

On Wednesday, Venezuela's military attaché to the United Nations (UN) Colonel Pedro Chirinos in [a video message](#) recognized opposition leader Juan Guaido as the interim president of Venezuela. This is the second incident after last month's similar support given to Guaido by [Venezuela's military attaché](#) to the US.

Even though the UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric has [mentioned](#) that no such changes were communicated by Venezuela's UN mission, it does amplify the increasing support to Guaido. Military support is necessary for Guaido to turn the tide against Maduro.

Background

To understand the influence of the military in Venezuelan politics, we need to go 60 years back. In 1958, the Venezuelan dictator Marcos Perez Jimenez is overthrown by a civil-military movement. During the initial phases of the movement, there was limited support from military personnel. But eventually, it was the military which was successful in a coup and established the transition government till successful conduction of democratic elections.

In the 1900s, the oil in Venezuela was explored by several foreign oil companies such as the Venezuelan Oilfield Exploration Company, Carribean Petroleum Company and Royal Dutch-Shell Oil Company. Initially, the exploration and production of oil were sluggish. But the trigger for Venezuelan oil production came during the First World War. Later on, Venezuela became one of the most important oil-producing countries in the world. And in World War II, Venezuela was considered the most secure oil provider to the United States (US). With an increase in oil supplies from Middle Eastern countries and significant demand in the US, the oil prices continued increasing from 1945-50. Due to the oversupply of oil and its decreasing demand, the oil prices plummeted in the 1950s. To control global oil production and pricing, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) was formed in 1960 by five countries including Venezuela.

In the 1960s, the Venezuelan economy started gaining traction through oil revenues. But the real jump came during the oil embargo of 1973. For the next 7 years, the Venezuelan economy was booming and its president Carlos Andres Perez wanted to use the oil profits to increase income and remove poverty. This was also the period in which the oil industry was nationalized in Venezuela. But, the subsequent oil price dip in 1980 pushed Venezuela into debt. As the oil industry was nationalised, Petroleos de Venezuela S.A (PDVSA) was born. The company was responsible for planning, coordinating and supervising the oil industry in Venezuela. The company bought Citgo which controls 20 per cent of the gasoline market in

the United States in 1986. And around 54 per cent of Venezuelan oil was exported to the United States and Canada. In this booming period, the military was given the responsibility to protect the oil-producing regions and monitor the export of oil. And with rampant corruption in place in the country, these military officials became the main beneficiaries.

In 1998, Hugo Chavez was elected as the President of Venezuela after President Perez was impeached on corruption charges. Chavez was himself a military officer who knew the insides of the Venezuelan military. So, the overwhelming support from the local populous and military ranks made the way for Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution. This involves having a new constitution, socialist and populist policies funded by high oil prices. Chavez was always against US policies in Latin America. He once said, "America wants to keep all the good things in the world for itself. But we will not let them do it." After the 2002 coup attempt, Chavez became one of the most vocal Latin American leaders against the United States foreign policy. After the 2007 nationalisation drive, the Venezuelan government seized the operations of Orinoco Belt which was operated by two US oil companies. Since 2008, Venezuela has increased its military, economic and telecommunications cooperation with Russian and Chinese. The United States considers both of these countries as its rivals, who would go to any extremes to thwart them.

Humanitarian Crisis

The current economic and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela is the result of President Maduro's economic and political policies. It has resulted in the high inflation rates, huge currency devaluation, and colossal mismanagement of the country's resources. Around 25 per cent of the population has already fled to nearby Latin America countries like Colombia, Brazil etc. Further, the last year's controversial elections and his growing unpopularity have led to the growth of opposition in the country. During the Chavez Presidency, it was the military which supported him when the 2002 coup was attempted. Similarly, Maduro is following the same path but he is missing the populous support which the charismatic leader Hugo Chavez commanded.

Another Proxy war?



Protest against President Trump over Venezuela Crisis/Image: AFP

Overall, Venezuela's political leadership has never tried to diversify its economy. Its overdependence on oil profits has led the country into chaos. Both the leaders are enticing military generals to protect their backs. But with US sanctions in place, the leverage Maduro has is diminishing which may lead to unrest among the military ranks. This would provide the necessary support to Guaido and severely weaken Maduro's control over the regime. Further, the western countries support to recognise opposition leader Guaido as president is two-fold: the first one is to immediately address the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela and second is to counter the growing influence of Iran, China and Russia in the country. It would be interesting to see on Saturday how Mr Guaido brings in foreign aid to Venezuela as Maduro shuts down the border. And the military response who are guarding these borders will have a decisive role in the country's future. Once again, the global geopolitical power play has consolidated its playground in Venezuela.

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