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## › “The Venezuela Model” and the New US Doctrine

- › The events in Venezuela following the US military intervention point to a new model for seizing and controlling natural resources with the aim to solidify geopolitical spheres of influence.
- › This model jeopardises the principles of international law and, in Venezuela, has shown that it only favours US interests over the genuine aspirations for political change.
- › This approach is a disaster that deprives its citizens of sovereignty through a neo-colonialist scheme, while simultaneously threatening regional stability by reviving military interventions in Latin America and setting a dangerous global precedent for US geopolitical interventionism.

Following the US air strikes on 3 January 2026 in Caracas, the capture of Nicolás Maduro and his wife, and the installation of a government led by his Vice-President Delcy Rodríguez, Venezuela finds itself in a new political situation characterised by the imposition of Washington’s interests on Venezuelan state affairs. This new situation is postponing the anticipated political transition, which is now subordinate to the decisions of the White House.

Since Maduro’s capture, the term ‘Venezuela model’ has been used to describe a combination of economic pressure, limited military action, negotiation with internal power structures, and subsequent political and economic tutelage, which US President Donald Trump has touted as a demonstration of strategic effectiveness, which he intends to replicate in other countries. This foreshadows a doctrine of US action that threatens international law and the principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter.

### **US unilateralism on steroids**

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One of the most significant aspects of what occurred in Venezuela was the unilateral nature of the military action. Unlike in Iraq in 2003 or in Latin American countries as Dominican Republic (1965), Grenada (1983), Panama (1989) or Haiti (1994), the White House made no effort to involve either the UN Security Council or the Organization of American States (OAS).



»» **There was no deterrent whatsoever to US action**

The US operation was preceded by threats, a naval blockade and economic sanctions, which escalated in tandem with the military deployment in the Caribbean, officially presented as part of the fight against drug trafficking.

The White House justified the operation as the execution of an arrest warrant issued by the Department of Justice against Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores, accused of drug trafficking,<sup>1</sup> an argument used to circumvent congressional authorisation for a formal declaration of war or a conventional intervention, and one that could be used.

### Unprepared or complicit?

Venezuela arrived at this juncture in a state of extreme political and economic weakness, a situation that has not changed since January. The government of Maduro, lacking in popularity and legitimacy, isolated and weakened the country to the point of turning it into a pariah – even within the region – with no influence on the international stage, not even in the oil sector. There was no *deterrent* whatsoever to US action.

Another significant aspect of the events of 3 January was the inaction of the Venezuelan armed forces. In the preceding months, Maduro had maintained a narrative centred on preparing to resist a military intervention and boasted that the army possessed air defence systems and weaponry designed for asymmetric warfare scenarios. However, there was no defensive response, and the early warning and detection systems were either deliberately switched off or failed to function.

Subsequently, the then Minister of Defence, Vladimir Padrino López, stated that he had ordered the defence forces, including *Sukhoi* fighter jets, not to respond, due to “US superiority”.<sup>2</sup>

There are statements, such as that of the Russian Ambassador to the UN, Vasili Nebenzia,<sup>3</sup> and those by Trump and the head of the CIA John Ratcliffe at Mar-a-Lago on 3 January itself,<sup>4</sup> stating that the military operation had the complicity and consent of key elements of the Venezuelan government.

Following Maduro’s capture, a government was installed headed by then Vice-President Rodríguez, accompanied by Jorge Rodríguez (her brother) and Diosdado Cabello, all of whom were senior leaders in Maduro’s government. Although it was presented as a provisional administration intended to lead a transition, the government kept the same structure intact.

<sup>1</sup> US Department of State, *Secretary of State Marco Rubio with Kristen Welker of NBC’s Meet the Press*, 4 January 2026, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/01/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-with-kristen-welker-of-nbcs-meet-the-press>.

<sup>2</sup> “Padrino López Admits It Was Unfeasible to Use Aircraft against US Military Operation” (in Spanish), in *El Nacional*, 5 February 2026, <https://www.elnacional.com/?p=2876673>.

<sup>3</sup> “Russia: ‘Some Senior Officials in Venezuela Have Betrayed Maduro’” (in Spanish), in *El Nacional*, 30 January 2026, <https://www.elnacional.com/?p=2872821>.

<sup>4</sup> White House, “President Trump Holds a Press Conference” (video), in *YouTube*, 3 January 2026, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsdKCLL2\\_bg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsdKCLL2_bg).



»» **The new Hydrocarbons Law took Venezuela back to the concessionary period of the early 20th century**

## US-run Venezuela

President Trump declared, hours after the military intervention, that “he himself would run Venezuela” and that he would take control of its oil.<sup>5</sup> Secretary of State Marco Rubio announced that the “transition” would follow three phases: “*stabilisation, recovery and transition*”.<sup>6</sup>

Since then, a period of direct subordination of Caracas to Washington has begun. Senior US officials are visiting Venezuela to oversee matters relating to energy, security, the economy and even the military. The transitional government accepted this relationship of tutelage, despite the anti-imperialist rhetoric in which they promised to turn Venezuela into “another Vietnam” for the US.<sup>7</sup>

Oil has been the United States’ priority; Venezuela possesses the world’s largest reserves, as well as significant strategic mineral resources.

On 29 January, the interim government approved – in a single day – a new Hydrocarbons Law,<sup>8</sup> drafted by US oil corporations. US Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum stated that the Venezuelan authorities not only accepted all the demands made by the United States without any problem, but even offered to do so before being asked.<sup>9</sup>

The new law violates the constitutional provisions reserving oil activities for the Venezuelan state and repeals nationalisations, including the laws of 1975, 2002 and 2006. In a single stroke, it wiped out the historic achievements of Venezuela, a founding member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and took the country back to the concessionary period of the early 20th century, with the privatisation of oil and the dismantling of the tax regime, rates and oil royalties.

The White House has been governing the oil sector through the issuance of licences by the powerful Office for Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) within the Treasury Department. OFAC authorises US companies to carry out oil operations in Venezuela, whereby all contracts must be drawn up under US laws and jurisdiction, in a process that is entirely discretionary and lacking in transparency.

On 9 January, Trump issued an executive order establishing the ‘*Foreign Government Deposit Fund*’,<sup>10</sup> into which revenues from Venezuelan oil sales are deposited; initially, were deposited in an account in Qatar to avoid the country’s

<sup>5</sup> CNN, “Trump Says ‘We’re Going to Run’ Venezuela” (video), in *YouTube*, 3 January 2026, <https://youtu.be/pA48gVurn4A>.

<sup>6</sup> Phillips, Morgan et al., “Rubio Lays Out Three-Phase Plan for Venezuela after Maduro: ‘Not Just Winging It’”, in *Fox News*, 7 January 2026, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/rubio-lays-out-three-phase-plan-venezuela-after-maduro-not-just-winging-it>.

<sup>7</sup> “Cabello Warns that if the US Invades Venezuela ‘We Will Be Another Vietnam’” (in Spanish), in *Efecto Cocuyo*, 5 July 2018, <https://efectococuyo.com/?p=69664>.

<sup>8</sup> Venezuela, “Reform of the Organic Law on Hydrocarbons” (in Spanish), in *Gaceta Oficial de la República Bolivariana de Venezuela*, 29 January 2026, <http://www.gacetaoficial.gob.ve/storage/2026/6978-2026-01-29-EXTRAORDINARIA.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> CNBC, “Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum speaks at CERWeek” (video), in *YouTube*, 25 March 2026, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkM4TyEfNw4>.

<sup>10</sup> White House, *Safeguarding Venezuelan Oil Revenue for the Good of the American and Venezuelan People*, 9 January 2026, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2026/01/safeguarding-venezuelan-oil-revenue-for-the-good-of-the-american-and-venezuelan-people>.



»» *The ‘Venezuela model’ has as its central element US economic interests and control over the country’s vast natural resources*

creditors; later, they were transferred to accounts in the US administered by the State Department. The Fund constitutes a confiscation of Venezuelan oil exports and a violation of sovereignty, an illegal action that has even been questioned by members of the US Congress.

The precedent for this mechanism is the “Development Fund for Iraq”, created by UN Security Council Resolution 1483 following the 2003 US invasion. This fund is still held in US Treasury accounts that, 23 years later, continues to function as a mechanism for US administration of Iraq’s oil wealth.

At the start of the year, following an order from President Trump,<sup>11</sup> US companies removed 30 million barrels of oil that had been stored on Venezuelan since the United States imposed its blockade in December 2025.

By April 2026, more than 110 million barrels of Venezuelan oil had been exported, and all those revenues have gone into the fund created by the White House. To date, nothing is known about its management or how much of it has been returned to the country.

Similarly, on 9 April, the Mining Act was amended, with US authorities declaring their interest in gaining control of Venezuela’s vast reserves of gold, rare minerals, coltan and even uranium. OFAC issued licenses under the same conditions as for the oil sector, and the proceeds from the sale of minerals also go into the Fund created by the White House.

Thus, the ‘Venezuela model’ has as its central element US economic interests and control over the country’s vast natural resources.

## Pretence of independence

At the national level, the transitional government announced measures designed to project an image of openness. These included an Amnesty Law administered by the judges and government officials themselves.<sup>12</sup> Human rights organisations reported significant limitations in the application of the law and that the judicial structures and security forces responsible for human rights violations remain intact.

Similarly, due to US pressure and as part of an internal realignment of power, some officials from Maduro’s government were removed from their posts, including former prosecutor Tareck Williams Saab, accused of crimes against humanity<sup>13</sup> and the powerful former minister Álex Saab, who was handed over to US authorities, accused of multiple offences.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Maher, Kit et al., “Trump Says Venezuela Will Hand over 30 million to 50 million Barrels of Oil to the US”, in *CNN*, 7 January 2026, <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/01/06/business/venezuela-turning-over-oil-trump>.

<sup>12</sup> Venezuela National Assembly, *Amnesty Law for Democratic Coexistence* (in Spanish), 19 February 2026, <https://www.asambleanacional.gob.ve/storage/documentos/botones/ley-de-amnistia-2026-20260223000136.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> See reports from 2021 to 2025 in the UN Human Rights Council website: *Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/ffmv/index>.

<sup>14</sup> US Department of Justice, *Homeland Security Task Force Arrests Maduro Regime Ally Alex Saab on Money Laundering Charges Involving Venezuelan Food Contracts and Oil*, 18 May 2026, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/maduro-regime-ally-alex-saab-arrested-money-laundering-charges-involving-venezuelan-food>.



## »» *The interim government lacks legitimacy*

The interim government lacks legitimacy; Rodríguez was Vice-President under Maduro, an unlawful government resulting from the massive electoral fraud of 2024. Nevertheless, the old-new regime has violated national sovereignty, changed laws and handed over natural resources to the United States.

President Trump asserts that Venezuela will be “the 51st state of the Union” and boasts of making a “fortune” from Venezuelan oil,<sup>15</sup> which highlights the geopolitical and economic objective of the operation in Venezuela.

In Trump’s speeches, there is constant reference to the ‘Venezuela model’ as the ‘ideal’, his aspiration in other geopolitical scenarios, taking it for granted that any military intervention will lead to a situation like that in Venezuela.

But the Venezuelan people continue to await a political transition to overcome the severe economic and social crisis of the last ten years. The country has no control over its own political process, something which would be determined by the manner in which Maduro’s departure was to take place.<sup>16</sup>

The Venezuelan Constitution sets out specific mechanisms for calling presidential elections within ninety days in the event of the president’s permanent absence,<sup>17</sup> and for legitimising state institutions. However, US authorities stated that their priority was the country’s ‘economic stabilisation’ rather than the holding of national elections,<sup>18</sup> whilst the transitional government seeks to consolidate its own position.

Whilst it is true that, in order to hold elections, the judicial authorities and the electoral body must be renewed – a process requiring a working schedule spanning several months – it is also true that, if an election date is not announced, the Venezuelan transition remains in the ‘limbo’ of US needs and priorities.

## **A model for neo-colonial disaster**

The Venezuelan economy continues to deteriorate. Rodríguez is failing to meet the population’s expectations and is losing the support of military and civilian members of the previous government. Whilst rejection of the government grows amongst the public, its mechanisms of social and political control remain intact.

Thus, the ‘Venezuelan model’ is a disaster for Venezuelans, not only because it entails the appropriation of their natural resources, but also because it deprives the people of the chance to decide their destiny in a sovereign manner, imposing a neo-colonialist scheme on the country.

<sup>15</sup> Carrillo, Rubén, “Donald Trump Says the United States Made a Fortune from Venezuelan Oil” (in Spanish), in *El Pitazo*, 16 May 2026, <https://elpitazo.net/?p=499086>.

<sup>16</sup> Ramírez, Rafael, “Venezuela: What Transition Ahead?”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 25 | 63 (December 2025), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/21225>.

<sup>17</sup> See Article 233, in Venezuela, *Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*, 1999, <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/ven127787E.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> US Department of State, *Secretary of State Marco Rubio with Sean Hannity of Fox News Channel*, 13 May 2026, <https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2026/05/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-with-sean-hannity-of-fox-news-channel>.



**>> The ‘Venezuelan model’, a disaster for Venezuelans, is particularly dangerous for Latin America**

This model of action is particularly dangerous for Latin America, because it reinforces the new “Donroe Doctrine”,<sup>19</sup> which sets the region back to the era of military interventions and the imposition of dictatorships or puppet governments of the 20th century. But it is also dangerous for the rest of the world, as it establishes a precedent for an interventionist approach, involving military conflicts, which could affect anyone on the US radar of priorities as it redefines new geopolitical spaces, as happened in Iran and could happen in Cuba.

But realities around the world are so diverse, each with its own political dynamics, military capabilities, international alliances and regional contexts, that an automatic replication of a similar pattern is unlikely.

The ‘Venezuela model’ has become a topic of debate regarding sovereignty, international intervention, natural resources and political transition. Beyond ideological positions, the case raises important questions about the limits of international action, the role of the major powers, the challenges faced by states in contexts of deep crisis, and the validity of the principles of international law.

<sup>19</sup> Aydıntaşbaş, Aslı and Chris Herrmann, “Venezuela, Trump’s ‘Donroe Doctrine’ and Three Dilemmas Facing Europe”, in *ECFR Commentaries*, 4 January 2026, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=147737>.

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