

NEEDLESS DIVERSION: ON VENEZUELA'S REFERENDUM AND ITS CLAIM OVER ESSEQUIBO

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Venezuela's [move to hold a referendum](#) on whether it should exercise sovereignty over Essequibo, a vast, oil-rich disputed region that is now part of neighbouring Guyana, has cut open old wounds and inflamed tensions between the South American nations. According to Venezuela's electoral authorities, more than 95% of the voters supported the country's claim. It is not clear what the government of President Nicolás Maduro is going to do next, but the fact that he held the referendum with just months left for the next presidential election suggests the leftist leader might keep the border tensions alive. Venezuela has always retained claims over Essequibo, which it says was stolen when the north-south border was drawn by colonial powers over a century ago. In 1966, Venezuela and the U.K. entered into a temporary Geneva Agreement on the border (Guyana was a British colony) to maintain the status quo while seeking to find a practical, peaceful and satisfactory solution for all. Tensions eased when Hugo Chávez, Mr. Maduro's leftist predecessor, was the President. But when an oil boom began transforming Guyana's economy, Mr. Maduro's regime started becoming more vocal about the country's claims over the region.

Guyana, the only English speaking country in Latin America, maintains that the 1899 border agreement between international arbitrators (from Britain, Russia and the U.S.) is final and approached the International Court of Justice in 2018, requesting a ruling. Venezuela on the other side has always argued that it was not part of the 1899 agreement, which it calls null and void. When Guyana moved the world court requesting a ban on the referendum, the court refused to do so but asked Caracas not to take any action based on the referendum altering the status quo. But Mr. Maduro has already dismissed the world court's jurisdiction over the dispute. He is under growing international pressure to hold free elections. Recently, the U.S. eased sanctions on Venezuela as the Maduro government reached a deal with the opposition for next year's election. While Mr. Maduro retains a tight grip over state institutions, he is also unpopular with sections who are increasingly frustrated with the state of the economy, particularly shortages of essentials, and hyperinflation. While a border crisis could be a welcome distraction for him from domestic woes as elections are approaching, it does not offer any solution to the myriad crises that the oil-rich South American country is facing. If anything, a border conflict would make the situation worse. Mr. Maduro should refrain from taking any unilateral action and continue to try and resolve the territorial issues with Guyana through talks in the true spirit of the Geneva Agreement.

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