

US, Russia Vie Over the Future of Venezuela



The crisis in Venezuela is only getting worse by the week. And with Russian backing, it looks less likely that dictator Nicolas Maduro will step aside. Ana Quintana of The Heritage Foundation explains what's at stake, and what's going on. Read our interview, posted below, or listen to it on the podcast:

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Kate Trinko: Joining us today is Ana Quintana, a senior policy analyst

specializing in Latin America at The Heritage Foundation. And she is here to explain to us what's going on in Venezuela and what the U.S. should do. Ana, thanks for joining us.

The liberal Left continue to push their radical agenda against American values. The good news is there is a solution. Find out more >>

Ana Quintana: Thanks for having me.

Trinko: For those of us who don't have the best memories. Walk us through why Juan Guaido, not Nicolas Maduro, is the true leader of Venezuela right now and how we got to this mess.

Quintana: Sure. So in May of 2018, Maduro held presidential elections. And they were incredibly fraudulent. ... Practically, the only countries that recognized the result were Russia, China, Cuba, the Palestinian Authority, barely any countries recognized the result. So, back then dozens of countries said they would not recognize Maduro as a legitimate leader.

Fast-forward to Jan. 10, Maduro's supposed inauguration day, that is when Juan Guaido became president because, according to Article 232 specifically, of Venezuela's constitution, if there exists a void in the presidency, if there exists a legitimate void in the executive, the next in the line of succession is the head of the National Assembly. And Juan Guaido was an elected member of the National Assembly and he was the president of the National Assembly.

Daniel Davis: We've heard about a lot of violence happening right now, erupting in the streets. People are protesting. Guaido said that he was ... [in] his last phase of revolution against Maduro and the government responded by running people over in the streets. That was last week. Where do things stand right now?

Quintana: ... Last week has been interpreted as a huge failure for Guaido. That's not the way I'm looking at it, right? So, Guaido ... on Tuesday, was trying to lead a military uprising against Maduro and people have tried to classify this as a coup; it's not. You can't lead a coup against somebody who's a usurper who is an illegitimate president. So, Guaido called upon the military to help him essentially pressure Maduro out of power.

That did not work but what ended up happening was, it exposed that 1. Maduro does not have the full control of the military. He spent 14 hours not appearing on TV and he didn't call upon the military to protect him because it was revealed that his minister of defense was actually conspiring with Guaido against him.

2. He called on the paramilitaries to protect him, which is quite significant. ... Typically when you would see these protests, Maduro would call the military to repress protesters. He called in the paramilitaries to repress the protesters. And you would always see kind of widespread death, that did not happen.

Also, Maduro's chief of intelligence defected. That is huge. Imagine all the secrets this man knows. He is the chief of military and domestic intelligence.

Davis: Wow.

Quintana: So now the situation is, kind of fast-forward to today, Maduro is weak. Maduro's incredibly vulnerable. He's in a situation right now where he's looking to his left and to his right and to his inner circle wondering, "Who's conspiring behind my back? Who's trying to hedge their bets? Who's trying to plan for Day Zero when I'm not around?"

And, frankly, I think there is probably a lot more of them than not. So I think Guaido ... has a significant advantage right now but I think we should recognize that it's not inevitable that Maduro falls. Right? He could perpetually stay into power.

I mean, look at what happened in Syria with Assad. Assad, I remember, back when, at the height of the Syrian civil war, people said, "Oh, Assad only has five, six more months." And look how the Russians guided him through this. And that's exactly what the Russians are now doing with Maduro.

Trinko: Tell us more. Why is Russia caring about Venezuela and why are they getting involved?

Quintana: Oh, man. I mean, think about this. If you're the Russians, this is low-hanging fruit. Right? This is an opportunity for you to stick your thumb in the eye of the United States. It's an opportunity for you to insert yourself in the middle of a conflict and to distract attention away from all the other bad things that you're doing in Ukraine, in the Middle East, in Syria, and kind of the other bad things

that you want to do elsewhere.

And now the Russians have ... inserted themselves inside of Venezuela and they're essentially a power broker. So they can sit down with the United States and they can say, "Hey, you need my help solving this crisis. This is what I want. I want, in exchange for you to leave me alone in Ukraine, for you to let me have Crimea, for you to let me have X, Y, and Z."

Also, the Venezuelans owe the Russians a lot of money. There is a lot of money, I think it's probably close to \$10 billion, if I'm not mistaken.

And for the Russians it's to their benefit to have such a powerful ally in charge of such a powerful country like Venezuela. It's the most oil-rich nation in the entire world. It's a country that's able to project a significant amount of power in Latin America. The Russia-Cuba relationship is always going to exist but Cuba doesn't have the capacity nor the power to project and to spread influence like it once did.

Trinko: Just to follow-up on what you said about how Russia has a history of propping up dictators, are we talking military weapons here? Are we talking strategic advise?

How, when Maduro finds himself in this situation so isolated from some of his own people, as you discussed, some of his top people, can Russia practically help?

Quintana: Everything that you just stated right there. Venezuela has been the largest purchaser and recipient of Russian weapons—from tanks, I think it's been about 100 tanks, about 5,000 surface-to-air missiles, MANPADS. It's just been this wide plethora of weapons that the Venezuelans have purchased from the Russians.

... You have dozens, if not hundreds, of Russian military advisers inside of Venezuela. The Russians are providing the Venezuelans with political advise.

... There's an outsized value of Russia's contributions to Maduro right now, regardless of how weak he is. Because he's incredibly weak, he has nobody around him that he can trust, but he does have the Russians.

... Maduro knows that he is protected because right now, he's internationalized

this conflict. He has now made this a conflict between Russia and the United States. And he knows by raising these stakes and not just making it something between he himself, this South American dictator, he is now able to project a lot more power.

Davis: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the president have spoken pretty strongly against what Russia's doing. And Cuba. But ... at the end of the day, what do they do? What can they do? To stop, cut off Russia's influence? Apart from, like you were saying, conceding stuff in Eastern Europe.

Quintana: Yeah, no, they definitely shouldn't sit down at a negotiating table with the Russians and concede anything. Nor with the Cubans. I definitely think, 1. They need to sit down and talk with the Cubans and the Russians. But I think, this is a time to make them pay a cost. They cannot get away with what they have been doing inside of Venezuela, with what they've continued to do for God knows how many years.

This is an opportunity right now to look at visa and travel restrictions against Russian oligarchs. Right? To hit them financially where it hurts. Because that's where these guys respond.

These guys don't respond to diplomatic statements and to condemnation and all these things. They don't care about that. For them, they actually fundraise and make money off of that, it makes them look good when the United States attacks them, frankly.

And on the Cuba side of things, I think that's where the administration has been incredibly tough by implementing ... this host of ... sectoral sanctions and opening Cuba up to the possibility of being sued by American companies. But, frankly, I think it's very difficult for the United States to do a lot of this when our European partners aren't being helpful.

Trinko: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo didn't rule out military action. Do you think there's any chance that Venezuela could be the next Iraq or Afghanistan?

Quintana: ... The regime of Nicolas Maduro, this is not a regime of politicians. This is a regime of thugs. And you don't speak to them in statesmen-like

diplomatic terms. You talk to them like thugs and you scare them like thugs and I think ... we should be scaring these guys. We should scare them out of power.

That being said, I think at this juncture, at this point, any sort of military intervention would have the complete opposite adverse effect. It would be the absolute worst thing this administration could do.

... There are some ideas that have been floated around, a tactical precision strike to take out key military installations. That would be stupid because that would draw the United States into this long-term peacekeeping operation. And then on the other side, a ground invasion, the same thing. It would also draw the United States into a long-term peacekeeping operation and then there's a humanitarian fallout.

... There's little to be gained and so much more to be lost and we've seen it in Libya. We've seen it in so many other countries where we think we can take a dictator out quickly, militarily, and it just devolves into such an even bigger mess.

Davis: And you can't have a U.N. force in there, right? Because Russia's on the Security Council. So they would veto everything.

Quintana: ... And that's the other challenge, right? Russia's on the U.N.—

Davis: Once again, highlighting the uselessness of the Security Council.

Quintana: It highlights the ... ridiculousness of much of the U.N. system. That it gives this outsized influence to countries like Russia and China, that just don't have a serious humanitarian bone in their body. No.

Davis: Recently, ... Rep. Ilhan Omar made a comment about Venezuela. She told Democracy Now, quote, "A lot of the policies that we have put in place has kind of helped lead the devastation in Venezuela. And we've sort of set the stage for where we're arriving today." End quote.

And, quote, "This particular bullying and the use of sanctions to eventually intervene and make regime change really does not help the people of countries like Venezuela, and it certainly does not help and is not in the interest of the United States."

Thoughts?

Quintana: It's like there's these boiler plate quotes that all the progressives use to criticize anything that the United States does when they have no concept of what exactly is happening.

U.S. sanctions have largely been against corrupt Venezuelan government officials for humanitarian reasons. They have been to cut off the financial access for these regime officials to make money and to stop them from drug trafficking.

One of the sanctions was against then-Vice President Tareck El Aissami, who was found to be a drug trafficker along with Los Zetas and they've discovered over \$500 million of drug trafficking-related assets in the United States.

I don't understand how seizing \$500 million of narcotics-related assets that were trafficked with Los Zetas hurts the Venezuelan people. She has no idea what she's talking about.

Trinko: Speaking of the Venezuelan people, how are they faring right now? Are there food shortages? Or are they facing violence? What is life like in Venezuela right now?

Davis: And what about that electricity outage? Is that still happening, too?

Quintana: The electricity outages are horrible. ... Consider just how much the regime has destroyed the country.

Venezuela is the most oil-rich nation in the entire world. This is a country that literally used to produce about 3.5, 3.6 million barrels of oil per day. ... It had enough oil to export and to use for its own domestic consumption. It's now producing about 900,000 barrels of oil per day; it's gone down fourfold in the last 10 years. And half of that oil is used to service external debt.

So Venezuela is in a position right now where it's importing refined oil for its own internal consumption. Which is just ... mind-boggling to consider that this is a country that has the most oil resource.

These electricity shortages are a consequence of just not investing in the energy infrastructure. They just did not care. The regime has stolen so much money, they've used the oil industry as a slush fund for party loyalists.

For the average Venezuelan, it's estimated that 90% of people live in poverty.

About 5 million Venezuelans are going to leave the country by the end of this year. Venezuelan migrants and refugees are scattered all throughout Latin America. There's about 2 million right now in Colombia.

The situation is bad. It is a dire, dire humanitarian catastrophe and the worst part is, it's a man-made crisis.

Davis: Well, Ana Quintana, as always, we appreciate your expertise. We'll be watching the situation unfold. Thank you.

Quintana: No, thank you guys.

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