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## Venezuela: International Efforts to Resolve the Political Crisis

### Background

The international community remains divided over how to respond to the political crisis in Venezuela. The United States and 54 other countries have formally recognized the interim government of Juan Guaidó, who Venezuela's democratically elected National Assembly named president in January 2019. These countries have placed pressure on authoritarian leader Nicolás Maduro, in power since 2013, to leave office and allow a political transition to occur. Other countries, such as China, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Russia, have provided diplomatic, financial, and military support to Maduro and sought to block anti-Maduro actions within international organizations. A third group of countries, including Mexico, Norway, Uruguay, and some Caribbean nations, has remained neutral in the crisis.

These international dynamics appear to have contributed to a political stalemate in Venezuela, even as conditions within the country have deteriorated. On April 30, 2019, a Guaidó-led uprising failed to garner enough military support to compel Maduro to leave office. While some observers maintain that Maduro is weak politically, others fear a prolonged, potentially violent, standoff. Observers hope that talks led by Norway, which began in May 2019, lead to free and fair elections. Those talks have been on hold, however, since the United States imposed new sanctions on the Maduro government in August 2019. Others hope that sanctions lead to fissures in the Maduro government, which could prompt a political transition.

### United Nations

The United Nations (U.N.) Security Council has discussed the political and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, but divisions among U.N. members have stalled action. Russia and, to a lesser extent, China support Maduro. The United States and most countries in Europe and the Western Hemisphere support Guaidó. Despite that polarization, U.N. agencies are increasing humanitarian relief in Venezuela after securing approval in April 2019 from Maduro and Guaidó. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration are coordinating to serve some of the roughly 4.3 million Venezuelans who had left the country as of August 2019 and the communities hosting them. In July 2019, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights published a report documenting state violence against civilians, which has included torture and extrajudicial killings. On September 9, the High Commissioner criticized the Maduro government for failing to implement the report's recommendations.

### Organization of American States

The Organization of American States (OAS), a regional multilateral organization that includes all 35 independent countries of the Western Hemisphere (Cuba currently does not participate), has focused attention on Venezuela's political crisis. Since 2016, OAS Secretary-General Luis

Almagro has issued reports on the situation in Venezuela, convened special sessions of the Permanent Council to discuss regional responses to the crisis, and spoken out against Maduro. Member states remain divided on how to respond to the crisis, with countries in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) particularly reluctant to intervene in Venezuela's internal affairs. Many of those countries had close ties with Venezuela under Maduro's predecessor, the late president Hugo Chávez, and until recently received significant amounts of subsidized oil from Venezuela. In 2017, Maduro denounced the OAS for meddling in his country's domestic affairs and began a two-year process to withdraw from the organization.

The OAS requires 18 votes to pass a resolution of the Permanent Council. In June 2018, 19 of 34 member states passed a resolution stating that the May 2018 presidential election in Venezuela lacked legitimacy and authorizing countries to take measures, including sanctions, necessary to hasten a return to democracy. In January 2019, the same 19 states approved a resolution that refused to recognize the legitimacy of Maduro's second term, called for new presidential elections, and urged all member states to adopt measures to facilitate the prompt restoration of democratic order in Venezuela. After Maduro withdrew his OAS ambassador, the Permanent Council welcomed the Venezuelan National Assembly's permanent representative to the OAS on April 9, 2019. Some observers have praised Secretary-General Almagro's activism on Venezuela, which has included calling for international intervention in the country. Others have asserted that he has sided too closely with the opposition and is unlikely to help broker a diplomatic solution to the current crisis.

### Lima Group

In mid-2017, efforts to reach a consensus at the OAS on how to respond to the crisis in Venezuela appeared to stall. On August 8, 2017, 12 Western Hemisphere countries signed the Lima Accord, which rejected what it described as the rupture of democracy and systemic human rights violations in Venezuela. The signatory countries included Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru. In 2018, Guyana and St. Lucia joined the Lima Group, which did not recognize Maduro's May 2018 reelection.

On January 4, 2019, 13 members of the Lima Group (excluding Mexico) signed a declaration urging President Maduro not to assume power on January 10, 2019. The countries resolved to reassess their level of diplomatic engagement with Venezuela, implement travel bans or sanctions on Maduro officials (as Canada and Panama have), suspend military cooperation with Venezuela, and urge others in the international community to take similar actions. Under leftist President Andrés Manuel López

Obrador, Mexico no longer participates in the Lima Group. El Salvador and Ecuador currently participate as observers at Lima Group meetings.

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On January 23, 2019, and in subsequent statements, 11 members of the Lima Group have recognized the Guaidó government and pledged to support a democratic transition in Venezuela. On February 4, 2019, the Guaidó government joined the Lima Group and signed its statement calling “for a peaceful transition ... without the use of force.”

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The Lima Group has denounced human rights violations by the Maduro government and the presence of “security and intelligence agents from countries” supporting Maduro, but it also has opposed U.S. or regional military intervention. On July 23, 2019, the group issued a declaration signed by 12 countries (including the Guaidó government but not St. Lucia or Guyana) pledging to coordinate with “relevant actors,” such as the International Contact Group (see below) and CARICOM, to help resolve the crisis.

### European Union

The European Union (EU) has imposed targeted sanctions on Maduro officials and adopted an arms embargo against Venezuela. The EU Parliament and most member states have recognized the Guaidó government. However, the EU has opposed military intervention and “any form of violence” in the country, most recently in an April 30, 2019, statement. Instead, the EU backed the formation of an International Contact Group (ICG).

### International Contact Group

The EU-backed ICG, now composed of several European countries (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom) and Latin American countries (Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panama, and Uruguay) first convened in February 2019. It aimed to “establish necessary guarantees” for free, transparent presidential elections and to hasten the delivery of humanitarian aid to Venezuela through dialogue. ICG supporters maintain the “necessary guarantees” include naming a new electoral council, releasing political prisoners, and ending bans on parties and candidates. Since February, the ICG has met at least three times, including in June with Lima Group representatives; sent political missions to Caracas; and supported the dialogue process led by Norway.

### Dialogue Effort Led by Norway

In May 2019, the Norwegian government confirmed it had been facilitating talks between negotiating teams for Maduro and Guaidó. The negotiations’ goal has been to determine the conditions under which free and fair elections can be held. Points of contention include whether Maduro will remain in office during the convening of the elections and whether he can run. Skeptics assert that, as in the past, Maduro is using negotiations as a delaying tactic. As noted above, Maduro called off participation in the negotiations after new U.S. sanctions were announced in August 2019.

### Implications for U.S. Policy

The 116<sup>th</sup> Congress has closely followed developments in Venezuela, Trump Administration policy responses, and

international efforts to broker a solution to the crisis. Congress has held hearings on Venezuela’s political crisis and U.S. policy responses; the country’s humanitarian crisis; the regional migration crisis that Venezuela’s unrest has wrought; the influence of Russia and China in Venezuela; and Congress’s role in authorizing any use of U.S. military force in Venezuela. The role of international actors and U.S. coordination with them may influence congressional consideration of legislative initiatives to require, authorize, or constrain certain Administration actions regarding Venezuela (e.g., H.R. 920, H.R. 1477, S. 1025, H.R. 1004, and S.J.Res. 11).

International perspectives may influence oversight of the \$333.5 million in U.S. humanitarian assistance dedicated from FY2017 to FY2019 to support Venezuelans in the region. They also may inform decisions about the amounts and types of U.S. funds most needed to support entities working in Venezuela, now and in the future. The Administration’s FY2020 budget request asked for \$9 million in democracy aid and the authority to transfer up to \$500 million to support a transition or respond to a crisis in Venezuela. Should Maduro leave office, the Administration proposes that such funds could support international election observers, increased humanitarian assistance in Venezuela, or a potential International Monetary Fund package.

Although there generally has been international support for U.S. policy toward Venezuela, some U.S. actions have prompted concern among partners working to resolve the crisis. Most of these countries have supported U.S. targeted sanctions on Maduro officials. Some are concerned, however, about the humanitarian impacts of U.S. sanctions imposed on Venezuela’s state oil company, *Petróleos de Venezuela, S. A.* (PdVSA), in January 2019 and sanctions imposed on the entire Maduro government in August 2019. Others fear the new sanctions may inhibit progress in the Norway-led dialogue process. Some countries also have expressed concern about repeated U.S. threats to use military force in Venezuela despite opposition from neighboring countries (such as Brazil and Colombia), the Lima Group, and the EU.

Threats of U.S. military action have occurred alongside denunciations of Russian and Cuban military assistance to Maduro. Some observers predict the Trump Administration could lose support from some partners because of the U.S. decision to impose strong sanctions on Cuba and secondary sanctions on any entities that do business with the Maduro government or PdVSA. Some U.S. partners on Venezuela have commercial ties with Cuba; others have energy companies that do business with PdVSA. Many also have urged the United States to prevent the situation from turning into a proxy conflict with Russia for regional and global influence.

Also see CRS In Focus IF10230, *Venezuela: Political Crisis and U.S. Policy*; CRS Insight IN11163, *New U.S. Sanctions on Venezuela*; CRS In Focus IF10715, *Venezuela: Overview of U.S. Sanctions*; and CRS Report R44841, *Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations*.

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