

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT
CSIS Event

**“A Conversation with U.S. Special Representative for Venezuela
Elliott Abrams”**

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FEATURING
Elliott Abrams,
U.S. Special Representative for Venezuela

CSIS EXPERT
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MOISES RENDON:

OK. Welcome, everybody, to CSIS. My name is Moises Rendon. I'm the director of The Future of Venezuela Initiative and fellow of the Americas Program. This is our first virtual event. We'll be posting a complete video in our website after the event finish. We will also post a transcript in Spanish.

Our feature and only speaker today is Elliott Abrams. He's U.S. special representative for Venezuela. Mr. Abrams has a long and respected history as a diplomat and public servant here in Washington, D.C. We're very thankful for having him to join us for our very first virtual event in this unprecedented moment in the U.S. and the world's history. Thank you, Mr. Abrams.

ELLIOTT ABRAMS:

You're very welcome. I didn't know we were doing an experiment here with a virtual event.

MR. RENDON:

(Laughs.)

MR. ABRAMS:

We were going to do this before the pandemic struck as a normal event. I'm glad we're still able to do it.

MR. RENDON:

That's correct. This is better than nothing. (Laughs.)

Despite the global shutdown due to COVID-19, the U.S. government has – particularly has continued to work hard and introduce new tools to pressure the Maduro regime, right, and this is why we're putting this conversation together. In February, for example, sanctions were imposed on Russian oil company Rosneft, and then four other sanctions were expanded to its subsidiaries in March. On March 26th, the DOJ – the Department of Justice of the United States – unveiled major indictments, including narcoterrorism, trafficking, money laundering, and other charges against Maduro and more than a dozen regime officials, right, and this also was an important event that just happened recently. Five days after indictments were announced, the U.S. State Department proposed a democratic transition framework for Venezuela which outlines steps – concrete steps for recovery for Venezuela.

And within this context, Mr. Abrams, I know there is a lot of events that just happened, and there's a lot of questions and a lot of things that we can cover today. We're going to give you a few minutes for introductory remarks, I'm going to follow with one or two questions, and then we're going to open it up for our audience. And I know they are already sending in questions. So thank you, Mr. Abrams. The floor is yours.

MR. ABRAMS:

Thank you. I'll try to be brief.

What you said is exactly right. We are continuing with our Venezuela policy. So the activities of the regime certainly have not stopped because of the pandemic. In the last couple of weeks, for example, there have

been a whole series of arrests of people around Juan Guaidó. They haven't arrested him, but they have arrested many members of his team and are treating some of them quite brutally. So we thought we're going to continue with this policy.

And we were asked last year, and then of course this year, well, what's the way forward, though, in addition to the pressure? How do you get out of this? How are sanctions lifted? And we thought, you know, that's quite a legitimate question and we ought to answer it. So we began to develop this proposal – and it is a proposal – for a way to transition from the Maduro regime to democracy, and ultimately to a presidential election because an election is what they need to have to have a fully legitimate government. So that – (inaudible).

Just a word about the indictments that I think people in many other countries don't recognize. You know, the State Department doesn't have anything to do with indictments. At a certain point – March, I guess – the attorney general came over and said to us grand juries have returned indictments on the following people and they're – that will be announced in a few weeks. And these are activities that have been taking place over a period of years, primarily drug trafficking, though in a few cases money laundering and violations of the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act – in other words, bribery. We also announced the military exercises, which are aimed at stopping narcotics trafficking because, again, while so much normal activity has stopped everywhere, criminal activity has not stopped. Drug traffickers are still trying to traffic drugs. So we moved ahead with that effort to stop.

Our hope is that lots of people in Venezuela in the Chavista party – the PSUV, in the army, inside the government will look at the proposal and maybe say, well, Maduro has to leave power, but we are treated reasonably. The future of the military as an institution is thought about in this plan. The future of the PSUV party – that is, the right to compete in elections fairly – is thought about in this plan. So our hope is that it actually produces some kind of discussion within various parts of the society, not only the opposition.

Why don't I stop with that?

MR. RENDON:

(Audio break) – given to the Maduro regime in the – (audio break) – Maduro. So what makes you believe that this new framework can convince Maduro and the Maduro regime for his exit, right, and to agree to it?

And let me do a second on top of that, which is we're also talking about criminal – a criminal enterprise, right? The Maduro regime is involved, as the DOJ and many of you and us have put out, that this is a criminal enterprise that is using institutions of the state – (audio break) – these government –

MR. ABRAMS:

Well, you're absolutely right that it is reminiscent of what was proposed by the opposition in Barbados last – it was. They talked about a Council of State, for example, which – (audio break) – because of oil prices coming from the Saudi-Russian oil-price war. So supply has increased at exactly the moment that demand, due to coronavirus, has collapsed.

So think of the finances of the regime and their ability to – I mean, Maduro has admitted publicly that the price they're getting for crude oil is below the cost of production. Production's declining. More and more is in storage. Buyers – partly due to U.S. sanctions, buyers are reluctant to buy. You even saw this kind of interesting thing with Rosneft where the Russian government seems to have bailed out Rosneft and said, yes, you can get out of Venezuela, which is certainly not a vote of confidence by Rosneft in the oil sector in Venezuela.

So the thought is maybe people in the regime recognize what they didn't recognize last summer, which is that the situation is increasingly difficult, not going to get better, and they need to look for a way out. They need to look for negotiated, agreed way forward.

Now, you know, one can argue that it's harder because of the indictments, because people who are indicted now, you know, they have no place else to go. They have one place to go, which is Venezuela, because the Venezuelan constitution does not permit extradition. So if they stayed in Venezuela, I guess they'd be beyond the ability of the United States to get them if they went to Cuba, with which obviously we also have no extradition treaty. But it is our hope that those indictments – again, which they're not a matter of foreign policy; they came from U.S. attorneys and grand juries in New York City and in Miami – maybe they make the regime even more toxic and maybe they persuade more people in Venezuela and out that this regime has to go. They've got to start moving toward a free election and electing a president legitimately.

MR. RENDON:

Yeah, no, no, absolutely.

So another question relating to the risks – right? – like what if Maduro doesn't accept this agreement? What we have seen in the last few months and years, Mr. Abrams, is that as much as pressure that we put on Maduro, the more they move toward criminal activities, right? And we see illegal mining, for example, has rised. Narcotrafficking has also come up. And – (audio break) – criminal interdependency to criminal activities in Venezuela. So is this a risk that you have in mind in terms of if they don't accept or don't agree on this path forward? And if so, what will be, you know, the steps that we need to take into consideration – right? – given the criminal nature of this regime?

MR. ABRAMS:

You know, the oil income has been reduced. It's not primarily because of U.S. sanctions. Right now, we know why. It's because of the collapse of

oil prices. But production levels were going down. You know, once upon a time Venezuela was producing over 3 million barrels a day. It came down to a million. Last year, it came down to maybe 750,000. Now it's lower than that.

The main reason is, you know, they haven't put any money into the oil sector. So things are getting more and more offline. They're getting more and more decrepit. So, yes, they have been relying more over the last years on criminal activities, gold mining, the Arco Minero, and drugs trafficked, it goes from Colombia, going into Venezuela, then north.

They've also relied on gold, what you might call semi legitimate gold sales, by which I mean the sales of monetary gold from the central bank. The gold from the gold fields never hits the central bank. It's simply smuggled out and sold to someone in Turkey or some place. The gold from the central bank, you know, that's gold bars. Last year they sold something like \$800 million or a billion dollars' worth. By the way, it disappeared. Nobody knows where it went. So that's money for the regime.

You know, in our view they're going to do what they can to get money anywhere they can. They have been for years. In the earlier years, they had enough money from oil revenues and they just stole a lot of it. Now there's a lot less money from oil revenue. You know, they'll try to continue on and on. But there are beginning to be signs, I think, that people in and around the regime realize there's no way out here. There's just a path down. And they've got to figure out some way forward.

Now we've proposed one path forward. Maybe there are others. We don't really see them. But what you need is what you didn't have last year in Barbados. Last year with Barbados the opposition proposed the National Assembly team representing Guaidó proposed this Council of State idea. And there were a lot of things that were discussed in Barbados, but one thing could not be discussed: Maduro, the future of Maduro. The regime negotiator said, "No, no, that's not on the table." And I think when they look at the pressures now, they've got to start coming to realization, more and more of them, maybe Maduro, maybe he's the last. But more and more of them around him, he's the obstacle. He's got to go.

MR. RENDON:

Yeah. But he can also still run for president once there is a potential presidential election in Venezuela. Is that correct? The same with Guaidó, no? Because that's – yeah, go ahead.

MR. ABRAMS:

Our view was, look, we are not Venezuelans. We're putting forward a proposal. We didn't think it was right for foreigners to say, okay, who's a list of Venezuelans who can run for office and here's a list of Venezuelans who cannot run for office. We just thought that was inappropriate for our government to do.

We made one exception to that, which was not about a person. It was about a position. We said, look, it's a fragile political system trying to return to democracy under our plan. Whoever is under the Council of State or is a member of the Council of State, the transitional president shouldn't run for president, because people won't believe that he or she isn't going to try to tilt the election for his or her own victory.

In the case of Maduro, you know, look, he is the most toxic figure in Venezuela. Some people in the opposition have said to me they hope he runs because he'll be the easiest Chavista to beat. And as Secretary Pompeo said, you know, he's done. I mean, he's never going to rule Venezuela again. If he presents himself in an election, he's going to be crushed.

MR. RENDON:

Yeah. Now, Mr. Abrams, the framework also proposes free and fair elections as a way out in Venezuela. You know, many people are (skeptical ?) to find an electoral way out in Venezuela given the president, right, that the Maduro regime has always stolen elections in Venezuela in the past few years. Conditions are not there, not even close. Colectivos and paramilitary groups represent a threat to the voters and to the Venezuelan people. The media that are left in Venezuela are repressed and are limited. So there's no way that any opposition candidates can have room to run their campaigns in a democratic country. That said, I think the framework states that Venezuela will have about six to 12 months to work on these conditions. But what specifically can international – (audio break) – so that there is free and fair elections in an environment that, as you said, is so toxic, there's so many criminal activities, and there's so much to do, right?

MR. ABRAMS:

Yes. Yeah, sure. You know, and we did say in the framework that our sanctions would finally be lifted, be revoked when there's a consensus of international observers that the elections were in fact fair and free.

You couldn't have an election tomorrow. And in our view, you couldn't have a free election under Nicholas Maduro. We saw this in 2018 in the unfair election that led Venezuela really into the present political crisis, because the international observers could not certify that that was a fair election. Now could you take – I think we said nine to 12 months – take a year, could you get there in a year? We think the answer to that is yes, because if you remove censorship, you get the development of a free press very, very quickly. You'd get people all over the internet. You'd get TV and radio stations bringing up again, or ones that exist starting to operate without government control.

You would need that time to figure out, technically, how to do the elections and to figure out a system that would allow the – (audio break) – of Venezuelans who are now abroad, you know, to vote in Quito or Guayaquil or to – you know, to vote in Bogota. And so you would need

time. But you know, this is one thing the international community is actually quite good at: helping not only observe elections but helping operate elections. You know, you have organizations like the Carter Center and IFES and in this country NDI and IRI. And the EU has done this many, many times – at this point, you know, over the last couple of decades, hundreds of times. So I would say all of these organizations know how to help prepare for an election and monitor an election, and not just on election day. You know, monitoring is now a multi-(mode ?) process so that you make sure that access is open and the press is free and – how could you do this, thinking of the pandemic? Could you do this now in the summer? Clearly not. But could you do it in nine months or 12 months? I think with the kind of help that will be available, I think the answer is yes.

MR. RENDON:

OK. Before moving on to the questions from the audience – I already have about five questions with me here – I want to ask about the pandemic, the COVID-19 and the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. Like, I understand there is not a long-term solution – there's not a long-term solution to the humanitarian crisis without Venezuela recovering its democracy, its liberty, and its freedoms, right? I completely agree. But nonetheless, the people are suffering. There are food and medicine shortages. And the fact that COVID-19 is spreading in a – in a speed that we don't even know – the Maduro regime official numbers are only about 150 cases of coronavirus, but I assume there are many more. So what can we do to limit the suffering while we work on the political and democratic side, right? Like, I don't think they – they can be in parallel. So what can we do to ensure and help the Venezuelan people from a humanitarian point of view?

MR. ABRAMS:

Yeah, you're absolutely right. I don't think the notion of, you know, 150 cases in Venezuela is at all credible. And given the terrible condition of the medical system, one really has to be fearful of the spread of the disease.

You know, yesterday, or I think it was yesterday – maybe today – a plane arrived organized largely by PAHO and UNICEF, I believe, with 90 tons of medical equipment. How did they get that past U.S. sanctions? Well, the answer, of course, is sanctions never cover food, medicine, medical equipment. So anybody who wants to do that can do it. So can the regime. We know that last year the regime was buying food in the United States. They can buy – if they want to buy antibiotics, they want – whatever, you know, is available, they can buy. And we've been saying for years, since the heavier sanctions were imposed, if there is – we said to the regime, if there's overcompliance – let's say you're trying to buy, I don't know, last year, pacemakers, and the bank or the – or the company says, no, there are sanctions, we don't want to deal with it, just tell us. Tell Treasury, and Treasury will contact the company or the bank and say, do it, you're covered, it's fine. In this – whatever it is now – 14

months, not one case. That is, the regime has not come to us a single time.

We're in the middle of investigating a recent effort to break sanctions by buying several dozen police cars, SUVs to serve as police cars, in the United States now, this year. So it's very interesting. You know, the regime figures out ways to buy police cars, but it doesn't want to use that kind of money, millions of dollars, to buy – (audio break).

Congress has appropriated lots of money. (Audio break) – and what we do with that, AID is in charge of this. They give the money to, you know, UNICEF, PAHO, the ICRC. They've just appropriated \$300 million more. That's globally, but a share of that will be used by AID, again, to give to the same agencies because they're on the ground in Venezuela. I think that's the best way to help. And they know – these U.N. agencies and UNICEF and all, they know that U.S. sanctions are – have nothing to do with this.

MR. RENDON: Yeah.

MR. ABRAMS: Anything they can buy they can get in.

MR. RENDON: Yeah. OK. I think it's time to go for some question, Mr. Abrams.

MR. ABRAMS: Thanks.

MR. RENDON: I'm trying to compile the questions into the themes that we have here. I think the most important – the ones that were – received the most questions is about this concept of mafia state, right? And you know, proposing a deal to a mafia state kind of generated a lot of confusion, so I assume that there's a lot of questions that are coming on this side.

We have one from Diego Arria. He's a former Venezuelan ambassador to the U.N., former presidential candidate. He's asking the following: Why would they – (audio break) – ask Venezuela to coexist with narcoterrorists, defined by you? Such an arrangement would be unthinkable in the U.S.

I have another question on the same line from Pedro Burelli, former member of the executive board of PDVSA among other things. He's saying: Could you explain the logic of guarantees for the current senior command of the military, and then particularly for the indicted minister of defense, Vladimir Padrino López? And in the same direction, why do you insist that Maduro could run in a future election when others in the U.S. government are insisting he must go and the U.S. placed a 50 million (dollar) tag on his head?

I also have a final question on this same line, Daniel Di Martino from Vente Venezuela. He's saying: Why does the democratic transition

framework allow the high command of the Venezuelan military to stay in power during a transition? Doesn't that undermine the chance of having any free and fair election while allowing indicted narcoterrorists like Vladimir Padrino to continue to sack Venezuela?

So again, they're all related.

MR. ABRAMS: Yeah.

MR. RENDON: Yeah. Back to you.

MR. ABRAMS: Right. Right. Yes, I understand. All good questions.

You know, how do we get out of this terrible crisis in Venezuela? Or more to – more to the point, how do Venezuelans get out? OK, maybe you believe in magic and you think that someone will wave a magic wand. That's one way out. Maybe you think the United States is going to invade tomorrow, and the Marines will land, and everything will be just fine. That's another way out.

But suppose you don't believe that those are going to happen today or – (audio break). Every dictatorship in Latin America, with the rarest of exceptions, ends with a negotiation. Think back, you know, to all those military regimes of Chile, Argentina, Peru, Ecuador, Uruguay, Brazil. Every one ends with a negotiation. The exceptions? Well, Panama. OK. So if you want to propose an American invasion, that's fine, go ahead and propose it. But if that's not going to happen, then how does this come to an end? And our view is it comes to an end the way it came to an end in most of Latin America – for that matter, the way South Africa's dictatorship came to an end – through a negotiation.

Now, you know, you don't exactly get to choose who you negotiate with. You end up negotiating with the people who are there. Let's be realistic. We could say, OK, here's how it ends: the opposition, the majority in the National Assembly, takes over tomorrow morning, and everybody connected to the Chavista party and the army goes to jail. Is this a realistic proposal? It is not. We tried to make a proposal that we thought was realistic given the situation in Venezuela.

Now, look, Venezuela has huge security problems. If you assume that there was – there is a political settlement that works, a terrific political settlement, there will still be a huge security problem: drug traffickers, ELN, FARC, criminal gangs, colectivos. Venezuela's going to need security forces. It's going to need an army. It has long borders.

Yeah, we could have said as part of the proposal every general is fired – every general; every general goes to jail. Do you think this would make the success of a negotiation more likely or less likely? So we tried to be realistic.

And remember, we're assuming something like a nine- to 12-month transition. And then, under the U.S. proposal, there's an elected democratic government. And it, now with an elected president, will have the legitimacy to make all those personnel decisions about the army and about the police and everything else. But meanwhile, you need an – (audio break) – you have to get – (audio break) – because Maduro has to go. Secretary Pompeo said it yesterday again: He has to go. We didn't think that foreigners should say here's our list of people who can't run for office in Venezuela. Are we going to, you know, make up lists for every country who can run for office and who cannot?

But it's obvious to us that his presidency legally came to an end in 2018, when he stole that election. At the end of 2018, his presidency ended. And his departure is clearly part of Venezuela's recovery. If he wants to run for office and get 10 percent of the vote, that's something Venezuelans are going to have to get through. It would be suicidal for the PSUV to let him present himself as a candidate.

MR. RENDON:

Yeah, no, I agree that the regime will probably decide to have someone else run in a potential presidential election. We have – just a quick follow up.

MR. ABRAMS:

You know, I'll just – actually, let me just follow that up by saying, you know, people should go back to look at South Africa. You know, think of the crime of apartheid. Think of what happened to nonwhites in South Africa. Nelson Mandela was elected, and what did he do? How many of those people did he send to jail? You know, the answer was almost none. He established a truth and reconciliation commission. That is what has happened in most of Latin America as well. And what our proposal – which Venezuelans, you know, are free to reject – our proposal was there was a reason that this happened in all of these countries and there's a reason that all of these countries separately decided this is the way forward.

MR. RENDON:

Yeah, no. Just a quick follow up before I move on to the next questions. I know you served back when the U.S. invaded Panama, no? And I know Ambassador Brownfield, as you probably know him, he has been arguing publicly and privately – he's a senior advisor at CSIS – that invading a country in the 21st century is completely different from the past, especially from the 20th century. He argues that the U.S. government specifically has tools that can be used maybe from a military nature, but they are far from invading a country. So do you have any lessons or any thoughts when you hear that type of proposals and arguments? Because as you know, that's the argument that Venezuelans are discussing all the time. And I agree with you, right now it doesn't seem realistic. But we want to set expectations very clearly, no?

MR. ABRAMS:

Look, first, I do know Ambassador Brownfield. I was in the State Department in 1987 and 1988 when we were in fact trying to push Noriega out and negotiating with Noriega about his departure. And he rejected all of the American proposals, which in a certain sense led to the invasion, which came in the George H.W. Bush administration, where I was not in the State Department.

What could we say about the military side? We can say that things don't get better, they get worse, if you reject American proposals. I think that's something that Mr. Maduro should be thinking about. If he thinks that – I'm sure he realizes that his situation is worse today than it was six months ago or twelve months ago. If he thinks this is going to be better in three months or six months, he's wrong. It's not going to get better. It's only going to get worse.

There are obviously lots of military options. When we said all our options are – exist, you know, they're on the table, you know, I was always saying, look, to say that all options are on the table isn't really a policy statement. It's a statement of fact. Every president has all of those options. At one end of the spectrum is that kind of full-fledged invasion – Panama, Iraq. And there is a wide spectrum. And there are – I read that interview with Ambassador Brownfield. There are many other things on that spectrum. You know, I'm not going to speculate about them today. They exist in real life. They're always there, if the president wants to use them.

MR. RENDON:

Thank you. OK, and let's move onto the next question, Mr. Abrams. We have Jeff Ramsey (sp) from Walla (ph). He's asking: If the Democratic opposition were to succeed in getting Maduro to agree to new presidential elections with a new senate, and full electoral guarantees that could be verified and international observation, but with him in Miraflores – I guess, Maduro in Miraflores – will the U.S. oppose such an agreement? I can repeat the question if you want me to.

MR. ABRAMS:

No, no, no, no. I got it. We do not see how it is possible to conduct free elections with Nicholas Maduro in the Miraflores claiming to be president of Venezuela. We know this from 2018, when he didn't allow a free election. But just think about it. You're trying to have free and fair elections, let's say in January of 2021, pick a date. There is Maduro. He has control of the police. He has control of the colectivos. He has next to him Tareck El Aissami and Diosdado Cabello. He has control of the army. He has several thousand Cuban intelligence agents. He has censorship of the press. How do you have a free election under those circumstances?

MR. RENDON:

Yeah. That's a good. Sorry, I'm getting a lot of questions there, trying to pull them together. We have one more from Michael Camilleri from Inter-American Dialogue. He's asking: The transition framework posits that the International Criminal Court referral for crimes against humanity

committed by the Maduro regime would be withdrawn. What is the reason for this? And did the countries involved agree on this point?

MR. ABRAMS:

Well, the countries involved were not consulted on this point. This is an American proposal. As we drew up the proposal, Juan Guaidó and we were developing the proposal, but we didn't talk to anybody else outside the United States. But why did we say that? If you have a transitional government and then a democratic government, and you have a truth and reconciliation commission, as we've proposed, then it would be sensible to withdraw the ICC move because the ICC always says: we only come in when the country in question is not doing it itself. We only act where there is no national action. We thought, in our proposal, that there would be national action to look at the crimes that had been committed. But we did not consult with any of the – of (those ?) countries.

MR. RENDON:

Yeah. Just for the audience to – probably they don't have the details. But I think one of them were Canada, for example. The European Union, some Latin American countries. But a few days ago I saw Germany and other Europeans agree with the framework and agree with the path that the U.S. State Department proposed. So there's definitely a moving dynamic there.

I have another question. This time it's anonymous. He's asking us specifically to be anonymous. I guess, what is the U.S. view of the role of the oil sector to rebuild the economy post-transition in Venezuela? And what is the likelihood of renewing GLA when it expires in April 22nd? And if the U.S. companies have to leave, it seems unlikely they will return. So it's a good question because, again, in CSIS we have done research on this. And the post-transition period would be extremely expensive, extremely challenging. And, you know, the oil sector is one of those go-to places that people see as the sector to pay the bill. So do you have any thoughts on this?

MR. ABRAMS:

Yeah. On the question of general licensing, which does run out on April 22nd, you know, any comment about that will come from Treasury. So I'm not going to get ahead of Treasury's decision on this. The oil sector's obviously going to be important, critical, central for Venezuela's future. But probably not as much as in the past. For one thing, there now have been some offshore oil discoveries that are being worked by Rosneft and by Shell. They're on the ocean border with Trinidad. Maybe there's more to find.

The reason I don't think it'll be as critical as it's been, where it was the heart of the whole economy, is that, you know, there's a move away from heavy sales for oil. Recently we saw the international maritime organization say ships have to move away from heavier crude because they're trying to get greener and cleaner. Now, will companies go back to Venezuela? Well, it does have these fantastic reserves. If Venezuela is a country at peace internally, that welcomes international oil companies, I

think, you know, many of them will go back. I think it's true that some of the ones that leave won't, but that doesn't matter as much as whether there are companies that want to invest money and continue to produce oil.

Venezuelan oil will be more expensive because it is heavier, the bulk of it is heavier. But, you know, the natural – they were selling a lot to India and China now, because we do not in the United States buy Venezuelan oil. And that is – you know, they're 8,000 miles away. Their natural market is the Gulf Coast, because the transportation's low. So I'm sure that companies will go back. I'm sure that we will restore that trade between Venezuela and the U.S. Gulf Coast.

MR. RENDON:

Yeah. OK, thank you. I'm getting a lot of questions about scenarios, like what happens if the Maduro regime doesn't accept this agreement, right? And what happens, for example, I have one from Laura (sp) from Universidad de Buenos Aires: If all options are on the table, can you share some potential scenarios if the council of five – I assume this is a council of the state that was proposing the framework – is rejected by the Venezuelan regime? And I have two or three questions more along those lines. I think I want to rephrase it in the following: If – and going back to one of the issues that we already discussed.

If Maduro, which through his foreign minister already did – he rejects this framework, and he says he's not willing to cooperate, what are the scenarios in your mind then? And what are other potential scenarios, right? He may be open to have another dialogue around and negotiate some of the conditions proposed in the framework right? Or he may have another – so I think the question that we want to ask here is, what are the potential scenarios in your mind after proposing for the first time this framework just last week?

MR. ABRAMS:

Again, it's a proposal. I can see lots of ways to change the proposal. You know, so maybe the council, say, shouldn't have five members, or should have seven, or nine. We've said five. We thought, because we're Americans and we believe in the separation of powers, no member of the TSJ, the supreme court, and no general should be on the council of state. Maybe Venezuelans negotiate something where Moreno, the head of the supreme court and the head of the army and the head of the National Assembly should be in the council of state. I mean, it's just – there are a million variations here that you could think Venezuelans might say, well, we want to change this because we think it works better for us in our negotiation. That's fine.

I mean, the point here is not that if you change a word in the American proposal catastrophe happens. The point is that this is a path forward back to democracy and the lifting of U.S. sanctions. People said, is there such a path? Yes. Here's a path. And we spent a lot of time working on it. And we think actually it is a good path, and one that takes into account

a lot of interests in Venezuela. Yeah, I mean, suppose that the regime starts secret negotiations with Guaidó and the National Assembly. And they say: Well, we're not ready to do the whole framework. Let's start with some confidence-building measures. We'll do X. We'll do Y. We'll do Z. Plausible.

I can tell you that there are people in and around the regime who are reaching out, asking the U.S. government – reaching out directly in some cases, indirectly in more cases. Do I understand this correctly? What about that? What about that? What of this need. We knew – we would have bet a million dollars that Maduro would instantly reject the plan. But you know, the framework was really addressed less at Maduro than everyone else. He's the hole in the doughnut. It was addressed to, as I said before, chavismo, the army, the regime, the government, to people to say: This country needs to get out of this horrible crisis. Maduro is a key obstacle. And then look at how, we would say fairly, others are treated during this transition.

You know, after the transition you have a democratically elected government, the transition is over, and the elected government takes whatever path it wants to take. But what happens if Maduro rejects the proposal? Well, you will see more pressure from the United States and, I think, others on this regime. It is possible to put more pressure on a regime while also providing more assistance to the Venezuelan people. And that is what we want to do. It's also what Juan Guaidó wants to do. It's what the EU wants to do. And that is – if the regime tragically decides that they're going to crack down, they're going to repress more, they're probably making the transition equally likely, but more dangerous and more disruptive.

MR. RENDON:

Mr. Abrams, I want to thank you again. Unfortunately we've run out of time. But I think it was a fascinating conversation. It will help a lot of – (audio break) – to understand better the steps that the U.S. has made. We will be following closely anything that comes in the next few days. But I want to thank you, again, for being part of our first virtual event. And I hope to have you in person whenever CSIS and Washington, this is ready to open its door for future in-person events. So thank you, again.

MR. ABRAMS:

I look forward to it and thank you for hosting this.

MR. RENDON:

Thank you, Mr. Abrams. And thank you all for watching online. Again, the video would be posted. And thank you. Thank you for your participation. Bye-bye.

(END)