

MEMORANDUM FOR: The President

FROM: Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)

SUBJECT: Avoiding War with Russia over Venezuela

Mr. President:

Your Administration's policies regarding Venezuela appear to be on a slippery slope that could take us toward war in Venezuela and military confrontation with Russia. As former intelligence officers and other national security practitioners with many decades of experience, we urge you not to let yourself be egged on into taking potentially catastrophic military action in response to civil unrest in Venezuela or Russian activities in the Western Hemisphere. With the recent arrival of two transport aircraft and enduring political support for the government of Venezuela, the Russians are far from crossing any "red line" emanating from the 1823 Monroe Doctrine.

Unfulfilled Objectives in Venezuela

Inside Venezuela, U.S. actions have failed to do more than plunge the country into deeper crisis, cause greater human suffering, and increase the prospects of violence on a national scale. President Maduro's mishandling of the economy and authoritarian reactions to provocations are impossible to defend, but they result in part from the fact that he has been under siege since he was first elected in 2013 and has faced sanctions aimed ultimately at removing him from office. In our view, the advice you've received from your top advisors – Florida Senator Marco Rubio, National Security Advisor John Bolton, Special Representative Elliott Abrams, and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo – was and apparently continues to be wrong.

- Recognition of Venezuelan National Assembly President Juan Guaidó as "interim president" did not prompt the military to rise up against President Maduro. Neither did attacking the officer corps as merely corrupt opportunists and drug-traffickers enriched through loyalty to former President Chávez and Maduro, nor did repeatedly threatening them with harsher sanctions. Those actions reflected a fundamental misunderstanding about the Venezuelan military, which has never been free of corruption and political compromise but has also never been so totally isolated from the Venezuelan people that it hasn't felt their suffering. U.S. policies incorrectly assumed that the officers – while probably fed up with Maduro's shortcomings – would support Guaidó despite his faction's commitment to dismantle *Chavismo*, which most officers believe brought historically necessary changes to the country, including enfranchisement of the poor.

Similarly, your Administration's repeated hints at military intervention have been counterproductive to your regime-change objectives. Your policy and intelligence

advisors were correct in interpreting the disparate polling data showing popular support for Guaidó as actually being support for the U.S. to extricate the country from its crisis – the National Assembly President was a political unknown until the United States and others recognized his claim to the Presidency – but your team showed a lack of understanding of Venezuelan nationalism. Venezuelans do not welcome the destruction that would be caused by U.S. military attack; they recall the death toll of Operation Just Cause, when the United States killed more than 3,000 Panamanians (by its own count) to remove one corrupt authoritarian, Manuel Noriega. Threats of invasion have pushed people to circle around Maduro, however reluctantly, not reject him.

- Your Administration’s strategy of punishing the Venezuelan people, including apparently knocking out their electricity, seems based on the false assumption that humanitarian crisis will prompt a coup to remove Maduro. In fact, the U.S. sanctions have allowed Maduro to shift blame from his own failings to U.S. malice – and it has left Guaidó, whom your advisors portray as the moral equivalent of our Founders, looking like a sell-out to Yankee imperialists at the cost of the Venezuelan people’s health and welfare and magnified civil disorder.

Lost Opportunity for Diplomacy

Senator Rubio, Mr. Bolton, Mr. Abrams, and Mr. Pompeo have also squandered a formidable moment to build on common values with allies in Latin America and Europe. Even though most Latin Americans find your aides’ public assertion that the Monroe Doctrine is alive and well to be insulting, the right-leaning Presidents of most of South and Central America rallied with you to support Guaidó’s self-proclamation. But Guaidó’s lack of leadership – he appears totally scripted by U.S. Government agencies – his inflexibility on negotiations, his open call for U.S. military intervention, and your own Administration’s dangling threat of war are rapidly alienating all but the most subservient to U.S. policy dictates. Negotiation proposals, such as those being developed by the International Contact Group, are gaining momentum.

Internationalizing the Conflict

National Security Advisor Bolton and others have sought to internationalize the Venezuela issue since before Guaidó’s proclamation. Bolton’s reference to a “Troika of Tyranny” in November – which he called “a triangle of terror stretching from Havana to Caracas to Managua” and “sordid cradle of communism in the Western Hemisphere” – was a veiled Cold War-era swipe at Russia and China. Mr. Bolton, Senator Rubio, and other advisors have made clear on numerous occasions that the overthrow of President Maduro would be just the first stage in efforts to eliminate the current governments of the “Troika” and “Communist influence” in the Western Hemisphere.

- They have repeatedly asserted that Cuban advisors have been crucial to the Maduro government’s survival without providing evidence. Indeed, the reportedly “hundreds” of Venezuelan military defectors, including many managed by U.S. agencies, have not provided even credible hearsay evidence that Cubans are

doing more than providing routine assistance. In addition, the threats coming out of Washington have preempted any willingness that Cuba might have had to contribute to a regional solution to the Venezuelan crisis as it has in similar situations, such as Colombia's recent peace process, the Angola peace process in 1989-90, and the Central American negotiations in the early 1990s.

Provocative Rhetoric about Russia

Most dangerous, however, are aggressive statements about Russia's engagement with Venezuela. Russian oil companies, particular Rosneft, have long been in Venezuela – bailing out the Venezuelan petroleum company (PDVSA) as its mismanagement and falling oil prices have caused production and revenues to plummet. Most long-term observers believe Rosneft's decisions, including throwing good money after bad, have been motivated by business calculations, without a particularly ideological objective.

- Your advisors' rhetoric imposing an East-West spin on the issue presented President Putin and his advisors an opportunity to try to poke the United States in the eye – especially as Administration efforts to remove Maduro foundered and diplomatic support for Guaidó cracked. Maduro and Putin have not enjoyed particularly close personal relations in the past, and their shared strategic interests are few, but U.S. rhetoric and threats have given them common cause in tweaking us. A meeting in Rome between your special envoy, Elliot Abrams, and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov achieved nothing amid further U.S. sanctions against Venezuela and continued threats that “all options” were on the table.

Publicly available information is insufficient for us to know exactly what was aboard the two Russian aircraft that landed at Maiquetía last week – two months after your Administration publicly proclaimed its intention to remove Maduro – but precedent suggests Moscow had two main objectives.

- One, and probably primary, is to embarrass your Administration by defying your rhetoric, just to rub your nose in Moscow's sovereign right to have the relations, including military liaison, with whomever it pleases. In this sense, Russian behavior resembles its intervention, at Bashar al-Assad's request, in Syria. And it is not a far cry from Moscow's reaction to the Western-supported coup in Kiev.
- Another objective, if press speculation about the Russian advisors and equipment aboard the aircraft is correct, would be to shore up Venezuela's ability to warn of and respond to a U.S. military strike. Your Administration has publicly asserted that the Russians are helping repair S-300 surface-to-air missile systems, which have a *purely defensive* purpose. There is no evidence, not even circumstantial, that Russia has any offensive objectives in this relationship.

The U.S. reaction has suggested a much greater chance of military confrontation. Mr. Bolton “strongly caution[ed] 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.” Without defining what activities he would object to, Mr. Bolton said, “We will consider such provocative actions as a direct threat to international peace and security in the region.” Your Special Representative said the “Russian presence” is “extremely pernicious.” Your Secretary of State said, “Russia’s got to leave Venezuela.” You said, “Russia has to get out” and reiterated that “all options are open” – including presumably forcing the Russians out militarily. And we note that Russia has not closed its embassy in Caracas as your Administration has.

Avoiding the Slippery Slope

As intelligence officers and security experts, we have given many years to protecting our nation from a host of threats, including from the Soviet Union. We also believe, however, that picking fights, including ousting governments, blocking negotiated settlements, and threatening other countries’ sovereign decision to pursue activities that do not threaten our national security – is rarely the wise way to go.

We repeat that we are not defending Maduro and his record, while at the same time pointing out that many of his troubles have been exacerbated by U.S. policies and efforts to oust him. We believe that due process and practical, realistic policies better protect our national interests than threats and confrontational rhetoric. It strains credulity to believe that your advisors picked this fight with President Maduro without realizing that Venezuela would seek help fixing its defensive capabilities.

Moreover and very seriously, rhetoric challenging Russia could all too easily lead to a much more consequential confrontation.

- Invoking the 1823 Monroe Doctrine is unhelpful. For Russia to provide assistance for purely defensive purposes to a country in which we seek to create regime change and threaten military attack would not be widely seen as violating the Monroe Doctrine or crossing a “red line.”
- We realize that some in the media are trying to egg you on into taking forceful action, perhaps even of a military nature, to punish Russia in any case. We urge you not to fall into this trap. This is not 19th century Latin America, and it is a far cry from the Cuba missile crisis of 1962.
- The best way to prevent dangerous miscalculation would be for you to speak directly with President Putin. Washington’s energies would be better spent clearing up differences, adjusting failed policies, and promoting a peaceful resolution in Venezuela.

For the Steering Group, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

Fulton Armstrong, former National Intelligence Officer for Latin America & former National Security Council Director for Inter-American Affairs (ret.)

William Binney, former Technical Director, World Geopolitical & Military Analysis, NSA; co-founder, SIGINT Automation Research Center (ret.)

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Mike Gravel, former Adjutant, top secret control officer, Communications Intelligence Service; special agent of the Counter Intelligence Corps and former United States Senator

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Peter Van Buren, U.S. Department of State, Foreign Service Officer (ret.) (associate VIPS)

Sarah Wilton, Commander, U.S. Naval Reserve (ret.) and Defense Intelligence Agency (ret.)

Ann Wright, U.S. Army Reserve Colonel (ret) and former U.S. Diplomat who resigned in 2003 in opposition to the Iraq War