

## Political Economy of U.S.-Russian Hegemonic Struggle for Sphere of Influence in Latin America: How the U.S. lost Venezuela

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### Abstract

*This article evaluates the U.S.-Russian hegemonic struggle for sphere of influence that escalated the 2019 presidential crisis in Venezuela. The crisis which centred essentially on whom the legitimate President of Venezuela is, was characterized by violent protests and international political intrigues between the supporters of Nicolas Maduro and Juan Guaido. U.S.' recognition of Juan Guaido and delegitimization of Maduro resultantly met with stiff opposition in Russia's legitimization and uncompromising support for Maduro's presidency. Deploying the Two Persons' Zero-sum model of the Game Theory of international politics, the article explores how the U.S. strove to leverage the advantages of the Monroe Doctrine and Dollar diplomacy to effect an opportunistic regime change in Venezuelawhile Russia smartly appropriated the benefits of its arms deals and oil diplomacy with Venezuela in furtherance of its strategic interests in Venezuela. The article concludes that the U.S. capitulated and steadily lost Venezuela to Russia.*

**Keywords:** Political economy, Hegemonic struggle, Sphere of influence, U.S.-Russian rivalry, Monroe Doctrine, Arms deal, Venezuela

### Introduction

Venezuela is an oil rich country in Latin America—a region which the United States (U.S.) of America has historically seen as her 'backyard'. Although the Venezuelan political space has known crisis—economic and political—for over a decade now, the current political unrest in Venezuela spiked in January 2019 when opposition leader, Juan Guaido, proclaimed himself the rightful President, dismissing Nicolas Maduro's 2018 re-election for second term of another six years as a fraud. The election which recorded no presence of electoral observers (Delgado, 2018) and the lowest turnout in Venezuela's modern democratic history (Phillips, 2018), was not only characterized by deliberate exclusion of opposition candidates and handpicking of candidates, but also by voter intimidation and sundry forms of vote buying (Delgado, 2018; Camacho, 2018). Consequently, the results of the election were rejected by the opposition on grounds of overwhelming irregularities. The opposition-dominated National Assembly rejected the election results, calling them an 'electoral farce', and declaring Maduro 'a usurper' (Rawlins, 2019). With

the rejection of the results as invalid, the National Assembly, in January 2019, invoked clauses of the 1999 Venezuelan Constitution, specifically articles 233, 333 and 350 to install the National Assembly Speaker, Juan Guaidó, as Acting President. A week later, the pro-Maduro Supreme Tribunal of Justice counter-labeled the presidency of the National Assembly the ‘usurper’ of authority and thus declared the body unconstitutional (*BBC 21 January, 2019*). These moves precipitated what has come to be referred to as the 2019 Venezuelan presidential crisis.

The crisis which has been characterized by all manner of organized protest, violent demonstrations, arrests and detentions, and clashes between pro-Maduro Venezuelan National Guard and millions of pro-Guaido supporters centres on who the legitimate president of Venezuela is. It borders specifically on which of the two principal parties to the conflict—the incumbent government led by President Maduro or the Transitional government led by Juan Guaido, is legitimate. While this is not the first time Venezuela is experiencing crisis on a large scale (Duddy, 2015), it is certainly the first time the Venezuelan ship, in melodramatic parlance, is having two antagonistic captains. The existence of two ‘Presidents’ in one Venezuela has resulted in a political impasse, plunging the polity to a near-grinding halt. For emphasis, since its jinx-breaking parliamentary electoral victory in 2015, the opposition has acquired an unprecedentedly daring, confrontational and unyielding posture. It is therefore not surprising that on 30<sup>th</sup> April 2019, Guaido called for an uprising against President Maduro in which a group of military personnel defected and joined many civilians in carrying out the call. Confrontation subsequently erupted between Guaido’s military supporters and Maduro’s loyalists. In the midst of this power tussle, a mediatory peace-talk was held in May 2019 in Norway between the two ‘presidents’. Regrettably, the peace dialogue fell apart in May 29, 2019 as opposition delegates insisted that Maduro must resign against Maduro’s delegates’ position (*Reuters 5 July, 2019*). While this stalemate lingered, supporters of both camps clashed violently, resulting in deaths, severe injuries and torturous arrests. In specific term, there were 107 recorded deaths, over 500 injured/wounded persons and 956 arrests between February and March, 2019 (Crusher, 2019; Luhnnow, 2019).

Meanwhile, the rejection and acceptance of the May 20<sup>th</sup> 2018 election and its outcomes attracted both domestic and international appeal, reflecting as it were, the old traditional geopolitical lines (*Vasilyeva, 2019*). While the governments of Russia, China, Cuba, Iran, Syria, Turkey and others accepted the results, the U.S. and over 50 other countries rejected both the

process and the outcome of the elections, and have thus thrown their support behind Guaidó (Wys, 2018; Phillips, 2019; Vasilyeva, 2019). With U.S.' swift recognition of Guaidó's presidency, the government of Maduro accused the U.S. government of organizing a *coup d'état* to overthrow him and take control of the country's oil reserves (Llamas, Torres, Radia, Castano, Hoyos & Jacobo, 2019). As part of the measures to pressure Maduro to resign, the U.S. government in January 2019, imposed sanctions on the Venezuelan state-owned oil and natural gas company, the *Petroleos De Venezuela Sociedad Anonima* (PDVSA) (Lee & Riechmann, 2019). Before now, the United States, the European Union, Canada, Mexico, Panama and Switzerland had imposed individual sanctions against people associated with Maduro's administration, including government officials, members of the military and security forces, and private individuals said to be involved in alleged human rights abuses, corruption, degradation in the rule of law and repression of democracy (Vidal & Mazzali, 2019). These steady strategic economic and political sanctions imposed on Venezuela by the U.S. government and many other Western countries have further worsened the humanitarian situation in the country.

Believing on the other hand that the crisis in Venezuela was artificially created by the U.S. (Rouvinski, 2019), Russia became determined to make every effort to prevent military intervention in Venezuela (*TASS News Agency* 3 March, 2019). In keeping with this determination, Russia allegedly sent security forces to Venezuela to help quell the uprising and ensure that Maduro is not forced out of office in the heat of the crisis (Trevithick, 2019). Two nuclear weapon-capable Russian planes carrying 99 troops and 35 tonnes of material (Zuñiga & Faiola, 2019) had landed in Venezuela in December 2018 as 'part of an effort to maintain Maduro's defense apparatus' (Zuñiga & Faiola, 2019, para: 3) and a 'show of support for Maduro's socialist government' to the infuriation of Washington. *The U.S. has continued to see these signs of strengthening relations between Maduro's government and Russia as undue 'encroachment in a region' historically seen as its backyard and exclusive sphere of influence* (Busch 2019).

However, scholars have tried to account for the ongoing political crisis in Venezuela. Studies like Solimano (2005), Duddy (2015), McClain (2018), Nelson (2018), World Report on Venezuela (2019), have almost in unison seen the crisis as a logical consequence of many years of lingering economic crisis and the accumulated sense of frustration thereof. Others such as Fadakinte (2014), Maya (2014), Wallsworth (2015), Duddy (2015), Ngah (2016), Zahler (2017),

Peter and Abdulrahman (2018), Angerbrandt (2018) among others situate the cause of the crisis on issues related to poor voters' turnout, political repression, weak political institutions and electoral laws, poverty and unemployment, political imbalance and ethno-religious polarization. Apart from skeletal newspapers commentaries, the role of external influence in the form of U.S.-Russia strategic interests as a possible factor accounting for the subsistence of the political crisis in Venezuela is grossly neglected by extant scholarly literature. Although scholars have variously documented the souring U.S.-Russian relationship (Rumer&Solkolsky, 2019; Tsygankov, 2019; Rumer, 2019; Carothers, 2018; Suslov, 2016; Stronski&Sokolsky, 2015; Kasymov, 2012; Nation, 2012; Graham, 2008; Edwards & Chairs, 2006), they did not relate it to how this impacts on the current political impasse in Venezuela, as well as the algorithms of the possibilities of victory for either of the two rival superpowers.

This epistemic void is regrettable given the fact that there is an ongoing geopolitical game between the U.S. and Russia that verges on struggle for supremacy and influence in Latin America, especially in Venezuela. What is more, there has been this lingering accusation and counter-accusation of rapacious desire for spheres of influence between Russia and the West in post Cold War era (Pop, 2009; Adamkus et al., 2009; Rettman, 2014). In view of this, this article seeks to achieve two objectives. First is to demonstrate that the U.S.-Russian governments' hegemonic struggle for sphere of influence escalated the post-election crisis in Venezuela. Second, and as a sequel to the first, is to demonstrate how and why the U.S. is apparently losing the geopolitical game in Venezuela to Russia.

### **Methodology**

The study is a qualitative one, thus the data for the study were sourced secondarily via documentary method of data collection. We relied heavily on such written documents like books, book chapters, journal articles, official documents, magazines and newspaper. Radio and television news were also recorded and subsequently played and replayed to the end of extracting important details, points, facts and figures contained in them. This enabled the researcher to glean information and data about units of observation and of analysis (Venezuelan citizenry, the Venezuelan, Russian and U.S. governments, etc). In making sense out of the data, we adopted the content analysis method. It is used in obtaining in-depth information about the units of analysis of a given item of

study. Being a method with high utility in qualitative research and with the most significant feature of relying heavily on skills, creativity and abilities of the researcher, it involves processes of interpretation, logical induction and analytic sagacity. It involved the presentation, reading, analysis, critique and discussion of relevant information gathered from the different categories of sources, from which conclusion can be drawn. We analyzed the contents of information collected from the above sources in such a way that meaningful inferences/conclusions were made possible.

The article is anchored on the logics and theoretical deductions of the Two-persons' Zero-sum model of the Game Theory of international politics. According to Plano and Riggs (1973, p.33), the game theory is a 'body of thoughts dealing with rational decision strategies in situations of conflict and competition, when each participant or player seeks to maximize gains and minimize losses'. Like some palour games after which the game theory is patterned or modeled such as chess, chicken, and poker, the game theory represents a game played between two or more players, where decisions of each player are dependent on the decisions of others, and the central point, therefore, is the interdependence among the decisions of the different players participating in the game.

Articulated first as an intellectual exercise by Emil Borel in 1920, the original game theory was later fine-tuned and popularized by John von Neuman and Oscar Morgenstern in their seminal work—*Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*—published in 1944, and was primarily applied to the study of economics. The credit of introducing, and to some extent applying, the game theory to political science goes to R. Duncan Luce and Howard Raiffa in their work, *Games and Decision: Introduction and Critical Survey*, 1957; Martin Slubik in *Games Theory and Related Approaches to Social Behaviour*, 1964; and Anatol Rapoport, in his work, *Two Person Game Theory: The Essential Ideas*, 1966 (Varma, 1975). Again, in 1970, the usefulness of the theory was further

extended to decision-making owing to the important contribution of Morgenstern titled *Theory and Decision*. Although the theory has its origin in mathematical economics, and deals essentially with the application of mathematical models to conflicts, competitive and decision-making situations, its utility in political science was sagaciously adumbrated and succinctly enunciated by Varma (1986, p.287) in the following lines:

In all situations, where a decision involving the others has to be taken, in the case of generals engaged in battles, diplomats engaged in bargaining and negotiations, politicians trying to influence the voters, legislators making efforts to organize groups or coalitions, the game theory has a role to play.

According to the theory, a game can either be zero-sum or non zero-sum. ‘On the one hand’, writes Igwe (2005, p.169), ‘the zero-sum game is where the gains and losses are fixed, a winner-take-all game, with any gain being only at the expense of a complete loss of the other actor and vice versa’. He further distinguishes the nonzero-sum game as one in which the gains and losses are flexible and relative, and can be affected or determined by cooperation, not just conflict, between players. Some of the basic assumptions or tenets of the Game theory therefore includes:

- ❖ In every game situation, player schemes to maximize his gains/advantages and minimize his losses.
- ❖ The decisions of each player are contingent upon the decisions of others.
- ❖ Each player is a rational entity with well-defined goals and resources
- ❖ In game theory, players adopt strategies by which they try to maximize their payoffs. Goldman (1972:337) defined a strategy as ‘an overall programme of actions which a player adopts in order to achieve a desired outcome or series of outcomes under adverse or conflict conditions’.
- ❖ Each player is guided by what is called the *rules of the game*, which Varma (1968, p.288) defined as the ‘distribution of resources and the strategic possibilities open to each player in the employment of these resources’.
- ❖ The prospect (i.e, range of possible outcomes) of each game has a specific payoff (reward) for each player.

### U.S.'s Invocation of Monroe Doctrine and Russia's 'Symbolic Presence' Policy

In the year 1823, that the then U.S. President, James Monroe announced the *Monroe Doctrine*, which among other things, stipulated that the U.S. deems the region spanning Mexico to the southernmost tip of Latin America its exclusive sphere of influence (Busch, 2019). The Doctrine has four (4) basic points, namely:

- i. The United States would not interfere in the affairs of European nations.
- ii. The United States would recognise, and not interfere with, countries that already existed in the Americas.
- iii. The Western Hemisphere was off-limits to colonization by any foreign power.
- iv. The United States would consider any attempt by a European power to colonize or interfere in the Western Hemisphere a hostile act.

Among other reasons, President Monroe also wanted to stop the influence of Russia in western North America (Ducksters,n.d). Juxtaposed therefore with the above, the U.S. considers Russia's increasing presence in Latin America, especially Venezuela since the end of the Cold War an undue flirtation with her backyard. In comparatively recent time, Russia, in the calculation of the U.S., has flouted the Doctrine by being the primary backer of Maduro, and the primary arms supplier to Venezuela for the past decade, including fighter aircraft and antimissile defense systems. To the U.S. infuriation, Moscow has continued to show open and strong support to Maduro's government, which to the U.S. is a dictatorship that must be ousted. In March, 2019, for instance, about 100 Russian military personnel arrived in Caracas aboard two military planes. The then U.S. national security adviser, John Bolton and the Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, expressed concerns that increased Russian military, diplomatic and economic support were propping up Venezuelan President, Nicolás Maduro, in the face of U.S. call for his ouster (DeYoung, 2019). They had thought the purpose for which the Russian military personnel came was to perform maintenance on the S-300 air defense system, at the completion of which they would leave. But unfolding events proved otherwise. So when the call by the U.S. for Russia to remove her people in Venezuela was not hearkened by Russia, John Bolton declared that the U.S. was 'implementing the Monroe Doctrine, established in 1823 to prevent outside powers from intervening in the Western Hemisphere' (DeYoung, 2019, para.3). He sternly warned that no country should enter the Western Hemisphere 'with the intent of establishing or expanding military

operations’ (Sanger, 2019, para.5). In May 1<sup>st</sup> 2019, he declared with distinct air of possessiveness: ‘This is our hemisphere — it’s not where the Russians ought to be interfering’ (Frolov, 2019, para.7).

It is important to note at this juncture that U.S. Presidents throughout history have had occasions to pragmatically invoke the Monroe Doctrine in the course of intervening in foreign affairs in the Western Hemisphere. **Table 1** contains some examples of the Monroe Doctrine in action.

**Table 1: Classic examples of the Monroe Doctrine in action in the past**

Year of Invocation	Nature and Places of Invocation
1865	The U.S. government helped to overthrow Mexican Emperor Maximilian I who was put in power by the French. He was replaced by President Benito Juarez.
1904	President Theodore Roosevelt added the ‘Roosevelt Corollary’ to the Monroe Doctrine. He used the doctrine to stop what he called ‘wrongdoing’ in several countries. It was the beginning of the U.S. acting as an international police force in the Americas.
1962	President John F. Kennedy invoked the Monroe Doctrine during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The U.S. placed a naval quarantine around Cuba to prevent the Soviet Union from installing ballistic missiles on the island.
1982	President Reagan invoked the Monroe Doctrine to fight communism in the Americas, including countries such as Nicaragua and El Salvador.

**Source:** Ducksters (n.d.). *US History: The Monroe Doctrine*.

However, Bolton’s (threat of) invocation of the Monroe Doctrine and his ‘spheres of influence framing’ makes Russia believe that, if done on an equal basis, a similar right should be recognized for Russia in Ukraine and other parts of the ‘near abroad’ (Frolov, 2019, para.7). Going forward, Frolov (2019) also notes that Putin made it clear to Trump on phone conversation that withdrawing Russian military support for Maduro should also be matched by the withdrawal of U.S. military assistance to Ukraine. With the U.S. reluctance to grant Russia’s request for equality of treatment, especially as it affects the Ukrainian crisis, Russia remains doggedly committed to her ‘Symbolic Presence’ policy in Latin America by unyieldingly propping up Maduro’s regime against the U.S. wish. According to Rouvinski (2019, p.3):



This policy had two main elements: The first was for Russia to provide both its state- and privately-owned businesses with new opportunities in the region. The focus was on areas where the Russian government believed it had a comparative advantage in Latin American markets, i.e. the energy sector and armaments. The second goal was for Russia to engage Latin American countries, even if only symbolically, in building a new multipolar world order that might challenge the existing U.S.-led world order.

The engagement of the Bolivarian Republic by Russia is a manifestation of the extent to which President Putin is prepared to carry far away nations along as allies in rebuilding a fresh multipolar world order that challenges the current order that is pro and pan-U.S. (Rouvinski, 2019). By geographical proximity, Venezuela, and indeed the entire Latin America, is a vast distance to Russia compared to the United States. But as it always is in every expansionist commitment (latent or manifest), Russia has thrown both caution and cost to the winds in making sure that the Bolivarian Republic (Venezuela) is technically recruited into her sphere of influence. Currently, Venezuela is Russia's closest ally in the Latin America. This commitment by Russia to establish and maintain 'symbolic presence' in Venezuela is further buoyed up and sustained by the predominant view among Russian political elite that the lingering Venezuelan economic quagmire is a product of U.S.-sponsored calculations and moves of sabotage, and not necessarily a consequence of Bolivarian government economic policies (Rouvinski 2019). Russia's greatest investment in Venezuela has been undertaken through Rosneft—Russian state-owned oil company. Russia elites have publicly declared through Rosneft's manager, Igor Sechin that their company and Kremlin 'will never abandon Venezuela' (*Reuters*, 2017, para.6). This is because 'Russia believes that it has made too many tangible and intangible investments here. Were Venezuela ever to fall from the Russian orbit, it would be very painful for the Kremlin. Moscow is therefore trying hard to prevent this from happening' (Rouvinski, 2019, p.2) by doggedly supporting Maduro against all the odds stalked against him.

Arising logically from the foregoing dynamics of U.S.' invocation of the Monroe Doctrine that sees Venezuela as U.S. backyard on the one hand, and Russia's determination to keep Venezuela within its orbital influence by maintaining 'symbolic presence' on the other hand, is the burning issue of who the legitimate Venezuelan President is; Maduro or Guaidó? This is what the presidential crisis in Venezuela is all about! Whose preferred candidate presides over the people, economy and territory of Venezuela underscores the battle for influence being waged between the United States, which firmly backs Guaidó, and Russia, a tenacious friend of the

Maduro government. Emboldened by the U.S. and about 50 other countries' support, 'President' Guaidó by late January 2019 had started forming his own cabinet and appointing individuals to serve as aides or diplomats (Adams & Tamoá, 2019; *Alianza News* 29 January 2019). The legitimacy tussle continued such that even the peace talks held around June, 2019 between Maduro and Guaidó ended in stalemate because, as it were, neither of the two superpowers (U.S. and Russia) backing the two 'presidents' was ready to compromise its vested interest in the country.

### **Russia's Arms Deals and U.S. militarization of Venezuelan Borders**

Russia has repeatedly signed arms deals with Venezuela, including more than \$3 billion in weapons deal (*TASS News Agency* December 4, 2017) resulting in intermittent and periodic supply of armored vehicles, missiles and artillery, air defense system and associated military equipment by the former to the latter (Wolland, n.d.). In terms of degree, Venezuela is the 'largest operator of Russian armament and military hardware in Latin American region' (*TASS News Agency* December 4, 2017, p.2). It is equally noteworthy that the U.S. withdrew permit for the sale of U.S.-origin arms to Venezuela due to the latter's ties to Iran and Cuba (Wolland, n.d.). The author notes that under Chavez regime, Russia and Venezuela struck an arms deal that sent '24 Russian-made Sukhoi Su-30 MK2 fighter jets and 53 military helicopters to Venezuela' (para.3). Included in the deal was an agreement for Russia to build a Kalashnikov rifle factory in Venezuela. Before this, there had been a deal under which Russia supplied 100,000 Kalashniko AK-103 rifles to Venezuela (Wolland, n.d.).

Still as part of the arms and intelligence deal, Russian troops have reportedly been embedding 'themselves in garrisons around Venezuela by the hundreds' in an effort to 'donning the fatigue of the Venezuelan army' (Berg, 2019, para.5). Following rumors of American military intervention in March 2019, two airplanes with Russian military technicians landed in Caracas in public display of support for Maduro's Venezuela (Kurmanaev, 2019). Although a Venezuelan official maintained that the Russian military officials were visiting to discuss equipment training and maintenance as well as strategy, Trump's administration expressed doubt about this. For this reason did the administration deploy and surround Venezuelan-Guyana borders with U.S. military troops, and so also did U.S.-backed Colombian and Brazilian governments follow suit in surrounding the western and southern borders of Venezuela respectively with their troops

(Bradley, 2019). The table below shows the nature of Russia's troop that landed in Venezuela in March 2019.

**Table 2: Russia's military troops in Venezuela**

What Were Involved	Remarks
The landing at the Caracas Airport of 2 Air Force planes belonging to Russia	This was shown by flight tracking
A Ilyushin IL-62 passenger jet and a Antonov AN-124 cargo plane	The flight took off from Moscow via Syria
The planes carried 100 soldiers, Vasily Tonkoshkurov, chief of staff of the ground forces, and 35 tons of equipment	This is according to independent local journalist, Javier Mayorca's report
The planes brought equipment and personnel to fulfill technical military contracts.	Report according to Russian state news agency <i>Sputnik</i>

Source: <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-sends-military-planes-to-venezuela/a-48047119>

Although the U.S. has over the years demonstrated that she has the military might to strike when and wherever she deemed fit, Russia is arguably a match for U.S. and ready to dare at present.

**Table 3** compares the U.S and Russia's military strengths.

**Table 3: U.S. and Russia military strengths compared**

Russian Army	U.S. Army
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 67,820 main battle tanks</li> <li>• 135,402 armored fighting vehicles</li> <li>• 23,917 self-propelled guns</li> <li>• 13,465 towed artillery</li> <li>• 10,467 multiple-launch rocket systems</li> <li>• 664 tactical ballistic missile systems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 28,950 main battle tanks</li> <li>• 186,930 armored fighting vehicles</li> <li>• 24,810 self-propelled guns</li> <li>• 11,600 towed artillery</li> <li>• 9,110 multiple-launch rocket systems</li> <li>• 2,850 tactical ballistic missile systems</li> </ul>
Russian Navy	U.S Navy

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 aircraft carriers</li> <li>• 4 battlecruisers</li> <li>• 3 cruisers</li> <li>• 15 destroyers</li> <li>• 3 frigates</li> <li>• 78 corvettes</li> <li>• 63 submarines</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 25 aircraft carriers</li> <li>• 23 helicopter carriers</li> <li>• 28 battleships</li> <li>• 119 battlecruisers</li> <li>• 233 cruisers</li> <li>• 389 destroyers</li> <li>• 516 frigates</li> <li>• 878 corvettes</li> <li>• 269 submarines</li> </ul>
<b>Russian Air Force</b>	<b>U.S. Air Force</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1,109 bombers</li> <li>• 6,490 fighters/interceptors</li> <li>• 2,638 attack aircraft</li> <li>• 1,506 transports</li> <li>• 5,474 helicopters</li> <li>• 5,094 attack helicopters</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 2,350 bombers</li> <li>• 11,895 fighters/interceptors</li> <li>• 6,930 attack aircraft</li> <li>• 8,843 transports</li> <li>• 12,720 helicopters</li> <li>• 8,690 attack helicopters</li> </ul>

**Source:** Compiled by the Researcher from: Global Firepower-2019 world military strength ranking available at [www.globalfirepower.com](http://www.globalfirepower.com) and [http://www.raptorfind.com/page/en/Russia%E2%80%93United\\_States\\_relations](http://www.raptorfind.com/page/en/Russia%E2%80%93United_States_relations)

In the face of this militarization of Venezuelan borders, coupled with the undiminished suspicion of the possibility of U.S. military intervention in Venezuela, both Maduro’s government and that of Russia vehemently opposed and stoutly rejected the U.S.-championed humanitarian aid shipments to Venezuela, dubbing it a pretext for arm importation and eventual military intervention to oust Maduro out of office (*BBC News* 12 February, 2019). Occasioned by this, the government of Maduro sent military troop around the Colombian and Brazilian borders – one of the three entry points of the U.S.-lead humanitarian aid shipment to Venezuela. When the humanitarian aids from the U.S and Brazil arrived in Colombia in February 6<sup>th</sup> 2019 to be delivered and distributed in Venezuela, it was found that the Russian-backed government of Maduro had blocked all entry points with military troops. This resulted in violent clashes that recorded much fatalities and casualties on both sides. In the end, over 285 persons were seriously wounded and not less than 14 deaths were recorded (*La Patilla*, 2019).

The net implication and consequence of the foregoing is that daily living in Venezuela has continued to worsen. Scarcity of food and consequent malnourishment has skyrocketed. The population of malnourished Venezuelans following hyperinflations and mangled food production in Venezuela has been put to 3.7 million (UNHROHC, 2019). A leaked UN report estimated that

7 million Venezuelans are in dire need of humanitarian assistance (Hadal, 2019). The dire humanitarian crisis in Venezuela has prompted many NGO and Governments of Nations to openly express and indicate interests in extend sundry humanitarian assistance to the Venezuelan citizens. At the Conference on Humanitarian Assistance in Support of Venezuela hosted by the OAS in Washington, D.C., John Bolton announced that 25 countries pledged US\$100 million for humanitarian aid to be delivered to Venezuela via centres in Curaçao, Colombia and Brazil (*News18 15 February, 2019*).

### **U.S. Dollar/economic Diplomacy and Russia's Oil Diplomacy in Action in Venezuela**

The U.S. use of dollar and other economic enticements in the form of loan or outright funding (and sometimes, its denial) to further American interests in foreign lands is age-long. To bolster the opposition to the eventual end of dislodging Maduro, the U.S. promised 'to provide Venezuela's Guaido with \$52 million in funding' (*Reuters, 24 September, 2019*). Prior to this, the U.S. had given Guaido control of Venezuela's bank accounts in the U.S., namely the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and other federally insured banks (*Aljazeera, 2019, January 29*). This was followed by the placement of sanction on Venezuela's state-owned oil company, the PDVSA, a move to 'block \$7bn in assets and result in \$11bn of lost export revenue' over the subsequent year (Lee & Riechmann, 2019; *Aljazeera, 2019, January 29, para.4*). The sanctions were later extended to individuals and entities associated with Maduro's administration, including government officials, members of the military and security forces, and private individuals alleged to be involved in human rights abuses, corruption, degradation in the rule of law and repression of democracy (Vidal & Mazzali, 2019).

These economic and sectoral sanctions have remained a collective punishment that have not only further sunk the Venezuelan economy but have also worsened the living conditions of the ordinary Venezuelans, 40,000 of whom have reportedly died (Vaz, 2019). The U.S. government's inordinate use of Dollar diplomacy in the form of economic and financial sanctions to choke Maduro's regime has not been entirely rewarding nor has it been without some negative outcomes. These sanction-induced sufferings when juxtaposed with 'Guaidó's failure to deliver on the many promises made during early 2019 has seen many Venezuelans who initially supported him become disillusioned with the self-declared intermediate president' (Smith, 2020, para.2). The implication,

according to him, is that ‘Venezuelans now set aside politics and focus on managing day to day problems just to survive’. Murphy cited in Smith (2020, para.2) laments thus:

We could have used the prospect of U.S. recognition or sanctions as leverage and could have done more to consult our European allies and to talk to or neutralize China and Russia at an early stage. In short, all we did was play all our cards on day one, and it didn’t work.

Russia has however not allowed the sanction on PDVSA to have the expected full effect on Venezuela’s oil sector as Russia’s oil firm, Rosneft, waded in, helping Venezuela to divert its oil export to Asia (Kurmanaev, 2019) thereby mitigating the effect of the sanction on Maduro’s government. For emphasis, Venezuela is heavily indebted to Russia and Russian establishments up to the staggering tone of about \$9 billion (Bremmer, 2019). The accepted modality for the repayment of this loan has come in the form of oil diplomacy in which Russia’s state-owned oil company—Rosneft—accepts oil in exchange for the loan. Just as Venezuela is the largest recipient of Russia’s armament and military hardware in Latin America, in recent time, Russia’s ‘Rosneft has quickly surpassed all other companies to become the top trader of Venezuelan oil’ (Berg, 2019, para. 2). Until its sanction by the U.S. between February and March 2020, Rosneft remained Venezuela’s largest oil trader, taking 44 percent of PDVSA exports in July and 66 percent in August, 2019 (Herbst&Marczak, 2019). Due to its role in Venezuela’s oil trading, especially as it affected the evasion of the biting edges of the sanctions on Venezuela’s PDVSA, Rosneft was equally sanctioned by the U.S. with the stern assurance that it would never be lifted until Rosneft, and by extension Russia, effectively withdraws from Venezuelan business (Garip, 2020). Rosneft’s sanction is arguably symbolic as it will not fundamentally change anything. The government transfer of its major stake in Rosneft to another Russian state-owned company is a very smart move to by-passing the effects of the sanctions on Russian interests in Venezuela. In view of the subsisting oil diplomacy and arms deal between Russia and Venezuela, Cuba had requested ‘Russia to escort tankers carrying Venezuela’s shipments of free oil to the resource-strapped island’ (Berg, 2019, para.4).

### **Game Theory and why the U.S. is Lost to Russia: From Hypothesizing the Odds to Assessment of Strategic Actions and Inactions**

The Two Persons’ zero-sum model of the game theory is appropriate for the analysis of the conflict situation in Venezuela where two superpowers—the U.S. and Russia, are competing for values.

There is no doubt that the first principle (in every game situation, player schemes to maximize his gains/advantages and minimize his losses) is what the current issue in Venezuela is primarily all about. It is on record that since 2010, Russia has made huge financial commitment and invested heavily and dearly in Venezuela up to the tune of \$9 billion (Lowe & Sagdiev, 2019). Now, should Russia-backed socialist government of Maduro be toppled and replaced by the U.S.-sponsored transitional government of Guaido, Russia, no doubt, runs the unimaginable risk of losing its over \$9 billion worth of investment in Venezuela. On the other hand, should Russia continue to deepen and exploit its burgeoning relationship with Maduro's Venezuela, America will definitely stand the risk of losing its historical grip on Venezuela and by extension, the whole of Latin America and its attendant negative economic implications to the U.S economy. It therefore stands to reason in view of the above to aver that the 'geopolitical game in Venezuela'(Gurganus, 2018, para.1) between the two countries is clearly and squarely that of maximization of gains/advantages and minimization of losses.

The manifestation of the second principle (The decisions of each player are contingent upon the decisions of others) in this ongoing 'game' between Russia and the U.S. has been very much evident. Russia's decision to openly and stoutly support Maduro is contingent upon America's decision to recognize and back Guaido. When the U.S. sanctioned the Venezuelan energy industry in January 2019, the oil company of Russia, Rosneft, was instrumental to the diversion of its oil export to Asia (Kurmanaev, 2019) until its ban in 2020. Similarly, following rumors of American military intervention in March of the same year, two airplanes with Russian military technicians landed in Caracas in public display of support for Maduro's Venezuela (Kurmanaev, 2019).

That 'each player is a rational entity with well-defined goals and resources' is another assumption of the game theory that applies to what Kurmanaev (2019) has described as 'geopolitical playing' in Venezuela. Both Russia and the U.S. are rational players with well-defined goals and resources for the Venezuelan game. The U.S. goal in Venezuela is to deepen ties of cooperation and understanding between the two nations, through the promotion and commercial exchange, greater hemispheric integration, among others (U.S. Virtual Embassy Venezuela, 2019). The hemispheric integration however, is only but a means to oversight suzerainty whose attainment is also tied to regime change/opposition to '21 century socialism' in Venezuela and economic gains (Roache, 2019). On the other hand, Russia's goal in Venezuela and indeed Latin America is very clear: Russia wants to have a symbolic involvement in Latin America, both as payback for U.S. intervention in the near-abroad, and in so doing build a new multi-polar world

order that would challenge the existing U.S.-led world order (Rouvinski, 2019; Roache, 2019). It is therefore evident from the above that Russia's goal in Venezuela is hugely revanchist in nature; that is, a revenge mission laced up in symbolic presence and opposition to U.S. hegemony.

On the availability of sundry resources with which to sustain this geopolitical game in Venezuela and attain the goals, both Russia and the U.S. have somewhat balance of resources. While Russia's foreign exchange reserves currently stands at 502,700 (millions of USD), that of the U.S. stands at 126,026 (millions of USD), with annual military expenditures of \$61.4 billion and \$649 billion respectively. In terms of Nuclear warheads, Russia and the U.S. stand almost at par, with the former having 6,490 nuclear warheads against the latter's 6,185 (Arms Control Association July 2019). Therefore, should the U.S. decide to make true her threat of the possibilities of military intervention in Venezuela, another Syrian scenario will likely repeat itself as there appears to be a balance of terror between the two geopolitical players. It is, therefore, this relative equality of 'distribution of resources' and the grave consequences of arbitrary 'deployment/employment of these resources' (Varma, 1968:288) by each player that have continued to keep both the U.S. and Russia to the *rules of the game*, which is the principle of non-intervention. Therefore, when the U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo said the U.S. was ready for military intervention in order to curb the Venezuelan crisis, the Russian Foreign Minister—Sergei Lavrov warned him in a phone call that further 'aggressive steps by the U.S. in Venezuela' would be 'fraught with the most serious consequences', describing U.S. 'interference' in the domestic matters of Venezuela as 'a gross violation of international law' (Bredemeier, 2019, para.6).

Of course, in line with the next principle of the game theory (players adopt strategies by which they try to maximize their payoffs), the U.S. adopted multi-sectoral sanctions so as to pressure Maduro to step down and thus effect its regime change goal. But anticipating the consequences of this on her own goal/mission in Venezuela, Russia has dutifully aided Venezuela in evading the targeted consequences of these sanctions through sanction-break moves. Thus, despite the U.S.-led sanctions on Venezuela's state-owned oil company, Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), Venezuelan oil yet gets to the global market via the instrumentality and facilitation of Russia's Rosneft. In exchange for loan refunding, the company accepts oil from Venezuela (Berg, 2019).



Being an archetypal zero-sum game, the geopolitical game in Venezuela between the U.S. and Russia has at least two fixed possible outcomes—Win (Gain) and Lost (Loss). In line with this tenet of the Game theory, this range of possible outcomes (prospects) has a specific payoff (reward) for each player. Should the U.S. succeed in unseating Maduro and seating Guaido, she will gleefully embrace the payoff (reward or gain) of unlimited and unrestricted access to the world's largest proven oil reserves (the Venezuelan oil reserves), victorious supplanting of 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism cum successful regime change and the attendant hegemonic suzerainty/influence over Venezuela. Of course, in a zero-sum game, a winner-takes-it-all, with any gain being only at the expense of a complete loss of the other actor and vice versa. Russia, in this hypothetical scenario, shall have lost it all: her between \$17 and \$20 billion loans (Roache, 2019; Tamkin, 2019) and humongous investments to Maduro's regime, her commitment to establishing symbolic presence in Latin America, her revenge mission for U.S. intervention in the near-abroad, and of course her dogged commitment to ending U.S. hegemony would have all crumbled in pathetic suddenness.

The foregoing hypothetical considerations, nevertheless, the U.S., through initiation and instigation of successful regime changes, has kept the fire of its geopolitical game of bringing independent States under its sphere of influence burning. However, with the waning popularity of Venezuelan opposition leader, Juan Guaido, coupled with the certainty of holding the National Assembly election in December 2020 under President Maduro's watch, it was becoming increasingly clear that the possibility of U.S. initiating a regime change in Venezuela was steadily slipping away (Smith, 2020). Again, the tempo and thrust with which the U.S. galvanized about 50 other countries and recognized Juan Guaido's interim presidency and their subsequent pressure to force Maduro out has greatly dwindled, almost from the sublime to the ridiculous. The once young and vibrant U.S.-anointed Messiah for the Venezuelan masses has ironically become, in the mouth of the same U.S., someone who 'doesn't have what it takes', 'inexperienced', and 'one who started very strong and fell very quickly' (Marquina, 2020, para.1). Although Trump has denied accusations of considering to back out, his recent insipid description of Guaido as 'Beto O'Rourke' (i.e, one who started very strong and fell very quickly) even in the light of the speed at which the latter's support base and initial tempo of the Venezuelan opposition push are evaporating tends to validate the thinking that the U.S. is capitulating. This is not unconnected to a number of tactical actions and inactions of especially the U.S. government.

First, Trump administration's inability to acknowledge that the Venezuelan opposition is bitterly more divided than united, and that there is the need to tackle it for a more united front against the Maduro regime. The administration chooses instead to dismiss 'the opposition's anti-Guaidó bloc as consisting of rogue politicians, some of whom it has hit with sanctions' (Ellner 2020, para.2). Rather than building the entire Venezuelan strategy on the opposition so as to allow for a fall-back strategy in case of any unpleasant developments, Trump's administration foists the strategy squarely on Guaido's shoulders. But as Senator Chris Murphy rightly noted, Guaido is not going to remain the undisputed leader of the Venezuelan people indefinitely. What is more, the 'dissension within the Venezuelan opposition threatens the leadership of self-proclaimed "president" Juan Guaido' (Ellner, 2020, para.1). This dissension has begun pointing out how events may unfold in the forthcoming parliamentary election. Following pro-Guaido's bloc decision not to participate in the election, the Catholic Church hierarchy which has vehemently opposed Maduro and his predecessor, Hugo Chávez, sharply criticized the pro-Guaidó bloc. This move is believed to have emboldened Enrique Mendoza of the social Christian COPEI party to declare for the election scheduled to take place in December. All these do not augur well for Guaido and the U.S.

Added to the above is the doggedness of the Venezuelan generals in standing by Maduro despite veiled U.S. February 2019 threats of military action. This was one of the earliest victories for Russia-Maduro axis. Although about 1,400 of the 280,000 strong Venezuelan armed forces broke ranks and crossed over to Columbia to join Guaido (*Boadle, 2019*), there were mostly from the lower echelon. No doubt, getting the Venezuelan top military echelon to desert Maduro is essential to controlling the populace. This, however, did not materialize, forcing U.S.-Guaido front to resort to foreign mercenaries camped in neighboring Columbia. The frustration arising from this culminated in US' unsuccessful deployment of strategy of impunity over diplomatic dialogue. US-backed military operation in May 2020, with Guaido as the Commander-in-Chief, aimed at overthrowing Maduro by force and installing Guaido in his stead became a very ridiculous fiasco that signaled that U.S.' was not going to come out of that maze triumphantly. Following the botched operation, two U.S. former soldiers and other mercenaries were among the 31 arrested operatives while eight others lost their lives (*Zamorano, 2020*). In response to this, Russian soldiers

began operating drones over Venezuela as part of a search operation for members of a paramilitary force that led the botched invasion (*Reuters* 9 May, 2020).

The point that needs to be acknowledged is that Russia's unwavering strategic supports and battle ready poses/responses in propping up Maduro's regime are undisguised. Events surrounding the Venezuelan presidential crisis and the concomitant U.S.-Russian geopolitical gaming in the Latin Americas suggest that Russia appears to be thinking far ahead of the U.S. Viewing it from Offensive-Defensive analytical prism, America-Guaido front represents the offensive side while Russia-Maduro axis passes for the defensive side. Although America under Trump is less likely to conduct a direct and undisguised military campaign in Venezuela given Russia and China's interest, the singular fact of mooted possibilities in the early days of the tussle, seem to have jolted Russia to embark on both stealthy and open preemptive strictures for such eventualities. Followings rumors of American military intervention in March 2019, two airplanes with Russian military technicians landed in Caracas in public display of support for Maduro's Venezuela (Kurmanaev, 2019). Again in August 2019, 'a group of nearly 80 Russian soldiers installed radars, antennas that block telecommunications signals, and flew drones in a military battalion' (Martin, 2020, para.1). By January 2020, Russian soldiers were reportedly moving around Venezuela on a 'secret mission', wearing the uniform of the Venezuelan Army, moving freely through the territory, using barracks, helicopters, and drones, performing tests, and making maps (Institute of Strategy, cited in Martin, 2020, para.1).

### **Conclusion**

The ongoing post-elections cum presidential crisis in Venezuela may have exuded visible domestic characterizations verging, as it were, on the constitutionality of Maduro's continued presidency; it is however externally inspired and motivated. The externality of its inspiration and motivation further accounts for its explosive escalation since January 2019. It is a paradigmatic dramatization of a Two-person Zero-sum geopolitical game between the U.S. and Russia. These traditional rivals are the two opportunistic hegemonies scrambling for the soul of the Venezuelan economy, leadership and political entity for further accretion of power and exercise of influence as superpowers. Implicitly and even explicitly, both Maduro and Guaido can be likened to mere *dramatis personae* acting out the scripts handed down to them from Moscow and Washington D.C. respectively. Therefore, Venezuelan presidential crisis has lingered thus far because the two

players (the U.S. and Russia) have unwaveringly stood behind ‘Presidents’ Nicolas Maduro and Juan Guido respectively. Given this dynamics, a critical observer would grasp that the crisis can only fizzle out any day either of the superpowers (the U.S. and Russia) withdraws its support and backing from its puppet (Maduro or Guaido).

The position of this paper is that this scenario has started playing out already. The U.S.’ strategies, policies and actions concerning Venezuela are arguably yielding the opposite of what they were intended for. The one-man show with Guaido, almost to the total neglect of the plight of Venezuelan opposition, is fast disintegrating the opposition. This has affected Guaido’s support base while also portending danger to his continued leadership of the opposition. Against Guaido’s bloc’s declaration not to participate in the National Assembly election in November, disenchanted former apologists of Guaido have begun declaring interests to participate. Guaido’s continued leadership of the opposition and command of large followership is under threat and likely to suffer after the November elections. Yet again, U.S.’ imposition of collective sanctions on Venezuela which has worsened the economic and humanitarian conditions of ordinary Venezuelans all in the name of ousting Maduro for the ascension of Guaido have left the people disillusioned and disenchanted. This disenchantment has reflected in people’s preference for economic survival over political demonstrations for leadership change, resulting further in the diminution of the initial tempo of the post-election crisis. Guaido’s lack of result and poor delivery of U.S.-backed tasks and operations may also have irked America, especially President Trump who reportedly dismissed him as someone who ‘doesn’t have what it takes’, while also likening him to ‘Beto O’Rourke’ (i.e, one who started very strong and fell very quickly).

Indeed, through effervescent support and propping of Russia’s Putin, Maduro has managed to foil virtually all Guaido-American plans, including those of sanctions and tactical invasions targeted at removing and abducting Maduro in May 2020. But for the indefatigable support of Russia, President Maduro would have been deposed and Venezuela through Guaidoby now would have been America’s. It has become evident in the light of the foregoing expositions that the escalation of the post-election crisis in Venezuela is not unconnected to the U.S.-Russian government’s hegemonic struggle for sphere of influence with all the embellishments of typical Two-persons Zero-sum game in which the U.S. is obviously losing to Russia.

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