



(U) Venezuela: Maduro likely to maintain power through 31 March 2019 despite declining support

(U) The Venezuelan opposition is unlikely to overtake President Nicolás Maduro by 31 March 2019 despite declining international support from key lenders, Russia and China, and an increasingly complex relationship with his security forces. Maduro's maintenance of the presidency primarily relies on the external support of Russia and China and the continued backing of the Venezuelan military. With a decrease in military backing and a moderating of external support from Moscow and Beijing, Maduro's chances of overcoming the opposition will greatly diminish likely leading to a transition of power or, more unlikely, a military-led coup attempt. Although Russia and China have recently increased talks with opposition leader Juan Guaidó's envoys, their continued support for Maduro is likely to signal preservation of power for the current administration. However, should foreign support decline and military support remain it can be expected that Maduro attempts to solidify his authoritarian powers, evident in the president's recent attempts to secure his nation's borders with Brazil, Colombia, and the Dutch Caribbean Islands.

(U) A transition of power to the Venezuelan opposition is very likely if the Venezuelan military defects against Maduro. Military rejection of Maduro is unlikely, however opposition leader Juan Guaidó is currently attempting to pass an amnesty law to protect security officers if Maduro is overthrown in an attempt to gain more support from the military. This hesitant support from the military will delay the transition of power beyond 31 March 2019 to the opposition, however, it remains a very likely outcome.

- (U) The opposition has chosen to target the middle ranks of the military.ⁱ According to Antonio Rivero, a former Venezuelan general exiled in Miami, low-and mid-ranking officials will most likely will turn against the Maduro regime.ⁱⁱ
- (U) Carlos Peñaloza, a former chief of staff for the Venezuelan Army, believes there is enough dissidents among these ranks to execute an overthrow of Maduro.ⁱⁱⁱ Although Maduro has maintained control over the military through incentives, lower ranked troops suffer from food shortages and meager earning similar to civilians and gain nothing but security against counterintelligence forces for their loyalty to Maduro.^{ivv}
- (U) Guaidó is offering an amnesty deal to current security forces that would protect them from legal prosecution by future administrations, in exchange for their loyalty in overthrowing Maduro.^{vi} Some military personnel fear the consequences that they will face under a new government for unconstitutional acts that were sanctioned by Maduro, although some distrust the opposition's offer.^{vii}



COSA: The Venezuelan Crisis—March 4, 2019

(U) A military-backed coup attempt is unlikely due to the Venezuelan military’s continued rhetorical support for Maduro and deployment to the Brazilian and Colombian borders. Due to the strong relationship between the military and the presidency established during the Chávez regime, the Venezuelan armed forces (aside from a few defecting officers) continue to voice their support for de facto dictator Nicolás Maduro. This indicates that if any action is taken on the part of the military in the coming weeks, it will likely be to restore Maduro to power while removing interim president and former head of the National Assembly, Juan Guaidó.

- (U) Currently, the military is acknowledged as the only force that could press for new elections. As Guaidó works toward strengthening his ties to the military, Maduro continues to accuse Guaidó-backed forces such as the US, Canada, and Israel of launching a coup through the means of new elections.^{viii}
- (U) Guaidó recently pitched an amnesty bill to the National Assembly which would offer protections and pardon military officers who were accused of “unconstitutional acts” during the Chavez and Maduro regimes if they acknowledge Guaidó’s authority.^{ix}
- (U) The amnesty bill has yet to be recognized by top military officials who still claim loyalty to Maduro; however, Guaidó told *The Washington Post* that he is confident he can strengthen ties between the military and himself, which will result in the eventual ousting of Maduro.^x

(U) With continued support of the Venezuelan military and the international support of Russia and China, it is likely that Maduro will remain in power through 31 March 2019. Maduro elevated the National Guard during his presidency using the military branch to maintain order and repress protests which allows for Maduro to maintain strong internal control over Venezuelan citizens. Russia and China remain loyal to Maduro’s regime as they have given Venezuela monetary support with outstanding loans as well as humanitarian aid, seeking to maintain influence over Venezuela while attempting to prevent international military intervention.

- (U) In 2014, China granted Venezuela \$30 billion in oil-backed loans. Due to the economic problems and management of oil production, Venezuela still has nearly \$20 billion Chinese loans. Due to these loans, Beijing is continuing moderate support of the Venezuelan government as to not lose their investment.^{xi}
- (U) Russia on 22 February 2019 shipped 7.5 tons of medical aid to Venezuela coupled with a warning to the United States not to use humanitarian aid as a front for military intervention.^{xii}
- (U) The military has an estimated 6% desertion rate due to the hardships of hyperinflation.^{xiii xiv} According to a former American official, these dissidents, along with thousands of others who have fled the country, could pose a threat to Maduro if neighboring countries would allow them to mobilize.^{xv xvi} However, the military have shown to follow Maduro’s commands by blocking international aid from entering the country.^{xvii}



(U) Maintained support of the Venezuelan military and withdrawal of international support from Russia and China is likely to create a stronger authoritarian regime, and further isolate Venezuela from international trade. Withdrawal of foreign actor support is unlikely, due to economic and political gains China and Russia respectively benefit from. Top military officials have repeatedly voiced support for Maduro, and have reiterated their unrestricted “obedience, subordination, and loyalty,” to the dictator stating they will resort to violence if necessary.^{xviii xix xx}

- (U) On 22 February 2019, the Venezuelan military opened fire on peaceful protesters of an indigenous community that was attempting allow aid into Venezuela, killing one and wounding 12.^{xxi} The military had been ordered to prohibit aid from entering the country, and will use force to defend the territory if necessary.^{xxii}
- (U) While China and Russia are the two main actors supporting Maduro, Maduro still garners support from several regional actors, including Bolivia, Cuba, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, as well as other nations abroad, including Belarus, Cambodia, Iran, North Korea, the Palestinian National Authority, Turkey, South Africa, and Syria.^{xxiii}
- (U) Without support from international actors, Venezuela will face further economic sanctions, which may be used as leverage towards negotiation.^{xxiv} Currently Venezuela can bypass sanctions on the oil sector by exporting to countries in support of or indifferent to Maduro, but lack of customers will exacerbate the humanitarian and economic crisis in Venezuela.^{xxv}

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