



# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

May 5, 2017 [Venezuela](#), [Regional Organizations](#)

# Venezuela's Bad Neighbor Policy

## Why It Quit the Organization of American States

By [Michael Shifter](#)

Just a decade ago, [Venezuela](#) was perhaps the most influential Latin American country in [the Organization of American States](#) (OAS), the world's oldest regional cooperation group. At the time, many of Latin America's left-leaning leaders had ideological affinities with Venezuela's socialist government, which was riding an economic boom on the back of its vast oil reserves. Hugo Chávez, the country's charismatic former president, pursued an aggressive kind of petrodplomacy, winning over or buying the silence of Venezuela's neighbors as his rule became increasingly authoritarian.

Today's situation is dramatically different. Nicolás Maduro, Chavez's hand-picked successor, presides over a broken nation of some 30 million people, most of whom are barely scraping by, desperate for food and medicine, fearful for their safety, and angered by their government's erosion of democratic safeguards. On March 29, a Supreme Court ruling effectively closed down the opposition-dominated [National Assembly](#), triggering massive street protests. Since then, more than 35 Venezuelans have been killed in violent clashes, many with government-backed militias—and there is no end in sight.

The Latin American governments that remained on the sidelines a decade ago now appear ready to take a stronger stand to prevent Venezuela from descending into deeper violence, state collapse, or [a more repressive form of](#)

[authoritarianism](#). Over the course of the last year, Venezuela was suspended from MERCOSUR, a regional trade bloc, and many Latin American officials—particularly in Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, and Peru—began to forcefully criticize Maduro for the first time.

On April 26, after a majority of OAS states called a special meeting to discuss Venezuela's crisis, Caracas declared that it would leave the organization. That choice need not spell the end of the international pressure on the Maduro government, however. By working together, the governments of the Western Hemisphere can still intensify their calls for the Venezuelan state to retreat from the precipice it is now approaching.

## OUT IN THE COLD

In its nearly seven-decade history, no country has quit the OAS on its own. But the organization has suspended two of its members: Cuba, from 1962 to 2009, and Honduras, from 2009 to 2011. On March 14, OAS Secretary-General Luis Almagro, who has led the charge in condemning the Maduro regime's dismantling of democratic institutions, [recommended](#) that the body similarly suspend Venezuela unless it held elections and freed political prisoners over the month that followed. The Maduro government's unilateral withdrawal from the organization seemed designed to preempt that outcome, which could have triggered multilateral banks to impose sanctions on Venezuela.

In some respects, Venezuela's withdrawal reveals that the OAS matters. Governments do not like being singled out as extreme cases in a region with so many human rights problems. Yet Venezuela's abandonment of the organization—a process that will take two years to complete—should also make other states uneasy. A major Latin American country has shut itself off from its neighbors, undermining their power to influence it.

The good news is that there is a way to deal with Venezuela outside of the OAS: through the formation of an ad hoc coalition of Latin American powers, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru. All of those countries, together with five others, endorsed an April 18 [statement](#) calling on the Maduro government to “guarantee the right to protest” and to schedule national elections, in line with the provisions of Venezuela's 1999 constitution. Now they should step up the pressure against Maduro, do what they can to expose the regime's abuses, and support any peaceful attempts to restore democratic rule. The goal should not be to sponsor talks between the opposition and the government, at least not in the near term. But by formally convening Latin American leaders to broadcast their concerns about the regime's actions or by consulting with opposition figures to determine what kinds of concessions they would be willing to make, regional states could help lay the ground for eventual negotiations.

It won't be easy. Outside governments can have only a marginal effect on Venezuela's crisis. Sanctions and other punitive measures can never match the amount of economic pain that Maduro's government is willing to inflict on itself, and worse, they could deepen the suffering of Venezuelan civilians. In addition, many of the Latin American states best positioned to pressure Venezuela, such as Brazil, are embroiled in distracting domestic problems.

The most recent multilateral effort to defuse Venezuela's crisis ended in failure. In 2016 and 2017, the former presidents of the Dominican Republic, Panama, and Spain, with the backing of the United States and the Vatican, sought to mediate between the government and the opposition. Regime officials and some opposition figures participated in the talks, which were held under the auspices of the Union of South American Countries (UNASUR). But in the end, Maduro used the dialogue to defuse opposition demonstrations and buy time without agreeing to hold the elections required by the country's constitution. The failure of those negotiations has convinced many Venezuelans that new talks will not be productive unless they are preceded by the release of political prisoners, a pledge to hold elections, and the acceptance of international humanitarian aid.

A fresh effort on the part of Latin America's powers could be different. The participation of active rather than former leaders would mark a major change. What's more, Maduro is growing weaker: Venezuela's citizens and its neighbors are less tolerant of the government's abuses today than ever before. The anger of those demonstrating in Caracas and other cities—not just the middle classes, but also poorer Venezuelans who form [Chavismo's](#) traditional base—cannot be put back in a box.

## THE TROUBLE WITH UNILATERALISM

Like its Latin American counterparts, the United States has recently taken a tougher stance against Venezuela. For the most part, the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump has upheld the policies of its predecessor. In 2015, Barack Obama approved sanctions against seven Venezuelan officials accused of human rights violations and criminal activities. The Trump administration targeted more senior officials in February, when it sanctioned Venezuelan Vice President Tareck El Aissami and one of his associates for their roles in the drug trade. The National Security Council is reviewing the United States' broader Venezuela policy, and it seems likely that Washington will impose more sanctions. Trump regularly raises Venezuela's crisis with other Latin American heads of state, as Obama did, though he has generally been more rhetorically confrontational than Obama was. Congress also clearly worries that Venezuela could descend into even greater violence and repression. On May 3, a high-level bipartisan group of U.S. senators introduced [legislation](#) that would back more sanctions on Venezuelan officials and provide the country's civilians with

humanitarian aid, among other measures meant to combat corruption and stop Venezuela's democratic and economic collapse.

In the coming months, Washington should work closely with its regional allies. It should support initiatives at the OAS that address Venezuela's humanitarian crises and human rights violations, try to build a stronger international consensus condemning the country's government, and back any serious independent group of [Latin American states](#) that seeks to deal with the crisis. Unilateral interventions, on the other hand, would be a mistake. Imposing economic sanctions on Venezuela as a whole would not only deepen the misery of many Venezuelans but also risk alienating the United States from its Latin American neighbors, as Washington's unilateral [policies toward Cuba](#) did for decades.

## WHY MADURO HOLDS ON

It's possible that growing pressure from abroad and the spreading domestic unrest could convince some senior Venezuelan officials that new elections makes sense. But so far, the government has adeptly kept such a scenario at bay. Through a series of illegal moves—such as its blocking of a constitutional recall referendum last year—it has divided and weakened the opposition. Its call for the creation of a constituent assembly to [rewrite the Venezuelan constitution](#) is its latest gambit, apparently aimed at distracting the opposition from its calls for an election.

At the root of the government's intransigence are its fears about the costs of relinquishing power. Venezuelan authorities have not only committed human rights abuses for which they could be punished if they lose their grip. They are also deeply involved in corruption, the drug trade, and other criminal enterprises. Along with the government's control over the [country's important oil sector](#), the depth of these entrenched interests set Venezuela apart from the Latin American regimes that have made democratic transitions in recent decades. Making matters more complicated, Maduro rules amid a number of factions, all of which are vying for power, and the extent of his authority is unclear. It is hard to imagine a negotiated political transition that would not also involve the military, which in recent years has not only preserved the regime's control by quashing protests but has also taken over such essential state functions as the distribution of food.

Leaders around the Americas should do more to address Venezuela's disaster, but they should also recognize the limits on their influence. The United States and other countries in the hemisphere can help Venezuela climb out of its crisis, and they can get ready to help the country's citizens should that crisis be resolved. But such a resolution can only come from within.