

Guyana and Venezuela: The Crisis of Imperialism Currently Unfolding on South America's Caribbean Coast

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Despite the reality of US intervention causing inhumane conditions in the region, Venezuela's push for the annexation of Guyana's Essequibo region prioritizes its own political objectives, heightening tensions with the US and leaving the Guyanese people without a say in their own fate.

This week Venezuela will hold a referendum on annexing Guyana's Essequibo region, claiming that it wants to rescue those Guyanese in Essequibo "mired in misery, in abandonment." While Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro speaks to a real concern impacting the Guyanese people - the external capture of governance in the country by ExxonMobil and US Southern Command (Westervelt 2023) - Maduro's statement shows a real disregard for Guyana and Guyanese people while amplifying a rightist tendency in Venezuelan politics that historically aimed to cement Venezuelan nationalism under the guise of anti-communist security objectives. Maduro is not standing with Guyanese workers or Amerindian peoples in Essequibo. In fact, Venezuela has not consulted these communities in its annexation push at all (Clash! Collective 2023). No amount of "left" proselytizing by Venezuela changes this fact.

Given the reliance of Guyana, and the Caribbean region more generally, on the West for both security objectives, goals, and funding - it should not come as a shock that Venezuela's referendum alongside these broadcasts by Maduro have been interpreted by Guyana as aggressive - heightening security tensions between both countries. Venezuela's actions, Guyanese Vice President Bharrat Jagdeo notes, makes his incumbent PPP/C party more welcoming towards the establishment of foreign military bases in Guyana to "protect Guyana's national interest" (France 24, 2023).

Whereas many Western headlines attribute Venezuela's annexation claims on Guyana to Maduro's failings as leader, and headlines in Guyana attribute Venezuela's annexation claims today on the oil find by Exxon - I reject all claims that solely attribute Maduro's stance towards Guyana on the internal domestic political calculations that he is making in Venezuela. Venezuela's domestic situation was already negatively impacted prior to Maduro gaining power, given Western sanctions and attempts to undergird the Venezuelan economy. Headlines in Guyana are more accurate noting the change in Maduro's position post oil. However these headlines tend to downplay the role of ExxonMobil in Guyana's offshore oil discovery and the subsequent security calculations that Venezuela has had to make from 2013 to the present since that discovery. ExxonMobil is not a neutral actor in the region; it belongs to a state that has tried to institute regime change in Venezuela for decades. It is this latter point, I contend, that is pushing Venezuela's annexation pronouncements.

I outline these security dynamics in a twitter thread [here](#), but essentially, the changed relationship between Venezuela and Guyana, given Exxon's oil find, is influencing both the foreign policy of

Venezuela and Guyana. Any analysis of the crisis situation unfolding must take into account how states become integrated into preferred regimes of Western security, extractivism, and financial governance. It is not the case that Venezuela's internal dynamics are purely influencing its current decision to annex the Essequibo; it is security concerns regarding what Venezuela sees as a captured Guyanese government (Westervelt 2023) that has amassed a huge amount of Western interest both during the exploration phase in 2013, and especially after, the oil find in 2015. It must be noted that Guyanese people have challenged their own government over the relationship with Exxon: first with the no-confidence votes of 2018 (John 2020), then the ongoing protests in Guyana against Exxon since first production began in 2019 (GSA 2022; Henry 2022; Bagot 2023), and, finally, the numerous court cases levied against the government of Guyana and Exxon by Guyanese citizens (Janki 2023). None of these grievances by Guyanese, however, have called for annexation by Venezuela.

In fact, Venezuela's annexation push has instead seen Guyanese people rally behind what they have been protesting against – what *The Intercept* has called a “captured government.”

Thus, while Venezuela's current moves emerge from clear threats to its security based on the long US imperialist push for regime change in the country, I argue that these moves by Venezuela also make western intervention more likely.

1962 Rejection of the 1899 Decision: Cold War Anti-Communism and Venezuela's Problem with Guyana

While border tensions between Venezuela and Guyana are not new, they tend to be aggravated by external European, and now US, interests in Guyana's resource extractive sectors. In 1899, the borders between an independent Venezuela and British Guiana were considered settled via an Arbitral Award – in which Venezuela, Great Britain, the United States, and (what is now) Guyana were all signatories. Thus, in real terms, after forcing the British to concede to arbitration of gold-rich Guyana in 1895, both Venezuela and Great Britain received a judgment on the shared border of Guyana in 1899, and both parties accepted those boundaries as “full, perfect, and final” (Felix 2015, 6). It would not be until August 18, 1962, that Venezuelan President Romulo Betancourt – given the knowledge that Guyana would soon become independent from Great Britain – declared the Arbitral Award “null and void” (Felix 2015, 10). This date marks the discursive controversy of Venezuela and Guyana border tensions – as legally, the border is considered settled.

Worrying for liberal Venezuelan President Betancourt in 1962 was internal left Venezuelan opposition to his rule. A staunch anti-communist, Betancourt faced challenges from communist groups in Venezuela in the early 1960s – some of them armed. He vowed that communists would not ever get power in Venezuela (Rabe 1996, 61), and suppressed these groups. Internationally, he also supported US interventions in Guatemala, US goals to get rid of Fidel Castro in Cuba, and cooperated with the US militarily and economically. Betancourt not only blamed left movements within Venezuela on the Cuban Revolution (Rabe 1996, 63-4), but when Betancourt declared the Arbitral Award that legally defined Venezuela's border with Guyana as “null and void,” he did so to prevent what he saw as a communist Cheddi Jagan leading Guyana's independence from Britain. Betancourt's government claimed that “communist subversives in Venezuela were receiving guns from British Guiana” and used this argument to recommend Guyana not become independent (Felix 2015, 11-2).

Thus, ironically, Venezuela's current position on the border dispute with Guyana is informed by the country's anti-communism of 1962. It was also in 1962 that Betancourt sought help from both the US and Great Britain in nulling the arbitral award prior to Guyana receiving independence. However, given the finality of the award, this was not possible. What was possible, and what would

eventually calm Betancourt's fears of growing communism in the region, was interference in Guyana's politics by Britain and the US so that a moderate Forbes Burnham's People's National Congress (PNC), and not Cheddi Jagan's more socialist People's Progressive Party (PPP), would lead Guyana into independence - with a power sharing deal alongside the pro-capitalist and conservative United Force (UF) party in Guyana (National Security Archive 2020). In 1966 when Guyana officially received independence from Great Britain under Burnham, his government, along with the governments of Venezuela and Great Britain, signed an agreement at Geneva (Switzerland) to establish a mixed commission for a practical settlement of the border controversy (Felix 2015, 23). However, nothing was settled given "the failure of Venezuela to present evidence on the nullity of the Arbitral Award" (Felix 2015, 24).

It was Burnham's contention that, unless a favorable decision for Venezuela was reached at Geneva, any questions regarding Guyana's territorial sovereignty would be moot. All political parties in Guyana, from the 1970s and into the 1990s, frequently condemned Venezuela as attempting to reinstate colonialism on, what it saw, as a smaller neighbor given that Venezuela had no legal claim to any of Guyana's territory after accepting the decision of 1899. From 1970 to 1981, Venezuela's issue with the border lay dormant after Forbes Burnham of Guyana and Rafael Caldera of Venezuela signed the Protocol of Port-of-Spain in Trinidad and Tobago to suspend Venezuela's territorial claim for 12 years (Felix 2015, 29). In 1981, the new Venezuelan President Luis Herrera Campins reasserted Venezuela's claim to the Essequibo and refused to renew the protocol. While Herrera Campins made lofty nationalist assertions on Guyana's Essequibo, his government did not go through with force given ties between Guyanese President Burnham and Brazil's military government under João Figueiredo. Thus, Venezuela's claim over the Essequibo continued to lay dormant in the 1990s.

The Rise of Venezuelan Left Chauvinism on the Border with Guyana after Chavez

It would not be until 2013, after the death of Hugo Chavez, that Venezuela would reassert a claim on Guyana's Essequibo region. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez maintained a friendly position with Guyana and the Caribbean more generally. In 2004, Chavez declared the border dispute between Venezuela and Guyana as a legacy of colonialism and a byproduct of Western intervention (Felix 2015, 31), and committed Venezuela to a diplomacy process that would involve the UN to settle the dispute through a good officer mechanism (Cummings 2018, 194). Jamaican economist Norman Girvan served as the good officer to help both countries reach a settlement to the controversy from 2010 until his passing in 2014 (Trotz 2014). Given the untimely demise of Girvan, no settlement of the controversy between the two countries was reached. Nonetheless, the overall friendly relations between the two states under Chavez downplayed the severity of the controversy. It was initially assumed after Chavez's passing that Maduro would continue friendly relations with Guyana. In fact, after Chavez's passing Guyana Foreign Affairs Minister, Carolyn Rodrigues-Birkett stated, "I have absolutely no doubt in my mind that our relations with Venezuela under President Maduro would continue to flourish... Guyana is willing to work with any government of Venezuela for the advancement of our two peoples" (Guyana Chronicle 2013a). However, this was not to be the case. Oil exploration in Guyana in 2013 and the eventual oil find in May 2015 would see Maduro not only revive Venezuela's border controversy with Guyana, but also reject diplomatic settlement of the controversy given that any diplomatic settlement would not be in Venezuela's favor to annex the region. When ExxonMobil announced a significant oil discovery off Guyana's coast on May 20, 2015, Maduro issued a decree 6 days later claiming sovereignty over 80% of Guyana's continental shelf. Two months after issuing the decree, Maduro announced in July 2015 a strategy to "recover the Essequibo" (Kaieteur News 2015), which like today, includes issuing residents in Essequibo Venezuelan ID cards (Campbell 2023).

As part of this strategy to "recover the Essequibo," under Maduro's tenure, an "Office for the Rescue

of the Essequibo” was created in Venezuela, and Venezuelan educational institutions frequently teach and showcase on its maps, the Essequibo as being a part of Venezuela’s territory (Felix 2015, 35-7). However, large swaths of Guyanese residents in the Essequibo reject what they consider to be hostile behavior by Venezuela (Campbell 2023). Residents in Essequibo note that although many Venezuelans flee Venezuela to live in Essequibo, they don’t mind because Guyanese “are kind people, people that welcome anybody into the area” (France 24, 2022). It is common practice that in times of hardship, in either Guyana or in Venezuela, citizens of both countries go to Essequibo given a welcoming porous border guaranteeing a better standard of living on either side – depending on which country is experiencing crisis. Venezuela’s annexation proclamations are not only paternalistic, given lack of consultation with those in Essequibo, but also guarantees that the border with Guyana will become more stringent and heavily policed by Guyana and its newfound Western “allies.”

Conclusion

It is not an exaggeration or an understatement to note how drastic of a change it is within Guyana’s politics for Guyanese politicians to be openly advocating for Western intervention. Guyana’s history of anti-imperialism served as the historical foundation for the creation of party politics in the country – especially Guyana’s PPP under Cheddi Jagan. It was previously normalized that Guyana would pursue diplomatic options when combatting Venezuela’s aggressive posturing on the Essequibo. However, this is not the case, today, given Venezuela’s referendum and its military actions on Guyana’s border. In less than a week, two teams from the US Department of Defense will be in Guyana, by invitation, given Venezuela’s referendum, its (now withdrawn) troops on the border, and Maduro’s announcements (France 24, 2023).

The prospects for actual confrontation between the two countries thus appears to be high, in sum, given three prominent reasons: First, Venezuela has no legal claim to the Essequibo and thus could only annex the territory by force. Venezuela’s response to the border is part of the security calculations Venezuela has had to make in light of the oil find in Guyana, which has enmeshed Guyana in Western security, extractive, and corporate governance. Second, Guyana’s government is willing to receive help via US military intervention in the region given Venezuela’s baseless legal claim to the Essequibo. Politicians in Guyana, beholden to oil and newfound Western security and corporate interests, are banking on these entities to purportedly “help Guyana develop.” Lastly, ExxonMobil will want to protect its oil interests in Guyana, and at minimum, Venezuela’s proclamations call into question Guyana, and thus regional, stability of which ExxonMobil will also lobby for US intervention. As Chavez stated almost two decades ago, the situation unfolding lays bare the sad, and ongoing, legacies of colonialism and Western intervention in South America and the Caribbean.

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