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Venezuela Claims to Guyana Territory and Its Regional Destabilization Threats

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**VENEZUELA CLAIMS TO GUYANA TERRITORY AND ITS REGIONAL
DETABILIZATION THREATS**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science, Defense and Strategic Studies

By

Anissa L. Rodriguez

May 2024

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VENEZUELA CLAIMS TO GUYANA TERRITORY AND ITS REGIONAL DETABILIZATION THREATS

Defense and Strategic Studies

Missouri State University, May 2024

Master of Science

Anissa L. Rodriguez

ABSTRACT

As global tensions escalate over territorial disputes, Venezuela's assertion of claims over the Essequibo territory in Guyana threaten to destabilize a pivotal region in South America known for its abundant natural resources and prospering economy. This thesis will highlight the key distinctions between different European explorers and how they diversified the legacy of colonialism, changed historical and political trajectory, and shaped modern-day Guyana and Venezuela. It will highlight the critical roles that natural resources and international law play in territorial contention and sculpting of the geopolitical landscape within this crucial region. This thesis will scrutinize the potential fallout of the Essequibo region dispute by highlighting its capacity to catalyze substantial destabilization across the region. It will also explore the border impacts on the Western Hemisphere by examining adverse external influences and shifts in international relationships resulting from challenges over this disputed territory. This thesis will examine the role of international involvement, committees, and judicial rulings to deter Venezuela's attempts to annex the Essequibo, mitigate conflict, and prevent destabilization within this key region in Latin America. It will also discuss the legacy of colonial-era border decisions and how they continue to shape contemporary geopolitics, highlight the complex dynamics of international relations, and emphasize the challenges of addressing territorial disputes in a global context. Lastly, this thesis will discuss implications to U.S. foreign policy to reassess diplomatic engagement, international dialogue, conflict resolution efforts, and regional initiatives for Latin America to address the Venezuela-Guyana territorial dispute and preserve regional stability.

KEYWORDS: territorial disputes, Essequibo territory, natural resources, international law, geopolitical landscape, destabilization, international relationships, judicial rulings, contemporary geopolitics

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicated the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION – HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

This first chapter will provide an overview of two nations currently facing a territorial dispute within a key region in Latin America. It will present a brief overview about the origins of this disputed territory. It will also provide the historical context related to the colonization of both Venezuela and Guyana. The historical context detailed in this section will highlight the differences in colonization of these two countries. This chapter will also provide political context encompassing the historical trajectory of these two nations from colonization to independence and the array of government and civil challenges they have faced. As a result of these differences, the information presented in this chapter is essential to understanding how a century long territorial dispute began and why it is still a momentous issue today that could pose a significant threat to regional stability.

Origins of a South American Disputed Territory

Venezuela is located in northern South America with the Caribbean Sea to the northwest and the Atlantic Ocean to the northeast. Venezuela is bordered by Colombia to the west, Brazil to the south, and Guyana to the east. Venezuela is one of five nations within the Andes region in South America. The Andes region is a group of nations delineated by the Andes Mountain system which includes Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela. Although the Andes Mountains are also geographically within Chile and Argentina, these two nations are not politically part of the Andes nations. Figure 1 at the end of this chapter depicts the political nations within Andes region and nations where the mountain system is geographically located.

Guyana is located on the northeast coast of South America with the Atlantic Ocean to the north. Guyana is bordered by Venezuela to the west, Brazil to the south, and Suriname to the

east. Guyana is considered one of twenty-six Caribbean nations due to its cultural and political history, also referred to as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). However, Guyana's historical background is different from other Caribbean nations. Guyana is also considered one of three independent nations referred to as The Guianas. While most Caribbean nations were colonized by Spanish explorers, The Guianas were colonized by the Dutch, British, and French. Guyana is also the only country in South America whose official language is English. Figure 2 at the end of this chapter highlights members of the Caribbean Community. Figure 3 at the conclusion of this chapter depicts nations of The Guianas.

Spanish Colonization of Venezuela

The first inhabitants of Venezuela were identified as Amerindians or natives who were hunter-gathers during the Paleolithic Period about 2.5 million years ago.¹ The Arawak and Carib indigenous peoples occupied the area of Venezuela when European explorers arrived in South America during the third voyage to the region in 1498.² European settlers primarily spent the first quarter of the 16th century enslaving indigenous peoples and fishing along the northern coast of South America. It wasn't until 1523 when the first Spanish settlement was established that German explorers arrived in Venezuela searching for metals along the northwestern coast.³ After German exploration and occupation failures of Venezuela, Spain reclaimed the area in 1546.⁴ During the mid-16th century, legends of El Dorado circulated the region which drove explorers to traverse further into Venezuela along the Orinoco River in search of the city of gold. In 1567,

¹ Martz, McCoy, and Lieuwen, "History of Venezuela," Encyclopædia Britannica, last modified August 16, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-Venezuela>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

the city of Caracas was founded, which would later become the nation's capital, and by 1600 over 20 settlements were established throughout the Venezuelan Andes Mountains and coastal region.⁵ During the colonial period, the Spanish Viceroyalty of New Granada ruled over Venezuela and developed its economy on agriculture and animal stock to include corn, beans, sugar, cacao, tobacco, beef, and animal hides.⁶

Venezuela's Independence

In the late 18th century, many Creoles (those who were born in Venezuela and of European descent) began to resent Spanish rule for the high taxes it imposed and its poor management of the colony. In 1806, Venezuelan General Francisco de Miranda gathered a force and launched a conquest of Venezuela that ultimately failed.⁷ By April 19, 1810, Venezuelan Creole leaders declared a provisional independence until the Spanish monarchy was restored in Spain.⁸ On July 5, 1811, congress approved Venezuela's unconditional independence as the First Venezuelan Republic, which made Venezuela the first nation in South America to formally dissolve colonial ties with Spain.⁹ However, a devastating earthquake in 1812 left the newly formed Republic vulnerable to a royalist recapture. In 1813, Simón Bolívar was designated as the commander of the Venezuelan forces. He led various campaigns to defeat the royalist army and continued movement west to liberate other regions in South America. Bolívar's conquest, the Admirable Campaign, was the first significant effort in liberating Venezuela (Britannica).¹⁰ After

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Christopher Minster, "The Complete Story of Venezuela's Revolution for Independence." ThoughtCo, last modified May 30, 2019. <https://www.thoughtco.com/independence-from-spain-in-venezuela-2136397>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Martz, McCoy, and Lieuwen, "History of Venezuela."

taking back Caracas, Bolívar established the Second Venezuelan Republic, which later fell due to royalist army victories and lack of an organized plan to fully free Venezuela.

In 1819, Bolívar crossed the Andes Mountains with his army to New Grenada, modern day Colombia, to recruit and expand his army.¹¹ At the Battle of Boyaca, Bolívar and his army overpowered the Spanish army in a decisive victory. Bolívar took Bogota where he was able to acquire significant resources to recruit and equip a greater army to return to Venezuela. In 1821, Bolívar and José Antonio Páez combined forces at the Battle of Carabobo to secure a patriot victory and win Venezuela's complete independence from Spain.¹²

Venezuelan Government and Authoritarian Presidents

From 1830-1935 Venezuela entered the era of caudillos, warlord military dictators, who ruled the government by force for personal gain rather than in the interest of the nation.¹³ Venezuela faced decades of bloody turmoil between the Conservative Party and Liberal Party over federalism, democracy, centralism, hegemony, social reformation, slavery, suffrage, and economic challenges. In 1892, General Joaquín Crespo came to power and under his rule Venezuela faced repeated political turmoil, increasing economic hardship, and the nation's first diplomatic dispute.¹⁴ Venezuela's discord with Great Britain over the eastern Venezuela and western British Guiana boundary heightened after gold was discovered and led to decades of dispute. Great Britain repeatedly dismissed Venezuela's petition for arbitration over the region,

¹¹ Minster, "The Complete Story of Venezuela's Revolution for Independence."

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Martz, McCoy, and Lieuwen, "History of Venezuela."

¹⁴ Ibid.

which eventually led to an international committee imparting a decision that ignored Venezuela's demands.¹⁵

In 1908, General Juan Vicente Gómez seized presidency of Venezuela as a ruthless authoritarian by monopolizing power, stifling the press, and exerting control through arbitrary arrests, lengthy imprisonments, exiles, and assassinations.¹⁶ The discovery of natural resources during his presidency enabled Gómez's acts of corruption and allowed him to become the richest man in Venezuela. Backed by other caudillos, he became one of the most cruel dictators in Venezuelan history. General Gómez ruled Venezuela for 27 long years until his death in 1935. For the next century, Venezuela saw the rise of various caudillos who maintained corrupt authoritarian rule during their presidencies. In 1998, Hugo Chávez was elected president and remained in power until he died in 2013. Chávez led the Fifth Republic Movement political party, which later merged with other parties to form the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).¹⁷ During his presidency, Chávez vowed to eradicate corruption, diminish power of the elite, and alleviate poverty in Venezuela. Chávez implemented a new constitution and directed national resources towards emergency aid and reconstruction initiatives after a series of severe rainstorms and mudslides. Additionally, he allocated petroleum revenue to fund numerous social programs across Venezuela.

In 2013, Nicolás Maduro was elected to complete the remainder of Chávez's term and won the following elections to secure his presidency. As Venezuela's economy decelerated and inflation surged, escalating crime rates fueled violent protests throughout the country. Eager to divert attention from domestic unrest, Maduro's government prioritized addressing border

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

disputes with Colombia and Guyana. Venezuela's long-standing dispute over a substantial portion of Guyana, dating back to the 19th century, intensified in 2015 with the discovery of oil in the contested territory.¹⁸ This region encompasses over 75 percent of Guyana's landmass west of the Essequibo River. After emerging as one of South America's most prosperous economies, Venezuela's economic decline spiraled to one of the poorest nations marked with increasing shortages in food and medicine. In 2018, presidential elections came under intense scrutiny in Venezuela due to allegations of fraudulence. Despite the controversy, the election results secured Maduro's presidency and extended his authoritarian rule over the country until 2025.

Shortly after Maduro's inauguration in January 2019, the head of the National Assembly and newly elected leader of the opposition, Juan Guaidó, proclaimed himself as Venezuela's interim president.¹⁹ Guaidó argued that the fraudulent elections had left the country without a legitimately elected president and cited constitutional justification for his actions.²⁰ The U.S. and several other nations recognized Juan Guaidó as the legitimate leader of Venezuela, whereas other countries, including Russia, denounced this declaration and backed Maduro's presidency.²¹ Despite international recognition, Guaidó's attempts to orchestrate an opposition coup was ultimately unsuccessful.

Throughout its history, Venezuela has been marred by dictatorial regimes that systematically exploited the nation's natural resources for personal gain, while reinforcing the elite to maintain their grip on power. This recurring pattern of dictatorial leadership has contributed to an imbalanced economy. This immense divide has allowed the affluent to amass greater wealth while the impoverished plunge further into poverty. Venezuela has endured

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

persistent political and economic turmoil due to the oppressive rule of corrupt dictators who stifle freedom of the press, suppress labor movements, and neglect meaningful reform efforts. Venezuela continues to experience the same oppressive governance under the current president, which has contributed to one of the most severe humanitarian crises in South America.

Venezuelan Humanitarian Crisis

The worsening social and political conditions in Venezuela have contributed to an increase in refugee migration and humanitarian crisis over several years. These conditions have profoundly affected various aspects of the nation, including its economy, poverty rates, income inequality, civil rights and liberties, security, health, and political stability. As of August 2023, more than 7.72 million people have fled Venezuela with approximately 6.54 million refugees located throughout Latin America and the Caribbean and the remainder spread across the globe.²² Migrants who have fled Venezuela continue to face ongoing challenges in other countries, including securing access to food, shelter, and stable employment. Additionally, migrants often encounter barriers in integration opportunities along with significant intolerance and xenophobia. Consequently, more than 300,000 nationals have returned to Venezuela in response to these challenges combined with the desire for family reunification and the perception of improving conditions in Venezuela.²³ However, findings from the Refugee and Migrant Needs Analysis (RMNA 2023) suggest that the majority of these national returns are temporary with most refugees intending to flee Venezuela again.²⁴

²² “Venezuelan Humanitarian and Refugee Crisis,” Center for Disaster Philanthropy, last modified January 9, 2024, <https://disasterphilanthropy.org/disasters/venezuelan-refugee-crisis/>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

The Venezuela refugee crisis is currently the largest in Latin American history and ranks among one of the most severe worldwide. The refugee and humanitarian crises in Venezuela accentuate the nation's profound economic and political turmoil stemming from decades of governmental mismanagement and rampant corruption. President Maduro's government and security forces actively target and deny access to essential services for individuals who voice dissent against the Venezuelan government. The Maduro regime has been accused of perpetrating acts of prosecution without due process, forced disappearances, torture, and extrajudicial killings. As of June 2023, the International Criminal Court is currently investigating alleged crimes against humanity in Venezuela to include deprivation of physical liberty, torture, sexual violence, and persecution on political grounds.²⁵ Due to the widespread abuse, the quality of life for the Venezuelan people has significantly deteriorated, which resembles conditions observed in countries afflicted by wars and conflicts.

As of October 2023, approximately 19 million Venezuelan nationals, constituting 66 percent of the population, are in need of humanitarian assistance within the country.²⁶ Despite the Humanitarian Response Plan aiming to raise 720 million dollars to aid 5.2 million people, only 362.8 million dollars were received in 2023.²⁷ Humanitarian assistance funding continues to remain inadequate and fails to meet the urgent needs in Venezuela. The Venezuelan government recognizes the imperative need for an economic lifeline to sustain the nation and political regime. The Maduro Administration persistently seeks opportunities to exploit in order to improve Venezuela's economic and political landscape. The Maduro regime's latest strategy to

²⁵ "Venezuela: ICC Investigation Gets Go-Ahead," Human Rights Watch, last modified June 28, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/27/venezuela-icc-investigation-gets-go-ahead#:~:text=The%20ICC%20inquiry%20focuses%20on,as%20persecution%20on%20political%20grounds.>

²⁶ "Venezuelan Humanitarian and Refugee Crisis."

²⁷ Ibid.

mitigate conditions in Venezuela involves seizing natural resources within the region to bolster economic gains and leveraging diplomatic relationships to alleviate political pressure stemming from the refugee and humanitarian crises in Venezuela.

Dutch Colonization of Guiana

Similar to Venezuela, Guyana's early inhabitants were primarily Amerindians or indigenous peoples dating back to the Paleolithic Period approximately 2.5 million years ago. Amongst the earliest settlers of Guyana were the Arawak, Carib, and the Warao peoples.²⁸ In the 16th century, Spanish settlers explored portions of the Guyana region but avoided the Orinoco and Amazon deltas.²⁹ It wasn't until approximately 1580 that Dutch explorers began establishing settlements and trading posts along the Orinoco River. During the mid-17th century, Dutch settlers began importing slaves from West Africa to cultivate sugarcane in the region.³⁰ The importation of slaves in colonial Guyana broadened the dynamics of cultural diversity and interactions. The blending of indigenous, European, and African influences led to the formation of the creole culture in Guyana. Dutch exploration of Guyana was driven by economic ambition and motivated settlers to expand trade further into South America. By mid-18th century, Dutch explorers had expanded southward along the Orinoco River and established settlements in the vicinity of estuaries and mud flats.³¹ Dutch explorers leveraged the Orinoco River to facilitate Dutch trade expansion as a transportation route and trade corridor. The environmental

²⁸ Bonham Richardson and Jack Menke, "Independence of Guyana," Encyclopædia Britannica, last modified October 25, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Guyana/Independence>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

characteristics of the estuaries and mud flats along the river also provided agricultural development and settlement for the Dutch.

British Colonization of Guiana

During the French Revolutionary Wars, Guyana underwent a notable shift in occupation, transitioning from Dutch and French control to British dominance in 1796.³² British settlers subsequently solidified their presence in the region and formally established the British Guiana colony in 1831.³³ Following the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1807, British settlers sought alternate sources of labor and turned to the recruitment of indentured laborers from India.³⁴ These indentured workers were brought to Guyana to work on plantations, which contributed to British settlements in the region. The importation of indentured workers from India illuminates the intertwined history of Guyana with British imperialism, reflecting the broader paradigm of colonial expansion and exploitation throughout the Caribbean region.

Guiana's constitutional framework remained largely unchanged from Dutch rule until 1953, when a new constitution was introduced and established an elected legislature for governance.³⁵ The People's Progressive Party (PPP) emerged as the first elected government that primarily adopted communist ideologies. However, British colonial authorities suspended the PPP's constitution and deployed troops to thwart any opposition, which delayed restoration of the constitution until 1957. The PPP subsequently fractured along two separate ethnic lines with the Afro-Guyanese population forming the People's National Congress (PNC), and the Indo-

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

Guyanese population continued to support the PPP.³⁶ Violent riots erupted between the two parties which prompted the return of British troops to restore order. In 1964, the British government facilitated elections for a new system of proportional representation aimed at accommodating both political parties.³⁷ British intervention to introduce proportional representation in Guyana played a pivotal role in fostering inclusivity and stability within a nation grappling with cultural and ethnic divisions. The fragmentation of the PPP along ethnic lines emphasizes the ongoing challenges faced by Guyana as a nation. Proportional representation remains a cornerstone of Guyanese politics and serves as a crucial mechanism for ensuring fair representation while accommodating diverse political views.

Guyana's Independence

In 1966, the British Guiana colony secured its independence from British colonial rule under the new name Guyana.³⁸ The nation's newly elected government was led by Forbes Burnham, who played a pivotal role in transitioning Guyana from a British colony to a republic. This transition symbolized Guyana's sovereignty and self-governance. On February 23, 1970, Guyana was officially established as a republic and formally recognized by the British Commonwealth.³⁹ This development marked a crucial moment in Guyana's history and affirmed its status as an independent nation on the world stage. The transition to republic status also carried political and economic implications. As Guyana assumed greater control over its governance and resources, it paved the way for further development and progress. During the late 1970s, Burnham officially declared the government of Guyana as socialist and subsequently

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

restructured it to align more closely with his own preferences and objectives (Britannica G).⁴⁰

This decision had profound effects on Guyana's political landscape and economic policies in the preceding era.

Government of Guyana and Civil Unrest

In 1980, Desmond Hoyte assumed presidency as Guyana's economy began to collapse as a result of the declining demand for bauxite and sugar exports.⁴¹ In 1992, Cheddi Jagan was elected president and began initiating a shift toward democratic governance and economic reform. Following his death in 1997, his wife Janet Jagan completed his presidential term and continued the trajectory of democratic reforms in Guyana.⁴² From 2001-2011, Guyana experienced a surge in crime rates along with political turmoil and a devastating flood that exacerbated economic challenges during Bharrat Jagdeo's presidency. During this period, Guyana experienced serious civil unrest marked by social discontent and economic challenges. This period of unrest was characterized by protests, demonstrations, and violence as a result of underlying tensions within the nation and dissatisfaction with the government's policies and actions. Factors that contributed to civil unrest in Guyana included ethnic tensions, political corruption, economic disparities, and social inequality. During this period, Guyana experienced a series of labor strikes, political demonstrations, and outbreaks of violence.

In 2007, a United Nations (UN) international tribunal resolved the boundary dispute between Guyana and Suriname and awarded Guyana the larger portion of the Guyana-Suriname Basin.⁴³ Following this settlement, offshore oil exploration commenced in the Guyana-Suriname

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

Basin. In 2008, President Jagdeo signed a trade agreement with the European Union (EU) aimed at enhancing economic stability and international relations for Guyana.⁴⁴ The year 2015 marked a significant development for Guyana when the discovery of a substantial oil field was discovered in its offshore waters of the Essequibo. By 2020, an additional 17 underwater oil fields were discovered along Guyana's shores, which presented immense potential to transform the nation's economy.⁴⁵ These developments in the oil industry coincided with the election of Mohamed Irfaan Ali as the new and current president of Guyana.

Guyana and Venezuela share similar historical and political backgrounds as neighboring countries in South America during the colonial period. Both regions experienced the consequences of European colonization on the indigenous populations such as displacement, cultural assimilation, and exploitation of native people, land, and resources. However, key distinctions between different European explorers diversified the legacy of colonialism in shaping modern-day Guyana and Venezuela. Differing European settlers changed the historical and political trajectory of both nations. Although Guyana and Venezuela both faced serious political turmoil, economic challenges, government corruption, and civil unrest, the Dutch and British colonialism of Guyana contributed to the current framework of government, societal norms, and economic systems within the country. Dutch and British colonial rule also significantly influenced the delineation of Guyana's current national borders.

This chapter offered an exploration of the historical and political landscapes of Venezuela and Guyana by tracing their trajectories from the colonial era of South America to the present day. This chapter shed light on shared experiences of colonization, struggles for independence, and evolving governance structures that have shaped both nations. Additionally, this chapter

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

delved into the unique historical and political contexts of Venezuela and Guyana by highlighting key differences that have influenced their development as neighboring countries. By examining these similarities and differences, this chapter provides valuable insights into the complex dynamics that shaped the histories, current disputes, and futures of Venezuela and Guyana. The next chapter will discuss the details of a major territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana by emphasizing the significance of natural resources and international law in shaping the geopolitical landscape within a pivotal region of South America.



Figure 1. Geographic depiction of Venezuela’s location as an Andes nation in South America.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Andean States – Political Map, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://conceptdraw.com/a1240c3/preview>.

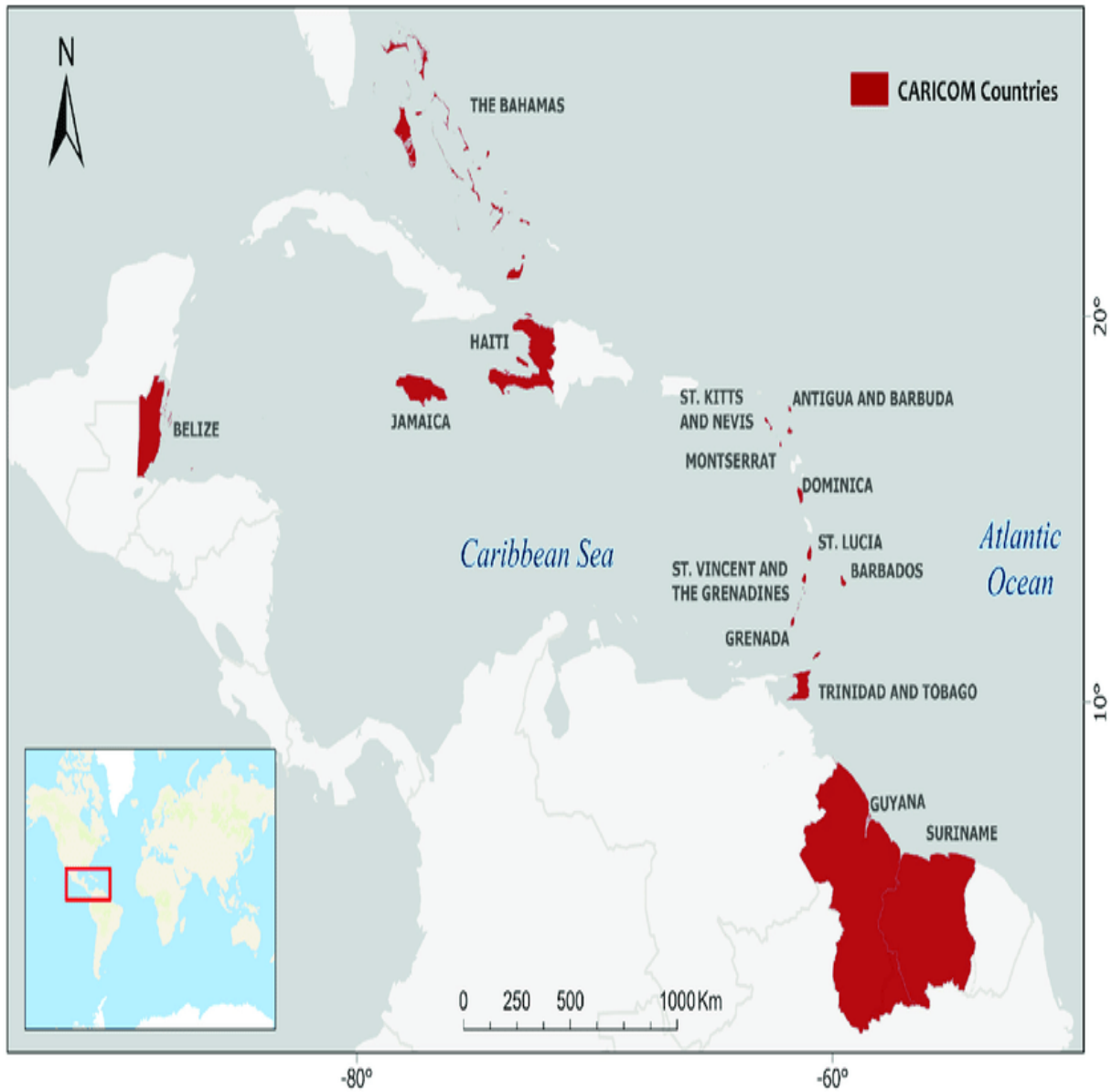


Figure 2. Geographic depiction of Guyana’s location as a Caribbean Community (CARICOM) country within Latin American and the Caribbean.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Deanesh Ramsewak, Map of Countries With Full Membership in CARICOM, last modified July 2022, https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-countries-with-full-membership-in-CARICOM_fig2_345628293.



Figure 3. Geographical depiction of Guyana’s location within Latin American as part of The Guianas.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Languages of South America – Thematic Map, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://conceptdraw.com/a1246c3/preview>.

CHAPTER 2: GLOBAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ESSEQUIBO CONTESTED REGION

The preceding chapter provided detailed context of the historical and political narratives of Venezuela and Guyana. The chapter discussed the evolution of both countries from colonization to struggles for independence and the development of government structures. By juxtaposing the commonalities and distinctions between these two countries, the chapter unraveled the intricate webs of influence that shaped the histories, ongoing challenges, and current disputes between Venezuela and Guyana. This chapter will highlight the critical roles that natural resources and international law play in territorial contention and sculpting of the geopolitical landscape within this crucial region in South America.

Venezuelan Oil and Natural Resources

Under the presidency of General Juan Vicente Gómez, Venezuela experienced a transformative event with the discovery of oil within the Orinoco Basin in 1914. This discovery attracted numerous foreign petroleum companies who immediately secured oil contracts in the country. By 1928, Venezuela had ascended to the world's leading exporter of oil, ranking second only to the United States in oil production.⁴⁹ Figure 4 at the end of this chapter outlines the locations of oil discovery in Venezuela. The expanding oil industry offered numerous benefits for Venezuela, including heightened international trade, increased revenue streams, the creation of higher paying employment opportunities, and the provision of agricultural subsidies. The newfound oil wealth enabled Venezuela to reduce domestic debt and pay off foreign debt. During the 1960s, Venezuela saw the emergence of a new petrochemical industry along with significant growth in its oil and iron ore sectors. This economic expansion positioned Venezuela to become

⁴⁹ Martz, McCoy, and Lieuwen, "History of Venezuela."

a founding member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).⁵⁰ In addition to petroleum and iron ore, Venezuela boasts an array of natural resources including natural gas, coal, gold, bauxite, diamonds, and various other minerals.⁵¹ The major mineral resources and agricultural subsidies within Venezuela are captured at the end of the chapter in Figure 5. It was through the exploitation of these abundant resources, particularly its vast oil reserves, that Venezuela was able to attain both regional and global prominence on the geopolitical stage.

Following the Arab-Israeli War in 1973, Venezuela experienced a threefold increase in its oil prices, which led to a substantial influx of immigrants, increased imports, and heightened revenue. This significant influx highlighted the economic importance of oil and Venezuela's vulnerability to notable fluctuations in global oil markets. In 1975, President Carlos Andrés Pérez initiated a path of nationalization by taking control of the iron ore industry followed by nationalization of the petroleum industry in the ensuing year.⁵² Under the presidency of Hugo Chávez in 2007, a comprehensive program of nationalization was initiated. This program aimed to seize control of Venezuela's petroleum sector and reclaiming operational authority of over 60 percent of the country's oil operations.⁵³ Concurrently, Chávez extended nationalization efforts to encompass Venezuela's electricity, telecommunications, cement, and steel industries. The nationalization efforts of Pérez and Chávez allowed the Venezuelan government to consolidate and assert state control over key industries within the country, which would play a momentous role in the management of the nation's economy and natural resources. Beyond serving as the

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ "Venezuela," OPEC, accessed January 12, 2024, https://www.opec.org/opec_web/en/about_us/171.htm#:~:text=Apart%20from%20petroleum%2C%20the%20country's,bauxite%2C%20diamonds%20and%20other%20minerals.

⁵² Martz, McCoy, and Lieuwen, "History of Venezuela."

⁵³ Ibid.

main sources of the country's economy, Venezuela's natural resources played a vital role in shaping its regional and global geopolitical relations.

Guyana's Natural Resources

Guyana parallels Venezuela's resource wealth and boasts abundant natural resources both on land and in offshore waters along the coast. Renowned for its reserves of gold, bauxite, diamonds, copper, iron, nickel, and various other minerals and semi-precious stones, Guyana's mining and mineral industries have been pivotal drivers of its economic growth over many decades.⁵⁴ Recent discoveries of lithium, manganese, and coltan have further spurred investments in Guyana's mining operations, which has enhanced its potential as a resource rich nation.⁵⁵ In addition to mining, agriculture has historically been a significant contributor and cornerstone of Guyana's economy. The cultivation of sugarcane, rice, wheat, and cocoa has played a vital role in sustaining economic activity. Sugarcane holds substantial importance and accounts for approximately 40 percent of the country's agricultural output and positions Guyana as a leading sugar producer in the Caribbean.⁵⁶ Figure 6 at the end of the chapter illustrates Guyana's natural resources by type and location within the country. These economic dynamics not only shape Guyana's domestic landscape, they also serve as driving forces in its geopolitical relations. The abundance of natural resources, coupled with ongoing developments in mining and agriculture, influence Guyana's interactions with other nations. Guyana's resource wealth and economic activities contribute to its strategic positioning on the global stage. The country's role

⁵⁴ "Guyana - Mining and Minerals," Guyana Country Commercial Guide, accessed January 13, 2024, <https://www.privacyshield.gov/ps/article?id=Guyana-Mining-and-Minerals#:~:text=In%20addition%20to%20its%20well,%2C%20and%20nickel%2C%20among%20others.>

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Benjamin Sawe, "What Are the Major Natural Resources of Guyana?" WorldAtlas, last modified January 4, 2019, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/what-are-the-major-natural-resources-of-guyana.html>.

as a key player in mining and agriculture highlights its significance in regional and global economic networks.

First Venezuelan Claims to the Essequibo Territory

The origins of the border dispute between Venezuela and Guyana date back to 1841 when Venezuela accused Great Britain of territorial encroachment.⁵⁷ This accusation laid the groundwork for subsequent tensions and disputes over territorial claims between the two countries. The discovery of gold in the Essequibo region of Guyana in 1889 served as a catalyst for reigniting Venezuela's claims to the territory.⁵⁸ The prospect of valuable resources within the region heightened the stakes in the dispute and intensified Venezuela's assertions of ownership. The government of Venezuela argued that the land west of the Essequibo River, accounting for over two-thirds of Guyana, rightfully belonged to Venezuela.⁵⁹ The disputed territory in question is depicted on Figure 7 at the conclusion of this chapter. This claim was based on historical, geographical, and cultural considerations, which further fueled the dispute. During the late 19th century, Great Britain still maintained colonial rule of Guyana. Despite Venezuela's appeals for arbitration over the disputed region, tensions escalated between the two nations when the British dismissed these appeals. The British government's dismissal contributed to the complexities and challenges of resolving the border dispute diplomatically. This rejection set the stage for prolonged territorial disputes and geopolitical tensions between Venezuela and Guyana.

⁵⁷ Noah Thomason, "Tensions Rise as Venezuela Referendum Calls for the Annexation of Guyana," *The Oakland Post*, last modified December 13, 2023, <https://oaklandpostonline.com/47741/politics/tensions-rise-as-venezuela-referendum-calls-for-the-annexation-of-guyana/>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

International Committee Ruling

Following Venezuela's appeals for arbitration over the disputed region in 1889, an international committee ruled on the matter in favor of the British in 1899.⁶⁰ This decision established the border between Venezuela and Guyana to the west of the Essequibo region. The ruling by the international tribunal of arbitration defined the current border between the two countries. However, the Venezuela-Guyana border has remained a contentious issue for Venezuela since the 1899 ruling. This decision ignited a dispute that has persisted for over a century centered around the contested region. The historical processes and negotiations Great Britain applied in the late-19th century were instrumental in shaping the territorial boundaries of the region. By employing international arbitration and legal frameworks, Britain effectively resolved border disputes and solidified the current territorial boundaries of Guyana.

Prior to Guyana's independence from Great Britain, Venezuela renewed its claims to the territory west of the Essequibo River. In 1962, the government of Venezuela alleged that the 1899 Arbitral Award resulted from a fraudulent agreement between British and Russian members of the tribunal.⁶¹ Venezuela's government insisted that the award was invalid. During the lead-up to Guyana's independence, Venezuela pushed for reconsideration of the boundary line.⁶² The Venezuelan government believed that it could sway the British government more easily over a newly sovereign neighbor for the Essequibo region. In February 1966 at Geneva UK, the governments of Guyana and Venezuela signed an agreement establishing a Mixed Commission tasked with discussing the dispute arising from Venezuela's claims.⁶³ Since Guyana's

⁶⁰ "Venezuela (07/09)," U.S. Department of State, accessed January 28, 2024, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/venezuela/126384.htm>.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

independence in 1966, the Mixed Commission has convened on nine occasions and has generally served as a valuable platform for defusing political tensions between both countries.⁶⁴ The government of Venezuela viewed the Mixed Commission as an opportunity to renegotiate the border boundary. However, with negotiations at a standstill, Venezuela eventually agreed to participate in the joint economic development of the disputed territory. While Guyana's government initially expressed openness to discuss Venezuelan economic assistance, it withdrew from negotiations after realizing Venezuela's intention to exert greater control over the Essequibo territory. In 1968, Venezuela issued a warning declaring its refusal to acknowledge any commercial concessions granted by Guyana to foreign firms within the disputed region.⁶⁵ In response, the Guyanese government accused Venezuela of violating the 1966 Geneva Agreement and committing economic aggression against its sovereignty. By 1969, Venezuela had withdrawn from the Mixed Commission and rejected any proposals for joint development of the disputed Essequibo territory.⁶⁶

Despite rulings from international tribunals or historical agreements, the dispute for the Essequibo territory persists. This ongoing dispute highlights the challenges of enforcing legal decisions in territorial conflicts. It also accentuates strong nationalist sentiments in both Venezuela and Guyana that contribute to the intransigence of their respective governments in finding resolutions for the disputed territory. The presence of valuable natural resources in the contested region also adds an economic dimension to the conflict, making resolutions more challenging to attain.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Guyana Discovers New Offshore Oil Deposits

The Essequibo territory dispute gained significant traction when substantial oil reserves were discovered offshore in 2015. Previously considered one of South America's poorest nations, Guyana's prosperity changed dramatically after Exxon Mobil uncovered a massive oil deposit off the coast of the Essequibo and propelled the nation to become the world's fastest-growing economy.⁶⁷ The location of Guyana's new oil reserves is illustrated on Figure 8 at the end of this chapter. Exxon Mobil had been exploring Guyana's oil potential since the late 1990s. However, it wasn't until the formation of a partnership with Hess Corporation and the Chinese National Offshore Oil Company (CNOOC) in 2015 that the significant discovery was finally made.⁶⁸ Located in deep offshore waters, accessing Guyana's reserves posed significant technical challenges. The first shipment of crude oil did not occur until 2019, and Exxon Mobil now forecasts that Guyana will surpass the Permian Basin in Texas as its most productive oil region by 2025.⁶⁹ This discovery in the Essequibo region positions Guyana to become the world's fourth-largest producer of offshore oil. As of 2023, over 40 percent of Guyana's citizens still live on less than \$5.50 a day which highlights the disparities and challenges the nation faces.⁷⁰ The oil discovery is expected to revolutionize Guyana's economy and quality of life.

Additionally, Guyana grapples with the profound impacts of climate change and has struggled to address these challenges effectively. Guyana is susceptible to rising sea levels, changing precipitation patterns, hurricanes, severe floods, eroding coastline, rising temperatures, and droughts as a result of significant changes in climate. Guyana is extremely vulnerable to El-

⁶⁷ Daniel Ackerman and Meghana Chakrabarti, "Guyana's Oil Boom: The World's Newest Petrostate Plans to Combat Climate Change with Oil Revenues," On Point, last modified October 10, 2023, <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2023/10/10/guyanas-oil-boom-the-worlds-newest-petrostate-plans-to-combat-climate-change-with-oil-revenues>.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) effects that result in greater than 2,00 mm/year precipitation in coastal areas, while the drier savannah region receives 1,400 to 1,800 mm/year of rainfall.⁷¹ By 2030, Guyana’s northern coast, where a considerable portion of its population resides, is anticipated to be submerged in the ocean due to its low-lying coastline, rising sea levels and flooding. Similar to numerous other nations affected by poverty, Guyana faces challenges in accessing energy resources and is often disproportionately affected by the adverse impacts of climate change. To mitigate environmental risks and lack of access to energy resources, Guyana plans to establish a sovereign fund financed by revenues from its oil industry aimed at safeguarding its citizens from the adverse effects of climate change. The nation aims to utilize revenue generated from its oil and gas reserves in the Essequibo region to fund its transition towards renewable energy sources to minimize environmental impacts associated with oil exploration.⁷² With approximately 85 percent of its land covered by rainforest, Guyana holds significant potential to combat climate change. Guyana can protect its rich rainforests by implementing safeguards to ensure that oil exploration activities minimize environmental degradation. President Ali communicated this vision during a public address in 2023 stating, “My country, Guyana, is blessed with the best of both worlds. That is the ability to lead on climate change, and the use of our expansive oil and gas resources to contribute to the advancement and development of our country and region.”⁷³

⁷¹ “Guyana - Country Profile 2020,” Health and Climate Change, accessed April 7, 2024, <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/336274/WHO-HEP-ECH-CCH-20.01.07-eng.pdf?sequence=1#:~:text=This%20vulnerability%20is%20exacerbated%20in,agriculture%20sector%20are%20as%20follows:&text=Sea%20level%20rise%20and%20saline,human%20health%20and%20well%2Dbeing.>

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

International Court of Justice Ruling

In March 2018, Guyana submitted the dispute over the contested Essequibo region before the International Court of Justice (ICJ).⁷⁴ Guyana filed an application to commence proceedings against Venezuela to seek legal validity and a definitive ruling on the boundary between the Colony of British Guiana and the United States of Venezuela as determined on October 3, 1899.⁷⁵ In 2020, the ICJ's ruling confirmed its jurisdiction to hear the case brought forward by Guyana. This acknowledgement established the ICJ as the legitimate forum for resolving the dispute in accordance with international law. Despite this ruling, the Venezuelan government reiterated its claim over the Essequibo region again in 2021. The government of Guyana issued an official statement asserting that Venezuela's claims pose a threat to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Subsequently, in 2023, the ICJ persisted to reject Venezuela's petitions declaring that the court does not hold authority to adjudicate the border dispute.⁷⁶ The ICJ has now twice confirmed its jurisdiction to resolve the dispute between Venezuela and Guyana and aims to deliver a definitive and legally binding resolution over the Essequibo territory.

In October 2023, Guyana formally petitioned the ICJ to implement interim measures intended to prevent Venezuela from proceeding forward with its proposed referendum regarding the disputed Essequibo region. In response, the Venezuelan government announced its intention to unilaterally adjudicate the border matter independently. Venezuela continues to maintain its stance that Guyana does not possess jurisdiction or authority over the offshore waters of the Essequibo. The ICJ convened hearings on the matter in November 2023, during which both

⁷⁴ "The World Factbook: Guyana," Central Intelligence Agency, last modified January 9, 2024, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/guyana/>.

⁷⁵ Shikema Dey, "'Only the Court Can Prevent the Annexation of Tens of Thousands of Guyanese Territory' - Greenidge Tells ICJ," OilNOW, last modified November 14, 2023, <https://oilnow.gy/featured/only-the-court-can-prevent-the-annexation-of-tens-of-thousands-of-guyanese-territory-greenidge-tells-icj/>.

⁷⁶ "Guyana Country Profile," BBC News, last modified December 11, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19546909>.

Guyana and Venezuela presented oral arguments regarding the dispute. The case concerning the contested Essequibo territory between Venezuela and Guyana currently remains in progress and is anticipated to span several years before reaching a resolution. Despite participating in the November hearings, the Maduro administration persisted to deviate from the international legal process by proceeding with its public referendum.

Venezuela's Public Referendum

President Nicolás Maduro sought to legitimize Venezuela's claims to the Essequibo territory by conducting a public referendum on December 3, 2023, to garner support.⁷⁷ This referendum sought citizen endorsement for the establishment of a new Venezuelan state in the Essequibo territory and rejection of the ICJ's jurisdiction. Venezuelan President Maduro urged the National Assembly to enact legislation that would officially integrate the Essequibo territory of Guyana into Venezuela. The Venezuelan government asserted that 95 percent of voters supported rejecting the ICJ's ruling and endorsed the integration of the Essequibo as Venezuelan territory.⁷⁸ The referendum also included votes to reject the 1899 border decision and recognize the 1966 Geneva border agreement as the sole legal basis for negotiations between the two nations.⁷⁹ In this referendum, Venezuelan citizens cast their votes on whether they opposed Guyana's authority over the Essequibo's maritime region. Additionally, Venezuelans voted on the

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Luke Taylor, "Guyana Appeals to US and UN as Maduro Advances Annexation of Territory," *The Guardian*, last modified December 6, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/06/venezuela-annex-guyana-maduro>.

⁷⁹ Daniel Somart, Laura Arrijuria, Niaomi Whipps, and Tejas Vaidya, "Threat Assessment: Guyana Prepares to Defend Itself; Venezuela Ready to Annex Essequibo Territory," CTG, last modified December 12, 2023, <https://www.counterterrorismgroup.com/post/threat-assessment-guyana-prepares-to-defend-itself-venezuela-ready-to-annex-essequibo-territory>.

establishment of the Guyana Esequiba state and the issuance of Venezuelan identification cards to Guyanese people within the disputed territory.⁸⁰

Following the referendum, President Maduro proposed a series of measures aimed at implementing the outcomes to include administrative, legislative, and diplomatic actions to reinforce Venezuela's claim to the Essequibo region. In mid-December 2023, Maduro presented a list of nine measures to implement the referendum's outcomes at the Assembly of the Federal Council of Government.⁸¹ Maduro unveiled a map depicting an expanded Venezuela encompassing the Essequibo region. President Maduro then demanded the immediate distribution of this map in schools, universities, community councils, and public institutions to enforce the results of the referendum.⁸² The Venezuelan President also proposed the creation of the High Commission for the Defense of the Guyana Esequiba with oversight by Vice President Delcy Rodriguez.⁸³ In addition to identification cards, other proposed measures include a census and the development of a social welfare program for the population residing within the Essequibo region. Maduro also called for the establishment of the Comprehensive Defense Operational Zone (ZODI) and appointed Major General Rodriguez Cabello as the primary authority of Guyana Esequiba territory.⁸⁴ President Maduro advocated for the creation of local subsidiaries for Venezuelan companies and the issuance of licenses for oil, gas, and mineral exploitation in the Essequibo region.⁸⁵ Additionally, Maduro is drafting legislation to restrict oil companies permitted by Guyana to operate within Essequibo waters. President Maduro's last proposed measure involves the designation of environmental protection zones within the

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Luke, "Guyana Appeals to US and UN as Maduro Advances Annexation of Territory."

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Somart, Arrijuira, Whipps, and Vaidya, "Threat Assessment: Guyana Prepares to Defend Itself; Venezuela Ready to Annex Essequibo Territory."

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Essequibo territory as part of his referendum agenda. In response to the Maduro administration's public referendum, the government of Guyana appealed for both regional and international assistance to counter Venezuela's annexation efforts for the Essequibo region.

The Maduro administration's public referendum had broader impacts and regional implications. This referendum has affected the geopolitical dynamics and relationships between Venezuela, Guyana, and other neighboring countries in South America and the Caribbean. It has also raised legal and diplomatic challenges, particularly about its compatibility with international law, existing treaties, and agreements governing territorial disputes and dispute resolution mechanisms. Many critics of the Venezuela's referendum have voiced concerns regarding the reported voter turnout and locations where voting occurred. The referendum only took place within Venezuela and completely disregarded the population residing in the Essequibo region. It also drew significant international attention and scrutiny with neighboring countries, regional organizations, and global powers who are closely monitoring the developments and expressing their respective positions on the matter. Critics of Maduro's referendum and campaign to annex the Essequibo region suspect that it serves as a domestic political tool to garner nationalist sentiment for the upcoming 2024 Venezuelan presidential elections and attempt to strengthen Venezuela's bargaining position in future negotiations with Guyana. The referendum's outcomes and the subsequent actions taken by Venezuela could have long-term implications for the stability, security, and economic development of the region and has the potential to shape the geopolitical landscape for years to come.

Guyana's Carbon Credit Industry

Guyana's forestry sector stands as another pivotal natural resource that has elevated the nation's prominence on the global stage. Encompassing nearly 90 percent of the country's landmass, Guyana's forests boast six types of major forest formations to include broadleaved rain forest, seasonal evergreen, semi-evergreen forest, dry evergreen forest, montane forest, alluvial marsh forest, and swamp forest.⁸⁶ Over recent years, Guyana's forestry sector has emerged as a bedrock for its economy and serves as a primary source of foreign currency earnings. Initially driven by the timber industry, the sector has recently diversified its revenue streams by tapping into income generated from carbon credits. Carbon credits represent permits that signify the removal of one ton of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere to offset greenhouse gas emissions.⁸⁷ Forest carbon credits specifically assign value on carbon stored by trees. Carbon credits are commonly purchased by companies to counteract carbon dioxide emissions generated from industrial production activities.⁸⁸ In 2022, Guyana entered into a partnership with the Hess Corporation by securing a contract for the acquisition of 37.5 million carbon credits valued at approximately 750 million dollars for a decade long period spanning from 2022-2032.⁸⁹ As more corporations increasingly invest in carbon offsetting measures and the value of carbon credits appreciate over time, this agreement with Hess Corporation holds significant potential for Guyana. Guyana President Ali expressed his aspirations for the country's Low Carbon Development Strategy 2030 to serve as "a global model on sustainability" during the 2023

⁸⁶ "Forests and the Forestry Sector - Guyana." Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, last modified January 14, 2016, <https://www.fao.org/forestry/country/57478/en/guy/>.

⁸⁷ Lucas Thompson and Leticia Miranda, "What Are Carbon Credits? How Fighting Climate Change Became a Billion-Dollar Industry," NBCUniversal News Group, last modified October 30, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/are-carbon-credits-fighting-climate-change-became-billion-dollar-indus-rcna3228>.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ "Guyana's Other Natural Resource," Energy and Climate Partnership of the Americas, last modified March 29, 2023, <https://ecpamericas.org/newsletters/guyanas-other-natural-resource/>.

International Energy Conference. He emphasized that the strategy is “visionary, proactive, sustainable, and it catalyzes the value of our natural resources”.⁹⁰ Guyana’s increasing investments in its forestry sector, facilitated using carbon credits, have positioned the nation prominently on the global stage in combating climate change. Figure 9 at the conclusion of the chapter highlights Guyana’s forests, specifically the regions within the Essequibo that have the highest potential to store carbon.

Guyana’s carbon credit industry has the potential to invoke real environmental impacts. It will play a crucial role in mitigating climate change by promoting sustainable practices in forestry management, reducing deforestation, protecting vital ecosystems, and preserving carbon sinks. The carbon credit industry offers significant economic and diplomatic opportunities for Guyana by attracting investment opportunities and providing revenue streams from the sale of carbon credits to international buyers. This revenue can be invested in sustainable development projects, infrastructure, social programs, education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation efforts within Guyana. Additionally, this industry specifically aims to promote inclusive growth and social development by creating employment opportunities in the forestry sector, supporting indigenous communities’ rights and livelihoods, and fostering community-based conservation initiatives. Investing in the carbon credit industry and sustainable forestry practices will help enhance Guyana’s resilience to climate change impacts such as extreme weather events, sea-level rise, and biodiversity loss. By preserving its forests, Guyana contributes to global efforts to adapt to and mitigate climate change.

This chapter illuminated the vital importance of the Essequibo contested region due to its abundance of natural resources. By juxtaposing Venezuela’s natural resources with Guyana’s, it

⁹⁰ Ibid.

becomes evident why the Maduro administration staunchly asserts claims to the Essequibo territory. The Essequibo region harbors vast potential for economic, diplomatic, and social advancement. This chapter discussed Venezuela's initial assertions over the Essequibo territory and the outcomes of the ICJ's adjudication on the original dispute. Furthermore, it also examined Venezuela's current efforts to assert control over the Essequibo region through a public referendum and introduction of nine implementation measures aimed at integrating the territory as a Venezuelan state. The next chapter will delve into the threat of destabilization stemming from Venezuela's dispute for the Essequibo region. Additionally, it will analyze the adverse external influences and international relations entangled in the dispute over this contested region.



Figure 4. Geographic depiction of oil discovery locations in 1914 within the Orinoco Basin and Maracaibo Basin in Venezuela.⁹¹

⁹¹ “Venezuela’s Oil Infrastructure,” Worldview, last modified April 8, 2014, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/venezuelas-oil-infrastructure>.

MAJOR MINERAL OCCURRENCES

- Al Bauxite
- Au Gold
- C Coal
- D Diamonds
- Fe Iron Ore
- G Natural Gas
- Mn Manganese
- Na Salt
- O Petroleum
- ⚡ Water Power
- 🏭 Major Industrial Areas



DOMINANT LAND USE

- Diversified Tropical Crops (chiefly plantation agriculture)
- Upland Cultivated Areas
- Upland Livestock Grazing, Limited Agriculture
- Extensive Livestock Ranching
- Forests

Figure 5. Geographic depiction and locations of Venezuela’s major mineral resources and agricultural subsidies.⁹²

⁹² “Venezuela Natural Resources Map,” Maps Venezuela - South America – Americas, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://maps-venezuela.com/venezuela-natural-resources-map>.



Figure 6. Geographic depiction of Guyana’s agricultural and mineral resources.⁹³

⁹³ “Guyana Maps,” Perry-Castañeda Map Collection, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://maps.lib.utexas.edu/maps/guyana.html>.



Figure 7. Geographic illustration of the Essequibo disputed region. Venezuela asserts claims to the land west of the Essequibo River.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ "Guyana-Venezuela Land Boundary," Guyana-Venezuela, last modified January 16, 2023, <https://sovereignlimits.com/boundaries/guyana-venezuela-land>.



Figure 8. Depiction of Guyana’s oil discoveries.⁹⁵

⁹⁵ “Venezuela’s Autocrat, Nicolás Maduro, Threatens to Annex Guyana,” *The Economist*, last modified December 4, 2023. <https://www.economist.com/the-americas/2023/12/04/venezuelas-autocrat-nicolas-maduro-threatens-to-annex-guyana>.

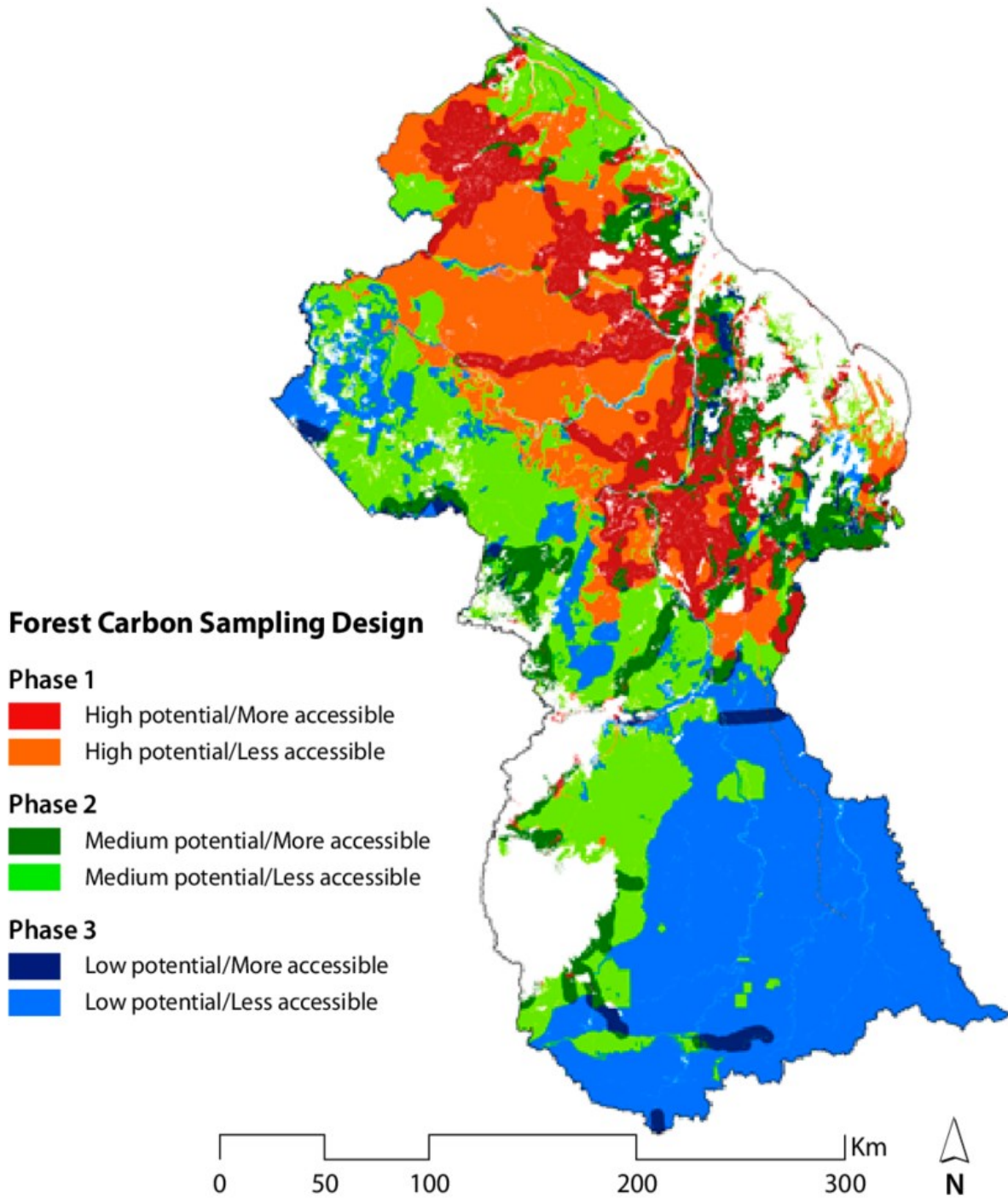


Figure 9. Depiction of Guyana’s forests categorized by potential to store carbon from the environment with the highest potential located within the Essequibo region.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Stefanos Georganos and Stamatis Kalogirou, “A Forest of Forests: A Spatially Weighted and Computationally Efficient Formulation of Geographical Random Forests,” MDPI, last modified August 31, 2022, <https://www.mdpi.com/2220-9964/11/9/471>.

CHAPTER 3: THREAT OF DESTABILIZATION

This chapter will delve into the repercussions of territorial disputes by emphasizing its profound ramifications within a crucial region of South America. It will scrutinize the potential fallout of such disputes by highlighting its capacity to catalyze substantial destabilization across the region. This chapter will analyze the potential escalation of conflict and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in response to the dispute over contested territory. It will also explore the border impacts on the Western Hemisphere by examining the adverse external influences and shifts in international relationships resulting from challenges over this disputed territory.

Dispute for Essequibo Natural Resources

The resurgence of the Essequibo region dispute occurred in 2015 following Exxon Mobil's discovery of oil reserves off the coast of Guyana. Since this discovery, these oil reserves have catalyzed a profound transformation of Guyana's economy with projections indicating a potential 200 percent increase in gross domestic product (GDP) over the next decade.⁹⁷ This economic boom is poised to elevate Guyana into a prominent position as an exporting powerhouse within the global economy. Again in 2018, Venezuelan President Maduro reaffirmed Venezuela's claims of sovereignty over the Essequibo territory. However, tensions escalated more recently in September 2023 when Guyana announced plans to solicit bids for exploitation of the newly discovered offshore oil deposits of in the Essequibo region. In response, the Venezuelan government condemned this move as illegal arguing that the Stabroek oil block

⁹⁷ Laura Coates and Mark Feierstein, "Mark Feierstein on Venezuela's Recent Push to Claim Part of Guyana," United States Institute of Peace, last modified December 22, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/12/mark-feierstein-venezuelas-recent-push-claim-part-guyana>.

concessions in the Essequibo maritime area lie within an “undelimited maritime zone”.⁹⁸ Venezuela warned oil companies against participating in the bidding process which sparked a fresh wave of dispute over the Essequibo’s natural resources.⁹⁹ Figure 10 at the end of this chapter depicts the Stabroek oil block along the Essequibo coast and the history of Venezuela’s claims to the territory.

In addition to the Essequibo’s massive oil reserves, Guyana is leveraging its forestry industry by utilizing carbon credits in the Essequibo Forest. The country’s Low Carbon Development Strategy 2030 represents another avenue for generating revenue and contributing growth of its expanding economy. Amidst a severe economic and humanitarian crisis, Venezuelan President Maduro is resorting to desperate measures to bolster nationalist sentiment ahead of the upcoming presidential elections. It is highly probable that if not for the substantial oil reserves discovered off maritime shores, emergence of the forestry carbon credit industry, and gold mines of the Essequibo, the Maduro regime would show little interest in the territory. The recent assertions by the Maduro administration regarding the territory are clearly motivated by the newfound natural resources and flourishing industries that are fundamentally reshaping Guyana’s economy.

Regional Destabilization in South America

According to the Counterterrorism Group (CTG), the ongoing dispute between Venezuela and Guyana over the Essequibo territory poses a looming risk of potential conflict.¹⁰⁰ If

⁹⁸ Somart, Arrijuira, Whipps, and Vaidya, “Threat Assessment: Guyana Prepares to Defend Itself; Venezuela Ready to Annex Essequibo Territory.” PAGE NUMBERS?

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Somart, Arrijuira, Whipps, and Vaidya, “Threat Assessment: Guyana Prepares to Defend Itself; Venezuela Ready to Annex Essequibo Territory.”

international courts and committees are unsuccessful in attaining a satisfactory resolution for both nations, the likelihood of an armed conflict between Venezuela and Guyana could escalate. Such a conflict would not only jeopardize a crucial source of revenue for Guyana's economy but also escalate border altercations between the two countries. Additionally, it would disrupt Guyana's oil production, causing significant economic ramifications that could reverberate throughout the global oil and energy markets. The economic stability of South America would be significantly compromised in the event of a conflict over the Essequibo territory and further aggravate existing challenges in the region. Considering the already substantial migration from the region, particularly from Venezuela, a conflict would only increase instability and spur further migration by magnifying humanitarian concerns and regional tensions.

While Venezuela's pursuit of control over the Essequibo territory is driven by the desire to secure additional resources to for economic relief, annexing Guyana is unlikely to address the underlying issues plaguing Venezuela's economy. Factors such as international sanctions, widespread corruption, and inadequate infrastructure within Venezuela are significant obstacles to its economic recovery. There are additional concerns that the Venezuelan government would mismanage the land and natural resources of the Essequibo territory, which would further inflame the economic challenges for both countries involved in the territorial dispute. Venezuela's annexation of the Essequibo region would likely exacerbate environmental degradation through over mining, dangerous erosion, significant deforestation, and depletion of oil reserves. Such actions could have severe lasting consequences that further destabilize this key region in South America and the Caribbean. While some Venezuelans may support their

country's claims to the Essequibo, residents of Guyana firmly believe that this territory rightfully belongs to their nation and that the arbitration decision from 1899 should be upheld.¹⁰¹

International pressure on Venezuela to refrain from annexing the Essequibo has been significant, particularly from the U.S., Brazil, and several Caribbean countries. The U.S. has demonstrated its support for Guyana through both diplomatic and military channels. The U.S. has signaled a readiness and commitment to a regional response to Venezuela's aggressive actions. This support has included joint military training with Guyana to reinforce its defense capabilities. Brazil has also taken proactive measures in response to the dispute by mobilizing its armed forces to its border with Guyana to prevent any potential use of its territory by Venezuela to launch an invasion of Guyana. Brazil's involvement in the dispute stems from its desire to prevent larger instability within the region and protect its own interests. Efforts to mitigate and resolve this dispute are imperative to prevent the escalation of tensions and potential conflict, safeguard economic interests, and promote regional stability in South America. International efforts highlight the seriousness of the situation and the determination of key regional players to prevent further escalation and preserve peace and stability within the region.

Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) Proliferation

Venezuela and Guyana currently do not have any weapons classified as weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). The potential for a conflict to arise over the Essequibo territory could spark the proliferation of WMDs to obtain a military advantage. Considering Venezuela's alliances, military trade, and nuclear cooperation with Russia and Iran, there are concerns about WMD

¹⁰¹ Coates and Feierstein, "Mark Feierstein on Venezuela's Recent Push to Claim Part of Guyana."

proliferation.¹⁰² Venezuela currently does not have a long-range ballistic or cruise missile programs.¹⁰³ However, the proliferation of WMDs by Venezuela would likely escalate the territorial dispute into a full military confrontation. The presence of such destructive weapons would increase the stakes of a conflict and may lead to greater reluctance to engage in diplomatic negotiations or compromise. The perceived possession of WMDs in the context of the Essequibo territorial dispute raises significant security concerns for Guyana and neighboring countries. The perceived presence of WMDs would amplify the potential for catastrophic consequences in the event of conflict, which would lead to heightened tensions between Guyana and Venezuela. The proliferation of WMDs in the region not only impacts these two nations, they also pose a significant threat to regional stability in Latin America. The perceived presence of these weapons could trigger a broader arms race or exacerbate current tensions among neighboring countries and further destabilize the region. The proliferation of WMDs in the context of the Essequibo territory dispute also raises international concerns about non-proliferation efforts in Latin America and global security. It may prompt increased scrutiny from the international community and call for diplomatic interventions to prevent the escalation of tensions and the potential use of such weapons. The perceived presence of WMDs would certainly complicate diplomatic efforts to resolve the territorial dispute over the Essequibo region peacefully. It may undermine security measures and hinder the effectiveness of the ICJ's mediation or arbitration processes aimed at finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict.

As tensions began to escalate between Venezuela and Guyana over the Essequibo I territory in December 2023, a retired colonel of the Russian Army and spokesman for the

¹⁰² “Venezuela Overview,” Nuclear Threat Initiative, updated October 25, 2021, <https://www.nti.org/analysis/articles/venezuela-overview/>.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Kremlin revealed that Russian President Vladimir Putin is considering the transfer of cruise missiles to Cuba and Venezuela.¹⁰⁴ According to this spokesman, these measures could be a response to escalating tensions between Russia and the U.S. regarding support for Ukraine during the invasion orchestrated by Putin. The Kremlin official disclosed that these missiles would have a range of up to 2,500 kilometers with the capability of reaching U.S. soil.¹⁰⁵ Missiles with this range would be capable of striking critical infrastructure, facilities, and people within the U.S. Putin could be considering stationing cruise missiles in these locations as an alternative to the deployment of Russian personnel and establishment of military bases, which are measures that have been thwarted due to sanctions imposed by the U.S. and allies. The Kremlin spokesperson also disclosed the possibility of dispatching Russian submarines equipped with Kalibr submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) to the region that could reach U.S. territory.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, the stationing of long-range tactical aircrafts and the installation of advanced defense systems in Cuba and Venezuela was also discussed.¹⁰⁷ Since 2008, Russia has deployed Tupolev nuclear-capable bombers to Venezuela on three occasions.¹⁰⁸ When examining Russia's considerations of stationing long-range cruise missiles and SLBMs in Venezuela and past employment of nuclear-capable platforms to Venezuela, the Essequibo border dispute could present an opportunity for Russia to station these platforms to support a Venezuelan annexation of the disputed territory. The use of WMDs in any potential conflict over the Essequibo territory would have devastating humanitarian consequences to include mass casualties, widespread destruction, and long-term environmental damage. The proliferation of these weapons would

¹⁰⁴ Carlos Eire, "Russia Plans to Send Cruise Missiles, Submarines, Aircraft to Cuba and Venezuela," Babalu Blog, December 26, 2023, <https://babalublog.com/2023/12/26/russia-plans-to-send-cruise-missiles-submarines-aircraft-to-cuba-venezuela/>.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Eire, "Russia Plans to Send Cruise Missiles, Submarines, Aircraft to Cuba and Venezuela,"

increase the risk of humanitarian crises within the region. Considering the risks associated with the proliferation of WMDs, there is a pressing need for disarmament measures and arms control agreements to prevent the use of such weapons and mitigate the threat they pose to regional and global security. Efforts to promote disarmament and non-proliferation should be prioritized to reduce tensions and promote peace in the region.

Impacts on Western Hemisphere

The ongoing territorial dispute contributes to regional instability and creates tensions between Venezuela and Guyana that could have a high potential to spill over into neighboring countries. The disputed territory is believed to contain significant oil and mineral resources, and the uncertainty surrounding its ownership hinders investment and economic development in the region. Neighboring countries, various nations in the region, and other states throughout the world have vested interests in Venezuela and Guyana's natural resources. A potential conflict would disrupt economic activities in this key region such as oil exploration, mineral mining, manufacturing, agriculture, trade, and investment. A conflict between Venezuela and Guyana could disrupt trade networks and supply chains, leading to shortages of goods and services. Trade routes could be obstructed, seaports may face closure, and trade agreements could be suspended, which would reduce the flow of goods and exacerbate economic difficulties. These disruptions would not only have adverse impacts on the two nations, it would also implicate trade and resources throughout the entire Western Hemisphere. Should the Essequibo turn into a conflict zone, its natural resources could be exploited illegally to fund armed groups or militias and lead to environmental degradation. These repercussions would further exacerbate the scarcity of resources and undermine sustainable development efforts within the region. Additionally, the

border dispute between Venezuela and Guyana attracts attention from major global powers, such as the U.S., Iran, Russia, and China who seek to influence the outcome to serve their own strategic interests. Russia may use its ties with Venezuela to assert its own strategic interests by using the Venezuela-Guyana dispute to expand its military presence in the region and challenge U.S. dominance in South America. China may intervene in the border dispute to protect its economic interests in Venezuela's infrastructure development and oil, mineral, and agricultural sectors while seeking an opportunity to undermine U.S. influence within the region. These conditions can propel existing geopolitical rivalries and great power competition in the Western Hemisphere.

If tensions between Venezuela and Guyana escalate, there may be a surge in migration and refugee movements from impacted areas, which would potentially place strains on neighboring countries and regional stability. An additional influx in migration from this region could stress other countries' resources, infrastructure, and socio-economic dynamics. The border dispute can also hinder efforts of regional cooperation and integration among countries in the Western Hemisphere, as it creates divisions and distrust between nations. The presence of Venezuelan military forces in the disputed area raises security concerns, particularly if tensions escalate into armed conflict. Continued presence of Venezuelan military forces in proximity to the Essequibo region indicates aggression and intention of an invasion. This issue could have broader implications for regional security and stability. The manner in which international bodies like the ICJ handle this dispute can establish precedents for resolving territorial disputes not only within the Western Hemisphere but also globally. This process can significantly influence international law and norms, shape diplomatic approaches, and advance conflict resolution mechanisms across the region and beyond. Additionally, Guyana faces a tri-border territorial

dispute with Suriname and Brazil. The outcomes of the Essequibo territory dispute with Venezuela will set precedents for resolving Guyana's other border disputes and various contested regions throughout Latin America. The rulings and outcomes of the Venezuela-Guyana territorial dispute could have far-reaching implications for regional dynamics, including other disputes in the Western Hemisphere, and may shape the future trajectory of territorial disputes and conflicts in the region.

Adverse External Influences and International Relations

The stability factors and destabilizing issues within regions facing territorial disputes are intricately linked with external influences and international relations. In Venezuela, the presence and activities of various non-state and state actors have heightened their influential presence in the country. Non-state and state actors often exploit territorial disputes to further their own interests. Non-state actors may compound instability by using territorial disputes to expand illicit activities such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and extortion to undermine state authority and increase tensions. Figure 11 at the conclusion of the chapter highlights non-state actors by location that operate in Venezuela. The involvement of external non-state and state actors can play a significant role in shaping the dynamics of the territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana. Countries with geopolitical interests in the region may provide additional political, economic, or military support to both nations involved in the dispute and further complicate efforts to resolve the conflict peacefully.

Transnational Criminal Organizations

During the presidency of Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez, the Bolivarian Joint Criminal Enterprise was created to form a trust-based, multi-national network with both social and criminal dimensions.¹⁰⁹ This network extends influence across the Andes, Caribbean, and Central America regions involving governments of Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Suriname, Cuba, Nicaragua, and El Salvador.¹¹⁰ Latin America continues to grapple with challenges posed by the Bolivarian Joint Criminal Enterprise which encompasses various non-state actors commonly referred to as transnational criminal organizations (TCOs). These entities are responsible for the proliferation of violence, corruption, and illicit activities throughout the region. TCOs are significant drivers of instability in various regions and contribute to irregular migration and insecurity. Their illicit activities undermine the rule of law and expose nations and their governments to the influence of malign non-state and state actors, which further fuels instability within the region. The pervasive corruption, political turmoil, and economic collapse in Venezuela have created an environment conducive to the unchecked operations and expansion of TCOs. It is evident that the Maduro regime not only tolerates but also facilitates TCO operations within Venezuela and allows corrupt officials to profit from illicit activities. Similar to its predecessor, the Maduro government utilizes TCOs as instruments of state power. These criminal organizations primarily generate revenue in Venezuela from illicit activities through the sale and trafficking of commodities such as gold, drugs, and oil.

In Latin America, some transnational criminal organizations are classified as “colectivos”, which have evolved into armed pro-government groups that accrue tolerance or

¹⁰⁹ Moises Rendon and Arianna Kohan, “Identifying and Responding to Criminal Threats from Venezuela,” CSIS, last modified July 22, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/identifying-and-responding-criminal-threats-venezuela>.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

support from authorities.¹¹¹ Over time, these colectivos have transformed into paramilitary groups that wield power to assert control over territory and exert influence. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the National Liberation Army (ELN) are both Colombian originated guerrilla groups that have significantly expanded their presence in Venezuela under the Chávez and Maduro regimes. Both the FARC and ELN are heavily involved in drug trafficking, smuggling, and illegal mining in Venezuela. These TCOs could assist Venezuela by acquiring weapons and military equipment needed through illicit channels to support annexation efforts of the Essequibo territory. TCOs could also be leveraged to facilitate the movement of Venezuelan forces and supplies into the disputed territory. As a result of operations across international borders and access to intelligence gathering capabilities, TCOs could provide intelligence and surveillance support to the Maduro regime on Guyana's military deployments and infrastructure to enable Venezuelan forces to better plan their annexation strategy. TCOs could also provide financial support to the Maduro regime by funding weapon purchases, propaganda campaigns, or bribery of local officials to further Venezuela's territorial claims. Additionally, TCOs could carry out covert operations to include sabotage, assassinations, and intimidation tactics to undermine Guyana's sovereignty and destabilize the Essequibo region to allow Venezuela forces to assert control over the territory.

Hezbollah

Over the past three decades, Hezbollah, an Iranian-backed Shi'ite Lebanese militant group, has significantly expanded its presence in Venezuela.¹¹² After the onset of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, Venezuela became a primary destination for those seeking asylum from the

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Rendon and Kohan, "Identifying and Responding to Criminal Threats from Venezuela."

conflict.¹¹³ At the time, Venezuela's flourishing economy and quality standard of living offered a promising haven to Lebanese refugees. However, the refugee route to Venezuela provided Hezbollah members with an opportunity to exploit this pathway to build support networks and operational routes throughout Latin America. Under the presidencies of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro, the Venezuelan government facilitated Hezbollah's activities by aiding in raising, concealing, moving, and laundering illicit funds.¹¹⁴ This support network has enabled Hezbollah to further its terrorist operations worldwide and poses a significant security threat not only to the region but internationally. In 2018, the U.S. Justice Department raised Hezbollah's classification and designated the group as one of the top five transcontinental criminal organizations.¹¹⁵ This escalation was based on Hezbollah's intricate web of illicit activities, horizontal diversification across various criminal enterprises, and its extensive global outreach facilitated by collaborative networks.

Hezbollah's presence and activities in Venezuela are facilitated through a support network of numerous compartmentalized familial clan structures.¹¹⁶ These clans have integrated into the illicit economy controlled by the Maduro regime. Many of the Hezbollah affiliated clans are embedded within Lebanese and Syrian communities across Venezuela and Colombia, which further expands the group's reach and influence in the region. In 2011, a two-year investigation uncovered one of the most extensive cases of trade-based mass money laundering and cocaine trafficking orchestrated by Hezbollah.¹¹⁷ This operation involved collaboration with the FARC,

¹¹³ Joseph Humire, "Hezbollah's Support Network in Venezuela and Ties to the Maduro Regime," JSTOR, last modified 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29477.5>, 5.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 9.

¹¹⁵ Joseph Humire, "The Maduro-Hezbollah Nexus: How Iran-Backed Networks Prop Up the Venezuelan Regime," Atlantic Council, last modified October 7, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/the-maduro-hezbollah-nexus-how-iran-backed-networks-prop-up-the-venezuelan-regime/>.

¹¹⁶ Humire, "Hezbollah's Support Network in Venezuela and Ties to the Maduro Regime", 5.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 6.

Mexican drug cartels, Iran, and Syria. Members of a Hezbollah clan devised a sophisticated network of cross border trade routes spanning between Colombia and Venezuela. Through this intricate maze, they gained control over illicit markets by smuggling and dealing in drugs, contraband, weapons, and money laundering. These activities not only served Hezbollah's interests, they also benefited local drug cartels operating in the region. In 2014, the Venezuelan military counterintelligence chief orchestrated a nefarious scheme involving the exchange of cocaine for weapons.¹¹⁸ This illicit trade deal was comprised of automatic rifles, grenade launchers, and various other small arms between a Hezbollah clan and the FARC.¹¹⁹ Additionally, intelligence documents uncovered a troubling revelation. A senior Venezuelan intelligence officer was involved in smuggling Hezbollah militants into the country by providing false passports and visas.¹²⁰

In addition to their involvement in arms and drug smuggling, Hezbollah clans have also been implicated in providing paramilitary training within Venezuela. Hezbollah clans are often referred to as “fixers” due to their crucial role in establishing support networks that connect the terrorist group to the Maduro regime.¹²¹ While clan members may not hold official positions within Hezbollah's hierarchical chain of command, their presence is instrumental in facilitating connections with the Maduro regime. The clan fixers in Venezuela enable Hezbollah to maintain a certain level of plausible deniability by establishing pathways that intertwine with the bureaucracy and political apparatus of the Maduro regime. Hezbollah has capitalized on Venezuelan state support to facilitate movement of illicit funds and personnel in and out of the region while effectively transforming the Maduro regime into a centralized hub for the

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 8.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 8.

¹²⁰ Rendon and Kohan, “Identifying and Responding to Criminal Threats from Venezuela.”

¹²¹ Humire, “Hezbollah’s Support Network in Venezuela and Ties to the Maduro Regime”, 8.

convergence of transnational organized crime and international terrorism in the Western Hemisphere.¹²² This convergence has not only bolstered the operational capabilities of both Hezbollah and the Maduro regime, it has also enabled them to expand their logistical and financial interests significantly. It is likely that Hezbollah would provide support to Venezuela through military training and tactics such as insurgency, sabotage, and unconventional warfare in the lead up and during an annexation of Guyana's Essequibo territory. Through its extensive intelligence network, Hezbollah could provide intelligence on Guyana's military capabilities, strategic vulnerabilities, and potential resistance movements within the Essequibo region to help Venezuela plan its annexation strategy more effectively. Hezbollah could also provide financial assistance through its illicit activities to help finance Venezuela's annexation efforts.

Illegal Mining

Illegally mined gold and other minerals in Venezuela serve an additional prime source of illicit profit as these resources are exported to various countries worldwide, including Europe, East Asia, and the Middle East. The presence of colectivos and other non-state actors poses additional threats in Venezuela's mineral rich regions as they compete for valuable resources such as gold, diamonds, and bauxite.¹²³ Hezbollah and colectivos have established partnerships with the Venezuelan government to facilitate illegal mining operations in the designated Heritage Protected Areas of the southern Orinoco region.¹²⁴ The illegal mining of minerals in this region is causing irreparable damage to the Amazon with consequences that would take centuries to reverse. Illegal over-mining in the Orinoco is leading to unnecessary deforestation,

¹²² Humire, "The Maduro-Hezbollah Nexus: How Iran-Backed Networks Prop Up the Venezuelan Regime."

¹²³ Rendon and Kohan, "Identifying and Responding to Criminal Threats from Venezuela."

¹²⁴ Ibid.

environmental erosion, and degradation of the area. Additionally, environmental erosion and illicit activities perpetrated by non-state actors are exacerbating social and economic challenges within the affected area. The pervasive presence of non-state actors is profoundly impacting indigenous communities, rural populations, and minors residing in the region.¹²⁵ A Venezuelan annexation of the Essequibo region would provide non-state actors with a significantly larger territory to exploit gold and minerals. An annexation of the Essequibo territory would also extend Venezuela's social and economic challenges to Guyana as a result of illegal mining. Illegal mining operations have not only provided funding for the colectivos and Hezbollah, they have also enabled the Maduro regime to generate substantial profits and further bolster its administration's financial resources. Access to the Essequibo's gold and minerals through illegal mining would provide significant economic benefits to Venezuela.

Venezuela's Oil Industry

Venezuelan oil continues to serve as a significant source of income and is exploited as an instrument for fraud and corruption within the government.¹²⁶ The Venezuelan government leverages its state-owned oil company, *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)*, as a political tool for financial gain by manipulating the international price of oil, particularly for countries reliant on petroleum imports. During his presidency, Maduro appointed a National Guard general with no prior energy or business experience as the leader of PDVSA and the oil minister of Venezuela.¹²⁷ This strategic move allowed the Maduro regime to intertwine government

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ "Venezuela's Political Unrest Has Made Drug Trafficking, Money Laundering, and Other Crimes Easier."

¹²⁷ Rendon and Kohan, "Identifying and Responding to Criminal Threats from Venezuela."

institutions with public sectors and allowed the administration to consolidate control and influence over the oil industry.

In 2018, amid widespread protests following the Venezuelan presidential election, the U.S. and other nations placed economic sanctions targeting Venezuela's oil, gold, mining, and other key industries along with sanctions imposed on individuals within the Maduro administration. These sanctions inflicted a significant blow to Venezuela's already faltering economy and led to a steady deterioration of the country's financial state. Despite possessing one of the world's largest petroleum reserves, Venezuela lacks the necessary infrastructure for refining its crude oil and heavily relies on the export of unrefined oil and the import of refined oil from other countries to meet its domestic needs. The Maduro administration initiated a sanctions evasion strategy aimed at circumventing U.S. imposed oil sanctions by engaging third party individuals and companies in the illegal sale of Venezuelan oil. With Venezuela's economic and humanitarian crisis worsening, the Maduro regime has intensified its reliance on illicit networks and activities to maintain its grip on power. Corrupt officials within the Maduro regime along with TCOs leverage shell companies, family businesses, and contracted enterprises to serve as proxies to conceal their assets and obscure the origins of their illicit operations.¹²⁸ Elite Venezuelan officials also employ transnational organizations and operations to facilitate the movement, storage, and trade of illicit products internationally. Under both the Chávez and Maduro administrations, the Venezuelan government has exhibited severe mismanagement of the nation's economy and natural resources. This mismanagement has created opportunities for government corruption, TCOs, and terrorist organizations to exploit and deplete Venezuela's natural resources through international criminal networks. The Maduro regime's urgent need for

¹²⁸ "Venezuela's Political Unrest Has Made Drug Trafficking, Money Laundering, and Other Crimes Easier."

additional resources, both for economic relief and political survival, is fueling Venezuela's desire for the annexation of Guyana and control over the Essequibo region with its abundant resources. President Maduro may use the territorial dispute as a diversionary tactic to deflect attention away from domestic issues of economic instability, political unrest, and human rights abuses. By focusing on external issues, the Maduro administration could rally public support and unity in the face of perceived external threats to Venezuela.

Iran

As a response to sanctions, embargos, and deficiencies in the petroleum industry infrastructure, the Venezuelan government sought to bolster bilateral relations with Iran. This strategic shift has raised Iran's profile as a growing state actor of concern in Latin America. In 2020, the Maduro regime forged a partnership with Iran to address Venezuela's urgent fuel needs and to assist in repairing oil refineries on the Paraguana Peninsula.¹²⁹ This collaboration culminated in a "gold for gas" deal, which involved the procurement of refinery parts from China, deployment of Iranian technicians, and the delivery of over 1.5 million barrels of gasoline to Venezuela.¹³⁰ The Iranian companies involved with the "gold for gas deal" include Mahan Air, National Iranian Oil Company (NOIC), and the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL), which have all been sanctioned by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) for their connections to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).¹³¹ The U.S. designated the IRGC as a terrorist group and identified Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism. The IRGC is known to execute Iran's foreign policy and facilitate the projection of influence and power globally. There

¹²⁹ Humire, "The Maduro-Hezbollah Nexus: How Iran-Backed Networks Prop Up the Venezuelan Regime."

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

are suspicions that these Iranian state-owned companies maintain relationships with the IRGC to engage in dual-purpose operations, potentially serving both commercial and militaristic objectives.

Iran and the IRGC have been able to execute commercial and military objectives in Venezuela and throughout the region through Hezbollah's networks. Iran and Venezuela have also initiated new cooperation agreements, including the launch of an Iranian supermarket in Venezuela for the retail chain Megasis, a subsidiary of the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) in Iran.¹³² MODAFL has also collaborated with the Venezuelan Company of Military Industries (CAVIM) to establish questionable military projects and ensure the protection of financial transfers through the PDVSA's commercial trade and exchanges with China.¹³³ Iran's multifaceted relations with Venezuela encompasses illicit activities through Hezbollah, trade agreements, and military cooperation to circumvent sanctions. It is likely that Iran would provide Venezuela with additional diplomatic support, financial assistance, and military aid to bolster the Maduro regime's efforts to annex Guyana's Essequibo territory. Diplomatically, Iran could advocate for Venezuela's position on the international stage by using its own diplomatic channels and alliances to garner support for Venezuela's territorial claims. Iran could also provide economic aid to Venezuela through increased investment to alleviate any economic sanctions and strain caused by annexation efforts. Additionally, Iran could offer military assistance by providing weapons or training to enhance Venezuela's military capabilities in the event of a conflict over the Essequibo territory.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

Russia

Russia has increasingly become a significant state actor of concern in Latin America, particularly due to its deepening ties with Venezuela. The U.S. and international community are apprehensive of Russia's efforts to extend its influence in Latin America as a means to counteract U.S. presence since the enactment of the Monroe Doctrine.¹³⁴ This doctrine is a cornerstone of U.S. policy established to prevent European powers interfering in the Western Hemisphere. During the Cold War, Russia attempted to challenge U.S. interests in the region when it began constructing missile launching sites in Cuba. Today, Russia's ongoing efforts to undermine U.S. interests and influence in Latin America by supporting authoritarian regimes pose a direct challenge to the principles outlined in the Monroe Doctrine. Despite political uprisings and protests surrounding Venezuela's presidential elections, Russia has consistently supported and recognized Nicolás Maduro as Venezuela's legitimate leader. Russia has also openly backed Venezuela's assertions to the Essequibo region and annexation of Guyana. Russia has recently reinforced its military cooperation with Venezuela by deploying additional 100 personnel to augment the existing Russian presence in the country and to assist with the modernization of Venezuela's military and equipment.¹³⁵ As part of this enduring military partnership, Russia is also facilitating the construction of two factories in Venezuela intended to fabricate Russian assault rifles and ammunition.¹³⁶ More recently, Russia has capitalized on its connections with Venezuela for its gas fields, oil production, and arms sales in pursuit of expanded financial benefit and gain. The Russian government has facilitated the sale of over \$11.4 billion worth of military equipment to Venezuela, which has contributed to over \$17 billion of Venezuela's debt

¹³⁴ Rendon and Kohan, "Identifying and Responding to Criminal Threats from Venezuela."

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

to Russia.¹³⁷ Military equipment purchased from Russia by Venezuela includes automatic rifles, small arms, and surface to air missiles for its military. There is growing concern among regional government officials about the proliferation of man portable air defense systems (MANPADS) and the ability to shoot down aircrafts falling into the hands of non-state armed actors and the threat this issue poses to air space security.¹³⁸ Regional government officials are also concerned with the intensions of Vladimir Putin’s regime to destabilize the region by forging partnerships with other authoritarian regimes in Latin America, such as Nicaragua’s Daniel Ortega and Cuba’s Miguel Díaz Canel.¹³⁹ In the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, bilateral relations between Russia and Venezuela have intensified. Facing sanctions and embargoes from the U.S. and several other countries, both Russia and Venezuela have leveraged their bilateral ties as a means to circumvent international restrictions. This alliance serves as a lifeline for both nations, which enables them to mitigate the impact of sanctions and embargoes imposed by the international community. These bilateral relations would also significantly benefit Venezuela during its territorial dispute with Guyana. Venezuela would be able to rely on Russia’s supply of military weapons in addition to gas and oil sales for financial support to bolster its position and capabilities during a conflict. It can be expected that Russia would likely strengthen its involvement and relationship with Venezuela during an annexation of the Essequibo territory. Russia could provide political and diplomatic support to the Maduro regime with its influence on the global stage to lobby other countries and international organizations to support Venezuela’s territorial claims. It is likely that this support would be implemented in the form of diplomatic pressure, public statements, or behind the scenes negotiations. A potential Venezuelan annexation

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ “Russia-Venezuela Military Partnership a Threat to Latin America,” *Diálogo Américas*, last modified April 7, 2022, <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/russia-venezuela-military-partnership-a-threat-to-latin-america/>.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

of the Essequibo territory could serve as a strategic move for Russia in an international power play aimed at projecting influence into Latin America. Support to Venezuela's annexation efforts could serve the dual purpose of both strengthening Russian influence in the region and fostering instability to undermine U.S. dominance during a territorial dispute in South America.

China

Another notable state actor of concern in Latin America is China as it continues to expand its presence and influence throughout the region in the Western Hemisphere. China and Venezuela have fostered strong bilateral relations and cooperation in various sectors to include energy, infrastructure, and trade. Venezuela is one of several South American nations that are part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China has voiced support for the Maduro administration and recognized it as the legitimate government of Venezuela despite international controversies surrounding its leadership. China has supplied Venezuela with a significant amount of weaponry and has sold over \$615 million worth of weapons to supply Venezuela's military and colectivos.¹⁴⁰ The China Development Bank has also extended billions in loans to Venezuela, providing crucial financial support to the Maduro administration amidst economic crisis and sanctions imposed by other countries.¹⁴¹ In addition to financial assistance, China has played a critical role in addressing Venezuela's healthcare needs by supplying over 65 tons of medical supplies. This assistance has been vital in alleviating the impact of the humanitarian crisis on the Venezuelan population.¹⁴² During the COVID-19 pandemic, China further demonstrated its

¹⁴⁰ Rendon and Kohan, "Identifying and Responding to Criminal Threats from Venezuela."

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

support for Venezuela by supplying vaccinations and additional medical resources to aid in the country's vaccination efforts and pandemic response.

Despite U.S. sanctions imposed on Venezuela, China has continued to indirectly purchase Venezuelan oil through intermediaries who have rebranded the transactions as Malaysian.¹⁴³ China has emerged as a key partner for Maduro's administration in circumventing these sanctions. Additionally, China has sustained its trade, investment, and lending operations in Venezuela's oil and gas industries.¹⁴⁴ As China's requirements for energy resources and consumer demands increase, its reliance on imports from nations such as Venezuela continues to grow. This investment not only serves China's growing energy needs, it also strengthens its geopolitical presence in Latin America and counters U.S. influence in the region. Echoing Iran's "gold for gas" deals, China employs "oil for loans" agreements with Venezuela. Currently, the government of Venezuela is in default to China for over 1.81 billion dollars.¹⁴⁵ As Venezuela struggles to meet its debt obligations amidst economic turmoil and declining oil production, it risks further entrenching itself in dependency on China and increases its financial distress. Despite its substantial debt, Venezuela would still heavily rely on its bilateral relations with China for gas and oil sales to finance military operations and weaponry purchases to strengthen its military capabilities in the event of a territorial conflict with Guyana.

The presence and influence of the three major state actors mentioned above contribute to destabilization within Venezuela and the surrounding region in Latin America. Iran, Russia, and China's involvement in Venezuela's economy creates a dependency on these countries while reducing Venezuela's cooperation with the United States. Venezuela's economic ties to these

¹⁴³ Andrew Hayley, "China's Oil Trade and Investment in Venezuela," Reuters, last modified September 12, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/chinas-oil-trade-investment-venezuela-2023-09-12/>.

¹⁴⁴ Hayley, "China's Oil Trade and Investment in Venezuela."

¹⁴⁵ Rendon and Kohan, "Identifying and Responding to Criminal Threats from Venezuela."

countries also undermine U.S. economic influence within this region in Latin America. By supporting the Maduro administration, Iran, Russia, and China challenge U.S. efforts to promote democracy and human rights in Venezuela. Support from these countries also contributes to polarization within Venezuela, political instability, and increased tensions with neighboring countries. The provision of military equipment and assistance by Iran, Russia, and China strengthens Venezuela's armed forces and potentially poses a threat to Guyana's territory and challenges U.S. military influence and interests in the region. The presence of Iran, Russia, and China in Venezuela heightens geopolitical competition with the U.S. and contributes to a broader power struggle in Latin America while undermining U.S. efforts to maintain hegemony in the region. Iran, Russia, and China's partnerships with Venezuela enable these countries to form alliances and support the annexation of Guyana. These multilateral alliances could counter U.S. influence in international forums and organizations, while weakening U.S. diplomatic efforts to address the territorial dispute of the Essequibo region. The overall involvement of Iran, Russia, and China in Venezuela could exacerbate tensions between Venezuela and Guyana during the Essequibo territorial dispute. These multilateral relations have the potential to create destabilization and jeopardize security in the region in response to the dispute between Venezuela and Guyana, which can also indirectly challenge U.S. influence and interests.

This chapter delved into the looming threat of destabilization in a pivotal region of Latin America due to a longstanding territorial dispute spanning a century. The recent discovery of substantial natural resources and the enticing economic prospects within the Essequibo region have sparked renewed claims from Venezuela. This chapter also examined how the escalation of tensions over the Essequibo territory could propagate regional destabilization across South America. This dispute carries the grave risk of undermining crucial revenue streams vital for

Guyana's economic sustenance and could significantly disrupt the broader economic stability of the entire South American continent. A conflict between these two nations would escalate instability in the region, worsen the humanitarian crisis, and amplify the refugee crisis in Venezuela. This chapter explored the potential for proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and its destabilizing ramifications in Latin America. Additionally, it examines the repercussions for the Western Hemisphere stemming from a conflict over the Essequibo region. The chapter also scrutinizes the adverse external influences and international dynamics linked to Venezuela. This chapter thoroughly examined the impact of non-state actors, including transcontinental criminal organizations and Hezbollah, and their ties to the Maduro administration. Additionally, it highlighted the international relations and cooperation involving several state actors with Venezuela. The chapter concluded by analyzing the economic, military, and political influence exerted by Iran, Russia, and China in support of the Maduro regime. Lastly, this chapter alluded to continued support to Venezuela by these state actors in the event of a conflict and annexation of the Essequibo territory.

The next chapter will provide a detailed overview of various options for contested region agreements and proposed resolutions aimed at resolving the dispute between Venezuela and Guyana over the Essequibo region. It will discuss Venezuela's current administration and the significant impact of the upcoming presidential elections on the territorial dispute. Additionally, the chapter will explore the imperative of humanitarian considerations in the negotiation of agreements and resolutions concerning the contested territory. The next chapter will analyze Guyana's bilateral relations, discuss the importance of regional security cooperation, and emphasize the necessity of international involvement to counteract Venezuela's aggressive stance over the Essequibo territory.

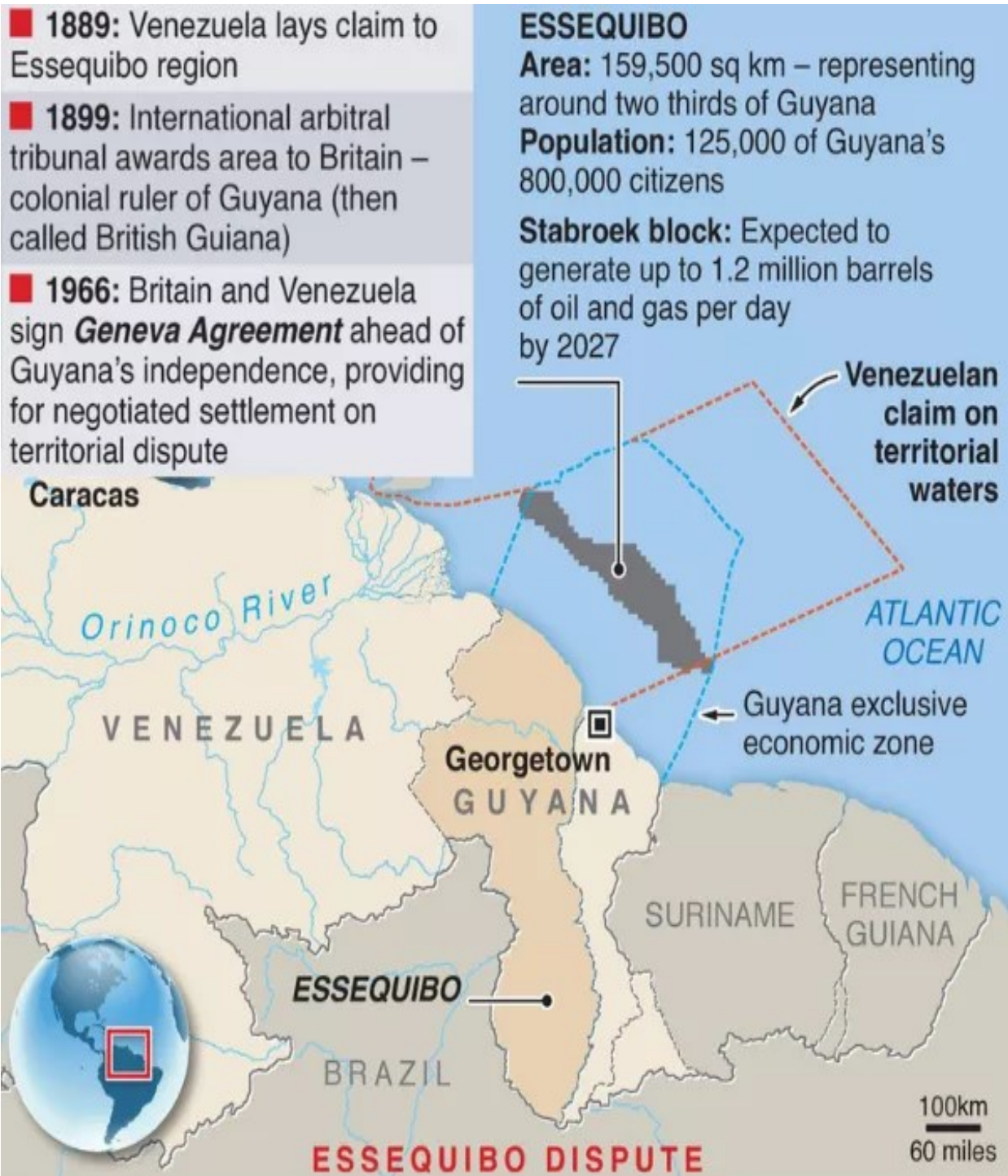


Figure 10. Geographic depiction of the Stabroek block and projected oil output with the history of Venezuela's claims to the Essequibo territory.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ "Explained: What Is the Border Dispute Between Venezuela and Guyana?" BreakingNews.ie, last modified December 24, 2023, <https://www.breakingnews.ie/explained/explained-what-is-the-border-dispute-between-venezuela-and-guyana-1568541.html>.

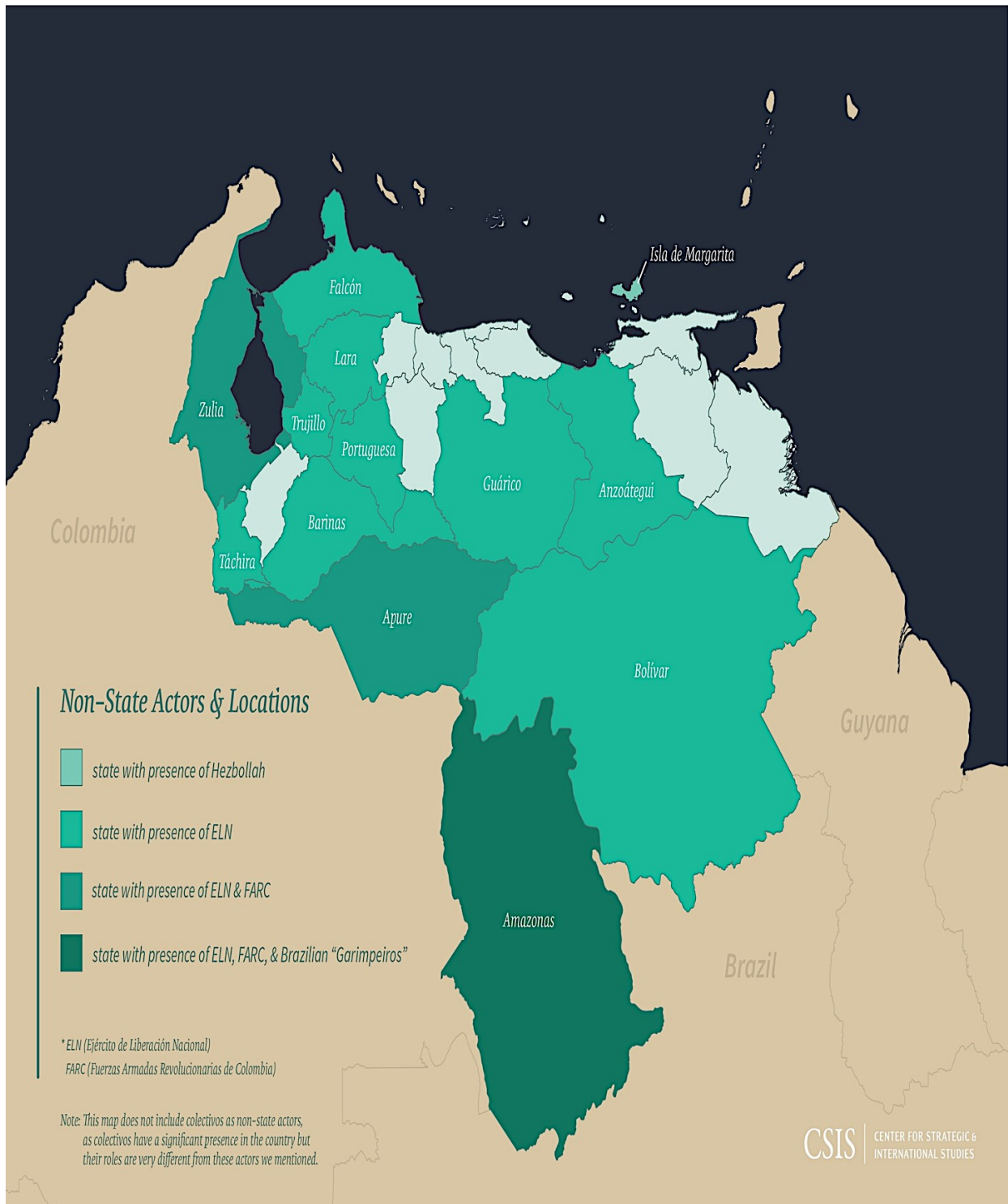


Figure 11. Geographic depiction of non-state actors' presence by location within Venezuela.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Rendon, Moises, and Arianna Kohan. "Identifying and Responding to Criminal Threats from Venezuela." CSIS, July 22, 2019. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/identifying-and-responding-criminal-threats-venezuela>.

CHAPTER 4: CONTESTED REGION AGREEMENTS AND RESOLUTIONS

This chapter will offer a concise overview of the structure of the Venezuelan administration while illuminating its transition into an authoritarian regime. It will delve into the upcoming Venezuelan presidential elections and its pivotal role in the context of the territorial dispute with Guyana. The chapter will also highlight the critical importance of humanitarian considerations in the negotiation of agreements and resolutions to prevent conflict over the contested Essequibo region. Additionally, it will examine the importance of Guyana's bilateral relations and regional security cooperation with allies as strategic measures to counter Venezuela's aggression and attempts to annex the Essequibo area. This chapter will also analyze the vital role of international involvement, committees, and rulings in addressing the territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana with intent to mitigate conflict and prevent destabilization within the region.

Venezuelan Administration and Elections

Since gaining independence in 1811, Venezuela has upheld a republic form of government. The nation's current constitution was ratified on December 30, 1999, and remains as its longest standing constitution in the nation's history.¹⁴⁸ Venezuela's governmental structure consists of a President who serves as both head of government and chief of state elected to six-year terms. Additionally, the government is comprised of a unicameral Congress with members serving five-year terms, a 32-member judicial Supreme Court appointed by Congress for 12-year terms, and a National Electoral Council elected by Congress for seven-year terms.¹⁴⁹ During his presidency, Chávez advocated for several reforms to the 1999 constitution aimed at consolidating

¹⁴⁸ "Venezuela (07/09)."

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

executive power of the president. On February 15, 2009, Chávez succeeded in securing the approval of a constitutional amendment that abolished term limits for all officials.¹⁵⁰ This amendment granted presidents and their administrations the ability to wield executive power without constraints from other branches of government and has led to widespread corruption and mismanagement within the Venezuelan government as an authoritarian regime.

Venezuela is slated to conduct presidential elections at the conclusion of Maduro's second six-year term in 2024. President Maduro and a faction of the opposition backed by the U.S. have established conditions for these.¹⁵¹ In an effort to encourage the Maduro Administration to conduct fair presidential elections, the U.S. has offered incentives including an agreement to lift key economic sanctions in exchange for the release of six political prisoners.¹⁵² However, a panel investigating human rights abuses in Venezuela has alleged that the Maduro government has intensified its efforts to restrict civil liberties leading up to the 2024 elections.¹⁵³ These efforts include detention, surveillance, and intimidation of political opponents through arbitrary criminal proceedings. Maduro's government violations came to light when Maria Corina Machado, the primary opposition party's elected candidate, was banned for running for office in June 2023. Maduro's administration claimed that Machado was complicit in fraud, tax violations, and advocated for U.S. economic sanctions against Venezuela.¹⁵⁴ Maria Corina Machado was leading the primary race and was elected as the primary candidate for Popular Will to run against President Maduro in the 2024 elections. Despite a 15-year ban on her candidacy for office, Machado won the presidential primary in October 2023 and secured over 90 percent of the

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Regina Cano, "Venezuela's Primary to Pick Challenger for Maduro in 2024 Presidential Rival," AP News, last modified October 21, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/venezuela-maduro-opposition-machado-primary-election-42fbd8f8cab3df16f0dd90f9841bc854>.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

vote.¹⁵⁵ In response, the Biden Administration gave the Venezuelan government until the end of November 2023 to reinstate all political candidates and threatened to reverse some of the sanctions relief if Maduro did not comply. Despite international pressure, the Venezuelan government maintained its ban on Maria Corina Machado's presidential candidacy in January 2024. The Democratic Initiative of Spain and the Americas responded by releasing a statement signed by 30 world leaders of Spain and Latin America affirming Machado's status as the legitimate representative of the Venezuelan opposition and as a presidential candidate.¹⁵⁶

The 2024 presidential elections mark a pivotal moment for Venezuela as a nation. If Nicolas Maduro succeeds in securing a third presidential term for the next six years, the nation's political, economic, and social conditions are poised to further deteriorate. The ongoing mismanagement and corruption within Maduro's administration would perpetuate instability and pose threats to the Andes and Caribbean regions of Latin America. Additionally, Maduro's continued presidency would likely continue to inflame the territorial dispute with Guyana. Conversely, the election of a new president from the opposition holds the potential for significant improvement in Venezuela's political, economic, and humanitarian crises. The election of a new president could directly influence the resolution of the territorial dispute over the Essequibo region and steer it toward a peaceful settlement in collaboration with the government of Guyana in accordance with international committees and rulings. However, if the territorial dispute over the Essequibo territory is not resolved in line with the demands of the Venezuelan government, it could potentially lead to a scenario where Maduro uses the conflict as a pretext to postpone presidential elections and remain in power. The Maduro regime understands that a democratic

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Regina Cano, "US Condemns Ban on Venezuelan Opposition Leader's Candidacy and Puts Sanctions Relief Under Review," AP News, accessed January 27, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/venezuela-opposition-candidate-ban-machado-maduro-548531e6db1dca250dc784f0dc2374c5>.

opposition aligned with American interests would pursue policies opposed to those of the current administration. This shift would likely entail a realignment away from China, Russia, and Iran back toward the U.S. A democratic opposition would also seek to transition Venezuela away from the socialist economic model that has contributed to its current crisis. In this context, a democratic opposition in Venezuela would emerge as a strong partner for the U.S. while promoting stability and cooperation in the region.

Humanitarian Considerations

As previously examined, Venezuela is currently grappling with a severe humanitarian crisis stemming from widespread government corruption and mismanagement. The crisis can be attributed to a combination of flawed policy decisions made during Hugo Chávez's presidency and a significant downturn in crude oil prices in 2016, which has rendered Venezuela's petrostate financially unsustainable.¹⁵⁷ Following Nicolás Maduro's failure to hold fair and transparent presidential elections in 2017, the U.S. adopted a maximum pressure policy by imposing sanctions on Venezuela.¹⁵⁸ While aimed at addressing Venezuela's political and humanitarian crisis, these sanctions have had significant economic repercussions and have contributed to the country's financial distress. Seven years later, Venezuela finds itself burdened with soaring debt and hyperinflation reaching 234 percent, making the nation's humanitarian crisis the most severe in Latin America.¹⁵⁹ In light of these economic challenges, the Maduro administration's strategic pursuit of promising resources and potential financial benefits of the Essequibo region reveals Venezuela's urgent need for economic relief.

¹⁵⁷ “Venezuelan Humanitarian and Refugee Crisis.”

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

However, the potential for conflict with Guyana over the disputed Essequibo territory poses further risks to Venezuela's already dire humanitarian crisis. It is crucial to prioritize humanitarian considerations in shaping negotiation agreements aimed at resolving the territorial dispute for both nations. Any resolution must take into account the well-being and rights of affected populations on both sides of the border. A conflict would entail military operations in the Essequibo territory that would extend Venezuela's humanitarian crisis impacts to Guyana by disrupting civilian access to essential services such as food, water, and healthcare. Additionally, military conflict would also impede efforts of non-governmental and humanitarian organizations from providing aid and support to affected civilians. International involvement can play a vital role in addressing humanitarian concerns arising from the territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana. International agencies and organizations can provide much-needed assistance, including humanitarian aid, protection for displaced populations, and support for affected communities. Negotiation efforts between Venezuela and Guyana should be focused on humanitarian considerations and the impact of conflict on affected communities, including access to humanitarian aid, protection of vulnerable populations, and promotion of peacebuilding initiatives to prevent conflict and war. Collaboration between governments, international organizations, and civil society actors is essential in addressing humanitarian considerations for dispute settlement and promoting peace and stability in the region. These organizations can bring diverse perspectives, expertise, and resources to the table for conflict resolution. Governments, international organizations, and civil society actors can leverage their respective platforms and networks to advocate for policy changes, mobilize resources, and raise public awareness about the need for humanitarian action in the event of a conflict over disputed territory.

Guyana Bilateral Relations

Guyana's bilateral relations with other nations are crucial in garnering support to safeguard its sovereignty against Venezuela's attempts to annex the Essequibo region. In December 2023, Guyana's diplomatic outreach included appealing for assistance from the United Nations (UN) and the U.S. following Venezuelan President Maduro's announcement of actions aimed at advancing the annexation of the Essequibo territory.¹⁶⁰ Guyana is also leveraging its membership in the Caribbean Political Community (CARICOM) to rally support from neighboring countries in the region to uphold its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Additionally, the government of Guyana is engaging with allies and regional partners in Latin America with whom it has defense agreements with to bolster its defense capabilities and protect the Essequibo region from potential Venezuelan threats.¹⁶¹ President Irfaan Ali has emphasized that his government has taken proactive steps to safeguard peace and stability of the Essequibo region.¹⁶² The government of Guyana is also diligently reassuring its allies and investors that the rule of law will continue to uphold Guyana's status as a self-governing nation and the rightful governing authority of the Essequibo region.

Regional Security Cooperation

Amidst the escalating territorial dispute, Venezuela's President Maduro authorization of the establishment of a special military unit for the Essequibo region prompted Brazil to deploy armored vehicles to fortify its border defenses.¹⁶³ In response, the government of Guyana is

¹⁶⁰ Luke, "Guyana Appeals to US and UN as Maduro Advances Annexation of Territory."

¹⁶¹ Danica Coto, "Guyana's President Says His Country Is Preparing to Defend Itself From Venezuela Over Disputed Area," AP News, last modified December 7, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/guyana-president-venezuela-essequibo-dispute-3340b813aad91049ac4ff9aa53706471>.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Luke, "Guyana Appeals to US and UN as Maduro Advances Annexation of Territory."

actively collaborating with other nations in Latin America to formulate a regional response strategy should Venezuela attempt to annex the Essequibo. Regional security cooperation serves as a powerful deterrent against Venezuela's aggression to annex Guyana's Essequibo territory. By presenting a unified front, neighboring countries can dissuade Venezuela from taking any provocative actions. President Ali's administration aims to foster regional security cooperation and has initiated discussions with key stakeholders including the U.S., Brazil, the United Kingdom (UK), France, the UN Secretary-General, and the U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM).¹⁶⁴ Amid escalating tensions between Venezuela and Guyana regarding the Essequibo territorial dispute, the U.S. conducted a military training exercise with the Guyana Defense Force (GDF). On December 7, 2024, USSOUTHCOM conducted flight operations in conjunction with the GDF in an exercise that aimed to build upon ongoing engagements and operations to foster a strong security partnership between the U.S. and Guyana.¹⁶⁵ Beyond the December training exercise, USSOUTHCOM will continue to collaborate with the GDF in disaster preparedness, aerial and maritime security, and countering transnational criminal organizations.¹⁶⁶ Through these efforts, the U.S. reaffirmed its commitment to serve as a trusted security ally for Guyana while demonstrating its resolve to bolster regional security cooperation in Latin America.

In late December 2023, the government of the UK dispatched a Royal Navy ship to Guyana as tensions began to escalate after Venezuelan President Maduro announced his

¹⁶⁴ Coto, "Guyana's President Says His Country Is Preparing to Defend Itself From Venezuela Over Disputed Area."

¹⁶⁵ "SOUTHCOM to Conduct Flight Over Guyana." U.S. Embassy in Guyana, accessed on December 7, 2023. <https://gy.usembassy.gov/southcom-to-conduct-flight-over-guyana/>.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

initiatives for the annexation of Guyana.¹⁶⁷ The HMS Trent, a small patrol vessel, was already conducting routine patrols in the Caribbean region when it was directed south to visit Guyana's waters. Although the vessel did not dock at Guyana's capital and restricted its maneuvers at sea, the HMS Trent served as a visible demonstration of UK military support for Guyana.¹⁶⁸ In February 2024, leadership from the French Navy engaged with the GDF to solidify agreements for increased joint training involving additional military units.¹⁶⁹ In response to Venezuela's aggressive stance, France renewed its commitment with Guyana for cooperation to mitigate shared challenges within Latin America.¹⁷⁰ These collaborative efforts among regional allies enable the implementation of robust border security measures, including joint patrols and intelligence sharing to prevent any unauthorized incursions or hostile activities along the disputed border. Joint training exercises also serve as an effective deterrent against potential aggression or destabilizing actions in the region. By demonstrating military readiness and capabilities, Guyana and allies send a clear message that they are prepared to defend against any threats to peace and security in the region. By conducting joint training and providing military resources, regional security cooperation initiatives allow Guyana and its allies to enhance their defense capabilities and interoperability against Venezuelan aggression.

A united stance by neighboring countries through regional security cooperation mechanisms can also exert additional international pressure on Venezuela to adhere to diplomatic resolutions and refrain from aggressive actions. Guyana's regional security cooperation framework can also provide a conducive platform for dialogue and negotiation with Venezuela

¹⁶⁷ "Royal Navy Sends Warship to Guyana as Border Tensions Rise," The Maritime Executive, last modified December 24, 2023, <https://maritime-executive.com/article/royal-navy-sends-warship-to-guyana-as-border-tensions-rise>.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ "Guyana, French Militaries Commit to Increase Joint Training," Guyana Times, accessed February 16, 2024, https://guyanatimesgy.com/guyana-french-militaries-commit-to-increase-joint-training/#google_vignette.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

that can be facilitated by impartial mediators or international organizations with the aim of finding a diplomatic solution to the dispute. By fostering greater trust, communication, and coordination among neighboring states and allies, regional security cooperation can help mitigate the risk of escalation and potential armed conflict over the territorial dispute. Additionally, collective action through regional security cooperation reaffirms the commitment of neighboring countries to uphold Guyana's sovereignty and territorial integrity. This proactive regional cooperation would send a clear message to Venezuela that any attempt to annex the Essequibo region will be met with resolute opposition. Confronting Venezuela's aggression through regional security cooperation not only addresses the immediate threat, it also contributes to long-term regional stability by fostering trust, cooperation, and mutual respect among neighboring states with territorial disputes. This joint effort highlights the growing recognition among Latin American nations of the imperative for regional security cooperation to uphold stability and peace during the ongoing dispute between Venezuela and Guyana.

International Involvement, Committees, and Rulings

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) can have a key role in resolving the territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana. If unopposed, it can be instrumental in enforcing the ICJ's ruling on the Essequibo region by ensuring compliance from both nations. Chapter VII of the UN Charter grants the UNSC the authority to implement enforcement measures aimed at upholding or restoring international peace and security.¹⁷¹ These measures may include the imposition of economic sanctions or the authorization of international military

¹⁷¹ "Maintain International Peace and Security," United Nations, accessed April 8, 2024, <https://www.un.org/en/our-work/maintain-international-peace-and-security#:~:text=The%20Security%20Council%20takes%20the,Operations%20and%20Special%20Political%20Missions.>

action.¹⁷² Other actions may involve mandating the demilitarization of the disputed zone and calling for the withdrawal of military forces from the Essequibo region and its surrounding borders. Additionally, the UNSC could be expected to establish extensive systems and processes to continue monitoring tensions between the two nations to prevent any escalation into conflict. These processes may include regular assessments, implementation of early warning systems, and diplomacy engagements to address re-emerging issues immediately. The UNSC is also likely to facilitate bilateral negotiations and agreements between Venezuela and Guyana to address border boundaries, management of natural resources, and regional security cooperation. Their involvement would aim to foster dialogue and consensus-building to achieve a peaceful resolution to the longstanding territorial conflict. However, decisions and resolutions on peace and security require a two-thirds majority by the UNSC General Assembly.¹⁷³ Given that Russia and China are among the five permanent members of the Council, their bilateral ties with Venezuela may prompt them to exercise their veto power to block any UNSC action concerning the Venezuela-Guyana border dispute.

The ICJ's role in the territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana is to serve as an impartial and independent judicial body that lends legitimacy to its rulings to ensure its decisions are respected and recognized by the international community. This impartiality is crucial in fostering trust and confidence in the adjudicative process between both Venezuela and Guyana. The ICJ's involvement in this dispute could also contribute to improving bilateral relations and fostering cooperation in other areas of mutual interest. After Guyana submitted the matter to the court, the ICJ issued a ruling that imposes restrictions on both Venezuela and Guyana by prohibiting any actions that could aggravate or prolong the territorial dispute in any way until a

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

resolution is reached. However, President Maduro's administration rejected the ruling by asserting its refusal to recognize the jury's jurisdiction over the matter. Maduro's stance suggests a likelihood of non-compliance with any ICJ rulings, as demonstrated by his actions to continue with the execution of his public referendum. Maduro's blatant disregard for the ICJ's authority undermines its effectiveness as a mechanism for international arbitration. Additionally, Russia and China may wield their veto power within the UNSC to strategically oppose any actions initiated by the ICJ concerning the Venezuela-Guyana border dispute. They retain the ability to veto UNSC resolutions endorsing or enforcing ICJ verdicts regarding the dispute. By leveraging their influence within the UNSC, they can obstruct any measures intended to implement ICJ rulings or impose sanctions on Venezuela. This veto authority enables Russia and China to safeguard their interests, along with those of Venezuela, by diminishing the credibility and impact of the ICJ's decisions on the matter. Regardless of Venezuela's allies in the UNSC, Guyana's representative, Carl Greenidge, indicated a commitment to engage with the court's processes by issuing a statement during an appeal to the ICJ in November 2023.

“The Court alone stands between such a solution and chaos, chaos that would threaten peace and security for Guyana and for the Caribbean region and beyond. Only the Court stands as the guardian to that gateway. Only the Court can protect Guyana and its rights at issue in this case from the irreparable harm that would certainly befall it if Venezuela is permitted to cross that threshold. Only the Court can prevent the annexation of tens of thousands of Guyanese territory.”¹⁷⁴

International involvement will be key in providing a framework to resolve the territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana. The U.S., Colombian, and Brazilian governments have publicly confirmed their support for Guyana's sovereignty over the Essequibo territory in order to dissuade Venezuela from annexing the region already adjudicated by the ICJ. In response to

¹⁷⁴ Dey, “‘Only the Court Can Prevent the Annexation of Tens of Thousands of Guyanese Territory’ - Greenidge Tells ICJ.”

the Maduro administration's referendum, the U.S. announced its plans to conduct joint military exercises with the Guyana military.¹⁷⁵ This statement aimed to demonstrate solidarity with Guyana and send a clear message to Venezuela regarding the U.S.'s intentions if it were to invade the Essequibo region. A combination of bilateral and multilateral dialogue and agreements involving Venezuela, Guyana, Colombia, Brazil, the U.S., and other regional nations will play a crucial role in alleviating tensions surrounding the disputed territory. Additionally, the ICJ's ability to offer impartial adjudication and legal mechanisms in conjunction with involvement from organizations like the UN can act as deterrents against Venezuela's unilateral actions. This strategy can also provide regional blocs to help prevent escalation that may lead to an armed conflict. International involvement also sends a message that attempts to infringe on a nation's sovereignty will face scrutiny and opposition from the international community.

International committee efforts and multilateral dialogue between nations with vested interests within the contested region will be critical in safeguarding economic security and energy markets in Guyana and South America. These efforts would also bring attention to the effectiveness of international committees and the application of international law concerning disputed territories and regional conflicts that pose a significant threat to regional destabilization. The ICJ's ability to resolve this territorial dispute will promote stability in the region, which is crucial for economic development and investment of the Essequibo region. Upholding international law and norms through involvement in territorial disputes, such as the dispute over the Essequibo territory, sets a precedent for resolving similar conflicts worldwide. It will reinforce the importance of adhering to established rules and principles governing state behavior when addressing contested areas. Undeterred by ongoing challenges, the ICJ remains poised to

¹⁷⁵ Noah, "Tensions Rise as Venezuela Referendum Calls for the Annexation of Guyana."

address the dispute between Venezuela and Guyana and provide a framework for peaceful resolution to promote regional stability and prevent the escalation of tensions between the two nations.

This chapter provided an overview of Venezuela's governmental framework while tracing its evolution into an authoritarian regime. It delved into Venezuela's upcoming 2024 elections and emphasized the pivotal role it will have in escalating tensions with Guyana over the Essequibo region or potentially ushering in an era for peaceful negotiations under a new president. Additionally, the chapter discussed the critical importance of humanitarian considerations in shaping negotiations and agreements to mitigate the crises plaguing Venezuela. This chapter highlighted the significance of Guyana's bilateral relations with regional partners and allies through security cooperation as a strategic response to Venezuelan aggression. It also examined the role of international involvement, committees, and judicial rulings to deter Venezuela's attempts to annex the Essequibo, mitigate conflict, and prevent destabilization within this key region in Latin America.

The next chapter will delve into the future of the Essequibo disputed territory by assessing Venezuela's aggressive stance and its implications for regional stability. It will also highlight the importance of security for natural resources within the Essequibo to maintain economic stability and environmental preservation. The chapter will emphasize Guyana's relentless pursuit of sovereignty as a nation while accentuating its significance in the broader geopolitical landscape. It will also discuss the importance of maintaining regional security amidst the looming threat of destabilization stemming from the territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana. Lastly, the chapter will explore the implications for U.S. foreign policy

in South America by providing valuable insights into how the U.S. can navigate the complex dynamics of the region as a result of ongoing tensions over the Essequibo territory.

CHAPTER 5: FUTURE OF THE ESSEQUIBO DISPUTED TERRITORY

The previous chapter examined Venezuela's government structure and the pivotal significance of the upcoming elections. Additionally, it highlighted the crucial significance of regional collaboration, international committees, and judicial interventions in resolving the Essequibo dispute. The chapter emphasized the role of collaborative efforts in mitigating potential conflicts and preserving stability throughout Latin America. It also delved into the complexities of the Essequibo dispute and explored avenues for resolution through diplomatic channels and legal mechanisms.

This chapter aims to analyze Venezuela's assertive stance regarding the Essequibo territorial dispute and its implications. It will also emphasize the importance of securing natural resources in the Essequibo region in order to safeguard Guyana's national sovereignty. Additionally, the chapter will explore the ramifications for U.S. foreign policy and propose effective strategies for U.S. engagement in the South American dispute. It will outline potential diplomatic, economic, and security measures that the U.S. could employ to address the Essequibo conflict and its broader consequences. Finally, the chapter will summarize key insights from the Venezuela-Guyana territorial dispute over the Essequibo region and offer recommendations for future actions and policies to address challenges posed by territorial disputes while drawing upon lessons from the Essequibo case and similar conflicts worldwide.

Venezuela's Aggression and Instability

Despite the ICJ's pending ruling on the matter, President Maduro continues Venezuela's advancements to annex Guyana's Essequibo territory. Throughout 2023, Venezuela maintained its aggressive stance by conducting military activities and mobilizing troops in proximity to

Guyana's borders. In December 2023, President Maduro announced a new law to recognize the establishment of a new state, Guayana-Esequiba, at the Assembly of Federal Council of Government.¹⁷⁶ Maduro also stated that residents in the region would receive Venezuelan national identification cards and instructed Venezuelan national companies to initiate mining and oil extraction operations within the Essequibo territory.¹⁷⁷ Additionally, President Maduro revealed plans to deploy a newly established military unit to defend and protect the region against any opposition.

Guyana has accused the Venezuelan government of disregarding the orders issued by the ICJ, which instructed both countries to not take any actions regarding the annexation of the Essequibo until the court reaches a verdict on competing claims to the region.¹⁷⁸ Given the complexity of the case, the ICJ's ruling on the disputed territory is expected to undergo a lengthy review process that may span several years before a resolution is reached. Despite the ICJ's instructions, President Maduro and his administration have increased their aggressive stance toward Guyana and have signaled their intentions to annex the Essequibo region. In response, Guyana is taking proactive measures in preparing itself against Venezuelan aggression, which reflects the gravity of the situation and has raised concerns among neighboring countries. Guyana has engaged in diplomatic efforts with the United Nations (UN) and Organization of American States (OAS) to garner national support and raise awareness about Venezuela's territorial claims. Guyana is also bolstering its defense capabilities, security measures, and readiness by conducting joint military training with various global partners. Guyana has sought support from neighboring countries and regional allies within Latin America and the Caribbean

¹⁷⁶ Taylor, "Guyana Appeals to US and UN as Maduro Advances Annexation of Territory."

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

to build a united front against Venezuela's aggression. Neighboring countries are also taking precautionary measures in response to Venezuela's encroachment on the territory by mobilizing military forces near their borders to prevent unauthorized crossing of national boundaries. The escalating tensions and Venezuela's persistent efforts to annex Guyana are contributing to increased instability and pose broader regional challenges in northern South America. The oppressive tactics, lack of economic oversight, and mismanagement by the Maduro regime are key factors directly fueling Venezuela's refugee and humanitarian crisis. This multifaceted crisis not only affects Venezuela, it also exacerbates regional instability in Latin America and poses significant challenges for nations hosting Venezuelan refugees. Maduro's potential reelection for another six-year term threatens to perpetuate the crisis in Venezuela and impede efforts to restore stability both within the nation and across the Latin American region.

Security of Essequibo Natural Resources

The Essequibo region is believed to hold significant natural resources to include oil, gas, gold, and timber, which are vital for Guyana's economic development and sustainability. Protecting the Essequibo territory from Venezuela's encroachment ensures that its natural resources are managed responsibly by the government of Guyana. A Venezuelan annexation of the Essequibo territory would result in gross mismanagement and depletion of the significant natural resources by the Maduro regime. Ensuring the Essequibo's security would also help prevent environmental degradation and preserve valuable habitats for future generations. Protecting the natural resources in the Essequibo region would ensure Guyana's sovereignty over its territory and safeguard its right to control and benefit from its own resources. Responsible exploration of natural resources in the Essequibo can foster stability and prosperity in Guyana

and contribute to the nation's economic growth, attract foreign investment, and create employment opportunities. Security of the Essequibo region's natural resources can mitigate tensions and conflicts with neighboring countries and promote both regional stability and cooperation in Latin America. The Essequibo's geographical location and resource-rich nature make it strategically important in geopolitical terms. Its security can influence regional dynamics and international relations in South America. Revenue generated from the exploration of the Essequibo territory resources can be reinvested in social development programs, such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure to enhance the welfare of Guyanese citizens. Protecting Guyana's sovereignty over the Essequibo territory through security of its natural resources reinforces the country's legal and diplomatic position in the territorial dispute with Venezuela and strengthens its case in the international forums with ICJ and UN.

Following Venezuela's referendum, leaders from Venezuela and Guyana engaged in more recent dialogue to address their ongoing border dispute. On December 14, 2023, President Nicolas Maduro and Guyanese President Irfaan Ali convened in Kingstown, St. Vincent and the Grenadines to discuss the matter.¹⁷⁹ During the meeting, both leaders mutually agreed that neither country would resort to the use of force over the territorial dispute involving the resource-rich Essequibo region. Venezuela and Guyana also committed to establishing a joint commission intended to address the dispute. Despite ongoing disagreements regarding sovereignty over the Essequibo territory, both presidents pledged to address the matter through mutual agreement. The joint commission is scheduled to reconvene in Brazil in three months (March 2024) to provide an update on the issue. Following the meeting with President Maduro,

¹⁷⁹ David Shortell, "Leaders of Venezuela and Guyana Agree to Avoid Use of Force in Land Dispute," CNN, last modified December 15, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/14/americas/venezuela-guyana-essequibo-summit-intl/index.html>.

President Ali emphasized Guyana's determination to pursue resolution through the ICJ. While Guyana confirmed its stance against war, it emphasized their rights to collaborate with partners to ensure the defense of its territory.¹⁸⁰

In February 2024, tensions between Venezuela and Guyana heightened following Exxon Mobile's announcement of plans to resume oil exploration in the Essequibo offshore waters. In response, Venezuelan President Maduro issued a public warning promising military intervention against any organization entering the disputed waters. Despite Maduro's warnings, Exxon Mobile affirmed its commitment to proceed with exploration operations and production plans in Guyana as defined within its contract. However, on February 21, 2024, Guyana issued a public statement stating that it would withhold approval for oil exploration in waters within the unverified border until the ICJ delivers a ruling on the disputed region.¹⁸¹ Guyana's Natural Resources Minister emphasized that Guyana will limit oil related activities to areas south of the disputed border to prevent escalating tensions with Venezuela.¹⁸² Both nations have agreed to maintain operations to within their confirmed borders until a verdict is reached. A satisfactory resolution of the territorial dispute by the ICJ holds the potential to unlock the economic opportunities of the Essequibo region. This will enable both Venezuela and Guyana to pursue sustainable development initiatives and harness the natural resources of the area for the benefit of their respective populations.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Kevin Crowley, "Guyana Won't Approve Drilling Near Venezuela Until Court Rules," Bloomberg, accessed February 21, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-02-21/guyana-won-t-approve-drilling-near-venezuela-until-court-rules>.

¹⁸² Ibid.

Guyana’s Fight for Sovereignty as a Nation

President Nicolás Maduro's meeting with the Assembly of the Federal Council of Government in Venezuela raised significant concerns in Guyana. In response, Guyana President Ali delivered a national address characterizing Venezuela’s potential annexation of the Essequibo as a “direct threat to Guyana’s territorial integrity, sovereignty, and political independence”.¹⁸³ Annexation of the resource-rich Essequibo territory by Venezuela would have significant economic repercussions for Guyana. It would lead to substantial reductions in one of Guyana’s primary revenue sources and adversely impact its economy. The loss of revenue from the Essequibo territory would impede funding for critical social projects in healthcare, education, social welfare, and infrastructure in Guyana, which would hinder the well-being and quality of life for its citizens. Additionally, a significant shift in territorial control by Venezuela would likely result in substantial job loss within the energy sector in Guyana. This would have a ripple effect on other sectors of the economy and likely induce unemployment and economic hardship. Beyond its immediate impact on the oil industry, a territorial change over the Essequibo territory would also trigger negative second and third order effects across supporting industries such as trade, transportation, manufacturing, and construction in Guyana. This response would further weaken the country's economy and impede its overall development.

The delineation of national borders would carry significant cultural and social ramifications for communities and ethnic groups in Guyana. The potential annexation of the Essequibo territory by Venezuela would create issues of displacement, identity, and sovereignty within its communities and impact their way of life and cultural heritage. The ICJ’s ruling will hold paramount importance for Guyana's national identity, territorial integrity, and its ability to

¹⁸³ Luke, “Guyana Appeals to US and UN as Maduro Advances Annexation of Territory.”

govern and protect citizens within its borders. Consequently, the ICJ's decisions and the repercussions concerning the territorial dispute could shape public perceptions and nationalist sentiments within both Venezuela and Guyana. These decisions may lead to heightened tensions and nationalist fervor, which could impact diplomatic relations and regional stability in Latin America. Additionally, the outcomes of the ICJ's decisions may be subject to diverse interpretations by various stakeholders and could spark debates and discussions regarding national identity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. These discussions could further polarize public opinion and inflame tensions between the two countries. Ultimately, the ICJ's decisions will significantly influence Guyana's future and its relationship with Venezuela. However, the territorial dispute also presents an opportunity for community engagement and empowerment within Guyana. Local communities and ethnic groups have a chance to contribute in significant ways by advocating for their rights and preservation of their cultural heritage in the face of territorial challenges. To defend its sovereignty against Venezuela's annexation attempts, Guyana will need support from the international community, regional organizations, and allies to assert its territorial rights. The resolution of the territorial dispute will have long-term implications for both Guyana and Venezuela. It will shape their geopolitical dynamics, economic development, and relations with neighboring countries. It is paramount that a peaceful and mutually acceptable solution is found, as it is essential for regional stability and prosperity within Latin America.

Threat to Regional Security and Destabilization

The potential annexation of the Essequibo territory by Venezuela represents a significant threat to regional stability in Latin America. It has the potential to escalate tensions and conflicts between the two nations that could involve neighboring countries. This consequence would have

broader implications for regional stability and security in Latin America. Venezuela's creation of the ZODI for the disputed territory would likely prompt both Guyana and Venezuela to increase military presence in the Essequibo area. An escalation of military presence and activity would amplify the likelihood of conflicts and confrontations between the security forces of both nations. Heightened military presence within the territory could lead to continuous border incidents and unauthorized military movements. The militarization of the contested region also raises concerns about potential human rights violations as military activities may impact local communities and indigenous populations residing in the area. The escalation of military presence and activity within the contested territory would undermine diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict peacefully. It would further strain relations between Guyana and Venezuela and diminish the effectiveness of diplomatic channels in addressing disputes.

A conflict over the Essequibo territory would likely trigger migration from the region as residents seek refuge in safer locations. This migration would strain resources and infrastructures in surrounding communities and could compound existing social and economic challenges. The authoritarian nature of the Maduro regime raises concerns about potential human rights violations in the event of a conflict. Civilians in the Essequibo area would be at risk of arbitrary detention, violence, and other abuses known to be perpetrated by Venezuelan security forces. Military operations in the Essequibo territory would extend Venezuela's humanitarian crisis impacts to Guyana by disrupting civilian access to essential services such as food, water, and healthcare. Additionally, military conflict would also impede efforts of non-government and humanitarian organizations from providing aid and support to affected civilians. Ultimately, the ICJ's ruling and its implications regarding the Venezuela-Guyana territorial dispute for the Essequibo region could play a pivotal role in fostering long-term stability, peace, and security in

the region. By establishing a legally binding framework for resolving the conflict and preventing future disputes, the ICJ's rulings have the potential to mitigate tensions and promote cooperation between the involved nations. By clarifying the legal status of the Essequibo region and delineating clear boundaries, the ICJ's rulings can serve as a catalyst for diplomatic efforts to resolve territorial disputes peacefully worldwide.

Implications for U.S. Foreign Policy

The militarization of the Essequibo territory could have broader implications for regional security, as neighboring countries may become involved or effected by the escalating tensions between Guyana and Venezuela. This situation could destabilize the entire region and jeopardize peace and stability in Latin America. Given the potential consequences of military escalation, it is imperative to prioritize diplomatic efforts to resolve the territorial dispute. International mediation and dialogue between Guyana and Venezuela facilitated by organizations such as the UN or regional bodies like the OAS can play a crucial role in preventing further escalation and promoting a peaceful resolution. Given its diplomatic interests and investments in the region, the U.S. may be forced to relook its foreign policy in relation to Latin America. U.S. foreign policy for Latin America may need to focus on diplomatic engagement, more dialogue encouragement, assistance in conflict resolution efforts, and establishment of effective regional stability initiatives. The U.S. can leverage its diplomatic influence to encourage both Guyana and Venezuela to prioritize peaceful negotiations and abide by international law and agreements. By promoting a peaceful resolution to the dispute, the U.S. can attempt to prevent further escalation and preserve regional stability in Latin America.

In recent years, both Venezuela and Guyana have assumed increasingly significant roles in U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America. In 2018, the U.S. responded to the uprisings and protests in Venezuela against Maduro's disputed elections by imposing sanctions to include freezing assets and implementation of trade restrictions. Additionally, sanctions were levied against numerous associates and members of the Maduro administration, making Maduro the “fourth sitting head of state to be personally targeted with economic sanctions by the U.S.”¹⁸⁴ The European Union (EU) also imposed sanctions on Maduro's government in response to the 2018 elections. The combined impact of these sanctions led to a further decline in Venezuela's oil production and hyperinflation of its national currency. Venezuela continues to be a focal point for U.S. interests in Latin America, particularly concerning efforts to facilitate the restoration of democracy for the Venezuelan people. The ongoing economic and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela poses significant risks to various aspects of U.S. interests to include economic, security, financial, and political concerns. The potential annexation of Guyana by Venezuela for the Essequibo region would undoubtedly catapult instability in a crucial area of Latin America where the U.S. holds numerous interests. Although Venezuela maintains alliances with Russia and China, the U.S. has an opportunity to engage with Venezuela by offering economic incentives such as easing current sanctions, provision of financial aid and humanitarian assistance, or offering investment opportunities in exchange for Venezuela refraining from annexing the Essequibo territory. By presenting economic benefits, the U.S. can incentivize Venezuela to prioritize economic development and stability over territorial expansion. In light of the ongoing territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana, the U.S. may need to reassess its current diplomatic involvement and sanctions policy for Latin America to ensure a more

¹⁸⁴ Martz, McCoy, and Lieuwen, “History of Venezuela.”

effective response to economic incentives. The following list of sanctions within U.S. foreign policy can be expanded to multilateral sanctions with other nations and international organizations. Multilateral sanctions would amplify economic and diplomatic pressure on Venezuela and to impede the Maduro regime’s ability to pursue its annexation agenda.

- Visa restrictions – restricts any visas related to corruption or human rights abuses pursuant to Section 7031(c) of annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs.¹⁸⁵
- Terrorism-related sanctions – Venezuela is not fully cooperating with U.S. anti-terrorism efforts” pursuant to Section 40A of the Arms Export Control Act (22 U.S.C. 2781).¹⁸⁶
- Drug trafficking-related sanctions – 25 companies are sanctioned due to connections with Venezuela designated as Specially Designated Narcotics Traffickers pursuant to the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act (P.L. 106-120, Title VIII, as amended; 21 U.S.C. 1901 et seq.).¹⁸⁷
- Targeted sanctions related to antidemocratic actions, human rights violations, and corruption – in response to increasing repression in Venezuela, Congress enacted the Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014 (P.L. 113-278; 50 U.S.C. 1701 note). E.O. 13692 is used to implement P.L. 113- 278 to target 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.¹⁸⁸
- Additional financial sanctions – E.O. 13808 prohibits access to U.S. financial markets by the Venezuelan government, including state energy company *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)*. E.O. 13827 prohibits transactions involving the Venezuelan government’s issuance of digital currency, coin, or token. E.O. 13835, prohibits transactions related to purchasing Venezuelan debt and any debt owed to Venezuela pledged as collateral.¹⁸⁹
- Broader sectoral sanctions – E.O. 13850 blocks assets of, and prohibits certain transactions with, any person determined to operate in designated sectors of the Venezuelan economy or to engage in corrupt transactions with the Maduro government.¹⁹⁰
- Sanctions on the Maduro government - E.O. 13884 freezes assets of the Maduro government in the United States and within the control of U.S. persons.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁵ Clare Seelke, “Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions Policy,” CRS Reports, last updated January 26, 2024, extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF10715, 1.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 1.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 1.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 1.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 2.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 2.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 2.

Should the territorial dispute over the Essequibo elevate to a conflict, it is very likely that the U.S. would be challenged with difficulties of war fatigue as the invasion of Ukraine and the Hamas-Israel war continue in other regions of the world. The U.S. has remained involved and continues to support Ukraine and Israel, which can lead to public weariness and exhaustion through prolonged military intervention with the addition of conflict in a different hemisphere. Military support requires significant resources in terms of funding, personnel, and equipment. The prolonged conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East can strain the U.S. military and economy and lead to concerns about the human and financial toll as a result of continued involvement. The U.S. may not have the diplomatic or financial endurance to support a third conflict over disputed territory, which would necessitate a shift in foreign policy. Additionally, continuous media coverage of conflicts can impact public opinion and lead to calls for reduced military intervention and shift focus on domestic issues. Over time, public support for prolonged military engagements may decline and contribute to war fatigue. As conflicts persist in different regions, policymakers may face challenges in balancing competing priorities and allocating resources effectively. The need to address multiple crises simultaneously can further exacerbate war fatigue among policymakers and the public alike.

The territorial dispute between Venezuela and Guyana over the Essequibo region carries broader implications for U.S. foreign policy in Latin America. Increasing cocaine exports from the Andes region pose significant threats to both U.S. national security and public health, with the U.S. ranking as the world's top consumer of the drug.¹⁹² Should Venezuela successfully annex the Essequibo territory, they would gain access to more resources and networks to facilitate the expansion of illicit products and activity. Additionally, the criminal networks

¹⁹² Rendon and Kohan, "Identifying and Responding to Criminal Threats from Venezuela."

operating out of Venezuela could enable non-state actors to operate in a larger territory, which would further extend their international reach bringing them closer to the U.S. Annexation of the Essequibo would also enable Venezuela to strengthen its partnerships and cooperation with other nations. The vulnerable state of Venezuela under the Maduro regime presents opportunities for other state actors such as Iran, Russia, and China to exert influence within the region to undermine U.S. interests. As tensions escalate between Venezuela and Guyana over the Essequibo, U.S. foreign policy may be required to shift focus toward South America in order to mitigate threats that could destabilize this strategically important region in close proximity to the U.S.

CONCLUSION

Regardless of the implications and destabilization threats it may impose, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's current intentions to annex Guyana for the Essequibo territory are highly dangerous and threatening to a free and independent Guyana. Maduro's strategy in claiming the Essequibo region is driven by the prospect of accessing additional natural resources and securing temporary economic relief for Venezuela to bolster his chances of re-election during a presidential election year. The Maduro government could launch a military invasion or occupation of the Essequibo region by deploying its armed forces to seize control of the territory by force. These actions could involve military incursions, troop deployments, and occupation of key strategic locations within the disputed area. A Venezuelan annexation of the Essequibo territory would further aggravate existing challenges, threats, and instabilities in South America. A conflict over the disputed territory would threaten the security and stability of this key region in Latin America by magnifying the economic, migration, and humanitarian crisis.

Maduro's timing in asserting claims to the Essequibo territory is highly calculated and aimed at taking advantage of the ongoing territorial conflicts elsewhere in the world. The Maduro regime appears to be capitalizing on the diversion of diplomatic efforts and resources of major international players, including the U.S., the UN, and EU nations, which are currently focused on conflicts in Europe between Russia and Ukraine and the war between Israel and Gaza in the Middle East. By sparking a territorial dispute in South America amidst global conflicts, Maduro aims to divide and dilute international responses to Venezuela's actions. The focus of the U.S., UN, and EU nations on conflicts in other regions poses challenges to mounting a cohesive and effective response to Venezuela's territorial claims. The legacy of colonial-era border decisions continues to shape contemporary geopolitics and territorial disputes between

neighboring countries. The historical context of border demarcations influences the perceptions and claims of nations involved in territorial disputes and adds complexity to resolution efforts. President Maduro's actions highlight the complex dynamics of international relations and the challenges of addressing territorial disputes in a global context. The situation emphasizes the need for coordinated diplomatic efforts and multilateral cooperation to prevent conflicts and uphold international norms and agreements.

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