

VIPS Memo: To the President—Avoid Hostilities Over Iranian Fuel Shipment to Venezuela

By [Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity](#)
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MEMORANDUM FOR: *The President*

FROM: *Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)*

SUBJECT: *Avoiding Hostilities Over Iranian Fuel Shipment to Venezuela*

Mr. President:

Recent U.S. rhetoric and actions against Venezuela — most immediately regarding Iran’s shipping of gasoline desperately needed during the pandemic — puts the U.S. at risk of an outbreak of dangerous and almost certainly counterproductive hostilities, not only in the Caribbean, but also in waters closer to Iran. As five Iranian tankers approach Venezuela, with the first due to arrive Sunday, hardliners in both Washington and Iran would relish a chance to give a bloody nose to the other side, but it may not be that simple.

While the U.S. can invoke the Monroe Doctrine in Latin America, geography trumps doctrine. True, the U.S. holds the upper hand in the Caribbean. It does not have tactical advantage in the Persian Gulf — despite the formidable amount of U.S. weaponry already deployed in the area. We believe there is a good chance Iran will pick the Gulf as the place to retaliate for any quarantine or more warlike actions off Venezuela.

As former intelligence officers and other national security practitioners with many decades of experience, we understand the frustration your Administration feels as its “maximum pressure” campaign to remove Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro enters its 17th month without much progress. Our purpose is not to defend Maduro, whose economic performance has alienated many and compounded Venezuela’s problems. Rather, we wish to ensure that you are aware of the possible pitfalls of the general threatening to use “maximum pressure” and “all means necessary” to effect “regime change” in Venezuela. In our view, any U.S. attempt to interdict access of the Iranian ships to Venezuela will be widely seen as an act of war. It could conceivably lead to unprecedented retaliation in places as far away as the Persian Gulf — events that the U.S. will not be able to fully control.

Inside Venezuela, U.S. sanctions and other policies are inflicting significant suffering, and the threat to continue “maximum pressure” even during the pandemic has had a significant psychological impact. It has pushed many Venezuelans eager for change to close ranks with the government and blame mostly the U.S. for their troubles. Nationalism and fear of foreign intervention are strong drivers in countries like Venezuela. The Venezuelan economy was already a shambles due to government mismanagement and corruption. But blocking the country’s ability to sell oil, to access accounts and reserves overseas, and to engage in

normal trade have had a devastating impact on the Venezuelan people — the more so as the corona virus takes its toll there.

National Assembly President Juan Guaidó, whom some 50 other governments besides the U.S. have supported in his claim to the National Presidency, has been badly discredited.

- His continued calls for ever-tightening economic sanctions - at a time that his countrymen lack food, water, and most basic supplies - is destroying his credibility as a man eager to “save his people.” His direct involvement in several failed coup efforts, most disastrously on 30 April 2019, and his \$213 million contract with the obviously inept expeditionary force wrapped up on Venezuelan beaches on 3 May, showed deeply flawed judgment and ineffective leadership. He has also been hurt by his failure to resist pressure from comrades in the extreme opposition to walk away from internal or international negotiations every time they show signs of progress.
- Polling in Venezuela is generally not reliable enough to give high confidence at any particular moment in time, but all polls and all observers in the country point to a steep decline in Guaidó’s support, and many members of the opposition Guaidó claims to lead have abandoned him. Because he ignored the moderate opposition, which is fragmented but has in many cases deep historical roots, they are unwilling to lend him a hand. We understand that many of the countries that joined the United States in recognizing Guaidó now regret doing so.

Locked out of most normal trade by the U.S. sanctions, President Maduro has had to reach out to non-traditional partners to get bare necessities. We do not know the terms of the gasoline deal he struck with Iran, but speculation that he paid in bullion, which the U.S. has called “blood gold,” is not substantiated. The Venezuelan government’s extreme frustration at the United Kingdom’s refusal to release Venezuelan gold in London is one indicator that Caracas has little of the precious metal to throw around.

- Lines for gasoline in Venezuela have been long - sometimes it takes two days to fill a tank - but traffic has dropped precipitously during the coronavirus pandemic. Oil industry observers estimate that the \$45.5 million in refined products carried by the five Iranian tankers would satisfy Venezuela’s needs for only a limited time. We have seen no information indicating whether future shipments are planned. (Venezuela produces about 550,000 barrels of oil a day but has only negligible capacity to refine finished product.)

There is no evidence - nor is anyone alleging - that the tankers are carrying military equipment or other sensitive cargo. But we understand the significance of this Iranian delivery into the Western Hemisphere. While Tehran’s purpose appears to be overwhelmingly to help Maduro cover his energy needs - and perhaps make a little profit - the Iranians probably also welcome the chance to tweak the United States’ nose by a) aiding a government that the U.S. wants to overthrow, and b) venturing into our “neighborhood.” Some Venezuelan leaders may actually hope the U.S. does overreact, and has to deal with accusations of piracy, and worse, by many other countries — including some traditional U.S. allies

- Iran has emphasized that the fuel deal is a purely civilian transaction, and that they have no hostile intent. Iranian diplomats have stressed that “this

relationship between Iran and Venezuela doesn't threaten anybody. It's not a danger to anyone."

- And yet, U.S. pronouncements that the Monroe Doctrine remains "alive and well," as then-National Security Advisor John Bolton said in June 2019 (echoing Secretary Rex Tillerson's statements 15 months earlier) puts down a hoary marker strongly opposed by many nations around the world, including Russia and China. We do not think that poking at the Doctrine is Iran's primary objective, but it may play a role. And there are many influential hardliners in Iran who would welcome a chance to "retaliate" in waters closer to home for any actions against Iranian ships in the Caribbean.

U.S. rhetoric about preventing the fuel shipments from reaching Venezuela has upped the ante significantly. Coming at a time when the Southern Command has a "counternarcotics" operation with U.S. Navy destroyers, littoral combat ships, Poseidon maritime planes and Air Force surveillance aircraft – a task force twice the size of what's normally deployed – near Venezuela and in waters that the Iranian tankers will traverse suggests your advisers and four-stars are playing with matches in a literally explosive situation. As you are no doubt aware, many of them would welcome a chance to give Iran a bloody nose.

Most important, perhaps, if the overall objective is to instigate the Venezuelan military to rise up and remove Maduro from office, the record of the past several years has shown that such an attempt is likely to fail. While perhaps not always comfortable with Maduro's leadership, the officer corps has tended to rally behind him – be it out of sense of obligation, fear of him, or fear of what the radical opposition will do to them if change occurs. This has enabled him to remain in power.

- Your statement to Hispanic leaders on Wednesday that "we've got it [Venezuela] surrounded, it's surrounded at a level that nobody even knows but they know; we are watching to see what happens" gave the impression that the United States was poised for imminent action.
- A member of your National Security Council staff has told the press, "We are going to be closing all the doors. This [the fuel shipment] is another door that will be closed." A Pentagon spokesman said he was not aware of military plans to stop the tankers, but other "senior Administration officials" refusing to be identified have said that you have "made clear the United States will not tolerate continued meddling by supporters of an illegitimate regime."
- SouthCom Commander Craig Faller has emphasized that his "preferred" way of effecting regime change in Venezuela is not military, but he has accused Iran of trying to "gain positional advantage in our neighborhood in a way that would counter U.S. interests" – without explaining how the sale of gasoline will achieve that. Last week he also claimed that he'd seen in Venezuela "an uptick in Iranian state-sponsored activity and liaison ... that has included Quds Force" — an elite unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. These seem more intended to lay the groundwork for military policies under consideration than statements of fact.
- U.S. officials also are resorting to tough talk regarding the two Americans captured by the Venezuelans during the failed 3 May military incursion. Secretary Pompeo said the United States will "use every tool" needed to bring them home. And, of course, you and the Secretary have on a number of

occasions explicitly stated that military options are among those on the table vis-a-vis Venezuela.

National Assembly President Juan Guaidó seems to be trying to egg on the United States into getting involved militarily. He has called for military intervention a number of times in the past, and last week urged the “international community” to stop the Iranian tankers from reaching Venezuela.

- To stir up U.S. concerns about Iran, Guaidó and his advisors have claimed – without evidence – that Tehran is providing materials for a range of covert operations, including a listening post in northern Venezuela to intercept aerial and maritime communications. Guaidó’s senior security aide, Iván Simonovis, said, “For Iran, an enemy of the United States, this means they are almost touching America’s tail.”

We are unable to assess with high confidence exactly how Iran would react to a U.S. effort to stop the tankers before they reach Venezuela. But – if Tehran’s reaction to the U.S. rhetoric so far is any indicator – it seems likely to resist strongly. Iran is laying the groundwork for international condemnation of any such U.S. action. And there probably are many military and civilian officials in Iran now orchestrating plans for tit-for-tat kind of retaliation in the Persian Gulf.

- Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, in a letter to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, warned the United States against interfering, stating that U.S. action would be an “illegal, dangerous and provocative move as a kind of marine piracy and a major peril to international peace and security.” Iranian officials have said the country “reserves the right to take all appropriate and necessary measures, including decisive action.” They delivered the same message to the United States through our Swiss representation in Tehran.

About 13 months ago, during a moment in which your Administration appeared to be edging toward confrontation with Russia over a Venezuelan matter, [we urged you](#) to avoid the slippery slope toward armed conflict. We were gratified that the hardliners in Washington pushing for confrontation were eventually reined in. We are now at a similar juncture.

- As intelligence officers and national security experts, we have given many years to protecting our nation from a host of threats, including terrorism, narcotics trafficking, Communism, Iran, Russia, and adventurism in Latin America. We also believe, however, that picking fights, interdicting civilian commercial trade, and threatening other countries’ sovereign decision to pursue activities that do not threaten our national security – is rarely the wise way to go.
- As we did last year, we repeat that we are not defending Maduro and his record, while at the same time pointing out that many of his troubles continue to be exacerbated by U.S. sanctions and other actions. And, as we also said last year, we believe that due process and practical, realistic policies better protect our national interests than confrontational rhetoric.

Venezuelans do not want war. They want better lives, and they want the political and

economic change that will help them achieve that. The vast majority of Venezuelans would prefer to trade with the United States, not Iran or others from far-off regions. But they don't want change with a gun pointed to their heads. They don't want to be your administration's battleground for the Monroe Doctrine. They know that their political system has long been broken – since before Hugo Chávez's first election in 1998 – but they know that rebuilding it has to be an evolutionary process with non-coercive international support.

Large segments of political parties opposed to Maduro, and even many members of the Chavista movement, are eager for ongoing domestic negotiations to gain traction so they can start this process. Even more Venezuelans want all sides, including Maduro and Guaidó, to restart negotiations facilitated by the Government of Norway. That's not going to happen until the United States stops the saber-rattling about Venezuela, Iran, Russia and Cuba, and lets Venezuelans themselves find their way forward. Huffing and puffing hasn't blown Maduro's house down, and – despite the immense economic and pandemic challenges it faces – do not seem likely to in the near future.

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