SUMMER SEMINAR ON WORLD AFFAIRS 2010

You are working for a high-level official in Bureau of Western Hemispheric Affairs in the State Department. An urgent message has arrived from the U.S. Embassy in Venezuela, and your boss needs to formulate a recommendation before she meets with the Secretary of State in one hour.

These are the facts:

Yesterday night, a group of military officers contacted the U.S. Ambassador in Caracas. They expressed their decision to launch a military coup against President Hugo Chávez next week, and requested the blessing of the ambassador. They stated that an important number of military units are behind the plot, but word that the U.S. supports the plan would encourage some undecided military commanders to switch sides against the government and would ensure their success.

The ambassador promised to inquire discreetly with his superiors in Washington and report back to the military officers. His brief about the meeting emphasizes the following points:

Regarding the local situation:

- Military officers and middle-class sectors are increasingly disgruntled with the Chávez Administration. They complain that administrative corruption is rampant, and that the president has tightened his grip on power to be reelected without limits. After his proposal for a constitutional amendment allowing for indefinite reelection was defeated in a referendum in late 2007, the president called for a new popular referendum in early 2009. This time the proposal passed, and the president is expected to win another six-year term in 2012. In the meantime, some of his opponents have been accused of corruption and arrested (or they have fled into exile). The government has dismissed complaints by non-governmental organizations (such as Human Rights Watch) and by multilateral organizations (such as the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights) about the erosion of civil liberties.

- The popular sectors increasingly complain against the scarcity of basic products, but a large number of people still support President Chávez. The ambassador asked what would happen if a large number of citizens were to mobilize in support of the government. The military officers at the meeting bluntly answered: “we are ready to preserve public order by force if necessary.”

- The officers promised that, if successful, they would arrest President Chávez, dissolve Congress, and impose martial law for three months. A prestigious military officer (and a former Chávez ally) would be appointed as interim president and he would call for free elections within six months.
It is not clear whether the military officers would desist from launching the coup if the U.S. opposes the plan, but they would probably grow resentful if they feel that the U.S. does not support their cause. However, the ambassador does not know if the military rebellion would succeed in event that it does occur.

Regarding the regional implications of the plan:

- If the coup takes place, the ambassador anticipates that a vast majority of Latin American countries in the Organization of American States (OAS) would invoke the “Democratic Charter” of the OAS and seek to isolate the Venezuelan military government. This would place the U.S. in a complex position.

- If the U.S. openly supports the military government, the Obama administration would be at odds with most Latin American governments. The U.S. would lose all credibility vis-à-vis Latin American audiences as a voice in support of democracy. Brazil would consolidate an unquestioned position as the moral leader in the region. Paradoxically, other presidents who are following Chavez’s strategy in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua would present themselves as strong critics of military dictatorship, blame the U.S., and gain prestige as democratic champions throughout the region.

- If the U.S. refuses to support the rebels, other presidents in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua may infer that they are free to suffocate the opposition and eliminate all term limits. Situations like this may in fact multiply in the future.

- If the coup takes place and the White House denounces the rebels, it is expected that Venezuelan-American citizens and Cuban exiles who control votes in Florida will lobby the U.S. Senate intensely to gain congressional support for the new military government. This could create a confrontation between the White House and the Republicans in Congress and delay several bills about domestic policy that are important for the Obama Administration.

Your boss may show up at any time now. Before she gets to the meeting with the Secretary of State, she needs answers to four questions:

1. What should the main goals of the State Department be in this situation?
2. What should the US ambassador reply to the Venezuelan military officers?
3. What should the US position be in the OAS if the coup takes place?
4. Should your boss make any further recommendations to the Secretary of State?