

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4205 | APRIL 23, 2014

Crisis in Venezuela: UNASUR and U.S. Foreign Policy

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Earlier this month, Secretary of State John Kerry urged Congress not to respond to the Venezuelan government's deadly crackdown against the democratic opposition. Recent high-level talks between the Venezuelan government and select members of the opposition have led the Secretary to mistakenly believe that the crisis will soon end. Additionally, he urged Congress to avoid pursuing legislation that could be used as "cannon fodder for them to use against me or us."¹

The Venezuelan government has been allowed to unilaterally dictate the terms of negotiations, which have been brokered by Venezuela's philosophically aligned Union of South American States (UNASUR). Essentially doomed from the beginning, these meetings have resulted in only confirming the Venezuelan government's determination to continue its violent reprisals.

The Venezuelan government's criminality is well documented, as is its aggressive anti-American foreign policy.² Claiming that the United States should actively appease a foreign government that is hostile to both the U.S. and its democratic opposition is irresponsible and against U.S. interests. Congress

should not let the U.S.'s Venezuela policy be decided by UNASUR.

Student-Led Uprisings Against Socialism. Venezuela is the top oil-producing country in Latin America, a major transit source for U.S.-bound drugs, and home to an aggressively anti-American regime. Yet the political crisis has remained off Washington's radar.³

The demonstrations have resulted in over 40 deaths, thousands of detentions, and the unconstitutional imprisonment of opposition government officials. The Venezuelan national guard and government-sponsored vigilante groups continue attacking largely unarmed protestors with live ammunition, water cannons, and tear gas. Journalists attempting to cover these crimes have been physically attacked, stripped of their visas, and even kidnapped.

During this time, the Venezuelan government has expelled three U.S. diplomats and falsely accused the U.S. of fomenting a coup. Despite calls from congressional leaders, the Obama Administration has remained disengaged.

Venezuela's Ideological Camaraderie with UNASUR. International efforts to diffuse the crisis have purposefully excluded the U.S. at Venezuela's behest. Delegates from Ecuador, Brazil, and Colombia are currently mediating discussions between the government and the more centrist opposition alliance, the Mesa de la Unidad Democrática, which is at best a nominal representation of an exceedingly complicated opposition movement.

The government has purposefully excluded from negotiations representatives for the student protestors, the initiators of the antigovernment movement, and chief opposition leaders who seek the social-

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4205>

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ist president's constitutional deposal. Additionally, the Venezuelan government has banned discussing many of the opposition's concerns, particularly government violence against demonstrators and the release of political prisoners.

Recently, the permanent council of the Organization of American States (OAS), which is composed of every country in Latin America except Cuba, voted overwhelmingly against convening a special session to address the Venezuelan crisis.

Instead, many Latin American countries—including historical U.S. allies—have chosen to have the Venezuelan-allied sub-regional UNASUR mediate the conflict.⁴ Their support of Venezuela is ensured by an ideological camaraderie with Caracas as well as subsidized Venezuelan oil.

Reality, Not Wishful Thinking, Should Dictate U.S. Foreign Policy. The Obama Administration's blind support of UNASUR is setting a dangerous precedent. As an institution aimed at reducing the U.S.'s regional influence, UNASUR is not a trustworthy third party for regional disputes.

Nor should the U.S. rely on the Venezuelan government to find a peaceful solution. Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro has made his intentions clear: He does not seek to negotiate with the opposition or come to any formal deal, as it would make him a "traitor" to his 21st-century socialist movement.⁵

Instead of waiting for the inevitable, the U.S. should:

- Enact targeted sanctions against government officials complicit in human rights violations in addition to those on the Treasury Department's Special Designated Nationals List. Part of these sanctions should include freezing their assets within the U.S. and revoking their visas.
 - Garner support among hemispheric allies against Venezuelan suppression of the opposition. Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, and Paraguay all voted for the OAS to convene a special session and could provide a viable regional platform for dispute resolution.
 - Assess the credibility of current peace negotiations based upon the InterAmerican Democratic Charter, of which both the U.S. and Venezuela are signatories. The Venezuelan government is obligated to guarantee the protection of human rights, including freedom from political persecution.
 - Immediately stop supporting these dialogues prior to determining their credibility.
 - Support democracy assistance programs targeted to the disenfranchised democratic opposition.
 - Reallocate funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development's Ecuador program funds, which have been forced to prematurely terminate in September.
- Congress's Role in Foreign Policy.** Secretary Kerry's mistaken belief that UNASUR can effectively mediate the Venezuelan crisis is premised on the faulty assumption that U.S. national interests are protected by international organizations.⁶ UNASUR is part of the growing wave of anti-Americanism aimed at reducing U.S. influence in Latin America. The Obama Administration's regional disengagement has complemented its efforts.
- In the age of Obama, Congress has a critical role in shaping U.S. foreign policy and a unique responsibility in protecting against dangerous extremes.

1. Editorial, "Venezuela's Opposition to Meet with Government," Associated Press, April 8, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-2599995/Venezuelas-opposition-meet-government.html> (accessed April 17, 2014).

2. Ray Walser, "State Sponsors of Terrorism: Time to Add Venezuela to the List," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2362, January 20, 2010, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/01/state-sponsors-of-terrorism-time-to-add-venezuela-to-the-list>.

3. See Ana Quintana, "Venezuela: U.S. Leadership Needed," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 4157, March 4, 2014, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2014/03/venezuela-us-leadership-needed>.

4. Editorial, "Dialogue Unlikely to Bring an End to Protests," *The Economist*, April 10, 2014, <https://country.eiu.com/article.aspx?articleid=1521713736&Country=Venezuela&topic=Politics#> (accessed April 17, 2014).

5. Andrew Cawthorne and Eyanir China, "Venezuela's Maduro, Opposition to Talk, Unrest Death Toll Hits 40," Reuters, April 10, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/10/us-venezuela-protests-idUSBREA3911920140410> (accessed April 17, 2014).

6. Kim Holmes and James Jay Carafano, "Defining the Obama Doctrine, Its Pitfalls, and How to Avoid Them," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2457, September 1, 2010, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/08/defining-the-obama-doctrine-its-pitfalls-and-how-to-avoid-them>.

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