



National Bolivarian Armed Forces of Venezuela, (Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana) |
Image: Al Jazeera

As a purely military force, the Venezuelan armed forces remain among Latin America's most potent. While not immune to the crisis plaguing the country, they retain capabilities beyond those of their neighbours and are still seen as important enough by the beleaguered Maduro government to corner sufficient funds to keep their major systems operational. - Sanjay Badri-Maharaj*

The National Bolivarian Armed Forces of [Venezuela](#), (Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana) as the Venezuelan armed forces are now styled, are among the largest and best equipped in Latin America. However, it has not been immune to the political and economic crises plaguing the country and is now increasingly suffering from the impact of food shortages. Desertions are increasing with the attendant deleterious effect on discipline. Thus far, the military has remained loyal to the Maduro government but it is an open question as to how long this loyalty will last.

It should be noted that the armed forces have, in the main, not been deployed to deal with civil unrest - the exception being the National Guard. The country's police forces have borne the brunt of the unrest and have taken quite heavy casualties in the process owing to a shortage of protective gear, leading to a spate of resignations.

The Armed Forces - An Overview

The Venezuelan armed forces are divided into six service branches, the Army, Navy, Air Force, National Guard, National Reserve and the Territorial Guard. The latter two are relatively new and show the heightened emphasis that Venezuela places on its reserve forces. The regular armed forces, namely the Army, Navy, Air Force and National Guard serve under the Strategic Operational Command (Comando Estratégico Operacional) while

the National Reserve and the Territorial Guard will serve under the National Militia General Command (Comando General de la Milicia Nacional). It should also be noted that the National Guard is primarily an internal security force deployed in support of the police and which has seen extensive action in Venezuela's ongoing unrest.

Venezuela has traditionally sourced its military equipment from the United States and Western Europe. This has changed dramatically in the last decade with Russia and, to a lesser extent, China, becoming the principal supplier of weaponry to the Venezuelan armed forces.

Army

The Venezuelan Army (Fuerzas Terrestres or Ejército), is made up today of roughly 130,000 troops (including conscripts). It is divided into 4 main commands and 6 divisions - 3 infantry, one armoured, one jungle infantry division and one mechanized cavalry division. There are a number of independent units and supporting arms such as the Corps of Engineers and army aviation which report directly to Venezuelan Army Headquarters.

The army has one of the largest armoured forces in Latin America with 192 T-72B1V and 84 AMX-30 tanks forming the core of its strength. These are supported by three dozen AMX-13 and 78 Scorpion light tanks and a large force of BMP-3 and BTR-80 armoured personnel carriers. Artillery support is provided by a large inventory of Oto-Melara M-56 105mm howitzers with smaller numbers of M-101 105mm and M-114 155mm howitzers. A substantial force of self-propelled artillery, spearheaded by 48 2S19 152mm systems and augmented by a force of self-propelled 120mm mortars.

One feature of the Venezuelan army is the strength of its Air Defense Artillery Brigades which are linked to the Venezuelan Air Force's Air Defence Forces Command, both reporting directly to the Operational Strategic Command. Venezuela's force of S-300VMs, Buk-M2 and Pechora SAMs is unmatched within the region. The army aviation forces operate at least 10 Mi-35 attack helicopters and 19 Mi-17 transports alongside a number of Bell variants.

It should be noted that it is unclear as to how often Venezuela conducts division or even brigade-level exercises. In recent times, for example, exercises seemed to be aimed at rallying loyalist support to the regime by conjuring an invasion scare. Exercises seem to last

for relatively short periods of time with one in 2016, heralded as the largest in Venezuela's history, lasting only two days.

Navy

The Venezuelan Navy (Fuerzas Navales or Armada Bolivariana) and Marines (Infanteria de Marina) have a strength of some 60,000 personnel including 12,000 Marines and 600 personnel in the Naval Aviation. The Naval Operations Command is composed of the Fleet Forces Command, Riverline Command, Naval Aviation Command, Coast Guard Command and the Marine Division. Operationally, the country is divided into two Naval zones; Western Naval Zone (HQ: Punto Fijo) and Eastern Naval Area (HQ: Carupano). Three more zones are planned but have not yet been made operational: Central Naval Area (HQ: Puerto Cabello), Atlantic (HQ: Güiría) and South (HQ: Caicara Orinoco).



The new Caricare PG-52, made 100% in Venezuela (Elis Manzanares/Notitarde) | Image: ELIS MANZANARES

The naval inventory is relatively modest with two submarines, three frigates and eight offshore patrol vessels forming the backbone of the fleet. Three more frigates are currently non-operational and it is doubtful as to whether they will ever be returned to service.

Air Force

The Venezuelan Air Force (Fuerzas Aérea Venezolana or Aviación Militar) has over a hundred combat capable aircraft spearheaded by 23 Su-30MK2 supplied by Russia. While some fourteen F-16A and three F-16B are still nominally on strength, it is estimated that only between six and ten are fully operational. Previously, the FAV operated a substantial force of Mirage 5/50s and CF/NF-5s - some fifty aircraft in total. While the CF/NF-5s were replaced by Su-30s, the Mirages were phased out in 2013 without replacement. Transport assets include 5 C-130 and 8 Y-8 plus a number of light liaison aircraft. Helicopters include a handful of AS.332 and ten Mi-17 helicopters.



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National Guard

The National Guard of Venezuela (Fuerzas Armadas de Cooperacion or Guardia Nacional), is a force that combines military and police functions but also possesses an air support command and a coastal surveillance command. With roughly 70,000 troops, it is organized into 9 regional commands (division size) and 24 state level zone commands of brigade size. The National Guard operates over six hundred Chinese made VN4 armoured personnel carriers which have seen extensive service in the suppression of anti-government protests. The National Guard has over fifteen aircraft on strength and its coastal surveillance command operates a force of several dozen vessels, mainly speedboats.

National Militia

The National Bolivarian Militia is very much a post-Chavez creation and is ostensibly intended to serve as a trained reserve to augment the armed forces. In theory, the militia has some 400,000, perhaps as high as 500,000 members but ambitious plans exist for the force to grow to a strength of over a million. Arms observed appear to be an eclectic mix of obsolete Moisin Nagant rifles, ex-military FN-FALs and Kalashnikovs. It is also of interest that the members of the militia include a disproportionate number of aged citizens and even of the younger ones, physical fitness is variable.

How Capable is the Venezuelan Military

The Venezuelan armed forces are undoubtedly very well-equipped by regional standards. Training standards are harder to gauge but the Venezuelan military cannot be disregarded or dismissed as either impotent or incompetent. Following the intemperate utterances of President Trump that the United States was considering a range of options against Venezuela, "including a possible military option if necessary", the Venezuelan armed forces have conducted a number of exercises aimed at ostensibly resisting an American "invasion".

Against regional potentates such as Colombia and Brazil, Venezuela would seem to be comfortably placed to deter any attack with neither country being able to overcome the combination of numbers and technology currently possessed by the Venezuelan armed

forces without sustaining considerable losses. It should be noted that neither Brazil nor Colombia has expressed any intention to militarily intervene in Venezuela, though the former did indicate it would do so in support of Guyana should Venezuela take military action against that country.

Against a more advanced enemy such as the United States - unlikely though that country's intervention might be - would inevitably prove a much sterner test for Venezuela. Potent assets such as its S-300VM and BukM2 SAMs and Su-30 fighters are individually very effective but it is not known how well integrated they are into an effective air defence network and whether operator training is of a sufficiently high standard.

However, it should be noted that unlike previous US military actions in Grenada and Panama, the Venezuelan military is larger and more potent. In addition, concentrating US forces in the theatre would prove to be somewhat more difficult as against their operations against Serbia and Iraq owing to the lack of regional military infrastructure capable of supporting a large US ground forces presence. That, of course, presumes that neighbouring countries will facilitate such a presence, which is unlikely.

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A Military Coup? - Wishful Thinking

Both the Chavez and [Maduro](#) governments have taken great care to subvert the military high command. Indeed, one might argue that the Bolivarian government is an accommodation between civilian "revolutionaries" and the military. There was a co-opting of the military into the government which ignored a growing nexus with narcotics-traffickers. President Maduro took things even further by placing military officers in charge of food distribution to new oil and mining projects. Of the thirty-two members of Cabinet, thirteen are from the military and of twenty "Chavista" governors, eleven are military personnel. In a real sense, the Maduro administration is a civil-military partnership with elites from both sides reaping benefits despite the current chaos.

The High Command of the Venezuelan army is apparently loyal to the Maduro government. In such circumstances the threat to the government may not be found among the members of the General Staff but rather among the so-called "Comacates" - junior and mid-level officers ranging from Lieutenants to Colonels (Hugo Chavez himself was a Lt. Colonel of

Paratroopers when he launched the attempted coup known as Operation Zamora in 1992). Less well-paid than the senior officers, with the attendant privations caused by the country's economic crisis, and with army units now supporting the police and Guardia Nacional de Venezuela internal security troops, the loyalty of the armed forces may become severely tested as they face the brunt of public fury while at the same time facing appeals from the opposition not to obey "illegitimate orders". So far no overt signs of dissent are forthcoming though it appears that junior officers and non-commissioned officers are fully aware of the dilemma that they face.



Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro watching a military parade during Army Day celebrations at Fort Tiuna in Caracas, Venezuela.

However, even if there was a desire to overthrow the Maduro government, coup plotters would be wary of Chavez's failed attempt in 1992 and the attempt against Chavez in 2002 when it became clear that the ringleaders had overestimated both their military support as well as the extent to which they might be resisted. To this end, the role of the National Bolivarian Militia of Venezuela has to be considered. To these must be added the well-trained operatives of the Bolivarian National Intelligence Service (Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional, SEBIN) which has shown itself to be highly proficient at surveillance of opponents of the regime.

Into this mix is a contingent of Cuban troops operating in Venezuela. The Secretary-General of the Organization of American States, Luis Almagro, suggested as many as 15,000 Cubans are in Venezuela although it is very unlikely that these are all military personnel. It is of interest, however, that Cuban Joaquín Quintas Solá General de Cuerpo de Ejército and a veteran of the South African Border War was present at Venezuela's Zamora 200 military exercises which were ostensibly to prepare for an "imperialist invasion.

Yet, in spite of these forces ranged against them, a determined effort on the part of Venezuela's armed forces, would overcome any practical resistance that the militia, SEBIN and the Cuban contingent might be able to offer. This is especially true since the militia's military potential may be severely overestimated with some reports suggesting only 10,000 to 20,000 members are deemed to be combat ready. Nonetheless, it is likely that any coup attempt, no matter how well supported, will be met with armed resistance with the inevitable loss of life. It should be noted that the Venezuelan armed forces have not successfully staged a coup d'état since 1958 - curiously enough in alliance with the civilian opposition to removing a dictator.

Conclusion

The Venezuelan armed forces are in an unenviable position. Their senior officers are now part of the ruling elite, though cautious to ensure that little blame for the Maduro government's missteps attaches to them. The lower-ranks, however, are facing pressures regarding their rations, remuneration and resources allocated to their physical well-being. Nonetheless, as a purely military force, the Venezuelan armed forces remain among Latin America's most potent. While not immune to the crisis plaguing the country, they retain capabilities beyond those of their neighbours and are still seen as important enough by the beleaguered Maduro government to corner sufficient funds to keep their major systems operational.

As the country's police and other internal security forces are placed under pressure by continuing unrest, the Venezuelan army may find itself being called upon to play an increasingly active role in containing civil unrest. This could place additional strains upon the lower ranks who will inevitably find themselves confronting kith and kin. This will have a deleterious effect on already shaky morale and discipline. While a military coup is unlikely, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that should a united opposition emerge, supported by effective international sanctions and isolation, the military might adopt a position of political neutrality so as to preserve influence with any successor to the Maduro administration while simultaneously not destroying its cozy and mutually beneficial relationship with the current regime.



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