

Testimony of Rebecca Bill Chavez
Hearing on Prohibiting Unauthorized Military Action in Venezuela Act
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
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Chairman Engel, Ranking Member McCaul, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on potential United States military intervention in Venezuela. I also want to express my gratitude to this Committee for its bipartisan commitment to maintaining focus on Venezuela and to helping resolve the crisis there.

My name is Rebecca Bill Chavez. I am currently a Senior Fellow at the Inter-American Dialogue, a think tank dedicated to analyzing, debating, and finding consensus solutions to the core issues we confront as a hemisphere. From 2013 until January 2017, I served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Western Hemisphere Affairs where I oversaw defense policy involving the countries of the hemisphere and defense cooperation programs in the U.S. Northern Command and U.S. Southern Command areas of responsibility. Before that, I was a tenured professor at the United States Naval Academy, focusing on democratization and security in Latin America and the Caribbean.

I have spent my policy and academic careers focused on U.S.-Latin American relations, Latin American political systems, security, and the rule of law. As a close observer of the region, I am deeply troubled by the humanitarian crisis and the dramatic unraveling of democracy under Nicolás Maduro, a brutal and corrupt dictator.

A core question raised by this hearing is whether the United States should use military force to remove Maduro from power in Venezuela. My answer, which reflects the position of many other U.S. defense and foreign policy experts, is no. The negative consequences of military action to Venezuela, to the region, and to the interests of the United States are clear and foreseeable.

In my testimony today I will highlight two broad reasons for avoiding U.S. military intervention in Venezuela.

First, any military intervention would be much more difficult than many believe; it would not be quick and it could involve engagement with elements of the Venezuelan military loyal to Maduro, armed civilians, and non-state actors.

Second, one of our most important tools is international pressure via our regional partners and European allies. We will squander that goodwill and partnership if we continue to threaten military intervention — and even more so if we intervene militarily. Given our history in the region, we will risk losing the trust so painstakingly built since the end of the Cold War.

For the above reasons, it is critical that Congress play a role in any decision to engage in military activity in Venezuela. Congressman Cicilline's proposed legislation, the Prohibiting Unauthorized Military Action in Venezuela Act, would help accomplish that goal. Its introduction is a welcome reminder of the need to think through very carefully military engagement in Venezuela.

The Current Situation in Venezuela

I want to be clear: Nicolás Maduro is responsible for the tragedy that has enveloped Venezuela. He stands at the center of Venezuela's man-made disaster. Maduro came to power as the handpicked successor of Hugo Chavez, and he assumed his second term through a rigged election in 2018. He has followed in Chavez's footsteps by systematically dismantling democratic institutions and shamelessly violating human rights. Multiple indicators demonstrate that Maduro has led Venezuela to state failure:

Economic Free Fall. Venezuela was once one of the most prosperous countries in Latin America, but today the economy is in free fall. Gross Domestic Product has shrunk by half since 2013, and the International Monetary Fund expects hyperinflation in Venezuela to reach a staggering ten million percent this year. And, though Venezuela has the largest oil reserves in the world, incompetence, mismanagement, and corruption have led to a 60 percent decrease in oil production output since 2013, from 2.9 million barrels per day to 1.2 million barrels per day. This drop in output detrimentally impacts Venezuela's ability to service its debt of \$150 billion, which is over five times its exports.

Extreme Poverty. Ninety percent of Venezuelans live in poverty, and Maduro is literally starving his people. Much has been written about the "Venezuelan diet," a reference to the fact that the average weight loss has been 24 pounds. We've seen images of skeletal babies dying because there is no formula, not even in emergency rooms, and the recent video released by Univision's Jorge Ramos of hungry young men rummaging for food in the back of a garbage truck.

Virtually Non-Existent Access to Healthcare. The speed at which Venezuela is losing access to essential medicine is like that of a war zone. The Pharmaceutical Federation of Venezuela reports an 85 percent shortage of medicine. In 2016, infant mortality increased by 30 percent and malaria infections rose by 75 percent. The country is also facing severe outbreaks of diphtheria and measles. The blackouts of recent days have exacerbated the medical crisis. Ninety percent of dialysis units were paralyzed, hospitals turned away pregnant women because they were unable to perform cesarean sections, and panicked nurses searched for manual resuscitators to keep premature babies alive.

Rampant Crime. Venezuela has become one of the most dangerous countries in the world. Many have turned to criminal activity such as robbery and kidnapping to survive. According to the Venezuelan Violence Observatory, the country had a homicide rate of 89 per 100,000 people in 2017. That rate dropped to 81.4 per 100,000 people, but only because even criminals are struggling to get by and therefore fleeing the country, according to a recent *Washington Post* report.

Refugee Crisis. Of the 3.4 million Venezuelans who have left Venezuela, 2.7 million have emigrated since 2015. Some estimate that the diaspora is even larger. That's over 10 percent of the country's overall population. Regional governments are struggling to cope with the humanitarian and political fallout from what is the largest mass migration in modern Latin American history.

The Consequences of U.S. Military Intervention in Venezuela

The Venezuelan people deserve a democratically elected and accountable government that delivers public services and provides citizen security, and the temptation to look for a quick fix given the level of human suffering is understandable. However, as noted above, U.S. military intervention in Venezuela would have foreseeable negative consequences.

A Long and Difficult Engagement

Over the past few weeks, there have been many references to the 1989 invasion of Panama that overthrew Manuel Noriega as a potential template for action in Venezuela. The two are not comparable. At the time of Operation Just Cause, U.S. Southern Command was headquartered in Panama, so intelligence collection was relatively easy and the headquarters functioned as a sort of forward operating location. The conflict itself lasted less than two weeks, and involved 24,000 U.S. troops, 13,000 of whom were already in Panama.

An invasion of Venezuela would likely require between 100,000 and 150,000 U.S. troops over a long period time under conditions of asymmetrical warfare. As a mountainous country twice the size of Iraq with multiple large urban areas, Venezuela would pose serious logistical challenges to an invading force. There would be thousands of civilian casualties. U.S. military intervention could create the need for a long-term occupation by setting the stage for prolonged low intensity conflict, with resistance from powerful elements of the military that will remain loyal to Maduro in addition to armed civilians and formidable non-state actors with access to funding through illicit activity such as drug-trafficking, illegal mining, and extortion.

The challenge posed by Venezuela's military is acute. In Panama, the U.S. had to contend with only 4,000 Panamanian combat troops. In contrast, the National Bolivarian Armed Forces of Venezuela is comprised of 356,000 members. Defections have not been on the scale that we hoped because both Chavez and Maduro have deftly used both carrots and sticks to make sure that the fate of the armed forces has been tied closely to their own. After the 2002 coup attempt, Chavez expelled any soldier that he suspected might challenge him, and the practice of purging anyone seen as a threat has continued. With the help of Cuban advisors, the Maduro regime monitors closely the military for signs of dissent.

On the carrot side, promotions have been based on loyalty, which is why there are over 2,000 Venezuelan generals. Maduro also rewards loyalty with lucrative government positions, giving officers a stake in preserving his control. Approximately half of the country's governors are current or retired military officers, and current or retired officers lead about one-third of the country's ministries. Control over food distribution has been one of the most powerful patronage tools to buy off members of the military. It has not only allowed officers to feed their families, it has also given them control over the profitable black market in food, a major source of illicit enrichment.

Although it is true that some Venezuelans would welcome an invasion, it is unrealistic to think that there would be no significant civilian resistance. As Venezuela expert Javier Corrales has pointed out, multiple armed groups with distinct interests would defend the status quo no matter

what the cost, whether for ideological reasons or because their livelihood is linked to the Maduro government. In addition to high ranking military officers, the Special Action Forces (FAES) and the infamous pro-government *colectivos* would be poised to become what defense expert Adam Isacson has called a “chavista insurgency” in a post-intervention scenario. Even Colombian National Liberation Army (ELN) guerillas and dissident Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) members would have incentives to take up arms in Venezuela, and the conflict would certainly spill into Colombia, adding to the challenges facing our close ally as it struggles to implement the 2016 peace accord and consolidate government control over previously ungoverned territory.

Loss of Partnership and Goodwill of Allies and Partners

A U.S. military intervention would shatter the hard-fought regional and international consensus that has marginalized the Maduro government. The United States is one of the 54 nations, including most Latin American and European countries, that have recognized Juan Guaidó as Venezuela’s interim president. At the same time, the vast majority of our partners have publicly and unequivocally stated their opposition military intervention in Venezuela including Venezuela’s closest neighbors: Colombia and Brazil. Eleven members of the Lima Group issued a joint statement last month: “[T]he transition to democracy must be conducted by the Venezuelans themselves peacefully and within the framework of the Constitution and international law, supported by political and diplomatic means, without the use of force.”

It’s not surprising that the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean would oppose U.S. military intervention given the history of the region. Recent saber-rattling along with references to the Monroe Doctrine have created concerns among Latin American governments that the United States may return to its Cold War posture. As members of this Committee know, past U.S. action and support for military coups in Latin America often led to deep-seated despair and resentment. During my tenure as DASD, I was frequently reminded of the history of U.S. intervention in countries from Chile to Guatemala to Mexico. Former U.S. Southern Command Commander James Stavridis captures this in his reference to the 2008 creation of the Fourth Fleet, which focuses on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, medical diplomacy, and counter-narcotics. In an interview last month, he recalled that regional partners saw the Fourth Fleet as “a return to gunboat diplomacy. We had to work very hard to overcome that.”

Indeed, the U.S. government has worked to overcome these perceptions and has created a significant amount of trust with our Latin American partners. A military intervention would set us back at a time when China and Russia are gaining influence in the region. It would also give Maduro an effective propaganda tool to use against the U.S. in the region and thus potentially strengthen his hand.

Military action in contravention of the stated policies of the Lima Group countries would stand to jeopardize the U.S. military’s broader work in Latin America and the Caribbean. As Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, I became keenly aware of the importance of our partnerships to combat effectively transnational criminal organizations, respond to natural disasters, strengthen defense institutions, and develop military human rights programs. Military intervention would put at risk our important collaboration with the governments and armed forces of the hemisphere.

Recommendations for Moving Forward

There is a crisis in Venezuela, and there are potential non-combat roles for the U.S. armed forces, especially in the delivery of humanitarian assistance. Moreover, although the focus of today's hearing is on military action, we cannot lose sight of the non-military policy tools at our disposal to address the current challenges of the Maduro regime.

Non-Combat Role for the U.S. Military: Humanitarian Assistance. Although a unilateral intervention would be a mistake, the U.S. military should be ready to provide humanitarian assistance. When the time comes, the United States armed forces (always in support of civilian authorities) should be part of a broader coalition of countries that steps in to alleviate the suffering of the Venezuelan people. The militaries of regional partners such as Brazil, Chile, and Mexico have extensive experience and expertise in delivering aid under difficult circumstances. A humanitarian mission presents an opportunity to strengthen our military-to-military partnerships and broader defense relationships in the Western Hemisphere at a time when the U.S. government is working to minimize Chinese and Russian influence in the region. A long-time goal of U.S. Southern Command has been to promote the United States as a partner of choice. Recognizing our partners' capabilities would go a long way towards conveying the message of equal partnership and building trust, which — as noted above — is critical to our mission in the region.

Depoliticize the Delivery of Humanitarian Assistance. The provision of essential supplies to mitigate the dire humanitarian crisis must be the priority. We should continue to look for ways get aid into Venezuela. In order to do this effectively, donors must not politicize the delivery of assistance, which means distancing the provision of aid from political goals. Humanitarian aid is most effective when it adheres to the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence. As humanitarian response expert Jeremy Konyndyk explains, humanitarian action in contested environments will not reach those in need if it becomes entangled in the wider political power struggle. One of the challenges of the well-intentioned February 23 effort was the characterization of the aid as support for Guaidó, which helped Maduro portray the mission as an attempt to overthrow him. In the future, we can apply lessons learned by keeping a low profile and ceding leadership to a credible and neutral party such as the International Red Cross, the U.N. or local NGOs.

Support the 3.4 million Venezuelans Who Have Fled to Other Nations. Supporting Venezuelans abroad means designating Venezuelans for Temporary Protected Status and providing additional financial assistance to the countries that have welcomed Venezuelans. Currently, we are asking nations in the region to host Venezuelan refugees when we aren't doing so ourselves. Supporting the refugees also entails pledging additional assistance for the Venezuela regional response. As Cynthia Arnson pointed out in recent testimony, the U.S. government pledge of \$152 million between fiscal years 2017-2019 is important but nowhere near the \$738 million needed according the U.N. Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan.

Stand Behind the Lima Group. From the perspective of regional stability and institution-building, the Lima Group's unity and resolve to take a front seat in addressing the Venezuelan crisis is a welcome change from the hands-off approach of most Latin American nations until

2017. We should give the Lima Group the opportunity to continue to take a leadership position and find diplomatic solutions to the Venezuelan crisis.

Continue to Pursue Multilateral Diplomacy. The U.S. government should continue to be part of multilateral engagement. Our efforts to support a democratic transition will not be effective unless we work closely with our partners — especially those in the region, including Mexico. Though it will be difficult, the U.S. should also put Venezuela on the agenda during engagements with China, Cuba, and Russia — countries that wield significant sway with Maduro.

Keep Our Eyes on Colombia. Colombia is often held up as a rare example of bipartisan foreign policy success. With the help of Plan Colombia, the country moved from the brink of state failure in 2000 to a liberal democracy with a strong market economy. The 2016 peace accords signaled that conflict with the FARC had finally drawn to a close after decades of civil war. Moreover, Colombia has the potential to increase its role as a security exporter, contributing to global stability. The crisis in Venezuela, however, has the potential to destabilize our closest ally in Latin America. Colombia has been the largest recipient of Venezuelan refugees, which has strained the country's economy, infrastructure, health system, and security. The government of President Iván Duque has the unenviable task of implementing the peace accords while dealing with the influx of 1.2 million Venezuelans, both of which require tremendous resources. The U.S. government should commit to supporting President Duque in this endeavor. The United States and the region have a lot riding on the consolidation of peace in Colombia.

Conclusion

Thank you again for shining a light on what is happening in Venezuela. I also want to thank the Committee for its attention to Latin America and the Caribbean more generally, a region that is too often an afterthought for policymakers. I would be happy to assist this Committee as it formulates its policy approaches to the Venezuelan challenge.