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A Moment of Strategic Choice: U.S. Policy in a Post-Maduro Hemisphere

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The capture of Nicolás Maduro on January 3, 2026 marks a strategic inflection point for the United States and the first real stress test of the 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS) in the Western Hemisphere. More than the apprehension of a leader, Maduro's removal forces Washington to reconcile competing strategic imperatives that the NSS elevates but does not fully resolve: democracy promotion, regional stability, great-power competition, energy security, and the expanding use of military force against non-state and hybrid threats.

Early signals from the administration, including statements suggesting the United States will "run" aspects of Venezuela's transition, now collide with congressional efforts to constrain executive authority in the region. Together, these tensions raise a central question: does U.S. policy in Venezuela align with the strategic commitments laid out in the NSS, or is this moment exposing the gap between doctrine and execution? How the United States sequences its actions in the coming weeks will likely shape not only Venezuela's political future, but the standing of U.S. strategy across the hemisphere.

The NSS and the Re-Centering of the Hemisphere

The 2025 National Security Strategy marked a notable departure from its predecessors by recentering the Western Hemisphere as a core arena of U.S. national security. What has been referred to by the President as the "Donroe Doctrine" or a "Trump Corollary" to the long-established Monroe Doctrine. While earlier strategies prioritized Indo-Pacific competition and global counterterrorism, the NSS elevates threats emerging from the Americas––transnational crime, narcotrafficking, mass migration, and illicit economic networks––as primary drivers of regional insecurity with a lesser emphasis on cooperation within the region.

At the heart of this shift is what the strategy describes as an “enlist and expand” approach: deepening cooperation with traditional partners while broadening coalitions to confront shared security challenges. The NSS explicitly acknowledges that law-enforcement tools alone are insufficient to counter modern criminal-terrorist networks and affirms that military force, including lethal operations, may be used to protect U.S. interests.

Developments in Venezuela, including sustained maritime operations, expanded interdiction campaigns, and ultimately the capture of Maduro, represent the most consequential real-world application of this doctrine to date. In this sense, Venezuela is not an anomaly; it is the proving ground. Yet the application of the NSS also reflects escalation. While longstanding U.S. concerns about instability, narcotrafficking, and migration remain central, their operationalization through overt military pressure signals a more assertive and risk-acceptant interpretation of hemispheric security––one likely to define U.S. engagement in the region for years to come.

Strategic Signaling in Plain Sight

Well before Maduro’s capture, the administration had begun publicly conditioning domestic and international audiences for a more forceful hemispheric posture. While the NSS provided formal doctrine, social media functioned as the signaling layer of strategy. Senior officials consistently framed transnational criminal organizations not as law-enforcement challenges, but as national security adversaries: “narco-terrorists,” “enemy networks,” and actors waging a form of war against the American people. This language closely mirrored the NSS’s reclassification of organized crime as a strategic threat.

Accounts associated with the Department of Defense, U.S. Southern Command, and the White House reinforced this framing through operational storytelling. Maritime interdictions, joint task force deployments, and kinetic strikes were presented not as isolated actions, but as components of a sustained campaign to “secure the hemisphere” and “deny sanctuary” to adversaries and criminal-terrorist networks. Presidential messaging––particularly on platforms such as Truth Social and X (formerly Twitter)––amplified this narrative in more explicit terms. Though rhetorically distinct from formal policy statements, the substance remained consistent: Venezuela’s leadership was inseparable from transnational crime; U.S. action was justified and

overdue; and traditional notions of sovereignty should not shield criminalized regimes.

Taken together, this messaging functioned as strategic pre-authorization. By collapsing the distinction between crime, terrorism, and hostile state behavior, the administration narrowed the political and intellectual distance between counternarcotics enforcement and military intervention. When operations intensified, and when Maduro was ultimately captured, these actions could be framed not as escalation, but as the logical execution of an openly signaled strategy.

This convergence of doctrine, messaging, and action reflects a broader evolution in how U.S. national security policy is communicated and implemented. Strategy is no longer confined to classified documents or diplomatic channels; it is increasingly socialized in public view.

Three Strategic Pathways After Maduro

With Maduro removed, Venezuela now sits at the center of a volatile strategic landscape. Three plausible pathways emerge, each intersecting differently with NSS priorities and each requiring deliberate policy choices rather than reactive improvisation.

First, a U.S.-supported transitional governance arrangement. Such a pathway could restore short-term order and prevent institutional collapse, but carries significant legitimacy risks if perceived as unilateral or externally imposed. This is especially delicate after President Trump called himself the "Acting President of Venezuela." Without early multilateralization, such as through the Organization of American States (OAS), transitional authority could undermine the democratic credibility the U.S. seeks to promote.

Second, fragmentation or protracted instability. Absent effective governance, Venezuela could experience renewed violence, humanitarian deterioration, and governance vacuums exploited by armed groups and criminal networks. Previous efforts to negotiate with these groups, including the establishment of so-called "Peace Zones," demonstrated the limited capacity of state institutions to constrain armed actors amid internal volatility. Under such conditions, fragmentation would likely intensify regional migration pressures, strain border management systems, and deepen illicit trafficking flows––directly contradicting core NSS objectives.

Third, heightened external contestation. Although external actors face varying strategic constraints elsewhere––including Russia's commitments in Ukraine, Iran's regional engagements, and Cuba's domestic economic pressures––all retain political, economic, and intelligence equities in Venezuela. China, in particular, maintains long-term strategic and financial interests that position it as a central external stakeholder. Efforts by these actors to preserve influence through diplomatic obstruction, sanctions evasion, or proxy engagement could quickly internationalize Venezuela's transition, particularly within the UN Security Council, where P5 dynamics will be closely watched.

Each pathway implicates core NSS priorities: democratic legitimacy through credible elections and transitional authority; great-power competition through deterrence signaling, sanctions coordination, and partner reassurance; energy and economic security through short-term supply mitigation and sanctions calibration; and regional stability through migration management, counternarcotics operations, and humanitarian assistance.

Policy Imperatives: Sequencing Matters

The core strategic risk facing Washington is not action, but mis-sequencing. A sustainable transition requires a clear progression: stabilize first, multilateralize quickly, and legitimize through defined benchmarks. Stabilization without legitimacy invites resistance. Legitimacy without security invites collapse. Multilateralization delayed too long invites external interference. Concrete policy steps should include:

- Early OAS and UN engagement to provide transitional assistance or mandate authority;
- Clear, public benchmarks tied to governance, elections, and institutional reform;
- Energy contingency planning to manage supply disruptions and sanctions recalibration; and
- Defined exit criteria to prevent open-ended U.S. political or security management.

Absent these guardrails, Venezuela risks becoming not a demonstration of strategic resolve, but a case study in strategic overreach.

A Test That Extends Beyond Venezuela

Maduro's capture is not the end of a crisis; it is the beginning of an assessment. For the first time since the release of the 2025 National Security Strategy, the United States is being forced to reconcile stated priorities with real-world tradeoffs in its own hemisphere. The outcome in Venezuela will shape regional perceptions of U.S. credibility, restraint, and leadership––not only in Caracas, but in Bogotá, Brasília, Mexico City, and beyond.

If managed deliberately, this moment could validate the NSS's vision of a more secure and cooperative hemisphere. If mishandled, it risks reinforcing long-standing skepticism toward U.S. intervention cloaked in strategic language. Venezuela is now the measure. The strategy is being tested.
