



Venezuela and Guyana: The South China Sea Situation of the Western Hemisphere

For years, the South China Sea has been an area of interest and the subject of numerous debates, studies, and threat scenarios. Its oil-rich waters have been claimed by China under protest of most of the adjacent states and the international community, based upon historic rights and use. The dispute has become a major focus and geopolitical hotspot, with China unambiguously declaring that it will not renounce its position. China declared the South China Sea as its territorial waters and views any maritime as intrusion. The United States, on the other hand, is conducting freedom of navigation operations with its navy in Chinese-claimed waters to stress the international accessibility of the South China Sea. Analysts have compared the importance of the South China Sea for the People's Republic of China, with that of the Caribbean for the United States. The U.S. Monroe Doctrine declared any foreign involvement in the Americas and Caribbean as unfriendly disposition toward the United States. In the eyes of many Chinese strategists, one of the reasons the United States emerged as a global power was its sole influence on South America, Central America, and the Caribbean. China, for its global rise, sees a similar necessity to exercise control over the South China Sea.

While analysts, military planners, the media, and the broad public concentrate on the South China Sea, a similar situation currently exists in the Caribbean Sea and adjacent areas of the Atlantic. Unnoticed by most, conflict is unraveling in South America and the Caribbean with similar characteristics as in the South China Sea. This is remarkable since it involves Venezuela, a country in the news almost daily regarding internal conflicts and turmoil.

Based upon historic territorial claims, Venezuela views nearly 70% of Guyana, its eastern neighbor, as part of Venezuela. Reminiscent of the South China Sea, Venezuela also claims a large maritime area with significant oil resources as its own and is hindering international freedom of navigation. A United Nations commission failed to settle the border debate in 2018 and the International Court of Justice has now taken up the issue. However, Venezuela has refused to participate in the proceedings.

This long-standing dispute can be traced back to 1648, when Spain (the colonial power ruling over Venezuelan territory at the time) signed the Peace of Münster with the Dutch Republic (which had small possessions and settlements in what would become Guyana). Great Britain had acquired the territory of Guyana, through a treaty, from the Netherlands in 1814. In 1841, Venezuela officially disputed the borders, claiming they extended as far east as the Essequibo River—an effective claim on two-thirds of Guyana's territory. 35 years later, Venezuela broke diplomatic relations with Great Britain, appealing to the United States for assistance and citing the Monroe Doctrine as justification for U.S. involvement. For the next 19 years, Venezuela repeatedly petitioned for U.S. assistance, calling on the United States to intervene by either sponsoring arbitration or with military force. In 1895, invoking the Monroe Doctrine, the U.S. demanded that Britain submit the boundary dispute to arbitration and after significant debate, the British government submitted the dispute to the American boundary commission. On 3 October 1899, an international tribunal decided that 90% of the disputed territory would remain under British control. Disappointed, Venezuela reluctantly ratified the decision, but never actually relinquished claim on the territory.

In 2010, Guyana awarded oil exploration rights in the disputed maritime areas, causing clashes and friction with Venezuela. On 10 October 2013, the Venezuelan Navy detained an oil exploration vessel conducting seafloor surveys on behalf of the government of Guyana. The ship and its crew were escorted to the Venezuelan Margarita Island for prosecution. The vessel and crew were released the following week, but the captain was charged with violating the Venezuelan Exclusive Economic Zone.

Guyana awarded the American oil corporation, Exxon a license to drill for oil in the disputed maritime area in 2015. The government of Guyana and Exxon announced the finding of promising results in their first round of drilling on the so-called Stabroek Block, a large area off the Guyanese coast. By 2018, it was estimated that Guyana possessed approximately 5 billion barrels of oil equivalent, consisting of a quarter of the world's 2018 discovered oil. As a result, Guyana's gross domestic product is expected to rise from 3.4 billion USD in 2016 to 13 billion by 2025. One of the poorest countries in South America, with a population of less than 800,000, Guyana is expected to benefit immensely from the massive offshore oil discovery. Soon, Guyana is poised to become potentially one of the wealthiest countries in the world, making it one of the top oil producers per capita, even outranking the Gulf countries, such as the United Arab Emirates or Kuwait.

Venezuela responded to the discovery of oil in Guyanese waters in 2015 by including the maritime area in dispute in its national marine protection sphere, thus extending the area that the Venezuelan Navy controls. This exceeds any previous claim by Venezuela on maritime territory. Additionally, Venezuela deployed troops along the border with Guyana, including tanks and military vessels armed with rockets in the Cuyuni River, crossing into Guyanese territory.

In late December 2018, two oil exploration ships were forced to suspend operations, after being approached by the Venezuelan Navy, in Guyanese waters 90 miles from the internationally recognized border. The Maduro regime is using the dispute to coerce Guyana into conceding part of its offshore oil to Venezuela in exchange for allowing Guyana to develop the remainder of its resources. Absent these unlikely concessions, continued Venezuelan provocations and increasing Russian military ties could exacerbate the effects of Guyanese instability, potentially dissuading international investors.

While the U.S. and most countries of the Caribbean have sided with Guyana in the most recent incident of Venezuelan interference, the Maduro regime and the opposition-led National Assembly are united in their message to defend national sovereignty and protect its claim to natural resources. It is alarming that the opposing parties have suddenly united around a common theme: the century-old dispute with Guyana.

The fall of the Maduro regime, although politically isolated, economically crumbling, and with large segments of the population in open opposition, is less likely than it appears. When the Syrian Civil War broke out in 2011, it was believed that it would only be a matter of time until the politically isolated Assad regime would be defeated or implode. Eight years later, the Assad regime is still in power in Syria. Assad has proven to be an excellent tactician, manipulating his population to his benefit and establishing a strategic symbiotic relationship with Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. These same forces are at play in Venezuela and it appears as if they are willing to muster as much support for Maduro as they did for Assad.

Iran and Venezuela have established substantial military and industrial agreements. The Maduro regime, and his predecessor Hugo Chavez, have provided Iran with Venezuelan

passports, bank accounts, intelligence infrastructure, and methods for moving people and equipment between Iran and Latin America. Through this cooperation, Iran has established an invaluable foothold in South America. Hezbollah is also well established in Venezuela, conducting various criminal activities to include smuggling, money laundering, and drug trafficking.

Lessons should be learned from the Russian and Iranian engagement in Syria. Russia and Iran have proven in Syria that they are willing to substantially back a government militarily, if deemed essential according to their strategic plans. Both countries have demonstrated that they are more than willing to overlook international law when it is in their own strategic interest. If Venezuela under Maduro would decide to annex parts of Guyana or conduct military operations on Guyanese soil, upsetting international norms, it is not clear that Maduro's international supporters would be opposed. Maduro could attempt to overcome the domestic unrest and the country's turmoil by trying to find an issue to unite the Venezuelans for a greater national cause.

The potential benefits of a Venezuelan intervention in Guyana for the Maduro regime are obvious. A foreign policy distraction could be leveraged to distract from the current socio-economic turmoil in Venezuela. Although the possibility of open armed conflict may not seem likely, escalation could be beneficial for the Maduro regime in the short term. The timing of Russia sending two long-range bombers to Venezuela in December when the Venezuelan Navy intervened with the seismic exploration of Guyana's offshore oil fields could be understood (mistakenly or not) as part of a larger plan to support the Maduro regime as it pushes into Guyana.

For many reasons, a U.S. military intervention in Venezuela is not a viable option. Although used many times in different conflicts, the term "superpowers don't bluff" — meaning that the United States should not threaten military action if it is not willing to execute — is also accurate for Venezuela. A direct U.S. military engagement holds far more risks than potential benefits and it seems that the Maduro regime is completely aware of this. Given the history of U.S. interventions in Latin America, U.S. political and military involvement is viewed critically; the United States would have to be extremely careful not to come across as a revisionist imperialist power. This aspect is also important for Latin American governments supporting the position of the U.S. against Venezuela because they could easily lose internal credibility if viewed as supporters for an unpopular U.S. military intervention.

Any air incursion into Venezuela would encounter the most sophisticated air and missile defenses in South America. Venezuelan air defense and anti-access area denial (A2AD) capabilities include the advanced S-300VM and the Buk-M2E Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) systems. The S-300VM is considered one of the most sophisticated Russian missile defense systems, capable of countering advanced cruise missile strikes and aircraft. The mobile Buk-M2E SAM system is extremely accurate and effective at defeating enemy aircraft at shorter ranges. Properly combining these systems could provide a layered defense capability. Although Venezuela has had these systems for some time, however, it is possible that its operators are not adequately trained and the systems are not efficiently and effectively employed.

Due to recent developments, Brazil has increased cooperation with Guyana. It has been claimed that Brazil's intelligence services discovered information regarding a possible Venezuelan military incursion into Guyana. A recent Brazilian delegation to Guyana pledged military support if Venezuela attempted to invade the disputed Essequibo area. In comparison to

Venezuela, Brazil's military would appear to have the advantage in a conflict. Clearly, Brazil maintains very capable armed forces; however, it is questionable how they would aid Guyana's defense. The Brazilian Air Force is the second largest air force in the Americas, behind only the U.S. However, Brazil lacks air defense systems. As previously discussed, Venezuela invested heavily in modern and capable air defenses. The Maduro government has positioned an S-300VM air and missile defense system near the border with Brazil after the closure of the mutual border. In comparison, Brazil's air defense capabilities are limited to the 9K38 Igla, also known as SA-18 Grouse, a Russian man-portable infrared homing surface-to-air missile, and 25 Swedish RBS 70 man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS). Among the Brazil's concerns must be Venezuela's A2AD capability. It is clear that Brazil is the primary regional power in South America. However, if Brazil wants to maintain credibility and be effective in this role, it needs to improve its air and (in anticipation of possible developments) missile defense capability appropriately. If Brazil attempts to assist Guyana, it may face unacceptable losses, including military equipment and personnel, as well as losing the perception of being the primary South American regional power.

A full military invasion of Guyana by Venezuelan ground forces may not be feasible. If a military incursion is attempted, large parts of Venezuela's armed forces would be forced to enter Guyanese territory by helicopter. The dense jungles and lack of roads would restrict movement for limited numbers of ground troops. Similarly, moving its naval forces along Guyana's coast would be difficult given Venezuela's limited naval capabilities. The Venezuelan military does have aerial superiority over Guyana, as well as military forces already situated near the border. Ultimately, it would be relatively easy for Venezuela to deploy just a few hundred troops into Guyana to seize limited points such as villages, bridges, or roads throughout the Essequibo region of Guyana.

Guyana's military capabilities are extremely limited. The Guyana Defence Force consists of less than 3,000 members, a few armored personnel carriers, and antiquated Chinese and Soviet artillery and air defense pieces. Guyana possesses 6 Soviet ZPU anti aircraft guns. The ZPU entered service in 1949 and was used during the Korean War. In addition, the Guyanese military has SA-7 Grail man-portable, shoulder-fired, low-altitude surface-to-air missile system (MANPADS), a Soviet weapon from the 1960s.

In comparison, Venezuela is believed to have up to 350,000 active military personnel and possibly 2,000,000 reserve personnel. The army possesses at least 40 Mil Mi-35 attack (Hind) helicopters, and approximately 200 additional helicopters for transporting troops. The air force of Venezuela has modern Russian Sukhoi Su-30 multi-role fighter aircraft. Venezuela's military manufacturer, CAVIM, produces the Iranian Mohajer-2 unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). It is operated by the Venezuelan Air Force as the "Arpia" and primarily used for reconnaissance but can also be armed. Iranian models have been fitted with two six-round RPG launchers and there is also a "suicide" strike variant of this UAV capable of precision strike. Venezuela possesses complete air superiority over Guyana. Militarily, Guyana is currently absolutely no match for Venezuela.

Within minutes, Venezuela could cripple Guyana's upcoming oil industry. Since Guyana lacks the personnel to compete against the armed forces of Venezuela, it needs to revert to more effective means of defense. As previously noted, the lack of roads and jungle terrain inhibits massive troop movements, thus forcing the Venezuelan military to utilize its air

capabilities. Properly employed modern air defense capabilities by Guyana could counterbalance Venezuela's air superiority. With a small number of trained operators, Guyana would be able to deny the effectiveness of Venezuela's air assets. With these proper defenses, Guyana's population, infrastructure, and vital economic centers could be protected, sending a clear message to potential investors that their interests are secure. Additionally, while Guyana would be modernizing and strengthening its military power, this move would be purely defensive in nature and likely not be interpreted as provocative or directed against any of its neighbors.

Guyana's impending economic boom could be at risk. Venezuela can and most likely will interrupt the economic development of Guyana. The only way to prevent this, and further conflict, is by obtaining effective air defenses. The consequences of inaction in this emerging conflict are extensive. Guyana may suffer irreversible economic, political, infrastructural, and social damage.