People look for food in garbage dumped outside a looted supermarket 21 April 2017 in the El Valle neighborhood of Caracas, Venezuela, after demonstrations against the government of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. (Photo by Ronaldo Schemidt, Agence France-Presse)

The Collapse of Venezuela and Its Impact on the Region

Dr. R. Evan Ellis

In May 2017, as the number killed during protests against the regime of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela climbed toward 40, and with more than 130 injured and over 1,300 arrests, many in the United States and the region asked, "How much longer could it go on?"[1] In addition to the crisis within Venezuela, the collapse of its economy and the escalating criminal and political violence have also

produced a massive outflow of refugees to neighboring Colombia and Brazil, to the nearby Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago, Aruba, and Curaçao, and to other locales throughout the region. In total, an estimated 1.5 million of Venezuela's 32 million people have left the country since the government of Hugo Chávez came to power in 1999.[2] Venezuela's neighbors watch the unfolding drama not only with concern for the Venezuelan people but also from the perspective of how that crisis could affect them as it deepens and possibly becomes more violent.[3]

The situation in Venezuela is often mistakenly diagnosed as principally a political or economic crisis.[4] It is better understood as a criminal act without precedent in Latin America: the capture and systematic looting of a state, achieved by first capturing its institutions through mass mobilization and bureaucratic machinations, then increasing control of the state through military force, as the criminal nature of the act and its consequences become apparent to the nation's citizens. Former Venezuelan government officials have suggested that as much as $300 billion may have been diverted over the last decade from national coffers to private accounts through the currency control system alone.[5]

The crisis in Venezuela is a problem for the country and the region that neither international law nor existing multilateral institutions are well equipped to handle. For neighboring states, politically acceptable alternatives appear to be few. For example, it is unlikely that the United States, or organizations such as the United Nations or the Organization of American States (OAS), will choose to physically intervene or be able to act in a manner sufficiently impactful to alter the current trajectory of Venezuela toward a broader and more violent internal crisis. Yet, both the United States and multilateral institutions do have plausible alternatives and may yet have the ability to play a decisive role in managing the consequences of that crisis for the region without direct intervention.

The Situation in Venezuela

It is difficult to anticipate when or how the Maduro regime in Venezuela will collapse, yet it is clear that its current course is both economically and politically unsustainable. In economic terms, destructive government policies, including expropriations, price controls, and currency controls, in combination with rampant corruption and mismanagement in government enterprises, have progressively eliminated the capacity of the Venezuelan economy to produce even the most basic goods required by the people of the country to survive. Additionally, declining petroleum output, high production costs, debt service obligations, an accumulation of adverse legal judgments from past expropriations, and increasing reluctance of creditors (even politically supportive China and Russia) to lend new money are shutting off Venezuela's access to hard currency to buy goods from abroad, even though international oil prices have recently trended upward.[6]

Defaulting on the loan obligations of Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (Venezuela's state-owned oil company, PDVSA) to use the hard currency to import more goods (to ease political pressures) would trigger legal consequences that could bring about the seizure of the company's assets, even oil shipments abroad, aggravating the regime's liquidity crisis in a way that could endanger its ability to maintain power.[7] The Venezuelan government has thus engaged in an increasingly desperate series of delays, legal actions, and fund shifting to make bond payments, while making a minimum quantity of foreign currency available to state organs and friends of the regime for the purpose of importing goods to maintain the support of the military and other key regime support groups.[8]

These measures have included drawing down remaining international reserves (largely in gold), continuing to expropriate companies such as General Motors, rolling over bond payments, mortgaging assets such as the petroleum refiner and distributor CITGO, seeking new loans from state partners such as China and trusted companies such as Rosneft,

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and filing creative legal actions to delay decisions and awards against the government.[9] Yet, little new credit is coming in, and the government is running out of assets to mortgage and legal options to postpone payments.

Venezuela is unable to produce needed goods domestically and lacks the cash to import them. The result, as increasingly evidenced in reports coming out of Venezuela, is ever greater scarcity of everything from food and medicine to toilet paper. Store shelves are empty, and people are spending significant portions of their day seeking food and other necessities.[10] Seventy-two percent of Venezuelans report having lost weight in the past year because of such shortages.[11] As *Wall Street Journal* reporter John Forero put it, "Venezuela is starving."[12]

The Maduro government has attempted to address the political implications of such shortages by appointing the military to distribute scarce food.[13] As a result, the system mainly channels the little available food to those who support the regime while also ensuring the military both has reliable access to food for itself as well as opportunities for earning money by selling food on the black market.[14]

With respect to political dynamics, the maneuvers adopted by the Maduro regime have demonstrated its determination to maintain power at any cost and its unwillingness to pursue a sincere political compromise or a constitutional solution that could result in its loss of power. A string of events and U.S. government actions in recent years against leaders in the current Venezuelan regime has highlighted that there are likely solid criminal cases against a significant number of persons in that government, thus signaling to them that a loss of political power could lead to their extradition and imprisonment in the United States. Indicative events include the July 2014 arrest of former Venezuelan security chief Hugo Carbajal when he left the country to become his country's ambassador to Aruba, the November 2015 arrest in Haiti (and subsequent conviction on narcotrafficking charges) of Maduro's nephews, and the U.S. Treasury Department's February 2017 designation of Venezuelan Vice President Tareck El Aissami as a foreign narcotrafficking kingpin.[15]

Reflecting such incentives to maintain power, Maduro and his fellow Chavista elites have violated Venezuela's constitutional order in increasingly egregious ways, demonstrating that a resolution of Venezuela's political and economic crisis through democratic processes is increasingly improbable. Key actions in this regard include dubious rulings by the pro-Maduro National Electoral Council and the Venezuelan Supreme Court

- preventing the opposition from using the supermajority it won in December 2015 elections (by blocking the seating of three opposition congressmen, giving pro-Maduro legislators two-thirds of the chamber);
- blocking a constitutionally stipulated recall referendum against the president;
- stripping the opposition-dominated congress of budgetary and other authority;
- ruling unconstitutional virtually all of the initiatives passed by that congress;
- postponing state and local elections; and
- eliminating key opposition leaders, including jailing Leopoldo López and disqualifying Henrique Capriles.

The Maduro regime has further begun a process of "renewing" the nation's political parties, likely designed to disqualify parties and leaders hostile to the regime if currently delayed local elections or future presidential elections are held.[16] Its boldest step to date, however, was its May 2017 initiative to form a constituent assembly and rewrite the constitution, a process almost certain to eliminate the elected opposition-dominated parliament.[17]

If such actions demonstrate the unwillingness of the Maduro regime to respect constitutional processes and limits that could lead to their loss of power, the Venezuelan military has equally demonstrated its unwillingness to intervene to restore the democratic order or to avert a further economic and political meltdown in the country. While Venezuela's armed forces have traditionally acted as guarantors of the nation's constitutional order, during the eighteen years of rule by populist leader Hugo Chávez and his successor, Maduro, the military has been politicized and heavily indoctrinated with pro-regime ideology. In addition, virtually the entire cadre of its senior leaders has been replaced by regime loyalists.

Further decreasing the likelihood that the armed forces would act to restore Venezuela's constitutional order, the military leadership (and particularly the National Guard) has become too deeply involved in drug trafficking, contraband, and other illicit activities to risk allowing or bringing about such change.[18] Furthermore, the regime has embedded Cuban intelligence and counterintelligence agents throughout the military to keep an eye out for defectors.[19]

Venezuela's President Nicolás Maduro (*right*) and Vice President Tareck El Aissami shake hands 14 February 2017 during a meeting with governors in Caracas, Venezuela. El Aissami is heavily involved in drug trafficking and has been widely reported to be providing material and financial support to terrorist groups in the Middle East, including Hezbollah and Hamas. He would assume the Venezuelan presidency under the current Venezuelan constitution if Maduro were forced from office before scheduled elections in October 2018. (Photo courtesy of Venezuelan Government/Miraflores Palace handout)

While the United States has been highly critical of the actions of the Maduro regime, it has not, to date, indicated a disposition to move beyond the imposition of economic sanctions.[20] And, while the OAS under Secretary Luis Almagro has strongly denounced the interruption of the democratic order in Venezuela, the organization principally functions on consensus, and the block of left-leaning anti-U.S. governments represented by the Bolivarian Alliance for the People of Our Americas (ALBA) continues to oppose any anti-Venezuela action by the OAS.[21] Venezuela's fellow ALBA countries may not agree with Maduro's decisions in governing Venezuela, but, arguably, they do not find it in their strategic interest for the OAS (in which the United States is an important actor) to condemn Venezuela or play a significant role in the region's politics in general. Even if the OAS were to expel Venezuela from the organization for violation of its democratic charter, the Maduro regime already gave its notice in April of its intention to leave the body.[22]

Similarly, while the United Nations Security Council, in theory, could authorize an intervention in Venezuela, permanent members Russia and China would likely veto such action, insofar as each has significant business interests in the country, as well as strategic interest in the persistence of a Venezuelan regime that actively resists the expansion of U.S. influence in the region.[23]

Adding to Venezuela's problems, the probability that violence will escalate is increased by the government's creation and deployment throughout the country of *collectivos,* relatively undisciplined armed bands of civilians, to enforce its will. This will ensure a high cost in lives of Venezuela's own military or of a foreign military if anyone attempts to change the regime by force.

Potential Scenarios for Venezuela

The plausible scenarios for Venezuela (all negative) loosely fall into three groups, based on assumptions regarding which side prevails and whether violence is sustained or dissipates: (1) resistance burnout and consolidation of the criminal state, (2) escalating violence resolved by imposition of a pseudodemocratic compromise regime, and (3) prolonged criminality, repression, and insurgency.

Resistance burnout and consolidation of the criminal state. In this scenario, the military and the government maintain cohesion, and there is no foreign intervention. Eventually, through the regime's control of resources and brutal repression (including violence by the collectivos), the majority of civil resistance is

suppressed or flees the country. Millions depart the country as economic or political refugees, or to escape the criminal violence. With the diminishing of resistance, the regime consolidates its totalitarian order, probably imposing a new constitution and legislative body. Following the imposition of stability, Maduro is killed or pressured to step down, and power passes to a new leader, similarly committed to the populist ideology and the criminal enterprise, but with more rational economic policies and improved managerial capabilities.

With some stability and improved leadership, key anti-United States statist investors such as the Chinese and the Russians begin loaning new money to the regime, further expanding their access to Venezuela's oil resources. New credit from these allies, possibly assisted by rising petroleum prices, supports further consolidation of power by the regime.

Escalating violence resolved by imposition of a compromise regime. In this scenario, violence increases significantly over that manifested in May 2017, possibly involving sporadic major confrontations between collectivos and Venezuelans identifying with the opposition and demanding the restoration of the previous constitutional order. Armed, self-interested groups are involved on all sides.

Violence exceeds the ability of Venezuela's National Guard to control; the regular military, already reluctant to participate in the repression of civilians, is deployed but refuses to act, possibly with some units dissolving or declaring themselves loyal to the opposition. Key extrahemispheric players, including the Chinese and the Russians, make a tacit agreement with the opposition in return for guarantees of the protection of their businesses and other interests in the country. Maduro and other key regime leaders are killed or leave the country, while others cut a deal for a power transition, with the support of key military leaders, in return for limited immunity and protection from extraditions.

Prolonged criminality, repression, and insurgency. In this scenario, like the prior one, violence increases significantly, and the regular military splinters or is too unreliable to be employed. Some key figures possibly flee the country. By contrast to the previous scenario, however, a deal involving a power transition cannot be achieved. Key external players such as Russia and China maintain a "wait-and-see" posture. Protest-based violence, including selective attacks against protesters by collectivos, deteriorates into broader, bloodier efforts by pro-regime forces to intimidate or silence regime opponents through large-scale violence, sparking reprisals by anti-Maduro groups, and occasionally drawing the National Guard and regular military forces into the conflict.

Continuing violence, including possible sabotage of oil installations and other government assets, leads to a broad economic collapse and the highest outflow of refugees of the three contemplated scenarios. In this scenario, major foreign actors, including China, would likely coordinate to evacuate their workers. Depending on the risk posed to Russian, Chinese, and other oil installations, United Nations Security Council agreement to a peacekeeping or peace enforcement mission could be possible, presuming that Chavista forces would see permitting such deployments as advantageous, or would no longer be able to block them.

There is no inherent limit to the deepening of suffering, violence, and criminality that could occur. Indeed, the economic plight and abuses by the regimes in Zimbabwe and North Korea serve as reminders of how much a people can suffer at the hands of a totalitarian regime that pursues irrational policies but is determined to maintain itself in power with the acquiescence of its military.

Implications for Venezuela's Neighbors

Each scenario discussed implies an expansion of the already significant outflow of refugees to neighboring Colombia and Brazil, nearby Caribbean islands such as Aruba, Curaçao, and Trinidad and Tobago, and the rest of the region, as well as the export of arms and broader impacts on the criminal and political landscape.

Colombia. Historically, people and goods have always moved relatively freely across the Venezuela-Colombia border; the mother of Maduro was born in Colombia, and possibly the president himself was as well.[24] Nonetheless, the influx of Venezuelans into Cúcuta and other Colombian border towns has created some resentment among Colombians. Some perceive the new arrivals as competing with them for jobs, particularly in the informal sector, and some believe the refugees have undermined security.[25]

In 2016 alone, over 150,000 people entered Colombia from Venezuela.[26] Some enter on a temporary basis to earn money in the informal or illicit economy and purchase goods not available in their

Venezuelan National Guard soldiers stand on a highway 3 May 2017 overlooking an antigovernment march trying to make its way to the National Assembly in Caracas, Venezuela. More than a hundred Venezuelan protesters were detained and put before military tribunals that week, a sudden upsurge in the use of a practice that legal activists say violates the constitution, which limits military courts to "offenses of a military nature." (Photo by Fernando Llano, Associated Press)

home country, while others choose to remain indefinitely.[27] The Colombian border town of Cúcuta has been the focus of this movement, with significant increases in the population of Venezuelans in the city, including those who work in the informal sector as prostitutes and street vendors, and in other activities. A portion of those crossing the border from Venezuela into Colombia are actually Colombians by birth who had immigrated to Venezuela years or decades prior in search of economic opportunity or to escape violence.

Colombia's major cities such as Bogotá, Medellín, and Cali have also registered significant increases in Venezuelans.[28] However, because two major roads from Venezuela's capital, Caracas, converge on the Colombian border near Cúcuta, an expanded flow of migrants from a deteriorating situation in Venezuela would probably concentrate there and, to a lesser extent, to the north in La Guajira department, including the town of Riohacha, and Valledupar in Cesar department. Nonetheless, some of those leaving Venezuela will also enter Colombia at more southerly points, including Arauca, Puerto Carreño, and Inírida, where controls are weaker.

Of those who initially migrated to Venezuela from Colombia, many now returning are expected to settle in the border region, since they have family or other contacts in the region.[29] Of those arriving from cities on Venezuela's Caribbean coast, such as Caracas, Puerto Cabello, Maracay, and Valencia, many will likely migrate toward Colombia's own Caribbean coast, to cities such as Maicao, Barranquilla, and Sincelejo, where the climate and culture are familiar. By contrast, Venezuelans coming from more rural areas to the south of the nation's principal mountain range will likely gravitate toward cities in the interior of Colombia on the other side of its flatlands, such as Villavicencio and Bogotá.

(Map courtesy of Google Maps)

Venezuela and Neighboring Countries

Other migration routes notwithstanding, the focus of migration on Cúcuta and La Guajira raises particular concerns for Colombia since the area, particularly Catatumbo and other parts of the province of Norte de Santander, is a hotbed of criminal and terrorist activity, with Colombia's notorious Gulf Clan and the National Liberation Army (ELN) vying to fill in areas being vacated by the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC).[30] In this complex dynamic, the newly arriving immigrants are both potential victims of and recruits for those organizations. Indeed, given the established history of cross-border smuggling, Colombian security officials believe that some people crossing the border are moving drugs and contraband, among other illicit activities.

Further to the south, in border towns such as Arica, Puerto Carreño, and Inírida, although the current and expected volume of immigration from Venezuela is less of a problem, the area is the center of the illicit mining for coltan, a strategic mineral used in a wide array of advanced batteries and electronics products.

In addition to the potentially destabilizing impact of refugee flows on both the Colombian economy and centers of organized crime in the country, Colombian security experts worry that some of Venezuela's collectivos and other groups will sell their FN FAL (light automatic) rifles and other military equipment to help maintain themselves, flooding contested criminal areas such as Catatumbo with arms as well as people in economic need.[31]

As the Venezuelan crisis deepens and the flow of refugees grows, de facto encampments are likely to form, particularly around Cúcuta. It will be in the interest of Colombia to formally manage such camps to alleviate suffering and to prevent them from becoming centers of criminal recruitment and victimization, given the challenging environment of the zone.

In preparation for a refugee crisis, the Colombian government has an established system, the "national entity for the management of the risk of disasters," that was used when Venezuela expelled more than six thousand Colombians from the country in August 2015.[32] Nonetheless, security experts in Colombia are concerned

that the resource requirements and the complexity of a massive flood of refugees from Venezuela would likely overwhelm the system's capacity.[33]

For Colombia, such challenges come at a time in which its military's resources for operations and maintenance are declining significantly, while the government is searching for the resources to fund the substantial obligations that it incurred in the agreement that it signed with the FARC in November 2016. Colombia must also deal with the upsurge of criminal and other violence between the ELN and criminal bands as the FARC demobilizes and withdraws from its former territory.[34]

Beyond outflows of people and guns, as the position of the Maduro leadership in Venezuela becomes more uncertain, Colombian security and defense professionals also worry that Venezuela could seek to provoke a war; this would serve to divert the attention of the Venezuelan people and the international community as well as maintain the unity of the Venezuelan military.[35] Indeed, Venezuela has a long history of aggressive posturing toward Colombia, including territorial claims over La Guajira and substantial parts of Colombia's eastern plains in Venezuela's 1999 constitution.[36] In March 2008, then President Chávez called to move ten Venezuelan armored brigades to the Colombian border in response to Colombia's signing of a base status agreement with the United States.[37] It further conducted a war game that year, Guaicaipuro, focused on a preemptive Venezuelan invasion of the Guajira. More recently, provocative Venezuelan actions include its conduct of a nationwide mobilization exercise, Zamora 200; its deployment of a small military force across the Arauca River into Colombia in March 2017; and the increasingly bellicose rhetoric of the Maduro regime toward Colombia, calling the nation a "failed state."[38]

Brazil and Guyana. While Colombia has, to date, borne the brunt of the spillover effects of the Venezuela crisis, Venezuelans have also crossed into the Brazilian state of Roraima. On one weekend in June 2016 alone, an estimated 150,000 Venezuelans crossed into Brazil, although only a portion stayed, while others came to purchase food and other goods.[39] In May 2017, the mayor of the Brazilian city of Manaus declared an emergency after more than 350 Venezuelan refugees appeared on its streets, while more Venezuelan refugees have also been seen in the provincial capital of Boa Vista.[40]

With respect to Venezuela's other neighbor, Guyana, although the two countries share a land border, the relative lack of infrastructure connecting the two across Guyana's Essequibo region and the lack of population in the area has limited the migration of Venezuelans to Guyana to date. As with Colombia, however, Guyanese worry that in a moment of crisis, the Maduro regime could provoke a military crisis with Guyana as a diversionary tactic, based on a historical dispute over the Essequibo region. The Maduro regime attempted to resurrect the dispute in September 2015, just months after ExxonMobil discovered significant oil deposits off the coast of the disputed area.[41]

Island nations. In addition to the countries that share a land border with Venezuela, instability in the country is affecting its neighbors in the Caribbean. Venezuelans looking to obtain supplies or to escape economic and other hardship in the country are crossing the relatively narrow expanse of Caribbean water to the nearby islands of Aruba, Curaçao, and Trinidad and Tobago.[42] In Trinidad and Tobago, Venezuelans reportedly take a ferry or hire local boats to cross the seven kilometers of water separating the two countries in order to buy goods in Trinidadian stores. In some cases, they bring guns from Venezuela to trade for food and other basic goods. And, the interchange between Venezuela and its island neighbors, exacerbated by the combination of sheer economic need and the breakdown of law and order, has also contributed to piracy off its coast.[43]

In Trinidad and Tobago, as in the La Guajira region on the Caribbean coast of Colombia, an additional risk is created by the possible migration of persons with ties to radical Islamic groups such as Hezbollah. During recent years, Iran reportedly used Venezuela as a point of entry for its Qods forces (religious paramilitary agents), while Venezuelan authorities sold government-issued passports to refugees from Syria and other parts of the Middle East.[44] While there has been little evidence of the outflow of such migrants to date, the established Muslim communities in Trinidad and Tobago and La Guajira make both a logical destination if the crisis in Venezuela deepens. Given that Trinidad and Tobago is already a leading source on a per capita basis for foreign fighters to the Middle East, migration from Venezuela of those affiliated with radical Islamic groups would have a potentially radicalizing and destabilizing effect on the Islamic communities in those areas.[45]

Recommendations for the United States

Despite the systemic looting of Venezuela by the Maduro regime, U.S. intervention in Venezuela would be strategically unwise. While such action could topple Venezuela's Bolivarian socialist government, it would reinforce the historic perception of the United States in the region as interventionist, sowing distrust and other anti-U.S. sentiment. In addition, in the short-term, it would leave behind an economically decimated, highly corrupted and politically polarized state. Following intervention, the United States would face the dilemma of allowing the newly "liberated" but broken Venezuelan state to continue as a source of criminality and instability in the region or engaging in the lengthy, expensive effort of trying to rebuild the country. In the process, as in the Middle East, the U.S. presence in Venezuela would likely become the focal point for rallying anti-U.S. sentiment, and U.S. forces in Venezuela would present a tempting target for the Chavista "resistance" and leftist terrorist groups posturing as resistors of the "yanqui invasion."

While it would be unwise for the United States to intervene in Venezuela and unrealistic for the international community to do so, both nonetheless have an important role in shaping the evolution of the situation in a positive direction, and in managing the consequences of the crisis in Venezuela on its neighbors. With respect to Venezuela itself, the United States should give the fullest support possible to the OAS, currently under Secretary Almagro, in condemning the departure from the democratic order established by Venezuela's constitution, and it should support the OAS and other multilateral and bilateral efforts pressuring the Chavista elite to restore that order. Also, it is imperative that the United States continue to highlight publicly the illegitimacy of the Maduro regime as a criminal elite that has, through administrative machinations, stolen control of the resource-rich state from its people, and which is increasingly relying on the force of arms to continue looting the state with an eye to making good a "getaway" with the money.

As part of such efforts, the United States must lead the international community in isolating the Chavista leadership through individually targeted economic sanctions, cooperating with other players in the international community to deny the Chavistas sanctuary in other countries after their rule. The U.S. State Department, Treasury Department, and other appropriate organizations should particularly focus on the legal and financial arenas, supporting Venezuela's National Assembly as it invalidates contracts made by the Chavista elite outside the constitutional order. This approach may have only limited short-term impacts in Venezuela itself, but it may help change the calculations of key Maduro regime benefactors such as China and Russia, convincing them that their best strategy for securing their oil holdings and other interests in the country is by working through the constitutionally legitimate National Assembly rather than the executive branch, whose operation outside the constitution leaves its commitments of Venezuelan resources to others without legal validity.

Beyond addressing the crisis in Venezuela itself, the United States should actively work with the country's neighbors to prevent the byproducts of the crisis, including the outflow of refugees and arms, from destabilizing the region. Venezuela's neighbor, Colombia, confronts the double challenge of being the country most impacted by the flow of Venezuelan refugees and arms (and possible military provocations), while dealing with the enormous resource and internal security challenges arising from its government's peace agreement with the FARC. While the Colombians take pride in their own capabilities, they will need more (and different) support from the United States, not less, in the months ahead.

In the short term, the United States should coordinate with Colombia, as well as Aruba, Curaçao, Trinidad and Tobago, and other states, in conjunction with the International Committee of the Red Cross and other nongovernmental organizations, to support the needs of the refugees. It should collaborate with the governments of the region to provide logistics, intelligence, and other support as permitted by national laws to help protect those refugees from victimization and criminal recruitment, as well as to monitor who is coming in, where they are going, and how they are affecting the local criminal environment. Particularly in Colombia, the United States should consider increased intelligence, training, and material support to police, prosecutors, and special military units combatting organized crime, which will likely expand through the refugee and arms flows.

In the unlikely, but not inconceivable, event that the Maduro administration attempts to provoke a military conflict with Colombia or Guyana, the United States should be prepared to provide military and other support to defend the territorial sovereignty of each. However, it

Venezuelan citizens holding signs that read *Primero Justicia*, or Justice First, fill the streets of Maracaibo, Venezuela, 6 September 2016, demanding the recall of President Nicolás Maduro. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

should avoid direct military intervention in Venezuelan territory aside from possible selective removal of offensive capabilities being used against Venezuela's neighbors, such as combat aircraft and helicopters in their bases, or forward-deployed armored vehicles.

As the United States supports the countries of the region in their response to the Venezuelan crisis, it should, wherever possible, work through the OAS and other multilateral institutions of the Inter-American System, including a coordinated response to the handling of refugees.[46] The United States should also look for ways to leverage the events of the Conference of American Armies, of which it is head during the current two-year cycle, as a vehicle for such coordination in military affairs.[47] Finally, the United States should be prepared to work with the United Nations to deploy a peacekeeping or peace enforcement force into the region when the evolution of the crisis and the positions of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council make such action feasible.

Conclusion

The crisis in Venezuela is a tragedy with grave implications for its neighbors and the region. Yet, in that tragedy, there is also opportunity for the United States to strengthen its relationship with countries in the region by tangibly demonstrating its commitment to work with them to mitigate the effects of the crisis. It is also an opportunity to do so in a way that strengthens the OAS and Inter-American System (in whose functionality the United States has a strategic interest) as the principal multilateral vehicle for addressing regional security issues.

The Venezuela crisis may be the first opportunity of the Trump administration to define its vision for democracy, security, and good governance in the region, and to demonstrate its commitment to the partner nations with which the United States shares the Western Hemisphere. Given U.S. connectedness to the region through geography, commerce, and family ties, doing so is critical not only for the Trump administration and Venezuela's neighbors but also for the United States and the region as a whole. ■

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