

# Trump invokes “military option” against Venezuela

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President Donald Trump’s bellicose threat Friday that Washington could resort to a “military option” against Venezuela has triggered a wave of statements of formal opposition from governments throughout Latin America, including right-wing regimes like those in Argentina, Peru and Colombia, which have called for the ouster of President Nicolas Maduro and collaborated closely with Washington.

Appearing with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the former head of ExxonMobil, whose predecessor company long dominated Venezuela’s oil production, and US ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, Trump declared: “We are all over the world and we have troops all over the world in places that are very, very far away. Venezuela is not very far away and the people are suffering. They’re dying. We have many options for Venezuela including a possible military option, if necessary.”

Asked by a reporter whether his statement implied a US military operation in the South American country, Trump replied, “We don’t talk about it, but a military operation, a military option is certainly something that we could pursue.”

Trump issued his statement in the midst of his incendiary and reckless threats of military action, including a possible nuclear strike, against North Korea. The rhetoric is one of an increasingly unhinged and thuggish US government prepared to carry out illegal wars of aggression across the planet.

Behind the statement, denounced by the Venezuelan government as “an act of madness” and “insolent foreign aggression,” there are definite political calculations. It was pitched, on the one hand, to Trump’s extreme right-wing political base within the US itself, as well as to the hardline elements within Venezuela’s right-wing opposition that are the most committed to US-backed regime change.

Trump’s threat came in the immediate wake of Maduro calling for dialogue with Washington. In a speech to the newly formed national constituent assembly, whose election on July 30 Washington has denounced as fraudulent, Maduro said he wanted a “personal conversation” with the US president, declaring, “Mr. Donald Trump, here is my

hand.”

The appeal came after US officials branded Maduro as a “dictator” and imposed economic sanctions against him and a number of other Venezuelan officials.

The major capitalist governments in Latin America had taken a similar position to that of Washington, with the foreign ministers of Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay and Peru—together with Canada—meeting last week in the Peruvian capital and releasing a so-called “Lima Declaration” which denounced the election of the constituent assembly as a “rupture with democracy.”

Washington did not send a representative to the meeting, in an apparent attempt to deprive the Venezuelan government of the ability to denounce the line-up against Maduro as engineered by US imperialism. If this was the intention, Trump’s statement has severely undercut it.

Trump’s remarks drew sharp criticism from elements close to the US military and intelligence apparatus who saw them as undermining the US strategy for regime change in Venezuela.

Trump’s “off the cuff comment” suggesting a US military intervention has thrown Maduro “a beautiful life preserver at a time when the growing Latin American consensus was causing fracturing within his own supporters and probably the military,” said Mark Schneider, a senior adviser at the Washington think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “Now they will have little option other than to unite at least rhetorically against the Trump threat to ‘send in the Marines.’”

“These are empty threats,” said Shannon O’Neil, a Latin America analyst at the Council on Foreign Relations. “And since they are empty threats, Maduro faces no new consequences by taking a tough stand, both rhetorically and against the opposition.”

Despite indications of division in Washington over Trump’s remarks, CIA Director Mike Pompeo described Venezuela as a “risk” to US national security.

“The Cubans are there; the Russians are there, the

Iranians, Hezbollah are there ,” he said in a television interview Sunday. “ This is something that has a risk of getting to a very , very bad place, so America needs to take this very seriously.”

Defending Trump’s remark, Pompeo added, “What I believe the president is trying to accomplish this week was to give the Venezuelan people hope and opportunity to create a situation where democracy can be restored.”

Similarly, Trump’s national security adviser, Gen. H.R. McMaster, said that Washington was concerned “how this crisis might evolve” and what it could do “to prevent an even greater humanitarian catastrophe.” He added, “the president never takes options off the table in any of these situations. And what we owe him are options.”

The pretense that the Trump administration is concerned about the suffering of the Venezuelan people is ludicrous. US imperialism has inflicted “humanitarian catastrophes” on populations from the Balkans to the Middle East for the past quarter century and is currently involved in bloody wars against the people of Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

Washington is attempting to place sufficient economic pressure on Venezuela to plunge the country into an uncontrollable crisis in which the military would turn against Maduro and install a government more subservient to US interests.

US concerns are not over the increasing impoverishment and hunger of the Venezuelan workers and poor, but rather over the prospect that the Maduro government will cement closer economic ties with Russia and China, undercutting the drive for American imperialist hegemony in Latin America.

The sanctions imposed thus far, while not directly targeting Venezuela’s oil exports, have served to further destabilize the country’s economy by driving out foreign investors and placing in doubt its ability to continue refinancing its foreign debt.

In the week after the constituent assembly election, food prices in many cases doubled, as the value of the Venezuelan currency depreciated 45 percent against the dollar.

The *Washington Post* cited the Venezuelan data firm Ecoanalàtica indicating that the economy could shrink 10.4 percent this year. Layoffs and plant closures are already widespread.

Social assistance programs initiated under the presidency of the late Hugo Chavez during a period of high oil prices have become increasingly threadbare, and the government has failed to grant increases in wages and pensions to compensate for the latest round of inflation.

Meanwhile, figures announced on Friday indicated a 90 percent decline in profits for the state-run oil corporation PDVSA, whose output has dropped by 20 percent over the past two years as prices have fallen to \$35 a barrel.

Venezuela is dependent upon oil for 95 percent of its export revenue.

The “Bolivarian socialist” government has continuously made its debt payments to the international banks, even as foreign exchange reserves for buying essential imports of food and medicine have dwindled, leading to widespread hunger and sharp increases in infant and maternal mortality rates.

Banks have reaped some of the highest profit rates in Venezuela, while a capitalist layer close to the government, the so-called *boliburguesia*, consisting of contractors, financial speculators, senior military officers and members of the ruling party, have enriched themselves, even as the conditions of the masses have sharply deteriorated.

Despite growing social unrest in the working class, the mass demonstrations mounted by the right-wing opposition coalition, the MUD, over the past four months have tapered off, with barely 1,000 people turning out over the weekend for a protest. While hostile to Maduro, large sections of workers view the right-wing opposition with equal hostility, as representatives of the country’s old ruling oligarchy.

The MUD is itself visibly split, with the predominant layers announcing their intention to participate in upcoming regional elections. The most right-wing elements have denounced this decision as a “surrender.”

Maria Machado, leader of the Come Venezuela (VV) party, a long-time recipient of aid from the National Endowment for Democracy, the US agency created to take over overseas political operations previously performed by the CIA, announced that she would break with the coalition and continue to fight for “the exit” of the Maduro government.

It is these layers that Trump is seeking to strengthen. At the same time, the threat of a direct US military intervention in Venezuela cannot be discounted as mere bluster. Should Washington be compelled to back down from its war threats against North Korea, it may well seek to reaffirm its “credibility” with an act of naked military aggression elsewhere.



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