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Maduro's geopolitical poker

Venezuela's leader wants to sit out his election fraud with the help of his global partners. But in South America, he is increasingly seen as a threat

More than three weeks after Venezuela's presidential election, the battle lines remain deadlocked. Nicolás Maduro, in office since 2013, has still not produced any proof of his alleged election victory and his security forces are brutally suppressing protests. Hopes of a sudden democratic epiphany or the disintegration of the ruling camarilla under pressure from the street demonstrations have evaporated. The civilian supporters of the regime and the security forces have closed ranks.

Some observers suspect that Maduro is playing for time, hoping that the international community will soon forget his blatant electoral fraud. Documents obtained by the opposition show a 67 to 30 per cent victory for their candidate Edmundo González Urrutia. Maduro is banking on his ability to avoid international isolation with the help of likeminded authoritarian potentates, to crush the opposition with his repression – human rights organisations call it 'state terror' – and to stifle any upsurge of resistance.

Former Maduro insiders, by contrast, believe that he is flexing his muscles so that he can negotiate from a position of strength. It remains to be seen who is right. With six months to go before the new government takes office, there is still a window of opportunity for a breakthrough. A first, seemingly improvised attempt at conciliation by Brazil and Colombia (Mexico dropped out) has come to nothing. What is needed now is professional diplomacy that takes the entire 'geopolitical chessboard' into account.

Autocratic alliances

Despite corruption and mismanagement, Venezuela is a rich country with resources in international demand. The petrostate has the biggest oil reserves in the world and still produces around 850 000 barrels a day (down from over 3 million 20 years ago). On top of that, it mines 35

tonnes of gold a year, 70 per cent of which is illegally exported via networks involving corrupt military officers, Colombian ELN guerrillas and international crime syndicates. The rest flows into the coffers of the central bank.

The United States imposed its first sanctions in 2015, initially primarily against individual regime officials. They have been stepped up over the years, in tandem with Maduro's creeping authoritarianism. In the meantime, Maduro has sought assistance and know-how from other dictatorships, notably Cuba, Iran, Russia and China. Economic hubs such as Turkey and India help to market the gold and the oil.

Cuba's revolutionary leader Fidel Castro and Venezuela's petro-socialist Hugo Chávez, elected in 1998, fell into a bromance right from the off. Castro was mainly interested in cheap Venezuelan oil and a political ally in his struggle against the US embargo. In exchange, Havana sent doctors, bodyguards for the president, and military and intelligence advisors to Caracas.

This brought the military into line and nipped coup attempts in the bud. Up to July 2024, half of all political prisoners were from the military. Havana's influence has waned since the deaths of Castro and Chávez and the severe crisis engulfing Cuba. But other autocracies have stepped into the breach.

Russia, China and Iran

The country's partnership with Russia began at military level in 2006. Because of Caracas' support for Colombian guerrillas, the US halted weapons exports to Venezuela. Russia seized the opportunity and has sought to expand its geostrategic partnership in the United States' backyard ever since. Today, Venezuela's arsenal includes Russian tanks, combat helicopters and Sukhoi fighter bombers. Russian energy giants Rosneft, Gazprom and Lukoil are partners of Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA, and Russian bot centres help out Maduro with disinformation campaigns.

Experts believe that Russian dictator Vladimir Putin is mainly interested in long-term strategic cooperation aimed at weakening US hegemony through the establishment of a multipolar world order. Russia is thus sponsoring Venezuela, which has applied to join the BRICS states, a key instrument of this envisaged multipolar order. Still, economic relations remain modest. In 2019, Venezuela exported goods and services worth $1.57 million to Russia, set against Russian imports in the amount of $92.5 million.

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China's priorities are somewhat different: the main issue is economic competition with the US in its resource-rich backyard. China is now Venezuela's main trading partners and has invested $4.5 billion in its energy sector. Beijing is also the source of Venezuela's social control strategy. Both the facial recognition software and the recording and registration of the population's biometric data for the digital 'Fatherland' app – used to pay out social benefits – come from China.

But first and foremost, Beijing is Caracas' main creditor. It has lent Venezuela almost $60 billion, more than Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil and Ecuador put together. Of course, corruption and mismanagement have absorbed a large proportion of this. According to various economic development agencies, Caracas still owes more than $15 billion. Indeed, Maduro has received no new loans since 2018, despite numerous overtures. Beijing's current focus is on stabilising the Venezuelan economy.

Iran's main interest appears to be establishing a South American bridgehead for its global anti-Israeli activities. Under Chávez, Teheran forged alliances with close associates of Venezuelan terrorist Ilich Ramirez Sánchez aka Carlos the Jackal. It also set up paramilitary training camps in Venezuela. Under Maduro, the focus has been on help with evading oil sanctions and shoring up the decrepit oil infrastructure.

Crossing a line

These authoritarian overseas axes are crisis-tested. Thanks to them, Maduro has survived the sanctions imposed by the US and the EU. However, they are geopolitical 'marriages of convenience' with countries whose immediate strategic priorities lie in their own sphere of influence: for Putin in Ukraine, for China in Taiwan and for Iran in the Middle East.

They offer a lifeline with no prospect of medium-term economic regeneration, at best maintaining a precarious status quo. Under Maduro, the Venezuelan economy has contracted by 75 per cent and poverty has increased by 82 per cent. Just under eight million Venezuelans have emigrated. That poses problems above all for its Latin American neighbours.

At the turn of the millennium, Chávez dreamed of the so-called

'Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America'. With oil selling for up to $150 a barrel, he was swimming in petrodollars, and his cronies could fill their boots. Infrastructure projects, new regional alliances and oil deliveries at concessionary prices to the island states of the Caribbean and Central America all made him a leader on a continent where the electoral pendulum was swinging to the left. From Ecuador through Bolivia to Argentina and Brazil, governments saw a historic opportunity with Venezuela's help to emancipate themselves from US hegemony — and from their own traditional conservative elites at the same time.

Maduro was able to bask in this aura for a number of years. But his election denial crosses a line. In Latin America, only Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Honduras have recognised his re-election. The first two are out and out socialist dictatorships and the latter are led by leftists nostalgic for the Chávez era. Economically and politically, however, all four are irrelevant.

By contrast, two left-wing heavyweights in the region have turned their backs: Luiz Inácio 'Lula' da Silva in Brazil, who only last year embraced Maduro on an official state visit, and Gustavo Petro in Colombia. They have made it clear to Maduro that recognition depends on his presentation of the election records and submission to an independent international audit. Maduro's response has been to try to worm his way out of trouble with legal trickery and a compliant Supreme Court. In the past, he could rely on his neighbours' indulgence, but now they're giving him the cold shoulder. On 16 August, the Organization of American States almost unanimously got behind the Colombian-Brazilian demands. The aim is to make it crystal clear to Maduro that recognition is off the table and that way steer him towards the negotiating table.

A threat to the whole region

But what explains this change of heart by Lula and Petro? For one thing it's a matter of image. Although they certainly see themselves on the left, they're also democrats. Lula even risks opening up a rift within his own Workers' Party, which hastened to congratulate Maduro on his election victory.

But reason of state also comes into it. Venezuela threatens to destabilise the whole region. The opposition has driven Maduro into a corner, and he's increasingly unpredictable. A few months ago, he threatened to invade neighbouring Guyana in an old border dispute, clearly gambling that it would win him a few votes. Another fear is that allies such as Iran will export their terror tactics to South America. This is not without foundation, as the Iran-sponsored attack on the Jewish community

centre in Buenos Aires in July 1994 shows.

The third problem is migration. Surveys show that another five million Venezuelans intend to emigrate if Maduro retains power. Past experience demonstrates that most would remain in Latin America. That would impose a burden on the already fragile labour markets and educational and health care institutions of the host countries. It's also a security problem. Intermingled in these migrant flows come Venezuelan criminal gangs, such as *Tren de Aragua*, which muscle their way into local criminal markets, for example, for prostitution, racketeering, arms and human trafficking.

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The US shares these concerns. But this time, the country is content to remain in the background. It has learned its lesson from previous attempts at interference, such as its support for the oppositional presidential challenger Juan Guaidó in 2019. Crude US attempts at solo action in the past have served only to feed Maduro's victimisation narrative in the face of attempted imperialist coups.

In contrast to 2019, however, there appears to be loose strategic coordination between Latin America, the US and the EU in an effort to step up international pressure on Maduro. In parallel with this, the opposition is calling for peaceful demonstrations while signalling its willingness to enter into dialogue with Maduro.

Chinese and Russian influence have gained ground in Latin America. Nevertheless, the main threads still come together in Washington. The United States is the driving force behind the sanctions, and it has issued bounties on Venezuelan political leaders for drug trafficking and human rights violations. The price of Maduro clinging to power has never been so high. That may well cause some of his comrades sleepless nights.



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