

US-Venezuela Relations, Geopolitical Warfare, and Global Security

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51584/IJRIAS.2026.110200160>

Received: 03 March 2026; Accepted: 09 March 2026; Published: 23 March 2026

ABSTRACT

This article examines the January 2026 military intervention by the United States that resulted in the capture and detention of President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela. Drawing on qualitative descriptive analysis of secondary sources and framed within realist power theory, the study interrogates how material capabilities, strategic interests, and geopolitical competition influenced U.S. decision-making despite prevailing normative constraints in international law. The intervention, justified by Washington as a response to alleged narco-terrorism, human rights abuses, electoral irregularities, and threats to U.S. security, also reflects deeper strategic imperatives linked to control over Venezuela's hydrocarbon resources and the broader politics of energy security. Historically strained U.S.-Venezuela relations shaped by ideological antagonism, sanctions, diplomatic pressures, and competing alignments with external actors such as Russia, China, and Iran provide the broader context for interpreting this event. The article argues that the U.S. action demonstrates enduring hegemonic behaviour in the Western Hemisphere, where power calculations related to regional influence and access to strategic resources can take precedence over institutional legal norms. By situating the 2026 intervention within debates on great-power rivalry, resource geopolitics, and the structure of global power, the study contributes to scholarship on intervention, energy politics, and the persistence of power dynamics in the contemporary international system.

Keywords: U.S.–Venezuela Relations, Geopolitical Competition, Realist Power Theory, Energy Security, International Intervention, and Global Power Dynamics

INTRODUCTION

In the early morning hours of January 3, 2026, the United States executed Operation Absolute Resolve, a significant military strike against Venezuela that targeted strategic locations and military facilities in Caracas, and resulted in the capture and removal of President Nicolás Maduro and First Lady Cilia Flores; the action was linked to longstanding U.S. criminal charges alleging narco-terrorism conspiracy, large-scale cocaine trafficking and weapons offenses, which U.S. authorities claim involved coordination with drug cartels and smuggling operations into the United States. The operation represented an unprecedented assertion of American power in the Western Hemisphere and was framed by commentators as a practical manifestation of what has been termed the emerging “Donroe Doctrine”, a revival of hemispheric exclusivity reminiscent of the nineteenth-century Monroe Doctrine (Este, 2026). More than a discrete enforcement action, the intervention signaled a re-assertion of sphere-of-influence politics in a region historically shaped by asymmetrical relations with the United States.

This intervention constitutes the most significant direct U.S. military action in Latin America since the 1989 invasion of Panama and raises profound questions regarding the continued authority of international law as a constraint on state behaviour. Scholars emphasize that the action challenges foundational norms of the post-1945 legal order, including the prohibition on the use of force, the principle of non-intervention, and the inviolability of state sovereignty (Wolff, 2026). From this perspective, Venezuela becomes not merely a regional crisis but a test case for whether great powers remain bound by collective security principles or are reverting to unilateral enforcement logic characteristic of earlier eras of imperial rivalry.

Analysts also situate the operation within a broader pattern of assertive U.S. geopolitical signaling. Uchoa (2026) argues that Venezuela functions as a “laboratory” for a more aggressive American foreign policy posture directed

at the Western Hemisphere. This interpretation suggests that the intervention is not an isolated response to domestic Venezuelan conditions but a strategic demonstration of capacity and intent under an evolving America First doctrine. Critics warn that such actions risk normalizing unilateral regime change and weakening institutional restraints embedded in the United Nations Charter.

Yet the political meaning of the intervention cannot be fully understood without situating it within the longer history of anti-Americanism in Latin America a phenomenon that predates Chavismo and has deep structural roots. Regional skepticism toward U.S. intentions emerged over a century of interventions, economic dominance, and perceived political intrusion that shaped Latin American political consciousness (Smith, 2005). Incidents such as the early twentieth-century Caribbean occupations, Cold War covert interventions, and the symbolic 1958 attack on U.S. Vice President Richard Nixon's motorcade in Caracas embedded narratives of resistance to external domination within Venezuelan and broader Latin American political culture (McPherson, 2006). These historical memories formed a reservoir of distrust that long preceded Hugo Chávez and later provided fertile ground for anti-imperialist mobilization in Venezuela.

Chávez did not invent anti-Americanism; rather, he institutionalized and radicalized sentiments already present in Venezuelan political discourse. His Bolivarian project reframed national identity around resistance to foreign hegemony, transforming historical grievances into a central pillar of state ideology. The 2026 intervention therefore resonates not only as a contemporary geopolitical event but as a reactivation of historical anxieties about sovereignty and external control. For many observers in Latin America, the operation appears less as an exceptional crisis than as confirmation of a recurring pattern in hemispheric politics.

Energy and economic considerations further complicate the legal and geopolitical analysis. Venezuela's vast oil reserves have long been central to its strategic relevance, yet experts caution that decades of structural decline mean military intervention alone cannot rapidly restore production capacity (Imsirovic, 2026). Rather than stabilizing markets, geopolitical shocks tend to increase volatility and uncertainty, reinforcing the interconnectedness of security and global energy systems. Legal scholars additionally question the maritime and sanctions enforcement actions associated with the intervention. Serdy (2026) highlights unresolved tensions between freedom of navigation and the extra-territorial reach of sanctions regimes, particularly when vessels linked to sanctioned states operate under third-party flags. These disputes reflect a broader erosion of consensus around the rules governing force and international commerce.

In addition, sociopolitical research underscores the human dimension of regime disruption. Wilde and Rogers (2026) document a complex emotional landscape among Venezuelans at home and abroad, ranging from relief and optimism to fear and uncertainty. Their findings align with literature on post-authoritarian transitions, where regime collapse often produces simultaneous hope and instability.

This article examines the January 2026 intervention within the broader context of geopolitical rivalry, energy security, and the dynamics of power in the international system. Drawing on realist power theory, the study argues that the intervention reflects the persistence of hegemonic enforcement behaviour within the Western Hemisphere and highlights the enduring tension between the normative framework of international law and the strategic imperatives of great powers.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature on U.S.-Venezuela relations, geopolitical rivalry, and intervention in Latin America. The subsequent section outlines the theoretical framework based on realist power theory. This is followed by an analysis of the strategic motivations underlying the U.S. intervention, including geopolitical competition, security concerns, and the politics of oil. The final section discusses the implications of the intervention for regional stability and the evolving structure of global power politics.

LITERATURE REVIEW.

Scholarly debates surrounding United States intervention in Venezuela intersect with broader discussions on geopolitical competition, energy security, international law, and the persistence of power politics in the contemporary international system. The literature reveals a convergence of perspectives that situate Venezuela as a critical arena where regional dominance, resource competition, and ideological contestation interact.

Among these articles are, first; Greenland, Venezuela and the ‘Donroe doctrine’ (Este, 2026). Recent scholarship on the evolving posture of United States foreign policy suggests a marked return to hemispheric assertiveness reminiscent of the nineteenth-century Monroe Doctrine. Contemporary analysts describe this shift as a re-articulation of American geopolitical exclusivity in the Western Hemisphere, reframed in what commentators have labeled the “Donroe doctrine.” This emerging framework has generated significant debate across international relations, energy politics, and global order literature.

A key strand of the literature situates the renewed doctrine within broader discussions of great-power competition. Wolff argues that the United States’ increasingly unilateral actions in Latin America signal a transition toward a tripolar world order in which the US, Russia, and China consolidate spheres of influence (Wolff, 2026). From this perspective, Venezuela functions not merely as a regional crisis but as a testing ground for a restructured global hierarchy. The concern among scholars is that normalization of unilateral intervention in one sphere may legitimize analogous actions by rival powers elsewhere, particularly in Ukraine and Taiwan. This interpretation aligns with realist theories emphasizing balance-of-power politics and the erosion of liberal international norms.

Complementing this geopolitical lens, Uchoa frames Venezuela as a “laboratory” for aggressive foreign policy experimentation (Uchoa, 2026). His work emphasizes the symbolic and strategic importance of regime targeting as a demonstration of capability. Rather than viewing US action as isolated, Uchoa situates it within a pattern of signaling directed at other states in the hemisphere, including Cuba and Colombia. This interpretation intersects with literature on coercive diplomacy and hegemonic signaling, where displays of force serve both domestic and international audiences.

Another important body of work focuses on energy security and the political economy of oil. Imsirovic cautions against simplistic assumptions that geopolitical intervention automatically translates into immediate production recovery (Imsirovic, 2026). Scholars in energy systems stress that Venezuela’s oil sector has suffered structural decline over decades, meaning any attempt to rapidly integrate its reserves into global markets faces logistical, technical, and institutional constraints. This position contributes to a long-standing debate in resource politics literature about the gap between proven reserves and actual production capacity. Furthermore, analysts note that geopolitical instability tends to increase price volatility rather than reduce it, reinforcing the idea that markets react more strongly to uncertainty than to theoretical supply expansion.

Legal scholarship adds another dimension by interrogating the maritime and sanctions frameworks surrounding US enforcement actions. Serdy and other experts in international maritime law examine the legality of boarding vessels linked to sanctioned states, especially when those ships sail under third-party flags (Serdy, 2026). This discussion reflects broader tensions between freedom of navigation principles and the expanding reach of sanctions regimes. The debate mirrors post-Cold War scholarship on extraterritorial jurisdiction and the politicization of global trade routes.

Recent scholarship on U.S.-Venezuela relations has increasingly focused on the intersection of economic sanctions, energy geopolitics, and regional security dynamics. A significant body of literature examines the impact of U.S. sanctions on Venezuela’s oil sector and broader economic stability. Studies indicate that financial and oil sanctions have played a major role in the collapse of Venezuela’s oil production and export revenues, which historically constituted the backbone of the country’s economy (Rodríguez, 2024). Empirical analyses suggest that sanctions significantly reduced oil production and government revenue, contributing to economic decline and large-scale migration from Venezuela to neighbouring countries and the United States.

Other scholars have examined the role of energy diplomacy and resource geopolitics in shaping Venezuela’s foreign policy and its relationship with major powers. Venezuela possesses the largest proven oil reserves in the world, making control over its energy resources a significant factor in international strategic calculations. Oil diplomacy has historically shaped the country’s external relations, influencing alliances, regional influence, and economic partnerships with global actors such as China and Russia.

Recent analyses also highlight how Venezuela has become a focal point of great-power competition in the global energy market. As U.S. sanctions limited Venezuela’s access to Western markets, the country increasingly turned toward China and Russia for financial support, investment, and oil trade partnerships. This shift raised concerns

in Washington about the expanding geopolitical presence of rival powers in the Western Hemisphere and the potential erosion of U.S. regional dominance.

In addition, emerging policy debates emphasize the strategic significance of Venezuela in global energy markets and geopolitical rivalries. Control over Venezuelan oil production has implications not only for regional power dynamics but also for global oil supply and pricing structures. Analysts argue that U.S. actions toward Venezuela including sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and military operations must be understood within the broader context of global energy security and strategic competition among major powers.

Despite this growing body of scholarship, a significant research gap remains. Much of the existing literature focuses primarily on sanctions, economic collapse, and domestic political developments within Venezuela. Relatively little attention has been devoted to analysing the January 2026 U.S. military intervention as part of a broader pattern of hegemonic power projection in the contemporary international system. Existing studies have yet to fully integrate the intervention into theoretical debates about realism, energy geopolitics, and great-power rivalry.

This article seeks to address this gap by examining the January 2026 intervention through the lens of realist power theory, situating it within the broader dynamics of hegemonic enforcement, energy security, and geopolitical competition. By linking the intervention to debates on global power politics and resource geopolitics, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how strategic interests continue to shape great-power behaviour in the twenty-first century.

Theoretical Framework.

This study is anchored in Realist power theory, which emphasizes the centrality of power, national interest, and strategic competition in shaping the behaviour of states within the international system. Classical and structural realist scholars argue that the international system is characterized by anarchy, meaning there is no overarching authority capable of enforcing rules uniformly. Consequently, states particularly great powers prioritize survival, security, and the maximization of power in pursuit of national interests (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979).

Within this theoretical tradition, powerful states often exercise hegemonic enforcement behaviour in regions they consider strategically vital. Realist scholars maintain that hegemonic powers attempt to maintain regional dominance to prevent the emergence of rival powers and to secure strategic resources and geopolitical influence. In the Western Hemisphere, the United States has historically assumed this role, guided by doctrines and strategic practices designed to preserve its geopolitical primacy (Mearsheimer, 2001).

From this perspective, external interventions by great powers are rarely motivated solely by normative concerns such as democracy promotion or humanitarian protection. Rather, they reflect calculations of relative power, strategic advantage, and resource security. The realist framework therefore provides a useful lens for understanding the dynamics surrounding the January 2026 U.S. intervention in Venezuela.

This article examines the intervention within the broader context of geopolitical rivalry, energy security, and the evolving dynamics of power in the international system, particularly as its concern the multipolar tripod of U.S., China And Russia in the contemporary global order. Drawing on realist power theory, the study argues that the intervention reflects the persistence of hegemonic enforcement behaviour within the Western Hemisphere and highlights the enduring tension between the normative framework of international law and the strategic imperatives of great powers.

In realist thought, the international legal order often reflects the distribution of power rather than constraining it. As such, powerful states may circumvent or reinterpret international legal norms when core strategic interests are perceived to be at stake (Krasner, 1999). In the case of Venezuela, the intervention can therefore be interpreted as a strategic response shaped by concerns over geopolitical competition, energy resources, and regional influence.

The U.S. decision to execute *Operation Absolute Resolve*, a large-scale military operation resulting in strikes across Venezuelan territory and the capture of President Nicolás Maduro reflects the realist notion that dominant states exercise power to secure strategic interests. According to expert analysis, the operation lacked clear authorization under the United Nations Charter's prohibition on the use of force (Article 2(4)), and there was no

Security Council mandate or valid self-defense claim justifying it under Article 51 of the Charter. Critics emphasize that the action constituted an unlawful use of force, undermining the institutional constraints of international law and signaling that material power still trumps legal norms in practice (University of Oxford, 2027).

From a Power Theory perspective, this intervention can be understood as the projection of U.S. dominance within the Western Hemisphere. Realists argue that hegemonic powers seek to preserve or expand their influence in strategically important regions, and interventions even controversial ones serve as demonstrations of capability. The rapid deployment of specialized U.S. military forces and the strategic capture of a sitting head of state align with offensive realist logic, in which powerful states seek to preempt potential threats and assert control in environments where others might challenge their interests (CSIS, 2026).

Beyond military force, the U.S. move also aligns with broader strategic interests, including energy and economic influence. Following the intervention, the U.S. Treasury issued licenses facilitating oil and gas exploration in Venezuela a move signaling Washington's intent to shape energy markets and secure economic levers in the region (Reuters, 2026).

Realists emphasize that economic power and access to resources are key components of state capabilities. Control over energy production and export infrastructure can augment strategic influence and constrain rival powers. This dimension reinforces Power theory's claim that security, economic, and political power are interconnected elements of state behaviour in the international system.

United States American Interventions that Preceded the Capture and Arrest of President Maduro

The antecedents of the US-Venezuela complexities of relations, with respect to the US's monitoring of Venezuela as a critical security threat to its national security, have preceded the capture of President Maduro. The US interventions have been laced with series of intense sanctions, naval blockades, operations targeting Venezuelan oil, intense hostility cum ideological clashes, accusations of U.S.-backed coup attempts, and Venezuela's shift toward anti-imperialist, socialist policies, strengthening ties with Russia, China, and Cuba, which were observable for years under the regime of Hugo Chávez (Shankar, 2026; Council on Foreign Relations, 2017; Ali, 2025). The US interventions were targeted at weakening the regime, disrupting drug routes, securing oil access via seized tankers, and implementing Operation Southern Spear (Evans, 2025; Jutten & Delivorias, 2026; Brookings, 2026; Centre for Preventive Action, 2026; Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2026).

Jeyaretnam & Guzman (2026) account that in August 2025, the US deployed Navy missile destroyers, along with thousands of military personnel, were sent to the edge of Venezuelan territorial waters for the purpose of thwarting drug trafficking, and the Trump regime committed military assets for attacks on Venezuela, including offering a \$50 million reward for information leading to the arrest of President Nicholas Maduro. Thus, on September 2nd, 2025, US Naval forces killed an estimated 115 persons with more than 30 strikes on boats in the Caribbean and the Pacific sea routes, alleged to be transporting drugs to the U.S, were regarded by President Trump as narco terrorism. However, the families of the victims killed by US Naval forces criticized the Trump administration for killing fishermen. Similarly, in December, the US military seized an oil tanker off the coast of Venezuela that was transporting Venezuelan oil with the operation of the sanctions championed by the US. The development signaled the decision of President Trump's pronouncement on the oil blockade to Venezuela.

Evans (2025) observes that the US intervention was tagged "Operation Absolute Resolve," meticulously adopted by the US security forces for training, rehearsal, and inclusion of the elite of US troops for the forthcoming attack and arrest of President Maduro. Due to the extraordinary US military intervention in Latin America, the US Congress was not informed or consulted ahead of time. With the precise details set, elite US military officials waited to launch the expected attack on Venezuela. US President Donald Trump ordered the US military force to invade and arrest Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro.

Blanca (2026) noted that the United Nations, international organizations, and legal experts questioned the legality of the strikes, which killed more than 100 people in Venezuela (Weller, 2026), the Trump administration increased pressure on President Maduro of Venezuela with a military buildup in the Caribbean and a series of deadly missile attacks on alleged drug-running boats. The US military conducted an intelligence operation in the

Caribbean, which gathered information on the movement of President Maduro as Special Forces that were covertly rehearsed to forcibly remove him from power. The operation, named Absolute Resolve, was carefully rehearsed for months.

Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (2006) averred that US intervention in Venezuela through its military action was based on the veneer of legality or pretext on accusations that Maduro leads drug cartels and smuggles drugs into the US; accuse of Maduro's regime of corruption; desire to seize control of Venezuela's oil, which President Trump perceived as "stolen" US property; US strive in reasserting its dominance in the Western Hemisphere in comparison with the 2022 strategy of former US president Joe Biden on competition with China in the Pacific and Indian Oceans and with Russia in Eastern Europe.

Moodliar (2019) opines that the intervention of the US into Venezuela was based on the changing regional balance of power in Latin America that constituted a most acute threat to Venezuela's Bolivarian project, with existing complex set of structuring contradictions including an oil-export-based economy; enduring, sharp unattenuated social polarization and an unremitting, coordinated project of political and economic sabotage, directed by domestic elites and the US national-security establishment. The development of US intervention in the country has been diminishing the combined Chinese-Russian counterweight to the U.S. imperial project under the regime of President Nicholas Maduro. Rubia (2026) acknowledged that the US military and political operation in Venezuela was a structural turning point in hemispheric security and the liberal international order, characterized by sovereign decision, the primacy of material power, and coercive geoeconomics.

Malik (2026) looks at the implications of U.S. actions against Venezuela for state sovereignty, with the belief that the idea of the US's' aggressive tactics towards Venezuela was based on economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation to imply threats against political leadership. The veracity of the US forces for the interventions includes delegitimizing the Maduro government; the inaction of the UNSC decision when strong power involvement, the contradiction between democratic rhetoric and the strategic practice of the US's operation in Venezuela through the lens of international law, reflecting the strategic environment shaped by selective norm enforcement on China's approach to Taiwan, and an indication of a larger change in international politics from a rule-based order and power-centric cum power politics.

Congressional Research Service (2021) noted that under the first tenure of President Donald Trump in 2019, the US had not recognized Maduro as Venezuela's legitimate president in January 2019. The Administration deliberated the possibility of using military force in Venezuela to compel Maduro to leave office through diplomatic, economic, and legal pressure. However, the stance changed under the regime of President Joe Biden. The Administration of President Joe Biden has stated that the Administration's approach toward the crisis in Venezuela will focus on supporting the Venezuelan people and engaging in multilateral diplomacy to press for a return to democracy and to hold Maduro's officials and supporters accountable for their actions. On March 8, 2021, the Biden Administration designated Venezuela for Temporary Protected Status (TPS), after President Trump ended removals of Venezuelans eligible for Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) on January 19, 2021. Biden Administration officials reviewed the humanitarian impacts of U.S. sanctions on Venezuela.

Lastly, Brown (2018) narrated that the motive of US intervention in Venezuela has been to promote the global democratization call globally, in the midst of the plight of Venezuelans on the escape from the confines of market democracy, over the struggle between the populist leadership in Venezuela and the contemporary surge of the US's call for democratization globally. The emergence of "populist" leaders, Presidents Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro whom challenge the liberal model of democracy of the United States of America, which they consider the greatest threat to contemporary democracy. The two Presidents perceived themselves as democratic socialist that want to build a participatory democracy, instituting a basic welfare system, and addressing Venezuela's chronic social problems, and not the interests of Venezuela's elites and those of the US.

The Capture and Arrest of President Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela

Fundamentally, the capture and arrest of Venezuela's President, Nicolas Maduro, with his wife, Cilia Flores, were swiftly flown out of the country, to face charges in the Southern District of New York of narco-terrorism, cocaine trafficking, and possession of machine guns and destructive devices against the U.S. The operation was marked by months of buildup by U.S. forces in the region, as U.S. President Donald Trump had accused Maduro of supporting drug traffickers, accusations that Maduro has vehemently denied. Presently, the U.S. is controlling

Venezuela, with particular attention to having U.S. oil companies take over Venezuela's struggling nationalized industry. The US-led intervention has vehemently enhanced the geopolitics of Latin America, with various states in support and against the US intervention. Countries that were against the capture of President Nicolas Maduro by the U.S. military forces, framing the operation as a violation of international law and national sovereignty, include Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Cuba, Chile, and Uruguay, which condemned the raid, urging diplomacy over military intervention. Beyond the region, key global powers including Russia, China, and Iran denounced the action as armed aggression, warning it sets a dangerous precedent for international relations. The majority of the countries that support US actions are the Western allies.

Thus, there are many dimensions to and over the reasons for US intervention in the capture and arrest of Nicolas Maduro. Harb (2026) noted that the US abduction of Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro was based on the US's reliance understanding of criminal charges to justify its military operation in Venezuela, with a pronounced opinion of experts that countries cannot use their own indictments to attack another state, rejecting framing Maduro's "capture" as a legal arrest but unilaterally use of force that contradicted the United Nations Charter of the respect of territoriality and sovereignty.

Mia (2026) observes that the capture of President Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela on 3rd January, 2026, has aided the criminalization in geopolitics. There are criminalized actor groups in the Latin American countries that are involved in illegal mining and resource exploitation, extortion, arms trafficking, and money laundering. A diverse constellation of domestic and transnational criminal actors operates within this region from multiple urban gangs (*megabandas*), government-linked paramilitary groups (*colectivos*) and 'home-grown gone regional' Tren de Aragua to transnational groups such as Colombian guerrilla cum criminal actors (including the National Liberation Army (ELN) and various Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) dissidents) and Iranian proxy non state actor Hezbollah. The development has culminated in the capture and forced transfer of Venezuela's then-president Nicolás Maduro and his wife to the US to face charges of narcoterrorism, drug trafficking, and weapons offences. The military actions of the US correlate with President Donald Trump's vision of US hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, over the strategic interest in resource security, coercion, and transactional deal-making often take precedence over democratic principles, sovereignty, and international law. The US capture of Nicolás Maduro marks a watershed in hemispheric power politics. Beyond Venezuela's future, regime decapitation risks reshaping transnational criminal networks, accelerating illicit diversification, and regional insecurity potentially undermining the very war on drugs Washington claims to advance.

Blanc (2026) noted that the reason why U.S had captured and arrested President Maduro was based on the complaint by the President Trump over narco-terrorism, conspiracy, drug trafficking and money laundering, and that the U.S will temporarily "run" Venezuela until a "safe, proper and judicious transition" can be ensured. Trump also announced Venezuela was handing over up to 50 million barrels of oil to the U.S. to be sold at "market price." This is not the first time that the U.S. has intervened militarily in Latin America. It happened in Grenada and Panama in 1983 and in Honduras in 1988 but an intervention of this magnitude in a large South American country is unprecedented. The United States has supported regime changes when they are perceived as pro-Communist or anti-American. But this case, a military intervention in the middle of the night at the presidential palace and the abduction of the leader of a modern country, is unusual.

Politics of Oil and the Strategic Interest of Major Powers in Venezuela

Venezuela is regarded as a leading country in the world's largest proven oil reserves, with an estimated 300 billion barrels. With this development, the politics of oil and strategic interests of the U.S., Russia, China, France, and other competing global actors have made the energy sector unstable and geopolitical implications over the value of crude oil in the struggle (Escribano, 2026). The competing actors in the struggle for crude oil in Venezuela adopt the strategies of investment, debt, and sanctions as tools of their foreign policy. The oil industry has been under the influence of nationalization and mismanagement in Venezuela for decades, with production currently hovering at an estimated 1 million barrels per day (ECCO, 2026).

Similarly, various key aspects of the politics of oil in Venezuela by the competing actors are: the U.S. has targeted the Venezuelan oil sector with sanctions to squeeze the government, yet the proximity of Venezuelan oil remains strategically important for U.S. refining capacity. The U.S energy dominance maintains a strategic interest to secure Venezuela's crude oil to support Western markets and counter the influence of rival powers, including Russia and China's footprint in the Western Hemisphere, and with a series of sanctions that have

strained the relationship between the U.S and Venezuela (The Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, n.d). Thus, Russia and China have acted as crucial backers of the past Presidents of Venezuela, namely Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro's governments, with billions of dollars invested in the energy sector and oil-backed loans, which have given China and Russia a significant interest and influence (Tobin, 2026; Polity, 2026). Russia and China have provided financial support and acted as buyers for Venezuelan oil, helping to circumvent U.S. sanctions, though they have been reluctant to fully sustain the regime financially. China is the largest purchaser of Venezuelan oil, with two-thirds of exports in 2023, which guarantees a steady energy supply to fuel the economy (Mares, 2026). Similarly, Russia's partnership with Venezuela was to maintain influence in the Western region, using its oil industry investments to secure geopolitical leverage (Polity, 2026). Venezuela's partnership with Iran involves exchanging oil for fuel and diluents to keep production barely functional (Nakhle, 2026).

Furthermore, under the Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro regimes, Venezuela transitioned from a market-friendly approach to the nationalization of the oil industry. The combination of the policy and sanctions led to a collapse in production from over 3 million barrels per day in the 1990s to roughly 1 million barrels per day in 2026 (Chaudhary, 2026). Finally, the change of regime via the capture and arrest of President Nicolas Maduro by U.S military forces on January 3, 2026, could shift the balance of power, unlocking investment from Western firms and reducing Chinese/Russian interest and influence in Venezuela (York, 2026). The Venezuelan crude oil industry has transformed from a source of national wealth into a high-risk geopolitical asset with various competing actors in the geopolitics of Latin America, driving intense power competition while the domestic industry remains in critical decline (Hill, Iversen & Hart, 2026).

CONCLUSION

From a realist perspective, the January 2026 intervention in Venezuela underscores a central and enduring proposition of international relations theory: the international system remains fundamentally structured by power, not law, especially in Trump's America First Doctrine. Despite the normative aspirations of the post-1945 order, great powers retain both the capacity and the willingness to act unilaterally when core strategic interests are perceived to be at stake. The United States' actions in Venezuela illustrate the persistence of hegemonic enforcement behaviour within its regional sphere of influence, reaffirming the realist claim that international institutions constrain state conduct only insofar as they align with the distribution of power. In this sense, the intervention is less an aberration than a re-assertion of structural realities that have always underpinned hemispheric politics.

The episode also reveals the limits of liberal expectations that interdependence and legal regimes can permanently transcend geopolitical competition. Venezuela's strategic value rooted in geography, energy resources, and symbolic control of regional order transformed it into a focal point where power calculations overrode institutional restraint. Realist theory predicts precisely such outcomes: when security, influence, and credibility converge, major powers privilege positional advantage over normative consistency. The controversy surrounding legality and legitimacy therefore reflects not a breakdown of the system, but its underlying logic. International law functions as a language of justification, yet enforcement ultimately rests on asymmetries of capability which multilateral institution like the United Nations lacks.

At the same time, the intervention demonstrates how historical memory interacts with structural power. Anti-Americanism in Latin America can be interpreted through a realist lens as a political response to enduring hierarchies within the hemispheric balance of power. The persistence of resentment is not merely ideological; it reflects the lived experience of unequal strategic relationships. In this context, the 2026 operation reinforces perceptions of a regional order defined by dominance rather than reciprocity, confirming for many observers that sovereignty in weaker states remains contingent upon the tolerance of stronger ones.

Whether this event signals a broader return to explicit sphere-of-influence politics or remains a contained episode will depend on how other powers interpret and respond to the precedent it sets. Realism suggests that actions by a hegemon inevitably provoke recalculations by rivals and allies alike, contributing to long-term adjustments in the distribution of power. The Venezuelan crisis thus stands as a reminder that international order is not a fixed achievement but an ongoing negotiation shaped by force, perception, and strategic adaptation. In reaffirming the primacy of power in the Western Hemisphere, the intervention exposes the enduring tension between the rhetoric

of universal norms and the practice of geopolitical hierarchy, a tension that remains central to understanding the trajectory of global security in the twenty-first century.

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