.

Specific Objectives

1. To analyze the concept of resource politics and its significance in international relations.
2. To examine the strategic importance of Venezuela's oil reserves in the global energy market.
3. To assess the role of oil in influencing the foreign policies of the United States and Venezuela.
4. To investigate how the nationalization of Venezuela's oil industry contributed to tensions with the United States.
5. To evaluate the impact of U.S. economic sanctions on Venezuela's oil sector and bilateral

relations.

6. To examine the relationship between energy security and geopolitical competition in the context of U.S.-Venezuela relations.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research approach of descriptive and analytical. The study analyzes the political, economic and diplomatic implications of oil for the relations between the U.S. and Venezuela. A qualitative approach is suitable since it allows for an in-depth analysis of the resource politics, foreign policy and international relations in the context of interpretation of literature and policy documents.

Research Approach

The study is carried out using a case study methodology, specifically the USA-Venezuela relationship as an example of strategic natural resources as a tool for international conflict and cooperation. The case study method enables in-depth analysis of factors shaping bilateral relations since the beginning of the Cold War era as well as in the present.

The sources of data are all secondary data, obtained from sources that are reliable and credible such as:

1. International relations, geopolitics, resource politics books.
2. Peer-reviewed journal articles.
3. International reports like those from the International Energy Agency (IEA), the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).
4. Government documents and publications from the United States and Venezuela.
5. Reports from research institutions and think tanks.
6. Recent developments in reputable newspapers and on-line databases.

Data Collection Method

The data collected is by documentary research method, which is a systematic review of the academic literature, official reports, government reports, and policy documents focusing on oil politics, U.S.-Venezuela relations, energy security, and economic sanctions.

Scope of the Study

This study will examine how oil has influenced U.S.-Venezuela relations since the Presidency of Hugo Chávez (1999) to more recent events under Nicolás Maduro. It reviews the political, economic and strategic aspects of the relationship while

focusing attention on the importance of oil in international relations.

1. Political and Ideological Differences

Chávez and later Nicolás Maduro adopted anti-U.S. policies and criticized American influence in Latin America.

1. The United States accused the Venezuelan government of undermining democratic institutions, violating human rights, and engaging in corruption.
2. Political disagreements increasingly affected energy cooperation.

Economic Sanctions

1. Beginning in the mid-2010s and expanding significantly in 2019, the United States imposed heavy sanctions on Venezuela's oil sector and PDVSA.
2. These sanctions limited Venezuela's oil exports and access to international finance.
3. The U.S. argued that sanctions were intended to pressure the government toward democratic reforms, while Venezuela maintained that they worsened its economic crisis.

Energy Security

1. Venezuela was once an important supplier of heavy crude oil to U.S. refineries, which are specifically configured to process it.
2. Changes in sanctions and global energy markets have periodically altered this relationship, with some limited exceptions allowing certain U.S. companies (like Chevron) to operate under specific licenses.

Impact on International Relations

The oil dispute has had several international consequences:

1. Diplomatic Realignment: Reduced diplomatic relations between the United States and Venezuela.
2. Shift in Alliances: Shifts in Venezuela's economic and strategic partnerships toward countries such as China, Russia, and Iran.
3. Market Volatility: Fluctuations in global oil markets due to sanctions and changes in Venezuelan production.
4. Sanctions Debate: Increased global debate over the use of economic sanctions as a foreign policy tool.
5. Geopolitical Rivalry: Greater geopolitical competition over access to strategic energy resources in the Western Hemisphere.

Theoretical Perspective

From the perspective of Realism in international relations, states seek to maximize

power and protect strategic interests. Oil serves as a source of economic strength and geopolitical influence, making it a major factor in state behavior. Resource politics demonstrates how competition over valuable natural resources can shape alliances, conflicts, and foreign policy decisions.

Impact on International Relations

The oil dispute has produced several broader international consequences:

1. Reduced Venezuelan oil production and exports.
2. Economic contraction and humanitarian challenges within Venezuela.
3. Greater involvement of non-Western powers in Venezuela's energy sector.
4. Fluctuations in global oil markets during periods of heightened sanctions.
5. Increased polarization within regional organizations and among Latin American governments regarding policy toward Venezuela.

Literature Gap

The literature abounds with examinations of either the domestic economic meltdown of Venezuela or the sweeping nature of U.S. sanctions, but there is a dearth of material that brings together the influence of the changing global energy transition (from fossil fuels) on today's effectiveness of resource leverage. This study seeks to fill that gap by looking at how oil continues to be a major flashpoint in USA-Venezuela relations in the wake of reduced production levels and changing global energy markets.

Literature Review

What is the concept of Resource Politics and Neo-Realism?

Realist and neo-realist theories have a strong connection with the natural resources-international relations nexus. Some scholars such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz have stressed that the international system is anarchic, putting the security and material strength of the states first. In resource politics, natural resources, especially fossil fuels, are considered to have less than just an economic value, but also as a strategic tool of national power. There is a long-standing literature in this field which suggests that high-energy consuming countries want to ensure energy supply lines, and high-energy producing countries want to use their energy resources to further the goals of their foreign policy, which can result in geopolitical tension.

The "Resource Curse" and Petro-Aggression

A significant body of literature explores the internal and external behavior of oil-rich states,

frequently referencing the "Resource Curse" (Auty, 1993) and Paradox of Plenty (Karl, 1997).

1. Internal Dynamics: Scholars argue that total reliance on oil revenues often weakens domestic institutional capacity, fosters corruption, and creates a volatile economy susceptible to global price shocks.
2. External Dynamics (Petro-Aggression): Jeff Colgan (2013) introduces the concept of petro-aggression, demonstrating that revolutionary governments in oil-rich states are statistically more prone to engaging in militarized interstate disputes. In the case of Venezuela, the literature highlights how vast oil wealth gave the state the financial autonomy to pursue an aggressive, anti-hegemonic foreign policy in Latin America.

Oil Nationalization and Chavismo

The structural shift in U.S.–Venezuela relations is widely attributed to the rise of Hugo Chávez in 1999 and his policy of *socialismo del siglo XXI* (21st-century socialism).

Prior to Chávez, literature characterizes Venezuela as a reliable, market-oriented "safe bet" for U.S. oil imports.

Following his election, the nationalization of oil assets and the restructuring of the state oil company, PDVSA, altered this dynamic. Scholars note that diverting oil revenues from infrastructure reinvestment to social programs and regional oil diplomacy (e.g., Petrocaribe) directly challenged U.S. commercial and geopolitical influence in the Western Hemisphere.

1. Energy Security and U.S. Foreign Policy

From the American perspective, literature on energy security traditionally revolves around diversification and risk mitigation. For decades, Venezuela was a critical logistical partner due to its geographic proximity and the specialized configuration of Gulf Coast refineries designed to process Venezuelan heavy crude. However, literature tracking the U.S. shale revolution of the late 2000s notes a paradigm shift. As the U.S. transitioned into a net exporter of energy, its strategic dependence on Venezuelan crude diminished, granting Washington greater political leverage and flexibility to implement aggressive foreign policy measures without fearing domestic energy shortages.

2. Economic Sanctions as a Geopolitical Tool

The contemporary literature focuses heavily on the efficacy and humanitarian impacts of U.S. economic sanctions imposed under the Trump and Biden administrations.

1. Policy Efficacy: Analysts from think tanks and

academic journals are divided. Some argue that targeting PDVSA was a necessary diplomatic tool to pressure the Maduro administration toward democratic reforms.

2. Economic Fallout: Conversely, critical political economists argue that the sanctions acted as an economic blockade, crippling Venezuela's primary revenue stream, accelerating the country's economic collapse, and forcing Caracas to seek alternative alliances with U.S. rivals like China, Russia, and Iran.

Conclusion

Oil has been one of the central drivers of tensions between the United States and Venezuela. Venezuela's vast petroleum reserves have shaped both countries' strategic calculations, influencing sanctions, trade policies, diplomatic relations, and geopolitical competition. While political ideology, governance, and human rights concerns also play important roles, control over energy resources remains a key dimension of the relationship. The USA–Venezuela case demonstrates how natural resources can become instruments of both economic development and international conflict, illustrating the broader significance of resource politics in international relations.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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