

Nikola Preradović*

*Strategic Research Institute, University of Defence,
Belgrade, Republic of Serbia*

**THE ROLE OF PERSONAL PRESTIGE
IN DONALD TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY
DECISION-MAKING: THE CASE OF
VENEZUELA
(Translation in *Extenso*)**

Abstract

The paper analyses the US intervention in Venezuela in 2026 from the perspective of prestige policy, seeking to show that security, economic, and value-based explanations are insufficient to understand the decision of the Donald Trump administration. In this context, the arguments about the fight against “narco-terrorism”, the spread of democracy, the economic interest in Venezuelan oil, and the strengthening of the Monroe Doctrine are critically examined, concluding that they cannot fully explain the scope, manner, and symbolic dimension of the armed action. The paper offers an interpretation of the intervention as a demonstration of US military power in order to affirm Donald Trump's personal political prestige. Relying on classical realism and Hans Morgenthau's concept of prestige, the paper shows that the need for recognition of one's own value remains an important motivational factor for leaders who perceive international politics as an opportunity to prove personal superiority. The intervention in Venezuela is

* E-mail address: nikola.preradovic@mod.gov.rs; ORCID: 0009-0007-9571-4258.

interpreted as an action aimed, more than at any real American strategic interest, at confirming Trump's historic role through a demonstration of force and determination.

Keywords: Donald Trump, USA, Venezuela, prestige politics, intervention.

INTRODUCTION

The decades-long crisis in relations between the United States (US) and Venezuela culminated on January 3, 2026, when integrated US military forces in operation "Absolute Resolve" captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife (Barnes, Pager and Schmitt 2026). The captured duo was detained in Brooklyn on charges of "narco-terrorism" (Suares Sang and Hubbard 2026). In the spirit of his earlier claims that Maduro's "days are numbered," President Donald Trump triumphantly described the operation as "bringing a renegade dictator to justice" and announced that the US would govern Venezuela for a limited period of time, guaranteeing safe access to its oil reserves for US companies (Politico 2025; Olay 2026; Aratani 2026). The dramatic escalation of tensions between Washington and Caracas has brought the "rogue" Latin American state back under the full control of "Uncle Sam". Two decades of hostility have ended in a matter of hours. A new example of the old practice of US interventionism in its own backyard has also reignited debates over its rationale. Is it a matter of national security, naked imperialism, regime change, or unscrupulous plunder of natural resources? Are the causes at the level of the international system and the renewal of great power competition, the state, and the special relationship of the US towards Latin America, or are they the personal whims of the returnee to the White House?

This paper aims to highlight the policy of prestige as an important factor in President Trump's decision-making. Specifically, the role that personal prestige played in the US intervention in Venezuela. The methodological approach relies on qualitative content analysis to examine statements by officials, key strategic documents, and other relevant sources. The following chapter is an analysis of different explanations for the US military operation in Caracas,

followed by a definition of the policy of prestige as a framework for interpreting the actions of the US president. The actions of the new administration towards Venezuela are examined in this light, indicating the continued importance of personal characteristics in foreign policy decision-making.

WHAT DOES TRUMP WANT IN VENEZUELA?

The beginning of Donald Trump's second term in the White House has predictably led to greater unpredictability in international politics. Despite the traditional isolationist impulses of the president's favourite slogan, "America First," the new administration's "move fast and break things" approach to foreign policy has chaotically made Washington omnipresent in global crises (Ashford 2025). For a leader who considers uncertainty and the element of surprise, in both business and political careers, to be one of his most potent tools, such a state of affairs is natural (Simić i Živojinović 2019, 290). It consciously increases unpredictability for both rivals and allies, seeking to preserve a wide range of options for the American president. In the whirlwind of the search for a comprehensive explanation of Trump's approach to foreign policy, possible motives for intervention in Venezuela have become a matter of dispute. What prompted the US president to deploy military power, leading to Maduro's capture?

The first formal reason, frequently cited by administration officials, is to protect the United States from drug trafficking, of which the Venezuelan president and his wife are accused. According to this interpretation, Maduro and other high-ranking officials of his regime not only facilitated the flow of drugs through Venezuela but also personally led a criminal organisation known as the "Cartel de los Soles," which Washington designated as a terrorist organisation late last year (Rubio 2025). The intervention was aimed at protecting American citizens from dangerous substances, for whose smuggling, according to President Trump, this Latin American country is largely responsible (Qiu 2026). This also fits into the broader rhetorical narrative of the returnees to the Oval Office about the "war" against drug cartels pompously announced during the election campaign (Blackburn Hudspeth et al. 2024).

However, Maduro's removal will not have a significant impact on the overdose epidemic caused by the illegal drug trade in the United States. Venezuela's overall role as a production site and a trafficking route for the two banned substances most frequently cited by Washington, cocaine and fentanyl, is minor. Almost all of the world's cocaine production takes place in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, while Mexico plays a key role in transit to the United States (Munir 2026). Last year's report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime shows that Venezuela figures as a regional transportation route, but it is not one of the primary producers of cocaine, nor a central smuggling corridor (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] 2025). Fentanyl, on the other hand, is mainly produced in Mexico, using chemicals from China, after which it is illegally transported across the US-Mexico border (Munir 2026). Venezuela's role in this supply chain is virtually non-existent (Munir 2026). Furthermore, the notorious "Cartel de los Soles" is more fiction than reality. The term has been familiar to the Venezuelan public since the early 1990s, when it was used to refer to alleged links between high-ranking military officials and the drug trade (Antillano 2026). However, in the absence of evidence of clear vertical integration that would allow for control of production and drug trafficking routes, it is difficult to speak of a defined criminal organisation. This is probably why the indictment against Maduro and his wife does not even mention the alleged cartel (Vigna 2026). Another contradiction in the administration's overall anti-drug agenda is the fact that President Trump pardoned the former leader of Honduras, Juan Orlando Hernández, who was convicted of smuggling over 400 tons of cocaine into the United States (Yousif 2025). Such a decision suggests that punishing those responsible for drug-related crimes is not a central priority for Washington, nor a plausible explanation for the armed intervention in Caracas.

Another reason for intervention cited by administration officials and some authors is to secure access to Venezuela's natural resources, primarily oil (Johnson 2026; Murphy and McManus 2026). This Latin American country has the largest proven reserves of "black gold" in the world, but the gradual process of nationalisation during the rule of Hugo Chávez almost completely pushed American capital out of that economic sector (Worldometer 2026; Koivumäki 2015). Immediately

after the intervention, Trump emphasised that Caracas would hand over up to 50 million barrels of oil to Washington and encouraged major oil companies to invest at least 100 billion dollars in Venezuelan infrastructure to facilitate the extraction of this important resource (Epstein and Chia 2026; Aratani 2026). Should we look for the key reason for the intervention in this? Did the opportunity for the return of American oil oligopolists shape Washington's foreign policy?

This interpretation overstates the importance and role of Venezuelan oil. Despite holding almost a fifth of global reserves, Venezuela accounts for less than 1% of total daily barrel production (Financial Times 2026). An important reason for this is that most of it is heavy crude oil, which is extremely demanding and expensive to extract, transport, and process (Domonoske 2026). In addition, rebuilding and modernising the damaged infrastructure to double production would, according to estimates, require a long-term investment of 115 billion dollars, approximately three times the combined capital expenditures of the two largest US oil companies, ExxonMobil and Chevron (Financial Times 2026). In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the head of Exxon claims that Venezuela is currently unprofitable for investment (Kimball 2026). Even if oil production were to increase dramatically, without increasing demand, lower prices could hit many smaller US oil companies (Financial Times 2026). In addition, Trump's pompously announced, and at first glance impressive, 50 million barrels of oil is less than what is produced in the US in four days, and their total value, at current prices, would not reach three billion dollars (Jain 2026). Hopes that Washington will profit enormously from Venezuelan oil are illusory.

The third explanation for the intervention refers, directly or indirectly, to the American practice of regime change, drawing an analogy with the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, or Panama in 1989, when Manuel Noriega was overthrown (O'Sullivan 2026; Gonzalez 2026; Haass 2026). These authors point to the lessons of Iraq and the challenges that accompany any attempt to overthrow an authoritarian regime through military intervention and the long-term control of a foreign state's affairs. Claims of such intentions are partially supported by some of Trump's statements about governing Venezuela until a safe transition to legitimate authority is possible

(Olay 2026). The term “legitimate authority”, in line with earlier interpretations of the US’s ambitious strategy of “liberal hegemony”, which, in the unipolar era, implied military interventionism masked by rhetoric about the protection of human rights (Mearsheimer 2018; Stekić 2025, 128–129), could technically refer to the establishment of democratic institutions in Caracas.

However, the idea that foreign policy was shaped by any pretensions to a fundamental regime change and democratisation of this Latin American country was quickly refuted by practice. The best indicator of this is that Maduro was replaced by his Vice President, Delcy Eloína Rodríguez Gómez, rather than by an opposition figure, such as Nobel Peace Prize laureate María Corina Machado, whom Trump said was “not respected” in Venezuela (Adams 2026). In addition, the US administration has ruled out any possibility of a political transition through early elections, claiming that the country is not ready for such a thing (Davis 2026). All this suggests that this is not a matter of regime change, but of personnel changes within the regime. The servile Rodríguez replaced the recalcitrant Maduro. It seems that in this case, the legitimate authority, from the White House’s perspective, is the one loyal to Washington.

A fourth explanation refers to the renewed importance of the Monroe Doctrine for the new American administration (Long and Schulz 2026; Grey 2026). The 1823 proclamation of the fifth US President, James Monroe, has influenced Washington’s policy in the Western Hemisphere for more than two centuries, in various phases and forms. In his address to Congress in 1823, he unilaterally emphasised that “the American continents, by reason of the free and independent position which they have adopted and which they maintain, shall not henceforth be considered as objects of colonisation by any European power” (Sexton 2011, 3). It initially appeared to be a very paradoxical document. On the one hand, the proclamation was much more the aspiration of a young republic, which had not risen to the rank of a great power, than an applicable policy. Formed under the influence of the European constellation after the Napoleonic Wars, the doctrine was, at that stage, more a reflection of American insecurity in the face of renewed interventionism on the Old Continent than of self-confidence. On the other hand, despite its distinctly anti-colonial tone

and opposition to the European presence in the Western Hemisphere, at its core, from the very beginning, the United States imperial ambitions lurked (Sexton 2011, 3). It was, in the words of historian William Appleman Williams, “imperial anti-colonialism” (Sexton 2011, 5). By the end of the 19th century, it was clear that the first part of this phrase had prevailed. Thus, in 1895, US Secretary of State Richard Olney could claim that “the United States of America is practically sovereign on this continent, and its word is law in those matters in which it chooses to intervene” (Gilderhus 2006, 10). The key influence on the development of the Monroe Doctrine in the first half of the 20th century was exerted by two Roosevelts. The first, Theodore, with his famous addition to the doctrine, strengthened its militant and interventionist dimension. For him, the almost natural mission of “civilised nations” required assuming the role of international policeman in America’s neighbourhood (Gilderhus 2006, 11). Such an approach, along with the alleged concern for order, served Washington’s strategic and economic interests. His cousin Franklin, on the other hand, shifted the doctrine from the “Big Stick” to the “Good Neighbour” policy. Rejecting interventionism and interference in the internal affairs of Latin American states, he emphasised reciprocal trade agreements and new commercial opportunities (Gilderhus 2006, 13). The softer approach was aimed at repairing the United States image in the Western Hemisphere before World War II, which was looming large amid the rise of fascism in Europe and Japan’s imperial ambitions. During the Cold War, the doctrine was interpreted in the light of the global competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, and its interventionist component was frequently used as a weapon against leftist or pro-Soviet governments in South and Central America (Gilderhus 2006, 14–16). After the end of the rivalry between the two superpowers, despite proclamations of “the end of the Monroe Doctrine era,” as US Secretary of State John Kerry claimed in 2013, the Monroe Doctrine continued to influence Washington’s policy toward its backyard (Naranjo Caceres and Brincat 2025).

The second administration of President Trump, like the first, attaches special importance to this doctrine in its strategic documents and official statements. Thus, the National Security Strategy of 2025 emphasises that the United States will “consolidate and implement

the Monroe Doctrine to restore American preeminence in the Western Hemisphere” (The White House 2025, 15). The document also emphasises that Washington will “prevent competitors outside the Hemisphere from deploying military forces or other threatening capabilities, as well as from possessing or controlling strategically vital resources in our Hemisphere” (The White House 2025, 15). This “Trump’s corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine is presented in the strategy as a return to key American security interests. Additionally, in a press conference following Maduro’s abduction, President Trump and Secretary of State Marco Rubio used the intervention in Venezuela as an opportunity to threaten other Western Hemisphere states such as Cuba, Mexico, and Colombia (Johnson 2026). So is the need to re-establish American hegemony in its own backyard the key reason for the intervention in Venezuela? Perhaps Caracas international partnerships, including the two great powers, China and Russia, posed a real threat to US strategic interests?

Since Maduro did not create Venezuela’s foreign policy approach but rather took over and continued that of his predecessor, Hugo Chávez, it is important to look back at that period of the “Bolivarian Revolution” and its consequences for Caracas’s relations with Moscow and Beijing. During his long reign, faced with the characteristic choice of Latin American states between aligning with Washington and seeking greater autonomy, Chávez adopted the latter approach (Mijares 2017, 207). His key foreign policy priorities were related to the preservation of national independence, both political and economic, but also to the promotion of a multicentric and multipolar international order. In this context, the US was identified as the main threat to Chávez’s project, while developing relations with Eurasian powers, Russia and China, was a necessary component of achieving greater autonomy (Mijares 2017, 213). Cooperation with Moscow developed in the economic and military spheres, and was accompanied by important political symbolism. For Chávez, Russia, especially since Putin’s speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, represented a great power that shared his view on the necessity of countering American dominance, an actor that could be presented to the public as a strong partner in building a different international order (Rouvinski 2019, 4). The Kremlin, on the other hand, in cooperation with Venezuela, received

symbolic confirmation of the return to the status of a global power, after the humiliation that accompanied the collapse of the USSR and the drastic loss of influence at the end of the last century (Rouvinski 2019, 12). However, modern Russia is not the Soviet Union; it was not ready to play the role of patron in relation to Venezuela that the communist colossus had towards Cuba during part of the Cold War (Rouvinski 2019, 12). The performative and symbolic importance of cooperation often exceeded its real, material scope, as shown by the fact that, of the over 200 agreements, contracts, and memoranda of understanding signed between Moscow and Caracas, many, in practice, remained mere words on paper (Rouvinski 2019, 15). Therefore, despite the significant development of relations between the two states since the beginning of the 21st century, the limitations were clear. Another major power with which Caracas has intensified its cooperation is China, which has primarily sought to position itself as an important economic partner for this Latin American country. Energy has played a central role in the development of these relations. Thus, oil exports from Venezuela to the Chinese market increased by 39% between 1999 and 2016 (Mijares 2017, 215). The continuity of this trend is also demonstrated by the fact that Beijing was by far the largest importer of Venezuelan oil in 2025 (Javaid 2026). However, in terms of total imports of this energy source into China, Venezuela participates with less than 5% (Javaid 2026). This suggests that Caracas has remained a minor energy partner for Beijing, despite the long-term trend of developing relations in this sector. In this context, Venezuela's strategic importance to China remained limited. Despite the obvious limitations, relations with these two great powers served for Chávez, and then for Maduro, primarily as a symbolic signal of the success of building greater autonomy from the traditional regional hegemon. Overall, Caracas based its foreign policy on an anti-imperialist and autonomous platform, which implied strengthening cooperation with Russia and China to balance the United States.

However, these relations did not pose a threat to Washington's security interests, either qualitatively or quantitatively. Venezuela was not close to becoming a military proxy for Russia or China in the Western Hemisphere, nor did the extent of their cooperation challenge US regional dominance. In addition, Caracas has been under

US sanctions for more than a decade, which have contributed to the country's overall economic crisis (Teixeira 2019). The country's gross domestic product (GDP) fell by approximately three-quarters between 2014 and 2021; debt is estimated at more than 150 billion dollars; hyperinflation reached 190% in 2023; and the budget is almost two-thirds financed by oil exports (Roy and Cheatham 2024). The Venezuelan military, despite acquiring Russian weapons, continued to face serious challenges in training personnel and maintaining equipment (Padinger 2025). The situation was also complicated by political instability, which intensified after the 2024 presidential elections, which were followed by accusations of ballot-box stuffing in favour of Maduro (CBS News 2024). The combination of these factors has made Venezuela an extremely fragile state. After all, the clearest demonstration of this is the operation of January 3, 2026, in which the president and his wife were captured in a few hours, without American casualties (Barnes, Pager and Schmitt 2026). That Venezuela could not count on any external support was clear from the reactions of Russia and China to Washington's intervention, which were limited to verbal condemnation of the use of force against a sovereign state (Lewis 2026). In this way, the limited scope of the relations that Caracas had built with Moscow and Beijing was once again confirmed. The United States undoubted military primacy in its neighbourhood was also confirmed. As Stephen Walt notes, no other great power has or is actively trying to establish a significant military role in the Western Hemisphere (Walt 2026). Overall, Venezuela and its international partnerships have not seriously undermined the United States regional position or threatened the Monroe Doctrine. Therefore, explanations that invoke the need for its reaffirmation as a key reason for the intervention, although they provide a partial picture of the new administration's strategic orientation, are not sufficient.

This chapter points out certain shortcomings in the frequently asked questions about what Trump wants in Venezuela. If the most commonly used arguments provide only a partial picture of American motivations, doubts remain. The aim of the next chapter is to offer a theoretical framework for interpreting the actions of the American president.

POLICY OF PRESTIGE

According to Kenneth Waltz's three Images of international politics, existing explanations locate the key causes of intervention at the level of the structure of the international system, namely the renewal of great power competition and the need to consolidate regional hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, or at the level of the state, where American interests are viewed through various prisms, from the fight against drug trafficking to the exploitation of Venezuelan natural resources and the practice of changing recalcitrant regimes (Waltz 2001). The perspective that has been neglected is the individual. The tendency of structural analyses to point to a small number of very important features of international relations can sometimes obscure the role of the personal factor in political decision-making. This, of course, means that the leaders themselves play an important role, a role often given very little space in neorealist theory, even though any study of history suggests that it is also the history of great men (Živojinović 2008, 370). As Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollak note, "explaining international relations without paying attention to people like Hitler, Bismarck, Napoleon, and other notable figures is like trying to understand art or music without studying Michelangelo and Mozart" (Byman and Pollak 2001, 145). In this case, it is necessary to show what President Trump's ambitions and goals are. One concept that can help in this, represented in the thinking of political philosophers and also of politicians, who can be defined as realists in a broader sense, is prestige.

In the context of ancient Greece and the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides cites "safety, honour, and self-interest" as powerful motives for action (Markey 1999, 135). Niccolò Machiavelli notes that the greatest harms are to "property, blood, or honour" (Markey 1999, 135). For Thomas Hobbes, fame, along with competition and distrust, is one of the fundamental causes of interpersonal conflict (Markey 1999, 135). Jean-Jacques Rousseau, making a distinction between self-love, which seeks exclusively to fulfil essential human needs, and envy, the basis of which is continuous comparison with others, emphasises that the latter, which develops in the context of social existence, causes mutual competition, thus making the pursuit of prestige an indispensable part

of human activity (Markey 1999, 138). Reinhold Niebuhr identifies prestige as an “indispensable source of power” (Kim 2004, 40). Honour and fame, that is, the pursuit of eminence, recognition by others, which is the essence of prestige, for these thinkers represent one of the central components of interpersonal relations. The same motif is present in the thinking of several statesmen, from Richelieu, Bismarck, Kennan, to Acheson, who considers prestige to be “the shadow cast by power” (Kim 2004, 40).

One of the founders of modern international relations, Raymond Aron, also considers prestige and glory to be important elements of politics (Aron 2001). He points out that the eternal goals that states strive for are security, power, and glory (Aron 2001, 106–107). Regarding their interaction, Aron notes that: “neither security nor power satisfies the aspirations of communities: each wants to defeat the others, to be recognised as superior by its rivals. Political units have their own self-love, just like individuals, perhaps even more sensitively. Therefore, they sometimes substitute the intoxication of victory for the advantages of a negotiated peace” (Aron 2001, 110). The embodiment of such a desire at the individual level is Louis XIV, who: “probably loved glory as much as power” (Aron 2001, 108). The wars he waged, due to their high material and human costs, even reduced France’s relative power, but they significantly contributed to shaping France’s image and, even more so, that of the “Sun King” himself. We find a similar motivation in Emperor Napoleon III in his efforts to be accepted as legitimate and equal to other European rulers, expecting fellow monarchs to address him as “brother”, in the same way they addressed each other (Kisindžer 2016, 102). These are two differentiated examples of the same need for recognition of status, for fame and respect.

Examples of similar actions are also evident in the history of other great powers. Andrei Tsygankov shows that national honour played an important role in relations between Russia and the West from Tsar Alexander I to Putin (Tsygankov 2012). Russia had possessed the material capabilities of a great power since the time of Peter the Great’s conquests, but it was only with the Peace of Teschen in 1779, which ended the War of the Bavarian Succession, that its status was recognised by other relevant actors in Europe. The Soviet Union was diplomatically isolated for much of the interwar period, until just before

the start of World War II, despite possessing the material resources of a great power. Prestige has a long tradition of being particularly important to the great powers in the system. Similarly, Sergey Radchenko explains the actions of Soviet political elites during the Cold War by their striving for legitimacy, or recognition, both within the international communist movement and by the other superpower (the USA) with which they were in a truly global competition (Radchenko 2024). From the Soviet perspective, according to Radchenko, this competition was a struggle for Hegelian recognition as the master not only of the current international order but also, in a philosophical sense, of history (Radchenko 2024). A similar motivation is often attributed to the current Russian leadership. Thus, Vladimir Trapara, in addition to the state-level prestige policy aimed at affirming Russia as a great power on the international stage, sees in the decision to launch the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a personal search for prestige by President Putin, to secure his own place in the history of great Russian leaders (Trapara 2025, 23). Chinese foreign policy is also increasingly viewed through the logic of prestige-seeking and status competition in international relations (Pan and Mao 2025; Deng 2008). In addition, the competition between the USA and China is viewed through the prism of the struggle for the top of the international prestige hierarchy in which the challenger seeks to replace the previous hegemon, and the central stage of this competition is the Asian continent (Foong Khong 2019).

For this paper, the best definition of prestige as a policy was provided by Hans Morgenthau. For him, it is an essential element of relations between individuals and nations (Morgentau 2014, 75). As part of such an understanding, he also notes that, in domestic, but also in international politics, “the desire for social recognition is a powerful dynamic force that determines social relations and creates social institutions” (Morgentau 2014, 75). In this process, the individual “tends to receive from his environment confirmation of the values he attributes to himself” and through this recognition “that others show for his goodness, intelligence and power, he becomes fully aware of what he considers his superior qualities; only in this way can he fully enjoy them” (Morgentau 2014, 75). Based on this: “in the struggle for existence and power – which, as we know, is the basic material of the social world – what others think of us is as important as what we

actually are” (Morgentau 2014, 75). In this context, the primary goal of prestige policy is to leave an impression on other nations and project an image of one’s own power and superiority. Its two main instruments are diplomatic ceremonial, which, in the broadest sense, encompasses all forms of symbolic and status representation of a country, and the demonstration of military power to impress other actors (Morgentau 2014, 76–81).

Morgenthau also lists two ultimate goals of this policy: prestige as an end in itself or as support for the policy of imperialism or the preservation of the existing status quo (Morgentau 2014, 81). He considers the second goal to be more frequent, emphasising that it is then a necessary element of a rational foreign policy, whereas in analysing the first, he implicitly draws an important distinction between the prestige of the states themselves and that of the individuals who lead them (Morgentau 2014, 83). Thus, he emphasises that “it is no coincidence that only conceited egocentrists tend to apply the policy of prestige for its own sake” (Morgentau 2014, 82). As blatant examples of such actions in the 20th century, he cites Wilhelm II and Benito Mussolini, who: “Intoxicated by their newly acquired power in their country... viewed international politics as a kind of personal sport in which exaltation for their own nation and humiliation of others were considered their personal superiority” (Morgentau 2014, 82). Narcissists in leadership positions frequently combine their own fanaticism with collective narcissism and nationalist radicalism (Subotić 2025, 30). As one of the key weaknesses of such a policy of prestige, especially in authoritarian or highly personalised regimes, he emphasises the tendency to confuse personal glory with a country’s national interests (Morgentau 2014, 82). In such situations, Morgenthau’s distinction between rational and irrational pursuit of prestige is relativised “because it depends on whether rationality is assessed from the perspective of the state or its ruler” (Trapara 2025, 23).

TRUMP’S QUEST FOR PRESTIGE

The above definition of policy of prestige can also shed light on Trump’s personal ambitions and actions. For a leader who, during the 2024 election campaign, described himself as the greatest president in

American history, above Abraham Lincoln and George Washington, prestige is clearly significant (Walt 2025). Moreover, a few leaders are so obsessed with their own image and desire to project a picture of power and personal superiority. This is clearly demonstrated both domestically and internationally. First, some of the obvious examples of the need to leave a personal mark everywhere are the renaming of the “Kennedy Center” to the “Trump-Kennedy Center” or the Institute for Peace to the “Donald J. Trump Institute of Peace”, the demolition of part of the East Wing of the White House to build a grandiose ballroom, and the proposal to build an American version of the Arc de Triomphe, which the US President already predicts will be “the largest and most beautiful in the world” (Asiedu and Debusmann Jr 2025; Gabbatt 2026; Politika 2026). Similar manifestations of the search for symbolic recognition of one’s own importance, but in the international arena, are evident in Trump’s repeatedly stated desire to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 2025 or his insistence on the renewal of global respect for the US under his leadership (Pager 2025; Benen 2026). The significance of this has been noted by other world leaders who regularly use appeasement tactics in their interactions with him in the hope of curbing the American president’s impulses (Psaropoulos 2025).

Beyond symbolic gestures, how has Trump’s quest for fame influenced US foreign policy? Already during his first term, a number of the administration’s foreign policy decisions were driven by prestige motives (Glaser 2018, 183). However, this moment, and especially its personal dimension, is qualitatively more pronounced after Trump’s return to the White House. The second term is generally when American presidents reflect most on their legacy. An important insight into how the current American president is beginning to consider his place in history is provided by Ashley Parker and Michael Scherer’s text, based on interviews with Trump associates (Parker and Scherer 2026). They note that Trump is not overly interested in legacy in the classical sense. He is a man of the moment, someone who cares much more about his historical significance being recognised while he is alive than about being celebrated *post mortem*. Thus, during the 2024 campaign, when one of his trustees pointed out to him that he should choose someone who could continue the political movement in the long term, Trump reportedly replied that he did not care because he would be dead (Parker

and Scherer 2026). This suggests that the traditional legacy, that is, the way his terms will be discussed in a hundred or more years, is not a priority for the American president. However, empowered by a major political comeback and relieved of the worry of reelection, he is increasingly beginning to see himself in the context of one of the most powerful men who ever lived, one who did things that others could not, primarily thanks to his brute force and unwavering will (Parker and Scherer 2026). Trump has almost certainly never read Hegel, but having heard of his concept of “world-historical figures”, actors of the *zeitgeist* who changed the course of human history, he no longer limits himself to the counterpart of Washington and Lincoln, but sees himself as the successor of Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Napoleon (Parker and Scherer 2026). Hegel’s immortal trio consists of “practical, political men” who, in their eras, broke norms and were accused of behaviour “subject to moral condemnation”, which the current US president is often accused of (Parker and Scherer 2026). Megalomaniac tendencies have been further strengthened by assassination attempts that Trump believes are directed only against significant figures (Parker and Scherer 2026). They have created an additional halo of untouchability, the belief that he is a man of destiny, preordained for great deeds. It goes without saying that this self-perception is a blatant example of Morgenthau’s claim about leaders intoxicated by newfound power and provides fertile ground for foreign policy adventurism.

How did this view of the American president’s own importance affect the intervention in Venezuela? Let us return to two specific instruments of prestige policy for Morgenthau. The operation in Caracas is clearly not a diplomatic ceremonial, but a demonstration of American military power. Did it serve prestige as an end in itself, or did it seek to support the policy of imperialism? As shown, Venezuela did not represent a serious stronghold for other great powers in the Western Hemisphere, nor did it threaten the regional dominance of the US, or require the reaffirmation of the Monroe Doctrine. Its natural resources or role in the illegal drug trade are also of secondary importance. After all, there are indications that Maduro himself was ready to hand over existing and future oil and gold projects to American companies, redirect oil exports from China to the US, and cancel his country’s energy and mining contracts with Russian, Chinese, and

Iranian firms (Kurmanaev, Barnes and Turkewitz 2025). This means that even these limited and largely symbolic American interests could have been achieved without intervention. All of this suggests that this is primarily an armed action for prestige's sake. Not the prestige of the US as a state, but the prestige of a president who often sees international politics as a "personal sport", a struggle for individual superiority and recognition of one's own power and value. In this context, it is possible to conceptualise American intervention in Venezuela as a form of policy of prestige, guided by the impulses of a "conceited egocentric", which is an end in itself.

CONCLUSION

Asked after the operation in Venezuela about possible limitations on his global power, Trump, bypassing not only international law but also American interests, emphasised that only his personal morality could stop him (Sanger et al. 2026). This is a picture of a highly personalised foreign policy and a leader who sees the state, among other things, as an instrument for achieving personal glory. This paper shows the importance of this component in the US president's decision to intervene in Venezuela in early 2026.

Beyond the Caracas operation, the relevance of the policy of prestige as a broader framework for interpreting US strategy in Donald Trump's second term is questionable. In this regard, several preliminary guidelines can be noted. On the one hand, at the highest level of grand strategy, structural influences retain their primacy in an international system transitioning from unquestioned unipolarity to unbalanced multipolarity. Here, traditional great power competition, especially geoeconomic competition with China, continues to dominate. On the other hand, at the level of individual foreign policy decisions or rhetoric towards allies and rivals, the prestige policy framework can provide important insights into the actions of the US president. Aren't Trump's announcements about the potential annexation of Greenland motivated, at least partially, by the desire to be the first US president in the 21st century to territorially expand the US, rather than by any real security threat? Additionally, in discussing his decision to go to war, together with Israel, against Iran, Trump stated that he did "what

no other president has had the courage to do”, presenting the attack as a demonstration of unprecedented decisive leadership (Hari 2026). The examples cited suggest that the quest for prestige is a constant feature of the US president’s foreign policy. During 2025, it was primarily focused on building an image as a peacemaker destined to be immortalised by the Nobel Peace Prize. When that failed, he sought recognition of his own greatness through a series of high-handed actions from the beginning of 2026. From the intervention in Venezuela to threats of annexation of Greenland and the war against Iran, Trump has largely subordinated US foreign policy to personal prestige, convinced of his own historic mission.

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Никола Прерадовић*

*Институт за стратегијска истраживања,
Универзитет одбране, Београд, Република Србија*

УЛОГА ЛИЧНОГ ПРЕСТИЖА У СПОЉНОПОЛИТИЧКОМ ОДЛУЧИВАЊУ ДОНАЛДА ТРАМПА НА ПРИМЕРУ ВЕНЕЦУЕЛЕ

Резиме

Овај рад пружа критичку анализу војне интервенције Сједињених Америчких Држава у Венецуели 3. јануара 2026. године, познате као операција „Апсолутна одлучност”. Основни циљ истраживања је да покаже да су традиционална објашњења усмерена на националну безбедност, економске интересе и промоцију демократских вредности недовољна да би се у потпуности објаснили обим, тајминг и симболичка природа одлуке Трампове администрације да зароби председника Николаса Мадуре. Уместо тога, студија предлаже теоријску интерпретацију засновану на класичном реализму, конкретно на концепту политике престижа Ханса Моргентхауа. Рад почиње деконструкцијом званичних оправдања која је понудила вашингтонска администрација. Прво од њих, борба против „нарко-тероризма”, оспорава се анализом података о глобалној трговини дрогом. Показује се да је улога Венецуеле у производњи и транзиту кокаина и фентанила мала у поређењу са Колумбијом или Мексиком, те да је „Картел де лос Солес” (*Cartel de los Soles*) углавном реторички конструкт који се користи за оправдање интервенције. Надаље, преиспитује се стратешки циљ обезбеђивања огромних резерви нафте у Венецуели. Студија открива да огромни трошкови модернизације руиниране венецуеланске инфраструктуре и тешка природа њене сирове нафте чине непосредну економску добит за америчке нафтне компаније илузорном. Што се тиче мотива „промене режима” и демократизације, рад истиче значајну противречност:

* Имејл адреса: nikola.preradovic@mod.gov.rs; ORCID: 0009-0007-9571-4258.

интервенција није довела до демократске транзиције нити до јачања венецуеланске опозиције. Уместо тога, Мадуро је замењен послушнијом фигуром из оквира постојећег режима, потпредседником Делси Родригез, што сугерише да је примарна брига била лојалност Вашингтону, а не институционалне реформе. Коначно, рад се бави „Трамповом допуном” Монроове доктрини. Закључује се да је, иако је администрација настојала да се супротстави руском и кинеском утицају, присуство ових сила у Венецуели било првенствено симболично и није представљало стварну војну претњу америчкој регионалној хегемонији. Основна теза рада је да се интервенција најбоље разуме као демонстрација моћи намењена афирмацији личног политичког престижа Доналда Трампа. Ослањајући се на Волцову „прву слику” међународних односа, индивидуални ниво, указује се да Трамп доживљава међународну арену као позорницу за личну валидацију и доказивање супериорности. Операција „Апсолутна одлучност” служила је као политика престижа, где војна сила није коришћена за опипљиве стратешке добитке, већ као симболички инструмент за учвршћивање Трамповог историјског наслеђа и слике одлучног глобалног лидера. У закључку, рад тврди да психолошки фактори на индивидуалном нивоу и потреба за признањем остају моћни покретачи спољне политике. Случај Венецуеле показује да у савременој ери тежња за престижом може надмашити материјалне националне интересе, водећи ка драматичним војним акцијама осмишљеним више због њиховог симболичког утицаја него због геополитичке неопходности.

Кључне речи: Доналд Трамп, САД, Венецуела, политика престижа, интервенција.

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