



Venezuelan's Prepared to Fight US Invasion - Ricardo Vaz

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Sharmini Peries (SP): It is theAnalysis.news in Toronto, and I'm Sharmini Peries. While Washington is dealing with a leadership crisis of the Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, over U.S. strikes on boats in the Caribbean Sea, the Caribbean itself is undergoing the largest U.S. military buildup in the region since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

The crisis began when the American U-2 spy plane photographed Soviet missile sites under construction in Cuba, leading President Kennedy to implement a naval quarantine around the island. Well, 61 years later, the U.S. has again deployed the world's largest, most advanced aircraft carrier, USS Gerald R. Ford, to the region, which is accompanied by a full carrier strike group that includes guided missile destroyers, cruisers, submarines, electronic warfare aircraft, long-range strike fighter jets, and about 15,000 U.S. troops.

U.S. Air Force bombers and fighter jets have been repeatedly flying inside Venezuela's Maiquetía Flight Information Region with the transponders turned off, which is a highly unusual and provocative activity in the region. This buildup is being described as a U.S. anti-narcotics mission, yet U.S. warships have already destroyed 22 vessels, killing 83 civilians without presenting evidence of narcotics activity. The Pentagon has also blocked maritime trade, including forcing commercial oil tankers to turn back before allowing them to proceed eventually to a Venezuelan port.

Now, airspace is tightening as well. Commercial airlines from Spain, Portugal, Colombia, Turkey, and Chile have suspended flights to Caracas. So far, Venezuela is being isolated by air and encircled by sea. Now, Washington officials have hinted unanimously at a new phase of operations potentially involving covert actions and U.S. forces concentrated near Puerto Rico, Curaçao, and international waters north of Caracas.

The real danger is that even a single miscalculation, a radar misread, a maritime encounter, or the actions of an irregular armed group could ignite a crisis with huge hemispheric consequences.

To help understand how the Venezuelan government, its military, and its people are responding to this encirclement, we turn to Ricardo Vaz, a Venezuelan analysis journalist, one of the most informed analysts tracking Venezuela. Ricardo Vaz, thank you for joining me.

Ricardo Vaz (RV): Thank you, Sharmini, for the invitation.

SP: Ricardo, how is the Venezuelan government and its military interpreting the current U.S. deployment encircling Venezuela?

RV: I think the way to describe it is that the threats are being taken very seriously. From the very beginning, there has been a significant military deployment across the land and maritime borders. There have been almost constant military exercises, defense exercises, as well as a drive for enlistment in the voluntary corps that is the Bolivarian Militia. These volunteer civilians have also engaged in training exercises with the Conventional Armed Forces, with the concept that the defense of Venezuela is not just going to depend on the army, but it's going to happen in the territories in connection with grassroots organizations, and all of that.

As for the government, it has been active on all fronts, so military, of course, being one of them, but also in diplomacy. Venezuela managed to summon an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council. It did not produce any resolutions, but it threw the issue into the international spotlight.

There were statements of support from China and Russia, and also statements from other countries in the Security Council, like France, which weren't necessarily in support of Venezuela, but also urged de-escalation here in the Caribbean. Which, as you were describing now, has the most significant deployment, perhaps since the Cuban Missile Crisis over 60 years ago, with the largest aircraft carrier in the world, here in Caribbean waters.

We have seen routine exercises where U.S. fighter jets and bombers fly very close to Venezuelan shores. That has happened maybe 15 times in the past couple of months. I think in a way, that's their strategy to try and test Venezuelan defenses, but it's also a way of imposing psychological pressure on the Venezuelan person, on the Venezuelan population at large. So I think that's more or less the status of the situation here on the ground.

SP: Many of us are assuming that the Venezuelan opposition had a hand in this, particularly the controversial figure of María Corina Machado, who happens to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize of 2025, and then decided that the prize would be dedicated to President Trump. Now, does she and her allies pose an imminent threat to Maduro's presidency if regime change is the U.S. plan for Maduro?

RV: I think sometimes we have the tail wagging the dog. In the case of the Venezuelan opposition, it has been trying to get back into power for over 25 years through many different methods, some less constitutional than others, and it has largely failed. I think it's also a testament to their own political shortcomings that they are now betting on, at least this more

extremist faction of the opposition, betting on an outright U.S. military intervention to deliver them to the presidency.

But in terms of its actual influence, I think it's very overstated. There were reports, I think from *Reuters* and other outlets, a couple of weeks ago, that Venezuelan opposition exiles in the U.S. played a role in creating this narrative that Maduro was connected to the gangs Tren de Aragua that were, quote unquote, invading the U.S. and trying to sow these ideas into the administration. I think that overstates their influence quite a bit.

I think their influence here on the ground is also very minimal right now for many different reasons. Of course, they are the ones who are trying to sell this idea that if the U.S. military overthrows the Venezuelan government, they are ready and they can step into the presidential powers the next day. I think that's a very fanciful reading of reality. I don't think it has any basis, but they need to pitch this in order to trigger action from the Trump administration.

SP: Now, I would tend to believe you in terms of the readiness of the Venezuelan population. I mean, it's a population that has been, in the last 26 years, really ready to fight imperialism. It's knowledgeable, educated, organized, and very ready. Are you seeing that momentum that was there when Chávez was in power continue through the Maduro period?

RV: I think we have to put into context that it has been a very long period, and many things have happened in the interim. If we look at where things stand right now, I think one of the feelings that I would use to describe it is defiance. I think the core support of the government is very defiant, as you are describing, very firmly, anti-imperialist. But I would not state that it's at the same level of enthusiasm and mobilization that exists during the Chávez time for many, many different reasons.

I think one of them has been this long-standing U.S. economic aggression against Venezuela that has devastating consequences in terms of just outright casualties and the destruction of living standards, migration. So I think that has eroded... I mean, by design, it has eroded some of the support for the revolutionary project. But even saying so, you have this core group that is very mobilized, and it will be on the front lines. I think we hope not, but if the moment comes where there's a need to defend the process, they will be on the front lines.

But even those who, for some reason, or, I mean, there are valid reasons, of course, who do not support the government, that does not necessarily mean that they want a change of government to come through a U.S. military intervention. In fact, they would oppose it for many different reasons. And then you have this fraction, the most extremist fraction, that is much more vocal abroad and here in Venezuela, that is firmly on the bandwagon of military intervention.

SP: In Venezuela, whenever we see representations of the general public, we, as it is in the U.S., see a very polarized population of opposition supporters and Chavistas. Would you say even under this threat, that still exists?

RV: It certainly exists, but I don't think it's the same level of polarization that existed before. I think, again, it's a consequence of this long-term economic warfare that one of the consequences that it has had is a level of depoliticization, so people are becoming less interested and less involved in politics. If nothing else, because they need to dedicate more time just to the daily reproduction of their lives. So there's less interest, less time for politics, and also some level of this enchantment, of course.

So you're not going to see the level of polarization in terms of people openly favoring a military intervention against Venezuela. That's not the debate that you see right now on the ground. But at the same time, the majority of people do not have this as their primary concern. Of course, they are aware that this is an imminent danger, but because living conditions are precarious, they need to focus first and foremost on the reproduction of daily life.

SP: Now, the Maduro government has put opposition members, as well as some leftists who have previously supported the Chavista movement, yet at this point have been really sidelined and silenced, and some of them have been imprisoned by Maduro. What is your response to that?

RV: I think, again, it's something that we have to look at with a lot of nuance and context. I mean, first of all, there has always been this very black and white narrative of the Venezuelan authoritarian crackdown on peaceful protests. When we were talking about Machado, the now Nobel Peace Prize winner, all her efforts to take power have been anything but peaceful. So when we take into account that the government has had to deal with a directly-backed, financed, and armed U.S. opposition, and it has responded in a way that it has felt necessary. Of course, that's always something that we have to keep in mind to provide the appropriate context.

On the other hand, with this long-term siege, it develops a siege mentality. With the siege mentality, there's less room for dissent. There is less room for debate, which, again, and this sometimes has been recognized by the government itself, there are excesses or abuses in terms of due process and judicial rights. I mean, the government a few years ago announced what they call the judicial revolution. So, understanding that there are issues of prison overcrowding and stuff like this.

But this is all in the context of a country that is besieged, a state that has a reduced capacity because of sanctions, which has all these consequences. I mean, some of them, I don't want to portray them as being inevitable, but they have to be seen in this globalized context of constant U.S. imperialist aggression.

SP: Now, let's turn to the region a bit. We know that in the past, there's been almost a full-proof support for Venezuela when it comes to Cuba, Colombia, and Brazil. A lot of the Caribbean countries themselves have been subjects of U.S. aggression, particularly because there have been such good relations built with some of the Caribbean nations. React to the

regional support that people are saying is waning at the moment?

RV: I think if you look at the recent months, I would say support is increasing because of the rejection of, on one hand, the U.S. military buildup, and on the other, the extrajudicial strikes against small boats, both in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific.

It is certainly a fact that the regional unity is not where it was 20 years ago. So last month, for example, we had the 20th anniversary of the defeat of George W. Bush's Free Trade Agreement for the Americas. And that was kind of a seminal moment in the regional unit, one of the high points of the progressive pink tide in the first decade of the 21st century. Right now, there is still a position of principle that is being espoused to a greater or smaller extent by the progressive governments in the region.

I think the best example, I mean, of course, we can always count on Cuba, but in terms of the more powerful actors here in South America, Colombia, and President Gustavo Petro has taken a very principled position in terms of opposing and denouncing this U.S. military buildup and threats in the region. Lula has been a bit hot and cold when it comes to Venezuela, but recently, during a summit with Trump and also during another international event, he said that Brazil was firmly committed to maintaining South America as a region of peace and even offered himself as a possible mediator in case that was necessary.

When we look at the Caribbean, that's something very interesting because maybe six or seven years ago, the OAS, the Organization of American States, was a vehicle to promote regime change against Venezuela. There was a series of resolutions that were blocked precisely because of the unity of the Caribbean community, the CARICOM, in opposing these U.S. efforts against Venezuela.

In part, that was a result, as you were saying, of long-term economic and diplomatic efforts in re-envisioning the Caribbean with programs like Petrocaribe, which I find to be one of the most important and impressive international cooperation, solidarity programs. Again, as an intended consequence of economic sanctions, Venezuela no longer had the capacity to maintain programs such as Petrocaribe. This makes all these very small countries much more vulnerable to U.S. pressure, and that's why now you're still seeing many Caribbean nations standing firmly in terms of defending sovereignty and opposing these regime-chained efforts. But you also have others like Trinidad who are very firmly aligned with U.S. policy.

SP: Going even broader than the region, do you believe at this point that the U.S. is on a mission to reassert the Monroe Doctrine, given that this is taking place and they're asserting themselves in this way, just in their backyard? Or is this a continued destabilization tactic that Venezuela has been experiencing for the last 26 years since Chávez came to power?

RV: I think it's both. I think there's a clear realignment of U.S. foreign policy, because this is not just about Venezuela. When you hear Trump, and of course, it's very incoherent, but he will say, "Oh, drugs are being produced in Colombia," or "We're going to do something

about the cartels in Mexico.” So it really is threats fired in all directions, including against staunch U.S. allies like Panama. Do you remember at the beginning of Trump’s second term, when he was saying, “Oh, we’re going to take back the Panama Canal.”

I think in terms of the broader geopolitical context, this is a case of the U.S. realizing that it has a long-term confrontation with China, and improving its position for that confrontation requires reasserting control over its closest sphere of influence, which is the Western hemisphere. Venezuela is, for many different reasons, the most obvious of targets. I mean, it’s home to the biggest oil reserves on the planet, which are just four to five days away from U.S. refineries. It would also be an opportunity to destroy or to complete these long-standing efforts to destroy a political project that has been an overt threat to U.S. hegemony.

SP: Right. Speaking of the economic situation that Venezuela is facing, particularly given the sanctions it has been trying to endure for the last so many decades, really, but particularly since the Maduro government has been in power, what are your thoughts on the economic pressure brought about by the sale of CITGO?

I’m going to preface this by saying I want to get into a longer segment with you on CITGO because it is a complicated dilemma for Venezuela, for the economic conditions, and the dependency that the government has had on Venezuelan oil. I want to do a historical take on that. But at the same time, there was a recent decision by a court in Delaware to sell CITGO, and you have particularly dove into that issue at *Venezuelanalysis*. Give us a little highlight here for the moment, and we’ll get into the bigger segment later.

RV: Yeah. I think that’s one thing to keep in mind. We’re talking about the prospect of the U.S. launching a war against Venezuela, and we certainly hope that’s not going to come. But we shouldn’t overlook a war. A war without bombs, as we have called it in the *Venezuelanalysis* publication, has been in place for a long time in terms of these economic coercive measures that we call sanctions for short.

Even now, even during this military buildup, you’ll remember that a couple of weeks ago, the State Department designated the so-called ‘Cartel of the Suns’ as a foreign terrorist organization. I mean, we could have a completely different discussion on how it’s not even clear that the ‘Cartel of the Suns’ exists, even less so of any direct ties of Venezuelan leaders to drug trafficking. So the entire narco-terrorism narrative is very dubious, to say the least.

But one of the consequences of this designation is that it increases the economic pressure against Venezuela because now international corporations that want to load oil at a certain Venezuelan port, if this port is handled by the Venezuelan military, then they are going to wonder, “Are we going to be accused of financing terrorism?” So it’s not like business is going to stop being done. It’s just going to increase the cost of doing business with Venezuela, and that is a ramp-up of economic pressure.

Still, as everything is going on here in Venezuela and in the Caribbean, there has been an

important development in a court in Delaware, where there have been legal proceedings for at least eight years. It has been so long that I think lots of outlets have even lost interest. But at *Venezuelanalysis*, we have kept up. Just last week, there was this decision by the Delaware Court, which is a final decision, to sell CITGO to a subsidiary of Vulture Fund, Elliott Management. The subsidiary is called Amber Energy.

So there's a lot to unpack in this process, and I hope we can actually get to discuss. But in a nutshell, this is also a consequence of economic sanctions that have left Venezuela unable to defend its own interests and to defend its most valuable asset in the U.S. The loss of CITGO is not just the loss of an asset worth \$13 billion; it's the loss of a key element in the oil ecosystem in the sense that it provided an outlet for Venezuelan oil production.

SP: Now, Ricardo, given the proximity of the United States, a basis in Puerto Rico and Curaçao, this aggression is very real. It's very close, and it's obviously very threatening. Are the people in Venezuela feeling that pressure? Are the people leaving? Is there an exit, or who can get out?

RV: Perhaps, contrary to our first assumption, there is no sense of panic. There is no rush to buy canned food and bottled water, and much less rush for the exit. I think there's an overall sense of calmness, I think, on one hand, because of the, let's say, precariousness of living conditions where people can't literally afford to be concerned about anything else. But also because there's no real alternative, and there's a belief that the worst is not going to come to pass.

But at the same time, when we talk about pressure, we're talking about economic conditions; this pressure has been there for over 10 years. We saw these significant migration waves during Trump's first term, which then, after COVID, saw hundreds of thousands show up at the U.S. border and get into U.S. territory. Then, that in turn became a narrative for the Trump administration.

Right now, there is no official data, which is frustrating. If I had to make a very uneducated guess, I would say that the migration phenomenon is more or less evened out. So people are still going out and coming in. There's also a phenomenon of temporary migration. People will go abroad for a few months and return.

In terms of the more recent and what we're seeing, perhaps some of the most well-off people who can afford to wait it out somewhere else have taken flights. But for the most part, people are staying, and they are obviously concerned, but more concerned or equally concerned about the Christmas holidays and their day-to-day activities.

SP: There is quite a bit of concern given that the U.S. has offered a \$50 million reward for any information that would lead to the arrest of Maduro. But it's not like they cannot get to Maduro. Why is this bounty being offered?

RV: Yes, I mean, Trump just spoke to Maduro on the phone less than two weeks ago. So I think it's just the usual mobster antics from the Trump administration, which, it must be said, the Biden administration left in place and even increased the bounty, pushed from 15 to 25 million, and then the Trump administration hiked it again to 50 million. I think this is part of the narrative that the U.S. wants to create in terms of convincing the public that regime change is justified, even though the case is very paper-thin, and that's being generous.

What these kinds of rewards tend to incentivize are, let's say, mercenary adventures. We had one of those in 2020, Operation Gideon, where a former U.S. Green Beret, together with members of the Guaido opposition, put together a very far-fetched, harebrained plot to come and invade with a group of a few dozen mercenaries and take power. So it might incentivize those kinds of adventures, even though, I mean, Operation Gideon was a warning to not try something similar.

The dream for the Trump administration, with instruments such as this bounty and other forms of pressure, what the Trump administration would want is for the Venezuelan Armed Forces to stop the government. To have a military coup, just like in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s in Latin America. However, it does not seem like there's anything like that on the cards. The military leadership has been very firm in saying that they oppose this imperialist pressure and this threat of imperialist intervention. There's a solid Bolivarian Doctrine in place in the armed forces.

SP: Ricardo Vaz with Venezuelanalysis, I thank you so much for joining us today. You have promised me another segment on CITGO. I consider you an expert in terms of the context and the analysis related to CITGO's operation in the United States. I hope to have you back for that. Thank you for joining us today.

RV: Thank you, Sharmini. It's been a pleasure.

SP: And thank you for joining us on theAnalysis.

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