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Mr. Hakim,

Thank you for inviting me to participate in the discussion on Tuesday, March 13, 2007 on U.S. policy towards Venezuela. In anticipation of the meeting, I read with great interest the Inter-American Dialogue's most recent report on Venezuela, *Hugo Chávez: A Test for U.S. Policy*. After careful consideration I have decided to respectfully decline your invitation. I hope to elucidate the reasons why I cannot accept your invitation below.

While the report attempts to dissect U.S. policy towards Venezuela and proposes various improvements, its fundamental shortcomings are conceptual in nature. Namely, at the national level, the report tries to analyze what has happened in Venezuela through a liberal conceptual lens that assumes that certain structures and means of governance are universal. At the international level, the report is based on the underlying assumption that U.S. interests are the same as the region's interests. I respectfully disagree on both counts.

Venezuela is in the midst of a dramatic political, economic and social reorganization that aims to create a system of government and economy that more fully incorporates its citizens, creates the bases for a sustainable economy and ensures an equitable distribution of the country's resources and riches. This process of change is a homegrown effort and responds to Venezuela's history and conditions – a significant break for a region that historically adopted foreign models as its own. By no means is this a simple process; much less will it occur without obvious and fervent opposition from traditional political and economic elites. (In what other country could the media collectively overthrow a government?) Thankfully, the Venezuelans conducting these changes have done so in peace and within the bounds of democracy.

Although your report acknowledges these realities in a historical context, it fails to give them the intellectual and conceptual consideration they deserve. The report simply does not recognize that what is taking place in Venezuela is a rearrangement of political, economic and social forces that can only be understood through new and emerging concepts that can better explain the realities of my country. Such concepts include participatory democracy, communal councils, and what we have labeled “social economics.” Your report leaves the reader with the impression that there are no alternatives to the liberal organization of political, economic and social forces promoted by Washington in a society like Venezuela. This is precisely the kind of analysis and thinking that has led to so many developmental failures in the past. Where would the U.S. be today if it had not adjusted its social organization to its emerging realities and challenges since independence? The U.S. has shown that societies that do not adapt to changing conditions are doomed to failure. This has been true in our lifetime with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, the civil rights movement and Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, among many examples. We in Venezuela are adjusting and adapting to our changing realities. What is happening in Venezuela has given the Venezuelan people a chance to be optimistic and to have hope in



the future – according to recent polling done by Evans/McDonough and Consultores 30.11, 68 percent of Venezuelans express optimism in the country's future. Your report seems to ignore this fact.

U.S. policy towards Venezuela has failed to grasp the scale of change that the Venezuelan people have demanded of their government. Most analysts and policymakers in Washington have looked at Venezuela through the prism of U.S. interests and assumptions, in the process identifying President Chávez as a threat. This is a mistake. Senator Barack Obama (D-IL) expressed as much when he commented on President George W. Bush's trip to Latin America, stating, "The President and his administration have misunderstood and mismanaged the political, economic and social change occurring through the Americas. The United States is seen as supporting democracy when it produces a desired result. It is vital to reverse that trend." Recent years have seen a whole host of new social movements and leaders rise to power in Latin America, products of decades of closed political systems and inequitable economic policies. As a consequence, governments like President Chávez's have undertaken substantive and far-reaching actions to incorporate entire classes of citizens that had until recently been excluded. Regionally, many countries have come to a consensus that development can only come through integration based on solidarity and cooperation. U.S. policy has never caught up with these changes, and few of the report's recommendations will help it.

The report is based on the underlying assumption that U.S. interests are the same as the region's interests. The report states that President Chávez is committed to "constructing a broad alliance in opposition to the U.S. agenda in Latin America and the world." Although I respect the honesty of the report in admitting that the U.S. first and foremost responsibility is to defend its national interest, it implicitly assumes that Venezuela's national interest should be an extension of it. Here again the assumption remains that somehow the "U.S. agenda" parallels other national, regional and global agendas. I respectfully disagree. What my government has done is to design a foreign policy which first promotes the sovereignty of Venezuela and our right to self-determination as well as Venezuela's national and strategic interests. These include a different conception of regional integration that requires a political unity that will allow South America to deal with other regions of the world – including the U.S., of course – as a united front. In this sense, Venezuela has been willing to redefine its national interest to pursue regional integration and cooperation in the pursuit of a multi-polar world.

Your report makes it clear that the U.S. need not adjust its national interest to the changing realities of the region. If we want to remain true to the concept of the Inter-American system and not allow it to become merely a fallacy, the U.S. agenda should focus more on cooperating with its partners, not dictating U.S. interests to them and demanding that they follow along. For the last six years, President Bush has pushed an aggressive and unilateral foreign policy, rarely stopping to listen to what his global partners and their people were saying. Its hostility towards Venezuela started when, after the bombing of innocent civilians in Afghanistan, President Chávez publicly denounced that we cannot fight "terror with more terror," a comment taken by some in Washington as an affront to the U.S.'s war on terror. The hostility continued when Venezuela – not to mention other countries in the region – opposed the invasion of Iraq under the U.S. doctrine of 'preemptive action' based on faulty intelligence. Given the events of recent years, those doubts and concerns seem almost prescient.

The result of such a doctrine and actions have been obvious – according to recent congressional testimony by Dr. Steven Kull of the Program on International Policy Attitudes, 51 percent of people in the world view U.S. influence as mainly negative. And according to the BBC World Service, opinion of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America is consistently low – 64 percent of Argentinians, 57 percent of Brazilians, 53 percent of Mexicans and 51 percent of Chileans hold negative views of U.S. influence



throughout the world. President Chávez has made it clear that his criticisms of the U.S. are limited to the policies that he feels threaten world peace, violate international norms and force countries into a second-class status vis-a-vis the U.S.

As you can see, as the ambassador of a country that democratically seeks a re-conceptualization of societal relations and a multi-polar world, it would be inappropriate for me to participate in any discussion in which the national interests of the U.S. is the only item on the agenda, particularly if President Chávez is *a priori* considered a “test” for U.S. foreign policy. However, if the day comes for a true *dialogue*, one in which there is a real discussion on some of the real social, political and economic changes affecting my country and the many interdependent interests represented in the Inter-American system, I would be more than happy to participate.

Respectfully,

Bernardo Alvarez Herrera  
Ambassador

**Cc:** Michael Shifter, Vice-President for Policy, Inter-American Dialogue  
Members of the Congressional Working Group on the Americas