



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

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On September 11, 2019, the United States and 11 other Western Hemisphere nations [invoked](#) the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance ([Rio Treaty](#)) to facilitate a regional response to the [crisis in Venezuela](#). Foreign ministers from the countries that have ratified the treaty (“states parties”) are to convene in the coming weeks to discuss a range of options that could include the suspension of diplomatic and consular relations, the imposition of economic sanctions, or the use of armed force. Congress may closely track the deliberations, given their potential implications for U.S. policy.

## Background

The Rio Treaty, which was signed in 1947 and entered into force in 1948, is a collective security pact among [19 of the 35 countries](#) of the Western Hemisphere. The United States ratified the treaty in 1947 after the U.S. Senate provided its advice and consent. Article 3 of 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. Article 6 of the treaty, which was invoked in this case, 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 United States, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, and Paraguay [supported](#) the resolution calling a Meeting of Consultation to address the crisis in Venezuela. The interim Venezuelan government of Juan Guaidó, which is recognized by the OAS and rejoined the Rio Treaty in August 2019, also backed the resolution. Five other nations (Costa Rica, Panama, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, and Uruguay) abstained from the vote; the Bahamas was absent.

As noted above, Article 8 of the treaty authorizes states parties to engage in a variety of collective measures, such as breaking diplomatic and consular relations, restricting economic relations, and using

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armed force. A Meeting of Consultation may adopt such measures with a two-thirds vote (i.e., 13 of 19 states parties). Decisions are binding on all states parties, with the exception of the use of armed force.

## Previous Applications

States parties have applied provisions of the Rio Treaty 20 times. They have never called for the use of force but have adopted other significant measures 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 arms sales. They withdrew those sanctions in 1962.
- 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. The OAS [partially repealed](#) Cuba's exclusion from the inter-American system in 2009.
- 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 food and medical supplies, and suspend all sea transport to Cuba. They subsequently agreed to allow states parties to normalize relations with Cuba in 1975.

The most recent invocation of the treaty—the first since 1982—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

U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo [argues](#) that collective action under the Rio Treaty is necessary because the political and economic crisis in Venezuela is having an “increasingly destabilizing influence” on the region. He notes that more than [4 million](#) people have left Venezuela, straining neighboring countries' resources. Secretary Pompeo also asserts that “recent bellicose moves by the Venezuelan military to deploy along the border with Colombia as well as the presence of illegal armed groups and terrorist organizations in Venezuelan territory demonstrate that Nicolás Maduro not only poses a threat to the Venezuelan people, his actions threaten the peace and security of Venezuela's neighbors.”

The United States could push regional allies to harmonize their policies with those of the United States by imposing [targeted sanctions](#) against officials in the Maduro government or [broader economic sanctions](#) against Venezuela. A Meeting of Consultation offers a possible venue to advance such measures, since most parties to the Rio Treaty have supported other multilateral efforts to exert pressure against Maduro. For example, 14 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. Few states parties have imposed sanctions thus far, however, suggesting many U.S. allies remain reluctant to enact such measures.

It appears unlikely that the Meeting of Consultation would authorize the use of armed force against the Maduro government. A majority of states parties, wary of U.S. threats, [have rejected](#) “any threat or course of action that involves military intervention.” Attitudes could shift, however, if the Venezuelan military or [other armed groups](#) were to attack Colombia.

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