

United States and Russian Governments' Hegemonic Struggle for sphere of influence and the Post-Election Crisis in Venezuela: A Retrospect

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Abstract: The result of the Venezuelan presidential election of 2018, like its 2013 counterpart, has plunged the country into a political crisis. It is a presidential crisis bordering essentially on who the legitimate President is. The crisis is characterized by violent demonstrations and clashes between the supporters of the two "Presidents" —Juan Guaido and Nicolas Maduro. The U.S. recognition and backing of the self-declared President—Juan Guaido and subsequent moves to force incumbent President Nicolas Maduro out of office resultantly met with stiff opposition in Russia's dogged and comprehensive support for Maduro's continued presidency. Scholars who have adduced different reasons for the on-going crisis therein have however not been able to establish a causal link between the U.S.-Russian rivalry over global influence and the continuity of the crisis in Venezuela. It is against this backdrop that the study investigates the U.S.-Russian rivalry and political crisis in Venezuela. The Two Persons' Zero-sum model of the Game theory of international politics provides the theoretical framework with which the study is better appreciated. While time series was adopted as the study's preferred research design, the documentary method and content analysis were deployed for data collection and analysis, respectively. The findings led to the validation of our hypothesis that the U.S.-Russian hegemonic struggle for sphere of influence has escalated the post-election crisis in Venezuela. Moreover, Russia and USA tended to have backed Venezuela diplomatically in various UN fora and has repeatedly blocked multilateral initiatives to punish or place embargoes on Venezuela (Rouvinski, 2019). Russia and USA has thus far shown much concern for outside interference in Venezuela's internal affairs. The study recommends for the amendment of Article 2.7 of the United Nations' Charter on Non-interference in domestic affairs as well as the passage of veto-striking resolutions.

Keywords: Hegemony, Post-election Violence, Russia, United States, Venezuela

Introduction

The wish of every citizen is to live and operate in a country where his freedom, liberty and pursuit of happiness will be secured and guaranteed by the government of the day; to elect a government that will provide and maintain an enabling socio-economic and political terrain where he or she will be able to attain his or her maximum potentials in a world of numerous needs, expectations and ambitions. This is however not the case with the Venezuelan citizens, for in recent times, both the polity and the economy of Venezuela, an oil-rich Latin American country, have gradually receded from the sublime to the ridiculous.

Although the Venezuelan political space has known crisis—economic and political—for over a decade now, the current political unrest in Venezuela spiked in January 2019 when opposition leader Juan Guaido proclaimed himself the rightful president, dismissing Nicolas Maduro's 2018 re-election as a fraud. On 30th April, a group of military personnel defected and joined many civilians in carrying out Guaido's call for an uprising against President Maduro. Confrontation subsequently erupted between Guaido's military supporters and Maduro's loyalists. This ongoing presidential crisis in Venezuela and the violent demonstrations/protests it has occasioned is nothing but a post-election crisis taken to another level. The existence of two "Presidents" in one country has resulted in a political impasse that has brought the polity to a near-grinding halt. In the midst of this power tussle, a mediatory peace-talks was held in May 2019 in Norway between the two "presidents". Regrettably, this peace dialogue fell apart in May 29, 2019 as opposition delegates insisted that Maduro must resign against Maduro's delegates position (Reuters, 5 July, 2019).

While this stalemate lingers, supporters of both camps have been clashing violently, resulting in deaths, severe injuries and torturous arrests. In specific term, there were 107 recorded deaths, over 500 injured/wounded persons and 956 arrests between February and March, 2019 (Crusher, 2019); Luhnow, 2019). Riding on claims and allegations of human rights violations by the Maduro administration, the U.S. government and many other western countries imposed strategic economic and political sanctions on Venezuela. These sanctions have further worsened the humanitarian situation in Venezuela. As these multi-sectoral economic sanctions take their toll on the economy of Venezuela which had shrunk by 18% in 2018 witnessed inflation rate that exceeded 10 million percent in 2019 (IMF, 2019). Consequently, shortages in food and medicine, declines in purchasing power, and a collapse of social services have further created a humanitarian crisis. As was estimated by the U.N. officials in April 2019, about 90% of

Venezuelans now live in poverty and about 7 million of them are in need of humanitarian assistance. What is more, infant and maternal mortality have equally worsened as diseases thought to have been eradicated resurfaced with greater intensity (Congressional Research Service, August 26, 2019).

In helpless response to all these, ordinary Venezuelans have taken to mass exodus to neighboring countries, with an estimated 4.3 million Venezuelan migrants already outside the country by August 2019 (CRS Infocus, 2019). As at November, 2019, there were over 290, 224 Venezuelan migrants in the United States; 208,333 in Spain; 1,000,000 in Colombia; 94, 000 in Panama; 220,000 in Ecuador; 500,000 in Peru; 85,000 in Brazil; 100,000 in Chile, and 130,000 in Argentina (UNHCR, 28 January 2019). Attempts by Guaido to ship humanitarian aids into Venezuela were fiercely countered by military officials loyal to Maduro. This resulted in humanitarian aid clash between the supporters of Guaido and the soldiers in which 45 persons were killed, over 33 injured and 36 soldiers detained by the indigenous people (BBC News, 24 February 2019).

Scholars have tried to account for the ongoing political crisis in Venezuela. Studies like Solimano (2005), Duddy (2015), McClain (2018), Crisis Group (2018), Venezuela World Report (2019), have almost in unison seen the crisis as a logical consequence of many years of lingering economic crisis and the accumulated sense of frustration thereof. Others such as Fadakinte (2014), Maya (2014), Wallsworth (2015), Duddy (2015), Ngah (2016), Zahler (2017), Peter and Abdurrahman (2018), Angerbrandt (2018) among others situate the cause of the crisis on issues related to poor voters' turnout, political repression, weak political institutions and electoral laws, poverty and unemployment, political imbalance and ethno-religious polarization.

Meanwhile, the role of external influence in the form of U.S.-Russia strategic interests as a possible factor accounting for the subsistence of the political crisis was grossly neglected by extant literature. This epistemic void or intellectual lacuna is regrettable given the fact that there is an ongoing geopolitical game between the U.S. and Russia that verges on struggle for supremacy and influence in Latin America, especially in Venezuela. What is more, there has been this lingering accusation and counter-accusation of rapacious desire for spheres of influence between Russia and the West in post Cold War era (Pop, 2009; Adamkus et al, 2009; Rettman, 2014).

Literature Review

U.S.-Russian Governments Hegemonic Struggle for Sphere of Influence and Post-election Crises

To do justice to this sub-section, we deemed it important to undertake a very brief and concise conceptual clarification of the major concepts and themes that constitute the very pivot around which the review is undertaken. These are 'Hegemonic Struggle' and 'Sphere of Influence'. Hegemony entails the socio-cultural cum politico-economic domination or military control of one society or state over another. While the state or society that dominates is referred to as the hegemon, the society or state that is dominated or controlled is variously referred to as a colony, protectorate, client state, buffer state, etc. Within the confines of international relations theory, hegemony further connotes a disparity in power relations (Schenoni, 2018). Hegemonic struggle thus ensues when two or more hegemons, or states with apparent hegemonic tendencies find themselves in a state of power contestation over who establishes and maintains greater degree of dominance or absolute control to the total exclusion of the other in a particular state or society.

On the other hand, Sphere of Influence (Sol) is a geographical space or region over which a state or organization has a level of cultural, economic, military, or political exclusivity. In other words, it connotes an area in which a foreign power or powers exert significant military, cultural, or economic influence (U.S. History, n.d.). Where the cases are extreme, a country within the "sphere of influence" of another may become a subsidiary of that state and serve in effect as a satellite state or de facto colony. In this regard, Zivec (2018, pp.2-3) remarks that "spheres of influence denote power relations and disproportionate authority of great powers over sovereign territories, creating patterns of international relations that constitute the global political order".

According to Onwunyi and Oguma (2023), the origin of Sol can be traced back to the later part of the 1800s, especially during the 'scramble for Africa'. It was however in May 1885 that the phrase was first used in an agreement between the Great Britain and Germany on the separation and division of areas of influence in the Gulf of Guinea. The true position is that the system and practice of spheres or zones of influence by which powerful states or nations meddle into the domestic matters of others have lingered to the present time, hence the current review of literature on U.S.-Russian hegemonic struggle for sphere of influence and political crises. Buranelli (2018) historicizes the dynamics of sphere of influence as well as the possibility of experiencing it again in Central Asia which was originally under the Tsarist Soviet Empire. The author contends that the phenomenon is better seen as social structure that continues to evolve by means of an orchestrated hegemony. Buranelli offers three explanations for the present influence of Russia in Central Africa. These are: Russia as a protector/provider of security in Central Asia; the ability of Russia to upset rules of behavior and values in the region; as well as the closeness/sameness of culture between Russia and defunct USSR. Nevertheless, states in Central Africa seem to have understood that this Russian influence is a dynamic one, and as a result have begun exploring other viable external policies and charting their own indigenous courses of action that lies outside of Russian dependency.

But then, Ortmann (2018) wonders whether the ragging geopolitical games of the post Cold war era can be satisfactorily explained within the framework and concept of sphere of influence. Her position is that the concept of sphere of influence reifies the state and focuses rather too much on a uni-directional analysis of the operation of power in the field of politics. She thus seeks a replacement of the concept, or even improvement, with an analytic framework capable of offering explanations for multifaceted and diverse political contexts. In this regards, the author came up with a tool of analysis that integrates 'seductive power' theory, operating via political intercourse, with 'state effect' analysis as developed by Timothy Mitchell. She demonstrated the efficacy of this tool by

revealing how political space and power Russian and Kyrgyz myth are effected in terms of relationship through rather loose and flexible means than the theory of sphere of influence advocates.

Perhaps in disagreement with Ortmann's idea, Ferguson (2018) offers a novel account about the contest for sphere of influence which did destabilize Ukraine. To him, it has nothing to do with the recrudescence of an old phenomenon, but a new phenomenon brought about in an effort to evade geopolitical squabbles in an area lying between Russia and the EU. In manifold ways, this effort did boomerang. The Ukrainian crisis stands as a marked delink from the state-centric typology of sphere of influence in the 19th century. However, towards questioning the sovereignty of Ukraine, and a handful of other related countries, a more sophisticated form of geopolitical struggle did spring up between Russia and the EU. By making allusion to neo-medieval political theory, the author explicates this. Following the attempt to forge an inviolate security order between Russia and the EU's borders by relying on the neo-medieval mentality, a fresh strand of sphere of influence was birthed, culminating in overlapping authority, crisis and conflicts as against peace and order in Ukraine. The author further notes that besides its fallacious pretences regarding the events of the past, the whole talk about sphere of influence is equally fastened to the activities of super states. Lilliputian states appear more like preys relative to the superpowers' geopolitical plays. The author therefore recognizes player participating sphere of influence deal is opportunistically driven, having organs, plans and preferences of their own.

It is therefore not surprising that Szostek (2018) expresses concerns about the way both the masses and powerful individuals react to the decision of Russia in imposing its power and influence. Apparently informed by Ferguson's (2018) emphasis on agency, Szostek (2018) examines the activities of the media in Ukraine and Belarus. The author however focuses on the interest of the domestic news providers in marketing information from Russia to Ukraine and Belarus, instead of critically inquiring into the means the media outfits based in Moscow are being used facilitating tools in establishing regional control. This kind of regional control by means of which actors in the developing world maintain the values of the developed world is what Szostek christened neo-Gramscian. She contends that the leadership of Russia has not been able to articulate a good plan of action towards deploying mass media in creating a sphere of influence. Again, the media message targeted at Russia's local audiences, which are later sent to Ukraine and Belarus, are usually poorly embraced by the audience of the less powerful countries against the interest of Russia.

While Szostek's (2018) point on the Russian leadership inability to develop a good plan of action towards deploying mass media in creating a sphere of influence to establish a sphere of influence remains logically coherent, Morozova (2018) advances the discussion on Russia's moves for sphere of influence narratives by focusing on the uses of the concept of 'humanitarian cooperation' in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The author reveals three connotations used in relation to uncovering three different 'humanitarian cooperation' used by Russia to include: literal, associative and symbolic. To overcome the problems associated with the incorporation of Crimea by Russia, the discussion on humanitarian cooperation was in 2014 amended. She however insists, using the Laclau and Mouffe's model of hegemony and antagonism that the influence of Russia in CIS region is not as deep as the prevailing narratives on the concept of sphere of influence appear to advance, while also prognosticating that countries in post-Soviet zone have the tendency to move further away from Russian orbit and influence.

Be that as it may, how true the above conclusion of Morozova (2018) can be depends yet again on the degree of importance that Russia attaches to the establishment and maintenance of Sol. It is in this regard that Suslov (2018) contribution becomes particularly remarkable. Illuminating on the perceptions of Russia concerning influence as well as how these developed, Suslov (2018) writes concerning how spheres of influence came to be engraved in the concept of 'Russian world', an phraseology that is fast assuming the status of a full blown ideology. Not ignoring the history of the concept, Suslov contends that the concept of 'Russian world' was not originally another word for neo-imperialist carvings of Russia in the post-Soviet space. The author moves to identify the periodic interruption of this between the 1990s and 2010s. He charts a move between the geopolitical extremes of a de-territorialized and de-centred imagery of the 'Russian archipelago' and a re-territorialized, irredentist and isolationist project. Then the option of 'sovereign democracy' came and injects to the 'Russian world' an agenda of spheres of interest quite different from what was known. His conclusion therefore is that Russia's, version of spheres of influence is better conceived as an outcome of hatred and disenchantment for American-led globalization and change of regime.

In their status seekers, Larson and Shevchenko (2010) note that China and Russia have since after the ideological war tended to be favourably disposed toward global governance whenever the two have the belief that such effort would boost their international ego and pride. The scholars, by deploying the theory of social identity, examined many improprieties in Chinese and Russian orientations which the existing models and theories, especially realism and Liberal institutionalism. They argue that the two countries made serious adjustments to their approaches as it concerns their identities as against variations in their relative power and these include: the isolation of China following the Tiananmen Square and Taiwan Strait conflict, the image of Russia as a 'basket case' of the 1990s. The authors stress that due to the desire for different means of identification, upcoming countries ought to be allowed to belong and identify with global structures and informal alignments without having to be made to do so on the basis of ideologies. They contend that in the face of the obvious reality of declining U.S's ability to attain its goals singlehandedly, it behooves the U.S. to start relating with Russia and China in a more friendly way instead of as dangerous competitors or unequal colleagues, as to do otherwise would end up in conflict situations.

Concerned about establishing a logical nexus between spheres of influence and spheres of conflict, Zivec (2018) turns to Russian pursuit of a sphere of influence in the Balkans, arguing that this pursuit heightened with the crystallization of the fresh cold war occasioned by the 2008 Georgian crisis. This fresh squabble became the 'New Cold War' in 2000s following the drifting of areas

formally under Russia's influence towards the West for security, closer affinity and success. Zivec blamed this on the Russia's inability to protect her sphere of influence as it rather recoiled into her cocoon to rebuild itself after the disintegration. This offered the U.S. and her western allies the opportunity integrate the emergent states of defunct Yugoslavia. To the author, it is the rebirth of Russia as well as heightened aggression in Eastern Europe, seen as a challenge of the U.S. sphere of influence in Eastern Europe that led to conflict.

Obiora, Onwunyi, Udegbunam, and Ostar (2019), however challenges the dominant view that U.S.-Russia relations have entered a new Cold War phase, arguing that Russia's US strategy can only be understood in the context of a changing international order. His position is that while America strives to preserve its global dominance, Russia exploits its asymmetric capabilities and relations with non-Western allies to defend and promote its interests, and to avoid yielding to U.S. pressures. Hinting on a number of issues like European security as well as cyber, nuclear, and energy, Tsygankov foresees a not too palatable scenario in which the two countries relations will apparently remain dotted with suspicion and conflict in the near future.

It is however worthy of attention that cycles of expectation and disappointments have plagued U.S.-Russian relations (Graham, 2008). The 1998 financial crisis that plagued Russia as well as the hot friction concerning the military activities of NATO against Yugoslavia in 1999 were the two cardinal events that dashed the hope and expectations of the first U.S.-Russian friendly relations after the end of the Cold War (Washington Post, June 18, 1992). The second decade of cycles of expectation and disappointments in these countries relations, according to the author, came following a number of issues, including but not limited to misunderstanding concerning Iraq, the insurgency in Chechnya, energy security, colour revolutions on region originally under Soviet Union, as well as other internal events in Russia. Graham therefore concludes that there is no easy way to improve the U.S Russian relations, because the disappointments of the last fifteen years have badly affected the relations, just as many puzzles in the contemporary have all combined to dispel the lack of trust truncating the effort.

It is therefore in this regard that Zahler (2017) offers what seems to be a more acceptable explanation of Chavez's contribution to the lingering crises. The author who explores the remote push-factor of the crisis in Venezuela insists that Chavismo did not create Venezuela's problems, conceding however that it nursed a corrupt administration than the preceding ones. The scholar notes that even prior to Chavez's reforms, corruption and unaccountability had been synonymous with the past governments of Venezuela. Far from pursuing transforming policies to better the economy, governments of the preceding era found power consolidation more imperative. Zahler however contends that a clear understanding of the current situation in Venezuela calls for a review of the events of 1958, the year a unified force of the military and civilians sacked Perez Jimenez.

U.S-Russian Foreign Policy and Venezuelan Political Crisis

Russian foreign policy tended to pay little attention to Latin America during the 1990s (Ellis, 2015). In 1997, then-foreign minister Primakov visited Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico and Venezuela. Russia began seeing Latin America as an increasingly global economic, political and cultural interest around 2003 (Blank and Kim, 2015). Russia started to intensify arms exports to parts of the region in 2004 (Blank and Kim, 2015) to increase its foreign policy clout by furthering Russian notions of a multipolar rather than a US-led rules-based liberal order, as well as propping up corrupt and undemocratic regimes, hence upsetting the US in its traditional sphere of influence, the Western Hemisphere. According to its foreign policy concept, "Russia remains committed to the comprehensive strengthening of relations with the Latin American and Caribbean States taking into account the growing role of this region in global affairs, [and expanding] cooperation with multilateral associations and Latin American and Caribbean integration structures, including [...] the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America," of which Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela and various Caribbean island states are members (Russian Federation, 2016). Furthermore, the official Russian foreign policy doctrine stresses the importance of "state sovereignty over natural resources" (Russian Federation, 2016).

The significant underlying motivations for Russia's multiple concerns in Latin America are political, strategic and financial (Onwunyi and Okonkwo, 2021). Further motives are strong links between the former Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez and Vladimir Putin before the Venezuelan crisis began to unravel (Katz, 2006), so that geopolitics, security-based vulnerabilities and balancing power relations against Western powers can be identified as Putin's principal motivations (Blank and Kim, 2015). The constructivist IR paradigm asserts that structural approaches that seek to shed light on foreign policy do not properly account for the centrality of identity and path-dependent explanations (Tsygankov and Tsygankov, 2021) that is inherent in "Putin's emerging foreign policy narrative" (Roberts, 2017, p. 28). Thus, they represent an oversimplification of the "multiple influences on Russian foreign policy" (Roberts, 2017, p. 29). Indeed, interactions between states unfold over time, and the presence of shared narratives, such as between the two state leaders Putin and Chávez, could explain why in a constantly changing international order, Russia and Venezuela still chose to solidify their nexus (Katz, 2006). According to constructivist perspectives, foreign policy is directed by a notion of Russian identity heavily influenced by Russia's past and present linkages and exchanges with the West, a hostile West bent on undermining Russian interests. Whilst the Russian ideational narrative might explain actions towards Russia's immediate neighbours, a historical and cultural connection to Russia in and of itself cannot fully explain Putin's actions (Tsygankov & Tsygankov, 2021).

Moreover, the rise of left-leaning or populist governments in some countries in the Latin American region since the end of the Cold War could explain why Russia has begun to identify new allies in the Western Hemisphere. As a result, Moscow has resorted to diplomacy, commerce and trade, investment, and military equipment and know-how sales to become an influential power (Sánchez, 2010). Furthermore, the Venezuelan and Cuban governments may be the most virulent anti-US powers in the Western Hemisphere

to have established themselves as a critical regional access and reference point in Russia's Latin American strategy in recent years. Thus, aspects of realist IR perspectives assert a strong influence on geopolitical objectives, and a favourable economic relationship and domestic issues such as national politics are explanatory factors that elucidate relations between Russia and Venezuela (Romero and Mijares, 2016; Mijares, 2019).

Furthermore, in multiple contexts, Russia has used soft power resources such as its state media channels, Russia Today (RT) and the Spanish-language Sputnik Mundo to shape and actively influence public opinion, thus, presenting Russia, its energy-based economy and military as well as Russian activity in international fora such as the United Nations (UN) or OPEC, in a positive light before a Latin American public. Venezuela plays a pivotal part in this strategy as it serves as the centre for transmitting Russian media activities, extending into politically motivated information campaigns on social media (Ellis, 2022a; Puyosa, 2021). Rouvinski (2021, p. 9) refers to this relationship as 'symbolic reciprocity' so much so that "Latin America and the Caribbean occupy a unique place in the government-controlled media's information effort."

Russia's interests have been fundamentally geostrategic, economic and culturally mediatic. The Latin American economy offers tangible benefits to Russia, particularly access to energy and arms sales. Some presidential and ministerial visits to and from Russia, major arms and energy deals, the presence of Russian long-range bombers, joint naval exercises with Venezuela and fleet calls to Nicaragua and Cuba (Ellis, 2022a) are manifest proof of Russian "collusion with anti-U.S. authoritarian regimes in the region" (Ellis, 2022b, p. 1), with Venezuela remaining the cornerstone of Russian activities in Latin America (Ellis and Berg, 2022). Although Russian interests in Cuba and Nicaragua are more of a military nature, Russian activities in Venezuela are multifaceted. Still, in more general terms, the three countries can be considered "Moscow's three loyal Latin American allies" (Financial Times, 2023). Without a grasp of the inter-linkage of all these factors, it is practically impossible to thoroughly comprehend the external actions of the Russian government on the international stage and the decisions of the Kremlin regarding Latin America, especially Venezuela.

On several occasions, Russia has stated that Latin America should be a region of peace based on respect for the guiding statutes of international law and the charters of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the UN. Russia has defended non-interference by other states, such as the US, in the region, which, according to the Russian view, are a source of violent verbal and demonstrative challenges to security (Blank and Kim, 2015). Also, this policy stance especially means opposition to unilateral operations involving the use of force. Moreover, Russia has tended to back Venezuela diplomatically in various UN fora and has repeatedly blocked multilateral initiatives to punish or place embargoes on Venezuela (Rouvinski, 2019). Russia has thus far shown much concern for outside interference in Venezuela's internal affairs. It has warned against the possibility of states using force against the territorial integrity and political independence of Venezuela, as well as what Russia perceives as possibly illegitimate interference within the domestic jurisdiction of the Venezuelan state (Rouvinski, 2019). The following section will focus on applying TGT concerning Russian foreign policy towards Venezuela in more specific terms.

Theoretical Framework

This paper was anchored on the Two-persons' Zero-sum model of the Game Theory of international politics provides the theoretical compass for navigating through the theoretical waters of the study. According to Piano and Riggs (1973, p.33), the game theory is a "body of thoughts dealing with rational decision strategies in situations of conflict and competition, when each participant or player seeks to maximize gains and minimize losses". Like some palour games after which the game theory is patterned or modeled such as chess, chicken, and poker, the game theory represents a game played between two or more players, where decisions of each player are dependent on the decisions of others, and the central point, therefore, is the interdependence among the decisions of the different players participating in the game.

Articulated first as an intellectual exercise by Emil Borel in 1920, the original game theory was later fine-tuned and popularized by John von Neuman and Oscar Morgenstern in their seminal work—Theory of Games and Economic Behavior—published in 1944, and was primarily applied to the study of economics. The credit of introducing and to some extent applying the game theory to political science goes to R. Duncan Luce and Howard Raiffa in their work, Games and Decision: Introduction and Critical Survey, 1957; Martin Slubik in Games Theory and Related Approaches to Social Behaviour, 1964; and Anatol Rapaport, in his work, Two Person Game Theory: The Essential Ideas, 1966 (Varma 1975). Again, in 1970, the usefulness of the theory was further extended to decision-making owing to the important contribution of Morgenstern titled Theory and Decision. Although the theory has its origin in mathematical economics, and deals essentially with the application of mathematical models to conflicts, competitive and decision-making situations, its utility in political science was sagaciously adumbrated and succinctly enunciated by Varma (1986, p.287) in the following lines:

In all situations, where a decision involving the others has to be taken, in the case of generals engaged in battles, diplomats engaged in bargaining and negotiations, politicians trying to influence the voters, legislators making efforts to organize groups or coalitions, the game theory has a role to play.

According to the theory, a game can either be zero-sum or non zero-sum. "On the one hand", writes Igwe (2005, p. 169), "the zero-sum game is where the gains and losses are fixed, a winner-take-all game, with any gain being only at the expense of a complete loss of the other actor and vice versa". He further distinguished the nonzero-sum game as one in which the gains and losses are flexible and relative, and can be affected or determined by cooperation, not just conflict, between players.

The Two Persons' zero-sum model of the game theory is appropriate for the analysis of the conflict situation in Venezuela where two superpowers—the U.S. and Russia, are competing for values. There is no doubt that the first principle (in every game situation,

player schemes to maximize his gains/advantages and minimize his losses) is what the current issue in Venezuela is primarily all about. It is on record that since 2010, Russia has made huge financial commitment and invested heavily and dearly in Venezuela up to the tune of \$9 billion (Lowe & Sagdiev, 2019). Now, should Russia-backed socialist government of Maduro be toppled and replaced by the U.S.-sponsored transitional government of Guaido, Russia, no doubt, runs the unimaginable risk of losing its over \$9 billion worth of investment in Venezuela. On the other hand, should Russia continue to deepen and exploit its burgeoning relationship with Maduro's Venezuela, America will definitely stand the risk of losing its historical grip on Venezuela and by extension, the whole of Latin America and its attendant negative economic implications to the U.S economy. It therefore stands to reason in view of the above to aver that the "geopolitical game in Venezuela" (Gurganus, 2018, para.1) between the two countries is clearly and squarely that of maximization of gains/advantages and minimization of losses.

Methodology

The study adopted the Time series design, which is a research design that involves measurements in series of events over time or some periods (Babbie, 2005; McNabb, 2009). To be sure, the measurements was taken at fixed time periods—days, weeks, months, quarters, years. Our model of Time-series design is thus a form of qualitative trend analysis involving a longitudinal study (collection of data at different points in time) on a population or phenomenon with the intention of monitoring its dynamism (changes or consistency in patterns).

For this study, the Documentary method was deployed in gathering data. It is important to note that documentary method of research data gathering is that approach that helps the researcher to glean information and data from an already documented source. In collecting the data for the study, we relied heavily on such written documents like books, book chapters, journal articles, official documents, magazines and newspaper.

In research, data are not collected for the purpose of gathering and stocking them. They are primarily collected for analysis towards the validation or rejection of research hypotheses. In this study, the Content analysis method was adopted. It is used in obtaining in-depth information about the units of analysis of a given item of study. Being a method with high utility in qualitative research and with the most significant feature of relying heavily on skills, creativity and abilities of the researcher, it involves processes of interpretation, logical induction and analytic sagacity. Although content analysis has its origin in information science and mass communication, its utility in the social sciences, nay, political science, has in recent time acquired remarkable popularity because of its systematic revelations of evidential facts, among others.

Data Presentation and Analysis

U.S.'s Invocation of "Monroe Doctrine" Versus Russia's "Symbolic Presence" Policy and the Presidential Crisis in Venezuela

As was stated in the background of the study, since 1823, the U.S. has considered the Latin Americas as its global back yard. It was in that year (1823), that the then U.S. President, James Monroe announced the Monroe Doctrine, which among other things, stipulated that the U.S. deems the region spanning Mexico to the southernmost tip of Latin America its exclusive sphere of influence (Busch, 2019). The Doctrine has four (4) basic points, namely:

- i. The United States would not interfere in the affairs of European nations,
- ii. The United States would recognise, and not interfere with, countries that already existed in the Americas.
- iii. The Western Hemisphere was off-limits to colonization by any foreign power,
- iv. The United States would consider any attempt by a European power to colonize or interfere in the Western Hemisphere a hostile act.

Among other reasons, President Monroe also wanted to stop the influence of Russia in western North America (Ducksters, n.d.). Juxtaposed therefore with the above, the U.S. considers Russia's increasing presence in Latin America, especially Venezuela since the end of the Cold War an undue flirtation with her backyard. In comparatively recent time, needless to say, Russia has been a primary backer of Maduro, and the primary arms supplier to Venezuela for the past decade, including fighter aircraft and antimissile defense systems. To the U.S. infuriation, Moscow has continued show open and strong support to Maduro's government, which to the U.S. is a dictatorship that must be ousted. In March, 2019, for instance, about 100 Russian military personnel arrived in Caracas aboard two military planes. The U.S. national security adviser, John Bolton and the Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, expressed concerns that increased Russian military, diplomatic and economic support were propping up Venezuelan President, Nicolas Maduro, in the face of U.S. and other calls for his ouster (DeYoung, 2019). They had thought the purpose for which the Russian military personnel came was to perform maintenance on the S-300 air defense system, at the completion of which they would leave. But unfolding events have proven otherwise. So when the call by the U.S. for Russia to remove her people in Venezuela was not hearkened by Russia, John Bolton declared that the U.S. was "implementing the Monroe Doctrine, established in 1823 to prevent outside powers from intervening in the Western Hemisphere" (DeYoung, 2019, para.3). He sternly warned that no country should enter the Western Hemisphere "with the intent of establishing or expanding military operations" (Sanger, 2019, para.5). In May 1st 2019, he declared with distinct air of possessiveness: "This is our hemisphere — it's not where the Russians ought to be interfering" (Frolov, 2019, para.7).

It is important to note at this juncture that U.S. Presidents throughout history have had occasions to pragmatically invoke the Monroe Doctrine in the course of intervening in foreign affairs in the Western Hemisphere. Table 1 contains some examples of the Monroe Doctrine in action.

Table 1: Classic Examples of the Monroe Doctrine in Action in the Past

Year of Invocation	Nature and Places of Invocation
1865	The U.S. government helped to overthrow Mexican Emperor Maximilian I who was put in power by the French. He was replaced by President Benito Juarez.
1904	President Theodore Roosevelt added the "Roosevelt Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine. He used the doctrine to stop what he called "wrongdoing" in several countries. It was the beginning of the U.S. acting as an international police force in the Americas.
1962	President John F. Kennedy invoked the Monroe Doctrine during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The U.S. placed a naval quarantine around Cuba to prevent the Soviet Union from installing ballistic missiles on the island.
1982	President Reagan invoked the Monroe Doctrine to, fight communism in the Americas, including countries such as Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Source: Ducksters (n.d.). US History: The Monroe Doctrine.

However, Bolton's (threat of) invocation of the Monroe Doctrine and his "spheres of influence framing" makes Russia believe that, if done on an equal basis, a similar right should be recognized for Russia in Ukraine and other parts of the "near abroad" (Frolov, 2019, para.7). Going forward, Frolov (2019) also noted that Putin made it clear to Trump on phone conversation that withdrawing Russian military support for Maduro should also be matched by the withdrawal of U.S. military assistance to Ukraine. With the U.S. reluctance to grant Russia's request for equality of treatment, especially as it affects the Ukrainian crisis, Russia remains doggedly committed to her "Symbolic Presence" Policy in Latin America by unyieldingly sinking her teeth deeper and deeper into the fresh of Venezuela. Although the U.S. has over the years demonstrated that she has the military might to strike when and wherever she deemed fit. Russia is arguably a match for U.S. and ready to dare at present. Table 2 compares the U.S and Russia's military strengths.

Table 2: U.S. and Russia Military Strengths Compared

Russian Army	U.S. Army
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 67,820 main battle tanks 135,402 armored fighting vehicles 23,917 self-propelled guns 13,465 towed artillery 1 0,467 multiple-launch rocket systems 664 tactical ballistic missile systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 28,950 main battle tanks 186,930 armored fighting vehicles 24,810 self-propelled guns 1 1 ,600 towed artillery 9, 1 1 0 multiple-launch rocket systems 2,850 tactical ballistic missile systems
Russian Navy	U.S Navy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 aircraft carriers 4 battlecruisers 3 cruisers 15 destroyers 3 frigates 78 corvettes 63 submarines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 25 aircraft carriers 23 helicopter carriers 28 battleships 119 battlecruisers 233 cruisers 389 destroyers 516 frigates 878 corvettes 269 submarines
Russian Air Force	U.S. Air Force

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1,109 bombers 6,490 fighters/interceptors 2,638 attack aircraft 1,506 transports 5,474 helicopters 5,094 attack helicopters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2,350 bombers 11,895 fighters/interceptors 6,930 attack aircraft 8,843 transports 12,720 helicopters 8,690 attack helicopters
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Source: Compiled by the Researcher from: Global Firepower-2019 world military strength ranking available at www.globalfirepower.com and http://www.raptorfind.com/page/en/Russia%20%93%20United_States_relations

The engagement of the Bolivarian Republic by Russia is a manifestation of the extent to which President Putin is prepared to carry far away nations along as allies in rebuilding a fresh multipolar world order that challenges the current order that is pro and pan-U.S. (Rouvinski, 2019). By geographical proximity, Venezuela, and indeed the entire Latin America, is a vast distance to Russia compared to the United States. But as it always is in every expansionist commitment (latent or manifest), Russia has thrown both caution and cost to the winds in making sure that the Bolivarian Republic (Venezuela) is technically recruited into her sphere of influence. Currently, Venezuela is Russia's closest ally in the Latin America (Onwunyi, Asukwo and Ojukwu, 2025). This commitment by Russia to establish and maintain "symbolic presence" in Venezuela is further buoyed up and sustained by the predominant view among Russian political elite that the lingering economic Venezuelan economic quagmire is a product of U.S.-sponsored calculations and moves of sabotage, and not necessarily a consequence of Bolivarian government economic policies (Rouvinski, 2019). Russia's greatest investment in Venezuela has been undertaken through Rosneft—Russian state-owned oil company. Russia elites have publicly declared through Rosneft's manager, Igor Sechin that their company and Kremlin "will never abandon Venezuela" (Reuters, 2017, para.6). This is because "Russia believes that it has made too many tangible and intangible investments here. Were Venezuela ever to fall from the Russian orbit, it would be very painful for the Kremlin. Moscow is therefore trying hard to prevent this from happening" (Rouvinski, 2019, p.2) by doggedly supporting Maduro against all the odds stalked against him.

Arising logically from the foregoing dynamics of U.S's invocation of the Monroe Doctrine that sees Venezuela as U.S. backyard on the one hand, and Russia's determination to keep Venezuela within its orbital influence by maintaining "symbolic presence" on the other hand, is the burning issue of who the legitimate Venezuelan President is—Maduro or Guaido. This is what the presidential crisis in Venezuela is all about! Whose preferred candidate presides over the people, economy and territory of Venezuela underscores the battle for influence being waged between the United States, which firmly backs Guaido, and Russia, a tenacious friend of the Maduro government.

Juan Gauido is the leader of the opposition-dominated National Assembly, who rejected the reelection of Maduro into second term of another six years on grounds of irregularities and fraudulent conduct (Camacho, 2018). With the rejection of the results as invalid, the National Assembly, in January 2019, invoked relevant sections, particularly articles 233, 333 and 350 of Venezuelan Constitution of 1999 to install Juan Gauido, the Speaker of the opposition dominated National Assembly as the acting President. On January 23rd Juan Gauido publicly declared himself the President of Venezuela. Few minutes after, President Trump of the U.S. officially recognized him in that capacity. As has been elsewhere stated, the rejection and acceptance of the May 2018 election and its outcomes have continued to enjoy both domestic and international appeal, reflecting as it were, the old traditional geopolitical lines (Vasilyeva, 2019). While the governments of China, Cuba, Iran, Syria, Turkey, Russia, etc accepted the results, the United Nations, the European Union, the Lima Group, the Organisation of American States, the G7, the U.S. and 53 other countries rejected both the process and the outcome of the elections, and have thus thrown their support behind Gauido (Wyss, 2018; Phillips, 2019; Vasilyeva, 2019). Tables 3 and 4 below show the pattern of international recognition and support for both Gauido and Maduro.

Table 3: Countries that Recognized and Support the Legitimacy of Gauido's Presidency

S/N	Name of Countries	S/N	Name of Countries
1	Albania	29	Hungary
2	Andora	30	Iceland
3	Argentina	31	Ireland
4	Australia	32	Israel
5	Austria	33	Japan
6	Bahamas	34	Latvia
7	Belgium	35	Lithuania
8	Brazil	36	Luxemburg
9	Bulgaria	37	Malta
10	Canada	38	Marshall Islands

11	Chile	39	Micronesia
12	Colombia	40	Montenegro
13	Costa Rica	41	Morocco
14	Croatia	42	Netherlands
15	Czech Republic	43	North Macedonia
16	Denmark	44	Panama
17	Dominican Republic	45	Paraguay
18	Ecuador	46	Peru
19	El Salvador	47	Poland
20	Estonia	48	Portugal
21	Finland	49	Romania
22	France	50	Slovenia
23	Georgia	51	South Korea
24	Germany	52	Spain
25	Greece	53	Sweden
26	Guatemala	54	Ukraine
27	Haiti	55	United Kingdom
28	Honduras	56	United States

Source: Tabulated by the Researcher based on information gleaned from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Responses_to_the_2019_Venezuelan_presidential_crisis#Maduro_presidency.

A number of intergovernmental, international and domestic organizations have also thrown their supports behind Acting President Guaido. These include: European Parliament, Lima Group, PROSUR, Organization of American States and the Andean Parliament (Inter-governmental Organizations); Inter-American Development Bank, Socialist International (international organizations); and Episcopal Conference of Venezuela, Fedecaimara, Institutional Military Front, Venezuelan Liberation Front, and Venezuelan Workers Front (domestic organizations).

Meanwhile, by late January, 2019, "President" Guaido had started forming his own cabinet and appointing individuals to serve as aides or diplomats. He appointed Carlos Vecchio as his administration's diplomatic envoy to the U.S., and Gustavo Tarre as that of the OAS. Julio Borges was appointed to represent Venezuela in the Lima Group (Alianza News, 29 January 2019). Acting on the prodding of Guaido, a plan for the rebuilding of Venezuela was approved and commissioned by the National Assembly (Adams & Tamoa, 2019). Still in the capacity of the Acting President of Venezuela, Guaido offered an Amnesty law, which was approved by the National Assembly, for military personnel and authorities who help to restore constitutional order. On February 5th, his Statute Governing the Transition to Democracy was approved by the National Assembly (Brito, 2019). However, while "President" Guaido was on one hand constituting and naming his cabinet members, Maduro's Minister for Prison services, Iris Varela, mockingly encouraged Guaido "to be quick in naming his cabinet" as she had prepared for him and his cabinet "prison cells" (Reuters, 15 January 2019). Of course, Guaido had been detained on 13 January by the Bolivarian Intelligence Service (SEEIN) and released 45 minutes later (Philip, 2019).

Table 4: Countries that Recognized and Support the Legitimacy of Maduro's Presidency

S/N	Name of Countries	S/N	Name of Countries
1	Belarus	12	Palestine
2	Bolivia	13	Russia
3	Cambodia	14	Saint Kitts and Nevis
4	China	15	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
5	Cuba	16	Serbia
6	Dominica	17	South Africa
7	Equatorial Guinea	18	Surinam
8	Iran	19	Syria
9	Laos	20	Turkey

10	Nicaragua	21	Uruguay
11	North Korea	22	Vietnam

Source: Tabulated by the Researcher based on information gleaned from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Responses_to_the_2019_Venezuelan_presidential_crisis#Maduro_presidency

Similarly, a number of intergovernmental, international and domestic organizations have also vehemently recognized and shown support for President Maduro. These are: ALBA and SADC (Inter-governmental Organizations); Hamas and Hezbollah (international organizations); and of course the PDVA (domestic organization).

Summarily, the presidential crisis in Venezuela which is rooted in legitimacy tussle has continued unabated because of U.S.'s invocation of "Monroe Doctrine" which see Venezuela as part of America's sphere of influence on the one hand and Russia's unyielding determination to establish and maintain a "Symbolic Presence" in Venezuela. The peace talks held around June, 2019 between Maduro and Guaido ended in stalemate because, as it were, neither of the two superpowers backing the two "presidents" was ready to compromise its vested interest in the country.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The academic curiosity that necessitated this study was aroused the post-election crisis in Venezuela. Following the May 20th 2018 presidential election in Venezuela that saw the reelection of President Maduro for another 6 years' term, the leader of the opposition-dominated national Assembly—Juan Guaido—announced himself the interim President of the country. The U.S. government's recognition and stout backing of Guaido's presidency further reinforced Russia's strong backing for Maduro's continued presidency. This situation engendered a post-election/presidential crisis bordering on who the legitimate president of Venezuela is—Maduro or Guaido? Supporters of both leaders have since clashed against another, with violent protests/demonstrations being correspondingly violently cracked down by the security forces loyal to President Maduro in the ensuing political crisis. The conclusion, in the light of the above annotations therefore, is that the U.S. and Russian governments' hegemonic struggle for sphere of influence has not only escalated the post-election crisis in Venezuela, it has also sustained it.

In view of the foregoing, study recommends that while it is very imperative to reanimate the principle of Non-intervention (Non-interference in domestic affairs) as contained in Article 2.7 of United Nations (UN) Charter, the UN should also as a matter of mounting urgency pass a resolution that strips the five permanent members of the Security Council of their veto power on any matter in which they are a party. By so doing, the party or parties will no longer be able to veto any resolution which they consider unfavourable to their interest.

Again, the absence of this has been the reason for the lingering presidential crisis in Venezuela as the UN's February 28th 2019 and September 27th 2019 resolutions on the Venezuelan crisis were all vetoed by Russia and China (two permanent members of the UN Security Council). It is a veritable point of law that no man should be a judge in his own case (*nemo judex in causa sua*).

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