

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

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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