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Sentinel of the Caribbean

**US Foreign Policy
towards Venezuela**

Key takeaways

- ▶ The security of the Kingdom of the Netherlands is directly affected by the US' course of action towards Venezuela. This applies in particular to Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, which find themselves in close proximity to Venezuela. The security interests at stake are: territorial security, economic security, social and political stability and the international legal order.
- ▶ The Netherlands should, on the one hand, remain vigilant that EU sanctions continue not to impact the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, while, on the other, it should engage with Washington in a bid to reduce the impact of sanctions on the Venezuelan population.
- ▶ In addition, the Netherlands should discourage US plans to stage a (military) intervention in Venezuela. Ideally, dialogue with the US would result in a transactional deal, in which the US provides some kind of security guarantee in exchange for the stationing of military assets at Hato Airport in Curaçao.
- ▶ Given the security interests at stake, the Netherlands should stress, together with like-minded countries within the United Nations, the need for a dialogue between the great powers, considering the significant impact of geopolitical tensions on the continuation of the Venezuelan conflict.
- ▶ To mitigate the significant impact that the continual influx of Venezuelan migrants has on Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, the Netherlands should explore the option of taking in a specified number of refugees.
- ▶ A peaceful Venezuela would be the ultimate goal. Peace facilitation by an independent broker would therefore be recommendable. Two options are available: to establish a UN Committee for Peace Facilitation in Venezuela, which would be neutral and independent, or, the International Contact Group could provide a framework for peace facilitation and dispute resolution, the benefit of which would be that the Netherlands already has a seat at the table.
- ▶ The Netherlands has a vested interest in stabilising post-Maduro Venezuela, especially considering the state's close geographical proximity to the Dutch Caribbean. Therefore, it is recommended that the Netherlands should at least consider, but preferably prepare for the establishment of an international post-Maduro stabilisation mission or force.

Strategic Alert

Introduction

“I know nothing about it. I think the government has nothing to do with it at all, and I have to find out what happened. If we ever did anything with Venezuela, it wouldn't be that way. It would be slightly different. It would be called an invasion”¹. These are President Trump's words delivered in a Fox News interview regarding the failed Venezuelan incursion of May 3rd 2020, in which two former United States (US) army personnel were arrested. The provocative claim that if the US government were to be involved, it would have been through an invasion, highlights the extremely tense relationship between the US and Venezuela. Hence, it may be hard to imagine that in the not so distant past, Washington and Caracas were close allies and cooperation blossomed. A turning point in the relations between Washington and Caracas, however, came when Hugo Chávez took office in 1999.² The deterioration of relations intensified further under the presidency of Nicolás Maduro from 2013 onwards, and in particular since his disputed re-election of May 2018. Thereafter, the US and 58 other states recognised Juan Guaidó as the legitimate (interim) President in January 2019. More recently, the strained relationship is expressed through the increased sanctions regime of the US government, significantly affecting the economy of the once most prosperous country in Latin America. The ties between the two countries reached a low point earlier this year when Trump indicted Maduro on charges of narco-terrorism.³

Even though US foreign policy primarily affects Venezuela itself, the impact is also felt in neighbouring countries. Amidst the continuation of the Venezuelan crisis, the US government has further tightened its harsh stance towards the country, aggravating existing implications of the crisis and thereby also the spillover effects in the region. This includes the Dutch Caribbean islands, in particular Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire, which find themselves in close (geographical) proximity to Venezuela (see figure 1). Consequently, the question arises how US foreign policy towards Venezuela can threaten and potentially undermine the security interests of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and, subsequently, how the Netherlands should deal with that. To

provide an answer to this question, this strategic alert will address the following issues. Firstly, we will provide historical background information on the Venezuelan crisis and US-Venezuela relations. Next, we will elaborate on the current US foreign policy towards Venezuela. The subsequent section will then delve deeper into the topic, by outlining the political, economic and humanitarian impact of American foreign policy and by explaining which security interests of the Kingdom of the Netherlands are most affected. The alert will conclude with a summary and several recommendations.

Figure 1 Map of Venezuela and the ABC islands⁴



Historical Context

The Venezuelan crisis

The backdrop for the ongoing Venezuelan crisis is constituted through the combined effects of economic, political and humanitarian factors. Firstly, as a result of having the world's largest proven oil reserves, the Venezuelan economy is largely driven by, and therefore dependent on, the oil sector. Since Hugo Chávez entered the presidential office in 1999, Venezuela has been governed by mainly socialist economic and social policies. Prolonged poor oil production, caused by a debilitating oil strike from 2002-2003, and the abrupt decline of global oil prices due to the financial crisis of 2008, led to persistent inflation and the

HAVING THE WORLD'S LARGEST OIL RESERVES, THE VENEZUELAN ECONOMY IS DRIVEN BY AND DEPENDENT ON THE OIL SECTOR

steady increase in food prices in Venezuela throughout the 2000s.⁵ Instead of addressing Venezuela's harmful financial policies, insufficient domestic production, rising debt, shortages and devaluation, President Chávez instead declared an "economic war" against "capitalist retailers" in June 2010.⁶

Between 2013 and 2014, in the first year after Chávez's death, the Venezuelan economy shrunk by over 50 percent.⁷ Between 2013 and 2016, it is estimated that food and medicine imports decreased by 71 percent and 68 percent respectively.⁸ These trends were compounded by the significant decline in global oil prices in 2014, which further destabilised the Venezuelan economy. Venezuela's GDP per capita had plummeted from \$17,981 in 2013 to \$7,399 by the end of 2019, whilst the country's annual inflation rate reached 9,586 percent.⁹

Demonstrations and riots have been a common occurrence in Venezuela since Nicolás Maduro took office in 2013. The protests stem not only from popular dissatisfaction concerning Venezuela's dire economic

circumstances, but also from discontent with the country's political state. A National Assembly election held in December 2015, which resulted in a two-thirds majority for Venezuela's opposition party, provided tangible evidence of Maduro's increasing loss of control.¹⁰ These results inspired waves of new repressive policies, such as the Supreme Court's ability to prohibit members of the opposition from competing in the April 2017 elections.¹¹ As anticipated, these policies incited new cycles of protests.

In May 2018, Maduro was re-elected as President and, undeterred by allegations of electoral fraud, proceeded with his second term as President in January 2019. In response to the nationwide protests that erupted after Maduro's re-election, Juan Guaidó, leader of the opposition party, but a relatively unknown figure internationally, branded Maduro as a usurper and designated himself as interim President using emergency constitutional powers. The US, Canada, the EU and most Latin American states swiftly recognised Guaidó as the legitimate interim President, responsible for organising new and fair elections.

VENEZUELA'S GDP PER CAPITA HAD PLUMMETED FROM \$17,981 IN 2013 TO \$7,399 BY THE END OF 2019



Who is who: Nicolás Maduro

Name: Nicolás Maduro

Born: 23 November 1962

Political party: Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela

Function: 65th President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela



Who is who: Juan Guaidó

Name: Juan Guaidó

Born: 28 July 1983

Political party: Voluntad Popular

Function: Interim President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and 10th President of the National Assembly

THE NUMBER OF VENEZUELAN NATIONALS LIVING IN OTHER LATIN AMERICAN STATES INCREASED FROM 700,000 TO ROUGHLY THREE MILLION

Besides the economic and political crises, the hardship experienced in Venezuela has also resulted in a severe humanitarian crisis, both within Venezuela and throughout the region. The Regional Refugee and Migration Response Plan¹² states that between 2015 and November 2018, the number of Venezuelan nationals living in other Latin American states increased from 700,000 to roughly three million.¹³ Yet these statistics are based on “conservative government figures” that often do not take irregular migration into account.¹⁴ At the time of writing, Response for Venezuelans estimates that just over five million individuals have fled Venezuela.¹⁵

Significant hopes were vested in peace facilitation talks between the Maduro government and Guaidó’s opposition that were hosted in Norway in May 2019. These talks had the purpose of organising a new round of free and fair elections. Yet by August 2019, the negotiations had ground to a halt by the imposition of new US sanctions against the Maduro government.¹⁶ The EU-backed International Contact Group (ICG), consisting of several Latin American and European states (including the Netherlands), was also created in 2019, in order to establish a dialogue with Venezuela, to support the Norway talks, to facilitate the arrival of humanitarian aid and to reinforce the need to organise legitimate presidential elections. The group has met several times, in addition to having sent political missions to Venezuela and liaising with Lima Group representatives.¹⁷

The Maduro government remains in power, however, and continues to hold on to its most significant domestic ally, the military. The military

THE MILITARY ARE LARGELY RESPONSIBLE FOR SILENCING AND REPRESSING SOCIAL UNREST, IN RETURN FOR COMMAND OF THE NATIONAL OIL COMPANY

are largely responsible for silencing and repressing social unrest, in return for command of the national oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela SA* (PDVSA). Fearing potential prosecution if Maduro is ousted, many high-ranking government and military officials are not interested in abandoning their support for the Maduro government. Since the outbreak of

Covid-19, gasoline has become rationed and food prices have experienced an additional increase, whilst the country only possesses between 85 and 120 ventilators for a population of roughly 28 million.¹⁸ Although it may be too early to tell what the pandemic’s full effects on the continuation of the Venezuelan crisis will be, it is already evident that the precarious nature of the situation has led to a significant spillover in the remainder of the region. The virus could very well contribute to these effects.

US-Venezuela relations

US-Venezuela relations have historically been close, and date back to the US protection of the Western Hemisphere under the 1823 Monroe Doctrine. Since the beginning of the 20th century, this relationship was primarily centred around the US exploitation of Venezuelan oil, regardless of whether Venezuela was being administered by an authoritarian regime (e.g. Marcos Pérez Jiménez, 1948-58) or a democratically elected government (e.g. Romulo Betancourt, 1945-48 and 1959-64).¹⁹ By the advent of the Cold War, the US, feeling threatened by the possibility of leftist revolutions in Latin America, became increasingly attracted to Venezuela due to its location, size, and oil wealth.²⁰ Cuba’s close ties to the Soviet Union merely heightened Venezuela’s perceived value to the US.

Hugo Chávez’s elevation to the Presidency in 1999 marks a turning point in US-Venezuela relations. Successive US governments were troubled by the way in which Chávez “undermined human rights, the separation of powers, and freedom of expression”, in addition to the stimulation of anti-American sentiments and the establishment of socialist policies.²¹ Under Chávez, Venezuela furthermore successfully pursued closer ties with Cuba, which represented another significant cause for American concern.

US-Venezuela relations further deteriorated after Chávez was ousted for two days in April 2002, when the Venezuelan armed forces and population revolted in response to an escalating crisis surrounding appointments made

BY THE ADVENT OF THE COLD WAR, THE US BECAME INCREASINGLY ATTRACTED TO VENEZUELA DUE TO ITS LOCATION, SIZE, AND OIL WEALTH

to the state oil company PDVSA. Although declassified documents indicate that the US was conscious of the plans to remove Chávez from power, there is no evidence to support the claim that the US government encouraged the attempted coup to take place.²² Nevertheless, Chávez would reiterate this accusation in the years following the plot.

Tensions between the two states merely continued to rise after Chávez's death in March 2013. According to the US government, the administration created by Chávez's successor, Nicolás Maduro, "manipulated democratic institutions; cracked down on the opposition, media, and civil society; engaged in drug traf-

US SANCTIONS, FIRST IMPOSED ON VENEZUELA IN 2006, UNDERWENT SIGNIFICANT EXPANSION UNDER THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

ficking and corruption; and refused most humanitarian aid."²³ US sanctions, first imposed on Venezuela in 2006, underwent significant expansion under the Obama administration. Initial designations included the prohibition of US arms sales to Venezuela and financial sanctions against targeted individuals and businesses, based on insufficient anti-terrorism efforts and narcotics trafficking offences.²⁴ By President Obama's second term, US sanctions were extended to visa restrictions and asset blocking against "those involved in actions or policies undermining democratic processes or institutions; serious human rights abuses; prohibiting, limiting, or penalizing freedom of expression or peaceful assembly; and public corruption."²⁵ Whilst the development of the US sanctions regime against the Maduro government was still in its early stages, these policies coincided with the aforementioned increasing socio-economic and socio-political unrest in Venezuela that led to the eruption of the state's multiple crises.

ally and internationally. This event has, to a significant extent, negatively altered the relationship between Washington and Caracas.

The Venezuelan presidential elections of 2018 were quickly denounced as a sham and illegitimate by the political opposition – who boycotted the elections, leading to an extremely low turnout rate of 46% compared to 80% participation in 2013²⁶ – and by foreign powers, including the United States and the Lima Group²⁷, because it did not "comply with international standards of a democratic, free, fair and transparent process."²⁸ Domestically, these elections triggered nationwide protests, the aftermath of which was that Juan Guaidó declared himself interim President of Venezuela in January 2019. Guaidó could rely on a wide array of support by foreign powers, including the formal backing of the US government. Ever since then, the US administration has coordinated its efforts with Venezuela through the "Guaidó government", in an attempt to form a transition government that should serve until internationally observed elections can be organised.²⁹ Even though Guaidó is formally recognised by 59 countries, he has been unable to oust Maduro from power.

Over the past few years, doubts have been raised concerning the US government's course of action. It is no secret that its eventual objective is to establish regime change and to organise free and fair elections³⁰, in order for Venezuela to find its way back to peace. It is however rather unclear with which means Trump seeks to achieve that aim. The question remains whether he will stick to his severe sanctions regime, or whether he will take more far-reaching measures, for example in the form of (military) intervention. There can be no doubt that fears of such an intervention exist, given Trump's past statements. Soon after Guaidó declared himself interim President, Trump referred to a military intervention in Venezuela as "an option", thereby implying the revival of the Monroe Doctrine, if that would result in Maduro stepping down.³¹ More recently,

US FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS VENEZUELA HAS EXPERIENCED A 180-DEGREE SHIFT FROM COOPERATION TO CONFRONTATION

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Contemporary US Foreign Policy

In the past two decades, US foreign policy towards Venezuela has experienced a 180-degree shift from cooperation to confrontation. Alongside existing criticism towards the socialist regimes of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro, it was the highly disputed re-election of President Maduro in May 2018 that sparked severe opposition, both nation-

Trump's comment on the Venezuelan incursion of May 3rd 2020 does not allay the fear of an intervention, as he claimed that if the US government were to be involved in Venezuela, it would be deemed an "invasion".³² Hence, such a scenario should not be regarded as completely unlikely in the future.

Targeted sanctions regime

Despite the ambiguity surrounding the potential course of action by the White House, some

US STRATEGY HAS SOUGHT TO BOLSTER SUPPORT FOR GUAIDÓ WHILE ISOLATING MADURO

aspects of US foreign policy towards Venezuela can be distinguished. Since the recognition of Guaidó, US strategy has sought to bolster support for Guaidó while isolating Maduro.³³ An essential part of this policy consists of targeted sanctions against Maduro government officials and their families, alongside broader sanctions against the economy. For over a decade, US governments have enacted sanctions against Venezuelan individuals and entities who could be linked to acts of terrorism, drug trafficking and other criminal activities. However, sanctions took on a new level of intensity in 2015 when former President Barack Obama implemented sanctions that addressed the long-term violation of the principles of democracy and human rights by the Maduro government.³⁴ Under the Presidency of Donald Trump, this sanctions regime intensified further, thereby deteriorating the already tense relations between Washington and Caracas even more. An all-time low was reached in March 2020 when the Trump administration indicted Nicolás Maduro and some of his closest allies on charges of narco-terrorism.³⁵ Currently, 120 individuals and 45 entities from or related to Venezuela are being sanctioned by the US Treasury Department.³⁶

Evidently, the US government has increasingly used sanctions as a policy tool in an attempt to weaken Maduro so that he would eventually be forced to step down. The principal motivations behind the expansion of sanctions have been human rights abuses, the usurpation of power from the National Assembly and public corruption.³⁷ However, when looking more closely at the sanctions regime,

THE US HAS USED SANCTIONS AS A POLICY TOOL IN AN ATTEMPT TO WEAKEN MADURO

it is evident that there is more at play than wrongful government behaviour, namely geopolitics. Firstly, in trying to weaken the Venezuelan economy, the US government sanctioned companies and vessels that were involved in transporting Venezuelan oil to Cuba. Moreover, financial sanctions and visa restrictions have been implemented against non-US persons who assist or support the Maduro government. An example of this has been the sanctioning of Rosneft Trading S.A., a Geneva-based subsidiary of Russia's Rosneft oil company, and its owner for helping the Maduro government to avoid US sanctions.³⁸ Furthermore, President Trump and various US officials have warned that secondary sanctions may be imposed on (foreign) energy companies that are doing business with Venezuela's PDVSA, the state-owned oil and natural gas company. Finally, and more recently, the shipment of Iranian oil to Venezuela has been met with great opposition from Washington, not only because of the act itself, but also out of concerns for Tehran's general growing influence in Latin America, in particular in Venezuela.³⁹ These examples clearly demonstrate that geopolitics matter and are a factor in determining US sanctions policy towards Venezuela.

Humanitarian and democracy assistance

Next to sanctions, another essential component of US foreign policy towards Venezuela is the provision of humanitarian and democracy assistance. Firstly, the provision of US humanitarian assistance is provided on the basis of need and according to principles of universality, impartiality and independence. As of February 2020, the US government has provided approximately \$472 million for the Venezuelan crisis (since the financial year of 2017), of which a great majority has been provided to Venezuelan refugees and migrants who have fled the country or for the communities hosting them, such as to Venezuelans on the border with Colombia and Brazil.⁴⁰ Despite American goodwill, the delivery of humanitarian assistance has to a significant extent been obstructed by security forces loyal to Maduro, thereby aggravating the already precarious humanitarian situation.⁴¹

THE US GOVERNMENT HAS PROVIDED APPROXIMATELY \$472 MILLION FOR THE VENEZUELAN CRISIS

In addition to humanitarian assistance, the US has also provided democracy assistance. To this end, the US government has contributed assistance for monitoring democratic stability and strengthening the country's democratic institutions. Moreover, in October 2019, the US Agency for International Development concluded a bilateral agreement with the Guaidó government to expand its democracy and human rights-related programmes. This expansion is in line with the objectives of the interim government to facilitate a transition to democracy and to rebuild key sectors that have been severely damaged by the economic crisis.⁴²

Impact Assessment of US Foreign Policy towards Venezuela

As previously described, US foreign policy towards Venezuela consists of various elements. However, as humanitarian and democracy assistance are primarily aimed at improving the situation, it is expected that these policies will not contribute to the hardships experienced by the Venezuelan people – except when the delivery of humanitarian aid is impeded, although this is not within the control of the US government. Hence, it can be assumed that, above all, the American sanctions regime has the most severe impact on the once so prosperous nation.

Politically, US sanctions have achieved very little in the way of a positive result. Broader sanctions, which have been in place since 2017, have yet to compel Maduro to leave

SUPPORT FROM STATES LIKE RUSSIA, CHINA, CUBA AND IRAN, HAS GIVEN MADURO THE ABILITY TO REDUCE THE EFFECTS OF AMERICAN SANCTIONS

office, despite the country's dire economic situation. Moreover, targeted sanctions against individuals closely aligned to the Maduro government have not led to behavioural change, nor have they encouraged them to abandon Maduro. In addition, the tough sanctions regime implemented by the Americans has given Maduro an easy scapegoat on which he can blame the country's economic problems.⁴³ Lastly, support from states like Russia, China, Cuba and Iran, has

given Maduro the ability to mitigate the effects of American sanctions. Without their (financial) support, it would have been less likely that Maduro remains in power.⁴⁴ To put it succinctly, US foreign policy has not yet led to significant political alterations, thereby questioning its effectiveness.

Venezuela's economy is to a very large extent oil-based, as the export of oil provides the Venezuelan government with the revenue needed to import essential goods, such as food and medical supplies. The one-sidedness of the economy makes the country extremely vulnerable to the effect of sanctions targeted at the petroleum sector. Hence, the economic implications of the US sanctions regime are severe: by restricting payments to Venezuela, US sanctions cut deeply into the country's export earnings and revenues, making the government less able to import essential goods.⁴⁵ It has even been suggested that US sanctions have caused the main shock that pushed the Venezuelan economy from high inflation to hyperinflation.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the Maduro government has, to a certain extent, been able to work around these sanctions with other partners, particularly with the Russian government and its state firm Rosneft as well as China which has been generous in providing loans to the country.

In terms of the humanitarian effects of US sanctions, it has been argued that these sanctions have mainly affected the civilian population, rather than the targeted Venezuelan government.⁴⁷ Serious concerns have been expressed by, among others, Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, that US sanctions “fail to contain sufficient measures to mitigate their impact on the most vulnerable sectors of the population”⁴⁸. Moreover, even though US sanctions do not apply to humanitarian relief as such, over-compliance with these measures severely hinders the trade in food and medical supplies, a risk highlighted by EU High Representative Josep Borrell.⁴⁹ Furthermore, a report by the economists Mark Weisbrot and Jeffrey Sachs highlights that US sanctions have resulted in serious harm to human life and health in

US SANCTIONS “FAIL TO CONTAIN SUFFICIENT MEASURES TO MITIGATE THEIR IMPACT ON THE MOST VULNERABLE SECTORS OF THE POPULATION”

Venezuela, with an estimated 40,000 or more deaths since 2017-2018. This means that the US sanctions fall under the description of collective punishment, as described in both the Geneva and The Hague International Conventions.⁵⁰

Considering that US foreign policy is contributing to a deterioration of the already precarious economic and humanitarian situation in Venezuela, the effects are, directly or indirectly, being felt throughout the region. This also applies to the Dutch Caribbean islands, and in particular Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, which find themselves in close geographical proximity to a collapsing Venezuela. The Venezuelan crisis and its aggravation following US foreign policy is mainly affecting the following four Dutch security interests: territorial security, economic security, social and political stability, and the international legal order. Table 1 (at the end of this section) provides a schematic overview of how Dutch security interests are affected by US foreign policy towards Venezuela.

Territorial security

The islands are especially fearful of a possible US military intervention, mainly due to the US' historical precedent regarding both direct and indirect interventions in Latin America in order to induce regime change, as well as the fact that such an intervention has previously been threatened by President Trump, alluding to the restoration of the Monroe Doctrine.⁵¹ A US invasion of Venezuela would almost certainly directly affect, as well as involve, the Dutch Caribbean islands of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao in a number of ways.

Firstly, the Kingdom of the Netherlands is a valuable regional strategic ally of the US, as

the former US Ambassador to the Netherlands, Clifford Sobel, highlighted in a cable in 2005. The Netherlands' vested interest in Latin America, originating from the geographical location of the Dutch Caribbean, makes the country a reliable partner in the fight against illegitimate regimes in Venezuela.⁵² Whereas the distance between Curaçao and the

Venezuelan mainland is roughly 80 kilometres, Aruba is situated only 30 kilometres

away from Venezuela's coastline. The failed coup that occurred in May 2020 highlights how relevant the geographical location of the Dutch Caribbean is for the logistics of a potential intervention by sea, as Jordan Goudreau, the organiser of the plot, has stated that the vessels carrying the insurgents were reliant on fuel to be delivered to them from Aruba.⁵³ This exemplifies how easily the Kingdom of the Netherlands can unknowingly and unwillingly become involved in the ongoing standoff between the US and Venezuela.

Aruba and Curaçao furthermore each house a US military Forward Operating Location (FOL), which are used to monitor regional potential threats to the US. In the event of a US intervention in Venezuela, these bases could become targeted, putting the security of the islands and their inhabitants at risk. In June 2020, four US Air Force aircraft and crew were deployed to Hato Airport on Curaçao by the US Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), in order to "help US and international law enforcement authorities disrupt and defeat transnational criminal organizations trafficking illegal narcotics in the region."⁵⁴ For the Maduro government, such activities could signal that the US is closely monitoring Venezuela, and may increase suspicions that the US is preparing for an intervention. Moreover, the fact that the Netherlands has allowed an extension of the presence of US military assets may raise doubts as to the role of the country in the event of a US-led military intervention in Venezuela. The islands could furthermore simply be targeted by the Venezuelan military due to the Kingdom's support for the Guaidó administration and close diplomatic ties to the US. As such, the islands face the risk of being dragged into a conflict, especially if the US were to use its FOLs as strategic headquarters. This threat could be materialised, for example, by Venezuela's advanced anti-aircraft systems that originate from Russia, or a renewed claim that the islands are legally a part of Venezuela, an issue that has been alleged in the past by Chávez.⁵⁵ Although it has been established that the Venezuelan armed forces have a defensive doctrine, these systems have the ability to cover the airspace above the Dutch Caribbean.⁵⁶

**THE ISLANDS
FACE THE RISK OF
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**THE NETHERLANDS'
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ILLEGITIMATE REGIMES
IN VENEZUELA**

Yet, although the possibility of a US military intervention in Venezuela has repeatedly been suggested since 2017, it appears as though the actual plans for such an intervention remain at an early stage. As far as is publicly known, the US has made no formal request to the Dutch government asking for military cooperation in the event of an intervention.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, in February 2020, it was reported that President Trump was considering potentially establishing a naval blockade against Venezuela in the Caribbean Sea, an action that would be of serious concern to the Dutch Caribbean.⁵⁸ The threat that is posed to the territorial security of the Kingdom of the Netherlands therefore also extends to the waters surrounding the Dutch Caribbean islands. The potential occupation of these waters may furthermore affect the islands' economic and social stability.

Economic security

Economically, the effects of the Venezuelan crisis, aggravated by American foreign policy, are felt in two principal ways: the ability to

THE DUTCH CARIBBEAN ISLANDS ARE DEPENDENT UPON TRADE WITH NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES, MAKING THEM VULNERABLE TO EXTERNAL SHOCKS

trade and the effects on the oil industry. Firstly, the Dutch Caribbean islands are, as a result of their small size and openness, to a great extent dependent upon trade with neighbouring countries, which makes them extremely vulnerable to external shocks.⁵⁹ Venezuela used to be an important trading partner, exporting goods like fruit and vegetables to the three nearby islands. The crisis has forced the islands to look for alternative markets, resulting in rising costs.⁶⁰ Even though this is primarily a direct effect of the Venezuelan crisis itself, and not so much a result of American actions, the US sanctions regime has placed the islands in a more volatile position, limiting the countries and companies with which they are allowed to trade.

Even though the search for alternative markets for the import of primary goods is already a very serious issue, the most pressing problem for the Dutch Caribbean islands is the threat to the vitality of their economies. American sanctions have hit their economies hard. In particular, US sanctions towards Venezuela's

state-owned oil company, the PDVSA, have caused serious problems for Curaçao and Bonaire. With respect to Curaçao, sanctions against the PDVSA and the seizure of its assets have led to the initial closure of the PDVSA-owned oil refinery

on the island. Consequently, the approximately 4,000 people who are working at or are associated with the oil refinery are affected.⁶¹

One of the main implications of the shutdown of the oil refinery was that unemployment levels rose significantly, from 13.4% in 2018 to 21.2% in 2019.⁶² In addition, the main port and port-related activities in Curaçao are also largely dependent on oil. The 800 to 1,000 ship movements a year are mainly related to the oil refinery, meaning that revenues from the port and pilotage industry have practically dried up. Only in early May 2019 did the US issue a waiver to allow the Curaçao oil refinery to operate again, although not using Venezuelan oil. For Bonaire, the US sanctions also have far-reaching consequences, given that the Bonaire Petroleum Corporation (Bopec) terminal is a subsidiary of the PDVSA. In March 2020, the US waiver for Bopec, which allowed for a partial continuation of income generation and the payment of employees' salaries, expired.⁶³ The expiration of the waiver has resulted in concerns over the supply of fuel to Bonaire's main electricity producer, thereby threatening the energy security of the island.⁶⁴ Moreover, the permanent closure of the Bopec terminal, which was recently seized due to the lack of payments by the PDVSA, could lead to increasing levels of unemployment.⁶⁵

US SANCTIONS HAVE CAUSED SERIOUS PROBLEMS FOR CURAÇAO AND BONAIRE

Social and political stability

Although it can be argued that the establishment of a US-led severe sanctions regime against Venezuela did not cause the Venezuelan economic, political and humanitarian crises, the UNHCR has stated that sanctions are "exacerbating further the effects of the economic crisis, and thus the humanitarian situation."⁶⁶ The ways in which the continuance of the American "maximum pressure" campaign in Venezuela has directly affected the social security of the Kingdom of the Netherlands include: the increased influx of migrants and refugees from Venezuela in the Dutch Caribbean; increased human, drugs

and weapons smuggling from Venezuela to the Dutch Caribbean; and the return of previously eradicated infectious diseases. These issues have contributed to a significant rise in societal tensions and unrest on the islands.

At the time of writing, it is estimated that 17,000 and 16,500 refugees and migrants have fled Venezuela and arrived in Aruba and Curaçao respectively.⁶⁷ This translates to between 10 to 16 percent of each island's population consisting of Venezuelans, a reasonably large increase over a short period of time. It has proven to be challenging for the Dutch Caribbean to receive and support these migrants, leading to an increase in hostility towards incoming Venezuelans. These negative attitudes are related to growing concerns surrounding the fact that the undocumented refugees are exceptionally vulnerable to exploitation, human trafficking and prostitution, in addition to the majority being unvaccinated. As a result, diseases that had been previously eradicated on the islands, such as polio and measles, have returned.⁶⁸ Curaçao's autonomous government has additionally confirmed that the island is

DISEASES THAT HAD BEEN PREVIOUSLY ERADICATED ON THE ISLANDS HAVE RETURNED

burdened by significant negative consequences of the Venezuelan crisis, such as an increase in drugs, weapons and human trafficking.⁶⁹ In part, US sanctions are to blame for this increasing trend, as legal trade with Venezuela has been severely restricted, forcing people to pursue alternative sources of income.⁷⁰

Covid-19 has a serious potential to exacerbate social security issues that have become commonplace in countries affected by the

AS LONG AS THE VENEZUELAN STATUS QUO REMAINS UNCHANGED THESE INSECURITIES WILL NOT DIMINISH

Venezuelan crisis. Even though refugees are being deported from host states, and while many borders have been shut, people will continue to escape from Venezuela through illegal means. Most worrying is perhaps the fact that unemployment on Aruba has increased

from 7.3 percent at the end of 2019, to 77 percent in 2020.⁷¹ Although the long-term consequences of this statistic remain to be seen, it will likely negatively affect and exacerbate previously existing tensions concerning

the perception that Venezuelan migrants are stealing the local population's jobs. As long as the Venezuelan status quo remains unchanged (i.e. the enduring stalemate between the Maduro government and Guaidó's opposition, each backed by a wide range of countries), and US sanctions continue to further worsen the effects of the ongoing crisis, these insecurities among the Dutch Caribbean population will not diminish.

International legal order

The Kingdom of the Netherlands has, as an open and small country, an interest in a well-functioning international legal order. The importance thereof is even embedded in the Constitution, stating that "the government shall promote the development of the international legal order".⁷² To that end, the international legal order has become one of the Kingdom's six national security interests.⁷³

US foreign policy concerning Venezuela, and in particular its clash with other great powers on the issue, is posing a serious threat to the international legal order. Geopolitics play a significant role in the Venezuelan crisis, to the extent that the country has become a new theatre of great power competition between the US and, to a lesser extent, the EU on the one side, and China and Russia, on the other.⁷⁴ Moreover, it has been argued that if Maduro was not supported by states like China, Russia and Cuba, he would not have been able to hold on to power.⁷⁵ However, as the US continues its severe sanctions regime, ostracised Venezuela will have no other choice but to prolong and intensify its relationships with states such as Russia, Cuba, China and Iran. This dynamic ensures that the breeding ground for conflict remains intact, thereby not improving, but aggravating the Venezuelan crisis. In addition, geopolitical tensions have impeded the adoption of a UN Security Council resolution on Venezuela, indicating a serious stalemate on the issue.⁷⁶

GEOPOLITICS PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN THE VENEZUELAN CRISIS

At a time when effective and adequate action by the UN (Security Council) is more needed than ever, considering the devastation caused by the humanitarian crisis, the stalemate between the permanent members is clearly exposing the ineffectiveness of the multi-lateral institution.

Table 1 How Dutch security interests are affected by US Foreign Policy towards Venezuela (direct or indirect)

National Security Interest	How is it affected?
Territorial security	Possible US (military) intervention in Venezuela
	Stationing of US military assets on Curaçao
	Threat to the territorial waters of the Kingdom through a naval blockade
Economic security	Disruption of (international) trade
	Severe impact on the oil industry (Curaçao and Bonaire)
Social and political stability	The increased influx of migrants and refugees from Venezuela
	Increased smuggling of drugs and weapons from Venezuela
	The return of previously eradicated infectious diseases
	Significant rise in societal tensions and unrest
International legal order	Geopolitics ensure that the breeding ground for conflict remains intact
	Geopolitics have hindered the adoption of a UN Security Council resolution
	Potential infringement of the principle of peaceful co-existence

However, the aforementioned geopolitical tensions do not represent the only threat to the international legal order. The risk that the US will unilaterally intervene in Venezuela is still present. The thwarted coup attempt of May 3rd indicates that some type of American involvement in the removal of Maduro from power is not unlikely, even though there is currently no hard evidence that the US government was involved. Trump's subsequent claim that the involvement of the US government in Venezuela would have occurred through an invasion is only fanning the flames further.⁷⁷ Without prejudging, such an invasion or intervention would seriously harm the international legal order, as it would violate the sovereignty of Venezuela and infringe the principle of peaceful coexistence.

negatively affected the country's already precarious situation. By aggravating the pre-existing consequences of the crisis, US foreign policy threatens, directly or indirectly, the security interests of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. This applies in particular to the islands of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, given their geographical proximity to Venezuela.

The impact of US foreign policy towards Venezuela ranges from territorial, economic and societal concerns, to the broader, but no less significant, impact on the international legal order. As a result of their geographic location and the deployment of US military assets on Aruba and Curaçao, the islands are especially fearful of an American military intervention in Venezuela, as an invasion could lead to involuntary Dutch involvement or retaliatory strikes against the islands. Economically, the US sanctions regime has severely impacted trade between the Dutch Caribbean and Venezuela, which has raised considerable concerns about energy and job security. These issues, in combination with the continual influx of Venezuelan migrants and rising criminal activity on the islands, have contributed to a tangible increase in societal tensions, and

BY AGGRAVATING THE PRE-EXISTING CONSEQUENCES OF THE CRISIS, US FOREIGN POLICY THREATENS THE SECURITY INTERESTS OF THE KINGDOM OF THE NETHERLANDS

Conclusions and Action Perspective for the Dutch Government

As long as the Venezuelan crisis continues, the immediate neighbourhood of the once so prosperous nation will continue to be subjected to the effects of the crisis. This Strategic Alert has shown that US foreign policy towards Venezuela, and in particular the tough sanctions regime, has to a significant extent

may redefine the relationship that the Dutch Caribbean has with the Netherlands in the coming years. As the geopolitical stalemate that has come to characterise the Venezuelan crisis continues to exist, as well as continues to be exacerbated by the US sanctions regime against Venezuela, it is unlikely that these security concerns will diminish in the near future. Hence, it is likely that the Kingdom of the Netherlands will continue to be affected. Consequently, in order to mitigate the impact of US foreign policy towards Venezuela and to minimise the risk that Dutch security interests will be harmed any further, the following policy recommendations are made:

1. To mitigate the humanitarian effects of sanctions, **the Netherlands should remain vigilant that EU sanctions continue not to impact the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, while simultaneously engaging with Washington in a bid to reduce the impact of sanctions on the Venezuelan population.** This is currently more relevant than ever given the deterioration of the humanitarian situation as a result of Covid-19. To this end, the introduction of “smart” sanctions can be a suitable alternative, targeting only those people and entities aligned to the Maduro government, without severely affecting the population. Another crucial aspect in this regard is a relaxation of restrictions on the import of transport fuel, which is essential for humanitarian operations. In this way, the issue of over-compliance is also addressed, by reducing the threshold for NGOs to deliver humanitarian aid. The EU can play an essential role in supporting the relevant NGOs in this regard.
 2. On the one hand, **the Netherlands should discourage US plans to stage a (military) intervention in Venezuela and continue to support Venezuela’s right to sovereignty.** International forums may serve as the best way to confirm these commitments. On the other hand, **the Netherlands should engage in a dialogue with the US, highlighting the security interests that are at stake for the Kingdom of the Netherlands,** especially due to the stationing of US military assets on Curaçao, which can be interpreted by Venezuela as provocative. This leaves a chance that once tensions between
- Venezuela and the US escalate, Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire are unwillingly drawn into a conflict. In such a scenario, it is not unlikely that Venezuela would threaten to undermine the territorial security of (one of) the three islands. Hence, it would be desirable if the US could support the local and national authorities with their military assets stationed on Curaçao. To this end, **it would be recommendable that the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the US conclude a transactional agreement,** in which the US provides a security guarantee to the islands, which should be complementary to the security provided by the already present Dutch forces, in exchange for the stationing of (an increased number of) US military assets.
3. Considering that geopolitics play an essential role in the continuation of the Venezuelan conflict, and Venezuela has become a proxy of the broader tensions between the great powers, **it is recommendable to initiate an inclusive dialogue with all the actors involved, including Russia, China, the US, and Cuba.** At the centre of such talks should be that all parties involved have a shared interest, namely that Venezuela moves back to peace. This should be the starting point for talks between the great powers involved. Given the security interests that are at stake, the Netherlands should, together with like-minded countries within the EU and/or the United Nations, stress the need for such a dialogue. Considering that various European states, such as Spain and Italy, also house a significant number of Venezuelans, bilateral cooperation with those countries would be a logical step, given the shared interests.
 4. In order to mitigate the significant impact that the continual influx of Venezuelan migrants has on Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, **the Netherlands should explore the option of taking in a specified number of refugees.** This may also relieve tensions between the islands and the Netherlands with regard to the criticism that the Netherlands has abandoned the Dutch Caribbean in managing this crisis, as expressed by the inability to safeguard the human rights of Venezuelan refugees on the islands.

5. The most favourable scenario is that the Venezuelan crisis would come to an end, independent of the US' course of action. This would, in the long term, significantly reduce the humanitarian effects of the crisis and would also help the country to climb out of the quagmire, even if that takes a long time. To this end, **peace facilitation by an independent broker, similar to the attempt by Norway in May 2019, would be recommendable**. Since the EU has taken the side of Juan Guaidó in the conflict, it cannot function as an independent broker. In contrast, what can be helpful is to **establish a UN Committee for Peace Facilitation for Venezuela**. Such a committee, which would have to receive the support of the great powers, is known for being neutral and independent, two aspects that are crucial in trying to negotiate peace in a country that is torn between two opposites. In a similar vein, **the EU-backed International Contact Group could also provide a framework for peace facilitation and dispute resolution** between Maduro and Guaidó. An obvious benefit of this option is the fact that the Netherlands already possesses a seat at the table by being a founding participant of the International Contact Group.
6. Lastly, **it is recommended that the Netherlands at least considers, but preferably prepares for the establishment of an international post-Maduro stabilisation mission or force**. Although this recommendation projects into the (potentially distant) future and the establishment of such a mission would require UN Security Council consent, it is imperative to remember the Dutch security interests that are at stake. These risks could become even more apparent if Venezuela's state apparatus collapses and needs to be reconstructed. The Netherlands thus has a vested interest in stabilising post-Maduro Venezuela, especially considering the state's close geographical proximity to the Dutch Caribbean and therefore a high likelihood of being asked to participate in a mission. Although the end of Maduro's Presidency is not yet in sight, it is important to already be thinking about a post-Maduro Venezuela, as well as to explore the options for the role(s) that the Netherlands can play.

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