The United States and Venezuela: A Test of American Regional Hegemony

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The United States and Venezuela: A Test of American Regional Hegemony

This essay analyzes the United States’ role in the Venezuelan crisis. It outlines relevant examples of United States intervention in Latin America to establish a historical baseline for US foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere. Subsequently, it provides brief historical overview of Venezuela from the Hugo Chávez regime to the current situation under Nicolás Maduro. Next, to better present the full scope of external influence in Venezuela, the essay discusses the interests of foreign actors supporting the Maduro regime, namely Russia, China, and Cuba. The title chapter, “A Test of American Regional Hegemony,” using the information established in the previous sections, will investigate five possible scenarios involving a United States input [foreign policy] and a Venezuelan output [resulting government and socio-economic future], considering factors mentioned in previous chapters. Each scenario will discuss its key actors, their goals and actions, what circumstances the scenario would require, and how likely the scenario is. The conclusion will review the full investigation.

The term “hegemony” is defined as “the ability of an actor with overwhelming capability to shape the international system through both coercive and non-coercive means” (Norloff 2015, 1). The term “regional hegemony” and not just “hegemony” is emphasized in this essay because this is an issue that relates to American foreign policy sentiments stemming from the Monroe Doctrine. The United States may be considered by some a global hegemon. However, in the US government’s eyes, the crisis in Venezuela is not a global issue – this issue is happening in their “backyard,” (Russia Times 2019) and requires classic Monroe Doctrine, US-Latin American foreign policy, which differs from US foreign policy for the rest of the world. The ideas of John J. Mearsheimer support that “the United States is concerned with maximizing its share of world power” whose title of “superpower” relies on its regional hegemonic presence (Mearsheimer
1998, 225). Consequently, this essay will utilize and discuss neorealist theory to understand and analyze the competing interests in this crisis that shadows classic Cold War politics.

The Venezuelan crisis is an essential topic to study when trying to understand current United States foreign policy. In a situation threatening its classic anti-socialist sentiments and its hemispheric shield from overseas powers, the United States is challenged with maintaining its hegemonic status quo. The Venezuelan crisis is a relevant example to demonstrate how difficult it can be [even for an individual to support one side or another] when a disputably-elected, socialist head of a corrupt government, who controls the largest oil reserves in the world (Guaidó 2019), is responsible for the nation’s demise. Additionally, the situation in Venezuela exhibits how complicated it is for the United States, often regarded as both a world policing power and an imperialist capitalist nation, to pursue the most ideal foreign policy. It is disappointing, but unfortunately not surprising that there is so little global focus on a mass migration larger than the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis (Nichols 2019). Sadly, the lack of attention reflects how little care there is when wealthy western nations are not directly affected. This prompts the question of why we hear what we hear when an issue does receive media attention, especially in cases when major companies of opposing political affiliation, like Fox News and CNN, agree on key features of the developing story. For this reason, the chapter focusing on the development of US foreign policy in Latin America will discuss Noam Chomsky’s theory of “manufacturing consent” and how the United States elite propagandizes to justify offensive action. Accordingly, the essay will explore a constructivist analysis to find a set of motives, parallel to those of the neorealist school, that explain and forecast US action toward Venezuela.

“A Saudi-like oligarchy that created a corrupt, exclusionary, and deeply flawed democracy in which poverty reigned despite the nation’s immense oil riches… A bickering,
incompetent opposition run and funded by the displaced elite, which was bent on recovering its historical privileges and willing to resort to any means, including a coup d’état, to oust a democratically elected president.” That is how Jennifer McCoy and David Myers began their 2004 book, *The Unraveling of Representative Democracy in Venezuela*, on Venezuela under the Chávez regime (McCoy & Meyers 2004, 1). Clearly, Venezuela finds itself in a very familiar situation today. The country has crumbled under the leadership of President Nicolás Maduro and his military generals, and is currently facing the most serious economic and humanitarian crisis in modern Latin American history (Farnsworth 2019). Simultaneously, the United States is fighting major security, trade, and immigration battles on many fronts. Russia and China have acted as rival forces to the US by violating sanctions around the world, intellectual property laws, nuclear regulations, and have expressed mounting interest in Latin America. So, at a time that some fear could be an entry into a new kind of Cold War, what will the United States do? Will they overtly intervene to “help the Venezuelan people” and “restore stability?” Will they covertly increase their presence through humanitarian aid? Will the international communities take over to provide aid and help to organize free and fair elections? Will rival powers enter the Western Hemisphere to assist Maduro in a return to uncontested power? Will Venezuela push harder against the United States and become a base for the major powers opposing the US? US-Venezuelan relations will fatefully test American hegemonic claims of the Western Hemisphere and ultimately foreshadow its role on the future world stage.

**Roots for Contemporary US Foreign Policy toward Latin America**

In December 1823, as president of an adolescent United States, James Monroe announced to Congress that any colonizing action by any other nation would be received as “the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition toward the United States” (Monroe 1895). His
declaration bolstered the independence claims of new Latin American countries and was happily accepted by Latin American politicians, like Simón Bolívar, as an act of Western solidarity (Lubbrage 1994). Citing the Monroe Doctrine for nearly 200 years now, the United States has played a role in numerous Latin American regime changes, especially since the second half of 20th century with reinforcement from the anticommunist manifesto, the Truman Doctrine.

The story of American relations with Cuba truly began when President Theodore Roosevelt deceived Cuban leaders to avoid liberating themselves from Spain, and to exist, essentially, as a colony until 1959. Relations soured upon the emergence of Fidel Castro and the Communist Party, who were not able to be steered in the “right direction” and whose executions of Batista officials alienated Eisenhower (Rabe 1988, 124-126). So, from 1960 to 1964, under the Eisenhower and Kennedy/Johnson administrations, the United States and the Organization of American States (OAS) waged economic warfare through a multitude of brutal sanctions (Hufbauer 2011). As Professor Noam Chomsky brilliantly articulates, to understand the true message of sanctions, it is important to realize the scale and effort brought on by declaring sanctions in the 1960s. “Huge resources go into tracking every ship in the world to make sure it does not stop somewhere and pick up some steel that might have Cuban nickel in it; and if it does, it has to be barred from US ports. Much more effort goes into this than to tracking terrorist finances and minor things like that — it’s really an obsession” Chomsky says. He explains that this policy was a message to a Soviet-sympathizing Cuba and the rest of Latin America to remember who rules the Western Hemisphere (Chomsky 2009). In their failed attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro with the Bay of Pigs Invasion, the United States entered a new era of foreign policy in Latin America. Chile would provide an arena for the US to test this policy.
In the 1970s, after failing to finance the election of the right-wing Christian Democratic candidate, the United States was faced with a democratically-elected, democratic-socialist Chilean leader named Salvador Allende. Vengefully, US President Richard Nixon instructed the CIA to “make the [Chilean] economy scream,” and covertly intervene by funding major anti-government strikes and propaganda. In their second coup attempt against Allende, the CIA helped violently install the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (Kornbluh 1998). Over 40,000 people were taken as political prisoners and tortured under the Pinochet regime and over 3,000 killed or “forcibly displaced” (Long 2009), but Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger still backed the intervention as a necessary control over Latin America to demonstrate that the United States could “achieve a successful order elsewhere in the world” (Chomsky 2009).

In the 1980s, US President Ronald Reagan instructed Lieutenant Oliver North and National Security Advisor John Poindexter to support the right-wing Contras against the communist Sandinista government of Nicaragua, despite Congress outlawing any US support to the violent cocaine-trafficking Contras. Reagan ordered the arms trade with Iran in exchange for the release of US prisoners, despite saying he would not negotiate with terrorists, and the CIA sent $18 million to the Contras (History 2018). Though he was eventually caught [but not convicted] for his actions and his effort to fund the Contras to a takeover failed, Ronald Reagan managed to impose sanctions that prohibited all trade between the US and Nicaragua and disallowed Nicaraguan ships and airplanes to enter US territory (Envio 1989). Again, Kissinger bolstered the president’s effort to support an overthrow by telling Public Opinion magazine that “If we cannot manage Central America, it will be impossible to convince threatened nations in
the Persian Gulf and in other places that we know how to manage the global equilibrium” (Gwertzman 1983).

In the 1990s, Colombia became Latin America’s top violator of human rights, simultaneously becoming the region’s chief recipient of military aid from the United States, as the country worked to massively increase its War on Drugs effort. Colombia was home to Pablo Escobar’s Medellín Cartel and the Cali Cartel, whose battles with the police claimed the lives of thousands of civilians at the hands of the government. Specialized Colombian police regularly kidnapped, tortured, and murdered civilians simply based on suspicions of involvement with drug trafficking. In 1994, Colombia’s war on drugs escalated as the United States began to increase its presence by helping to fumigate millions of acres of crops with glyphosate, killing coca plants and, naturally, many other crops (Mejía 2016). This kind of chemical warfare drove the agriculturally-dependent, working-class people from their homes, only to be replaced by wealthy mining and agricultural corporations (Chomsky 2009). The Colombian government designed Plan Colombia – a 17-year counternarcotic and counterterrorism program – to begin in 2000 with $10 billion from the United States (Congressional Research Service 2019). Between 1994 and 2008, over 57,000 Colombians were “killed as a consequence of growing illegal drug markets and resulting confrontations between drug trafficking organizations [DTOs] and the Colombian government during the war on drugs” (Mejía 2016). In 2018, the Colombia accord signed a peace accord with the nation’s most prominent guerilla group, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia [FARC], creating territorial disputes out of a power vacuum. Because of the decades of War on Drugs terror, Colombia has 7,671,124 internally displaced persons [IDP] – the highest IDP population in the world as of 2018, according to the UNHCR (United Nations 2019).
According to Professor Noam Chomsky, the United States and its citizens take for granted one of its hegemonic privileges to establish military bases in countries all around the world and enforce our will. Through the DEA, CIA, and other agencies, the US can control the sale and distribution of target product, specifically narcotics. Chomsky compares this phenomenon to a hypothetical situation where China would establish military bases to fumigate the “lethal crop” of tobacco in Kentucky and North Carolina that is killing Chinese citizens, and asks “is that alright?” Undoubtedly eye-opening to many Americans, Professor Chomsky asserts that “it’s part of the imperial mentality… it doesn’t register. Since, we’re the owners of the world, we can do anything we want” (Chomsky 2009).

As one of his first major acts in Latin America, US President Barack Obama publicly said he believed that Honduran General Romeo Vásquez Velásquez’s military coup that overthrew President Manuel Zelaya was “not legal” and should be overturned (Phillips & Torres 2019). However, unlike the rest of the international community – including most countries in Latin America, Europe, and the OAS – the Obama administration did not officially recognize the incident, led by US army-trained Velásquez, as a military coup, and therefore did not have to terminate aid to the country (Kovalik 2011). To prevent the return of Zelaya to office, the United States refused to withdraw their ambassador and “strategized on a plan to restore order in Honduras and ensure that free and fair elections could be held quickly and legitimately, which would render the question of Zelaya moot,” as admitted by Hillary Clinton in her 2014 book, *Hard Choices* (Phillips 2019). Nobel Peace Prize laureate Barack Obama acted against the recommendations of the international community and his own ambassador, and instead exercised the traditional United States’ hegemonic privilege over Honduras.
Instead of symbolizing Western isolationism, the Monroe Doctrine, spiked by the sentiments of the Truman Doctrine and neoliberal influence, has become a justification for unconditional US intervention in Latin America. Generally, US foreign policy since the beginning of the Cold War has been to replace Latin American socialist regimes by means of ring-wing, military coup d’état, for the economic and security interests of the United States. As Professor Chomsky puts it, “democracy is a good thing in the eyes of US administrations if, and only if, it is consistent with strategic and economic interests” (Chomsky 2009).

**Maduro vs. The People of Venezuela**

In 1992, a 37-year-old Colonel Hugo Chávez led a coup d’état attempt against the neo-liberal reforms government of President Carlos Andres Perez. The coup was suppressed, 18 people were killed, and Chávez was jailed for two years before being pardoned. He began his career as a politician and in 1998 was elected President of Venezuela by an overwhelming majority (BBC 2002). In 2002, a coup d’état which was openly supported by Washington attempted to overthrow Chávez, but the US government had to back down after the coup was overturned by popular uprising (Chomsky 2009).

As president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez increasingly took control over the national oil company, Petroleum of Venezuela (PDVSA), to fund social services that benefitted the poor. Chávez successfully cut the poverty rate in half, increased education enrollment, conducted massive housing projects, and earned his place as a renowned leader and savior of Venezuela (Chomsky 2009). But, Chávez failed to diversify the nation’s economy and invest in other sectors for long-term stability, leaving oil to make up roughly 98 percent of the export earnings (OPEC 2019). Instead of putting aside any reserves, Chávez continued to sell and spend at an unsustainable rate. Meanwhile, Venezuela’s homicide rates quadrupled from 1998 to 2010,
Caracas reached morbid rates of up to one violent death per hour, and illegal police executions were “in the thousands” (Crisis Group 2019). Instead of focusing on arms control or justice reform, Hugo Chávez focused on maintaining his power, armed civilian groups, and commanded they take part in a “violent revolution” in case the opposition was elected.

In 2014, about a year after the death of Hugo Chávez, the price of oil dropped by roughly 50% and Venezuela could no longer rely on its massive oil revenues (LastWeekTonight 2018). Successor Nicolás Maduro Moros inherited the most corrupt and violent country in Latin America [see Figures 1 and 2] (Transparency International 2018) – a distinction Maduro has managed to maintain (Fidler 2019). President Maduro has led Venezuela into turmoil by trying to make up for lost oil revenues by simply printing more money, creating a hyperinflation that totally devalued the Venezuelan bolivar [VEF]. As a result, the country has suffered dramatic food and medicine shortages to the point that Venezuelans rely on social media to find the medications they [often desperately] need. However, in one of the most violent countries in the world, as reported by the US Department of State, social media is also a source of danger. “Guillermo,” an anonymous citizen of Venezuela, told NPR that he is afraid to post anything on social media in case it looks like he has any money. He explained that someone might see the picture and kidnap his family because they believe he can pay a ransom of thousands of dollars (Garsd 2018). As reported in March 2019 by the UN, 300,000 people with diseases like diabetes, cancer, and HIV have had no access to medicines or treatment for over a year, 1.9 million people are in “nutrition need,” and 4.3 million people face serious water, sanitation, and hygiene issues (United Nations 2019).

However, certain drugs run abundant in Venezuela. High-ranking Venezuelan military officials spearhead operations as cocaine courier for Colombia, transporting 240 tons in 2018
from Colombia to Venezuela [worth $40 billion when sold in US]. Border patrol officers are ordered to let drug traffickers pass, otherwise they are replaced or even arrested. Flights take off in the Zulia State from one of 50 hidden runways, fly to Honduras on one of the several daily flights, and the drugs are moved up through Mexico and into the US. This kind of opportunity for corrupt elite to make enormous profit has inspired loyalty to President Maduro, who protects their drug trafficking schemes from the law (CNN 2019).

Venezuela has fallen into the most tragic economic and humanitarian crisis of the Western Hemisphere in modern history. In 2016, Venezuela experienced its highest-ever homicide rate, 85% of basic medicines were unavailable, infant mortality increased 30 percent, maternal mortality increased 65 percent, and 87 percent of the Venezuelan population claimed it did not have enough money to buy basic foods (Council on Foreign Relations 2018). Above 90 percent of the Venezuelan population now live in poverty and over 50 percent are living in extreme poverty. As a result, about 3.4 million Venezuelans have fled the country (United Nations 2019) selling all their assets without getting much more than pocket change in return because of the hyperinflation that is to reach 10,000,000 percent in 2019 (Phillips 2019). About half of the people migrating have moved to neighboring countries to work and send money back to their families. The other half has mainly fled to Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, or elsewhere in Latin America. Refugee camps in Brazil offer food and healthcare services, but have local trouble with xenophobic outbreaks requiring military defense of borders and potential threats to human rights. Sadly, Venezuelans have consistently told media outlets that they are fleeing not just because living conditions are brutal now, but because they do not see change in sight (Ramsey 2018).

Maduro has imprisoned many of his political opponents, and reformed the Venezuelan government and constitution so that he may stay in power. Maduro has blamed the United States
for injecting Hugo Chavez with cancer, sabotaging Venezuelan teller machines [ATMs], and inspiring the intense public protests that denounce his regime. Though the people of Venezuela are dying from starvation and lack of healthcare, Maduro has refused all kinds of humanitarian aid, claiming fears of an American effort overthrow him. So, with no other option, National Assembly leader Juan Guaidó declared himself the constitutional interim president on 23 January 2019 (Schultz 2019).

However, despite his corruption and dictatorial oppression, Maduro is not solely responsible for the mounting devastation in Venezuela. In a primary stage of re-entry into their pursuit for neo-liberal democracy in Venezuela, the United States government, under the Obama administration, initiated Executive Order 13692 on March 8, 2015. In its second paragraph, it states “… I, Barack Obama, President of the United States of America, find that the situation in Venezuela… constitutes an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States, and I hereby declare a national emergency to deal with that threat.”

Surely, a threat to our foreign policy is a curious statement, no? What does that exactly mean? John Mearsheimer argues that American elites use a “permanent ‘state of emergency’ for the grand, bipartisan cause of maintaining ‘liberal hegemony’” (Fuller 2018). This is the kind of phenomena that we can see, literally, through executive orders.

The Congressional Research Service states that “for more than a decade, the United States has employed sanctions as a policy tool in response to activities of the Venezuelan government and Venezuelan individuals. These have included sanctions related to terrorism, drug trafficking, trafficking in persons, antidemocratic actions, human rights violations, and corruption” (Congressional Research Service 2019). Clearly, these sanctions are in line with the traditional, south-facing US foreign policy values, and allow much interpretation for the ruling
administration as to the grounds that constitute “justified” sanctions, particularly in the
categories of antidemocratic actions and corruption. World-renowned economics professor and
former Special Advisor to the UN Secretary General Jeffrey D. Sachs (Sachs 2019) claims that
broad US sanctions since 2017 have deliberately caused the Venezuelan oil industry to suffer
severe losses, national access to food and medicine to be choked off, and are a major source of
Venezuela’s current humanitarian crisis. Sachs asserts that the Trump administration’s more
recent brutal set of sanctions that have frozen the earnings and assets of Venezuela are illegal
because they aim to topple an elected government (Sachs 2019).

International law is classically very difficult to enforce unless a nation has committed a
blatant, very serious act, widely condemned by [the major powers of] the international
community. So, as a leader of modern, Western/international institutions and arguably the most
powerful nation in the world today, the United States is probably the least likely to be
reprimanded in the case of an infraction of international law [different from being the least likely
to violate international law]. However, to best understand foreign policy, it is important to
understand when and why the United States consciously violates international agreements for the
sake of their exclusive prosperity – especially when nations like Russia frequently publicly
accuse the United States of violating international law in Venezuela.

Chapter 1 Article 2(4) of the Charter of the United Nations states that “all Members shall
refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial
integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the
Purposes of the United Nations” (United Nations). Obviously, the United States has not yet used
force, but one could certainly argue that the US has threatened the use of force with the
catchphrase used by Trump, Pompeo, and Bolton, that “all options are on the table” (CNN 2019).
Secretary of State Mike Pompeo even went as far as to say “military action is possible. If that’s what’s required, that’s what the United States will do” (Limitone 2019) So, where is the line drawn? Again, it is in not unusual that a country threatens another the use of force, as international law usually does not stop states from pursuing objectives of passion or necessity. But, as a source of objective morality, consider the following articles of the 1981 UN Declaration of the Inadmissibility of Intervention and Interference in the Internal Affairs of States, and apply them to the Venezuelan crisis.

Art. II(f): “The duty of a State to refrain from the promotion, encouragement or support, direct or indirect, of rebellious or secessionist activities within other States, under any pretext whatsoever, or any action which seeks to disrupt the unity or to undermine or subvert the political order of other States” (United Nations 1981). Maduro’s supporters, as well as more neutral isolationists, argue that this is one of the forms of illegal intervention the United States currently executes in their support for opposition leader Juan Guaidó. Christopher Dickey, Foreign Editor for the Daily Beast, argues that Guaidó’s claim for the presidency was “heavily choreographed” with the United States. He points out that several countries around the world quickly declared support for Guaidó in a way that “you can’t help but think this was all arranged beforehand” (Dickey 2019). Dickey’s point is certainly debatable. US media did announce weeks before Guaidó declared himself interim president that Trump was “considering recognizing Venezuelan opposition leader as legitimate president,” but does that mean the Trump administration just had the intelligence, or did the Trump administration announce it to the media to popularize international support for Guaidó? In response to the recent 30 April 2019 coup attempt, dubbed “Operation Freedom” or “Operation Liberty” by Juan Guaidó, US Vice President Mike Pence immediately tweeted to the opposition, “we are with you! America will
stand with you until freedom & democracy are restored” (Pence 2019). Similarly, via Twitter, National Security Advisor John Bolton called on the Venezuelan military to back Guaidó: “The FANB must protect the constitution and the Venezuelan people. It should stand by the national assembly and the legitimate institutions against the usurpation of democracy. The United States stands with the people of Venezuela” (Bolton 2019). Certainly, these public statements by some of the highest-ranking US government officials constitute the “promotion, encouragement or support… of rebellious or secessionist activities within [another State].”

The declaration makes several other points that would challenge the United States’ use of human rights issues as a justification for [potential] intervention and its refusal to withdraw its diplomats against the will of Maduro. Once more, legality is not necessarily relevant here, but morality is. It is a method to measure how far the United States will go to achieve its objectives in Venezuela; and, many may agree with Professor Jeffrey Sachs, that this type of behavior “is normal right-wing US foreign policy, nothing different. This is the same foreign policy we saw throughout Latin America in the 20th century” (Sachs 2019) – in which case, the Venezuelan crisis is far from over.

**Pro-Maduro Foreign Actors**

**Russia**

General John Kelly reported to the US House of Representatives in 2015 that Russia struck deals with Venezuela, as well as Cuba and Nicaragua, for access to their airbases and ports for resupply of Russian naval assets and strategic bombers operating in the Western Hemisphere (U.S House 2015). The Kremlin has consistently expressed aims to seek defensive parity in response to the placement of NATO anti-ballistic missile [ABM] systems on either side of Russia. The effort to attain military stronghold on the United States’ southern front and work to
install a “multipolar” world system demonstrates Russia’s priority for political objectives over business interests in Venezuela. It is a mission that has undoubtedly resurrected American fears reminiscent of the Cuban Missile Crisis and, for some, begs the question of a new Cold War.

Between 2018 and 2019, Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, and Cuba were all in the process of political transitions, recharging Russian interest in Venezuela. In the last fifteen years, Venezuela purchased more Russian arms than any other country in the Western Hemisphere, spending $4 billion on Russian rifles, helicopters, and fighter jets (Rouvinski 2019). The relationship briefly attracted a range of agricultural, manufacturing, energy, and other foreign investment from Russia, but soon withdrew as Venezuela’s economy began to wither. Despite PDVSA’s deteriorating refining capacities, Rosneft, the biggest oil-producing company in Russia, stands as the only Russian company that has endured, and has acted as a large contributor to the combined Russian investment of about $20 billion into Venezuela (Rouvinski 2019).

Amid ever-expanding US sanctions, Russia has operated as Venezuela’s top ally by facilitating its oil trade worldwide. In early December 2018, Nicolás Maduro and Russian President Vladimir Putin convened for what Maduro described as “the most useful meeting of [his] career” (TASS 2018). The two leaders met at a time when questions of President Maduro’s legitimacy began stir in Venezuela and leaked into the international community. Vladimir Putin symbolically bolstered his Venezuelan counterpart’s authority in their conference on options to combat the damaging drop in oil prices. The presidents formed an agreement to trade oil using the Petro – a Venezuelan cryptocurrency created in 2018 to circumvent American sanctions (Maloney 2018). With Russian assistance, Venezuela stabilized its exports to 980,355 barrels/day in March, despite suffering long-term, nationwide blackouts and a new set of sanctions (Phillips & Torres 2019). However, PDVSA’s production is at its lowest point since the 1940s, and
roughly 45% of its $20 billion in 2019 profit will go straight to Russia and China as debt payment (Economist 2019).

In their efforts to secure geopolitical objectives in Venezuela, a Russian pattern of convenient “consultation” has developed as a response to emerging threats to the Maduro regime. On many occasions, some more disputed than others, as an issue is about to arise for Maduro, Russia inserts itself as the stabilizing factor to counterbalance the influence of the United States. On 30 April 2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that Maduro “had an airplane on the tarmac” and was prepared to flee Venezuela, but decided not to when “the Russians indicated he should stay” (CNN 2019). Russia denies this claim. In fact, after his conversation with Vladimir Putin on 3 May 2019, President Trump announced that Putin “is not looking to get involved in Venezuela, other than he’d like to see something positive happen for Venezuela” (Reeves 2019). Repeating what President Putin told him over the phone, Trump contradicted his own staff as well as most academics in his statement.

Victor Jeifets, a professor of the International Relations department at St. Petersburg State University, confirmed that Venezuela is highly likely to be a point of contention between the US and Russia because of its strategic location. Jeifets says Venezuela is “one of the few remaining countries that still exist in the necessity for the world to become more multipolar,” and will be a key for Russia to achieve its geopolitical goal (Rouvinski 2019). Russia is determined to maintain Latin American presence, but it is also aware of the limited resources it has to invest in Venezuela, so some interest has dwindled. Michael Penfold describes that “under Chávez, for Russia, Venezuela was really a platform to engage with a region that was experiencing the Pink Tide and that was moving toward the left… Russia [engaged] with Lula in Brazil and Kirchner in Argentina, and with other countries, particularly Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua.” Penfold, however,
also makes the point that “the difficulties in terms of the size of the financial requirements that Venezuela has to stabilize its economy, to reconstruct the oil sector, are going to make it very difficult for that objective to be achieved” (Penfold 2019).

Vladimir Rouvinski argues that Russia acts as an opportunist and will look for chances to expand its influence depending upon Latin American relations with the United States (Rouvinski 2019). However, if the United States keeps pressing, it is possible Russia will begin to withdraw in the hopes to seek a deal with the United States. “Russia’s bottom line is to stop regime change by external intervention, but if it falls from within, they’ll go with the flow,” says Christopher Granville (CNBC 2019). If Russia realizes that the US has an exceedingly high chance of winning over Venezuela, an exit deal would at least provide a method for Russia to receive money back, which would be much easier for Venezuela to provide when the US lifts its sanctions. So, will Russia be willing to lose their influence in another nation to the United States? On Sunday, 5 May 2019, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov addressed the US in a statement from Moscow, saying "we call on the Americans, and all those supporting them, to abandon their irresponsible plans and to act exclusively within the boundaries of international law" (Deutsche Welle 2019), showing that for now, Russia will maintain its course.

China

Venezuela became the first Latin American nation to enter what has become a long-lasting investment partnership with China in 2001. In the last ten years, China has invested about $70 billion in development programs in Venezuela. China has massively financed programs to boost the Venezuelan oil and gas industry, in exchange for discounted oil prices, making it the now second largest importer of Venezuelan crude oil, behind India (Labrador 2019). However, since 2016, China has halted any new loans as the economically-crippled state has become
accumulated abundant debt, and now owes upward of $20 billion to China (Hermoso 2019). In their in-depth analysis for the Wilson Center of the Chinese-Venezuelan relationship, Stephen Kaplan and Michael Penfold assessed that, in its wide range of investment projects, “China helped finance sugar refineries, cell phone assembly, electricity generation, cattle ranches, egg farms, transportation systems, and massive housing projects. Several of these projects were never completed, and if built, failed to be commercially viable, including controversial investments in a home appliance factory and high-speed railway” (Penfold 2019). In the face of failed projects across several sectors because of disastrous Venezuelan economic mismanagement, where corruption has channeled investment funds into the pockets of the pro-Maduro elite, China has suspended its financing of any further ventures.

Despite the “high-risk” characteristics of Venezuela’s economy that would deter most Western nations and their economists, China has much confidence that Venezuela will easily be able to pay off their loans in the long-term. Chinese economists stress that the situation comes down to Venezuela having the largest oil reserves in the world, so China can sit comfortably, awaiting repayment. Nevertheless, to ensure payment within a reasonable time, for the last few years, China has expressed a flexibility toward both Maduro and the opposition (Penfold 2019, 18 & 38). In a letter published 14 April 2019 by Bloomberg, Juan Guaidó addresses China, urging them to join in to help Venezuela rebuild and recover by supporting the opposition. “The moment has come for Beijing to add its voice to this chorus… It’s in [China’s] own interest to help bring about the climate of peace, stability and well-being to which we all aspire. If it does so, it will find a willing, open and more reliable partner in Caracas,” Guaidó proclaims (Guaidó 2019). In his message, Guaidó describes a more independent Venezuela, working equally with all invested foreign powers.
The Chinese government has strayed much further from political objectives in Venezuela than Russia and decreased its presence as Venezuelan distrust for China, from both Maduro and the opposition, swells. Though Xi Jinping and his regime have spoken out against US intervention in Venezuela, unlike Russia, their willingness to offer any additional support has been depleted (Penfold 2019). Evidently, China believes that the geopolitical advantages of increasing efforts are not worth the economic troubles and potential contribution to a humanitarian crisis; nonetheless, it does not support UN intervention into Venezuela (Labrador 2019).

**Cuba**

The United States has described Cuba as a brutal military and intelligence force working to suppress the will and best interests of the Venezuelan people. Since the days of Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez, Cuba and Venezuela have been closely aligned. In 2000, Cuba began providing medical and education professionals in exchange for discounted Venezuelan oil (Labrador 2019). Today, the status of 20,000 Cuban workers in Venezuela is very controversial. US officials, like John Bolton, have cited 20,000 as the population of Cuban security operatives in Venezuela; but, Cuba’s director-general of US affairs, as well as former US Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes, rebut these claims, saying the US has mistaken medical professionals for military agents. Rhodes has, however, confirmed that Cuba is unquestionably involved in Maduro’s security force (Lee 2019). Cuba is “very active” in Venezuela, according to Vice President of the Council of the Americas Eric Farnsworth, “particularly in the security services — offering not just guidance in terms of how to organize intelligence operations, but also helping the Venezuelans carry them out” (Farnsworth 2019). Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has elaborated that Maduro depends on security provided by “Cuban thugs,” and that
military intervention has already happened at the hands of the Cuban government. Pompeo implies that American intervention could be justified because this Cuban “invasion” happened without the consent of the National Assembly of Venezuela, and the Cubans have utilized their strength to further discount their bargain price for Venezuelan oil (CNN 2019).

Instead of taking direct action in Venezuela against Cuba, the Trump administration has decided to punish Cuba by lifting the suspension of Title III under the Helms Burton Act. “Contrary to international law,” as claimed by EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini, Title III allows US citizens of Cuban descent to sue Cuban firms and individuals for using property confiscated from them by the government after the Cuban Revolution in 1959 (Havana Times 2019). Trump’s decision has alienated and inconvenienced Canada and the European Union with a tidal wave of lawsuits, with about 6,000 certified claims and approximately 200,000 uncertified claim (Economist 2019). The United States will be met with a wall of objections and countermeasures, further souring transatlantic relations during the Trump presidency. Trump’s decision is bound to be proven a petty one that will hurt his allies more than Cuba, effectively acting as a costly insult to Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel.

The Associated Press has corroborated that “Cuba has a large and highly professional security and intelligence apparatus, which includes thousands of operatives who would not be considered military troops. Venezuelan defectors have reported the presence of Cubans in key positions among the Venezuelan armed forces and intelligence services, but to date there has been no public proof”. John Bolton’s claim of 20,000 Cuban troops in Venezuela scarily echoes his justifications for the US invasion of Iraq on the basis of weapons of mass destruction [WMDs]. As compared to Russia or any other foreign actor, Cuba is Maduro’s most deeply integrated, dedicated, and directly active supporter, and their presence will survive as long as
Maduro’s presidency does (Lee 2019). Thus, the major security dilemma of the Venezuelan crisis has developed.

A Test of American Regional Hegemony

Scenario 1: Armed Intervention

In his 2019 book, The Threat, former FBI Deputy Director Andrew McCabe describes a briefing with President Donald Trump in 2017. “Then the president talked about Venezuela. ‘That’s the country we should be going to war with,’ he said. ‘They have all that oil and they’re right on our back door’” (Goodman & González 2019). Trump and his administration have revealed some of their darkest motivations toward Venezuela. Before sanctions, the top importer of Venezuela’s oil was the United States, particularly through Koch Industries refineries in Texas, whose refineries specifically require the kind of heavy crude oil sold by Venezuela. After being deliberately over-charged since the days of Chávez, the Koch brothers now have an opportunity to seek a deal with an American sympathizer, Juan Guaidó, who has already offered to open up Venezuela’s oil fields to American companies (Palast 2019). 21st century Republican leadership has so far been characterized by a willingness to stretch the moral fiber of the United States in armed pursuit for oil, and may now have a substantial motivation pursue that path again.

In this first scenario, the United States would engage in overt military intervention, and would begin in a style similar to their current provocation in, where John Bolton is being accused of provoking Iran to strike against a US aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf (Boot 2019). By keeping their diplomats in Venezuela against Nicolás Maduro’s banishing orders, the United States has essentially committed, what WikiLeaks has called, a “small occupation” (W.L.V. 2019). Of course, because the United States recognizes Guaidó as interim president, it may not be considered an occupation. However, this act is certainly not just intended to insult the Maduro
regime, and not even just to maintain contact and coordination with the opposition, but to instigate action against the United States that would warrant a “reflexive” response by the US military. Because this “small occupation” is not just a plan, but an existing fact, it contributes massively to the possibility of an overt armed intervention.

The path to US military intervention would be prompted by either the arrest of or harm to an American diplomat or citizen, and encouraged by elites of the oil industry. The media would label Maduro a “bad guy,” and his regime an abusive intelligence state that, with the help of Cuba, has caused millions to flee and millions more to suffer. The elite who control stations like CNN, NBC, and Fox News would manufacture the consent of Americans as they have for previous interventions by flooding the United States with anger and suspicion. New figures would arise for the count of Cuban security operatives in Venezuela, and human rights abuses would escalate. Russia and China would stay out of Venezuela, understanding that with the opposition government installed, the US would lift its sanctions and free trade with an independent Venezuela would still be possible. However, a new ruling party classically installed by the imperialist United States would likely face many difficulties with the question of regime legitimacy. The new democratic leadership would, though, be able to resolve the tension in the long term with the organization of set of election fair elections.

Christopher Dickey describes a pattern leading up to US intervention, using the example of Noriega in Panama, where pressure mounts with a series of confrontations, human rights abuses, and denunciations, “and at some point, the dictator is stupid enough to kill an American” (Dickey 2019). To his credit, Nicolás Maduro has been very cautious about the United States, focusing all counter-opposition efforts on Guaidó and his protesters. But, all it might take is one
soldier or police officer to drive or shoot into a crowd of opposition protesters and accidentally kill an American.

**Scenario 2: Humanitarian Intervention**

The UN has warned the United States about its use of humanitarian aid to Venezuela, as UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric announced, “humanitarian action needs to be independent of political, military or other objectives” (Schultz 2019). In working with the international communities and non-governmental organizations, the United States will have to be very careful not to overstep boundaries of international law when directly working through aid. Regardless of how much of a conflict of interest the United States may have, the Organization of American States has supported the request of the Venezuelan opposition by calling for both its members and the international communities “to continue providing support and implementing measures to address the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela” in its March 2019 resolution, “Humanitarian Assistance in Venezuela” (OAS 2019).

In this scenario, the United States would engage in covert intervention to gain control through humanitarian aid. Nicolás Maduro would allow international organizations to enter and provide relief as food and medicine shortages become absolutely unbearable, in the understanding that the United States at least would not play a major role in the process. The United States would advise Guaidó more directly and gradually increase their presence while financing much-needed support to the struggling people of Venezuela. Eventually, the US would work as a direct counter force to the Cubans and Russians that protect Maduro, and tensions would build to a breaking point. The situation would spiral into an internal military conflict, similar to the 1973 coup d’état in Chile, under the supervision of the United States, who be prepared to physically back the opposition in case the Cubans or even Russians engaged. But,
armed conflict would last briefly in the United States’ hemisphere, as Maduro would understand he was already defeated by the time the opposition had substantial internal support from the Americans. The military elite who support Maduro would see US strength coming from within Venezuela and would have the opportunity to negotiate their own realigned support for the opposition. Already installed humanitarian aid organizations would provide stability to the Venezuelan people during the conflict, promoting the presence of the United States in Venezuela. The US would be able to directly facilitate a prompt and peaceful transfer of power, shadowing the Obama administration’s Honduras strategy.

Again, to his credit, Maduro has consistently refused all aid, claiming that it is simply an American effort to overthrow him, thus decreasing the likelihood of this scenario. The covert intervention of the United States would certainly be met with some contest from Russia at first, but the United States, with war hawks like John Bolton whispering into the ear of President Trump, would soon be too much for Russia. The question of legitimacy would be answered similar to the previous scenario, but with less direct influence from the United States. As US sanctions increase, and China and Russia progressively withdraw interest, the future could mean desperation for Nicolás Maduro.

**Scenario 3: International Aid**

In this scenario, the United Nations and other non-governmental organizations would provide humanitarian assistance, in which the United States would essentially be excluded for its conflict of interest. The United States would however promote the idea to the people of Venezuelan, as well as around the world, that the opposition needs to come to power because the Maduro regime has mismanaged Venezuela to the point that it requires international assistance. The US would continue its sanctions and denunciation, pressuring the international communities
to help organize and observe free and fair elections, as popularly requested by Venezuelan organizations like the Citizen’s Platform in Defense of the Constitution, who argue that Guaidó’s movement already has the popular support (Goodman 2019).

The opposition would have the upper-hand campaigning in this scenario where military support is fluid and cannot force the extension of Maduro’s rule. They would promote that Maduro is incapable of running the country and that the Venezuelan economy would flourish under opposition leadership as US sanctions would be lifted. The opposition would also appeal to the population by alluding to their regional Latin American support, which is much stronger than Maduro’s [See Figure 3] (Mackinnon 2019).

Of the scenarios where the opposition would seize power, this is most near to the current situation, and it is certainly the most ideal for the Venezuelan people. However, the involvement of the international communities in organizing elections would make this scenario much more time-consuming, and because Venezuela is so polarized and in such a deep stalemate, progress through external assistance could take years. Nevertheless, in the case Maduro accepts humanitarian aid, the possibility of United States intervention would grow considerably and time to completion would decline. But, in March 2019, members of the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere strongly voiced their opposition to the option of intervention in their hearing before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (Farnsworth 2019). So, the path of the United States is not certain. What is clear, however, is that the US will continue their sanctions of Maduro and support for Guaidó, with the intention to inspire regime change.

**Scenario 4: Maduro Reemergence**

As Chair to the Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Senator Marco Rubio established three key points for regime change in Venezuela: widespread unrest,
loss of military and elite support, and continued international pressure. The previous scenarios meet all three criteria and result in opposition emergence. A common factor for the United States in the three previous scenarios is sanctions. US Members of Congress, like Democratic Senator Bob Menendez, claim that sanctions are the United States’ most effective method of “peaceful diplomacy” available, which allows them to strip money from the elite – whose support for Maduro is truly only loyalty to a situation in which they have been able to make the most money (Farnsworth 2019). However, studies and reports, like Mark Weisbrot and Jeffrey Sachs’, have shown that because the corrupt elite control all flow of money through Venezuela and are able to keep their own pockets full, US sanctions are actually just hurting the average Venezuelan (Weisbrot & Sachs 2019).

In this scenario, Maduro’s status as the leader of Venezuela would be revitalized with the help of Russia and Cuba. Crucially, Russia would refuse to sacrifice their geopolitical center in Latin America to the United States. The Russian Federation would become a more actively invested support system for the nation, advising Maduro to rebuild Venezuela’s oil production capacities. With a renewed oil industry, the Maduro regime would be able to circumvent American sanctions, as the Cubans have for decades, to the extent that an increase in oil revenues would evidently boost general welfare and further prove that United States sanctions were the true cause of devastation. As Venezuela’s rise under Maduro came to fruition, China would begin to reinvest, along with countries like India and Iran, to further strengthen the nation and mutually benefit the economies of all pro-Maduro countries involved.

This scenario is definitely the worst for the United States. With the assistance of foreign powers, Venezuela would exit this era of hardship by following socialist Maduro, as he would claim to have saved the country from the capitalist oppressors. The United States would be cut
off because of its obvious aims to control Venezuelan oil reserves, and to ultimately institute neoliberal reforms, in their attempt to insert the leadership of Guaidó and his right-wing insurgents. The Trump administration would at least briefly hang its head in shame, as Russia and China enter the Western Hemisphere, and James Monroe rolls in grave.

However, unless the Maduro regime made major changes to combat the corrupt practices and poor management that initiated the country’s economic collapse, there is no convincing evidence that the country would not fall straight back into economic collapse. Considering Russia and China’s disinterest and gradual withdrawal from Venezuela, and that they face much bigger issues directly affecting their own countries, this scenario of reinvested, pro-Maduro foreign support may be unlikely.

**Scenario 5: Status Quo**

News viewers keeping up with the Venezuelan crisis are constantly told to “keep their eye on” an upcoming event, such as when Juan Guaidó was about to declare himself interim president, or when he was about to launch Operation Liberty against Maduro. But so far, no matter the circumstances, no real change has happened: US sanctions slowly tighten, China gently withdraws, Russia quietly meets with Maduro, and Cuba secretly coordinates Venezuelan security and intelligence. Strong evidence for a scenario of long-term status quo is Juan Guaidó’s failed coup attempt. He planned for weeks, promised a list of pro-opposition military officials, called on the Venezuelan people to rise up against their oppressors, and people took to the streets in protest. But, within days of his unsuccessful uprising, Juan Guaidó practically disappeared from the public eye. All of Guaidó’s attempts to oust Maduro and seize real power, and all of Maduro’s efforts to revitalize his own national support, have failed.
Perhaps the best measure of likelihood that Venezuela will maintain status quo is the millions of citizens that have fled, not just because of the harsh conditions, but because they see no change in sight. If the problem was just US sanctions, and not the policies and permanence of the Maduro regime, millions of Venezuelans would be marching through their own streets instead of into Colombia and Brazil. The United States has vowed that its sanctions will last as long as Maduro does. Maduro has suppressed all efforts to overthrow him internally and externally. The stalemate continues.

**Conclusion**

In my research, I explored sources and opinions all across the political spectrum. Struggling to find facts, I came across many strong arguments for various motives and outcomes of each involved actor in the Venezuelan crisis. I came to understand that pursuing a single most likely outcome of the issue would ultimately just be a contribution to the sea of overconfident, one-argument opinion articles. The reality is that the complex catastrophe in Venezuela has an array of disputed truths and a one-scenario approach is far too narrow-minded to serve this topic justice. For example, nobody actually knows whether Nicolás Maduro or Juan Guaidó has the majority of the popular support. The people of Venezuela want a resolution, they want a settled, legitimate leader, and they want to begin heading in a positive direction, but it is impossible to say with certainty whether the polarized political climate will ever allow the organization of a free, fair, and respected election.

This research was limited by a finite amount of concrete widely-accepted information. Scholarly articles such as the Wilson Center’s Rouvinski report are often very detailed and provide a vast amount of statistics, but the question of bias always comes into play (especially in the case of the Washington D.C. think-tank). I found the most reliable news sources to be the
UNHCR, Reuters, the Associated Press, and Al Jazeera. Information and opinions from people like Noam Chomsky, Christopher Dickey, Vladimir Rouvinski, Jeffrey Sachs, and Greg Palast were exceptionally helpful in shaping a deeper understanding for the crisis, each contributing an insightful point of view, each with a unique focus area [oil, Russia, sanctions, etc.]. To improve the essay, I would have liked to have more direct access to Venezuela, and would ideally visit the country myself. The opportunity to interview people with various political opinions [more than just two] and to observe the conditions around the afflicted country would without question boost the quality of the essay. As the situation develops, it has not become much easier to decipher what is happening, but I think that is the case for most people following or even involved in the Venezuelan crisis. This issue has become so politicized that fact-based reporting can be hard to come by. It is certainly an eye-opening way to get to understand International Relations when there is such a lack of mainstream attention on a massive issue involving the world three most prominent powers.

It is evident that United States foreign policy in Latin America itself is changeable, as was demonstrated by the variety of interventions through the past decades. US President Donald Trump’s apparent amorality and unpredictability make it difficult to determine what kind of approach he will take toward Venezuela. Time and time again, President Trump has opposed the ideas and values of his own administration. Since his election campaign, his fickle nature toward policy has been extremely evident. Trump’s constant dramatic claims and threats – like his simple March 2019 announcement that “Russia has to get out” of Venezuela (Limitone 2019) – are not usually followed up with corresponding action; and, in the case of Russia in Venezuela, Trump actually began to vouch for Putin. Over the course of his presidency, a theme has emerged where the president condemns a country and subsequently sympathizes with its rich, powerful
leaders, like Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. So, how harsh will Donald Trump’s ultimate response to Maduro be?

The anti-socialist sentiments of Trump’s conservative regime have remained quite clear and consistent, however. Now a former US Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson condemned the Maduro’s government in the beginning of the Trump presidency, labelling the government of Venezuela a “corrupt and hostile regime” (CGTN America 2018). Current National Security Advisor John Bolton has made plainly anti-socialist statements like “…the Cuban, Venezuelan, and Nicaraguan people suffer in misery because socialism has been implemented effectively” and has called “for the immediate release of all Venezuelan political prisoners; acceptance of international humanitarian assistance; free, fair, and credible elections; and legitimate steps to restore democratic institutions and the rule of law in Venezuela” (Bolton n.d.).

Whatever course the Trump administration chooses to pursue in Venezuela will influence United States’ position on the world stage for years to come. At a time when the Trump administration’s foreign policy is going relatively unchecked by Democrats, who obsess over the Mueller Report and their candidate for the presidential primaries, anything can happen.

Because states are made up of individuals with their own philosophies, they cannot be characterized by one theory of International Relations. Collectively, a state acts as a self-interested power/security-maximizer, simultaneously influenced to pursue specific foreign policy objectives by the will of the elite, which may or may not parallel the goals of the egoist state. Foreign policy is determined by the order of supremacy of those two sets of objectives. By this conclusion, the United States will determine its foreign policy relating to the Venezuelan crisis.
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A geographic visualization of the Corruption Perceptions Index 2017, showing the most corrupt countries in dark red and the least corrupt countries in yellow (Transparency International 2018).
Here, the Corruption Perceptions Index names Venezuela as the statistically most corrupt Latin American country (Transparency International 2018).
A geographic visualization of global support, displaying countries that back Maduro (red), countries that back Guaidó (blue), countries on the fence (yellow), and countries that have not yet declared their support (grey) (Mackinnon 2019).