

## Russian Influence Complicates Venezuelan Crisis

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6 April, 2021

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## **Abstract**

Russia relies on its military exports of both equipment and services as a stepping stone for expanding its interests and influence on the global stage. In Venezuela, through multiple arms sales and services over the last decade, this has complicated the current crisis through both direct and indirect influence on the government and military. The military-government relationship in Venezuela is symbiotic in that both are dependent on support from the other to retain their power and authority. This has led to widespread corruption within both entities which is exacerbated by support from Russia. The military-technical relationship between Venezuela and Russia has allowed Russian energy corporations access to the country's energy resources and introduces further corruption of trade and financial agreements in a circular loop at the expense of the general population. This has led to increased instability in the region, including security concerns, humanitarian issues, mass emigration, regional arms races, and degradation of US policy initiatives.

## Military-Technical Relationship

Historically, Russia has relied on its military-technical prowess as a means of establishing working relationships with foreign countries. In the last decade, Russia has trailed only the United States as the leaders in arms sales and services, and has steadily increased its global, annual military exports by an average rate of 5.3% since 2007.<sup>1</sup> The United States dominates the military market in North America and Latin America. However, in terms of arms sales and services to South American countries specifically, the United States and Russia have remained relatively even across the same time period, with deals valued between one and two billion dollars annually.<sup>2</sup> A significant portion of these sales from Russia have gone to Venezuela.

During this time period, Russian military sales to Venezuela have included Su-30 fighter aircraft, attack helicopters, S-300 SAM systems, and MANPADS.<sup>3,4</sup> Military services have included helicopter training and maintenance facilities<sup>5</sup>, establishment of a new Su-30 ground trainer<sup>6</sup>, training and maintenance for the S-300 SAM system, as well as multiple other advisory positions throughout the defense ministry and the military as a whole.<sup>7,8</sup> Additional lines of effort involve port agreements allowing Russian warships the use of Venezuelan ports,<sup>9</sup> and the

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of State, "World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 2019." <https://2017-2021.state.gov/world-military-expenditures-and-arms-transfers-2019/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> US Department of State, "World Military Expenditures."

<sup>3</sup> R. Ellis, "The Influence of Extra-Hemispheric Actors on the Crisis in Venezuela," Foreign Affairs Committee, US House of Representatives, Washington (2017)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Dmitry Fediushko, "Venezuela inaugurates Russian-made ground trainer for Su-30MK2 pilots," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, (November 2019).

<sup>7</sup> James Dorschner, "Kingmakers: Venezuela's armed forces and the national crisis," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, (August 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Alejandro Sanchez, "Nicaraguan government approves initial 2020 international military deployments, visits," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, (November 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Alejandro Sanchez, "Venezuela, Russia sign ports agreement," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, (August 2019).

establishment of a Russian-licensed, military production facility for the AK-103 assault rifle; the first such facility located in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>10</sup> Although the plant has yet to be completed, mainly due to corruption of funding as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, its significance cannot be overlooked.<sup>11, 12</sup>

As mentioned above, Russia views its military sales and services as a stepping stone for increased roles and influence in regions that are of interest. The most widely accepted causes for Russian involvement, specifically in Venezuela, are economic expansion and strategic messaging against the United States. In terms of economic expansion, Russia seeks to broaden its market base for future military sales and also diversify its economy via imports. This is not a new foreign policy concept for Russia with examples of similar relationships prevalent on the African continent in recent years. The Russian government downplays the rhetoric from the United States that it is trying to establish a strategic foothold in South America. Moscow pledges that it has an inherent right to develop and enhance its well-being while simultaneously presenting itself as a counter to Western monopolization.<sup>13</sup>

The above position of presenting itself as a counter to Western influence is apparent in regions like the Arctic, Africa, and the Middle East. The theory is that Russia involves itself in areas of opportunity that are directly juxtaposed to the United States position in an effort to be

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<sup>10</sup> Ben Vogel, "Russia–Latin America trade relations may give cover to intelligence operations, says SOUTHCOM Chief," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, (July 2019).

<sup>11</sup> "After 14 years Russia fails to complete construction of Kalashnikov assault rifle factory in Venezuela," UAWire, Accessed March 20, 2021, <http://uawire.org/after-14-years-russia-fails-to-complete-construction-of-kalashnikov-assault-rifle-factory-in-venezuela>

<sup>12</sup> Rendon, Moises, and Claudia Fernandez, "The Fabulous Five: How Foreign Actors Prop up the Maduro Regime in Venezuela," Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Galeotti, "Words Apart: On Narratives and the Voids Between Them," *New Perspectives*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2019.

recognized on the world stage as a viable alternative and also as a means of degrading United States influence.<sup>14</sup> This position is a softer approach when it comes to the crisis in Venezuela. The strategic message has been that Russia will support the current government, Maduro, in every way possible but has been shy about promising outright intervention.<sup>15</sup> This has been echoed from President Putin and parliament officials with comments hinting that if it comes to foreign military intervention in Venezuela that Russia would not militarily intervene.<sup>16</sup> This stems from fear of a very similar scenario which play out during the Cuban missile crisis. The cost and logistics of direct military support so far from the homeland has led Russia to distance itself from this outcome, as the benefits would not outweigh the associated costs.

### **Effects of Russian Influence**

Even with a relatively distanced support effort, the effects of Russian military influence in Venezuela can clearly be seen in the Venezuelan government, economy, military as well as influencing these realms in South America as a whole. The military sales relationship with current and previous Venezuelan presidents was the driver that opened the door for Russian energy companies such as Lukoil, Gazprom, and Rosneft to take advantage of Venezuela's rich energy resources.<sup>17</sup> The two countries have also signed multiple agreements in the fields of

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen Blank and Younkyoo Kim. "Russia and Latin America: The New Frontier for Geopolitics, Arms Sales and Energy." *Problems of Post - Communism* 62, no. 3 (2015): 159. <http://aufric.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.aufic.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/russia-latin-america-new-frontier-geopolitics/docview/1686463042/se-2?accountid=4332>.

<sup>15</sup> Stepan Kravchenko and Henry Meyer, "Russia vows full support for Maduro as U.S. Sanctions Bite," *Bloomberg*, January 29, 2019. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-01-29/russia-vows-full-support-for-maduro-government-in-venezuela>

<sup>16</sup> Stepan Kravchenko and Ilya Arkhipov, "Russia Offers Warm Words, Little Cash to Visiting Venezuela Ally," *Bloomberg*, March 1, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Victor Jiefets, "Latin America and the Caribbean and the new international system: Looks from the South," *Yearbook of Regional Integration of Latin America and the Greater Caribbean*, No. 11, 2015.

nuclear energy and agriculture development.<sup>18</sup> Corruption in these endeavors on both sides has increased the rate of economic collapse in Venezuela. There is a circular loop of Russian energy investors and companies taking advantage of the crisis through bad faith dealings which allow Maduro to distribute funds and loans directly to those loyal to him in the military, thus ensuring the support of one of the most important aspects of politics in the region.<sup>19</sup> Even the United States' backed president Juan Guaido realizes that it requires three groups of people to support a stable government: "the people, the international community, and the military."<sup>20</sup> This "military-government symbiosis has been in practice since the late 50's and is reflected in the military's ascension into government positions not normally held by military leaders.<sup>21</sup> In January of 2019, eight of the 32 government ministries in Venezuela were held by military leaders.<sup>22</sup> As mentioned previously, there are many Russian military ties at all levels within the Venezuelan military. It would not be a far stretch to outline the amount of influence Russia contains in these positions and how that in turn can influence the Venezuelan government.

Another detrimental effect of the close military-technical ties with Russia would be the start of a South American arms race. The advanced weapon purchases mentioned previously have not gone unnoticed to Venezuelan neighbors. Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia have sought to make their own purchases to upgrade or expand their capabilities in response to

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<sup>18</sup> Victor Jiefets, "Latin America and the Caribbean and the new international system: Looks from the South," *Yearbook of Regional Integration of Latin America and the Greater Caribbean*, No. 11, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Dr Diego Lopes daSilva and Nan Tian Dr, "The Crucial Role of the Military in the Venezuelan Crisis," *Inter Press Service*, April 03, 2019. <http://aufric.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.aufvic.idm.oclc.org/wire-feeds/crucial-role-military-venezuelan-crisis/docview/2202760405/se-2?accountid=4332>.

<sup>20</sup> Scott Smith and Christine Armario, "Backed by Military, Venezuela's Maduro hits back at rival," *Associated Press: US Politics & Government Online*, January 25, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Dr. Diego Lopes da Silva, "The Crucial Role of the Military," 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Dr. Diego Lopes da Silva, "The Crucial Role of the Military," 2019.

Venezuela.<sup>23</sup> While the threat of direct military conflict between South American nations remains remote, the far more likely threat is that Venezuelan arms will fall into non-governmental hands. As the lower-echelons of the military feel the effects of hyper-inflation it becomes more and more likely that criminal organizations or revolutionary militias will obtain discarded small arms and MANPADS.<sup>24</sup> This along with mass emigration away from Venezuela has put an increased burden on neighboring countries like Colombia and has a direct effect on current United States policies.<sup>25</sup> The crisis situation in Venezuela has provided a safe haven for drug producers to flee to in response to counter-drug efforts.<sup>26</sup> All of these factors exponentially increase the overall instability in the region.

### **United States Policy Implications**

The United States has limited options for improving the Venezuelan crisis and curbing Russian influence. The most prominent options being economic sanctions, direct military intervention, humanitarian aid, and strengthening regional partners. Previous sanctions against both Venezuelan and Russian corporations in the energy sector have achieved mixed results. While these sanctions have significantly decreased revenue streams they have had the negative impact of increasing reliance on Russian development and financial loans.<sup>27</sup> Thus further strengthening the ties between the two countries. The corruption engulfed within the

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<sup>23</sup> Victor Jiefets, "Latin America and the Caribbean and the new international system: Looks from the South," *Yearbook of Regional Integration of Latin America and the Greater Caribbean*, No. 11, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> James Dorschner, "Kingmakers: Venezuela's armed forces and the national crisis," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, (August 2019).

<sup>25</sup> James Dorschner, "Kingmakers: Venezuela's armed forces and the national crisis," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, (August 2019).

<sup>26</sup> "Annual Defence Report 2019: The Americas," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, (December 2019).

<sup>27</sup> Simon Shuster, Phillip Elliott, and Alec Luhn, "Putin's Empire of Autocrats," *Time International*, Vol. 193 Issue 14, p 22-31, April 15, 2019.

Venezuela-Russia government and corporate relationship has also exponentially increased the hardships on the population due to inflation, leading to a lack housing and food.<sup>28</sup> This option may prove fruitful in the long run but will ultimately succeed or fail based on how long Russia is willing to keep Maduro afloat, which is unlikely due to the generous economic deals they are obtaining in return for its support.

The poor conditions that much of the country finds itself in point toward the humanitarian aid option. Results of this option have had little impact due once again to the corruption within the Venezuelan government and upper-echelons of the military. Aid is usually dispersed to those in power via the military, leaving nothing for those in the most need.<sup>29</sup> Current non-government organizations have experienced degraded support and resources due in part to the foreign policy objectives of the previous US administration as well as disagreements and limited resources from international organizations.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the most controversial option would be direct United States military intervention to remove Maduro from power to allow Gaido to reinstall the legitimacy of the democratic process. While the objective is militarily feasible, the international appetite for this type of action from the United States is at an all-time low. The United States' track record in

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<sup>28</sup> Alejandro Uzcategui and Victor Mijares, "The Versatile Amalgam: Interests and Corruption in Russia-Venezuela Relations," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, No. 109 (2020): 181-202.

<sup>29</sup> Dr Diego Lopes daSilva and Nan Tian Dr, "The Crucial Role of the Military in the Venezuelan Crisis," *Inter Press Service*, April 03, 2019. <http://aufric.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.aufic.idm.oclc.org/wire-feeds/crucial-role-military-venezuelan-crisis/docview/2202760405/se-2?accountid=4332>.

<sup>30</sup> Richard, Anne C. "US Diplomacy on Refugees and Migrants: Inside Recent History." *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 20, (Fall, 2019): 42-50. <http://aufric.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.aufic.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/us-diplomacy-on-refugees-migrants-inside-recent/docview/2327871298/se-2?accountid=4332>.



Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as its involvement in past regional conflicts in Latin and South America, forms the basis for discontent in such a direct action operation. Additionally, this type of action, regardless if it succeeded or failed, would only further confirm the overreaching image that some countries perceive of the United States and could push Western Hemisphere support in the wrong direction. Latin American and South American countries have long held the viewpoint of the United States policy in the region as imperialism disguised as democracy.<sup>31</sup>

A less threatening approach would be to strengthen regional partners specifically Brazil, Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador. The US has already implemented many mechanisms to this end including combined military exercises, foreign aid, and humanitarian assistance and training to these countries. The concept is that together, these countries can achieve greater influence and stabilizing measures on Venezuela as beacons of South American independence from outside influence. Additional combined military exercises focusing on crisis support and counter-insurgency training could lead to regional stability policed by its own members. The main goal of the United States should not be to increase interaction between the US military and these countries but to facilitate and possibly fund these exercises to increase the cooperation and participation amongst themselves.<sup>32</sup> Herein lies the problem, the United States does not consider any nation in South America to be an imminent military threat to national security. Therefore, United States Southern Command is at the bottom of the list with regard to funding. This type of policy is what the United States should continue to strive for and provide resources towards regardless of the outcome in Venezuela.

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<sup>31</sup> Cameron G. Thies, Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis in Latin America, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Volume 13, Issue 3, July 2017, Pages 662–681, <https://doi-org.aufic.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/fpa.12072>

<sup>32</sup> Oliver Stuenkel, "How South America Ceded the Field in Venezuela." *Foreign Affairs* 31 (2019).

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