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## U.S. Threats and Sanctions Play into Venezuelan Government's Hand

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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The political situation in Venezuela—where until recently the government was very much backed into a corner—shifted radically when President Nicolás Maduro managed, on July 30, to impose a controversial constituent assembly (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, ANC) and US President Donald Trump, shortly afterwards, threatened military action against the country ([NotiSur, Aug. 25, 2017](#)).

With the establishment of the ANC, whose 545 seats are occupied by members or minor allies of the governing Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (United Socialist Party of Venezuela, PSUV), the opposition, represented by the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (Democratic Unity Roundtable, MUD) coalition, was left without answers despite widespread popular concern about the development. The streets, which had been the “property” of the dissidence and the scene of much violence, emptied, and the “down with the dictatorship” slogan that had fueled the guarimbas (barricades set up in middle and upper class neighborhoods to block pedestrian and vehicle traffic) was limited to social networks, a correspondent for the Italian news agency ANSA wrote.

Trump's military threat—along with sanctions issued by the US Department of the Treasury—strengthened Maduro's position even more and left the opposition facing a difficult dilemma, analysts and news outlets around the world argued.

### *A 'risible' threat*

News sources that have been decidedly critical of the Venezuelan government, including the London-based BBC, The New York Times and Agence France-Presse (AFP), have stuck with their editorial line but are now criticizing the US government as well. They took issue, for example, with sanctions announced Aug. 25 by US Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin that are directed, for the first time, at the country rather than at individuals. Specifically, the measures look to restrict Venezuela's access to US debt and equity markets by prohibiting US banks from dealing with the Maduro government and the state-run oil company, PDVSA.

The media outlets also criticized Trump's typically non-diplomatic threat of military intervention in Venezuela. “We're all over the world, and we have troops all over the world in places that are very, very far away. Venezuela is not very far away,” the US president said on Aug. 11.

“I can't imagine any government in Latin America, right or left, agreeing with the idea of military intervention in Venezuela,” Michael Shifter, president of the Inter-American Dialogue (IAD) think tank in Washington D.C., told BBC Mundo, the network's Spanish language arm, just hours after Trump made his controversial remarks. “This just strengthens Maduro and, unfortunately, opens up an even bigger breach between the US and the region at a critical moment for the situation in Venezuela.”

At the time of the interview, it wasn't yet known that with the exception of Panama, whose position is still ambiguous, all of Latin America and its regional bodies would openly reject Trump's idea. In the weeks that followed, Shifter's predictions proved to be correct in all respects.

Shifter again took Trump to task in an Aug. 16 opinion piece in *The New York Times*. Among other things, he said the "notion" of military action "is risible," dismissed the president's remarks as "bluster," and said the timing "was particularly infelicitous." The IAD president noted, furthermore, that Trump made his threat just days after countries throughout Latin America had begun putting just the kind of diplomatic pressure on Venezuela that the US government had been hoping for. The MERCOSUR (Southern Common Market) trade bloc sanctioned Venezuela, and at a gathering in Lima, representatives from 12 Latin American governments signed a declaration calling the Maduro government a "dictatorship." They also promised to limit arms shipments to Venezuela and to block Venezuelans from being nominated to international organizations.

Trump doesn't seem to be aware, Shifter suggested, that he "inadvertently boosted Mr. Maduro" by giving "credence" to the Venezuelan government's recurrent warnings about possible military incursions by the US.

"Predictably, Mr. Maduro and other senior Venezuelan officials have reacted defiantly, invoking the principle of national sovereignty," he wrote. "Mr. Maduro asked Venezuelans to prepare themselves 'to defend the peace, with tanks, planes, and missiles.'" The Venezuelan president also ordered the armed forces to carry out exercises, which took place Aug. 26 and 27.

"Mr. Trump's mention of a military option also puts Venezuela's opposition in a tough spot, just when it is trying to regroup," Shifter added. "Some in the opposition, which is already divided by personality and policy differences, are concerned that their ranks could fracture even further as they respond to Mr. Trump's reference to military action."

## *Unified front*

As part of its response, the opposition said it supports "sanctions that any government in the world imposes on human rights violators and looters of state resources." What's more, it called on "the entire international community to tell its companies and citizens not to carry out financial operations and contracts" with Venezuela. The Maduro government fired back via the ANC, saying, "The political right is limitless in its criminal actions and wants the Venezuelan people to starve." The ANC's constituents said proceedings would be held to try MUD leaders on charges of treason.

That same week, the Trump administration made its first direct contact with Latin America through Vice President Mike Pence, who made a whirlwind tour of the region to meet with Presidents Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia, Mauricio Macri of Argentina, Michelle Bachelet of Chile, and Juan Carlos Varela of Panama. With the exception of Varela, who was ambiguous in his response, the other leaders openly rejected the White House's military threat, forcing Pence to modify the interventionist discourse.

"Venezuela is sliding into dictatorship, and as President Trump has said 'the US will not stand by as Venezuela crumbles,'" the US vice president said during an appearance with Bachelet in Chile. "As President Trump has said just a few days ago, the United States has 'many options for Venezuela.' But the president also remains confident that working with all our allies across Latin America we can achieve a peaceable solution to the crisis facing the Venezuelan people." At no point did Pence

mention the military option. Afterwards, he said that whatever the US does in Venezuela, it “will do together” with its Latin American allies.

Either way, Pence wasn’t able to salvage his mission as Latin America’s leaders, all using similar language, formed a unified front against Trump’s treats. “Chile will do all it can to support the Venezuelan people, but it will not back coups or military interventions,” said Bachelet. “The possibility of military intervention cannot be considered,” said Santos. “We agree with what MERCOSUR expressed,” said Macri. “The Venezuelan people have the right to self-determination, which is why we emphatically reject President Trump’s threats,” Uruguayan President Tabaré Vázquez said earlier.

Trump’s rhetoric has also caused serious problems at home. On Aug. 16, the AFP published a dispatch from the US titled “Trump isolated after Charlottesville remarks.” The piece referred to the president’s backing of white supremacist demonstrators in the Virginia city and suggested that “just over 200 days into his presidency” he had crossed “a red line.” It also noted that only “David Duke, a former KKK leader and avowed racist and anti-Semite” came out in his defense after the Charlottesville debacle. The article then quoted a New York Times editorial suggesting that “Washington politicians had hoped the recent appointment of John Kelly, a retired Marine general, as his chief of staff would instill some discipline in his chaotic administration ... But the root of the problem is not the personnel; it is the man at the top.”

The AFP story appeared the same day that The New York Times ran Michael Shifter’s commentary on Trump and Venezuela. The US president’s remarks, the IAD president wrote, “evoked the Cold War era, when the United States sent troops to Central America and the Caribbean (though never to South America, where Venezuela is), often with unhappy results.” The last US incursion in Latin America took place in 1989, when US soldiers disembarked in Panama for the fifth time that century. Shifter also noted in his piece that just a week before Trump threatened Venezuela, his national security adviser, H. R. McMaster, when asked by The Washington Post if he thought Venezuela could face any kind of outside military intervention, said, “No, I don’t. I don’t think so.”

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