

Opinion **The FT View**

## Donald Trump's reckless intervention in Venezuela

Few will mourn Maduro's ousting, but its manner sets a dangerous precedent

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Details of the US capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro are broadcast over the weekend. While extraordinary, it did not come as a total surprise © Cristobal Olivares/Bloomberg

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Donald Trump has long signalled his appetite to intervene in Venezuela. Late last year his administration mustered an armada in the Caribbean, bombed small boats it accused of carrying drugs to the US, imposed a naval quasi-blockade and commandeered Venezuelan oil tankers. All the while it intensified a public-relations campaign to justify taking action — arguing that Venezuela's president Nicolás Maduro was an illegitimate leader presiding over a “narco-cartel”.

So the US [attack](#) on the oil-rich repressive state and the capture of Maduro and his wife, while extraordinary, did not come as a total surprise. What was startling was the casual manner in which Trump later announced that America would for now [“run” Venezuela](#), and his brazen declaration that US oil companies would “go in” and take over the [oil industry](#).

This, arguably more than anything else so far in his tumultuous second presidency, epitomises the [cavalier](#) and self-interested nature of the US under Trump. Critics of the US-led 2003 invasion of Iraq liked to argue, somewhat inaccurately, that it was “all about oil”. This intervention, though, really does seem to be a lot about oil; Venezuela has the largest reserves in the world.

At the start of the second year of Trump’s second term, his message is clear: his US does not just feel unbound by the niceties of the post-1945 ideas of international rules and law, it will intervene all but at will in its own hemisphere — and possibly elsewhere too. The blatant violation of sovereignty of a major South American state sends a bleak signal to the rest of the world. It will reinforce the conviction around the world and increasingly among US allies that America is not just a hypocrite, but Trump is willing to lead by example in presiding over a world where might is right. There was no attempt to gain congressional approval for action nor even to go through the motions of seeking backing at the UN, however doomed such an attempt would have been.

Authoritarians will be heartened by Trump’s behaviour. It may be simplistic to argue, as have some critics of the US leader, that this will embolden China over Taiwan. But there is no question that it will, for example, make it even harder for the west to rally support in the global south against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. As for Venezuela itself, few will mourn the end of Maduro’s rule, but sadly Trump seems to have little interest in what [happens there next](#).

For more than a quarter of a century Maduro and his predecessor Hugo Chávez ran a brutal and corrupt system. The economy has imploded. Opposition leaders fled across the borders, as did as many as 8mn Venezuelans. The overthrow of a tyranny is always risky whether it happens from within or without, and the operation to seize Maduro does seem to have been a textbook case of planning and execution. Many Venezuelans will be hoping it could be a turning point after years of misery.

Yet it is unclear that the White House even wants wholesale regime change. Maduro presided over a corrupt clique, backed by the army, which is [still in place](#). Many in the opposition already fear the “new” order will be very like the old one, just with a different face. In a triumphalist press conference, Trump airily dismissed the Nobel peace laureate and opposition leader María Corina Machado as lacking support. He made no mention of new elections nor of [Edmundo González Urrutia](#), who is widely seen as the true winner of the heavily rigged 2024 presidential race.

The US has learnt to its cost in recent decades the perils of toppling tyrants without a plan for the day after. It gives every appearance of having done the same again. In pursuing his America First agenda, a hubristic Trump appears untroubled. America and the world will regret his latest show of recklessness.

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