Posted on the CEEEP website

Date: September 5, 2024

Russian Warships, Venezuelan Elections, and a Fabricated Crisis with Guyana in the Caribbean?

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Summary

In the article "Russian Warships, Venezuelan Elections, and a Fabricated Crisis with Guyana in the Caribbean?" written prior to Venezuela's July 28, 2024 elections, R. Evan Ellis explores Russia's military presence in the Caribbean and its implications for regional geopolitics, particularly concerning Venezuelan elections and the territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana.

Ellis explains how Russia, whose power projection capabilities have declined since the end of the Cold War, has periodically deployed limited yet threatening forces to the region in response to U.S. activities within its sphere of influence. The recent presence of Russian warships in the Caribbean, according to Ellis, is more symbolic than substantial, reflecting Russia's military limitations.

Looking toward the then approaching elections, the author argues that the extended presence of these Russian ships could complicate a potential crisis fabricated by Nicolás Maduro's regime in Venezuela, especially regarding the disputed Essequibo territory with Guyana. Ellis suggests that Maduro might use such a crisis as a pretext to cancel or annul the Venezuelan presidential elections, and argues that the Russian military presence in the region could be part of a strategy to deter possible U.S. intervention in defense of Guyana, further complicating the geopolitical situation in the region.

Keywords: Russian Influence, Latin America, military cooperation, geopolitics, U.S. Relations Strategic Alliances

The deployment of Russian warships to the Caribbean is Kabuki theater. For 15 years, a Russia whose international power projection capabilities have deteriorated[2] significantly since the end of the Cold War has periodically sent limited, yet still threatening forces to the U.S. near abroad, in response to U.S. activities[3] in what it regards as its own "sphere of influence".

In 2008, Russia sent nuclear-capable Tu-160 backfire bombers, then warships[4], to the Caribbean in response to[5] its discontent over U.S. positioning of naval forces in the Black Sea during the Georgian Civil war launched by Russian-backed separatists in South Ossetia and

Abkhazia. In October 2013[6], Russia again sent Tu-160s to the region as the U.S. and European Union pressured Russia over its aid to Russian militias seizing control of Ukraine's Donbass region.[7] Although Russian arms sales to Venezuela dropped off remarkedly in the mid-2010s as the later ran out of money to pay for them, in 2019, Russia again sent Tu-160s to Venezuela[8] (along with an aircraft-load of parts to ensure they didn't get stuck there), as well as S-300 air defense systems[9], Wagner group mercenary forces[10], military maintainers and trainers[11] to its ally, to show support on the cheap (without providing significant new hardware) to the Maduro regime. During 2022 and 2023, as the U.S. sought to rally international opinion against Russia for its unprovoked invasion of the Ukraine, Russia predictably reached out to its anti-U.S. allies in Latin America—Cuba[12], Venezuela[13], and Nicaragua[14], to declare support for Russia and expanded military cooperation. With the exception of minor gestures, such as a modestly expanded agreement for military exchanges with Nicaragua[15] in 2022, and the participation of Russians in a small sharpshooter exercise in Venezuela[16] in 2023, such Russian events were generally heaver on symbolism than substance.

As with prior periodic Russian deployments to the region, the June 2024 transit of four Russian Naval vessels to Cuba was widely represented in the press as Moscow expressing discontent with the Biden Administration's authorization of the use of U.S. supplied weapons to strike targets in Russian territory.[17] Still, the weeks required by Russia to have planned and executed the mission means that the decision to send the flotilla was probably made well before the "U.S. provocation" it was supposedly responding to.

For the general public, the transit of the aging Russian missile frigate Admiral Gorshkov[18] and the nuclear-powered submarine Kazan[19], including their missile drills[20] off the U.S. East Coast, and their arrival in Havana Harbor[21], may have seemed intimidating. The shadowing of the Russian warships[22] in route by at least two U.S. destroyers, a Canadian frigate, and multiple U.S. and Canadian maritime patrol aircraft[23], reflected the U.S. ability and duty to monitor the threat, however limited.

Beyond the optics of the Russian activities and the necessary response however, for serious military analysts and policymakers, Russia's actions arguably sent very different messages. The inclusion of a Project 5757 rescue tug[24], while not uncommon, highlighted Russia's concerns over one of its aging ships breaking down during the journey, as well as its lack of confidence in its Cuban and Venezuelan partners to fix it, if that occurred. In addition, Russia's sending of a frigate as its lead ship, by contrast to the much larger destroyer Peter the Great[25] that it sent in 2008, highlighted the constraints in the availability of its forces. Indeed, at a time in which Russian naval forces have performed embarrassingly poorly in the Black Sea, including the April 2022 sinking of its flagship Moskva[26] by improvised Ukrainian sea drones[27], Russia diversion of four vessels to the Western Hemisphere, possibly for months to participate in announced "worldwide naval exercises"[28] in the fall, arguably undercuts its effort in its war against Ukraine, where it would appear it needs all the help that it can get. Indeed, the relatively new frigate Admiral Gorshkov, which will now be tied up in the

Caribbean, and thus unavailable for operations against Ukraine or to defend the Russian homeland, is only one of three in its class.[29]

Further adding to the military non-logic, Russia has diverted those forces to relatively stationary and indefensible positions close to the U.S., in which their operations and electronic signatures, including that of its new Yasen-M class submarine[30], can be closely observed with far greater convenience by their U.S. and Canadian counterparts.

Everything about the Russian deployment suggests that the considerations of military professionals are not prevailing in Putin's choices about the use of military forces. Indeed, even the symbolism was bad. While highlighting its aging, numerically limited forces and the unreliability of its allies for maintenance, Russia's deployment still managed to remind the entirety of democratic governments in the hemisphere, including leftist regimes in Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil, that Russia, together with its authoritarian local partners Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua, present a threat to security in the region.

While not necessarily deliberate, the extended presence of Russian military ships in the Caribbean becomes more ominous in the context of Venezuelan national elections, scheduled for July 28.[31] The opposition candidate, Edmundo Gonzalez, currently leads Venezuela's autocratic head, Nicholas Maduro, by more than 50 points[32] in some polls. The regime has already found a pretext in May 2024 to exclude European election observers.[33] In previous elections, he has demonstrated its capability to go "all out" in rigging elections.[34]

The Maduro regime's demonstrated tactics include leveraging the tools of the state and media to dominate the messaging space, "bribing" supporters with government handouts[35], disqualifying opposition voters from the rolls and resurrecting the dead to vote for the regime, using pro-regime "colectivos"[36] and criminal groups to make polling places in opposition-friendly areas hard to access[37], robbing and stuffing ballot boxes, and possibly even manipulating the electronic voting machines[38], which the regime controls.

If the opposition disadvantage is so great that Maduro believes he cannot credibly rob the election, however, his logical fallback is to engineer a major security crisis that demands its cancellation or invalidation. His most logical vehicle to do so, is through military action in Essequibo, the oil and mineral rich territory he claims from neighboring Guyana.

Maduro has already unilaterally fabricated a crisis[39] where there was none through the holding of a "referendum"[40] in violation of the order of the International Court of Justice[41], which is currently attempting to peacefully decide the case, then declaring Essequibo part of Venezuela, changing national maps[42], creating a new Venezuelan military district asserting control over it, plus new oil and minerals zones[43], effectively demanding extortion payments from foreign entities operating there with the permission of the Guyanese government. The Venezuelan military has already also bolstered capabilities for projecting military forces into

Guyana, including improving a military airstrip[44] near the region, expanding military facilities on Ankoko Island and Punto Barima[45] adjacent to the territory, and building a bridge[46] for rapidly crossing a river into it.

Given that Guyana's key source of income are the oil platforms operating on or near the waters covered by the Venezuelan claims, it is ominous that the Venezuelan Navy has acquired Iranian Zolfaghar fast attack boats[47] armed with Chinese anti-ship missiles, and Venezuelan naval personnel have reportedly trained in Iran, near Bandar Abas, in the type of underwater demolition[48] that could wreak havoc on the offshore oil platforms of companies like Exxon. Even more ominously, the Maduro regime has already sought to charge Venezuelan opposition members with treason[49] involving supposed collusion with Guyana over Essequibo.

If the Maduro government indeed fabricates a military crisis over the Essequibo region to cancel or annul the election, he may be counting on the presence of Russian warships to complicate any U.S. defense of the vastly outmatched Guyana Defense Force.[50] Indeed, the specter of a broader international crisis, with a choreographed Russian escalation against NATO in Ukraine may be exactly what Maduro is counting on. It is entirely too easy to imagine how such a crisis might unfold to Maduro's advantage in the region. As fighting supposedly initiated by Guyana, or a fabricated "terrorist attack" "obliged" Venezuela to occupy Essequibo, Colombian President Gustavo Petro would refuse to allow U.S. military operations in his country in the name of "total peace," while CELAC met in special session to condemn "outside intervention," and the Chinese, and Luis Ignacio "Lula" de Silva of Brazil rushed in with proposals to cease hostilities with Venezuela in control of the territory--the Nobel Peace Price finally in Lula's sights. Maduro, meanwhile, would present "conclusive" evidence of "Yanquii" collusion with the Venezuelan opposition to rig elections, destabilize Venezuela, and "hand over" Essequibo to Guyana, declaring that elections in his country would unfortunately have to wait.

Not every nefarious machination that can be imagined of Maduro and his Chavista co-conspirators is necessarily happening or will happen. Still, if Russia's extended presence is inadvertently, or deliberately, part of a Maduro plan to fabricate an international crisis to postpone the July 28 elections, the time for planning to mitigate the consequences, including hard conversations with the Russians, as well as U.S. partners and stakeholders in the region about response options, should begin now.

About the author

Dr. Evan Ellis is a research professor of Latin American Studies at the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, with a focus on the region's relationships with China and other non-Western Hemisphere actors, as well as transnational organized crime and populism in the region. Dr. Ellis has published over 500 works, including five books. During 2019-2020, Dr. Ellis

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