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VENEZUELA

Beginning the endgame in Venezuela

By Evan Ellis / [🐦REvanEllis](#) / January 30, 2019

As the crisis in Venezuela has deepened over the past week, a mysterious transformation has occurred. What started out as U.S. diplomatic support for the new, constitutionally legitimate government of Juan Guaidó has come to be treated in the international media as a possible U.S. military intervention.



The unfolding drama playing out in the media includes adventure-movie-style details such as the arrival of [Russian mercenaries](#) to protect the dictator Nicholas Maduro and U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton's ledger, which was photographed in the White House Situation Room with the ominous words "[5,000 troops to Colombia.](#)"

While the United States could merely lament over the damage caused to the country and its people by the criminal regime of Nicholas Maduro, which refuses to relinquish power, it has instead embarked on a “high payoff, high risk” strategy. In joining the international community to back Guaidó’s strong constitutional claim, the U.S. has put their strategic position in the region at risk and given themselves little margin for error. Adversaries such as China and Russia stand ready to exploit the worst historically-rooted perceptions of the U.S. to advance their own interests in the hemisphere.

The international media’s insistence on the prospect of a U.S. military intervention is bolstered by the U.S. administration’s position that “all options are on the table.” Yet while such declarations should be taken seriously by those in the Venezuelan military deciding which side of history they will be on, the most decisive actions in the current struggle will likely play out in the battlefields of diplomacy and finance, rather than military engagements.

The Maduro regime on the brink

Venezuela is at a tipping point in which perceptions are critically important to outcomes. Military officers loyal to Maduro likely understand that, whether his regime falls in 2019 or 2020, it is running out of money and time. Their calculus is thus

arguably shifting from inaction driven by fear of the consequences if Maduro's regime falls, to finding the best "off ramp" before it does. To the extent that they believe Guaidó will prevail, joining him will make them part of the patriotic forces that risked their lives to defend the Venezuelan constitution, democracy, and the will of its people, rather than ending as criminals tried for their crimes, or subjected to street justice by angry

Venezuelans. Given Guaidó's likely success, the National Assembly's possible offer of amnesty is the military's best "off-ramp" to preserve their liberty, and possibly part of their illicit earnings. Accordingly, the defection of a significant portion of Venezuela's armed forces from Maduro to Guaidó will cement the latter's successful restoration of democracy to the country. On the other hand, if the military calculates that Guaidó will not succeed, declaring loyalty to his government could be a death sentence; the critical mass of the Venezuelan armed forces will not publicly support Guaidó, and in the near term, his efforts will fall short.

In short, in this critical moment, who wins in Venezuela depends largely on who the military and other key actors believe will win.

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To its credit, the Trump administration has demonstrated its commitment to a positive outcome in the current struggle. Many key players in Venezuela and the international community have not taken this level of commitment into consideration in their own actions. The strong statements in support of Guaidó's government by President Trump, Secretary of State [Mike Pompeo](#), and National Security Advisor [Bolton](#), among others, plus coordination behind the scenes with representatives of the [Grupo de Lima](#), the Organization of American States, and even the United Nations Security Council, demonstrate that the U.S. is fully engaged and determined to see the conflict through to a successful conclusion.

The expanding group of governments recognizing the Guaidó government, including virtually all of the principal states of the Western Hemisphere, and other key states outside it from Great Britain to Israel, illustrate a growing consensus within the international community to finally put an end to the affront that the Maduro regime represents to democracy, responsible government, human rights, and the international order. The ultimatum to Maduro from [Spain and the European Union](#) demanding a call for legitimate elections within eight days, highlights the difficulty of the bloc to take decisive action. Nonetheless, Maduro's [brutish rejection](#) of the demand gives Europe the political cover to do what it could not otherwise: support decisive action against the Maduro regime.

Such international positions go beyond mere critical words; domestic courts of law are generally obliged to follow the positions of their governments. With the United Kingdom's recognition of Guaidó as the official leader of Venezuela, for example, Guaidó's government has petitioned the Bank of England, to grant it (rather than the former

Maduro regime) access to the \$1.3 billion in gold in Venezuela's official accounts. New sanctions against the Venezuelan oil company PdVSA, announced January 28 by the Trump administration, do not technically stop the U.S. from buying Venezuelan oil, but rather, stop payments to Maduro's regime for that oil, since the U.S. government does not recognize the regime as the legal representative of Venezuela. With U.S. support, Guaidó has correspondingly appointed new boards of directors not only for PdVSA, but also its U.S.-based affiliate CITGO, as well as other Venezuelan assets abroad, over which it has announced it is "assuming control in an orderly fashion." The sanctions against PdVSA alone could cut in half the cash flow that the Maduro regime relies upon to feed and otherwise pay off the military, and less disciplined pro-government private armed groups such as the "colectivos."

With respect to the security situation, the Guaidó government's counter to Maduro's demand for U.S. diplomats to leave the country demonstrates a promising level of thoughtfulness about the complex game of "chess" now being played, and suggests coordination between Guaidó's government and the United States. While putting U.S. diplomats in a vulnerable situation is certainly not typical practice, the move creates a dilemma for Maduro. Given the high levels of discontent believed to exist within the Venezuelan military, if he orders the military into action against U.S. diplomats, with the U.S. having warned in unequivocal terms of a response, Maduro risks provoking a split in the ranks of the Venezuelan armed forces, as they contemplate whether they are actually willing to risk their lives in the final stages of a losing battle to defend an illegitimate dictator and a corrupt chain of command, after having already silently watched the suffering of Venezuelans who are, after all, their own family members and

neighbors. On the other hand, if Maduro does not act, members of his inner circle could conclude that he no longer has the confidence of the military and, in desperation, turn on Maduro to save themselves, also precipitating the downfall of his regime. Maduro's gesture to give U.S. diplomats 30 days to leave likely reflects the regime's assessment that attempting to deploy troops in a show of force against the embassy or other targets named as protected by the U.S. government would lead to mass defections that could ultimately promote the downfall of the regime.

Adding to military unrest, the declaration of loyalty to Guaidó by Jose Luis Silva, Venezuela's military attaché in Washington, may have been motivated by a desire to avoid having to return to Caracas. His public turn likely has caused discomfort among Maduro's defense officials, both because it highlights how other key officers could make such decisions for personal interest, and because of likely concern about what Silva knew about the Venezuelan military situation, and what he may now have shared with Guaidó as his new commander-in-chief, or with the United States.

Potential roles for the U.S. military

While discussion of U.S. military activities in Venezuela often seem to refer to a large-scale, long-term presence of U.S. forces in the country, in reality, there are a range of possible ways that U.S. forces could be employed, with some more controversial or legally and diplomatically complicated than others. Such possibilities include deployment of U.S. forces to Venezuela's neighbors (at their invitation, and with the appropriate legal authorizations) to respond to the humanitarian needs occasioned by a chaotic regime collapse. Such forces, without entering

Venezuelan territory, could also be called upon to protect Venezuela's neighbors against attacks by rogue elements of that nation's disintegrating armed forces. At the invitation of the legitimate Guaidó government, U.S. forces could conceivably be called upon to protect U.S. diplomatic personnel or members of the legitimate government from imminent danger, or to rescue them from an untenable position. In the extreme, at the invitation of the Guaidó government, and at the request of appropriately constituted international tribunals, a coalition that includes U.S. forces could be called upon to conduct surgical operations to capture wanted criminals in Venezuela and bring them to justice.

The outsized importance of Venezuela's allies

As Maduro's prospects darken, the actions of Cuba, Russia, and China will take on increasing significance.

For Cuba, the penetration of the Venezuelan military by the Cuban intelligence services gives Havana substantial insight into what is occurring in Venezuela. It may wish to cut a deal with the United States to ensure the wellbeing of those operatives, rather than risk what could happen to them if they contribute to violence trying to prevent the Venezuelan military from supporting Guaidó.

For Russia, Guaidó's assumption of control of CITGO and PdVSA virtually assures that it will lose the money it loaned to the Maduro regime in exchange for a percentage ownership of CITGO, unless it deals with Guaidó's government. At the same time, Russia's sending of mercenaries to Caracas to "protect Maduro" may reflect the desire of Vladimir Putin to make it more difficult for the Cubans to sell out their

Venezuelan friends, even while hedging their bets by doing so with a “non-official” force which is effectively expendable if things go badly.

For China, Guaidó’s successful exploitation of international recognition of his legal status as the legitimate government of Venezuela is an unpleasant end run around Beijing’s claims to the Venezuelan oil, debt, and work projects its companies thought they had cemented through their dealings with the corrupt Maduro elite. The PRC now finds itself in an ever-shrinking circle of states, including rogue North Korea, fighting a losing battle and damaging the nation’s public image by supporting an inept dictator whose retinue has hijacked the country’s institutions, destroyed its economy, and robbed it and its people blind. Indeed, Guaidó’s increasingly likely triumph in the current struggle incentivizes Beijing to work with the new government to protect its investments and future position in Venezuela. If Beijing does begin to work with Guaidó’s government, it could seal the downfall of the Maduro regime.

In Mexico, the government of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) has resisted endorsing Guaidó over Maduro. That position will add to sources of tension such as immigration and the U.S. “border wall” in AMLO’s increasingly difficult attempt to avoid conflict with the United States. Given AMLO’s disposition to focus on Mexico’s internal challenges rather than foreign policy, it is doubtful how long he will feel it’s worth it to risk Mexico’s international reputation, and a distracting conflict with the United States, to defend a corrupt dictator as hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans, not unlike those who once supported AMLO in Mexico, protest in the streets.

Few good paths forward remain

As the current conflict unfolds, the risk that Guaidó will fail to oust the Maduro regime is increasingly overshadowed by risks stemming from the conditions in which he might succeed. Specifically, if Guaidó's victory is less than decisive, or occurs on the heels of a controversial U.S. intervention, Maduro and his cronies could flee Caracas, yet leave substantial military elements loyal to the former regime (possibly bankrolled by Russia and Cuba) to conduct a terrorist campaign against the new Guaidó government. Russia or Cuba could also fund actions by the armed but often undisciplined "*colectivos*," as well as armed groups such as the [FARC](#) and [ELN](#), Venezuelan prison gangs ("[pranes](#)") and other criminal entities, with the objective of making the country ungovernable for the new Guaidó government and drawing the U.S. into an expensive long-term security deployment not unlike Iraq or Afghanistan.

In such a situation, Russian media outlets such as *Sputnik* and *Russia Today* (RT) would likely seek to exploit every misstep by the Guaidó government, and every accidental civilian death caused by U.S. forces, to discredit the latter's role in the region in general.

Ironically, the successful ouster of Maduro and his criminal cabal could actually hurt the U.S. strategic position in the region. Since 2015 (and arguably before), the negative symbolism of Maduro's abuses and mismanagement have discredited the ideological left across the region and helped centrist and right-of-center governments come to power in countries including Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Colombia, to name a few. Not only would the removal of Maduro deprive right-of-center politicians of their most compelling poster child, it would potentially set the stage for a new negative tale of U.S. interventionism, likely punctuated by regular stories about deaths at the hands of U.S. or

U.S.-trained security forces, and unmet expectations in the restoration of prosperity to the country.

The value of measured restraint from the U.S.

In the complex and demanding circumstances as the Venezuela crisis evolves, it is imperative for the U.S. to stay the course in its support for the Guaidó government. This must include continuing to coordinate with the rest of the international community, not only to advance diplomatic support for that government, but also for its control over assets abroad that rightfully belong to the Venezuelan people.

As part of those ongoing efforts, it is important for the U.S. to prepare to use military means, if necessary, to defend its diplomatic personnel, the elected Venezuelan National Assembly, and representatives of the legitimate government of Juan Guaidó against harm by those occupying Venezuelan territory. Consistent with international law, and in coordination with partner governments, the U.S. should also prepare to use its Armed Forces to defend allies such as Colombia, which could be affected by the spillover of violence should the Venezuelan military and other armed groups loyal to Maduro disintegrate. If, upon establishing its de facto control of Venezuela, the Guaidó government invites international peacekeepers to the country to maintain order (under the leadership of Brazil or another capable party from the region, and possibly involving Uruguay, Mexico, Peru, Ecuador, among other states), the United States should be prepared to contribute logistical and other support to that effort. As the U.S. prepares for such a possibility, now is the time for it to talk to Russia and China, leveraging their concerns about the future of their investments, to ensure that they do not use their veto in the U.N. Security Council to

block such an operation, or (as noted in the earlier scenario) play a spoiler role against the Guaidó government.

Perhaps most important, no matter how legitimate the Guaidó government is, nor how much the campaign against Maduro is actually led by other governments, decision makers in Washington must keep in mind that the international press (and many in the region), will nonetheless cast any U.S. effort to help restore democracy to Venezuela as self-interested gringo military interventionism. To this end, while noting that “all options are on the table” may help the military forces backing Maduro to make the right and wise choice, U.S. decision makers must not let frustration or enthusiasm distract them from the importance of maintaining the Venezuelan people and constitution in the leadership role in resolving the present crisis with the support of the full international community. Whatever the temptation, any role for the U.S. military must be a limited, supporting one at most. Such action, particularly if the U.S. succeeds in helping the Guaidó administration to win the backing of the international community, and the good faith of the rest of the region, will also create the expectation that the U.S. be equally respectful and supportive of the region’s constitutions and democratic expression the next time such an imperative arises, even if doing so is not as clearly aligned with immediate U.S. interests.

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