

In an Attempt to Offset Rising Oil Prices, Biden Administration Makes Nice with Brutal Saudis—But Spurns Socialist Venezuela

Right-wing lobbies and ideological zealotry continue to prevent initiation of rational policy toward Venezuela

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On June 2, Saudi-led OPEC and its allies [announced it will accelerate oil production](#) in July and August, as the cartel’s key player, Saudi Arabia, agreed to U.S. pleadings that it take action to cool crude oil prices. The sharp rise in the price of a barrel of crude since the start of hostilities in Ukraine has threatened to stall the global economy with the United States being especially vulnerable.

OPEC indicated [it would increase output by nearly 650,000 barrels a day](#) in the next two months, which is a sharp increase on the previously scheduled increase of 400,000 b/d. The announcement followed in the wake of a statement from the European Union that member states had agreed to impose a partial ban on Russian oil imports.

This only served to underline fears in the energy markets that shortages will be exacerbated and cause a further scramble for ever rarer surplus supplies. The expectations around the OPEC meeting were that most of the supply increase will be met by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The extra supplies will come after months of high-level U.S. diplomacy to repair relations with Riyadh.

It also represents a climbdown for the Biden administration, which came to power in 2021 on election slogans which had seen Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, being labeled a “murderer” and Saudi Arabia itself a [“pariah state” by candidate Joe Biden](#).

The U.S. welcomed OPEC’s statement in what it termed an [“important decision”](#) and gave a

very vocal credit to Saudi Arabia ensuring that the OPEC gathering succeeded in *“achieving...consensus amongst the group members.”* The White House also recognized the *“positive contributions of the UAE, Kuwait, and Iraq.”*

OPEC’s decision comes ahead of a planned visit to the Middle East by U.S. president Joe Biden.

The U.S. president has now added Riyadh to his itinerary, a move that was thought unthinkable as recently as February of this year, and which [some are saying is tantamount to a “pardon for murder.”](#)

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has forced Joe Biden to not only soften his previous antipathy toward Prince Mohammed but to retreat so aggressively from that position that any veneer of self-respect has been thoroughly removed.

Joe Biden has maintained a distance from the Crown Prince because of his [links to the murder](#) of U.S.-based journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Realpolitik, however, means that the U.S. is forced to improve ties with Saudi Arabia, with energy a cornerstone of the bilateral relationship stretching back nearly 75 years.

Background briefings indicate that Saudi Arabia’s softening of its stance toward the Biden administration follows [weeks of shuttle diplomacy](#) by the White House’s top Middle East energy envoys, Brett McGurk and Amos Hochstein, who paved the way for an improvement in relations between Riyadh and Washington.

All of this begs the question: Why does the Biden administration refuse to reach compromise with the oil giant that is Venezuela? This is a country with the largest proven reserves of oil in the world and it is located right next to the U.S.’s backyard.

Historically, the Venezuelan oil industry has been as much under the de facto control of U.S. Big Oil as was Saudi oil for decades. It is a fact that several of the largest refineries located on the Gulf Coast of the United States were built specifically to refine Venezuelan crude. So why then Biden’s unwillingness to step forward with an extended hand and grasp the opportunity for rapprochement with the government of President Maduro?

That the U.S.’s attempts to install former head of the Venezuelan National Assembly Juan Guaidó as *“interim president”* has been an embarrassing failure is no longer a matter for debate. Even an attempted coup in early 2020 fell comically flat on its face with evidence emerging in its aftermath of ludicrously high success fees having been offered by Guaidó and his inner circle to the ringleaders.



Juan Guaidó and Donald Trump. [Source: venezuelaanalysis.com]

Further revelations about [misuse of substantial donor funds](#), with fingers pointing directly at Guaidó's brother, have also eroded what little support remained for the former National Assembly chief. Another source of embarrassment for Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken is that Guaidó today is not even an elected official.

What little authority he had has been greatly reduced since the time that Donald Trump anointed him "Interim President." The fickle Trump soon pulled back from Guaidó and clearly viewed him with disdain and contempt, as revealed in former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper's recent book *"A Sacred Oath."*

The only viable alternative, Nicolás Maduro, is the man who, despite the best laid plans of Washington hawks like Mike Pompeo and John Bolton, has remained in power since being passed the baton by late President Hugo Chávez in 2013.

Nicolás Maduro has shown a very astute political acumen which has surprised many outsiders who have failed to grasp the loyalty the vast majority of Venezuelans feel toward him. He has been able to navigate Venezuela through the worst ravages of the COVID pandemic to the edge of a sustained economic recovery.

Shops in downtown Caracas are once again full, the local stock market has been amongst the best-performing globally over the past 12 months and 2021 saw annual GDP in positive territory for the first time in several years. And now, Venezuela is projected to have a whopping [20 percent growth](#) in 2022, an eye-catching turnaround, but not good enough for Joe Biden, Secretary of State Blinken and others. It seems that Venezuela can do nothing right.

Or perhaps in keeping with the way U.S. administrations have behaved over the past decade, the Biden administration only shows respect to those who show it no respect in

return. Historically, Venezuela has been as close an ally of the United States as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Perhaps the reason for the truculence of President Biden is that he would rather seek to exploit the natural resources of Venezuela whereas, in the case of Saudi Arabia, the U.S. would rather take advantage of that country's very significant cash reserves and sell more overpriced weapons and second-hand technology polished up to look brand new.

In March of this year, after a few days of fighting in Ukraine, it appeared that the Biden White House had awakened and recognized the Bolivarian Republic for the friend that it has always been rather than the pariah that the Trump regime (and indeed the late-Obama period) had painted it. No sooner had it been confirmed that [the highest level delegation in many years](#) to officially visit had arrived in Caracas, that the anti-Venezuela brigade went apoplectic, claiming to anyone who would listen that the event was akin to the betrayal of Christ and that the end of civilization was near!



President Joe Biden with Juan S. González, who headed the U.S. delegation to Venezuela in March.

[Source: venezuelaanalysis.com]

Nevertheless, it is a fact that the visit to Caracas was long overdue. Any serious first-year student of political science would be able to confirm that. Unfortunately, in what passes for civilized political discourse (you shout, I shout, we both shout, we both tweet videos of the other person shouting, and both call the other out for being radical), the anti-reconciliation coalition led by Marco Rubio (R-FL) ratcheted up the noise to such a level that any dialogue became impossible.

Even the substantial gesture of goodwill shown by President Maduro in releasing two Americans held in Venezuela was condemned as “*tokenism*” by Senator Rubio. Indeed, the hysteria from the right rose to such a level that the Biden administration was forced onto the back foot to such an extent that it appeared for a few days that this initiative, based on political and economic realities, was all but dead.

The problem for President Biden and Secretary of State Blinken is that this is not where this matter can be allowed to end. There is far too much at stake for the initiative to be buried by the rabid right.

And, of course, the situation has the added complexity of the ongoing detention in Miami of

Venezuelan diplomat Alex Saab.

[Alex Saab is the Venezuelan Special Envoy](#) who was forcibly and unprecedentedly brought to the United States from the West African state of Cape Verde in October 2021. He had been detained by the Cape Verdean authorities since June 12, 2020, during a refueling stop en route from Caracas to Iran to undertake a humanitarian special mission at the peak of the COVID pandemic.

What makes Saab's ongoing detention in Miami unique and a matter of concern to not just Venezuela, but especially to the global diplomatic community, is that, as a Special Envoy traveling from Venezuela to Iran, where he was accredited to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, [he was entitled to diplomatic immunity](#) and inviolability and protected by centuries-old rules which govern the freedom of movement of diplomats and political agents.

Saab's detention, initially in Cape Verde and now in Miami, had to be cloaked in allegations of criminal activity in order to justify it, which is a widely held view beyond U.S. law enforcement circles. It is the fulfillment of a political goal—the overthrow of the government of President Nicolás Maduro—which has been behind the pursuit of Saab who was indicted and sanctioned by the United States on July 25, 2019.

What began as an openly declared political objective of the Trump administration (the removal of Nicolás Maduro from office) had become increasingly untenable over the past 18 months even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Unfortunately for the United States, President Maduro has not only remained in office but strengthened his power-base with an unwaivering campaign of defying the economic and political blockade of Venezuela by the United States.

The dramatic rise in the price of gasoline, together with the increasing incidences of "*heat or eat*" in conjunction with upcoming U.S. mid-term elections, have combined to create a perfect storm that *should* result in a significant reset of the Venezuela-U.S. political and economic relationship. Only it has not.

This is why the inability of Biden, Blinken and others to reach an accommodation with Venezuela when they have shown an astonishing ability to undertake a U-turn with Saudi Arabia without so much as a blush of embarrassment is extraordinary.

The Biden administration has been criticized for ineptitude on several fronts but its schizophrenic approach toward President Maduro has shocked many and is now in danger of collapsing altogether. Venezuela has made it clear that it wants its diplomat, Alex Saab, released and allowed to return to Caracas. Is this really so difficult to do?

It seems that, making nice with Saudi Arabian officials, whom Biden once warned of "[significant changes](#)" in their country's relationship with the U.S. as a result of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, [was not hard to do](#). Perhaps because it comes with a different level of political risk assessment. No Marco Rubio or Ted Cruz or noisy social media activists telling anyone who will listen that you are soft on this or that. Or that you are giving in to communists. The Saudis may be many things but communists they are not.

The recent Summit of the Americas held in Los Angeles, which was meant to be a showcase for President Biden's engagement with South America, was a public relations disaster [with](#)

[several prominent no shows](#). The debacle has left Biden, Blinken and the summit's chief organizer, Juan González, desperate for a “win” in their backyard. However, with Colombia (one of the few remaining allies that the U.S. has in its backyard) recently following the region's trend and turning politically left, the Troika is now adrift.

González, who has the grandiose titles of “Senior Adviser and Special Assistant to the President of the United States and the Senior Director for the Western Hemisphere at the National Security Council,” came into his post in early January 2021 with high expectations. [One article referred to his appointment this way:](#) “As for the Western Hemisphere, after four years of the [Trump] anti-immigrant and xenophobic stances on the region, González's appointment represents the start of new relations between the United States and Latin America.”

Coming on the heels of “America is back!” there was genuine optimism that the return of a Democratic administration in Washington would lead to a rebuilding of historical ties; however, that early optimism has been shattered by a combination of surprising political naivete and acute political partisanship which means the two sides of the congressional aisle cannot agree which day of the week it is, let alone agree on a meaningful approach to dealing with a whole continent.

Juan González has, in the eyes of many observers, been a disappointment. It has not helped, of course, that those above him have shown an inability to provide any leadership. Nonetheless, the cringe-worthy knots into which the White House has tied itself since making an initial approach to Caracas in March, following the commencement of hostilities in Ukraine and the accompanying surge oil prices, has been embarrassing.

That the U.S. needs Venezuelan oil is self-evident. That Caracas is willing to supply that oil is very self-evident. That the Trump-anointed Juan Guaidó is irrelevant is self-evident. That the diplomat Alex Saab's release is a must for the political progress Washington wants is very self-evident.

The time has come for the grown-ups in the White House to accept that Nicolás Maduro is not leaving his presidential palace any time soon, accept that international law provides Alex Saab with immunity and inviolability, stop creating artificial barriers to political dialogue and accept that American authority will be better served by being engaged with one of its most economically significant neighbors rather than continuing with a discredited political policy that the U.S. neither needs nor wants.

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