

The Defeat of the FTAA. The Emergence of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America - Peoples' Trade Treaty (ALBA-TCP)

On the Occasion of the 10th Anniversary of FTAA's Defeat on November 5, 2005

By [Arnold August](#)

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The Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) was a proposed US-backed agreement to eliminate or reduce the trade barriers among all countries in the Americas. It was an extension of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Canada, Mexico and the US. It was supposed to extend to all countries in the Americas - except for Cuba - from Canada to Chile and Argentina's Tierra del Fuego. However, critics saw this as a move that, as was the case with NAFTA, would only serve to benefit the rich and powerful.

I regard Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Revolution as the architects of the new Latin America and Caribbean. This new development is the antithesis of the US-controlled FTAA.

To appreciate the momentous changes occurring in Latin America and the Caribbean, some background information is in order.

On December 14, 1994, Hugo Chávez arrived for the first time in Havana, having recently been granted clemency from prison in Venezuela, thus freeing him for the rest of his sentence for leading a failed civic/military coup. The Cuban stop was the last in a tour of Latin America. Chávez was looking to drum up international support for the burgeoning Bolivarian movement he was now leading. As he disembarked from his commercial airline flight, he was amazed to find Cuban President Fidel Castro waiting for him outside the aircraft. This would be the first of many encounters between the two revolutionaries. According to Cuban historian Eusebio Leal, Castro saw Chávez's potential to become a political, international and revolutionary leader at the highest levels.

Four years after the meeting with Castro, Chávez was elected for the first time as President of Venezuela, in December 1998, and sworn in on February 2, 1999.

The FTAA began with the Summit of the Americas in Miami, Florida, on December 11, 1994. However, the FTAA only came to public attention during the Quebec City Summit of the Americas, during the weekend starting Friday, April 20, 2001, a few years after the Bolivarian Revolution had won political power. In Quebec City, the FTAA meeting was targeted by massive anti-corporate and anti-globalization protests. A vocal critic of the FTAA was Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, who has described it as an "annexation plan" and a "tool of imperialism" for the exploitation of Latin America. Among the 31 participating nations present, Venezuela, represented by Chávez, was the only one that opposed it.

On December 14, 2004, three years after the Quebec City meeting, the Cuba-Venezuela Agreement was established to mark the 10th anniversary of the historic first encounter between the Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro. The signed agreement was named the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA).

It was later known as ALBA-TCP, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America – Peoples’ Trade Treaty (ALBA-TCP), based on the Spanish *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América, Tratado de Comercio de los Pueblos*. The term “Bolivarian” refers to the ideology of Simón Bolívar, the 19th-century South American independence leader born in Caracas who wanted South America to unite as a single “Great Nation.” “Our America” stems from José Martí’s concept of referring to a Latin America and Caribbean owned and governed by its people rather than outside interests.

This Cuba-Venezuela Agreement, signed by Presidents Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro, was aimed mainly at the exchange of petroleum and medical and educational resources between the two nations. Venezuela began to deliver about 96,000 barrels of oil per day from its state-owned oil company, PDVSA, to Cuba at very favourable prices. In exchange, Cuba sent 20,000 state-employed medical staff and thousands of teachers to Venezuela’s poorest states as well as to Caracas. The agreement also made it possible for Venezuelans to travel to Cuba for specialized medical care, free of charge.

This is what Chávez foresaw when he took a stand in Quebec City against FTAA – to build the opposite, that is, ALBA-TCP, an alliance not based on selfish interests, but on mutual cooperation and solidarity that did not include the US and Canada. Founded initially by Cuba and Venezuela on December 14, 2004, it associated with other governments that wished to consolidate regional economic integration based on a shared vision of social welfare, mutual economic aid and development, and to strengthen cooperation through mutual respect and solidarity.

ALBA grew from two to 11 members. The 11 member-countries are [Antigua and Barbuda](#), [Bolivia](#), [Cuba](#), [Dominica](#), [Ecuador](#), [Grenada](#), [Nicaragua](#), [Saint Kitts and Nevis](#), [Saint Lucia](#), [Saint Vincent and the Grenadines](#), and [Venezuela](#).

It should be noted that on December 15, 2009, the de facto president of Honduras, Roberto Micheletti, issued an executive decree through which he decided that Honduras should leave ALBA. Honduras was a member of ALBA under the leadership of President Mel Zelaya. This was one of the reasons that the US organized a coup against Zelaya and his constitutionally elected government in 2009.

ALBA-TCP is an integration platform for the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. It emphasizes solidarity, complementary relationships, justice and cooperation, which have the historical and fundamental purpose of linking the capacities and strengths of the collaborating countries. The goal is to produce the structural transformations and relations necessary for achieving the integral development that is required for the continued existence of Latin America and the Caribbean as sovereign nations that are based on social justice. Additionally, ALBA-TCP is a political, economic and social alliance that defends the independence, self-determination and identity of the peoples comprising it.

For the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, integration is an indispensable condition to development amid the increasingly large formations of regional blocs that

occupy predominant positions in the world economy. The cardinal principle that governs ALBA-TCP is the widest solidarity between the peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean, as upheld by Bolívar, Martí, Sucre, O'Higgins and so many other national heroes. This solidarity excludes selfish nationalism or restrictive national policies that reject the objective of constructing a large homeland in Latin America and the Caribbean, bringing to reality the dreams of the heroes of the emancipating struggles.

ALBA does not harbour commercial criteria or selfish interests related to business profits or national benefit to the detriment of other peoples. It seeks to rely on a wide Latin American vision that recognizes the fact that it is impossible for the countries to develop and be really independent in isolation. And one that aspires to seeing, as Bolívar stated, "the biggest nation of the world emerge in America, not less for its extension and wealth, but for its freedom and glory," and what Martí would conceive as "Our America," to separate it from the other America, which is expansionist and thus driven by imperial appetites. ALBA-TCP also has had as a goal to develop and widen regional integration even further, while the US-backed FTAA has been fizzling out.

What happened to the FTAA?

The last Summit was held at Mar del Plata, Argentina, in November 2005, but no agreement on FTAA was reached. Of the 34 countries present at the negotiations, 26 pledged to meet again in 2006 to resume negotiations, but no such meeting took place. The failure of the Mar del Plata Summit to establish a comprehensive FTAA agenda signalled the end of the US-backed FTAA. At the same time a very wide people's mobilization from all over the continent rejected the FTAA in the very headquarters where this Summit took place, in the soccer stadium of Mar del Plata. The Summit thus occurred in the face of thousands of people who had demonstrated throughout the city. Chávez delivered a historic speech where he declared: "To hell with the FTAA!"

Let us briefly look at some of ALBA's accomplishments regarding wider integration and programs. I provide only three examples even though there are many more.

1. Petrocaribe

Petrocaribe was established in 2005 and based on earlier agreements between ALBA founders Cuba and [Venezuela](#). It looks to sell oil under a concessionary financial agreement to 14 member nations located in the Caribbean. This initiative provides the Caribbean nations with important hydrocarbon resources, which many do not possess in their territories.

2. teleSUR

Launched in 2005, [teleSUR](#) is a media conglomerate that provides news and current affairs broadcasts throughout the ALBA bloc. The program is founded on an Internet-based television channel and is a cooperative effort between the governments of [Venezuela](#), [Argentina](#), [Uruguay](#), [Cuba](#), [Bolivia](#), [Ecuador](#) and [Nicaragua](#). Note that Argentina and Uruguay are not ALBA members. While not yet a TV broadcast, [teleSUR](#) in English has recently been created as a website. I consider [teleSUR](#) to be the most important alternative to the media war carried out by the US conglomerates. I encourage you to follow and support this media initiative at www.telesurtv.net and www.telesurtv.net/english.

3. CELAC

ALBA countries were instrumental in the formation of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC, based on the Spanish *Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños*). CELAC is a regional bloc of Latin American and [Caribbean](#) states conceived on February 23, 2010, at the [Rio Group–Caribbean Community](#) Unity Summit, and created on December 3, 2011, in [Caracas, Venezuela](#), with the signature of the Declaration of Caracas. It consists of 33 sovereign countries representing roughly 600 million people. Due to the focus of the organization on Latin American and Caribbean countries, other countries and territories in the Americas, namely Canada and the US, were not included. CELAC is an example of a decade-long push for deeper integration within Latin America and the Caribbean. CELAC is being created to deepen Latin American and Caribbean integration and to reduce the previously domineering influence of the US on the internal affairs and economics of Latin America. It is also seen as an alternative to the Organization of American States (OAS), the regional body organized largely by Washington in 1948. CELAC is developing its ties with other countries such as China and Russia, thus contributing significantly to the transformation of a unipolar world led by the US toward a multipolar world. The Bolivarian Revolution and Hugo Chávez have their imprint on this major international development.

In addition to the three points just mentioned, what have been the practical implications of ALBA?

The derailment of FTAA is representative of two broader trends, which ALBA has strengthened: helping to secure a post-neoliberal Latin America and lessening the grip of US imperialism in favour of independence and self-determination.

The economic model that ALBA is institutionalizing differs from orthodox neoliberalism in significant ways. For example, the state is being brought “back in” as an economic actor in order to restrict untrammelled market forces.

Whereas the neoliberal economic framework was often treated as “one-size-fits-all,” ALBA acknowledges the diversity of its members and emphasizes that a differentiated approach must be taken. Neither the universal removal of protective barriers, tariffs and subsidies, nor the compulsory adherence to ALBA programs, is a condition for ALBA membership.

ALBA has provided support for peoples and governments who have demanded the removal of US military bases and the cessation of US military-policing operations. Such is the case with the removal of US troops from the Manta military base in Ecuador and the expulsion of US-backed anti-drug enforcement personnel in Bolivia.

ALBA has fostered an expansion in trade between its members, which allows for greater self-sufficiency and lessens the long-standing dependency of these countries on the US market. This intra-ALBA trade has also been complemented by a diversification of the external trading partners of the ALBA countries.

Through the creation of the Bank of ALBA and a new regional currency - the SUCRE - ALBA is providing an alternative to the traditional reliance that Latin America has had upon the pro-status quo international financial institutions that many deem to be under the effective control of the US and Europe.

In terms of education, Mission Robinson, a literacy program based primarily on the positive experiences of Cuba, has been extremely successful. It is estimated to have reached over 3.8 million people, and has played a large role in Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua achieving literacy rates that classify them, according to UNESCO standards, as illiteracy-free countries.

In my view, one of the key features of ALBA is solidarity and opposition to US interference.

Let us take the example of Venezuela. The ALBA-TCP issued a Special Communiqué after meeting in Caracas on September 14, 2015 entitled "In Defense of Venezuela's Sovereignty and Independence." I quote it here in full:

"The countries of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America - Peoples' Trade Treaty (ALBA-TCP) express their firmest defense of the principles of independence, self-determination of peoples, sovereignty and sovereign equality of States that enable harmonious relations among the countries in the international community.

The ALBA-TCP countries cannot accept interference in the internal affairs of a state by another state. Thus, they express their concern regarding opinions on the judicial decisions taken in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, by the appropriate authority and within the framework of its sovereign jurisdiction, to punish terrorist acts and effectively protect the human rights of victims.

Some countries have spoken out about this fact revealing the double standard that violates the international legal order and favors political conditions to overthrow constitutional governments in an attempt to plunder strategic natural resources. These high-sounding statements attempt to hide serious violations of human rights in their own territories and prevent the deepening of the democratic processes that the ALBA countries have been developing in exercise of their right to self-determination.

The ALBA-TCP countries warn against the smear campaign, slanders and aggressions against the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and commit to remain alert vis-à-vis the threats to its peace, independence and sovereignty.

Caracas, September 14, 2015."

This shows the importance of supporting Venezuela today. The goal of US imperialism is to smash the Bolivarian Revolution now led by the constitutionally elected President Nicolás Maduro in order to bring down other progressive governments, especially those that are members of ALBA. While focusing primarily on Venezuela and President Maduro, the US has also been very active recently in attempting to destabilize the constitutionally elected governments in Ecuador and Bolivia, led respectively by Rafael Correa and Evo Morales.

To stand in support of Venezuela and the ALBA countries today is to be on the side of sovereignty, self-determination and social justice, not only of the ALBA members, but also of all of Latin America and the Caribbean as the most promising region in the world for the future of mankind.

Thank you very much.

* Remarks by Arnold August at the First Gathering of Solidarity of Our America, Organized by the Embassy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela in Canada, Ottawa, September 26,

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Arnold August, a Canadian journalist and lecturer, is the author of Democracy in Cuba and the 1997-98 Elections and, more recently, [Cuba and Its Neighbours: Democracy in Motion](#). Cuba's neighbours under consideration are the US, Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. Arnold can be followed on Twitter [@Arnold_August](#).

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