



## Introduction

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the ongoing war in Gaza over the last two years, and China's increasing aggression towards Taiwan and its surrounding seas, the recent US intervention in Venezuela is nothing more than confirmation that there are few traces of “credible” international law left in this new global order that is taking shape.

In this context, it is no longer a question of highlighting the importance of applying international law, but rather of accepting that international law is no longer relevant<sup>1</sup>. This is precisely one of the peculiarities of this new emerging order.

The current geopolitical landscape is marked not only by the latest US actions on Venezuelan soil, but also by the immediate threats to Denmark's sovereignty and the increasingly isolationist rhetoric of the US towards its traditional partners and Western institutions to which it (still) belongs.

These events cannot be analyzed as isolated incidents, but rather as interconnected events, all forming part of the same foreign policy (rather than a refined strategy), for which there is no precedent in recent US history<sup>2</sup>.

From this, two possible interpretations could be deduced in an attempt to understand how the leader of the most powerful country in the world—with a very particular vision of how it should function—can shake up an entire system and override the rules-based order that was once founded and expanded by the various presidents who preceded Trump since the postwar period.

## How should we interpret Trump's behavior?

The first interpretation of Trump's behavior (and probably the most widespread) is based on the premise of not considering the US president as a politician “per se,” so his interest

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<sup>1</sup> Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller stated that “*We live in a world where you can talk all you want about international niceties and everything else. But this is a real world...that is governed by force, that is governed by power.*” Greenland, Venezuela, NATO: Stephen Miller sums up a new US mission statement of Strength, Force, and Power | CNN Politics <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/01/06/politics/trump-greenland-venezuela-colombia-miller-analysis>

<sup>2</sup> “*The longer Trump remains in office, the more his differences with his postwar predecessors become apparent. He seems more suited to an earlier era of equally authentic US presidents who imposed tariffs and conquered new territories in the 19th century*” (Ibid.)

in the application of legality in the international system is assumed to be unlikely, if not almost non-existent. This would explain his transactional policy based exclusively on the interests of the tycoon.

Assuming this premise undoubtedly serves to raise alarm bells in the security agendas of many countries (whether allies or not), precisely because of the uncertainty and unpredictability of the actions that could result from US foreign policy. This vision leads to greater security awareness, but it is also likely to provoke widespread rearmament, lowering the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons and thus increasing the risk of global escalation.

On the other hand, the tendency toward inaction on the part of the international community, already demonstrated in the face of clear signs that Russia was going to invade Ukraine, increases the possibility of continued strategic blocking by organizations such as the UN, NATO, and the EU. These organizations are subject to international law, but their actions are currently limited by the systemic harassment of the US, so they are essentially hoping that after Trump's departure, the rivers of legality will return to their traditional course in international relations<sup>3</sup>.

The possibility of this “return” is highly unlikely and also dangerous to assume, precisely because of the global repercussions that many of the decisions taken by this administration are already causing, and of some others that are likely to be irreversible due to their geopolitical impact.

The second interpretation (the most realistic but the most difficult to accept) comes from assuming that Trump is probably marking the beginning of a paradigm shift in the discipline of international relations, thereby establishing a new way of conducting international politics<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Trump's first departure already caused a crisis in international law, which Biden attempted to restore by rejoining organizations such as UNESCO and the Paris Agreement, strengthening NATO, and defending the rules-based order. The resulting challenges still persist, and it is expected that the impact of Trump's departure after this last term will leave even greater “irreversible” consequences on the international order. With the threat of high tariffs and the intention to use investments and technology as coercive tools, Trump has opened new fronts in his trade wars that are much more far-reaching than those initiated in his first term. These represent an intensification of economic nationalism and protectionism and a new blow to globalization, which is already in crisis, with unpredictable consequences” [https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2557568/CE\\_231\\_Cap01.pdf](https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2557568/CE_231_Cap01.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> The effects of US foreign policy decisions that are yet to be seen are linked to the new strategic and military reorientation, the “Trump corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine, pressure on its allies (NATO and the EU), the trade and tariff offensive, and the recent withdrawal from 66 international organizations. As a more specific example, we refer to the Abraham Accords of 2020, a distant precedent from Trump's first term, which led to the attacks of October 7,

This means that, although it is always necessary to adhere to international law and commit to “rules of the game” that bind states equally, the reality is that it can become part of the problem—insofar as it inhibits effective solutions—if too much reliance is placed on it.

The big difference between these two interpretations is that the first one frames the US's actions as merely Trump's political eccentricity in foreign policy matters, considering these actions as temporary circumstantial anomalies within a global governance system that, although it leaves significant scars on the international system, will return to the natural order of things after the president leaves office. This is why international organizations prioritize maintaining their alliance with Washington above all other considerations<sup>5</sup>.

However, the second interpretation constitutes the acceptance (and resignation) that there is a global convergence of economic, strategic, and military interests in an increasingly complex and constantly changing world, where the accumulation of power can become a matter of national security. This leads to operational logic in the major powers of claiming space, imposing costs, and redefining what is acceptable outside the international consensus.

This second interpretation forces us to accept the possibility that the US will occupy Greenland militarily as another geopolitical reality, even if it seems unimaginable given its repercussions for the future of NATO's integrity or European defense.

Under this premise, the EU would have no choice but to adopt (once and for all) effective mechanisms to guarantee its own security and pursue strategic autonomy<sup>6</sup>, which would

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2023, by Hamas, citing as one of the circumstantial causes that brought the Arab world closer to Israel, but which was also interpreted as isolating and marginalizing the Palestinian cause.

<sup>5</sup> The lack of response from EU institutional leaders [to the threats against Greenland] was striking. [...] They refused to comment on an explicit threat from the US against European territory. [...] If there was any logic to this, it was to avoid confrontation with Washington at all costs. [...] Europe risks ensuring its own decline. [...] European elites are sacrificing the continent's long-term autonomy for the prospect of their continued access to power. In doing so, they are exposing their own societies to increasing risks—economic, political, and military—without increasing their security or influence. While the future of the global order remains uncertain, Europe's fate seems to be sealed." <https://unherd.com/2026/01/will-europe-ever-wake-up/#:~:text=Far%20from%20abandoning%20hegemony%2C%20the,broader%20post%2D1945%20imperial%20order>

<sup>6</sup> Europeans have long talked about strategic autonomy in the defence industrial sector and the need to be able to “act autonomously when and where necessary” [...] But if the U.S. is less engaged, EU and NATO members must find a way to overcome both domestic dissent and their own disagreements.

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/rpt/europe-central-asia/eastern-europe/ukraine-russia-internal-united-states/272-ukraine-and-beyond-shaping>

clearly be essential if it wants to learn to operate outside of US protection and survive as an organization.

It is true that this latter interpretation, even if considered the most appropriate, also calls for widespread rearmament and the risk of escalation, but the difference is that, as far as European defense is concerned, it leads to doing so with more discernment, clearer objectives, greater responsibility, and in the most appropriate direction, that is: expecting nothing from the US and acting on the premise that international legality is definitely out of the picture because it has been replaced by a more visible and coercive use of power.

Given the violations of Ukraine's sovereignty and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, this lesson should already be perfectly clear from the behavior of Russia and China (two revisionist and authoritarian powers). However, paradoxically, it has been the US (the main standard-bearer of democracy and an indispensable historical ally) that has confirmed the validity of this premise.

### **Venezuela’s situation and geopolitical interpretation**

Recent events following the start of 2026 have given rise to a flood of legal arguments seeking to determine whether the US intervention in Venezuela, which culminated in Maduro's arrest, was in accordance with international law. These arguments may be valid for theorizing about possible improvements to the international legal order, but in practice they only serve to heighten tensions in the media debate and consolidate “ideological islands” that lead to polarization, mistrust, and insecurity. More importantly, they do not solve the problem; if anything, they accentuate it.

Following the US actions, we started from the legal basis that Maduro's presence at the head of his illegitimate government in Venezuela had to be ended, without a doubt, but at what cost? To date, it does not appear that Trump is seeking to establish a democratic regime in the country, so what would be preferable? the apparent stability<sup>7</sup> provided by the now-ousted Maduro, or a Venezuela plunged into chaos?

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<sup>7</sup> When we say “apparent stability” here, we are referring to the fact that the regime in Venezuela “is not an isolated episode or an ideological anomaly: it is a prolonged experiment in which institutional degradation, economic depletion, and social pressure have coexisted with surprising external stability [...] a country can fall apart internally without the international system intervening, as long as the strategic vectors remain aligned.” “Monroe, Donroe, and the Shadows

On the other hand, what repercussions could these attacks have in the competitive context with other powers present in Latin America, such as China, Russia, and Iran? Only time will tell, but a strategic miscalculation by the US that prevents it from stabilizing a new regime would confirm that the attacks on Venezuelan soil were only part of a “reactive” process to its apparent hegemonic decline coupled with a growing lack of credibility perceived by the international community.

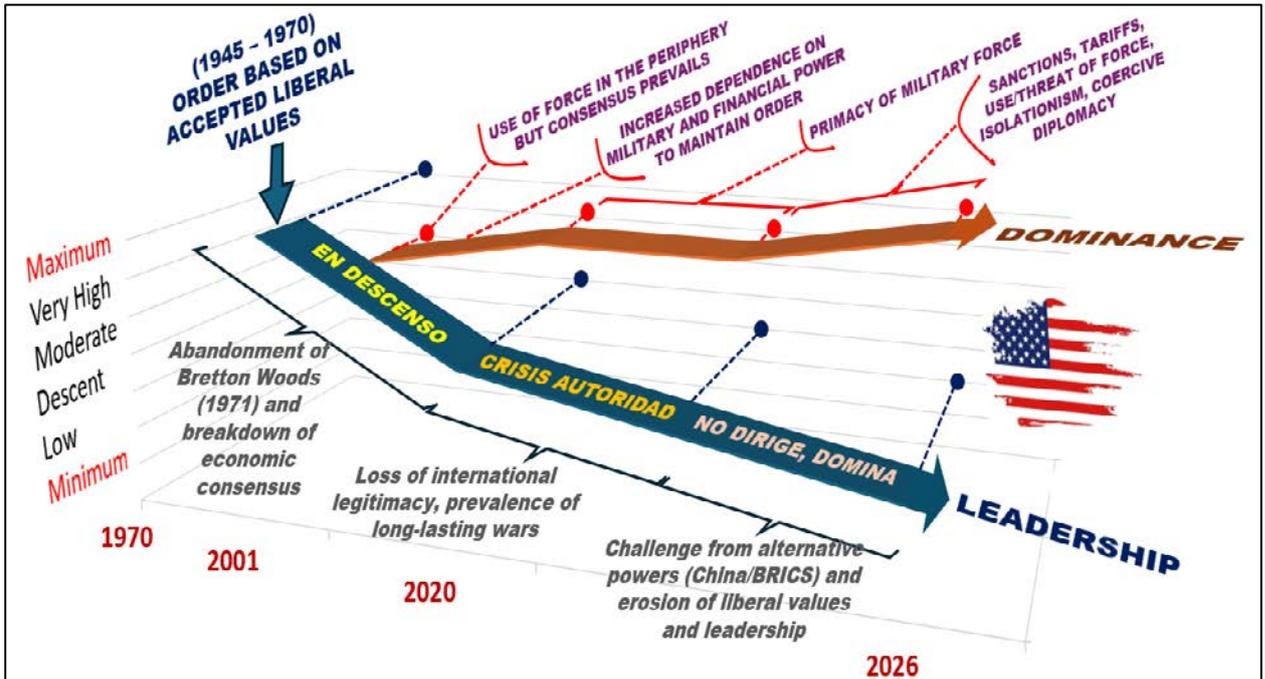


Figure 1. Decline of US hegemony in the evolving context of the gap between “Domination” and “Leadership”<sup>8</sup> (Source: own elaboration)

Trump's new term began with promises that were impossible to keep and escalating warmongering rhetoric, embodied by the renamed “Department of War” and the glorification of the American “warrior ethos.” This has only confirmed the return to the primacy of military action and, therefore, to the foreign interventionism that this administration wanted to avoid.

of the New Order” – LISA News <https://www.lisanews.org/internacional/monroe-donroe-y-las-sombras-del-nuevo-orden/>

<sup>8</sup> Figure prepared based on Gramsci's original thinking, which was adapted to the field of international relations by R. Gilpin, G. Arrighi, and D. Harvey. Here, the cohesion or continuous articulation between Domination (coercion) and Leadership (consensus) is considered the true driving force behind US hegemony. Its decline is therefore the result of a lack of leadership, which has been replaced by policies of domination in order to maintain its preeminent position in the international system. The US's tendency not to limit itself in the use of power speaks to a lack of interest in steering the system in the desired direction and to a perception among its allies that the general interest is no longer being pursued. This interpretation helps us understand that hegemony should not be understood as something that arises and is maintained until it is replaced by another, but rather as “a constant overcoming of unstable equilibriums with subordinate groups” (Gramsci, 1980). [https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci\\_arttext&pid=S2007-91762022000200197](https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2007-91762022000200197)

After the failures of mediation in the war in Ukraine and the “fragile” ceasefire achieved in Gaza, the determination shown in operations against drug trafficking in the Caribbean justified and finally provided an outlet for the use of American “hard power,” which has always been the main instrument of its foreign policy and the accretor of its status as a Great Power.

The intervention in Venezuela and the capture of Maduro put an end to an illegitimate government, but also confirm the historical commitment underlying the US Grand Strategy of always seeking “monsters outside to fight”<sup>9</sup>. The problem is that the margin of uncertainty now opening up in Venezuela could be yet another episode of a military victory that no one knows how to manage.

### **The new role of the US diplomatic instrument in power relations**

The recent behavior of the US is a clear sign that it is no longer content with being a great power, but needs to demonstrate this in a multipolar world of emerging powers (with particular attention to China), which threaten its decline. History also teaches us that great powers in decline resort to military power to try to maintain their hegemonic position<sup>10</sup>.

Has diplomacy ceased to be a useful tool in international relations?

The short answer is no. What happens is that its effectiveness is measured in terms of how much it can be translated into tangible results.

International law has traditionally been the tool used by international diplomacy to promote peaceful coexistence between states. It is true that one could argue that its effectiveness has been more the “exception” than the “rule” throughout history, but there is no doubt that it is a necessary tool for giving voice and establishing agreements based on a common framework of rules established by international consensus.

However, to quote Thucydides, the Greek historian and author of the first recorded political and moral analysis of a nation's war policies: "*The siege of Melos made it clear*

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<sup>9</sup> Quote attributed to the fourth president of the United States, John Quincy Adams. His quote addresses the danger of fabricating threats that supposedly threaten the national security of the United States.

<sup>10</sup> “Structural realism’s interpretation of the relationship between power transitions and war between great powers fundamentally agrees: the process by which an emerging power displaces the dominant power increases the risk of war.” <https://global-strategy.org/transiciones-de-poder-y-guerra-entre-grandes-potencias/>

*2,500 years ago that the force of arms determines international relations much better than diplomacy and agreements between nations. Legal arguments come into play when there is a balance of power, but otherwise, the strongest determine what is possible and the weakest accept it<sup>11</sup>.*

This idea, far from being rooted in a “classical” era, is part of the current ideology of this new paradigm of international relations. In the current context, diplomacy is undoubtedly “useful,” but in the eyes of the US, it must be given credibility and focused on achieving tangible results that truly reflect a nation's power.

That is why “hard power” has become the most credible tool of this new form of “coercive diplomacy” by the US, and resistance to its decline has become the real driving force behind its use.

### **The new US National Security Strategy is unveiled**

Reinforcing these ideas, the recently signed 2025 National Security Strategy with its “Peace through Strength” approach and priority on Latin America and the Caribbean is the latest wedge that highlights the US's need to reaffirm its status as a great power by ensuring three main things:

- Its sphere of influence, appealing to a “remake” of the historic “Monroe Doctrine” of the early 19th century.
- To continue to be the leading voice in all matters of global importance, even if nothing is at stake, simply as a symbol of that status. In this sense, Venezuela was the perfect candidate because of its alleged status as a narco-state, its links to terrorism and organized crime, and because its military weakness did not suggest a forceful response from the Bolivarian armed forces<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup>[https://historia.nationalgeographic.com.es/a/tucidides-hace-2500-anos-mas-fuertes-determinan-posible-debiles-aceptan\\_25262](https://historia.nationalgeographic.com.es/a/tucidides-hace-2500-anos-mas-fuertes-determinan-posible-debiles-aceptan_25262)

<sup>12</sup> “Trump's foreign policy behavior does not stem from doctrine, but from friction. Venezuela offered a target that was perceived as weak, morally reprehensible, geographically accessible, and manageable.” <https://warontherocks.com/2026/01/trumps-venezuelan-regime-change-why-do-people-keep-getting-him-wrong-on-foreign-policy/>

- To be able to bypass the rules of the international institutions he himself founded, demonstrating that he is not obliged to abide by laws or the principles of international law if his national interests are compromised.

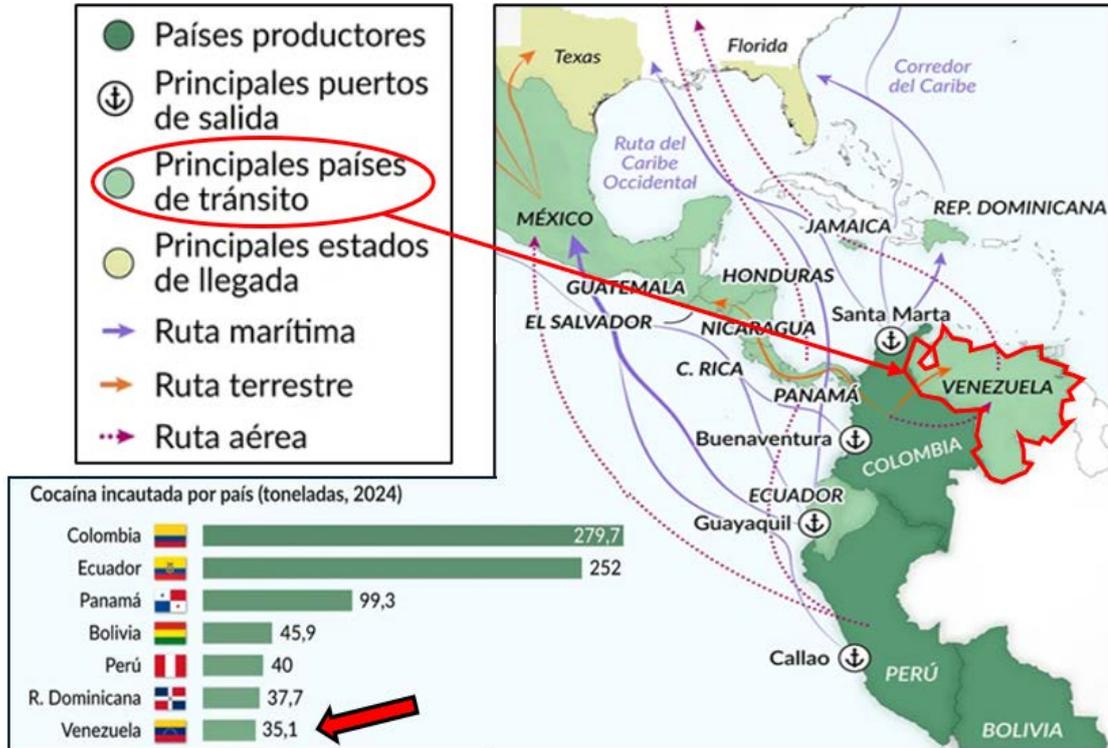


Figure 2. Drug trafficking routes to the US and Canada. Venezuela ranks seventh in terms of cocaine seizures (2024 data). It is also a transit country (not a major producer). Its main route is by air, and it does not stand out for having major ports of departure. (Source: EOM adapted)

There is little debate about the first two points, but the third point is the most controversial given the uncertainty surrounding the true nature of the US national interests that justify these latest actions.

There is much speculation about Trump's motivations for taking control of Venezuela's “heavy” oil—undoubtedly necessary for his refineries in the Gulf and to appease MAGA voters<sup>13</sup> –, but that does not justify US intervention<sup>14</sup>, given that Maduro seemed more

<sup>13</sup> Although Trump recently suggested in January 2026 that the slogan should evolve to “Keep America Great,” the movement continues to operate under the acronym MAGA (Make America Great Again).

<sup>14</sup> Most of the heavy crude oil imported by the US comes from Canada, especially since the US sanctions against Venezuela in the second decade of the 21st century. Venezuela has the largest reserves in the world, but only produces 1% of the world's oil. Any drop in fuel prices for American citizens will be modest. Furthermore, control of Venezuelan crude oil under Trump's new policies would require a multi-million-dollar investment to restore its production capacity (which would take years), and his plans are meeting with reluctance from the major oil companies. It seems more a question of acquiring the status of the world's largest “Petro state” than of obtaining practical advantages. [Las refineras de EE. UU. se beneficiarán del control de Trump sobre el petróleo venezolano - The New York Times](#)

than willing to negotiate without conditions and with bonuses the importation (or intervention) of Venezuelan oil <sup>1516</sup>.

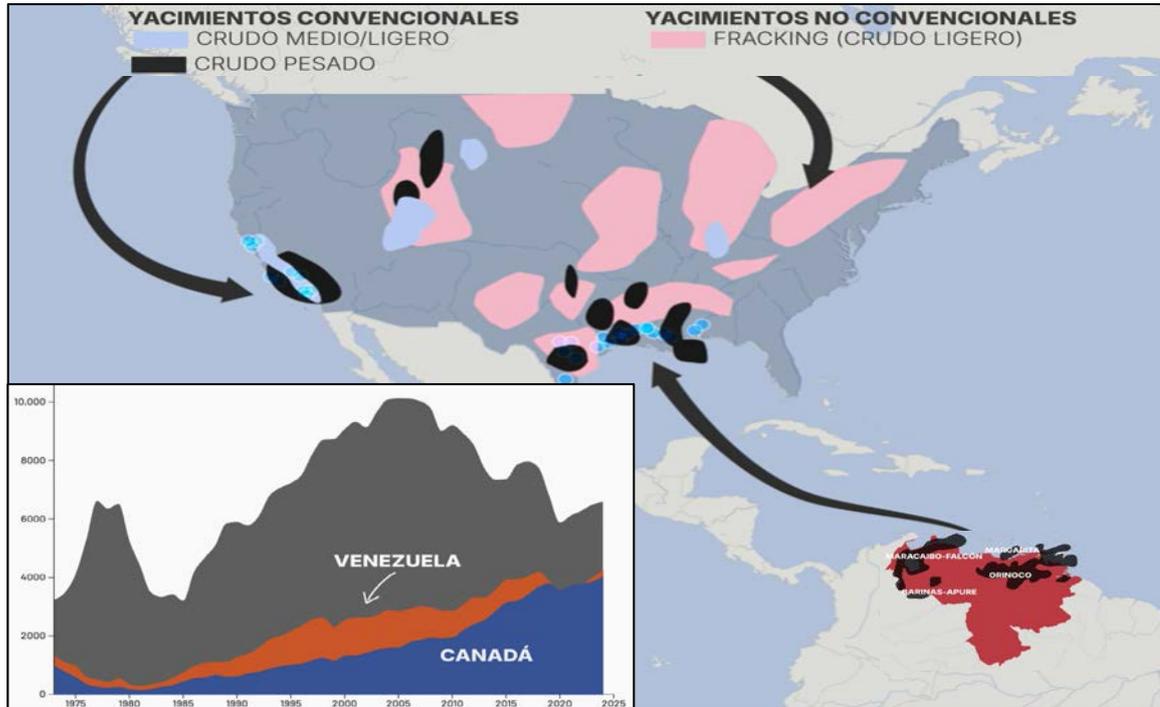


Figure 3. Main sources of heavy crude oil imports to the US (Source: El Confidencial)

Another of Trump's motivations is based on attempting to reduce the influence of Russia, China, and Iran in Latin America, and this motivation is the same one that justifies the recent threats regarding the annexation of Greenland: to prevent powers such as Russia and China from accessing natural resources and exploiting the new maritime routes offered by the Arctic.

None of these motivations suggest that the cost-benefit ratio of the use of force (or threat of force in the case of Greenland) has been consciously and strategically considered. Is it “realistic” to want to avoid or limit the influence of other powers in Venezuela or the Arctic? What actions could the US take without provoking an escalation with China and Russia (actors with a consolidated strategic presence in Venezuela and commercial ambitions in the Arctic)? Does it make sense to talk about the need for effective US control

<sup>15</sup> According to Maduro's statements: “If they want oil from Venezuela, Venezuela is ready for US investments such as with Chevron, whenever they want, wherever they want, and however they want.” <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/cn7jy8vd3rlo>

<sup>16</sup> “Venezuela's autocratic leader offered to open all existing and future oil and gold projects to US companies, grant preferential contracts, reverse the flow of Venezuelan oil exports from China to the US, and drastically reduce his country's energy and mining contracts with Chinese, Iranian, and Russian companies.” “Maduro offered oil and other resources to the US to avoid conflict – The New York Times <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2025/10/10/espanol/america-latina/maduro-diplomacia-petroleo-eeuu.html>

over Greenland, given the difficulty of extracting resources and when there is already de facto control, if not de jure? Is it worth jeopardizing the integrity and future of NATO, and therefore international security, with all these ambitions?

The closed answers to these questions give us a clue that US motivations are easier to deduce than they appear because they respond to an underlying logic of power accumulation as primitive as the beginnings of globalization, whose promising economic integration would produce new vectors of confrontation and constant power struggles throughout history. The big difference from those early days is that, in this multipolar, interconnected, borderless world, politics and power are now more than ever a matter of “perception,” and appeals to international law and respect for the “rules of the game” have become mere rhetoric.

To better understand this game of perceptions, it is worth asking, for example, why the US and Russia are the only two major powers that have recently and forcefully used their military power over other areas of sovereignty<sup>17</sup>.

The answer is simple: because the US is a great power, but it perceives that it is ceasing to be one, and Russia is not (objectively speaking<sup>18</sup>), but insists on being perceived as such.

Both motivations are based on the image that the two countries want to project and how they want to be perceived at a systemic level, and both serve to justify the use of force. If the calculations are correct, it would be China's turn to “make a move,” which, if it were to happen (for example, with more forceful actions on Taiwan), would confirm that we are in the midst of an escalation toward an inevitable confrontation sponsored by the three major powers on the world “podium.”

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<sup>17</sup> Russia has been doing this since 2008 (Georgia, Crimea, Donbas, and the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022), and the US throughout 2025: Yemen (March 15-May 6), Iran (June 22), Venezuela (beginning September 2, with more than 35 naval attacks and blockades of oil tankers), Syria and Somalia (December), Venezuela and Nigeria (January 2026).

<sup>18</sup> Losing an empire and, with it, superpower status is tough [...] [Putin] rebels against Russia's new place in the world [...] This is a country that is losing population and has an economy comparable in size to Spain's, which is heavily dependent on oil and gas. It has nuclear weapons and a large army, but it can barely afford either, with a third of the federal budget devoted to security, broadly defined [...] By objective criteria, Russia is not a great power. But Putin is determined to make it count, to make it matter more than might be inferred from this relationship between its moderate strengths and its not-so-moderate weaknesses." Galeotti, M. (2022) *We need to talk about Putin: Why the West is wrong about the Russian president*. Capitán Swing Libros (p.46)

## In conclusion

Therefore, with all of the above in mind, we see that in this new international arena, the US needs to perceive itself as the undisputed world power and export that image abroad, acting at the expense of international law and the opinion of its traditional allies. This is the only way that the US understands as truly effective in increasing its relative gains or “net” power.

However, Trump's overconfidence in his own perception of power could ultimately affect his interests and, therefore, the country's national security, as it gives him an exaggerated sense of control over events and overly optimistic expectations about the future<sup>19</sup>.

This overconfidence translates into an overestimation of the capabilities of its forces (the US is beginning to have too many fronts open); an underestimation of its potential enemies (US actions affect the interests of Russia, China, and Iran); and a likely dismissal of intelligence reports<sup>20</sup>, when he does not surround himself with those who tell him what he really wants to hear.

What Trump also fails to control is that yet another failure in Venezuela and that recurring tendency toward the “ethos” of war and the use of force are likely to impact the image he wants to project as the leading power, further damaging his credibility as a guarantor of world peace and stability.

We are not talking about the decline of a historical hegemon that increases the chances of a change in order and that this could lead us to a global war, we are talking about the real possibilities of a war that confirms that we are already in that new order.

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<sup>19</sup> On overconfidence and its impact on the outbreak of wars, we recommend reading: Johnson, D. (2004) “Overconfidence and War. The havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions”. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.