

US encouragement of a military coup in Venezuela is dangerous for both countries



Publicly condoning military action and using economic sanctions to provoke it will only exacerbate Venezuelan suffering and further damage the tattered reputation of the US on democracy and human-rights issues in the Western Hemisphere, writes [Timothy M. Gill](#) (University of North Carolina, Wilmington).

Since the election of former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in 1998, the US and Venezuela have been at odds.

US state elites repeatedly condemned Chávez and his socialist policies, met with opposition leaders in Washington, and failed to recognise the electoral success of both Chávez and his successor the current president Nicolás Maduro.

Chávez, meanwhile, aligned himself with several US foes (such as Iran and Russia), routinely lambasted US imperialism, expelled the US ambassador, and ultimately blamed the US for the 2002 coup d'état which temporarily removed him from power.

The Trump administration's approach on Venezuela and Latin America

Like Iran and North Korea, Venezuela has remained a top foreign-policy priority for the new Trump administration. While certain elements within it have pushed for a harsh response to President Maduro, other individuals – recently retired Under Secretary Tom Shannon, for example – have discouraged the application of more dramatic measures like a ban on oil imports from Venezuela, which the administration has been seriously considering.

While US administrations from Clinton to Trump via Bush and Obama have made no secret of their disdain for Venezuela's socialist government, only the Trump government has publicly signalled its support for a military coup in the country.

[Speaking at the University of Texas](#) before his recent tour of Latin America, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stated plainly that he believed “there will be a change [in Venezuela],” and that the Venezuelan military would ultimately carry it out.

Tillerson also claimed that:

[in] the history of Venezuela, and, in fact, the history in other Latin American and South American countries, oftentimes it's the military that handles that. When things are so bad that the military leadership realizes they just can't serve the citizens anymore, they will manage a peaceful transition.

He even declared the Monroe Doctrine, which established US imperial domination over the Western Hemisphere, “a success” and asserted that it remains “as relevant today as it was the day it was written.” If anyone doubted Tillerson's familiarity with the nature of that document, he went on to say that Latin America did “not need any new imperial powers” like China and Russia exerting their influence in the region, clearly implying that Latin America is already currently subject to the imperial power of the US.



Opposition leader María Corina Machado meets George W. Bush in 2005 ([Eric Draper](#), public domain)



Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, the US actively supported military coups all across Latin America, from Guatemala and Nicaragua in Central America to Argentina and Chile in the Southern Cone. But these coups led to nothing remotely approaching “peaceful transition”.

The Guatemalan military, for instance, committed what many consider genocide against local indigenous populations, whereas the Chilean regime disappeared tens of thousands of left-wing activists. These governments safeguarded US economic and security interests, but only by terrorising their own citizens.

Secretary of State Tillerson ([US Embassy London, CC BY-ND 2.0](#))



Much depends on how the Venezuelan military views President Nicolás Maduro ([Xavier Granja Cedeño, CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

The threat of oil-related sanctions and the 2018 elections

As well as voicing support for a military coup, Tillerson also indicated that the Trump administration is weighing up the nuclear option of banning oil imports from Venezuela.

The severely debilitated Venezuelan economy relies almost exclusively on oil exports for foreign exchange, much of which continues to come from sales to refineries on the US Gulf Coast.

Despite Maduro's claims that Venezuela would survive any embargo, in reality this would doubtless prove catastrophic for the Venezuelan economy, intensifying the already significant suffering of citizens all across the country. It is hard to envision a means of compensating for the loss of this foreign exchange, which is desperately needed to service foreign debt and cover the imports that keep a minimum of goods on Venezuelan shelves.

In response, Maduro would also amplify his anti-imperialist rhetoric and shore up nationalist sentiment. Yet, if the Trump administration wants to scare military members into moving against the government, there is no better move to make.

There is no denying that Venezuela faces a serious political-economic crisis with no end in sight:

- Oil production and prices, which together provided the government with the windfall of foreign exchange that underpinned its heavy social spending, have both plummeted;
- hyperinflation has left the local currency virtually worthless;
- homicide rates are among the highest in the hemisphere – if not the world;
- President Maduro remains deeply unpopular throughout the country.

Though Maduro did overcome former governor Henrique Capriles in a 2013 election generally considered free and fair, he has since sought to maintain his rule through a host of authoritarian manoeuvres: sidelining the opposition-controlled National Assembly, establishing a parallel legislative body, and jailing or disbarring political adversaries.

Yet, historically the opposition hasn't played by the rules either. In 2002, some opposition members supported a military coup and a transitional government that temporarily displaced Hugo Chávez. Opposition groups then orchestrated a months-long strike that paralysed the country by shutting down the vital oil industry. And since 2014 the opposition has periodically called for the ouster of Maduro through nationwide protests that have resulted in the death of dozens of Venezuelans, amongst them security forces, opposition activists, and government supporters alike.

Elements of the opposition have recently sought to negotiate with the Venezuelan government to work out the many messy details surrounding imminent presidential elections. But several rounds of mediated negotiations in the Dominican Republic have ended in a standstill, with the two sides unable even to achieve a temporary resolution of their many differences.

Nonetheless, presidential elections are now slated for 22 April 2018, and Maduro is undoubtedly aware of his own unpopularity. Should the government tamper with election results in an attempt to prolong its rule illegitimately, the international community – and particularly Venezuela's neighbours – would be right to condemn these acts.

But encouraging a military coup by threatening "[to make the economy scream](#)" will only exacerbate Venezuelan suffering and further damage the tattered reputation of the US when it comes to democracy and human rights in the Western Hemisphere.

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