



# Overcoming the Global Rift on Venezuela

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# Principal Findings

**What's new?** Once a largely domestic affair, the struggle for political supremacy in Venezuela has become a source of geopolitical discord. Partly due to the worsening humanitarian emergency, it remains a vital concern for neighbours. The Venezuelan parties' recent readiness to negotiate could allow for a more constructive role from foreign powers.

**Why does it matter?** Outsiders cannot impose an end to the feud between President Nicolás Maduro's government and the opposition. But neither can the parties resolve the crisis without the tacit consent, and preferably the active involvement, of world powers including the U.S., the European Union, Russia and China.

**What should be done?** Now on pause, talks between government and opposition will require external mediation, sustained support from foreign allies on both sides, and pledges from abroad of financial and technical support should a settlement eventually be reached.

## *Executive Summary*

Over two decades of political tumult in Venezuela have ended up entangling much of the world. The dispute between the governments of self-proclaimed socialist Hugo Chávez (1999–2013) and his successor Nicolás Maduro, on one side, and an opposition alliance on the other, spread first to Latin America and after that erupted into global feuding. Early in 2019, U.S. President Donald Trump, with the support of the mainstream opposition, openly sought to oust Maduro through “maximum pressure”: harsh economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation and vague threats of military intervention. The bid failed. But it drew a clear dividing line between states supportive of Maduro, including Russia and China, and nearly 60 others that backed the U.S. gambit and opposition leader Juan Guaidó’s “interim presidency”. Three years on, the country remains politically deadlocked and mired in humanitarian emergency. But the two sides returned to the table in 2021. Foreign allies of both sides should urgently back these tentative efforts, which are now stalled, to reach a negotiated settlement for Venezuela.

The consummate charismatic populist, Chávez used cheap oil, generous finance and acts of solidarity to cultivate a circle of close allies in Latin America and the world, with Cuba foremost among them. At the same time, he demonised those who opposed his rule – the U.S. and its acolytes, in particular. But the onset soon after his 2013 death of a devastating economic slump intensified Venezuela’s internal political conflict and extended it far beyond the nation’s borders. Neighbouring countries absorbed most of the massive exodus of migrants, now estimated at six million, fleeing poverty and collapsing public services. Meanwhile, organised crime and armed groups from Colombia looked to turn an illicit profit and collude with cash-starved security forces across the border, sparking Bogotá’s ire. The two states severed relations in 2019.

As the Venezuelan government honed its state security apparatus and adopted a more repressive stance, the U.S. from 2015 onward tightened its sanctions on state officials and eventually expanded them to target whole economic sectors. Numerous countries in Europe and Latin America rallied to this cause after Maduro was re-elected in 2018 amid a mainstream opposition boycott and accusations of fraud. These circumstances led the opposition-held National Assembly to name Guaidó head of state in January 2019. Dozens of states recognised his new “interim government”.

Maduro’s supporters immediately rose up in his defence, leading to vitriolic confrontation on the international stage. Moscow, already a financial, military and diplomatic backer of Caracas, helped it evade sanctions and blocked U.S. efforts to muster support for punitive measures at the UN Security Council. Beijing had also invested heavily in Venezuela, often to its regret, but it likewise joined efforts to safeguard the Maduro government. Turkey and Iran, for their part, emerged as crucial economic partners of the beleaguered South American state.

Three years after Guaidó staked his claim and Venezuela’s international partners split into rival blocs, foreign governments might now be in a position to foster rather than hinder a peaceful resolution of the crisis. Government and opposition resumed Norwegian-facilitated negotiations in August 2021 in Mexico City, though the govern-

ment suspended its participation two months later. A role for foreign powers is explicitly contemplated in the memorandum of understanding signed at the outset of the talks. Russia and the Netherlands have been invited to “accompany” the process. There is also provision for a Group of Friends, comprising an equal number of allies of each side, even if the part these countries will play – and the group’s composition – has yet to be defined.

The talks began amid an international climate in some ways more favourable to a settlement than at any time in the recent past. Under President Joe Biden, Washington has adopted a more multilateral stance and modified Trump’s “maximum pressure” policy, enabling much closer alignment among the U.S., Canada and the European Union on Venezuela. Latin America is more evenly divided than before and, with some exceptions, less bent on kicking Maduro out of office. With support for Guaidó’s claim to the interim presidency eroding, and the Maduro government’s collapse seemingly averted, Russia and China may be less worried about regime change and its effects on their global standing, and more concerned to rescue their depreciating investments.

Even so, achieving consensus across the Venezuelan divide is far from easy given tense relations between major powers, made all the more challenging by the standoff over Ukraine. The U.S. perceives the growing footprint of Russia and China in Latin America as a threat. Neither Moscow nor Beijing is keen to see a settlement that would represent a clear strategic gain for Washington, especially if it would hurt their economic interests, too.

Bringing the various foreign powers on board with compromise will require adapting to their key interests and red lines. The U.S. has a small but influential Venezuela lobby that will actively oppose any agreement it perceives as too lenient with Maduro. Cuba and other Caribbean nations will need assurances that their energy needs will be met. Russia and China will seek guarantees for their investments, particularly in the energy sector, and of the repayment of bilateral debts. Bogotá will be unhappy with any deal that does not address the issue of safe haven in Venezuela for armed groups dedicated to illicit profit-making in Colombia.

Yet these difficulties should not obscure the evidence that champions of both sides have an interest in seeing the impasse resolved. To this end, they should encourage their Venezuelan counterparts to return to the negotiating table and work in good faith to achieve an agreement. They should offer incentives, especially to the government side, for moves toward compromise. They should also be ready to provide assistance of various kinds to skirt obstacles and ensure progress in the talks, from financial aid packages to support for internal security or justice reforms, or by pledging to verify compliance with a final agreement.

The geopolitical rift has made it easier for both sides in Venezuela to turn to foreign allies for support rather than make concessions to domestic foes. But so long as the country is suffering extreme socio-economic distress, all concerned have more to gain from a peaceful, negotiated solution to the long-running crisis.

**Caracas/Bogotá/Brussels, 17 February 2022**

# Overcoming the Global Rift on Venezuela

## I. Introduction

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In January 2019, the U.S. administration of President Donald Trump took the extraordinary step of recognising opposition leader Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's legitimate interim head of state. Subsequently matched by dozens of Washington's allies, including most European Union (EU) member states, the move was intended to trigger the downfall of President Nicolás Maduro, whose 2018 re-election the opposition and its foreign supporters regard as a sham. The attempt failed, and most of the countries involved (albeit not, so far, the U.S.) have quietly dropped their recognition of Guaidó's "interim government".<sup>1</sup> But the U.S. decision to recognise an opposition politician as head of state generated a sharp backlash, exposing the extent to which Venezuela's long-running homegrown political conflict had spilled into the terrain of geopolitical rivalries.

The spat over Venezuela reflected and aggravated existing geopolitical divides. Some of the most vocal denunciations of the recognition of Guaidó came from expected quarters; Maduro's allies Russia and China condemned the move as unwarranted interference in Venezuela's internal affairs. U.S. attempts to seek support for its strategy at the UN Security Council failed to prosper as a result.<sup>2</sup> But international tensions stemming from Venezuela's interlocking political, economic and humanitarian crises are not confined to spats between major powers. They had been building for many years, above all in Latin America and the Caribbean, where the policies pursued by Maduro and his predecessor Hugo Chávez as well as their support for left-wing causes stirred heated controversy over how Venezuela's government should be branded and treated.

These international dimensions of the Venezuelan conflict have made a seemingly intractable domestic dispute even more complex, but they could also offer a route toward its resolution. In August 2021, the Maduro government and opposition signed a memorandum of understanding in Mexico City, marking the resumption of talks – facilitated once again by the Norwegian government – that had broken down two years

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<sup>1</sup> "Venezuela's strongman wants to improve relations with the United States", *The Economist*, 3 June 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Gerardo Lissardy, "Crisis de Venezuela: qué significa el veto de Rusia y China a la resolución de EE.UU. en el Consejo de Seguridad de la ONU", BBC, 1 March 2019. The Security Council first held an open meeting to consider the Venezuela matter on 26 January 2019, at Washington's request, although it had been the subject of previous informal meetings. The Council debated the matter again on 28 February that year, when the U.S. tabled a motion demanding a fresh presidential election. Russia advanced another motion condemning "outside interference", adding that Venezuela was no threat to international peace and security and thus lay outside the Council's purview. Russia and China vetoed the U.S. motion, while Moscow's failed to obtain enough votes. On 10 April, again at U.S. urging, the Council heard testimony on the humanitarian crisis, and slightly over a year later, on 20 May 2020, the body convened at Russia's behest after the failure of Operation Gideon, an attempted mercenary landing to oust Maduro. See "Country and Regional Issues (Venezuela)", Security Council Report, n.d. See also Crisis Group Latin America Report N°85, *Venezuela: What Lies Ahead after Election Clinches Maduro's Clean Sweep?*, 21 December 2020.

earlier. Although the government side suspended its participation in mid-October, amid a row over the extradition to the U.S. of a close Maduro ally, neither side has decisively pulled out. While Maduro said in late November that conditions were still not right, the government has indicated it will eventually return to the table.<sup>3</sup>

Although the Mexico talks have stumbled, initial signs were that international involvement in attempts to resolve the crisis had evolved in important ways from the tentative diplomatic discussions that took place in Sweden in 2019.<sup>4</sup> The role of external stakeholders was incorporated from the outset: the Russian and Dutch governments were chosen to “accompany” the talks, and a Group of Friends – potentially comprising countries acceptable to both sides, including allies of each – was also contemplated. The composition of this latter group proved to be a source of friction, delaying its formation. Even so, the decision to bring in foreign governments as more than mere observers represented an important step toward overcoming Venezuela’s deadlock.<sup>5</sup>

This report examines the geopolitical stakes of the Venezuelan crisis, and how they might serve to support rather than frustrate an eventual negotiated settlement. It argues that, while outsiders should not impose a solution, as that must necessarily emerge from negotiations among Venezuelans themselves, the engagement of foreign powers, including the key external allies of the two sides, is an essential prerequisite.<sup>6</sup> The report is based on dozens of interviews and informal contacts with politicians, diplomats, academic experts and civil society activists in Venezuela, as well as with people attached to foreign governments and multilateral bodies. It draws not only on Crisis Group’s longstanding presence in Caracas, but also on its network of analysts in foreign capitals, including Washington, Brussels and Moscow.

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<sup>3</sup> In early November 2021, during a visit to Moscow, Venezuelan Foreign Minister Félix Plasencia expressed confidence that the negotiations would resume “sooner rather than later”, while his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov expressed his government’s interest in the talks’ success. “Plasencia: la extradición de Saab no implica el fin del diálogo con la oposición”, EFE, 8 November 2021. “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference with Foreign Minister of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela Felix Plasencia following talks”, press release, Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation, 8 November 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Phil Gunson, “Venezuela: Making the Most of the Mexican Breakthrough”, Crisis Group Commentary, 30 August 2021. From 2019 to 2020, the Swedish foreign ministry hosted three meetings on Venezuela at which virtually all the most relevant international players, with the exception of Cuba, were represented. See “Russia, other key powers discuss Venezuelan crisis in Sweden”, Associated Press, 13 June 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group interviews, diplomats close to negotiations, Caracas, September 2021.

<sup>6</sup> See Crisis Group Latin America Report N°79, *Imagining a Resolution of Venezuela’s Crisis*, 11 March 2020.

## II. Conflict and the Possibility of Compromise

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Venezuela's political turmoil is far from over, and the country remains in the throes of a prolonged humanitarian emergency. But recent developments, including tentative fresh talks and regional elections, suggest that there may be room for compromise between government and opposition, particularly if the foreign allies of both sides evince greater pragmatism.

### A. *Deepening Dispute*

Once a matter of concern largely to Venezuelans themselves, the country's internal tensions began to spill over into Latin America and the Caribbean as a whole not long after Maduro's 2013 election, when a sharp downturn in oil prices exposed the vulnerability of its badly run economy and triggered what would become a mass exodus. Economic mismanagement, corruption and falling oil prices, exacerbated by U.S. sanctions, have slashed GDP by over 80 per cent, leaving Venezuela among the poorest countries in the hemisphere.<sup>7</sup> Around six million people have fled unemployment, poverty and repression, creating an unprecedented regional refugee crisis that has intensified political divisions in and outside the country.

The concentration of ever more power in the hands of President Maduro, who succeeded the late Chávez in 2013, and the progressive dismantling of institutions enshrined in the 1999 constitution have played a central role in the escalation of conflict between the Venezuelan government and opposition. After the opposition Democratic Unity alliance won a parliamentary majority in the December 2015 legislative elections, Maduro used his control of the judicial system to render the National Assembly impotent, stymie a presidential recall referendum in 2016 and, the following year, set up a parallel parliament, in the form of the National Constituent Assembly.<sup>8</sup> The government, for its part, argues that it has been targeted by an insurrectionary campaign led by right-wing national and international forces bent on undermining the country's independence.<sup>9</sup>

The claim by Guaidó to the interim presidency in January 2019 heralded a new, more intractable phase in the conflict, characterised by overt attempts to topple Ma-

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<sup>7</sup> Amelia Cheatham and Rocío Cara Labrador, "Venezuela: The Rise and Fall of a Petrostate", Council on Foreign Relations, 22 January 2021.

<sup>8</sup> The National Constituent Assembly sat for close to three and half years, but never produced a new constitution. Its activities included convening local and regional elections, installing a "truth commission", lifting the parliamentary immunity of opposition legislators and barring certain opposition parties from electoral participation, replacing the Public Prosecutor (Fiscal General), passing a "law against hate", which targeted non-government media and opposition figures, and (in its final days) approving an "anti-blockade law" giving the government discretionary powers over investment and trade. "Venezuela: la Asamblea Constituyente de Nicolás Maduro se disuelve", *El País*, 19 December 2020. Santiago Martínez Neira, "No Room for Debate: The National Constituent Assembly and the Crumbling of the Rule of Law in Venezuela", International Commission of Jurists, July 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group virtual interview, Venezuelan government minister, 3 March 2021. Alejandra Bastidasa, "Despojo criminal! Venezuela sufre una política sistemática de agresión imperialista con la complicidad de Juan Guaidó", *Prensa Vicepresidencia*, 24 March 2021; "Venezuela denuncia consecuencias de las agresiones de EE.UU.", *Telesur*, 29 July 2020.



duro, intensified persecution of the opposition by state security forces and an even deeper economic slump in Venezuela. Two separate but almost simultaneous events in January 2021 eventually disrupted the deadlock between the sides. On 5 January, opposition domination of the National Assembly came to an end with the inauguration of a new, 277-seat parliament, produced by a one-sided election boycotted by the mainstream opposition, and overwhelmingly dominated by the Maduro government. Two weeks later, Joe Biden took over from Donald Trump as U.S. president, committed to a less confrontational, more multilateral approach to Venezuela.<sup>10</sup>

The immediate effects of these changes were mild. Although it lost control of the National Assembly, the Guaidó-led opposition has continued to insist on its status as the only democratically elected representative of the Venezuelan people while disputing the Maduro government's authority and legitimacy. Meanwhile, substantive changes in U.S. policy have to a degree been impeded by the Biden administration's domestic political concerns and its need to deal with other foreign policy challenges. Even so, these developments have strengthened the hand of those, in government and opposition, who seek to replace the mutual antagonism of 2019-2021 with a more low-key, gradualist approach to political, economic and social reform.<sup>11</sup>

## B. *International Polarisation vs. Pragmatism*

Alongside the Trump administration's campaign to unseat him, Maduro has faced until recently a much more hostile regional environment than his predecessor Chávez. While the communist government of Cuba remains an important ally, the "pink tide" of leftist-populist governments that came to power in the 21st century's first decade had receded conspicuously by 2019. Venezuela's two biggest immediate neighbours – Brazil and Colombia – are now led by implacable right-wing opponents (although both face significant electoral challenges from the left in 2022). The Organization of American States (OAS) voted in April 2019 to recognise an appointee of the opposition-led National Assembly as Venezuela's rightful representative, pending free and fair elections. Its secretary general, Luis Almagro, is overtly aligned with the most intransigent wing of the opposition.<sup>12</sup>

Swelling opposition to the Maduro government across Latin America led a dozen OAS members to form the Lima Group in 2017, largely out of frustration that Caracas' oil diplomacy among Caribbean states had prevented the organisation from taking tougher action. The group's stated aim was to produce "a peaceful restoration of democracy" in Venezuela.<sup>13</sup> Behind the call for political change lay concern about the massive socio-economic impact of the refugee crisis. But the increasing severity of

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<sup>10</sup> Vivian Sequera and Deisy Buitrago, "Maduro allies win majority in disputed Venezuela congress election", Reuters, 7 December 2020; Holly K. Sonneland, "U.S. 2020: Joe Biden and Donald Trump on Venezuela", AS/COA, 2 September 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group Statement, "Venezuela: An Opportunity That Should Be Seized", 7 May 2021.

<sup>12</sup> In May 2021, Almagro rejected out of hand the new, more politically representative electoral authority, deriding those prepared to work with it as "collaborationists". "Comunicado de la Secretaría-General de la OEA sobre Venezuela", Organization of American States, 4 May 2021.

<sup>13</sup> "Lima Declaration", 8 August 2017; "Venezuela Crisis: Juan Guaidó backed by Lima Group", BBC, 5 February 2019. See Section V.C below for an account of the Lima Group and its present significance.

political tensions and public unrest throughout the region, greatly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has lately blunted the group's ability to focus on external issues, and hence its capacity to influence conditions in Venezuela. Changes of government have also led some countries to exit the group.

At the same time, rising pressure since 2017 from U.S. financial sanctions, and since 2019 from non-recognition of President Maduro, has been countered by the efforts of several governments supportive of Caracas. They include Russia, China, Cuba, Turkey and Iran, whose assistance has come in various forms, such as financial, diplomatic and intelligence support, as well as increasingly sophisticated techniques for evading sanctions. These states have helped the government in its efforts to resist popular discontent, attempted coups and international isolation.<sup>14</sup> Even so, their interests are diverse, and not all would necessarily be averse to some form of political adjustment. China can afford to be more flexible than Cuba, whose communist government is hugely dependent on Caracas for its survival. Russia is playing a role in the Mexico talks, as an "accompanying" government, while Turkey has offered to mediate.

### C. *The Path to the Mexico Talks*

Prospects for a resumption of full-scale talks appeared dim at the start of 2021. The mainstream opposition leadership had declared a previous round of Norwegian-facilitated talks "exhausted" in September 2019 and seemed ill disposed to return to the table. Yet civil society organisations gathered under the umbrella of the recently created Foro Cívico (Civic Forum), as well as a minority opposition faction under former presidential candidate Henrique Capriles, pursued a more modest agenda, and found the Maduro government willing to make concessions in areas such as electoral conditions, access for humanitarian assistance and political prisoners.<sup>15</sup> The government's most significant compromise was its decision to allow the opposition two seats on the five-person board of the National Electoral Council appointed in May 2021 by the government-controlled parliament.<sup>16</sup>

These moves sparked renewed interest in negotiations on the part of Guaidó's "interim government", perhaps apprehensive that political rivals might outflank it.<sup>17</sup> A fresh round of contacts, once again facilitated by Norway, gathered speed, although the Maduro government was reluctant to give fresh impetus to Guaidó by bargaining with his representatives, while the latter's negotiators continued to rule out partial agreements, believing these would only help consolidate the government they sought to remove. Another obstacle was the local and regional elections approaching in November, which the government anticipated would divide and demoralise its oppo-

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<sup>14</sup> Javier LaFuente, Elías Camhaji, Zorayda Gallegos, Georgina Zerega, Roberto Deniz and Ewald Scharfenberg, "How a vast network enabled Venezuela to avoid US oil sanctions", *El País*, 16 June 2021.

<sup>15</sup> The Foro Cívico Nacional emerged in early 2021 from Diálogo Social, a loose coalition founded in 2017 that includes NGOs and professional, student and labour bodies, as well as representatives from the private sector and faith groups. Its stated aim is to foster peaceful restoration of democracy in Venezuela.

<sup>16</sup> Crisis Group Statement, "Venezuela: An Opportunity That Should Be Seized", op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group interview, foreign specialist in negotiations, Caracas, 8 June 2021.

nents, giving it a powerful motive to resume talks after rather than before the vote.<sup>18</sup> But both sides faced international pressure to return to the table and eventually reached an agreement to restart negotiations.

At the outset of the talks, on 13 August 2021, the two sides signed a four-page memorandum of understanding outlining the purpose and framework of negotiations.<sup>19</sup> In a startling turnaround for a movement that regards Maduro as having “usurped” the presidency and considers Guaidó the legitimate president, the opposition agreed to define the two delegations as representing the “Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela” and the “Unitary Platform”, the present name of the mainstream opposition coalition. The seven-point agenda included the key issues for each side – a timetable for free elections, for the opposition, and the lifting of sanctions and return of foreign assets, for the Maduro government. It also referred to the need to address social welfare issues and concluded with a reference to implementation and verification measures.

Despite the opposition leadership’s previous insistence that anything short of a comprehensive agreement would strengthen the government’s grip on power, the memorandum explicitly contemplates partial accords as part of the process. It also includes a reference to the need for “consultation mechanisms” to enable “other political and social actors” to have a say. In two subsequent sessions during September, negotiators signed three partial agreements, although none of them resolved a substantive issue. The two sides agreed on the need to assert Venezuelan sovereignty over the disputed Essequibo territory in neighbouring Guyana (one of the few uncontroversial causes in Venezuela); set up a joint Social Welfare Working Group (Mesa de Atención Social), comprising three representatives from each side; and follow through “as soon as possible” with the “inclusive” consultative mechanisms referred to in the original memorandum.

Progress has faltered, however, and the talks are now on ice. A month after the agreement to establish the Social Welfare Working Group, there was still no agreement on who its members should be. The government made the issue yet more difficult to resolve by insisting that one of them should be Alex Saab, a Colombian businessman facing money-laundering charges in the U.S. When Saab, whom the government had also named a member of its Mexico delegation, was extradited to the U.S. from Cape Verde in October, it announced it was suspending participation in the talks, accusing Washington of sabotaging them, even though the extradition request came more than a year before the Mexico meetings began.<sup>20</sup> The pause may be temporary: Foreign Minister Félix Plasencia insisted several weeks later that negotiations would resume.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interviews, sources close to negotiations, Caracas, May–June 2021.

<sup>19</sup> The memorandum, subsequently approved by Venezuela’s government-controlled National Assembly, can be found in “Acuerdo en Respaldo al Memorando de Entendimiento entre el Gobierno de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela y Sectores de la Oposición Venezolana”, *Gaceta Oficial*, no. 6,637, extraordinaria (17 August 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Julie Turkewitz, “US extradites key financial ally of Venezuela’s president, inciting retaliations”, *The New York Times*, 16 October 2021.

<sup>21</sup> “Plasencia: la extradición de Saab no implica el fin del diálogo con la oposición”, op. cit.

The initial promise of external backing for the talks was also proving hard to render operational. Russian diplomats privately expressed confusion as to what the precise role of an “accompanying” government was supposed to be.<sup>22</sup> Such was the squabbling over who should join the Group of Friends that its formation was postponed, with some sources suggesting it might never come into being.<sup>23</sup> Following regional and local elections on 21 November, the government repeated its call for broadening talks to include opposition groups that do not belong to the Unitary Platform; these alternative forces in total obtained some 1.4 million votes.<sup>24</sup> While Maduro insisted on election day that the U.S. must “respond” for its “kidnapping” of his confidant Saab before talks resumed, opposition sources said they expected a return to the table early in 2022.<sup>25</sup> To date, however, there has been no change in the government’s stance.

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<sup>22</sup> Sources close to the talks said the Norwegian facilitators had sought to clarify the issue with Russia, adding that the precise role of accompanying delegations would evolve as the talks progressed. Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Caracas, November 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Caracas and by telephone, September 2021. Those reportedly under consideration (or putting themselves forward) for membership of the Group of Friends included the U.S., Canada, Colombia, Spain, Bolivia, Turkey and China, as well as the EU. Neither the government nor the opposition was keen to admit Spain, however, while Colombia’s overt scepticism regarding the talks seemed to rule it out.

<sup>24</sup> Maduro said in November: “The conditions still don’t exist. The kidnapping of our diplomat Alex Saab by the United States was very serious. They must answer for that kidnapping. When the conditions exist [to return to talks] we will announce it to the country.” Manuel Tomillo C., “Maduro: No hay condiciones todavía para retomar el diálogo en México”, *Efecto Cocuyo*, 21 November 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group virtual interviews, opposition sources, November 2021.

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### III. Making Friends and Enemies

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It was Maduro's predecessor, Hugo Chávez, who set the stage for the international divisions over the Venezuela crisis today. Long before Chávez declared his "Bolivarian revolution" to be a socialist project, he made it clear that he intended to remove Venezuela from the U.S. orbit and seek a "multipolar world", marking a clear departure from the policies of almost all the country's modern presidents.<sup>26</sup> While insisting, at the outset, that he was ideologically equidistant from capitalism and communism, he placed nationalism and "anti-imperialism" at the heart of his project, in part due to his close ties with and admiration for Fidel Castro, not to mention his longstanding association with Venezuela's own leftist guerrillas.<sup>27</sup>

Chávez quickly started distancing Caracas from Washington. In 1999, his first year in office, he countermanded an order from his defence minister accepting emergency aid from the U.S. military after the flood disaster that December. He also cancelled an agreement that allowed the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration to operate counter-narcotics surveillance flights over Venezuelan territory, justifying both decisions on the grounds of national sovereignty. In a move that would place him on a collision course not only with the U.S. but with a succession of governments in neighbouring Colombia, he declared his country's neutrality in the conflict waged for decades by leftist guerrillas, who had long been an irritant on the Venezuelan side of the border, too. This tolerance was matched by an ambiguous stance toward other types of non-state armed groups, including criminal gangs, whose activities often spilled over from Colombia into adjacent countries.<sup>28</sup>

Another initiative calculated to rouse Washington's ire was Chávez's bid to revive the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). In 2000, the late president hosted only its second heads-of-government meeting since Venezuela co-founded it 40 years earlier.<sup>29</sup> On a tour of OPEC capitals, he made a point of visiting the pariah government of Saddam Hussein, despite UN sanctions banning flights to Baghdad. Oil diplomacy based on close ties with fellow producers, the creation of new export destinations (notably China), and distribution of subsidised fuel to allied or favoured nations in Latin America and the Caribbean proceeded to become hallmarks of *chavismo*. Chávez strongly opposed U.S. hemispheric free trade proposals and in 2004, in conjunction with Cuba, he proposed the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, seeking to build a counterweight to U.S. influence in Latin America.<sup>30</sup>

The U.S. ambassador in Caracas when President Chávez came to power was John Maisto, who famously downplayed the threat to his country's interests, saying it was

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<sup>26</sup> Rosalba Linares, "La Estrategia Multipolar de la Política Exterior Venezolana", *Aldea Mundo*, vol. 15 (July-December 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Brian Palmer, "Why did Hugo Chávez hate the United States so much?", *Slate*, 6 March 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group Latin America Report N°78, *A Glut of Arms: Curbing the Threat to Venezuela from Violent Groups*, 20 February 2020. Luis R. Martínez, "Transnational Insurgents: Evidence from Colombia's FARC at the Border with Chávez's Venezuela", *Journal of Development Economics*, vol. 126 (May 2017).

<sup>29</sup> Brian Knowlton, "Chávez, defiant, tells OPEC to show its power: Venezuelan visits Iraq, angering Washington", *The New York Times*, 11 August 2000.

<sup>30</sup> Anthony Boadle, "Chavez oil diplomacy gains ground in Caribbean", Reuters, 20 December 2007; Mauricio Vicent, "Nace la 'América bolivariana'", *El País*, 16 December 2004.

important to “watch what Chávez does, not what he says”.<sup>31</sup> Later developments, however, showed that these early forays into international affairs demarcated the boundaries between external friends and foes of *chavismo*. Just as he did on the domestic front, Chávez placed a premium in his diplomacy on close ideological and political affinities: he would lavish gifts on his allies, while decrying or exacting swift revenge upon any government that stood in his way.<sup>32</sup> An oil boom that lasted for most of his time in office, along with the region’s increasing domination by sympathetic left-leaning governments, facilitated this approach.

Not all was smooth sailing, however. The Chávez years featured frequent diplomatic spats with Latin American neighbours. In 2005, Mexico came close to breaking relations over Chávez’s accusation that President Vicente Fox was a “lapdog” of Washington. The following year saw similar tensions with Peru, after Chávez openly interfered in the Peruvian presidential race in favour of candidate Ollanta Humala, casting a shadow over Venezuela’s subsequent relations with the election winner, Alan Garcia. In 2009, Chávez ally Manuel Zelaya was ousted from the Honduran presidency after seeking to end a ban on re-election. In 2010, relations were briefly severed between Bogotá and Caracas over President Álvaro Uribe’s complaint to the OAS over Colombian guerrilla camps on Venezuelan soil.

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<sup>31</sup> Franklin Foer, “The talented Mr Chávez”, *The Atlantic*, May 2006. By the end of his term as ambassador, however, Maisto was unsure where the country was headed. Dan Bohning, “Venezuela at crossroads, U.S. ambassador says”, *Miami Herald*, 14 August 2000.

<sup>32</sup> In 2003, for example, Chávez abruptly halted around 110,000 barrels/day of oil shipments to the Dominican Republic after accusing its government (without evidence) of conspiring with former Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez to overthrow him. Gary Marx, “With oil cut off, Dominicans try to pacify Venezuela”, *Chicago Tribune*, 20 October 2003.

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## IV. Maduro's Supporters

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Maduro, who succeeded Chávez after the latter's death in 2013, sought to continue in the same vein, but a collapsing energy industry, sharply lower oil prices and growing diplomatic isolation made the task harder. Maduro had served as Chávez's foreign minister from 2006 to 2013, playing a central part in cultivating a network of allies.

Friendly governments had varied motives. One was to diminish U.S. influence, both in Latin America and around the world; another was to secure trade, cheap supplies of oil and related products, or other forms of material assistance from Caracas. Several countries had both ambitions.<sup>33</sup> Prominent among the partners were China, Russia, Cuba and Iran, all of whom had adversarial relations with the U.S. as well as financial and economic interests in Venezuela. Allies driven largely by material expediency included most of the beneficiaries of Petrocaribe, a scheme launched in 2005 to provide oil at preferential rates to small countries in and around the Caribbean basin.<sup>34</sup> Despite the substantial reduction of shipments under the Petrocaribe scheme, caused by a slump in production and financial constraints, Caracas has been able to count on a solid bloc of Caribbean votes in international forums, which, among other things, for many years impeded the approval of sanctions promoted by its foes in the OAS.

Maduro's international champions tend to regard Guaidó and other opposition leaders as surrogates for Washington, believing that regime change in Venezuela would alter the geopolitical balance to their disadvantage. At the same time, neither China nor Russia is particularly enamoured of the government. The status quo does not serve their economic and financial interests (including energy investments and debt repayment), and neither has responded favourably in recent years to Maduro's pleas for money. But they have done enough to keep his government afloat, including by assisting it in evading U.S. sanctions. On the other hand, another key ally, Cuba, is both heavily dependent on the *chavista* government and a key source of intelligence, both domestic and international.

### A. China

One of Chávez's core goals as he sought to extricate Venezuela from the U.S. sphere of influence was to diversify trading partners. In 1998, the year before he took office, Venezuela exported over 600 million barrels of crude oil and oil products to the U.S., which was not only nearby and a major consumer but also closely integrated with its supplier.<sup>35</sup> Through Citgo, a wholly owned U.S. subsidiary of the state oil corpora-

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<sup>33</sup> Gitanjali Wolfermann and Lisseth Boon, "Compadres Ideológicos del Chavismo", Connectas, September 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Under the Petrocaribe scheme, in which seventeen Caribbean basin countries took part, Venezuela supplied oil in exchange for 50 per cent of its market price, with the remainder to be paid for over 25 years at 1 per cent interest, with a two-year grace period. Jason Beaubien, "The fallout from a seemingly sweet oil deal for Venezuela's neighbors", NPR, 20 July 2019.

<sup>35</sup> By the time Maduro came to power in 2013, this figure had roughly halved. U.S. dominance of Venezuelan oil exports lasted until early 2019, when Washington banned U.S. entities from dealing with PDVSA. See Devika Krishna Kumar and Collin Eaton, "Venezuelan oil exports to U.S. still a primary source of cash", Reuters, 25 January 2019.

tion PDVSA, the government controlled a chain of refineries in Texas and Louisiana, geared toward processing Venezuela's heavy, sour crude, as well as a network of petrol stations. Chávez feared that this mutual dependence on what he called "the empire" was weighted in favour of Washington, which could in theory strangle his incipient revolution by boycotting Venezuelan oil or even by expropriating Citgo. He determined to seek markets elsewhere, and the rapidly growing, energy-hungry Chinese economy had obvious appeal. The main impediment was cost: earnings from oil shipped around the world, to a country whose refineries were not set up to process it, would be much reduced.

Beijing proved a willing partner. Chávez's early years in power coincided not only with a sharp increase in China's need for commodity imports, including oil, but also with its revived diplomatic outreach to developing countries and the "go global" policy promoted by President Jiang Zemin (1993-2003). The Chinese were looking primarily for beneficial trade and investment relations, including markets for their industrial products. Chávez – who had first visited Beijing in October 1999 – was looking for something more: an alliance with the communist superpower was as much an ideological match as it was a commercial one. He insisted that his "Bolivarian revolution" was founded on Mao Zedong's principles, apparently unaware that his invocations of Mao and the Great Leap Forward were more likely to embarrass his new partners than to endear him to them.<sup>36</sup>

While at the time, trade between the two countries was negligible – around \$200 million at the highest – it soon ballooned. As China embarked on a massive expansion of its trade and investment relations in Latin America, Venezuela would become by far its biggest debtor in the region. Under Chávez, the country would receive over \$60 billion in loans.<sup>37</sup> At their peak, Chinese investments in Venezuela represented around 75 per cent of Beijing's entire portfolio in the region, while Venezuela's oil exports to China rose from 90,000 barrels/day in 2005 to 344,000 in 2014 (albeit still well below the originally projected one million). China has also been Venezuela's most important arms supplier in recent years.<sup>38</sup> Unlike Western banks and multilaterals, China's development banks were undeterred by the Chávez government's heterodox economic policies. China prided itself on its policy of non-interference in others' internal affairs and refrained from imposing macro-economic policy conditions. It calculated Venezuela's capacity to repay its loans based on the presumption that its oil reserves would guarantee its solvency.

Venezuela's economic slump, beginning in 2013, and the collapse of its energy industry, exacerbated eventually by U.S. sanctions, rendered China's bet a losing proposition. By 2014, Beijing had opted to cut its losses by granting a moratorium on capital repayments. Despite repeated requests from Maduro for fresh loans, the Chinese authorities have limited themselves to rolling over existing lines of credit in order to save Caracas from full-scale bankruptcy. In fact, China's relations with the region

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<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interview, guest at dinner for visiting Chinese Vice President Zeng Qinghong, January 2005. Jorge Domínguez, "China's Relations with Latin America: Shared Gains, Asymmetric Hopes", *Inter-American Dialogue*, June 2006.

<sup>37</sup> China-Latin America Finance Databases, *Inter-American Dialogue*, n.d.

<sup>38</sup> "Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana – Adquisición, Recepción e Incorporación de Armamento y Material Militar, Período 2017-2021", *Asociación Civil Control Ciudadano*, 12 November 2021.



as a whole have undergone a shift from loans to investment. For the first time in sixteen years, the country's two main development banks offered no fresh finance to Latin American governments in 2020. Instead, China is focusing on infrastructure and extractive investments.<sup>39</sup> At a meeting in Caracas with Chinese business leaders in late 2020, Maduro asked for Chinese assistance, both public and private, in reviving the Venezuelan economy through investment and transfer of technology and scientific expertise.<sup>40</sup>

Close observers of the relationship believe China's primary interests are economic and financial. Chinese policymakers, a former high-ranking foreign diplomat said, are "basically pragmatic and super-frustrated" with the Maduro government's inability to put its house in order.<sup>41</sup> In a departure from its hands-off stance vis-à-vis involvement in domestic policy, China in 2018 sent economic advisers to Caracas but, like their Russian counterparts, they found their words ignored. Struggling to recoup its loans to the Venezuelan government, Beijing has declined to provide fresh funds. China is seen as a possible member of the Group of Friends backing the Mexico talks, a move that would both contribute to the sustainability of negotiations and allow Beijing to monitor more closely the prospects of an eventual settlement. In the past, China has also signalled that it is willing to offer financial support if the parties reach such an agreement.<sup>42</sup>

While China's stance on Venezuela retains an undeniable geopolitical element, Beijing has shown itself willing to deepen commercial relations with Latin American nations regardless of political leanings. In its dealings with right-wing Latin American governments, like those of Mauricio Macri in Argentina (2015-2019) and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (2019-present), China has shown that trade and investment tend to trump geopolitical alignment. Hence, there seems to be no reason why it would not maintain good relations with a post-*chavista* government in Caracas. With this possibility in mind, Guaidó held "exploratory" talks with both China and Russia in 2019, according to one of his envoys.<sup>43</sup> That said, indications are that Beijing continues to find the opposition's assurances unconvincing.<sup>44</sup>

## B. Cuba

The Cuban government has been Venezuela's closest ally since the Chávez government's early days. Chávez used to refer to the two countries as one: "In essence we are a single government", he said.<sup>45</sup> Cuban advisers were closely involved in devising the "missions", the social welfare programs that have been at the heart of *chavismo*'s

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<sup>39</sup> Alicia González, "China cambia préstamos por inversiones en Latinoamérica durante la pandemia", *El País*, 10 May 2021.

<sup>40</sup> "Maduro pide ayuda a China y le ofrece liderar nuevas inversiones en Venezuela", EFE, 7 November 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group interview, former Western Hemisphere ambassador to Venezuela, 25 June 2021.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan financial analyst, Caracas, June 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Guaidó has explicitly offered good relations with China should the alliance he leads come to power. "Venezuela's Guaidó holds 'exploratory' talks with China, Russia: Envoy", AFP, 22 October 2019; "Juan Guaidó, 'Por qué China debería cambiar su posición in Venezuela'", Bloomberg, 14 April 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan financial expert with China ties, November 2021.

<sup>45</sup> Ángel Bermúdez, "Maduro vs Guaidó: qué se juega Cuba en la crisis política de Venezuela", BBC Mundo, 13 February 2019.

appeal to voters since the first two of them (Barrio Adentro, a primary health-care program, and Misión Robinson, a literacy campaign) helped Chávez defeat a recall referendum in 2004. Thousands of Cuban literacy teachers, sports instructors and medical personnel were deployed to Venezuela, while the Castro government was rewarded with virtually free supplies of oil and petroleum products via an energy agreement that was even more generous than the Petrocaribe accord.<sup>46</sup> Deliveries of Venezuelan oil were crucial to Cuba's emergence from the austerity of the "special period" that followed the Soviet Union's collapse and persists to this day. Arguably more than ideological affinity, the cut-rate oil is a major reason for Havana's reluctance to abandon its key South American ally.

Cuba's contribution to the Maduro government's survival goes well beyond its role in social welfare. Cuban "advisers" are embedded throughout the Venezuelan government bureaucracy. They advised the agriculture ministry on sugar and coffee cultivation, for example, despite Cuba's flawed domestic record in both industries.<sup>47</sup> They played a key part in running highly sensitive departments, including ports and airports, commercial registries and the citizen identification system.<sup>48</sup> Although precise details are hard to obtain, the Cubans in Caracas reportedly include a number of intelligence officers who not only guard against civilian and (importantly) military subversion but also give Havana an inside track on everything from the economy and internal security to the inner workings of the circles around Maduro.<sup>49</sup> They have also helped ensure the military remains loyal to the government by bolstering counter-intelligence within the armed forces, which has weeded out dissent by methods allegedly including torture and mass arrests.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Under the Convenio Integral de Cooperación, signed by Cuba and Venezuela on 30 October 2000, the Chávez government initially agreed to supply 53,000 barrels/day of oil and oil products to Cuba on generous terms, including barter. Cuba was to provide doctors, teachers and other professionals partly in exchange. By 2006, daily deliveries had risen to 90,000-98,000 barrels/day and the annual subsidy to Cuba to over \$1 billion. Andrés Serbin, "El Caribe, Chávez y los límites de la diplomacia petrolera", *Nueva Sociedad*, no. 205 (September-October 2006); Luis R. Luis, "Venezuela's Cuban Burden", Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy, 10 May 2019.

<sup>47</sup> Prior to the 1959 revolution, Cuba was the world's top sugar exporter, as well as a major coffee exporter. Coffee production slumped after the plantations were nationalised, and since that time it has never met national demand. Sugar production collapsed after the fall of the Soviet Union, from a high of about 8 million tonnes to around 1 million. Rory Carroll, "Hard times mean Cuban coffee tastes of peas again", *The Guardian*, 6 May 2011; Marc Frank, "Sugar harvest no sweetener for Cuba's ailing economy", Reuters, 11 March 2021.

<sup>48</sup> Paulo A. Paranagua, "Their men in Caracas: The Cuban expats shoring up Maduro's government", *The Guardian*, 27 May 2014; "Venecuba', a single nation", *The Economist*, 13 February 2010.

<sup>49</sup> Angus Berwick, "How Cuba taught Venezuela to quash military dissent", Reuters, 22 August 2019; Abraham Zamorano, "La grabación que desató un terremoto político en Venezuela", BBC, 20 May 2013.

<sup>50</sup> Reports by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) and other human rights bodies have documented torture and other abuses by security services, including the Directorate General of Military Counter-Intelligence (DGCIM). In 2020, the UNHCHR "observed that individuals deprived of their liberty were interrogated by intelligence services following their arrest, either at the DGCIM premises or at non-official and unknown locations. It was mainly during this period of time that victims were reportedly subjected to ill-treatment and, in some cases, torture [with the aim of] to intimidat[ing] and punish[ing] detainees, extract[ing] confessions or incriminate[ing] others through videos or written statements. Reports of physical and psychological torture of mili-

The Trump administration gave Havana strong reasons to help Maduro survive U.S. sanctions and opposition efforts to topple him. Proclaiming the goal of eradicating “socialism” in the hemisphere, Trump’s team openly tried to oust the governments in Venezuela and Nicaragua, with Cuba next on its list. But if Havana hoped for leniency upon the advent of Biden, it was to be disappointed. There appears to be no prospect of imminent return to President Barack Obama’s policy of rapprochement with Cuba, partly because relations with Havana are well down the new administration’s docket of priorities, but also because (as with Venezuela itself) any relaxation of sanctions and restoration of relations could bring political costs that the White House would rather defer at least until after the 2022 mid-term congressional elections.<sup>51</sup>

Although the Venezuelan opposition has sought to reassure Cuba that its interests would be safe under a post-*chavista* government, these promises carry little credibility in Havana. The Cuban government has in the past indicated to intermediaries that, even assuming they are sincere, the opposition leadership is in no position to give solid guarantees.<sup>52</sup> For the moment, Cuba would only back a negotiated transition by agreement with the Maduro government. It could well oppose – and even seek to interfere with – any transition that affects its vital interests. Its government representatives have also made clear that Cuba’s priority is normalisation of relations with the U.S., a goal that it considers independent of its stance toward Venezuela.<sup>53</sup> Intensive efforts by Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland in 2019 to enlist Cuban support for a negotiated solution made no headway, despite a series of apparently friendly meetings.<sup>54</sup>

### C. *Russia*

Before Chávez, Venezuela had only a distant relationship with Russia.<sup>55</sup> But after Chávez adopted a confrontational stance toward Washington, President Vladimir Putin seized the opportunity to develop economic ties while expanding Russia’s geopolitical footprint in Latin America after a sharp contraction following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>56</sup>

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tary or ex-military personnel were common”. “Outcomes of the investigation into allegations of possible human right violations of the human rights to life, liberty and physical and moral integrity in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela”, UNHCHR, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Karen DeYoung, “New Cuba policy on hold while Biden deals with bigger problems”, *The Washington Post*, 27 June 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, leading opposition politician, Caracas, August 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interview, Cuban diplomat, July 2021.

<sup>54</sup> “Canadá insiste en incluir a Cuba en un arreglo sobre Venezuela”, *Deutsche Welle*, 29 August 2019.

<sup>55</sup> In June 1952, authorities arrested two suspected Russian secret agents at Venezuela’s main airport, later deporting them. The incident led to a bitter exchange of protests between the two governments, after which Caracas broke diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Ties were restored in 1970. “Venezuela: Broken contact”, *Time*, 23 June 1952.

<sup>56</sup> Stanislav Secieru, “The Comeback Kid: Russia in Latin America”, EU Institute for Security Studies, 26 November 2021. Chávez visited Moscow in May 2001, signing a bilateral agreement with Putin that signalled the intention of both parties “to develop a mutually advantageous political dialogue”. According to the joint statement published after the meeting, “the Presidents agreed to jointly work for establishing a new multi-polar and non-violent world order based on the principles of non-interference in internal affairs of other states”. Putin highlighted that the visit “would serve

The benefits to Moscow of this relationship were soon clear. Following Washington's announcement in 2007 that it would no longer allow the sale of arms of U.S. origin to the country, Venezuela became one of Russia's leading arms buyer, with over \$4 billion in weapons deals since then, including combat aircraft.<sup>57</sup> Under Chávez, Venezuela recognised the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Moscow recognised after its short war with Georgia in August 2008. According to Putin, the recognition "clearly underlined the independent nature of Venezuelan foreign policy". At the same time, Chávez was adamant that Venezuela had become a Russian ally; of the Kremlin, he said: "Our foreign policies coincide in a multipolar world".<sup>58</sup>

Military deals were followed by energy cooperation between Venezuela and leading oil and gas producers from Russia, such as Gazprom, Lukoil and TNK-BP, which signed agreements to develop projects in the Orinoco Belt, an area rich in heavy oil reserves. In 2010, Russia even committed to help build a nuclear power plant in Venezuela, a move that Chávez argued would "help Venezuela reduce its dependence on fossil fuels".<sup>59</sup> The project never got started.

Even before Maduro was elected, the likelihood of sustained economic decline in Venezuela had led some Russian companies to abandon their projects in the country. The only state-owned entity that maintained an important presence on the ground was Rosneft, an oil giant headed by Igor Sechin, a close Putin ally who also developed personal ties to Chávez and Maduro. In 2019, when the U.S. imposed sanctions on oil exports from Venezuela, Rosneft played a crucial role in facilitating oil shipments to other parts of the world while simultaneously importing diesel to address Venezuela's domestic shortfall.<sup>60</sup>

Russia's role in Venezuela was conspicuous as the Trump administration sought to force Maduro's exit from power.<sup>61</sup> Putin saw the occasion as an opportunity to increase his leverage when negotiating deals with Maduro, as well as a chance to counter-balance U.S. and EU moves in conflict zones such as Kosovo, Crimea and eastern Ukraine.<sup>62</sup> In 2019, Russia went so far as to dispatch military personnel to Venezuela on several occasions, arguing that it was complying with contractual obligations to

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as a powerful boost for the development of political and economic ties between the two countries". "President Vladimir Putin had talks with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in the Kremlin", *The Kremlin*, 14 May 2001.

<sup>57</sup> "FACTBOX: Military power in Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador", Reuters, 5 March 2008; "Hugo Chávez says Russia lends Venezuela \$4 billion for arms", Reuters, 27 November 2010. Russia and China are "almost the only" arms suppliers to Venezuela. See "Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana – Adquisición, Recepción e Incorporación de Armamento y Material Militar 2017-2021", *Asociación Civil Control Ciudadano*, 2021, op. cit.

<sup>58</sup> "Venezuela's Chávez recognises Georgian rebel regions", Reuters, 10 September 2009; Pavel Felgenhauer, "Venezuela's multibillion-dollar Abkhazia and South Ossetia recognition fee", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 17 September 2009.

<sup>59</sup> "Russia, Venezuela strengthen energy ties in Orinoco oil belt", *Rigzone*, 11 September 2009; "Russia to build nuclear power plant in Venezuela", Reuters, 15 October 2010.

<sup>60</sup> "Russia's Surgut says leaves Venezuela oil consortium", Reuters, 7 November 2012; "Venezuela, Russia's Rosneft agree on \$14 billion oil, gas investment", Reuters, 28 May 2015; "Rosneft becomes top Venezuelan oil trader, helping offset U.S. pressure", Reuters, 22 August 2019.

<sup>61</sup> Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Why is Russia helping Venezuela?", *The New York Times*, 8 March 2019.

<sup>62</sup> Alexander Gabuev, "Russia's support for Venezuela has deep roots", *Financial Times*, 3 February 2019.

service military equipment but offering highly visible and symbolic backing at a time when U.S. military intervention had been mooted.<sup>63</sup> At the UN, Russia played a key role in blocking U.S. efforts in 2019 to promote a Security Council resolution on the Venezuelan crisis.<sup>64</sup> In January 2022, amid an escalating Ukraine crisis, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov refused to rule out an increased military presence in Venezuela and Cuba if its Europe-focused demands were not met.<sup>65</sup>

As time dragged on, however, the limitations of Russia's support also became apparent. Rosneft decided to sell its direct stake in Venezuelan projects after the U.S. imposed sanctions on its trading subsidiaries, while Russian businesses and the government have in general become increasingly cautious over involvement in economic projects.<sup>66</sup> Russian officials have repeatedly insisted on the need for a negotiated settlement in Venezuela, and reportedly sought to impress the importance of a political agreement on their Venezuelan counterparts.<sup>67</sup> Moscow, however, is unlikely to stop defending the Maduro government, and would as a bare minimum require guarantees that any successor government protect its energy investments in particular. Russian representatives have also continued to stress the present government's legitimacy and the egregiousness of U.S. policy.

Encouraging Russian backing for negotiations leading to a restoration of constitutional rule would require assurances that Moscow's economic interests in Venezuela would be unaffected by a change of government, as well as that debt repayment would continue uninterrupted and diplomatic relations undisturbed. But pragmatism would likely prevail where investments are at stake, as suggested by Moscow's actions regarding Bolivia in 2019, after its ally Evo Morales was removed from power. Albeit somewhat reluctantly, the Kremlin soon recognised the controversial interim presidency of Jeanine Áñez in a bid to preserve its investments.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group interview, Russian diplomat, March 2019. "Venezuela crisis: Russian military planes land near Caracas", BBC, 25 March 2019. In March 2021, photographs of what appeared to be a Russian soldier in the midst of a Venezuelan military operation against Colombian guerrillas near the Venezuela-Colombia border caused controversy, although specialists suggested that any Russians on the scene were probably doing nothing more than providing technical assistance. Francisco Zambrano, "Presencia de militares rusos confirma carencia operacional de la FANB", Runrun.es, 30 March 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Michael Schwartz, "Russia blocks Venezuela measure at U.N., calling it a U.S. ploy for regime change", *The New York Times*, 28 February 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Jennifer Rankin, Luke Harding and Julian Borger, "Russia threatens military deployment to Cuba and Venezuela as diplomacy stalls", *The Guardian*, 13 January 2022.

<sup>66</sup> Olga Tanas and Dina Khrennikova, "Rosneft exits all Venezuela projects, sells assets", Bloomberg, 28 March 2020. In 2018, Russia signed a deal envisaging Venezuela's repayment of \$3.12 billion in principal as well as \$217 million in interest. Caracas has to pay Moscow \$133 million a year until 2022, but the amount increases to \$684 million from 2023 to 2026. There is no public information about new loans since then. "Russia says Venezuela will increase debt repayment five-fold from 2023", Reuters, 30 June 2020.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Russian diplomats, November 2020 and April 2021. After the September 2021 suspension of the Mexico City talks, Russia repeatedly urged a return to the table. "We are keen for these talks to succeed", said Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov after meeting his Venezuelan counterpart Plasencia in November. "Russia to keep supporting Venezuela in settling internal political differences – Lavrov", TASS, 8 November 2021.

<sup>68</sup> "Russia recognises Bolivia's interim leader as violence continues", *The Moscow Times*, 14 November 2019.

#### D. Turkey and Iran

Turkey's involvement in Venezuela is relatively recent. The Maduro government, anticipating heightened criticism from regional neighbours, sought to diversify its relations and in particular to foster close ties with other non-Western governments.<sup>69</sup> From the Turkish standpoint, Maduro's offer represented an opportunity to profit from the Venezuelan gold trade and other commercial undertakings, while underlining the growing distance between Ankara, on one side, and Washington and Brussels, on the other, especially over the issue of sanctions.<sup>70</sup>

The Maduro government's speed in expressing solidarity with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan after he faced down a coup attempt in July 2016 was a catalyst for the new relationship. Soon after that initial contact, Maduro travelled to Turkey, and the two countries signed agreements on trade, energy and air transport. In December 2018, Erdoğan visited Caracas and the two countries inked various additional trade and cooperation accords. Maduro said Venezuela was open to Turkish investment "in all areas: oil production, refining, petro-chemicals, tourism development, trade enhancement, among others".<sup>71</sup>

Further agreements since late 2018 have consolidated economic ties between the two countries. Bilateral trade tripled that year, as Venezuela began shipping tonnes of gold to Turkey for refining. The gold imports disappeared relatively quickly, however, from official figures at least, after Washington imposed sanctions on the Venezuelan gold industry.<sup>72</sup> In many instances, Turkish entities paid for the gold with food exports, and Turkish products began to feature in Maduro's subsidised food program.<sup>73</sup> By 2020, Venezuela's imports from Turkey – although still modest at almost \$236 million – were worth twelve times what they had been in 2016, with nearly 80 per cent of the total accounted for by pasta and wheat flour.

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<sup>69</sup> Imdat Oner, "New breathing room for the Maduro regime: Authoritarian coalition", *The Global Americans*, 22 May 2018.

<sup>70</sup> "Turkey-Venezuela bilateral trade on rise", Anadolu Agency, 20 July 2018; "Turkey hopes to turn new page with U.S. and EU in 2021, Erdogan says", Reuters, 23 December 2020.

<sup>71</sup> "Venezuela y Turquía firman acuerdos para fortalecer lazos de cooperación", Ministerio del Poder Popular del Petróleo de Venezuela, 3 de diciembre 2018. "Maduro y la alianza de Estambul", *Deutsche Welle*, 10 October 2016; "Turquía y Venezuela, amigos de conveniencia frente a Occidente", *El País*, 31 January 2019. Turkish Airlines is one of the few international carriers with connections to Caracas.

<sup>72</sup> Imdat Oner, "Turkey and Venezuela: An Alliance of Convenience", Wilson Center, March 2020; Humeyra Pamuk and Corina Pons, "Venezuela exported \$779 mln in gold to Turkey in 2018 – data", Reuters, 19 July 2019. A peak was reached in 2019, when an unknown Turkish company imported over \$900 million worth of Venezuelan gold. "Mysterious Turkish firm helped Maduro move \$900 million in gold", Bloomberg, 8 February 2019.

<sup>73</sup> In April 2016, Maduro launched a network of Local Supply and Production Committees, better known by its Spanish acronym CLAP. Each committee is assigned an area or neighbourhood in which to distribute cheap staples such as powdered milk, flour, pasta and rice. The program has been plagued with corruption and lack of transparency. Reports indicate that, since late 2016, the main contractor for the CLAP scheme has been Alex Saab, a Colombian national whom the U.S. has extradited on charges of money laundering. See Michael Smith and Monte Reel, "Venezuela's trade scheme with Turkey is enriching a mysterious Maduro crony", Bloomberg, 25 April 2019; "Llegan a Falcón ocho mil toneladas de pasta alimenticia para los CLAP", *Prensa SENIAT*, 15 July 2021.

Even so, the relationship has its limits. Turkey, which has been suffering a severe economic crisis, is in no position to become a lifeline for the Maduro government.<sup>74</sup> On the political front, Erdoğan has put Ankara forward as a potential mediator between Maduro and the opposition, building on the fact that it is alone among the government's allies in straddling to some extent the geopolitical divide between Washington and Moscow. The initiative forms part of what one close observer calls a "hyperactive" Turkish foreign policy that seeks a presence "at the table" in global affairs and plays well with Erdoğan's nationalist base. But circumstances have made it hard for Ankara to be as active as it would wish on the Venezuelan front.<sup>75</sup>

Unlike Turkey, Iran began its relationship with Venezuela long before *chavismo*. The two countries were among the five co-founders of OPEC in 1960, when Venezuela was still a major oil producer often at odds with more conservative members led by Saudi Arabia. The relationship became more intense with the rise to power of Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), who developed such a strong personal bond with Chávez that the Islamic Republic declared a day of mourning when the Venezuelan leader died in 2013. Ties between the two vocal adversaries of Washington sparked fears that Hizbollah, the Lebanese movement backed by Iran, and even Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps might use Venezuela as a springboard for attacks in the Americas, although there is a dearth of hard evidence to this effect.<sup>76</sup>

Iranian-Venezuelan ties have been somewhat uneven. In 2007, the two countries established a \$7 billion fund for joint projects, including one to support "anti-imperialist" governments in Latin America. But binational companies, including the Veniran car-manufacturing plant, either never got off the ground or went bankrupt.<sup>77</sup> The political relationship, on the other hand, took on a new urgency when the Trump administration targeted both Caracas and Tehran with draconian sanctions regimes. Iran became particularly important for the Maduro government in 2020, after the Russian company Rosneft pulled out of Venezuela as a result of the sanctions. It has supplied not only food, oil and petroleum products but also equipment and assistance to keep Venezuela's battered refinery infrastructure semi-operational.<sup>78</sup> Iran's long experience dodging sanctions has allowed it to help Venezuela do the same.<sup>79</sup>

With relations between Tehran and Washington at least as tense as in the case of Caracas, prospects for persuading Iran to help foster a transition in Venezuela are

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<sup>74</sup> Carlota Gall, "Battered Turkish economy puts a powerful Erdogan to the test", *The New York Times*, 31 May 2021.

<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, former Turkish diplomat, 19 November 2021. "Turkish Mediation and the Venezuelan Crisis: Reasons for Engagement and Prospects", United World International, 9 July 2020. Turkey has also been mentioned as a possible member of the Group of Friends, should it be set up.

<sup>76</sup> In late 2021, Colombian Defence Minister Diego Molano alleged that the presence of Iran and Hizbollah in Venezuela constituted a threat to his country's security, but later said his comments had been "hasty". "Colombia advierte sobre actividades de Hezbolá en su territorio", *Deutsche Welle*, 15 November 2021.

<sup>77</sup> "Venirauto produjo 1,844 autos y trabaja a 7% de su capacidad", *800noticias*, 25 March 2015.

<sup>78</sup> "With help from Iran, Venezuela doubles oil production despite U.S. sanctions", *Miami Herald*, 21 January 2022.

<sup>79</sup> Marianna Parraga, Rinat Sagdiev and Parisa Hafezi, "Phantom oil buyers in Russia, advice from Iran help Venezuela skirt sanctions", *Reuters*, 10 November 2020.

extremely poor. The new Iranian government under hardline President Ebrahim Raisi has strengthened ties with Caracas. Raisi has said Latin America – and especially Venezuela – will be a foreign policy priority, promising a twenty-year bilateral cooperation pact.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Maziar Motamedi, “Iran, Venezuela to sign 20-year cooperation accord”, *Al Jazeera*, 18 October 2021; “Iran, Venezuela presidents hold phone conversation”, *Tehran Times*, 6 December 2021.



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## V. The Anti-Maduro Bloc

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### A. *The United States*

For most of the 20th century, relations between the U.S. and Venezuela were heavily influenced by oil. They were, respectively, the world's largest importer of petroleum and the Western Hemisphere's biggest supplier. Venezuela was valued in the U.S. not only as a conveniently located, major source of energy but also as a politically stable ally and one of the few big oil producers located far from the volatile Middle East. Most of Venezuela's oil exports went to the U.S. market, and the U.S. was Venezuela's top trading partner prior to the imposition of sanctions.<sup>81</sup>

The relationship has since undergone major upheaval. Caracas has adopted an adversarial stance toward Washington, while its oil production has suffered a precipitous decline and been reoriented toward the Asian market. At the same time, the U.S. as a whole has become a net petroleum exporter, even if most of its regions continue to be import-dependent.<sup>82</sup> Although a number of U.S. oil companies continue to maintain skeleton operations in Venezuela, despite sanctions, oil no longer dominates the bilateral relationship as it once did.<sup>83</sup> Prior to the imposition of sanctions, Venezuela's oil exports to the U.S. averaged around 500,000 barrels/day, but sanctions reduced that to zero.

Washington first adopted sanctions as far back as 2006, in response to what it saw as the Venezuelan government's lack of cooperation on issues such as drugs and terrorism. Prior to the Trump administration, however, sanctions were mostly individual, rather than targeted at sectors of the economy.

Beginning in 2017, when President Trump took office, the U.S. tightened the squeeze on Venezuela in an increasingly overt effort to force Maduro from power. Sanctions became sectoral: executive orders signed in 2017 and 2018 barred the Venezuelan government and the state oil corporation PDVSA from access to U.S. financial markets and prohibited dealing in Venezuelan debt. In January 2019, the U.S. endorsed Guaidó's claim to be interim president. With the subsequent application of "maximum pressure", the sanctions regime got even tougher. U.S. officials insisted privately that Maduro could not hold out more than a few months at best.<sup>84</sup> That year saw the freezing of all Venezuelan government assets in the U.S., sanctions on the central bank, a ban on U.S. citizens and companies engaging in transactions with Venezuela, and even secondary sanctions on non-U.S. citizens and companies deemed to be aiding and abetting the Maduro government.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> "U.S. Relations with Venezuela (Bilateral Economic Relations)", U.S. Department of State, 6 July 2021.

<sup>82</sup> "Despite the U.S. Becoming a Net Petroleum Exporter, Most Regions are Still Net Importers", U.S. Energy Information Administration, 6 February 2020.

<sup>83</sup> Chevron is the last major U.S. oil company still operating in Venezuela. It does so under a six-month, renewable licence from the U.S. Treasury Department, which allows it to conduct only "limited maintenance" activities. Four oil service companies are similarly licenced. "Biden administration renews Chevron license in Venezuela", Reuters, 1 June 2021.

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior U.S. official, Caracas, February 2019.

<sup>85</sup> "Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions", Congressional Research Service, 22 January 2021.

Sanctions were accompanied by even less subtle efforts to oust the president. On 23 February 2019, the U.S. and some of its regional allies took part in an abortive attempt to turn the military against Maduro by forcing aid convoys across the border from Colombia and Brazil.<sup>86</sup> On 30 April, a U.S.-supported coup also failed, after top generals and a Supreme Court justice who had supposedly conspired with the opposition failed to act.<sup>87</sup> National Security Advisor John Bolton had made it abundantly clear that the Trump administration saw Venezuela as a domino whose fall would accelerate the demise of the other members of what he dubbed the “troika of tyranny” – the Daniel Ortega and Raúl Castro governments in Nicaragua and Cuba, respectively.<sup>88</sup>

Many aspects of the Trump team’s policy endure. The U.S. embassy in Caracas has been closed since March 2019, and its staff are now based in Bogotá. The U.S. has kept formal diplomatic relations with Guaidó’s “interim government”, which maintains an “embassy” in Washington, as Venezuela’s legitimate authority. Stated U.S. concerns include Venezuela’s lack of cooperation on drug interdiction and counterterrorism efforts, domestic repression, economic collapse and the regional migration crisis.<sup>89</sup> U.S. officials and elected politicians often continue to cite the presence of potentially hostile extra-regional powers as an additional worry.<sup>90</sup> Another issue, which appears less in public statements but is often mentioned behind the scenes, is the exposure to Venezuelan debt on the part of U.S. bondholders and hedge funds.<sup>91</sup>

Although the Biden administration has abandoned “maximum pressure”, it has so far failed to replace that policy with a clear alternative or demonstrate sustained engagement in efforts to end the conflict. Venezuela figured little in Biden’s presidential campaign, and to the extent that it was a 2020 electoral issue (mainly in southern Florida, where Cuban and Venezuelan exiles are concentrated), it counted against

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<sup>86</sup> “As Venezuelan aid standoff turns deadly, Maduro severs ties with Colombia”, *The New York Times*, 23 February 2019.

<sup>87</sup> Nicole Gaouette and Jennifer Hansler, “Pompeo claims Russia stopped Maduro leaving Venezuela for Cuba”, CNN, 1 May 2019.

<sup>88</sup> Rafael Bernal, “Bolton dubs Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua the ‘troika of tyranny’”, *The Hill*, 11 January 2018.

<sup>89</sup> “Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations”, Congressional Research Service, 28 April 2021; “U.S. Relations with Venezuela”, U.S. Department of State, 6 July 2020.

<sup>90</sup> Bolton went so far as to say the 19th century Monroe Doctrine – by which the U.S. designated Central and South America as its sphere of influence and admonished other powers not to interfere there – is as relevant today as when it was first enunciated. Lucia Newman, “Trump revives Monroe Doctrine as warning to China and Russia”, Al Jazeera, 19 June 2019. Meanwhile, Trump’s secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, accused Russia and China of “spreading disorder” and propping up an undemocratic government. Tal Axelrod, “Pompeo: Russia, China ‘spread disorder’ in Latin America”, *The Hill*, 4 December 2019.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan economist, 19 November 2021. Financial sector sanctions make it impossible for creditors, whether they hold bonds, commercial debt or other forms of publicly backed instruments, to trade in them or have any dealings with the Venezuelan government. A sudden lifting of sanctions would lead to a free-for-all, and the total debt vastly exceeds the country’s reserves and overseas assets, but no restructuring can take place so long as the sanctions exist. Some creditors have sought to press their claims against Citgo through the courts, which might threaten Venezuela with losing the PDVSA subsidiary altogether. Isabella Cota, “Los bonos de PDVSA y el riesgo de perder la ‘joya de la corona’ de Venezuela”, *El País*, 17 August 2021.

the Democrats, who were widely perceived by these constituencies as “soft” on Maduro. Officials have made it clear that the country is not among their top foreign policy priorities for now.<sup>92</sup>

Even so, Venezuela meets many of the criteria for outlining matters of concern in the new president’s interim security strategy.<sup>93</sup> The administration is explicitly committed to combating authoritarianism and, in particular, to standing up to what it perceives to be a threat from Russia and – especially – China to “a stable and open international system”.<sup>94</sup> Moscow, in the White House’s words, “is determined to play a disruptive role”, and the “growing rivalry [between the U.S. and] Russia, China and other authoritarian states” is a major issue in the global security environment. The strategy document also stresses, however, that “strategic competition does not, and should not, preclude working with China, when it is in our national interest to do so”.<sup>95</sup>

Despite the new administration’s declared preference for a more realistic multi-lateral approach to Venezuela, and the clear need for coordination between Washington and Brussels, progress toward a common strategy was slow at first. On 25 June 2021, the U.S., EU and Canada issued a long-awaited joint communiqué, which acknowledged the need to relax sanctions in return for “meaningful progress in a comprehensive negotiation”, suggesting that, as Crisis Group has recommended, there could be reciprocal sanctions relief before a full-scale settlement is reached.<sup>96</sup> The wording, however, remained ambiguous, and opposition representatives continued to insist that government concessions be “irreversible”.<sup>97</sup>

Meanwhile, the State Department has expressed support for the negotiations in Mexico City and, although highly critical of election conditions under Maduro, was supportive of those who took part in the 21 November 2021 regional and local polls.<sup>98</sup> While the Venezuela Affairs Unit in Bogotá, under Ambassador James Story, has consistently favoured the position of Guaidó’s “interim government”, in Washington the approach is more nuanced.<sup>99</sup> Alongside abiding concern as to whether the Maduro government can be trusted to honour its side of any bargain, the principal impediment to adoption of a more flexible policy appears to be domestic political considerations.<sup>100</sup> These include the resistance of prominent Cuban-Americans in both main U.S. parties to any concessions to Maduro and the prospect of mid-term elections in November 2022, in which once again the southern Florida factor will come into play.

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<sup>92</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, leading Democratic Party member, 28 July 2021.

<sup>93</sup> “U.S. Interim National Security Strategic Guidance”, The White House, March 2021.

<sup>94</sup> The Biden administration has declared: “When the Chinese government’s behavior directly threatens our interests and values, we will answer Beijing’s challenge”. Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> “Venezuela: Joint Statement by the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the Secretary of State of the United States of America and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada”, 25 June 2021.

<sup>97</sup> Crisis Group interview, adviser to Guaidó, 24 June 2021.

<sup>98</sup> Antony J. Blinken, “Venezuela’s Flawed November 21 Elections”, U.S. State Department, 22 November 2021.

<sup>99</sup> Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington and Bogotá, December 2021 and January 2022.

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interview, U.S. diplomat, Bogotá, 31 January 2022.

## B. *The European Union*

Europe has had a historically close relationship with Venezuela. After World War II, many Europeans resettled in the country, becoming a driving force in sectors such as agriculture, construction and services.<sup>101</sup> It was in Venezuela that, in 1977, the European Economic Community, forerunner of the EU, established its first delegation in South America. Around one million residents of Venezuela are nationals of a European country, reinforcing the link with the continent.<sup>102</sup>

Throughout much of the 20th century and even during the early Chávez years, the relationship was mainly geared to trade. Many major European companies, including oil giants – France’s Total, Italy’s Eni and Spain’s Repsol – had a significant presence.<sup>103</sup> But as Venezuelan democracy began to falter, relations with the EU, and with some of its member states, were affected by the political fallout from the crisis, even as Brussels sought to provide humanitarian aid.<sup>104</sup>

*Chavismo*’s relations with the EU have seldom been as contentious as with the U.S., and governments of individual member states have at times enjoyed close ties with Caracas. Collectively, the 27 EU members are perhaps best thought of as occupying a potential middle ground between Washington and Maduro’s allies. Nonetheless, tensions have occasionally flared. An early episode came in 2007 during an Ibero-American Summit, when President Chávez repeatedly interrupted Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, prompting King Juan Carlos of Spain to interject: “Why don’t you shut up?”<sup>105</sup> A similar incident occurred in 2008 when Chávez declared that Angela Merkel, then German chancellor, and her party belong to the same “right” that supported Adolf Hitler and fascism. Previously, Merkel had said she did not believe “state-guided economies can tackle urgent problems better or more sustainably”. She also said the late Venezuelan president did not represent the interests of Latin America.<sup>106</sup>

Incidents such as these strained ties with European countries, whose recommendations regarding democracy and human rights the *chavista* government has usually dismissed as originating from “colonial powers”.<sup>107</sup> In 2006, when the EU deployed an observation mission for the presidential election, which Chávez won easily, its report highlighted the “high turnout, and peaceful atmosphere in which [the vote was] held, together with the acceptance of results by all those involved”.<sup>108</sup> But it was also

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<sup>101</sup> Sebastian Huhn and Christoph A. Rass, “The Post-World War II Resettlement of European Refugees in Venezuela: A Twofold Translation of Migration”, in Gabriele Pizarz-Ramirez and Hannes Warnecke-Berger (eds.), *Processes of Spatialization in the Americas* (Berlin, 2019).

<sup>102</sup> “Venezuela y la UE”, Delegation of the European Union to Venezuela, 16 May 2016; Barry Hatton, “European nations raise pressure on Venezuela’s Maduro”, PBS, 4 February 2019.

<sup>103</sup> “Minister Quevedo reviews joint projects with PDVSA Strategic Partners”, PDVSA, 13 December 2017.

<sup>104</sup> “EU announces 35mn euro aid package for Venezuela crisis”, France 24, 31 August 2018.

<sup>105</sup> “Spain’s king tells Chávez, ‘Why don’t you shut up?’”, *The New York Times*, 11 November 2007.

<sup>106</sup> “Chavez criticizes Germany’s Merkel”, NBC News, 13 May 2008; “Chavez hits out at Merkel ahead of EU-Latin America summit”, Deutsche Welle, 12 May 2008.

<sup>107</sup> “Maduro señala que la UE ve a Venezuela como una ‘colonia’ y que eso se produce porque no creen en la ‘democracia’”, *Notimérica*, 20 June 2019.

<sup>108</sup> “Final Report, Presidential Elections, Venezuela 2006”, European Union Election Observation Mission, n.d.

critical of the state publicity in Chávez's favour, the unbalanced media coverage and the participation of public employees in the incumbent's campaign. As a result, Caracas refused to allow meaningful international election observation – by the EU or, indeed, any other body – from 2006 to 2021, permitting only “accompaniment” instead.<sup>109</sup>

Relations between many European countries and Venezuela reached breaking point early in 2019, after Brussels decided that the presidential election the year before did not comply “with the minimum international standards for a credible process ... political pluralism, democracy, transparency and the rule of law”.<sup>110</sup> When the Trump administration declared that Maduro had only weeks left in power, the EU urged the Venezuelan leader to bring forward the presidential election.<sup>111</sup> A majority of EU member states proceeded to recognise Guaidó as interim president, but the EU itself was reluctant to set a precedent for other opposition figures worldwide.<sup>112</sup> Instead, it opted for a “credible process” of engagement with Maduro, establishing an International Contact Group with the aim of promoting a negotiated solution and stepping up humanitarian aid to the country.<sup>113</sup>

The Contact Group met with scepticism not only from the U.S. but also from the Maduro government's allies, including Russia, Turkey, China, Cuba and Iran. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov dismissed the Group, saying “all mediation initiatives should be unbiased” and that the Group's notional purpose was at odds with its demand that Maduro hold a fresh presidential election.<sup>114</sup> According to diplomats, Russia lobbied to join the Contact Group at first, but the EU refused, ostensibly because in the absence of the U.S. its presence would unbalance the initiative. While the Group has failed to achieve a breakthrough, it has acted as a moderating influence, bringing together European and Latin American countries committed to a negotiated solution leading to credible elections, as well as full access for organisations bringing in humanitarian assistance.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Venezuelan electoral law limits external observers to “accompaniment”, meaning – *inter alia* – that they can publish their conclusions only with National Electoral Council approval. For the November 2021 elections, however, the Council lifted the usual restrictions, citing the “process of dialogue and national understanding” taking place in Mexico. “CNE admite excepcionalmente esquema para la observación internacional”, National Electoral Council, 4 October 2021.

<sup>110</sup> “Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the presidential and regional elections in Venezuela”, Council of the EU, 22 May 2018.

<sup>111</sup> “Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the situation in Venezuela”, Council of the EU, 26 January 2019.

<sup>112</sup> Robin Emmott, “EU states move to recognize Venezuela's Guaidó: Diplomats”, Reuters, 1 February 2019.

<sup>113</sup> “International Contact Group on Venezuela – Terms of Reference”, Council of the European Union, 31 January 2019. The Group's composition has varied over the years. At present, the members are Chile, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, the EU, France, Italy, Germany, Netherlands, Panama, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Uruguay.

<sup>114</sup> Elena Teslova, “Russia ‘ready’ to mediate in Venezuela peace efforts”, Anadolu Agency, 30 January 2019.

<sup>115</sup> EU humanitarian engagement in Venezuela has scaled up in recent years. Brussels hosted the first two international humanitarian conferences on Venezuela in 2019 and 2020, gathering pledges to alleviate the conditions of Venezuelan migrants and refugees across South America and cushion

The EU also maintains targeted measures against high-level officials involved in human rights violations and other actions undermining democracy, including imposing an arms embargo prohibiting European countries from selling equipment the Venezuelan security forces could use for repression.<sup>116</sup> Sanctions have placed great strain on relations between Brussels and the Maduro government. Reacting to European sanctions on eleven officials in 2020, Caracas asked the EU ambassador to quit the country and declared her persona non grata after the EU Council extended the list of sanctioned individuals in February 2021.<sup>117</sup>

Even so, the EU has trodden a fine line between chastising the Venezuelan government and seeking a negotiated, peaceful resolution to the conflict. It has eschewed the use of economic and financial sanctions and, in recent years, put its weight behind calls for improved election conditions, including the acceptance of international observers. This stance, together with its withdrawal of de facto recognition of the “interim government”, puts it at odds with Washington, which opposed the deployment of observers on the grounds that this step risked legitimising a rigged election.<sup>118</sup> Part of the EU’s stance is down to the personal engagement of former Spanish foreign minister and current high representative for the EU common foreign and security policy, Josep Borrell, who has had to defend his policy toward Caracas from sceptics in the European Parliament.<sup>119</sup>

Having failed to reach agreement with Maduro ahead of the December 2020 legislative elections, the EU finally signed a deal with the government on 28 September 2021 to deploy an observer mission ahead of the 21 November local and regional polls.<sup>120</sup> The mission’s preliminary report identified “structural shortcomings” in the electoral system, while recognising “improved ... conditions”.<sup>121</sup> Its measured tone, however, did not assuage Maduro, who reacted by calling the team “enemies, a delegation of spies” whose aim had been to “stain” the election with false accusations.<sup>122</sup> The team was obliged to leave earlier than planned, and the government blocked presentation of its final report in Caracas.

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the effects on host communities. “International Donor’s Conference in solidarity with Venezuelan migrants and refugees, in the midst of COVID-19: Co-Chair Statement”, 26 May 2020.

<sup>116</sup> “EU slaps sanctions on 19 more Venezuelan officials”, Associated Press, 22 February 2021; “EU readies sanctions on Venezuela, approves arms embargo”, Reuters, 13 November 2017.

<sup>117</sup> “Venezuela: head of mission to the EU declared persona non grata”, Council of the EU, 25 February 2021.

<sup>118</sup> Luke McGee, “Europe on collision course with US over Venezuela elections”, CNN, 13 October 2021.

<sup>119</sup> “Venezuela: Remarks by the High Representative/Vice President Josep Borrell at the EP plenary debate on the EU diplomatic mission in Venezuela in view of possible elections”, European External Action Service, 7 October 2020.

<sup>120</sup> “Acuerdo Administrativo entre el Consejo Nacional Electoral de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela y la Delegación de la Unión Europea en la República Bolivariana de Venezuela sobre la Misión de Observación Electoral para las elecciones Regionales y Municipales del 21 de noviembre 2021”, National Electoral Council, 28 September 2021.

<sup>121</sup> “Preliminary Statement on the 21 November regional and municipal elections”, European Union Election Observation Mission – Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, 25 November 2021.

<sup>122</sup> Daniel Lozano, “Maduro acusa a los observadores europeos de ser ‘espías’ enviados a ‘manchar’ sus elecciones”, *El Mundo*, 28 November 2021.

### C. *The Lima Group*

From 2016, when Maduro moved to neutralise the opposition-dominated National Assembly, several Western Hemisphere countries, led by the recently elected OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro, sought to build consensus in the region for concerted intervention in the Venezuelan crisis. The first idea was to invoke the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which allows the region collectively to take whatever measures are “deemed necessary” to discourage democratic backsliding. But despite repeated attempts at the OAS to muster a majority of votes in favour of applying the Charter, by 2017 it was clear that success was improbable.<sup>123</sup> Thanks to years of oil diplomacy in the Caribbean by Caracas as well as support from left-wing governments in the region, a majority was not forthcoming.<sup>124</sup> In response to the deadlock, a group of twelve countries decided to set up an ad hoc body, which they later called the Lima Group, to exert greater pressure on the Venezuelan government.<sup>125</sup>

The Lima Group recognised in its first statement in August 2017 that outside powers lacked the tools to resolve the crisis, declaring that it simply wanted to “contribute” to finding a “peaceful, negotiated solution” that would allow “restoration of democracy” in Venezuela.<sup>126</sup> The Group deplored the Maduro government’s creation of the National Constituent Assembly that July and decried worsening human rights violations. It called on countries that had done military deals with Caracas to “stop arms transfers to Venezuela”, per the Arms Trade Treaty, which prohibits the transfer of equipment that could be used to commit crimes against humanity.<sup>127</sup> In an unprecedented move, Lima Group members Argentina, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay and Peru in September 2018 referred alleged crimes against humanity in Venezuela to the International Criminal Court.<sup>128</sup>

Over the next two years, the Group tried to ratchet up the pressure but to little avail. In January 2019, it recognised Guaidó’s “interim presidency”, pledging to support a “democratic transition” in Venezuela.<sup>129</sup> The U.S., which never formally joined the Group, began to take part in its discussions, impeding its already limited capacity to engage with the Maduro government’s foreign allies.<sup>130</sup> The Group continued to

<sup>123</sup> Joan Faus, “La OEA no logra decidir si interviene en la crisis venezolana”, *El País*, 23 June 2016.

<sup>124</sup> “La OEA debate si activa la Carta Democrática Interamericana a Venezuela”, AFP, 3 April 2017. A simple majority (eighteen votes) is required to activate the Charter, while a two-thirds majority is needed to suspend the membership of a country deemed to be in violation of it.

<sup>125</sup> “Cancilleres de 12 países de América y el Caribe suscriben en la ‘Declaración de Lima’ que Venezuela ‘no es una democracia’”, BBC Mundo, 8 August 2017. The signatories were: Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay and Peru.

<sup>126</sup> “Declaración de Lima”, Peruvian Foreign Ministry, 8 August 2017.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> “Statement of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Fatou Bensouda, on the referral by a group of six States Parties regarding the situation in Venezuela”, International Criminal Court, 27 September 2018. The effect of the referral – the first ever by state parties relating to events occurring on the territory of another state party – was that an eventual decision by the prosecutor to open a formal investigation would not be subject to review by the Court’s Pre-Trial Chamber.

<sup>129</sup> “Declaración del Grupo de Lima”, Peruvian Foreign Ministry, 23 January 2019. Mexico, Guyana and Saint Lucia declined to join the others in recognising the “interim government”.

<sup>130</sup> Alex Horton, “Trump soured relations in Latin America. China and Russia have welcomed the chaos”, *The Washington Post*, 20 April 2019; “Tillerson urges Latin America to beware of Russia,

issue sporadic communiqués in response to events in Venezuela, but after it recognised Guaidó it was never able to agree on the next step. It could not, for instance, get behind President Trump's threats of military intervention.<sup>131</sup> In September 2019, it threatened to adopt “new sanctions or other economic and political measures against the Maduro regime”, but it never did so.<sup>132</sup>

Political changes in the region by the start of 2021 had led some countries, such as Argentina, Mexico, Bolivia and Saint Lucia, to leave, marking the start of the Group's demise. Twelve countries issued a declaration questioning the legitimacy of the *chavista*-dominated National Assembly elected in December 2020 and acknowledging the existence of the “legitimate” delegate commission of the National Assembly elected in December 2015, chaired by Guaidó.<sup>133</sup> But the election in 2021 of a new Peruvian government headed by leftist Pedro Castillo further weakened the Group. Castillo adopted a “non-interventionist” approach to international relations and renewed diplomatic ties with the Maduro government.<sup>134</sup>

#### D. Colombia

A member of the Lima Group since its inception, Colombia has particular importance in the Venezuelan crisis. It shares a 2,200km border with Venezuela and has received by far the largest number of migrants escaping the economic meltdown. At the same time, the two governments maintain a tense, adversarial stance toward one another: they have had neither diplomatic nor consular relations since February 2019.<sup>135</sup> Each has repeatedly accused the other of harbouring rebels seeking to overthrow the respective governments, and in May 2020 Venezuela foiled a poorly executed plot, known as Operation Gideon, involving small groups of armed men trained in Colombia.<sup>136</sup> In September 2021, Maduro said Colombia had sent up to 100 “armed terrorist drug traffickers” into Venezuela with the aim of attacking police, soldiers and political targets. He presented no evidence, and Colombia denied the accusation.<sup>137</sup>

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China”, Radio Free Europe, 2 February 2018; Ciara Nugent, “The U.S. and China are battling for influence in Latin America, and the pandemic has raised the stakes”, *Time*, 4 February 2021.

<sup>131</sup> Melissa Barra, “El Grupo de Lima ha perdido vigor y está llamado a desaparecer”, analiza experto”, RFI, 25 March 2021; “Declaración de Lima”, Peruvian Foreign Ministry, 25 February 2019.

<sup>132</sup> “Declaración del Grupo de Lima”, Peruvian Foreign Ministry, 23 September 2019.

<sup>133</sup> On 26 December 2020, the outgoing National Assembly chaired by Guaidó approved a partial reform of the Transition Statute regulating the functioning of parliament, determining that the National Assembly would function through a “delegated commission” until 5 January 2022 or until free elections are held. Michael Stott, “EU drops recognition of Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's interim president”, *Financial Times*, 6 January 2021. “Declaración del Grupo de Lima”, Peruvian Foreign Ministry, 5 January 2021.

<sup>134</sup> “El Gobierno del Perú nombra un nuevo Embajador en Venezuela”, Peruvian Foreign Ministry, 15 October 2021.

<sup>135</sup> Venezuela closed the border after the 23 February 2019 clashes, reopening it to commercial traffic on 5 October 2021. “Venezuela to reopen border with Colombia on Tuesday, official says”, Reuters, 4 October 2021. Colombia had shut the border itself in March 2020, on account of the COVID-19 pandemic, but reversed the measure a year later.

<sup>136</sup> Joshua Goodman, “3 Venezuelans plead guilty for aiding anti-Maduro plot”, Associated Press, 5 March 2021.

<sup>137</sup> “Maduro acusa a Colombia de infiltrar ‘grupos terroristas’ en Venezuela”, Deutsche Welle, 1 October 2021.



The two sides have also traded accusations of military incursions in border regions, most recently involving alleged drone flights. Another major source of friction is the growing presence in Venezuela of Colombian guerrillas from the National Liberation Army and “dissident” or rearmed groups from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.<sup>138</sup>

It was from the Colombian border city of Cúcuta that, with backing from the U.S. and several Latin American governments, the Venezuelan opposition sought without success on 23 February 2019 to introduce humanitarian aid across the border, with a view to driving a wedge between the Maduro government and the Venezuelan armed forces. President Iván Duque’s government in Bogotá has maintained a consistently hardline stance regarding the Venezuelan crisis and the president himself has publicly expressed scepticism regarding the Mexico City talks.<sup>139</sup> His ambassador to Washington from September 2018 to June 2021, Francisco “Pacho” Santos, spoke openly of a possible use of force to oust Maduro and has tried since resigning as ambassador to undermine the talks.<sup>140</sup> Colombia’s insistence on being part of the proposed Group of Friends is one of the factors hindering its creation.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Luis Jaime Acosta, “Some 1,900 Colombian guerrillas operating from Venezuela, says Colombia military chief”, Reuters, 30 September 2021. See also Crisis Group Report, *A Glut of Arms: Curbing the Threat to Venezuela from Armed Groups*, op. cit.; and Bram Ebus, “A Rebel Playing Field: Colombian Guerrillas on the Venezuelan Border”, Crisis Group Commentary, 28 April 2021.

<sup>139</sup> “Iván Duque: ‘Soy escéptico respecto a las negociaciones sobre Venezuela’”, EFE, 17 September 2021.

<sup>140</sup> “Francisco Santos plantea posible intervención en Venezuela”, *Semana*, 18 September 2018. Since resigning as ambassador, Santos has used his Twitter feed @PachoSantosC to criticise the Mexico talks and associate leftist Colombian presidential aspirant Gustavo Petro with Maduro.

<sup>141</sup> Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, September 2021.

## VI. Can Foreign Powers Bring Peace to Venezuela?

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A robust, sustainable resolution of Venezuela's crisis is unlikely unless major powers on both sides of the conflict can come to an understanding. At the very least, it is essential that none act as a spoiler, either by imposing impossible conditions or by providing resources that allow or encourage either side – government or opposition – to maintain the status quo indefinitely and resist concessions that would allow a settlement to be reached.

### A. *Zone of Agreement*

The portents as regards foreign backing for a negotiated solution are better than they have been for many years, provided that the standoff over Ukraine does not escalate. The Biden administration's commitment to multilateral diplomacy, and early efforts by Washington, Ottawa and Brussels to forge a common Venezuela policy, are encouraging developments. China has shown that it is prepared to exert pressure on the Maduro government, albeit in pursuit of its own interests. Russia is publicly committed to a peaceful, negotiated resolution of the crisis, and seeks to help secure such an outcome as one of the two "accompanying" countries at the Mexico talks. Nonetheless, the gap between the U.S., the EU and their allies, on one hand, and Maduro's major foreign allies, on the other, remains wide.

To complicate matters further, many issues that separate the two sides have little or nothing to do with Venezuela. Russia, for instance, has hinted in the past that it would be more open to a deal if its concerns about Ukraine were addressed.<sup>142</sup> Cuba's priority is to normalise its relationship with Washington, although its Venezuela policy might prove more pragmatic if it could resolve its economic crisis without access to subsidised oil. China and the U.S. have a wide range of bilateral disputes, from trade to Taiwan and the South China Sea.

While none of the three – Russia, Cuba and China – would want a change of government in Caracas that would bring a full-blooded U.S. ally to power and potentially threaten their interests, there is still room for compromise. None of them is well served by indefinitely prolonging an already protracted crisis that has not only wrecked Venezuela's economy but also severely damaged the interests of its foreign investors and trading partners. After years of debilitating crisis, it should be evident to all that the only way back to stability and public well-being is through compromise. Such an agreement would likely entail allowing the gradual lifting of financial and economic sanctions in return for a process of restoring functioning state and judicial institutions and paving the way to free and fair elections. For talks to this end to succeed, Crisis Group has argued, both sides will need guarantees that neither will face political exclusion or judicial persecution in the event of defeat.<sup>143</sup> External

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<sup>142</sup> "Testimony by Dr Fiona Hill (deputy assistant to the president and senior director for European and Russian affairs, National Security Council, 2017-19)", Joint Hearings, U.S. House of Representatives Intelligence, Foreign Affairs and Oversight Committees, 14 October 2019. Hill said the Russian government had "signal[ed] very strongly that they wanted to somehow make some very strange swap arrangement between Venezuela and Ukraine".

<sup>143</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Imagining a Resolution of Venezuela's Crisis*, op. cit.

partners will also want assurances that their economic and financial interests will be preserved.

### B. *Supporting a Negotiated Outcome*

One important contribution would be for the parties to the Mexico negotiations (or any future round), along with their major external allies, to reach agreement on the precise role that foreign governments should play at the talks. To date, diplomats say, that role has been left rather vague, and for now it is on the back burner, but it will have to be better defined as discussions move toward a conclusion.<sup>144</sup>

Certain elements of international support for negotiations appear self-evident. Foreign governments – whether “accompanying” the talks or as members of a future Group of Friends – must exercise discretion, preferring silence to public comments that might undermine the talks. They should be friends of the process, rather than of one side or the other, and if they bring any influence to bear on the Venezuelan parties it should be to encourage them to remain at the table and adopt a flexible attitude. They may be able to offer technical, logistical or financial assistance for the talks. If the parties reach an agreement, foreign governments may play a role in seeing it fulfilled. While the word “guarantor” is often used, it is perhaps more useful to think in terms of monitoring implementation of an accord and distribution of post-conflict assistance.<sup>145</sup>

At the same time, managing the manifest tensions among interested external parties will be crucial to promoting a peaceful settlement in Venezuela. One way to do so would be to revive the suspended “Stockholm process”, hosted by Sweden, which gathered almost all the main foreign stakeholders and potential facilitators for closed-door meetings that – while they reached no conclusion – helped participants understand one another’s motivations and red lines.<sup>146</sup>

As in any negotiations, the chances of success will be hugely enhanced if the parties abandon extreme positions. If consensus is to be reached, not only do the two main parties have to trim back their expectations, but so do their external partners. Intransigent positions on both sides of Venezuela’s divide – whether among government supporters who chafe at the idea of losing power or among opposition factions demanding Maduro’s immediate departure from office and prosecution – have their corresponding cheerleaders abroad. Both sides will need to progressively temper their positions if the stalemate is to be resolved.

For the U.S. and Europe, the priority should be to build on the skeleton policy framework they have already jointly established and put their weight and that of their allies behind the talks, encouraging the opposition to participate in elections and embrace partial accords. They should explicitly ditch the Trump administration’s winner-take-all approach, under which nothing short of an end to Maduro’s role was on the table, and accept a step-by-step restoration of constitutional rule and economic

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<sup>144</sup> Crisis Group interview, diplomats, Caracas, 5 November 2021.

<sup>145</sup> For a detailed analysis of the role played by such groups in peace talks, and the potential pitfalls, see Teresa Whitfield, “Working with Groups of Friends”, U.S. Institute of Peace, 2010.

<sup>146</sup> Joshua Goodman and Aritz Parra, “Russia, other key powers discuss Venezuela crisis in Sweden”, 14 June 2019.

and financial normality, in return for reciprocal moves on sanctions relief and recognition of the Maduro government. To this end, the Biden administration would need to overcome domestic political constraints, adopt a policy of phased sanctions relief in return for steps by the Maduro government and move away from recognition of Guaidó's "interim government".<sup>147</sup> As Maduro tends to regard the U.S., rather than the domestic opposition, as his chief antagonist, the U.S. – whether it wishes to be or not – is a vital interlocutor in the search for a peaceful solution.

In the meantime, a thorny question that outside governments critical of Maduro will have to address concerns the status of Venezuela's foreign assets. Governments of countries (primarily the U.S., Colombia and the UK) in which Venezuela's assets are located need to agree with the Maduro government and the opposition on the joint administration, under multilateral supervision, of the resources and capital now held in the name of the "interim government" while talks continue. Sanctions relief and asset protection will have to go hand in hand, so as to avoid exposing Venezuela's external assets to claims by its many creditors before a comprehensive settlement enables full-scale restructuring of its foreign debt.

Russia and China, for their part, should encourage their ally Maduro to stay at the negotiating table and agree to a timetable for a gradual transition back to institutional rule and stability, in return for guarantees, including recognition of commercial and investment agreements made by these countries under the Chávez and Maduro governments.

### C. *Backing a Peaceful Outcome*

Foreign governments and multilateral bodies can make various contributions to a peaceful outcome beyond their support for negotiations.

Members of the UN Security Council, and in particular the permanent five, should seek ways to temper their differences over Venezuela, potentially enabling the UN to play a more constructive role in resolving the crisis. The first step is likely to be technical assistance for the talks themselves, particularly with regard to the consultation mechanisms contemplated in the August 2021 memorandum of understanding.

If consensus could be achieved among the permanent five, as well as at the talks, there is broad scope for the UN to play a more central part, perhaps including a verification mission for an accord like that operating in Colombia since the 2016 peace agreement.<sup>148</sup> Financial backing for economic recovery, both from multilateral lending agencies and sovereign partners (including China), as well as commitments from the UN, the EU and individual governments in areas such as electoral and security assistance – particularly as regards reforming the security forces – could foster com-

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<sup>147</sup> Such is the complexity of the web of sanctions that unravelling it will be difficult and time-consuming. Detailed planning is essential: political transitions in countries affected by sanctions are often impeded by the protracted nature of sanctions removal. Those sanctions with a clear impact on the welfare of the population should be lifted unilaterally, particularly those that prevent Venezuela from importing fuel. Financial sanctions are a particularly complex issue, because a disorderly lifting of restrictions would expose Venezuelan assets to creditors before Caracas could negotiate debt restructuring or fresh loans.

<sup>148</sup> See also Crisis Group Special Briefing N°2, *Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020*, 12 September 2019.

pliance with an agreement and build support for it in Latin America. Countries with experience of complex political changes requiring transitional justice mechanisms, as well as multilateral bodies, are well placed to offer information and expertise on this delicate issue.

One particularly important role for the UN or another multilateral body would be to broker cooperation between the Venezuelan and Colombian governments in stabilising the border and demobilising armed groups in the area, thereby assuaging concerns in Bogotá about the risks of an agreement with the Maduro government.<sup>149</sup> At the very least, on this issue and others, foreign friends on both sides should seek to ensure that no significant external stakeholder undermines or actively opposes efforts to end decades of bruising political dispute.

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<sup>149</sup> The current Colombian government, whose term ends in August, in 2021 dismissed requests from Venezuela for the UN to play a role in investigating violence in the border region, arguing that Caracas has a “complicit relationship with drug-trafficking groups and terrorists”. “Colombia envía comunicación a ONU y arremete contra Venezuela”, *El Tiempo*, 15 April 2021.

## VII. Conclusion

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The Venezuelan crisis is domestic in origin, but its eventual resolution is likely to hinge on foreign powers. Norway has taken the lead as a facilitator of talks between Venezuela's protagonists. The U.S., Russia, China and Cuba have major stakes in the country's future, and any one of them could become the spoilers of negotiations (as Washington did in August 2019) if their interests are not taken into account, or if tensions between them heighten elsewhere in the world, notably in Ukraine. The U.S., in particular, is deeply and unavoidably involved by virtue of its sanctions policy, whether or not it has a seat at the table and in spite of the inertia fostered by powerful constituencies in Florida and elsewhere opposed to Maduro.

Room for compromise on both sides remains narrow. Foreign backers of the Venezuelan government perceive the opposition leadership as a surrogate for Washington, and fear that a change in power would alter the geopolitical balance to their disadvantage. On the other hand, neither China nor Russia is particularly enamoured of the Maduro government. The status quo does not serve their economic and financial interests, and were the opposition's more flexible wing to take charge of the agenda and give Beijing and Moscow sufficient guarantees, they might not feel so aggrieved by a transition away from *chavismo*. Another key Maduro ally, Cuba, is both heavily dependent on *chavismo*'s survival and a key source of intelligence, both domestic and international. Its support for any negotiated solution will in all likelihood depend on assurances that its vital interests will be protected.

Among friends of the opposition, such as the U.S., the EU and their regional allies, differences remain and are an obstacle to reaching a solution. Attempts at coordination have been hampered in part by the domestic political cost for the Biden administration of looking "soft" on Maduro. But the election of a new government in Colombia and potentially in Brazil later in 2022 could reinforce Latin America's shift to a more pragmatic stance on Venezuela. The talks represent the best prospect so far for achieving a sustainable resolution of the crisis. It is incumbent on all involved to make sure they do not break down.

International partners will need to make concessions of their own, while persuading government and opposition of the need to stay at the table. Hopes for ending the protracted Venezuelan crisis now rest on the willingness of both sides to negotiate in good faith and relinquish the search for a definitive victory.

**Caracas/Bogotá/Brussels, 17 February 2022**

Appendix A: Map of Venezuela



## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. Ero first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director and Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, UN Mission in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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**February 2022**



## Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Latin America and the Caribbean since 2019

### Special Reports and Briefings

- Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy*, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.
- Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020*, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.
- Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative*, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.
- COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch*, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).
- A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda*, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.
- Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022*, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.
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- Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South* Latin America Report N°73, 28 February 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- A Way Out of Latin America's Impasse over Venezuela*, Latin America Briefing N°38, 14 May 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- The Keys to Restarting Nicaragua's Stalled Talks*, Latin America Report N°74, 13 June 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- A Glimmer of Light in Venezuela's Gloom*, Latin America Report N°75, 15 July 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- Calming the Restless Pacific: Violence and Crime on Colombia's Coast*, Latin America Report N°76, 8 August 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- Venezuela's Military Enigma*, Latin America Briefing N°39, 16 September 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- Containing the Border Fallout of Colombia's New Guerrilla Schism*, Latin America Briefing N°40, 20 September 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- Fight and Flight: Tackling the Roots of Honduras' Emergency*, Latin America Report N°77, 25 October 2019 (also available in Spanish).
- Peace in Venezuela: Is There Life after the Barbados Talks?*, Latin America Briefing N°41, 11 December 2019 (also available in Spanish).
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- Imagining a Resolution of Venezuela's Crisis*, Latin America Report N°79, 11 March 2020 (also available in Spanish).
- Broken Ties, Frozen Borders: Colombia and Venezuela Face COVID-19*, Latin America Briefing N°42, 16 April 2020 (also available in Spanish).
- Mexico's Everyday War: Guerrero and the Trials of Peace*, Latin America Report N°80, 4 May 2020 (also available in Spanish).
- Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador*, Latin America Report N°81, 8 July 2020 (also available in Spanish).
- Bolivia Faces New Polls in Shadow of Fraud Row*, Latin America Briefing N°43, 31 July 2020 (also available in Spanish).
- Leaders under Fire: Defending Colombia's Front Line of Peace*, Latin America Report N°82, 6 October 2020 (also available in Spanish).
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- A Broken Canopy: Preventing Deforestation and Conflict in Colombia*, Latin America Report N°91, 4 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).
- Handling the Risks of Honduras' High-stakes Poll*, Latin America Briefing N°45, 23 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

*A Fight by Other Means: Keeping the Peace with Colombia's FARC*, Latin America Report N°92, 30 November 2021 (also available in Spanish).

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