

Global Americans Report

**Why Autocracies Threaten War:
The Case of Venezuela and Guyana**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Executive Summary</i>	2
<i>Introduction</i>	3
<i>A History of Claims</i>	4
<i>Venezuela’s Domestic Politics and Increasing Volatility</i>	5
<i>Resource Competition in Essequibo</i>	7
<i>Future Challenges and Lessons</i>	8
<i>Recommendations</i>	9

Executive Summary

This article delves into the escalating tensions between Venezuela and Guyana, highlighting how autocratic regimes, such as Nicolás Maduro's government, are more prone to inter-state aggression, particularly targeting democracies. The ongoing dispute over the Essequibo region – rooted in Venezuela's historic, territorial claims, fueled by competition over Guyana's recently discovered oil reserves in the contested region, and exacerbated by Maduro's domestic legitimacy crisis – serves as a stark example of the risks posed by unchecked democratic backsliding. Despite a CELAC-brokered peace agreement in late 2024, over 5,000 Venezuelan troops remain deployed at the border and the Venezuelan government recently completed a bridge to a military base on an island on the shared border. The risk of open conflict continues, as the recent concerns over a Venezuelan coastguard's violation of Guyanese waters to approach an offshore oil facility. The agreement's fragility lies in its failure to address the root causes of Venezuela's aggression, including Maduro's illegitimacy, his reliance on nationalism to distract from domestic crises, and attempts to pressure investors eyeing Guyana's oil resources. To address these challenges, the article proposes a series of policy recommendations, from establishing multilateral border-monitoring mechanisms to international mediation of Venezuela's internal political crisis. The article also calls for reforms to strengthen representation for small states like Guyana in the UN Security Council. The piece concludes with an urgent call for coordinated international action to counter democratic backsliding and reduce the risk of autocrats stoking conflict in the region.

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1. Introduction

In 1998, Spencer R. Weart argued that, historically, no two democracies have ever gone to war. The provocative thesis was compelling, especially amid the third wave of democracy and the collapse of the Soviet Union. But Weart's definition of democracies across history was soon picked apart, and realists contended that peace among democracies was due more to shared threats and common interests than regime type. Nevertheless, there was some truth to Weart's argument. Autocracies are more prone to inter-state aggression than democracies, including – perhaps especially – against democracies. The escalation of military threats and aggressive rhetoric by President Nicolás Maduro's government in Venezuela against its neighbor Guyana serves as a compelling example of the unpredictability and risks inherent in the chain of events that unfold when autocrats resort to saber-rattling, whether motivated by territorial claims, resource competition, or domestic politics. In the midst of a crisis of legitimacy and rising international and domestic pressure for free and fair elections in 2024, in late 2023 the Maduro government mobilized 5,000 troops to the border of Venezuela and Guyana and staged a spur-of-the-moment popular referendum over Venezuela's centuries-old claims over the Essequibo region in Guyana.

The factors behind Maduro's recent threats to the Essequibo region of Guyana on the border of Venezuela are many. Venezuela's longstanding dispute over the Essequibo dates back to when the region was still part of the British colony of Guyana. There are also resource motivations of the aggressor: the Guyana-controlled Essequibo region contains an estimated 11 billion barrels of oil.¹ Moreover, international reasons such as the Maduro government's effort to distract from growing foreign pressures for negotiations and improvements in human rights figures prominently. Then there are the domestic drivers: the Venezuelan regime's desire to stoke national sentiment to legitimize Maduro's leadership and to marginalize domestic opponents.

Given the often personalistic, unaccountable nature of autocratic regimes, the policy challenge is interpreting and predicting where autocratic warmongering leads – whether it remains hollow, jingoistic posturing or, once unleashed, leads to more aggression and even open conflict. This is the case of Maduro's actions from 2023 to 2024 over Guyana's Essequibo region. While the motivations are obvious, the outcomes are less so.

In this article, we detail the factors – historical, international, and domestic – that have led to a stand-off in which the Maduro government appointed a governor over the contested Guyanese territory and pledged to offer drilling licenses to energy companies in the region; over 5,000 Venezuelan troops² are still based at the Venezuela-Guyana border; and even after a peace deal negotiated in [2023](#),³ The Maduro government continues to build bridges and airstrips on the Venezuelan side of the border that could facilitate an invasion. More recently, a Venezuelan coast guard patrol allegedly violated maritime borders by approaching an Exxon-Mobile oil platform in Guyanese territorial waters, prompting a reaching by the Secretary General of the Organization of American States, Luis Almagro, and indicating that the issue is far from resolved.

¹ Ariel Cohen, "Venezuela vs Guyana: The Battle for El Essequibo's Oil," *Forbes*, November 23, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/arielcohen/2023/11/16/venezuela-vs-guyana-the-battle-for-el-essequibos-oil/>.

² Megan Janetsky, "Venezuela Says Troops Will Stay Deployed until British Military Vessel Leaves Waters off Guyana," *The Independent*, December 30, 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/venezuela-ap-guyana-british-nicolas-maduro-b2471386.html>.

³ Government of Barbados, "THE JOINT DECLARATION of ARGYLE for DIALOGUE and PEACE between GUYANA and VENEZUELA," Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, December 14, 2023, <https://www.foreign.gov.bb/the-joint-declaration-of-argyle-for-dialogue-and-peace-between-guyana-and-venezuela/>.

2. A History of Claims

Covering 160,000 square kilometers, the Essequibo region constitutes nearly two-thirds of Guyana's territory. The dispute traces its origins to colonial-era border rivalries between Venezuela and British Guiana. The jungles of Essequibo, steeped in the myth of El Dorado – a dream of boundless wealth that lured Spanish and British colonizers – became a nexus of colonial ambitions. Spain's neglect of the eastern frontier of Orinoco left the land open to Dutch settlements along the Essequibo, Demerara, and Berbice rivers. Seized by Britain during the French Revolutionary Wars, these territories were absorbed into British Guiana in 1831 with little resistance, cementing a legacy of contested sovereignty.

In 1835, the British Empire commissioned German botanist Robert Schomburgk to map British Guiana. This resulted in the "Schomburgk Line," which extended British boundaries west of the Essequibo River to the Orinoco delta.⁴ Venezuela rejected the demarcation, arguing that the territory historically belonged to Spain, which thereafter passed on its claims to Latin America's newly independent republics. British attempts to revise the border in the 1880s failed, leaving the dispute unresolved and setting the stage for further geopolitical involvement.

In the nineteenth century, the United States began asserting its dominance over the Western Hemisphere, opposing European territorial ambitions. The United States was concerned that allowing Britain to expand the boundaries of its colony in Guyana risked encouraging other European powers to do the same. Invoking the Monroe Doctrine, U.S. Ambassador William Lindsay Scruggs falsely accused Britain of seeking control of the Orinoco River's mouth – likely a pretext to reinforce U.S. regional dominance rather than protect Venezuela. This intervention led to the 1899 Paris Arbitral Tribunal, which gave ninety-five percent of the Essequibo River to British Guiana, reinforcing the Schomburgk Line.⁵ Venezuela viewed the decision as not only a territorial loss but a violation of national sovereignty, an argument that resurfaced in 1949 when a former U.S. lawyer for Venezuela alleged that tribunal president Friedrich Martens had coerced American arbitrators into siding with Britain.

By the twentieth century, Cold War dynamics led the United States to leverage Venezuela's territorial claims to weaken Guyana's leftist, pro-independence leadership. A CIA covert operation orchestrated the 1964 overthrow of Cheddi Jagan in British Guiana,⁶ driven by U.S. fears of his leftist ideology and potential alignment with communist powers. The push for Guyana's independence ushered in a new phase in Venezuela-Guyana relations. In 1966, Britain signed the Geneva Agreement to address the Venezuela-British Guiana border dispute, just before relinquishing its colonial claims to the territory. Yet, initiatives like the 1970 Port of Spain Protocol's twelve-year moratorium to foster peaceful dialogue failed, reflecting a recurring pattern of unresolved claims and stalled negotiations under UN mediation by the 1980s.⁷

President Hugo Chávez's election in 1998 (1999-2013) offered a unique opportunity to resolve the dispute amicably. Chavez's promise to establish twenty-first-century socialism aligned closely with the political project of then-Guyanese President Bharrat Jagdeo (1999-2011). However, lack of strategic foresight and inconsistent policies squandered the opportunity for a resolution.

⁴ Victor Bulmer-Thomas, "The Guyana-Venezuela Dispute in Historical Perspective," Global Americans Working Paper 1, March 27, 2024.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Stephen G Rabe, *U.S. Intervention in British Guiana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

⁷ Leslie Bethell, "Notes on the History of the Venezuela/Guyana Boundary Dispute," CEBRI Revista (CEBRI Journal Brazilian Center for International Relations, March 2024), <https://cebri.org/revista/en/artigo/138/notes-on-the-history-of-the-venezuelaguyana-boundary-dispute>.

On March 29, 2020, Guyana took the Essequibo dispute to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), seeking validation of the 1899 Arbitral Award. By December, the court affirmed its jurisdiction over the case despite Venezuela's objections but has yet to offer a decision, which may take years.⁸ Since 1899, Venezuela's claims to the Essequibo have remained a deeply nationalistic issue.

3. Venezuela's Domestic Politics and Increasing Volatility

Democracy in Venezuela has been on a steady and predictable decline since the inauguration of Hugo Chavez in 1999. By re-writing the constitution, packing the supreme court, politicizing the armed forces, and breaking the independence of the central bank and of the semi-independent national energy company *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)*, Chavez and his successor, Maduro, systematically crushed checks and balances on executive power and politicized the state, consolidating partisan control over the government including the National Electoral Council (CNE), which helped tilt the electoral playing field in favor of the incumbent government.

Too often the opposition relied on street protests intended to provoke regime change (which briefly occurred in 2002 in a failed coup d'état) rather than sustained organization or commitment to election mobilization. Because of concerns over the integrity of the elections – at first, exaggerated but then genuine⁹ – the opposition abstained from elections in 2005,¹⁰ 2018 and 2020,¹¹ arguably missing opportunities to build community networks and mobilize opposition support through democratic channels.

But by 2023, following negotiations between the Maduro government and the opposition, aided by the targeted easing of U.S. sanctions, the Maduro government agreed to hold democratic elections in 2024. It was a gamble for the Chavez-Maduro regime that had governed for 23 years and overseen history's worst economic crisis in a country not at war. From 2014 to 2020, Venezuela's economy contracted by nearly [three quarters](#),¹² and inflation in 2023 raged at an annual rate of [130,000 percent](#),¹³ all provoking the mass exodus of more than 8 million Venezuelans from the country, the worst migration crisis in the world for a country not at war, with only Syria, Ukraine, and South Sudan experiencing higher out-migration rates. Understandably, despite the initial popularity of Chavez's government, by 2024, Maduro had little public support. A genuinely free and fair election would spell defeat and accountability for Maduro and his cronies, many of whom had U.S. and European sanctions levelled on them for crimes against humanity, human rights abuses, and illicit activities, including narcotics trafficking.

Perhaps, predictably, the Maduro government, unchecked by Venezuela's congress and other means of accountability – such as free press and democratic opposition – reverted to nationalism and division to try to build popular support before the election. On December 3, 2023, the government staged an impromptu, unrequested referendum on Venezuela's claims to the Essequibo region. The ballot referendum consisted of five questions, concerning the [International Court of Justice's](#) jurisdiction over the matter, "[the creation of the Guyana](#)

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Tom Phillips, May 21, 2018 'Venezuela elections: Maduro wins second term' *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/21/venezuela-elections-nicolas-maduro-wins-second-term>

¹⁰ Christopher Sabatini, November 25, 2017, '2005: The blunder year', *Caracas Chronicles*, <https://www.caracaschronicles.com/2017/11/27/2005-blunder-year/>

¹¹ Enrique Gomez Ramirez, December 2020, "Controversial legislative elections in Venezuela" European Parliamentary Research Service, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659427/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)659427_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/659427/EPRS_BRI(2020)659427_EN.pdf)

¹² Congressional Research Service, *Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations* (Washington, DC, 2022), <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R44841.pdf>.

¹³ Amelia Cheatham and Diana Roy, "Venezuela: The Rise and Fall of a Petrostate," Council on Foreign Relations, July 31, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/venezuela-crisis>.

[Essequibo state](#),¹⁴ granting its population of approximately 125,000 Venezuelan citizenship, and whether voters would agree “to oppose by all means in accordance with the law” Guyana's "unilateral" use of the sea waters off Essequibo. The latter was a reference to the oil-rich waters that ExxonMobil was tapping. Particularly worrying was the phrase “all means possible,” which appeared to justify military intervention. The referendum was issued after the Venezuelan government had already sent more troops to the border, threatening an incursion into sovereign territory. The government claimed it had won ninety-five percent of the vote, but [credible sources](#)¹⁵ questioned the claim that more than ten million voters had cast their ballot in the referendum.

In response to the referendum on Venezuela's claim to the Essequibo region, opposition leaders exhibited a lack unified messaging. María Corina Machado criticized the referendum, advocating for its suspension and advocated for international arbitration. Conversely, opposition figures like Manuel Rosales and Henrique Capriles supported participation, with Rosales urging citizens to vote and Capriles announcing his intent to participate, while cautioning against politicizing the issue. This divergence in approaches reflected the longstanding splits within the opposition.

Venezuela's populist, bellicose strategy sparked regional intervention. On December 14, 2024, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) convened negotiations in St. Vincent and the Grenadines to ease the tensions. Brazil's senior diplomat, Celso Amorim, played a key role in brokering the talks¹⁶. The final result was a mutual commitment from both sides to refrain from the use of force, though the focus was primarily on pressuring Caracas and Maduro. This resolution appeared to defuse the immediate interstate threat. However, Venezuela's continued military buildup – including the expansion of a landing strip, the construction of a military base on Anacoco Island in the Orinoco River, and the deployment of two Iranian-built Peykaap III (Zolfaghar)¹⁷ fast missile boats within striking range of Guyana – and the tensions over Venezuelan coastguard boats violating Guyanese territorial waters in early March 2025 suggest otherwise.

It is possible that the negotiations that produced Venezuela's agreement may have been an intentional distraction. On July 28, 2024, after increasing repression against members of the political opposition – including arrests of prominent leaders of the opposition, in the run-up to the elections, the Maduro government stole Venezuela's presidential election. The conditions leading up to the contest and the claims of a Maduro victory despite paper ballots demonstrating a clear opposition victory were denounced by the Carter Center and the United Nations, and governments from Europe to Latin America have condemned the Maduro government's refusal to provide evidence of its self-proclaimed victory. The matter now is whether the international/regional community could have and should do more to avert conflict.

¹⁴ Rachele Krygier and Vanessa Buschschlüter, “Essequibo: Venezuela Votes on Claim to Guyana-Controlled Oil Region,” [www.bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-67583582), December 3, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-67583582>.

¹⁵ Juan Pablo Arraez and Regina Garcia, “Venezuela's Government Wins Vote on Claiming Part of Guyana, but Turnout Seems Lackluster,” AP News, December 4, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/venezuela-guyana-essequibo-territory-dispute-maduro-referendum-ffce14fecob4ee63a24a125caf2373fe>.

¹⁶ Jacqueline Charles, ‘Leaders of Guyana, Venezuela commit to peace and agree to lower border-dispute tensions’ *The Miami Herald*, December 14, 2023, <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/venezuela/article283066158.html>

¹⁷ Ryan C. Berg et al., “The Essequibo Pressure Cooker: Runaway Nationalism and Maduro's Compellence Strategy,” [www.csis.org](https://www.csis.org/analysis/essequibo-pressure-cooker-runaway-nationalism-and-maduros-compellence-strategy), May 14, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/essequibo-pressure-cooker-runaway-nationalism-and-maduros-compellence-strategy>.

4. Resource Competition in Essequibo

For decades, Essequibo, home to fewer than 100,000 people, was an afterthought—economically insignificant and remote. That changed in 2015 when ExxonMobil discovered 11 billion barrels of recoverable oil in the Stabroek block in the waters off the coast of Essequibo – waters included in Venezuela’s historical claims.¹⁸ Since then, Guyana has transformed into an oil powerhouse, attracting billions in foreign investment.

Guyana has swiftly ascended to become the world's third-largest per capita oil producer, with an annual output of approximately 3,900 barrels per person—double that of Saudi Arabia's 1,900 barrels. In 2024, oil revenues surged by 50% to \$2.57 billion, funds that President Irfaan Ali intends to channel into job creation and economic diversification¹⁹. An ExxonMobil-led consortium, including Hess Corporation and China's CNOOC Ltd., oversees all of Guyana's oil exports, which by [November 2024 reached 650,000 barrels per day](#)—about two-thirds of Venezuela's total output. With production expected to exceed 1.3 million bpd by 2027 and 1.7 million bpd by 2030, Guyana’s rise is impossible to ignore.²⁰

Yet, Venezuela – sitting on 303 billion barrels of reserves – sees its neighbor’s burgeoning oil industry as a threat to its regional dominance.²¹ The initial oil discovery, rapid production growth, and growing list of investors have drawn envy from the Maduro government. When Chavez was elected in 1998, Venezuela produced 3 million bpd. But, years of corruption, mismanagement, oil giveaway programs to allied governments, and the raiding of PDVSA’s reserves to pay for generous social programs squandered the capital to invest in the company’s upkeep and scared off investors. A ban on the Venezuelan government and PDVSA being able to raise fresh capital in U.S. capital markets and the sweeping sectoral sanctions of 2019 effectively collapsed the industry. By 2022, production had plunged to 400,000 bpd.²²

Despite these challenges, Venezuela managed to increase its oil output to [1.03 million bpd in January 2025](#). A key driver was a 2022 U.S. license allowing Chevron to resume operations in Venezuela, boosting oil exports by 10.5% in 2024 to their highest level since 2019. However, in [February 26th, 2025, President Donald Trump threatened to revoke Chevron's license](#), citing Venezuela's failure to meet democratic commitments and assist in deporting migrants. The move threatens to deepen Venezuela’s economic crisis, exacerbating inflation and further devaluing the peso.

Oil, power, and sovereignty have long fueled tensions between ExxonMobil and Venezuela. In 2007, Chávez nationalized oil projects in the Orinoco Belt, expropriating ExxonMobil’s assets after the company refused to accept PDVSA’s majority control. ExxonMobil sought \$10 billion in compensation, but the ICC awarded just \$908 million, of which Venezuela paid only \$255 million after claiming deductions. Eight years later, as Venezuela’s oil

¹⁸ ExxonMobil, “ExxonMobil Makes Three New Discoveries Offshore Guyana, Increases Stabroek Resource Estimate to Nearly 11 Billion Barrels,” ExxonMobil, April 26, 2022, https://corporate.exxonmobil.com/news/news-releases/2022/0426_exxonmobil-makes-three-new-discoveries-offshore-guyana-increases-stabroek-resource-estimate.

¹⁹ Kevin Crowley, “Guyana’s Oil Boom Prompts Expat Returns as ExxonMobil Develops Offshore Resources,” Worldoil.com (Bloomberg, June 29, 2024), <https://worldoil.com/news/2024/6/29/guyana-s-oil-boom-prompts-expat-returns-as-exxonmobil-develops-offshore-resources/>.

²⁰ Smruthi Nadig, “Explainer: the Venezuela and Guyana oil dispute,” Offshore Technology, February 29, 2024, <https://www.offshore-technology.com/features/explainer-the-venezuela-and-guyana-oil-dispute/>.

²¹ Smruthi Nadig, “Explainer: The Venezuela and Guyana Oil Dispute - Offshore Technology Focus | Issue 95 | March 2024,” Nridigital.com, July 2024, https://offshore.nridigital.com/offshore_technology_focus_mar24/explainer-the-venezuela-and-guyana-oil-dispute.

²² Elliott Abrams, “Oil Companies, Biden Policies, and Democracy in Venezuela,” Council on Foreign Relations, September 7, 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/oil-companies-biden-policies-and-democracy-venezuela-o>.

industry crumbled, ExxonMobil resurfaced across the border in Essequibo, spearheading one of the largest oil discoveries in recent history. The episode illustrates how a government's drive for resource control can reinforce sovereignty—but at the cost of economic isolation.

5. Future Challenges and Lessons

Several lessons and policy recommendations can be gleaned from the tensions surrounding the Venezuela-Guyana border dispute. The first of which relates to the unpredictability of autocratic, unchecked executives, especially as their popularity declines. Here, Weart's argument – despite the criticism – has a bearing. It is difficult to imagine this scenario and its potential outcome without the aggressor as an autocratic state. Indeed, Maduro's strategy is not unlike the Argentine junta's 1982 invasion of the Falklands Islands in a desperate attempt to restore its flagging legitimacy in the face of economic crisis and international condemnation over flagrant human rights abuses²³, including disappearances.

Democracies may, at times, go to war, and the lack of conflict between democracies may reflect broader issues of shared security challenges, as Mearsheimer has argued. But non-democratic regimes are significantly more prone to interstate aggression than their democratic counterparts. Threats to popular legitimacy, the personalization of politics, and the lack of accountability both horizontally across the government and vertically to citizens can more easily descend into jingoism and nationalism when unchecked, capricious autocrats feel threatened. In short, Maduro's saber-rattling with Guyana would have been significantly constrained by political checks and a government that drew its legitimacy from popular support expressed through elections.

The question is what comes next. The Maduro-packed national electoral council declared Maduro the winner of the July 28 elections, despite credible evidence that opposition candidate Edmundo Gonzalez won at least sixty percent of the popular vote.²⁴ Even neighboring countries, including ideologically proximate governments in Brazil and Colombia, joined the European Union and the United States in calling the elections fraudulent. For Brazil, the challenge goes beyond skepticism over Maduro's victory claims – it now faces the task of enforcing the non-conflict agreement it brokered between Venezuela and Guyana. In late December, the Maduro regime completed a bridge linking Venezuela to Ankoko Island, where the Venezuelan military has maintained a base since occupying the Guyanese side of the island in 1966.²⁵ The Guyanese government condemned this as a breach of the St. Vincent agreement.

However, the international community's rejection of the election results and the Maduro government's clear lack of popular support may re-escalate bellicose actions toward Guyana. Such a strategy could shift Brazil and its regional neighbors away from their previous focus on maintaining interstate peace, directing attention instead to the domestic sources of the aggression. Addressing only inter-state threats while overlooking Venezuela's internal violations of human and democratic rights that are driving it provides merely a temporary solution under the guise of preserving peace.

²³ Amy Oakes, (2006) 'Diversionary War and the Invasion of the Falklands' in *Security Studies*, 15:3, <https://www.scribd.com/document/761930107/09636410601028354>

²⁴ Samantha Schmidt, Ana Vanessa Herrero, and María Luisa Paúl, "Maduro Declared Winner of Disputed Venezuelan Election," *Washington Post* (The Washington Post, July 28, 2024), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/07/28/venezuela-election-maduro-gonzalez/>.

²⁵ Bert Wilkinson, "Tensions over Essequibo region resurface as Venezuela completes a bridge to a disputed border base," *Associated Press*, December 21, 2024 <https://apnews.com/article/guyana-venezuela-border-essequibo-military-ankoko-mining-072e3f69997521fb178091362ba27cef>

The past two years' events demonstrate that an autocratic, popularly discredited government is as unpredictable in international politics as in domestic politics. At the very least, Maduro's behavior demonstrates an unbounded plan to compel neighbors and the private sector (ExxonMobil) to bend to its claims for territory or extort from investors future concessions in exchange for access to Venezuela's rich and now largely under-tapped oil fields. For Maduro, the discovery of oil in Guyanese waters presented an opportunity to revive Venezuela's dormant territorial claims, using the promise of Essequibo's wealth to restock its coffers emptied by decades of economic mismanagement and corruption. By contrast, a democratic Guyana has channeled its newfound resources into fostering innovation, entrepreneurship, and sustainable development through transparent frameworks and private-sector collaboration, primarily with ExxonMobil.

6. Recommendations

These events provide important lessons to policymakers. The volatility of the Venezuela-Guyana dispute stems from the unpredictability of an unchecked, personalistic, unpopular regime. A broader, collective effort to address Venezuela's democratic backsliding could potentially have headed off the conflict. Unfortunately, regional organizations like the Organization of American States (OAS) have struggled to address the challenge,²⁶ partly due to the weakening regional consensus on democratic principles and the ideological double standards regarding democratic transgressions – not only in Latin America but also in the United States.

Regional players failed to address the root causes of the original crisis, instead kicking the issue down the road. Brazil and CELAC's role in preventing an inter-state conflict is a cautionary tale. In the end, Maduro may have gotten what he wanted: the commitment of neighboring states to defend a principle of peace to avert a conflict that may have been a red herring. CELAC, as a body, remained distant from Venezuela's stolen election, and Brazil eventually walked away from attempting to guarantee a free and fair election. Instead, it could claim a victory of a higher principle for Brasilia, namely averting a war.

While it is impossible to prove a counterfactual, earlier and more decisive action by Venezuela's neighbors to defend democracy and human rights might have mitigated the tensions and future risks of territorial disputes escalating into conflict. The question now turns to the appetite of Venezuela's neighbors to address the root causes of Maduro's continued aggression toward Guyana – the lack of accountability of the Maduro regime and his military and its lack of legitimacy. This does not mean promoting regime change, anathema to many of Venezuela's Latin American neighbors and for good reason given the history of U.S. intervention. Instead, it calls for a mediation on domestic political conditions in Venezuela between the opposition and government with international support.

The first step should be a broad effort to enlist the United Nations or other credible multilateral organizations in negotiations inside Venezuela to address concerns over contested elections, the threats to the political opposition and a potential path forward for congressional elections scheduled for 2025. Such an effort could include CELAC countries or could be a more informal arrangement among a group of friends in the region, including governments more closely aligned with Maduro. Such an effort should also include enhancing monitoring along the Venezuela-Guyana border. Brazil has increased its military presence on its border with Venezuela and Guyana, but a more international, on-the-ground effort, vested with multilateral authority, is required. The recent completion of the bridge is only one action that was already predictable. More will likely come. A multinational peacekeeping force will also keep international attention on the slow-motion buildup that

²⁶ 'Venezuela to withdraw from OAS as deadly protests continue' (April 27, 2017), BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-39726605>

Maduro has maintained in the border region and prevent any potential skirmishes that may erupt – intentionally – from the cross-border actions. The March events in Guyanese territorial waters by Venezuelan forces should provide a reminder that potential conflict remains and regular threat.

The Venezuela-Guyanese tensions could also serve as a push for broader UN Security Council (UNSC) reform. As Nand C. Bardouille outlined in a recent article in *Global Americans*, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) maintains an active interest in gaining a seat on the UNSC²⁷, advocating for representation that better reflects the geopolitical realities of smaller states, particularly those on the front lines of climate change. The Essequibo crisis reinforces CARICOM's argument: a seat at the table could provide a stronger platform for defending national sovereignty and regional stability.

On the global stage, support for Guyana's sovereignty has been unequivocal. The United States has reaffirmed the validity of the 1899 arbitral award, which established the border between Guyana and Venezuela, while CARICOM and the Commonwealth have strongly condemned Venezuela's actions. These organizations warn that unilateral moves by Nicolás Maduro's government not only violate international law but also risk destabilizing the region.

Seeking to contain the crisis, Guyana has turned to the ICJ, urging the international community to stand firm against Venezuelan aggression. Georgetown's approach has been clear: uphold the rule of law, deter unilateral actions, and push for a peaceful resolution through established legal mechanisms. The stakes are high, not just for Guyana, but for the broader principle of territorial sovereignty.

These policy recommendations are not just matters for Guyana. This should serve as a cautionary tale for neighboring countries and multilateral institutions about the importance of recognizing the risks associated with democratic backsliding – not only for human rights reasons, but also for the potential that domestic conflict can spill across borders. Preventing this, however, requires early action. Policymakers in neighboring countries seeking peace must be prepared to act over political and civil rights deterioration and the consolidation of autocratic power before it reaches a crisis point. When and how, though, remains to be defined. The next steps by Venezuela's neighbors can provide a potential path.

²⁷ Nand Bardouille, [‘The Caribbean's Diplomatic Stance on UN Security Council Reform,’](#) *Global Americans*, November 26, 2024.