

U.S. Military Buildup in the Caribbean Demands Congressional Action

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Overview

Since early September, the United States has been building up military forces in the Caribbean and has conducted at least 15 strikes on small craft allegedly used by narcotics traffickers, killing more than 60 people.

The size of the buildup indicates that the military will likely be used for a larger mission than counter-drug strikes on small boats. With the recent deployment of the USS *Gerald Ford* carrier strike force, there are now more than a dozen large naval warships, more than 10,000 U.S. military personnel, and substantial air assets in the region. This is the largest U.S. military buildup in the Caribbean since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

The larger mission is likely intended to destabilize the government of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and potentially to remove him from power. In a recent [60 Minutes interview](#), President Donald Trump refused to confirm that the United States would conduct strikes inside Venezuela, but he indicated that Maduro's days are "numbered." The United States has offered a \$50 million reward for Maduro's capture and claims Maduro leads a narcotics cartel.

The U.S. operation in the Caribbean and its potential expansion to Venezuela raises many issues that should concern every American. These include:

- **The illegal use of military force by President Trump.** The Constitution reserves the power to declare war to Congress, but these military strikes are being conducted without congressional authorization. The Trump administration is

apparently claiming that the president's powers as commander in chief of the armed forces under Article II of the Constitution permit him to arbitrarily use lethal military force, based on his own personal judgment of a threat to the United States. This approach risks uncontrolled authority to unleash the military on any perceived enemy the president chooses.

- **A U.S. effort to overthrow Maduro by force could unleash chaos in Venezuela and the region, with unpredictable costs to the United States.** Venezuela's 2024 election showed that Maduro is an authoritarian leader who is not supported by the majority of the population. However, his government controls a significant military force, there are multiple other armed groups within Venezuela, and some popular support remains for *Chavismo*, the revolutionary movement that Maduro represents. It is highly unlikely that the entire population of Venezuela — some 30 million, which is larger than Iraq's was in 2003 — would simply accede to a new U.S.-backed government. Trump has also called President Gustavo Petro of neighboring Colombia (with a population of 50 million) an "illegal drug leader," raising the risk of broader regional fallout and further military operations. A situation where Venezuela lapses into complete anarchy or civil war and becomes a supersized Libya in the Western Hemisphere would be enormously destructive to U.S. interests.
- **The use of military force against Venezuela is an ineffective and unjustified way to address drug trafficking.** Venezuelan drug trafficking is

not a significant threat to the United States. The Trump administration's own 2025 National Drug Threat Assessment did not find a major role for Venezuela as a drug supplier to the United States, identifying Mexico as the primary source of opiates and Colombia as the primary source of cocaine. Although Venezuela may be a transshipment point for cocaine, no credible sources find it is a supplier of the opiates that cause the vast majority of U.S. narcotics fatalities. Beyond this, narcotics trafficking is fundamentally a law enforcement issue that will be most effectively pursued through the careful gathering of evidence and the use of police powers to dismantle criminal organizations and interdict proven supply.

Congress should assert its authority over war and peace to signal that there are limits to presidential military authority and to head off the worst outcomes that could result from a regime-change operation in Venezuela.

Discussion

Illegal Use of Military Force

To prevent the president from arbitrarily using his commander-in-chief powers to wage war without the consent of the public, the Constitution gives Congress the power over war and peace. This is enforced through the War Powers Resolution of 1973, which, among other things, requires the administration to notify Congress when U.S. armed forces engage in hostilities and to withdraw them within 60 days, absent congressional authorization.

It has now been more than 60 days since the military began strikes on alleged drug smuggling vessels in early September. The Trump administration recently claimed that these strikes do not constitute military action requiring congressional approval on the novel theory that, because the boats could not strike back, American military personnel were not endangered. Not only does this theory mean that the strikes are not justified by any imminent threat to the American military but the precedent would permit the president to use lethal force in any situation where he claims the military enjoys an overwhelming

advantage. In addition, the use of the military to perform extrajudicial killings of alleged drug dealers is also a potential violation of the Posse Comitatus Act, which prohibits the military from performing law enforcement activities.

The administration has also declared an armed conflict involving Venezuela, based on the claim that President Maduro directs the activities of Venezuelan criminal gangs such as the Tren de Aragua and the Cartel de los Soles. However, this claim is not backed by evidence and contradicts the April 2025 assessment of the U.S. intelligence community. Based on the declaration of armed conflict, the administration informed Congress that the Venezuelans killed in the boat strikes were "enemy combatants" and that the president was using his commander-in-chief powers in a manner similar to the War on Terror. However, during the War on Terror, Congress had actually authorized military action against al-Qaeda and related groups.

Permitting military action without congressional authorization on the basis of unsubstantiated claims by the executive branch risks giving the president unlimited power to use the military at his whim. In the case of the administration's claim of a "non-international armed conflict" with Venezuelan gangs, and the apparent extrajudicial use of law enforcement powers by the military, this power could extend to actions on American soil against those the administration claims to be members of drug cartels.

If the White House believes that the alleged drug boats are flooding the United States with deadly narcotics and that this requires a military as opposed to a law enforcement response, it needs to provide Congress with credible evidence. Congress would then vote on authorizing military action and be held accountable to the American people.

Potential Chaos From a Military Operation in Venezuela

The steps taken so far by the Trump administration look suspiciously like preparations for a regime-change operation. This is the kind of neoconservative foreign policy Trump promised

the American people he would end. Efforts during Trump's first term to provoke regime change in Venezuela failed to overthrow the regime. Yet it seems that a sector of the Venezuelan opposition, led by Nobel Peace Prize–winner María Corina Machado, has doubled down on efforts to unseat Maduro by convincing key Trump administration officials that Venezuela poses a security threat that cannot be solved through diplomacy.

It is undeniable that Maduro is an authoritarian leader who has refused to step down from power despite apparently losing the 2024 presidential election. But that does not mean that it would be simple to overthrow him and bring order to a post–Maduro Venezuela. The Maduro government controls a sizable military with more than 100,000 soldiers in the regular forces and substantial additional paramilitary personnel. In addition, there are many other armed factions within Venezuela, not all of which are drug cartels. These armed forces might not be able to stand up to the U.S. military in direct combat, but it is unlikely that they would welcome the imposition of a U.S.–backed regime by force. Experts agree that the violent elimination of Maduro would not lead to a peaceful transition. All of the ingredients are present within Venezuela for a chaotic civil war, comparable in scope if not in detail to the one that erupted in Iraq after the U.S. invasion. With a population of 30 million (larger than Iraq's population in 2003) and a land area twice the size of Iraq, it is unlikely that the United States could keep order at a reasonable cost.

A civil war could turn Venezuela into another zone of anarchic chaos in the Americas. Such a conflict could resemble the one Colombia has faced for decades, which has required billions of dollars in U.S. security and development assistance. Protracted armed conflict in Venezuela would do little to stem the flow of drugs and could even increase their flow, as non–state armed actors consolidate control of vast swaths of the country's territory.

Land strikes or a possible war with Venezuela could also create broader regional chaos. Civil war could lead to further displacement of Venezuelans into nearby countries like Colombia or eventually Mexico. This would place further strain on Latin

American countries important to U.S. security, which will likely request increased assistance and whose cooperation the United States needs to halt the flow of illicit drugs. Caribbean nations have also expressed concerns about the impacts of the strikes on their fishing, tourism, and energy industries. Without action by Congress to restrict military operations, the Trump administration itself could extend the conflict into nearby countries. President Trump has already accused Colombian President Petro of being an “illegal drug leader.” Colombia is a larger country than Venezuela, and the implications of further destabilizing it are even greater.

Drug Trafficking Is a Law Enforcement Issue

Drug trafficking poses a serious problem to the United States and demands a serious solution. But the pursuit of this goal cannot be allowed to morph into a regime-change operation that deploys the deadly use of force by the U.S. military. Decades of experience in drug-control policy have yielded lessons the Trump administration should be keen to follow — if stopping the flow of drugs is truly the aim.

Despite claims that Maduro is “one of the largest drug traffickers in the world,” Venezuela neither produces nor serves as a transit hub for heroin or fentanyl, the opiates responsible for the vast majority of drug deaths among U.S. citizens. As stated above, the Trump administration's own assessment determined that Venezuela is not even the major player in cocaine trafficking. That assessment found that less than 15 percent of U.S.–bound cocaine, which Venezuela also does not produce, transits through the country.

Even if the Venezuelan route were sealed off, drug–trafficking organizations, which are highly resilient and adaptable, can reroute shipments through Mexico or the Pacific coast. After the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama, drug trafficking through that country to the United States did not stop and may have actually increased.

The Trump administration has more cooperative and less lethal tools at its disposal to fight drug trafficking from Latin America that avoid costly military escalation, adhere to domestic and

international law, and address the problem at its root.

These include increasing drug interdiction on the high seas, restoring funding to demand-reduction programs at home, prosecuting actors complicit in illicit financial rackets, and strengthening governance, the rule of law, and economic alternatives in areas plagued by fragile institutions, poverty, corruption, and weak state presence. Boosting judicial cooperation and intelligence sharing, countering impunity and criminal governance in drug-producing regions, and restoring counter-narcotics assistance previously paused earlier this year will go far in weakening crime syndicates and rebuilding trust with U.S. security partners in the region.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Rather than embark on an illegal and dangerous course of military aggression, there are clear diplomatic and law enforcement options available. A diplomatic path is the Democratic Transition Framework for Venezuela, a power-sharing road map from 2020 that can be adapted to the current context. While past negotiations have faced challenges, the Trump administration should reengage mediators in Qatar, Norway, Mexico, and

Brazil, among others, to pressure both Maduro and the Machado-led opposition to come to — and stay at — the negotiating table until a reasonable and realistic outcome is accepted. The Maduro administration has apparently offered numerous concessions to the United States already, although moving beyond authoritarian rule will admittedly be difficult.

The true scope and end goal of the current military operation in the Caribbean remain unknown, but it appears to offer few, if any, strategic benefits to U.S. national security or to effective control of drug trafficking, while actually exacerbating conditions that fuel drug cartels and instability in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Trump administration should recommit to a law enforcement-first approach to the fight against drug trafficking that targets the actors who are actually most significant in the trade.

Congress must act to ensure that U.S. policy takes a more reasonable and less militarized course and prevents the worst outcomes of an unconstrained U.S. military operation. Without congressional action to place clear limits on the administration's ability to take arbitrary military actions against Venezuela and to expand military operations to nearby countries, the result could be extremely damaging to U.S. interests.

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