

Russia Throws Down the Gauntlet to US on Venezuela

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Global Research, March 28, 2019

[Indian Punchline](#) 27 March 2019

The Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova [acknowledged](#) in Moscow on Tuesday that Russian “specialists” are indeed in Venezuela within the ambit of a 2001 military-technical cooperation agreement with Caracas. Zakharova underscored that Russia’s bilateral military cooperation with Venezuela is in accordance with the latter’s constitution and has legal underpinning, which “doesn’t require any additional approval from the (opposition-controlled) National Assembly of Venezuela.”

This followed [media reports](#) that two Russian air force planes landed at Caracas on Saturday carrying Vasily Tonkoshkurov, chief of staff of the ground forces with nearly 100 military personnel and some 35 tonnes of material. An unnamed official at the Russian embassy in Caracas told the Sputnik that the Russian personnel had arrived to “exchange consultations. Russia has various contracts that are in the process of being fulfilled, contracts of a technical-military character.”

Zakharova’s remarks came a day after Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov received a phone call from the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on March 25. The Russian readout said Pompeo was “interested in certain issues related to the developments in Venezuela.” It added,

“Sergey Lavrov emphasised that Washington’s attempts to organise a coup d’etat in Venezuela and threats to its legitimate government are a violation of the UN Charter and blatant interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state... After stating principal differences in Russian and US positions, the officials agreed to stay in touch and continue to exchange assessments.”

The state department readout, however, claimed that Pompeo warned Russia “to cease its unconstructive behavior” in Venezuela” and that Washington and its regional allies “will not stand idly by as Russia exacerbates tensions.” It also said Pompeo accused Russia of “continued insertion ... to support the illegitimate regime of Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela [which] risks prolonging the suffering of the Venezuelan people who overwhelmingly support interim President Juan Guaido”.

Meanwhile, on Monday and Tuesday, in a series of tweets, US national security advisor John Bolton vent anger and frustration:

“Maduro has lost the support of the Venezuelan people, so he’s relying on Cuban and Russian support to usurp democracy and repress innocent civilians... Rather than sending nuclear-capable bombers and special forces to prop up a corrupt dictator, Russia should work with the international

community to support the Venezuelan people. The United States will not tolerate hostile foreign military powers meddling with the Western Hemisphere's shared goals of democracy, security, and the rule of law... Maduro asks for Cuban and Russian goons to suppress the people of Venezuela."

With these developments, the crisis situation around Venezuela may seem to have acquired a New Cold War dimension to it. Clearly, Moscow has weighed the pros and cons of the Venezuelan situation and has decided to be unapologetic about its support for the Maduro government. Despite the US outbursts, Moscow is showing no signs of backing off, either.

The big question ahead is whether Russia is climbing the escalation ladder. Indeed, the stepping up of the military-technical cooperation stems from the assessment in Moscow that the desperate US attempts to engineer / sponsor a military coup in Caracas aren't getting anywhere. Meanwhile, President Nicolas Maduro [announced](#) in an interview with the Russian state television today that "a high-level working session on intergovernmental cooperation" between Russia and Venezuela is due to take place in April where "we will sign over 20 documents on cooperation in economy, trade, culture, energy and education."

Suffice to say, Moscow intends to step up its support for Maduro and is drawing up a plan of action to develop a comprehensive bilateral cooperation program with a medium and long term perspective. Now, that can only mean that in the Russian assessment, US' blueprint to overthrow the regime through economic sanctions and other covert actions (such as the [sabotage of power supply](#)) and various methods of political and diplomatic pressure (including [illegal confiscation](#) of Venezuelan assets in western banks running into tens of billions of dollars) can be and must be countered. It is interesting that Cuba, which is rich in experience in countering the US' coercive policies, is working shoulder to shoulder with Russia in this direction.

From all appearance — so far, at least — a direct US military intervention in Venezuela to forcibly change the regime is not on the cards. Rather, a cold-war era war of attrition appears to be looming ahead. Can Russia sustain the financial and economic burden involved? But the analogy of the Russian intervention in Syria does not hold good here insofar as Venezuela is potentially a rich country with the world's largest proven hydrocarbon reserves. Equally, China is also a stakeholder in Venezuela's economic stability.

On the other hand, it is vitally important for Russia that the US, which aspires to be the number one exporter of oil and gas, does not gain control of the vast Venezuelan reserves, as that would mean an enormous capacity falling into Washington's hands to manipulate the supply and demand in the world energy market and set the price of oil and gas.

In geopolitical terms, a strong Russian presence in Venezuela becomes a negotiating chip for Moscow in dealing with the growing NATO and American deployments along Russia's western borders in central and eastern Europe and the Baltic states. That alone makes Venezuela a strategic partner for Russia.

Plainly put, any projection of Russian power in the US' backyard will at some point sooner rather than later impress upon Washington the imperative need to constructively engage Moscow in dialogue and negotiations, howsoever unpalatable that prospect might be. In fact, at one point, Zakharova pointedly touched on the Trump administration's Munroe

Doctrine, asking in an acerbic tone,

“What are they (US) themselves doing in Eastern Hemisphere? Perhaps, they believe that the people of this part of the world will be thankful when Washington wilfully changes their leaders and kills the unwanted ones. Or the US still believes that people are waiting for the Americans to bring democracy to them on the wings of their bombers. Ask Iraqis, Libyans or Serbs about it.”

Zakharova did not explicitly mention Ukraine or the Baltic states and Poland and the Black Sea and the Caucasus, but the implicit meaning is clear: If the US interferes in Russia's backyard, Moscow serves the right to retaliate. Period. It is useful to recall that the denouement to the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 was ultimately on the basis of a reciprocal withdrawal of Russian missiles in Cuba and the American missiles deployed in Turkey.

Pompeo's phone call to Lavrov suggests that the US is trying to figure out the Russian intentions. Interestingly, the [Russian readout](#) mentioned that Lavrov also brought up Syria and Ukraine during the conversation with Pompeo. Lavrov's remarks were rather sharp:

“He (Lavrov) also stressed that the US's intention to recognise Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights would lead to a serious violation of international law, impede the Syrian settlement process and aggravate the situation in the Middle East. Speaking about Ukraine, Sergey Lavrov noted that Washington's playing into the Kiev regime's hands in torpedoing the Minsk Agreements on the settlement of the intra-Ukrainian conflict was unacceptable.”

Curiously, on the contrary, the [US state department readout](#) completely omitted any references to Syria or Ukraine. Evidently, it was too much of a hot potato for Washington to even acknowledge that Lavrov might have drawn a parallel with the US behaviour in the 'Eastern Hemisphere', which Russia finds utterly unacceptable.

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Featured image: An airplane with the Russian flag was seen at Simon Bolivar International Airport in Caracas, Venezuela, March 24, 2019. (Source: Indian Punchline)

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