

*Great powers do not have neighbours,
they have spheres of influence.*
Henry Kissinger

Introduction

The current military escalation driven by President Donald Trump in northern South America marks a new turning point in US hemispheric security policy and raises scenarios of tension that, although still limited, could evolve into broader confrontations. Although the offensive is mainly directed against the government of Nicolás Maduro, recent events show that its scope has also extended to Colombia, where political and military pressure on President Gustavo Petro has intensified amid a discourse focused on drug trafficking and regional security. In this context, recent attacks on alleged *drug boats* in waters near the Venezuelan and Colombian coasts, together with reports of covert intelligence operations on Venezuelan territory, have generated a sense of geopolitical alertness and strategic uncertainty throughout the region¹.

Recent incidents in the Caribbean and the Pacific also show a trend towards the progressive militarisation of Washington's rhetoric and foreign policy in the hemisphere. Naval movements, statements by the Southern Command and leaks about the authorisation of covert operations by the CIA on Venezuelan territory² indicate that the line between interdiction and direct intervention has become blurred. In this scenario, the traditional lines of cooperation and prevention between the United States and Colombia are also undergoing transformations, with a growing component of surveillance, pressure, and political questioning of Petro's government, accused by some sectors in the United States of "softness" towards armed groups and criminal networks.

From a geopolitical point of view, the northern region of South America has become an area of friction between conflicting narratives: while Washington reactivates the logic of hemispheric security—continuing the old paradigm of the "war on drugs" and the "defence

¹ DW. "Milestones in Trump's military escalation against Maduro." 24/10/25. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/es/lo-que-hay-que-saber-sobre-la-escalada-militar-de-trump-contra-el-r%C3%A9gimen-de-maduro/a-74489052>

Note: All hyperlinks in this article are active as of 30 October 2025.

² THE NEW YORK TIMES. "CIA operations in Venezuela intensify as tensions with Washington rise" [international edition]. 22/10/25. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2025/10/15/espanol/estados-unidos/trump-cia-venezuela.html>

of democracy"—Caracas and Bogotá are presenting discourses aimed at distancing themselves from that model, demanding greater political autonomy and sovereign control over their own security agendas. However, the balance of power remains deeply asymmetrical, and the United States' ability to combine diplomatic pressure, sanctions and forceful action continues to have a decisive influence on the course of events.



Figure 1. Presidents Maduro, Petro and Trump.

Source: Globovisión and own elaboration.

Both scenarios—open confrontation and contained pressure—form part of the same regional framework in which Washington seeks to reaffirm its strategic influence and send a deterrent signal to both local actors and its global competitors. The coincidence in timing between the maritime incidents, reports of covert operations and growing security rhetoric suggests that the United States is moving towards a dual control strategy, combining direct actions against Venezuela with geopolitical warnings to Colombia in an attempt to reorder the balance of power in northern South America.

The current escalation must also be interpreted in light of a reconfiguration of the international system. Venezuela's alignment with extra-regional actors such as Russia, China, and Iran not only provides it with room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis Washington but also introduces an element of geostrategic competition in the Western Hemisphere³. At the same time, Colombia's relationship with the United States, although formally solid, faces tensions arising from the redefinition of the White House's global priorities and

³ REUTERS. "Russia condemns US strike on alleged drug vessel near Venezuela." 5/10/2025. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/russia-condemns-us-strike-alleged-drug-vessel-near-venezuela-2025-10-05/>

changes in Colombian domestic policy. The coexistence of these two scenarios—one of open confrontation and the other of contained friction—creates a kind of geopolitical pincer in which both countries, for different reasons, have placed themselves at the centre of US power politics.

Thus, what emerges is not an isolated series of incidents, but an articulated regional strategy in which pressure on Venezuela and control over Colombia act as complementary mechanisms of the same logic of containment. The use of anti-narcotics rhetoric as a legitimising framework, the expansion of US military presence in the Caribbean and the Pacific, and the reappearance of covert practices are reminiscent of dynamics from other moments of hemispheric confrontation, albeit adapted to a more competitive and multipolar international environment.

In this context, this document seeks to offer an in-depth analysis of the evolution of this escalation, addressing its political, military, and symbolic dimensions. We start from the premise that recent events reflect not only temporary tensions, but also a process of structural reconfiguration of the US presence in Latin America, with direct implications for the sovereignty of states, regional stability and security governance on the continent.

Structural background

The current military escalation in northern South America cannot be understood without placing it in the historical context of US policy towards Venezuela and Colombia over the last two decades. Since the 2000s, the White House has oscillated between diplomatic containment and coercive pressure, alternating between strategies of cooperation and confrontation depending on the internal political cycles in both countries and Washington's global strategic interests.

In Venezuela, Donald Trump's first administration (2017-2021) applied the so-called "maximum pressure" policy, which consisted mainly of economic and financial sanctions, as well as explicit support for the opposition led by Juan Guaidó, aimed at weakening Nicolás Maduro's regime. These measures included a ban on transactions with Petróleos de Venezuela S.A. (PDVSA); the freezing of state and personal assets; and sanctions

against senior officials and strategic allies, with the stated aim of restricting the regime's resources to sustain its political and military control⁴.

The official purpose was to pressure the Venezuelan government to accept significant political reforms or to facilitate a democratic transition. Nevertheless, those sanctions had a high humanitarian cost in a country already struck by scarcity, hyperinflation, and mass migration.

When Joe Biden took office, the US administration maintained pressure but introduced tactical and diplomatic adjustments. Sanctions remained in place, but with political caution and through more targeted mechanisms. At the same time, efforts were made to reposition the United States in the region through multilateral approaches, dialogues with the European Union, and a more circumspect management of the Venezuelan crisis⁵. Even so, the presence and influence of actors such as Russia, China, and Iran in Venezuela continued to consolidate during those years, which limited Washington's ability to completely isolate the regime⁶.

By contrast, relations with Colombia have followed a more consistent pattern of strategic cooperation, though not without tensions. Since the beginning of Plan Colombia in the 2000s, the United States sought structural influence: providing military assistance, training, surveillance technology, and intelligence support to combat drug trafficking and insurgent groups⁷. This cooperation created a relationship of strategic dependence on the United States within the Colombian security apparatus, which was reinforced during successive administrations. Under Trump's first term, this cooperation remained largely unchanged, focusing on security and drug interdiction. However, Gustavo Petro's arrival as Colombian president in 2022 introduced a notable change: his strategy of negotiating with armed groups and implementing the "Total Peace" programme generated mistrust in Washington and led to an adjustment in US policy towards Bogotá, moving from direct cooperation to a more monitored and conditional relationship⁸.

⁴ "Venezuela: Overview of US Sanctions Policy, Congressional Research Service," 4/6/25. Available at: https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF10715/IF10715.54.pdf

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ POMPA GUEVARA, B. E. and ALMEYDA BAZAN, J. C. "Notes on the Biden administration's policy towards the Caribbean: impact on inter-American relations", *Revista Política Internacional*, vol. VII, no. 2. April-June, 2025.

⁷ CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE. Colombia: Background and US Relations. 30/5/25. Available at: https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R48287/R48287.4.pdf

⁸ CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES. Colombia... *op. cit.*

The regional framework helped shape both bilateral relationships. In recent years, the Lima Group⁹, created to coordinate diplomatic pressure against the Maduro government, and the Organisation of American States (OAS) played a substantial role in earlier phases, but over time their operational and cohesive capacity was eroded by differences of interest among member countries and by resistance from the Venezuelan regime. This reconfiguration of the multilateral space reduced the scope for independent diplomatic action by countries in the region, reinforcing US influence and consolidating the role of the United States Southern Command as a central actor in the planning and execution of control and deterrence strategies, making it a key factor in Washington's military and intelligence projection in the hemisphere. This implied a redefinition of the regional diplomatic space, with less room for Latin American states to act with full autonomy.

Finally, during this period, the first signs of convergence between the Venezuelan and Colombian theatres began to emerge. Although policies towards each country responded to different logics—coercion and pressure in Venezuela, conditional cooperation in Colombia—US decisions began to consider both scenarios simultaneously, anticipating that Colombia's stability was linked to the dynamics in Venezuela and that pressure on Caracas could have repercussions in Bogotá. This was not a complete merger of policies, but rather a cross- y approach to specific issues: maritime drug trafficking, maritime security, the use of sea routes between the two countries, and the vulnerability of coastal areas to illicit transit were increasingly addressed in US discourse and operations. This early interrelation between the two countries shaped a structural framework that allows us to understand the subsequent escalation, the coordination of US rhetoric and operations, and the construction of what some analysts have called the 'Venezuela effect' on Colombia.

The current escalation: between the Caribbean and the Pacific

Since late August 2025, US foreign policy towards Venezuela has entered a phase of operational intensification that goes beyond the mere imposition of economic sanctions, marking a concrete expansion of the theatre of operations from the Caribbean to the

⁹ Comprising Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, and Peru. Guyana, Haiti, and Saint Lucia joined later. Bolivia joined after the political crisis of 2019. It was also endorsed by Barbados, the United States, Grenada, and Jamaica.

Pacific. In recent months, US policy towards Venezuela has evolved from a predominantly sanctions-based strategy to an active phase of maritime confrontation, with actions expanding to the Colombian Pacific coast, pointing to an increase in the operational presence of the United States in the hemisphere.

In this new stage, Washington has mobilised military resources, activated offensive intelligence mandates and reinforced its anti-narcotics narrative to justify a strategy that combines elements of maritime warfare, deterrence and diplomatic pressure¹⁰. It should be recalled that, back in February of this year, the Trump administration designated Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel, Venezuela's Tren de Aragua, and other groups as foreign terrorist organisations. More recently, the designation of the Cartel de los Soles as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) by the US Treasury Department in July 2025 marks a significant shift in foreign policy towards Venezuela. This measure, covered by Executive Order 13224, allows the US Executive to activate direct action mechanisms without the need for legislative approval, under the argument of fighting international terrorism¹¹. The fact that this organisation is allegedly led, according to Washington, by Nicolás Maduro himself and senior figures of the chavista regime reinforces the narrative that the Venezuelan state operates as a transnational criminal actor.¹²

This strategic shift has materialised, first of all, in the execution — as acknowledged by US authorities — of at least seven attacks on vessels suspected of drug trafficking in waters near Venezuela, with an estimated toll of more than thirty deaths, and with confirmation that at least one of those attacks occurred outside the Caribbean, in Pacific waters, evidencing the intention to extend pressure to new maritime zones. In one of the most striking incidents, a recent attack carried out by the US Navy left six dead off the Venezuelan coast — an event presented by Trump and the Pentagon as part of their anti-narcotics campaign.

At the same time, attacks have been confirmed in the Pacific basin. On the morning of 22 October, the US Armed Forces reported that they had struck two vessels in eastern

¹⁰ REUTERS. "How many US strikes on boats near Venezuela have there been?" 22/10/25. Available at:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/how-many-us-strikes-boats-near-venezuela-have-there-been-2025-10-17/>

¹¹ US DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY. *Treasury Sanctions Venezuelan Cartel Headed by Maduro*. 25/2025.

Available at: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0207>

¹² DIARIO LAS AMÉRICAS. "The Cartel of the Suns: From cocaine network to terrorist organisation." 29/7/2025.

Available at: <https://www.diariolasamericas.com/america-latina/el-cartel-los-soles-red-cocaina-organizacion-terrorista-n5379920>

Pacific waters, killing five alleged drug traffickers, marking the first verified expansion of the offensive into the ocean controlled by Colombia¹³.¹⁴ That operation was presented as a continuation of the effort initiated in the Caribbean and was publicly justified by Defence Secretary Marco Rubio as a necessary action to intercept emerging illicit routes. The contrast is clear: what was originally proposed as a strategy focused on the Caribbean has mutated into a broader maritime campaign, with possibly interconnected objectives between Venezuela and Colombia.

This shift is reinforced by the explicit authorisation of covert intelligence operations in Venezuelan territory, particularly to identify and neutralise maritime drug trafficking routes and to participate in joint operations with the United States Southern Command and special forces¹⁵, a decision that turns the campaign into a hybrid effort combining lethal force with clandestine actions. In October, official US sources confirmed that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had an expanded mandate to operate against Maduro regime targets from coastal or maritime bases, with authorisation to take direct action when necessary.

At the same time, the United States is escalating its naval presence in the region: the latest order includes the deployment of the USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier group, reinforcing the presence of the Iwo Jima Amphibious Group already operating in the Caribbean, as well as several destroyers and cruisers.¹⁶

¹³ REUTERS "US strike against alleged drug vessel in Caribbean kills six, Pentagon says." 24/10/2025. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-strike-against-alleged-drug-vessel-caribbean-kills-six-pentagon-says-2025-10-24/>

¹⁴ CNN. "US strikes two vessels in the Pacific in apparent expansion of its campaign against alleged drug traffickers." 23/10/25. Available at: <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2025/10/22/eeuu/eeuu-ataca-embarcacion-pacifico-trax>

¹⁵ REUTERS. "US strike...", *op. cit.*

¹⁶ USNI News. *Fleet and Marine Tracker*, 27/10/25. Available at: <https://news.usni.org/2025/10/27/usni-news-fleet-and-marine-tracker-oct-27-2025>



Figure 2. Left: USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN 78). Right: USS IWO JIMA

Source: Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Jacob [Mattingly/https://www.dvidshub.net/about/copyright](https://www.dvidshub.net/about/copyright)

This crossover between intelligence and military action indicates that the line between 'interdiction' and 'intervention' is becoming increasingly blurred, implying a qualitative shift from the traditional logic of the 'war on drugs', that is, a transition is underway towards a hybrid warfare model in the maritime domain, where elements of deterrence, selective attack and permanent military presence coexist under an anti-narcotics umbrella.

The actors involved in this escalation are not limited to the Washington executive branch.

The White House defines the political and communicative orientation of the strategy, using anti-narcotics rhetoric as a legitimising framework, but the execution falls mainly to the Pentagon and the Southern Command, which are responsible for naval and air deployments in the Caribbean and Pacific maritime corridors. The State Department manages the diplomatic implications with regional allies, while the CIA, under special authorisation, conducts covert intelligence operations in support of the campaign. Taken together, these actions reflect inter-agency coordination that combines military deterrence, diplomatic pressure and clandestine operations under the direct supervision of the White House.

At the same time, the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (FANB) has responded by mobilising up to 25,000 military personnel and increasing its coastal deployment in border states such as Zulia, Sucre, Delta Amacuro and Nueva Esparta, in a logic of preventive

defence and symbolic projection of resistance against what it considers external aggression¹⁷. It has also reinforced coastal surveillance systems, radar towers and anti-ship batteries, while the government of Nicolás Maduro has formally denounced US operations before the UN Security Council, requesting that attacks in international waters be declared illegal.

For its part, Colombia emerges in this scenario not only as a spectator but also as an indirect actor in the escalation. Official US rhetoric has begun to weave connections between Venezuelan maritime incidents and trafficking routes that could also be used in the Colombian Pacific. President Trump has made public accusations against Bogotá, warning that it is "not doing enough" to control the Pacific coastal routes that could feed illicit networks. Although Colombia remains formally allied with the US, these statements strain the relationship and project onto its territory the maritime pressure that was first concentrated in Venezuelan waters, in a context of strategic relief.

¹⁸In turn, President Gustavo Petro has accused Washington of carrying out "assassinations" on Pacific vessels that could have affected Colombian citizens, and has called for greater respect for sovereignty, as well as the restoration of the Colombian state's role in patrolling its coasts. In a significant episode, ELN forces denied having operated any of the attacked vessels, contradicting statements by the Pentagon attributing the operations to that Colombian guerrilla group¹⁹. Apart from its direct role in combat, Colombia has been the target of recent US sanctions: the Trump administration sanctioned the Colombian president, accusing him of tolerating the growth of drug trafficking within his administration, which increases bilateral political tension.

Although Bogotá maintains cooperation agreements, the rhetoric has shifted towards a tone of warning and diplomatic confrontation, complicating the alliance between the two countries.

¹⁷ REUTERS. "Venezuela to boost troops to tackle drug trafficking as US strengthens military in Caribbean". 8/10/25. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/venezuela-boost-troops-tackle-drug-trafficking-us-strengthens-military-caribbean-2025-09-08/>

¹⁸ THE GUARDIAN. "Colombia urges US to halt strikes on alleged drug-smuggling boats: 'It is murder'." 23/10/25. Available at: <https://the-guardian.livejournal.com/236713582.html>

¹⁹ US NEWS. "Colombia ELN Rebels Deny Any Involvement With Alleged Drug Boat Destroyed by US." 21/10/25. Available at: <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2025-10-21/colombia-eln-rebels-deny-any-involvement-with-alleged-drug-boat-destroyed-by-u-s>

The narrative coherence of the escalation is reinforced by aggressive presidential statements: in public speeches, Trump has directly linked drug trafficking to threats to hemispheric security, assuring that "those boats will be stopped" and even alluding to the use of submersibles or speedboats as part of illicit routes²⁰. Such assertions legitimise the military campaign by placing it in a framework of urgency and defence, but they also complicate legal and diplomatic lines with neighbouring countries that do not necessarily share the US approach.

This set of events—attacks in the Caribbean and the Pacific, military deployments, expansion of covert mandates, punitive rhetoric, and sanctions against Colombia—constitutes a moment of multidimensional escalation. What we are seeing is not simply an increase in bilateral tension between the United States and Venezuela, but rather the consolidation of an expanded maritime corridor that crosses both coasts, projecting pressure and its consequences onto Colombia and the regional security architecture as a whole.

All this forms a map of military escalation in which the Caribbean acts as the initial focus and pressure is projected towards the Pacific, transforming the Venezuelan scenario into an expanded maritime control space. The convergence of these actions with pressure on Colombia and the use of anti-drug rhetoric as a form of legitimisation suggest that what began as a policy towards Venezuela has become a regional strategy for the United States, with the capacity to reopen latent conflicts.

Conflict as an expression of strategy and the limits of confrontation

Taking into account what has been discussed so far, it could well be argued that what is happening in northern South America is part of a strategic reorganisation rather than a sequence of isolated incidents: what we are observing is the convergence of a renewed US policy of naval force projection and intelligence operations, with a strategy of support from extra-regional allies, and with a regional political and military reaction that transforms a security conflict into a geopolitical dispute of hemispheric scope. This growing tension

²⁰ REUTERS. "Trump warns of 'very serious action' against Colombia, defends strikes on vessels." 22/10/25. Available at: <https://www.reutersconnect.com/item/trump-warns-of-very-serious-action-against-colombia-defends-strikes-on-vessels/dGFnOnJdXRicnMuY29tLDIwMjU6bmV3c21sX1ZBNTk3NjlyMTAyMDI1UIAx>

between the United States, Venezuela and, to a lesser extent, Colombia, has taken on a dimension that transcends the operational or circumstantial.

In a matter of weeks, the region has become part of dynamics of containment that is reminiscent of the Cold War. Washington seems determined to reaffirm its role as arbiter of continental security, while Caracas seeks to consolidate a resistance front supported by its extra-regional allies. Between these two poles, Colombia has become an ambiguous terrain, caught between its historical cooperation with the United States and its political will to differentiate itself from its tutelage.

The Trump administration has made the "iron fist" rhetoric a tool for global repositioning. In the case of South America, the logic could be twofold: to contain the influence of Russia, China and Iran—which have found a political and logistical partner in Venezuela—and to demonstrate military projection capabilities to a domestic public that associates drug trafficking control with the defence of order.

Under this premise, although the US deployment has been presented as a "routine maritime security operation," the Pentagon hints at a broader purpose: to deter adversaries from challenging US influence in its immediate maritime border²¹.

Caracas' response has been immediate and symbolically significant, not limited to diplomatic denunciation. The decision to suspend energy agreements with Trinidad and Tobago—which allowed for joint exploitation of the Dragon gas field—was the first concrete gesture of a policy that associates military pressure with an attempt at a "covert economic blockade"²². In a televised speech, Nicolás Maduro warned that "there will be no energy cooperation with countries that endorse naval manoeuvres by foreign powers," directly linking military tension with the energy front. This move introduces a geo-economic dimension to the crisis: Venezuela is using its supply capacity as an instrument of sovereignty, while Washington interprets the suspension as a challenge to the regional order.

²¹ REUTERS. "US to escalate military presence in South America with aircraft carrier group." 24/10/25. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/us-military-deploy-aircraft-carrier-south-america-amid-soaring-tensions-with-2025-10-24/>

²² FINANCIAL TIMES. "Venezuela suspends Trinidad gas deals over US military build-up." 28/10/25. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/8d42900e-6bb2-430e-9495-34f7dc138832>

In the official Venezuelan narrative, the escalation is not a bilateral conflict but a re-enactment of the historic confrontation between Latin America and the imperial powers. This narrative finds an echo among its allies — Cuba, Russia, Iran, and China — who have expressed political support and, in some cases, technical and logistical cooperation. The arrival of Iranian technicians at the port of La Guaira and Russian military advisers in Caracas is interpreted as a reinforcement of support for Maduro's government in the face of US pressure, according to regional media.²³

In parallel, Washington's policy towards Colombia has been quietly but steadily tightening, as we have been analysing. On 24 October 2025, the State Department announced that it would not certify Colombia as a reliable partner in the fight against drug trafficking, arguing that President Gustavo Petro's policies have been "disastrous and ineffective" and have contributed to a historic increase in coca cultivation and cocaine production in the country²⁴. Although Bogotá remains a preferred partner in intelligence matters, the bilateral relationship is going through its most tense moment in two decades. US officials have hinted at the possibility of "reviewing cooperation programmes" if Colombia maintains its rapprochement with Caracas, while media outlets close to the White House accuse Petro of "weakening the democratic front in the hemisphere"²⁵. Ultimately, what is at stake is the continuity of the model of strategic subordination that has defined the Colombian-US alliance for years.

Added to this dynamic is a legal debate that transcends the regional sphere. The US Navy's attacks on alleged "narco-boats" in waters near Venezuela have been condemned by experts and multilateral organisations, who warn of the erosion of the limits of international law. Without authorisation from the UN Security Council or the consent of the coastal state, such operations may violate the principle of territorial sovereignty.

²³ CUSPIDEMEXICO. "Following agreement between Venezuela and Russia, Wagner Group commandos begin to arrive in Venezuela." 27/10/2025. Available at: <https://cuspidemexico.com/2025/10/27/tras-acuerdo-venezuela-rusia-comienzan-a-arribar-comandos-de-grupo-wagner-en-venezuela>

²⁴ US DEPARTMENT OF STATE. *US decision not to certify Colombia's anti-narcotics initiatives and sanctions against Colombian officials involved in the global illicit drug trade.* 24/10/2025. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/translations/spanish/decision-de-ee-uu-de-no-certificar-las-iniciativas-antinarcoticos-de-colombia-y-sanciones-contra-funcionarios-colombianos-involucrados-en-el-comercio-mundial-de-drogas-ilicitas>

²⁵ INFOBAE. "US State Department sends blunt message to Petro after he is included on the Clinton List: 'Stop indulging narco-terrorists'." 24/10/2025. Available at: <https://www.infobae.com/colombia/2025/10/24/departamento-de-estado-de-ee-uu-envio-lapidario-mensaje-a-petro-tras-ser-incluido-en-lista-clinton-dejar-de-consentir-a-narcoterroristas/>

Argentine jurist Alejandro Chehtman has pointed out that the use of force for interdiction purposes cannot be justified under the pretext of transnational security .²⁶

In response, Washington insists that the operations are in line with multilateral commitments to combat illicit trafficking and the doctrine of "extended self-defence" that the Pentagon has been promoting since the last decade. The ambiguity of this concept—which allows for the justification of preventive actions against "hybrid threats" in extraterritorial spaces—broadens the scope of US action, but also opens the door to arbitrariness and political interpretation.

In this sense, the anti-narcotics campaign becomes a platform for legitimising a broader strategy of pressure and attrition, which seeks to weaken the Venezuelan regime on multiple fronts.

However, a formal invasion would entail significant diplomatic, military and humanitarian costs. At the international level, it would require solid justification before multilateral organisations such as the UN, which is unlikely in the current multipolar scenario, where actors such as Russia, China and Iran have expressed their support for Maduro's government²⁷ . In Latin America, direct intervention would reawaken historical memories of interference and could generate regional rejection, weakening the United States' position in forums such as the OAS and CELAC, where several governments—Brazil, Mexico, Chile and Argentina—have already expressed their concern about the militaristic drift of the conflict and have advocated for Latin American mediation²⁸ .

In military terms, a prolonged occupation would face not only resistance from the Venezuelan armed forces, but also a complex geographical environment and a polarised population, which could lead to a long-lasting conflict with a high human cost.

Operationally, the US administration has less costly and less risky tools at its disposal to try to change the political balance in Caracas: special operations and selective *raids*, intelligence warfare and cyber operations, economic degradation campaigns and asset

²⁶ CHEHTMAN, Alejandro. *The Law of Targeting*. Oxford University Press, 2021.

²⁷ INDIA TODAY. "What the war in Venezuela could look like." 28/10/2025. Available at: <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/us-donald-trump-venezuela-nicolas-maduro-war-possible-scenarios-2809642-2025-10-28>

²⁸ FRANCE 24. "Lula suggests the US fight drug trafficking and not 'invade', ahead of possible meeting with Trump." 24/10/2025. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/es/am%C3%A9rica-latina/20251024-lula-suggests-the-us-fight-drug-trafficking-and-not-invade-ahead-of-possible-meeting-with-trump>

freezing, support for internal opponents, and logistical readiness to force internal rifts. The authorisation given to the CIA and the naval interdiction operations themselves seem to be steering the campaign towards such measures: surgical strikes, covert operations and combined pressure, rather than a massive invasion. Some analysts point out that the intensification of limited attacks (including special forces assaults), blockades and 'selective capture' operations is more plausible than a full occupation operation²⁹.

Thus, what is taking shape would not be an invasion in the classical sense, but a strategy of intensive pressure, sustained by a combination of limited military operations, economic sanctions, disinformation campaigns and diplomatic isolation. This strategy seeks to progressively erode the Venezuelan regime's capacity to manoeuvre, force it to negotiate on unfavourable terms or provoke its internal collapse without the United States having to bear the costs of open intervention.

The boundary between interdiction and intervention has become increasingly blurred. The use of anti-drug rhetoric as legitimisation, the expansion of the theatre of operations to the Colombian Pacific and the militarisation of presidential rhetoric—with Trump warning that "those ships will be stopped" and linking drug trafficking to threats to hemispheric security³⁰—reinforce the perception that the United States is executing a regional campaign with geopolitical implications that transcend the fight against organised crime. What is at stake is not only control of illicit routes, but also the reaffirmation of US power in a hemisphere where its influence faces growing challenges, once again highlighting the so-called Monroe Doctrine³¹, which stated in the early 19th century (1823) that America should be free of external influence and should belong to the Americans... or to the North Americans?

²⁹ ZEROFOX INTELLIGENCE. "US Counter-Narcotic Actions in Latin America." 25/10/25. Available at: <https://www.zerofox.com/intelligence/u-s-counter-narcotic-actions-in-latin-america>

³⁰ DAILY MAIL. "Trump strikes 'narco-terrorist' boat killing six as Venezuela warns of full-scale US invasion." 14/10/2025. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-15192151/Trump-strikes-narco-terrorist-boat-Venezuela-celebrates-peace-Gaza.html>

³¹ MUSA, Marcelo Néstor. "What was the Monroe Doctrine?" Iberian American Encyclopaedia. Available at: <https://enciclopediaiberoamericana.com/doctrina-monroe/>

Conclusion

The geopolitical background of this confrontation is part of a broader trend: the militarisation of US foreign policy as an instrument of global repositioning. In a context of competition between powers, Washington has transferred to the Western Hemisphere the logic of strategic containment applied in other arenas. The Southern Command, in its latest report to the Senate, admitted that the great-power competition is also being waged on the continent's margins — an admission that confirms the reactivation of classical geopolitics under new justifications. The Caribbean and the South American Pacific are today laboratories of that competition: spaces of deterrence, surveillance and deployment, where hybrid warfare intermingles with coercive diplomacy and the fight against transnational crime. What for Washington is a strategy of “preventive stabilisation” is perceived by much of Latin America as the reappearance of imperial tutelage in new forms — more technological, more precise, but equally asymmetrical.

The immediate future does not seem to point to open war, but rather to a prolongation of the conflict in the form of structural tension, where force and diplomacy coexist as instruments of reciprocal pressure. The analytical key lies in recognising that the current crisis is not an accident, but a manifestation of a deeper change: Latin America's transition from the passive periphery of the global order to a space of active dispute between powers. The evolution of this process will depend on three critical variables: Washington's prudence in calibrating its coercion; Caracas's capacity to manage its resistance without provoking internal collapse; and the regional system's response — or inaction — in building a multilateral solution.

The current crisis must therefore be understood as a symptom of a major geopolitical transition: the shift in the centre of gravity of global power and the loss of effectiveness of the old inter-American system as a guarantor of stability. If this trend persists, Latin America could enter a phase of permanent securitisation, where the management of threats—real or perceived—justifies a continuous military presence and conditions the foreign policy of states. In this equation, the Caribbean and Pacific margins are not peripheral: they are areas witnessing the struggle for global hegemony.

Ultimately, this confrontation expresses a historical paradox. While the United States attempts to reaffirm its authority through force, the region as a whole demands an order

based on law and sovereignty. Venezuela exploits this tension to strengthen its internal position; Colombia, caught between prudence and pressure, seeks to avoid becoming the next target; and the rest of the continent observes how the local conflict takes on hemispheric proportions. Between the Caribbean and the Pacific, what is at stake is not only the political future of a government, but the validity of the inter-American system and Latin America's ability to resist, once again, the logic of the powers that be.

History shows that open confrontations are rarely decided by a single action, but by the accumulation of poorly calibrated decisions. Latin America once again finds itself at that uncertain threshold where strategy can turn into inertia and pressure into war. It is not yet inevitable, but the window to avoid it narrows by the day.

Therefore, in this era of global geopolitical reconfiguration, it is worth asking whether, as the Monroe Doctrine pointed out, the strategic premise of the United States will once again be "America for Americans".

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