

Some reactions to the US military attack on Venezuela, detention of Maduro, plans outlined by Trump and other US officials at the subsequent news conference, and US media coverage.

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Overall take: The US military operation undertaken in Venezuela was a brazen violation of international law and clearly aimed at regime change. The detention of Maduro was a virtual kidnapping. Maduro was widely unpopular, responsible for serious human rights violations, and involved in corruption, but Venezuela was not a “failed state. He was not the “kingpin” of a major drug trafficking operation; never emptied the country’s prisons and sanitariums of flood the US with criminals; and retained the support of a considerable minority of Venezuelans. The US operation has major destabilizing repercussions for the hemisphere and international system; the Trump regime has indicated it is prepared to act similarly against other governments that refuse to accept American regional and global hegemony. This was made clear in the news conference on Sunday, January 3. The major and most surprising features of that conference were (1) the open announcement that the United States was prepared to “run the country” for the near future; (2) that American oil companies would be sent to Venezuela to take control over its oil fields; (3) that Maria Corina Machado, the hard-right opposition leader, was not to be involved in plans to run the country.

“Running the Country”: On the one hand, if Corina Machado is to be frozen out, that reduces the threat of a far-right government launching a major purge of all loyalists to *chavismo*, many of whom are not necessarily supporters of Maduro. Machado’s support for sanctions and military intervention played badly within Venezuela. There are sectors of the opposition forces who will welcome her exclusion. However, it will not be so easy a task to relegate her to the sidelines. She has already alerted her supporters to be ready to take some kind of action, apparently pre-planned before her flight from the country. This may complicate American plans. Trump made a favorable comment about Delcy Rodriguez, the foreign minister, who, under the Bolivarian Constitution, has succeeded to the presidency. He seemed to think that Rodriguez would cooperate in running the country. This turned out to be wishful thinking

Trump’s mention that US forces may have to be deployed to protect US control of Venezuela’s oil fields (see below), his vague references to do whatever is needed to hold

the country together and to suppress resistance, and his references to the military's readiness to launch a second wave operation all add up to the possibility of occupation—which could very well bring about the return of the word “quagmire” to our vocabulary, little heard since Vietnam. Remember, “We do deserts, not jungles.”

It's not all about oil, but it's about oil: While Trump and Secretary of State Marco Rubio have spoken of sending US oil companies in to resume production, I think the companies will move cautiously. The foreign oil companies in Venezuela much prefer in my view, to work as associates of the state company, Petroléos de Venezuela (PdV). This gives them political cover for their profitable extraction of the country's national resources. extraction. Under the “oil opening” of the 1990s, the major oil companies extracted oil under fiscal terms worse for Venezuela than they were before nationalization.

Numerous Venezuelan executives and professionals left the country after Chávez fired them for trying to bring him from office by shutting down PdV for three months in December 2002. The American oil companies or a compliant government could bring them back.

What is often called the “re-nationalization” or “expropriation” of oil in Venezuela refers to the Chavez government requiring the companies to migrate, with compensation for their assets, to new association agreements that complied with the nationalization law of 1974. During the “oil opening”, PdV executives forged deals in violation of the law requiring that the state company had to have majority ownership and control. This migration was imposed on both American and other foreign companies, including the Chinese. Venezuela also exercised its sovereign right of taxation to increase its take of profits during the boom years in the 2000s, while still leaving the companies with healthy profits typical of those of other industries.

When US officials speak of how the oil industry was “stolen,” we need to remember that the nationalization of 1974 was negotiated with the three major foreign companies. The companies were well-compensated and highly receptive to nationalization because their major concessions were going to expire by 1983.

The oil fields are spread out across two regions: Lake Maracaibo in the west and the Orinoco River region in the east. In addition, Venezuela has troves of valuable natural resources that undoubtedly will attract the attention of Trump and the conservative oligarchs who are a base of his political support. The Trump family may find new opportunities to extort investors in various mining enterprises.

Hemispheric implications and response: As recently as 2020, I would have predicted a unified response condemning the intervention throughout the region, but now there are likely to be more divisions among countries in the region. Venezuela's neighbors, Brazil and

Colombia, have responded with harsh criticism, and Mexico will likely join them. All are currently led by center-left presidents. However, the swing to the right in several other countries, including Argentina and Chile, has been abetted by the support of Trump and MAGA elites. These countries will be somewhat of a counterweight. On the other hand, the tenor of Trump's morning press conference had to alarm large parts of the population throughout the region, complicating the political situation for the right. This is something to watch in the coming weeks.

International implications and response: Russia will have to make a major decision on whether it will use its military and technological assets to help defend Cuba, surely the most important domino in the mind of Secretary of State Rubio and the MAGA base in Florida. Russia may also take the US action as further justification for the War in Ukraine. China, as indicated above, has a large financial stake in what follows because so much of its loans are to be paid back in oil deliveries. Europe collectively has been slow to speak clearly about the invasions; the Iberian countries, for obvious reasons, are the ones most likely to seek some sort of mediation. Efforts will have little success until and unless resistance in Venezuela forces the Trump regime to look for an exit.

Implications for the U.S.: What should be especially disturbing to (US) Americans is the way Trump has linked the (apparently) successful military intervention to the deployment of the military in urban USA. His invocation of "narcoterrorism" as a national security threat takes us one large step closer to the militarization of domestic security. These kinds of interventions have always in the past generated a blowback into domestic politics.

The indictment of Maduro and others

The first part of the indictment reads like a rehash of broad and general claims made about corruption and claims about Venezuelan involvement in drug trafficking going back as far as 1999. Specific allegations go back to 2008, with the bulk of charges referring to the Maduro era. If the cases ever go to trial (and they most likely will), the outcome may turn on the more on the reliability of specific claims of recorded interactions among Maduro, those included in trafficking schemes, and the credibility of testimony from other actors, many of whom likely will have cut a deal of some sort with the prosecution.

To the extent that the evidence and testimony are credible, it would seem to implicate Maduro as a knowledgeable actor and, at times, himself involved in specific conspiracies to traffic cocaine. Some of the allegations reference tons of cocaine, but are still far short of claims made by Trump officials. Of more than passing interest is the claim that some trafficking was organized or approved by Maduro to generate money needed for political campaigns. The indictment does not include allegations of trafficking in fentanyl. The

indictment certainly does not justify characterizing Venezuela as a “narcostate” or as engaged in “narcoterrorism.” It certainly does not amount justify a military invasion or kidnapping of the Venezuelan president.