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REVOLUTIONIZING U.S. FOREIGN POLICY: THE CASE OF TRUMP'S APPROACH TOWARD VENEZUELA**

(Translation in *Extenso*)

Abstract

A limited U.S. military operation against Venezuela in January 2026, which resulted in the arrest of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, sparked considerable debate among observers regarding the factors that led the second administration of Donald Trump to cross the threshold into direct military confrontation with the Chavista regime in Caracas. This paper argues that the decision was neither accidental nor opportunistic, but rather formed part of a broader grand strategy that prioritizes the Western Hemisphere as the primary region of U.S. interest – one in which Washington seeks to reassert its hegemony. This approach contrasts with the policies of previous administrations, which emphasized pursuing global hegemony while largely taking U.S. dominance in the Western Hemisphere for granted, thereby tolerating some dissent among regional actors. In the case of Venezuela, oil

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interdependence had long acted as a constraint on escalation, with Washington resorting to more radical measures only opportunistically – typically when the Chavista regime appeared particularly vulnerable. Trump’s strategic shift, as articulated in his National Security Strategy, placed the recent intervention within a more coherent regional policy framework. The paper concludes that Trump’s approach toward Venezuela illustrates that the most visible and consistent outcomes of his broader attempt to revolutionize U.S. foreign policy are to be found in the Western Hemisphere.

Keywords: The United States of America, Donald Trump, Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, Western Hemisphere, grand strategy.

INTRODUCTION: TRUMP VS. VENEZUELA, ROUND TWO

On the early morning of January 3, 2026 – the 36th anniversary of the capture of Panama’s dictator Manuel Noriega by invading U.S. forces – a dozen helicopters from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, carrying Delta Force soldiers, entered Venezuelan airspace, supported by U.S. Air Force jets and bombers. The target of operation “Absolute Resolve” was the presidential residence in Caracas, and Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores. After neutralizing their Venezuelan and Cuban security, American commandos succeeded in capturing and arresting the couple, who were subsequently flown to New York City to stand trial in a U.S. court on charges of “narcoterrorism”. Justifying the operation, U.S. President Donald Trump stated the United States “will run the country until we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition”, since “we can’t take a chance that someone else takes over Venezuela who doesn’t have the interests of Venezuelans in mind”, adding that major U.S. oil companies would enter Venezuela to restore its oil infrastructure (Reuters 2026). However, he left the Venezuelan regime formally intact, with Maduro’s vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, assuming power, in the expectation of her cooperative stance toward Washington on matters of U.S. interest. “We just received from our new friend and partner, Venezuela, more

than 80 million barrels of oil”, Trump later declared in his State of the Union address (Associated Press 2026).

In his first term, amid the 2019 Venezuelan presidential crisis, Trump had already approached the brink of military intervention but ultimately backed off. His successor, Joseph Biden, returned to a more conventional U.S. policy toward the Venezuelan Chavista regime, one that has been largely characterized, since its establishment in 1998, by restraint and the avoidance of decisive measures aimed at removing Venezuelan leaders from power. This paper argues that the more hawkish approach of Trump 2.0 to Venezuela, culminating in Maduro’s arrest, was neither accidental nor merely opportunistic. Rather, it is part of his broader foreign policy strategy, which prioritizes the Western Hemisphere as the region where the United States must reassert its hegemony after decades of taking it for granted. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. First, it examines the standard post-Cold War U.S. approach to regional hegemony, often marked by opportunism and selective engagement. It then analyses the innovations introduced by Trump, as reflected in his latest National Security Strategy. The subsequent section reviews recent U.S.-Venezuela relations, culminating in the 2019 presidential crisis and its aftermath. Finally, the paper traces the evolution from Biden’s policy of appeasement toward Caracas in expectations of electoral change, to Trump’s shift to decisive action in disciplining a leading regional outlaw. The theoretical approach applied in the paper is neoclassical realism, with an emphasis on grand strategy. The paper presents a combination of a qualitative case study, historical analysis, and policy document analysis.

OPPORTUNISTIC REGIONAL HEGEMONY: THE LEGACY OF TRUMP’S PREDECESSORS

The United States is the hegemon of the Western Hemisphere. Since the Monroe Doctrine of the 1820s (and especially since Theodore Roosevelt’s “corollary” to it), Washington has viewed the rest of the American continent as its strategic backyard, seeking to limit the influence of external powers and secure its own predominance. There is broad consensus within the U.S. foreign policy establishment and

the academic community that hegemony over the Western Hemisphere constitutes a core national interest. Even the most vocal critics of American global hegemony rarely challenge this premise in the Americas. Already, classical realist Hans J. Morgenthau, drawing on the Federalists, identified three fundamental U.S. interests: securing a dominant position in the Western Hemisphere; maintaining the balance of power in Europe; and maintaining the balance of power in Asia (Morgenthau 1952, 4–6). Among contemporary scholars, offensive neorealist John J. Mearsheimer advocates Washington’s abandoning the pursuit of global hegemony – later termed “liberal hegemony” – in favour of grand strategy of “offshore balancing”. This approach would preserve U.S. hegemony in the Americas while preventing other powers from achieving regional hegemony in Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf (Mearsheimer 2018). Another prominent realist, Stephen Walt, similarly endorses “offshore balancing” along comparable lines (Walt 2018). Barry R. Posen, for his part, rejects liberal hegemony in favour of the strategy of “restraint”, which likewise challenges U.S. global, but not regional hegemony (Posen 2014).

None of these authors criticizes American global hegemony primarily on moral grounds; rather, they regard it as unfeasible and therefore strategically unrealistic. According to Mearsheimer, the “stopping power of water” renders the sustained projection of power across the oceans inherently difficult (Mearsheimer 2001, 41–42). Posen devotes the entire chapter in his book to calculating the direct and indirect costs of liberal hegemony (Posen 2014, 24–68). By contrast, hegemonic policy within the Western Hemisphere is seen as both feasible and justified. Yet this is where a paradox emerges. Proponents of American global (liberal) hegemony, who have dominated U.S. foreign policy decision-making in the post-Cold War era, have often taken regional hegemony for granted. Accustomed to projecting power abroad, they have allowed themselves the luxury of not maintaining constant control over every part of their “home” region, particularly when doing so proves costly due to local resistance or the involvement of extra-hemispheric powers. As a result, the U.S. has frequently tolerated temporary disloyalty among regional actors, refraining from extreme measures against them to avoid exhausting resources needed

for broader strategic objectives – as illustrated by its decades-long policy toward Cuba. Washington has also demonstrated flexibility in the means it employs to secure regional alignment. For example, in the late 1980s, it shifted its approach in Latin America from supporting right-wing authoritarian regimes to facilitating their removal and promoting moderate democratic movements. Both the doctrine and practice of U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere have thus been characterized by a degree of opportunism: an assertive pursuit of control when conditions are favourable, coupled with restraint, and even retrenchment when they are not. U.S. policy toward Venezuela before the recent events closely fits this pattern. Washington's opportunism, shaped in part by oil interdependence, restrained it from pursuing overly radical measures against the Chavista regime during periods of stability. Yet when the regime entered a phase of profound crisis, that same opportunism drove the U.S. toward escalating the conflict to the brink of military intervention – even at the cost of temporarily disrupting oil ties. Ultimately, the shift under Trump 2.0 – from opportunism to sustained assertiveness in the Western Hemisphere, combined with restraint elsewhere, led to crossing even that threshold.

TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY REVOLUTION: BACK TO THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

Upon returning to the U.S. presidency in 2025, Donald Trump shocked the world with a series of statements targeting the Western Hemisphere. These ranged from proposing to rename the Gulf of Mexico as the American Gulf, to expressing intentions to annex Greenland and the Panama Canal (and even to incorporate Canada as the 51st U.S. state), announcing new tariffs on neighbouring countries, and reviving confrontational rhetoric toward the Venezuelan regime, which, as will be shown, became the clearest case in which he moved from words to deeds. These were not random rhetorical flourishes characteristic of Trump's first term, but rather signals of a more assertive policy toward the Western Hemisphere, embedded within a broader Trump 2.0 revolutionizing U.S. foreign policy away from the pursuit of global hegemony toward a more restrained grand strategy

– paradoxical as it may initially appear. In fact, the reassertion of hegemony in the Western Hemisphere is fully consistent with a more defensive global posture, one aimed not at imposing U.S. dominance worldwide, but at preventing rival powers from achieving hegemony in their own regions. This congruence between realist critiques of liberal hegemony and the practice of the new administration’s foreign policy is most clearly reflected in Trump’s recent National Security Strategy – NSS.

The document opens with an almost academic inquiry into the very meaning of “strategy”, criticizing previous editions for failing to define it adequately. It conceptualizes strategy as “a concrete, realistic plan that explains the essential connection between ends and means”, one that “must evaluate, sort, and prioritize”. Accordingly, the central focus of Trump’s NSS is “the protection of core national interests”, understood as “the purpose of foreign policy”. In contrast, “American strategies since the end of the Cold War... have not clearly defined what we want... and often have misjudged what we should want”. Within this framework, the document offers a clear rejection of the pursuit of global hegemony: “After the end of the Cold War, American foreign policy elites convinced themselves that permanent American domination of the entire world was in the best interest of our country. Yet the affairs of other countries are our concern only if their activities directly threaten our interest” (The White House 2025, 1). The NSS proceeds to define “overall” U.S. interests – such as survival of the U.S. as a sovereign republic, having the most powerful military, the strongest economy, and unrivalled soft power, American “spiritual and cultural health” – before specifying foreign policy interests, framed as “what do we want in and from the world” (The White House 2025, 3–4). In prioritizing among the world regions, the document closely mirrors the prescriptions of realist critics of liberal hegemony. A “reasonably stable and well-governed” Western Hemisphere, “free of hostile foreign incursion or ownerships of key assets”, with ensured U.S. “continued access to key strategic locations” is placed at the top of the hierarchy: “In other words, we will assert and enforce a ‘Trump Corollary’ to the Monroe Doctrine”. Other “United States’ core, vital national interests” include keeping the Indo-Pacific “free and open”, supporting allies

in “preserving the freedom and security” of Europe, and preventing “an adversarial power from dominating the Middle East, its oil and gas supplies... while avoiding the ‘forever wars’” (The White House 2025, 5).

The remainder of Trump’s NSS elaborates a series of principles that mark a clear break with the grand strategy of liberal hegemony in favour of a more restrained foreign policy. Notably, it explicitly endorses balance of power as the opposite of hegemonic logic: “As the United States rejects the ill-fated concept of global domination for itself, we must prevent the global, and in some cases even regional, domination of others”, but “without wasting blood and treasure to curtail the influence of all the world’s great and middle powers”, recognizing that “the outsized influence of larger, richer, and stronger nations is a timeless truth of international relations” (The White House 2025, 10). Applied to regions beyond the Western Hemisphere, this approach translates into a “focus on deterrence to prevent war in the Indo-Pacific”, particularly with regard to Taiwan, alongside “denying aggression anywhere in the First Island Chain”, and preventing any competitor from controlling the South China Sea; the pursuit of “strategic stability” with Russia¹ while encouraging European allies to restore their “civilizational self-confidence” as they “enjoy a significant hard power advantage over Russia by almost every measure, save nuclear weapons” and should therefore not regard it as an existential threat (with this goes “ending the perception, and preventing the reality, of NATO as a perpetually expanding alliance”) and a reorientation of Middle Eastern policy away from experimenting with forcing nations “into abandoning their traditions and historic forms of government” and “fruitless ‘nation-building’ wars” (The White House 2025, 19–29).

Finally, with respect to the Western Hemisphere, “Trump’s Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine” is more closely explained, stating that “after years of neglect, the United States will reassert and enforce the Monroe Doctrine to restore the American pre-eminence”,

¹ U.S.-Russian strategic stability is in line with “controlled confrontation”, an idea already employed during Trump’s first term, but also Biden administration (Proroković 2026, 30–32).

particularly by denying “non-Hemispheric competitors the ability to position forces or other threatening capabilities, or to own or control strategically vital assets”. The objectives in the Western Hemisphere are defined as “enlist and expand”. “Enlist” refers to mobilizing existing friends and partners to advance shared Hemispheric goals, such as migration control, counter-drug-trafficking efforts, or strengthening stability and security. “Expand” entails reaching out to other nations to encourage them to choose the U.S. “as their partner of first choice”, rather than aligning with Washington’s non-Hemispheric competitors: “The choice all countries should face is whether they want to live in an American-led world of sovereign countries and free economies or in a parallel one in which they are influenced by countries on the other side of the world” (The White House 2025, 15–19). In sum, the revolutionizing elements of Trump’s foreign policy relevant to this analysis, as articulated in his NSS, are twofold: first, a shift away from the pursuit of global hegemony toward a more restrained strategy centred on maintaining balances of power in vital non-Hemispheric regions – the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East – thereby conserving resources; and second, a more assertive policy in the Western Hemisphere, aimed at consolidating regional hegemony by expanding alliances and limiting the influence of non-Hemispheric rivals. In this context, Trump’s approach toward Venezuela, once a close partner, now a deeply adversarial, oil-rich state, fits squarely within the broader logic of his foreign policy thinking.

THE UNITED STATES AND VENEZUELA, FROM UNLIMITED COOPERATION TO CONTAINED CONFLICT: THE OMNIPRESENCE OF THE OIL FACTOR

“Oil + Latin America = trouble” would be an apt formula for capturing the Venezuelan issue. The country possesses the largest proven oil reserves in the world – approximately 300 billion barrels (Gallegos 2016, 150). The discovery of oil and the beginning of its exploitation a century ago have remained, to this day, not only the foundation of the Venezuelan economy, but also the core component

of national identity, as well a defining factor in its relationship with the United States (Salas 2015, 1, 4–5, 61–62, 67–68; Kovalik 2019, 33–34). Once Venezuelans recognized the benefits of administering the oil industry on their own, the country effectively became a petro-state, one in which the entire society grew accustomed to spending enormous amounts of unearned fortune extracted from the land (Salas 2015, 78; Gallegos 2016, 21–22, 75–76, 170). Being a petro-state in the Latin American context carried two major implications. First, the Latin American mentality of “anarchist individualism” hindered the efficient management of oil wealth, leading to patterns of overspending and underinvestment (Gallegos 2016, 112–113). Second, the country’s proximity to the powerful United States ensured the Venezuelan oil would remain a special point of interest to the Western Hemisphere’s hegemon. During the Cold War, Venezuela established a very close partnership with the United States, grounded in oil interdependence. Unlike in some other cases in Latin America, this relationship was not primarily exploitative. Under the umbrella of U.S. hegemony, Venezuela was able to use its oil revenues to raise the living standards of its society, develop advanced healthcare and education, maintain low fuel prices, construct the most advanced infrastructure in Latin America, and, since 1958, consolidate a stable two-party democratic system (Naím and Toro 2018, 126–127; Salas 2015, 91–96). Furthermore, during the presidencies of Rómulo Betancourt (1959–1964) and Carlos Andrés Pérez (1974–1979), Venezuela pursued an especially active foreign policy (Mijares 2015, 76–77; Salas 2015, 97–103; Gallegos 2016, 77, 83; Corrales and Romero 2013, 18–19, 119). Washington, for its part, tended to disregard minor political disagreements with Caracas to preserve a stable oil trade, viewing Venezuela as one of its most loyal regional allies.

The situation began to deteriorate rapidly with the decline in oil prices during the 1980s. Venezuela’s previously highest national per capita income in Latin America masked one of the highest inequality rates in the population. Once this income contracted, the burden fell disproportionately on the poorest segments of society, particularly following the introduction of International Monetary Fund – IMF designed neoliberal measures (Salas 2015, 106–107, 118).

In 1989, Pérez was re-elected president after campaigning against such measures, only to fall short on his promises once in office. The sharp increase in public transport prices triggered mass protests in the poorer suburbs of Caracas, prompting the authorities to respond violently, resulting in several hundred deaths in what became known as the “Caracazo massacre”. This generated deep disillusionment of Venezuelans with the country’s political and economic system (Kovalik 2019, 39–41, 53–54; Salas 2015, 110–120; Gallegos 2016, 88–90). The political consequences were swift. In 1992, a failed coup attempt was launched by a leftist movement led by sublieutenant Hugo Chávez, who was subsequently arrested and spent two years in prison before being pardoned. Originally a member of a military unit tasked with suppressing internal unrest, he embraced leftist ideas, viewing the army as a potential vehicle of social transformation. He also cast himself as a continuer of the work of Simón Bolívar, envisioning the liberation of Venezuela – and the rest of Latin America – from U.S. dominance, as well as the emancipation of the poor from the higher classes (Kovalik 2019, 52–55, 58; Salas 2015, 122–128). What he failed to achieve through force, Chávez accomplished through legal political means, winning the 1998 presidential elections decisively by capitalizing on widespread dissatisfaction with the country’s economic and political conditions (Salas 2015, 125–135). The Chavista era in Venezuela – renamed the Bolivarian Republic – thus began, characterized by radical changes in its social, economic, and political systems, as well as a fundamentally altered relationship with Washington.

How and why did the United States allow Venezuela to suddenly shift from being one of its most loyal and valuable regional partners to a major regional challenger? First, despite their close ties, Venezuela and the United States differed significantly in their domestic structures and foreign policy priorities. Washington failed to recognize in time the potential for profound socio-political change in Venezuela once declining oil revenues made social inequalities unsustainable. Furthermore, the end of the Cold War fostered a degree of complacency in U.S. policy toward the Western Hemisphere (Ciccarilo 2016, 25–28). Venezuela proved particularly conducive to the rise of a new leftist political project due to several factors: the element of surprise stemming

from U.S. mistaken assumptions of continued Venezuelan loyalty; Venezuelans' widespread nostalgia for the relative prosperity of the 1970s; the existence of a democratic system that permitted political mobilization without systematic repression of the far left; and the strength and social prestige of the army as an institution (Salas 2015, 9; Corrales and Romero 2013, 124).

In his effort to radically transform Venezuela, Chávez relied on the same flawed model as his predecessors – overspending on oil revenues rather than recognizing that dependence on oil was a problem, not a solution. However, he was lucky – during his rule, global oil prices had another dramatic surge, from ten dollars per barrel in 1998 to 133 dollars in 2008 (Mijares 2015, 77). As a result, Chavismo did deliver tangible social outcomes, particularly through expansive social programs targeting the poorest segments and through agrarian reform. Poverty declined from 49% to 25%, while extreme poverty fell from 21% to 7% (Kovalik 2019, 58–62; Salas 2015, 192–200; Gallegos 2016, 93). At the same time, however, despite the adoption in 1999 of one of the world's most progressive constitutions – expanding the rights of women and indigenous populations and introducing new institutions of participative democracy – the political system in practice moved toward increasing autocracy. Checks and balances were gradually eroded, the army was drawn to the service of the ruling party, and the Supreme Court was packed with loyalists (Salas 2015, 136–139, 167–168; Corrales and Romero 2013, 132–134). The state-owned oil company (Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. – PDVSA), along with most of the economy, was likewise placed under the control of party cadre, which contributed to declining efficiency and paved the way for later economic catastrophe (Naím and Toro 2018, 130; Corrales and Romero 2013, 79, 135–137; Gallegos 2016, 39–40, 94–99, 153).

Of particular relevance here is Chávez's use of oil revenues to sustain not merely an active, but hyperactive foreign policy, guided by three key objectives that were fundamentally at odds with U.S. interests: asserting Venezuela's sovereignty and international status; promoting socialist ideology beyond Venezuelan borders to reshape the ideological orientation of the states in the region; and fostering Latin American integration as a means of reducing dependence on U.S. hegemony and

securing a more autonomous position within an emerging multipolar world order (Romero and Mijares 2016, 182; Mijares 2017, 209–210; Corrales and Romero 2013, 174–175). Although this policy also involved cultivating ties with major global U.S. rivals (Russia, China, “rogue” states like Iran), its primary vector remained regional. Chávez made extensive use of oil revenues as an instrument of what has been termed the “diplomacy of social power”, directing financial and diplomatic support to ideologically similar governments and movements across Latin America. Cuba was the principal beneficiary, receiving subsidized Venezuelan oil in exchange for its qualified military, intelligence, education, and especially healthcare workforce (Corrales and Romero 2013, 17, 26–27, 34–36, 171). Venezuelan support was crucial to the emergence of the “pink tide” – a wave of leftist political leaders and movements critical of U.S. hegemony – and to the rise to power of these leaders and movements in many countries of the region. These included Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Fernando Lugo in Paraguay. Caracas also provided support to Manuel Zelaya in Honduras, the Kirchners in Argentina, Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff in Brazil, among other leaders who swept over Latin America in the early twenty-first century (Corrales and Romero 2013, 24–25; Salas 2015, 144). In parallel, Venezuela promoted several alternative frameworks of regional integration, including ALBA (Bolivarian alliance for the people of our America), Petrocaribe (ALBA’s economic component), UNASUR (Union of South American nations), and CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean states) (Romero and Mijares 2016, 180; Mijares 2015, 78–79; Corrales and Romero 2013, 24, 27; Kovalik 2019, 55–56; Salas 2015, 145–146, 151).

Although the United States did not like to see a radical socialist and anti-American leader appearing in its “backyard”, initially it mostly ignored him, until Chávez emerged as its biggest post-Cold War Latin American challenge (Corrales and Romero 2013, 40–46). Signs of a more assertive U.S. approach appeared as early as 2002, when Washington supported conservative opposition protests against Chávez’s reforms to oil and agricultural laws. This culminated in tacit backing for a failed coup attempt, when segments of the military

briefly detained Chávez on Orchila Island, only for the U.S. to back off once his loyalists set him free and restored him to power (Salas 2015, 154–157; Kovalik 2019, 121–122; Mijares 2017, 210; Corrales and Romero 2013, 48–50). Later that same year, Venezuela faced renewed destabilization in the form of a U.S.-supported general PDVSA strike, but it also failed due to the regime’s loyalty among oil workers and Brazilian da Silva’s support for oil to Chávez. Finally, the opposition’s failure to impeach Chávez through the 2004 referendum further consolidated his power (Salas 2015, 158–162). After Chávez repelled this first series of domestic attacks, the U.S. shifted toward a strategy of external containment, strengthening its own regional integration frameworks, supporting removal of some of Chávez’s regional allies from power (like in Haiti and Honduras), and imposing sanctions on Caracas over its military cooperation with U.S. rivals and “rogue states” like Iran, but also over Venezuelan refusal to cooperate with Washington in its war against drug trade (Corrales and Romero 2013, 21–24, 29–31, 52–53, 166; Salas 2015, 143; Kovalik 2019, 132–142).

Nevertheless, the conflict never slipped out of control. On the contrary, since 2007, Washington adopted a more calibrated policy described as “speak quietly, sanction softly”, devised by the State Secretary deputy Thomas Shannon. This strategy involved ignoring Chávez’s rhetoric, downplaying the Venezuelan threat, applying moderate sanctions, and focusing on areas in which the two countries could cooperate (Corrales and Romero 2013, 56–57, 92–98). During the first administration of Barack Obama, the tensions between the U.S. and Venezuela were largely contained. This can be explained by the same factor that had previously underpinned both cooperation and conflict in their relations – oil. Oil interdependence between the U.S. and Venezuela survived throughout Chávez’s rule. Neither decently successful Venezuelan efforts to diversify its oil exports (particularly toward China) nor Washington’s reliance on Middle Eastern supplies could beat geographical proximity of the two countries, in addition to the unique technology that PDVSA-owned U.S. company CITGO possessed for refining extraordinarily thick Venezuelan oil (Romero and Mijares 2016, 182–183; Mijares 2015, 78; Corrales and Romero 2013, 66–72). Thus, oil interdependence proved to be a stabilizing constraint

on U.S.–Venezuelan relations. However, Chávez’s death from cancer in 2013, after he had hand-picked the foreign minister Nicolás Maduro as his successor, soon combined with a series of adverse international developments, would alter the trajectory of the relationship and bring an end to this uneasy coexistence.

THE 2019 PRESIDENTIAL CRISIS AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Less than a year after Chávez’s death, the Ukrainian crisis erupted, contributing to a sharp decline in global oil prices and triggering one of the worst economic crises in Venezuela’s history. The country’s GDP (Gross Domestic Product) was soon cut in half, while poverty rose to levels exceeding those that had prevailed when Chávez first came to power. These developments were accompanied by a record-high inflation, shortages of basic consumer goods, and difficulties in the functioning of the healthcare system and the electrical grid (Naím nad Toro 2018, 134–135; Gallegos 2016, 47, 51–52, 99). Maduro, one of the most ideologically hardline members within Chávez’s administration, often described as “Cuban man”, was confirmed as president in the elections he won very narrowly – by just 1.5 percentage points over Henrique Capriles (Salas 2015, 207–210). Lacking Chávez’s charisma, he soon faced authority problems, particularly within the military, which he sought to resolve by stuffing them with cadres sent by the Cuban secret service (Mijares 2015, 80; Naím and Toro 2018, 127). In the years that followed, the centralization of power and the intensification of authoritarian tendencies in Venezuela further intensified. First violent opposition protests against the regime erupted already after Maduro’s election and reemerged in 2014, resulting in dozens of casualties and the arrest of several prominent opposition leaders, including Leopoldo López, María Corina Machado, and Antonio Ledezma (Kovalik 2019, 78; Salas 2015, 213–214; Briceño-Ruiz 2019, 185). In 2015, the opposition won a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly elections. In response, Maduro completely sidelined this body through a series of unconstitutional measures, prompting renewed protests that again resulted in fatalities

(Briceño-Ruiz 2019, 186; Antonopoulos and Cottle 2018, 50–52, 61). To contain unrest, Maduro initiated negotiations with the opposition in the Dominican Republic. After their failure, he called early presidential elections in 2018, which he won decisively (68%) amid a widespread boycott of opposition candidates. The legitimacy of these elections was subsequently rejected by around fifty countries (Antonopoulos and Cottle 2018, 63–64; Briceño-Ruiz 2019, 186–187).

As the economic crisis deepened, accompanied by a massive refugee crisis (approximately three million people left Venezuela), a new wave of the regime's repression followed – particularly following a drone attack on Maduro in August. At the same time, large-scale protests intensified (Pantoulas and McCoy 2019, 397–402). The opposition eventually consolidated in January 2019, when the young attorney Juan Guaidó was elected president of the National Assembly and subsequently declared himself interim president, invoking the Venezuelan constitution (Pantoulas and McCoy 2019, 404; Briceño-Ruiz 2019, 180). Despite his declining domestic popularity, Maduro managed to survive in power following several months of the presidential crisis and a failed coup attempt in April 2019, largely due to the loyalty of the majority of Cuban-infiltrated military and the assistance of pro-Chavista irregular armed groups, known as “colectivos” (Briceño-Ruiz 2019, 188). But not before the crisis acquired a distinctly international dimension. In addition to the catastrophic economic and political situation in the country, the regional environment had become increasingly unfavorable to Maduro's continuation of Chávez's hyperactive foreign policy. During the 2010s, the “pink tide” gave way to a resurgence of right-wing and pro-Washington governments across Latin America, including in some of Venezuela's former allies, such as Bolivia and Ecuador, as well as in major regional powers like Brazil and Argentina (Kovalik 2019, 146–150). These shifting domestic and international conditions created a window for a renewed, more assertive U.S. approach toward Venezuela.

This shift unfolded gradually, during the second term of Obama and, more decisively, during the first term of Donald Trump. At the initiative of Senate “hawks”, most notably Marco Rubio, the Obama administration imposed sanctions on individuals from the Venezuelan

establishment in 2014, expanding them in 2015 after declaring Venezuela an “unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States” (Kovalik 2019, 154). The Trump administration not only continued but intensified this policy. Shortly after taking office, Trump met with Lilian Tintori, the spouse of imprisoned opposition leader Leopoldo López. In August 2017, he expanded sanctions, including limiting the Venezuelan government and PDVSA’s access to U.S. financial markets (Camilleri 2018, 189–192). That same month, twelve Latin American countries established the anti-Venezuelan Lima Group, while Trump and his Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, publicly raised for the first time the possibility of military intervention (Pantoulas and McCoy 2019, 402; Camilleri 2018, 194–195). Throughout 2018, particularly after refusing to recognize Maduro’s re-election, the U.S. continued to pressure Caracas. Finally, in early 2019, after Trump and his Vice President Mike Pence signaled their support for Guaidó, Washington took the unprecedented step of imposing sanctions on PDVSA and enacting an oil embargo against Venezuela (Kovalik 2019, 159–160).

Nevertheless, this escalation ultimately proved to be another instance of opportunism in U.S. policy toward Venezuela. Despite repeated threats of military intervention, the Trump administration refrained from crossing that threshold and decided to allow Maduro to survive the crisis. Several factors may explain this restraint. First, the crisis exposed the fragility of Maduro’s regime, leading many observers to believe that its collapse was imminent even without direct military action. Diplomatic isolation – Guaidó was recognized as Venezuela’s legitimate president by more than 50 countries, including many Latin American countries – and economic (particularly oil) sanctions were regarded as potentially sufficient to bring about regime change in the next crisis. Or, as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo remarked: “No food. No medicines. No electricity now. The next is – no Maduro” (Kovalik 2019, 94, 164). Second, the role of extra-Hemispheric great powers, especially Russia, likely contributed to U.S. caution. Moscow had become Venezuela’s primary weapons supplier, which over time served as the foundation of expanded military cooperation between the two countries, including numerous visits of Russian military

planes and ships to Venezuela, as well as the joint military exercises (Romero and Mijares 2016, 184; Corrales and Romero 2013, 32–33). We can only guess whether particularly frequent landings of Russian planes in Venezuela during the peak of the crisis deterred Trump from the intervention. Finally, disagreements within the U.S. security establishment, along with resistance from Washington’s key Latin American partners – particularly after Trump administration senior officials invoked the Monroe Doctrine as one of justifications for potential intervention – may have further constrained policy options (Kovalik 2019, 33). Taken together, these factors (especially the third one) suggest that the Trump administration’s first-term approach to Venezuela remained largely within the bounds of opportunism (Trapara 2021a, 95–97; Trapara 2021b, 158–160). Another circle of waiting for favourable outcome in Venezuela, without resorting to decisive measures, would follow before Washington ultimately embraced a more fundamental shift in its strategy.

FROM BIDEN TO TRUMP 2.0: THE PATH TO AN (UN)EXPECTED OUTCOME

Upon taking office in 2021, the administration of Joseph Biden brought back the grand strategy of liberal hegemony, albeit with a note of tactical pragmatism (Trapara 2021c, 124–125) – once again deprioritized the Venezuelan issue within U.S. foreign policy. The Venezuelan presidential crisis formally came to an end in January 2023, when Guaidó’s term as president of the National Assembly and, with it, his claim to the interim presidency expired. In contrast to Trump’s hawkish approach, the Biden administration placed its hopes on the 2024 Venezuelan presidential elections, encouraging the opposition to unify and pursue a peaceful transition of power. Following renewed dialogue in Barbados, which produced an agreement between the opposition and the Maduro government on electoral conditions, Washington temporarily eased sanctions on the Venezuelan oil sector (Bryngel 2024, 54–55). However, this shift in U.S. policy failed to produce a meaningful change in Venezuela. The regime did not adhere to the terms of the agreement. Although María Corina Machado won

the opposition primaries, she was barred from running. However, her replacement as the unified opposition candidate, Edmundo González Urrutia, according to opposition-released tally sheets covering a large majority of polling stations, secured a decisive victory, reportedly around two-thirds of the votes. This outcome prompted the regime to take an unprecedented step, ordering the central electoral commission to falsify the results. Before 2024, the elections in the Chavista regime were neither free nor fair, given the uneven field between the government and the opposition, but they were never outrightly stolen. Maduro decided to retain a transparent and technologically very advanced system for counting votes, which made fraud at the polling station level very difficult. The logic behind this decision was: if I win, I would be able to rebuff the opposition's accusations of fraud; if I lose, the army would stand by me in cracking down on the protests after the post-election falsification of the results. It was the latter scenario that effectively materialized following the 2024 elections (Corrales and Kronick 2025). Maduro may have assumed that the U.S. would once again refrain from decisive action, but another change in the White House soon got him in for a rude awakening.

As soon as he returned to the office, Trump reinstated a more adversarial stance toward the regime in Caracas, yet this time as part of a broader strategy to reassert U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. The increased salience of Venezuela in U.S. foreign policy was signalled early on the appointment of Marco Rubio, a long-standing critic of Chavismo and a staunch supporter of the Venezuelan opposition, to the positions of Secretary of State and National Security Advisor. The primary justification in Trump's second term for increased pressure on Caracas shifted toward its alleged lack of cooperation in combating drug trafficking. Maduro was labelled as the head of a drug cartel, and Washington authorized strikes against Venezuelan vessels in the Caribbean suspected of transporting drugs to the U.S. soil. In late 2025, these measures were accompanied by a visible U.S. military buildup in the Caribbean. While many observers anticipated a full-scale military intervention aimed at regime change, Trump publicly denied such intentions and even engaged in direct phone communication with Maduro (Messari 2025). A fateful January

3 ultimately revealed Trump's design. Rather than pursuing a costly and potentially destabilizing full-scale intervention, the U.S. opted for a targeted operation aimed at removing the leader while leaving the broader regime structure intact. Conducted on the anniversary of the capture of Manuel Noriega, the operation carried clear symbolic weight. It sent a clear message not only to Venezuela but also to the broader international environment: the United States, under Trump's leadership, claims the Western Hemisphere as its own sphere of influence and is prepared to assert its authority decisively within it.

CONCLUSION: THE KING IS GONE, THE KINGDOM STANDS IN THE EMPEROR'S REALM

Although Trump pursued a hawkish policy toward Venezuela during his first presidential term, he ultimately refrained from military intervention. While plausible explanations for this restraint exist, such as persistence of oil interdependence between the two countries and the mysterious role of Russian planes, they can be subsumed under a broader argument: at that stage, Trump had not yet articulated a coherent grand strategy that would elevate the Western Hemisphere to the top priority, formally proclaim a Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, and thereby justify a more assertive posture toward Venezuela (Trapara 2017). Once such a strategy was formulated, the outcome was a move that symbolically reaffirmed U.S. hegemony in Latin America while leaving the Chavista regime formally in place, at least for the time being. Should the regime cease to cooperate, the U.S. President has already demonstrated both the willingness and the capability to act decisively. Moreover, Trump's signaling of readiness to assume responsibility for administering Venezuela's oil sector – through U.S. companies – marks a significant departure from his earlier reluctance to undertake such a measure (Bahar, Piccone, and Trinkunas 2018, 8).

In this context, it is worth considering whether Trump, only two months after the confrontation with Maduro, deviated from his newly articulated grand strategy by attacking Iran. Although this intervention (still ongoing at the time of writing) differs from the Venezuelan case in

most respects, one notable similarity stands out – the targeted removal of a top leader. In this instance, U.S. forces proved the same skill as in the Caracas operation, by eliminating Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in a matter of hours (in this case by assassination). Intervention against Iran can be partially reconciled with Trump’s overall strategy, as it has been justified as a response to direct threats to U.S. interests and may also be interpreted as an effort to prevent adversarial powers, whether Iran itself as a regional power, or Russia and China as its major great power partners, from dominating the Middle East. However, it also partially constitutes an exception to the strategy. Iran and its regional influence had already been weakened in preceding years, including through earlier strikes on its nuclear infrastructure. Furthermore, the intervention has already exposed gas and oil routes Trump claims to protect at risk, while its possible escalation and threatening Iranian collapse after the regime change could lock the U.S. in a new nation-building “forever war” he seeks to avoid. Explanations for this exception can be found in the long-standing U.S. grudge against the Iranian regime (since the 1979–1980 hostage crisis) and the influence of the Israeli lobby. The broader conclusion, therefore, is that Trump’s attempt at revolutionizing U.S. foreign policy does not represent a linear process. While his approach in the Western Hemisphere displays a high degree of consistency, policies in other regions, particularly in the Middle East, continue to reflect a more complex interplay of change and continuity.

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РЕВОЛУЦИОНИСАЊЕ СПОЉНЕ ПОЛИТИКЕ САД: СЛУЧАЈ ТРАМПОВОГ ПРИСТУПА ВЕНЕЦУЕЛИ**

Резиме

Ограничена америчка војна операција против Венецуеле у јануару 2026, која је резултирала хапшењем венецуеланског председника Николаса Мадуре, отворила је велику дебату међу посматрачима у погледу чинилаца који су водили другу администрацију Доналда Трампа ка преласку линије директне војне конфронтације са чавистичким режимом у Каракасу. У овом раду тврди се да одлука о интервенцији није ни случајна, ни опортунистичка. Она представља део шире велике стратегије, која поставља западну хемисферу као приоритетно подручје америчког интереса, где би Вашингтон требало да потврди своју хегемонију. Раније администрације су нагласак стављале на тежњу ка глобалној хегемонији, док су регионалну узимале здраво за готово, услед чега су биле спремне да донекле толеришу непослушност регионалних актера. У случају Венецуеле, нафтна међузависност је дуго служила као брана ескалацији. Она је успостављена још у време када су САД и Венецуела били блиски партнери, а Каракас водио активну регионалну спољну политику која се углавном поклапала с интересима Вашингтона. Након доласка Уга Чавеза на власт 1998, Венецуела активну спољну политику, финансирану приходима од нафте, претвара у хиперактивну, али овога пута уперену против интереса САД. Ипак, Вашингтон је

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према чавистичком режиму поступао углавном опортунистички, избегавајући радикалније мере, осим у случајевима када би овај режим испољио одређене слабости. Такав случај претходни пут се догодио у председничкој кризи 2019, кад је прва администрација Доналда Трампа привремено прекинула нафтне везе са режимом Чавезовог наследника, Николаса Мадуре, те признала његовог опозиционог ривала, Хуана Гваиду, за легитимног председника, али се ипак уздржала од оружане интервенције. Администрација Џозефа Бајдена вратила се старој политици и ублажила санкције Венецуели, у неиспуњеном очекивању да ће Мадуро моћи да буде смењен на изборима. Док у свом првом мандату Трамп није имао кохерентну велику стратегију, у другом ће је имати, те ће њене основне елементе – потврду хегемоније на западног хемисфери, те уздржанију спољну политику у Европи, Индо-Пацифику и Блиском истоку – изнети у својој Стратегији националне безбедности. Ова стратегија стога је сместила интервенцију у Венецуели у кохерентни оквир регионалне политике. Закључак рада је да Трампов приступ Венецуели илуструје чињеницу да су највидљивији и најконзистентнији исходи његовог ширег настојања да револуционише спољну политику САД присутни на западној хемисфери (за разлику од нпр. Блиског истока, што показује случај Ирана).

Кључне речи: Сједињене Америчке Државе, Доналд Трамп, Венецуела, Николас Мадуро, западна хемисфера, велика стратегија.

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