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by WILLIAM CAMACARO - FREDERICK B. MILLS
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The Military Option Against Venezuela in the “Year of the Americas”

If the US attacks Venezuela from Colombia it will initiate a “war of 100 years, and this war will extend to the entire continent.”

President Hugo Chavez Frias (Nov. 2009)

Year of the Americas: Venezuela in the crosshairs

Defense Secretary James N. Mattis began his trip to South America on August 13th to “exchange strategic perspectives” with senior defense counterparts in Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Colombia. This trip follows a series of Latin America tours by high level Trump administration officials all aimed at making 2018 the “Year of the Americas”: Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited in February 2018; Vice President Pence attended the Eighth Summit of Americas in April and returned for a Latin America tour in June; Secretary of State Mike Pompeo went in July; and US Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, visited Central America in February and Colombia just last week.

A major focus of senior US official tours to Latin America this year has been to discuss ways to increase pressure on Venezuela with the aim of bringing down the government. Regime change in Venezuela is presumably in accord with the “freedom model” advanced by the White House. The content of this model, supposedly exemplified by Colombia, claims to champion democracy throughout the Americas, yet this content was not democratically determined. Moreover, the “year of the Americas,” having been largely made in the USA, did not emerge from a consensus of all those in the hemisphere whose everyday lives would be impacted by it. These contradictions are important issues

because the “freedom model” threatens to impose unbridled neoliberalism throughout the region by any means necessary.

In this latest high level visit, Secretary of Defense Mattis arrived in Brazil just one week after an assassination attempt by opposition extremists against Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. If the drone attack had been successful, it could have also eliminated many of the leaders of other state institutions and decimated the military high command, generating the intended chaos and leaving a political void in the country. A “transitional” opposition government already waiting in the wings in Bogota and Miami would have probably acted quickly to fill this void and swear in a provisional government. With prompt endorsement from the US-NATO alliance and its regional partners in the Lima Group, such a provisional government could then have called for an international mission to deal with an urgent “humanitarian crisis.” While this and various other possible plans for regime change are a matter of speculation, there is no doubt attacks on the Venezuelan state are still underway in Caracas: Venezuela is under siege.

Such a terrorist attack in the Western Hemisphere should have evoked a strong condemnation by the White House, however, Washington’s antipathy towards Caracas appears to have muted any such concerns. This refusal of the Trump administration to take an unequivocal stand against political assassination, even in the case of an attack on a perceived adversary, does not bode well for regional peace and security, nor for the rule of law, in this self declared “year of the Americas.”

Although Washington has denied any [US involvement in this terrorist attack](#) on the Venezuelan state, according to [AP](#), “President Donald Trump reportedly floated the idea of invading Venezuela to both senior administration officials and world leaders multiple times in the past year.” Trump also met with several Latin American leaders, and floated the same idea, but was unable to garner support at the time. Washington’s outspoken support for regime change and President Trump’s contemplation of military intervention may have been perceived by opposition hardliners as giving the green light to such conspiracies to overthrow the government in Caracas.

Some historical context may help explain, but not justify, Washington’s tepid response to the assassination attempt in Caracas and its call for regime change in this South American nation. For two decades the US has backed the Venezuelan opposition drive to undermine, first President Chavez, who was elected president in December of 1998, and now Maduro, who was first elected President in April 2013, following the death of Chavez on March 5, 2013. [A short lived coup against Chavez in April 2002](#), followed by

an [oil strike](#), and then a recall referendum, all failed to unseat Chavez. And more recently, opposition protests, a US led effort in the OAS to isolate Venezuela, [an escalating economic war](#), several foiled coup plots, and now an assassination attempt against Maduro, have also failed to bring the current Venezuelan government to its knees.

On May 20, despite intense pressure from the US and Lima Group to postpone presidential elections in Venezuela, Maduro was re-elected with [68% of the vote](#) and 48% participation. The election had been boycotted by a majority of the opposition Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) as part of an effort to delegitimize the electoral process. This effort was somewhat undermined, however, by the participation of opposition party Avanzada Progresista candidate, Henri Falcon, as well as Evangelical candidate, Javier Bertucci, who both ran against Maduro despite pleas from Washington and the MUD to withdraw from the contest. [The election was arguably a victory for Maduro](#), having brought out a significant, though historically smaller percentage of the electorate, despite the MUD boycott and threats of dire consequences from the empire should voters go to the polls.

Why the adversarial relationship between Washington and Caracas for the past two decades? It is not just about the control of natural resources, though Venezuela does have some of the largest proven oil reserves in the world and is rich in minerals, including gold. The Bolivarian revolution has posed a challenge to US hegemony in the region since the election of Chavez in 1998 because it has been the principle catalyst for Latin American independence and integration and has promoted a multipolar world. Moreover, Venezuela has been in the forefront of the formation of regional bodies, such as ALBA, CELAC, and UNASUR, that do not include the United States. These associations had begun to shift the center of gravity for decisions concerning the fate of regional economics and politics from the Global North to the peoples of the Americas, giving political space to progressive governments that have sought alternatives to the so called Washington Consensus. That Venezuela led the way for this seismic shift in regional politics, which has recently undergone setbacks, is something Washington has not and apparently will not pardon.

There are several important indicators that preparation for a possible international military intervention in Venezuela is underway. There has been an increase in military [exercises coordinated by US Southern Command](#). Recent press reports reveal that President Trump has been contemplating an invasion of Venezuela. And there is an

intensifying right wing lobby in Washington against the governments of [Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Cuba](#); as well as [open calls by some US policy makers](#) for a military coup in Caracas.

It is clear that for Washington regime change in Venezuela is now a top priority.

But why the hurry to topple Maduro? It could be that the US seeks to bring about regime change in Venezuela before the progressive government elect of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) in Mexico takes office in December. AMLO has already declared Mexico would pursue a foreign policy based on respect for the sovereignty of member nations. He is also committed to using dialogue as a means of resolving differences within and among nation states. As [AMLO states clearly](#): “Nothing by force; everything by using reason.” Such a non-interventionist stance would strengthen the discourse within the Organization of American States (OAS) in favor of diplomacy over coercion as well as dilute the anti-Bolivarian influence of the [Lima Group](#) in which Mexico has been a major player. It would then not be so easy for the US to patch together a coalition of the willing to impose regime change in Venezuela.

Another consideration for Washington and its allies in the region is the popular push back against neoliberal reforms and corruption in Argentina, Peru and Brazil. This push back may soon intensify and make it increasingly difficult for the US to put together a coalition of the willing to invade Venezuela. The balance of forces can change at any moment given the vulnerability of these key US partners in the region. The entire continent is a pressure cooker.

If the US and its “coalition of the willing” in the region were rash enough to deploy a military option against Venezuela, it would likely meet fierce resistance from the popular sectors and the civic–military alliance built by Chavez to defend the Bolivarian Republic against such an eventuality. As Chavez once declared, “in the face of an invasion by the most powerful country on earth, we will disperse, we will become earth, air, water, and we will wage a war of resistance.” These words still have currency in Venezuela today. For despite the present hardships and growing discontent with the economic crisis, polls indicate that [the large majority of Venezuelans oppose the sanctions and outside military intervention](#) and prefer dialogue over civil conflict.

An invasion of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela could have unintended but tragically foreseeable consequences for Venezuela’s neighbors. Most immediately, it could ignite a rapid escalation and spread of the armed conflict that is still underway in

Colombia and thereby further undermine the Colombian peace accords signed in 2016, an accord which is already coming apart.

An attack on Venezuela would also likely provoke an intensification of repression and resistance in Argentina, where President Mauricio Macri, on the heels of new agreements with the IMF, last month issued a [decree](#) for the military to “collaborate in internal security.” In Argentina, this ominous measure has evoked memories of the role of the Argentine military during the dirty war (1976-1983) that claimed an [estimated 30,000 lives](#).

The involvement of Brazil in a US led intervention in Venezuela could lead to increased protests against the unpopular Brazilian President, Michel Temer, who was brought to power in a [parliamentary coup](#). Temer is now facing growing opposition from grassroots movements as well as an electoral challenge by former president [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#).

These considerations suggest that the relentless US backed assault on Venezuela will not enhance the cause of freedom and democracy in the region and may instead, in the case of some nations, provoke escalating civil conflict, when politics and dialogue ought to prevail.

Colombia exemplifies the “freedom model”

If advancing the cause of regime change in Venezuela, followed by Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Cuba is the proposed destructive part of “the year of the Americas” what is the constructive part? US Ambassador to the UN, [Nikki Haley](#), visited Colombia last week to celebrate the inauguration of the right wing president elect Iván Duque. On August 4, in an article for the [Miami Herald](#), Haley declared: “[It’s time for Maduro to go](#)” and held up Colombia as an example of the advancement of the “freedom model”:

“Colombia is increasingly embracing the freedom model. Colombia has democracy, economic growth, and respect for human rights. The freedom model is the future, both in the Americas and worldwide. It produces stable societies, not to mention good strategic partners for the United States.”

In this statement Colombia is portrayed as paradigmatic of the “freedom model” for the “year of the Americas.” If this is the case, the model is not very encouraging with regard to “respect for human rights.” The death threats against thousands of activists across the country are far from idle. Since January 1, 2016, [336](#) community leaders and human rights defenders have been murdered in Colombia. As Amnesty International points out,

these atrocities have continued, even in the aftermath of a peace treaty between the government and the FARC, with the [“silent complicity of the government elect.”](#)

This South American nation is also suffering violence by a number of groups—paramilitaries, leftist guerillas, narco-traffickers, and the military— all of which are competing for control of territory and resources. According to the UNHCR, the violence has resulted in the massive internal displacement of [7,671,124 citizens](#). In a [recent report](#), this UN agency also noted “an increase in murders of, and threats against, human rights defenders and community leaders in the Pacific Coast region. In most cases, the victims are from indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities.” Advancing democracy and human rights in the present climate then, will not be easy. President Duque will be dealing not only with an insurgency, an assassination campaign against community leaders, and a growing narcotics trade, but what [Insight Crime](#) recently described as the establishment of “criminal organizations within state institutions.”

During her visit to Colombia, Ambassador Haley also visited the Colombian-Venezuelan border, denouncing the government of Venezuela and drawing attention to the plight of Venezuelan immigrants in Colombia and their need for material assistance. There has been little coverage, however, of the increasing xenophobia against these immigrants, many of whom are [Colombian citizens](#). [During the first six months of 2018](#), 99 of 114 reported foreign homicide victims in Colombia have been Venezuelan, and 18 of 21 suicides by foreigners are reportedly also Venezuelan. So Venezuelan immigrants need more protection as well as material assistance.

As the [US pledges 9 million](#) to Colombia to aid Venezuelan immigrants, it tightens the stranglehold on the Venezuelan economy through a series of ever more stringent sanctions, exacerbating the very economic crisis which generates such emigration. Sanctions have triggered [the freezing of billions in Venezuelan](#) assets, including more than 1.65 billion dollars which the Maduro administration maintains had been slated for the purchase of food and medicine. It is clear that sanctions not only target government officials; they hurt Venezuelan citizens as well.

One way the US can help the Venezuelan consumer is not only to remove the crippling economic sanctions, but also to denounce the constant flow of contraband Venezuelan gasoline, food and medicine into Colombia. More than 25 thousands liters of Venezuelan [gasoline is smuggled](#) into Colombia every day, as well as [tons of contraband Venezuelan subsidized food](#). These items fetch much higher prices in Colombia than in Venezuela, despite the soaring inflation in Venezuela’s ailing markets. Dealing in contraband

enriches Colombian and Venezuelan mafias, small time smugglers, and corrupt officials on both sides of the border, while aggravating food shortages and the economic crisis inside Venezuela. Venezuela's ambitious [economic recovery plan](#), the prospects for which are presently the subject of much [heated debate](#), is in part aimed at derailing this illegal gravy train. If the plan meets with even moderate success, it could save billions in lost annual revenue and put some of these mafias out of business.

The "year of the Americas" is not likely to bring peace and prosperity to the region any time soon if Colombia is taken as a prime example of the "freedom model." Colombia is host to seven US military bases that now threaten the peace and security of the entire region. As mentioned above, [it is no secret that the Trump administration contemplates a military invasion of Venezuela](#) and some Venezuelan opposition hardliners join [Washington's call for the Venezuelan military to overthrow](#) the elected government. Moreover, Colombian territory serves as a base of operations for a ["transitional"](#) Venezuelan government as well as a safe haven for conspiracy against Caracas. Finally, President Duque has announced that Colombia, which now enjoys [NATO "global partnership" status](#), will soon [withdraw from UNASUR](#), a move that would deal a serious blow to the union's mission of advancing regional independence and cooperation.

No to war. Yes to regional peace, dialogue, and cooperation

[The last time President Trump floated the idea of invading Venezuela](#), his cabinet did not go along. And despite advice from his inner circle not to bring the issue up among regional allies, he did so anyway, and at the time, regional allies balked at the idea. But times have changed. With Uribista President Iván Duque at the helm in Colombia, the outcome of any similar deliberation is less certain. To be sure, given the possible catastrophic consequences of a military option for all nations involved, Secretary Mattis might hear some serious reservations from some of his defense counterparts during his South America tour this week. The outcome of these meetings is uncertain. The specter of Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen as well as the insurgencies of the 1980s and 90s in Central America should suggest caution to the interlocutors.

Progressive forces around the world ought not be mere bystanders as the future of the Americas hangs in the balance. It is still possible to resist the spread of perpetual war and a permanent state of exception to the Western Hemisphere. The imposition of necropolitics from the North in the name of democracy and freedom can never gain democratic legitimacy among the sovereign peoples of the Americas. After five hundred

years of subjugation and exploitation, millions in the Global South can finally see their way forward toward building a new world, a world in which all human beings can live and grow in community and in harmony with the earth's ecosystems. Approaching this goal may be a long way off. And in practice, every project will have its limitations and even reversals. But it is ethically impossible for hegemonic consensus to be built around models imposed from outside by the colonizer. The protagonists of economic and social transformation in Venezuela and beyond must be the constituents themselves. It is up to people of the Americas, not Washington, nor the European Union, nor the agents of empire in the OAS, to construct their own models to advance a politics of liberation.