

The Essequibo Dispute and the Demise of Latin American Solidarity

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Title

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Given the recent flare-up of tensions between Guyana and Venezuela regarding the Essequibo region, it is essential to understand its significance in reflecting on Venezuela's place in Latin America. The article seeks to place the dispute in a historical and geopolitical context, explaining the origins of the dispute and its development in modern times and mapping out the turning points of the conflict in the international system. Regarding the current situation, the article analyses how the escalation of the dispute affects the anti-U.S. and anticolonial networks in Latin America and the broader Global South, especially regarding Venezuela's support.

The Essequibo Dispute and Latin American Border Conflicts

The December 3 referendum held by President Maduro of Venezuela on the annexation of most of neighbouring Guyana's territory sent shockwaves throughout Latin America, where the danger of major interstate war is a rare occurrence among the otherwise many travails of the continent. Looking at the basic facts, Maduro's attempt to claim the Essequibo and its adjacent coastal waters is a proposal for a blatant land grab aimed at the newfound oil fields of Guyana, which lie in the "Starbroek Block" primarily the region claimed by Venezuela. A long-running historical dispute exists between the two countries over the Essequibo region. Nevertheless, Venezuela's attempt to claim the territory is a complete reversal of the policies pursued by his predecessor, Hugo Chávez, toward Guyana. The Essequibo crisis is thus not only a threat to Latin American stability but also signifies that the solidarity project of "Bolivarian Venezuela" since 1998 is now a thing of the past. It also suggests that Caracas may resort to aggression now the windfall revenues from the global oil commerce, which supported its lavish social spending, no longer bankroll the regime.

The contrast between Venezuela's support for anticolonial networks during the Cold War and today's narrative also illustrates the main feature of much anticolonial rhetoric, namely, to denounce U.S. power, even if it entails a complete

volte face from earlier positions. The following analysis situates the Essequibo crisis within the historical context of Latin American territorial disputes, summarizes the most important historical milestones in the dispute, and reflects on the development of Venezuelan-Guyanese relations up to today's crisis. The account shows how anti-U.S. forces in the Essequibo dispute today, demonstrate a total reversal of the anti-colonial rhetoric adopted during the Cold War.

Major international conflicts are rare occurrences in Latin America. However, territorial disputes are much more pervasive, cutting across the whole continent. The core problem is the same that characterizes other countries in the Global South, namely the borders left after the colonial era are not best suited to the successor states. However, while in Asia and Africa, these boundaries separate or cobble together groups and peoples, which causes ethnic problems, in Latin America, the problem is the opposite. One problem is that of the boundaries of the remnants of Iberian empires, that is, the successor states of Spanish Latin America and Portuguese Brazil. The boundaries of former colonies were mostly poorly defined due to the relatively uncultivated and, at many times, uninhabited state of border regions. Colonial governors were also uninterested in the definition of these borders when the other side belonged to the same colonial power. After independence and the demographic and economic transformation of these states, populations and economic interests shifted, creating a new need to define boundaries. This led to various interstate conflicts that have happened in Latin America. Peru and Ecuador closed their dispute after almost a century of periodically renewed small wars in 1998; Chile and Argentina almost went to war over the Tierra del Fuego region in 1978; Bolivia and Paraguay fought one of the bloodiest conflicts of the hemisphere between 1932 and 1935 to decide the ownership of the marshy and sparsely populated Chaco lands.

A different case is the conflicts of these Iberoamerican successor states with states of other imperial heritage – mostly British. In these cases, the conflict dates to colonial times. The British and the Dutch occupied several smaller territories throughout Latin America, wresting them directly from the Spanish or occupying a territory that was at least legally claimed by one of the adjacent *Virreinos* of the Spanish or the Portuguese. The successor states inherited these claims, and for different reasons, they pushed them more or less vigorously. The best-known example of these cases is the conflict over the Falkland/Malvinas Islands, which led to the Argentine invasion of the islands in 1982 and the subsequent defeat of the Gaitieri regime by the United Kingdom. This is not the only example of the problem. Guatemala claims part of Belize (former British Guatemala), Nicaragua contested, then successfully occupied the British vassal Mosquito Kingdom on its

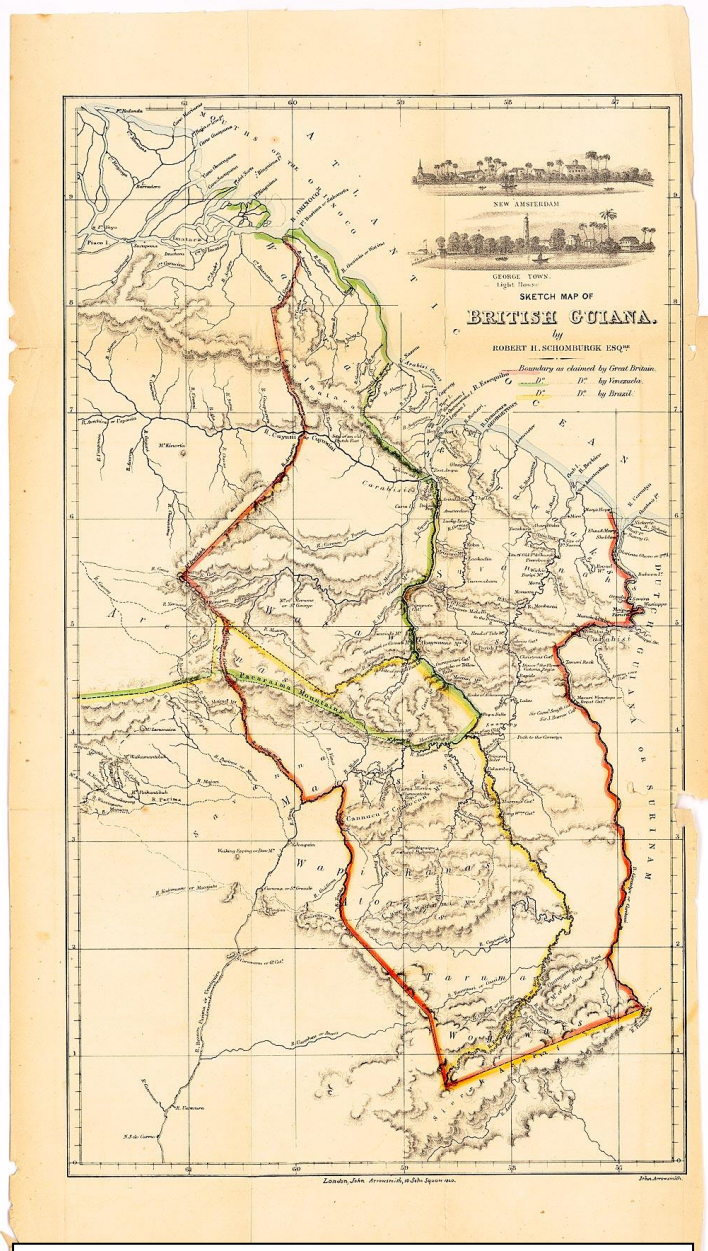
present western coast, and, arriving on our case, Venezuela has a claim to most of Guyana's territory. This is a case of a weaker legal claim originating from colonial times. To understand today's crisis, we have necessarily to look at the history of the dispute.

From Colonial to Cold War hotspot: dispute over the border of Guyana and Venezuela, 1581-1990

Among European travelers, the marshy beaches of Guyana were first spotted by the ships of Vicente Yanez Pinzón, a lieutenant of Christopher Columbus, in 1500.¹ However, the settlement of the land was not initiated by the Spanish. The territory between the mouths of the Orinoco and the Amazon was not deemed desirable for settlement. In turn, the "empty" territory (empty from European exploration) was first claimed by Dutch settlers in 1581, who arrived in present-day Georgetown, set up a fort, and then started to cultivate slave-worked sugar plantations. Legal disputes were irrelevant, as the nearest Spanish settlement was at the mouth of the Orinoco, and the Dutch were legally Spanish subjects. Of course, as the 80-year independence war raged after 1566, the small settlement was antagonistic to its Spanish "neighbors," but the question of borders did not arise. With the end of the war, the Spanish and Dutch colonies were delineated for the first time, the Dutch officially receiving a territory based on the status quo: territories east of the mouth of the Essequibo River. This is the oldest legal reference of modern Venezuelans in claiming Guyana's territory, and they consequently follow this boundary in their claims.

In the years following 1648, the problem was the same as that in other Latin American border disputes. Although the legal demarcation had been made, the border was not observed or defended in any way. The Spanish settlements were far away, but the Dutch were situated on the edge of the border. Their settlements and explorations soon reached to the West, into Spanish territory. The Spanish were aware of this, but they did little, given the relative lack of importance of the territory and the almost impenetrable jungle between the Spanish Orinoco Valley and the Dutch settlements in Guyana. Dutch expansion and Spanish inaction persisted throughout the 18th century in the region. It even continued with the arrival of the British, who first took over the colony in 1796, then, after alternating periods of rule with the Dutch, formalized their colonial ownership in 1814 at the Congress of Vienna. The British assumed the de facto territory of the former Dutch colony. They, however, attempted to designate the formal boundaries of their new possessions. To this end, in 1840, they commissioned Robert Schomburgk, a Prussian naturalist, to survey the borders of British Guyana and thus delineate the

official British claim. Schomburgk survey extended the British claim well into former Venezuelan territory, even marking an outlet on the Orinoco.²



Intersecting British, Venezuelan and Brazilian territorial claims in Guyana in the 1840s

Orange: British claims

Green: Venezuelan claims

Pale yellow: Brazilian claims

Source of original image: [Wikimedia Commons](#). Edited by Ildikó Makkosné Scherer on the request of the author

The Venezuelans protested, but the British persevered with most of their claims. The matter was not pushed further, as the territory was still very sparsely populated. The problems arrived with a gold rush in the region in the 1880s. gold miners flowed into the territory, and British authorities and infrastructure followed. Venezuela protested again, and this time, a multilateral commission – U.S, Russia, Britain, and Venezuela - was set up to arbitrate on the issue in 1897. The commission awarded most of the territory to the British, rejecting their claims to an Orinoco outlet and basically marking out the present-day boundaries of Guyana. The Venezuelans reluctantly accepted and bilaterally surveyed the common border in the following years.³

Tensions, however, flared again 50 years later following a bizarre incident. In 1949, the memorandum of Severo Mallet-Prévost, the Venezuelan member of the 1897 arbitration committee was published after his death. In short, Mallet-Prévost claimed that the Russians and the British pressured the United States and the Venezuelans into accepting the current boundary. Caracas then rejected the 1899 arbitration and reasserted its claim to the territory.⁴ This time, however, it was a different international environment: the Cold War was in full swing, and the decolonizing British Empire was in the process of granting Guyana independence. Guyana claims that resurrecting Cold War geopolitical considerations is responsible for the resurfacing of the border problem today. Their claim pivots on declassified American documents from 1962, and communications between US President Kennedy and Foreign Minister Dean Rusk concerning Guyana. The Cold War problem Guyana raised for the Kennedy administration was that Guyanese politics was dominated by the People's Party of Power (PPP), a pro-Soviet leftist party led by the ethnically Indian dentist Cheddi Jagan. In the declassified documents, Rusk advised Kennedy that if they couldn't deny Jagan political power in Guyana after independence, then they should support Venezuelan claims to the Essequibo territory to put pressure on Jagan and his followers.⁵

This claim by the Guyanese is supported by the fact that just months after the Rusk memorandum, Venezuela officially staked its territorial claim before the United Nations. This coincidence is the only evidence that the United States may have encouraged Caracas to push its territorial claims. It nevertheless is highly probable.

The Venezuelan and Guyanese parties signed an accord in the year of Guyanese independence, 1966, to submit the claim to an independent tribunal. This also recognised the General Secretary of the United Nations as the ultimate arbitrator in the question.⁶ The question, however, was never resolved. Venezuela, occasionally, revived the Essequibo claim as part of nationalist rhetoric. The Cold

War indeed strengthened their position. While the U.S. successfully barred Cheddi Jagan and the PPP from taking power, their governing alternative, the People's National Congress under Charles Burnham turned in a pro-Soviet and pro-Third World direction too. They even tried to offer Cuba a refueling base for planes and offered supplies to the pro-Soviet forces in Angola after 1976. In turn, Venezuela was supported and strengthened by the Americans. Guyana acquired F-16 fighter planes in the 1980s, in the same year as the Venezuelan army openly discussed an invasion of Guyana.⁷

Cold War, geopolitical considerations, while leaving the conflict unresolved, also prevented it from escalating. In the bipolar world, an attack on Guyana ruled by the radical left would have been a major incident between the two superpower blocs, without any clear advantage for Venezuela's Cold War "overlord" the United States. In this sense, the Cold War period made the conflict a chronic problem but prevented it from degenerating into open conflict.

However, by the start of the new century, the geopolitical and ideological positions of the two states had reversed, and a new set of variables began to influence the course of the conflict. This was, of course, connected to the rise of Hugo Chávez and the "Bolivarian Revolution" the consequences of which bring us right up to the present-day conflict.

1999-2015 Venezuela-Guyana Solidarity

After Hugo Chávez came to power in Venezuela in 1999, he not only launched a radical social transformation in his own country, but he also tried to create a broader network of like-minded South American states in order to challenge U.S. power in the American Hemisphere. One of these initiatives was the ALBA (*Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América* – Bolivarian Alliance for the People of Our America). This network of states, which, aside from Venezuela, included Cuba, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Bolivia along with tiny Caribbean entities, proposed the creation of a "non-imperialist" alliance of states, advancing socialism. Most of the initiatives of the new alliance were supported by the Venezuelan state from its oil export revenues.⁸ Chavez tried to build different levels of cooperation with neighboring nations. The core states were ALBA members, but, on a mutually beneficial basis, he also launched other cooperative measures. One of these was the PetroCaribe initiative. This meant the export of oil at a subsidized price and payable either by cheap credits or goods – and at an inflated price.⁹

Chavez, notably, took an internationalist turn toward Guyana, too. Early in his presidency he repeated the conventional territorial claim, but in February 2004 he changed tack. He announced that Venezuela had to “unite” with all the nations of the Americas so they could tackle the “malign” influence of the United States. He even announced in the same month that Venezuela would not oppose any economic projects by the Guyanese government in the contested zone, although he recommended “cooperation” on bigger initiatives. It is interesting to note that Chávez used fundamentally the same argument Guyana does today, namely, that the modern form of the conflict is essentially a Cold War product. He even suggested that the U.S. even supported (and briefed the Venezuelans about) an invasion of Guyana in the 1980s.¹⁰

After these proposals to ease the tension between the two countries, Guyana became a beneficiary of the PetroCaribe scheme. Venezuela bought Guyanese rice at inflated prices and supplied cheap oil. In the years between 2005 and 2015, Guyana’s rice production rose by 50%. The help was crucial for the small nation, as its rice exports were generally uncompetitive with U.S. and Asian rice suppliers. Its smallholders simply produced marketable rice at too high prices to be competitive on the global market. Venezuela supported Guyana’s dysfunctional economy for almost a decade.¹¹ The fact that a petrostate helped its less fortunate neighbor is also notable. In the late 1970s, when Third World solidarity and nationalism was a fashionable topic in international politics, this solidarity collapsed largely because the oil price explosion caused by the OPEC cartel meant the financial ruin of many emerging Third World states, and the Arab petrostates ignored their plight.¹² Venezuela, at least for a short period, did at least attempt to aid its less resource rich neighbours in the hope that it could project its socialist ideology across the hemisphere.

2015-2023: The Demise of Bolivarian Solidarity – Causes and Consequences

However, as with almost all Global South solidarity projects, there came a reckoning. First, the donor country found that it had overreached itself. The mismanaged system and petro monoculture that was the Venezuelan economy was already showing cracks by the early 2010s, and the fall in oil prices in 2014 completely undermined it. In 2015, inflation rose by 121%, and GDP decline was more than -6%.¹³ The economic foundations of buying a socialist network of states with cheap oil collapsed.

All the while, Guyana capitalized on Chavez's earlier conciliatory measures and allowed oil exploration in the offshore waters of the coastline of the Essequibo. This drew the ire of Caracas, which intercepted an oil-exploring ship in 2013 in the waters adjacent to the coastline of the Essequibo region. Then came the final break. In 2015, as the Venezuelan economy crashed, Exxon Mobil found an oil field of gigantic proportions, running parallel to the Guyanese coastline. The Liza-1 find, announced in May 2015, was the first of many finds, now approximately assessed as an 11-billion-barrel oil reservoir in the EEC (Exclusive Economic Zone) of Guyana. Production did not start until January 2020, but it was clear that Guyana was at the dawn of an oil boom.¹⁴ The Venezuelans promptly expelled Guyana from the PetroCaribe scheme, ending the oil shipments by the end of 2015. Officially, this was because Venezuela could not sustain the shipments due to its economic crisis, but it was evident that it was connected to the fact that Venezuela realized its solidarity approach had failed, and it had wasted precious time not pushing the Essequibo claim.

This reversal of its attitude to Guyana also reflected the strengthening of traditional irredentist voices in the Venezuelan army. There was already some resistance in the armed forces to Chávez's socialist presidential policies. In 2007, a Venezuelan army platoon crossed into Guyanese territory and destroyed two gold dredges used by small-time gold miners.¹⁵ Caracas apologized for the incident and there was not any similar event until many years later, but it suggests that some military commanders remained antagonistic to Guyana during the Chávez years. And while the left-wing president made many informal conciliatory statements, he never indicated the official cancellation of Venezuela's territorial claim.

After 2015, the relations between Guyana and Venezuela went into freefall. In the same year, Venezuelan forces harassed an oil explorer ship in the Guyanese EEC. The harassment of ships has occurred periodically since. When Venezuela reached the nadir of its financial crisis caused by its left-wing policy mistakes in 2018-2019, the Essequibo dispute retreated from the regime's focus for a couple of years. It seemed that the dispute might even be moving to a settlement. Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary-General, using his jurisdiction defined by the 1966 Geneva Agreement between the parties, ruled that the conflict had to be solved by the International Court of Justice (ICJ).¹⁶ Guyana promptly tried to appeal to the Court in the matter, seeking to confirm the validity of the 1899 border arbitration. This indicated that the country was sure of its position in international law.

However, Venezuela was not inclined to accept the ICJ's decision, possibly because its case was not that strong and it would not lead to the desired outcome – the annexation of the whole of Essequibo. The ICJ ruled that it had jurisdiction over

the dispute in December 2020. The following month, Venezuela unilaterally announced the creation of a Maritime Zone for Venezuelan economic projects in Guyanese territorial waters. Maritime incidents intensified, and two Russian-made Su-30 fighter bombers entered Guyanese airspace passing over the community of Eteringbang on March 2, 2021.¹⁷ This was not only a direct violation of airspace, but also demonstrated Guyana's lack of anti-air capabilities. The small country has never possessed a fighter jet, and its Soviet-made anti-air missile systems were retired in the 1990s.¹⁸

This period of escalating conflicts came to a head with Nicolas Maduro announcing a referendum to be held on the Essequibo dispute on December 3rd 2023. The referendum included a question about the jurisdiction of the ICJ in the matter, along with the core question- should Venezuela include the Essequibo region inside of its national borders? The result sparked the current stand off. After a



*Contemporary Venezuelan claim regarding the Essequibo region (called Guayana Esequiba in Venezuela).
Source of the image: [Wikimedia Commons](#).*

meeting between the two claimant states on St. Vincent later in December, moderated by the Brazilian president, no compromise was reached. Maduro, however, onfirmed that Venezuela would not use military force to enforce its claim (Guyana promised the same) and they agreed further arbitration talks in Brazil in

the coming months.¹⁹ The referendum offered Maduro the chance to get his voice heard in the dispute. In this sense, the referendum indeed had political benefits for Venezuela.

The outcome of the December 3 referendum should not come as a surprise, given the nature of the Maduro regime. The communication around it also reflected the aims of this referendum. The Essequibo question, of course, is a great way to ignite populist support for the regime. The Orinoco Tribune, a pro-government Venezuelan news site, noted that the referendum gathers together actors from across the political spectrum.²⁰ As we have seen, Venezuela upheld its territorial claims even when it was pro-US in the Cold War. In this sense, it is not a surprise that the Essequibo question enjoys multipartisan support. Chavez, according to most analysts, is also preparing for the next presidential elections due in 2024.²¹ In this sense, the escalation of tensions was a clever move regarding Venezuela's domestic politics and its continuing financial difficulties.

However, that is all that Maduro's statecraft serves. The greater scheme of his predecessor Chavez, for turning Caribbean nations into clients of Venezuela, and the broadening of anti-U.S. forces in the spirit of the ALBA initiative has been abandoned. By contrast, the aggression of Venezuela towards Guyana alienates not only Georgetown but also its closest allies in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), which consists mostly of former British and French colonies. This means a significant loss of Venezuelan influence in the region, except, of course, for the friendship of Cuba and perhaps Nicaragua. This decision indicates that, while the regime did not collapse in 2018-19, it lost all pretense of being a moderate player in Latin American politics. Now, it simply seeks to hold together the Maduro regime. The enormous price that Caracas paid just to build a cross-party alliance on this question shows that Maduro's regime is in a critical state. At the same time, the Biden administration's decision to secure oil from Venezuela, lifting its embargo, could also play an encouraging and neglected role, in the volte face from Chavez-style socialism.

Of course, there is an attempt that tries to situate the conflict in a way that is trying to be less damaging to Venezuela's image as a torchbearer of Global South solidarity. We can also measure – from some reactions – just how close some thinkers are to the Venezuelan government and its international networks. Back in the early 2000s, it was easy for many to frame the Chavez regime as a classic example of an anti-imperialist force taking up solidarity with global South states. Now, however, the case is the opposite. Venezuela is clearly bullying a smaller state to grab its newfound natural riches. To support Venezuela in this question, one has to reject or just set aside all claims that were made by the global anti-

colonial left before the 1990s, then in support of the pro-Soviet, pro-global South Guyana in resisting Venezuelan aggression.

However, there are still attempts to frame the question as an anti-colonial struggle where Venezuela is the underdog, and somehow Guyana is an aggressor. Usually, this requires finding a U.S. hand in Guyanese actions. Vijay Prashad is a great example. He is an Indian-born historian and director of the Tricontinental Institute for Social Research, which, judging by its name, tries to uphold the values of Fidel Castro's initiative for the solidarity of former and present Asian, African, and Latin American colonial peoples. He is also the author of *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*, which presents a curious perspective on the decolonization process in the 20th century. In the wake of the Essequibo crisis, Mr. Prashad wrote an opinion piece²² on the *People's Dispatch* site which claims that Guyana is just a vehicle for U.S. imperialism. He argues that the Exxon Mobil oil company capitalizes on Guyanese resources in violation of the 1966 Geneva Agreement, which says that Guyana and Venezuela must agree on the future of the territory. This echoes a Venezuelan claim that says that, along with the cited 1966 agreement, Venezuela needs to have a say in the exploitation of the territory's resources. Prashad even accuses Exxon Mobil of exploiting Guyana by offering it a lower share of revenue from the oil extracted. This notwithstanding, Venezuela does not have a right to unilaterally announce an annexation of a territory ruled by another state, rejecting the decisions of the UN Secretary-General and the International Court of Justice. On the question of the oil revenue, it is important to point out that whatever the case may be – a multinational corporation is not always a benefactor – it does not help Guyana's financial standing if Venezuela occupies 75% of its territory and its newly constructed oil wells.

Another argument pro-Venezuelan actors have cited to support the case of an anti-imperial struggle is the help that the U.S. Southern Command (the military command responsible for Latin American cooperation with Washington) gave Guyana after the referendum helping create ID's for inhabitants of the Essequibo region. The aid included an unspecified level of protective overflights and joint training with the Guyanese army.²³ CUNY Professor Danny Shaw claimed on air on *Russia Today* television that this indicated clear US intervention in the dispute. Shaw framed the issue as if it was a limited local dispute between Latin American states, which U.S. aggression inflamed.²⁴ In fact the United States conducted aerial defense maneuvers and no other military actions. This is a sign that the Southern Command reacted to the immediate need of Guyana to defend its airspace, as the country lacks any means to fight a possible aerial campaign by Venezuela.

It is clear that pro-Venezuelan voices that claim to be part of a wider anti-colonial network unequivocally support Venezuelan measures, while denouncing the defense of Guyanese national territory with moderate U.S. support. Of course, Venezuela gathered a lot of goodwill in anti-colonial circles over the Chávez years. However, in the current context support for Venezuela merely reflects a knee-jerk anti-Americanism. Since the early years of decolonization and the emergence of the Third World states, it has been a notable phenomenon that progressive Western intellectual circles identify with the Global South. Even when the new state act as just another, aggressive and self-interested power, some of these intellectuals do not denounce it but instead try to justify its actions. Nevertheless, the definitive demise of Venezuela's "Bolivarian" solidarity project can be dated to the referendum of December 3, 2023. Notwithstanding the rearguard actions of some left-wing intellectuals, the pretensions of Global South solidarity, so obsessively invoked during Latin America's Pink Tide years in the 2000s, is now definitely dead in Venezuela.

But how will the Guyana conflict affect the Latin American political landscape? In an earlier analysis, I pointed out that anti-left forces, such as the Iberosfera network of Vox and its allies can gain ground in Latin America if they can frame extra-hemispheric powers and left-wing governments as aggressors and neo-imperialists. The Venezuela-Guyana conflict and the rupture of left-wing solidarity in Latin America offers them a chance. Of course, it is not always easy to use the example of Venezuela against the Left in Latin America, as many otherwise left-wing forces denounced Maduro's rule in the last years.²⁵

The outcome of the current crisis is also beneficial to Brazil. Ignácio Lula da Silva's administration tries to steer an independent course from Washington, and the fact that Venezuela and Guyana accepted him as a moderator in their talks and promised to meet again on Brazilian soil strengthens his hand.²⁶ He could present himself as a moderating force, in a conflict where the U.S. could serve as a provider of basic security, but not really solve any ongoing dispute. Through the strengthening of Brazil's position, the situation of the BRICS alliance could also be strengthened in Latin America after Argentina's sudden turn away following Milei's victory. In summary, the left-wing forces led by Venezuela and its allies face a loss of influence and credibility because of the crisis. To a lesser extent, the U.S. and Brazil can capitalize on the crisis, and generally, the Latin American right could use the conflict to advance an anti-left agenda.

Endnotes

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