

Military tensions rise in South America after Venezuela claims oil-rich region controlled by Guyana

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After the government of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro claimed the oil-rich Essequibo region controlled by Guyana through a referendum held on December 3, military tensions in South America have escalated. Military operations have been carried out by the US and planned by the UK as the Guyana Defense Forces, and Brazil, the region's largest country, sent troops and arms to the border region with Venezuela and Guyana.

In an international context dominated by the US and NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and Israel's genocide backed by the imperialist powers in Gaza that threatens to engulf Iran, Venezuela and Guyana are aligning themselves with rival sides of a future third world war.

Since the government of former president Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), Venezuela has maintained strong economic and military relations with China, Russia and to a lesser extent Iran, countries that the head of the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), Laura Richardson, denounced in October as "strategic competitors [of the US] who have malign intentions" in South America.

In a telephone conversation between Maduro and Russian President Vladimir Putin on December 21, both defended "a fair multipolar world order" and "the rejection of illegal sanctions," which have been used by US imperialism to undermine both countries economically and to attempt regime change. Putin also advocated Venezuela joining BRICS, a bloc formed by Brazil, Russia, India and South Africa, which recently included Iran and seven other countries to counter US hegemony.

On the other hand, Guyana, a former British colony and member of the Commonwealth that in recent years has seen soaring economic growth due to huge offshore oil reserves discovered and exploited mainly by the American company Exxon Mobil, has sought the support of the US and the UK against the threat of annexation by the Maduro government. Having guaranteed "unwavering support" for Guyana, the Pentagon carried out an air operation in Essequibo on December 7, and Guyanese President Irfaan Ali has repeated that he may allow the US to install a military base in the country.

On Sunday, December 24, the United Kingdom announced the deployment of the warship HMS Trent to Guyana for military exercises with its Defense Force. This follows the SOUTHCOM-sponsored military exercise Tradewinds 23, held in July, which for

the second time in the last three years was hosted by Guyana and saw the participation of 21 countries, including the United Kingdom and Brazil.

Venezuela's defense minister, Vladimir Padrino López, responded that same day by writing on X/Twitter that the British initiative is a "provocation that puts the peace and stability of the Caribbean and our America at risk." He added: "A warship in waters to be delimited? ... What about the commitment to good neighborliness and peaceful coexistence? What about the agreement not to threaten or use force against each other under any circumstances?"

López was referring to the agreement reached between Presidents Maduro and Ali on December 14 in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, whose president, Ralph Gonsalves, heads the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). According to the agreement, the two countries undertook "not to make threats or use force," but rather to seek solutions to the crisis in accordance with "international law" and the "peaceful coexistence and unity of Latin America and the Caribbean." Another meeting is scheduled to take place in Brazil within the next three months.

Despite the claims in the final declaration, the crisis is far from over. Ali has insisted that the "International Court of Justice (ICJ) will decide the dispute over the borders between Guyana and Venezuela," whose origins date back to the 19th century. The Maduro government, however, has insisted that it does not recognize the ICJ's jurisdiction, and that Guyana did not have the right to grant oil exploration concessions to Exxon Mobil in a disputed territory.

The government of Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Workers Party – PT) has been working closely with the US government of President Joe Biden to mediate the crisis between Venezuela and Guyana. Due to the possibility of an invasion by Venezuela crossing through Brazilian territory, the Lula government's defense minister, José Múcio, has warned, "if a more energetic 'you won't pass here' is necessary, we are prepared for it."

This has led the Lula government to escalate its military presence as a deterrent to any Venezuelan initiative in the sensitive Amazon region bordering both countries. He has moved up by two years the transformation of the 12th Mechanized Cavalry

Squadron in Boa Vista, capital of the northern state of Roraima, into the 18th Mechanized Cavalry Regiment, which will increase the number of troops from 230 to 700.

Sixteen armored tanks and dozens of surface-to-surface missiles similar to the American Javelin, widely used by Ukraine against Russia, are also being sent to Boa Vista's military base.

Since the fraudulent impeachment of PT president Dilma Rousseff in 2016, the Amazon region has been the stage for military exercises with the participation of the US armed forces. In 2017, Brazil and the US, alongside Peru and Colombia (which host most of the US bases in Latin America), carried out the first war games in the region. The military exercise marked a new stage of the US imperialism's "pivot to Latin America" offensive to counter China's growing presence in the region.

In 2020, under the government of fascist President Jair Bolsonaro, a close ally of then-US President Donald Trump, the Brazilian armed forces held the largest military exercise in the Amazon region, simulating a war with an "enemy country," with clear reference to Venezuela. It took place amid increasing US threats against the Maduro government and the largest recent US military deployment in Latin America.

Since Lula's inauguration earlier this year, his government has deepened its military partnership with the US while providing criminal political cover for the Biden administration as it tries to assert US imperialism's strategic interests in the region it historically considers its "backyard." As part of this process, 1,200 Brazilian military personnel and 300 American military personnel carried out a military exercise between November 1 and 16 on the border between Brazil and French Guiana—the same Amazon rainforest environment as the triple border region between Brazil, Venezuela and Guyana.

According to Brazilian Gen. Luciano Guilherme Cabral Pinheiro, head of the Northern Military Command, the aim of the Combined Operation and Rotation Exercise (CORE) was to "expand interoperability" between the armies of Brazil, the US and "forces made up of NATO member countries," in addition to "ensuring that the Brazilian Army is trained to take part in international operations." Since 2019, Brazil has been a "Major Non-NATO Ally," a position surpassed only by Colombia, which since 2018 has been the only Latin American country to be a "global partner" of NATO.

The crisis between Venezuela and Guyana has been used by the Bolsonaro-led opposition to the Lula government to advance a proposed constitutional amendment that increases the defense budget from 1.1 percent to 2 percent of Brazil's GDP. The measure, however, is also being promoted by leading officials in the Lula government, including its Defense Minister. If approved, the measure would add to an investment of 53 billion reais (11 billion US dollars) already announced by Lula in July to boost the national defense industry. These actions are at the core of the PT's bourgeois nationalist answer to the tensions with the Brazilian armed forces that emerged in the attempted fascist coup on January 8.

Maduro's claim to Essequibo is based on the capitalist character of his "Bolivarian" government. The Venezuelan bourgeoisie doesn't want to be left out of the exploitation of oil, and Maduro's

administration sees the enterprise as a way of boosting a severely deteriorated economy and profiting politically ahead of the general elections scheduled for next year. His government also reportedly intends to reactivate PetroCaribe, a partnership between Venezuela and 16 Caribbean countries for the sale of oil and fuel at favorable prices. Launched in 2005 by the Chávez government, it was virtually halted due to US sanctions in 2019.

Despite the Maduro government's anti-imperialist rhetoric, which has mainly targeted Exxon Mobil's actions in Essequibo, it has relentlessly sought a diplomatic rapprochement with the US. Seeing oil exploitation in Venezuela, the country with the largest known reserves in the world, as a way of minimizing the Ukraine war's impact on global fuel prices and of undermining oil exportation to China, the US government has slightly relaxed its crippling economic sanctions on Venezuela over the last year.

At the same time, Washington sees the relaxation of sanctions against Caracas as a way of getting its candidate, María Corina Machado, into next year's general elections. This process has also been overseen by Brazil, which has mediated negotiations between the Maduro government and the US-backed Venezuelan opposition.

In the latest move toward rapprochement between Venezuela and the US, an exchange of prisoners was announced on December 20. Venezuela released 30 prisoners, including two former members of the US armed forces who took part in an operation in 2020 to overthrow Maduro, and Roberto Abdul, a member of the commission that coordinated the opposition primaries. In exchange, the US released Alex Saab, a former Venezuelan diplomat convicted on trumped-up money laundering charges.

Maduro's claim on Essequibo has nothing to do with the interests of the Venezuelan working class, let alone the workers of Guyana. Amid a growing domestic crisis, Maduro is trying to deflect a series of internal tensions outwards and, responding to growing geopolitical tensions, to stay in power and guarantee the interests of a sector of the Venezuelan bourgeoisie that has benefited from *Chavismo* since 1999.

As recent developments have shown, imperialism's ferocious drive to world war, alongside the bankruptcy of bourgeois nationalism, including its "Pink Tide" variant, are threatening to transform South America—sooner rather than later—into a battleground. The only way to answer this threat is for the workers and youth of Venezuela, Guyana and all of Latin America to unite with the American and international working class in an anti-war movement based on an internationalist socialist program.



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