



Evolution or Revolution? U.S. Policy on Venezuela from Obama to Trump

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Less than a month after taking office as President of the United States, Donald J. Trump employed his preferred mode of communication, Twitter, to deliver a foreign policy statement of some consequence. Following a meeting with Lilian Tintori, the wife of Venezuelan political prisoner Leopoldo López, Trump demanded that Venezuela allow López “out of prison immediately” (Philip, 2017).

The development took Washington by surprise, for a number of reasons. The meeting with Tintori was unscheduled. After a meeting with Vice President Mike Pence brokered by Senator Marco Rubio, Tintori was offered the chance to drop by the Oval Office, and ended up briefing Trump for 40 minutes on the crisis in Venezuela. The call for López’s release was consistent with U.S. policy under the outgoing Obama Administration, but there was no indication Trump’s presidential tweet had been drafted or planned by foreign policy aids. Moreover, Trump had

shown little prior interest in human rights abuses in Venezuela, and in fact had spoken in admiring terms of strongmen elsewhere in the world, including Vladimir Putin. Perhaps most surprising of all for a president with a famously short attention span, Trump's concern for Venezuela turned out to be lasting. Several months later, it was reported that Venezuela, together with North Korea and Iran, was one of the President's top three foreign policy priorities (Nakamura, 2017).

Trump and his Administration have since taken a number of steps to pressure the Venezuelan government of Nicolás Maduro, including expanded sanctions. Thus far, however, these actions have failed to achieve their objective of returning Venezuela to a democratic trajectory. Venezuela has grown increasingly isolated internationally, to be sure, but it has also become more authoritarian and repressive. U.S. actions have had an effect - including forcing Venezuela into a selective debt default - but have not been effective. In this regard, the Trump Administration, like the Obama Administration, has found itself frustrated in achieving its objectives in Venezuela. This article will analyze why that is the case, by examining the contours of recent United States policy toward Venezuela, as well as potential future courses of action and their consequences. The ensuing analysis suggests that, for all the diplomatic and economic leverage of U.S. government, change in Venezuela will ultimately need to come from Venezuelans themselves.

Venezuela Policy in Transition

Trump's meeting with Tintori and subsequent tweet was labeled in some reports as a major change in U.S. policy (Nakamura, 2017). In fact, it was a mark of continuity. The Administration of President Barack Obama had for some time been calling for Venezuela to release political prisoners (Reuters, 2016), and while Obama himself had not met with Tintori, his Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State John Kerry had.

Over its first several months in office, the Trump Administration increased the pressure on Venezuela's government, but largely followed a playbook left in place by its predecessor. This included imposing personal sanctions on Venezuelan Vice President Tareck el Aissami for alleged involvement in drug trafficking, an action that had been readied - but

not executed - by the Obama national security team. It also involved a diplomatic effort to censure Venezuela at the Organization of American States (OAS) by expanding a coalition of 15 countries that Obama's State Department had assembled in June 2016 (Seelke and Nelson, 2018). The Trump White House's rhetoric was sharper and noisier - befitting the new President's blunt style - but similar in substance to that of its predecessor, with calls for Venezuela to abide by its constitution, hold free and fair elections, and cease human rights violations.¹

However, when efforts to secure a resolution critical of Venezuela at the OAS General Assembly in June 2017 fell short, the Trump Administration began to distinguish its approach to Venezuela policy more clearly, even if the overall thrust of U.S. policy remained consistent. While the United States' stated objective remained the promotion of democracy in Venezuela, the new Administration - frustrated by OAS dynamics and unwilling to wrestle with its own mistakes, including the decision by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to skip the General Assembly² - shifted tactically toward unilateral policy options, with a particular focus on sanctions in lieu of multilateral diplomacy. This included expanding individual sanctions to an additional 44 Venezuelans - albeit based on a 2015 executive order issued by President Obama that authorized asset freezes and travel bans on Venezuelans who undermine democracy, violate human rights or freedom of expression and assembly, or engage in public corruption by senior government officials. On July 31, 2017, the Trump Administration added President Maduro himself to the sanctions list, one of only four heads of state in the world subject to such a measure (The American Presidency Project, 2015; Seelke and Nelson, 2018).

The following month, the Trump Administration took perhaps its most significant step to date. The scope of U.S. sanctions, which previously had targeted individual members of the Venezuelan regime for serious wrongdoing, was expanded to restrict Venezuela's access to U.S. financial markets (US Department of the Treasury, 2017). In the weeks before the financial sanctions were announced, speculation was rife that the Trump Administration would complement existing individual sanctions with "sectoral" sanctions, including a potential embargo on U.S. oil imports from Venezuela.³ The United States remains the largest purchaser of Venezuelan oil, with imports valued at \$11.7 billion in 2017 (Seelke and Nelson, 2018; Clemente, 2017). Ultimately, the Administration chose

a more carefully calibrated approach with the goal of amplifying the pressure on the Maduro regime while limiting the collateral damage on a Venezuelan population already suffering the humanitarian consequences of the country's economic free-fall. The sanctions limited the access of the Venezuelan government and the state-owned oil and gas company PDVSA to the U.S. financial system. The immediate impact was minimal but the sanctions' bite increased over time, severely limiting Venezuela's options as it sought unsuccessfully to stave off a debt default. In November 2017, Maduro, who had remained remarkably committed to staying in Wall Street's good graces,⁴ conceded defeat and called for a "refinancing and restructuring" of Venezuela's foreign debt (Faiola, 2017).

While the Trump Administration's financial sanctions generated the desired economic pressure, the Administration's hoped-for political impact has failed to materialize. Notwithstanding his country's dire economic and humanitarian straits, Maduro proceeded to tighten his authoritarian grip: breaking the constitutional order by creating an all-powerful Constituent Assembly, manipulating an election for state governors in late 2017, and rigging his own reelection in May 2018.⁵ The United States had seemingly little to show for years of increasing pressure on Maduro.

Clarity of Objectives, Operational Missteps

U.S. policy toward Venezuela from the final years of the Obama Administration through the first 15 months of the Trump Administration has largely followed a consistent vision and a tactical approach that evolved in response to changing circumstances. These circumstances included accelerating authoritarian consolidation by the Maduro government - including President Maduro's quashing of a recall referendum in 2016, his violent crackdown on massive protests in the spring of 2017, and the seating of the Constituent Assembly in August 2017 - as well as a regional political environment far more tolerant of unilateral steps by the United States.

U.S. foreign policy, which has not always been on the right side of history in Latin America, has in the case of Venezuela rightly defined the preservation of democracy as its overarching goal. Successive administrations understood that advancing U.S. interests - including protecting

hemispheric democracy norms, preserving regional stability and security, and preventing a humanitarian catastrophe with significant spillover effects - is best accomplished through a policy aimed squarely at restoring democratic institutions and the rule of law in Venezuela.

In a hemisphere that was far too slow and soft in its response to democratic backsliding by the Chávez and (especially) Maduro governments, the United States was among the first and loudest in defending the human rights of Venezuelan citizens. In the Trump Administration, criticism of authoritarianism in Venezuela sits inconsistently alongside the President's praise for authoritarian leaders in Russia, Turkey, Egypt, the Philippines, and elsewhere (Montanaro, 2017). Whatever its motives, however, the Trump Administration has remained rhetorically committed to the cause of democracy in Venezuela. That U.S. efforts to coax and cajole Maduro back from his authoritarian slide have thus far failed to achieve the desired results is due overwhelmingly to the actions Maduro and his cronies have taken in the single-minded pursuit of power, profit, and self-preservation. Nevertheless, both the Obama and Trump Administrations committed operational missteps in implementing a fundamentally sound strategic vision, and may have missed important opportunities as a result.

In its final two years in office, the Obama Administration pursued a multi-track approach to Venezuela that included individual sanctions, multilateral diplomacy (mainly through the OAS), support for negotiations between the Venezuelan government and political opposition, and public advocacy for human rights and constitutional order—including the recall referendum.⁶ The Venezuelan opposition had registered a strong victory in December 2015 legislative elections, despite a playing field tilted heavily against it, and seemed well positioned to pursue a referendum to recall Maduro. U.S. diplomats were wary of getting in the way. They were loath to provide a politically weakened Maduro a pretext to divert attention from his own failings, and cognizant of the strong negative reaction in Latin America to U.S. sanctions (and accompanying language referring to Venezuela as an “extraordinary threat to national security”) when they were first announced in March 2015. Seemingly, one of the few things the Maduro government knew how to do well was paint itself as the victim of an imperial plot by the United States in an effort to gain favor at home and abroad, and many in the Obama Admi-

nistration were eager to avoid this trap. Hence the State Department's emphasis on securing the support of other countries for a tougher line on Venezuela, which in mid-2016 began - at last - to yield results.

The Obama team's execution became muddled, however, over disagreements among bureaucratic stakeholders. In theory, the various tracks of the team's approach were mutually reinforcing: maximizing unilateral and multilateral pressure on the Venezuelan government would strengthen the opposition's ability to achieve concessions on human rights and democracy in the negotiations. In practice, the multi-track approach allowed the Administration to paper over policy differences and provided cover for actors within the Administration to focus on the particular track they favored. Most prominently, the State Department's preeminent Latin America hand, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Shannon, invested his substantial diplomatic muscle in a Vatican-supported negotiation process (Ellsworth 2016) that others in the Administration, including at the National Security Council and within the State Department itself, viewed with significant skepticism. Unfortunately, their skepticism turned out to be well placed. The Maduro government simply used the negotiations to buy time, and months were squandered providing space for the ill-fated dialogue that might otherwise have been used to ratchet up pressure on the regime.

For its part, the Trump Administration's missteps have stemmed not from bureaucratic politics but from mixed signals emanating from the top of the Administration. President Trump revealed in August 2017 that he was considering a "military option" on Venezuela, a proposition that was immediately rejected by many of Washington's closest partners in Latin America and forced Vice President Mike Pence to spend a subsequent regional tour trying to clean up the mess (Ellsworth and Taj, 2017; Wilkinson, 2017). Nonetheless, Trump reportedly raised the issue again the following month in a meeting with Latin American leaders on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly (Glasser, 2018). Trump's then Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, later compounded matters with an ahistorical and tone deaf speech on hemispheric relations that invoked the 19th century Monroe Doctrine and seemed to suggest Venezuelan democracy could be restored via a coup by military officers (Tillerson, 2018). Taken together, these statements raised concerns in Latin America that the Trump Administration's interest in Venezuela was driven

less by a concern for restoring democracy - especially in light of Trump's solicitousness toward dictators elsewhere - and more by the desire to be rid of an ideological foe, including through regime change if necessary.

Due in part to the confusion and resistance generated by such signals - but also to Trump's deep unpopularity in Latin America (Keating, 2018) and the Administration's own unilateral tendencies and shallow foreign policy bench - the Trump Administration has at times found itself aligned but isolated from Latin America on Venezuela. Most significantly, the Trump Administration was excluded from the Lima Group (Government of Canada, 2018), an *ad hoc* bloc of hemispheric nations critical of Venezuela that grew out of the Group of 15 countries initially assembled by the Obama Administration in 2016. As a result, while the Trump Administration has shown commitment in its use of unilateral tools to pressure Venezuela, it has failed to match these tools with a similarly effective approach to multilateral diplomacy. Given the limitations of unilateral sanctions by any one country - even one with the unique leverage and capabilities of the United States⁷ - and the growing spillover effects of the Venezuelan crisis (particularly mass migration), the Trump Administration's diminished capacity for regional leadership and coordination may prove the Achilles heel of its Venezuela policy.

President Trump's decision to skip the April 2018 Summit of the Americas in Lima seemed to offer further confirmation of his Administration's passing interest in multilateralism, including as it pertains to the crisis in Venezuela. Trump's absence, however, may have proven a blessing in disguise. With the more disciplined and less provocative Vice President Mike Pence leading the U.S. delegation, the United States for the first time joined 15 Lima Group members in issuing a declaration on the situation in Venezuela, which included a statement that planned presidential elections would lack "legitimacy and credibility" (Prime Minister of Canada, 2018). Perhaps driven by growing concerns from U.S. regional partners about the impact of the Venezuelan migration crisis on neighboring countries, Pence also announced a commitment of \$16 million to help Colombia assist Venezuelans crossing the border in increasingly desperate circumstances (The White House, 2018).

The Path Forward

In March 2018, President Trump shook up his foreign policy team by replacing his Secretary of State and National Security Advisor. The outgoing incumbents, Rex Tillerson and General H.R. McMaster, were considered stabilizing forces, generally inclined to steer an impetuous and inexperienced president toward conventional foreign policy choices. The replacements named by Trump - CIA Director Mike Pompeo and former Ambassador John Bolton - seem more likely to reinforce his instincts than restrain them (Rucker and Costa, 2018; Worth, 2018). Incoming National Security Advisor Bolton, in particular, has a reputation for hawkishness, skepticism of multilateralism, and willingness to advocate for the preemptive use of military force against hostile governments (Kahl and Wolfstahl, 2018). Bolton and Pompeo share a deep antipathy toward Iran, and both have voiced concerns about Venezuela's links to the Iranian government and Hezbollah (Bolton, 2018; The Tower.org, 2017). At a time when serious observers have begun to suggest removing Maduro by force - including prominent members of the Venezuelan diaspora and Republican Senator Marco Rubio (who has proven influential on Venezuela policy in the Trump Administration) (Hausmann, 2018; Fox News, 2018) - it is fair to ask whether the Trump's bellicose new foreign policy team will seriously consider such an endeavor.

Given the extreme unpredictability of President Trump and his willingness to suggest a "military option" in Venezuela in the past, such action cannot be ruled out. Nevertheless, a U.S. military intervention in Venezuela remains unlikely. It would be risky, expensive, and do lasting damage to U.S. interests in the hemisphere while lacking a compelling national security justification⁸ and would likely be resisted by the U.S. military establishment as a result. Bolton and Pompeo may be more open to such an extreme step than their predecessors, but they will be preoccupied with bigger challenges elsewhere, especially in North Korea and Iran. A large and potentially lengthy deployment of the U.S. military to Venezuela would weaken their leverage in responding to the perceived threats posed by those nations, though it could also provide a comparatively attractive opportunity to engage in regime change.

The more likely scenario is that the Trump Administration will double down on its current approach, with increasingly vociferous denunciations of the Venezuelan regime and an expansion of financial sanctions - per-

haps to include the oil sector - possibly combined with quieter actions by law enforcement and intelligence agencies. As the negative externalities of the Venezuelan crisis grow - particularly migration, but also public health risks and organized criminality - a coordinated international response will be increasingly essential.⁹ Whether the Trump Administration is interested and able to lead such an effort will be a serious test of its diplomatic intentions and capabilities. The Administration's relative disengagement from regional diplomacy on Venezuela and its tense UN Security Council relations with Venezuela's benefactors China and Russia, as well as the unilateralist predilections of Bolton and Pompeo, suggest it may struggle to do so.

At the end of the day, the Trump Administration will confront the same frustrating reality its predecessor did: however much the world's most powerful nation wants to see democracy restored in Venezuela, it is the Venezuelan people who will determine their country's future. The international community can cajole, isolate, shame, pressure, and even seek to prosecute the Venezuelan leadership. It can raise and lower the costs for the regime to stay in power or leave power in ways that are more helpful or less. It could - were it permitted by Maduro - help alleviate the humanitarian crisis inflicted on the Venezuelan people by their leaders. These actions are far from inconsequential, and the United States' role is and will remain preeminent. Ultimately, however, the essential, tragic struggle in Venezuela is between a majority of Venezuelans who want change, and an authoritarian regime that will seemingly stop at nothing to prevent it.

NOTES

1. See: The White House (2017). "Statement by the Press Secretary on Venezuela," August 11, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-venezuela/>.
2. See: David McKean and Michael Camilleri (2017). "The United States Can't Go it Alone in Venezuela." *Foreign Policy*, June 30, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/30/the-united-states-cant-go-it-alone-in-venezuela-oas/>.

3. See, for example: David Mortlock and Francisco Monaldi (2017). “Venezuela: What are the most effective US sanctions,” *Atlantic Council*, August 9, 2017, <http://www.publications.atlanticcouncil.org/spotlight-venezuela/>.
4. See: Ricardo Hausmann and Miguel Ángel Santos (2014). “Should Venezuela Default?” *Project Syndicate*, September 5, 2014, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/ricardo-hausmann-and-miguel-angel-santos-pillory-the-maduro-government-for-defaulting-on-30-million-citizens--but-not-on-wall-street?barrier=accessreg>.
5. See: Luis Almagro (2017). “Denunciation of a Dictatorial Regime’s Consolidation in Venezuela,” September 25, 2017, <http://scm.oas.org/pdfs/2017/CP38157REPORT.pdf>; Jennifer L. McCoy (2017). “Venezuela’s controversial new Constituent Assembly, explained,” *Washington Post*, August 1, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/01/venezuelas-dubious-new-constituent-assembly-explained/?utm_term=.5843f734b922; Anatoly Kurmanaev (2017). “How Hundreds of Mysterious votes Flipped a Venezuelan Election.” *The Wall Street Journal*, November 2, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-venezuela-fell-victim-to-clear-manipulation-in-election-1509615002>; Kirk Semple (2018). “Venezuela Calls for Early Elections, and Maduro Aims to Retain Control”. *The New York Times*, January 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/23/world/americas/venezuela-election-maduro.html>.
6. See John Kerry (2016). “Remarks at the 46th Organization of American States General Assembly”. June 14, 2016, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/06/258461.htm>.
7. See: Edward Fishman (2017). “Even Smarter Sanctions”. *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2017-10-16/even-smarter-sanctions>.
8. See: Frank O. Mora (2017). “What Would a U.S. Intervention in Venezuela Look Like?” *Foreign Affairs*, November 8, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/venezuela/2017-11-08/what-would-us-intervention-venezuela-look>.
9. See: Shannon K. O’Neil (2018). “A Venezuelan Refugee Crisis”. Council on Foreign Relations, February 15, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/report/venezuelan-refugee-crisis>.

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ABSTRACT

Evolution or Revolution?

U.S. Policy on Venezuela from Obama to Trump

Since taking office, the Administration of U.S. President Donald Trump has taken a confrontational stance toward the regime of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. The Trump Administration issues regular condemnations of the Venezuelan government's autocratic behavior and human rights abuses, it has adopted both individual and financial sanctions aimed at pressuring the Maduro government, and it has even floated the idea of sponsoring military action or supporting an internal coup against Maduro. This hardline approach is often assumed to mark a departure from the policies of the prior administration of President Barack Obama. In fact, however, there is a significant degree of continuity in U.S. policy toward Venezuela under the Obama and Trump Administrations, to include a stated commitment to the restoration of democratic governance and respect for human rights in the country, sanctions against the Maduro regime, and multilateral efforts to isolate the Venezuelan government. To a large extent, Trump Administration policy reflects a natural hardening of U.S. policy in response to actions by Maduro that further undermine democracy in Venezuela.

The exception is the willingness of President Trump to countenance military action, which—however unlikely—has hampered U.S. multilateral efforts. Ultimately, for all their actions, both the Obama and Trump Administration have been stymied in achieving their objective of a democratic restoration in Venezuela—where the essential, tragic struggle is between a majority of citizens who want change, and an authoritarian regime that will seemingly stop at nothing to prevent it.

RESUMEN

¿Evolución o Revolución? Política de EE.UU. hacia Venezuela desde Obama a Trump

Desde que asumió el cargo, la Administración del Presidente de Estados Unidos, Donald Trump, ha tomado una posición de confrontación hacia el régimen del Presidente venezolano Nicolás Maduro. La Administración Trump emite regularmente condenas del comportamiento autocrático del gobierno venezolano y sus abusos de derechos humanos, ha adoptado sanciones tanto individuales como financieras dirigidas a ejercer presión contra el gobierno de Maduro e incluso ha circulado la idea de patrocinar una acción militar o apoyar un golpe de Estado interno contra Maduro. Este enfoque de línea dura se asume frecuentemente para marcar distancia de las políticas de la administración anterior del Presidente Barack Obama. De hecho, sin embargo, hay un grado significativo de continuidad en la política de Estados Unidos hacia Venezuela bajo las Administraciones de Obama y Trump, para incluir un compromiso declarado de restaurar la gobernanza democrática y el respeto por los derechos humanos en el país, las sanciones contra el régimen de Maduro y los esfuerzos multilaterales para aislar al gobierno venezolano. En gran medida, la política de la Administración Trump refleja un endurecimiento natural de la política de Estados Unidos en respuesta a las acciones de Maduro que han minado aún más la democracia en Venezuela. La excepción es la voluntad del Presidente Trump para favorecer la acción militar, la cual – sin embargo, improbable- ha dificultado los esfuerzos multilaterales de Estados Unidos. En última instancia, por todos sus esfuerzos, tanto la Administración Obama como la de Trump se han visto impedidas en alcanzar su objetivo de una restauración democrática en Venezuela – donde la lucha esencial y trágica se da entre una mayoría de ciudadanos que desean el cambio, y un régimen autoritario que aparentemente no se detendrá ante nada para evitarlo.

SUMMARY

Evolução ou revolução? Política dos Estados Unidos para a Venezuela, de Obama a Trump

Desde que assumiu o cargo, o presidente de Estados Unidos, Donald Trump, tomou uma posição de confronto em relação ao regime do

presidente venezuelano Nicolás Maduro. A administração Trump, que reprova regularmente o comportamento autocrático do governo venezuelano e seus abusos em matéria de direitos humanos, adotou sanções tanto individuais quanto financeiras com o fim de exercer pressão sobre o governo de Maduro e, inclusive, veiculou a ideia de patrocinar uma ação militar ou apoiar um golpe de Estado interno contra ele. Este enfoque de linha dura é assumido frequentemente para marcar distância das políticas da administração anterior do presidente Barack Obama. No entanto, há de fato um grau significativo de continuidade na política dos Estados Unidos para a Venezuela nos governos de Obama e de Trump para incluir um compromisso declarado de restaurar a governança democrática e o respeito pelos direitos humanos no país, as sanções contra o regime de Maduro e os esforços multilaterais para isolar o governo venezuelano. Em grande medida, a política da administração Trump reflete um endurecimento natural da política de Estados Unidos em resposta às ações de Maduro que minaram ainda mais a democracia na Venezuela. A exceção é a vontade do presidente Trump de favorecer a ação militar, a qual – embora improvável – tem dificultado os esforços multilaterais dos Estados Unidos. Em última instância, por todos os seus esforços, tanto a administração Obama como a Trump viram-se impedidas de alcançar seu objetivo de uma restauração democrática na Venezuela – onde a luta essencial e trágica ocorre entre uma maioria de cidadãos que desejam a mudança e um regime autoritário que aparentemente não se deterá diante de nada para evitá-lo.

