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A Wounded Hemispheric Order: Trump's US Interventionism in Venezuela
Paulo Afonso Velasco Júnior

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Abstract: This article examines how the initial strategy of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation failed to achieve regime change and, instead, facilitated regional fragmentation. It further details the execution of “Operation Absolute Resolve”, which resulted in the military capture and extraterritorial judicialization of Nicolás Maduro. The study highlights that the 2026 intervention made under Donald Trump's second term represents a fundamental fracture in the post-1945 international order, signaling a transition toward a hemispheric security architecture governed by geoeconomic coercion and unilateral force.

Keywords: Venezuela; Operation Absolute Resolve; hemispheric order.

The deterioration of the Venezuelan State and its subsequent political isolation are rooted in the systemic transformation of its foreign and domestic policy, from the Chávez era to the consolidation of power under Nicolás Maduro. “Bolivarian” foreign policy was initially sustained by the abundant oil revenues of the first decade of the 2000s, which allowed for a geopolitical reconfiguration characterized by a “counter-hegemonic” project. This ideological architecture, focused on promoting 21st century socialism, utilized regional organizations—such as the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America—to cultivate international solidarity and establish a distinct sphere of influence (Serbin & Serbin Pont 2017).

However, the transition from Hugo Chávez to Nicolás Maduro (2013-2016) coincided with a fundamental shift in the global economic scenario and internal sociopolitical fragmentation (Romero & Mijares 2016). As international oil prices fell, the structural basis of Venezuela’s regional leadership eroded, forcing the administration to prioritize the centralization of domestic power over its formerly expansive foreign policy (Romero & Mijares 2016; Serbín & Pont 2017). During this period, the government’s approach to domestic political competition underwent a profound transformation, characterized by “autocratic legalism”—the tactical and abusive use of legal institutions to neutralize opposition vectors and dismantle democratic checks and balances (Corrales 2015).

The political crisis reached a critical tipping point between 2016 and 2017, marking the end of competitive democratic processes in the country. Following the opposition’s landslide victory in the 2015 legislative elections, the executive branch acted systematically to nullify the National Assembly’s powers (Rosales & Jiménez 2021). This culminated in the State’s decision to bypass the legislature entirely by creating a pro-government National Constituent Assembly in 2017—a move rejected by more than 40 countries. This process of authoritarian consolidation effectively blocked any pathways to a democratic transition as the State co-opted or hijacked opposition parties and imprisoned key political figures (Rosales & Jiménez 2021).

This internal collapse occurred alongside a growing regional stalemate. The Venezuelan crisis unfolded during what was called a “hemispheric order upheaval”—a turbulent transition period that restricted the regional actors’ ability to provide effective multilateral protection for democracy. Consequently, the “Venezuela issue” came to be characterized by a “frozen” conflict, in which the gap between regional

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rhetoric on human rights and the actual capacity to influence the situation on the ground increased significantly.

Despite the cumulative impact of economic implosion, international isolation, and the repression of civil society, the government successfully maintained its survival through the use of coercive force and institutionalized strategies of political exclusion (Buxton 2018; Rosales & Jiménez 2021). By 2019, this shift led the opposition to seek regime change through the establishment of an “interim government,” reflecting the polarized and high-stakes nature of the conflict as it progressed through the 2020s (Rosales & Jiménez 2021).

This article analyzes the actions taken by the United States toward Venezuela from 2019 onward, beginning with the “Maximum Pressure” policy, which relied on diplomatic isolation and intensified economic sanctions, and later transitioning to a more direct intervention that culminated in Operation “Absolute Resolve” and the capture of Nicolás Maduro—marking the first military actions in Latin America in a generation. The text also examines the impacts on multilateralism and international law, alongside the positions adopted by Latin American and European nations.

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THE TRUMP POLICY OF “MAXIMUM PRESSURE”

The policy of “maximum pressure” enacted by the Trump administration against the Maduro government between 2019 and 2022 represents a significant intensification of US interventionism in Latin America (Herrera Yera 2024). This strategy was not an isolated event, but the culmination of a hardening of relations that began following the death of Hugo Chávez in 2013 and gained momentum with the Obama administration’s 2015 Executive Order 13692, which formally designated Venezuela as an “unusual and extraordinary threat” to United States

national security. Under Donald Trump, this approach evolved into a systematic attempt to destabilize the Venezuelan State by targeting the essential pillars of the Bolivarian process (Herrera Yera 2024).

Washington's strategy relied on a multifaceted approach designed to fracture the civil-military union, facilitate diplomatic isolation, and provoke economic collapse (Herrera Yera 2024). Central to this was the aggressive use of economic sanctions, which became the primary instrument of the "America First" foreign policy, framed within a contemporary resurgence of the Monroe Doctrine (Bodemer 2023). The administration's radicalized discourse was a deliberate component of this pressure, intended to discredit Bolivarian institutions while maintaining the external perception of impending regime change. Notably, President Trump and his National Security Advisor, John Bolton, frequently employed provocative rhetoric—famously asserting that "all options were on the table", including direct military intervention.

Despite this bellicose public posturing, the administration pragmatically avoided such a radical operational shift, initially to avoid invoking unfavorable historical associations in Latin America. Instead, the focus remained on a "dual-track" strategy, combining unilateral US economic measures with multilateral diplomatic efforts, notably through cooperation with the Lima Group, to force the Maduro government's capitulation (Bodemer 2023). This policy of "maximum pressure" was heavily supported by a disinformation campaign intended to accelerate the perceived implosion of the Bolivarian process (Herrera Yera 2024).

By the end of Trump's initial term, the policy of tiered sanctions had largely exhausted its utility; major members of the Maduro administration were already targeted through assets freezing or international legal action, and the continued economic deterioration failed to achieve the immediate regime change sought by Washington (Bodemer 2023). Furthermore, rather than fostering regional unity against Caracas, the US-led initiatives contributed to increased geopolitical fragmentation, creating a power vacuum that facilitated the involvement of external actors such as China, Cuba, and Russia (Bodemer 2023). Ultimately, the campaign served more to solidify the confrontational stance of both Washington and Caracas than to dismantle the Bolivarian process, leaving the region more divided and the Venezuelan government resilient against the intended collapse (Herrera Yera 2024).

The Biden administration's approach to Venezuela marked a significant departure from the rigid "maximum pressure" campaign of its predecessor, pivoting instead toward calibrated, carrot- and-stick diplomacy. Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the subsequent global energy crunch, Washington reevaluated its strategic priorities, recognizing the necessity of stabilizing global energy markets

and addressing regional migration. This shifted US policy toward pragmatic re-engagement, leveraging the partial relief of oil sanctions—most notably through specialized licenses for Chevron—to incentivize the Nicolás Maduro regime to return to the negotiating table with the democratic opposition.

This diplomatic track culminated in the October 2023 Barbados Agreement, a fragile milestone where the Venezuelan government pledged to establish a framework for competitive presidential elections in exchange for broader, temporary US sanctions relief. However, this period of relative détente was short-lived. Following the highly contested July 2024 presidential elections, during which the Maduro regime barred leading opposition figures, engaged in widespread electoral manipulation, and cracked down on post-election protests, the Biden administration was forced to pivot back. Washington systematically rolled back its general sanctions exemptions and re-imposed restrictive measures, cementing a renewed diplomatic estrangement that demonstrated the severe limitations of using economic incentives to foster democratic transitions in authoritarian States.

Upon returning to office, Donald Trump discarded the incremental, diplomatic maneuvering of the previous administration in favor of a highly assertive, unilateral, and transactional doctrine for Latin America. Reviving a modernized, energy-centric interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine, the Trump administration treated Venezuela not through the lens of long-term democracy promotion, but as a site for direct economic and geopolitical leverage.

OPERATION ABSOLUTE RESOLVE

On January 3, 2026, the United States executed “Operation Absolute Resolve,” the definitive culmination of the “maximum pressure” strategy, which had been intensified since January 2025, with the beginning of Trump’s second term. The operation resulted in the swift military capture of President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, who were subsequently transported to New York to face arraignment on drug trafficking charges. In the immediate aftermath, Vice President Delcy Rodríguez was sworn in as President. While Venezuela’s constitution mandates that presidential elections occur within 30 days in the event of a “forced absence,” the legal clarity regarding this timeline and the validity of the transition remained a subject of intense domestic and international debate (Jütten & Delivorias 2026).

In fact, instead of fostering a democratic rebirth by backing the prominent challengers from the 2024 election—specifically Edmundo González Urrutia, recognized by numerous international governments as the rightful winner, or the 2025 Nobel Prize recipient María Corina Machado—Trump instead designated

Maduro's former Vice President as the provisional leader. For more than ten years, Rodríguez was a fundamental pillar of the Maduro dictatorship, which was defined by widespread corruption, ties to narcotics syndicates, and egregious human rights violations. Paradoxically, she was the target of sanctions imposed by the Trump administration in 2018.

Unlike past US interventions designed to completely collapse an administrative apparatus or implement a pre-selected opposition government, the 2026 intervention explicitly targeted the primary executive leadership (capturing Nicolás Maduro) while deliberately allowing the existing regime's institutional framework and military chain of command to remain intact under a swift legal succession. This represents a shift from "regime change" to "regime decapitation and management."

The official defense of Operation Absolute Resolve—the American seizure of Nicolás Maduro and his spouse, Cilia Flores—notably lacked any focus on safeguarding civil liberties or restoring constitutional order. Rather, Trump affirmed that the United States would supervise the country during its transition, specifically to "get the oil flowing." In a post on Truth Social, he declared that the US was poised to receive millions of barrels of petroleum through this new interim Venezuelan authority.

While 20th-century operations were heavily shrouded in the ideological rhetoric of promoting democracy or combating communism, the 2026 operation was marked by blunt, overt transactionalism. The official rhetoric immediately following the operation explicitly tied the military action to direct control over strategic energy assets, defining the intervention as a mechanism for domestic economic security and direct geopolitical leverage.

The operation was preceded by a significant and deliberate military escalation. In the months leading up to the intervention, the US military presence in the region expanded to include eight warships, a submarine, and approximately 10,000 troops (Jütten & Delivorias 2026). The tactical preparation for the operation included a series of lethal strikes. Since September 2025, the US military has reportedly launched 21 lethal strikes against vessels in the Caribbean and the Eastern Pacific, resulting in more than 80 deaths (Jütten & Delivorias 2026). These actions were framed by the White House through the lens of the "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine, which explicitly sought to deny non-hemispheric competitors—specifically China and Russia—the ability to position forces or maintain control over vital assets within the Western Hemisphere.

The strategic implications of Operation Absolute Resolve represent a fundamental fracture in the long-standing norms governing international relations. It is quite easy to understand this intervention as a unique departure from previous

US actions in the region, which were generally justified by humanitarian concerns or Cold War ideology and often sought validation through international institutions. This operation, by contrast, integrated three distinct elements: the utilization of military force without multilateral approval; the extraterritorial abduction of a sitting head of State; the assertion of external control over strategically important natural resources (Eze et al. 2026).

By acting outside of collective security mechanisms, the United States has challenged the authority of the United Nations and the wider rules-based international order. This intervention demonstrates that when vital geopolitical and resource interests are at stake, established legal rules and norms are increasingly set aside in favor of unilateralism. The operation risks normalizing the use of force by powerful States to achieve regime change, thereby weakening the protections afforded to sovereignty under the UN Charter (Eze et al. 2026). As a consequence, this episode accelerates the decline of multilateral cooperation, signaling an era where international institutions are increasingly viewed as reflections of power relations rather than impartial mediators.

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The response of the international community reveals a sharp divergence between the normative posture of the European Union and the existential “alignment dilemmas” faced by regional powers like Brazil. While the European Union has utilized its diplomatic framework to, in some way, condemn the intervention and uphold international norms, regional actors find themselves navigating a precarious geopolitical scenario characterized by US-led coercive power.

EUROPEAN UNION AND LATIN AMERICAN REACTIONS

On January 4, 2026, the European Union established its formal diplomatic position. Kaja Kallas, the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs, issued a statement on behalf of all EU member States—with the exception of Hungary—

explicitly recalling that the principles of international law and the UN Charter must be upheld under all circumstances (Eze et al. 2026; Jütten & Delivorias 2026). The European Commission reinforced this by declaring it would not recognize Delcy Rodríguez as part of any interim government, signaling potential diplomatic isolation for the new regime (Eze et al. 2026).

This institutional response aligns with the EU's multi-year engagement. Since 2016, the Union has provided €520 million in emergency humanitarian aid, and, in 2025 alone, it disbursed approximately €62.5 million to address urgent needs (Jütten & Delivorias 2026). Furthermore, the EU maintains a restrictive measures regime, including an arms embargo and targeted sanctions, which the Council decided to prolong on December 15, 2025 until January 10, 2027 (Jütten & Delivorias 2026).

In contrast, regional powers like Brazil operate within what some analysts describe as a “Gramscian interregnum”—a period where the traditional liberal order has lost its capacity to generate stability, yet no alternative model has taken its place. Brazil is forced to confront direct security externalities, including the expansion of illicit economies and cross-border violence at a time when the country feels increasingly vulnerable due to the weakening of multilateralism and a growing disregard for international norms (Marquez de la Rubia 2026).

For Brazil and its neighbors, the intervention creates acute dilemmas regarding sovereign decisionism. The operation marks a shift toward the primacy of material power, forcing States to recalibrate their risk calculations between strategic dependence on the US and economic ties with powers like China (Marquez de la Rubia 2026). As China continues to focus on Latin American resources—including oil, iron, lithium and copper in nations like Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Peru, and Mexico—the US intervention acts as a demonstration of “red lines” (Eze et al. 2026; Marquez de la Rubia 2026). Ultimately, while the EU addresses the intervention through international law, the region remains trapped in a rupture of the hemispheric order, where US-led coercion has significantly reduced the margins of strategic autonomy (Marquez de la Rubia 2026).

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A CRISIS OF MULTILATERALISM

The inability of international and regional organizations to effectively mediate the Venezuelan crisis underscores a profound erosion of the post-1945 multilateral architecture. This institutional failure is a systemic consequence of a widening gap between the formal rules of the international system and the actual practice of unilateral coercive diplomacy (Eze et al. 2026).

The United Nations has seen its capacity to constrain dominant States tested and found wanting. The intervention revealed a disconnection between rhetorical commitments to the Security Council and the reality of unilateral military force, which bypassed these mandates entirely (Jütten & Delivorias 2026). The removal of a sitting head of State by external forces has created a dangerous precedent, blurring the distinction between legitimate accountability and illegal regime change (Eze et al. 2026). By merging military action with extraterritorial judicialization, the intervention shattered the normative assumptions of liberal multilateralism, signaling a transition toward a framework based on geoeconomics rather than collective rules (Marquez de la Rubia 2026).

At the regional level, organizations such as Mercosur and CELAC failed to articulate a coherent response. Mercosur's prior actions, specifically the permanent suspension of Venezuela for an alleged "rupture of the democratic order," isolated Caracas but failed to facilitate a sustainable solution, exacerbating regional fragmentation. The lack of a common strategy—characterized by a polarized mix of alignment, distancing, or continued support for Maduro—left the region paralyzed (Bodemer 2023).

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Bodies like the Organization of American States and CELAC have explicitly lacked the capacity to bridge these divides. States have increasingly been forced

into bilateralized, asymmetric relationships with the United States (Marquez de la Rubia 2026). This shift represents a retreat from autonomous governance. The diplomatic breakdown during the Guaidó “pseudo-interinato,” which involved the acceptance of illegal representatives and the expulsion of diplomats, violated fundamental tenets of the Vienna Convention and the UN Charter (Herrera Yera 2024). Consequently, regional organizations are rapidly losing relevance as security outcomes are determined outside these institutional channels (Eze et al. 2026).

A WOUNDED HEMISPHERIC ORDER AND HUGE UNCERTAINTIES IN VENEZUELA

The aftermath of Operation Absolute Resolve reveals a Latin American geopolitical scenario that is profoundly wounded. The capture of Nicolás Maduro represents a decisive departure from the principles of national sovereignty and non-intervention that served as collective protection for States across the hemisphere (Marquez de la Rubia 2026). This intervention has fundamentally altered the security architecture, replacing multilateral consensus with the reality of military force and economic leverage as strategic tools (Eze et al. 2026; Marquez de la Rubia 2026).

As circumstances evolve, the US Congress could play a vital role in scrutinizing the legal foundations and the broader implications of those executive actions. It is essential for lawmakers, the media, and the public to evaluate who actually profits from this policy. Bipartisan congressional members who have long advocated for Venezuelan self-determination could insist that the Trump administration provide a transparent strategy for democratic restoration and justify the costs associated with this intervention serve the national interests of the United States.

The current administration's stance, coupled with a general pattern of disengaging from global democratic advocacy—including the 2025 termination of humanitarian and democratic assistance to the Venezuelan people—creates significant uncertainty regarding the country's prospects. Transitioning from an autocratic system to a functional democracy is an immense challenge, though not impossible. Indeed, there are intense economic, security, and political obstacles that Venezuelans must overcome.

The perceived inaction of regional bodies and the United Nations impotence underscore the fragility of existing international frameworks. Regional powers like Brazil found their margins for autonomous strategic maneuvering drastically reduced (Marquez de la Rubia 2026). The operation deepened political polarization and exacerbated security externalities, including the expansion of illicit economies and a resurgence of migration flows (Eze et al. 2026; Marquez de la Rubia 2026).

This outcome is the culmination of the strategic evolution from the Trump administration's earlier sanction-based approach. Between 2019 and 2022, the "maximum pressure" policy failed to force a regime collapse and, instead, contributed to the fragmentation of the opposition and the polarization of regional alliances (Bodemer 2023; Herrera Yera 2024). By the end of that period, the strategy had exhausted itself, having driven Venezuela further into the economic embrace of China, Russia, and Cuba (Bodemer 2023).

The 2026 intervention marks the abandonment of these constraints. President Trump's assertion that "American dominance in the Western Hemisphere will never be questioned again" serves as the definitive doctrine of this new era (Jütten & Delivorias, 2026). It is a stark reassertion of the US claim to the region as its sphere of influence, evoking the ideological framing of the Cold War (Jütten & Delivorias 2026). The legacy of this operation for Latin American nations is a diminished capacity for independent action and profound uncertainty regarding international law. The region now faces a geopolitical environment where sovereignty is contingent upon the will of the great power, leaving the hemispheric order deeply fractured and vulnerable to future unilateral incursions (Eze et al. 2026; Marquez de la Rubia 2026).

Historically, US interventions in Latin America relied on backing local proxies or justifying actions through regional treaties. The 2026 operation represents a qualitative rupture because it treated a foreign head of State directly as a criminal target. By fusing a lightning military raid with domestic judicial warrants (indictments by the US Department of Justice on drug trafficking and terrorism charges), the US bypassed traditional international legal frameworks entirely, substituting global norms with the extraterritorial enforcement of US domestic law.

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In sum, the 2026 operation signals the normalization of raw power over institutional restraint, as well as it redefines modern imperialism by trading the ideological burden of democracy-building for an ultra-rapid, transactional, and judicialized form of military intervention.

Finally, the Trump administration's recent maneuvers should be viewed as a warning by pro-democracy movements worldwide, particularly those in Ukraine and Taiwan who are resisting autocratic pressure. There is a concern that recent US activities in Venezuela may have actually hindered a potential democratic revival instead of facilitating one. ▬

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