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**Building the "narco-state": media,  
international law and the war on  
drugs in Colombia and Venezuela**

## *Building the "narco-state": media, international law and the war on drugs in Colombia and Venezuela*

### *Abstract:*

*The so-called War on Drugs establishes an unequal order of violence and state control that operates with differentiated effects depending on each state's position in the political economy of drug trafficking. This article examines how this asymmetry is articulated between Colombia, Venezuela, and the United States. Colombia represents the paradigmatic case of this logic, with decades of eradication, fumigation, and military assistance backed by the United States. These measures did not sustainably reduce coca production and contributed to consolidating a structure of inequality concentrated among the most vulnerable links in the cultivation chain. Venezuela, meanwhile, represents the most recent phase of this process.*

### *Keywords:*

*War on Drugs; Cocaine Economy; Plan Colombia; Drug trafficking, Narco-state; Venezuela; United States Intervention; International Law; Media Framing.*

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**\*NOTE:** The ideas contained in the Opinion Papers shall be responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.

## Introduction

The recent capture of President Nicolás Maduro under a military operation conducted by the United States government on Venezuelan territory, and the resurgence of interventionist discourse toward the entire hemisphere, have reignited a debate that appeared relegated to the past of the Cold War. This constitutes a clear continuation of a historical pattern of intervention justified under the umbrella of the "war on drugs." The Colombian case, with decades of fumigations, joint military operations, and military assistance under Plan Colombia, demonstrates that this strategy is not new to the region. What is revealing is how Venezuela, despite its marginal role in cocaine production and trafficking toward the United States, has been progressively incorporated into this same punitive framework through narratives linking drug trafficking, terrorism, and state criminality.

In this process of threat construction, the media play a central role by framing the drug problem as an external threat emanating from the Global South, thereby contributing to the legitimization of an asymmetric distribution of state violence. This dynamic also entails tensions with international law and with the multilateral institutions designed to address the drug problem, which tend to be marginalized from the dominant public debate, even though their relevance for evaluating the legality of unilateral actions is determinative.

In both Colombia and Venezuela, the prolonged application of this strategy has failed to sustainably reduce the production or trafficking of narcotics, but has instead redistributed violence toward the most vulnerable populations in the region. This finding raises a central question: if the efficacy of this war is questionable in terms of its declared objectives, its execution contravenes the existing institutional framework, and its geographic distribution is manifestly unequal, what logic of power and what model of regional order does it serve?

## Theoretical framework

From the perspective of critical political economy, drug trafficking does not constitute an anomaly of the global economic system, but rather one of its structural expressions. Various scholars have documented how the value chains of drug trafficking reproduce logics of accumulation and externalization of risk characteristic of other global industries. As a result, the most lucrative stages (processing, distribution, and consumption) are

concentrated in the countries of the Global North, while the costs (violence, incarceration, environmental destruction) fall upon the producer and transit countries of the South.

This asymmetry is reinforced by public policies that prioritize supply-side interdiction (crop eradication, border militarization) over demand reduction. As Tokatlian<sup>1</sup> and Youngers & Rosin<sup>2</sup> have noted, the result of this approach is a redistribution of violence toward the most vulnerable populations in producer countries, without translating into a sustained reduction in the availability of drugs in consumer markets. More recently, evidence has demonstrated how forced eradication of illicit crops generates planting cycles, as farmers have no other alternatives<sup>3</sup>. Researchers have explained<sup>4</sup> how the substitution program of the 2016 peace process failed, as the resources required for crop replacement were not effective. To this day, farmers return to planting coca because it was their only stable source of income, with earnings equivalent to the minimum wage, but with the tradition of having constant buyers. Now, even that has been lost. Armed groups offer "protection," but buy irregularly and at half the price, leaving families in a desperate situation and young people vulnerable to recruitment<sup>5</sup>.

On the other hand, it is important to situate ourselves within theories of media framing and threat construction, which will allow us to deepen the analysis of the problem. The concept of framing<sup>6</sup> applied to media analysis<sup>7</sup>, allows us to examine how the media select, prioritize, and interpret events to construct representations of social reality. In the field of international security, this approach has been used to analyze how certain actors

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<sup>1</sup> TOKATLIAN, Juan Gabriel, *La guerra contra las drogas en el mundo andino: Hacia un cambio de paradigma*, Libros del Zorzal, Buenos Aires, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> YOUNGERS, Coletta A. y ROSIN, Eileen (Eds.), *Drugs and democracy in Latin America: The impact of U.S. policy*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Colombia: Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2023", UNODC, octubre de 2024, available at: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Colombia/Colombia\\_Monitoreo\\_de\\_territorios\\_afectados\\_por\\_cultivos\\_ilicitos\\_2023.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Colombia/Colombia_Monitoreo_de_territorios_afectados_por_cultivos_ilicitos_2023.pdf). Fecha de la consulta [10.04.2026].

<sup>4</sup> RUEDA, María Ana, "Coca a precio de huevo: ¿por qué un kilo ahora vale menos de 2.000 pesos?", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, agosto de 2024, available at: <https://ideaspaz.org/publicaciones/opinion/2024-08/coca-a-precio-de-huevo-por-que-un-kilo-ahora-vale-menos-de-2-000-pesos>. Accessed [10.04.2026].

<sup>5</sup> RUEDA, María Ana, "Coca a precio de huevo: ¿por qué un kilo ahora vale menos de 2.000 pesos?" op. cit. ; UNODC op.cit.

<sup>6</sup> GOFFMAN, Erving, *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*, Harper & Row, Nueva York, 1974.

<sup>7</sup> ENTMAN, Robert M., "Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm", *Journal of Communication*, vol. 43, nº 4, 1993, pp. 51-58, available at <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>.

or countries are discursively constructed as threats, thereby legitimizing coercive responses<sup>8</sup>

In the case of the war on drugs, media framing has historically contributed to externalizing the problem, presenting it as a threat originating from producer countries in the Global South<sup>9</sup>. This discursive construction ignores shared responsibilities across the drug trafficking chain, and opens the door to interventions that would be difficult to justify under any other interpretation.

The third theoretical axis is situated at the intersection of international law and international relations. The principle of sovereignty (understood as the exclusive right of each State to exercise its authority over its territory without external interference) constitutes one of the pillars of the Westphalian order and is enshrined in the United Nations Charter (art. 2.1) and in numerous conventional instruments. Its complement, the principle of non-intervention, prohibits States from interfering directly or indirectly in the internal affairs of another State, as the International Court of Justice reaffirmed in the *Nicaragua v. United States* case (1986).

However, sovereignty is "hypocritically organized"<sup>10</sup>: historically, major powers have invoked sovereign norms selectively, subordinating their application to their strategic interests. In this sense, the analysis of how the war on drugs operates at the frontier between multilateral cooperation and unilateral coercion requires attention to both the formal norms of international law and to the practices that erode them.

## Methodology

This study adopts a mixed methodological design that combines three complementary analytical strategies: media coverage analysis using GDELT data, spatial analysis of data on crops and armed groups, and examination of international legal instruments.

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<sup>8</sup> BUZAN, Barry, WAEVER, Ole and DE WILDE, Jaap, *Security: A new framework for analysis*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> REINARMAN, Craig and LEVINE, Harry G. (Eds.), *Crack in America: Demon drugs and social justice*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997.

<sup>10</sup> KRASNER, Stephen D., *Sovereignty: Organized hypocrisy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999, available at <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7s9d5>.

Media coverage is analyzed using the GDELT 2.1 Event and Discourse database, which tracks news events in media outlets worldwide and incorporates metrics on coverage volume, emotional tone, and event type. For this study, two differentiated databases were constructed through specific queries to the database. One focused on the Colombia–United States relationship regarding drugs, and another on Venezuela–United States, both corresponding to the period January 2025–January 2026.

The Colombian data extract all media events occurring in the country that explicitly link drug-related issues with U.S. actors or institutions. The identification of drug-related events was carried out through keyword filters including references to cocaine, drug trafficking, coca cultivation, eradication, fumigation, and armed groups commonly associated with the cocaine economy (e.g., FARC, ELN). To ensure the bilateral focus of the analysis, events were additionally restricted to those explicitly involving U.S. state actors or institutions (e.g., United States, DEA, State Department, White House), identified through actor country codes or name matching.

For each month, three types of information were constructed. First, the drug-related tone in Colombia–U.S. coverage was measured as the monthly average of GDELT's AvgTone indicator, capturing the emotional range of the coverage. Second, the visibility of drug-related coverage was operationalized through the number of mentions, aggregated monthly and normalized by the total coverage of Colombia, in order to obtain a relative share within national media attention. Third, events were disaggregated by the system's EventRootCode and EventCode, which allowed them to be classified into analytical categories: cooperation/accommodation, verbal conflict, force posture, physical violence, and investigation. The final dataset comprises 64 aggregated entries for Colombia in 2025, reflecting monthly variation in event types, tone, and visibility.

The Venezuelan analysis coverage is conducted through actor-based keyword filtering, capturing references to narcotics, trafficking, language associated with the "war on drugs," and narco-state discursive frameworks, in conjunction with mentions of relevant political actors, particularly Nicolás Maduro. For each month, the dataset records: the average tone of drug-related coverage; the average tone of all coverage on Venezuela; the relative share of drug coverage within total national media attention; and the distribution of reported action types through CAMEO event root codes.

It is important to note a scope limitation: the Venezuelan data must be interpreted as a record of how drugs are discussed within political media narratives, and not as an exhaustive account of criminal dynamics within the country. The analysis does not seek to measure the reality of drug trafficking in Venezuela, but rather to trace the discursive construction of that reality in the international media.

Second, there is the spatial analysis for the Colombian case. Coca cultivation data come from UNODC's SIMCI monitoring system for the period 2020–2023, disaggregated to the square kilometer level. Information on the presence of armed groups corresponds to data published by the Fundación Ideas para la Paz (FIP) for 2025. A cartographic exercise is performed in QGIS to evidence the cartographic overlap of both layers, in order to identify territorial coincidence patterns between the illicit economy and the presence of armed actors.

Finally, the legal analysis is based on the examination of relevant conventional instruments. In particular, the United Nations Charter, the United Nations Convention against the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (1988) and ICJ jurisprudence, as well as specialized doctrine in international law. The objective is to contrast formal normative frameworks with the practices described in the empirical sections.

### **Results: Colombia as Precedent — Laboratory of the War on Drugs**

Coca cultivation in Colombia has been a subject of media and political attention since the 1980s. The most recent data reveal significant transformations in its dynamics. The potential production of cocaine hydrochloride reached 3,708 tons in 2023, a 34% increase over the previous year, placing Colombia as the world's leading producer with 230,000 cultivated hectares (more than Peru and Bolivia combined)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> UNITED NATIONS OFFICE ON DRUGS AND CRIME, "Colombia: Potential cocaine production increased by 53 per cent in 2023...", Press release, UNODC, 2024.

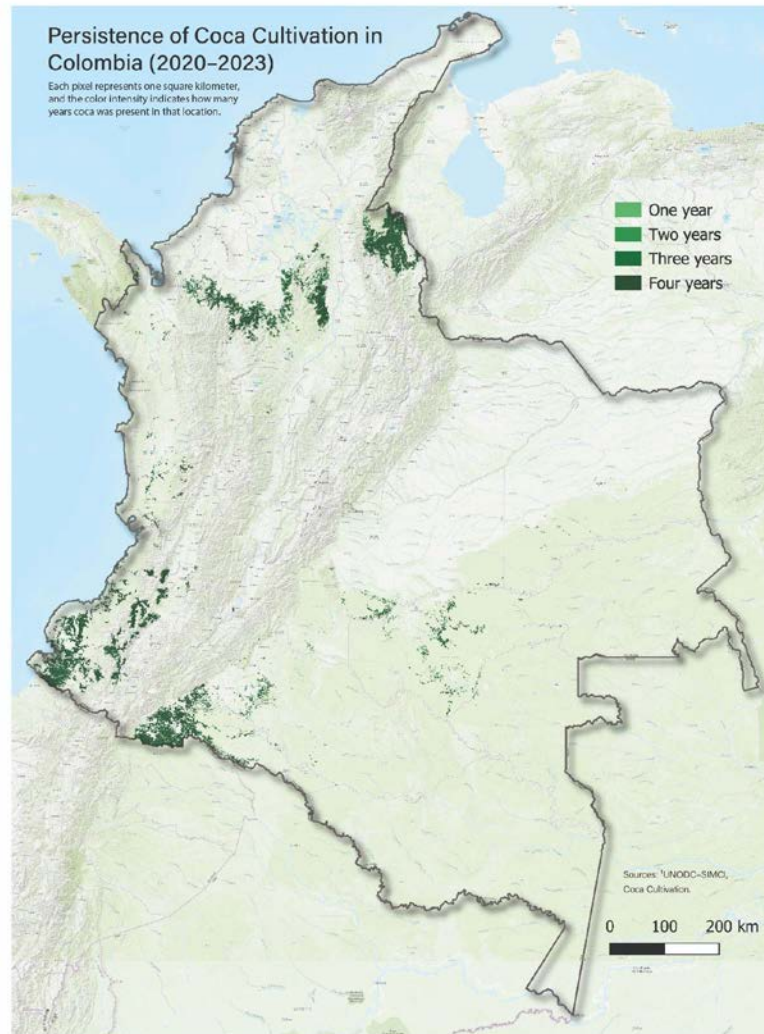


Figure 1: Persistence of coca cultivation (2020–2023). Own elaboration based on UNODC-SIMCI data (2020–2023).

The spatial analysis of cultivation persistence between 2020 and 2023 (Figure 1) reveals a structural concentration in southern departments and border zones, with patterns of four consecutive years of presence in the same territorial units. This persistence coincides with the zones of influence of the main armed organizations (FARC dissident groups, the ELN, and the Clan del Golfo), as well as with areas of limited state presence where coca is articulated with other illicit economies such as illegal gold mining and deforestation (Figure 3).

To better understand this information and the evolution of coca cultivation and the war on drugs in the country, we must go back to the beginning. In 1999, this was already a problem, with 178,000 hectares planted in the country, which is when Plan Colombia

arrived. Plan Colombia was the most important U.S.-led security plan. It was initiated in 2000 with the objective of "reducing the production and export of illegal drugs and reinforcing the counterinsurgency campaign against the FARC"<sup>12</sup>.

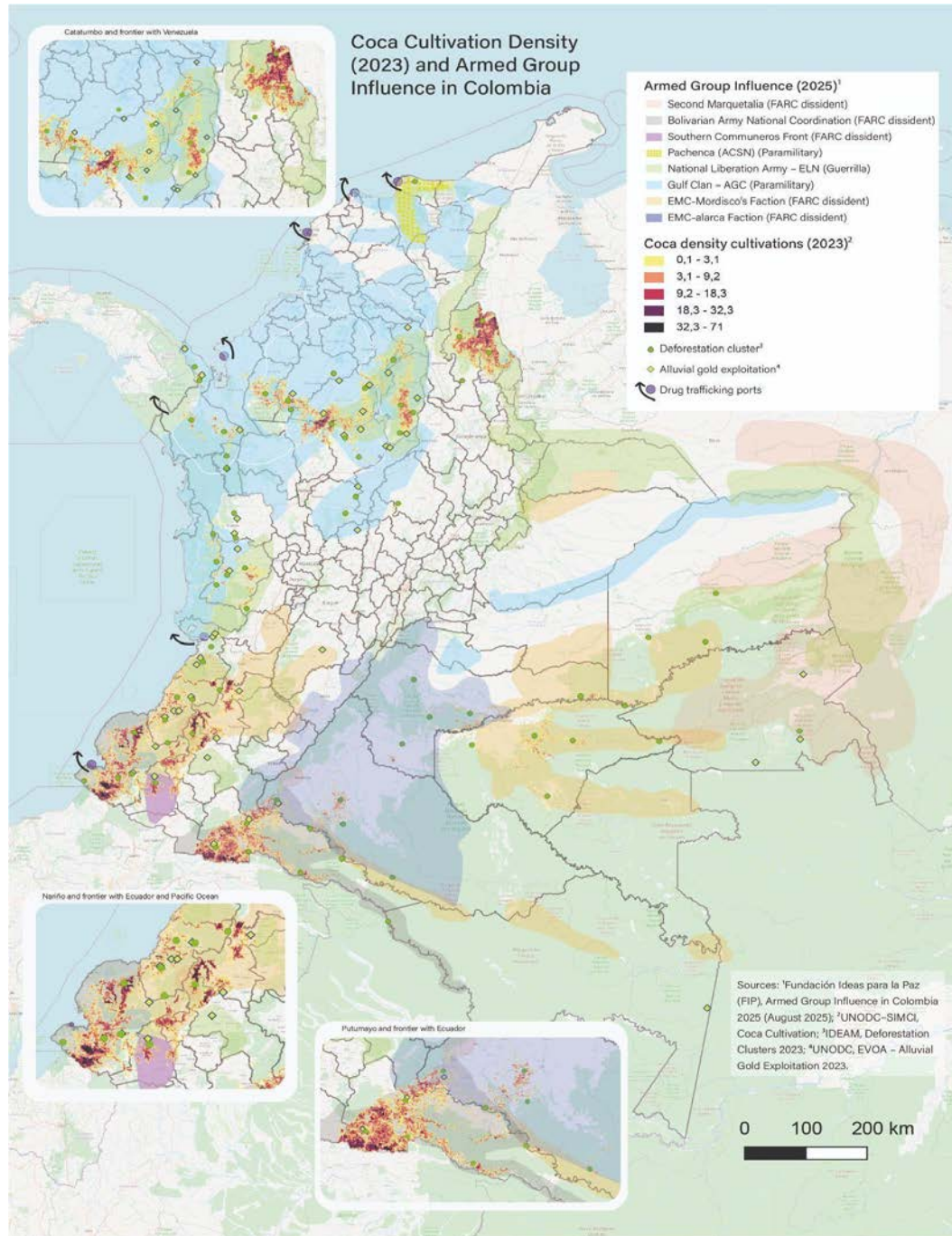


Figure 2: Density of coca cultivation (2023) and presence of armed groups (2025). Own elaboration based on data from Fundación Ideas para la Paz (FIP) (August 2025), UNODC-SIMCI, IDEAM (2023), UNODC EVOA (2023).

<sup>12</sup> CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS LEGALES Y SOCIALES (Ed.), *The internal war: How the fight against drugs is militarizing Latin America*, 1<sup>a</sup> ed., CELS, Buenos Aires, 2018. p.28

The UNODC report even links the permanence of crops with increased productivity<sup>13</sup>, noting that coca plants in these same areas produce up to 34% more coca leaves per hectare than before. The zones of influence of the main armed organizations (see Figure 3), such as FARC dissident groups, the ELN, and the Clan del Golfo (AGC), are combined with the persistence of illicit economies in areas with limited state presence and border zones. Areas with the highest concentration of coca are intertwined with other illegal income streams. It is evident how illegal gold mining generates income for the purchase of supplies, and deforestation facilitates access to illegal cattle ranching, among many other linkages and complements.

However, the current scenario has an important nuance: Colombian coca growers face the worst economic crisis in their history. This began in Catatumbo (on the border with Venezuela) in 2022, where coca leaf growers are not finding buyers for their crop, and the local economy, which depends entirely on this, suffers an unprecedented decline<sup>14</sup>. Even the United Nations World Food Programme has warned of a hunger crisis in coca-growing regions. Why? The main thesis appears to be overproduction (Colombia cultivates 230,000 hectares, more than Peru and Bolivia combined), as well as the fact that fragmented armed groups replaced the organized purchasing system of the FARC<sup>15</sup>. However, it is important to emphasize that as of this date there is no sufficiently explanatory reason for the fluctuation of coca leaf prices.

Taken together, these patterns illustrate what could be termed a double failure of the war on drugs: it does not halt production (which reached a 53% increase in 2023 according to UNODC, 2023), but it devastates the most vulnerable actors in the chain, while the most lucrative stages of the illicit business (processing, distribution, and consumption) remain largely intact.

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<sup>13</sup> UNODC, 2023, *Colombia: Monitoreo de territorios afectados por cultivos ilícitos 2023* (UNODC), 2023).

<sup>14</sup> RUEDA, María Ana, "Coca a precio de huevo: ¿por qué un kilo ahora vale menos de 2.000 pesos?", Fundación Ideas para la Paz, 2024.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibíd.*

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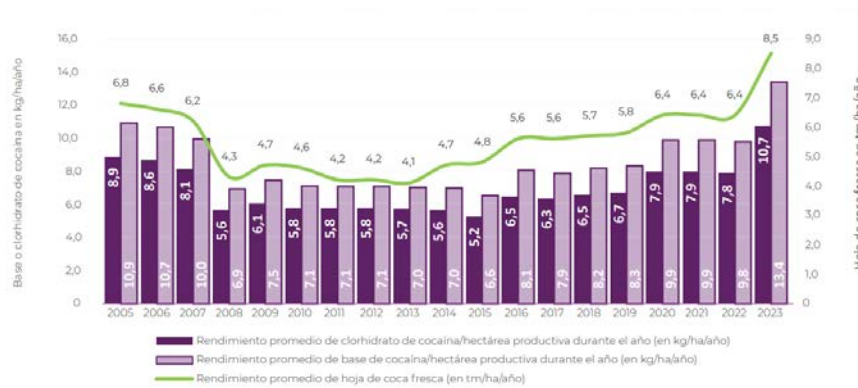


Figura 3: Average productivity of cocaine hydrochloride (2005–2024). Source: UNODC (2025)

An additional mechanism through which Washington exercises influence over Colombia's anti-drug policy is the annual certification system, whose origins trace back to the Nixon era and were formalized with the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986. This certification determines whether a government is meeting its anti-narcotics commitments and enables the imposition of economic sanctions in cases of non-compliance, generating a structure of asymmetric pressure in bilateral relations<sup>16</sup>.

In 2025, the possibility of decertification was once again raised with respect to Colombia. The U.S. government ultimately opted to grant a "national interest" waiver, which allowed Colombia to avoid immediate sanctions and continue receiving assistance, but exposed it to reputational costs in international markets and generated increased scrutiny from multilateral lenders and foreign investors.

**GDELT Data Analysis: How the Media Portray the War on Drugs in Colombia in the Past Year**

During 2025, the relationship between Colombia and the United States on drug matters returned to the center of international public debate, where anti-drug policy functioned as an instrument of diplomatic pressure. The analysis of international media coverage conducted using GDELT data reveals patterns that allow us to characterize how the "war on drugs" is publicly constructed in this context.

<sup>16</sup> WALSH, John, "U.S. drugs policy: At what cost: Moving beyond the self-defeating supply-control fixation", Washington Office on Latin America, 19 of June of 2008.

The data show that media attention was not constant, but episodic (see Figure 4). Visibility peaks were concentrated between July and November 2025, coinciding with the anti-drug certification crisis driven from Washington. The most critical moment occurred in September, when the United States decided to decertify Colombia and announced a military buildup in the Caribbean for interdiction operations: that month concentrated the highest volume of coverage and the most negative tone of the entire period analyzed (see Figure 5).

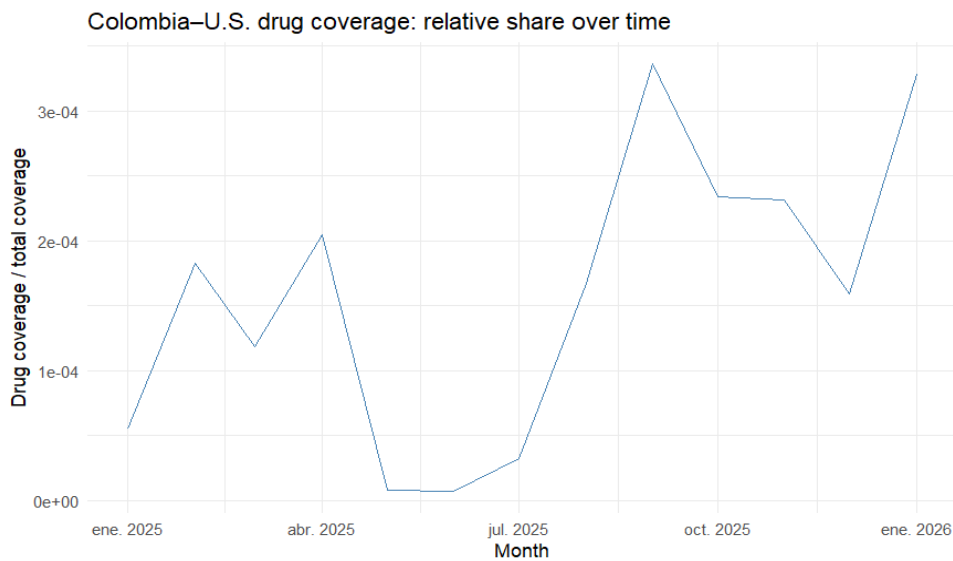


Figure 4: Media coverage on drugs Colombia-U.S.: relative share over time. Source: Own creation with GDELT media data (2025–January 2026).

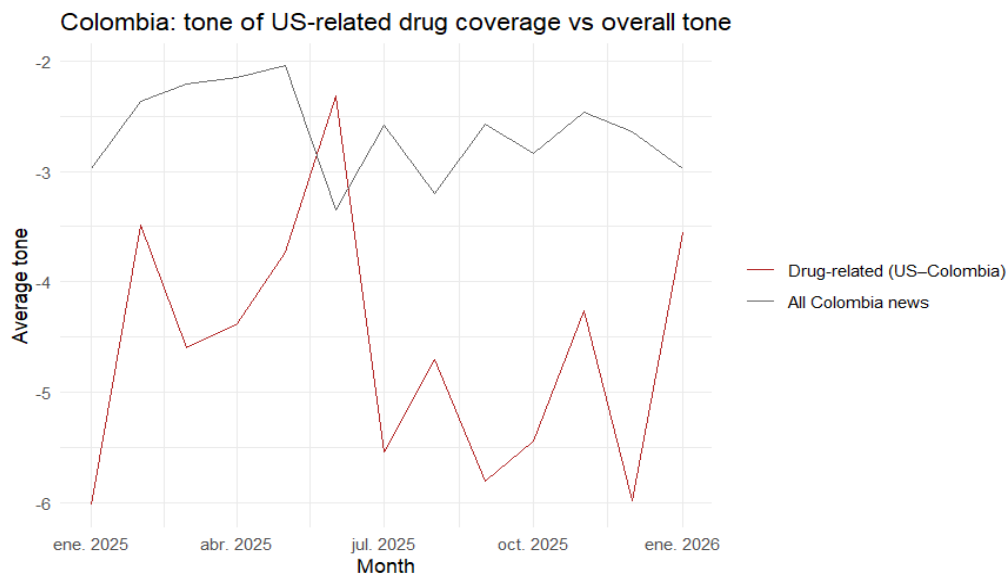


Figure 5: Tone of Colombia-U.S. drug coverage versus overall tone. Source: Own creation with GDELT media data (2025–January 2026).

With respect to the most represented event types, it is evident that cooperation and verbal conflict events appear most frequently and represent a greater proportion of media visibility (see Figure 6), while events related to investigation are infrequent and receive marginal coverage. Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that visibility is unevenly distributed across event types, and that media narratives tend to privilege the symbolic action of the State (such as cooperation announcements or verbal disputes) over sustained coverage of law enforcement practices or the structural dynamics of the cocaine economy. The evidence thus demonstrates how the escalation of diplomatic tensions around the U.S. anti-drug certification of Colombia was a relevant event that dominated media attention.

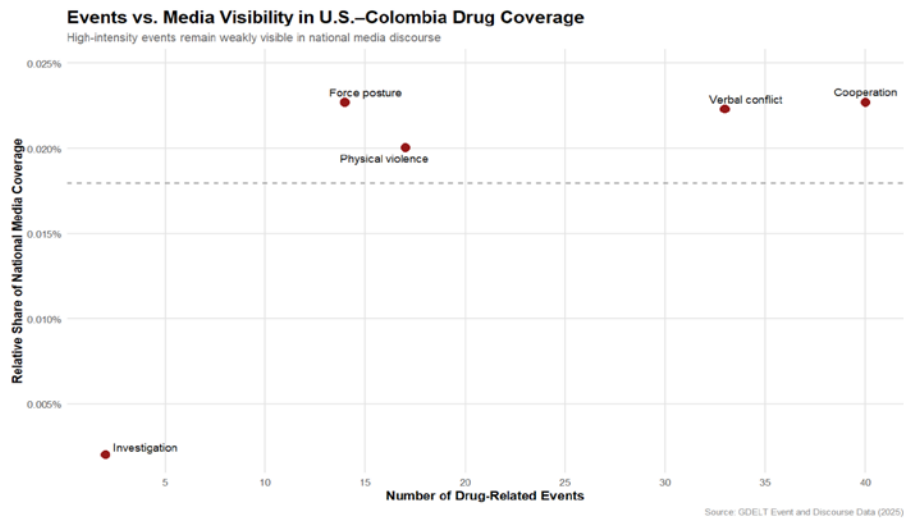


Figure 6: Types of drug-related events in U.S.–Colombia coverage. Source: Own creation with GDELT media data (2025–January 2026).

An additional relevant finding is that the only period with a relatively more positive media tone was not a response to advances in public policy, but rather to the dissemination of news about scientific research and medical uses of coca leaf derivatives. This reinforces the interpretation that the tone of coverage reflects above all the state of diplomatic relations, rather than the actual evolution of drug trafficking dynamics.

### ***Results: Venezuela as the Present and Future of the War on Drugs***

Before analyzing the media and political narrative on Venezuela, it is necessary to establish with precision what role the country plays in global drug trafficking dynamics, in order to contrast the facts with the dominant discursive framing.

UNODC's 2023 World Cocaine Report, as well as the 2025 World Drug Report, consistently situate cocaine production in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. Venezuela does not appear in these reports as a producer country, but rather as a tertiary transit route, primarily in shipments destined for Western European markets. This characterization has been taken up by specialized analysts<sup>17</sup>, who note that cocaine trafficking from Venezuela is directed primarily toward Europe, not the United States.

Additionally, the primary drug security threat to the United States during the period analyzed is not cocaine, but synthetic opioids: in 2023, these compounds account for approximately 69% of all overdose deaths in the country<sup>18</sup>. Illicitly manufactured fentanyl is primarily a North American phenomenon. It is produced and distributed in the United States-Mexico-Canada triangle, and its value chain depends far less on actors in the Global South than that of cocaine trafficking<sup>19</sup>. This gap between the real drug threat to the United States and the focus of its foreign anti-drug policy demonstrates a strategic incoherence.

### ***Analysis of International Media Coverage (Venezuela, 2025)***

Unlike the Colombian case, the media narrative on drugs in Venezuela during 2025 was not marked by debates over outcomes or cooperation, but rather by a progressive political construction of the country as an international criminal and security threat. Let us first examine the evidence in media coverage, with around 400 entries analyzed.

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<sup>17</sup> SHAMIM SARAH, "Is Venezuela the Big Cocaine Menace Trump Claims It to Be?," Al Jazeera, 2026., January 21, 2026, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/4/is-venezuela-the-big-cocaine-menace-trump-claims-it-to-be>.

<sup>18</sup> CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, "About overdose prevention", CDC, 16 of January of 2026, disponible en <https://www.cdc.gov/overdose-prevention/about/index.html>.

<sup>19</sup> FARFÁN-MÉNDEZ, Cecilia y ELIGH, Jason, "Unregulated fentanyl in North America", Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2025.

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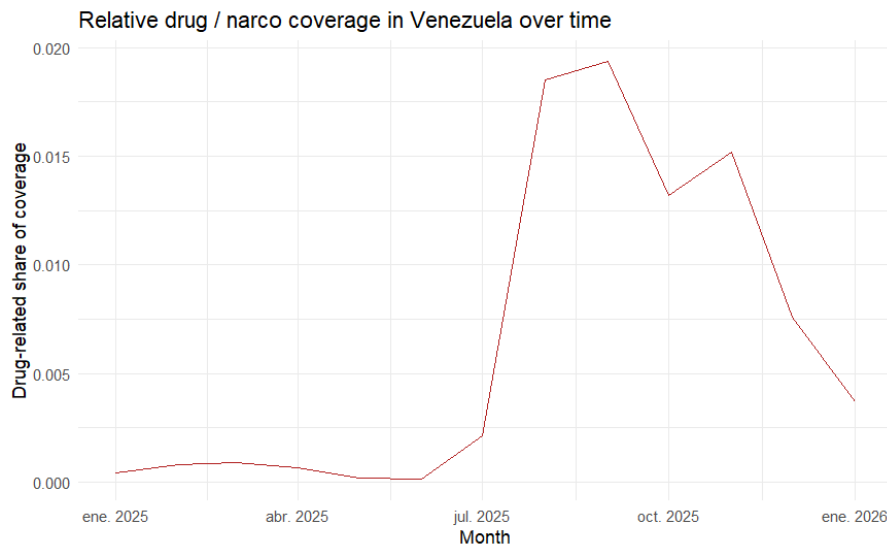


Figure 8: Relative coverage and tone in drug-related news. Source: GDELT media data (2025–January 2026).

The data show that the increase in media attention and the deterioration of tone do not respond to visible changes in drug trafficking dynamics within Venezuela, but rather to political decisions made outside the country. The inflection point occurs in June 2025, when the tone of drug-related coverage drops abruptly (see Figure 9), while coverage relative to other topics experiences an accelerated peak (see Figure 8). This moment coincides with the formal designation by the United States of the Venezuelan criminal organization Tren de Aragua as a Foreign Terrorist Organization at the beginning of the year. Subsequently, in August, the United States expanded its lists to include the Cartel de los Soles as a terrorist organization and doubled the reward for information leading to the arrest of Nicolás Maduro<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> GLOBAL CONFLICT TRACKER, “U.S. confrontation with Venezuela”, Council on Foreign Relations, 2026, available at <https://cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/instability-venezuela>.

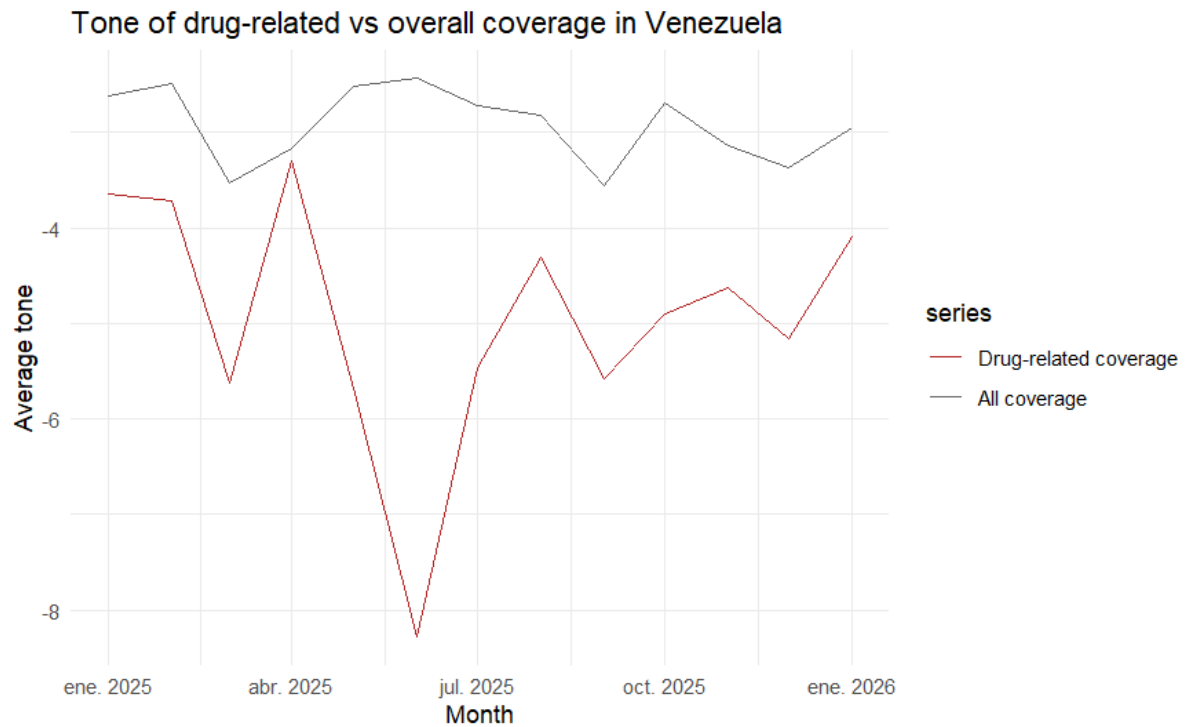


Figure 9: Tone of drug-related coverage versus overall tone in Venezuela. Source: Own elaboration with GDELT data (2025–January 2026).

The analysis of the types of events represented in the coverage shows that the vast majority are structured around public declarations, political condemnations, diplomatic disputes, and symbolic gestures. References to concrete control actions, ground-level violence, or law enforcement appear marginally. This asymmetry suggests that the drug narrative on Venezuela is constructed primarily in the discursive and geopolitical sphere, rather than on the basis of evidence concerning territorial or security dynamics.

### ***The Construction of the "Narco-State"***

The public narrative of Venezuela as a "narco-state" is articulated around reiterated elements that were cumulatively consolidated throughout 2025. A series of consecutive events can be identified to demonstrate this. First, the presentation of drug trafficking as a threat to U.S. national security, followed by the positioning of Nicolás Maduro as the ringleader of the so-called "Cartel de los Soles" allegedly linked to the Tren de Aragua<sup>21</sup>,

<sup>21</sup> WHITE HOUSE, "Invocation of the Alien Enemies Act regarding the invasion of the United States by Tren de Aragua", La Casa Blanca, 2025.

concluding with the justification of military actions through anti-drug operations in the maritime sphere and the attribution of personal responsibility to the Venezuelan government leadership.

The timeline presented in Figure 9 documents a series of U.S. attacks against vessels suspected of drug trafficking in the Caribbean and the Pacific. The U.S. government maintained that these attacks were directed against vessels linked to criminal organizations, such as the Tren de Aragua and the so-called "Cartel de los Soles,"<sup>22</sup> both designated as "Foreign Terrorist Organizations."<sup>23</sup>

In 2025, these attacks increased in number and intensity (see Figure 10), and in some cases the exact location of the operations was not even reported. Donald Trump claimed (without presenting evidence) that the actions reduced the entry of drugs into the United States by 97%<sup>24</sup>. Secretary of State Marco Rubio defended the attacks as legal and more effective than traditional interdiction<sup>25</sup>.

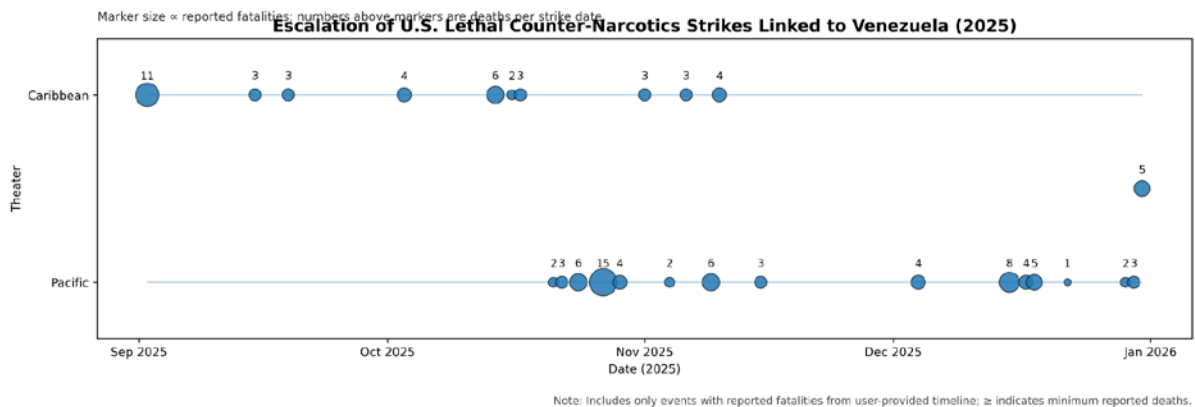


Figure 10: Events of U.S. attacks against alleged drug trafficker vessels in 2025. Source: Own elaboration with data from InSight Crime.

<sup>22</sup>Experts say that the term does not refer to a traditional cartel, but rather describes an informal network of corruption within certain sectors of the Venezuelan security forces that may facilitate illicit activities, but does not operate as a formal transnational cartel. Read more at PONS, Carlos, "¿Por qué el Cártel de los Soles no es un cártel?", *El Orden Mundial*, 9 de septiembre de 2025, available at <https://elordenmundial.com/cartel-soles-narcotrafico-venezuela/>.

<sup>23</sup> Read more at Sean Doherty, "Cronología de los ataques de EE. UU. contra presuntas embarcaciones de narcotráfico," *InSight Crime*, November 7, 2025, <https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias/cronologia-los-ataques-ee-uu-contra-presuntas-embarcaciones-narcotrafico/>.

<sup>24</sup> DOHERTY, Sean, "Cronología de los ataques de EE. UU. contra presuntas embarcaciones de narcotráfico", *InSight Crime*, 7 de noviembre de 2025, available at <https://insightcrime.org/es/noticias/cronologia-los-ataques-ee-uu-contra-presuntas-embarcaciones-narcotrafico/>.

<sup>25</sup> SHAMIM, Sarah, "Is Venezuela the Big Cocaine Menace Trump Claims It to Be?", *Al Jazeera*, 2026, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/4/is-venezuela-the-big-cocaine-menace-trump-claims-it-to-be>. Accessed 21.01.2026.

### ***Historical Continuity of the Same Doctrine***

To understand current political and military events, it is necessary to place them in the context of the long history of relations between Venezuela and the United States, marked by a logic of hemispheric influence.

Already at the end of the nineteenth century, those responsible for U.S. foreign policy considered Venezuela a key geopolitical space, describing it as the "fulcrum of the southern rim of the Caribbean." After 1898, U.S. leaders increasingly treated the region as a sphere of influence, subsequently described in political discourse as America's "backyard."<sup>26</sup> This logic became explicit under the Monroe Doctrine. During the debt crisis of 1902–1903, when European powers imposed a naval blockade, Theodore Roosevelt intervened in the nation as a method of assistance and protection of the hemisphere. This facilitated the transition from the leadership of Cipriano Castro to Juan Vicente Gómez, whom U.S. officials considered a reliable partner<sup>27</sup>. Gómez governed for twenty-seven years in a context of rapid expansion of U.S. oil companies under favorable conditions.

This pattern continued after his death and throughout the twentieth century. Although Venezuela briefly entered a democratic phase with the election of Rómulo Gallegos in 1947, a military coup in 1948 shook the country once again<sup>28</sup>. Although U.S. involvement in the coup was officially denied, Washington swiftly accepted the new dictatorship of Marcos Pérez Jiménez. His anticommunist stance and protection of oil interests aligned with U.S. priorities<sup>29</sup>.

However, the democratic system that emerged after the fall of Pérez Jiménez in 1958 was based on elite agreements and oil rents rather than on structural economic transformation. The Punto Fijo Pact stabilized elections, but preserved a rentier model dependent on oil revenues and external support. Oil thus created the illusion that political stability could substitute for economic diversification, postponing deeper

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibíd.*, p.6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibíd.* p.70.

<sup>28</sup> CORONIL, Fernando, *The magical state: Nature, money, and modernity in Venezuela*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1997.p.123

<sup>29</sup> CORONIL, Fernando, *The magical state: Nature, money, and modernity in Venezuela...op. cit*; EWELL, Judith, *Venezuela and the United States: From Monroe's hemisphere to petroleum's empire...op.cit.*

development<sup>30</sup>. This shaped the subsequent crisis that brought Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro to power. The direct loss of U.S. power over the country did not lead to disengagement from its objectives; quite the contrary. Recent interventions reactivate failed-state narratives under the war on drugs, while simultaneously prioritizing control of oil resources and maritime routes. As in previous periods, the language of security and criminality serves to justify coercive actions and external management, while democratic reconstruction remains subordinate to strategic and economic interests<sup>31</sup>.

### ***The Underlying Strategic Interests***

The analysis of the anti-drug narrative on Venezuela requires consideration of the strategic interests surrounding it, which go beyond drug control policy. Particularly worth analyzing is access to Venezuela's energy resources and competition with emerging global powers. Venezuela possesses some of the world's largest proven oil reserves, and U.S. officials have openly linked intervention objectives with the restoration and control of the country's oil infrastructure and exports<sup>32</sup>. However, given that Venezuelan oil is a heavy crude that is difficult to extract, it is important to be skeptical — and this is where we must address China.

The Trump administration's 2025 National Security Strategy revalued influence in the Western Hemisphere as a strategic advantage vis-à-vis traditional competitors such as China and Russia, actors with growing economic and political presence in Venezuela<sup>33</sup>. From this perspective, the invocation of the war on drugs in public discourse would operate as a legitimizing element of intervention, while the actual determinants of the policy would respond to a greater degree to energy and balance-of-power considerations.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibíd.*

<sup>31</sup> AP NEWS, "U.S. expands military role in Venezuela", AP News, 2026, available at <https://apnews.com/article/venezuela-us-explosions-caracas-ca712a67aaefc30b1831f5bf0b50665e>; REUTERS, "Trump says U.S. will oversee Venezuela's transition", Reuters, 2026, disponible en <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/loud-noises-heard-venezuela-capital-southern-area-without-electricity-2026-01-03/>.

<sup>32</sup> THE NEW YORK TIMES, "Trump Long Wanted to 'Take the Oil.' He Says He'll Do It in Venezuela", *The New York Times*, 3 de enero de 2026, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/03/us/politics/trump-venezuela-oil.html>. Accessed 22.01.2026.

<sup>33</sup> POQUE GONZÁLEZ, Axel Bastián, "Energy Security and the Revival of US Hard Power in Latin America", *E-International Relations*, 12 of January of 2026, available at <https://www.e-ir.info/2026/01/12/energy-security-and-the-revival-of-us-hard-power-in-latin-america/>. accessed 19/02/2026.

## Legal Analysis: The War on Drugs and International Law

The analysis of the cases studied requires examining how the described strategies interact with international law and the global drug control regime. A systematic gap is observed between the declared objectives of cooperation, shared responsibility, and sovereignty, and the unilateral and coercive practices applied in reality, generating conditions in which conventional obligations and fundamental principles of international law may be violated.

The most evident principle is that of non-intervention, recognized by the International Court of Justice, which prohibits intervening directly or indirectly in the internal or external affairs of other States<sup>34</sup>. From this standpoint, coercive sanctions, lethal attacks, and the capture of Nicolás Maduro interfere in Venezuela's internal regime and additionally trigger the prohibition on the use of force enshrined in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. Given that there is no Security Council authorization<sup>35</sup>, the United States relies on self-defense (art. 51). However, *jus ad bellum* requires the existence of an "armed attack," defined by its "scale and effects."<sup>36</sup> Drug trafficking hardly meets that threshold. States cannot justify themselves on a "drug crisis" or on the uncoordinated actions of different cartels to justify the use of force. Moreover, self-defense against non-state actors would require substantial attribution to the Venezuelan State. Even if a corrupt relationship between the South American government and the Tren de Aragua were proven, this would not suffice to justify self-defense. Consequently, U.S. self-defense claims fail to meet either of the two legal requirements: drug trafficking does not reach the scale of an armed attack, and a concrete action against U.S. sovereignty cannot be attributed to the Venezuelan State.

The alleged lack of democratic legitimacy against Maduro does not alter the analysis either: international law is based on the effective control of state power, not on diplomatic recognition<sup>37</sup>. Certainly, there is room to criticize how the current international regime

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<sup>34</sup> INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE, "Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v United States of America)", ICJ Reports 1986, paragraphs 80-85, available at <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/70>.

<sup>35</sup> ORGANIZACIÓN DE LAS NACIONES UNIDAS, "Charter of the United Nations: Chapter VII (Action in the Event of Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, or Acts of Aggression)", 26 of June of 1945, available at <https://www.un.org/es/about-us/un-charter/chapter-vii>.

<sup>36</sup> INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE, *Military and Paramilitary Activities...*, op. cit., párr. 195.

<sup>37</sup> TINOCO ARBITRATION (Great Britain v. Costa Rica), 1923, Reports of International Arbitral Awards (R.I.A.A.), vol. 1, pp. 369-399.

interprets sovereignty. Nevertheless, even the United States accepts the role of Vice President Delcy Rodríguez to continue as president in the so-called transition process<sup>38</sup>.

These law enforcement practices also strain the 1988 illicit trafficking regime, which promotes cooperation and does not authorize the unilateral use of force<sup>39</sup>. Over time, U.S. interpretations have pushed the conventional framework toward coercion and punishment. This approach imposes disproportionate burdens on producer and transit countries, while demand in consumer countries remains largely unaddressed.

This asymmetry in the application of the principle of shared responsibility — enshrined as a foundation of the international drug control regime — constitutes a normative contradiction. Consumer countries invoke the cooperation obligations of producer countries while avoiding assuming their own responsibilities in demand reduction and the control of financial flows linked to drug trafficking.

## Discussion

The results presented in the preceding sections allow for an integrated reading of the logic of the war on drugs and its implications for the international legal and political order.

First, the cases of Colombia and Venezuela show that the "war on drugs" operates less as a public health or citizen security policy than as an instrument of asymmetric geopolitical management. Colombia illustrates how decades of militarized intervention failed to reduce coca production, but instead transformed its geography and concentrated its costs on the most vulnerable populations, while the economic structures of the illicit business remained largely intact. Venezuela, by contrast, represents how the same discursive framework can be applied to a country with a marginal role in drug trafficking when there are strategic interests to justify it.

Second, the media analysis confirms that the visibility of the drug problem in international media does not correspond to the evolution of drug trafficking dynamics, but rather to Washington's foreign policy decisions. Coverage peaks are concentrated around

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<sup>38</sup> CNN, "Who Is Delcy Rodríguez, Venezuela's Leader after Maduro's Capture?", CNN, 3 de enero de 2026, disponible en <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/01/03/americas/delcy-rodriguez-venezuela-leader-atl-latam>. accessed 18.01.2026.

<sup>39</sup> TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE, "The UN drug control conventions", TNI, 2015.

sanctions, decertifications, and terrorist designations, while the realities of cultivation, trafficking, and consumption receive marginal and sustained attention. This framing pattern contributes to naturalizing intervention by presenting it as a response to verifiable external threats, when in reality the determinants of the drug crisis in the United States (fundamentally synthetic opioids) are largely domestic in origin.

Third, the legal analysis reveals that the described practices generate structural contradictions in international law. States invoke multilateral cooperation while acting unilaterally, cite conventional obligations while simultaneously violating fundamental principles of sovereignty and the prohibition on the use of force. The capture of Maduro represents the most extreme expression of this logic — an action that, under any reasonable interpretation of *jus ad bellum*, fails to satisfy the requirements of self-defense and is sustained by a "narco-state" narrative constructed through media and political means rather than on consolidated legal evidence.

Finally, the comparison of the two cases allows the identification of a logical historical continuity. In both Colombia and Venezuela, the war on drugs has functioned as a device that enables intervention, while simultaneously weakening the international legal order it claims to defend. Its asymmetric application is structural, reflecting the differentiated position of actors in the global political economy and in the power hierarchy of the international system.

## **Conclusión**

The principal contribution of this article lies in two parts. First, in its empirical findings taken separately — such as the ineffectiveness of eradication in Colombia, the discursive construction of the Venezuelan "narco-state," or the tensions with international law. Second, in the articulated reading of these findings, where the three phenomena are expressions of a single logic that uses drug control as a basis for geopolitical intervention. This is not evident when each case is studied in isolation, and constitutes the contribution that this mixed analysis — media-based, spatial, and legal — seeks to offer.

The analysis has limitations that should be acknowledged. GDELT coverage overrepresents Anglophone media and sources with high online presence, which may bias the tone toward frames produced in the countries of the Global North. The

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Venezuelan corpus, in particular, captures political narratives rather than on-the-ground drug trafficking dynamics, and cannot substitute for ethnographic or intelligence-based studies that access the actual structure of illicit flows. The legal analysis, for its part, is confined to doctrinal argumentation and does not incorporate interviews with legal practitioners or analysis of state practice in multilateral forums. These limitations clearly suggest that the findings should be read as interpretive hypotheses, and not as definitive verdicts.

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