

Trump team tries to rattle Maduro with military tough talk

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Two U.S. officials said the strategy is designed more to rattle embattled leader Nicolás Maduro than to foreshadow an American military effort in Venezuela.



For the U.S., losing the support of its Latin American allies in the push to get rid of Nicolás Maduro would be a fatal blow to efforts in Venezuela. | Yuri Cortez/AFP/Getty Images

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Thursday that the Trump administration “will simply not rule out” military action in Venezuela. And on Friday, Trump administration officials met for the second day in a row at the Pentagon to discuss options for toppling the country’s embattled autocratic leader. Speaking to reporters back in March, national security adviser John Bolton held a yellow notepad with a line of text conspicuously visible: “5,000 troops to Colombia,” he had written.

Together, the actions and planning meetings — one of them held in “the Tank,” the Pentagon’s most secure room — are part of a threatening drumbeat aimed at Nicolás Maduro, who, U.S. officials say, may be on the brink of ouster.

“The time for talking is over,” Sen. Rick Scott (R-Fla.) said in a Friday statement. “The safety and security of our nation depend on this fight.”

“Where is our aircraft carrier?” tweeted Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), a close Trump ally.

But on a day when Trump spoke to Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose backing of Maduro is causing tensions with the U.S., Trump officials and national security experts said mounting talk of U.S. military action is almost certainly hollow.

Two U.S. officials told POLITICO these actions are designed more to rattle Maduro — and Venezuelan military leaders who have been a key source of support for him — than to foreshadow an American military effort in Venezuela.

“The administration’s strategy on Venezuela over the past two years had been one of building regional consensus, a policy of incrementalism,” said Ana Quintana, a Latin America analyst at conservative think tank The Heritage Foundation, citing the steady buildup of “incremental sanctions” and support to the opposition.

“The idea of a military invasion does not logically fit into that strategy whatsoever, especially when there are still so many other types of pressure that can be applied,” she said, pointing to additional sanctions targeting the government or sanctions by other countries that oppose Maduro.

The U.S. has yet to deploy an aircraft carrier strike group to the region, which would represent the most visible sign of U.S. military power and the keystone of any Pentagon war plans.

The nearest major U.S. military asset is a group of amphibious ships that left San Diego on Thursday for a scheduled deployment in the Pacific. The group could move quickly to a position off the Colombian coast if it were needed to launch limited combat strikes, provide humanitarian relief or evacuate American citizens from a conflict zone.

Asked today whether naval forces would be involved in potential military action, acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan would say only, “There’s a lot of water nearby.”

The tough talk from U.S. officials has escalated since Bolton indicated earlier this week that senior Venezuelan military officials were in talks with the U.S.-backed opposition leader, Juan Guaidó, to potentially throw their support behind him.

But President Donald Trump, who campaigned on putting an end to scurrilous American military forays, is resisting an intervention in Venezuela.

“We’re doing everything we can do short of, you know, the ultimate,” Trump told Fox Business Network’s Trish Regan on Wednesday, adding that “there are people that would like to have us do the ultimate.”

Garrett Marquis, a National Security Council spokesman, said: “The President has made clear that all options are on the table.”

The Lima Group of 13 Latin American countries plus Canada, which has joined American efforts to oust Maduro, rejected military intervention in Venezuela at a

meeting in mid-April. For the U.S., losing the support of its Latin American allies in the push to get rid of Maduro would be a fatal blow to efforts in Venezuela.

Adm. Craig Faller, the head of U.S. Southern Command and responsible for U.S. military activity in Latin America, suggested in congressional testimony this week that any military planning is geared more toward stabilization and humanitarian assistance should the Maduro government fall than toward aggressive action.

“There is going to be a day when the legitimate government takes over, and it’s going to come when we least expect it,” said Faller, who was at the Pentagon on Friday to meet with Shanahan, Pompeo and Bolton. “And it could be right now, so we are calling it ‘day now’ planning.”

The defection this week of Maduro’s intelligence chief, Christopher Figueroa — which Pompeo touted in an interview on Thursday — could help the administration and its allies more effectively target nonmilitary pressure, said Quintana.

“He knows the ins and outs of who’s involved in the deepest, dirtiest misdeeds of the regime,” she said. “This is the guy who has the knowledge” to bring pressure to bear against individual members of Maduro’s government.

At the Pentagon on Friday, Shanahan met to discuss Venezuela with Bolton, Pompeo and Faller. It was the second meeting this week that the Trump administration’s senior national security officials had convened to discuss options in Venezuela.

Speaking to reporters afterward, Shanahan was tight-lipped about what they discussed in the meeting, saying the talks were simply “so that we all stay stitched together in real time.” Shanahan added that he’d invited Faller from his Florida headquarters to share observations from recent visits to Brazil and Colombia.

“All options are on the table,” Shanahan reiterated. “We have a comprehensive set of options tailored to certain conditions, and I’m maybe just going to leave it at that.” Pressed as to whether the plans extended beyond the evacuation of American citizens to “kinetic,” or violent, military action, he said, “I’ll leave that to your imagination.”

Trump and Putin also discussed the standoff in their first phone call since special counsel Robert Mueller released his finding that the Trump campaign had not criminally conspired with Russia during the 2016 election.

The Kremlin has sent a small number of military personnel to Venezuela as part of a campaign to save the Maduro regime. But Putin appeared to warn Trump off of any military intervention, telling him that only Venezuelans should determine the future of their country, according to a Kremlin readout of the phone call.

The White House had not yet provided a readout of the phone call as of Friday afternoon, but White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders told reporters that the president communicated his hopes for a peaceful transition of

power. Still, Sanders noted, Trump emphasized that “all options continue to be on the table.”

For Trump, the situation in Venezuela has [become](#) something of a proxy battle with the Kremlin, challenging the president’s stated desire to improve relations with Russia.

“The tension between Trump’s very well-advertised desire that we need a new relationship with Russia and the fact that Russia is being so in your face in Venezuela just seems to make those two situations really incompatible,” said Andrew Weiss, an expert in U.S.-Russia relations at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

While the administration has worked to lay the groundwork for a Trump-Putin meeting at the G-20 meeting in Osaka next month, “there’s really no promising issue on the agenda,” Weiss said.

Nahal Toosi contributed to this report.

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