



Why the United States should not send the military to Venezuela | Commentary

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Venezuela today faces an existential crisis of its own making. Thanks to decades of cronyism, corruption, and mismanagement under Hugo Chavez and now Nicolas Maduro, Venezuela's economy is in freefall and the country is unable to feed itself. More than three million Venezuelans have fled the country since 2015 while hundreds of thousands of those who remain, including as many as 300,000 children, are at risk of dying from malnutrition. The health care system is in shambles. Newborns in Syria have a better chance of survival than those born in Venezuela today. The United States and others have sent humanitarian aid but so far Maduro's military forces have blocked its delivery at the border.

The United States has thrown its support behind National Assembly leader Juan Guaido, recognizing him as the legitimate president of Venezuela and calling on Maduro to step down. It is not clear that the Trump administration will wait long for Maduro's response. Trump has repeatedly suggested that the United States is open to the possibility of military intervention to ensure Maduro's removal.

Few illegitimate rulers, however, leave power without a push. If Maduro refuses to step down, should the United States intervene to rescue Venezuela? The short answer is no.

An American military strike would surely succeed in crushing Venezuela's military and ousting Maduro. But even though Maduro, like Chavez before him, is an autocratic leader with little interest in the welfare of his own people, he is just the tip of the iceberg.

As in many corrupt states, Maduro rules Venezuela with the help of a circle of civilian and military elites that he rewards with plum government jobs, sweetheart business deals and other carrots. Thousands of competent government employees have been replaced with incompetent cronies, which has led to decreasing oil production over the past fifteen years, mismanagement of the economy, and to increasing levels of drug trafficking supported by elements of the Venezuelan government.

A partial analogy here is the attempt to rebuild the Iraq government, which took not only getting rid of thousands of Baathists loyal to Saddam Hussein – itself a large job – but also many years of painful and costly American occupation while Iraqis attempted, with limited success, to rebuild their economy. And in fact, Iraq scores just as poorly on Transparency International's

corruption index as it did under Saddam Hussein and the same as Venezuela does today, both near the bottom of the global rankings.

A military strike that toppled the government could also unleash more trouble. If Maduro were to fall, there is a possibility of widespread violence thanks to the “colectivos,” pro-government collectives of civilians armed and trained by the government. These paramilitary groups, which operate across much of Venezuela, often act as a stand-in for the government, quashing domestic unrest and encouraging support for Maduro. As their power has grown, thanks to the central government’s inability to extend control over the whole country, they have become increasingly dangerous. Experts estimate that these groups control as many as 10% of Venezuela’s towns and cities.

The strength of the colectivos should raise serious red flags about the prospects of an American military intervention. As the United States found in both Afghanistan and Iraq, a successful regime change is not the end of the violence, but the beginning. There is no reason to expect that things will be easier in Venezuela.

An American intervention could also create obstacles for the future of Venezuela politics, as well as inflame anti-American sentiment. Nicolas Maduro told ABC News that Trump is “willing to go to war for [Venezuela’s] oil.” Whatever the reality, any American intervention is likely to be seen by many Venezuelans to be an unwarranted violation of their sovereignty and incentive to oppose any politicians or policies associated with American support.

As difficult as it is to watch Venezuela go through this crisis, the United States should resist military intervention. Though the diplomatic path will not be easy or quick, it is the path most likely to lead to enduring reforms viewed as legitimate by the Venezuelan people.

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