

How Not To Save Thirty-One Million People:
An Analysis of American Intervention in Venezuela

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Venezuelan citizens currently face mass exodus, starvation, and a despot who refuses to accept international aid despite his citizens' widespread suffering. International actors such as the United States have recognized Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro as the central cause of his country's humanitarian crisis.¹ "The people are suffering," stated United States President Donald Trump, "We have many options for Venezuela including a military option."² President Trump assured the United States and Venezuela that American military intervention in Venezuela is "certainly something that we could pursue" until "democracy is restored in that country."³ United States Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has backed President Trump, stating that the United States is considering every possible solution.⁴ Other leaders have also recognized American military intervention as a legitimate solution to the crisis, including Luis Almagro, the Secretary General of the Organization of American States. Secretary General Almagro stated: "With respect to a military intervention to overthrow Nicolas Maduro's regime, I don't think any option should be ruled out."⁵ The option is not only being considered; it is becoming increasingly plausible according to Michael Shifter,⁶ the president of Inter-American Dialogue.⁷

The crisis originated during late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's term when the Venezuelan economy's overreliance on oil proved economically disastrous. Following Chavez's death in 2013, Nicolas Maduro became the president of Venezuela and continued espousing his predecessor's ideology, Chavismo, which combines elements of nationalism, strong opposition to neoliberalism, and socialism through large social welfare programs (Corrales 2015). Through

¹ The British Broadcasting Corporation, 24 January 2019.

² The Telegraph, 12 August 2017.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Politico, 2 February 2019.

⁵ The Associated Press, 14 September 2018.

⁶ Washington Post, 25 February 2019.

⁷ Inter-American Dialogue is a think-tank based in Washington D.C. dedicated to Western Hemisphere affairs.

Chavismo, human rights and democratic values in Venezuela eroded, including freedom of expression, separation of powers, and judicial independence (Kornblith 2013). During this time, the economy continued to deteriorate. To compensate for the dwindling cash reserves, President Maduro began printing more money, which caused inflation to soar and food to become scarce.⁸ The situation worsened in 2018 when the United States,⁹ the Lima Group,¹⁰ and the Venezuelan National Assembly rejected President Maduro's purported democratic reelection. After declaring the 2018 election invalid, the Venezuelan National Assembly held a presidential election in which Juan Guaido was elected. Shortly thereafter, many international actors, including the United States, recognized Guaido as Venezuela's legitimate president.¹¹ Many Venezuelan citizens support interim President Guaido, but the Venezuelan military continues to back President Maduro, further escalating the tension in the country.

Interim President Guaido has joined President Trump in recognizing American military intervention as an option, emphasizing that he supports "whatever pressure is necessary."¹² Because so many world leaders see this option as legitimate, it is necessary to understand the interventionist argument. Pro-interventionists argue that the United States' military should invade Venezuela and remove President Maduro from power, believing that military intervention in the country would be successful.

In this paper, I measure American military intervention success by how well the United States improves the invaded country's major problems. Specifically, the region should not require significant American military presence following the invasion (Regan 1996).

⁸ The New York Times, 14 May 2017.

⁹ United States Mission to the United Nations. Twitter Post. 20 May 2018, 1:47 PM.

¹⁰ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Peru, 4 January 2019.

¹¹ The New York Times, 4 February 2019.

¹² Cable News Network, 31 January 2019.

Additionally, the intervention should result in few civilian and American casualties, and it should not harm the United States' diplomatic relations with other powerful nations. Finally, the intervention should uphold human rights (Pearson 1974).

Considering the crisis in Venezuela, proponents of an American invasion support their argument with three major justifications. First, pro-interventionists assert that due to the superiority of the American military over the Venezuelan military, the invasion would be successful and would not result in significant American casualties. Pro-interventionists use the success of the United States' 1989 Just Cause operation in Panama as evidence that an invasion of Venezuela would be successful. Secondly, pro-interventionists argue that once President Maduro is deposed, interim President Guaido, with the backing of the Venezuelan National Assembly and many Venezuelan citizens, will be able to re-establish democracy in the country. Finally, pro-interventionists believe that the United States can use the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance to justify the intervention internationally.

Currently, the most significant barrier that the intervention option faces is a domestic, political one. Article 1, Section 8 of the United States Constitution gives the United States Congress, not the president, the power to declare war. Despite the growing credibility of the intervention option, it remains unlikely that military intervention would receive the necessary bipartisan support from Congress.¹³ However, pro-interventionists argue that President Trump can use the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance to bypass the United States Congress. Article 3, Section 1 of the Treaty states that attacks against one participating country are considered attacks against all participating countries.¹⁴ In February of 2019, interim President

¹³ The National Broadcasting Company, 6 February 2019.

¹⁴ Article 3, Section 1 of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance states: "The High Contracting Parties agree that an armed attack by any State against an American State shall be considered as an attack against all the

Guaido attempted to move humanitarian aid from Colombia across the Venezuelan border, but the attempt was hindered by the Venezuelan military, which injured hundreds of people on Colombian territory.¹⁵ Because both Colombia and the United States signed the treaty, pro-interventionists argue that President Trump can use Venezuela's aggression towards Colombia to justify sending military forces to Venezuela. This tactic has received support from many American politicians. Marco Rubio, a senator among this group, warned Venezuela that "The United States will help Colombia confront any aggression against them."¹⁶

As a result of the growing validity of the intervention option, it is necessary to consider whether or not the United States should intervene in Venezuela. In this paper, I will analyze previous instances of the American military involvement in Latin America, as well as the effects of the current international actors involved in Venezuela. Using this analysis, I will thus argue that the United States should not intervene militarily in Venezuela.¹⁷ In particular, the United States should not intervene because intervention would be an immense military investment, requiring the American military to remain in Venezuela for a prolonged period of time. Furthermore, intervention would complicate the United States' diplomatic relationship with Russia. To support this argument, I have structured the paper into three sections. I will begin by rebutting why the success of the 1989 Just Cause operation in Panama does not suggest similar success for an American invasion of Venezuela. I will then demonstrate why the Colombian guerrilla forces present in Venezuela would necessitate a constant American military presence in

American States, and, consequently, each one of the said Contracting Parties undertakes to assist in meeting the attack in the exercise of the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations."

¹⁵ The New York Times, 23 February 2019.

¹⁶ Rubio, Marco. Twitter Post. 23 February 2019, 10:15 AM.

¹⁷ Unless otherwise specified, references to *intervention* should henceforth be interpreted as *military intervention*.

the region. Finally, I will demonstrate why military intervention in Venezuela cannot be viewed simply as the United States fighting the Venezuelan military. Rather, in addition to direct confrontation with Venezuelan forces, the United States would be indirectly engaging in a conflict with Russia, and this would, therefore, inhibit future diplomatic progress with Russia and its allies.

The Differences Between Panama and Venezuela Weaken the Parallel Between Them

Pro-interventionists argue that intervention in Venezuela is a viable option because the United States' 1989 Just Cause operation in Panama was successful. During Operation Just Cause, the United States' military was able to invade and remove Panama's de facto ruler Manuel Noriega from power in approximately two weeks (Nanda 1990). After deposing of General Noriega, the American military withdrew from the region immediately. Furthermore, following the operation, Panama's economy improved significantly. The unemployment rate fell from approximately eighteen percent in 1989 to thirteen percent in 1993. Since 1993, the unemployment rate has generally followed a downward trend to where it currently lies at approximately 6 percent (International Monetary Fund 2018).¹⁸ Additionally, Panama's gross domestic product doubled less than a decade after the invasion (International Monetary Fund 2018). In summary, the invasion was successful because of its short duration, as well as Panama's economic growth following the operation.

¹⁸ The data from the International Monetary Fund was accessed through the October of 2018 World Economic Outlook Database. The World Economic Outlook Database used data from the National Statistics Office of Panama and Venezuela.

According to former United States President George H.W. Bush, the goals of Operation Just Cause were to “safeguard the lives of Americans” and “to defend democracy in Panama.”¹⁹ The Bush administration believed General Noriega was threatening the United States by supporting drug-trafficking, violently suppressing efforts to democratize Panama, and endangering the lives of American citizens and military personnel in Panama (Miller 1998). This highlights a key difference between the situation in Panama in 1989 and the current situation Venezuela: the threat that each country’s leader posed to American citizens.

Leading up to Operation Just Cause, President Bush believed that General Noriega threatened Americans residing in Panama (Meernik 1996). A week before Operation Just Cause, an American service member was killed while residing in the country (Nanda 1990). This gave further domestic and international justification to President Bush’s statement that General Noriega’s rule endangered American citizens, including the 35,000 American citizens and soldiers living there at the time. However, in a paper published in the *Yale Journal of International Law*, Ohio State University Law Professor John Quigley argues that General Noriega’s military dictatorship – despite killing an American residing in Panama – did not pose a significant threat to the other soldiers stationed there (Quigley 1990). This paper will not explore the validity of Quigley’s argument. Regardless of its plausibility and what became known after the events transpired, it is evident that President Bush and his administration saw Panama as a notable threat to the American citizens living there.

In contrast, no Americans have been killed in present-day Venezuela as a result of the humanitarian crisis. President Maduro has shown that he does not intend to hurt American

¹⁹ The New York Times, 21 December 1989.

citizens. In January of 2019, President Maduro gave American diplomats seventy-two hours to leave the country.²⁰ Two months later, President Maduro released an American journalist who was detained in Venezuela.²¹ Some pro-interventionists, however, argue that the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance obligates the United States to intervene militarily in Venezuela. However, this is a misrepresentation of the Treaty. It specifies that in the event of an attack on an American State, the Contracting Parties will “assist in meeting the attack” by exercising their right to self-defense recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations.²² Article 51 protects the rights of countries to defend themselves in the event of attacks by other nations. This article does not give the United States the political entitlement to invade Venezuela; it only allows the United States to defend Colombia in the event of an attack on the country. The Venezuelan military, however, has not invaded Colombian territory; they responded to Colombian and American personnel and resources entering the Venezuelan border. The United States, therefore, cannot justify military action against Venezuela. Nevertheless, pro-interventionists argue that the United States should intervene in Venezuela because of the harm President Maduro is inflicting on the Venezuelan people.

Despite the absence of a threat to American citizens, pro-interventionists argue that the United States would be able to help Venezuelans with a successful, low-casualty operation as the

²⁰ Washington Post, 23 January 2019.

²¹ The New York Times, 7 March 2019.

²² Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations states that: “Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security. Measures taken by Members in the exercise of this right of self-defence shall be immediately reported to the Security Council and shall not in any way affect the authority and responsibility of the Security Council under the present Charter to take at any time such action as it deems necessary in order to maintain or restore international peace and security.”

American military did with Operation Just Cause. This fails to account for significant differences between Panama and Venezuela. Prior to the invasion of Panama, the United States already had 12,000 soldiers stationed in the country (Miller 1998). In contrast, the United States has no active military bases in Venezuela (Venezuela Analysis 2016). Furthermore, Operation Just Cause involved 26,000 soldiers, which was the largest night operation since the Second World War (Miller 1998). Given that Venezuela is over eleven times the size of Panama, it can be expected that an invasion of Venezuela would need to be of similar magnitude to, if not greater than, Operation Just Cause. This demonstrates that military intervention in Venezuela would not be a small operation.

Pro-interventionists use the economic success of Panama following Operation Just Cause to argue that military intervention in Venezuela would be similarly beneficial to Venezuela's economy. Like Panama's economy prior to Operation Just Cause, Venezuela's economy is struggling. However, the economic situation in Venezuela is far worse than Panama's economic situation was in 1989. In Panama, unemployment rose from approximately eleven percent in 1987 to eighteen percent in 1989 (James 1990). In Venezuela, the unemployment rate increased significantly more, rising from twenty percent in 2016 to thirty-four percent in 2018 (International Monetary Fund 2018). Furthermore, from 1985 to 1989, Panama experienced less than two percent change in the inflation rate per year. Conversely, Venezuela experienced over 1000 percent change in its inflation rate during 2017 (International Monetary Fund 2018). Given the severe economic struggles of Venezuela, it is reasonable to argue that the country is in desperate need of economic improvement, which may support American intervention. However, it is oversimplified to argue that Panama's economic growth following Operation Just Cause

implies a similarly positive fate for Venezuela's economy. The differences between the two countries' economic struggles prohibit such facile comparisons.

In summary, I have argued why the success of Operation Just Cause cannot justify an American invasion of Venezuela. In the next section, I will discuss why – even if President Maduro is deposed – the American military will be required to remain in Venezuela for a prolonged period following the invasion.

Extensive Military Investment Required to Manage Colombian Guerrilla Forces

In this section, I discuss why the guerrilla groups and drug cartels residing in Venezuela support President Maduro and how this would complicate American military intervention in the country.

Many guerrilla organizations and drug cartels are present in Venezuela, and these groups have strong motivations to keep President Maduro in power. A report published by InSight Crime, a nongovernmental organization that studies crime in the Western Hemisphere, argues that “mafia tendencies of the Venezuelan state” have solidified under President Maduro’s rule (Venezuelan Investigative Unit 2018). By “mafia tendencies,” the report references the increasingly powerful rebel armies and drug cartels present in Venezuela. Although some of these organizations, including the Colombian National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), emerged from Colombia, they remain in Venezuela because they have “faced little government pushback and have been allowed to flourish” (Venezuelan Investigative Unit 2018). American politicians are in bipartisan agreement

with this report. According to Democratic Senator Robert Menendez and Republican Senator Marco Rubio, President Maduro:

In an effort to cling to power and promote a failed political ideology, has dismantled democratic institutions, repressed political opponents, and starved the Venezuelan people through economic mismanagement. This lawless environment... [provides] fertile ground for drug cartels and U.S. designated foreign terrorist organizations, such as the FARC and ELN, to operate (Menendez and Rubio 2018).

The Venezuelan Investigative Unit argues that “Instead of sidelining those accused of drug trafficking, Maduro has promoted them to the highest offices,” expecting that “they have the most to lose if his regime falls and will therefore fight the hardest to preserve it” (Venezuelan Investigative Unit 2018). Thus, these guerilla groups have strong motivations to keep President Maduro in power.

This motivation is reinforced because the president that would succeed Nicolas Maduro threatens to challenge the guerilla groups. Since Juan Guaido is recognized as the legitimate Venezuelan president by the United States and the Venezuelan National Assembly, he would likely assume power following President Maduro’s deposition. Interim President Guaido has vowed to extinguish the ELN from Venezuela. In February of 2019, interim President Guaido instructed Venezuelan soldiers, the majority of whom still support President Maduro, to expel the ELN from Venezuela. “It is not only to side with the Constitution,” stated interim President Guaido, “it is your role in the reconstruction of Venezuela, in exercising sovereignty, in expelling the ELN from the Venezuelan border, in generating governability, sovereignty, security.”²³ Therefore, if the United States removes President Maduro from power, the incumbent president will attempt to expel groups such as the ELN from Venezuela.

²³ El Pais, 4 February 2019.

As a result of the threat posed by Juan Guaido, the ELN has vowed to respond to any American effort to overthrow Nicolas Maduro.²⁴ ELN commander Israel Ramírez Pineda²⁵ acknowledged the danger the ELN faces from an American invasion, and he guaranteed that “if they come for us, we will respond. We won’t run away and hide.”²⁶ Therefore, if the United States’ military attempts to remove President Maduro from power, they will be faced with significant opposition from guerrilla groups in Venezuela.

While the United States’ military may be able to defeat the Venezuelan military with a sufficiently large operation, the opposition from guerrilla and drug-trafficking groups would complicate the United States’ intervention in Venezuela. As a result, invading Venezuela would require the American military to remain in the region for a prolonged period of time. Otherwise, the Venezuelan military would be responsible for defending civilians and the country against these rebel groups. The Venezuelan military, however, currently supports President Maduro, and therefore, they have to be defeated before the United States can remove President Maduro from power.

It is unlikely that the Venezuelan military would be capable of this immense challenge immediately following their defeat to the United States’ military. The history of the rebel groups provides evidence for these claims. The ELN and FARC emerged in 1964 at the beginning of the Colombian conflict, a war between Colombian guerrilla groups and the Colombian government. The conflict has lasted over four decades, despite the Colombian government receiving significant intelligence and military support from the United States (Gonzalez-Perez 2006). In only the last two decades, the United States spent over ten billion dollars supporting the

²⁴ The Telegraph, 2 February 2019.

²⁵ Israel Ramírez Pineda is commonly referred to as Pablo Beltran.

²⁶ The Telegraph, 2 February 2019.

Colombian government.²⁷ The conflict, in four decades, resulted in over 150,000 casualties, including 5,000 police officers (Gonzalez-Perez 2006).

If the United States invades Venezuela, they face many of the guerilla groups responsible for the Colombian conflict's harm, including the ELN and FARC. FARC is considered by the International Policy Institute for Counterterrorism to be "one of the largest and best-equipped guerilla forces in history" (Gonzalez-Perez 2006). Despite recently establishing a peace deal with the Colombian government, there remain over two thousand armed dissidents of FARC who currently reside in Venezuela (Venezuelan Investigative Unit 2018). Therefore, despite the United States having military superiority over Venezuela, invading the country would result in years of costly war with rebel groups.

American Intervention in Venezuela Complicates US-Russia Diplomatic Relations

In the final section of my argument, I discuss why Russia has economic and political motivations to support President Maduro against the United States. As a result of these incentives, I argue that if the American military intervenes in Venezuela, the United States will be indirectly engaging in conflict with Russia. Military intervention will complicate the United States' diplomatic relationship with Russia and thus inhibit future diplomatic progress.

Russia has financial motivations to support the Venezuelan government currently in power. Russia's economy has struggled since the Great Recession in 2008 (Guriev and Tsyvinski 2010). Venezuela, however, supported Russia during that time, importing nearly two billion dollars of weapons from 2006 to 2008, which made them Russia's fourth largest customer of

²⁷ The New York Times, 16 November 2015.

arms (Bonfili 2010). From 2001 to 2013, Venezuela bought a total of fourteen and a half billion dollars' worth of Russian weapons. Over the last twelve years, Russia has lent Venezuela over seventeen billion dollars, and Venezuela currently owes Russia six billion dollars (Bonfili 2010). According to the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency in 2017, Vincent R. Steward, this has led to Russia continuing to seek security-related influence in Venezuela.²⁸ Therefore, we see that Russia has strong financial incentives to remain allies with Venezuela.

Despite this, pro-interventionists argue that Russia's financial relationship with Venezuela could still continue if President Maduro is overthrown. This, however, is not what President Maduro suggests to Russia. In a paper published in the *Journal of Democracy*, Dr. Javier Corrales, a political science professor at Amherst College, argues:

Today, with Venezuela facing a severe economic crisis that makes it a less lucrative business partner and a less attractive role model, the regime's ability to project power globally is dwindling. So Maduro has had to change tactics. Rather than trying to reshape the outside world, his main goal now is to convince Venezuela's global partners that, in terms of their economic interests in Venezuela, a change in the status quo is likely to be harmful to them. This is just another way of using economic ties abroad to promote regime survival at home (Corrales 2015).

The Defense Intelligence Agency is in agreement with this analysis. In 2018, the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Robert Ashley, highlighted reports suggesting that Russia supports President Maduro "to protect their investments in Venezuela's economy" and "sustain their security-related influence in Venezuela."²⁹ Thus, we see that Russia has financial incentives to support President Maduro.

²⁸ United States Senate Armed Services Committee. Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment. 23 May 2017.

²⁹ United States Senate Armed Services Committee. Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment. 6 March 2018.

In addition to the economic incentives that Russia has to support President Maduro, Russia also has political reasons to support the Venezuelan despot. When Hugo Chavez was the president of Venezuela, he recognized territories that Russia had helped to secede from Georgia, such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia.³⁰ Following President Chavez's death, President Maduro has continued acknowledging controversial Russian territories, including Russia's annexation of Crimea.³¹ Most democratic countries, including the United States, do not recognize Crimea as a part of Russia. Russia, however, is politically incentivized to have countries recognize Crimea as its own territory in order to gain international credibility and legitimacy (Fish 2017). If President Maduro is overthrown by the United States, it is likely that the incumbent president will be sympathetic to the United States and will thus similarly reject Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Finally, Russian President Vladimir Putin is incentivized to prevent President Maduro from being overthrown by the United States because it could set a precedent which threatens President Putin's power. According to M. Steven Fish in a paper published in the *Journal of Democracy*, "Putinism broadly prioritizes the maintenance of the status quo while evincing hostility toward potential sources of instability." Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev has confirmed that Russia opposes the precedent set by the Venezuelan National Assembly's election of Juan Guaido. In response to Guaido's election, he stated: "We are witnessing as yet another head of state is being unconstitutionally 'elected' by the crowd out there in the streets, and a number of heads of state support this quasi-government coup."³² We see that Russian politicians oppose Juan Guaido and discredit his legitimacy.

³⁰ The Economist, 1 February 2019.

³¹ General Assembly Resolution 68/262, *The Territorial Integrity of Ukraine*, A/RES/68/262 (2017 March 2014).

³² Medvedev, Dmitry. Twitter Post. 24 January 2019, 7:05 AM.

In response to the threat of American intervention, Russia has aided the Venezuelan military, which continues to back President Maduro. In 2017, Russia supplied Venezuela with ten Mi35M2 combat helicopters (Menendez 2019). The following year, Russia sent two nuclear-capable combat aircrafts to Caracas, in addition to the weapons it has continued to supply to Venezuela.³³ In early 2019, The United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations stated that reports confirmed that two Russian aircrafts landed in Venezuela with one-hundred Russian military officials.³⁴ The operation verified the enduring military collaboration between President Maduro and President Putin.³⁵ Thus, Russia has demonstrated its willingness to support President Maduro and the Venezuelan military.

Given Russia's incentives for supporting President Maduro, if the United States were to invade Venezuela, they would be entering into a conflict with Russia that would complicate diplomatic relations between the countries. This would inhibit future diplomatic progress with Russia or its allies.

Conclusion: The United States Should Not Intervene Militarily in Venezuela

In summary, I rebutted why the success of the 1989 Just Cause operation does not imply similar success for an American invasion of Venezuela. I then demonstrated why the United States' military will be required to remain in Venezuela following an invasion in order to quell resistance from guerrilla forces. Finally, I discussed the broader implications of the United States intervening in Venezuela, which includes harming diplomatic relations with Russia. This evidence demonstrates why the United States should not intervene in Venezuela.

³³ The Economist, 1 February 2019.

³⁴ The United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Press, 26 March 2019.

³⁵ Ibid.

This analysis has significant implications for American foreign policy. It suggests that despite having superior military power over most countries, the United States' foreign policy should not always rely on using force. In order to solve future conflicts, the United States may have to rely on diplomacy or other measures, including international collaboration, for success.

However, by issuing threats of military intervention towards Venezuela, President Trump appears to be ignoring alternative options. Through his hostile talk towards Venezuela, President Trump seems to indicate a foreign policy shift towards relying on American military prowess. As a result, the end of the suffering for Venezuelan citizens may not be as near as many would hope.

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