

U.N. Vote Becomes Referendum on U.S. Policy in Latin America

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[UNITED NATIONS](#), July 28 — [Venezuela](#) has set its sights on a seat on the Security Council and the United States has set out to block it, converting a normal Council rotation into a showdown with the country's Washington-baiting president, [Hugo Chávez](#).

The United States has had strained relations with Venezuela since Mr. Chávez took power in 1998, and even appeared to support a coup attempt against him in 2002. Mr. Chávez regularly rails against American foreign policy, and has called President Bush an idiot. Making fast friends with Washington's adversaries, he went last week to Belarus, which has cracked down on dissenters after an election widely believed to be rigged. This weekend he is set to visit Iran, and he says he wants to go to North Korea.

[John R. Bolton](#), the American ambassador to the United Nations, said Venezuela would be "disruptive" as a Council member.

"I remember when Cuba was a member of the Security Council and it was just a disruptive influence," he said. "We'd rather have a responsible government on the Council."

He said the United States was supporting [Guatemala](#) as a reward for what he called the recent progress it has made in becoming a peaceful, democratic country. Mr. Bolton and other American officials have been unusually public in expressing their support for Guatemala, and opposition to Venezuela, and are asking other countries to follow their lead.

The seat in question, which opens in 2007, is one of 10 on the Security Council that rotate every two years.

With Venezuela and Guatemala vowing to maintain their candidacies, it seems likely that the contest will go to a vote in the [General Assembly](#) in October, as is required when a regional bloc, in this case Latin America and the Caribbean, fails to designate a

nation. In that case, a successful candidate needs to win two-thirds of a secret ballot by the 192 member nations.

In the meantime, as Latin American and Caribbean countries announce which candidate they support, the race has become a referendum of sorts on United States influence in the region.

“It is further polarizing the region, moving it toward two separate blocs,” said Adam Isaacson of the Center for International Policy in Washington. “It has a real ‘with us or against us’ quality to it. It’s like picking sides for kickball, with lots of wheedling and threatening going on.”

Francisco Arias, the Venezuelan ambassador to the United Nations, said Washington was using “excessive force” in what he described as a senseless campaign to quash Venezuela’s chances. He insists that Washington’s fears are ill founded.

“We aren’t going to be a spoiled brat, pounding on the table and breaking lamps in the Security Council,” Mr. Arias said. Countries in the region do not like being pressured by the United States, he said.

“Things are changing in the region, and there are signs that relations with the United States are going to be different,” he said. “We don’t have the kind of relations anymore where the U.S. ambassador picks up the phone and tells the president of a country what kinds of decisions to make.”

But Julia E. Sweig, the director of the Latin American program at the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), said a vote for Guatemala was being viewed as a vote for the United States.

“Guatemala is a tiny country, it is a weak country, it’s very poor and it is not known as having international stature outside of the American purview,” she said. “It would be hard for it to operate independently from the United States.”