

US-Venezuela Crisis (January 2026)): Operation Absolute Resolve

1. Introduction

In **January 2026**, the **United States** conducted a **direct military operation in Venezuela**, codenamed **“Operation Absolute Resolve”**, resulting in the **capture of President Nicolás Maduro, First Lady Cilia Flores, and senior officials**. This marked **one of the most explicit US military interventions in Latin America in recent decades**, signalling a **revival of the Monroe Doctrine** in a contemporary strategic context.

The operation has **far-reaching implications** for:

- International law and sovereignty
- Great power competition
- Energy geopolitics
- India's foreign policy and strategic autonomy

2. Background: Venezuela's Prolonged Crisis

(a) Political Crisis

- Nicolás Maduro assumed power in **2013** after Hugo Chávez.
- Repeated allegations of **authoritarianism, electoral manipulation, and democratic backsliding**.
- **2024 Venezuelan elections** were widely questioned; the US and over **50 countries withdrew recognition** of Maduro.

(b) Economic Collapse

- Hyperinflation, currency collapse, and sanctions.
- Nearly **8 million Venezuelans migrated**, creating one of the largest displacement crises globally.
- Oil production fell from:

- **3.5 million barrels/day (1990s)**
- to **~900,000 barrels/day (2025)**

(c) Strategic Dependence

- Maduro regime survived through:
 - Military loyalty
 - Support from **Cuba, China, and Russia**
 - Oil-for-loan arrangements, especially with China

3. Operation Absolute Resolve: What Happened?

- **Date:** 3 January 2026
- **Target:** Miraflores Palace, Caracas
- **Action:** US Special Operations Forces extracted:
 - President Nicolás Maduro
 - First Lady Cilia Flores
 - Senior regime officials

Casualties

- Over **80 casualties** reported.
- **32 Cuban military personnel** killed (Cuban forces were providing security assistance).

US Justification

- Based on **narco-terrorism charges** filed earlier by the US Department of Justice.
- Allegations that the Venezuelan state was complicit in **drug trafficking networks**.

4. Strategic Rationale Behind US Intervention

4.1 Revival of the Monroe Doctrine

Monroe Doctrine (1823)

- Declared the **Western Hemisphere off-limits to European powers**.
- Emphasised **non-colonisation and non-interference**.

Evolution

- **Roosevelt Corollary (1904):**
 - Justified US intervention as an “international police power”.
- **Cold War:** Used to counter Soviet influence (Cuba, Nicaragua).
- **Post-Cold War:** Largely dormant.

“Trump Corollary” (2025-26)

- Reasserts US primacy in the Americas.
- Seeks to **deny strategic space to China and Russia**.
- Frames intervention as a **security necessity**, not regime change.

4.2 Countering China and Russia

- China is:
 - Venezuela’s **largest oil buyer** (~80%)
 - Major investor under **Belt and Road Initiative**
- CNPC is the **largest foreign operator** in Venezuela’s oil sector.
- Russia and Cuba provide:
 - Military training
 - Intelligence support

→ **US perceives Venezuela as a strategic outpost of rival powers** in its traditional sphere of influence.

4.3 Oil and Energy Geopolitics

- Venezuela holds **over 300 billion barrels of proven crude oil reserves** (~17–20% of global reserves).
 - Trump publicly demanded the return of “**stolen American oil assets**”.
 - US aims to:
 - Reduce dependence on Middle Eastern oil
 - Limit China’s energy access
 - Reinsert US oil companies into Venezuela
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4.4 Narco-Terrorism Narrative

- US indicted Maduro for:
 - Drug trafficking conspiracy
 - Using state infrastructure for narcotics trade
- Framed Venezuela as:
 - A **state-sponsored narco-terrorist entity**
 - Linked to US domestic drug crisis (fentanyl)

→ This narrative provided **legal and political cover** for intervention.

5. International Law and Legal Controversies

5.1 UN Charter Provisions

- **Article 2(4)**: Prohibits use of force against another state.
- **Article 51**: Allows self-defence only in case of armed attack.
- **UNSC Authorisation**: No explicit Security Council approval obtained.

US Argument

- Claims self-defence against **state-linked narco-terrorism**.
- Argues that since the US does not recognise Maduro as legitimate, **sovereignty protections are weakened**.

Criticism

- ICJ precedent favours **strict interpretation** of self-defence.
- Narco-terrorism does **not clearly meet the armed attack threshold**.

6. Regional and Global Reactions

- **Latin America:** Mexico, Colombia, Cuba expressed concern over sovereignty erosion.
- **Global South:** Fear of precedent for unilateral intervention.
- **Multipolar Order:** Raises questions about selective application of international law.

7. India's Position on the Crisis

Official Response (4 January 2026)

- Expressed **“deep concern”**
- Emphasised:
 - Peaceful dialogue
 - Well-being of Venezuelan people
 - Respect for sovereignty

Consistency with India's Foreign Policy

- Non-intervention
- UN Charter principles
- Strategic autonomy

8. Impact of the Conflict on India

8.1 Trade and Economy

- Minimal impact:
 - India-Venezuela trade already reduced due to sanctions.

- Exports in FY2025: **USD 95.3 million** (mainly pharmaceuticals).

8.2 Energy Security

- Oil imports declined by **81.3% in FY2025**.
- Short-term impact negligible.
- Long-term possibility:
 - Sanctions easing could allow discounted Venezuelan crude
 - Enhances diversification and bargaining power

8.3 Strategic Autonomy Challenge

- India must balance:
 - Partnership with the US
 - Solidarity with Global South norms
 - Opposition to unilateral regime change

9. Venezuela: Strategic and Geographical Importance (Prelims Ready)

- Location: Northern South America
- Borders: Colombia, Brazil, Guyana
- Capital: Caracas
- Resources: Oil, gas, gold, iron ore
- OPEC founding member
- Key features:
 - Orinoco River
 - Lake Maracaibo
 - Andes Mountains
 - Angel Falls (world's highest waterfall)

- Territorial dispute: **Essequibo region with Guyana**

10. Conclusion

The **US military intervention in Venezuela** represents a **decisive revival of the Monroe Doctrine** under a new strategic framework. While the US justifies its action through **security, narcotics control, and democratic restoration**, the operation raises **serious concerns about sovereignty, international law, and global power asymmetries**.

For **India**, the episode reinforces the importance of:

- Strategic autonomy
- Multilateralism
- Peaceful conflict resolution

In a **multipolar world**, such unilateral actions risk undermining global stability and the credibility of international legal norms.

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