

## Venezuela crisis: Putin's new Cold War on America's doorstep?

Analysis by Nathan Hodge

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(CNN) — The crisis in Venezuela appears to be shaping up like a Cold War-style confrontation: The Kremlin is throwing its support behind embattled Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, while Washington backs Juan Guaido, the self-proclaimed interim president.

The story at first glance seems to have all the elements of a spy thriller. In recent days, rumors have swirled about Russian mercenaries, massive bullion shipments and murky assassination plots.

Maduro has cast himself as a latter-day Fidel Castro in this drama. In an interview with Russia's state-owned news agency RIA-Novosti, Maduro hinted at a US-backed attempt on his life, saying, "Without a doubt, Donald Trump gave the order to kill me, told the Colombian government, the mafia of Colombia to kill me."

That sounded like an episode ripped from one of the [CIA's failed plots to kill the Cuban leader](#). And the crisis carries echoes of the Cuban Missile Crisis: Late last year, Russian bombers capable of delivering nuclear weapons flew to Venezuela, signaling that Russian President Vladimir Putin was willing to play in America's backyard.

So are we about to watch a Netflix-era remake of the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion? Is Venezuela another arena for proxy conflict between Russia and the United States,

much like the way Moscow and Washington back opposing sides in the Syrian civil war?

Certainly, Maduro's conspiracy theories -- and his language about resisting American neocolonialism -- are reminiscent of the old contest between the US and the USSR in Latin America. But Russia is not backing his government in Venezuela to spread the ideology of Marxism. For starters, Moscow sees Venezuela in large part as a business proposition.

Russia's state-controlled oil company Rosneft has been a major backer of Maduro's government, and Russia and Rosneft have provided billions in loans and lines of credit for cash-strapped Venezuela.

Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA is covering almost all of those debts with shipments of oil. In a [research paper](#) published last year, analyst Julia Gurganus noted that Venezuela "has relied on Rosneft for prepayments of future oil deliveries to meet its financial commitments and to market physical volumes of Venezuelan crude to refiners in the United States and other countries."

But in addition to Moscow's economic bet on Maduro, there's a geopolitical dimension to Russia's interest in keeping the president in power. Russian state television in recent days has cast the Venezuela crisis in terms of US-Russian confrontation, sometimes comparing Guaido and the Venezuelan opposition to Ukraine's pro-democratic Maidan revolution in 2014 or to the Arab Spring uprising that, among other things, toppled longtime Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi.

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Activists pour into the streets of Caracas on Saturday, February 2, to back opposition leader Juan Guaido's call for early elections in Venezuela.

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National Assembly President Juan Guaido, who has declared himself the acting president of Venezuela, waves to supporters during a rally against the government of Nicolas Maduro on February 2 in Caracas.

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An anti-government protester wears glasses with a Venezuelan flag motif at a demonstration demanding the resignation of President Nicolas Maduro on February 2 in Caracas.

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Maduro supporters gather February 2 in Caracas to mark the 20th anniversary of the rise to power of the late Hugo Chavez.

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Opposition demonstrators in Caracas take part in a protest against Maduro's government on Wednesday, January 30.

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In this handout photo released by the Miraflores Presidential Press Office, Maduro flashes a "V for victory" hand gesture after arriving at the Fort Tiuna military base in Caracas on January 30. Maduro has begun a second term after a 2018 vote that his political opposition and many in the international community denounced as a sham.

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Members of the National Police line up to guard the entrance of Venezuela's Central University in Caracas during an anti-government protest on January 30.

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National Assembly President Juan Guaido, who has declared himself the acting president of Venezuela, speaks to reporters in Caracas on January 30. The United States and more than a dozen other countries have recognized Guaido as Venezuela's legitimate ruler.

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A Maduro mural is seen in the Petare slum of Caracas on Tuesday, January 29.

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Guaido listens to deputy Rafael Veloz during a session at the National Assembly in Caracas on January 29. The Assembly met to debate a legal framework for creating a transitional government and calling new elections. Simultaneously, Venezuela's

attorney general asked the Supreme Court to freeze Guaido's assets and bar him from leaving the country.

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A view of the National Assembly building in Caracas on January 29.

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The president of Venezuela's Supreme Court, Maikel Moreno, speaks at a news conference in Caracas on January 29.

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A man pumps fuel at a gas station in Caracas on January 29. A day earlier, the United States announced sanctions against Venezuela's state oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela, S.A.

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Supporters of Venezuela's opposition hold up letters that read "Justice" at a rally to hear Guaido speak in Caracas on Saturday, January 26.

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Guaido speaks to reporters after attending Mass in Caracas on Sunday, January 27.

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Government supporters in Caracas hold a rally in support of Maduro on January 26.

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Maduro holds a news conference in Caracas on Friday, January 25. The Venezuelan strongman has accused Guaido and the United States of trying to orchestrate a coup against him.

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Portraits of former Venezuelan leaders Simon Bolivar and Hugo Chavez hover in the background as Venezuelan Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez, bottom left, addresses a news conference in Caracas on Thursday, January 24. Venezuela's top military officials swore their allegiance to Maduro after other nations recognized Guaido as head of state.

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A man wrapped in a Venezuelan flag raises his arms in front of security forces during anti-government protests in Caracas on Wednesday, January 23.

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Opposition supporters in Caracas protest Maduro on January 23.

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Opposition supporters react to tear gas as they take part in the Caracas rally on January 23. Sporadic clashes erupted, but Maduro's military response to the protests seemed more measured than in the past.

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Police secure an area in Caracas on January 23.

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A National Police officer fires rubber bullets in Caracas.

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People raise their hands to show solidarity with Guaido, who was declaring himself interim president on January 23.

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A wounded protester in Caracas on January 23.

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Security forces stand in a street full of stones after clashing with demonstrators in Caracas.

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Maduro, speaking to a crowd of supporters at the Miraflores Palace in Caracas, holds up a document that says his government is breaking off diplomatic ties with the United States. "We cannot accept the invasive policies of the empire, the United States, the policies of Donald Trump," he said to cheers from the crowd on January 23. "Venezuela is a land of liberators."

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A wounded protester shows his back as riot police clashed with opposition demonstrators in Caracas on January 23.

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A man walks by a bus that had been set on fire in Caracas.

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An opposition demonstrator runs with a tear-gas canister on January 23.

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Guaido greets a crowd in Caracas on January 23.

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Protesters set up barricades to block a road in Caracas.

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A National Police officer fires tear gas at demonstrators in Caracas while another shoots the scene with a cell phone.

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Venezuelan banknotes were thrown on the ground during the Maduro protests on January 23.

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[Russia spreads its global reach](#)

The rhetoric mirrors official thinking in Russia, where the Kremlin routinely accuses the US of illegitimately pursuing a policy of "regime change" or "color revolutions" aimed at toppling Washington's opponents around the globe.

"Going back to the days of [former US President] George W. Bush, color revolutions are a neuralgic issue for the Kremlin," said Andrew Weiss, vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "And they have no shortage of people inside the Russian government who spin elaborate conspiracy theories or see indicators that the US goes around the world under the convenient flag of democracy removing regimes it doesn't like."

These Venezuelan defectors want US arms 02:51

Weiss noted another rationale for Russia's support for Maduro: Showcasing Moscow's global reach.



"There is also a big thread in Russia's behavior in Latin America that is aimed at rattling the United States and making Russia's role seem larger than it actually is," he said. "It's part of a headgame ... a way of saying, 'We can cause trouble in America's backyard.'"

Venezuela is a long way from Russia's borders, and Moscow no longer has any military bases in the Western Hemisphere. But that has done little to discourage conspiracy theories.

Maduro, for instance, did not halt speculation that Russian private military contractors may have augmented his security detail when he said that he had "no comment" about whether Russian private security guards might be providing him protection.

Russia certainly has a track record of sending private military contractors to advance its foreign-policy aims. The Russian government has never fully and officially acknowledged the existence of private military companies such as Wagner, the shadowy Russian firm the US Treasury has sanctioned for recruiting mercenaries to fight alongside pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. However, the existence of the group became more difficult to conceal after [paramilitary contractors were killed in US airstrikes](#) in Syria.

But Konstantin Kosachev, a Russian senator who heads the foreign affairs committee of Russia's Federation Council, or upper house of parliament, cast doubt on Russians being brought in to protect Maduro.

"I don't think that there will be a request directly for protection by Russia," Kosachev told RIA-Novosti, adding that the army is on the side of the current president, and that Maduro himself expressed confidence that he was well defended.