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The US Intervention in Venezuela: Establishing International Chaos Through the Logic of Force

Unit for Political Studies

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Table of Contents

- Reasons and Pretexts for US Intervention 1
 - a. Deceptive Pretexts 1
 - b. Controlling Venezuela's Oil Wealth 1
 - c. Geopolitical Calculations 2
- US Strategy towards Venezuela after Maduro 3
- Conclusion 5



On 3 January, the United States launched a military operation, in violation of Venezuelan sovereignty, which led to the abduction of President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, from their residence in Caracas. They were then transported to New York City, where they appeared before a federal court on charges related to drug trafficking and other allegations. The operation sparked widespread criticism domestically and around the world, due its lack of a legal basis and its blatant violation of the sovereignty of an independent state, especially given that US President Donald Trump had threatened similar operations against other countries.

Washington accuses Maduro of leading a "corrupt and illegitimate government" that allegedly oversees "narco-terrorism" operations including the export of cocaine to the US. None of these allegations justify the operation. Maduro has consistently denied the charges, accusing Washington of using the "war on drugs" as a pretext to overthrow him and seize control of his country's oil wealth. Since September 2025, the US has imposed a naval and air blockade on Venezuela and launched 35 airstrikes targeting boats it alleges were being used to traffic drugs across the Caribbean; the raids have resulted in the deaths of at least 115 people. The US has also seized tankers carrying Venezuelan oil shipments. In recent months, Trump has repeatedly demanded that Maduro surrender, voluntarily relinquish power, and hand over control of Venezuela's oil sector to the US.

Reasons and Pretexts for US Intervention

The US based its intervention in Venezuela on a range of reasons and pretexts, largely under the following themes:

a. Deceptive Pretexts

These are the pretexts Washington used to justify its military action against Venezuela and give it a veneer of legality, as if it were targeting a US citizen under its own jurisdiction. These pretexts centre on accusations that Maduro leads drug cartels and smuggles drugs into the US. Trump has also repeatedly accused Maduro's regime of corruption. During Trump's first term (2017-2021), the US Department of Justice claimed that Maduro had transformed Venezuela into a criminal organization serving drug trafficking networks and terrorist groups – despite the fact that most drugs entering the US do so via Mexico, not Venezuela.

b. Controlling Venezuela's Oil Wealth

Trump has never concealed his desire to seize control of Venezuela's oil, which he sees as "stolen" US property. To this end, on 16 December, he imposed a complete blockade on the entry and exit of US-sanctioned oil tankers to and from Venezuela, a measure that came after months of escalating tensions. Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform: "Today, I am ordering A TOTAL AND COMPLETE BLOCKADE OF ALL SANCTIONED OIL TANKERS going into, and out of, Venezuela." He added, in a mix of delusion and propaganda: "Venezuela is completely surrounded [...] until such time as they return to the United States of America all of the Oil, Land, and other Assets that they previously stole from us."

1 Tara Suter, "Trump: Venezuela must Pay for Seized US Oil Assets," *The Hill*, 18/12/2025, accessed on 7/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F32m>.



But what did Venezuela "steal" from the US? Trump sees Venezuela's decision to nationalize its oil sector in the 1970s – which ended American companies' control of the industry – as "theft." Venezuela maintains that the move halted the plundering of its national wealth by American oil companies, just as in the cases of other oil-producing countries such as Iran, Iraq, the Gulf Arab states, Libya, and others. Speaking shortly before Trump's post, Maduro had quipped that "Imperialism and the fascist right want to colonize Venezuela to take over its wealth of oil, gas, gold, among other minerals."²

Venezuela possesses the world's largest proven oil reserves, estimated at some 300 billion barrels or approximately 17% of global reserves. Despite this, its production barely exceeds 900,000 barrels per day (less than 1% of global production), most of which goes to China. This is the result of US sanctions, which have long disrupted its infrastructure development, maintenance, and modernization, and prevented the sale of oil at market prices. Venezuela also suffers from a dearth of both capital and expertise. What is more, its oil is heavy and of low quality, making it expensive to refine.³

Trump wants American companies to seize control of and develop Venezuela's oil fields – a clear act of colonialism that the world thought was a thing of the past. The US president explicitly stated this point during the press conference at which he announced the kidnapping of Maduro and his wife.⁴ But developing Venezuela's oil sector to the point where production can actually be increased will be no easy task. Adding just half a million barrels of output per day would require \$10 billion in investment, in a process that would take at least two years.⁵ The American firm Chevron is the main Western oil company still operating in Venezuela, producing about a quarter of the country's oil, roughly half of which is exported to the US.

c. Geopolitical Calculations

In November 2025, the Trump administration released its annual National Security Strategy, which explicitly stated that the US would strive to reassert its dominance in the Western Hemisphere.⁶ This contrasted with the 2022 strategy of former US president Joe Biden, which focused on competition with China in the Pacific and Indian Oceans and with Russia in Eastern Europe.

This approach is based on the Monroe Doctrine, declared in 1823 by then-US president James Monroe. This concept saw Latin America – and the Western Hemisphere in general – as the "backyard" of the US, and aimed to prevent European powers from gaining access and establishing influence there. To consolidate its dominance in the region, the US waged wars against the European colonial powers; most notably, the Spanish-American War of 1898, which ended in a US victory that bolstered US

² Idrees Ali, Phil Stewart, Shariq Khan & Marianna Parraga, "Trump Orders 'Blockade' of Sanctioned Oil Tankers Leaving, Entering Venezuela," *Reuters*, 17/12/2025, accessed on 7/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2A9>.

³ Vivian Salama et al., "Even Close Allies Are Asking Why Trump Wants to Run Venezuela," *The Atlantic*, 3/1/2026, accessed on 7/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2SD>.

⁴ Stanley Reed, "The Venezuelan Oil Industry Trump Is Planning to Revive," *The New York Times*, 3/1/2026, accessed on 7/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2QD>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (November 2025), accessed on 7/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2BQ>.

influence in the Caribbean by bringing about Cuba's independence from Spain, and allowing the US to occupy Porto Rico, an occupation which remains in place to this day.

During the Cold War (1946-1989), the US intensified its interventions in Latin America under the pretext of containing Soviet influence. However, the region's importance declined to some extent with the end of the Cold War and the rise of China, along with efforts to push back against Russia's attempts to regain some of its former influence in Eastern Europe. During his press conference announcing the success of the military operation against Venezuela, Trump explicitly invoked the Monroe Doctrine, justifying the operation with the desire to "surround ourselves with good neighbours" and stability. He also expressed his willingness to use ground troops to achieve this – a shift from his previous preference for relying solely on air power in military operations. He dubbed his new approach the "Donroe Doctrine," a portmanteau of his own name and that of Monroe.

Panama was the first target of this principle following Trump's return to the White House in early 2025, when he threatened to reoccupy the country's 80-kilometre-long canal, which connects the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, under the pretext of containing Chinese influence. The US had returned the canal to Panama in 1999, ending nearly a century of American control over the vital waterway. In the face of significant US pressure, Panama announced in February 2025 that it would not renew its Belt and Road Initiative agreement with China, thus neutralizing any pretext Trump might have for reoccupying the canal.

Indeed, Venezuela's relationship with China is one of the main reasons the US sought to overthrow Maduro. In 2023, Caracas signed a "Permanent Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" agreement with Beijing. It was notable that Maduro had hosted the Chinese Special Envoy for Latin America and the Caribbean just hours before being abducted. This was a significant blow to China as it strives to portray itself as a reliable and dependable friend of Venezuela. China had been providing support to Venezuela, particularly since the tightening of US sanctions in 2017. China is also the largest importer of Venezuelan oil; Chinese state-owned oil companies have invested approximately \$4.6 billion in the country, and Venezuela's debt to China amounts to some \$60 billion.⁷ Maduro's ouster therefore constitutes a major setback for China, which was forced to make do with condemning the move and accused the US of acting as the "world's policeman."⁸ While it will likely step up its purchases of cheap oil from Iran and Russia, some have speculated that China will in fact benefit from the US approach in Latin America in terms of its own policy toward Taiwan.

US Strategy towards Venezuela after Maduro

It is unclear whether the Trump administration has a clear vision for how it will manage the situation in Venezuela in the post-Maduro era. This presents it with a historical dilemma in light of its military interventions around the world, given its failure to build states after intervening to change regimes,

⁷ "China Says it Cannot Accept Countries Acting as 'World Judge' after US Captures Maduro," *The Asahi Shimbun*, 4/1/2026, accessed on 7/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F305>.

⁸ Ibid.

or to translate military successes into political and strategic gains. During his press conference to announce the abduction of the Venezuelan president and his wife, Trump said that the US would "run the country until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition."⁹ These statements raised American concerns about repeating the country's failed experiments in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. However, the Trump administration claims to be aware of these risks – hence its strategy, in Venezuela, of removing the head of the regime while preserving its basic structure, which is controlled by the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV). Washington claims that it is working to bring the party under control, rather than risking the burdens and dangers of removing it. It is clear that Trump and his administration officials' reluctance to push for the Venezuelan opposition to assume power, despite having asserted that the opposition candidate had won the 2024 presidential election, aligns with this approach.

Trump summarized this approach in an interview with *The Atlantic* the day after the abduction of Maduro, whose vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, had promptly been sworn in as interim president. The US leader threatened Rodríguez, saying, "If she doesn't do what's right, she is going to pay a very big price, probably bigger than Maduro."¹⁰ Trump and several senior administration officials have warned that if Venezuelan officials fail to cooperate with the US, this could expose them to another, more powerful American attack. This undermines the drug war narrative at its core, demonstrating that the issue is not drug trafficking, but rather a lack of "cooperation" with the US. Secretary of State Marco Rubio later explained this approach, indicating that Washington would use the leverage it had gained from the oil embargo and the regional military buildup to achieve its policy objectives, without this implying direct rule over Venezuela. "It's not running [the country]," he said. "It's running policy, the policy with regard to this. We want Venezuela to move in a certain direction."¹¹

Yet the success of this strategy is not guaranteed. On the one hand, Rodríguez and senior regime officials, such as Defense Minister López, find themselves compelled to maintain the strategy of late president Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) amidst factional power struggles within the regime, and to avoid accusations of collusion with the US in Maduro's abduction. On the other, they must take care not to provoke Washington. This dilemma explains Rodríguez's seemingly contradictory statements. Her initial stance was quite assertive – describing the US military operation as "barbaric," arguing that it aimed to bring about "regime change in Venezuela, in order to enable the seizure of our energy resources, our mineral resources, and our natural resources," and maintaining her support for Maduro's legitimacy.

Yet she quickly softened her tone. In a statement addressed to Trump the day after the operation, she said: "Our peoples and our region deserve peace and dialogue, not war." She added, "We extend an invitation to the government of the US to work jointly on an agenda of cooperation, aimed at shared development, within the framework of international law, and that strengthens lasting peaceful

⁹ Garrett Downs, "Rubio Explains how U.S. Might 'Run' Venezuela after Maduros' Ouster," *CNBC*, 4/1/2026, accessed on 7/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2E3>.

¹⁰ Michael Scherer, "Trump Threatens Venezuela's New Leader With a Fate Worse Than Maduro's," *The Atlantic*, 4/1/2026, accessed on 7/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F39p>.

¹¹ Downs.



coexistence."¹² However, maintaining this balance remains a daunting task with unpredictable outcomes, especially as it is unclear how willing the US is to accept compromise.

Conclusion

The danger of the Trump administration's decision to abduct the Venezuelan president and his wife lies not only in the fact it was an attack on a sovereign state, carried out without authorization from the United Nations Security Council, or in the claim that sovereignty can simply be confiscated for the benefit of the US. It is also dangerous for the precedent it sets, which could open the door to other American attacks against sovereign states in Latin America or elsewhere. This policy, based on the logic of force, with zero regard for rules, laws, or international agreements, also threatens to undermine the foundations upon which the international order was built, foundations that took centuries of wars and tragedies to create.

Moreover, in his voracious appetite to control the world's resources, Trump appears not to distinguish between enemy and ally. After threatening Iran with being "hit very hard"¹³ if it kills demonstrators during protests over the country's economic situation, he turned to the question of seizing and occupying Greenland, a semi-autonomous territory of Denmark – a founding member of NATO. Despite the silence of other countries and the hypocrisy of the European Union, this explains why certain European countries, such as France and Spain, voiced opposition to the US aggression against Venezuela. These countries fear that the policies and behaviour of the Trump administration might encourage Russia or China to do the same in Ukraine or Taiwan, and that other countries might follow suit. This could lead to a state of international chaos unless the nations of the world unite to halt a slide to policies based on the logic of force.

¹² Anatoly Kurmanaev, Jack Nicas, Edward Wong & Eric Schmitt, "Venezuela's New Leader Softens Tone as Trump Threatens Colombia," *The New York Times*, 4/1/2026, accessed on 7/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2oZ>.

¹³ Yan Zhuang, "Trump Suggests U.S. Could Take Action Against More Countries," *The New York Times*, 4/1/2026, accessed on 7/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2Lu>.