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SPOTLIGHT

The Significance and Implications of US Intervention in Venezuela

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The military operation to capture Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro and his wife on 3 January is the most significant manifestation yet of the Trump administration's return to hegemonic US policy in Latin America. The US's main goal with regard to Venezuela is to take control of the country and its oil reserves rather than to combat drug trafficking or restore democratic order. Leaving the current regime in place will make it easier for Trump to achieve these goals.

What was the reasoning behind the Trump administration's decision to intervene?

The Trump administration cited the need to bring Maduro to trial in the US as the main formal rationale for the operation to capture him, citing charges including supporting drug smuggling and trafficking (so-called narcoterrorism) into the US. However, after his capture, President Trump admitted that the goal was to seize control of Venezuela's oil resources for US companies. Furthermore, the administration indicated its willingness to implement a democratic transition in Venezuela.

The final decision to capture Maduro may have been dictated by the Venezuelan authorities' lack of response to the imposition of a naval blockade by the US Navy, and the resulting need to exert greater pressure on the regime's ruling elites. It may also have been influenced by [Trump's failure to oust the Venezuelan regime during his first term](#). The military operation can also be seen as an attempt to signal to other countries in the region that if they do not pursue policies consistent with the interests of the United States—as formulated in the latest [National Security Strategy](#)—they will have to face the consequences.

What could be the consequences for the internal politics of the US?

The intervention in Venezuela could be seen as fulfilling [Trump's 2024 campaign promises](#). At the time, he promised, among other things, to stem the flow of illegal immigrants and drug smuggling from Latin American countries. By capturing Maduro, Trump hopes to bolster his domestic image as a politician capable of effectively fulfilling promises and utilising state power, unafraid of the consequences of his decisions. By not informing Congress of his plans, Trump is also attempting to further strengthen the position of the office of the president within the system of power, particularly in areas related to the use of military force against other countries. At the same time, Trump's interventionism could work to his disadvantage in the long term – especially if he decides to launch a ground operation in Venezuela. Such an action would contradict Trump's declared policy, supported by the MAGA movement, of mitigating the risks arising from questionable and prolonged US military interventions abroad.

What does the future hold for Venezuela and the current regime?

Maduro's removal is mainly symbolic. [He was more of a figurehead than a guarantor of the Chavista regime's stability](#), especially after the [rigged presidential election in July 2024](#). Control over the armed groups and the apparatus

of repression, including the police, secret services and “colectivos” militias, still belongs to Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello. Control over the army lies with Defence Minister Vladimir Padrino, although the attack has undermined the military’s credibility, given its failure to defend the country. Trump is not seeking immediate regime change because he wants to secure his influence over the situation in Venezuela and, above all, to expand his control over the oil sector. His administration aims to achieve these goals by cooperating with the current Vice President Delcy Rodríguez, announced as the interim President of Venezuela on January 4 and perceived in the US as the most conciliatory and competent representative of the regime’s leadership in terms of state management. The US will likely force concessions from Venezuela’s weakened, undemocratic authorities and then may initiate a process of power transition. Internal divisions within the opposition and Trump’s critical attitude towards its main figure, María Corina Machado—last year’s Nobel Peace Prize winner—make it difficult to predict what this transformation might look like. The US may want to force the opposition to cooperate with the regime and grant amnesty to regime members who abide by Trump’s demands. It is uncertain to what extent it will be possible to maintain order and avoid destabilisation by pro-regime armed groups.

How will the Trump administration’s policy affect other countries in the region?

The actions taken against Venezuela are a clear signal of how far the current US administration is willing to go in [its efforts to rebuild its influence in Latin America](#). So far, Trump has openly interfered in various electoral processes (e.g. by supporting politicians considered ideologically close to him) and judicial processes, as in the case of [US sanctions against Brazil in defence of former President Jair Bolsonaro](#). [The alliance with El Salvador’s President Nayib Bukele](#) demonstrates that what is crucial for the US is a government’s willingness to cooperate, rather than its democratic credentials. Nor does compliance with the law matter, as exemplified by the release of former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, who was sentenced to several decades in prison for smuggling drugs into the US. Strong ideological divisions in Latin America favour the Trump administration. Conservative pro-American presidents in Argentina, Ecuador and Paraguay, as well as the president-elect in Chile, supported the intervention. The main critics were the left-wing governments of the region’s major countries – Mexico, Brazil and Colombia. US control of Venezuela could complicate the situation in Cuba, which has been dependent on material support from the chavista regime. It is also unclear whether the US will increase

pressure on Nicaragua, ruled by the regime of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, a country that is important in controlling migration flows.

How should US actions be assessed, and what are the potential international legal consequences?

The US action violated, most of all, the Charter of the United Nations, particularly the prohibitions on the use of force and interference in the internal affairs of states, as well as the obligations to respect the political independence of any state and settle international disputes peacefully. According to General Assembly resolution 3314 of 1974, which reflects customary international law, it also constitutes an act of aggression. A similar US intervention in Panama in 1989, which resulted in the capture of the local dictator Manuel Noriega (later convicted of drug offences), was also deemed unlawful. International law does not permit exceptions to the prohibition of the use of force on the grounds of stopping drug trafficking (the exception concerning the right to self-defence cannot be invoked here) or supporting democracy. This intervention will encourage other countries to justify their violations of international law, including [Russia’s war in Ukraine](#) and [China’s actions in the South China Sea](#). It also leads to the erosion of the international legal order.

How are other countries and the EU responding?

Among the countries outside of Latin America, [China and Russia — the regime’s closest political and economic partners](#), present in the Venezuelan oil sector — have protested strongly. However, their response is not expected to be anything other than diplomatic, even though they are likely to lose a close partner as a result of the intervention. Belarus, Iran and North Korea have also criticised the action, as have some countries that support respect for international law, such as Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, as well as the UN Secretary-General. Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, the EU and most European countries have avoided making explicit assessments, although they have emphasised the need to respect international law.

Shortly after the intervention, President Donald Trump once again raised [US territorial claims against Greenland](#). In response, the Prime Minister of Denmark emphasised that Greenland is part of Danish territory covered by NATO alliance guarantees, calling for an end to the threats. Due to the serious political and economic costs that the use of force against Greenland would entail (such as impact on financial markets and the future of NATO), no military action by the US against Greenland is to be expected, at least in the short term.