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By Bill Van Auken
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Trump calls for naval blockade of Venezuela

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly called upon his national security officials and senior military commanders to draw up plans for a US naval blockade of Venezuela to stop all goods from either entering or leaving the country.

Such an illegal military intervention would come on top of a set of unilateral US sanctions that already amount to an effective embargo, tantamount to an act of war.

Earlier this month, according to Reuters, when asked by a reporter whether he was considering a naval embargo, he responded, “Yes, I am,” without elaborating on his plans. Citing five unnamed administration officials, the *Axios* news web site reported that Trump has been advocating the blockade for the past year and a half. Pentagon officials have been cool to the proposal, considering the sealing of Venezuela’s 1,700-mile coastline impractical and requiring a major deployment of warships that are already stretched thin by simultaneous US military buildups against both Iran and China.

“He literally just said we should get the ships out there and do a naval embargo,” one official told *Axios*. “Prevent anything going in.”

“I’m assuming he’s thinking of the Cuban missile crisis,” the unnamed source added. “But Cuba is an island and Venezuela is a massive coastline. And Cuba we knew what we were trying to prevent from getting in. But here what are we talking about? It would need massive, massive amounts of resources; probably more than the US Navy can provide.”

The flailing about for a plausible “military option” reflects the increasing frustration of the White House over the failure of the regime-change operation launched last January with

the self-swearing-in of the virtually unknown right-wing opposition politician Juan Guaidó as “interim president” and his speedy recognition by Washington and its allies.

Repeated provocations and appeals for a military coup have failed to achieve the desired result of ousting the government of Nicolás Maduro and installing a US puppet regime that would assure Washington’s control of Venezuela’s oil reserves, the largest on the planet, while denying them to the country’s current chief economic partners, China and Russia.

Guaidó’s fiasco of a coup attempt on April 30 produced no significant fissure in the Venezuelan military, the backbone of the Maduro government and so-called “Bolivarian socialism.” Since then, his political fortunes have plummeted. Washington has proven incapable of mobilizing mass popular support behind Guaidó to achieve its objective of regime change.

There is widespread opposition to and anger against the Maduro government, which has placed the full burden of the country’s crisis on the backs of the working class. At the same time, it has defended the profit interests of domestic and foreign capital as well as the wealth and privileges of the *boliburguesia*, a corrupt layer of government officials, military officers, financiers and contractors who have enriched themselves through wholesale corruption.

However, workers also recognize Guaidó and the right-wing and US-funded parties with which he is allied as their long-time class enemies.

While threatening military action, Washington has severely tightened the economic noose it has placed around the Venezuelan economy with the aim of literally starving the country’s population into submission. It rolled out the most punishing measures yet with an August 5 executive order signed by Trump, who invoked federal laws granting the US president emergency powers in face of extreme crisis. Similar actions were taken under Obama, who classified US relations with Venezuela as a “national emergency.”

The order imposed a freeze upon all Venezuelan assets, while threatening anyone carrying out any kind of economic relations with the Venezuelan government and its state-owned oil company. Coming on top of measures denying Venezuela access to capital and consumer markets controlled by the US, the aim of the order is to bring the country’s entire economy to a standstill, while denying food and basic necessities to its population.

The impact of the new sanctions found expression this week in reports that China’s state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) has halted shipments of oil for

August. CNPC, one of Venezuela's top customers as well as investors, reportedly took the action out of fear of being hit with US secondary sanctions.

Similarly, Turkey's largest bank has halted its relations with the Venezuelan Central Bank.

Article continues below the form

Even while imposing these sweeping sanctions aimed at severing Venezuela's economy from the rest of the world, the Trump administration has approved a waiver for Chevron Oil, which is involved in joint ventures with the state-owned Venezuela oil company, PDVSA, which produces approximately 200,000 barrels of oil per day. Similar waivers were granted to oil service companies Halliburton, Schlumberger Limited, General Electric's Baker Hughes and Weatherford International. The Maduro government has made no move to retaliate against Washington's economic state of siege by nationalizing the property of these US capitalist firms

Under these conditions of intensifying US aggression and rising crisis, the Associated Press published a story Monday reporting that Diosdado Cabello, the head of the National Constituent Assembly and vice-president of the ruling party, the PSUV, had been involved in secret talks last month with a representative of the Trump administration on a potential deal to oust Maduro from the presidential palace.

The AP story is based on unnamed sources, including a "senior administration official" and a "source familiar with the encounter" who spoke not for attribution. The official said, according to the AP, that "the goal of the outreach is to ratchet up pressure on the regime by contributing to the knife fight the US believes is taking place behind the scenes among competing circles of power within the ruling party."

Axios embellished upon this account, identifying the "senior administration official" as Mauricio Claver-Carone, the National Security Adviser for Western Hemisphere Affairs and an extreme right-wing anti-Castro Cuban-American.

On his Twitter account, Cabello mocked the report, writing about himself in the third person: "Diosdado met in SECRET with a gringo SECRET agent to agree to a SECRET plan to topple Nicolás [Maduro], who knows nothing about this, because if he did know it wouldn't be a SECRET."

The implication is clear. If such "secret" talks were taking place, why would the Trump administration decide to reveal them to the corporate media. The obvious answer is what the "senior administration official" indicated. It is designed to "ratchet up pressure," a

psychological warfare tactic aimed at fomenting a confrontation within the Maduro government.

Whatever the truth of the claims of secret meetings, Washington's target is clear. It has chosen to sow divisions between Maduro, the president, and Cabello, a former army officer who enjoys much closer connections with the Venezuelan military and intelligence services, with the continued hope of provoking a military coup.

Any regime emerging from such a US-backed coup, or for that matter from a negotiated settlement between the Venezuelan government and the forces around Guaidó or a direct US military intervention, would be charged with the privatization of Venezuela's oil reserves and handing them over to the US-based energy conglomerates, while imposing starvation wages and the complete subordination of the country's economy to the austerity adjustment plans of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Such policies can be implemented only by means of police-state dictatorship.

Venezuelan workers cannot leave it to either the Maduro government or the high command of the country's military to defeat the conspiracies of Washington and its puppet Guaidó. Both Maduro and the military defend the existing capitalist order in Venezuela.

The only progressive way out of the increasingly dangerous crisis in Venezuela lies in the independent political intervention of the working class itself, fighting for arming of the masses, seizing bourgeois property and foreign capitalist holdings, and placing the country's vast oil wealth under popular control.

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