

## Trump Bows to Reality, Stands Down on Venezuela

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Remember when President Donald Trump faced down the Russians over their meddling in Venezuela? That was the moment American progressives finally stopped calling him a Putin stooge. Neoconservatives, long suspicious of Trump's reluctance to use force, at last abandoned Never Trumpism. As the hawks predicted, Moscow quickly caved to the administration's demands.

Remember when? Actually, it never happened.

Five months ago, after Russia tightened military ties with Venezuela, the president and his colleagues talked a good game, breathing fire and fury against Russian President Vladimir Putin. Why, Venezuela was in America's most important sphere of interest, and that's saying something given that Washington treats the entire world as one gigantic sphere of interest.

Then nothing happened. Nicolás Maduro—remember him?—remains in power. Moscow continues to back the Maduro regime. And Russia maintains its Western Hemisphere military outpost. What happened to the tough crew that took over in Washington? The administration just stopped talking about what was once one of its most vigorous foreign policy initiatives.

In fact, the president's botched policy towards Caracas offers important lessons for the future.

First, regime change ain't easy. It's hard to imagine a less competent government than the one in Venezuela. A kleptocratic, statist political class had misgoverned the country, opening the way for Hugo Chavez, who was elected president after attempting a coup. He quickly turned into an authoritarian and destroyed the economy. Once oil money ran low, social infrastructure imploded. Virtually nothing in Venezuela works now; people are going hungry and dying of treatable diseases.

Yet Washington, backed by most of Venezuela's neighbors, has found itself powerless to do anything other than exacerbate the humanitarian situation. While conspiring with opposition politicians, Washington decided to impose devastating commercial sanctions and threaten military intervention. To no effect on the Maduro regime.

Of course, the president's aides blamed virtually everyone but themselves: the Venezuelan military, the Cuban government, Beijing, the Russians, and neighboring governments that opposed a U.S. invasion. Even in America's geographic backyard, the world's superpower appears to be a helpless giant.

Second, sanctions are a bust. Prior to targeting Venezuela, the U.S. penalized Chinese banks and businesses for dealing with North Korea without changing Beijing's policy. This isolated the North economically without forcing it to abandon nuclear weapons, punished Russia without forcing Moscow to leave Ukraine alone, and maintained a half-century-old embargo against Cuba without forcing the Castros from power. Washington then tried the same tactic against the Maduro government and its chief backer, Cuba, without effect.

Sanctions can wreck an economy and impoverish a people. But they rarely force governments to yield control. To the contrary, those governments typically play to nationalist sentiments, blaming the disastrous impacts of their policies on outside meddlers. Destroying people's livelihoods rarely succeeds in goading them into revolt. Targeting regime elites, denying them visas and freezing their bank accounts, has yet to spark a successful coup against an authoritarian regime.

Third, military action is no panacea. Washington can defeat any country's armed forces, but that doesn't mean it can eliminate bloody blowback, control unintended consequences, forestall nationalist resistance, and fulfill fantastic ambitions. The U.S. has repeatedly demonstrated its inability to overcome social, cultural, historical, religious, ethnic, and political differences to create stable, democratic, and prosperous systems. With multiple botched "cakewalks" to its name—most recently Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen—we should be only skeptical of any new proposed military campaigns.

Yet President Trump appeared surprised when Venezuela's neighbors, which supported Maduro's ouster, opposed his casual suggestion that the U.S. oust the Venezuelan strongman. Countries throughout Latin America had suffered before at the hands of Uncle Sam and weren't inclined to back yet another burst of Yankee Imperialism. South Koreans fear that Washington's brinkmanship could trigger a war in which their homes would be the battlefield. Even Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates apparently got cold feet as the administration headed toward military confrontation with Iran. The costs to all concerned would have been quite high.

Fourth, the chief threat to American credibility is not failing to enforce red lines; it's recklessly and promiscuously drawing stupid red lines. Once that happens, Washington faces a truly unsavory choice: take action that is counterproductive, even dangerous, or retreat, sacrificing credibility.

A succession of presidents insisted that North Korea could not develop nuclear weapons. It has done so. Only military action, likely leading to full-scale war, could have stopped Pyongyang. And that would have been foolish beyond measure. President Barack Obama wisely stepped back from military intervention against Syria in response to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons, which only marginally added to the horror of a conflict in which hundreds of thousands died from bullets and bombs.

In March, when the administration campaign to oust Maduro seemed to climax, Moscow offered the regime modest assistance, including expanded military ties. Washington's reaction was near apoplectic, as National Security Adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo suddenly rediscovered the virtue of spheres of influence, at least as applied to America. Said the latter: "it's in our neighborhood." (That's presumably just how Russia views Ukraine.) A cavalcade of threats followed.

For instance, Bolton warned Russia against any military activities in the hemisphere: “We will consider such provocative actions as a direct threat to international peace and security in the region.” Moreover, “it is unacceptable that a foreign government engages in military cooperation programs with a usurping regime that has been declared illegitimate by resolutions and inter-American law, which also threatens hemispheric peace and security.”

Pompeo insisted that the U.S. “will not stand idly by” as Moscow augmented its military forces in Venezuela. State’s Elliott Abrams said: “We have options and it would be a mistake for the Russians to think they have a free hand here. They don’t.”

President Trump was bluntest of all, declaring: “Russia has to get out.” He added: “all options are open.”

Tough statements. But nothing happened. The Russians are still there.

CNN’s Fareed Zakaria warned: “if Washington does not back its words with deeds, a year from now, we will be watching the consolidation of the Maduro regime, supported with Russian arms and money.” Yet Moscow pouring funds and manpower into a disastrously failed state looks like a very bad bargain. Putin’s “victory” might embarrass America, but it’s likely to prove Pyrrhic, given the waste of valuable resources.

In fact, Russia’s presence in Venezuela is irritating, not threatening. The Putin regime’s ability to keep Maduro afloat is modest at best. Moscow appears far more interested in protecting past loans than risking new capital.

Putin’s primary objective may be to unsettle the U.S., which is deeply involved in military activities along Russia’s border—in the Baltic States, Poland, Georgia, and especially Ukraine. Russia already had military ties with Cuba, which ran far deeper and longer than those with Venezuela. Any reinforcements would have to cross the Atlantic Ocean, which amounts to an American lake.

Moscow helpfully pointed out the American hypocrisy. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov unkindly asked: how could Washington complain about others’ military activities when the U.S. had covered “the whole world” in bases? A foreign ministry spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, suggested: “Before giving advice to somebody to withdraw from somewhere, the United States should bring to life its own concept of exodus, particularly from Syria.”

Venezuela represents most everything wrong with U.S. foreign policy. John Bolton promised: “We will continue to defend and protect the interests of the United States, and those of our partners in the Western Hemisphere.” Really doing that would end Washington’s campaign for regime change in Venezuela. The price is simply too high.

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