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From Posture to Purpose: Rethinking U.S. Strategic Aims in Venezuela

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Executive Summary

The U.S. military buildup in the Caribbean reflects a strategic confusion between counter-narcotics and regime-change objectives in Venezuela. Current operations project power but lack coherence, risking escalation without achievable outcomes. A sustainable strategy must align U.S. means and ends, favoring intelligence, law-enforcement, and targeted financial tools over military coercion. Even limited “surgical strikes” risk hardening regime cohesion, triggering regional instability, fueling migration flows, and creating governance vacuums with grave humanitarian consequences. To avoid these pitfalls while focusing on transnational criminal organizations, Washington should prioritize multilateral law-enforcement cooperation, expand Coast Guard and intelligence capabilities, and strengthen sanctions enforcement targeting the regime’s illicit revenue streams. Aligning coercive, diplomatic, and economic instruments toward realistic, proportional goals offers the only path to sustainable results without deepening Venezuela’s crisis or entangling the United States militarily.

Background

The current U.S. military deployment in the Caribbean of [roughly 8,000 U.S. sailors and Marines](#) with an accompanying naval task group has revived memories of the first [Trump administration’s threats in 2019](#) to intervene militarily to topple Nicolás Maduro. It led many to wonder if this time around the White House intends to follow through on its threats of regime change.

Confusion over the White House’s goals is widespread. That could be in part by design to keep the Maduro regime guessing, but it is also driven by a profound mismatch of capabilities, objectives, and political orientation. For example, the [U.S. operation has conducted live-fire exercises, maritime interdictions, and lethal attacks on fast boats](#) reportedly carrying drugs. With U.S. assets currently including an amphibious assault ship, destroyers, support vessels, and aircraft capable of rapid strike or landing operations, the scale, posture, and proximity of the U.S. deployment suggest that the show of force is not just about drug traffickers but also directed squarely at those in power in Venezuela. For many, this simply does not smell like a routine counter-narcotics mission. At the same time, however, a costly military invasion with uncertain political outcomes is at odds with President Donald Trump’s traditional reluctance to entangle

the United States in the type of state-building adventures that doomed neo-conservative administrations in the recent past. Put differently, it is hard to reconcile an “America First” foreign policy with risking U.S. blood treasure via military invasion to restore democracy in Venezuela. So, what exactly is going on here? Is current U.S. policy aimed at using overwhelming force against criminal networks or forcing regime change in Venezuela?

For its part, the [Pentagon has described the deployment as part of a broader effort to disrupt transnational criminal and drug-trafficking networks](#) operating out of Venezuela and its Caribbean approaches. Despite the public messaging, however, the deployment of military assets such as amphibious ships, destroyers, attack submarines, expeditionary Marines, B-52 bombers, Reaper drones, F-35 fighter jets, and, more recently, [the USS Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike](#) Group, is not consistent with contemporary state-of-the-art U.S. tools used for counter-narcotics operations, which rely heavily on intelligence, surveillance, and law-enforcement cooperation. If the current mission is explicitly about interdicting illicit shipments, Washington could have simply expanded existing Coast Guard patrols, joint intelligence operations, and/or regional policing partnerships. Instead, it has sent a heavily armed amphibious force into the theater whose configuration and visibility are clearly meant to intimidate rather than to just disrupt illicit trafficking operations.

Main Argument

In 2019, [analysts rightly pointed out that an operation to topple Maduro would require tens of thousands of troops](#) and a long-term stabilization effort, an undertaking that would be both politically and militarily unsustainable. Those constraints remain unchanged today. Though large by regional standards, the current force is still far too small to invade or occupy Venezuelan territory. Yet it is big enough to project menace. Thus, the U.S. presence in nearby waters still feels more like intimidation than a real intent to use the military to remove the Maduro regime from power by force, at least for now.

After decades of failed U.S. policy, and six years after the last debate over intervention, the U.S. finds itself in the same position seeking change in Venezuela but unsure how to achieve it. Breaking this cycle will require moving from posture to policy, from pressure to purpose. Washington must align its instruments with its aims. Until then, the warships in the Caribbean will remain powerful symbols of American capability but not of American strategy.

Policy Context

The most plausible explanation for current U.S. policy is that the Trump administration hopes to shake the foundations of the Maduro regime through psychological pressure, a strategy that also relies in part on Trump’s mercurial and unpredictable decision-making behavior. The goal, it seems, is to rattle Venezuela’s leadership

and military command, especially those who may harbor doubts about Maduro's future, and encourage defections, internal conspiracies, and/or an internal coup. In this scenario, the logic is not one of imminent invasion but of calibrated intimidation: to convince elites that the costs of continued loyalty will increasingly outweigh the benefits.

This is not an irrational gamble, but it rests on assumptions about the nature of power in Caracas. Over the past two decades, [Venezuela's Bolivarian Armed Forces have fused their survival and financial interests with those of the regime](#). Senior officers control key state enterprises and profit from smuggling, mining, and illicit oil and gold sales. Civilian officials, too, are deeply enmeshed in criminal networks and sanction-evasion schemes. The regime's resilience is therefore not ideological but transactional built on shared enrichment and mutual protection. These actors know that regime collapse would expose them to prosecution, asset seizure, or worse. For now, their incentives are to preserve the system, not to defect from it. So, the assumption that pressure will lead to a fracturing of the military or political elite could be flawed.

External pressure of the military kind could also **reinforce cohesion within the ruling elite**, particularly among the military hierarchy and other key political actors, even as it fails to mobilize ordinary Venezuelans. The regime will not likely be able to rally broad public support through tired anti-imperialist slogans. [Venezuelans](#)

[have endured years of economic ruin](#) and political manipulation; few are moved by official propaganda blaming the United States. But within the inner circle, the threat of external force is more likely to harden loyalties, as key figures close ranks to defend their collective survival, rather than fracture them. For any pressure campaign to have a better chance of success, military leverage must be accompanied by a diplomatic or negotiation strategy that provides viable assurances to convince enough elites to change course. Nonetheless, for Maduro and his inner circle, relinquishing power represents an existential threat.

Although the myriad potential pitfalls of a military invasion of Venezuela serve as something of a brake in an America First decision-making calculus, the unprecedented military build-up in the Caribbean has put the White House in a position where it must achieve a convincing return on investment or risk returning home with too little to show. In short, the Pentagon will have to go further than sinking a handful of drug vessels to deliver the kind of political victory that the White House seeks by elevating counter-narcotics as a top policy priority and/or "hoping" that the US military's massive presence will trigger regime change.

Considering the broader context, it is therefore most likely that Washington will next pursue a military strategy narrower than regime change but splashier than blowing up drug boats namely, a series of "surgical strikes" on clandestine airstrips, fuel depots,

military installations or armed groups in Colombia and Venezuela associated with trafficking networks loyal to Maduro and his associates in the regime. Such limited operations might demonstrate U.S. resolve without entailing the risks and responsibilities of full-scale intervention. Yet even if tactically successful, precision attacks may not alter Venezuela's political equilibrium. The [regime's power does not depend on infrastructure but on control of coercive institutions, illicit revenue streams](#), and the absence of credible internal rivals. Targeted strikes might inflict damage but would do little to shift those fundamentals. More likely, they would allow Maduro to cast himself as the victim of aggression, while the elite quietly celebrates a new pretext for unity. If, on the other hand, the U.S. escalates to a massive air campaign that dismantles the regime's coercive apparatus and removes Bolivarian leaders, it may create, much as we have seen in other recent cases, a governance vacuum with profound implications for Venezuela and the region's stability.

The paradox of U.S. policy toward Venezuela is that it continues to confuse **activity with strategy**. Over successive administrations, both Republican and Democrat, Washington has alternated between sanctions, negotiations, and threats of force none integrated into a coherent framework. The MEU II deployment, for all its visibility, fits this pattern: a tactical move without a strategic horizon. It may serve as a show of determination to domestic audiences and to regional partners who view U.S. commitment as waning. But shows of

determination are not a substitute for long-term strategy.

Policy Recommendations

To craft a meaningful approach, Washington must clarify its objectives. Is the goal regime change and democratic transition, or the containment of transnational crime? Each requires different tools, coalitions, and levels of risk. Deploying Marines and warships in a vacuum cannot solve for any of these objectives, much less simultaneously achieve all of them. A force configured for amphibious operations, for example, cannot plausibly conduct sustained counter-narcotics missions. And coercive pressure aimed at destabilizing the regime runs the risk of closing diplomatic channels needed for eventual negotiation to secure buy in from the diverse array of relevant Venezuelan constituencies that will eventually be required to avoid another disastrous U.S. state-building adventure in a post-Maduro context.

If the objective is countering drug trafficking and transnational crime, a more effective counter-narcotics approach in the Caribbean should begin with aligning U.S. objectives with the tools best suited to achieve them. For far too long, despite the growing complexity and scale of illicit maritime activity in the region, the U.S. Coast Guard has been operating in the Caribbean without the necessary resources, funding, and capabilities required to effectively confront escalating drug trafficking. Instead of deploying large amphibious forces or strike-capable aircraft,

which signal intentions far beyond drug interdiction, Washington should expand Coast Guard patrols and maritime policing cooperation with Caribbean partners. This includes enhancing radar coverage, air-maritime surveillance, and intelligence fusion centers already operating under the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative. These assets are far better tailored to tracking and intercepting traffickers than expeditionary Marine units or amphibious ships, and they do so at significantly lower financial and political cost.

Also, the U.S. should prioritize law-enforcement and judicial cooperation to disrupt the financial and logistical networks that sustain trafficking organizations. That means strengthening anti-money laundering regimes, improving port and customs monitoring, and supporting vetted transnational investigative units within regional police forces. Because the power of trafficking networks rests less on physical infrastructure than on financial and political protection, targeting the revenue streams and corrupt intermediaries that enable smuggling is far more likely to produce lasting effects than episodic maritime interdictions or symbolic force deployments. The necessary tools and expertise are available; the challenge is one of political will and prioritization.

Finally, any counter-trafficking or regime change strategy must begin with the recognition that the Maduro regime and the military and political elites whose survival is tied to illicit rents has little incentive to cooperate in meaningful negotiations.

Efforts that assume goodwill or a willingness to reform are likely to fail. At the same time, relying primarily on overt military pressure risks backfiring by deepening the regime's internal cohesion and strengthening the criminal networks embedded within it. In addition to significantly ramping up US Coast Guard and other capabilities in the Caribbean and Pacific, a more realistic and scaled up counter-narcotics approach would combine targeted financial accountability measures, multilateral law-enforcement coordination, and support for regional partners and local institutions capable of disrupting trafficking routes independent of Caracas. A strategy that matches means to ends would be more proportionate to the problem and more likely to generate sustainable results.

In terms of the restoration of democratic rule in Venezuela, a strategy has to acknowledge the political realities on the ground: the objective is not to convince the regime to dismantle the system from which it benefits. Because Maduro has proven adept at evasion and resilience, the smarter course is to double down on non-military levers while preparing robust contingencies. That means sharpening sanctions into a precision, enforcement-first strategy against the Maduro regime's core revenue streams (targeting oil/gold networks, shippers, bankers and key facilitators), that increases the real costs of authoritarian entrenchment while offering **clear, credible benefits** for measurable democratic steps. This will require regional and extra-hemispheric partners to muster the collective will to enforce these measures effectively and to

close off the evasion mechanisms that Caracas has relied upon.

These measures are not without their pitfalls. Critics argue that variations of them have been attempted before without yielding the desired political outcome. The frustration is understandable. However, military intervention carries grave legal, political, humanitarian, and strategic risks that make it an extremely dangerous and counterproductive option. External military action tends to “own” the aftermath; it can create governance vacuums, fuel armed groups and criminal violence, inflict significant civilian and economic harm, and trigger large-scale migration flows.

The temptation to use force is understandable. Venezuela’s implosion has produced one of the largest refugee crises in the world, empowered criminal organizations, and destabilized neighboring states. Venezuelans deserve better. But symbolic U.S. deployments raise expectations of imminent action that Washington is not only unlikely to deliver, but that could also have uncertain and costly consequences. Furthermore, by signaling even the possibility of intervention, Washington may inadvertently undermine domestic momentum for change, as segments of the opposition could begin to wait for U.S. military action rather than continue their valiant effort at building their own capacity to restore democracy in Venezuela. The result is a strategy that is more spectacle than substance, a performance of resolve in the absence of direction.

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