



As ally struggles, US sees narrowing path on Venezuela

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After an uprising in Venezuela quickly fizzled out, the United States is insisting that President Nicolas Maduro's days remain numbered. But experts warn of limited options to break a protracted stalemate in which Washington may have overestimated the opposition leader's strength.

Juan Guaido, who is recognized as interim president by the United States and more than 50 other countries, on Tuesday claimed support from a group of "brave soldiers" at a base in Caracas, but Maduro quashed ensuing street protests within hours.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned Wednesday that "military action is possible." But short of that, the United States has already forcefully intervened for three months, including imposing sweeping sanctions on Venezuela's state-run oil company, a lifeline for the cash-strapped government.

Michael Shifter, president of the Inter-American Dialogue, which promotes democratic governance in Latin America, said the latest bid by Guaido brought to mind his failed attempt in February to force US aid across the Colombian border.

"Clearly, the opposition forces have underestimated Maduro's resilience in power and his ability to withstand significant pressure on the streets," Shifter said.

He said the hawkish rhetoric by President Donald Trump's administration had been "unhelpful and often counterproductive" in helping Venezuela, which is embroiled in an economic meltdown that has sent millions fleeing.

"Much of the policy seems to be driven by wishful, not strategic, thinking," he said.

- Pressure via statements -

The Trump administration has meanwhile stepped up a psychological offensive aimed at portraying Maduro as weak and dependent on his allies Russia, Cuba and China.

Pompeo dropped a bombshell as the insurrection subsided by saying that Maduro had been ready to fly out Tuesday morning to Havana before being dissuaded by Russia, although both Maduro and Moscow denied the account.

In an especially baffling move, the Trump administration publicly named three senior Venezuelan officials including the defense minister who it said had committed to back Guaido, the head of the elected National Assembly.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, said the military was the crucial player in preserving Maduro's rule and that Washington has been surprised at the modest number of defections.

"The US was overly optimistic, and the administration and its supporters keep coming up with excuses as to why Maduro's hold on power has remained, including greatly exaggerating the role of Russia and China," said Carpenter, who last year published the book "Gullible Superpower: US Support for Bogus Foreign Democratic Movements."

Carpenter said the coming days would show whether Guaido can indeed amass a substantial popular uprising and that Washington had few options other than perhaps tightening already stringent sanctions.

"What I worry about is that the temptation will rise for the US to save face and try to salvage the policy by intervening directly with its military forces, and to me that would make a bad situation even worse."

- Calls for military -

Senator Rick Scott of Florida, which has a large Venezuelan-American community, urged Trump to mobilize the military to deliver aid by force and break down barriers on the border.

A fellow Republican lawmaker active on military affairs, Representative Jim Banks, said the United States should consider both naval and ground deployments with an aim "not to violently provoke but to firmly warn."

Trump has cast Venezuela as part of an ideological battle against socialism and has sought to link the country's crumbling economy with the US Democratic Party -- which, in a rare point of agreement, has mostly backed the administration on ousting Maduro.

But many experts doubt that even the most hawkish Trump administration officials are serious about war with a country nearly the population of Iraq that few Americans view as a threat.

"We can be reminded many times that the military option is on the table but, given that it hasn't been used so far and how it's not clear that it will actually solve any of the fundamental problems, I think Maduro's government eventually can simply call the US's bluff," said Ivan Briscoe, Latin America program director of the International Crisis Group, which researches ways out of conflict.

The Trump administration has rejected talks with Maduro -- but Briscoe said dialogue in Venezuela was ultimately the best path.

"It's quite clear that the government cannot survive a long, drawn-out period of sanctions, nor these monthly outbreaks of instability. And the opposition understands clearly that US support can't bring the government down," he said.

"So that would suggest that we're looking effectively at a deadlock in which neither can beat the other guy and that the only solution is to sit down with each other."