Venezuela today leads the anti-imperialist struggle in Latin America. This struggle, in the current form of the Bolivarian Revolution, according to President Maduro, can be traced back twenty-six years (February 27–28, 1989) to the popular rebellion against the neoliberal policies of the Carlos Andrés Pérez government that produced the Caracazo—the massacre by government security forces of at least 3,000 protesters. ‘This was,’ he noted (in a telephone conversation with the governor of the state Aragua), ‘the beginning of the Bolivarian Revolution to escape the mistreatment [of the people], the pillaging and neocolonialism, [and] the false democracy’ [of the republic] (El Jorope, 2/28/2015). Venezuela, he noted—in a televised broadcast at the time—under the leadership of Hugo Chávez was the first country in the region to say ‘no’ to the concerted effort of imperialist forces to convert the countries in the region into ‘colonies of the IMF’ and to reject ‘savage capitalism and neoliberalism’.

Maduro in this televised broadcast also alluded to the form that the anti-imperialist struggle would take under Chávez’s leadership, that of the Bolivarian Revolution, or, as he had it: ‘the miracle of the socialist revolution’ and the misiónes—the social programs of the government’s national executive.

The course of this open-ended and ongoing revolutionary process has been anything but smooth and far from consolidated—and indeed is currently in jeopardy, assailed as it is by forces of opposition from both within and outside the country. The aim of this chapter is to elucidate some of the political dynamics of this revolutionary process and the efforts of the US imperialist state to derail it.

First, we outline some of the critical features of Chávez’s political project to bring about by means of the Bolivarian Revolution what he described as ‘the socialism of the 21st century’, the antidote to both capitalism in its neoliberal form and US imperialism. Our main focus here is on the strategic response of the US to Chávez’s political project, and the political dynamics of class struggle associated with it.

Second, we trace out the changes in the correlation of force in the class and anti-imperialist struggle subsequent to Chávez’s death and the transition towards the Madero regime. Our main concern here is to establish the diverse forms taken by the class struggle and US imperialism in this conjuncture, and the conditions of a failed attempted coup against a democratically elected regime.
Chávez and the Anti-Imperialist Struggle

The Chávez years witnessed the thwarting of US efforts to restore client regimes in Latin America and the growth of anti-imperialist movements in the region. However, Colombia—containing seven US military bases—remained the lynchpin of US foreign policy in the region, and principal adversary of Chávez’s anti-imperialist struggle.

The anti-imperialist struggle from the 1950s to the 1970s predominantly took the form of armed movements of national liberation, which combined anti-imperialist struggles with movements for revolutionary change in the direction of socialism. In the new century under Chávez’s leadership the anti-imperialist struggle took the form of the Bolivarian revolution, which involved mobilizing the resistance against imperialist exploitation, made tangible with two projects: (i) building a movement towards the socialism of the 21st century; and (ii) pushing for Latin America’s integration, which has taken various forms including UNASUR, CELA and ALBA, conceived and led by Hugo Chávez and excluding Washington.

Needless to say both projects converted Chávez into US enemy number one in the region. In response Venezuela mobilized its power to deepen its commitment to Latin American centred trade and diplomatic blocs.

With the defeat of US efforts to oust Chávez in 2002, considerable advances were made to further the Chávez’ project to socialize the economy and develop a comprehensive welfare state. In turning the society towards socialism the government proposed to nationalize production, placing decisions in the hands of elected community councils; join the PWC in progressive extractivism using oil resources to reduce poverty; and promoting ALBA as a counterweight to the US-dominated OAS.

The approach adopted by Chávez to bring about 21st century socialism was what might be termed ‘progressive extractivism’, or even the ‘new developmentalism’ based on a post-Washington Consensus on the need for an inclusive development, an approach focused on reducing poverty through the use of oil rents and promoting forms of social ownership. This strategy, considered by some economists as the ‘new developmentalism’, points to the need to bring the state back into the development process and increase social expenditures as a more inclusive form of economic growth. This strategy of ‘progressive extractivism’ was also pursued in Bolivia and Ecuador (Gudynas, 2010; Veltmeyer & Petras, 2014). In Venezuela, however, the government went much further, moving beyond the institutional pillars of the new developmentalism by redistributing the proceeds, socializing the means of production and purporting to put the economy in the hands of the workers. This approach took the form of