



Venezuela's Military Enigma

Crisis Group Latin America Briefing N°39

Caracas/Brussels, 16 September 2019

What's new? After months of political struggle and the failure of the Venezuelan opposition and its international allies to oust Nicolás Maduro's government, both sides recognise the critical importance of the country's armed forces in determining the balance of power and the fate of efforts to achieve a peaceful settlement.

Why does it matter? Military support is vital to Maduro's survival, and will be essential to Venezuela's stability in the event of a political transition. While talks between government and opposition have made faltering progress without military participation, the resilience of any eventual agreement will depend to a large degree on senior officers' consent.

What should be done? The top brass's cohesion should persuade the opposition to stop trying to splinter the military, but it should not blind the government to discontent in the barracks. If negotiations are revived, the armed forces should participate in the design of transitional power arrangements affecting their interests and commit to future stabilisation.

I. Overview

In the bruising contest for power in Venezuela, the armed forces' loyalties will be a decisive battleground. The high command continues to offer frequent vocal support for President Nicolás Maduro's government. The opposition, led by Juan Guaidó, who has asserted a claim to the interim presidency backed by the U.S. and numerous Latin American states, has sought since January to fracture that support so as to force Maduro from office and stage fresh elections. This plan has succeeded in exposing the depths of discontent in the military's rank and file but not in its primary goal. Maduro remains in place, despite a tremendous economic contraction, escalating U.S. sanctions and regional diplomatic isolation.

The high command's protestations notwithstanding, the armed forces' intentions are opaque. Their conflicting duties and competing factions make it uncertain just how far they would allow the country's economy or its internal security to fall toward utter collapse. Nor is it clear under what circumstances they might back a negotiated settlement or what role they might play in that process.

The internationally sponsored talks about a brokered political transition have included civilians close to both Maduro and Guaidó – but no one to represent the armed forces as an institution. The fact that the government delegation does not include the military is significant, given the extent of its political and economic clout

in the country and its clear interest in protecting the prerogatives it has obtained. The military is not only the most obvious spoiler of a transition but also the only actor that can safeguard a handover of power from the numerous non-state armed groups that might also wish to thwart it. Venezuela's best shot at a peaceful post-Maduro future is to ensure that the armed forces have a stake and a say in the shape of a transition sooner rather than later.

II. The Heart of Chavismo?

The most recent effort to sever the military's attachment to Maduro took place on 30 April, when Guaidó and his mentor Leopoldo López, whom state security police sprung from house arrest for the occasion, led an abortive civic and military uprising in Caracas. Only a small number of low-ranking soldiers, along with one more significant figure, General Manuel Ricardo Christopher Figuera, who was then head of the intelligence service SEBIN, answered Guaidó's call to rebel. According to Christopher, now in U.S. exile, armed forces chief General Vladimir Padrino López knew of the plot, though whether he approved it is unknown.¹ It remains a mystery as well whether the top brass would be willing to entertain such a move in the future. Maduro and his predecessor, the late president and former army lieutenant colonel Hugo Chávez, have striven to ensure that they will not.

For two decades, the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (FANB) has lain at the core of the revolutionary credo of "civilian-military union" in Venezuela. Chávez assured the military of an enhanced role in politics and the economy under the terms of the 1999 constitution. He also enforced loyalty to *chavismo*, as his political doctrine is known, in army barracks, even though the same constitution stipulated that the military were to embrace no "political militancy".² He cemented senior officers' support for the government – which had seeped away in the run-up to the failed 2002 coup – by steadily increasing the upper ranks' privileges. Maduro, who took over in 2013 after Chávez died, added still more perks.³ The top brass now controls swathes of the economy, occupies senior political and administrative positions, and oversees the country's internal security (see Sections III and IV below).

Guaidó first sought to switch the military's allegiance through public offers of amnesty for past crimes and guarantees of future employment to those officers willing to contribute "to the reestablishment of democratic order", as he put it in January.⁴ The approach aimed to lure individual commanders into changing sides rather than engaging the military as a whole in a political transition. Faced with repeated

¹ Anthony Faiola, "Maduro's ex-spy chief lands in U.S. armed with allegations against Venezuelan government", *Washington Post*, 24 June 2019.

² Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Article 330, 1999.

³ For an overview of the armed forces' role in the years of *chavismo*, see Francine Jácome, "Los militares en la política y la economía de Venezuela", *Nueva Sociedad*, vol. 274 (March-April 2018).

⁴ Joe Parkin Daniels, "Venezuelan security forces offered amnesty if they defect to opposition", *The Guardian*, 28 January 2019. In May, Leopoldo López, leader of Guaidó's party, insisted on the armed forces' need for "certainty" that there will be "no persecution of any sort" in the event of Maduro's exit and fresh elections. "Maduro no puede confiar ni en quien le sirve el café: Leopoldo López", *El Tiempo*, 3 May 2019.

failures and Padrino López's apparent fidelity to Maduro, Guaidó has modified this stance slightly. He indicated recently that he would be happy to sit down with the military to "talk about the transition and forge a common position".⁵ Hardliners in the opposition camp still insist, however, that the armed forces accept the opposition's political goals, first and foremost Maduro's immediate exit from power. They are unwilling to countenance senior commanders' economic and political powers, and they openly call for a foreign military intervention to bring down the "ruling narco-state".⁶

At the same time, the military's role in negotiations to resolve Venezuela's battle for power remains ill defined. Beginning in May, Norway has chaired talks between the two sides' representatives. The Oslo talks continued in July in Barbados, only for the government to suspend them in early August after the U.S. announced more stringent economic and financial sanctions.⁷ The opposition for its part announced on 15 September that the Barbados talks were over, without closing the door entirely on future negotiations.⁸ So far, the negotiations have included no direct representation from either the Trump administration or the Venezuelan armed forces, though it is clear to both government and opposition camps that each of these actors has the clout either to help forge a settlement or to sabotage any deal.⁹

Recent events have highlighted the need for the Venezuelan military to endorse any putative peace deal as the threat posed by non-state groups in the country has risen. Stabilising the country during and after a transition will require the demobilisation of numerous heavily armed outfits, including pro-government *colectivos*, Colombian guerrillas from the National Liberation Army (ELN) and dissidents from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), as well as powerful home-grown criminal organisations known as *sindicatos*. The situation became even more complicated and dangerous with the announcement on 29 August that a number of former FARC guerrilla leaders were reneging on the peace agreement with the Colombian government.¹⁰ Colombia's President Iván Duque accused Maduro of harbouring and encouraging the insurgents, and has taken his complaint to the Organization of American States while saying he would also present it to the UN.¹¹ The Venezuelan

⁵ Maru Morales and Claudia Smolansky, "Guaidó: Tenemos a militares en puestos de comando trabajando por la Operación Libertad", *Crónica Uno*, 9 June 2019.

⁶ "María Corina Machado y Antonio Ledezma aseguraron que la fuerza es la única opción para terminar con la dictadura de Maduro", *Infobae*, 12 June 2019.

⁷ Anatoly Kurmanaev, "Venezuela's leader suspends talks with opposition", *The New York Times*, 8 August 2019.

⁸ "Mensaje del Gobierno Legítimo de Venezuela al pueblo, la Fuerza Armada nacional y la comunidad internacional tras el abandono de la negociación por parte de la dictadura", "President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela's Office", 15 September 2019.

⁹ Alejandra Arredondo, "Quién es quién en los equipos negociadores venezolanos en Barbados", *VOA*, 15 July 2019. European and U.S. diplomats asserted that the Venezuelan government was not prepared to include military representatives in the negotiating team. Crisis Group interviews, August 2019.

¹⁰ "Colombia ex-FARC rebel Iván Márquez issues call to arms", *BBC*, 29 August 2019.

¹¹ "Acuerdo en Rechazo a la Presencia y Expansión de Grupos Narcoterroristas en el Territorio Nacional". Passed less than three weeks after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, Resolution 1373 calls on all states, inter alia, to prevent terrorist groups from operating in their territory and to collaborate with others in suppressing terrorist movements.

government responded that it would present its own evidence, purportedly showing that Colombia promotes terrorism targeting Venezuela.¹²

III. Force Expansion

Official data about the FANB are scarce, and when available, usually consist of estimates rather than precise figures. According to the Defence Ministry, the armed forces comprise between 95,000 and 150,000 active professional members. When reservists are included, according to the same source, the number of combat troops rises to 235,000.¹³ Other estimates from specialised observers put the total size of the armed forces at 128,000.¹⁴

In addition to the army, navy, air force and National Guard, whose roles include internal security and border control, there is also a National Militia, a volunteer body committed to defence of the “revolution”. The militia is mainly employed in welfare programs, including the production and distribution of subsidised food. According to the government, the militia had 1.6 million members at the end of 2018.¹⁵ One military analyst, however, doubted that “more than 10 per cent of them have any serious military training”.¹⁶ Maduro has repeatedly said he expects each member of the militia to be armed, though there is little evidence this has occurred so far.¹⁷ He recently announced the incorporation of an estimated 30,000 *milicianos* into the regular forces, a decision that reportedly provoked indignation among military officers.¹⁸

As the militia's role suggests, Venezuela's armed forces in the *chavista* era fulfil functions that go beyond the customary tasks of defending national territory and sovereignty, and even stretch their constitutional role of “active participation in national development” (Article 328). The armed forces' purpose and identity have in fact grown inseparable from those of the “Bolivarian revolution” itself. The military was ever present in Chávez's governments, not surprisingly given Chávez's background, participation in a failed coup in 1992 and general attachment to a praetorian style of rule. But their presence in the government of Maduro, a civilian, is qualitatively and quantitatively different.

Chávez's charisma, popularity and military credentials gave him unusual advantage in his relations with the armed forces. Combined with the privileges he granted the

¹² Santiago Torrado, “Duque acusa a Maduro de resguardar a los disidentes de las FARC que retoman las armas”, *El País*, 30 August 2019. “Venezuela presentará en la ONU pruebas del amparo de Duque a terroristas”, EFE, 31 August 2019. Maduro also announced an “amber alert” and military exercises along the two countries' common border. “Pdte. Maduro declara alerta naranja en frontera con Colombia frente a amenaza de agresión”, Telesur, 3 September 2019. “Colombia does not want peace; Colombia wants war”, the president said in his speech.

¹³ “Fuerza Armada”, Venezuelan Ministry of People's Power for Defence.

¹⁴ “Venezuela Military Strength”, Global Firepower, August 2019. “Unas Fuerzas Armadas para servir al chavismo”, *El País*, 5 May 2019.

¹⁵ “Presidente Maduro certificó incorporación de 1.600.000 milicianos”, VTV, 23 August 2019.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, military analyst, Caracas, 20 July 2019.

¹⁷ “Maduro: Para el año 2021 debe haber 4 millones de milicianos armados”, *El Nacional*, 24 June 2019.

¹⁸ “Incorporan contingente de milicianos y milicianas al componente GNB”, Agencia Venezolana de Noticias, 4 August 2019; Sebastiana Barráez, “Crece la indignación en la Guardia Nacional Bolivariana ante la incorporación de los milicianos ordenada por Maduro”, Infobae, 6 August 2019.

military and a defence budget buoyed by high oil prices, his persona made him the undisputed leader of the military and a man beloved by mid- and low-level troops. Parts of the armed forces disputed his presidency in the 2002 coup, and during his 2007 feud with former defence minister and one-time ally Raúl Isaiás Baduel, but Chávez emerged victorious from both battles (Baduel has been imprisoned almost continuously since 2009).

Maduro, a civilian with neither his predecessor's magnetism nor his seemingly limitless financial resources, has had to resort to giving the military ever greater power and autonomy, while at the same time demanding that senior officers display allegiance to *chavismo* and to himself. His inner circles are heavily drawn from the military: seven of the twenty *chavista* state governors come from the armed forces, and on average 20 to 30 per cent of his cabinet ministers have been men and women in uniform.¹⁹

IV. An Economic Empire

Academic studies indicate that the defence budget in U.S. dollars has continued to rise under Maduro despite the huge overall economic contraction since 2013 and indications that much of the new military hardware is barely operational.²⁰ But defence spending is only a slice of the military's share of the country's economy. Between 2013 and 2017, Venezuela established an estimated fourteen military firms in twenty economic sectors, including agriculture, mining, oil, construction, banking, tourism, insurance and the media.²¹ Officers occupy senior positions in these and other state-run businesses. The Venezuelan chapter of the international civil society organisation Transparency International, reported that in 2017 officers headed at least 60 of the 576 state-run companies, including the oil giant PDVSA, whose chairman is General Manuel Quevedo of the National Guard.²²

The government has assigned exclusive control over sensitive parts of the national economy to military commanders. Officers run key ports and, in some parts of the country, operate "special economic military zones" free from public scrutiny.²³ Since 2016, the Defence Ministry has overseen the Gran Misión Abastecimiento Soberano (Big Sovereign Supply Mission), a government program for production and countrywide distribution of food, medicines and other staples. Together with the Food

¹⁹ Shari Avendaño, "Radiografía de los resultados de las elecciones regionales del #15Oct", *Efecto Cocuyo*, 23 October 2017.

²⁰ Only between two and four of its 23 Sukhoi fighter jets, reportedly, are flightworthy. Crisis Group interview, diplomat, Bogotá, 17 August 2019. On military spending, see Francesca Ramos Pismataro, "Los militares y el deterioro democrático en Venezuela", *Estudios Políticos (Universidad de Antioquia)*, vol. 53 (2018).

²¹ Mayela Armas, "Con 20 empresas la FANB acapara el poder económico", *Crónica Uno*, 20 August 2017.

²² "El Poder Militar También Alcanzó a la Empresas Estatales", *Transparencia Venezuela*, 11 February 2018.

²³ In May, at Padrino López's request, Maduro announced the creation of a special economic zone in the state of Aragua, west of Caracas, where the armed forces will also produce the food that they consume (reports from the barracks indicate that troops often go hungry). "Gobierno crea Zona Económica Especial Militar por petición de Padrino López", *Tal Cual*, 23 May 2019.

Ministry, headed by generals throughout Maduro's presidency, this "mission" is responsible for the CLAP program that provides subsidised food parcels to six million families. Venezuelan and international media have reported systemic corruption in the CLAP program, as well as its abuse in the name of social control.²⁴

The military has also been active in the mining industry since 2016. In that year, the Maduro government established the Orinoco Mining Arc in southern Venezuela, generating a gold rush and a boom in extraction of other minerals (eg, diamonds and coltan) that have brought waves of violence and environmental damage to the region.²⁵ It has declared the Arc a "military economic zone", giving the armed forces control not only over security in and around the mines but also over mineral extraction itself through a military-run company, CAMIMPEG.

Rapidly expanding economic activities have allowed many high-ranking officers to fill positions unconnected with their core military duties. Under the 1999 constitution, the president is responsible for military promotions at or above the rank of colonel and for senior military appointments. *Chavista* governments have repeatedly emphasised loyalty over competence when determining these promotions. Partisan appointments and the need for ever more high-ranking officers to fill state or economic posts have inflated the upper ranks: it is estimated that Venezuela has over 2,000 active and retired generals and admirals, compared with well under a thousand in the million-plus-strong U.S. armed forces.²⁶

Maduro's military appointments in June and July suggest that his priority is to quell discontent in the bloated officer corps by maintaining a balance between competing cliques while also ensuring that the lines of command in this top-heavy structure remain blurred.²⁷ Padrino López stays on as defence minister, while Admiral Remigio Ceballos continues to serve as operational commander of the armed forces; both are regarded as close to Maduro. But the post of commander of the armed forces, effectively the third most important job in the armed forces, is now held by General Alexis Rodríguez Cabello, a close ally of the government's second most powerful figure, Diosdado Cabello. Maduro replicated this balancing act in appointments lower down the hierarchy, with most appointees associated with the president's faction while a significant minority are linked to Cabello.

²⁴ Roberto Deniz, Joseph Polizuk and Ewald Scharfenberg, "Detrás del hambre de los venezolanos hay una trama de corrupción", *The New York Times*, 15 October 2018. Observers say the government uses the CLAP social program for electoral benefit. In the midst of hyperinflation and food shortages, an increasing number of citizens rely on CLAP for most of their food, leaving them more vulnerable to government pressure. Eugenio Martínez, "El chavismo se vale del control social para mantener su base electoral", *Diario Las Américas*, 11 December 2017.

²⁵ For more information about the mining boom's social and political impact on southern Venezuela, see Crisis Group Latin America Report N°73, *Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South*, 28 February 2019.

²⁶ Brian Ellsworth and Mayela Armas, "Special report: Why the military still stands by Venezuela's beleaguered president", Reuters, 28 June 2019.

²⁷ Ibid.

V. Political Leanings

The armed forces' political preferences are a matter of bitter dispute. Guaidó has stated that 80 to 85 per cent of army officers support a political change, adding that only the top brass remains loyal to Maduro.²⁸ In spite of the repeated calls to break ranks, however, so far only around 1,400 officers have defected to neighbouring Colombia and Brazil since the beginning of 2019, all around the time of the opposition's planned humanitarian aid operation on 23 February.²⁹ A further 25 who took part in the April coup attempt have asked for asylum in Brazil.³⁰

Salaries are a major cause of discontent. The Venezuelan military is among the lowest paid in the world, echoing the national economic calamity: at current exchange rates, a general's wages do not exceed \$10 per month, while for low-ranking soldiers they are slightly over \$2.³¹ Low pay, in combination with the military's massive economic interests, create perfect conditions for corruption and illegal enrichment. A low-ranking officer who recently resigned explained that middle-ranking officers "fight tooth and nail" to be appointed to administrative positions that offer access to resources, whereas positions devoted to troop command and training arouse far less interest.³² Corruption controls do not exist inside the armed forces, she said, and the opportunity to make illicit earnings depends on connections and political influence.

On the other hand, controls over allegedly subversive activities within the armed forces are draconian. Local human rights organisations report that at least 100 soldiers are political prisoners.³³ Like all such prisoners in Venezuela they are subject to torture and ill treatment, as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has documented.³⁴ At the end of June, following his arrest on charges of conspiring against Maduro's government, naval captain Rafael Acosta Arévalo died of the torture inflicted upon him.³⁵

But, for many officers, political attitudes are rooted in principle and tradition, rather than fears and material prospects.

One political analyst and former FANB member told Crisis Group that after almost two decades imbibing *chavista* military doctrine, it was unlikely that many soldiers

²⁸ Maru Morales and Claudia Smolansky, "Guaidó: Tenemos a militares en puestos de comando trabajando por la Operación Libertad", *Crónica Uno*, 9 June 2019.

²⁹ The U.S. and Venezuelan opposition attempted on 23 February to bring humanitarian aid across the Colombian and Brazilian borders in defiance of the Maduro government. But their expectation that the high commands of the security forces would take their side were dashed. Only low-ranking soldiers and police defected, seeking protection in Colombia and, to a lesser extent, Brazil. "Militares desertores venezolanos son desalojados (nuevamente) de hotel en Cúcuta", *El Espectador*, 15 May 2019. Bram Ebus, "Savannah Strife: Brazil's Combustible Border with Venezuela", Crisis Group Commentary, 5 September 2019.

³⁰ "Unos 25 militares venezolanos piden asilo en la embajada de Brasil en Caracas", EFE, 30 April 2019.

³¹ Marianela Palacios, "Militares venezolanos entre los peor pagados del mundo #CotejoVerifica", Cotejo.Info, 2 July 2019.

³² Crisis Group interview, former military officer, Caracas, 6 July 2019.

³³ "Justicia Venezolana: hay 211 militares presos en Venezuela", *RunRun.es*, 5 August 2019.

³⁴ Michelle Bachelet, "Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela", Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, 4 July 2019.

³⁵ "Venezuela: Outrage over the death of a detained navy captain", Al Jazeera, 1 July 2019.

still belonged to the old “institutionalist” school – which held that the armed forces were mostly apolitical and subordinate to civilian rule.³⁶ This philosophy helped Venezuela stay free after 1958 of the military dictatorships that swept Latin America. Officers nowadays understand their role as a broader one, comprising the country’s defence, development and sovereignty. But many of them also regard the Maduro government’s economic mismanagement as the antithesis of this mission.³⁷ These officers are alarmed by recent surveys showing the armed forces’ popularity plummeting, with over 85 per cent rating the institution unfavourably.³⁸

Even so, senior officers’ dislike of the government and willingness to engage in political activity have not translated into widespread support for any coup attempt. Opposition efforts earlier this year to persuade senior officers to defect to Guaidó’s camp on the basis of offers of individual amnesties for past crimes appeared to many officers to be an insulting ploy serving primarily U.S. interests.³⁹ U.S. diplomats have since admitted the strategy failed to reassure officers of the benefits of a transition.⁴⁰ Instead, most of the armed forces appear to have retained a conservative outlook in favour of the status quo, preferring to avoid the risks of armed intervention in national political life not merely because of the dangers to themselves but also out of awareness that the six coups since the end of the last military dictatorship have all failed.⁴¹ Discontented soldiers “do not become partisan opposition followers”, noted the former officer.⁴²

Several low-ranking officers consulted by Crisis Group observed that Defence Minister Padrino López was clearly committed to *chavismo* and personally loyal to Maduro, but that he also respected the constitution and defended the armed forces’ institutional roles against efforts to turn the military into a protagonist in Venezuela’s political battles.⁴³ One example is his reported insistence in 2015 that the results of the legislative elections, which the government lost, were respected.⁴⁴ Padrino López has held the position for five years, longer than anyone else since Chávez rose to power. His ability to manage the military’s internal workings and the mounting demands upon it reinforces his perceived legitimacy. After defecting in April, Christopher Figuera wrote a letter to Padrino López acknowledging the general’s leadership but urging him to serve “the path of reconstruction of the country”.⁴⁵

Padrino López has issued more frequent vows of fealty to the government since then, particularly following claims of his clandestine role in the 30 April coup attempt,

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Caracas, 10 July 2019.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, National Constituent Assembly deputy, Caracas, 8 February 2019.

³⁸ “Encuesta nacional omnibus”, Datanálisis, August 2019.

³⁹ According to one deputy from the National Constituent Assembly, “Fuerte Tiuna [the main military base in Caracas] is a church, with images of Chávez on all sides. That is not going to be eliminated with photocopies of an amnesty law”. Crisis Group interview, Caracas, 8 February 2019.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, U.S. diplomat, Washington, 28 June 2019.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, Venezuelan social scientist, Caracas, 19 March 2019. These include coup attempts in 1961, 1962 (twice), 1992 (twice) and 2002. “Venezuela arrastra más de un siglo de golpes de Estado, ¿por qué?”, France 24, 29 January 2019.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, Caracas, 10 July 2019.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, junior military officers, Caracas, 8 July 2019.

⁴⁴ Phil Gunson, “Slow-motion Coup in Venezuela?”, Crisis Group Commentary, 5 August 2016.

⁴⁵ Juan Carlos Zapata, “Exclusiva: El jefe del Sebin que se le fue a Maduro le escribe a Padrino López: ‘Llegó la hora de actuar’”, *Alnavio*, 22 May 2019.

but his statements can often appear calculatedly ambiguous. In mid-August, he called on the opposition to return to negotiations, despite the fact that it was the government side that had withdrawn – one of a number of occasions on which he appeared to be sending a coded message to the government.⁴⁶ His response to Colombian accusations that Venezuela was behind the rearming of FARC dissidents was also notably less bellicose than that of civilian politicians.⁴⁷ When Maduro announced the “amber alert” along the border, Padrino was conspicuously absent, having been sent on an official visit to Nicaragua. Some commentators believe that the relationship between the two men is somewhat tense, despite Padrino’s ratification as minister.⁴⁸

Venezuela’s changing alliances under *chavista* rule have also shaped new geopolitical affinities within the armed forces. The U.S., once one of Venezuela’s main sources of military equipment, prohibited all commercial arms transfers to the country in 2006, arguing that Caracas had failed to cooperate with counter-terrorism efforts.⁴⁹ Since the U.S. ban came into force, Russia has become one of Venezuela’s closest military allies, dispensing between \$12 and \$14 billion in military equipment, including assault rifles, jet fighters, tanks and missile systems, between 2004 and 2012.⁵⁰ Joint military exercises, Russian naval use of Venezuelan ports and facilities, and the dispatch of close to 100 Russian military personnel to Venezuela in March, reportedly to perform maintenance on military equipment, underline the proximity between the two high commands.⁵¹

Yet it is Cuba’s reported influence over Venezuela’s military intelligence and counterintelligence that tends most to stir opposition outrage, although the precise extent of the Cuban footprint is hard to ascertain and often distorted for political purposes. Cuban expertise has been critical in helping the Maduro government hone its skill in detecting signs of military rebellion.⁵² Cubans also man the president’s personal security detail, estimated at between fifteen and twenty guards.⁵³ Sources in the Venezuelan opposition and the U.S. government say there may be 25,000 Cuban security personnel in the country, though the Cuban government has denied taking

⁴⁶ “FANB de Venezuela llama a la unión nacional ante bloqueo de Trump”, Telesur, 13 August 2019.

⁴⁷ “Padrino López pidió a Colombia no buscar ‘excusas’ ante rearme de un grupo de las FARC”, *Noticias 24*, 30 August 2019. The minister said the “political problem Colombia faces cannot and must not lead to armed conflict”.

⁴⁸ Roberto Lobo, “Sebastiana Barráez: Maduro ordenó ejercicios militares sin la presencia del ministro de la defensa Padrino López”, *PuntodeCorte*, 4 September 2019.

⁴⁹ With the exception of the sale of F-16A combat aircraft in the 1980s, U.S. arms sales to Venezuela before 2006 were not of great significance, with an estimated value of \$300 million between 1994 and 2004. “U.S. Bans Future Arms Sales to Venezuela”, Arms Control Association, June 2006. See also Carlos Romero, “Venezuela y Estados Unidos: ¿una relación esquizofrénica?”, *Nueva Sociedad*, vol. 206 (November-December 2006).

⁵⁰ José Carlos Hernández and Alberto Bueno, “¿El enemigo de mi enemigo...? Las relaciones militares entre Venezuela y Rusia”, *GESI*, 12 February 2019.

⁵¹ “As Maduro confronts a crisis, Russia’s footprint in Venezuela grows”, *Washington Post*, 29 March 2019.

⁵² Angus Berwick, “How Cuba taught Venezuela to quash military dissent”, Reuters, 22 August 2019. Kirk Semple, “With spies and other operatives, a nation looms over Venezuela’s crisis: Cuba”, *The New York Times*, 26 January 2019.

⁵³ Faiola, “Maduro’s ex-spy chief lands in U.S. armed with allegations against Venezuelan government”, *op. cit.*

part in military or security operations in Venezuela.⁵⁴ For his part, former intelligence chief Christopher said in a recent interview that the Cuban role inside the military intelligence services is “a myth”.⁵⁵ Other former and current government officials also discount claims that the Cubans wield such extensive influence.⁵⁶

VI. The Military and Negotiations

Despite Norway's insistence that both sides avoid public declarations about the talks, government and opposition sources indicate that the agenda has consisted of six points. These include the length of Maduro's remaining tenure; the reestablishment of the National Assembly's powers and curtailment of the National Constitutional Assembly's role; the dates of possible elections; the content of electoral reforms and the makeup of a new governing board for the National Electoral Council; and the lifting of international sanctions, in conjunction with human rights and economic reforms.

The negotiators have all been active or retired civilian politicians close to either Maduro or Guaidó. A notable potential weakness of the process so far is the absence of military representatives. Nor does there seem to have been discussion of the military's role in a prospective transition, even though military consent would be crucial to its success and to economic stabilisation.⁵⁷ In the long run, the armed forces' commitment to a peace process would be necessary to ensure that none of the country's various non-state armed groups poses a major security threat as the transition proceeds. This risk, again, is thrown into sharper relief by the announcement of a new FARC dissident outfit possibly based in Venezuela, which could lead to a worsening border dispute with Colombia.

Should the government stick by its decision not to include the military in any future talks, the risk is that negotiators will mistake formal political representation for the real balance of power. Politicians may simply expect the armed forces to support any eventual agreement between the two parties. But in Chile following the dictator Augusto Pinochet's exit in 1990, and in Nicaragua after elections that same year, negotiations with the military proved to be an essential element in ensuring stability. In both cases, political forces had to offer concessions regarding the military's role in the country's future, its relative independence of civilian control and continuation of some economic privileges.

A viable agreement for a political transition in Venezuela will in all likelihood need to include detailed provisions of this kind regarding the role of the armed forces in the transition and possibly inside an interim government; a medium-term plan for safeguarding military autonomy and officers' career prospects; and long-term objectives regarding the transformation of a partisan institution into an apolitical one under strict civilian control. With the armed forces present at the negotiating

⁵⁴ “How many Cuban troops are there in Venezuela? The U.S. says over 20,000. Cuba says zero”, *Washington Post*, 2 May 2019.

⁵⁵ Javier Lafuente, “Las torturas en Venezuela son sistemáticas”, *El País*, 10 July 2019.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, 28 May 2019.

⁵⁷ Opposition sources say their side has repeatedly attempted to put the issue of the military's role on the agenda, but the government refuses. Crisis Group interview, opposition source close to talks, Caracas, 5 September 2019.

table, the parties could design plans regarding the armed forces' command structures, decision-making processes and operational tasks during the transitional phase so as to prevent the military's use for political ends.

Discussions should also extend to the matter of proliferating non-state armed groups or quasi-state militias. The armed forces' commitment to pacifying the country and restoring its monopoly over legitimate force will be essential to preventing a protracted, low-intensity conflict involving *chavista* paramilitaries, Colombian guerrillas and organised crime gangs, especially in the event of a handover of power. Assuring the military of support for this stabilisation mission on condition that it remains subordinate to civilian control and governed by strict human rights standards will be a crucial element in planning for a peaceful future in Venezuela.

By explicitly addressing the armed forces' role during and after a transition, the government and opposition can increase the odds that all parties will respect a deal and that no military faction will try to derail it. Taking into account the real power relations in the country is an essential prerequisite for the success of peace talks. To ignore them is to risk repeated shows of armed dissent by heavily politicised soldiers.

Caracas/Brussels, 16 September 2019



International Crisis Group

Headquarters

Avenue Louise 149, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38. Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

brussels@crisisgroup.org

New York Office

newyork@crisisgroup.org

Washington Office

washington@crisisgroup.org

London Office

london@crisisgroup.org

Regional Offices and Field Representation

Crisis Group also operates out of over 25 locations in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America.

See www.crisisgroup.org for details

PREVENTING WAR. SHAPING PEACE.