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Venezuela, China, Russia, and the 'Donroe Doctrine'

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There are numerous pressing issues in the world currently. Among them, for many, the alleged United States attacks on Venezuelan drug smuggling boats seems to be a significant point of interest.

On that subject, the questions are myriad: Did the boat attacked in September pose a national security threat so significant that the Pentagon was forced to attack it a second time? Is it lawful under international maritime law to attack a damaged ship rather than offer rescue? From the admiral who gave the order, to the secretary of war, or the president, who is ultimately responsible for the attacks? What did U.S. President Donald Trump mean when he said on Dec. 2 that, "We are going to start doing those strikes on land, too"?

As noted in my and Nic Bell's [August 2024 essay on Venezuela's history](#), the relationship between the U.S. and Venezuela has been tense for a long time. During the previous Trump administration, the Venezuelan National Assembly moved to replace President Nicolás Maduro with its Speaker, Juan Guaido. At that time, the U.S. and 53 other countries considered Guaido to be Venezuela's legal president. Eventually, the Venezuelan military quelled the coup and Guaido fled to exile in Florida.

Similarly, in the 2024 election, Maduro claimed victory over the proxy candidate named to replace Maria Corina Machado Parisca, who won the primary that year,

but was then barred from running in the general election. These results are in dispute with only six countries accepting the outcome, including China and Russia. Machado was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2025 and dedicated it to Trump.



D.J. Trump Institute for Peace building

Trump had lobbied hard for the prize, as outlined in this [recent essay on the Prize](#), but has consoled himself with renaming the iconic U.S. Institute for Peace building in Washington, D.C., after himself once he fired its staff and closed the congressionally-created organization. The graphic shows how the roof of the building looks like a dove aerially.

In an interview with CNN’s Christiane Amanpour on Oct. 15, Machado praised Trump’s hard line on Venezuela and said that Maduro has waged war on her country as the head of a “criminal narco-terrorism structure.” She has accused Maduro of making Venezuela “a real threat to the national security of the United States.” Responding to a question about the U.S. strikes on suspected Venezuelan drug boats, she said, “We need the help of the President of the United States to stop this war because it is about human lives,” deftly declining to clarify whether she meant the lives of those on the boats or was calling for direct U.S. intervention to topple Maduro.^[i]

In July, the U.S. Department of the Treasury announced sanctions on property owned by Maduro and other high-ranking figures named as being involved in the group.^[ii] The U.S. Department of State announced on Nov. 16 that it would designate Venezuelan Cartel de los Soles as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in effect as of Nov. 24 and named Maduro the head of it. As a “Narco-terrorist

organization,” this designation includes the act of trafficking drugs to other countries, such as the U.S., as part of its campaign of terror. The designation itself grants U.S. law enforcement and military assets broad authority to target and destroy the group, which is alleged to have deep ties within Venezuelan political and military institutions.^[iii] These designations are usually for nonstate actors, but not always. Does this mean that it is a de facto designation of Venezuela itself?

It is unclear whether these designations give the U.S. legal authority to fire missiles on boats alleged to be from Venezuela and alleged to be carrying drugs. The Department of State Fact Sheet on "Terrorist Designations and State Sponsors of Terrorism"^[iv] refers to George W. Bush's September 2001 Executive Order 13224 that only authorizes sanctions and asset freezing. Specifically, it states that these designations, "provide a means by which to disrupt the financial support network for terrorists and terrorist organizations" by authorizing the U.S. government to designate and block the assets of foreign individuals and entities so designated.^[v]

These sea routes are common passages for Venezuelan cocaine to the U.S., which in past administrations were stopped by the Coast Guard and searched, with contraband confiscated and the traffickers detained. It is also unclear whether these designations give the U.S. legal authority to attack the sovereign territory of Venezuela. That question resurfaced when Trump remarked, "You know, the land is much easier ... And we know the routes they take. We know everything about them. We know where they live. We know where the bad ones live. And we're going to start that [attacks on land] very soon, too."^[vi]

The Law of the Sea Treaty was signed by the U.S. in 1983 with President Ronald Reagan's Ocean Policy Statement that the United States "will accept and act in accordance with the provisions of the Convention relating to traditional (non-seabed) uses of the ocean, such as navigation and overflight." Thus, not signing onto the entire treaty and the Senate has never ratified it. Article 108 of the treaty, governed by the United Nations deals with the issue of "illicit traffic in narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances," states^[vii]

1. All States shall cooperate in the suppression of illicit traffic in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances engaged in by ships on the high seas contrary to international conventions.
2. Any State which has reasonable grounds for believing that a ship flying its flag is engaged in illicit traffic in narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances may request the cooperation of other States to suppress such traffic.^[viii]

However, while we have only seen brief video of the alleged drug boats, it is unlikely they were flying the Venezuelan flag and we know that Venezuela did not “request the cooperation” of any other states to “suppress such traffic.”

Rather than get into the fray of whether the second strike on the disabled vessel on Sept. 2 was legal or a criminal act,^[ix] my concern here is what could happen if the U.S. initiates attacks on the Venezuelan mainland. Thus far, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights issued a statement on Dec. 2, 2025, enumerating the U.S. strikes, saying:

The Commission calls upon the United States to: refrain from employing lethal military force in the context of public security operations, ensuring that any counter-crime or security operation fully complies with international human rights standards; conduct prompt, impartial, and independent investigations into all deaths and detentions resulting from these actions; and adopt effective measures to prevent recurrence.^[x]

The Commission is part of the Organization of American States (OAS), a kind of mini United Nations comprised of all 35 countries in North and South America. As such, the U.S. is a member. OAS is self-described as the premier regional forum for political discussion, policy analysis, and decision-making in Western Hemisphere affairs. The OAS was created in 1948, replacing the original International Union of American Republics formed in 1890. Its mission is “to achieve among its member states an order of peace and justice, to promote their solidarity, to strengthen their collaboration, and to defend their sovereignty, their territorial integrity, and their independence.” ^[xi]

On Dec. 2, when a question came up about Colombian cocaine trafficking at a Cabinet meeting, Trump told reporters, “Anybody that’s doing that [trafficking illegal drugs] and selling it into our country is subject to attack.”^[xii] I will be watching as this crisis unfolds to see if the OAS sides with increased U.S. incursion into Venezuelan territory if it poses a potential threat to other OAS members. The Maduro presidency has led to the out-migration from Venezuela of an estimated 8 million people into neighboring states, straining their resources and political structures. There is little doubt that most of their leaders would like to see Maduro’s reign end, but it is unclear how they will feel if the U.S. president is responsible for his ouster as any of them could be next.

As a result of this migration crisis, in 2021, the U.S. designated Venezuelan migrants as parolees with special temporary protected status, allowing them to reside and work legally in this country. However, the Trump administration’s Department of Homeland Security determined that conditions no longer meet the criteria for this status and that the designation for Venezuelans is contrary to the

U.S. national interest. As of Nov. 7, 2025, the program was terminated. Their employment authorization will expire on Oct. 2, 2026.^[xiii] At this point, it is impossible to know if this will change if the U.S. and Venezuela go to war.

In Venezuela, the most recent informal polling conducted by Al Jazeera on Dec. 5, indicates mixed views among the people in the capitol, Caracas. One farmer who sells his fruit in the city said, “The homeland is the homeland, and my army is my army.” Despite a health condition that requires frequent treatment, he said, “I would be knee-deep in the dirt with those people. I would face [the invaders] with them [the Venezuelan army].” A woman selling confections said that with U.S. intervention, “Venezuela is going to be free.” A young man who stocks shelves in a supermarket said, “I think we are screwed.” He added, “Venezuela is a country with too many resources. They are interested in Venezuela because they need its resources.”^[xiv]

Of additional serious concern is the fact that China and Russia have made their support of Maduro clear, and both countries have unknown numbers of security forces in the country in the form of technical advisers. In February 2024, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visited Caracas and reassured Vice President Delcy Rodriguez and Foreign Minister Yván Gil of Russia’s “unconditional support.”^[xv] In the same press release from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lavrov emphasized the two sides’ “readiness to work together in favor of a more equitable polycentric world order.” This means a concerted effort to reduce U.S. global hegemony.

Gil then claimed that “Venezuela and Russia are two countries that are victims on the international stage of illegal, irrational, illegitimate application of unilateral coercive measures.” However, he said, both countries “have woven a close relationship, a functional, structural relationship that allows us today to show concrete results to our people.”^[xvi] By emphasizing victimhood of “unilateral coercive measures,” Gil meant those imposed by the U.S., even though the EU voted in January 2025 to extend sanctions imposed in 2017 on 69 Venezuelans, including freezing their assets and placing travel restrictions on them until January 2026.

In May 2025, Maduro visited Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow for the 80th anniversary of its victory in World War II, signing a new comprehensive partnership for cooperation in energy, transportation, and other sectors. In October 2025, Maduro wrote to Putin asking for Russian missiles, radars, and upgraded aircraft in the face of increasing U.S. pressure.^[xvii] The Washington Post wrote that in addition to Maduro writing Putin for help, the Venezuelan Transportation Minister coordinated a shipment of Iranian military equipment and drones with 600-mile range, while planning a visit to Iran. The closest U.S. territory to Venezuela is Puerto Rico at about 900 miles away, so it can be

assumed, if meant for us, drones that can fly up to 600 miles would be needed to retaliate against U.S. ships and planes or are being amassed to use in an invasion or while U.S. planes are over Venezuelan territory.

While the U.S. has sanctioned Russia's use of certain Ilyushin aircraft in 2023 for transporting arms and mercenaries to Venezuela, The Washington Post also reported that one of the banned aircraft landed in the capital, Caracas, on Oct. 26, 2025, having flown over Africa to avoid Western airspace.

The same document haul revealed that Maduro also wrote to Chinese President Xi Jinping requesting to "expand military cooperation" to mitigate U.S.-Venezuelan "escalation." He also asked the Chinese government to help expedite production of radar detection systems, likely to provide early warning of U.S. attacks.

China and Venezuela signed a Memorandum of Understanding for cooperation on the Belt and Road Initiative on Sept. 14, 2018, with bilateral cooperation running smoothly in areas such as energy, agriculture, infrastructure, and technology. Maduro made his fifth visit to Beijing in September 2023, and Jinping told Maduro that China will "support Caracas in protecting national sovereignty and countering external interference." Both leaders announced the elevation of the China-Venezuela relationship to an "all-weather strategic partnership," ahead of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the two nations in 2024.^[xviii] China is Venezuela's main trade partner. In October 2025, Venezuela's imported \$425 million in goods from China and exported \$120 million, mainly in petroleum products since the previous October.^[xix]

On Nov. 29, 2025, Trump declared Venezuelan airspace "completely closed," which Venezuela claimed was a "colonialist threat against the country's sovereignty and not compatible with international law."^[xx] According to modern diplomacy, Beijing criticized Trump's use of a campaign against terrorist gangs and drug trafficking in Latin America as part of a plan to undermine Chinese interests in the region, under the name "Donroe Doctrine." China has deep interests in Venezuela itself, as its companies manage and invest in the country's oil sector and it holds huge amounts of Venezuelan debt to be repaid in oil. As with Kim Jong Eun in North Korea, Chinese support keeps Maduro in power.^[xxi]

Despite Russia's pledge of unconditional support, it is unlikely to provide actual support that would detract from its capabilities in fighting the war in Ukraine. Russia can still provide intelligence and other assets to assist in defending the country against U.S. aggression, though. China too, is unlikely to send troops to Venezuela, but it has enormous resources at its disposal that enable it to spoil evolving U.S. plans that clearly threaten its own. Although direct provocation is not China's usual style, it launched the newest aircraft carrier of its fleet of three

in November this year. While its purpose is more likely focused on Taiwan and in patrolling the South China Sea, China might like to see how it does on open water on a long voyage.[xxii]

Whether or not U.S. actions in the Caribbean are determined to be legal under international law, the admiral gave the order, the secretary of war now says he supports it, and the president leaves it up to them. In any case, as Harry Truman famously emphasized, “The buck stops” with the president. This spat between Washington and Caracas clearly has much larger implications than the important legal issue of whether blowing up suspected drug boats or a “double tap” attack on a single boat violates international law.

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