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**The Venezuelan Crisis and its
Eurasian Implications**

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The Venezuelan Crisis and its Eurasian Implications

In a new era of globalization shaped by a rising geopoliticalization and entrenched great power rivalries, critical junctures in the international system might turn out as nodal points of global conflict systems. A recent example is Venezuela. Its besieged Maduro government is currently supported – among others - by three significant Eurasian powers, namely China, Russia, and Turkey, while the US and most other Western governments back the opposition under its leader Juan Guaidó. As stakes are high in this geopolitical conflict, tensions are now heating up also internationally.

Vested economic interests

Especially China and Russia have vested economic interests in Venezuela that are competing with Washington's hegemonic claims over the region.

For Russia, Venezuela is an important arms customer that has bought the biggest part of its modern-day military arsenal from Russia. Even more important, Russia's national oil company, Rosneft, led by Igor Sechin, one of Russia's most powerful men, has invested about \$9 billion in Venezuelan oil projects since 2010. Rosneft is still waiting for the economic break even, being owed roughly \$ 3 billion from Venezuela, while owning two offshore gas-fields in the country. [\[Vox\]](#) Based on such significant investment stakes, Rosneft has just ignored the imposed U.S. embargo and recently sent shipments of heavy naphtha to Venezuela which is the starting point to extract heavy crude oil. Meanwhile, president Maduro had moved the headquarters of Venezuela's European oil subsidiary from Lisbon to Moscow. [\[Salon\]](#)

For China, Venezuela has become an important source for its huge demand of energy supply after Sino-Venezuelan relations markedly intensified since the beginning of Hugo Chávez's presidency in 1999. [See Joseph Y. Cheng and Huangao Shi, "Sino-Venezuelan Relations: Beyond Oil," *Issues & Studies*, 44, no. 3 (September 2008): 99-147 (137)].

Critical support by Russia, China and Turkey

After the US had recognized Guaidó as Venezuela's rightful interim president, US adversaries Russia and China but also Turkey, strongly condemned the move which President Putin called a "[d]estructive interference from abroad [that] blatantly violates basic norms of international law."

Following prior Russian deliveries, China has now also delivered humanitarian aid to Caracas in form of 65 tons of medical supply. [\[Anadolou\]](#)

Moreover, amid accusations of the Maduro government that the recent blackouts in Caracas were orchestrated by Washington, Beijing has also offered to help fix the country's electricity grid. Also, in support of Maduro, Beijing has cancelled a high-profile meeting organized by the Washington-based Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) in China over its refusal of a diplomatic visa for participating Guaidó. [\[Newsweek\]](#).

Particularly noteworthy, however, is Turkey's support for Maduro, both diplomatically as well as in terms of bilateral gold trade, as Turkey is a major NATO ally that has recently

shown strong signs of rapprochement with Russia and Iran amid increasing tensions with Washington.

In January, Venezuela's Minister of Industry and former Vice-President, Tareck El Aissami, met Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Ankara to finalize an agreement on gold trading. Venezuelan-born himself, Aissami's father is linked to Iraq's former Baathist regime, while he, Aissami, is reported to have links with Syria, Iran, Cuba, and the Lebanese Hezbollah. Having been designated a drug dealer by the US in 2017, criminal charges were brought against Aissami by the US Attorney's Office in New York last week for violating sanctions by using a US-based air transport company "to set up private meetings around the globe including Turkey and Russia." [Kurdistan 24]. After a US Treasury Department's Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing has warned Ankara in early February about Turkish trade with Venezuela, US Special Representative for Venezuela, Elliott Abrams declared last week "Turkey's support for the Maduro regime" in Venezuela "is completely contrary to US policy and very unhelpful" to warn: "We will continue to take a look at the ways in which [Turkey's] support" to Venezuela "takes place and in the context of sanctions by [the] Treasury [Department.]" [Kurdistan 24].

Turkey, however, seemed not much impressed answering: "Turkey, like many countries, recognizes the Maduro Government, which came to power through elections, as the legitimate government of the country in accordance with international law and as represented in the UN," reiterating: "Turkey is against attempts to replace legitimate governments through foreign intervention and by resorting to undemocratic means. Besides, Turkey conducts its trade with Venezuela in accordance with international trade regulations and in a transparent way". [Ahval]

Monroe Doctrine – invoked and refused

The most noteworthy development, however, is the deployment of around 100 Russian troops and military equipment to Venezuela, after Russia had conducted joint air drills with Venezuela over the Caribbean last December as a clear and daring warning to the US.

While Russia has sent some military advisers to Venezuela in the past, even the low number of around 100 Russian soldiers in Venezuela has been seen as making an essential difference, be it merely symbolic or not. [Vox] Reportedly, the Russian soldiers sent to Caracas are primarily working on the 2014 purchased Russian S-300 air-defense systems, which may have been damaged by recent widespread power outages and which seem to be brought into a state of operational readiness now. Moreover, some Russian experts seem also to be sent in relation to the opening of a helicopter training center on March 29 which has been built with Moscow's support. Noteworthy, helicopters are a state-of-the-art weapon to get control of a kind of uprising the Maduro administration might have to face if things escalate further. In any case, the Russian deployment is setting a sign.

In fact, the move came only shortly after the 'Russian-Venezuelan Threat Mitigation Act' passed the US House of Representatives. The act requests the US administration to provide a threat assessment and strategic approach for dealing with Russia's growing military sway in Venezuela.

Before the troops were moved, both sides held intense diplomatic exchanges on the Venezuelan crisis. After a first meeting of U.S. Special envoy for Venezuela, Abrams, and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov in Rome, Abrams underlined as a mutual outcome “a better understanding of the other’s views”. The Russian side reiterated much tougher that it had strongly warned the US “against any temptation to resort to military power” in Venezuela, quoting the Deputy Foreign Minister as saying: “We assume that Washington treats our priorities seriously, our approach and warnings.” [\[VoA\]](#)

Then, when the Russian deployment materialized, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had a phone call with his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, saying that Moscow's dispatch of military personnel to Venezuela would be increasing tensions there, warning that Washington will not "stand idly by." [\[Radio Free Europe\]](#) Lavrov's response according to the Russian Foreign Ministry was that he believed the US had tried to organize a coup in Venezuela which violated the United Nations charter. [\[New York Times 1\]](#)

The US response became more pointed when the White House warned that it viewed the sending of troops and military equipment to Venezuela as a “direct threat” to the region’s security.

The strongest response came from President Trump’s national security adviser John Bolton, who declared: “We’re not afraid to use the phrase ‘Monroe Doctrine’ in this administration,” [\[Reuters\]](#) to issue a strongly worded formal statement based on this core principle of US grand strategy: “We strongly caution actors external to the Western Hemisphere against deploying military assets to Venezuela, or elsewhere in the Hemisphere, with the intent of establishing or expanding military operations,”. [\[Powerline blog\]](#) Bolton also tweeted that the U.S. "will not tolerate hostile foreign military powers meddling" within the Western Hemisphere. [\[Newsweek\]](#). Previously, in a fierce Miami speech in February, President Trump had already formulated a sort of new Monroe doctrine against Venezuela which he strongly linked with the fight against socialism in Latin America. [\[youtube\]](#)

With the present state of affairs, two red lines are at least emerging: the stern US rejection of a Russian military presence in support for Maduro and the likewise determined Russian rejection of a stronger US engagement in favor of Guaidó. The entire situation is dangerously reminiscent of the Syrian theater, albeit now looming in the US backyard. [\[New York Times 2\]](#)

Occasional reference to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis [\[Newsweek\]](#) only reinforces the perception of a dangerous course even if the situation is far from being as serious at present.

Things came worse when not only Russia refused to reconsider its military presence, but Beijing resolutely stood by to defend its Russian partners. In surprisingly strong words, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson stated that "countries in the Western Hemisphere, including Latin American countries, are all sovereign states," so "they have the right to determine their own foreign policy and their way to engage in mutually beneficial cooperation with countries of their own choosing."

"Latin American affairs are not a certain country's exclusive business, nor is Latin America a certain country's backyard," he added.

These remarks highlight the broader structural context of the present conflict and its symbolical impact. China has, in fact, effectively challenged the US dominance in Latin America and the Caribbean for quite some time. Back in 2005, at a hearing of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee of the House International Relations Committee, U.S. Congressman Dan Burton notably stated with regard to the rising Chinese influence in Chavez's Venezuela: "China's rising economic, political, and military influence in the Western Hemisphere poses serious challenges to the U.S. in the years ahead [...]. We must work in earnest to prevent this from happening" [See Joseph Y. Cheng and Huangao Shi, "Sino-Venezuelan Relations: Beyond Oil," *Issues & Studies*, 44, no. 3 (September 2008): 99-147 (137)]. Yet, the structural shift did not necessarily need to be addressed by a forceful and defined US response for the meanwhile.

This is somehow different now. After the US has identified a "direct threat" to their backyard's security in form of a foreign military presence and after having addressed that threat in the framework of the Monroe doctrine – after all "the operating definition of the American national interest" [Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, Simon & Schuster, 1994, p. 812 f.] – the situation has become tricky. Even if things will not escalate between the US on the one hand and Russia and China on the other – not to speak of NATO ally Turkey –, the Venezuelan crisis might be about to emerge as a modest contribution to the history of global order.

What actually is about to emerge in Venezuela in the coming days will probably not manifest in a Syrian-like proxy-war, although the specter is lurking around the corner. The US administration, despite its bold reference to the Monroe Doctrine, has so far been notably cautious in its announcements of possible consequences. While it resorted to "ritual reminders that 'all options are on the table'," there were no threats of military actions and – until present – there are also no indications that any military intervention is being seriously contemplated. [[New York Times 2](#)].

What is at stake to a certain degree though is the credibility of the Monroe Doctrine and the US' momentum concerning the currently reshaping world order.

The resolute rejection of the Monroe doctrine by Moscow and Beijing in the given situation, points at a critical juncture not only in the reproduction of a US dominated regional order but also to the global state of affairs indeed, where the pivot of power seems to shift to a non-Western dominated Eurasia.

After all, and somehow ironically, it was the Venezuela Crisis of 1902-1903, a naval blockade against Venezuela by Great Britain, Germany, and Italy, over Caracas' rebuff to pay off its foreign debt, which prompted President Theodore Roosevelt to invoke the Monroe doctrine. This led the US to intervene in the crisis, and, by doing it, lay the foundations for the US to emerge as an international, especially an international naval power at the turn of the new century.

While the Venezuela Crisis of 1902/3 was a shaping moment for the crafting of US hegemony in the Western hemisphere, the current Venezuelan crisis could put this very US hegemony to a critical test.

At the same time, China's sovereignty claims in the South China Sea and over Taiwan strongly echo the Monroe Doctrine. [Robert D. Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*, Random House, 2015, p. 49] Even if the Venezuelan crisis will eventually enter safer waters, these Chinese interests are increasingly clashing

with the US' and its allies' efforts to ensure the freedom of navigation in the Eastern hemisphere.

In all these regards, the Venezuelan crisis might indeed become an interesting representation of the current state of the global system. As such, the crisis highlights both the world order's irritating dynamics and emerging entanglements much under the sign of an increasing 'Eurasiazation' with a Sino-Russian partnership as its single most significant factor.

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