

BACKGROUND

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Ten Steps for U.S. Policy on Venezuela

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Abstract

Venezuela has become a failed state. The economy is in ruins and the humanitarian crisis has resulted in Latin America's worst refugee and migration exodus. The political impasse has evolved into a proxy showdown between the U.S. and hostile foreign actors. U.S. policymakers cannot predetermine the outcome—but they can strongly influence events. They should maintain support for interim president Juan Guaidó and ask America's international allies and partners to do so as well, by increasing targeted sanctions against Maduro's illegitimate government. They can prepare for various outcomes in a post-Maduro Venezuela. Above all, U.S. policy must remain aligned with that of U.S. regional partners and avoid a dangerous military intervention. This Heritage Foundation Backgrounder lays out 10 important principles, and details 10 corresponding steps, for the United States' Venezuela policy.

Venezuela is in the midst of a dire political, economic, and humanitarian crisis. Since January 10, 2019, on what was to be Nicolás Maduro's re-inauguration day, Juan Guaidó has been Venezuela's interim president. More than 50 countries,¹ including the United States, the majority of South America, and the European Union, now recognize Guaidó as Venezuela's legitimate leader. Dozens of countries had already vowed shortly after Venezuela's May 2018 election that they would not recognize Maduro's re-election on the grounds that he committed election fraud.²

According to Article 233 of Venezuela's constitution, if a void exists in the chief executive, next in line of succession is the head of the National Assembly—which was Juan Guaidó. Guaidó now has official ambassadors in 30 countries, including the U.S. and the

KEY POINTS

- Venezuela is in the midst of a political, humanitarian, and economic crisis—caused by the illegitimate Maduro regime. There are few guarantees that this crisis will end soon.
- U.S. policymakers must work with their foreign counterparts at all levels to ensure that international efforts remain focused on bringing about the end of Maduro's unlawful government and a legal transition to the interim presidency of Juan Guaidó.
- The U.S. military should not be used as the mechanism for resolving the political crisis. While Maduro undermines U.S. regional interests, the situation in Venezuela does not threaten vital national interests.
- The humanitarian and economic consequence of any military response must also be factored into the policy planning process. Venezuelans are already fleeing the humanitarian catastrophe in their country. The destabilizing impact of military action would most definitely make these conditions even worse.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/bg3412>

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United Kingdom, and representatives at multilateral organizations, such as the Organization of American States (OAS) and the InterAmerican Development Bank (IDB).

Maduro's continued ability to weather the crisis raises questions about how this situation will play out. His intransigence was reinforced when Guaido and well-known former political prisoner Leopoldo Lopez failed to convince members of the Venezuelan armed forces to rebel against Maduro. Senior members of Maduro's inner circle were discovered to have collaborated with Guaido, even being the ones to free Lopez from jail. Dubbed Operation Liberty, the failed uprisings aimed at pressuring Maduro out of office were beaten back by paramilitaries loyal to the illegitimate government. Videos emerged of paramilitaries shooting protestors and military tanks plowing into a crowd of demonstrators.³ Civilians took to the streets, demonstrating against the illegitimate government, but the expected uprising against Maduro did not manifest.

While unsuccessful, Guaido's April 30 attempt to pressure Maduro to resign has left Maduro vulnerable. Credible reporting uncovered that Maduro's inner circle was working with Guaido to remove Maduro from office. Under the reported plan, Venezuela's Minister of Defense Vladimir Padrino, Supreme

Court Chief Maikel Moreno, and presidential guard commander and head of military intelligence General Ivan Rafael Hernandez collaborated with Guaido.⁴ General Hernandez ended up defecting and is believed to be working with U.S. intelligence services.⁵ Defense Minister Padrino and Supreme Court Chief Moreno have managed to hang on to their jobs for the time being.

The fissures amongst Maduro's inner circle, combined with U.S. sanctions and international and domestic pressure, paint a bleak long-term outlook for Maduro. His government's ability to earn money and pay off loyalists is declining rapidly, leaving him at the mercy of external actors, such as Russia and Cuba, for support. These weaknesses do not necessarily imply he will be leaving the country soon. Nor is it a guarantee that if he leaves a democratic transition will occur.

Over the past two years, the Trump Administration has rightfully taken a leadership role on the Venezuela crisis. It has crafted a forward-leaning and muscular policy to weaken the dictatorship and support the humanitarian needs of Venezuelans. Alongside Latin American and international partners, the Trump Administration has ramped up pressure on Maduro's illegitimate government and created an international coalition of like-minded nations. A

1. Dave Merrill and Carolina Milan, "Map: All the Countries Recognizing Guaido as Venezuela's New President," Bloomberg, January 24, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-01-24/trump-support-sparks-global-backing-of-venezuela-s-guaido-map> (accessed May 5, 2019). Albania, Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bahamas, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia, Malta, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Montenegro, Morocco, Netherlands, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Taiwan, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom, and the United States.
2. News release, "Declaration by the High Representative on Behalf of the EU on the Situation in Venezuela," Council of the European Union, April 19, 2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/04/19/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-situation-in-venezuela/> (accessed May 16, 2019); news release, "Declaration by the High Representative on Behalf of the EU on the Presidential and Regional Elections in Venezuela," Council of the European Union, May 22, 2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/04/19/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-situation-in-venezuela/> (accessed May 5, 2019); news release, "OAS Permanent Council Agrees 'to Not Recognize the Legitimacy of Nicolas Maduro's New Term,'" Organization of American States, January 10, 2019, https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=E-001/19 (accessed May 16, 2019); and U.S. Department of State, "Remarks by Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo: An Unfair, Unfree Vote in Venezuela," May 21, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2018/05/282303.htm> (accessed May 5, 2019).
3. Martin Farrer et al., "Venezuela Crisis: Maduro Claims Coup Has Been 'Defeated'—as it Happened," *The Guardian*, April 30, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2019/apr/30/venezuela-opposition-leader-juan-guaido-claims-coup-underway-live-news?page=with%3Ablock-5cc8bec98f08c89bd906b888> (accesses May 8, 2019).
4. David Lunhow and Jose de Cordoba, "Venezuela's Opposition Held Talks with Government on Ousting Maduro," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 1, 2019, https://www.wsj.com/articles/venezuelas-opposition-held-talks-with-government-on-ousting-maduro-11556767656?mod=article_inline (accessed May 9, 2019), and Karen DeYoung, Josh Dawsey, and Paul Sonne, "Venezuela's Opposition Put Together a Serious Plan. For Now, it Appears to Have Failed," *The Washington Post*, May 1, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/venezuelas-opposition-put-together-a-serious-plan-for-now-it-appears-to-have-failed/2019/05/01/7df68fe0-6c19-11e9-be3a-33217240a539_story.html?utm_term=.ed9432b10eb8 (accessed May 9, 2019).
5. Ibid.

democratic transition—sooner rather than later—is in the U.S. interest. The situation in Venezuela is deteriorating rapidly, and the chance for a peaceful and democratic transition appears to be slipping away. In order to maintain a sense of purpose and a central focus on Venezuela, U.S. policy should be grounded in the following 10 key principles.

To the Extent it Suits U.S. Interests, the U.S. Should Remain Aligned with Latin American Partners

There is a widespread misperception that the U.S. is operating unilaterally on Venezuela. To the contrary, there has never been a hemispheric consensus of this kind in Latin America. An unprecedented like-mindedness transcends political ideologies amongst countries in the region in respect to this crisis. The core members of the Lima Group, a bloc of 14 countries working to end the crisis in Venezuela, have amplified the external pressure campaign against Maduro. Continuing to work alongside U.S. regional partners and allies is the most effective diplomatic strategy.

Step 1: Maintain and Broaden Cooperation with Like-minded Hemispheric Counterparts. The U.S. can and should lead, but must do so alongside its regional partners. Doing so would negate the basis for criticisms of U.S. unilateralism and maintain regional cohesion for the current crisis, as well as address Venezuela's long-term reconstruction.

The U.S. Must Recognize that There Is No Alternative to Maduro Leaving Office

Over the past two decades, the increasingly authoritarian government has consolidated power, and aside from the opposition-controlled National Assembly, government institutions have become apparatuses of the ruling Socialist Party. Party loyalists and officials control the levers of power within the government, including the electoral institutions. The electoral field and political environment denies basic rights and freedoms to the opposition. In order

for free, fair, and democratic elections to occur, Maduro's government cannot have a role in any future electoral process.

Maduro has committed electoral fraud on previous occasions, including in May 2018, and there are few means to prevent him from doing so again.⁶ The July 2017 Constituent Assembly race demonstrated that the illegitimate government circumvented the constitution and created a rival legislative body when the ruling Socialist Party lost control of the National Assembly in 2015.⁷ Maduro has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to the destruction of democratic norms and principles.

Step 2: Ignore Calls for Early Elections in Venezuela. The U.S. should not support early elections as a means to resolving Venezuela's crisis, especially if they involve Maduro. Any election under Maduro's watch and with the current electoral system in place would almost certainly result in a fraudulent victory for either himself or a member of his illegitimate administration, thus prolonging the crisis.

The EU's International Contact Group (ICG) Plan Is Severely Flawed

Shortly after Guaido assumed office as interim president, the EU launched a multilateral effort to mediate a negotiation between Maduro and his political opponents. Known as the International Contact Group (ICG), this initiative is led by France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, with involvement by several Latin American countries. This high-risk venture aims to support new elections in Venezuela and allow Maduro to participate. This would be dangerous and irresponsible. Maduro has consistently manipulated attempts at negotiations and dialogues to his benefit. He has proven time and again that he and his inner circle cannot be a trusted party. The EU must recognize that its efforts with the ICG will be used by Maduro to buy time, evade future sanctions, and give the false impression of cooperation. The ICG claims it is not a dialogue mechanism but rather a multilateral

6. News release, "Message from OAS Secretary General on Elections in Venezuela," Organization of American States, May 21, 2018, https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=S-019/18 (accessed May 9, 2019); news release, "Message from the Secretary General on Venezuela," Organization of American States, October 16, 2017, https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=S-031/17 (accessed May 9, 2019); and news release, "Gubernatorial Elections in Venezuela," U.S. Department of State, October 12, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/10/274768.htm> (accessed May 9, 2019).

7. News release, "Declaration of the High Representative Federica Mogherini on Behalf of the EU on Venezuela," Council of the European Union, August 2, 2017, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/08/02/hr-venezuela/> (accessed May 9, 2019).

TEXT BOX 1

Why Juan Guaidó Is Venezuela's Legitimate Leader

There is a general misperception that interim president Juan Guaidó's legitimacy is derived from international diplomatic recognition. In reality, his legitimacy comes directly from Venezuela's 1999 constitution—created under the administration of then-leader Hugo Chávez.¹ Specifically, Article 233 of the constitution explains why Nicolás Maduro is no longer Venezuela's legal head of state:

The President of the Republic shall become permanently unavailable to serve by reason of any of the following events...[including] abandonment of his position, duly declared by the National Assembly.²

After the presidential elections of May 2018, the National Assembly, reputable Venezuelan nongovernmental organizations, and international bodies, such as the Organization of American States³ and the European Union,⁴ determined the elections were fraudulent. It was clear that the voting process had been anything but free and fair: Political opposition parties and candidates were prohibited from running.⁵ Opposition members were imprisoned and protestors were murdered and incarcerated.⁶ International organizations were banned from observing.⁷ State employees and Venezuelans dependent on government welfare were forced to vote for Maduro.⁸ The repressive conditions did not meet Venezuela's own requirements for a constitutional election.

The vote was never even supposed to take place in May. Maduro's unconstitutional parallel legislature moved the elections ahead from December to May, presumably to avoid elections taking place when inflation was forecasted to hit 1 million percent.⁹ Maduro created this illegitimate "legislature," known as the National Constituent Assembly,¹⁰ by executive decree after his political opponents won control of the National Assembly in 2015. The National Constituent Assembly's unconstitutional existence and, by extension, its rulings should be dismissed. On the contrary, the validity of the National Assembly's 2015 electoral win is indisputable. Domestic observers and a regional network of election monitors

1. Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, University of Minnesota Human Rights Library, <http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/research/venezuela-constitution.html> (accessed May 17, 2019).
2. Ibid.
3. News release, "Message from OAS Secretary General on Elections in Venezuela," Organization of American States, "May 21, 2018," https://www.oas.org/en/media_center/press_release.asp?sCodigo=S-019/18 (accessed May 17, 2019).
4. News release, "Venezuela: Council Adopts Conclusions," Council of the European Union, May 29, 2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/05/28/venezuela-council-adopts-conclusions/> (accessed May 17, 2019).
5. "Venezuela Opposition Banned from Running in 2018 Election," BBC, December 11, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-42304594> (accessed May 17, 2019).
6. "Factbox: Venezuela's Jailed, Exiled or Barred Opposition Politicians," Reuters, February 19, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-factbox/factbox-venezuelas-jailed-exiled-or-barred-opposition-politicians-idUSKCN1G31WU> (accessed May 17, 2019), and Human Rights Watch, "Venezuela: Events of 2017," <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/venezuela#56edeb> (accessed May 17, 2019).
7. Clare Ribando Seelke, "Venezuela's 2018 Presidential Elections," *CRS Insight*, May 24, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IN10902.pdf> (accessed May 17, 2019).
8. Alexandra Ulmer and Andreina Aponte, "Venezuela's Maduro Orders State Workers to Vote for Assembly," Reuters, July 7, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics/venezuelas-maduro-orders-state-workers-to-vote-for-assembly-idUSKBN19S229> (accessed May 17, 2019).
9. Alejandro Werner, "Outlook for the Americas: A Tougher Recovery," IMF Blog, July 23, 2018, <https://blogs.imf.org/2018/07/23/outlook-for-the-americas-a-tougher-recovery/> (accessed May 17, 2019).
10. Human Rights Watch, "Venezuela: Events of 2017."

TEXT BOX 1

determined that even despite Maduro's efforts to manipulate the vote, "the election day concluded normally."¹¹ As such, U.S. and international policymakers should treat the National Assembly as the only legitimate authority in Venezuela's government.

As a result of the May 2018 electoral irregularities and outright fraud, the National Assembly determined that Maduro was not, in fact, re-elected—and on January 10, his expected re-inauguration day, Venezuela had no lawful head of state. The EU, the OAS, and the United States, among others, stated they would no longer recognize Maduro as Venezuela's legitimate leader either. Article 233 of Venezuela's constitution further elaborates on the line of succession, explaining:

When an elected President becomes permanently unavailable to serve prior to his inauguration, a new election by universal suffrage and direct ballot shall be held within 30 consecutive days. Pending election and inauguration of the new President, the President of the National Assembly shall take charge of the Presidency of the Republic.¹²

At this point, Juan Guaido was already the president of the National Assembly and, via the powers of the constitution, rightfully assumed the role of interim president.

11. National Democratic Institute, "A New National Assembly for Venezuela," December 16, 2015, <https://www.ndi.org/venezuela-elections-2015> (accessed May 17, 2019).

12. Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

initiative to create the conditions for fair elections in Venezuela. Yet, a part of the ICG's proposed electoral process would require a dialogue between Maduro and his political opponents. Maduro is already known for engaging in dialogue in bad faith with his political opponents, most recently in the Dominican Republic before the May 2018 presidential election.⁸

Fair and credible elections in Venezuela require a fundamental overhaul of the electoral system. Under Maduro, the mechanisms of state power are used to maintain control and win elections. With Maduro's devastation of Venezuela and history of electoral fraud, he cannot be permitted to participate in future elections. While Maduro should have no role in Venezuela's future, members of the Socialist Party should be allowed to run for office.

Should Maduro ever agree to participate in fair elections with his political opponents, the ICG has no mechanism for holding Maduro accountable for defaulting on negotiated agreements. Carrying out elections under the ICG's structure would also require Maduro to admit his previous election was fraudulent,

a proposition that is highly unlikely, as such an admission would be uncharacteristic of the dictator.

Step 3: Reject the ICG's Plan for Venezuela.

U.S. policymakers must recognize this as an irresponsible initiative and urge regional partners to do so as well. The ICG does not provide the proper safeguards or pathways to a democratic transition in Venezuela. Elections held with the current electoral system, or any election that involves Maduro, will not produce free, fair, and representative results. Such an election would most likely result in another fraudulent outcome and prolong the crisis.

The Lack of Military Defections Does Not Mean that the Armed Forces Support Maduro

To date, there have been few high-ranking military defections. Yet there is evidence that casts doubt on the armed forces' loyalty to Maduro. Credible reporting revealed that Maduro's defense minister was collaborating with other senior officials and interim president Guaido. Defense Minister Padrino still

8. Scott Smith, "Venezuela Sets April 22 for Election After Talks Break Down," Associated Press, February 7, 2018, <https://www.apnews.com/a8ac3f4c869e42f48f88965bbb52c98b> (accessed May 9, 2019).

retains his role, but it is believed Maduro has lost confidence in him and feels threatened by the armed forces' loyalty to Padrino.⁹ Also, Maduro's increasing reliance on the paramilitary forces and external actors like Russia and Cuba could be indications that he is uncertain about the armed forces' trustworthiness. Traditionally during anti-government demonstrations, the armed forces were called upon to break up the protests. Yet over the past several weeks, and most notably during Guaidó's attempt to incite a military rebellion on April 30, Maduro called on paramilitary forces to repress protestors and protect him.¹⁰

More broadly, these trends speak to the fractious nature of Maduro's inner circle and their potential loss of confidence in Maduro's long-term viability. This, combined with the recent senior intelligence official defections, leaves Maduro in a vulnerable place.¹¹ Until the day he defected on April 30, General Manuel Cristópher Figuera was head of Venezuela's domestic intelligence services and the de facto leader of the military intelligence services. Presumably he is also working with U.S. and other partner nation intelligence services. Hugo Carvajal, the former director of military intelligence for Hugo Chávez, abandoned Maduro in February. He is currently incarcerated in Spain on U.S. drug charges.¹² Maduro's defense attaché in Washington, DC, also defected, as have another 11 of Maduro's diplomats abroad.¹³ While exact numbers are difficult to calculate, it is estimated that over 1,500 soldiers have abandoned Maduro, many crossing the border into neighboring Colombia.¹⁴

Step 4: Recognize that Maduro's Government and Inner Circle Are Not a Cohesive, United Entity. The U.S. should recognize there are strong reasons to believe Maduro's government is not fully behind its leader. While the number of overall defections

from Maduro's government has been low, the recent desertion by his intelligence chief and reports that close members of his inner circle collaborate with his political opponents reveal deep schisms. U.S. policy-makers must take these factors into account when assessing the viability of Maduro's government.

A Military Intervention to Remove Maduro from Power Would Only Make the Crisis Worse

The U.S. military should not be used as the mechanism for resolving the political crisis. While Maduro undermines U.S. regional security and stability interests, the situation in Venezuela does not threaten vital national interests. Considerations for using the military to depose Maduro overlook several key points. There is the option for tactical strikes to take out key military infrastructure, but that would also require destroying communication, and possibly energy, infrastructure. There is no predetermining the political outcome of this route. Maduro could survive the attempt, which could increase support for him among the armed forces. A ground invasion would commit the U.S. Armed Forces to a situation in which the security threats do not justify the resources required.

While higher-level Venezuelan military officials are involved in the illegitimate government's corruption, the same cannot be said for mid-level and junior officers and soldiers. Unless proven otherwise, these troops should play a role in Venezuela's reconstruction. Removing a key pillar of stability like the military would seriously complicate the transition process. It would leave a security void that Cuba, Russia, or criminal organizations could exploit. It would also commit the U.S. military and other international partners to a long-term peacekeeping role.

9. Caracas Chronicles, "First Attempt," *Political Risk Report*, May 3, 2019.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Nicholas Casey and Raphael Minder, "Venezuelan Ex-Spy Chief Arrested in Spain," *The New York Times*, April 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/12/world/americas/hugo-carvajal-arrested-spain.html> (accessed May 9, 2019).

13. Ryan Dube and Kejal Vyas, "Maduro Demands Military's Loyalty After Attaché Defects," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 27, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/maduro-demands-militarys-loyalty-after-attache-defects-11548634073> (accessed May 9, 2019), and "Eleven Venezuelan Diplomats in U.S. Defect Since Last Month: Opposition," Reuters, February 21, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-usa/eleven-venezuela-diplomats-in-u-s-defect-since-last-month-opposition-idUSKCN1QA213?feedType=RSS&feedName=topNews> (accessed May 9, 2019).

14. Francisco Toro, "The Bitter Truth About What's Happening in Venezuela," *The Washington Post*, May 1, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/05/01/caught-between-washington-moscow-venezuelans-cant-see-end-this-crisis/?utm_term=.6c3a9b40e7d0 (accessed May 9, 2019).

The humanitarian and economic consequence of any military response must also be factored into the policy planning process. Venezuelans are already fleeing the humanitarian catastrophe in their country. The destabilizing impact of military action would most definitely make these conditions even worse. According to the OAS, over 3 million of Venezuela's 32 million population have already fled the country. An estimated 5.39 million to 5.75 million Venezuelans are expected to flee the country by the end of 2019, and up to 8.2 million by 2020. There is already a serious lack of funding to properly care for these individuals.

Step 5: Reject Plans for a Military Solution to Solve Venezuela's Crisis. At this juncture, the U.S. should not conduct a military intervention in Venezuela. The threats posed by the illegitimate Maduro regime do not threaten vital U.S. interests, and the Venezuelan military should not be destroyed or disbanded, as it is a necessary component for reconstruction.

Venezuela Urgently Requires a Post-Maduro Security and Stabilization Plan

In a post-Maduro Venezuela, the future government will find itself dealing with a complex security dilemma. It has to find a way of demobilizing and disarming over 100,000 paramilitary fighters loyal to Maduro. There are also Venezuelan guerillas; factions of Colombian guerilla groups, such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC); and numerous transnational and domestic criminal organizations with entrenched interests throughout the country.¹⁵ Over the past two decades Venezuela has purchased over \$10 billion in Russian weapons, including 100 tanks; two battalions of the S-300VM "Antey-2500" surface-to-air missiles with radar capabilities able to engage targets from surface to 100,000 feet; 5,000 SA-24 shoulder-fired heat-seeking MANPADS (man-

portable air defense systems)¹⁶ with a capability of engaging targets up to 15,000 feet; and numerous other small arms and equipment. These weapons have gone to the Venezuelan armed forces, parts of which have cooperated with regional guerillas and criminal organizations.¹⁷ Complicating the security conditions is the state's lack of control over many parts of Venezuela, and the proliferation of criminal organizations. In terms of homicide rates, Venezuela is Latin America's most violent country, and the capital of Caracas is one of the most dangerous cities in the world.¹⁸

Interim president Guaido and his advisers have developed a general framework for the national reconstruction of Venezuela known as "Plan País" (country plan).¹⁹ The publicly known information in the security plan contains broad strategic guidelines on citizen security and reforming Venezuela's security institutions. Yet it lacks definitive proposals for stabilizing Venezuela after the transition and addressing the complex security environment. Addressing the security challenges in Venezuela is the key linchpin to implementing the governance, economic development, and humanitarian components of the Plan País.

Step 6: Develop a Security Plan that Is Ready to Be Implemented as Soon as a Transition Occurs. The U.S. State Department and relevant agencies must work with interim president Guaido's administration to create a post-Maduro peace plan. Regardless of who assumes control, the U.S. should also develop plans with Venezuela's neighbors Colombia and Ecuador to disarm and demobilize the paramilitaries and insurgencies. The strategy must provide protections for critical facilities, counterintelligence measures, and vetting for domestic security services. Fixing Venezuela's citizen security crisis must be a priority as well. There can be no free and fair elections under the current security circumstances. The U.S. should also develop a plan as quickly as possible to identify and take control of the surface-to-air missiles and MANPADS.

15. "ELN in Venezuela," InSight Crime, March 11, 2019, <https://www.insightcrime.org/venezuela-organized-crime-news/eln-in-venezuela/> (accessed May 10, 2019).

16. Girsh Gupta, "Exclusive: Venezuela Holds 5,000 Russian Surface-to-Air MANPADS Missiles," Reuters, May 22, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-arms-manpads/exclusive-venezuela-holds-5000-russian-surface-to-air-manpads-missiles-idUSKBN1810E9> (accessed May 10, 2019).

17. Ibid.

18. "Venezuela: A Mafia State?" InSight Crime, May 2018, <https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Venezuela-a-Mafia-State-InSight-Crime-2018.pdf> (accessed May 10, 2019).

19. Plan País, <https://www.planpais.com/> (accessed May 17, 2019).



SOURCES: Organization of American States, "Preliminary Report on the Venezuelan Migrant and Refugee Crisis in the Region," March 8, 2019, <http://www.oas.org/documents/eng/press/Preliminary-Report-2019-on-Venezuelan-Migrant-and-Refugee-Crisis-in-the-Region.pdf> (accessed May 15, 2019); Migration Policy Institute, "Creativity amid Crisis: Legal Pathways for Venezuelan Migrants in Latin America," January, 2019, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/legal-pathways-venezuelan-migrants-latin-america> (accessed May 15, 2019); and author's field research in Colombia.

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The U.S. Must Mitigate the Impact of Venezuela's Crisis on Regional Partners

Venezuela's instability is spilling over into many countries in Latin America. Colombia is experiencing the brunt of this crisis, providing for nearly 2 million Venezuelan migrants and refugees. Just off the coast of Venezuela in the Caribbean Sea, 15 percent

of the Dutch island of Curaçao's population is Venezuelan.²⁰ According to 2018 OAS data, an estimated 5,000 Venezuelans fled the country daily that year, equaling roughly 200 people per hour.²¹ High numbers of Venezuelan migrants and refugees are also in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru. Many of these individuals and families are without the means

20. OAS Working Group, "Preliminary Report on the Venezuelan Migrant and Refugee Crisis in the Region," Organization of American States, March 8, 2019, <http://www.oas.org/documents/eng/press/Preliminary-Report-2019-on-Venezuelan-Migrant-and-Refugee-Crisis-in-the-Region.pdf> (accessed May 11, 2019).

21. Ibid.

to support themselves and are heavily reliant on their host countries. It is Latin America's worst refugee and migration crisis to date.

The exodus of Venezuelans can be traced back to a singular cause, the corrupt and dictatorial government of Nicolas Maduro. Venezuela's manmade crisis has become a significant challenge for neighboring countries in terms of coordinating logistics and providing resources. Colombia is also dealing with major domestic challenges aside from the Venezuelan refugees. It is in the midst of implementing an ambitious peace process and demobilizing thousands of FARC insurgents and combatants. It is also experiencing historically high levels of cocaine cultivation.²² Resources for Colombia's own post-conflict reconstruction plans and security challenges are stretched due to the inflows of Venezuelans. As Venezuela's neighbor, it will naturally remain on the receiving end of the humanitarian exodus.

Step 7: Assist Regional Partners Affected by Venezuela's Breakdown. The U.S. must work with international donors and assess the needs of its partners, balance them with U.S. interests, and support efforts to offset their burden when appropriate. Regional countries are overwhelmed with the exodus of Venezuelan migrants and refugees to the point on being unable to contend with their domestic challenges. This urgent problem requires increased efforts and resources.

It Is a Priority for the U.S. to Convince Partners and Allies to Match U.S. Efforts

More than 50 countries recognize the legitimacy of interim president Juan Guaido.²³ To date, he has ambassadors in 30 countries. Yet despite the broad international support, few countries have been willing to move beyond strongly worded diplomatic statements. Nor have they re-evaluated their policies on external actors shaping events in Venezuela, most

problematically Cuba and Russia. Canada has sanctioned over 100 Venezuelan government officials, prohibiting Canadian citizens and entities from commercial transactions with the designated officials.²⁴ Some members of the Lima Group have also implemented targeted sanctions, suspended military cooperation, and lowered their status of diplomatic representation.²⁵ To their credit, some Latin American countries in the Lima Group have displayed an unprecedented willingness to proactively encourage a democratic transition in Venezuela. Yet the EU has been reluctant to move beyond minor targeted sanctions of fewer than 20 Venezuelan officials and an arms embargo. And, the arms embargo is not being fully enforced, as Spain recently granted a license to export parts for the modernization of Venezuelan army tanks after the embargo.²⁶

Step 8: Insist that EU and Latin American Counterparts Ramp Up Pressure on Maduro. Lima Group and EU member states share the same objective, yet they can and should do more to achieve this goal. The Trump Administration should strongly encourage both blocs to replicate the U.S. sanctions regime. Their current response to Maduro is not proportional to the crimes already committed and will not deter him and his cronies from future misdeeds. U.S. policymakers across the executive and legislative branches must urge their counterparts to do more.

It Is Essential to Raise the Cost of External Interfering in Venezuela and Backing the Unlawful Maduro Government

In Russian President Vladimir Putin, Maduro has an ally who can provide him additional top cover from the U.S. in venues like the United Nations Security Council, and who can guide him through a crisis, similar to the way in which Russia has had success with Syria's Bashar al-Assad. For Russia's leader, propping

22. Government Accountability Office, "U.S. Counternarcotics Assistance Achieved Some Positive Results, But State Needs to Review the Overall U.S. Approach," Report to the Caucus on International Narcotics Control, U.S. Senate, December 2018, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/695952.pdf> (accessed May 10, 2019).

23. Ibid.

24. Government of Canada, "Canada Sanctions Related to Venezuela," April 15, 2019, https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/international_relations-relations_internationales/sanctions/venezuela.aspx?lang=eng (accessed May 10, 2019).

25. News release, "Lima Group Declaration," Peruvian Ministry of Foreign Relations, January, 4, 2019, <https://www.gob.pe/institucion/rree/noticias/24270-declaracion-del-grupo-de-lima> (accessed May 10, 2019).

26. Miguel Gonzalez, "Spain Modernizing Venezuelan Tanks Despite EU-Wide Arms Embargo," *El País*, December 31, 2018, https://elpais.com/elpais/2018/12/31/inenglish/1546243499_331028.html (accessed May 10, 2019).

up Maduro requires little investment and has the potential for high reward. Supporting Maduro does not require Russia to provide a massive troop deployment or significant financial investment like in Syria. While Venezuela is indebted to Russia, financial concerns are not the most important issue on the table. There could even be a scenario where Russia forgives Venezuela's debt in exchange for oil assets or other forms of collateral.

Russia's objectives in Venezuela are clear. Russia is inserting itself into the conflict in order to be a strategic powerbroker. Moscow wants to be a part of the solution in order to distract attention from its nefarious activities elsewhere. U.S. policymakers must raise the cost of Russia's meddling in Venezuelan affairs and make supporting Maduro unsustainable. Putin cannot be trusted in negotiations, and the U.S. must not waste time expecting Moscow to play a productive role in Venezuela. U.S. policymakers should sanction Russian state, and Russian-backed, entities that are providing Maduro with security assistance and support for circumventing U.S. oil and gold sanctions.²⁷

For the Cuban regime, maintaining Maduro in power is in the national interest. The regime in Havana is economically bankrupt and unable to survive without a foreign benefactor. The Soviet Union had filled that role. Cuba's economic crisis following the fall of the Soviet Union brought a need for a new donor state. The current relationship with Venezuela emerged following the election of Hugo Chavez in 1998. The bilateral relationship is not simply an alliance—Chavez himself described it as a merger

of two revolutions.²⁸ A sizeable percentage of Cuba's gross domestic product comes from Venezuelan subsidies and aid, peaking at 12 percent in 2012.²⁹ A 2018 estimate states that Cuba has only 5 million barrels of oil in storage which would be enough to last up to 45 days.³⁰ According to numerous credible accounts, Cuba has thousands of officials embedded in the intelligence and security services of the Maduro government.³¹ For obvious reasons, Cuba's influence and presence have found their way into key Venezuelan government institutions. Cuba's survival depends on Maduro or a leader who shares Maduro's vision for the bilateral relationship. No other country, not even Russia, appears willing to replace Venezuela's subsidies.

Interim president Guaido has vowed to end the Cuban presence in Venezuela. The Trump Administration has rightfully recognized that the road to liberty in Venezuela runs through Havana and has ramped up sanctions against Cuba. Recently, the Administration decided to fully implement Title III of the 1996 Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act—the U.S. embargo against Cuba—which will allow U.S. citizens to sue foreign companies trafficking on stolen property in Cuba. This decision is meant not only to increase pressure on Havana, but also to dissuade foreign investment on the island, which sustains the regime with hard currency. It also provides a signal to countries like Canada and EU partners seeking a transition in Venezuela that they must also recalibrate their Cuba policy.³² More can and should be done. Russia and Cuba's meddling and support of the unlawful Maduro government is prolonging Venezuela's dire crisis.

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27. Marianna Parraga, "Exclusive: After U.S. Sanctions, Venezuela Seeks to Collect Some Oil Payments via Rosneft," Reuters, April 18, 2019, <https://ru.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idAFKCN1RU2AU> (accessed May 10, 2019).
 28. Anthony Boadle, "Chavez Steals Show in Castro's Cuba," Reuters, October 16, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-venezuela-idUSN1620821020071016> (accessed May 10, 2019).
 29. Republic of Cuba's National Office of Statistics and Information, <http://www.one.cu/sien2012.htm> (accessed May 10, 2019), and Carmelo Mesa-Lago, "There's Only One Way Out for Cuba's Dismal Economy," *The New York Times*, March 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/28/opinion/cuba-economy.html> (accessed May 10, 2019).
 30. Patrick Oppman, "The History that Chains Cuba to Venezuela's Crisis," CNN, February 2, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/02/americas/venezuela-cuba-history-oil/index.html> (accessed May 11, 2019).
 31. Venezuela Investigative Unit, "Cuban Doctors Used in Extortion Scheme by Venezuelan Gov't," InSight Crime, March 22, 2019, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/brief/cuban-doctors-used-in-extortion-scheme-by-venezuelan-govt/> (accessed March 22, 2019); Kirk Semple, "With Spies and Other Operatives, a Nation Looms Over Venezuela's Crisis: Cuba," *The New York Times*, January 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/26/world/americas/venezuela-cuba-oil.html> (accessed May 11, 2019); Craig A. Deare, "The Solution to Venezuela Runs Through Cuba," *Americas Quarterly*, May 30, 2018, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/content/solution-venezuela-runs-through-cuba> (accessed May 11, 2019); and U.S. Embassy and Consulates in the United Kingdom, "OAS Secretary General: Cuba Trains Torturers in Venezuela," February 7, 2019, <https://uk.usembassy.gov/oas-secretary-general-cuba-trains-torturers-in-venezuela/> (accessed May 16, 2019).
 32. Ana Rosa Quintana, "Trump's Cuba Sanctions Will Punish Maduro's Enablers in Havana," Heritage Foundation *Commentary*, April 23, 2019, <https://www.heritage.org/americas/commentary/trumps-cuba-sanctions-will-punish-maduros-enablers-havana>.

Step 9: Encourage a Tougher Domestic and International Response to External Actors Proping up Maduro. The U.S. must strongly urge other countries to address Cuba and Russia's destabilizing role in Venezuela. Partner nations should not be investing in Cuban state-owned enterprises and should openly condemn the regime for undermining Venezuela's democratic ambitions. The U.S. should adopt targeted and sectoral sanctions against Russian state and state-supported enterprises for providing Maduro with security assistance. Russia's direct role in helping Maduro circumvent U.S. oil sanctions should be met with a similar combination of sanctions.

Prepare for a Transition that May Not Involve Guaido or Occur in the Foreseeable Future

While interim president Guaido should legally assume power if Maduro leaves office or is deposed, it is far from sure that this will take place. Guaido could be arrested or harmed. There is also the possibility that a member of Maduro's unlawful government will seize control. Regardless of the outcome, U.S. policymakers must be ready for a rocky transition that might not involve the interim president. There could be a transition scenario in which Venezuela continues being governed by individuals who are under U.S. and international sanctions, thus complicating international relief efforts both legally and diplomatically. Or, the military could assume control, undermining Venezuela's prospects for a democratic transition. This development would also create difficulties for the U.S. and other countries in providing security cooperation and humanitarian relief. While U.S. and international efforts must remain committed to interim president Guaido, as he and the National Assembly represent the only legitimate authority in Venezuela, there should be alternative plans in the event that he does not assume the presidency.

There are also no clear indications the end is near. Due to international actors meddling in Venezuela

and the regime's tightfisted grip on power, Maduro's weaknesses and unpopularity have not resulted in his removal from power. This could very well mean that Venezuela's instability will continue and result in a protracted crisis. Or a single unpredictable event or series of such events could act as a catalyst for change.

Step 10: Prepare for a Potentially Lengthy Conflict in Venezuela. There are few guarantees that this crisis will end quickly. In the meantime, policymakers must work with their foreign counterparts at all levels to ensure that international efforts remain focused on bringing about the end of Maduro's unlawful government and a legal transition to the interim presidency of Guaido.

The Way Forward on Venezuela

By all measures, Venezuela is a failed state. The economy is in ruins and the humanitarian crisis has resulted in Latin America's worst refugee and migration exodus. The political impasse has evolved into a proxy showdown between the U.S. and hostile foreign actors. U.S. policymakers cannot predetermine the outcome—but they can strongly influence events. They should maintain support for interim president Guaido and ask America's international allies and partners to do so as well by increasing targeted sanctions against Maduro's illegitimate government. They can prepare for various outcomes in a post-Maduro Venezuela. Above all, U.S. policy must remain aligned with that of U.S. regional partners and avoid a dangerous military intervention. The U.S. must urge its regional allies to reject ill-fated plans, such as that of the EU's ICG. The U.S. must remain committed to a peaceful and democratic transition in Venezuela.

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