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Canada vs. Venezuela: The Background Gets Even Murkier

By Joyce Nelson
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On January 26, Canadians learned the extent to which Canada's "quiet diplomacy" had helped Venezuela's Juan Guaido emerge to declare himself interim president on Jan. 23, in defiance of the elected president Nicolas Maduro. In a lengthy piece for The Canadian Press, reporter Mike Blanchfield noted that "emboldening Venezuela's opposition has been a labour of months" for Canadian diplomats, given that the opposition parties had been in complete disarray. [1] But by January 9, Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland was able to phone Guaido and "congratulate him … on uniting the opposition." [2]

Freeland, working with the ad hoc Lima Group, had long been calling for unity among the Venezuelan opposition parties. After foreign affairs ministers from the Lima Group met in Toronto on October 26, 2017, Freeland appeared at a Munk School of Global Affairs panel and said the message of the Lima Group to the Venezuelan opposition is "Get your act together, guys!" [3]

Then came Maduro's May 20, 2018 presidential victory, in which the Venezuelan people re-elected him despite months of suffering under U.S. economic warfare. [4] Blanchfield noted that the election results "galvanized" the Lima Group.

It took months to unify Venezuela's opposition parties among themselves and also with the Lima Group, which Nino Pagliccia reminds us is "not an international organization. It's just an ad hoc group of governments with no other purpose" than to promote "the overthrow of the legitimate Maduro government." [5]

So getting foreign ministers to agree with Venezuelan opposition parties on a uniting figure and platform must have been difficult. The Lima Group members who eventually signed the declaration supporting Juan Guaido include Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay and Peru. Similarly challenging would be "building bridges with a fractured opposition that was as much at odds with itself as it was with Maduro." [6]

And here's where one sentence from Blanchfield's article stands out, especially for alert Canadian readers. He noted:

> "In a November [2018] report, the International Crisis Group documented the divisions and urged the groups to set aside their 'personal and political rivalries'." [7]

In Canada, we've read and heard that name quite a lot in the past few weeks. The

International Crisis Group is the current employer of Michael Kovrig, a former Canadian diplomat and one of two Canadian men arrested in China in December in what appears to be retaliation for Canada's arrest (at the request of the U.S.) on December 1, 2018 of Huawei's chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou, daughter of Huawei's CEO and founder.

So the question arises: is there some connection between these two international political situations – Canada's role in Venezuela and Canada's role in the China embroglio? As it turns out, the answer is yes, and the International Crisis Group (ICG) is an important player in that connection.

What Is the ICG?

The Brussels-based International Crisis Group touts itself as a think tank and NGO dedicated to its slogan: "Preventing War, Shaping Peace." Its analysts study political crises and make recommendations for so-called conflict-resolution through a series of reports, articles, seminars, and private meetings with its governmental, foundation, and corporate donors.

Given that ICG had advised on unifying Venezuelan opposition parties, I asked Raul Burbano, Program Director for the Canadian NGO Common Frontiers for comment. During the 2018 Venezuelan presidential election, members of the Common Frontiers delegations had observer status. With regard to the International Crisis Group, Burbano answered by email,

> "They are a conservative right-wing think tank that masks itself as progressive. Any organization that proports to support peace and has Juan Manuel Santos as one of their trustees is out to lunch and can't be trusted."
>
> Santos is the "former hawkish right president of Colombia," Burbano explained.

Former Colombian President Santos is not the only controversial trustee of the International Crisis Group. The ICG website lists several other trustees, including Wesley Clark (former NATO Supreme Allied Commander); Lawrence H. Summers (former U.S. Secretary of Treasury); George Soros (founder of Open Societies Foundation); and Frank Giustra (President and CEO of Fiore Financial Corporation).

As F. William Engdahl recently wrote

> "The International Crisis Group is an NGO with a knack for being involved in key conflict zones such as Myanmar. The magazine Third World Quarterly in a peer-reviewed article in 2014 accused the ICG of 'manufacturing' crises. It was founded by Trump nemesis and Hillary Clinton supporter, George Soros." [8]

ICG says of its role:

> "Crisis Group enjoys strong relationships with government and foundation donors, whose long-term funding is critical to our organisation's effectiveness. For governments, Crisis Group fills a vital niche as diplomats' access to key conflict actors is increasingly hindered by security concerns and political obstacles. Senior officials tell Crisis Group that our reports are indispensable, with a unique emphasis on the political foundations of international peace and security. We engage substantively with our institutional donors through private

> policy briefings, roundtables, and rapid response from field experts and senior staff. Crisis Group in turn benefits from this sustained engagement and knowledge sharing with its donors. Our partners have come to rely on our information and analysis on developing emergencies." [9]

The ICG website lists as one of its 19 governmental donors "Canada (Global Affairs Canada)," currently headed by Chrystia Freeland.

Advancing Peace?

Just days after Engdahl's article referring to the ICG appeared, Vancouver billionaire and ICG trustee Frank Giustra wrote an op-ed for The Globe & Mail in which named Michael Kovrig as ICG's "senior advisor for North East Asia" and stated:

> "Mr. Kovrig works for the International Crisis Group, a conflict-prevention organization that I have proudly supported for years. I am baffled by the allegations Chinese officials make against him – that he is somehow 'endangering China's national security'. Mr. Kovrig's work – as anyone bothering to check it out would know – involves analysis of Chinese engagement with conflict-affected countries where Crisis Group advocates policies that advance peace, an approach congruent with China's foreign policy. To conduct his research, he meets openly with China's officials, analysts and academics to understand China's perspectives on global affairs. His writings are published on Crisis Group's website for all to see." [10]

Interestingly, one of Mr. Kovrig's recent analyses was entitled "Why China Should Help Solve Venezuela's Deepening Crisis," originally published as an op-ed in Asia Times (April 11, 2018). The piece, written with ICG colleague Phil Gunson, highlighted China's political support for Venezuelan president Maduro and delineated China's extensive financial investments in Venezuela, including $60 billion in loans, while noting China's "overriding concern to ensure long-term access to Venezuelan oil and other raw materials." [11]

The piece also stated that China's support for Maduro is "increasingly at odds with another strategic priority for China: strengthening commercial ties with burgeoning economies elsewhere in Latin America. Beijing has stated its intention to pump $250 billion in direct investment into the region and ramp up trade to $500 billion in the coming years. … But China and these promising economic partners are on opposing sides of a divide over the political impasse in Venezuela." [12]

So, in advance of the 2018 Venezuelan election, what was it that ICG's Michael Kovrig and Phil Gunson thought China should do? "As one of the [Venezuelan] government's few remaining supporters, Beijing can either prolong Venezuela's plight or join the Lima Group in persuading Maduro to bargain with the opposition. …In the long term, the goodwill [towards China] that would be generated among Venezuela's people and Lima Group members would far outweigh any short-term cost to relations with Maduro." [13]

While the language seems mild, reasonable, and diplomatic, the message to China is more formidable: Dump your support of Maduro or risk losing those "promising economic partners" in the rest of the region.

The piece further noted: "The Lima Group is backed by a broad international consensus that includes the US and the European Union." [14]

Kovrig and Gunson's piece ended with this: "Beijing has signaled that it is unwilling to invest forever in Venezuela's present dysfunction. The time is ripe for Lima Group states to engage with China to align objectives and policies as far as possible." [15]

Engaging with China?

At this point, there is no way of knowing how the Lima Group member countries subsequently "engaged" with China throughout the remainder of 2018, but by late November the decision had been made to arrest Huawei's Meng Wanzhou in transit at the Vancouver International Airport on December 1, while U.S. president Donald Trump discussed trade issues with China's leadership.

The timing of the arrest was strange, given that the U.S. has for many years been concerned about Huawei and its rising technological supremacy, especially in the pending rollout of 5G. As Amy Karam, author of The China Factor, noted in a recent op-ed, "Having tracked the Huawei concern for 14 years, I wonder why the West is just now mobilizing on this? The Huawei challenge is not new." [16]

Arguably, one explanation for the timing of the arrest has to do with 5G (fifth generation wireless technology) itself. Throughout 2018, there has been increasing criticism across North America and Europe of 5G's potential to massively irradiate people and the planet. [17] The arrest of Huawei's executive is an attempt to change the narrative from one of whether 5G should be allowed at all, to which companies should do the rollout.

But major moves like this arrest usually have several motivations behind their timing.

Of course, the Chinese were infuriated by Canada's arrest of Meng Wanzhou, and days later detained ICG's Michael Kovrig and Canadian businessman Michael Spavor. [18]

By late January, with Juan Guaido having declared himself interim president of Venezuela, and with ICG's Michael Kovrig still in Chinese custody, International Crisis Group trustee George Soros used his annual dinner at the World Economic Forum in Davos to attack China as a cybersecurity threat and urged the U.S. and others to "crack down" on Huawei. [19]

A day later, Juan Guaido made "rapid moves to privatize Venezuela's oil and open the door for multinational corporations." [20] The Trump administration backed up those moves with new sanctions on the country's oil giant PDVSA. National Security Advisor John Bolton said that $7 billion of PDVSA assets would be immediately blocked, while the company would also lose about $11 billion in export payments over the coming year. [21] That was the same press conference in which Bolton was seen carrying a notepad which read: "5,000 troops to Colombia."

On January 31, Reuters reported that PetroChina Company "plans to drop Petroleos de Venezuela SA (PDVSA) as a partner in a planned $10 billion oil refinery and petrochemical project in southern China," and noted that under the revised plan, "the refinery will not be restricted to Venezuelan oil" but could process other heavy crude oil that could come from other countries. [22]

No doubt, the International Crisis Group's Big Oil donors – Chevron, Shell, BP – are pleased with the way things are unfolding. Chevron and Shell are part of ICG's International Advisory Council, whose members "play a key role in Crisis Group's efforts to prevent deadly conflict." [23] Meanwhile, the Lima Group will meet in Ottawa on Monday, February 4 "to

see what can be done to ease the crisis in Venezuela." [24]

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Joyce Nelson is the author of seven books, including Bypassing Dystopia: Hope-filled Challenges to Corporate Rule, published in 2018 by Watershed Sentinel Books.

Notes

[1] Mike Blanchard, The Canadian Press, "Quiet Canadian diplomacy helped Guaido's anti-Madura movement in Venezuela," National Post, January 26, 2019.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Joyce Nelson, "Canada vs. Venezuela: Have the Koch Brothers Captured Canada's Left?" Counterpunch, February 16, 2018.

[4] Joyce Nelson, "Economic Warfare," Watershed Sentinel, August 3, 2017; reprinted as "Venezuela: Target of Economic Warfare," Counterpunch, August 11, 2017.

[5] Nino Pagliccia, "The 'Lima Group' Mandate to Trigger Regime Change in Venezuela," Global Research, January 19, 2019.

[6] Blanchard, op cit.

[7] Ibid.

[8] F. William Engdahl, "Is Canada Huawei Arrest Attempt to Sabotage Trump XI Talks?" Global Research, December 19, 2019.

[9]www.crisisgroup.org/support-us/our-supporters/governments-foundations

[10] Frank Giustra, "The Chinese government needs friends – people who are a lot like the Canadians it has detained," The Globe and Mail, December 24, 2018.

[11] Michael Kovrig and Phil Gunson, "Why China Should Help Solve Venezuela's Deepening Crisis," Asia Times, April 11, 2018; re-posted on www.crisisgroup.org.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Amy Karam, "The West can learn from Huawei's wins," Toronto Star, January 30, 2019.

[17] Joyce Nelson, "5G Corporate Grail: Smart Cities/Dumb People?" Watershed Sentinel, November 5, 2018; reprinted as "5G Corporate Grail: Microwave Radiation," Global Research, November 9, 2018.

[18] Ben Blanchard, John Ruwitch, “Detained Canadian in China being probed for harming state security,” Reuters, December 11, 2018.

[19] Larry Elliott, “George Soros: China is using tech advances to repress its people,” The Guardian, January 24, 2019.

[20] Ben Norton, “US Anointed ‘President’ Moves to Seize National Petroleum Company,” The Gray Zone, January 25, 2019.

[21] Tom Phillips, “Trump steps up Maduro pressure with sanctions against Venezuelan oil giant,” The Guardian, January 29, 2019.

[22] Chen Aizhu, “Exclusive: PetroChina to drop PDVSA as partner in refinery project – sources,” Reuters, January 31, 2019.

[23]www.crisisgroup.org.

[24] The Canadian Press, “Canada to host Venezuela summit to support anti-Maduro forces, Freeland says,” National Post, January 28, 2019.

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