Spheres of Influence Reborn

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The capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro by U.S. forces in January 2026 marks one of the most consequential moments for American foreign policy in decades. Although a corrupt dictator strongly disliked by the people of Venezuela, Maduro was nevertheless a sitting head of state who was abducted by a foreign military to stand trial in their domestic courts. The Trump Administration framed the operation as a victory for justice and regional security, yet the broader context suggests something far more significant: a deliberate shift toward a foreign policy based on spheres of influence, unilateral action, and openly transactional power.

Justice as pretext: The inconsistencies of the narrative

The administration justified the operation primarily by citing Maduro's alleged involvement in drug trafficking. That justification rings hollow. Only weeks earlier, President Trump pardoned Juan Orlando Hernández, the former President of Honduras, who had been convicted in U.S. courts and sentenced to 45 years in prison for facilitating large-scale cocaine trafficking into the United States. If narcotics crimes warrant regime change in Venezuela, pardoning Hernández undermines any claim of consistency or principle. Drug enforcement appears less like a guiding rationale than a convenient narrative.

On the other hand, there are clear economic motivations for American intervention in Venezuela. Trump stated plainly that the United States wants access to Venezuela's oil. Venezuela possesses the world's largest proven oil reserves, nationalized under Hugo Chávez in the mid-2000s and largely kept out of American corporate reach since. With energy prices politically salient at home and Republican prospects for the 2026 midterms tied closely to economic performance, access to Venezuelan oil offers both material and electoral incentives.

The broader framework for understanding this moment is the administrations rejection of the United States as a global hegemon in favor of a world divided into spheres of influence. Latin America, under what critics have called the "Donroe Doctrine," is treated as a zone of exclusive U.S. authority. Within that logic, intervention is not an aberration but an instrument. Venezuela is simply the most dramatic, and first, example so far.

Greenland and the geography of power

The Donroe Doctrine helps explain why, almost immediately after Maduro's capture, the Trump administration revived its interest in Greenland with Secretary of State Marco Rubio suggesting the U.S. purchase the land. The President reasserted that the United States "needs" Greenland for national security, citing China and Russia as threats, and even refusing to rule out military force in an unconvincing argument for national security.

The U.S. already maintains access to Greenland through long-standing defense agreements with Denmark and operates Pituffik Space Base, currently staffed by roughly 150 U.S. personnel. Danish and Greenlandic authorities have repeatedly stated that they would welcome an expanded U.S. military presence within the NATO framework. All this reveals that if security were the true objective, annexation would be unnecessary.

The claim that Greenland is needed as a hedge against Russia is particularly difficult to reconcile with Trump's broader hegemonic posturing. Trump has consistently praised Vladimir Putin and taken an excessively accommodating stance toward Moscow, particularly within the context of the Russio-Ukraine war. Against this backdrop, the idea that Russia suddenly constitutes a pressing Arctic threat that requires territorial acquisition holds

no credibility. Greenland appears less as a strategic necessity than as a symbol of power and leverage.

Regional reactions and the fear of precedent

Reactions in Latin America to the Maduro operation also reveal serious concerns. In Mexico, President Claudia Sheinbaum has tried to foster positive relations with Trump in hopes of avoiding U.S. military intervention against drug cartels and economic concessions with CUSMA re-negotiations on the horizon. Colombia's President Gustavo Petro condemned the action as a violation of international law and warned against a return to unilateral interventionism. Cuba denounced the operation as brute aggression and accused Washington of destabilizing the region. These responses reflect not ideological alignment with Maduro, but fear of precedent. If Venezuela can be subjected to regime change by force, other governments worry they may not be immune.

On the domestic level, protests have been held across Latin America in opposition to the operation and Trump's proposed next steps. In Havana, demonstrators protested Trump's claim that Venezuela would no longer supply Cuba with oil which could have catastrophic impacts on an already fraught economy. Similarly in Mexico, a growing anti-imperialist movement has mobilized in major cities like Puebla and Mexico City. Significant to note is that protests are not necessarily about the removal of Maduro as a leader, but rather about Latin American sovereignty and concerns over the future. Those fears are reinforced by rhetoric from Washington. Trump and senior officials have openly criticized Cuba and Colombia, and Trump has threatened further intervention if governments in the region defy U.S. expectations. On January 23, the U.S. House shut down a resolution that would have barred Trump from further military action in Venezuela without Congress approval, leaving the door open to further unilateral military action. Regardless of whether such threats are credible or not, they contribute to a climate of uncertainty and mistrust.

Meanwhile, Latin America waits with bated breath to see when the next hammer falls on their independence. When the United States openly disregards sovereignty and international law, it weakens the very norms it has historically claimed to defend. Russia can point to Venezuela as evidence that borders and governments are negotiable when power allows. China may draw similar conclusions regarding Taiwan. Even if Washington insists that its actions are exceptional, the precedent is set. Whether this approach ultimately strengthens American power or accelerates the erosion of the international order remains an open question. What is clear is that the consequences will extend far beyond Venezuela.