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The Legacy of January 3: Repercussions for the Americas

In the early hours of January 3, 2026, not only did Venezuela experience a change in leadership with the capture of Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores, but a transformation within the inter-American system was set in motion. What was officially designated as Operation Absolute Resolve was not merely an isolated episode of leadership change, but rather the most forceful manifestation of a radical shift in United States foreign policy under the second administration of Donald J. Trump. This event represents the practical application of the “Trump Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine –a strategic framework that redefines national sovereignty under the logic of U.S. national interest, transnational security, and, critically, control over the strategic resources of the Western Hemisphere.

Maduro’s arrest and his subsequent transfer to New York to face charges of narco-terrorism have upended the regional geopolitical balance in many ways, compelling every nation in the Americas to recalculate its position vis-à-vis a Washington that has abandoned the language (and practice) of multilateral diplomacy in favor of a pragmatic and force-driven realism. This operation, carried out with a precision that demonstrated tactical and strategic superiority, also functioned as a display of capabilities that reshapes perceptions of deterrence in the region,

including the confidence that several countries have placed in extra-hemispheric security and defense providers such as China and Russia. The message was unequivocal: the era of the “zone of peace” in Latin America –already eroded by criminal violence– is now in direct tension with an open logic of coercion and competing spheres of influence.

In this context, this article examines the systemic repercussions for the Americas, with particular emphasis on Latin America. Maduro’s downfall is the symptom of a deeper sickness in the previous international order: the collapse of Latin American autonomy in the face of the renewed urgency of the United States to secure its role in the West in a world of competition with China and other powers.

I. Before January 3, 2026: Chronicle of a Breakdown Foretold

The intervention in Venezuela did not emerge from a strategic vacuum or an improvised decision. It was the consequence of behind-the-scenes negotiations, constant communications, but above all a political framework built by a particular group of individuals within the administration of Donald Trump, including, in a vital way, Secretary of State Marco Rubio. The guiding document of this new foreign policy, the November 2025 National Security Strategy, already outlined a fundamental paradigm shift in the way the United States conceives its role in the world and, in particular, in the West. This document would be reinforced by the subsequent National Defense Strategy published in January 2026, aligning with the idea that the post-Cold War approach of previous administrations –including Trump’s first– was being explicitly abandoned. Those earlier policies often got lost in wish lists and a globalism that, according to this second

Trump administration, had weakened the industrial base, social cohesion, sovereignty, and U.S. security.

The new doctrine centers on a stricter and more pragmatic definition of the national interest, under the slogan “America First.” For the Western Hemisphere, this translates into the formulation of the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine –an update of that 19th-century principle that sought to warn European powers against any interference in the Americas. The 2025 National Security Strategy expresses, in essence, three goals: preserving regional stability to discourage mass migration toward the United States, ensuring cooperation against transnational criminal organizations, and preventing external actors from acquiring or controlling strategic assets. Read retrospectively, that logic contained the seed not only of the January 3 operation, but also of the repertoire of pressure that may follow.

It remains to be seen in practice what it will mean to ensure that the “Western Hemisphere remains reasonably stable.” This stability could entail more military operations, greater economic coercion, or simple coexistence with non-democratic leaders, as long as they are functional to the security and resource agenda –given that democracy is not the ultimate objective of this entire operation.

II. Immediate Repercussions: Between Shock and Controversy

News of the January 3 operation hit the global geopolitical board like a bomb, generating an immediate and deep fracture in Latin America that revealed pre-existing leadership and government differences across the region. Reactions polarized almost instantly, reflecting the political divisions that have characterized Latin America in recent decades.

On one side, a group of countries led by Argentina, El Salvador, and Paraguay praised the operation as a decisive blow against “narco-terrorism” and tyranny. Argentine President Javier Milei termed it a decisive step forward that could open the space for freedom to advance in Venezuela. They were joined by Ecuador under President Daniel Noboa, who expressed his support for the fight against “narco-Chavistas,” as well as Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago, which saw in Maduro’s fall an opportunity to restore democracy and regional security. Guyanese President Irfaan Ali even announced the deployment of troops to the border with Venezuela as a preventive measure. Similarly, Venezuelan opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner María Corina Machado thanked the United States government for its “firmness and determination in upholding the law,” promising that Venezuela would be “the principal ally of the United States on security, energy, democracy, and human rights.”

On the opposite end, the left-leaning governments in the region condemned the intervention unanimously, invoking the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention enshrined in international law and in Latin America’s diplomatic tradition. Colombian President Gustavo Petro was among the first to react, rejecting “any unilateral military action that could worsen the situation or put civilians at risk” and deploying troops to the Colombia-Venezuela border. Brazilian President Lula da Silva adopted an even firmer tone, warning that “airstrikes on Venezuelan territory and the capture of its president cross an unacceptable line” that could represent “the first step toward a world of violence, chaos, and instability, where the law of the strongest prevails over multilateralism.” Mexico, through its president Claudia Sheinbaum, issued a more nuanced but equally firm condemnation, reminding that “the continent belongs to the peoples of each of its countries” and not to any one doctrine or power. Finally, the authoritarian government of Cuba, Maduro’s

closest ally, labeled the operation an “act of terrorism” and reported the deaths of 32 of its military personnel in the bombings that accompanied the extraction.

A third group of countries, including Guatemala, Peru, Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, and Canada, adopted a more cautious and ambiguous stance. While they did not explicitly condemn the U.S. action, they called for respect for international law and emphasized the need for a peaceful democratic transition led by Venezuelans themselves. This division was replicated in multilateral forums such as the OAS, whose Secretary General Albert Ramdin acknowledged the “divergent perspectives in the hemisphere,” and the United Nations Security Council, which was convened in an emergency session at Colombia’s request with the support of China and Russia. During that session, the Chinese and Russian representatives condemned the United States’ “unilateral aggression,” while Washington’s European allies, although uncomfortable with the unilateral nature of the action, shared the urgency of combating transnational organized crime and limited themselves to calling for “calm and restraint.”

At the same time, the operation sparked intense controversy within the United States over the president’s war powers and the constitutional limits of executive action. The Trump administration argued that the president has constitutional authority to use military force without congressional authorization, provided it is not expected to result in “prolonged and substantial military engagements.” Secretary Rubio defended the legality of the action before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, stating that “this was not an invasion, we did not occupy a country... It was an operation to assist law enforcement,” implicitly suggesting that broader operations would indeed require congressional approval. Americans remain divided over the role the United States should

play in the Venezuelan context and regarding the supposed subsequent stages following the January 3 military operation.

III. Future Repercussions: A New Paradigm for the Americas

The most enduring legacy of the January 3 operation will be measured by the structural changes it provokes in the inter-American system. Although it is impossible to predict the future with certainty, the sequence of narratives and actions from the Trump administration, as well as the strategic framework that the government itself has established in its official documents, allow several long-term repercussion axes to be outlined: the precedent regarding sovereignty and the use of force, the reconfiguration of strategic alignments, and the new focus on transnational security.

1. Sovereignty and the Use of Force

The intervention in Venezuela has set a dangerous precedent that erodes the principle of sovereignty and the prohibition on the use of force, which until now have stood as pillars of international law and peaceful coexistence in a region historically sensitive to both direct and indirect intervention by great powers and other international actors. By justifying the operation on the grounds of combating narco-terrorism and applying U.S. justice to a foreign leader accused of drug trafficking, Washington has established a flexible justification that could be applied to multiple contexts. As outgoing Chilean President Gabriel Boric warned at a press conference on January 3, “today it is Venezuela, with the pretext of narco-terrorism and a declared intention to control its resources; tomorrow, it could be anywhere else, with some other pretext.” Brazilian President Lula da Silva made a similar statement, calling attention to the dangerous precedent for all countries of the Global South.

This new situation encourages mirror responses and greater distrust toward the United States. Countries that feel vulnerable could seek to strengthen their capabilities, accelerate unconventional armament programs, or tighten ties with extra-hemispheric powers to obtain diplomatic and military counterweights –something many already have been doing, including Venezuela, to counter perceived threats from the United States. The idea of Latin America and the Caribbean as a “zone of peace,” promoted in joint statements by several governments in the region, becomes seriously compromised. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres described the action as “a dangerous precedent,” a warning that, while not surprising, resonates beyond the hemisphere. Observers in Taiwan, for example, have expressed fear that the operation could embolden China to act in a similar manner. The same could happen in other regions and contexts.

2. Strategic Alignments: The Logic of the Sphere of Influence

The operation in Venezuela appears to be a central piece of a broader strategy to reconfigure alignments in the hemisphere under an explicit logic of sphere of influence. The 2025 National Security Strategy document envisions a more transactional international order where alliances are conditioned on strategic alignment and shared responsibilities –not by shared values or multilateral institutions. For Latin America, this implies a return to a dynamic that many believed had been overcome. Countries in the region may obtain benefits from their geographic proximity, such as preferential investment, access to the U.S. market, and security cooperation, but the cost could be accepting conditions that marginalize their relations with extra-hemispheric actors, principally China, whose commercial and financial presence in the region has grown exponentially over the past two decades.

The first steps have already been taken with the recent ministerial meeting in Washington, D.C., on Critical Minerals, in which nine delegations from the Americas participated. Beyond the rhetoric of cooperation, the meeting aims to consolidate a framework of supply, standards, and investment in strategic minerals with the United States as the central node, with the objective –though not explicitly stated– of reducing the region’s dependence on China. The implication for Latin America is that critical minerals cease to be a commercial issue and become a political alignment variable.

In general terms, the reactions of China and Russia to the January 3 operation were rhetorically condemnatory but also notably operationally cautious –something that is not surprising given that both countries lack effective capacity and presence in the Western Hemisphere and have other priorities outside the western hemisphere. The United States’ show of force and, particularly, the failure of the Russian and Chinese area defense systems deployed in Venezuela to detect or repel the operation, force these powers to recalculate the cost-benefit of challenging Washington in the West. It is likely that, in the short term, they will moderate their more provocative actions in the region, although they will maintain and defend their most important economic and diplomatic ties in the region.

3. *Transnational Security: The War Against the Cartels*

Finally, the operation in Venezuela has elevated the fight against transnational organized crime and drug trafficking to the level of a national security priority for the United States, comparable in its rhetoric and operational implications to the fight against terrorism that defined U.S. foreign policy after September 11, 2001. The 2026 National Defense Strategy is clear in identifying drug trafficking as a “direct threat to the security” of the national territory and states that while cooperation with regional partners

will be sought, the United States is “prepared to act decisively and unilaterally if necessary.” The operation in Venezuela was the first demonstration of this willingness.

President Trump’s comments about the need to “do something with respect to Mexico,” where the cartels supposedly “run the country,” and his promise to “start hitting land with respect to the cartels,” indicate that pressure will intensify on other countries in the region. Although a unilateral military intervention in Mexico is considerably less likely due to the enormous political, economic, and security costs it would entail, Washington will use all of its diplomatic and economic coercive capacity to demand tangible results in the fight against the cartels.

The message from the United States is clear: either they integrate into the preferential bloc with the United States, or they will face tariff barriers that could sink their economies. Maduro’s removal from power did not bring a transition, but rather an outbreak of controlled acephaly. Although Delcy Rodríguez assumed the de facto interim presidency, her scope for action is limited. Several actions already speak for themselves: the amnesty law, the hydrocarbons law, changes in the cabinet, among others. Likewise, in Latin America, Gustavo Petro has maintained a relationship marked by conflict and hostility with Trump, positioning his leadership in extreme vulnerability ahead of the May 2026 presidential elections. Claudia Sheinbaum in Mexico has received an escalation of rhetoric from the United States that culminated in the handover to the United States of at least 37 prisoners charged with drug trafficking. Díaz-Canel’s Cuba says it is willing to engage in dialogue with the United States while pressure in the Caribbean continues and the United States threatens countries that supply oil to the island. These actions show that, for several governments not aligned with Washington, political stability is becoming conditional: it depends on offering

early signs of cooperation with the U.S. agenda, despite rhetoric about sovereignty. The transfer of detainees, the acceleration of extraditions, or visits to the White House operate as gestures aimed at easing diplomatic, economic, and security pressure and to avoid a more direct escalation. At the same time, positions openly aligned toward Washington, such as Javier Milei's Argentina, show that this realignment also advances through ideological and electoral affinities, not only through geopolitical calculation.

The January 3, 2026 operation has inaugurated a new era in inter-American relations, one whose contours we are only beginning to discern. Rather than an isolated event or an ad hoc response to the Venezuelan crisis, it was the culmination of a profound doctrinal shift in Washington that revives the Monroe Doctrine under a new pragmatic corollary and appears to be advancing with full force. The immediate repercussions have been a deep diplomatic fracture in the region, which has exposed—beyond the region's own Latin American leaderships—the underlying ideological divisions, as well as an intense debate over the limits of presidential power within the United States.

In the long term, the legacy of this operation will be a redefinition of the concepts of sovereignty and non-intervention, a reconfiguration of strategic alignments under the logic of an explicit sphere of influence, and an intensification of the fight against transnational crime using tools that were previously reserved for counterterrorism. The Americas now face, over the next three years, a new reality in which the rules of the game that governed for decades have changed in ways that may well be irreversible. It remains to be seen whether this shift will be consolidated as a lasting doctrine of American power or whether it will be moderated, corrected, or reversed by the priorities of future administrations and by the capacity of regional countries to resist or negotiate new terms.