

## Intel Report: Rising military tension between Venezuela and Guyana over Essequibo territory

**Date:** 06/12/2023

**Where:** Guyana Essequibo  
- Venezuela - Guyana

**Who's involved:**

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, Guyana President Dr Mohamed Irfaan Ali, International Court of Justice (ICJ), Brazilian National Army



**What happened?**

- **On Sunday, 03/12/2023, Venezuelans voted in favor of claiming sovereignty over the oil-rich Essequibo region**, long contended with Guyana, in a referendum. According to Venezuelan authorities, over 95% of the voters supported the claim. Yet, **the transparency and credibility of the results is questionable**.
- The president of Venezuela's National Electoral Council (CNE) celebrated the **massive popular support for the referendum due to a "historic turnout" that exceeded 10 million votes** out of the approximately 20 million eligible voters. However, according to available data and photographs of empty polling stations posted by social media users, it is suspected that the **actual referendum participation was remarkably low**. Several opposition figures have said that the low turnout is a clear demonstration of the regime's failure, despite claims of success by the Maduro government.
- In the [referendum](#), Venezuelans were asked if they agreed with the creation of a new state in the Essequibo region, granting its population Venezuelan citizenship. However, the referendum was initially described as consultative, and **no indication was given of how Maduro would implement the outcome of the vote**.
- On 05/12/2023, **President Maduro ordered the "immediate" exploitation of oil, gas, and mines in the Essequibo region** by granting operational licenses to the state-owned oil companies PDVSA and CVG. Moreover, Maduro announced the

**creation of a special military division focused on the disputed area called the Comprehensive Defense Operational Zone (Zodi).** The President also told **foreign oil companies in the disputed area that they have three months to withdraw their operations.**

- On the same occasion, the **new official Venezuelan [map](#) was released, redrawn with the Essequibo as the 24th proclaimed state of Venezuela,** which will immediately replace the former one and be included in all school books.
- Despite the initial skepticism about Maduro's intention to invade Guyana's territory, Guyana's President Ali [said](#) on 05/11/2023 that the **recent actions of Venezuelan authorities are posing an "immediate and direct threat to Guyana's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and political independence."** President Ali also announced a high alert for the Guyana Defense Forces (GDF) and **contingency plans** to deal with an escalation of the situation.
- **Guyana's President said that the dispute would be reported to the UN Security Council.** Despite the concern that the **Venezuelan referendum served as a "pretext to annex"** the Essequibo region, the Guyanese President stressed that the dispute would be resolved through international law, following the ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), with the assistance of the international community. He also reassured foreign investors that **Guyana remains a safe and democratic country for investment and business.**
- On 05/12/2023, **Brazil reinforced its northern border with Guyana** and moved armored vehicles and more troops to the city of Boa Vista. Earlier in the day, the Guyana Defence Force (GDF) released a statement announcing the **strengthening of bilateral ties and cooperation, including on defense and strategic affairs, between Guyana and Brazil.**

### Scenarios:

President Maduro's decision to hold a **national referendum** regarding the disputed area of Essequibo **could be a political move to distract the population from domestic issues, foster national cohesion, and gain support**. However, recent developments suggest that Maduro may be preparing to proceed with the military annexation of the Essequibo region. Several incentives and deterrents for military action can be identified.

### Incentives for action:

The referendum results could justify Venezuela's attempt at annexing the Guyanese-controlled Essequibo region. Several factors could prompt this.

- Venezuela has **claimed the Essequibo territory** for almost two centuries **based on historical rights**. The dispute can be traced back to 1815 when the border between Venezuela and the former colony of British Guyana was established by the colonizers.
- **Venezuela has significantly more military capability than Guyana**, if Guyana does not receive any military support from other countries.
- The **disputed territory is rich in natural resources**, which makes it attractive for Venezuela.
- The annexation could be used as a **political tool to distract public and international opinion from the upcoming 2024 elections** and **delay electoral and democratic concessions** granted by the government. Authoritarian leaders have started conflicts in the past to remain in power.
- Recently, **other countries have annexed land successfully with little international intervention**. Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and Eastern Ukraine in 2021, and Azerbaijan re-took control of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023. Maduro might use these examples as an incentive for his actions.

### Deterrents for action:

While there are incentives present for Venezuela to escalate the conflict with military actions, other factors may discourage a military invasion of Essequibo.

- Although Venezuelan military power overpowers that of Guyana, **its military appears to be obsolete and poorly organized**, which makes it difficult to launch an effective and unified offensive into Guyana
- **The Maduro government lacks full control over territories close to the border** with Guyana. Non-state armed and criminal groups have increased rapidly in the region. Therefore, the Venezuelan military may not be able to launch an offensive from these territories.

- Any **Venezuelan military operation will result in some kind of regional and international response** ranging from the reinstatement of recently eased sanctions to military intervention or peacekeeping missions in support of Guyana. **International military intervention, as well as the establishment of sanctions, could act as a deterrent.**
- In recent weeks, the Venezuelan government achieved the easing of U.S. sanctions by granting political and electoral reforms, including allowing the opposition to participate in the 2024 election. However, **the U.S. is likely to re-impose the sanctions if Venezuela invades Guyana-Essequibo.** The risk of jeopardizing the country's recently improved economic and diplomatic situation could make Maduro reconsider any annexation plan.

### Conclusion:

In conclusion, the prospect of Venezuela annexing the Guyanese-controlled Essequibo region is marked by a complex interplay of **incentives** and **deterrents**. While historical claims, military capabilities, and the allure of natural resources provide **motives** for such action, significant hurdles, including the weaknesses in the Venezuelan military, the presence of non-state armed groups, and the threat of an international response, act as formidable **deterrents**. Moreover, **recent diplomatic gains and the easing of U.S. sanctions** hinge on the Maduro government's adherence to political and electoral reforms, making the risk of jeopardizing these advancements a **crucial factor that could sway the decision-making** process. The many options and quick developments make **the situation hard to predict**. However, with Maduro issuing a directive for the "immediate exploitation" of oil, gas, and mining resources and the creation of the "Zodi" special military division in the contested area, **the likelihood of imminent military action has increased**. As the situation can change rapidly, it is recommended to have **preparatory evacuation plans** in case armed conflict would break out.

Take actions based on risk intelligence



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