

US deploys missile destroyer off coast of Venezuela

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In an escalation of the US “maximum pressure” campaign against Venezuela, the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) has deployed a guided-missile destroyer, the USS William P. Lawrence, barely 15 nautical miles off the Caribbean coastline of the South American nation.

Venezuelan Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza issued a statement denouncing the deployment as an “erratic and infantile provocation” on the part of Washington, while ridiculing US claims that it is part of a US operation against drug trafficking.

In the midst of the surging coronavirus pandemic last April, US President Donald Trump announced the deployment of US naval and air assets, the largest such US operation in the region since the 1989 invasion of Panama, on the pretext of preventing drug traffickers from exploiting the COVID-19 outbreak. The justification was preposterous on its face as even Washington’s own agencies acknowledge that the source of the bulk of drugs bound for the US is its own closest ally in the region, Colombia, and that the shipments do not pass through the Caribbean, but up the Pacific Coast and through Central America, through countries whose governments are also aligned with Washington.

In addition to the drug interdiction pretext, the Pentagon also justified the deployment of the advanced warship as a “freedom of navigation” operation designed to challenge what it termed Venezuela’s “excessive maritime claims in international waters.”

“The illegitimate Maduro regime improperly claims excessive controls over those international waters, which extend three nautical miles beyond the 12-nautical mile territorial sea, a claim that is inconsistent with international law,” the US Navy said. It noted that it had similarly deployed warships into waters claimed by Venezuela in June and July.

The “international law” invoked by the Pentagon is the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,

which limits member states’ claims to control over coastal waters to 12 nautical miles. Neither Venezuela nor Washington are signatories to the agreement.

The provocative deployment of the US warship follows by barely two weeks joint exercises conducted by the US and Colombian militaries in a threatening show of force against Venezuela. The exercises were timed to coincide with a four-day Latin American tour by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who visited every country bordering Venezuela, promoting regime change in Caracas and railing against China’s influence in the region.

The US naval provocations are particularly threatening under conditions in which Venezuela is receiving desperately needed gasoline supplies aboard tankers sent from Iran, which is also the target of a “maximum pressure” sanctions campaign and continuous military provocations aimed at achieving regime change in Tehran.

The Faxon, the third in a group of three Iranian tankers carrying fuel, is expected to arrive at a Venezuelan refinery port over the weekend. Together with two Iranian ships that have already reached the country, the Forest and Fortune, the total cargo amounts to 800,000 barrels of gasoline.

While Venezuela has the largest known petroleum reserves, its production has fallen precipitously under the impact of US sanctions, falling global oil prices and a lack of investment and maintenance of the country’s state-owned energy firm, PDVSA. It is also dependent on the import of condensate, a natural gas needed to turn Venezuela’s crude oil into gasoline. Its two functioning refineries are producing just 55,000 barrels per day, roughly 50 percent of the country’s requirements, meaning that the Iranian imports will not go that far.

Nonetheless, Washington is determined to cut off the gasoline imports. Last month, Washington claimed to have intercepted four ships carrying Iranian gasoline to

Venezuela. None of the vessels were Iranian-flagged or owned, and the UAE, Oman and UK-based owners of the cargo shipped on Greek-owned tankers are suing the US government, insisting that the fuel was bound for Trinidad and destined for sale to Colombia and Peru.

If US warships were to attempt to seize Iranian tankers bound for Venezuela, the outcome could be a spiraling military escalation threatening region-wide war in the Middle East or even a global conflict.

Gasoline shortages and a protracted economic crisis sharply exacerbated by onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the official figures standing at nearly 80,000 cases and nearly 650 deaths, have led to growing poverty and hunger as well as a breakdown of basic services in Venezuela.

Lack of fuel, electricity, water and other necessities has triggered a wave of protests in recent weeks. The Venezuelan Observatory of Social Conflict reported over 100 separate protests over the last week in September across 19 of the country's 23 states.

Unlike previous protests, these have been concentrated in small towns and villages in the country's interior and are driven by social unrest, rather than the machinations of the US-backed right-wing opponents of the government of President Nicolás Maduro. Nonetheless, the Maduro government has dispatched troops, police and paramilitary *colectivos*, or militias, to repress them.

The Maduro government has attempted to counter the country's deepening crisis with a further turn to the right. While suppressing popular revolt from below, it pardoned in late August over 100 rightists who engaged in attempted coups and terror plots, in hopes of forging some kind of national unity accord and lending legitimacy to parliamentary elections scheduled for Dec. 6.

In addition, on Tuesday, the Maduro government unveiled what it described as an "anti-blockade" bill that it will submit to the National Constituent Assembly. The most significant clauses in the bill call for measures to "stimulate and favor" the growth of the private sector and foreign direct investment by means of labor and tax incentives along with guarantees of investments.

At the same time, it proposes to grant the government power to "modify the mechanisms of the constitution, property, management, administration and functioning of public enterprises." This has been widely interpreted in Venezuela as opening the door to the privatization of PDVSA or its subsidiaries.

Washington, however, has shown no interest whatsoever in reaching an accommodation with Caracas,

no matter how far Maduro goes in subordinating his regime to the interests of world imperialism. Its latest round of sanctions has targeted not just the Maduro government, but also those elements of the right-wing opposition that have agreed to participate in the Dec. 6 election. This includes representatives of the country's four largest opposition parties: Justice First (PJ), Popular Will (VP), Democratic Action (AD) and A New Time (UNT).

The Trump administration has also successfully pressured the European Union to back out of providing election observers, with the EU now demanding that Maduro postpone the election for six months. The shift in the EU's position was joined with one of the main opposition figures, Henrique Capriles, a former governor and presidential candidate, announcing his withdrawal from the election, joining the demand for its postponement.

Washington's puppet, the self-proclaimed "interim president" Juan Guaidó, meanwhile, has openly called for military intervention to topple Maduro. Addressing remarks to the United Nations, he urged the country's member nations to invoke the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine to justify military action and to "consider a strategy that contemplates different scenarios after the diplomatic route has been exhausted."

Since his self-anointment as president in January of last year, Guaidó has utterly failed to mobilize a popular base of support or to trigger a military coup. He and his coterie of right-wing politicians are implicated in an abortive invasion led by an ex-US special forces operative, as well as in multi-million dollar corruption scandals surrounding their attempts to lay hold of Venezuela's foreign assets.

That he now openly calls for military intervention represents a serious threat under conditions in which a crisis-ridden Trump administration may seek to execute an "October surprise" in the form of a new eruption of American militarism.



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