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By Andrea Lobo
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US commander says navy ready for Venezuela intervention

On Tuesday, Adm. Craig Faller, head of the US Southern Command, made the most explicit threat so far of military intervention against Venezuela, while reaffirming efforts to consolidate US neocolonial control across Latin America.

While overseeing the UNITAS maritime military exercise in Rio de Janeiro, which included forces from nine Latin American countries, Japan, the UK, Portugal, and the US Navy and Marines, Faller declared that the event “sends a message to [Venezuelan president Nicolás] Maduro and other partners that don’t share the same values.”

“I won’t speak of details of what we’re planning and what we’re doing, but we remain ready to implement policy decisions and we remain on the balls of our feet,” regarding Venezuela, he said. “The United States Navy is the most powerful navy in the world. If a policy decision is made to deploy the Navy, I’m convinced that we’ll be able to do what needs to be done.”

The statements follow the August 5 decision by the Trump administration to freeze all Venezuelan government assets in the US, ban all transactions with US entities, and extend a threat of secondary sanctions against foreign firms or governments that “support” Caracas. At the same time, recent reports have revealed that US President Donald Trump has repeatedly advocated a full-fledged naval blockade of Venezuela’s Caribbean coast.

After the August 5 measures, which amount to an economic blockade—an act of war—Maduro was compelled to pull his government out of negotiations in Barbados with representatives of the US-backed Venezuelan opposition.

Even as Faller was making his statements, however, both Trump and Maduro confirmed that US and Venezuelan officials have been holding direct talks.

Trump told reporters that his government is talking to “various representatives of Venezuela ... I don’t want to say who, but we’re talking at a very high level.”

A few hours later, Maduro indicated in a televised address that “for several months” he has authorized “secret meetings in secret places” with Washington. “I reaffirm that we are looking for all means of dialog so that President Donald Trump hears the truth of Venezuela and the voice of the Bolivarian Revolution. We seek to normalize the conflict that exists with the American Empire. I believe in dialog. I believe in peace,” he added.

The escalated threats and “secret” talks reflect the impatience in Washington regarding its regime-change operation in Venezuela after the failure to pressure the military and state bureaucracy to overthrow Maduro through economic sanctions and to install a puppet regime led by the self-proclaimed “interim president,” Juan Guaidó.

The AP reported Wednesday that opposition leaders also continue to hold meetings in Washington, which has become the new setting of the talks.

For all the “anti-imperialist” bluster of Maduro and his United Socialist Party (PUSV), and despite the enormous unpopularity of the US-backed opposition, Caracas is effectively capitulating to the Trump administration.

On Wednesday, the *Wall Street Journal* cited unnamed officials in Caracas and Washington who claimed that officials of the Maduro government were negotiating a path toward early presidential elections in exchange for no reprisals and the opportunity to remain in politics.

Amid growing threats from Washington, this capitulation heralds enormous dangers for workers in Venezuela and across the region, since it emboldens the Trump administration to pursue an even more reckless course.

After news of the talks broke, US National Security Adviser John Bolton insisted, in a tweet on Wednesday, that “Maduro must go.” Even though Maduro had acknowledged involvement in the talks, Bolton added: “The only items discussed by those who are reaching out behind Maduro’s back are his departure and free and fair elections.”

Last month, in a meeting with Ecuadorian President Lenín Moreno, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had noted that “it seems incomprehensible that you could have a free and fair election with Maduro still in Venezuela on the ground,” but immediately added: “I don’t want to rule out the possibility that someone could find a clever way to do that ...”

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Then, earlier this month, Faller had declared in Colombia that the Southern Command was preparing for “the day after Maduro,” which he described as “a point in time where a legitimate government, not a Maduro government, has asked the United States and others to come in to Venezuela to help.”

After the shrinking of the economy by a third, the plunging of the majority of the population into poverty and the displacement of millions of Venezuelans abroad, any future bourgeois government will deepen the suffering of Venezuelans to service its \$150 billion debt with the international financial elites and to hand over control of its oilfields to the US-based energy conglomerates.

Only a brutal police-state dictatorship could advance these policies against mass opposition, independently of how or whether the PSUV leadership, the extreme right-wing opposition parties, and US occupation forces split power.

The Trump administration and growing sections of the Venezuelan ruling class are hoping that an agreement, sold as a “normalization of the conflict” with imperialism, as expressed by Maduro, can be used to politically and physically disarm the growing social unrest among workers.

At the same time, Washington’s efforts to roll back Russian and Chinese economic influence in Venezuela and the region poses the threat of a military conflict between nuclear-armed powers.

In fear of US sanctions, the Russian state-owned firm Rosneft has been directly managing a growing share—66 percent this month compared to 40 percent in July—of Venezuelan oil exports, and shipping them to refineries in China and India, according to Reuters.

Rosneft also owns 49.9 percent of Citgo, state-owned PDVSA’s branch in the US, which has been taken over by Washington. Any claim made by Russia could lead the Committee of Foreign Investments in the United States (CFIUS) “to block this on grounds that Rosneft owning half of Citgo threatens US national security,” wrote *Forbes* earlier this year. “It would be a compelling standoff between Venezuela, Russia and the US.”

Venezuela and Russia signed a deal last week agreeing to send warships to each other's ports. On Wednesday, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov held talks with Venezuelan vice-president Delcy Rodriguez in Moscow. Lavrov vowed to defend Venezuela's "right to independently choose its own development paths and to oppose any illegitimate unilateral methods of blackmail and pressure."

Earlier this year, giving a glimpse of the broader strategy of US officials, Hector Schamis, a professor at the US School of Foreign Service, wrote in *El País*, "Without American troops [Yugoslavian president Slobodan] Milosevic would not have gone to the diplomatic negotiating table. Much less would he have died as a prisoner in The Hague in 2006."

After the brutal NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in early 1999, Milosevic agreed to call for early presidential elections to be held on September 24, 2000. He won the elections against the Western-funded Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOC), only to be overthrown on October 5 in a "political coup organized by the United States government and the European powers to ensure their undisputed control of the Balkan peninsula," as reported by the WSWS at the time.

Since the turn of the century, the efforts of US imperialism to counter its crisis of economic hegemony globally through military means have only become more aggressive, with Democrats and Republicans both supporting the campaign against Venezuela and competing with each other on who is more militaristic, especially in the face of a renewed global economic downturn.

In Venezuela, the United States, Russia, China and all over the world, millions of workers are entering into struggle against attacks on jobs, wages and social services. This movement must be consciously united across borders and independently of all bourgeois parties, trade unions and their pseudo-left apologists, in the fight against colonial re-subjugation and imperialist wars and to abolish their source, the capitalist system.

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