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Venezuela's Bolivarian Armed Force: Fear and Interest in the Face of Political Change

Harold Trinkunas¹

July 2021 finds Nicolás Maduro in one of the strongest political positions of his time in power. Since 2013, he has survived external pressure from the United States, the European Union, and neighbors in South America. He has outwaited the mandate of an opposition-controlled legislature (2016-21), and he now faces weakened and divided domestic rivals. He remains unchallenged as the official head of the *chavista* movement in Venezuela, even though when he inherited the mantle from Hugo Chávez in 2013, some considered him little more than a figurehead.

Despite an increasingly strong political position, the continuity of Maduro's regime hinges on the support of the Venezuelan armed forces. Here, Maduro's position is also better than it was when he first took power. The Venezuelan National Bolivarian Armed Forces (Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana, FANB) have gained power, influence, and resources under Maduro, which they are now loath to lose. In addition, the regime has engaged in effective 'coup proofing' to dissuade any military attempts to remove Maduro. The armed forces' senior officers do not find the opposition a credible alternative under the leadership of interim President Juan Guaidó. The opposition has not articulated a positive vision for the future of the armed forces, and the military itself views some of its more outspoken elements as a threat to the institution.

¹ The author would like to thank Guillermo J. Bolinaga, Venezuelan lawyer and expert on civil-military relations, risk management and scenario planning, and Richard Feinberg, professor at the University of California, San Diego and expert on Latin America's political economy, for their comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this paper. This paper solely represents the views of the author, not any institution with which he is affiliated. Any remaining errors are his alone.



Yet Maduro's improved position rests on shaky ground. Domestically, Venezuela's situation is precarious due to its economic collapse, vast increases in poverty, greatly diminished oil production and exports, mass outmigration, and a rampant COVID-19 pandemic. The present balance of power between Maduro, the opposition, and the armed forces may yet change unpredictably in the face of new shocks to the system. Even so, the military's latitude and leverage to influence change in Venezuela is highly constrained, and it is likely to move carefully in the face of any changes to protect the institution and the individual interests of senior officers. The armed forces are more likely to support change that protects their interests, provides guarantees that accountability for any crimes committed by the military will be limited or diffuse, and results in a government that they trust and allows them to maintain influence.

Fear of Political Change in Venezuela

The armed forces in Venezuela fear regime change for two principal reasons: the risk that the institution will lose power and resources under a new government; and individual officers' fears of being held accountable for corruption, human rights abuses, and illicit transnational trafficking, particularly among senior ranks.

These fears are credible. The institution has been granted control of many economic sectors that serve as key power resources in Venezuela. These include some elements of the oil industry, gold mining, and food distribution. Military officers serve or have served in the most senior positions in the Maduro administration and as governors of many states.² Some members of the senior officer corps enrich themselves from connections to international drug trafficking and smuggling of goods from Brazil and Colombia.³ Some others are associated with multi-billion dollar arms purchases, principally from Russia but also from China.⁴ Such a central role in government and the economy would inevitably diminish following a political transition to allow for civilian political parties to assume greater responsibility for the commanding heights of the state.

Some individual lower-ranking officers are also likely to fear accountability for committing criminal acts or for associating with or collaborating with those who do. By all accounts,

² "Venezuela's Military Enigma," Briefing 39, Latin America and the Caribbean (New York, NY: International Crisis Group, September 16, 2019), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/venezuela/039-venezuelas-military-enigma>.

³ "Los nexos criminales de los nuevos jefes militares de Maduro en Venezuela," *InSight Crime* (blog), July 17, 2019, <https://es.insightcrime.org/noticias/analisis/los-nexos-criminales-de-los-nuevos-jefes-militares-de-maduro-en-venezuela/>.

⁴ Sebastien Roblin, "\$10 Billion in the Hole: Venezuela Owes Russia Tons of Money for Weapons," *The National Interest*, November 6, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/10-billion-hole-venezuela-owes-russia-tons-money-weapons-93906>; Joshua Chang, "China's Arms Diplomacy in Venezuela Affects Stability in the Western Hemisphere," *Georgetown Security Studies Review*, October 27, 2020, <https://georgetownsecuritystudiesreview.org/2020/10/27/chinas-arms-diplomacy-in-venezuela-affects-stability-in-the-western-hemisphere/>.

corruption is widespread in the armed forces, touching even officers who are not otherwise engaged in more serious criminal acts.⁵ In addition to illicit criminal trafficking there is evidence of connections of some members of the military to human rights abuses,⁶ particularly within the military counterintelligence directorate (Dirección General de Contrainteligencia Militar, DGCIM). Additional responsibility for repression can be found among members of the Guardia Nacional and (to a lesser extent) the army. Both have some responsibility for internal security.⁷

Even officers who have stayed away from criminality may yet fear that by remaining passive in the face of such activities, they may in future be blamed alongside their fellow officers by a post-transition government. These fears are compounded by the anti-military messaging of hardline elements of the Venezuelan opposition. Sources suggest that the Venezuelan senior officer corps is aware of the post-transition experiences of militaries in Argentina and Peru and wish to avoid being exposed to similar accountability measures, such as greatly reduced military budgets and prosecutions of officers for collaborating with the preceding dictatorship or committing human rights abuses.⁸ This fear of being held collectively responsible is likely to lead members of the Venezuelan military to hang together for fear of being hung separately if they allow a transition.

Interests and Factions within the Venezuelan Armed Forces

The Venezuelan armed forces have traditionally had four components: the army, air force, navy, and the Guardia Nacional (a militarized internal security force). During the Chávez period, a fifth force, the Bolivarian Militia, was created with its own chain of command that by-passed the military high command and the Ministry of Defense and led directly to the president.⁹

Of these, the army has traditionally been (and still is) the dominant institutional and political force. It has the numbers and the firepower to make itself felt in domestic politics and internal security, although it has traditionally avoided an overt coercive role, at least since the conclusion of counterinsurgency operations against left-wing insurgents in the 1960s.¹⁰

⁵ This is not unique to the Chávez/Maduro period, as the Venezuelan government (both in its civilian and military dimensions) has long had a corruption problem.

⁶ “OHCHR | Venezuela: UN Report Urges Accountability for Crimes against Humanity,” September 16, 2020, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26247&LangID=E>.

⁷ Human Rights Watch, “Venezuela: Senior Officials’ Responsibility for Abuses,” June 15, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/15/venezuela-senior-officials-responsibility-abuses>.

⁸ Conversation with Venezuelan civil-military relations scholar, Stanford, California, fall 2019.

⁹ Harold A. Trinkunas, “The Transformation of the Bolivarian Armed Force: Venezuela,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Civil-Military Relations* (Routledge, 2012), 143–54.

¹⁰ Brian Fonseca, John Polga-Hecimovich, and Harold Trinkunas, “Venezuelan Military Culture” (Miami, FL: Steven J. Green School of International and Public Affairs, Florida International University, May 2016).

The Guardia Nacional is the institutional rival to the army. It has been a smaller all volunteer force focused on internal security, historically more lightly armed than the army but better trained, at least among its enlisted personnel. This began to change after 2011 as the Guardia

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Nacional was authorized to double its numbers to bolster the regime's internal security apparatus to a nominal end-strength of approximately 80,000 (closer to the army's nominal end-strength). However, the expansion effort led the Guardia Nacional to lower training requirements for new recruits (from two years to six months), which outside observers view as significantly impacting its capabilities and professionalism.¹¹ The third ground force, the Bolivarian Militia, is highly politicized and

potentially larger than either the army or the Guardia Nacional, allegedly numbering in the hundreds of thousands, but consists mostly of part-timers with limited training and poor equipment.¹²

The air force and navy are traditionally viewed as more professional and less politicized because they are small, technically oriented institutions. They are also concentrated in a small number of garrisons hosting air and naval units.¹³ This lessens their relevance in terms of defending the Maduro regime, influencing domestic politics, and maintaining territorial control.

Within the military, the Chávez/Maduro period has created new institutional divides, such as that between technical officers (*oficiales técnicos*) and regular line officers. Technical officers were formerly classified as career professional non-commissioned officers (*sub-oficiales profesionales de carrera*, similar to US Army warrant officers or perhaps US Navy limited duty officers), but under Chávez's military reforms, they acquired a status, rank, and pay structure similar to that of line officers, including the ability to be promoted to one-star generals and admirals. This new category of officers may be concerned that a political transition may put their improved status at risk.¹⁴

Another important division is between officers (mostly senior) who hold key positions in the civilian administration and officers serving in combat units or military staff positions. Under the Chávez and Maduro governments, selected military officers have long formed a backbone of

¹¹ Discussion with retired Venezuelan officer in exile, Bogotá, Colombia, September 2020.

¹² Daniel García, "Qué es y quiénes integran la milicia, el cuerpo de civiles voluntarios dispuestos a 'dar la vida' por Venezuela," *BBC News Mundo*, August 28, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-41070324>.

¹³ Harold A. Trinkunas, "The Transformation of the Bolivarian Armed Force.

¹⁴ Fonseca, Polga-Hecimovich, and Trinkunas, "Venezuelan Military Culture."

regime control over the civilian bureaucracy.¹⁵ These officers typically have more opportunities for self-enrichment, benefit in other ways from their closeness power (such as patronage and nepotism opportunities), and are likely to be more concerned about preventing a political transition than officers in the combat arms.

Finally, there are some elements of the armed forces that have connections to international drug trafficking and to illicit activities and smuggling defined more broadly.¹⁶ Since many of these activities are crimes not only in Venezuela but also in neighboring states, the United States and the European Union, officer participants are more likely to fear political change and the risk of accountability.

After 22 years of rule by presidents Chávez and Maduro, the Venezuelan armed forces are thoroughly politicized. Politicization begins early in officers' careers in military academies and schools. Venezuelan military doctrine (*El Nuevo Pensamiento y Doctrina Militar Bolivariana*) reinforces the political role of the armed forces, calls for civil-military fusion, and the participation of the whole of the population in national defense in preparation for prolonged popular war against an invader (the United States is seen as the most likely candidate). In an institution as opaque as the Venezuelan armed forces, it is difficult to know how widely held these views are in the officer corps, but this doctrine is incorporated into officer education at all levels and into public statements by senior officers. Moreover, adhering to official doctrine is the safest course of action for members of a military as heavily surveilled by its own counterintelligence service (DGCIM) as is the case in Venezuela.¹⁷

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Politicization is reinforced through the selection, promotion and assignments process which prioritize loyalty to the regime. Performing and adhering to pro-regime activities and policies are important for individual officers to get ahead. Assignments (and where officers are posted in Venezuela) are also important because they can mean access to opportunities to economic well-being and self-enrichment.¹⁸

¹⁵ Francesca Ramos Pismataro, "Los militares y el deterioro democrático en Venezuela," *Estudios Políticos*, no. 53 (May 15, 2018): 260–82.

¹⁶ "Venezuela: A Mafia State?" *InSight Crime*, 2018, <https://www.insightcrime.org/investigations/venezuela-mafia-state/>.

¹⁷ Francine Jacome, "Los Militares En La Política y La Economía de Venezuela," *Nueva Sociedad | Democracia y Política En América Latina* 274 (April 2018), <https://nuso.org/articulo/los-militares-en-la-politica-y-la-economia-de-venezuela/>; Luis Manuel Esculpi, "Principales elementos del nuevo pensamiento militar venezolano," *PolitiKa UCAB* (blog), April 13, 2020, <https://politikaucab.net/2020/04/13/principales-elementos-del-nuevo-pensamiento-militar-venezolano/>.

¹⁸ Trinkunas, "The Transformation of the Bolivarian Armed Force: Venezuela."

To secure favorable opportunities, officers must demonstrate loyalty to the regime and to their senior officers. While it is perhaps true that only a minority are truly ideologically committed to the regime, successful officers have had to collaborate with regime policies and, on occasion, with illicit activities conducted by peers and superiors.¹⁹ And even if individual officers are able to avoid becoming actively complicit with the Maduro regime, many have likely had to look the other way in order to maintain their positions and livelihoods. This expands the complicity of the officer corps with the regime beyond ideology.

In addition to an incentive structure favoring politicization, there is also a robust internal surveillance program to monitor the armed forces for disloyal elements. The Cuban-trained DGCIM (military counterintelligence) carries out this function, using wiretaps, other forms of electronic surveillance, and informants to identify elements that might be disloyal.²⁰ Membership in the officer corps does not protect suspects from detention and interrogation. Members of the military constitute one of the largest single categories of political prisoners in Venezuela.²¹

However, even though the military is politicized and thoroughly surveilled, it nonetheless has corporative institutional interests which have become better defined under Maduro. Unlike Chávez, who came from the armed forces and had great personal ascendancy within it, Maduro has a civilian background; he has had to rebalance the civil-military relationship to grant more power to the military. Greater participation in the economy and direct access to rent-generating state enterprises have given the armed forces more power and more responsibility within the regime, so long as they remain loyal.

The Impact of the Guaidó Interim Administration on the Venezuelan Armed Forces

The Guaidó administration has had a tin ear when it comes to dealing with the Venezuelan armed forces. Initially upon declaring himself interim president, Guaidó and his opposition supporters offered, as part of a *Proyecto de Ley de Amnistía*, a form of amnesty to officers who switched sides to support his administration.²² While this was mostly aimed at senior officers who might

¹⁹ Fonseca, Polga-Hecimovich, and Trinkunas, “Venezuelan Military Culture.”

²⁰ Brian Fonseca and John Polga-Hecimovich, “Two Nations, One Revolution: The Evolution of Contemporary Cuba–Venezuela Relations,” in *Venezuela’s Authoritarian Allies: The Ties That Bind?*, ed. Cynthia Arnson, Woodrow Wilson Center Reports on the Americas 43 (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2021).

²¹ Angus Berwick, “Special Report: How Cuba Taught Venezuela to Quash Military Dissent,” *Reuters*, August 22, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-cuba-military-specialreport-idUSKCN1VC1BX>.

²² Mietek Boduszyński and Victor Peskin, “Guaidó Backed an Amnesty Plan for Venezuela’s Military. How Might That Play Out?” *Washington Post*, February 11, 2019, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2019/02/11/guaido-backed-an-amnesty-plan-for-venezuelas-military-how-might-that-play-out/>.

have fears of accountability in the event of re-democratization,²³ the message was reportedly badly received by some junior officers. The proposed amnesty law was perceived as asking the military to pick sides rather than uphold the constitution. Apparently, many junior officers did not feel they had done anything wrong, so a message focused on amnesty only for those who ‘switched sides’ was not only not relevant, it even carried an implication that the opposition had prejudged them as guilty and in need of legal absolution unless they were political supporters of President Guaidó.²⁴

In addition, the Trump administration’s embrace of Guaidó, which the interim government welcomed, was portrayed by the Maduro regime as evidence that the opposition was part of a vast right wing imperialist conspiracy.²⁵ The main external security threat Venezuelan military officers are trained to counter is a US attack in coordination with neighboring Colombia.²⁶ Years of criticism of the Venezuelan government under the Bush and Obama administrations and outright hostility and ‘maximum pressure’ under the Trump administration²⁷ likely contribute to the perception of officers that this conflict hypothesis is correct. For President Guaidó to attend Trump’s 2020 State of the Union address, for example, was only one of many ways in which the Venezuelan military could draw links between the opposition and its principal adversary, the United States.²⁸ Other examples include the February 23, 2019, failed humanitarian aid attempt on the Colombian and Brazilian borders (attended by US Vice President Mike Pence in Colombia), which was seen as an attempted violation of Venezuelan sovereignty, and Operation Gideon, an attempt to start an armed insurrection in Venezuela linked to a few members of the opposition, in which a few former members of the US military were captured by Venezuelan

²³ Ernesto Londoño and Isayen Herrera, “‘No puede haber impunidad’: la amnistía que ofrece la oposición venezolana despierta críticas,” *The New York Times*, February 8, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2019/02/08/espanol/america-latina/amnistia-venezuela-maduro.html>.

²⁴ “Venezuela debe reformar proyecto de Ley de Amnistía,” Human Rights Watch, January 31, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/es/news/2019/01/31/venezuela-debe-reformar-proyecto-de-ley-de-amnistia>; T F, “Así es la Ley de Amnistía de Guaidó para indultar a quienes renuncien a Maduro,” *El Confidencial*, January 29, 2019, https://www.elconfidencial.com/mundo/2019-01-29/proyecto-ley-amnistia-venezuela-maduro-guaido_1791870/.

²⁵ Tom Phillips and Mariana Zuñiga, “Maduro Starts New Venezuela Term by Accusing US of Imperialist ‘World War,’” *The Guardian*, January 10, 2019, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/10/venezuela-president-nicolas-maduro-begins-second-term>.

²⁶ Fonseca, Polga-Hecimovich, and Trinkunas, “Venezuelan Military Culture.”

²⁷ John Polga-Hecimovich, “Why the United States’ Maximum Pressure Approach toward Nicolás Maduro Is Unlikely to Stabilize Venezuela,” *LSE Phelan US Centre* (blog), April 29, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2020/04/29/why-the-united-states-maximum-pressure-approach-toward-nicolas-maduro-is-unlikely-to-stabilize-venezuela/>.

²⁸ Francisco Toro, “Opinion | Juan Guaidó May Have United Congress Briefly, but He Is Faltering in Venezuela,” *Washington Post*, February 2, 2020, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/02/05/juan-guaido-may-have-united-congress-briefly-he-is-faltering-venezuela/>.

security forces.²⁹ Taken together, these incidents were used by pro-Maduro senior military officers to portray the opposition as too radical to protect the interests of the armed forces and not supportive of the constitution and democratic legality.

Domestic and International Threats to the Venezuelan Armed Forces

Internationally, the situation for the Maduro regime has recently improved, so even if the armed forces are unhappy with the regime's performance, dissident officers are less likely to risk working towards regime change. The change in administrations in the United States is seen by Maduro and his allies as an opportunity to seek an accommodation or at least a reduction of tensions with its principal adversary. Regionally, the regime's main adversaries in neighboring Colombia and Brazil, Presidents Duque and Bolsonaro respectively, are distracted by domestic politics. The regional diplomatic coalition organized to press for democratic change in Venezuela, the Lima Group, has been weakened with the election of leaders in Argentina and

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Mexico who are more sympathetic to the Maduro government.³⁰ Furthermore, the impact of the novel coronavirus pandemic on Latin America³¹ has diminished regional governments' appetite for addressing the Venezuela crisis, further relieving pressure on Maduro. Maduro continues to receive Russian, Chinese, Cuban, Turkish, and Iranian support. The amount of support varies year to year, and it often comes as services or loans that must be repaid or have other strings attached. But these are important anyway because they allow Maduro to evade the full impact of US sanctions, which helps explain why 'maximum pressure'-type approaches by

the United States have failed.³² And finally, the end of interim President Guaidó's parliamentary mandate in January 2021 undercuts the claims to legitimacy of his government among many international actors (although not the United States) as well as within the military. This combination of factors places President Maduro in a relatively stronger position internationally compared to earlier periods in his government.

²⁹ "El vicepresidente de EE.UU. Mike Pence viajará a Colombia la próxima semana," *CNN* (blog), February 21, 2019, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2019/02/21/mike-pence-visita-colombia-crisis-venezuela/>; Kevin T. Dugan and Kevin T. Dugan, "Inside Operation Gideon, a Coup Gone Very Wrong," *Rolling Stone* (blog), December 6, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/venezuela-operation-gideon-coup-jordan-goudreau-1098590/>.

³⁰ Reuters Staff, "Argentina Leaves Lima Group, Says Bloc's Venezuela Policies Have 'Led to Nothing,'" *Reuters*, March 24, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-argentina-limagroup-idUSKBN2BG2VA>.

³¹ Julie Turkewitz and Mitra Taj, "After a Year of Loss, South America Suffers Worst Death Tolls Yet," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/29/world/americas/covid-latin-america.html>.

³² Rocío Cara Labrador, "Maduro's Allies: Who Backs the Venezuelan Regime?" Council on Foreign Relations, accessed May 25, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/maduros-allies-who-backs-venezuelan-regime>.

Domestically, the situation is much more precarious, including for the armed forces. Economic activity in Venezuela has declined catastrophically since the beginning of the Maduro government. GDP has declined over 70 percent, 96 percent of the population live in poverty, and oil production, the regime's principal foreign exchange earner, has collapsed along with the government's revenues.³³ Members of the armed forces are likely very concerned by the decline of the oil industry, which they have traditionally viewed as the nation's most important strategic asset.³⁴ They are also hard hit by the declining purchasing power of their official salaries.³⁵ The regime has gone to great lengths to shield the armed forces from the impact of the economy through subsidized access to foreign exchange, food and household goods and loans at low rates of interest.³⁶ But the high rate of inflation in Venezuela (which hit hyperinflationary levels in 2016)³⁷ most likely makes hard currency and illicit sources of income (which may often be synonymous for most members of the military) even more important. On top of the catastrophic

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economic situation is layered the impact of COVID-19. There are no truly reliable statistics of the overall impact of the pandemic on Venezuela; but given the poor public health response, the effects are likely to be even worse than those in neighboring countries, in a region harder hit by the disease than other parts of the world.³⁸ Like many governments in

the region, the Maduro regime has given the Venezuelan military important domestic responsibilities for addressing the COVID-19 crisis, and it has particularly used the pandemic to increase its internal security measures against the opposition.³⁹

³³ Dany Bahar, Ted Piccone, and Harold Trinkunas, "Venezuela: A Path out of Misery," Policy Brief (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, October 2018); Amelia Cheatham and Rocio Cara Labrador, "Venezuela: The Rise and Fall of a Petrostate," Council on Foreign Relations, January 22, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/background/venezuela-crisis>.

³⁴ Harold A. Trinkunas, *Crafting Civilian Control of the Military in Venezuela: A Comparative Perspective* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 224–26.

³⁵ Brian Ellsworth and Mayela Armas, "The Maduro Mystery: Why the Armed Forces Still Stand by Venezuela's Beleaguered President," Reuters, July 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/venezuela-military/>.

³⁶ Nan Tian and Diego Lopes da Silva, "The Crucial Role of the Military in the Venezuelan Crisis | SIPRI," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, April 2, 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/commentary/topical-background/2019/crucial-role-military-venezuelan-crisis>.

³⁷ Mayela Armas and Corina Pons, "Venezuela's Timid Gains in Taming Inflation Fade as Food Prices Soar," Reuters, May 11, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-economy-idUSKBN22N26A>.

³⁸ Ana Vanessa Herrero and Anthony Faiola, "In the Venezuelan 'Workers' Paradise,' Very Different Pandemics for the Haves and Have-Nots," *Washington Post*, April 25, 2021, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/04/25/coronavirus-venezuela-socialist-latin-america-inequality/>.

³⁹ Anatoly Kurmanav, Isayen Herrera, and Sheyla Urdaneta, "Venezuela Deploys Security Forces in Coronavirus Crackdown," *The New York Times*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/world/americas/coronavirus-venezuela.html>.



Photo credit: Protest in Caracas, Venezuela against the government of Nicolás Maduro: Reynaldo Riobueno, Shutterstock, April 2017

More worrisome for the armed forces is the recent conflict with Colombian insurgents. This skirmish was a symptom of the expansion of ‘ungoverned spaces’ in Venezuela. Progressively, the Maduro regime has ceded control of Venezuelan territory to armed non-state actors.⁴⁰ Some are simply criminal organization engaged in extortion and trafficking. Others are more ideologically motivated and linked to the civil conflict in Colombia. But the Maduro regime has been complicit in this process, seeing these armed non-state actors as an additional way of ensuring regime survival against possible armed opponents, even its own armed forces. By giving the groups permission to exercise authority over certain parts of Venezuelan territory, Maduro has sought to purchase their loyalty to the regime.⁴¹ In a sense, armed non-state actors de facto also contribute to the regime’s coup-proofing apparatus, since any dissident officers in the military who would support a transition away from authoritarianism would undoubtedly worry about having to confront these armed non-state actors. But the conflict in Apure, which apparently derives from a falling out between the regime and some factions among Colombian insurgents operating in Venezuela’s border regions, has generated tensions within the military due to its poor performance in combating these rebels.⁴²

⁴⁰ Daniel Pardo, “Tensión en Apure y Arauca: 5 claves para entender la escalada de violencia en ‘la otra frontera’ entre Colombia y Venezuela,” BBC News Mundo, April 6, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-56645187>.

⁴¹ “Venezuela: A Mafia State?”

⁴² Private conversation with Venezuelan analyst of civil-military relations, Stanford, California, May 2021.

This combination of domestic and international factors cuts both ways: some strengthen the regime, others undermine it. But when it comes to military support for the regime, an additional important factor in explaining armed forces' support for the status quo lies in the elaborate coup-proofing apparatus that the regime has created since the days of Chávez. Not only does this include ideological indoctrination of officers from the junior ranks, but also aggressive use of informants and other counter-intelligence techniques to root out dissent. The regime's counter-intelligence system was created with the support of the Cuban intelligence services, which are well trained and professional. In addition, the regime has several counterweights to the regular armed forces, such as the Militia, Bolivarian National Police, Police Special Forces (Fuerza de Acciones Especiales, FAES), Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional, SEBIN), and armed non-state actors, to dissuade any from engaging in armed uprisings against Maduro. Even if officers want to dissent from the regime, they find it difficult to organize without detection. They also face massive odds even when they rebel, as we have seen in the small sporadic military uprisings against Maduro in the past.⁴³

Unable to change the regime or oppose it institutionally, members of the military are instead voting with their feet. Desertions are reportedly frequent, and some deserters are joining the outflow of refugees from Venezuela, over 5 million strong as of 2021. For example, leaks from the Guardia Nacional General Command indicate that desertions number over ten thousand in that service alone since 2015,⁴⁴ a substantial number in an all-volunteer force with a nominal end strength of 80,000 and which in practice is reportedly significantly and consistently understrength.

Envisioning Political Change in Venezuela: What do the Armed Forces Prefer?

The armed forces are an important pillar of the Maduro regime, but their support would also be crucial for any post-Maduro government. The Venezuelan armed forces' continuing acquiescence to President Maduro's rule should not be interpreted as a blank check. Members of the military are unlikely to defend the regime at all costs. However, they also oppose alternatives that put the institution or individual officers at risk of punitive accountability. Although there is likely a great deal of variation within the military in their views on the regime and Venezuela's situation, due to the 'coup proofing' measures put in place under Chávez and Maduro, it is the views of the

⁴³ Fonseca, Polga-Hecimovich, and Trinkunas, "Venezuelan Military Culture;" Ellsworth and Armas, "The Maduro Mystery: Why the Armed Forces Still Stand by Venezuela's Beleaguered President."

⁴⁴ Sebastiana Barráez, "La expulsión de 1.473 miembros de la Guardia Nacional Bolivariana revela los alarmantes niveles de deserción de militares en Venezuela," *Infobae*, November 30, 2020, [/america/venezuela/2020/11/30/la-expulsion-de-1473-miembros-de-la-guardia-nacional-bolivariana-revela-los-alarmantes-niveles-de-desercion-de-militares-en-venezuela/](#); Sebastiana Barráez, "Separaron de la Fuerza Armada venezolana a casi 6.000 sargentos por 'hacer caso omiso del llamamiento de sus comandantes naturales'," *Infobae*, December 12, 2019, [/america/venezuela/2019/12/12/separaron-de-la-fuerza-armada-venezolana-a-casi-6000-sargentos-por-hacer-caso-omiso-del-llamamiento-de-sus-comandantes-naturales/](#).

senior officers that matter most in any orderly transition scenario.⁴⁵

In the event of orderly or negotiated change, senior military officers would likely prefer to report to a more competent government that also guarantees immunity from accountability. This means that in the event a post-Maduro regime takes power, they would prefer one led by another *chavista* figure, but one who could more competently administer the economy and improve Venezuela's international standing. '*Chavismo sin Madurismo*' offers them little downside risk, with much upside potential to improve the economic opportunities for individual officers and resource availability for the institution.

In the event of a transition to a non-*chavista*, post-Maduro regime, senior officers would likely seek guarantees of institutional autonomy and influence over judicial processes and investigations into armed forces' activities during the Maduro and Chávez periods. If an incoming administration were able to circumscribe the reach of accountability efforts targeting the armed forces, the armed forces would be unlikely to actively oppose such a government, especially if the transition were portrayed as taking place within the existing constitutional framework. Obedience to the constitution would provide a rationale for members of the military to support the new government if most did not fear facing prosecution. The democratic transitions in Spain after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco in 1975 or in Uruguay after 1985 provide examples in which accountability was delayed or diffused to an extent sufficient to minimize military opposition to democratization.

If political change is to occur in Venezuela, the armed forces would prefer a low-accountability future that looks more like the situation of the Chilean armed forces after Pinochet lost power.

The bottom line is that, if political change is to occur in Venezuela, the armed forces would prefer a low-accountability future that looks more like the situation of the Chilean armed forces after Pinochet lost power in 1990 or after the transition to democracy in Brazil in 1985 or in Spain post-Franco. And they would oppose anything that looks like the most serious accountability measures implemented in Argentina after democratization in 1983, such as trials of the senior military officers who supported the previous dictatorship. This would place a new post-Maduro government in a difficult position since its supporters would undoubtedly prefer more accountability and less military autonomy; additionally, some of the crimes committed by military members are not pardonable under either domestic or international law, nor will prosecutors be bound by statutes of limitation.

⁴⁵ The views of junior and mid-ranking officers matter most in disorderly transition scenarios, and the risk of violence rises in this scenario.

Depoliticizing the Venezuelan Armed Forces after Political Change

In the event of political change, any future Venezuelan administration would inherit a highly politicized armed force. But there are some historical cases of transitions from authoritarian rule that offer examples for how democratizers can work towards taking the politics out of the military. How constrained a future democratic government will be by the armed forces depends on the nature of the liberalization and transition process. A transition in which the Maduro regime collapses is likely to offer more opportunities to expand civilian authority over the military, but at the risk of higher levels of violence.⁴⁶ But an orderly democratic transition in which the armed forces continue to be led by many of the current senior leaders may result in an increase in military autonomy, at least in the short run. Institutional autonomy goes hand in hand with efforts to limit accountability, a likely key demand of the Venezuelan military high command in a transition scenario.

While limiting the accountability of members of the military for criminal acts committed under Maduro would be decidedly negative for the rule of law (and infuriating for many Venezuelans), it could be paradoxically be used as part of a bargain to restore professional boundaries between civilian and military elements of the state and depoliticize key aspects of the armed forces. Most crucial to depoliticization are reforming military education and the promotions and assignments processes. Depoliticizing military educational institutions offers the possibility of new generations of officers entering the military without being blinkered by a particular political perspective, particularly one hostile to a new democracy. And reforming promotions and assignments processes offers the shortest path to creating new incentive structures to guide the behavior of the existing officer corps. A more democratic Venezuelan government would also have to address the question of what to do with the exceedingly large number of general and admirals in the Venezuelan armed forces promoted under Maduro.⁴⁷ Offering buyouts for early retirement or assigning the less offensive senior officers to diplomatic posts abroad are two ways of thinning the senior ranks. Trading reduced accountability for depoliticization may be one of the hard bargains an incoming democratic government may have to make to ensure its survival and success.

Because senior officers know the effect of such reforms on civil-military relations too, democratizers will need to identify those officers most interested in professionalizing the armed forces and work with them to shield democratization against its military opponents. Senior leaders' views towards the *chavista/madurista* past and, in such a scenario, a democratic future will not be uniform. Some will be more interested in being soldiers than politicians, and the support for such a position may deepen in the wake of the poor performance of the armed forces

⁴⁶ Trinkunas, *Crafting Civilian Control of the Military in Venezuela: A Comparative Perspective*.

⁴⁷ Brian Ellsworth and Mayela Armas, "How a Military Overhaul in Venezuela Keeps Troops Standing by Maduro," Reuters, July 28, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/venezuela-military/>.



in the recent Apure skirmishes. By way of historical comparison, albeit not with respect to the ideological orientation of the outgoing regime, Spain's new democracy found itself in a similar position vis-à-vis its armed forces post-Franco. The armed forces it inherited were too big, over-officered (particularly at the senior ranks), and highly politicized. Working with, supporting, and promoting reform-minded professionals in the Spanish military during the democratic period was one of the factors (but not the only one) that helped the new democracy survive.⁴⁸

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Venezuelan opposition has a fundamental problem in dealing with the armed forces: they have a major credibility gap. Opposition politicians know little about the armed forces, have not put forward a credible vision for the future of the armed forces, are closely identified with the main foreign adversary of the armed forces (the United States), and a small number have engaged in undemocratic and non-institutional attempts to enact regime change. In addition, the focus of some opposition members on the presumed criminality of the armed forces contributes to the impression that the opposition is unable and unwilling to differentiate among military members that are truly guilty of the most egregious crimes, such as violations of human rights, and those who have avoided such activities. The opposition's approach to the armed forces is likely to lead the military to close ranks. It creates an unfortunate sense of solidarity between those who are truly ideologically committed to the regime or who are truly guilty of the worst crimes and the rest of the officer corps. However, it is also important to keep in mind that even if the Venezuelan opposition had done everything right when it came to dealing with the armed forces, the Venezuelan military would still have its own set of interests; and as a powerful political actor, it would and will defend them in the event of political change.

Redressing this state of affairs will be very difficult. First, the opposition needs to lay out a credible, thoughtful national defense vision for Venezuela that provides members of the military with a desirable (or at least tolerable) road map to the post-Maduro future. Newly democratized states developed defense 'white books' to achieve this end after transitioning,⁴⁹ but the opposition may need to do this now. Second, the Venezuelan opposition will also need to take measured distance from the United States, perhaps by triangulating its position with other international supporters in Europe and in South America and focusing more on bolstering their credentials at home. Third, it should outline a vision for accountability in a post-Maduro Venezuela that offers members of the military who have avoided engaging in major criminal activities a reason to support the new regime. Here, past efforts at truth and reconciliation commissions or more recent efforts to achieve transitional justice that is inclusive of the military, such as is now underway in Colombia, may offer an accountability road map that is less

⁴⁸ Felipe Agüero, *Soldiers, Civilians, and Democracy: Post-Franco Spain in Comparative Perspective* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

⁴⁹ Octavio Amorim Neto, "Democracy, Civil-Military Relations and Defense Policy in Brazil," in *APSA 2012 Annual Meeting Paper*, 2012, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2110718.

threatening for current members of the military but still offers the possibility that the most guilty will be identified and punished in the future once democracy is more consolidated. The opposition is fortunate that many of its allies in South America and Europe have experience in conducting or supporting such efforts, and it should draw on these resources and lessons.

The international community has collaborated to pressure for political change in Venezuela, albeit unevenly. Better coordination of incentives and sanctions among the United States, the EU and the Lima Group would be helpful, at least at the margins, to ensure that pressure and leverage are uniformly applied (as well as lifted) to encourage democratic change. Although it is not yet a salient part of the international debate about the future of Venezuela, the country will

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eventually need considerable support to rebuild its economy. Even though there are many pressing needs in a country with such high levels of food insecurity and poverty, it is important for international actors to realize now that some of this assistance will be needed to support efforts to re-professionalize the Venezuelan armed forces and sustain them, especially if political change in Venezuela leads to a desirable reduction in links between the military and non-

military or off-books sources of income, such as the oil industry, mining, and illicit trafficking.

The Biden administration may have to do less to achieve more in Venezuela, at least when it comes to the armed forces. One of the hindrances to promoting a transition in Venezuela that achieves at least the acquiescence of the military (if not its active support) is the too-close identification of the Venezuelan opposition with the United States, the hypothetical main adversary of the Venezuelan armed forces. The Biden administration should encourage the Venezuelan opposition to put distance between itself and the US government. The US government, particularly the military, should also tamp down hostile rhetoric aimed at the Venezuelan military, which had been used during previous administrations. Such an approach feeds into Maduro regime propaganda that portrays the United States as the main enemy of the Venezuelan armed forces.

Finally, should there be an opening for re-democratization in Venezuela and, along with this, an opportunity to re-establish a military-to-military relationship, the US military should avoid trying to establish a ‘tutelary’ relationship. Regardless of what US officials think the Venezuelan armed forces actually need, it would be preferable to propose interactions that are portrayed as opportunities to partner on an equal basis. This will contribute to overcoming mistrust. ‘Talking down to’ or lecturing the Venezuelan armed forces about defense reform, for example, will likely



fall on deaf ears and may end badly. Instead, the focus should be on confidence building and mutual learning to rebuild professional ties between the two armed forces.

About the Author

Harold Trinkunas is the Interim Co-director and a Senior Research Scholar at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. He is also a non-resident Senior Fellow in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution. His research focuses on issues related to foreign policy, governance, and security, particularly in Latin America.