



# The Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance and the Crisis in Venezuela

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Recent [press reports](#) suggest that the Trump Administration and some Latin American governments have discussed invoking the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance ([Rio Treaty](#)) to facilitate a collective response to the [crisis in Venezuela](#). Doing so could provide a basis for multilateral intervention, but it is unclear if parties to the treaty (“states parties”) would support such an effort. Congress may assess the implications of invoking the treaty as it considers legislative initiatives to require, authorize, or constrain certain Administration actions regarding Venezuela (such as H.R. 920, H.R. 1477, S. 1025, H.R. 1004, and S.J.Res. 11).

## Background

The Rio Treaty, which was signed in 1947 and entered into force in 1948, is a collective security pact among [17 of the 35 nations](#) of the Western Hemisphere (including the United States). In some respects, it mirrors the North Atlantic Treaty that created [NATO](#). Like NATO’s Article V, the Rio Treaty asserts that “an armed attack by any State against an American State shall be considered as an attack against all American States,” and it calls on each party to the treaty to assist in collective self-defense through a range of actions, potentially including, but not limited to, military force. It also empowers states parties to collectively respond to any other “situation that might endanger the peace” of the region.

The treaty establishes a Meeting of Consultation of Ministers of Foreign Affairs as the principal forum through which states parties are to address collective security threats. Any treaty signatory may request such a meeting but must secure the votes of an absolute majority of parties to the treaty within the Permanent Council of the [Organization of American States](#) (OAS). The Permanent Council, chaired by the United States through June 30, 2019, may act provisionally as an organ of consultation under the treaty until a Meeting of Consultation is held.

The treaty authorizes states parties to engage in a variety of collective measures, such as recalling ambassadors, breaking diplomatic and consular relations, restricting economic relations, and using armed force. A Meeting of Consultation may adopt such measures with the votes of two-thirds of states parties. Any parties directly involved in the situation under consideration are excluded from voting. Decisions are binding on all states parties, with the exception of the use of armed force.

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The United States and Venezuela are among the original signatories of the Rio Treaty. The United States ratified the treaty in 1947 after the U.S. Senate provided its advice and consent. Venezuela withdrew from the treaty in 2013, but the country's National Assembly—recognized by the United States and the OAS as Venezuela's only democratic institution—began the process of rejoining the agreement on May 7.

## Previous Applications

States parties have applied provisions of the Rio Treaty [20 times](#) but only [once since 1982](#). Although the measures adopted have varied considerably, states parties have undertaken significant collective initiatives on several occasions:

- In 1960, states parties convoked the [Sixth Meeting of Consultation](#) to consider acts of aggression by the government of the Dominican Republic against the government of Venezuela that culminated in an assassination attempt against the Venezuelan president. The foreign ministers agreed to break diplomatic relations with the Dominican Republic and partially restrict trade, beginning with a suspension of all arms sales.
- In 1962, states parties convoked the [Eighth Meeting of Consultation](#) to consider threats to peace and political independence in the region arising from the intervention of outside powers. The foreign ministers declared that adherence to Marxism-Leninism is incompatible with the principles of the inter-American system and excluded Cuba from further participation in Western Hemisphere institutions.
- In 1964, states parties convoked the [Ninth Meeting of Consultation](#) to address acts of aggression by the government of Cuba that threatened the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Venezuela. The foreign ministers agreed to break diplomatic and consular relations with Cuba, suspend all trade with Cuba with the exception of foodstuffs and medical supplies, and suspend all sea transport to Cuba.

The most recent invocation of the treaty occurred following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against the United States. The 24<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Consultation recognized the attacks against the United States as an [attack on the entire region](#) and committed to using all legally available measures to pursue, capture, extradite, and punish any individuals involved.

## Potential Application to Venezuela

The U.S.-recognized interim government of Juan Guaidó asserts that the crisis in Venezuela “[has national security consequences](#)” for Venezuela and its neighbors. The deteriorating situation has allowed [organized crime](#) to flourish and caused an estimated [3.7 million Venezuelans](#) to leave the country. The Guaidó government also argues that foreign forces in Venezuela—including [Cuban intelligence agents and Russian military personnel](#)—place the region at risk. To date, however, no parties to the Rio Treaty have openly expressed support for using the treaty's collective defense mechanisms to address the situation.

Parties to the treaty have supported other multilateral efforts to confront the regime of Nicolás Maduro. For example, 14 of the 17 states parties voted in favor of a January 2019 [OAS resolution](#) that refused to recognize the legitimacy of Maduro's second term; called for new presidential elections; and urged all member states to adopt diplomatic, political, economic, and financial measures to facilitate the prompt restoration of the democratic order in Venezuela. If states parties opt to pursue aggressive initiatives that are unable to win approval within the OAS or other international forums, they could try to advance such measures under the umbrella of the Rio Treaty.

Nevertheless, many parties to the treaty have urged restraint. A majority of states parties, wary of U.S. threats to use armed force, [have rejected](#) “any threat or course of action that involves military

intervention.” Likewise, although most states parties have expressed support for sanctions, many have been reluctant to impose them. Recent regional efforts have focused on building broad support for a [political solution](#) rather than pursuing measures that could fracture the international coalition working to resolve the crisis. Attitudes could shift, however, if the situation in Venezuela deteriorates further and continued migration flows begin to destabilize neighboring countries.

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