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The Washington Post's "Cartel of the Suns" Theory is the Latest Desperate Excuse for Why the Coup Attempt in Venezuela has Failed



Drawing by Nathaniel St. Clair

With the attempted coup in Venezuela now nearing its four-month mark, commentators in the corporate-owned Western press are scratching their heads as to why Washington's plan for its proxy, Juan Guaido, to topple the government of Nicolas Maduro has so far failed to materialize. Of course, all of the real reasons elude them because they have never so much as crossed their minds. It is beyond their mental world to consider the

lasting popularity of the late Hugo Chavez's policies and lasting suspicion toward the right-wing opposition amongst large swathes of the population – or the deep revulsion at the thought of US (and especially US military) intervention into their country held by the vast majority of Venezuelans (and, indeed, Latin Americans generally). Rather, both the coup attempt's puppeteers in Washington and their ventriloquist dummies in the mainstream media have been coming up with ever-more desperate excuses for why Guaido's attempt to take power has not been a swift and decisive success. The so-called "propping up" of the Maduro "regime" by the traditional the US boogymen of Russia, China and Cuba seems to have been the most frequently touted explanation. This has manifested itself in increasingly bizarre ways, such as the recent claim by Mike Pompeo that Maduro was at the point of fleeing the country before being convinced otherwise by Russia.

Now, the Washington Post's notorious warhawk and deranged conspiracy peddler Jackson Diehl has come up with the latest labored rationalization for the failure of the coup attempt: the so-called "Cartel of the Suns." According to Diehl, this shadowy organization is made up of "some of the most senior officials in the Maduro regime." He claims that it "flies hundreds of tons of Colombian cocaine from Venezuelan airfields to Central America and the Caribbean for eventual distribution in the United States and Europe." He furthermore claims that the Maduro government's crimes also include skimming accounts used for importing food and medicine and "corrupt currency trading." Describing the Maduro government as "less a government — much less a socialist one — than a criminal gang," he claims that "the money it is reaping from criminal activity is serving as a prop that allows it to survive U.S. sanctions." The only sources he provides to support these assertions are: an Associated Press article from September 2018 that reported on an unproven allegation made by a minor US Treasury Department figure, a January 2019 Wall Street Journal article that reports on another unproven allegation made by the US Treasury Department, and a link to one of his own Washington Postarticles published in 2015. Leaving aside the self-citation, allegations made by the Treasury Department can hardly be considered credible evidence. It is, after all, a branch of the US government, which has been attempting to destabilize Chavista administrations since their earliest days in office. The Trump administration that it currently answers to, meanwhile, has been the major driving force behind the attempted coup and makes no secret of basing the effort on the advancement of US corporate economic interests.

Larissa Costas has gone so far as to posit that the very idea of such a government-operated cartel might be a whole-cloth fabrication. She stated in February 2017 article: Although information abounds in the mediums of communication, the “Cartel of the Suns” has not been caught with a single gram of drugs, nor has there been any insignia of the organization identified in any seizure, nor has a single death been attributed to it. There are just two explanations: either it is the most inoffensive of cartels or it simply does not exist. [translated from the original in Spanish]

This latter possibility seems to be confirmed by the consistent failure of repeated Washington-led investigations into members of the Maduro government to result in actual convictions or even clear conclusions. For instance, in January 2015 the US Justice Department (DoJ) and Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) launched a joint probe into then-President of the National Assembly Diosdado Cabello and other senior figures of the Venezuelan government. News reports soon followed repeating the allegations, including the claim that Cabello is the “capo” of the “Cartel of the Suns.” (Note here the loaded use of mafia-tinged language that’s seemingly borrowed straight from The Godfather movies.) But now, over four years since the launch of this probe, the DEA and DoJ have yet to even charge, let alone convict, any of the people implicated in it. Yet still the mainstream media reports repeat the allegations as if they were beyond question. In May 2018, for example, InSight Crime published an article titled “Drug Trafficking Within the Venezuelan Regime: The ‘Cartel of the Suns’,” in which the publication claims to have built “files on senior [Venezuelan] officials, current or past, that have been involved in the trafficking of cocaine.” But rather than providing the reader with this purported mountain of evidence that they have amassed, the authors instead cite an anonymous Justice Department official as their source. Just as with the US Treasury Department, the Justice Department can hardly be trusted when successive administrations in Washington have been consistently trying to undermine Chavista governments ever since Hugo Chavez was first elected in 1998. From CIA and Bush administration involvement in the 2002 coup attempt and also in the 2002-2003 PDVSA management lock-out through to the present coup attempt and oil sanctions, Washington has gone from covert to brazenly overt regime change methods.

But things go deeper than this. It seems that these dubious accusations of drug trafficking, in fact, form a significant part of the regime change effort itself. For one thing, they are used as justification for sanctions that Washington enacts in order to weaken the regime

by sending thinly veiled signals to international capital to avoid Venezuela. Second of all, these sanctions and allegations are in turn used as a form of leverage to weaken the regime and encourage defection to the US's and US-backed opposition's side. There is no better case to illustrate this reality than that of the retired Venezuelan General Hugo Carvajal. In July 2014, as Carvajal was being released from custody in Aruba, Reuters reported that he categorically denied US charges of involvement in the illegal drug trade and provision of aid to Colombian leftist armed groups. But in February 2019, with the coup attempt about a month in, Carvajal did an about-face and accused Maduro and his inner circle of involvement in drug trafficking. This was right after Trump made an open threat that military officials who remain loyal to Maduro have "everything to lose" while Guaido simultaneously offered amnesty to those willing to defect to his side. It seems that Carvajal was responding to this "carrot and stick" threat/incentive combination that the US had, in his case successfully, employed as part of its regime change arsenal. The questionable validity of his claims is demonstrated by his repetition of Washington's oft-repeated mantra that Maduro officials are courting the Lebanese "militant" group Hezbollah. These claims have been decisively debunked by Richard Vaz, who points out that mainstream media outlets such as CNN that report these allegation again use solely the Treasury Department as their source, or worse still figures such as Marco Rubio. Vaz also points to the absurdity of holding up Tarek el Aissami as the facilitator of some kind of cross-Atlantic Iranian-led Shi'ite alliance when el Aissami himself is not even Muslim, but rather the son of Lebanese Druze immigrants who was born and has spent all his life in Venezuela.

In any normal situation this is all that would have to be said to dismiss Diehl's claims. But Latin America is no normal place and US relations with the region constitute no normal situation. In addition to the scarcity of evidence for the claims he makes, there is an additional question of double standards that lies beneath the surface. Diehl undoubtedly wishes to imply that the Maduro government's alleged involvement in criminal activity justifies the interventionist actions from Washington and its proxies on the ground. But when one looks across the region and into both its past and present, one sees a whole cornucopia of flagrant narco-states that Washington has not only ignored but bank-rolled and armed to the teeth. Not coincidentally, two of them are staunch allies and the other was so until very recently. I am talking, of course, of Colombia, Honduras and Mexico.

Colombia's status as a narco-state during the first decade of this century is hardly a secret. Even some of the US's own declassified intelligence documents contain allegations of former president Alvaro Uribe's close ties to narco-trafficking. A 1991 declassified Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) report, for example, describes Uribe as a "close personal friend of Pablo Escobar" and "dedicated to collaboration with the Medellín cartel at high government levels." Another intelligence report from 1993, and declassified in 2018, says that Colombian Senator told officials at the US Embassy in Bogota that Escobar's cartel had financed Uribe's election campaign for the Colombian Senate. In spite of having such information available, Washington nonetheless generously funded the Uribe government through Plan Colombia to engage in so-called "counter-narcotics" campaigns, which served as a cover for brutal offensives against labor and indigenous rights activists and displacement of rural campesinos. The extent of state capture by drug cartels in Colombia was furthermore exposed by the Parapolitics scandal, which led to the conviction of 32 members of the Colombian congress along with five state governors for collusion with right-wing paramilitaries. These groups, incidentally, have been the biggest players in the Colombian drug trade, dwarfing the involvement of leftist guerrilla groups such as the FARC and ELN.

Revelations from the recently concluded trial of Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán have shone a light onto a similar story in Mexico. State witness Alex Cifuentes made a credible accusation during his testimony against Guzman that former Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto received a bribe from Guzman worth \$100 million dollars. Mexican investigative journalist Anabel Hernandez has long claimed that collusion between the Mexican state and narco-trafficking groups stretches all the way to the top, including the presidency, which Cifuentes' testimony seemingly confirms. As has been the case with Colombia, the US has not only turned a blind eye to this situation, but has been generous funding the Mexican government to conduct "counter-narcotics" campaigns through the Merida Initiative. And again, these campaigns provided cover for brutal human rights violations on the part of Mexico's state security forces.

Finally, we should turn to Honduras, the most contemporary and, in many ways, most flagrant example of a narco-state that the US cozies up to. Ever since the State Department orchestrated a coup against the democratically-elected government of Manuel Zelaya in 2009 there have been growing signs that Honduras has degenerated into a fully-fledged narco-state. In January of last year, for example, it emerged that a national police chief personally facilitated a cocaine delivery worth \$20 million in 2013.

In November 2018, President Juan Orlando Hernandez's brother, Tony Hernandez, was arrested on drug trafficking charges in Miami. Just as this article went to press, testimony that he gave to US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) was unsealed in which he reportedly admits to interacting with several known drug traffickers as well as taking bribes. Even according to the aforementioned InSight Crime: "Tony Hernández's detailed knowledge of the activities of some of Honduras' most prominent drug traffickers makes it increasingly difficult for President Juan Orlando Hernández to deny being aware of these acts." The president himself has previously faced allegations of involvement in drug trafficking via ex-army captain Santos Rodriguez Orellana. And as with Colombia and Mexico, not only has Washington never issued any punitive measure whatsoever against Honduras for any of this, it has rather been generously funding its state security forces in spite of its brutal record of human rights violations.

Note that all three of the above countries have been close US allies for the last few decades, with Colombia and Honduras remaining so while Mexico begins to break from Washington following the election of progressive president Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. This is no coincidence. So long as a country is serving the US's geostrategic and economic interests, it will not just overlook its status as a narco-state but will aid and abet its committing of human rights violations. You won't hear about any of this from Jackson Diehl, however. Because as an obedient cheerleader for the Monroe Doctrine he must faithfully promulgate the selective indignation that underpins its entire edifice of justification propaganda. Given Washington's record in the wider region, whether or not Venezuela is indeed a narco-state ceases to be the point. Rather, the question becomes one of credibility. And when it comes to evenhandedness in its treatment of Latin American states, Washington has exactly none.

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