

US escalates threat of military intervention in Venezuela

By Bill Van Auken
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In the wake of Tuesday's stillborn coup called by the US-backed and self-proclaimed "interim president" Juan Guaidó, the Trump administration has escalated its threats of a direct military intervention to realize its aim of regime change in Venezuela.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo Wednesday told the Fox Business Network that US "military action is possible."

"If that's what's required, that's what the United States will do," Pompeo stated.

The secretary of state's language was the most direct and belligerent used by the US administration since its regime-change operation kicked off last January with Guaidó swearing himself in after being assured of US support by Vice President Mike Pence. The stunt was immediately followed by Washington's recognition of the previously unknown right-wing politician as the "legitimate" ruler of Venezuela.

While since then, Trump administration officials have incessantly declared that "all options are on the table." Pompeo's statement spells this threat out in no uncertain terms. His threat came as the US national security council, including himself, acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford, and National Security Advisor John Bolton, prepared to meet at the White House Wednesday afternoon in what amounted to a war council on Venezuela.

Shanahan canceled a planned trip to Europe to remain in Washington to discuss the crisis besetting Washington's regime-change operation.

Tuesday's fiasco of a coup attempt was followed Wednesday by reduced crowds at what Guaidó had predicted would be the biggest demonstration in the country's history. The numbers who turned out for a protest held in the wealthier area of eastern Caracas were overshadowed by a larger May Day rally organized by the government of President Nicolas Maduro.

Addressing the crowd early Wednesday evening, Maduro charged that those who had launched the abortive coup on Tuesday "want to lead us into a civil war." He pointed to the deployment of two tanks and machine-guns by the handful of troops that joined Guaidó and Leopoldo Lopez, the leader of the right-wing Voluntad Popular party who had escaped house arrest to join the operation.

Before the day was out, Lopez had sought refuge first in the embassy of Chile and then in that of Spain. Some 25 of the soldiers who turned out for the coup attempt sought protection in

the Brazilian embassy. A roughly equal number had faded away as the nature of the operation became clear to them, reporting that they had been awakened at 3 a.m. and told to grab their rifles and turn out for an event where they were to be decorated with medals.

"What would have happened if we responded with tanks?" Maduro asked the crowd. "A massacre between Venezuelans. And in Washington it would have been celebrated, and they would have ordered an invasion."

After proclaiming on Tuesday that the military was supporting his "Operación Libertad," Guaidó called upon his followers to join him in an assault on the La Carlota Air Base, located near the wealthy right-wing stronghold of Altamira.

Throughout Tuesday's events in Venezuela, the US media operated as an undisguised instrument of US imperialist propaganda, repeating unsubstantiated and highly suspect claims of US government officials as fact, cheering on the possibility of a military overthrow of the Venezuelan government and attempting to portray the government's dispersal of right-wing protesters as dictatorial repression.

The reality is that not a single person was killed in Tuesday's confrontations at La Carlota, in which right-wing protesters, some of them armed with pistols, succeeded in knocking down the gate to the air base, but were turned back with tear gas and rubber bullets.

One can only imagine what the response would be if an attempt were made by armed demonstrators to storm an air base in the United States.

In his statements on Wednesday, Guaidó said that he would support an escalating wave of strikes against the government leading to a nationwide general strike. He denounced the government's announcement of a salary hike as inadequate given the rate of inflation.

The hypocrisy of the political operative of Voluntad Popular and asset of the CIA posturing as a defender of the Venezuelan working class is breathtaking. After swearing himself in as "interim president," Guaidó spelled out his own economic program in his so-called "Plan País" (plan for the country), which calls for the wholesale privatization of state enterprises, opening up, in particular, Venezuela's oil reserves, the largest in the world, to unfettered exploitation by US-based energy conglomerates. It also called for Venezuela's submission to a brutal IMF austerity plan.

With the failure of the brazen provocation launched on Tuesday,

US officials sought to blame Cuban and Russian influence for impeding Washington's regime change operation. Pompeo claimed, without providing a shred of evidence, that Maduro had been set to board a plane for Havana, but had been persuaded by Moscow to stay in place. National Security Advisor Bolton insisted that Cuban military and intelligence operatives were propping up Maduro and controlling the Venezuelan military.

Moscow, Bolton said, is "using the Cubans" to achieve its aims. "They would love to have effective control over a country in this hemisphere," he said, adding that this was the reason the Trump administration was "dusting off" the Monroe Doctrine, the 19th century canon of US foreign policy used to justify Washington's unrestricted domination of the hemisphere, along with a succession of US invasions, CIA-orchestrated coups and support for fascist military dictatorships.

Pompeo on Wednesday spoke by telephone with his Russian counterpart, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

Russia's Foreign Ministry said that Lavrov told Pompeo that Washington's threats of military intervention constituted a "gross violation of international law" and that its "destructive influence has nothing to do with democracy," but rather constituted "an intervention into the internal affairs of Venezuela." A continuation of Washington's "aggressive steps," he said, would have "the most serious consequences."

A State Department spokesman said that Pompeo had told Lavrov that Russia's role was "destabilizing for Venezuela and for the bilateral relationship between the United States and Russia."

His remarks echoed the earlier defense by Bolton of Washington's domination over its "own backyard." The national security adviser told reporters: "This is our hemisphere. It's not where the Russians ought to be interfering. This is a mistake on their part. It's not going to lead to an improvement of relations." This from a government that carries out ceaseless "interference," "color revolutions" and fascist-led coups in the former republics of the Soviet Union.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova added on Wednesday that Washington was using "fake news as part of an information war."

The Cuban government, meanwhile, repudiated US claims that tens of thousands of Cuban security forces are controlling the Venezuelan government as a pure fabrication. "There are no Cuban military operations or troops in Venezuela," Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel tweeted. "We call upon the international community to stop this dangerous escalation of aggression and to preserve peace. Enough with the lies."

Trump threatened on Tuesday to impose a "total embargo" on Cuba. His administration has already imposed new sanctions on the island, restricting remittances and tourism. Today, it is allowing Title III of the Helms-Burton Act, which codified the US blockade of Cuba, to go into effect for the first time since it was signed into law in 1996. It allows US corporations and Cuban-American citizens to launch lawsuits involving billions of dollars against foreign corporations—mostly European, Chinese and Canadian—carrying out business in Cuba involving properties that were expropriated following the 1959 revolution led by Fidel

Castro.

The abject failure of Tuesday's call by Guaidó for a military uprising follows the similar fiasco of the February 23 attempt to force trucks supposedly carrying US aid across the Colombia-Venezuelan border, a stunt that was also supposed to trigger a military revolt against the Maduro government.

What becomes ever clearer is that the right-wing opposition, representing the interests of Venezuela's traditional ruling oligarchy, has no broad base of popular support, despite the mass discontent with the increasingly abysmal social conditions created by punishing US sanctions and the Maduro government's defense of capitalist property relations and the interests of finance capital in Venezuela.

These failures will only intensify US aggression, which is driven by the crisis of US capitalism and its global drive to assert its hegemony by military means against its rivals, Russia and particularly China, which have increasingly challenged Washington's former domination over Latin America.

This policy of Yankee imperialist aggression enjoys the support of both the Republican and Democratic parties.

Leading Republicans have made increasingly bellicose statements, with Senator Rick Scott of Florida calling for US troops to be "pre-positioned" for intervention in Venezuela, and Florida Congressman Mario Díaz-Balart comparing Venezuela to the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and suggesting that Moscow has already deployed nuclear weapons in the South American country.

Meanwhile, Joe Biden, the former vice president and current front-runner for the Democratic nomination in 2020, tweeted his support for a coup on Tuesday, stating, "The violence in Venezuela today against peaceful protesters is criminal" and that the US "must stand with the National Assembly & Guaidó in their efforts to restore democracy."

Similarly, Senator Dick Durbin, the second-highest-ranking Democrat in the US Senate, took to the Senate floor to express his hope that Tuesday would be "a day of reckoning" in the attempt to "move forward with regime change." He said that he "supported" and "applauded" the Trump administration for its policy of aggression in Venezuela.

The so-called lefts of the Democratic Party, including Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, have maintained a discreet silence on the criminal US intervention in the Latin American country.

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