

## Russia Warns U.S. Not to Intervene in Venezuela as Military Backs Maduro

By Ana Vanessa Herrero and Neil MacFarquhar  
The New York Times, Jan. 24, 2019

Vladimir Padrino López, the head of Venezuela's armed forces, reaffirmed his support for President Nicolás Maduro, saying Juan Guaidó proclaiming himself president was tantamount to a coup. Luis Robayo/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

CARACAS, Venezuela — The embattled government of [Venezuela](#) struck back against its opponents on Thursday, winning strong support from the country's armed forces and the solid backing of Russia, which warned the United States not to intervene.

The events put Venezuela's president, [Nicolás Maduro](#), at the center of a Cold War-style showdown between Russia, an ally that has shored up his government with billions of dollars, and the United States, which has denounced him as a corrupt autocrat with no legitimacy.

The Trump administration pressed its case on Thursday, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo calling on all countries in the hemisphere to reject Mr. Maduro and “align themselves with democracy,” setting up a test of wills with the Kremlin.

Only a day before, Mr. Maduro's political nemesis, the opposition leader Juan Guaidó, seemed to have the momentum. During nationwide protests against the government, he proclaimed himself the country's rightful president, earning endorsements from President Trump and several governments in the region.

But on Thursday, it was Mr. Maduro's turn to put Mr. Guaidó on defense. In a televised news conference, the leader of Venezuela's armed forces declared loyalty to Mr. Maduro and said the opposition's effort to replace him amounted to an attempted coup.

People walking past a defaced mural of President Nicolás Maduro in Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, the day after an opposition leader declared himself the legitimate president. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times



People walking past a defaced mural of President Nicolás Maduro in Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, the day after an opposition leader declared himself the legitimate president. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

*[A short, simple primer on [what's happening in Venezuela.](#)]*

In a further blow to the opposition, Russia warned the United States against meddling in Venezuela. President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia telephoned Mr. Maduro and “emphasized that destructive external interference is a gross violation of the fundamental norms of international law,” according to a [statement](#) on the Kremlin’s official website.

The United States ignored the admonitions, trying to rally other countries to reject what Mr. Pompeo called “Maduro’s tyranny.”

“His regime is morally bankrupt, it’s economically incompetent and it is profoundly corrupt. It is undemocratic to the core,” [Mr. Pompeo told a meeting](#) in Washington of the 35-member Organization of American States.

The United States also offered \$20 million in emergency aid to Mr. Guaidó’s side and requested an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council on Saturday on the Venezuela crisis.

Taken together, the events escalated the confusion and conflict over who is the rightful president of Venezuela, the oil-rich and formerly prosperous country upended by political repression and severe economic hardship under Mr. Maduro.

Mr. Maduro was sworn in for his second term this month after an election widely viewed as rigged. Mr. Guaidó argues that, as the president of the National Assembly, an opposition-controlled legislative body, he has the constitutional authority to assume power because Mr. Maduro had taken office illegally.

President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela at the Supreme Justice Tribunal in Caracas on Thursday. Getty Images



President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela at the Supreme Justice Tribunal in Caracas on Thursday. Getty Images

After Mr. Trump recognized Mr. Guaidó on Wednesday, an infuriated Mr. Maduro cut ties with the United States and ordered all its diplomats to leave within 72 hours. Mr. Pompeo said the United States would not comply.

But a senior American official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the embassy in Caracas, the capital, was evacuating all family members and several diplomats, keeping a core team of officers in place. How long they might stay remained unclear, but the State Department said late Thursday it had “no plans to close the embassy.”

Mr. Maduro, addressing Supreme Court judges on Thursday afternoon, urged the United States to heed his call to withdraw all the diplomats by this weekend.

“If there is any sense and rationality, I say to the State Department: You must follow the order,” Mr. Maduro said.

He added that Venezuela’s diplomatic missions in the United States, which include an embassy in Washington and consulates in Florida and Texas, would be shut down by Saturday.

### **Sign up for The Interpreter**

**Subscribe for original insights, commentary and discussions on the major news stories of the week, from columnists Max Fisher and Amanda Taub.**

Opposition leaders had hoped that key members of the armed forces would break ranks with Mr. Maduro after large demonstrations across the country and international pledges of support for Mr. Guaidó, including the Trump administration’s repeated warnings that a [“military option”](#) was possible for restoring democracy in Venezuela.

The 35-year-old opposition leader Juan Guaidó just swore himself in as Venezuela’s interim president. Who is he? Carlos Garcia Rawlins/Reuters

But so far, senior military commanders appear to be siding with Mr. Maduro, even as they express alarm over the possible consequences of rival claims to power.

“We’re here to avoid a clash between Venezuelans,” Vladimir Padrino López, the defense minister, said in a televised address, flanked by high-ranking officers. “It’s not a civil war, a war among brothers, that will resolve Venezuelans’ problems.”

Mr. Padrino called Mr. Guaidó’s claim to power “laughable” and described him as a pawn of right-wing factions subservient to the United States.

“It makes you want to laugh,” he said. “But I must alert the people of the danger this represents.”

Mr. Guaidó remained out of sight at an undisclosed location on Thursday, making few pronouncements. His decision to keep a low profile was likely a result of widespread speculation in Caracas that the government could move in to detain him soon.

Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Paraguay, Peru, Ecuador, Guatemala and the Organization of American States have also recognized Mr. Guaidó as the country’s leader. Mexico and others in the region have not, including Cuba and Bolivia, longtime allies of Mr. Maduro.

The State Department has said it will not heed the order to leave the country because Mr. Guaidó has invited the United States to stay.

Workers cleaning the street on Thursday, a day after a largely antigovernment protest drew crowds into the streets in Caracas. Carlos Garcia Rawlins/Reuters

Workers cleaning the street on Thursday, a day after a largely antigovernment protest drew crowds into the streets in Caracas. Carlos Garcia Rawlins/Reuters

Roberta S. Jacobson, a former assistant secretary of state who oversaw Latin America policy in the Obama administration, called the impasse over the diplomatic rupture untenable.

“I don’t think the administration has thought through all of the consequences of taking action as quickly as it did in recognizing Guaidó,” she said.

Diplomats who back Mr. Guaidó hoped that key members of the armed forces would switch sides. But Mr. Padrino said he was speaking for a unified command. He argued that the opposition had the “dark aim of sowing chaos and anarchy in our society.”

At least 14 people in Venezuela have been killed in clashes with security forces and other politically related violence since Tuesday, according to the [Venezuelan Education-Action Program on Human Rights](#), known by its Spanish acronym, Provea.

Rocío San Miguel, a defense analyst in Venezuela who studies the military, said it was notable that the military weighed in so long after Mr. Guaidó took the oath. For the time being, she said, commanders appeared to have concluded that Mr. Maduro has the upper hand.

While the armed forces “aspire to a peaceful resolution” to the crisis, they will “stick with the most concrete power structure, pragmatically,” said Ms. San Miguel, who runs an organization called [Citizen Control](#).

A bread line at a bakery in Caracas on Thursday in an area where some of the heaviest street protests have taken place. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

A bread line at a bakery in Caracas on Thursday in an area where some of the heaviest street protests have taken place. Meridith Kohut for The New York Times

Ms. San Miguel said military leaders may ultimately flip. That, she added, would possibly happen if the rank and file were signaling clearly that they did not want to crack down on protesters.

“That would be the sign that Maduro has to leave,” she said.

Before the defense minister spoke on Thursday, Russia accused the United States of promoting regime change in Venezuela, warning of the “catastrophic consequences” of destabilizing the country.

Moscow has been a close ally of Venezuela for more than a decade, helping the country’s crumbling economy with billions of dollars in loans as well as military support.

“Any external intervention is very dangerous,” Dmitri S. Peskov, Mr. Putin’s spokesman, told reporters in Moscow. “We consider the attempt to usurp the top power in Venezuela as going against the foundations and principles of the international law.”

Sergey V. Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, said the United States was being hypocritical in accusing Russia of meddling in American elections while blatantly interfering in Venezuela’s internal affairs. He also said that hints of armed intervention were particularly alarming.

“That the United States and some other countries have recognized the self-proclaimed president shows that they played a direct role in the crisis in Venezuela,” Mr. Lavrov told a news conference in Algiers, where he was visiting.

A burned truck in Caracas on Thursday, after protests drew tens of thousands of people. Carlos Garcia Rawlins/Reuters



A burned truck in Caracas on Thursday, after protests drew tens of thousands of people. Carlos Garcia Rawlins/Reuters

As recently as December, Russia dispatched a small group of aircraft to Venezuela in a show of solidarity with Mr. Maduro, including two Tu-160 nuclear-capable bombers that flew more than 6,000 miles.

More important, it has given Venezuela more than [\\$10 billion in financial assistance](#) in recent years. In exchange, Rosneft, the Russian state oil company, has acquired stakes in Venezuela's energy sector.

Venezuela has also been one of the largest markets for Russian arms exports in Latin America. It signed 30 contracts worth \$11 billion from 2005 to 2013, according to the Russian news agency Tass.

China, another critical foreign partner of Mr. Maduro, has offered a more neutral message, not explicitly condemning American support for his opponents.

In a statement on Thursday, China's Foreign Ministry expressed hope that all sides in the conflict would "resolve their political differences through dialogue and consultation."

China has been a supporter of the leftist government in Venezuela since Mr. Maduro's predecessor, Hugo Chávez, first came to power, and both leaders were feted in visits to Beijing. The relationship has been undergirded by China's growing appetite for oil, partly paid for with tens of billions of dollars in loans to Venezuela.

By 2015, China's loans to Venezuela had grown to \$65 billion, a Chinese Ministry of Commerce [researcher said that year](#).

But China's enthusiasm for Venezuela has dimmed in recent years as the Venezuelan economy has staggered. When Mr. Maduro visited China last year, [reports indicated](#) that his wishes for a large injection of Chinese loans were not granted.

*Follow Ana Vanessa Herrero and Neil MacFarquhar on Twitter: [@AnaVHerrero](#) [@NeilMacFarquhar](#).*

Ana Vanessa Herrero reported from Caracas, and Neil MacFarquhar from Moscow. Chris Buckley contributed reporting from Beijing, Edward Wong and Peter Baker from Washington, and Rick Gladstone from New York.

Ana Vanessa Herrero reported from Caracas, and Neil MacFarquhar from Moscow. Chris Buckley contributed reporting from Beijing, Edward Wong and Peter Baker from Washington, and Rick Gladstone from New York.

A version of this article appears in print on Jan. 25, 2019, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Military Backs Maduro as Russia Tells U.S. to Butt Out of Caracas. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

What do we use cookies for? We use cookies and similar technologies to **recognize your repeat visits and preferences**, as well as to **measure the effectiveness of campaigns and analyze traffic**. To learn more about cookies, including how to disable them, view our [Cookie Policy](#). By clicking "I Accept" or "X" on this banner, or using our site, you consent to the use of cookies unless you have disabled them.