

Intelligencer

Venezuela's Maduro Doesn't Appear to Be Going Anywhere. What Now?

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When Juan Guaidó, the leader of Venezuela's National Assembly, declared Nicolás Maduro's government illegitimate and claimed the presidency, he assured his backers abroad that the rank and file of the country's armed forces were on his side and would turn on the regime in a matter of weeks, as his popular uprising gained momentum.

That was in January. Nearly three months later, while Guaidó's protest movement continues and about 1,500 Venezuelan soldiers have defected to neighboring countries, the pace of defections has slowed and the military remains solidly aligned with Maduro. For both Guaidó and the Trump administration, that's a problem, because the military is the final guarantor of Maduro's job security and will ultimately decide whether he stays or goes. So far, it seems to have decided that he stays, which raises some serious questions about Guaidó's future and that of the Trump administration's efforts to shepherd Maduro out of power.

The U.S., along with most countries in this hemisphere, came to recognize Guaidó as the legitimate interim president after he invoked a constitutional provision that he claims gives him the power to force Maduro out of office. Of course, in a military dictatorship, the only people who can force the head of state out of office are his generals, so Guaidó's soft coup would only go as far as the military would allow it. The opposition leader's widespread popular support has perhaps kept him alive and out of prison, but street protests alone are not enough to install him in the presidential palace.

Why hasn't the military flipped as promised? To hear the Trump administration tell it, the Cubans are to blame. Elliott Abrams, the administration's special envoy for Venezuela, told the *Washington Post* that the 20,000 Cuban military and intelligence agents the administration believes to be embedded in the Venezuelan armed forces "are watching generals and colonels like hawks" for any signs of disloyalty, for which they "are substantially in charge of incarceration and punishment."

There's no doubt that the Venezuelan armed forces are heavily surveilled, particularly at this moment, but the full answer is more complicated: Potential defectors are isolated and have no opportunities to organize against the regime, they are afraid of retaliation targeting their families, and Guaidó has still not convinced the generals and other key figures that the end of the Maduro regime would come with reconciliation, not vengeance. The would-be president has floated an

amnesty for crimes committed at Maduro's behest, but his assurances don't seem to have convinced the right people — at least not yet.

Furthermore, Maduro knows where his power base lies and is actively working to expand it. On Saturday, he called for the drastic expansion of the civilian militia established by his predecessor Hugo Chávez, from 2 million to 3 million members. This paramilitary group reports directly to the president and serves as his unaccountable intimidation machine and death squad, spying on their neighbors, hunting down enemies of the regime, and cowering communities into submission. Maduro is now encouraging them to get involved in agricultural production; this would embed the militia further into the economy and make the population more dependent on them, paralleling the dual role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iran.

Along with the popular pressure provided by Guaidó and his supporters in the street, the Trump administration has also sought to put economic and diplomatic pressure on the Maduro regime. The U.S. Treasury has steadily tightened sanctions on Venezuela's petroleum-dependent economy — the latest of which affected four shipping companies and nine vessels believed to be transporting Venezuelan oil to Cuba — in an effort to cut off Maduro's resources. The State Department, meanwhile, has worked with other democratic countries in the Americas and beyond to isolate the regime diplomatically.

Yet just as Guaidó's attempts to win over the military have faltered, the U.S. strategy of sanctions and isolation has yet to show any concrete wins — and in some ways, may even be backfiring. The Venezuelan regime has proved resilient to sanctions so far, even as its people have suffered shortages of food, water, medicine, and electricity. The government has been dipping into its gold reserves, and using gold sales as one means of skirting sanctions, even as many of its sovereign assets are frozen in banks abroad. Some countries — most crucially Russia, China, and Cuba — have resisted U.S.-led calls to stop doing business with Venezuela and are helping Maduro stay solvent. Combined with sanctions on Iran, the U.S. embargo is having an impact on the global oil market and giving Russia a perverse boost, as European countries are forced to replace their former Iranian and Venezuelan supplies with Russian crude.

In Venezuela itself, the sanctions risk exacerbating an existing humanitarian and refugee crisis and allowing Maduro, who insists there is no crisis, an American scapegoat for explaining to impoverished Venezuelans why they have no food or electricity. The Trump administration won't hear this: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo got testy at a news conference in Lima this week when a *Post* journalist asked whether Peru might consider engaging with Maduro if sanctions eventually make the humanitarian situation worse.

“You shouldn't ask questions like that,” Pompeo exclaimed. “A hundred percent of the refugee challenge that is faced by Peru and Colombia is the direct result of the Russians, the Cubans and Nicolás Maduro.”

A more measured version of that argument came from James Story, the U.S. charge d'affaires for Venezuela, who told Reuters that most of the sanctions imposed thus far have been deliberately targeted at individuals and the regime. Those that would have a broader economic impact took

effect too recently to be blamed for Venezuela's current problems, he said, instead blaming corrupt officials for blocking humanitarian aid and misappropriating resources.

Story also said the administration has no timeline for regime change in Venezuela but is intent on seeing Maduro and his regime replaced by a democratically elected government. "This was never going to be something that was quite easy," he emphasized.

The administration's insistence on this outcome reflects the ideological bent of key foreign-policy officials like Abrams, Pompeo, and National Security Adviser John Bolton, but while democracy in Venezuela may be a noble goal, it is hardly out of bounds to question at what point the cost of achieving that goal becomes too much to bear. Notwithstanding his petulant demand that a reporter not ask a difficult question, Pompeo was right that the primary perpetrators of Venezuela's immiseration are Maduro and his enablers abroad. It is ridiculous, however, to pretend that embargoing the country's sole export won't engender some suffering on the ground, and entirely legitimate to ask what happens next if these sanctions don't move the necessary levers of change in Caracas.

For their part, Maduro and his supporters claim that Guaidó is a right-wing American stooge and that the U.S. is preparing to invade Venezuela imminently to enforce regime change in Caracas at gunpoint. In this framing, the sanctions are merely a form of siege warfare intended to wear the country down and create a pretext for invasion by ginning up a humanitarian crisis. The Trump administration has pointedly refused to take military intervention off the table, even though Pentagon leaders and our allies in Latin America are broadly opposed to this course of action.

Even as the Trump administration dangles the perpetual threat of military action, however, it clearly hopes to avoid military intervention and instead achieve regime change in Venezuela through coercive diplomacy, economic pressure, and support for indigenous anti-regime forces — the same thing it's supposedly trying to do in Iran. Bolton, notably, is known to be a skeptic of these softer tactics and may be waiting for them to fail so he can make a case for war to the president.

The military planning has taken on an international dimension, however, and the Defense Department is currently developing new military options specifically aimed at deterring Russian, Cuban, and Chinese influence in Venezuela. In remarks to Congress last week, Pompeo described the Maduro regime as a threat to U.S. national security, citing the growing involvement of Iran, Russia, and Cuba in that country. Skeptics of this reasoning, like the Cato Institute's Doug Bandow, point out that further destabilizing South America in an unwanted war with unpredictable consequences could prove a greater threat, especially if that war drags in *actual* rivals like Russia and China.

These world powers clearly see Venezuela as a proxy conflict in the low-key Second Cold War we are now fighting but not acknowledging, and are interpreting U.S. actions there as a matter of sphere-of-interest and strategic resource politics rather than a commitment to democratic ideals. After all, would we be so enthusiastic about backing Guaidó if we didn't think he'd be a reliable ally of ours? The fact that Chinese, Russian, and Iranian influence in Venezuela has increased in

tandem with our escalating effort to topple Maduro presents a chicken-and-egg question, Bandow's colleague Ted Galen Carpenter remarks: Is U.S. foreign policy *responding* to the coordination of tyrannical governments around the world or *encouraging* it?

If the Trump administration's coercive strategy in Venezuela doesn't bear fruit soon, it will be time to ask some more tough questions. As the humanitarian crisis wears on and gets even worse, do we give up and cut Guaidó loose? Do we keep tightening the screws and hoping that Russia and China get tired of bailing Maduro out? Or do we pull the trigger on an invasion, defying our regional allies and potentially escalating geopolitical tensions to dangerous levels? Mike Pompeo won't want to answer these questions either, but before too long, he might have to.