Maduro Gone: Impacts on Russia, China & Iran

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The Consequences of Maduro's Ousting on Russia, China, and Iran

Introduction

American forces started the year off with a standard for lightning operations on foreign soil. While Russian forces have failed to establish aerial dominance and decapitate their enemy's government across four years, United States forces disabled key elements of Venezuela's air defences in an oper-

ation that culminated in the capture of its president, Nicolás Maduro. This has resulted in the symbolic and strategic loss of a partner for Russia and China, the security and economic ramifications of which will be discussed in this brief. The ousting of Maduro reveals a spectacle whose operational success is somehow overshadowed by the lightning reorganization of great power calculation in a multipolar world.

Effects on Russia

Military Weakening of Russia's Sphere of Influence

Russia has suffered a major military-strategic setback as a result of the U.S. intervention in Venezuela, which also shows how Moscow's sphere of influence is gradually eroding outside of its immediate neighborhood. For a considerable amount of time, Venezuela served as Russia's most prominent strategic base in the Western Hemisphere, signifying Moscow's capacity to extend its influence into the conventional sphere of influence of the United States. The swift apprehension of Nicolás Maduro by U.S. special forces in the absence of significant Russian opposition highlights the extent to which the conflict in Ukraine has limited Moscow's capacity to defend its international allies.

Through arms sales, military cooperation, and symbolic power projection, Russia developed Venezuela as a strategic ally for over ten years. Moscow organized high-profile deployments, such as the 2018 deployment of Tu-160 strategic bombers to Caracas, and supplied cutting-edge weapons, including air defence systems. The goal of these moves was to demonstrate Russia's resurgence as a major world power that could rival American hegemony even in the Western Hemisphere. But as the U.S. operation in Venezuela in January showed, this presence proved largely symbolic. Russian air defences were unable to defend Maduro during the operation, and Russian military forces in Venezuela were unable to thwart or complicate American action. Both abroad and within Russia, the disparity between symbolic deployments and actual military effectiveness has not gone unnoticed.

Russia's subdued reaction emphasizes even more how unreliable it is as a security guarantee. The Kremlin itself was noticeably silent, despite the regular diplomatic protests and calls for dialogue from the Russian Foreign Ministry. This moderation is part of a larger trend seen in Syria, Iran, and now Venezuela: Moscow is being compelled more and more to put its war effort in Ukraine ahead of its obligations elsewhere. Given Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, providing Maduro with military support would have required long-distance force projection into an area dominated by U.S. naval and air power, an undertaking well beyond Russia's current operational capacity. Felix Riefer, a political scientist, notes,

"Russia has lost Armenia, Syria and now Venezuela. Russia's international position is weakening noticeably as it escalates its war against Ukraine and lacks the resources to maintain such relationships."

The loss of Venezuela comes after a string of setbacks that collectively erode Russia's standing internationally. Despite Tehran's material support for Russia's war effort, Moscow did not intervene on Iran's behalf, failed to stop the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, and now stood aside as its closest Latin American ally was eliminated. When combined, these examples show a pattern of selective disengagement motivated by necessity rather than just strategic choice. Russia's aspirations for the world are becoming more ambitious than its financial and military capabilities. In areas like Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East, where Moscow has made significant investments in fostering anti-Western alliances, this undermines Russia's credibility with both present and potential allies.

Precedent Works in Russia's Favor

The U.S. intervention in Venezuela and the capture of President Nicolás Maduro have inadvertently strengthened Russia's ability to legitimize its war in Ukraine by reinforcing the logic of great-power spheres of influence. Moscow has long argued that Ukraine falls within its strategic neighborhood and that external interference justifies military action. Washington's unilateral use of force in the Western Hemisphere now mirrors this reasoning and weakens Western claims to moral and legal consistency.

Russian officials have seized on the precedent. While formally condemning the U.S. operation as a violation of sovereignty, Kremlin figures simultaneously praised its clarity in defending national interests, underscoring the belief that power, rather than international law, determines legitimacy.

More broadly, the Venezuela operation signals a return to sphere-of-influence politics, in which the U.S. prioritizes dominance in its own hemisphere while showing reduced willingness to enforce norms elsewhere. This vision aligns closely with Russia's preferred international order and risks granting Moscow greater freedom of action in Eastern Europe. As Time commentators have warned, if Washington claims the right to impose outcomes in Latin America, it provides Moscow with a ready-made justification to assert the same logic in Ukraine.

Economic Effects

The U.S. capture of Nicolás Maduro is economically unfavorable for Russia, primarily through its implications for global oil markets and sanctioned export mechanisms. Moscow risks losing long-standing investments in Venezuela's oil sector and outstanding loans tied to arms sales. More importantly, the prospect of U.S. influence over Venezuelan oil production raises concerns in the Kremlin about sustained downward pressure on global oil prices. Given already soft markets and reports of Russian oil selling at sharply discounted rates, even a gradual reintroduction of Venezuelan crude could further constrain Russian export revenues and fiscal capacity.

A second key concern is enforcement against Russia's so-called "shadow fleet," which has been instrumental in circumventing sanctions on Russian oil exports. U.S. naval interdictions linked to Venezuela could serve as a testing ground for broader action against these networks, increasing transport costs, insurance risks, and uncertainty for Russian energy trade. While volumes alone may not dramatically shift global supply, enhanced U.S. control over shipping routes and legal pressure at sea would disproportionately affect Russia's ability to monetize its hydrocarbons under sanctions.

A third, longer-term, strategic risk for Moscow lies in the erosion of its geopolitical leverage rather than direct oil access. Russia does not need Venezuelan crude for its own energy balance. Instead, Venezuela functioned as a political and logistical asset in the Western Hemisphere. A successful U.S. reorientation of Venezuela's oil sector would weaken Russia's role as a sanctions-evasion partner and reduce its capacity to use energy diplomacy as a tool of influence, while simultaneously reinforcing U.S. leverage over pricing dynamics that are critical to Russia's wartime economy.

Effects on China and Iran

Venezuela as the Trigger for Eurasian Repositioning

With Maduro gone and the regime's financial networks under threat, China loses a friendly government and the institutional machinery that sustained its oil inflows. Chinese imports of Venezuelan crude oil had declined prior to the intervention due to hardened American measures on capturing oil vessels in the Caribbean. While this oil is illegal under American sanctions, their strategic value remained nonetheless. The sudden termination of China's oil relationship to Venezuela deprives China of a sanctioned and flexible energy source that proved resilient in the face of Western pressure. American pressure on Venezuela forces China to compete in an already tight global market, increasing the costs of oil imports and redirecting its dependence on regions where American naval dominance remains decisive. This loss matters less for the Americas than for China's Eurasian posture. By narrowing China's external energy options, the successful operation in Venezuela frees up American naval and military resources to the Persian Gulf, Black Sea, Indian Ocean, and Indo-Pacific regions – precisely the regions where Iran, Russia, and China feel U.S. pressure the strongest.

Implications for Iran and Its Security

This is where the intervention intersects with broader patterns involving Iran and Hezbollah as well. Venezuela under Maduro had become a permissive environment for the Chinese, Russian, Iranian networks, and Hezbollah-linked financial and logistical operations. These relationships were mutually reinforcing. Iran gained an outsized platform in the Western Hemisphere to circumvent sanctions and threaten American security; Hezbollah expanded illicit finance; and China benefited from a regime

willing to continue opaque transactions by defying Western pressure. The U.S. operation disrupts this entire ecosystem, thereby limiting anti-American resources in Eurasia.

By dismantling this relationship, Washington weakens Iran's external platforms for sanctions evasion and reduces the geographic reach of its illegal networks. This matters the most in the Middle East, where Iran remains heavily constrained by financial pressure and dependent on proxy groups to sustain its regional strategy and influence. The loss of Venezuela narrows Iran's operational capabilities and increases its reliance on already limited Eurasian partners, as Russia remains busy, Israel weakens Iranian proxy groups, and American diplomacy has gotten footholds over the Caucasus and Central Asia.

This has implications for China and Russia's relationships with Iran as well. China is Iran's biggest import partner, and Russia gained a lot of drones from Iran. Venezuela serves as a precedent where Washington is willing to remove leaders who facilitate sanctions evasion and actively oppose the U.S. While Iran is far more militarily capable and geopolitically central than Venezuela, the signal nonetheless stands. As a matter of fact, Iran became a brief topic of conversation after Maduro's capture as protests threatened Tehran's grip on the country. With this in mind, the vulnerability of China's sanctioned energy strategy and support to anti-American states lies exposed. Simultaneously, Iran's future security remains uncertain.

The loss of a crisis in Venezuela also deprives Russia and China of a valuable diversionary asset. Like Russia, China has benefitted from the existence of strategic irritants close to the United States that consume political and militaristic attention. Venezuela served this role by hosting adversarial powers, supporting anti-American rhetoric, and creating the latent possibility of a military crisis in the Caribbean. The removal of that problem (at least for now) simplifies the U.S. security environment in the hemisphere and allows Washington to reallocate its attention and resources towards the Indo-Pacific, Persian Gulf, and Arctic Sea, where China represents the primary threat, followed by Russia and Iran.

Conclusion: Consequences for Eurasia

The ousting of Maduro reveals a very dynamic environment where great powers have the ability to reorient the strategic calculus for others in a matter of hours. Whether that change is for the strategic benefit of a great power is a different matter, but Venezuela nonetheless offered a great case to see how Russia, China, and Iran are affected. By examining the military situation of the American intervention, and the three states' losses and benefits, the United States has shown its willingness to throw around its weight.

In this sense, the intervention reinforces a broader conclusion suggested by earlier analysis. While Russia suffers a visible erosion of influence and

credibility, China experiences a quieter and equally damaging form of attrition: the steady removal of the economic and peripheral advantages that supported its long-term rise. The operation in Venezuela strengthens the logic of great-power spheres of influence described earlier, but in a way that disproportionately benefits the United States. By reasserting dominance in its own hemisphere, Washington weakens adversarial footholds and frees itself to act in more important regions of the world.

Taken together, the removal of Maduro reduces the capacity of external powers to challenge the United States near its borders, disrupts their access to resources that sustained their competition, and reinforces a world in which proximity to American power once again imposes decisive limits. In that sense, the intervention in Venezuela represents a great military and symbolic embarrassment for Russia, and the limits of how much evasion China can get away with when compared to American capacities.

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