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Venezuela 2026: The Test Case for the New World Order

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1. Prologue: The End of the International System and the Dawn of a New Order

The American intervention in Venezuela on 3 January 2026 is not an isolated event. It is the **breaking point that marks the end of the multilateral international system as we have known it** and the dawn of a new world order based on hegemonic spheres of influence (Allison, 2020). The capture of Nicolás Maduro is not about drug trafficking, nor about democracy, nor about human rights. It is about the **imposition of a new global architecture** wherein the great powers divide the world amongst themselves and international law becomes a relic of the past (Safranchuk and Lukyanov, 2021).

This analysis dissects the complex situation in Venezuela as a **test case for Donald Trump's geopolitical vision**: a world divided into three great spheres of influence (the United States, China, and Russia), where each power has the right to intervene in its “backyard” without consequence (Nelson, 2025). Venezuela is the first laboratory for this new doctrine, and what happens here will set the precedent for the future of international relations.

2. The New Global Architecture: The World of Three Spheres

1.1. Trump's geopolitical vision: A new yalta

The Trump administration has abandoned the pretence of a rules-based world order and has embraced a pragmatic and transactional vision of international relations. This vision, which could be described as a “New Yalta”, is based on the idea that the world should be managed by the three great nuclear powers: The United States, China, and Russia (Ferguson and Hast, 2018).

In this new order, each power has a recognized sphere of influence:

- **United States:** The American continent (the “Donroe Doctrine”)
- **China:** Asia-Pacific (Taiwan, South China Sea)

- **Russia:** Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Ukraine, Georgia, etc.)

Within these spheres, each power has the right to intervene militarily to protect its strategic interests, without interference from the other powers. International law, national sovereignty, and human rights are secondary concepts to stability and the balance of power among the great powers (Taim, 2024).

1.2. The collapse of the multilateral system and the irrelevance of the OAS

The intervention in Venezuela demonstrates that the multilateral system (UN, international law, etc.) has collapsed. International condemnations are performative, with no real consequences. The UN is paralysed. The Organisation of American States (OAS), once the primary forum for hemispheric diplomacy, has been rendered

Irrelevant. Its failure to prevent or meaningfully respond to the intervention underscores its inability to act as a check on the hegemonic power of the United States (Cooper and Legler, 2001).

The OAS's historical role has been one of ambiguity, often criticised for its inaction during past US interventions in Latin America. The Inter-American Democratic Charter, adopted in 2001, was intended to strengthen the organisation's commitment to democracy, but it has proven to be a paper tiger in the face of unilateral action by its most powerful member (Legler, 2010). The Venezuelan crisis confirms that the OAS is no longer a relevant actor in hemispheric security, but rather a bystander in a new geopolitical game.

We are witnessing a return to the "law of the strongest," where the great powers impose their will by force. The intervention in Venezuela is not an anomaly; it is the new normality (Mazarr, 2022).

3. Venezuela: The Test Case for the New Doctrine

Why Venezuela?

Venezuela was chosen as the test case for this new doctrine for several reasons:

1. **Geographical Proximity:** It is located in the heart of the American sphere of influence.
2. **Regime Weakness:** The Maduro regime was internally fragile and lacked significant international support.
3. **Strategic Resources:** It possesses the world's largest oil reserves, a key resource for American energy security.
4. **Convenient Pretext:** Accusations of drug trafficking provided a convenient justification for the intervention.
5. **Low Risk of Escalation:** Neither China nor Russia was willing to risk a military conflict with the United States over Venezuela.

3.1. The "Controlled Operation" as a model for intervention

The intervention in Venezuela was not a large-scale invasion, but a "controlled operation" designed to minimise costs and risks. This model of intervention is based on:

- **Prior Negotiation with the Elite:** Communication channels are established with factions of the regime willing to cooperate.
- **Silent Guarantees:** Unstated amnesties and non-prosecution agreements are offered in exchange for cooperation.
- **Decapitation of the Regime:** The main leader is removed to create a power vacuum.
- **Tutored Transition:** A transitional government is installed that answers to the interests of the intervening power.
- **Control of Resources:** Control over the country's strategic resources is secured.

This "controlled operation" model is likely to be replicated in other spheres of influence.

4. The Controlled Operation: Mechanisms of the Tutored Transition

4.1. The absence of chaos as evidence of negotiation

The most reliable indicator that the intervention was a controlled operation is the absence of chaos. There was no military fracture, no hysteria among the leadership, no blood in the streets. This is only possible if there has been **prior negotiation with the elite that guarantees order.**

4.2. "Functional betrayal" and "strategic calm"

The Chavista elite did not betray Maduro for ideological reasons, but for **functional pragmatism:** they recognised that the regime had fallen and chose to reposition themselves. The "strategic calm" of figures like Delcy Rodríguez is evidence that they have received **agreed-upon guarantees.**

4.3. The judicial obstacle as a mechanism of control

The real bottleneck of the transition is not political, but **judicial.** The threat of trials for crimes against humanity is what keeps the Chavista elite in check. Any transition agreement must include **silent legal guarantees.**

5. The Role of the Actors: Washington, the Chavista Elite, and the Opposition

5.1. Washington: The architect of the new order

Washington does not seek democracy or justice. It seeks **stability, control of resources, and the reaffirmation of its regional hegemony.** The intervention in Venezuela is a demonstration of power directed at both its adversaries (China, Russia) and its allies in Latin America.

5.2. The chavista elite: Managers of the landing

Figures like Delcy Rodríguez are not saviours or demons. They are **managers of the landing.** Their objective is to survive physically, legally, and economically. They are willing to cooperate with Washington in exchange for guarantees.

5.3. The democratic opposition: A cover, not a power

The democratic opposition, represented by María Corina Machado, plays the role of a **cover.** It is allowed to participate in a tutored transition to provide a semblance of democratic legitimacy, but it wields no real power. The important decisions are made in closed-door meetings between Washington and the repositioned Chavista elite.

6. Machado's Gesture and the New Function of the Opposition

6.1. The symbolic act: The death of idealism

The gesture of María Corina Machado, the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, of giving her medal to Donald Trump is an act of devastating symbolic weight. The Nobel Medal, the ultimate symbol of the multilateral order, human rights, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts, is handed over to the leader who personifies unilateralism, disdain for international institutions, and the primacy of brute force (Ettinger, 2020).

This act is not a mere anecdote. It is the **staging of the death of idealism and the unconditional surrender to the new order of power.** It is the acknowledgement, by the leader of the democratic opposition, that the principles and values her struggle represented have been defeated by crude geopolitical reality. Machado, in handing over the medal, not only surrenders herself but also symbolically surrenders the entire project of a democratic transition based on law and legitimacy.

6.2. The new function of the opposition: From alternative to cover

This gesture completely redefines the function of the Venezuelan opposition on the new geopolitical chessboard. The opposition is no longer a power alternative destined to govern. Its new role is much more subordinate and functional to the interests of the hegemonic power. The opposition becomes a **legitimising cover**.

Its main function is to provide a veneer of democratic legitimacy to a transition that is, in essence, an operation of control and power realignment orchestrated from Washington. The opposition becomes the local actor that allows the intervention to be presented not as an imposition, but as a "liberation" requested and welcomed by the "Venezuelan people" they claim to represent.

Old Function (Multilateral Order)	New Function (Spheres of Influence Order)
Alternative government in exile	Local manager of the tutored transition
Defender of democracy and human rights	Provider of democratic legitimacy
Subject of international law	Instrument of the hegemon's foreign policy
Pursuit of free and fair elections	Administration of supervised elections
Restoration of national sovereignty	Acceptance of limited sovereignty

6.3. The tragedy of the opposition: Trapped between two realities

The tragedy of the Venezuelan opposition is that it is trapped between two irreconcilable realities. On the one hand, its internal and external legitimacy was built on the defence of democracy, human rights, and national sovereignty. On the other hand, the only way to access a share of power is to submit to the pragmatic and cynical logic of the new order of spheres of influence.

Machado's gesture is the acceptance of this tragic reality. It is the choice of pragmatism over principles, of power over legitimacy, of political survival over moral coherence. In doing so, the opposition may gain a seat at the transition table, but it loses its soul in the process. It ultimately becomes another cog in the power machine it sought to fight, validating the premise that, in the new world order, force is the only source of law.

7. Strategic Conclusions: Navigating the New World Order

7.1. Venezuela as a turning point

The intervention in Venezuela is not the end of history, but the beginning of a new era. It is the turning point that marks the end of the post-Cold War liberal order and the beginning of a new, more dangerous, and more competitive world order.

7.2. The dilemma of lesser powers

Lesser powers face a dilemma: accept the new reality of spheres of influence and align with one of the great powers, or resist and risk being crushed? The answer to this question

will determine the future of international relations in the 21st century.

7.3. The need for new strategic thinking

Navigating this new world order will require new strategic thinking. The old assumptions about international law, national sovereignty, and multilateralism are no longer valid. World leaders must adapt to this new reality if they are to survive and prosper in the century to come.

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Final Note: This strategic analysis is based on the interpretation of recent events and geopolitical trends. The scenarios presented are not predictions, but projections of possible futures based on the available information. The situation is fluid and could change rapidly. However, the underlying logic of a new world order based on spheres of influence appears to be the dominant trend in current international politics.