

Marubeni Washington Report**Between Law Enforcement and War**

The Trump Administration's Growing Confrontation with Venezuela

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- What began as a U.S. counternarcotics deployment in the Caribbean now seems to be expanding into a larger, more complex operation. Recent use of lethal force at sea, and reports of covert authorizations could be laying the groundwork for options that extend beyond counternarcotics objectives, possibly including pressure on the Maduro regime.
- By framing drug cartels as participants in an “armed conflict,” the administration has taken steps that could broaden the legal basis for U.S. military action without explicit congressional authorization. While officials describe this as a necessary response to transnational threats, critics see it as a potential expansion of executive authority with uncertain legal and political consequences.
- The administration's harder line toward Caracas may reflect a mix of strategic, political, and economic considerations, from the growing influence of Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Florida's domestic political importance to the potential for future U.S. commercial access in Venezuela's energy sector. These developments suggest that Venezuela could become an early test case for how the administration intends to integrate hemispheric policy into its broader competition with China, Russia, and Iran.

What started as a U.S. counternarcotics deployment in the Caribbean is now turning into a far larger, sprawling campaign that could serve as the opening round of regime change in Venezuela, should the president decide to pursue it. In his second term, President Trump had until recently pursued a dual-track approach toward Caracas, sanctioning President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela for refusing to relinquish power and return his country to democratic rule while at the same time pursuing pragmatic deals, such as exchanging detained Americans for the return of Venezuelan migrants. Maduro won a third term last July in an election widely viewed as fraudulent, and the United States, along with most other countries, continues to recognize opposition candidate Edmundo González, now in exile in Spain.

That balance now seems to have given way. Since August, the administration has doubled the reward for information leading to Maduro's arrest, designated the Cartel de los Soles (believed to be led by Maduro himself) as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entity, and deployed major naval forces to the Caribbean. As of this writing, U.S. forces have destroyed seven suspected drug-trafficking vessels since August, resulting in at least thirty-two deaths and prompting renewed scrutiny over the legal basis for such actions. The administration has also declared an “armed conflict” against drug cartels, a move widely viewed as laying the legal groundwork for expanded military operations, potentially extending beyond traffickers to the Maduro government itself.

On October 2, the Times reported that Trump, in frustration over Maduro's refusal to step down, had ordered his envoy Richard Grenell to suspend all negotiations with the Venezuelan leader. The diplomat had been working quietly since last year to prevent a wider conflict, and to encourage cooperation on migrant returns and the protection of Chevron operations in the country. However, two weeks later, on October 15, the same paper exposed that Mr. Trump had given a secret authorization to the C.I.A. for the conduction of covert action in Venezuela, thus allowing the spy agency to conduct lethal operations either unilaterally or as part of a larger military campaign.

Meanwhile, Congress has grown increasingly uneasy over the administration's expanding use of war

powers. Multiple classified briefings have failed to produce an explanation from officials about the recent use of lethal force – a sharp break from the prevailing practice of intercepting the trafficking vessels without kinetic engagement. Some Republicans joined Democratic dissenters to express concerns about overreach into the Caribbean, but a bipartisan resolution to curb Trump's power to send forces into the region was defeated in the Senate, leaving him broad discretion to act militarily.

Largest Military Deployment in Decades

News of the deployment of U.S. naval forces to the southern Caribbean first emerged on August 14, following reports that President Trump had directed the Pentagon to prepare military options against drug cartels. The directive effectively established an official basis for potential direct military operations (both at sea and on foreign soil) targeting narcotrafficking networks.

By early September, the United States had positioned at least eight warships and one nuclear attack submarine in the eastern and southern Caribbean. The deployment¹ included an Amphibious Ready Group carrying Marines from the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit, serving as a rapid-response force capable of launching missions within hours. The MV Ocean Trader, often described as a “special-operations mothership” significantly expands US capability in the region and makes targeted raids more plausible and credible. Additional assets, including C-17 cargo planes and F-35 and F/A-18 fighters, began arriving at the reactivated Roosevelt Roads Naval Station in Puerto Rico. Navy P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft, P-3 Orion patrol planes, and MQ-9 Reaper drones have also been sighted on the island. On October 15, three B-52 bombers were spotted flying between Mexico and Cuba.

In addition to Puerto Rico, the United States maintains bases in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and could leverage regional partners like Trinidad and Tobago—whose proximity to Venezuela provides additional options should the president decide to act militarily.

According to the Wall Street Journal², the U.S. has invaded three Latin American Countries in the past 60 years - 1965 intervention in the Dominican Republic, 1983 invasion of Grenada, and the 1989 operation in Panama to remove General Manuel Noriega. In the post-Cold War era, deployments to the Caribbean have typically been limited to counternarcotics patrols, disaster relief, or humanitarian missions—making the current buildup highly unusual.

So far, U.S. forces have conducted at least seven lethal strikes against suspected drug-trafficking vessels in international waters, resulting in thirty-two fatalities. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), “the next phase of operations could witness strikes within Venezuelan territorial waters—or even on land.”³

Adding to the complexity was an October 15 New York Times report⁴ revealing that President Trump had authorized the C.I.A. to conduct covert actions, including lethal operations, targeting Maduro or

¹ Amir Daftari and John Feng, “Full List of U.S. Navy Ships Trump Has Sent to the Caribbean,” *Newsweek*, September 3, 2025, updated September 3, 2025, ([link](#)).

² Dion Nissenbaum and Isabelle Khurshudyan, “U.S. Weapons in the Caribbean,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 14, 2025, ([link](#)).

³ Ryan C. Berg and Henry Ziemer, “Escalation Against the Maduro Regime in Venezuela: Puerto Rico’s Emerging Role in U.S. Power Projection,” CSIS, October 9, 2025, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), ([link](#)).

⁴ Alan Feuer, “Trump Pursued Covert CIA Action in Venezuela, U.S. Officials Say,” *The New York Times*, October 15, 2025, ([link](#)).

his government, either unilaterally or in coordination with the military. While the C.I.A. has previously supported Mexican intelligence and military units in operations against drug cartels, direct paramilitary activity of the kind Trump authorized has not been seen in the region for decades. The report remains unverified in full detail.

Furthermore, these developments coincided with the sudden resignation of Adm. Alvin Holesy, commander of U.S. Southern Command, which oversees military operations across Central and South America. According to *The New York Times*⁵, although Admiral Holesy was the senior officer nominally responsible for the air campaign, the decision to conduct the strikes originated at the White House and was executed by Special Operations forces—with Holesy reportedly sidelined from the decision-making process. Regardless, this development adds another layer to this already complex situation.

The extraordinary scale of the deployment has been matched by a parallel legal effort in Washington to justify the use of force against cartel-linked networks.

Laying the Legal Groundwork

Since January 2025, the administration has been laying the legal groundwork to justify potential military action against drug cartels. On inauguration day, the President issued an executive order⁶ directing the Secretary of State to begin designating major international cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs)⁷—a departure from past practice that treated them as criminal enterprises. The move signaled an intent to apply counterterrorism tools to transnational narcotics networks, though such designations alone do not authorize military force.

The administration went a step further in mid-September, when it sent a memorandum to Congress asserting that the United States is engaged in an “armed conflict” against drug-trafficking organizations designated as terrorist groups⁸. According to the document, obtained by *The New York Times*, “the President has determined that the United States is in a non-international armed conflict with these designated terrorist organizations” and has directed the Department of Defense “to conduct operations against them pursuant to the law of armed conflict.”⁹ The memo added that U.S. forces “remain postured to carry out military operations as necessary to prevent further deaths or injury to American citizens by eliminating the threat.”

This amounts to an assertion of presidential war powers. Under the U.S. Constitution, the President, as Commander in Chief, possesses limited authority under Article II to use military force without prior congressional authorization in cases of national self-defense or to protect U.S. persons and interests abroad. By declaring that the United States is engaged in a non-international armed conflict with cartel-linked organizations, the administration effectively expands that rationale, framing

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ The White House, “Designating Cartels and Other Organizations as Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Specially Designated Global Terrorists,” January 20, 2025, ([link](#)).

⁷ According to the State Department, FTOs are foreign organizations that are designated by the Secretary of State pursuant to section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act. Current list of FTOs is maintained at the State Department website. ([link](#))

⁸ Aamer Madhani and Lisa Mascaro, “U.S. Is in ‘Armed Conflict’ With Drug Cartels, Trump Says,” *AP News*, October 2025, ([link](#)).

⁹ Julian E. Barnes, Tyler Pager, and Maria Abi-Habib, “Trump Threatened Venezuela’s Maduro Again,” *The New York Times*, October 6, 2025, ([link](#)).

narcotrafficking as a sustained threat to U.S. national security rather than a law-enforcement issue. In doing so, it asserts that the President can invoke wartime authorities typically reserved for conflicts against foreign states or terrorist groups, including the use of lethal force and detention under the law of armed conflict, without seeking a new Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) from Congress.

As the administration hardened its legal and military posture, its brief experiment with diplomacy toward the Maduro regime began to unravel.

End of Diplomacy

During his first term, President Trump pursued a “maximum pressure” strategy designed to topple Maduro’s regime without direct U.S. military involvement. The approach combined sweeping sanctions on Venezuela’s state oil company and senior officials, diplomatic isolation through recognition of opposition leader Juan Guaidó, and repeated warnings that “all options are on the table.” The goal was to restore a U.S.-aligned democratic government while signaling Washington’s determination to roll back anti-U.S. regimes in the hemisphere, a revival of Monroe-Doctrine logic that shaped Trump’s first-term Latin America policy.

Although the campaign inflicted severe economic damage and deepened Maduro’s isolation, it ultimately failed to achieve its central goal. The Venezuelan military remained loyal, the opposition fractured, and international attention waned. By the end of Trump’s first term, Venezuela had become unfinished business, highlighting an ambitious strategy that fell short of its goals.

Early in the second administration, the priority of halting illegal immigration, drugs, and crime paved the way for a pragmatic, if uneasy, form of cooperation with the Maduro regime. Grenell, Trump’s envoy for special operations, led direct negotiations with Maduro to secure the return of Venezuelan nationals residing illegally in the United States, including members of Tren de Aragua, later designated as an FTO. Less than two weeks after inauguration day, Grenell obtained the release of six American detainees and a commitment to repatriate Venezuelan illegal immigrants. As part of this arrangement, the administration appeared willing to allow Chevron to maintain its operations in Venezuela as leverage for continued cooperation on immigration and counternarcotics issues.

However, on October 2, President Trump abruptly instructed Grenell to terminate all diplomatic outreach to the Maduro government¹⁰. The sudden reversal, following months of dialogue and progress, fueled speculation that the administration was preparing to broaden its military campaign to include potential regime-change operations.

Possible Motives

(1) Ascendancy of Marco Rubio

In recent months, hawkish voices led by Secretary of State and acting National Security Advisor Marco Rubio have gained influence, pushing the president to take more coercive measures. Rubio, a Floridian of Cuban descent, has long advocated a harder line on Venezuela. He argues that removing Maduro and replacing him with a U.S.-friendly government would restore Venezuela as a reliable partner and weaken Cuba, which relies on Venezuelan oil in exchange for doctors, teachers, and military advisers. Regime change would also curtail Chinese and Russian influence, both of which

¹⁰ Julian E. Barnes, Tyler Pager, and Maria Abi-Habib, “Trump Calls off Diplomatic Outreach to Venezuela,” *The New York Times*, October 6, 2025, ([link](#)).

have become key benefactors of the Maduro government.

(2) Political Importance of Florida

Florida remains politically vital to Trump. He captured a significant portion of the Cuban American vote in Florida during the last election¹¹. Removing Maduro and weakening Havana would be welcomed by Cuban and Venezuelan communities in South Florida and could cement Republican advantage in the upcoming midterms. Republicans now hold a slim majority in both chambers, and Florida lawmakers have used that leverage to condition support for the president's agenda on favorable outcomes, particularly on Venezuela. A tougher stance on Caracas thus helps secure their backing and bolster electoral prospects.

(3) Geocommercial Interests

Business interests are also at play. According to The New York Times¹², under a deal discussed between a senior U.S. official and Maduro's aides, Maduro offered to open existing and future oil and gold projects to American companies, give preferential contracts to U.S. firms, redirect Venezuelan oil exports from China to the United States, and scale back energy and mining deals with China, Iran, and Russia. President Trump reportedly rejected the offer, likely calculating that U.S. business opportunities would be more lucrative under a post-Maduro government.

To that end, opposition leader María Corina Machado has maintained frequent contact with the administration and Congress, advocating military strikes against drug boats and arguing that Maduro heads a narco-terrorist state. Following her receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize, she called President Trump to express gratitude for his "work for peace, freedom, and democracy in the Americas." Her movement claims to be prepared to assume administrative control immediately after Maduro's fall, with plans for the first 100 hours and the first 100 days of transition¹³.

(4) Energy Dimension

Washington's decision to permit Western energy companies to continue developing assets in Venezuela may be seen as a form of strategic signaling. In July, the U.S. Department of the Treasury issued a limited license to Chevron¹⁴, allowing the company to resume operations and export oil from Venezuela after a three-month suspension.

Although the U.S. had previously revoked a 2023 license granted to Shell and BP, it has since reinstated authorization¹⁵ for Shell and Trinidad and Tobago's National Gas Company to develop Venezuela's offshore Dragon gas field. BP is also reportedly seeking to restore its license to develop the neighboring Cocuina-Manakin field.

This renewed openness to Western energy involvement in Venezuela is being viewed as a series of

¹¹ According to a CNN exit poll, Trump received 70% of the Cuban/Puerto Rican vote. ([link](#))

¹² Anatoly Kurmanav, Julian E. Barnes, and Julie Turkewitz, "Maduro Faces U.S. Pressure Over Venezuela's Oil," *The New York Times*, October 10, 2025, ([link](#)).

¹³ Americas Society / Council of the Americas, "María Corina Machado's Trillion-Dollar Plan: Venezuela's Economic Transformation," AS/COA, accessed October 15, 2025, ([link](#)).

¹⁴ "U.S. Resumes Imports of Venezuelan Oil Under New License to Chevron," *Reuters*, August 21, 2025, ([link](#)).

¹⁵ Curtis Williams, "U.S. Grants License for Shell, Trinidad to Develop Venezuelan Gas Field, Official Says," *Reuters*, October 9, 2025, ([link](#)).

“minor victories” by advocates of economic engagement with the Maduro regime. It may also reflect a broader strategic aim: maintaining a Western foothold in Venezuela’s energy sector to deter Chinese and Russian expansion, while positioning for a potential return of a Western-friendly government in the future.

Venezuela at the Center of U.S. Strategic Reorientation

The forthcoming National Security Strategy, expected in the coming weeks, is likely to reorient U.S. strategic attention toward the Western Hemisphere. Within this framework, Venezuela may emerge as a focal point. For decades, Latin America has occupied a peripheral position in U.S. foreign policy, creating space for China, Russia, and Iran to expand their influence across the region. The Trump administration appears determined to reverse this trend by linking deeper regional engagement to its broader strategy for countering geopolitical rivals.

Yet in the Trump era, rigid strategic frameworks often take a back seat. The president’s foreign policy has been marked by abrupt shifts and tactical reversals. On Ukraine, Trump initially dismissed the idea of Kyiv reclaiming lost territory as unrealistic and favored an accommodation with Moscow. Today, however, his administration is reportedly providing targeting intelligence deep inside Russia, enabling Ukrainian strikes on energy infrastructure and signaling a renewed U.S. commitment to offensive operations. A similar pattern of oscillation has shaped his approach to China, with cycles of tariff escalation alternating with efforts to stabilize the relationship.

Still, dismissing the discipline that strategic frameworks bring to foreign policy carries its own risks. Among national security professionals in Washington, it is often noted that economic sanctions alone have rarely—if ever—toppled a foreign regime. In practice, it has typically required military force to bring about regime change. Iran and North Korea, despite facing some of the most severe sanctions regimes in history, remain under the same leadership. By contrast, the regimes in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya collapsed only after the application of direct U.S. military power.

But the inverse is also true: the presence of popular discontent within a country does not guarantee that U.S. intervention will be welcomed, or that it will produce a stable or favorable outcome. While the idea of ousting an unpopular dictator in South America may hold political and strategic appeal in Washington, the aftermath of such actions often proves far more costly (in terms of lives, resources, and U.S. credibility) than initially anticipated.

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