

Opinion US foreign policy**Trump now owns Venezuela**

The US president has a growing appetite for military adventure

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People take part in a demonstration against US military action in Venezuela in front of the White House © AFP via Getty Images

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As military operations go, the US kidnapping of Nicolás Maduro was seamless. But Donald Trump's Venezuela story is only just beginning. Having ousted its leader, Trump now enthusiastically owns the aftermath. "We're going to run the country until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition," he said a few hours later. To put it another way, Trump has converted to regime change. What happens in Venezuela from now on will be on his account.

Trump had been flagging Maduro's capture for months. The shock lies in his readiness to "run" a sovereign country of almost 30mn people. The last time the US tried this was after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. That turned into a Vietnam-style quagmire. Trump made a lot of hay ever since in promising never to repeat George W Bush's forever wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Until now, he has upheld that line, which is popular with most Americans, not just his Maga base.

But as Trump's second term progresses, he is acquiring a taste for more imperial-style operations. Saturday's early morning raid on Caracas came barely a week after US air strikes on north-west Nigeria in a yuletide operation Trump said was to protect the country's Christians. It also followed last summer's US pummeling of Iran's underground nuclear sites. Trump again this week threatened to strike Iran to rescue people demonstrating against its regime. "We are locked and loaded and ready to go," [Trump posted](#) at 2.58am on Friday morning.

But regime change is a departure. As with Iraq, Trump's grounds for taking over Venezuela are manifold and shifting. On Iraq, Bush variously talked about seizing Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, his alleged links to al-Qaeda, spreading democracy to the Middle East and striking the axis of evil. On Venezuela, Trump has talked about a war on narco-terrorism, combating gang warfare on America's streets and retrieving what he describes as American territory and oil. Venezuela nationalised its foreign oil operations earlier this century. To those causes could be added the animus of his secretary of state Marco Rubio towards Cuba's communist regime. Cuba gets much of its oil from Venezuela and has thousands of paramilitary "advisers" stationed there. At more than 300bn barrels, Venezuela has the largest reserves in the world. For Cuba's regime, this moment could be existential.

Two questions leap out. The first is whether Trump's appetite for military adventurism will continue to spread. He has advertised designs on Canada, Panama, Greenland and the Gaza Strip. On Saturday, he implied Mexico was also in his sights. "She's a good woman," Trump said of Mexico's president Claudia Sheinbaum. "But the cartels are running Mexico. She's not running Mexico . . . Something is going to have to be done with Mexico." Mexico, not Venezuela, supplies almost all of America's fentanyl. Trump on Saturday also warned Gustavo Petro, Colombia's leftwing president, to "watch his ass". Colombia, not Venezuela, supplies most of America's cocaine.

The second question is how Trump plans to govern Venezuela. Should he be serious about running the country, US boots on the ground will be essential. Even if Trump thinks he can run the place by remote control, reality will intervene. The country is awash with weapons, militias and supporters of "Chavismo", the brand of thuggish Venezuelan socialism named after Maduro's predecessor. Should Russia, China or another adversary wish to bog Trump down in his own quagmire, they have an opportunity.

At his Mar-a-Lago press conference on Saturday, Trump betrayed no concern about the scale and complexity of the task he has set himself. The priority, he kept insisting, would be to restore Venezuela's infrastructure so that it could start pumping oil to its full potential. The expanded flow of oil revenues would be used to compensate US oil companies and fund Venezuela's reconstruction. Quite how America's oil companies could accomplish this without heavy US military protection Trump did not specify.

Either way, leaders in the western hemisphere and beyond will be sleeping less easily from now on. Trump is getting increasingly comfortable with the awesome firepower that he has at his disposal. The consequences of his disregard for both international and US constitutional law will take time to manifest. So too will the precise nature of how he plans to run Venezuela.

Whatever way that pans out, Trump's new world order is now very much a reality. It consists of no obvious rules, does not respect allies, celebrates the jungle and is almost always about money. There is a lot of wealth under Venezuela's soil. Trump is now committed to extracting it.

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