



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Russia's Military Should Leave Venezuela Immediately

by Dr. Jiri Valenta

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,147, April 21, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, as reported by *Moscow Times*, states that Russia is considering deploying strategic bombers full-time in Venezuela. The outlet also reports that an agreement has been reached between Moscow and Caracas to allow the deployment of Russian aircraft at a military base on Venezuela's Caribbean island of La Orchila, where Russian advisers were dispatched in December. It is urgent that Washington act before Russia and Venezuela reach their imminent formal military agreement. At the same time, NATO membership should be offered to Brazil, a major ally, and economic aid should be provided to Colombia.

After the landing of [two Russian aircraft](#) in Caracas on March 23 – one an Ilyushin Il-62 passenger plane transporting 100 ground forces; the other an Antonov An-124 military cargo plane carrying 35 tons of matériel – US President Donald J. Trump said that “[Russia has to get out](#)” of Venezuela.

Two months earlier, two Russian Air Force Tu-160 strategic bombers [flying over the Arctic region](#) near the North American coastline were detected and escorted out of the area by Canadian and US Air Force jets.

Although it was not clear where these Russian bombers were headed, a similar incident had occurred a few weeks before, when two of the same type of [Russian Tu-160 strategic bombers](#) landed outside Caracas. Those sorties suggest that the later pair, too, were headed to Venezuela.

According to the *Moscow Times*, the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* reported earlier in December that Russia is considering deploying strategic bombers full-time in Venezuela. The Russian media outlet [also reported](#) that an agreement had been reached between Moscow and Caracas to allow the

deployment of Russian aircraft at a military base on Venezuela's Caribbean island of La Orchila, where Russian advisers were dispatched in December.

The above moves are all part of [Russia's open support](#) for the beleaguered government of [Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro](#), which the US and dozens of other nations have declared illegitimate. These countries support the popular young chairman of Venezuela's National Assembly, [opposition leader Juan Guaidó](#), who has claimed an interim presidency.

Most 21st century Russian invasions were launched in order to either bring about or prevent regime change. [Putin invaded Georgia](#) in 2008 to undermine [President Mikheil Saakashvili](#), who had pushed aggressively for Georgia's entry into NATO and the EU. His 2014 invasions in [Crimea and eastern Ukraine](#) were a response to what Moscow viewed as an illegal and unconstitutional coup in Kiev, which removed Ukraine from the Kremlin's orbit.

While [intervening in the Syrian civil war](#), which began in 2011, ostensibly to save Syrian President Bashar Assad's rule, Putin also aimed at projecting Russian power into the [eastern Mediterranean](#). By late 2018, he had achieved both goals. Meanwhile, Trump – heir to a covert war started by his predecessor, President Barack Obama – decided to [withdraw US forces](#) from Syria.

Putin's response was to reanimate the conflict with Ukraine in the [Azov Sea](#). Instead of attacking the port city of [Mariupol](#), however (as some had expected), he turned his attention to the more timely crisis in Venezuela.

As it did for Syria's Assad, Russia has been providing the Maduro regime with [economic and military aid](#). While Syria is an important energy-transfer state, Venezuela is an energy jewel: it harbors one of the world's largest oil reserves. Maduro's Venezuela is also part of what US National Security Adviser John Bolton has termed the "[troika of tyranny](#)," the others being Cuba and Nicaragua.

The recent landing of the two Russian planes in Venezuela came just days after the Trump administration's special envoy to Venezuela, Elliott Abrams, met with Russian Deputy FM Sergei Ryakbov in Rome. At that meeting, the two negotiators [agreed to disagree](#) over who is the real leader of Venezuela, Maduro or Guaidó. Ryakbov failed to mention that Russia was about to dispatch military aircraft and manpower to Caracas.

Although this and other recent Russian moves in Venezuela are relatively minor at the moment, Moscow's intervention, if kept unchecked, will grow, as it did in Syria.

The same also applies to moves by Beijing. As [Gordon G. Chang recently wrote](#):

[China and Russia] back Maduro to the hilt because they have much to lose if his leftist government falls. Both maintain crucial military facilities in the country... In recent months, China, the regime's largest creditor, has been

digging itself in deeper. In September, Beijing [extended Venezuela another \\$5 billion](#) in credit. Russia has also loaned the country billions.

Meanwhile, two Leninist groups-turned-narcotics traffickers – the [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia](#) (FARC) and the [National Liberation Army](#) (ELN) – have been coordinating their activities with the Maduro regime, which is [backed by Iran](#).

It is not sufficient for Trump to tell Russia to leave Venezuela. It is imperative for the US to liberate the people of that country – who are in the throes of a [major humanitarian catastrophe](#) – from Maduro's stranglehold. It is urgent for Washington to act before Russia and Venezuela reach their imminent formal military agreement.

President Trump should declare that no more Russian or Chinese military planes and ships will be allowed to enter Venezuela, and, if legally possible, back up this warning with an air and sea blockade. At the same time, NATO membership should be offered to Brazil, a major ally, and economic aid should be provided to Colombia.

Only a speedy, tough response can salvage what is left of the [Monroe Doctrine](#), the basic premise of which is to keep extra-hemispheric hostile forces out of the US's strategic backyard.

A few weeks ago, when Maduro denied food and medical assistance to his starving people, the US had a compelling enough reason, political considerations permitting, to invade Venezuela, even before the Russians got militarily involved. Moscow's moves constitute a dangerous encroachment on US national security, and delay has made things both more complicated and more necessary.

While the Trump administration contemplates how to proceed to prevent Venezuela from falling to Russia, it might recall the words of the late American diplomat [George Kennan](#), best known for advocating the policy of “containment” to oppose Soviet expansionism after World War II.

In a 1950 [memorandum](#), Kennan summed up his view of how the US should approach Latin America to keep it from falling to the Soviets. He wrote this to the countries south of the border in an “imaginary statement”:

We hold out to you what perhaps no great power – no power of our relative importance in world affairs – has ever held out to neighboring smaller powers: the most scrupulous respect for your sovereignty and independence, the willing renunciation of the use of force in our relations with you, the readiness to join with you at any time in a large variety of forms of collaboration which can be of benefit to us both. But you will appreciate that the payoff for this unprecedentedly favorable and tolerant attitude is that you do not make your countries the sources or the seats of dangerous intrigue against us.

This is an edited version of an article [published](#) by the Gatestone Institute on April 4, 2019.

Dr. Jiri Valenta is a Senior Non Resident Research Associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. A Council on Foreign Relations member in NYC, he was formerly a tenured associate professor in the Department of National Security Affairs of the U.S. Postgraduate Naval School, and Director of the Institute of International Relations, a post-revolutionary think tank in Vaclav Havel's government in Prague.