

Venezuela claims oil-rich territory controlled by Guyana as Pentagon carries out flight operations

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In a speech on Tuesday, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro presented new official maps of the country including the Essequibo, an area the size of Greece that represents two-thirds of the territory claimed by neighboring Guyana. He announced “immediate” plans to exploit the region’s large oil, gas and mineral deposits.

The speech took place after a referendum Sunday in which, according to Venezuelan authorities, more than 95 percent voted for turning the territory into a new Venezuelan state, rejecting a contested 1899 arbitration in Paris that drew the existing border, and opposing the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice.

“Now we really are going to recover Venezuela’s historic rights in Guayana Esequiba,” proclaimed Maduro.

Ahead of the vote, the UN-administered ICJ had ordered Venezuela to refrain from taking any actions until it rules on the border dispute, which could reportedly take years.

For centuries the border dispute was driven by ambitions by the British colonial authorities in British Guiana to control gold deposits found in what was the Spanish Viceroyalty of New Granada, and Gran Colombia after that.

At the end of the 19th century, as the new imperial power in the region, the US administration of Grover Cleveland, backed the Venezuelan claim against Britain ahead of the 1899 international arbitration, which ruled in favor of Britain amid evidence of pro-British complicity of the judges.

After a series of coups and conspiracies by the MI5 and CIA against the bourgeois nationalist Cheddi Jagan and his People’s Progressive Party—at the time oriented to the Stalinist and Castroite leaderships—Guyana was granted “independence” in 1966.

Today, oil deposits found only in 2015 off the shore of the Essequibo and a global context marked by preparations for a new redivision of the world through war have reignited the border dispute over the sparsely populated and remote jungles west of the Essequibo River, which Venezuela considers the natural border.

The Biden administration responded initially to the referendum by posing as a peaceful bystander, with the US State Department calling for “a peaceful resolution of their dispute,” while also hypocritically calling on Venezuela to respect the 1899 ruling.

Since its birth, however, Guyana has been treated by US imperialism as an enclave ruled by puppets of transnational corporations, as evidenced by the hated agreement in 2019 to let a consortium led by US conglomerate ExxonMobil keep 50 percent of the proceeds from its Stabroek offshore oil block.

US imperialism has been the main player stoking tensions in recent years, by building up the tiny and largely volunteer Guyanese military, and chiefly by frequent deployments of US troops to Guyana and Caribbean waters claimed by Venezuela, ostensibly for “exercises.”

The Obama, Trump and now Biden administrations, meanwhile, imposed a devastating sanctions regime aimed at provoking a military overthrow of the Maduro government. Combined with a fall in oil prices, corruption and mismanagement, the sanctions plunged Venezuela into a crisis that shrank the economy by over 80 percent and triggered an exodus of over 7 million Venezuelans.

In the most provocative move yet, the US Southern Command conducted flight operations over Guyana on Thursday, while posting a statement claiming to uphold “its commitment as Guyana’s trusted security partner.”

This took place shortly after Guyanese President Irfaan Ali denounced Maduro for attempting to annex the territory and calling on the US to help “deter” Venezuela.

Even as Washington supports and arms Israel’s ethnic cleansing of Palestine, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken insisted in a call with Ali on Thursday that he could count on the United States’ “unwavering support for Guyana’s sovereignty.”

Amid its proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and support for Israel as part of plans for a broader war in the Middle

East, the Biden administration is eager to secure the Stabroek block, which is producing 600,000 barrels per day (bpd) of oil, and is expected to double this amount by 2027. By comparison, Venezuela has been producing less than 800,000 bpd.

More broadly, US imperialism seeks to keep key resources in the region, particularly the world's largest oil deposits in Venezuela's Orinoco Belt, out of the hands of its main geopolitical rivals, China and Russia.

As summarized in October by US Southern Command chief Laura Richardson, a few weeks after a visit to Guyana:

I worry about the extraction of these resources from these reserves of heavy crude oil [and] light sweet crude that was discovered off the shores of Guyana, the largest growing economy, 25 percent GDP growth anticipated for Guyana over the next 25 years. You have 60 percent of the world's lithium in the lithium triangle, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, and copper, gold. We have the Amazon. So the resources are so rich. And when you look at the strategic competition globally but then also in this hemisphere you want to make sure that adversaries and strategic competitors aren't trying to go there for nefarious reasons to extract. This hemisphere has the potential to feed and fuel the world.

For its part, the Maduro administration is responding to both growing social opposition from below, amid a deepening economic and humanitarian crisis, and the intensified pressures from US imperialism.

The Maduro and Biden administrations reached a deal in October for a license allowing Venezuela to sell oil, gas and gold in return for freeing so-called "political prisoners" and allowing the US-backed opposition candidates to run in general elections in 2024. While Washington said Maduro had until late November to fulfill these conditions, the US State Department declared this week that conditions have not been met but the licenses remain valid, suggesting ongoing talks.

Behind the nationalist rhetoric to be defending the "Fatherland" and the calls for "national unity," the Maduro regime speaks for a section of the Venezuelan ruling class hoping to reach a new agreement with US imperialism on how to divide the profits from the exploitation of Venezuelan workers. It seeks to use its ties to China and Russia as leverage for this, as demonstrated by plans by Maduro to visit Moscow later this month, and the fact that

Venezuela had continued exporting most of its oil to China despite US sanctions.

In this process, however, Maduro is following the same reactionary path as the Putin government when invading Ukraine in 2022 or the Iraqi Saddam Hussein government when invading Kuwait in 1990, which US imperialism exploited to carry out long-planned military operations against its targets.

Despite the threats from the Pentagon, the Venezuelan Bolivarian Armed Forces have begun explicit preparations for a military takeover of the territory, including building roads and bridges on the northern end of the border, while Maduro said corporations operating in Essequibo have three months to leave. On Thursday, the Venezuelan Minister of Defense Vladimir Padrino announced the designation of generals who will be in charge of the "Operational Zone for the Integral Defense of Guyana Esequiba."

Notably, the Lula da Silva government in Brazil has carried out its own military buildup along its borders with Venezuela and Guyana. Representing the regional power ambitions of the Brazilian oligarchy, Lula is effectively warning Caracas that it needs its permission to act.

As demonstrated by the history of Guyana and similar disputes across South America since colonial times, it is through borders and nation states that imperialism exploits the workers and peasants and controls the resources, with the help of the local ruling elites.

Exposing the Pan-South-American pretensions of Hugo Chavez and his Bolivarianism, which were once combined with limited social reforms, the dead end of all bourgeois nationalist movements is being clearly revealed by the development of the crisis of global capitalism, with Latin America being increasingly dragged into a third world war.

The only progressive response is the independent mobilization of workers in Venezuela, Guyana and across the continent, against capitalism and its outmoded nation states and for the establishment of the United Socialist States of the Americas.



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