

Washington Follows Ukraine, Syria Roadmap in Push for Venezuela Regime Change

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What happens in Venezuela going forward will have major consequences for the entire region and the world; and, with the U.S. already pushing countries to pick sides, the world may soon become as divided as it was immediately preceding WW II.

Since the decision of the Trump administration on Wednesday to recognize a member of the Venezuelan opposition, Juan Guaidó, as an unelected “interim president,” the situation in the South American country has become increasingly tense, with efforts to force the current government of Venezuela — led by Nicolás Maduro — out of power having grown in intensity over the past few days.

Despite the enormous pressure his government faces from both local and international sources, Maduro has managed to maintain his position thanks to a combination of factors. These include the loyalty of the country’s well-armed military, in addition to popular support from Venezuelans who recently voted for Maduro, as well as Venezuelans who may not like Maduro but prefer him to a politician hand-picked and foisted upon them by the United States.

Yet, the long-standing campaign of the United States to effect regime change in Venezuela — a campaign that has been ongoing ever since Hugo Chávez, Maduro’s predecessor and mentor, was elected in 1998 — has shown time and again that the U.S. is unwilling to let go of its dream of installing a “friendly” government in the world’s most oil-rich country.

For that reason, if the Trump administration’s attempt to simply install a Venezuelan president fails to produce the intended result (regime change), there is substantial concern that the U.S. will turn to other means to bring about a change in government, including the instigation of a new proxy war.

While direct military intervention by the U.S. has not been ruled out, it has long been seen as more probable — based on the U.S.’ troubling history of ousting leftist Latin American governments through right-wing coups — that the U.S. would follow the roadmaps it used to push for regime change in both Syria and Ukraine. In other words, the danger of another major proxy war — this time in Latin America — looms large and, much like what has transpired in Syria and Ukraine, the manufacture of such a conflict would again pit the U.S. against both Russia and China, both of which have invested heavily in Venezuela, and by extension in the current government, for nearly two decades.

Also troubling is the fact that the U.S. has already laid much of the groundwork for such a

proxy war and the chaotic situation on the Venezuelan-Colombian border offers U.S. intelligence enough cover to funnel arms, money and personnel into Venezuela to further destabilize the country. If Maduro is to be believed, the U.S. has already been doing this for much of the past year.

Raising the temperature and the stakes

Juan Guaidó, a relative newcomer to Venezuelan politics and a founding member of the Popular Will political party, declared himself to be the new president of Venezuela on Wednesday, a move that was quickly backed by the U.S. with the support of all countries closely allied with the U.S. throughout the Americas, North and South.

The U.S. decision to back Guaidó, as has been pointed out by many analysts in recent days, was significant as it shows a clear effort by the U.S. to push the already tenuous situation in the country to its boiling point. Indeed, by effectively creating two governments within Venezuela, the clearest consequence is to deepen the rift in Venezuelan society by forcing the country's citizens to choose sides.

Though Guaidó's relatively short time in Venezuelan national politics gives him the benefit of having relatively little political baggage, his association with the Popular Will Party, known as Voluntad Popular in Spanish, makes it clear why he so quickly won the U.S.' support.

Popular Will was founded by Venezuelan opposition firebrand [Leopoldo López](#). Lopez is a member of the upper echelons of Venezuela's political aristocracy, educated in elite institutions like the Hun School of Princeton, a private boarding school whose alumni include Saudi princes as well as the children of U.S. presidents and Fortune 500 CEOs. He attended Kenyon College in Ohio and then Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government. Some journalists have asserted that López began a [relationship with the CIA](#) while at Kenyon.

A few years after beginning his political career, López — immediately prior to the U.S.-backed failed coup of 2002, in which he enthusiastically participated — began heading to Washington rather frequently “to visit the IRI (International Republican Institute) headquarters and meet with officials from the George W. Bush administration,” [according to journalist Eva Golinger](#). The IRI is one of three foundations that comprise the National Endowment for Democracy, a U.S. government-funded NGO [linked to numerous regime-change efforts](#) abroad, including Egypt (2013) and Ukraine (2014). Notably, the IRI, along with the National Democratic Institute (NDI), both have funded Popular Will since its founding in 2010. López is currently the party's national coordinator.

While the U.S.' decision to back Guaidó was undeniably an effort to escalate the situation in Venezuela, the U.S. has also made it clear that it plans to continue pushing for escalation. Indeed, the U.S. has officially requested a UN Security Council meeting on Saturday “to discuss the ongoing crisis in Venezuela.” South Africa's U.N. Ambassador Jerry Matjila [stated that](#) the “consultations” between the Security Council and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo would be closed, though subsequent reports have claimed that the meeting would be [open](#). The meeting, if it is approved by 9 out of 15 member states, will likely push for countries to choose between Guaidó and Maduro.

Given that the U.K., Spain and Germany have already backed Guaidó at the U.S.' behest, more European nations are likely to follow, meaning that the international pressure facing the Maduro-led government will continue to grow following Saturday's events. Thus, in

addition to forcing the Venezuelan people to choose sides, the U.S. will likely be — over the weekend — forcing the international community to choose sides as well.

Notably, key countries — including Turkey, Russia, China as well as Maduro’s regional allies such as Mexico, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Cuba — have backed Maduro. Given the presence of both Russia and China, who hold veto power on the UN Security Council, any resolution by that body that would support Guaidó will be dead on arrival. Yet, if the U.S. is able to win the support of a significant number of countries in its bid to withdraw Maduro’s “legitimacy” — whether by diplomatic or more forceful means — the Trump administration may feel confident enough to take matters into its own hands. This makes the recent comments of a top Trump official stating that “all options are on the table” in regards to Venezuela equal parts significant and chilling.

Groundwork for Syria/Ukraine-style regime-change op already laid in Venezuela

In pursuit of regime-change agendas abroad and as part of a larger strategy of containment aimed at Russia and China, the U.S. has followed a roadmap in recent cases that includes some or all of the following elements: the manufacture of a “humanitarian” justification for regime change; funneling of arms and weapons into the country via its foreign borders; mass funding of the political opposition; and covert involvement of U.S. government agencies, particularly the CIA.

In the case of Syria, a CIA-backed revolt, along with a compliant international media and complex network of pro-regime-change “humanitarian” organizations, were critical in creating the current situation, which was further exacerbated by the influx of weapons and funds to “moderate rebels” via the CIA and later U.S. allies. A few years later, Ukraine followed a distinct but similar roadmap. As was noted last year by [South Front](#), the U.S.-backed regime-change operation in Ukraine in 2014 involved an outsized role from the U.S. State Department, billions of dollars in U.S. funding of the political opposition, and the early involvement of the CIA.

Unsurprisingly, many of these elements are currently at play in Venezuela. Since the late Hugo Chávez came to power in the 1998 election, the U.S. has funded the Venezuelan opposition to the tune of [over \\$100 million](#). The humanitarian justification has long been played up by the international media, which has placed sole responsibility for Venezuela’s economic and political crisis on the Maduro-led government, despite the role of [U.S. sanctions and economic warfare](#), as well as the U.S. government and the Venezuelan opposition groups it funds colluding to create the conditions for the current political crisis in order to facilitate their regime-change plan.

Though this last point is less known, it was confirmed following [a leaked 2013 phone conversation](#) of Maria Corina Machado, another [key figure](#) in the U.S.-funded Venezuelan opposition and another top political ally of Guaidó and his associate Leopoldo López. In the leaked conversation, Corina Machado describes what Ramon Guillermo Avelledo, the chairman of the opposition umbrella group Mesa de la Unidad Democrática, told Undersecretary for Latin American Affairs Roberta Jacobsen, whom he had recently met in Washington. During the call, Corina Machado stated:

I found out that Ramon Guillermo Avelledo told the State Department that the only way to resolve this is by provoking and accentuating a crisis, a coup or a self-coup. Or a process of tightening the screws and domesticating to generate

a system of total social control.”

In addition, there is substantial evidence that the still chaotic situation on the Venezuelan-Colombian border offers plenty of opportunity for U.S. intelligence agencies to funnel arms, insurgents and other agents of destabilization into Venezuela. Furthermore, the conflict there could potentially be used as the pretext for a direct role for the U.S. military in escalating the situation in Venezuela.

For decades, the Venezuelan-Colombian border has been the sight of considerable violence, much of it the result of in-fighting among leftist and right-wing paramilitary groups vying for control of the regional drug trade. It is increasingly porous, allowing the flow of paramilitary fighters, migrants, smugglers and others between the two nations, resulting in various controversies that have seen Maduro [close the border](#) from August 2015 to July 2016 following an attack by a Colombian group on the Venezuelan military.

Since then, drug-fueled violence and Colombian concerns over the exodus of Venezuelan migrants have led Colombia to [increasingly militarize](#) its side of the border, though [some analysts](#) have claimed recent violence from the National Liberation Army (ELN) leftist paramilitary group has led the Colombian and Venezuelan authorities to leave major expanses of the border “to its fate.”

Given the precarious situation on the Venezuela-Colombia border, it is a weak point through which state actors wishing to destabilize Venezuela could easily act. Some evidence, including the aforementioned incident in August 2015, suggests that such action has already taken place. For instance, in March 2017, the Venezuelan military [dismantled](#) a right-wing paramilitary camp near the Colombian border, which was stocked with numerous supplies including stolen Venezuelan military uniforms, Colombian military uniforms and — most notable of all — U.S. army uniforms. At the time, [teleSUR asserted](#) that the discovery “substantiates claims that the U.S. Army is training right-wing paramilitaries to spread terror in the region.”

More recently, last year, Maduro asserted that Colombian paramilitary groups were “seeping through” the Venezuelan-Colombian border and had been planning to “carry out a series of provocations” before being intercepted by Venezuelan authorities. At the time, he had blamed Colombian oligarchs and the U.S. government for orchestrating the “infiltration.”

Though some may choose to discount Maduro’s claims, the CIA [essentially admitted](#) in 2017 that it was actively attempting to foment regime change in Venezuela. In July of that year, Mike Pompeo — then CIA director — stated:

We are very hopeful that there can be a transition in Venezuela and we the CIA is doing its best to understand the dynamic there, so that we can communicate to our State Department and to others.”

He then added:

I was just down in Mexico City and in Bogota a week before last talking about this very issue, trying to help them understand the things they might do so that they can get a better outcome for their part of the world and our part of

the world.”

In addition, while the Venezuelan-Colombian border may be used to destabilize the situation by more covert means, the current situation along the border may also provide the U.S. a justification to intervene militarily. Indeed, the presence of the ELN group in both Venezuela and Colombia has led notable U.S. figures — such as the architect of the current coup, Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) — to offer them up as reasons to list Venezuela as a “state sponsor” of terror.

Rubio has been pushing for Venezuela to be added the U.S.’ State Sponsors of Terrorism list [for months](#). Last Saturday, however, Rubio claimed in a tweet that ELN “operates from Venezuela where Maduro has given them safe harbor,” though the group is equally active in both Colombia and Venezuela, Venezuelan soldiers are [frequent targets](#) of ELN attacks, and pro-Maduro Venezuela outlets [often characterize](#) ELN as an “illegal group”.



Donald Trump, Mike Pence and Sen. Marco Rubio meet with the wife of US-backed Venezuelan opposition leader, Leopoldo Lopez. White House Photo

Though Rubio provided no evidence to support the claim that Maduro has given ELN members “safe harbor,” the growing strength of the group and its violent tactics could be just the pretext the U.S. or its regional allies would need to intervene more directly in Venezuela, especially considering that U.S.-linked think tanks [have claimed](#) that the ELN is now present in half of Venezuela. Indeed, making Venezuela an official “state sponsor of terrorism” would allow the U.S. to greatly increase its pressure on the country, both economically and diplomatically.

Left-wing terror group carried out the bombing that killed 21 people in [#Colombia](#).

The groups leaders live in [#Cuba](#) under the protection of regime.

And the group operates from [#Venezuela](#) where Maduro has given them safe harbor. [#StateSponsorsOfTerror](#) <https://t.co/5Yaz4A3GVV>

Other events that have occurred in the past few years have suggested that a role for the U.S. military is in the cards as well — a possibility only strengthened by the emerging “state sponsor” narrative already being fielded by Sen. Rubio. For instance, in 2017, the U.S. military held [a major military drill](#) and established a “temporary” military base in close proximity to Venezuela with the governments of Colombia, Peru and Brazil. Since then, following the recent election of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, a Colombian official [stated](#), “If Bolsonaro helps topple Maduro with military intervention, he will have Colombia’s support.” Though Bolsonaro later [claimed](#) that he has “no interest” in a military intervention in Venezuela, several of the top officials in his government — including his Vice President, Hamilton Mourao — [have repeatedly called](#) for a “humanitarian intervention” in Venezuela. The size and scope of such an intervention, however, has yet to be determined.

These complex situations along its border, the confirmed role of the U.S. in bringing about the country’s political crisis, and the looming possibility of military intervention — by either the U.S. or its regional allies — show that Venezuela currently has many of the same elements that were present in Ukraine in 2014 and Syria in 2011. The U.S. seems intent on bringing about regime change in Caracas by any means necessary, but Washington’s success will largely depend on the actions of Venezuela’s most powerful foreign allies, who incidentally are both Washington’s chief rivals — Russia and China.

Russia and China’s skin in the game

In the event that the internal situation in Venezuela — thanks largely to external pressure — devolves into a major conflict between Guaidó-supporting and Maduro-supporting sides, it will only be a matter of time before both Russia and China join the fray — either directly or indirectly — to prevent a U.S.-backed regime-change effort from succeeding.

A major reason the involvement of Russia and China is a given is that both have invested a tremendous amount of money in the country, particularly after Venezuela’s relationship with the U.S. greatly decayed during the early years of Chavista rule.

By a large margin, the largest foreign sponsors of Venezuela following the rise of the Chavista movement have been Russia and China. Though no exact measures of their investments in the South American nation are available, China is believed to have invested around [\\$70 billion](#), in the form of loans as well as [social projects](#) and maintenance of the country’s oil production infrastructure. Most of those loans are set to be paid back to China [in the form of Venezuelan crude](#). In addition, China and Venezuela have formed several joint ventures involving the production of automobiles, mobile phones and computers, among other goods. These investments and connections make China by far Maduro’s largest and most influential foreign sponsor and creditor.

However, as *Foreign Policy* [wrote in 2017](#):

If Venezuela collapses ..., China faces a large risk of diplomatic and financial blowback. Opposition politicians are well aware that China propped up ... Maduro rule. A new Venezuelan government could well refuse to honor the Maduro-era obligations entirely and look to Washington for support instead.”

Russia is believed to have lent and invested around [\\$17 billion](#) in Venezuela over the past 20 years, significantly less than China. However, Russia — through state-run companies such as Rosneft — [has gained](#) significant ownership stakes in at least five major Venezuelan oil fields along with several decades worth of the future outputs of Venezuelan-held natural gas fields in the Caribbean. In addition, and most significantly from the U.S. perspective, in 2017 Venezuela [offered](#) 49.9 percent of Citgo — its wholly owned U.S. subsidiary — along with three Gulf Coast refineries and its pipeline network as collateral to Rosneft for \$1.5 billion.

Rosneft's interests in Venezuela are so great that its executive chairman, Igor Sechin, [stated in 2017](#) that “we will never leave and no one will be able to kick us out of there.” Yet, as Leonid Bershidsky [recently wrote](#) in *Bloomberg*, “If Maduro falls and a U.S.-backed government takes his place, it's highly likely that the Russian projects will be suspended and Venezuela's debts won't be repaid.”

In addition to the tremendous amount of money on the line for both nations, neither Russia nor China is willing to let the world's most oil-rich country — with more proven crude oil reserves than Saudi Arabia — see its current government, which is friendly to their interests but hostile to those of the U.S., be toppled and replaced with its polar opposite. Not only would a new U.S.-backed government in Venezuela endanger the billions of dollars in loans that Maduro's government owes to both countries, it would also endanger the independence of all of Latin America.

Indeed, many Latin American governments in recent years have been targeted by the U.S. for regime change, and most of these attempts were successful, including those in [Honduras](#) (2009), [Brazil](#) (2016) and [Paraguay](#) (2012). Venezuela, with its significant oil and gold reserves, is the obvious prize in the region but also arguably the strongest country opposed to U.S. dominance of the region. Were Venezuela to fall, it would greatly weaken the governments of Maduro's regional allies, particularly Nicaragua and Cuba.

This is underlined by National Security Adviser John Bolton's [recent creation](#) of a new Latin American “Axis of Evil” that he terms the “Troika of Tyranny,” encompassing Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua. If Venezuela's government is toppled, Bolton has already given the signal as to which nations will be the subsequent targets of regime-change efforts elsewhere in Latin America. Thus, Russia and China — lest they wish to see a domino effect of the toppling of most of the remaining Latin American countries not dominated by the U.S. — are more likely than not to do everything in their power to prevent the collapse of Maduro's government.

It is also important to point out that, for its part, the United States can't really back away either. While the U.S. strategy of “containing” Russia and China has been largely focused on starting and fomenting proxy wars in both geopolitically strategic areas and on their doorsteps, Russia and China's strategy has been more covert and aimed at reducing their dependence on the U.S.-backed financial system, particularly the U.S. dollar.

This effort to undermine the U.S. dollar has [frequently targeted](#) the petrodollar, which has been a major factor in past U.S. military interventions, such as the toppling of [Saddam Hussein](#) in Iraq and later [Muammar Gaddafi](#) in Libya. In 2017 Maduro, like Hussein and Gaddafi before him, [stopped selling](#) Venezuelan oil in dollars. In order to shore up the petrodollar system amid its own [looming economic recession](#), the United States needs a government in Venezuela that will denominate the sale of its oil in dollars to keep the

cornerstone of its global hegemony, the U.S. dollar, in demand despite unprecedented threats to its value.

Thus, with neither the U.S. nor its rivals able to back down without ceding a major geopolitical and strategic advantage to the other, it is almost assured that, as the situation in Venezuela escalates, the involvement of all three will soon make Venezuela the most watched country — and the most dangerous — in the world.

“Another bloody battlefield of the color revolution”?

Given the enormity of their investments in Venezuela and their eagerness to keep the world’s largest oil reserves controlled by a government friendly to them but hostile to their greatest rival, Russia and China have unsurprisingly condemned in no uncertain terms the U.S.’ recent decision to recognize Guaidó as Venezuela’s “legitimate” president.

Russia’s response not only warned the U.S. against the “catastrophic consequences” of its effort to escalate the fragile situation in Venezuela but also hinted that the U.S. decision would lay the groundwork for a civil war. On Thursday, Russia’s deputy foreign minister, Sergei Ryabkov, [told *International Affairs*](#), “We warn against this ... We believe that this would be a catastrophic scenario that would shake the foundations of the development model we see in the Latin American region.” In a phone call to Maduro, Russian leader Vladimir Putin [described](#) the U.S. move as “destructive interference.”

Then the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a separate statement that described the U.S. move to recognize Guaidó as president as being “aimed at deepening the split in Venezuelan society, increasing the conflict on the streets, sharply destabilizing the internal political system and further escalation of the conflict,” with such escalation being “fraught with catastrophic consequences.” Some media outlets [compared](#) this statement to those made by Russia during past international exchanges with the West prior to intervention in Libya and Syria.

Since then, Russian military contractors have been deployed to Venezuela, which prompted Maduro to promise that Venezuela will not become another “Syria or Libya.” Some reports [have claimed](#) that the Russian military contractors have “been charged with stopping opposition sympathizers or members of Maduro’s own forces from detaining him.”

China’s response also hinted that the U.S. decision was aimed at stoking an internal war in the country. In [an article](#) published by the Chinese government-aligned *Global Times*, Beijing stated:

In recent years, Washington has enhanced its interference in affairs of Venezuela and Cuba and attempted to regain influence in Latin America. The fast recognition of Guaidó signaled the strong U.S. desire to intervene in Venezuela’s internal affairs.”

The article went on to note:

All sides must keep calm and be alert about possible provocation to militarily intervene in Venezuela ... The international community should encourage forces of Venezuela to peacefully solve the issue within the framework of dialogue. Picking sides will not be conducive to the solution, but intensify the

rivalry, worsen the situation and possibly push the nation into long-term turmoil.”

It ultimately added, “Venezuela should not be another bloody battlefield of the color revolution.”

The fact that the responses of both the Russian and Chinese governments to the U.S. decision to back Guaidó directly stated that the U.S. move is set to create another U.S.-backed proxy war masquerading as a “color revolution” is highly significant. Indeed, such clear assertions of this reality not only show how clearly the U.S. is pushing for a major escalation in Venezuela but also show that both Russia and China are aware that their interests in the country are under threat as a direct result of this U.S. push. This greatly increases the likelihood that any continued push for escalation from Washington will trigger strong responses from both countries and could quickly devolve into a tit-for-tat that could eventually develop into a major military conflict.

Is this how WW III gets going?

The current situation in Venezuela — if the U.S. continues to push for fresh escalations — has the potential to morph into one of the world’s most dangerous proxy wars, owing to the size of the prize (world’s largest oil reserves included) and the fact none of the major parties involved can back away without making major concessions to their chief geopolitical rivals. Russia and China, as previously stated, are unlikely to stand idly by as the U.S. installs a government that would undo their years of investment in the country and refuse to pay back billions in loans. Indeed, Russia has already sent military contractors into Venezuela, setting a precedent that could see more significant Russian support for Venezuela in the coming months.

Beyond that is the fact that the U.S. has made it clear that Venezuela if it succumbs to regime change, is merely the first on the new “Troika of Tyranny” list of leftist Latin American governments that the Trump administration seeks to topple. The goal is to make a Latin America that is obedient to the U.S., a crucial part of the ultimate U.S. goal of maintaining the existing unipolar world order. However, both Russia and China know that this goal is a microcosm of Washington’s end game and that they are both the ultimate targets. Such an agenda is hardly a secret given that it is directly stated in the [Pentagon’s National Defense Strategy](#).

However, it would be naive to assume that the U.S. will be planning to escalate only in Venezuela and not in other U.S. proxy conflicts such as Ukraine and Syria. Indeed, just two months ago, there was a flare-up in Ukraine in what is now known as the “Kerch Strait Incident” and provocations in Syria have commonly occurred throughout the conflict, particularly during moments when it seemed things were finally dying down. These flashpoints and more — such as the South China Sea, among others — can all be pressed on rotation by the U.S. in an effort to disorient its Russian and Chinese rivals.

Thus, Venezuela may become host to the latest in what is now a series of proxy wars and flashpoints across the world that Washington has erected as part of its long-term goal of preventing the formation a multipolar world order. And it may quickly become the most dangerous in terms of drawing larger world powers into the conflict, making the risk of a wider world war a striking possibility that cannot be ignored. What happens in Venezuela going forward will have major consequences for the entire region and the world; and, with

the U.S. already pushing countries to pick sides, the world may soon become as divided as ever, with the risk of another “great war” looming large.

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