

A Military Coup in Venezuela? Not Without the Military's Support

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A military coup d'état in Venezuela doesn't seem likely so long as the Armed Forces support Maduro. Meanwhile, U.S. action will likely backfire, and serve only to strengthen those in power

Juan Guaidó, leader of the Venezuelan National Assembly, declared himself President of the Republic on January 23 before a mass demonstration of supporters. This was less than two weeks after the start of Nicolás Maduro's second term, which the opposition—concentrated within the National Assembly—rejected, labeling Maduro a ["usurper."](#) The 14 countries that make up the Lima Group didn't recognize Maduro's inauguration either. They quickly accepted Guaidó's takeover and released statements in his favor, which the United States did as well. But considering the powers that be and overwhelming support for Maduro from the Armed Forces, Guaidó's rise to power is likely a symbolic event, with little chance of successful implementation.

Meanwhile, China and Russia, who have already declared their support for Maduro, had invested five and six billion dollars, respectively, in Venezuela to help kick-start the weakened petroleum industry. And in early December, Russia teased at a military deployment in Venezuela, landing two Tu-160 strategic bombardiers on Venezuelan soil and [provoking criticism from the United States](#).

The intensification in political discourse and geopolitical pressure since the beginning of the new year will only worsen economic instability and cause a spike in migration. Barring military intervention organized by the United States and its allies, diplomatic pressure seems useless to take down Maduro. But the key element, the Armed Forces, seem to remain loyal to Maduro, making an internal military coup unlikely.

The probable outcomes range from a military intervention led by the United States in alliance with Colombia and Brazil to a prolonged stay in power for Maduro to the possibility of a Russian and Chinese intervention or a military coup. In the following text, we will analyze each of these potential outcomes.

Legitimacy and Intervention

The legitimacy of Maduro's second six-year term is the point in question, given that a large portion of the opposition did not participate in the presidential elections held on May 20, 2018. The share of abstained votes, moreover, climbed to [54%](#). Compare this to the [79% participation rate](#) during the last presidential elections in 2013. General lack of trust in the

bodies overseeing the race, such as the Electoral Council, motivated a widespread boycott of the 2018 electoral process. Indeed, state institutions implemented crude tactics in the 2017 legislative elections, which verged on illegal: magistrates were appointed in an unprecedented fashion through the Chavista-backed [Constituent Assembly](#), and opposition leaders were barred from running. Yet broadly speaking, neither general conditions nor the Electoral Council have changed since the opposition won a majority in the National Assembly in December 2015. For Chavista analysts, promoting low voter turnout was an opposition strategy that would force, in conjunction with the United States, an intervention in the country that would completely uproot the revolutionary movement. The events of the past few days could potentially give credence to this theory.

In the 2015 legislative elections, the opposition obtained 7,726,066 votes. In the presidential elections of May 2018, Maduro received 6,245,862. But this discrepancy could have been much higher, given the economic situation and the government's inability to improve it in the two-and-a-half years between the two elections. But the opposition's election boycott prevented another result, even if the government had let it happen. For the opposition and their international allies, winning presidential elections wouldn't mean much if Chavismo retains power over the Armed Forces, the Supreme Court, and the Electoral Council. Instead, they preferred a clean slate. How could this be achieved?

This can only be understood as a show of support for a military coup with international cooperation. This brings us to Guaidó's proclamation, and the immediate recognition of it by the United States and its regional allies. For the actions of January 23 to not wind up another failure for the opposition, they must take action quickly—military or otherwise. Trump, for his part, has emphasized that ["all options are on the table."](#)

The threats of international backing for a coup d'état—although the opposition made its first coup attempt in 2002—started in earnest in early 2018. During a tour of Latin America, former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson commented that he believed there would be "change" in Venezuela, and that ["oftentimes it's the military that handles that."](#) This was perhaps the first reference to a military coup that would replace the current regime in Venezuela. But it wasn't until last August that the *New York Times* [confirmed](#)—according to leaked information corroborated by the United States government—that U.S. officials had met with members of the Venezuelan military who were planning a coup d'état.

Loyal Armed Forces, For the Most Part

During the past two years, different contingents of the opposition have set in motion a host of actions ranging from occupying military barracks to the [stealing a helicopter to launching grenades](#) at a federal building, to a [drone assassination attempt against the president](#). All have either been aborted or have failed to meet their objectives, while the bulk of the military's institutions remain loyal to Maduro. As Nikolaus Werz, professor emeritus at the University of Rostock, says in the German outlet *DW*, "Given the privileges enjoyed by many in the military within the framework of the Bolivarian Revolution, it is most likely that those in uniform will continue to support Maduro."

But the reasons for the military's support are not solely economic. On the one hand, the army has unified around the tenets of Chavismo, based on a rejection of any kind of foreign military intervention. On the other hand, the United States' treatment of high-level Venezuelan military officials helps to explain the military's entrenchment around Maduro.

For example, Lieutenant Alejandro Andrade, former Treasury Secretary under Hugo Chávez, was sentenced to 10 years on [corruption charges](#) after collaborating with U.S. officials as a protected witness. If the military turns on Maduro, will other soldiers who want to take refuge feel confident trusting the United States? What message does Andrade's sentence send to the Venezuelan military? Perhaps that if they want to protect themselves, the best option is to stand behind the Maduro regime.

So, the departure of the president via a military coup doesn't seem to be around the corner. That's how Brian Ellsworth and Mayela Armas see it. They [conclude](#) that there are "few signs that the military high command is prepared to abandon Maduro, a new spring for the opposition sector—and the excitement being generated among investors—could be premature." Meanwhile, military expert Rocío San Miguel said in the wake of last Monday's uprising: "I'm not worried about a rank-and-file sergeant from a security deployment [defecting], but I would be if there was a situation within a larger unit or a battalion." Her analysis is that "military commanders are loyal to Maduro."

U.S. policy toward Venezuela, especially during the Trump administration, has been contradictory, precipitating strategic errors by the Venezuelan opposition. Their main error has been to openly consider taking power through non-electoral means. The promises the Trump administration has made, both publicly and privately, about a non-electoral option to oust Maduro have exerted more pressure, inspiring the bulk of the opposition's factions to stop considering electoral options at a time when they could have won in that arena. Thus, it is logical that, facing the Trump-backed option of an invasion, radical opposition politicians prefer to explore options of "exterminating" Chavismo, [as the AP has reported](#), instead of continuing to challenge it in institutional spaces.

But there are other contradictory messages that could be contributing to Chavismo's ongoing strength as a social, political, and military force, especially in regard to the sanctions imposed by the U.S. government. Since 2008, the U.S. Treasury has raised sanctions related to corruption against Venezuelan officials, but it wasn't until 2017 that the sanctions prohibited U.S. citizens from making transactions with the Venezuelan government. Subsequent sanctions have targeted the Petro, a cryptocurrency created by Maduro, and the [gold business](#) Maduro developed to supplement decreases in price and production of petroleum.

In mid-July 2018, the Department of Treasury [imposed sanctions](#) on U.S. nationals doing business with the Venezuelan government—an act of improvisation. The moment the U.S. shifted its sanctions from targeting officials to targeting businesses with ties to Venezuela, the Venezuelan government's discourse was able to double-down on its theory of an economic embargo and blame the U.S. government for causing the economic crisis. This analysis weakens the argument that Maduro was incapable of handling the situation and helped the government promote unity among their followers and the Armed Forces against a common foe.

Since Maduro's second term began on January 10, the United States has [reverted to sanctioning](#) officials and Venezuelans associated with the government, all of them already identified and some imprisoned abroad. It appears that these decisions are veiled forms of pressure to appease radical right-wing sectors in the United States. Venezuela's ruling party's leadership has responded to these actions with mockery due to their inefficacy. On Friday, the United States announced that it would [step up its economic actions](#) against the Venezuelan government by imposing sanctions on the state oil company.

In short, there is no clarity in terms of Trump's policies on Venezuela and, far from being effective, they have engendered the loss of the opposition's institutional terrain while Russia and China have simultaneously gained more influence in Venezuela. These policies encouraged anti-Chavistas to abandon politics and abstain from participating in electoral processes, resulting in the loss of governorships, mayorships, and seats that the opposition would surely hold if it had participated. Trump, moreover, has not yet taken a sufficiently forceful action that would justify the opposition strategy to abandon electoral politics.

Dialogue Versus Isolation

Meanwhile, other geopolitical forces have changed perceptions of the sanctions against Venezuela. On the one hand, each of the countries in the Lima Group does not recognize Maduro's new administration and recognize Guaidó as President of the Republic—[except for Mexico and Uruguay](#), which have promoted opening another dialogue. On the other hand, the Lima Group also [amended controversial Point 9 of a January 4 statement supporting Guyana](#) in a border dispute with Venezuela due to ExxonMobile's oil exploration in the area. Removing its support for U.S. business interests in the region can be seen as going against U.S. policy in the territorial dispute between Guyana and Venezuela. This could signal that Latin American countries aren't ready to blindly go along with U.S. intervention in Venezuela.

The European Union, for its part, did not recognize Guaidó right away, but on [Saturday released a statement](#) calling for new elections within a week's time—which Maduro rejected the following day. Indeed, in December, the EU put together a "contact group" intended to establish a foundation for dialogue between the government and the opposition. Spain plays a key role in its implementation. Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, [stated in December](#): "We believe that the absence of political channels is a dangerous approach. Sanctions should always come with a space for dialogue and compromise." Comments like this are in stark contrast with her previously radical stances. But Spain's more [recent remarks](#) hint at its coming support of Guaidó, along with Germany and France.

If opportunities for dialogue are not provided, it could result in the regime further hardening its positions and acting like it has nothing to lose. Ana Soliz, researcher at the University Helmut Schmidt of the German Armed Forces, [explained](#) the shift from isolation to dialogue in more detail: "Isolating Maduro's government is necessary, but without closing all channels of communication with Chavismo," she said to *DW*.

Brazil has also revised its more radical statements on Venezuela. Once in power, the Bolsonaro administration has not been particularly hostile toward Venezuela, but has only joined in the statements of its allies. This stance contrasts with its positions in the weeks leading up to Bolsonaro's inauguration, when his vice president, General Hamilton Mourao, who was Military Attaché for the Brazilian embassy in Venezuela, predicted a coup d'état in Venezuela. He [said](#) on December 17 that "the United Nations will have to intervene with peace-keeping troops...and that's the role of Brazil: to lead the peace-keeping troops." Such declarations have not been repeated since, despite official rejection to Maduro's second term and the recognition of Guaidó.

The domestic political actors who refused to participate in the electoral process expected radical actions from these countries, such as the withdrawal of ambassadors, [embassy closures](#), blockades, or petroleum embargos. But the fact that the countries most actively

opposing Maduro have not taken any more definitive action could be seen as diplomatic weakness, which could frustrate them further. But just backing Guaidó as president, beyond being a symbolic act, doesn't offer clear options for exerting power.

Plausible Scenarios

The two most radical economic scenarios—an economic blockade or a petroleum embargo—would consolidate the Venezuelan government's entrenchment around allies like China, Russia, and Turkey. Even the withdrawal of ambassadors or the closure of embassies are unlikely to twist Maduro's arm, and will instead feed into nationalist and anti-interventionist rhetoric. At the same time, [increased migration](#) has allowed millions of families in Venezuela to rely on remittances, alleviating the gravity of the situation.

In the domestic sphere, the opposition is again mobilized and [waiting to see what Guaidó can do as president](#). Guaidó is a member of the most radical party of the opposition (*Voluntad Popular*) and the more moderate sectors are nervous because every venture of this type has culminated, until now, with a weakening and fracturing of the opposition itself. Guaidó is not a very well-known politician in the country, and does not appear to have sufficient support to completely subvert the ruling party from a military standpoint, which can also rely on tried and tested tools to contain street manifestations and their potential to become violent. The scenario at hand could end up dividing the opposition and the general public could lose patience, given the radical nature of their actions and demands.

In this context, it is possible that anti-Chavista forces, domestic and foreign, are considering only two options: to initiate a U.S.-led military invasion with the help of Brazil and Colombia, or simply to return to the electoral arena and wait six years for the next presidential election. The first of these options may lead the United States—and the Venezuelan people—in an uncertain direction.

For now, Venezuela faces a government weak in the economic and social arenas, but with strong judicial and military institutions. This will be the case unless—weakened by international pressure—Chavismo's emerging fissures gather momentum and are able to undermine the government's stability. However, as long as the U.S. government's strategy operates on the basis of threats, Chavismo will have a reason to remain strong and unified.

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Featured image: Juan Guaidó speaking in Caracas on January 21, 2018 (Luis Dávila/República Bolivariana de Venezuela).

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