

The American Conservative

Venezuela is a Tragedy of Corruption, But Not a Threat

Doug Bandow

April 11, 2019

Two centuries ago, President James Monroe insisted that the European powers stay out of the Western Hemisphere. Only the U.S., he explained, had the right to attack its neighbors.

Over the years, America has repeatedly asserted its authority in Latin America. Washington's motivations have ranged from the arguably humanitarian to the angrily nationalistic to the frankly commercial. As a result, America's reputation for Yanqui Imperialism is well earned.

Washington took an interest in Venezuela in the late 19th century, announcing that a border dispute between that nation and Great Britain (involving the latter's colony of British Guiana) fell within America's sphere of interest. The U.S. asserted the Monroe Doctrine, demanding that London accept international, meaning American, arbitration. President Grover Cleveland threatened to enforce his decision "by any means." Britain rejected the Monroe Doctrine as having no standing in international law, but nonetheless decided that a good relationship with Washington was more important than a little extra real estate.

Now, Donald Trump is again threatening to apply American military might to Venezuela. It is a very bad idea.

Venezuela illustrates the consequences of despotic, incompetent, corrupt collectivism. As long as oil revenues were flowing prodigiously, there was enough for most everyone: Chavista elites, military commanders, and foreign allies, with a little left over for Venezuela's traditionally impoverished masses. Indeed, the plight of the latter gave Hugo Chavez, the one-time coup master who was elected president, a patina of righteousness. The traditional ruling parties had looted the country with little concern for those outside the halls of power. There was rampant injustice. Unfortunately, Chavez only compounded the unfairness.

The country's collapse, which predates the Trump administration's imposition of stifling sanctions, was almost total. Economic activity crashed. Hyperinflation raged—this year it could hit as much as *10 million percent*. Businesses folded. Even the national petroleum company ran aground. Food disappeared from supermarket shelves. Hospitals essentially ceased to function. Nine in 10 people fell below the poverty line. A tenth of the population fled. The *New York Times'* Andes bureau chief, Nicholas Casey, called the current situation "almost unimaginable."

At least Chavez, who died six years ago, had a raw, undisciplined charisma. His successor, Nicolás Maduro, is a dour dictator who survives politically by rigging elections, arresting opponents, and circling regime wagons. At least four out of every five Venezuelans want him gone.

Enter the Trump administration. So far its routine policy of maximum pressure has been a bust, failing to force regime or even policy change in North Korea, Iran, Russia, and Cuba. But that didn't stop President Trump from taking the same approach in Venezuela.

He imposed new economic penalties, most significantly seeking to stop oil sales, thereby depriving the Venezuelan government of revenue. But regime elites are most able to adapt to foreign sanctions. The Maduro government simply focused more on protecting its supporters while blaming Washington for its problems. As in Cuba, U.S. sanctions became an excuse for state failure. Attempting to drive already suffering civilians to overthrow their government is a dubious enterprise. Anti-Maduro union leader José Bodas warned: "The rich will not stop getting richer, it's the workers who will shoulder the cost of these measures."

President Trump also recognized opposition leader Juan Guaido, president of the National Assembly, as Venezuela's legitimate leader, and invited the military to defect. The administration expected swift collapse in Caracas. Not incidentally, Trump hoped to win support from voters who hailed from Latin America.

But nothing happened. Well, that is not exactly true. Living standards fell even further. The electricity went off. Security forces tightened their brutal grip. Popular desperation intensified. But Maduro and his apparatchiks remained firmly in place. The more Trump administration officials huffed and puffed—and tweeted—the less effective their efforts became.

So President Trump threatened war. He previously was dissuaded from taking military action by his own officials and Latin American leaders. But the failure of his Venezuela policy has increased pressure on him to do something.

Yet military action would be entirely inappropriate.

Venezuela's neighbors have been flooded with refugees and Washington no doubt prefers stability in the region. But war should be a last resort to protect truly vital interests, and Venezuela poses no security threat to America.

Moreover, assuming a positive outcome in Venezuela reflects the triumph of hope over experience. The U.S. has intervened in scores of other nations over the years, with results that have often been counterproductive and sometimes disastrous. Venezuela would be no different.

Last year, Trump declared of Maduro's government, "It's a regime that frankly could be toppled very quickly by the military, if the military decides to do that." And while the U.S. would certainly win any war, the cost could be significant. Most Venezuelans want Maduro gone, but they don't necessarily want Washington to do the ousting. Retired Admiral James Stavridis observed that "everywhere I went as a four-star Admiral in [Latin America] while commanding U.S. Southern Command, I would be reminded of America's history of intervention."

Moreover, initial victory is very different from ultimate success. Look how quickly Iraq devolved from mission accomplished to bloody disaster. Even modest resistance from regular military units and far more numerous militiamen in such a large, urbanized country could prove difficult to eradicate. Given the deep divisions among Venezuelans, including opponents of Maduro, American military action might trigger a civil war. Washington would own such a conflict, and the resulting responsibility for nation-building. And Americans would learn yet again why social engineering abroad is so hard.

The administration is also targeting Cuba, since apparatchiks on loan from Havana have apparently been buttressing the Chavista authoritarian state. Trump is considering more sanctions, even though revoking aspects of President Barack Obama's opening to Cuba achieved nothing. The Castro regime has survived six decades of economic warfare; it isn't likely to abandon its closest regional friend now. Any new penalties will primarily harm the already suffering Cuban people.

Russia and China also have complicated Washington's task. They are providing Caracas with diplomatic support, humanitarian aid, and, in the case of Moscow, military backing. Russia has sent weapons and personnel who are thought to be repairing S-300 anti-aircraft missiles and training Venezuelan helicopter pilots.

The reaction of the administration—which is aiding Russia's neighbor Ukraine in their military conflict—was hypocritical outrage. “Russia has to get out,” said the president. He added that “all options are open,” presumably including military action. National Security Advisor John Bolton called the Russian presence “a direct threat to international peace and security in the region”—though it's Washington that's been threatening war. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo insisted, “The United States has its responses being prepared.”

The Russian Foreign Ministry reminded “U.S. politicians that they live in the 21st rather than the 19th century” and that “Venezuela is a sovereign state.” Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov unkindly noted: “Take a look at the map of the U.S. military bases—the whole world is dotted” with them.

Secretary Pompeo apparently looked to the Monroe Doctrine, declaring, “This is our neighborhood.” Yet Washington previously dismissed Russian complaints about NATO expansion, claiming not to believe in sphere of interest geopolitics. Former Pentagon official Jed Babbin foresees dire threats, noting that with “about 500 Russian mercenaries, at least 100 Russian regular troops, an unknown number of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps troops, and who-knows-how-many Cuban troops, Venezuela is being transformed into a major Russian-Iranian power base in South America.”

These seemingly breathless warnings don't amount to much. Cuba already offers such a “power base” and has long been involved in Venezuela. Reports of Iranian involvement in Venezuela go back nearly a decade. And Russian mercenaries likely first arrived a year ago and are primarily tasked with protecting Maduro. The presence of such forces remains highly inconvenient rather than seriously threatening. Yet causing Russian casualties in an attack or invasion would risk deadly escalation.

Targeting Moscow with additional sanctions is likely to prove no more effective than whining, and there aren't many new sanctions to put on Tehran. Unless the U.S. offers a deal—perhaps mutual respect for each other's natural spheres of influence—the Putin government will have no incentive to leave.

For once, much of Latin America shares the U.S. position, opposing the Maduro dictatorship. The administration should offer quiet backing as Venezuela's neighbors seek a peaceful solution. Ultimately only the Venezuelan people can fix what is broken.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.