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Venezuela's Guyana intentions

Is Caracas bluffing? Or are Maduro's recent moves meant to signal intent, namely, to take Essequibo by force?

Guyana was propelled into international headlines in the last few weeks due to its would-be annexation by Venezuela. On 3 December, Venezuela carried out a non-binding referendum to revise the disputed border with Guyana – specifically over the ownership of the Essequibo area – which passed with over 90 per cent approval. In the next days, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro warned all international oil companies operating in Essequibo to leave within three months. He also ordered Venezuelan companies to prepare to enter Guyana's internationally recognised territory to explore for fossil fuels. While the Venezuelan armed forces claim to have begun 'infrastructure' work 'in Guyana'.

Guyana's President Irfaan Ali called these moves a 'direct threat' to the country. Indeed, Guyana's armed forces are on 'high alert' and have also engaged the US Southern Command. Guyana's attorney general warned that the country would invoke Articles 41 and 42 of the UN Charter to defend itself from Venezuela's threats. These articles would (arguably) empower the United Nations Security Council to take military action against Venezuela, as was the case during the Korean War or the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Venezuela's foreign minister called Guyana's recent moves 'erratic, threatening and risky'. On 6 December, Brazil's foreign minister stressed the risk of war.

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Consisting of two-thirds of Guyana's territory, Essequibo is known to hold vast oil reserves in its waters. The current border was settled in 1899 by an international arbitration tribunal in a process multiple Venezuelan governments claim was rigged. Ever since, Venezuela has pursued its claims primarily through the International Court of Justice. Direct conflict has been evaded so far. In the 2010s, bilateral relations were seen as positive — Guyana was part of the Venezuelan subsidised oil programme PetroCaribe. As the Venezuelan

economy melted, the programme lost support and was disbanded in 2019. Maduro, upon taking power in 2013, resumed Venezuela's traditional claims over Essequibo.

The 2023 referendum attracted international attention. The US declared its 'unwavering support' for Guyana, and on 7 December, the US Southern Command announced a flight operation over the country. Brazil – traditionally friendly to Guyana – enhanced its military presence close to Essequibo and has attempted to mediate between Guyana and Venezuela. China called for dialogue. Russia – a close Venezuelan partner – has been quiet, but Russian propaganda channels are already at work.

Yet another war in the world?

Is Caracas bluffing? Or are Maduro's recent moves meant to signal intent, namely, to take Essequibo by force? The Venezuelan escalation is serious, but its goal is unclear. The idea that war can start by accident or by 'things getting out of control' is a popular trope that does not bore out when looking at the historical record. Intentions matter. But what might Maduro's be?

On the one hand, in escalating the conflict, Maduro is enhancing his position domestically. Maduro's approval ratings have hovered around 20 per cent since 2019. In 2024, a new presidential vote will take place, one that makes some opposition figures optimistic about a Maduro defeat. Thanks to secret negotiations between Caracas and Washington and partial US sanctions relief, the regime might allow a unity opposition candidate – former lawmaker María Corina Machado – to stand for election. Machado stated in an interview that Maduro's regime is currently at its weakest moment.

Yet, the opposition has been divided by the Essequibo referendum, with portions of the opposition supporting the government and others decrying the referendum as a ruse. Moreover, Caracas has deployed the referendum as an excuse for more repression. On 7 December, new arrest warrants were issued for members of the Venezuelan opposition on the allegation of them working for Exxon Mobile in a conspiracy to thwart the 3 December referendum. Many members of Machado's team were targeted by the new repression. Indeed, journalist Sebastiana Barráez commented that Maduro might be brewing a crisis over Essequibo in order to suspend the 2024 elections.

Some also doubt the readiness of Venezuela's armed forces. Despite their large size (125 000 active-duty personnel) when compared to Guyana's

armed forces (3 000), the primary purpose of Venezuela's military is repression and not warfare. Their previous fighting record in Colombia alongside Colombian rebels is lacklustre. Moreover, Venezuela has many active armed challenges, such as the 2020 failed insurrection led by Venezuelan dissidents. Finally, due to the mountainous and densely forested border region, an assault on Guyana would require aerial and naval operations, and Venezuela does not have adequate capabilities for either. A ground assault would likely require entering Guyana through Brazilian territory, a much riskier move.

Returning favours

Escalating the crisis further could jeopardise US sanctions relief and the prospects of Venezuela reconnecting to international trade. The White House already signalled on 1 December its willingness to resume sanctions because of Maduro's reluctance to release political prisoners. So, on these bases, one can speculate that Venezuela's escalation in Guyana might be part of Maduro's attempt to legitimise himself at home and gain leverage with the US.

On the other hand, Maduro may have drawn the wrong lessons from Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Namely, that states engaged in expansionist wars can come off relatively unscathed. Before the relief of sanctions, Venezuela was among the most sanctioned countries in the world, suffering from isolation and a damaged economy for well over a decade. As Russia's case showed, additional sanctions can only accomplish so much (in the short term). Moreover, Venezuela's main export destinations are in Asia, with the West and Latin America being relevant but smaller destinations. So, Caracas is accustomed to navigating through economic turbulence.

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The experience of recent years may have also given Maduro the impression of strength in domestic and international affairs. The 2019 insurrection was defeated, and the 2020 operation to depose Maduro was foiled. The internationally recognised opposition government was dissolved in December 2022. The degradation of Venezuela's military does not appear to dampen their readiness to act on the referendum results, as *Control Ciudadano* – an opposition NGO monitoring the country's armed forces – warned.

Finally, Maduro might be counting on Russia to return a favour. Since

Russia began its war against Ukraine in 2014, Venezuela has helped Moscow escape full diplomatic isolation. In turn, Russia invests in Venezuela and even provides regime security through Wagner Group mercenaries and the transfer of cyberwarfare capabilities and surveillance technology. Bilateral trade and investment have grown despite sanctions and Venezuela's persistent economic troubles.

Maduro might think that – in case of a deepening crisis – Russia will not hesitate to provide support, if not through direct military intervention, at least by mobilising its mighty communications and disinformation arsenal. Already now, Russia's state-controlled media networks RT and Sputnik amplify – in Spanish and other languages – Maduro's narratives about Guyana and the conflict. For domestic audiences, Russian media has begun to disseminate the narrative that Venezuela's moves are defensive, and that it is the US and its oil companies who are to blame for the war. Like in the case of Ukraine, the smaller country – Guyana – is granted no agency.

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Many experts have concluded that Maduro is bluffing, plain and simple. Still, risks remain, and Guyana's warnings should not be ignored. The US could be blindsided by a potential Venezuelan aggression. The risk might be that the White House perceives Guyana's warnings as a potential spoiler in the negotiations with Venezuela.

The announced US Southern Command flight operation signals deterrence, but preventive diplomacy is needed as well. The UN Security Council will discuss the ongoing crisis on 8 December. Whatever the outcome, it must reinforce the ongoing mediation efforts and be ready to step up in case the Brazilian efforts stall. While a new war in Latin America appears unlikely, it would be impactful if it happened. So, the crisis deserves attention.



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