

Introduction

While much strategic attention is now focused on Iran, the war currently under way is confirming a classic premise: force should be employed only in pursuit of clear, limited, and attainable political objectives¹. When those objectives are ambiguous, shifting, or excessive, even a campaign that is formally sophisticated and tactically highly effective may fail to produce the desired outcome. That is, to a large extent, what is happening today in Persia². And it is precisely for that reason that it is worth returning to Operation Absolute Resolve against Venezuela: not only because of its immediate interest, but because it offers the opposite contrast – a campaign in which the use of force was structured around a more limited political objective and was therefore more readily translatable into a political result.

Put differently, if Operation Epic Fury illustrates the limits of coercion when the political leadership fails to define clear objectives and ignores its own bureaucratic machinery, Absolute Resolve allows us to examine what happens when ends, ways, and means are more tightly aligned. It is precisely for that reason that it matters to clarify what we mean by multi-domain operations³. Contemporary debate on the subject tends to slide into several misunderstandings. The first is to reduce them to a matter of means: more sensors, more precision, more connectivity. The second is to confuse them with mere simultaneity across domains, as though acting at the same time on land, at sea, in the air, in space, in cyberspace, and in the information sphere were in itself enough to produce decisive effects. The third, finally, is to believe that a sophisticated doctrinal design can compensate for the absence of political clarity. None of these shortcuts is persuasive. What matters is not the accumulation of capabilities, nor acting simultaneously across multiple domains, but rather the structuring of a campaign capable

¹ A caution that, in the American case, recalls the Weinberger-Powell doctrine (1984). Formulated to avoid another Vietnam, the Weinberger doctrine and Powell's corollary revolved around a simple idea: force should not be used without clear objectives, sufficient means, and a stable relationship between ends and execution. Paradoxically, the campaign against Iran appears to have departed from several of those criteria.

² Erin Banco and Jonathan Landay, "U.S. intelligence says Iran government is not at risk of collapse, say sources," *Reuters*, 11 March 2026.

³ Multi-domain operations are, to a large extent, a war for decision. They do not simply consist in acting simultaneously across several domains, but in integrating capabilities and effects rapidly enough to accelerate one's own decision cycle and degrade that of the adversary, confronting the latter with simultaneous dilemmas that cannot be absorbed sequentially. See Department of the Army, *FM 3-0: Operations* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2025).

of disorganising the adversary, accelerating one's own decision cycle, and converting that operational advantage into a politically exploitable result.

Seen in that light, Absolute Resolve becomes an especially interesting case. The operation did not simply consist in the simultaneous employment of kinetic and non-kinetic means, but in their integration within a sequence designed to generate political disorganisation and operational paralysis. Its logic was not one of merely piling up blows against the Venezuelan leadership and armed forces, but of rapidly dislocating their critical functions as a system: degrading their ability to see, communicate, decide, coordinate, and react before they could recover. Ultimately, what matters is not the sophistication of the military instrument as such, but its ability to translate military advantage into a political result, because – as Clausewitz warned long ago – war acquires meaning only insofar as it serves a political purpose⁴.

From that point on, the Venezuelan case allows us to address three questions. The first, doctrinal in character, concerns the utility of the multi-domain approach when understood as a theory of victory rather than a mere inventory of capabilities. The second, operational in nature, concerns the way in which the operation combined shaping, the suppression of defences, penetration of the objective area, the capture of Nicolás Maduro, and his extraction within a single sequence. The third, finally, points to a broader hypothesis: that the success of Absolute Resolve may have reinforced in Washington the impression that brief, precise, and highly integrated campaigns were still capable of producing rapid political results – an impression that may in turn help to contextualise the subsequent, more assertive posture towards Iran⁵.

⁴ The idea is not new: war is not an end in itself, but an instrument subordinated to a political purpose. See Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976 [1832]), pp. 87–89.

⁵ Although it is too early to draw firm conclusions, it does not seem unreasonable to think that the success of *Absolute Resolve* reinforced in Washington a certain confidence in the ability of brief, precise, and highly integrated campaigns to produce rapid political results. Yet that expectation can only be sustained when the political objective is clearly defined and attainable with the means available. That kind of “learning from success” may widen the political margin for more ambitious courses of action in other theatres, but it also encourages misleading extrapolations when the structural conditions of conflict change. This is precisely where a decisive difference with Iran emerges: whereas in Venezuela the purpose seemed more delimited, the later campaign displayed a growing dislocation between ends, ways, and means. The problem was not simply the regime's resilience, but the gradual displacement of declared objectives – from a relatively intelligible logic of military degradation towards a more ambiguous combination of decapitation, strategic coercion, and political change – to the point that it became unclear what result was actually considered attainable. And when ends become fluid, expansive, or incompatible with one another, military superiority no longer automatically translates into the desired outcome. Warren Strobel et al., “White House rationale for war keeps shifting,” *The Washington Post*, 3 March 2026.

A campaign designed to dislocate, not devastate

The significance of Operation Absolute Resolve lies less in the scale of the means employed than in the logic that shaped their use. The operation did not seek the comprehensive devastation of the Venezuelan state, nor the occupation of the country, nor a war of attrition, nor even a coercive campaign in the classical sense. Its purpose was more limited and, precisely for that reason, more intelligible: to neutralise the political centre of the regime, disorganise its immediate response, and prevent the system from reconstituting itself quickly enough to frustrate the intended effect. Viewed in this light, the campaign was not directed simply against isolated targets, but against the coherence of the whole. The distinction is significant: a campaign designed to paralyse the overall functioning of the adversary state does not pursue the same objective as an operation aimed at dislocating the politico-military core that sustains its command capacity. Absolute Resolve belongs much more clearly to this second logic⁶.

The operation was limited and surgical in character. Special operations teams entered Caracas after months of surveillance designed to build up a pattern of life around the target, and the damage was concentrated on a small number of key points – Fort Tiuna, La Carlota, La Guaira, and Higuero – in order to capture Maduro, open a secure corridor for helicopter insertion and extraction, and minimise collateral damage. It did not entail widespread attacks on the military structure as a whole, nor on national infrastructure such as the power grid, transport, or communications⁷.

That point is central, because it places the operation somewhere between a special operations raid and a highly complex joint campaign. It was neither a simple snatch operation nor a coercive campaign resting primarily on air power⁸. It was a brief,

⁶ This distinction points to two different strategic logics. The first seeks a form of systemic paralysis or devastation of the adversary by acting on the whole set of functions that sustain its resistance; in the tradition of air power, this idea has been linked to theories of strategic paralysis, aimed at disorganising the enemy system by striking its functional centres of gravity. The second logic does not seek to paralyse the state as a whole, but to dislocate the politico-military core that sustains its immediate command and coercive capacity. The literature on coercion has further insisted that degrading capabilities becomes politically useful only when it alters the adversary's calculations to a sufficient degree and answers to a clear political objective. From this perspective, *Absolute Resolve* fits much better within a logic of limited functional dislocation than within a campaign of systemic devastation. See David Fadok, *John Boyd and John Warden: Air Power's Quest for Strategic Paralysis* (Maxwell AFB: Air University Press, 1995); and Robert Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

⁷ Ryan C. Berg et al., "Imagery from Venezuela Shows a Surgical Strike, Not Shock and Awe," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 9 January 2026.

⁸ Although the scale of the air and naval deployment initially suggested a coercive-diplomatic campaign based mainly on air power, in the event the operation unfolded in an entirely different fashion—something

concentrated, and politically delimited campaign whose success depended on precisely combining local air and electromagnetic superiority, persistent intelligence, selective suppression of defences, urban assault capability, maritime extraction, and immediate political control of the situation⁹. The clearest evidence of this lies in the design of the effort itself: hundreds of hours of rehearsal, detailed knowledge of the target's routines and habits, and a joint architecture in which military forces, the intelligence community, and the Department of Justice all converged¹⁰. The aim was not to defeat the Venezuelan armed forces as such, but to prevent them from reacting coherently during the brief critical interval between the initial blow and the collapse of the chain of command¹¹.

Shaping the environment: intelligence, signatures, and vulnerabilities

Every campaign of this kind begins long before the first visible strike. In Operation Absolute Resolve, the decisive phase was the shaping of the environment. Available sources agree that the operation was the result of months of cooperation between military commanders and intelligence services, and that the execution order was issued only once sufficient information had been gathered on the habits, location, approach routes, and vulnerabilities of the Venezuelan defensive apparatus¹².

Operationally, this required several things at once: building a pattern of life around the target and his immediate environment; mapping the air-defence architecture, radars, links, and response routes; identifying which nodes needed to be neutralised in order to open a local window of superiority; and recognising, finally, that part of the success would depend not so much on brute force as on the exploitation of pre-existing vulnerabilities:

that stands in marked contrast to Operation *Epic Fury* against Iran. Classical air-coercion literature has long warned that bombing may degrade capabilities, raise costs, and open operational opportunities without thereby guaranteeing the desired outcome – still less a hypothetical regime change—if the adversary's coercive apparatus retains cohesion and control. See Pape, *op. cit.*; and Ellwood Hinman, *The Politics of Coercion* (Maxwell: Air University Press, 2002).

⁹ The success of the operation depended on a highly precise combination of effects: persistent intelligence, the opening of corridors through selective suppression of defences, helicopter-borne insertion, naval support, and the superimposition of cyber, informational, and electromagnetic effects. See Berg et al., *op. cit.*; and Louise Marie Hurel, "Layered Ambiguity: US Cyber Capabilities in the Raid to Extract Maduro from Venezuela," *Royal United Services Institute*, 14 January 2026.

¹⁰ The very presence of the Department of Justice in the capture-and-extraction apparatus also reminds us that Washington presented the operation as an act of coercive enforcement of earlier indictments for narco-trafficking and narco-terrorism. See Bradley Peniston, "How 'Absolute Resolve' harnessed 150 aircraft and more to launch a regime change in Venezuela," *Defense One*, 3 January 2026.

¹¹ Christian Villanueva, "Estados Unidos ataca Venezuela (I): la caída de Maduro," *Revista Ejército*, 3 January 2026.

¹² Idrees Ali et al., "Mock house, CIA source and Special Forces: The US operation to capture Maduro," *Reuters*, 4 January 2026.

the obsolescence of the defensive system, poor maintenance, weak integration between Russian- and Chinese-made equipment, and the geographical setting of Caracas itself, whose mountainous surroundings favoured a low-level approach¹³. Convergence, accordingly, did not emerge from technology in the abstract, but from detailed knowledge of the adversary and of its operational environment.

The cyber and electromagnetic dimension is especially revealing. In the briefing after the operation, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff explained that, as the force approached the Venezuelan coast, the United States began layering different effects provided by Space Command, Cyber Command, and other agencies in order to “open the way” for the operation¹⁴. In parallel, Trump claimed that the lights in Caracas had gone out thanks to a certain American “expertise”. Yet the most rigorous analysis counsels caution: it is not clear exactly what cyberspace produced – reconnaissance, disruption, or both – and part of the effect may also have rested on the pre-existing fragility of Venezuela’s electrical infrastructure¹⁵. The lesson is not that cyberspace “won” the operation, but that ambiguity and the superimposition of effects reinforced the opacity of the initial blow and, with it, the disorganisation of the adversary¹⁶.

¹³ The performance of Russian and Chinese matériel in Venezuela requires a nuanced reading. The poor performance of the integrated air-defence system (IADS) does not appear to be explained solely by the intrinsic quality of the equipment, but by a combination of poor maintenance, low real availability, limited operator proficiency, inadequate camouflage, the possible obsolescence of some S-300 components, and – above all – the inability to operate an integrated and layered air-defence network. In other words, possessing the elements of an IADS is not the same thing as possessing an operational IADS. In the Venezuelan case, the combination of Chinese radars with Russian systems may have worsened interoperability problems, while the geography of Caracas – lying beneath a coastal mountain range – favoured low-level approaches and reduced the effectiveness of outer radar coverage. More than a simple failure of matériel, the case reveals the vulnerability of a poorly maintained, weakly integrated defensive architecture operated by an eroded institution.

¹⁴ Press conference by General Dan Caine, 3 January 2026.

¹⁵ Maggie Miller, “Trump suggests US used cyberattacks to turn off lights in Venezuela during strikes,” *Político*, 3 January 2026.

¹⁶ The cyber dimension must be treated with caution. The interest of the case does not lie in proving some supposedly decisive autonomous role for cyberspace, but in showing how it may be integrated with electronic warfare, suppression, and the exploitation of pre-existing vulnerabilities. Hurel, *op. cit.* insists precisely on this point in her analysis of the “layered effects” mentioned by General Dan Caine, while noting that, even if cyber effects were indeed present, the precariousness of the electrical grid and of Venezuela’s defences makes it difficult to distinguish clearly between deliberate exploitation and systemic failure. Recent literature on Ukraine has suggested something similar: in high-intensity conflict, cyber tends to perform better as a supporting, degrading, and opportunity-opening capability than as an autonomous vector of decision.

The multi-domain strike

The tactical execution of the operation illustrates its multi-domain logic with considerable clarity. More than 150 aircraft and drones took off from around twenty bases and ships distributed throughout the region. The covering force included F-22, F-35, and F-18 fighters, EA-18G electronic-warfare aircraft, B-1 and B-2 bombers, a wide range of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms, and numerous special operations helicopters. The extraction force flew at very low altitude, covered by a suppression-of-defences sequence that combined precision fires, electronic warfare, cyber effects, and other non-kinetic measures in order to open a local window of superiority¹⁷. All of this enabled a capture force to descend on Maduro's compound, seize the objective, and begin the extraction towards the amphibious assault ship Iwo Jima.

The operation also confirms an important doctrinal intuition: the value of multi-domain action lies not in operating simultaneously across many spaces, but in synchronising distinct effects in such a way that the adversary cannot absorb them sequentially. That, in essence, is what happened here. While one force penetrated the objective area, other platforms suppressed air defences, protected the air corridor, updated intelligence in real time, and covered the exfiltration. There was no linear succession of closed phases, but rather a temporal convergence of fires, protection, electronic warfare, ISR, and maritime support¹⁸. In that sense, the execution of the operation resembled a lethal web more than a linear chain of detection and destruction¹⁹.

The performance of the Venezuelan defensive system reinforces that reading. No US aircraft were shot down, and the combination of kinetic fires, electronic warfare, and other non-kinetic effects helped to dislocate Russian- and Chinese-origin radars and batteries²⁰. Yet the decisive point was not simply the attacker's technical superiority, but Venezuela's inability to make its defence function as a coherent system. Partially

¹⁷ Aaron Mehta, "150 aircraft, cyber effects and 'overwhelming force': How the Venezuela operation unfolded," *Breaking Defense*, 3 January 2026.

¹⁸ The point refers to the doctrinal concept of *convergence*: the rapid and continuous integration of capabilities and effects across domains in order to create simultaneous dilemmas and disorganise the adversary. It is therefore not mere simultaneity, but a campaign logic. See U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, *The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028* (Fort Eustis: TRADOC, 2018).

¹⁹ Broadly speaking, a *kill chain* describes a linear sequence of functions leading from target acquisition to target destruction, whereas a *kill web* is a more distributed and redundant architecture, with multiple possible routes between sensors, decision-makers, and shooters. The Venezuelan operation more closely resembled the latter logic.

²⁰ Ziemer, *op. cit.*

operational equipment, poor maintenance, inadequate camouflage, and weak integration are, in fact, the inverse of the multi-domain logic. If the attacker seeks convergence, the defender requires coherence; when that coherence is absent, the campaign quickly becomes asymmetric.

Why it worked

The first reason for the success of Absolute Resolve was informational superiority. Without a persistent intelligence architecture, and without detailed knowledge of the habits, routes, defences, and vulnerabilities of the adversary system – including Maduro’s own pattern of life – the subsequent synchronisation would have been far more uncertain. The operation rested on high-quality information and, more importantly, on the ability to translate that information into a viable plan²¹. It is not enough to know; what matters is knowing what to do with what one knows.

The second reason was the attacker’s organisational quality. The operation required extremely fine coordination between the military component, the intelligence community, and the judicial authorities. That in turn implied a flexible command architecture, rehearsed procedures, low latencies, and an institutional culture capable of operating with discipline under conditions of considerable complexity. Put differently, technology mattered, but institutions mattered more. A force may possess links, sensors, and precision munitions; if it cannot integrate them in operational time, the promise of the multi-domain approach remains rhetorical. Here the opposite occurred: the campaign worked because there was a mature organisation behind it²².

The third reason was the weakness of the adversary system. Venezuela was militarily vulnerable. It could not contest the electromagnetic and cyber spectrum, nor air superiority, nor the attacker’s freedom of manoeuvre. In addition, its air-defence system had been eroded by years of corruption, underinvestment, and dependence on Russian material without adequate backing²³. The case therefore shows that a mature force can

²¹ Berg et al., *op. cit.*

²² Ali et al., *op. cit.* Here we find a central point in the contemporary doctrinal debate: decision advantage is not a property of software, but of the organisation that employs it.

²³ More than a simple failure of matériel, the case points to the military cost of coup-proofing. The literature on authoritarianism has long underlined that regimes concerned above all with their own survival tend to sacrifice integration, professionalism, and military autonomy in favour of political loyalty, parallel control, and coercive fragmentation. The result is well known: forces that are less coherent, less well coordinated, and more vulnerable when they are required to operate as a system. From this perspective, Venezuela’s weakness was not only technical, but politico-institutional. See James Quinlivan, “Coup-Proofing: Its

produce systemic dislocation against an adversary incapable of denying enemy convergence; it does not show that the same formula can be exported without friction to denser and more resilient theatres.

The fourth reason was probably the most important: the clarity of the political objective. The operation was not designed to reorder the region, nor to change the Venezuelan regime, nor to occupy the country. Its aim was more limited: to neutralise Maduro, prevent an organised immediate response, and open up a new political situation under conditions of American pressure. That clarity of purpose gave coherence to the operational sequence²⁴. By contrast, the campaign against Iran has shown precisely the opposite: a powerful military force employed in the service of ends that do not always appear stable or fully compatible with one another. That, in all likelihood, is the decisive difference between the two cases.

Impact, limits, and strategic learning

The immediate impact of Absolute Resolve was obvious: Maduro's capture, Delcy Rodríguez's elevation to the interim presidency, and the opening of a new phase of tactical cooperation with Washington. Yet despite the gradual opening of the system, the Venezuelan repressive apparatus remains intact²⁵. That observation is important: the rapid dislocation of a political centre may open up a process of liberalisation, but it does not in itself guarantee regime transformation. It may facilitate or accelerate such a process, but it cannot substitute for the subsequent work of institutional reform, redistribution of power, and the reconfiguration of coercive balances.

Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24, no. 2 (1999), pp. 131–165; and Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

²⁴ The comparison must be drawn with caution, but it remains illuminating. In its initial conception, the campaign against Iran could appear militarily more limited and therefore more politically translatable. US Central Command (CENTCOM) presented it as an effort aimed at dismantling the Iranian security apparatus, giving priority to command and control, air defence, missile capabilities, and other critical military assets. The problem was the subsequent drift in objectives. Coinciding with the decapitation of part of the Iranian leadership, Trump began publicly to suggest a broader regime-change logic. In other words, an initially intelligible objective of military degradation was gradually contaminated by a drift in ends that made its political translation far more uncertain. See Nandita Bose et al., "Trump seeks to justify Iran war, but stated objectives shift," *Reuters*, 3 March 2026.

²⁵ The issue points to a classic distinction in the study of political transitions: the removal of the leader does not necessarily amount to the dismantling of the authoritarian apparatus. In the Venezuelan case, the operation opened a phase of limited liberalisation, but without immediately dislocating the inherited coercive structures. Rather than a figure fully subordinate to Washington, Delcy Rodríguez is better understood as operating within a relationship of tactical dependence under strong external tutelage, while remaining constrained by the internal balances of Chavismo.

That point leads to a broader issue. The operation was a clear operational success, but it may also have reinforced in Washington a problematic impression: that brief, precise, low-footprint campaigns can still generate rapid political results. Yet that expectation can be sustained only when the political objective is clearly defined and attainable with the means available. What worked in Venezuela rested on a very specific set of conditions: a delimited political objective, a fragile adversary, freedom of access, overwhelming informational superiority, and limited adversary capacity for escalation, both vertical and horizontal. None of these conditions is reproduced in Iran. There, after two weeks of bombardment, the partial decapitation of the leadership, and the combined use of kinetic and non-kinetic effects, Tehran retains its capacity for control, does not appear on the verge of collapse, and has moreover escalated the conflict horizontally in the most predictable theatre of all: the Strait of Hormuz. What this contrast highlights is not the failure of military power in the abstract, but its limits when the relationship between ends, ways, and means breaks down: an initially intelligible objective of military degradation was gradually contaminated by a drift in declared aims that made its political translation far more uncertain.

Conclusions

Absolute Resolve matters because it offers a relatively rare case of alignment between political objective, operational design, and strategic conditions. Its success cannot be explained solely by American material superiority, but by the ability to integrate intelligence, electronic warfare, cyberspace, space, air, sea, and special operations forces within a sequence designed to disorganise the adversary as a system rather than simply to inflict damage. Seen in this way, the operation illustrates the multi-domain logic in its most demanding form: not as a mere sum of capabilities, but as a means of producing functional disintegration within a favourable temporal window.

But the case also leaves a warning. Precisely because it worked, it could encourage an excessively optimistic reading of military power. The contrast with Iran confirms as much: the decapitation of the leadership, precision strikes, and non-kinetic effects do not in themselves guarantee regime collapse, nor do they resolve the attacker's political ambiguity. The underlying lesson remains a classical one. War may be extraordinarily modern in its means and yet still obey an old rule: it produces consistent strategic results

only when politics clearly defines what is to be achieved, and when the campaign is designed to obtain exactly that result, and no other. In that sense, Absolute Resolve anticipates not only the limits of military power when ends become ambiguous, but also a more assertive way of understanding US primacy in the American continent, close to the reinterpretation of the Monroe Doctrine that the White House has begun to formulate in terms of a “Trump Corollary”.

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