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THE CASTRO CRISIS. DUTCH GUNBOAT DIPLOMACY AND REGIME CHANGE IN VENEZUELA 1908

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Abstract

Recent research by political scientists systematically comes to the conclusion that policies of foreign powers that promote military coups in a target state through own (limited) military action often fail. This paper questions these analyzes and, based on source publications, archive and literature research, discusses a more historical case that refutes the aforementioned statements. It concerns Dutch fleet deployment against Venezuela in 1908, which brings about the regime change intended by the Netherlands and stabilizes the mutual international relationship between both states in the medium term. Issues such as trade policy, territorial threat, revolutionary unrest, influence of other (great) foreign powers like the US, which with regard to Latin America and European colonial powers used the Monroe, but also the fact that the Netherlands was the weakest of the aforementioned powers, is discussed. The paper concludes with the analysis that the afore mentioned political science studies generalize too much, and have also to take into account less recent historical casuistry regarding irregular transfers of political power thanks to foreign military intervention.

Key words: Regime change, Foreign military intervention, Gunboat Diplomacy, Naval History, Netherlands, Caribbean, Monroe Doctrine.

Introduction

Given the theme of this XLIX ICMH Congress, “The Role of the Military in Political Transitions: from the 18th century to the present day”, I would like to analyze a historical case of a putsch which was triggered by a foreign military action/intervention. Many studies concerning the latter type of regime change, focus on US involvement in coups d’état in for example Latin America and Asia, but also on countries like France that influenced with its military palace revolutions etc. in former colonies in Africa. As political scientist Lindsey A. O’Rourke says, stimulating regime change by foreign states is most salient as a political tool, when officials in for example Washington in the past viewed changing a regime was easier than trying to negotiate a settlement of various contentious issues.⁽¹⁾

However, as O’Rourke, but also other academics like Benjamin Denison, Alexander Downes and Aaron Rapport underline, to their opinion history shows that there was rarely much reduction in later conflicts between the intervener and the targeted country - or improved relations - following a regime-change operation. Instead, interstate relations are in their view often made worse due to principal-agent dynamics. New regimes felt compelled to placate local concerns over the intervener’s interests in order to prove that the government was legitimate and not a foreign puppet. Furthermore, foreign interveners/influence, according to O’Rourke and others, undertook military action for regime change to enhance the economic relationship with the target state and produce benefits for own national commerce companies. However, according to aforementioned academics, rather than improving bilateral trade flows, foreign-stimulated regime change often lead to stagnation or worsening of the bilateral trade relations.⁽²⁾

This paper will discuss an early 20th century foreign military intervention that in many aspects successfully brought regime change in a target-state. It was successful not only in the sense that the intended coup actually took place, but also in the sense that a policy change favorable to the intervening power took place, and brought medium term calm to the bilateral relationship between the two involved countries. It concerns an intervention by the Royal Netherlands Navy (RNLN) in Venezuela, in a period in which the Netherlands, surprisingly, internationally maintained a foreign policy of strict neutrality. The backgrounds of this case study are explained from several points of view, and of course analyses and comments follow on the above-mentioned studies that foreign involvement in regime change often had negative results.

1. Lindsey A. O’Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America’s Secret Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 5.

2. Benjamin Denison, “The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: The Failure of Regime Change”, *Policy Analysis* No. 883, Cato Institute, Washington, DC, January 6 (2020) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23039>; Alexander B. Downes and Lindsey A. O’Rourke, “You Can’t Always Get What You Want: Why Foreign Imposed Regime Change Seldom Improves Interstate Relations”, *International Security* 41, No. 2 (2016), 43–89; Aaron Rapport, *Waging War, Planning Peace: U.S. Noncombat Operations and Major Wars* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

The international situation in the Caribbean

The Caribbean in 1900 was a region full of tensions where European powers tried to expand their influence after the colonial partition of Africa. However, in the course of the nineteenth century, the US claimed a special position for itself here (and the rest of Latin America) on the basis of the so called Monroe Doctrine. It was named after American president James Monroe (1817-1825), who stated that the US, apart from existing colonies, did not accept further foreign (European) interference in the domestic politics of the American continent. At the same time Washington tried to extend a “protective US umbrella” over this part of the world, among others to justify own power politics.⁽³⁾

Latin American countries had little to offer in return. Economically weak and politically unstable, these states were at the mercy of the major powers. These in turn made use of the international division in trade and production. The Latin American countries were only suppliers of raw materials and plantation products and soon found themselves burdened with large foreign debts. In addition to the US (and when it suited them with its blessing), European powers also used these outstanding debts and claims from own national companies as an excuse to intervene in the internal affairs of the Caribbean. An example of this was a joint German, British, Italian naval blockade (1902/3) against Venezuela under the fickle president and general Cipriano P. Castro Ruiz (1899-1908). Hereafter, Caracas had to give in and make payments to the countries involved.⁽⁴⁾

The Netherlands relations with Venezuela

Dutch relations with countries in the Caribbean were to a large extent dominated by the aforementioned rise of the US. After a war against Spain and its South American colonies that Washington had successfully concluded in 1898, the Dutch were worried about their hold on the Netherlands Antilles, especially since the US searched for further bases for the US Navy in the Caribbean. Shortly after the above mentioned blockade, the Venezuelan regime began to fall back on old measures that made it difficult for European colonial powers to continue their trade policy. As a result, also the relations between Venezuela and the Netherlands cooled.⁽⁵⁾ After 1907, relations deteriorated further due to several incidents. Damage claims by Dutch ship-owners, the flight of three rebellious Venezuelan generals to the Antilles and the subsequent tightening of measures against Curacao trade, brought growing irritations on both sides.⁽⁶⁾

3. Frank Niess, *A Hemisphere to Itself. A History of US-Latin America Relations* (Zed Books: Köln 1990), 75.

4. K.H. Corporaal, *De Internationaalrechtelijke betrekkingen tusschen Nederland en Venezuela 1816-1920* PhD Thesis University Leiden (Vereenigde Drukkerijen: Leiden, 1920), 426-428; Niess, *Hemisphere to Itself*, 75.

5. Corporaal, *Nederland en Venezuela*, 426-428.

6. C. Smit, *Bescheiden concerning the Foreign Policy of the Netherlands 1848-1919*. 3th Period 1899-1919. 3th Vol. 1907-1914 (Instituut voor Nederlandse Geschiedenis: The Hague, 1974), 287, Minister-resident Caracas J.H. de Reus to Minister of Foreign Affairs, R. de Marees van Swinderen, 30 May 1908.

Castro hereafter took an economic measure that was supposed to demonstrate inland, his steadfastness and hit the Curacao transit trade in its core. On May 14th 1908, the government in Caracas issued a decree, after which all transshipments had to take place at the Venezuelan port of Puerto Cabello. Because Curacao trade was mainly focused on Coro and Maracaibo, this decree formed an obstacle to Dutch trade in the region. On 15 May, Castro issued another decree, this time prohibiting the sailing of all small vessels to Venezuela.⁽⁷⁾ These measures brought Curacao's trade to a standstill. The Dutch were shocked.

From bad to worse

Given the above-mentioned situation, it was no surprise that the Dutch government in The Hague reconsidered the relationship with Caracas. The station ship in the Antillean waters, the light cruiser HNLMS *Gelderland*, with Captain W.D.H. Baron van Asbeck as CO, was put on alert. Governor J.O. de Jong van Beek en Donk of Curacao, was ordered by Minister of Colonies A.W.F. Idenburg to have the *Gelderland* to operate near the Venezuelan coast and "satisfy the opinion that Dutch commercial shipping was by this secured".⁽⁸⁾

Meanwhile, the Dutch diplomat and minister-resident in Caracas, J.H. de Reus, complained in vain against the various Venezuelan measures. Moreover, his position became untenable because the Venezuelan Ministry of Foreign Affairs made an error in the translation of one of his protest notes, and now described Castro as an "*espíritu maléfico*" (malevolent spirit).⁽⁹⁾ To make matters worse, a private letter from De Reus in which he criticized the political and commercial situation of Venezuela under Castro's rule, was leaked in the press. A furious Castro had the Dutchman sent his passports on 20 July 1908, to leave the country. Also, the permits of all the Dutch consuls in Venezuela were revoked. For the moment Dutch interests were to be handled by the German consul A. Baron von Seckendorff.⁽¹⁰⁾

Intervention plans and the Monroe Doctrine

The government in The Hague, meanwhile, began to think about military intervention. This required political support from major foreign powers, and especially the US. The Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs R. de Marees van Swinderen therefore spoke with the

7. M. van den Blink, *Olie op de golven. De betrekkingen tussen Nederland/Curaçao en Venezuela gedurende de eerste helft van de twintigste eeuw* (Bataafsche Leeuw: Amsterdam 1989), 18; Smit, *Bescheiden*, 3th Period. 3th Vol., 288, Appendix letter De Reus to De Marees van Swinderen, 30 May 1908.

8. *Yearbook RNLN 1907-1908* (De Gebroeders Van Cleef: The Hague 1909), 39.

9. Smit, *Bescheiden*, 3th Period. 3th Vol., 313-315, De Reus to Minister of Foreign Affairs De Marees van Swinderen, 20 June 1908.

10. Smit, *Bescheiden*, 3th Period. 3th Vol., 339, Telegram of governor of Curacao De Jong van Beek en Donk to Minister of Colonies Idenburg, 23 July 1908.

American envoy A. Beaupré on 1 August. He announced that the government had reached a provisional decision and had send the iron clad HNLMS *Jacob van Heemskerck* under Captain J.B. Snethlage to the Caribbean, to support the light cruiser *Gelderland* and to put pressure on Caracas, as well as to hint at possible hostilities. Given these intentions, the government in The Hague hoped that Washington, “neither in the Monroe Doctrine nor in any other purely national interest, would find reason to greet the actions of the Netherlands with less approval.”⁽¹¹⁾

The State Department, through Assistant Secretary of State A.A. Adey, stated that

“concerning the possibility of coercive action in regard to Venezuela, we should not feel at liberty to object to measures of the character described in the Minister’s question, not involving occupation of the territory either permanent or of such a character as to threaten permanency.”⁽¹²⁾

This positive US stand was no surprise. The American government of president Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909), who was also at odds with the Castro regime and had broken off diplomatic relations in June 1908, was at that time in no position to take action itself. The president had submitted a possible US decision on a naval action to the Senate, but it had broken up before the summer recess without taking a stand. Furthermore, presidential elections were looming. An intervention by the US Navy at that moment would therefore be very sensitive.⁽¹³⁾

In order to seek further political support, the Netherlands contacted Britain and France on a possible joint intervention against Caracas.⁽¹⁴⁾ Both Paris and London, despite far-reaching frictions with Caracas, responded negatively regarding a possible multinational military action. Entangled in an European crisis situation, which had arisen after the annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary, and in no hurry to upset Washington, they were happy to leave this matter to the Netherlands.⁽¹⁵⁾

11. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 341, Remark of Minister of Foreign Affairs De Marees van Swinderen, 1 August 1908.

12. Smit, *Bescheiden concerning the Foreign Policy of the Netherlands 1848-1919*. 3th Period., 6th Vol. Foreign Sources 1899-1974 (Nederlands Instituut voor Geschiedenis: The Hague, 1974) 401-402, Numerical telegram Assistant Secretary of State Adey to the American envoy in The Hague Beaupré, 6 August 1908.

13. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 341-342, Remark Minister of Foreign Affairs De Marees van Swinderen, 1 August 1908.

14. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 343, Minister of Foreign Affairs De Marees van Swinderen to envoy in London Gericke van Herwijnen, 4 August 1908; idem, Confidential, Minister of Foreign Affairs De Marees van Swinderen to envoy in Paris De Stuers, 5 August 1908.

15. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 344-345, Envoy in London Gericke van Herwijnen to Minister of Foreign Affairs De Marees van Swinderen, 6 August 1908; idem, 345, Envoy in Paris De Stuers to Minister of Foreign Affairs De Marees van Swinderen, 6 August 1908.

Further “unfriendly acts”

On 2 August 1908, the Dutch Ministry of the Navy learned that HNLMS *Gelderland* was hindered in its mission by the Venezuelan authorities at the port of La Guaiara. Dutch naval officers who carried a report for the German diplomat Von Seckendorff, were told that “no communication was permitted”.⁽¹⁶⁾ Late July tensions increased further after riots by Venezuelan exiles on Curacao. They had marched to the Venezuelan consulate, after which some of them removed the coat of arms from the facade and molested the consul.

The Dutch characterized the La Guaiara events with their naval officers as an “extremely unfriendly act”.⁽¹⁷⁾ Caracas had, given this new incident, to show its goodwill by restoring free trade with Curacao “for a date to be determined and to be set very soon”. If no such a reaction came, the Dutch threatened to end a protocol from 1894 that restricted arms exports to (rebellious regions of) Venezuela.⁽¹⁸⁾ The only reaction The Hague received was a Venezuelan protest note on the riots at the consulate in Curacao; satisfaction and reparation were demanded from the Dutch. If the Netherlands did not comply, “friendly [diplomatic] relations were no longer possible”.⁽¹⁹⁾ This note was received with great annoyance and the Dutch announced that they would “considérer le protocole de 1894 comme aboli”.⁽²⁰⁾

The noose is tightened

After the above mentioned incidents the Dutch strengthened their naval force near Curacao with a third vessel. In addition to the already present HNLMS *Gelderland* and the *Jacob van Heemskerck* that had arrived 28 August, the light cruiser *Friesland* (CO Captain W.J. Cohen) was sent. This task force was under the command of Captain Snethlage onboard HNLMS *Jacob van Heemskerck*.⁽²¹⁾ In October 1908 Van Swinderen informed diplomats of the major Western powers that a possible blockade of Venezuela by the RNLN was nearing.⁽²²⁾ A new Venezuelan note on 7 November indicated that Castro would not withdraw the decree of 14 May 1908. The governor of Curacao hereafter

16. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 345, Minister of Foreign Affairs De Marees van Swinderen to Queen Wilhelmina, 8 August 1908.

17. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 345-346, Minister of Foreign Affairs De Marees van Swinderen to Queen Wilhelmina, 8 August 1908.

18. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 345-347, Minister of Foreign Affairs De Marees van Swinderen to Queen Wilhelmina, 8 August 1908.

19. Smit, *Bescheiden*, 3th Period. 3th Vol., 360, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Venezuela J. de J. Paul to Minister of Foreign Affairs De Marees van Swinderen, 28 July 1908.

20. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 362-363, Minister of Foreign Affairs De Marees van Swinderen to Venezuelan Minister of Foreign Affairs Paul, 3 September 1908.

21. *Yearbook RNLN 1908-1909*, 247-249.

22. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 406-407, Confidential, Gevers to De Marees van Swinderen, 1 November 1908.

suspended the ban on arms exports to Venezuela (i.e. the domestic opposition).⁽²³⁾ This made little impression on Castro. Von Seckendorff reported from Caracas that “stärkerer Mittel” were necessary to change the dictator’s policy.⁽²⁴⁾

These measures were not far off: on 21 November 1908, Van Swinderen wrote a memo to Venezuela in which he indicated that the Dutch felt compelled to abandon friendly attitudes.⁽²⁵⁾ The necessary signals were also sent to Washington. Van Swinderen hoped that, whatever action the Netherlands was forced to take, “the US government to understand that the Netherlands government has gone to the limits that the national honor permit towards a peaceful settlement of the controversy”. The full responsibility for the situation that had arisen was placed with President Castro and not with the *state* of Venezuela. Negotiations on lasting good relations could only take place if the president revoked the 14 May decree.⁽²⁶⁾

The political message was clear: since Castro would probably never withdraw his decision and by placing all the blame of this international crisis on him, the Dutch aimed to bring down the head of state. A salient and not unimportant detail in all this, was the fact that the Venezuelan president was no longer in his country, but was forced to travel to Europe for medical treatment (he suffered from a rare kidney disease). For the moment, the government was being assumed by vice-president Juan Vicente Gomez.

The blockade

The Dutch naval task force at Curacao was ordered on 26 November 1908 to prepare for “taking in open sea and until further notice keeping in Willemstad [main port of Curacao] warships and other vessels belonging to the Venezuelan government”. The Dutch warships were to patrol along the coast and to avoid fights with coastal defenses, as this was “beyond the intention of the Dutch government”. When Venezuelan ships were seized, it had to be explicitly stated that this measure was not directed against the Venezuelan people, but against the administration of President Castro. With a view to a possible overthrow of the regime of the dictator, The Hague considered it of outmost importance that the population knew the reason for the Dutch actions.⁽²⁷⁾ By blocking only shipping ordered by the Venezuelan government, not all shipping (something that would ask for a very extensive deployment of the Dutch fleet and would give a wrong political signal to the Venezuelan population), also the transport of troops to possible

23. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 413, De Marees van Swinderen to Queen Wilhelmina, 7 November 1908.

24. Smit, *Bescheiden*, 3th Period. 3th Vol., 415, Von Seckendorff to De Marees van Swinderen, 14 November 1908.

25. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 419-420, De Marees van Swinderen to Venezuelan Minister of Foreign Affairs Paul, 21 November 1908.

26. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 404, Beaupré to Secretary of State E. Root, 5 November 1908.

27. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 424-425, Secret, Minister of the Navy J. Wentholt to CO Task Force Caribbean J.B. Snethlage, 28 November 1908.

rebellious provinces was prevented. A fact that, given the poor road system, was not unimportant.⁽²⁸⁾

The Dutch naval vessels left Willemstad 30 November.⁽²⁹⁾ HNLMS *Jacob van Heemskerck* headed for La Guiara, HNLMS *Friesland* to Puerto Cabello, while HNLMS *Gelderland* (CO Captain G.P. van Hecking Colenbrander) steamed towards the Gulf of Maracaibo. The latter warship was the first to see action. The guard division had to go immediately “into the battery”, whereupon Colenbrander deployed an armed sloop that began inspections of schooners lying at anchor. In addition, the cruiser itself hailed some coastal vessels, but no naval or government vessels were encountered.⁽³⁰⁾ The other ships had meanwhile steamed towards Puerto Cabello and La Guiara. These vessels hardly spotted any Venezuelan ships.⁽³¹⁾

The days hereafter gave a similar picture. The *Friesland* and *Gelderland* repeatedly fired warning shots across the bows of ships that tried to escape, but inspections by boarding parties revealed these were innocent cargo vessels.⁽³²⁾ The CO's could only report on Venezuelan navy and other government ships, that they had observed them but that Caracas wisely kept them inshore and did not take up the challenge.⁽³³⁾

Although there was little to report in military terms, there was certainly political news. In Venezuela, the Dutch naval actions had led to demonstrations and looting, which were primarily aimed at the policy of President Castro. The German consul Von Seckendorff was in secrecy approached by Gomez. The appearance of Dutch cruisers off the coast had prompted the vice-president to inform the German that, the former would like to solve the problems with the Dutch and to find a *modus vivendi* to end the 14 May decree. The utmost confidentiality about these intentions was asked for the time being, so that the news would not reach President Castro and his followers.⁽³⁴⁾

All this was of course heard with “great satisfaction” by The Hague. Van Swinderen announced that a *modus vivendi* with Gomez could be feasible with withdrawing the mentioned decree. In addition, further Venezuelan measures had to make clear for Curacao that the situation on transit trade was back to normal. Were this to happen, the

28. *Yearbook RNLN 1908-1909* (The Hague: De Gebroeders Van Cleef, 1910), 15.

29. *Yearbook RNLN 1908-1909*, 15.

30. NL National Archives (NA-Ha), 2nd Department (II), Ministry of the Navy (MvM), Archive Ship's Logs, inv.nr. 1687, HNLMS *Gelderland*, 30 November and 1 December 1908.

31. NA-Ha, II, MvM, Ship's Logs, inv.nr. 1900, HNLMS *Jacob van Heemskerck*, 30 November and 1 December 1908; NA-Ha, II, MvM, Ship's Logs, inv.nr. 1464, HNLMS *Friesland*, 1-2 December 1908.

32. NA-Ha, II, MvM, Ship's Logs, inv.nr. 1464, HNLMS *Friesland*, 2-5 December 1908; NA-Ha, II, MvM, Ship's Logs, inv.nr. 1687, HNLMS *Gelderland*, 2-4 December 1908; NA-Ha, II, MvM, Ship's Logs, inv.nr. 1900, HNLMS *Jacob van Heemskerck*, 3-7 December 1908.

33. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., Secret, Governor Curacao De Jong to Minister of Colonies Idenburg, 4 December 1908.

34. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., Secret, Envoy in Berlin Gevers to De Marees van Swinderen, 9 December 1908; Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., Appendix, telegram of Von Seckendorff to Von Schoen, 8 December 1908.

Dutch were inclined to “stop the military measures on its side” and “generally consider itself bound again by the protocol of 1894” [halt arms exports].⁽³⁵⁾

Driven to a climax

A new reaction from the Venezuelan government was of a completely different nature. Its Ministry of Foreign Affairs protested sharply against the naval actions. This “aggression” was all the more reprehensible, because the Dutch had neither announced a blockade nor transmitted a declaration of war.⁽³⁶⁾ It was clear that a power struggle was going on in Caracas. The confusing signals meant the fleet operations continued. The RNLN could hereafter report some success. Sailors of the *Gelderland* boarded 12 December near Puerto Cabello the coastguard ship *Alix*, which was seized. The crew was brought ashore, and the *Alix* taken in tow to Curacao. A second seizure followed after the *Jacob van Heemskerck* intercepted 14 December the Venezuelan navy schooner *23 do Mayo*. This ship was also taken to Willemstad after the crew had been put ashore.⁽³⁷⁾

Hereafter no Venezuelan government or navy vessels were seen. This to the frustration of the Dutch CO's, who asked on 19 December in a note permission to maneuver more closely towards the Venezuelan coast. Extending the blockade mandate was perhaps an option from a military point of view, but would make Castro or Gomez irreconcilable and could cause the conflict to escalate into a war with all its consequences.⁽³⁸⁾ Therefore, on the eve of Christmas 1908, the Dutch government faced a dilemma.

Dutch success under an American shadow

In Venezuela, things had become even more restless. After the news of the seizure of two naval vessels, rebellion started in several provinces. Acting president Gomez declared a state of emergency on 17 December. The removal of Castro as president and the formation of a new government under Gomez seemed not far off.⁽³⁹⁾ The Venezuelan Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed Washington on 20 December that a general uprising against the head of state was underway and that Castro had been deposed as president with Gomez as his successor. The Americans were asked “to make all arrangements” and

35. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 447-448, Top Secret, De Marees van Swinderen to envoy in Berlin Gevers, 10 December 1908.

36. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 450-451, German consul in Caracas Von Seckendorff to Minister of Foreign Affairs De Marees van Swinderen, 12 December 1908; Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 450-451, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Venezuela Paul to Von Seckendorff, 11 December 1908.

37. *Yearbook RNLN 1908-1909*, 254-255.

38. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 458-459, Minister of Colonies Idenburg to Minister of Foreign Affairs De Marees van Swinderen, 22 December 1908; Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 458-459, Numerical telegram governor Curacao De Jong to Minister Idenburg, 21 December 1908.

39. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 457, Confidential, Envoy in Berlin Gevers to De Marees van Swinderen 18 December 1908.

it was considered desirable by the Venezuelans to send American warships.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Caracas seemed to be playing on the Monroe Doctrine in this, to nip further adventures from Europe in the bud. The Americans responded immediately and sent on 21 December cruisers and a battleship to Venezuela. One of the cruisers would steam to La Guaiara while another, USS *Des Moines*, headed for Curacao.⁽⁴¹⁾

President Gomez made hereafter a gesture of goodwill towards The Hague and suspended the implementation of the decree of 14 May. He expected The Netherlands to end its naval operations.⁽⁴²⁾ The Hague was now confronted with a completely new situation. An extension of the naval blockade was no longer on the agenda, and had to be cancelled completely. Certainly, now that the Americans were coming. Although the USS *Des Moines* was officially directed to the Dutch colony for “le cas échéant” regarding connections with Venezuela, the message was clear. The Netherlands had played its part and now had to make way militarily and politically.⁽⁴³⁾ The Dutch decided on December 23rd to break off the naval action.⁽⁴⁴⁾ The returning ships encountered in the port of Willemstad the vanguard of the approaching US Navy; the despatch boat USS *Dolphin*.⁽⁴⁵⁾

The Netherlands started negotiations with the new Venezuelan government in January 1909. Within weeks, the withdrawal of the consuls’ exequatur was lifted, after which the Netherlands reaffirmed the arms export ban. In February, Gomez also withdrew the decree of 15 May 1908, which made shipping of less than twenty tons possible again.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Because of this action, the relationship was further normalized and later negotiations led to a very favorable trade protocol for the Netherlands for years to come.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Conclusion

The Dutch naval intervention of 1908 had been a deliberate action to give Caracas’ policy a favorable turn for The Hague. The common thread in Castro’s policy was inspired by the international colonial trade. Other European powers and the US were

40. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 457-458, Numerical telegram, envoy in Washington Loudon to De Marees van Swinderen, 20 December 1908.

41. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 458, Numerical telegram, Envoy in Washington Loudon to De Marees van Swinderen, 21 December 1908.

42. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 460, Numerical telegram, Governor Curacao De Jong to Minister of Colonies Idenburg, 22 December 1908. Ex-president Cipriano Castro would be operated successfully and lived in exile until his dead in 1924.

43. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 463-464, Envoy in Washington Loudon to De Marees van Swinderen, 24 December 1908.

44. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 3th Vol., 460, Numerical telegram, Minister of Colonies Idenburg to governor Curacao De Jong, 23 December 1908.

45. Smit, *Bescheiden*. 3th Period. 6th Vol., 404-405, American consul Curacao E.H. Cheney to assistant Secretary of State Adey, 27 December 1908.

46. *Yearboek RNLN 1908-1909*, 18-19.

47. Corporaal, *Nederland en Venezuela*, 507-508.

also affected by Castro's trade measures and keen to see him fall, but had their reasons not to act in the summer/fall of 1908. The fact that the Netherlands felt most challenged of the Western states and had to act had several reasons. It was the least powerful and it had to show that it was adhering to its regional status as a colonial power. Furthermore, Castro's trade policy, unlike that of the other powers, paralyzed the entire economic traffic of the nearby Netherlands Antilles and put their viability at stake. The traditional instable regimes of Venezuela, Castro's long term stay abroad, as well as the hope of bringing about a change of government through military intervention, resulted therefore in a large but politically refined and restrained RNLN operation. This clever power projection worked indeed as a catalyst to mobilize Venezuelan domestic opposition. Although Washington hereafter quickly emphasized its influence and military presence, this did not alter the fact that this Dutch gunboat diplomacy achieved what was intended; removal of President Castro and (long term) revocation of the Venezuelan trade policy towards the Netherlands Antilles.

The above-described coup d'état case seems to illustrate that, contrary to what political scientists like O'Rourke state, pre-coup policy of the target state can indeed be negotiated efficiently by the actor state after facilitating or stimulating regime change with own military actions. Although it can be argued that this case study highlights the exception that proves the rule, a series of further foreign (limited) military intervention for the benefit of regime change, from around 1900 until well into the 20th century, shows otherwise, especially were it concerns US actions. One can think of Honduras 1903-1925, Nicaragua 1911/12, Cuba 1933, Iran 1953, Guatemala 1954, Congo/Zaire 1965 and Chile 1973.⁽⁴⁸⁾ In all these cases it came to US-minded governments that implemented over a long period a domestic and foreign policy favorable to Washington. Perhaps the above-mentioned political scientist have been too focused on more recent and indeed failed long-term military US/Western interventions for regime change in Iraq and Afghanistan. Looking further back in more contemporary history proofs otherwise, not least the Dutch naval operations in 1908. Food for thought to sketch a more nuanced picture on this subject?

48 . <https://www.history.com/news/us-overthrow-foreign-governments>; Marc Becker, "History of U.S. Interventions in Latin America". www2.truman.edu; <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/ip/108629.htm>

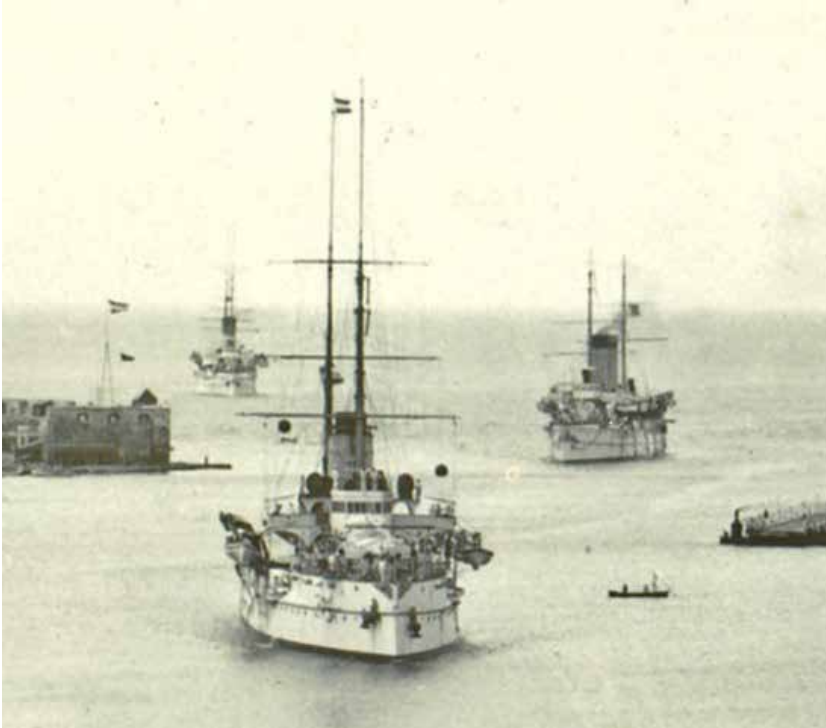


Fig. 1 - November 1908, on the eve of the Venezuelan coastal blockade, the Dutch naval squadron returns in Curacao after maneuvers.

Source: NLDA/Netherlands Institute of Military History.

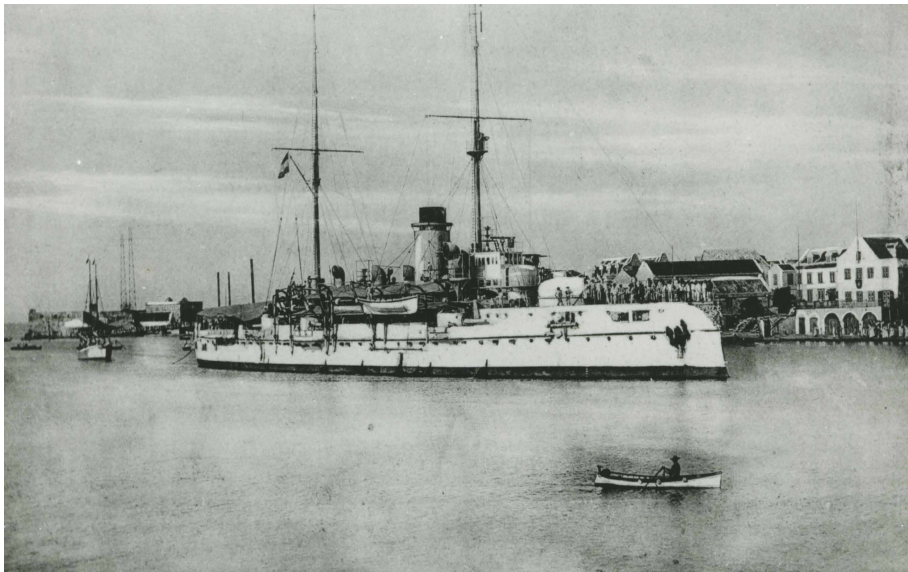


Fig. 2 - The iron clad HNLMS Jacob van Heemskerck with the seized Venezuelan navy schooner 23 do Mayo in tow, mid December 1908.

Source: NLDA/Netherlands Institute of Military History.

Author's short CV

Anslem van der Peet received his M.A. in Military and Political History from the University of Utrecht in 1994, and in 2016 earned a Ph.D. from the same university. His doctoral dissertation was entitled, "Out-of-area: The Royal Netherlands Navy and multinational fleet operations, 1945-2001" analyzing global worldwide Dutch naval ambitions during the Cold War and the 1990s. He is a senior historian and naval specialist of post 1940 RNLN operations and strategy at the Netherlands Defense Academy/ Institute of Military History. Currently he is doing research on the RNLN and ASW in the ACLANT area during the Cold War. He has contributed articles, chapters and book reviews on various naval and defense matters. Adviser of the RNLN on the status of 20th century shipwrecks of men-of-war; member of both the RNLN Tradition Commission and the RNLN Advisory Commission on honors and awards. He is a member of the editorial board of *Marineblad* (magazine of the RNLN officers society); member of the advisory board of *Atlantisch Perspectief* (magazine on transatlantic security relations) and president of the Netherlands Commission on Military History.

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