



## FOREIGN AFFAIRS

# How to Topple Maduro

## And Why Regime Change Is the Only Way Forward in Venezuela

**BY ELLIOTT ABRAMS**

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On the last day of October, CBS's *60 Minutes* asked U.S. President Donald Trump about his policy on Venezuela and his thoughts about that country's dictator, Nicolas Maduro. "Are Maduro's days as president numbered?" asked Norah O'Donnell. "I would say yeah," Trump replied. "I think so, yeah."

This phlegmatic response was a good summary of current U.S. policy: Washington favors Maduro's downfall, but its position lacks clarity and is not backed by the actions—including military strikes inside Venezuela—that would bring about the outcome U.S. officials appear to want. And therein lies the danger for Trump and his administration: that after a great deal of chest-thumping and a show of naval force aimed at Maduro, they will leave him in place. In that scenario, Maduro would emerge as the survivor who bested Trump and showed that American influence in the Western Hemisphere is limited at best.

Removing Maduro, on the other hand, would advance Washington's interests, protect U.S. national security, and benefit Venezuelans and their neighbors. Regime change would result in reduced migration to the United States, less drug trafficking, more freedom and prosperity in Venezuela, and an end to the country's cooperation with China, Cuba, Iran, and Russia, which gives countries hostile to U.S. interests a base of operations on the South American mainland.

The use of American military force to overthrow Maduro would not be without risk. It could fail to end the Maduro regime and could incite demonstrations against the United States. But regime change would not require any ground deployments of U.S. forces except, at most, Special Forces raids against regime figures who have already been indicted for narcoterrorism by U.S. law enforcement. The potential gain for the United States from the collapse of the Maduro regime far outweighs the risk, because it would end a brutal dictatorship that relies on drug trafficking to stay afloat and would open the door to Venezuelan economic recovery. That would end the mass migration of Venezuelans and reduce the role of Venezuela in cocaine flows to the United States.

Most recently, Trump has left open the possibility of more talks with Maduro while also signaling that deploying U.S. troops to Venezuela remained an option, as well. The Trump administration should eliminate this ambiguity and make clear that it intends to deal not only with the symptoms of the problem—trafficking in gold, drugs, and human beings; mass migration; violent crime; and instability—but with their root cause: the Maduro regime.

## **THE DRUG LORD DICTATOR**

In 2019, toward the end of his first term, Trump initiated a pressure campaign against the Maduro regime. At the time, I served as special representative for Venezuela in the U.S. State Department and helped organize diplomatic efforts and severe economic sanctions to delegitimize and undermine Maduro. Nearly 60 countries joined the United States in recognizing Juan Guaidó, who had been National Assembly speaker, as the legitimate interim president of Venezuela. The theory was that the presidency was vacant because Maduro had stolen the 2018 presidential election—which he had.

But those U.S. efforts failed, because economic and diplomatic pressure was simply insufficient against a regime willing to use violence and brutal repression against the Venezuelan people to stay in power. When Trump left office in 2021, Maduro was still ruling Venezuela. In the ensuing years, the repression, economic ruin, refugee flows, and trafficking in drugs, gold, and human beings have continued. But in the 2024 presidential election, the opposition figure Edmundo González crushed Maduro in a landslide, making clear that Venezuelans want an end to the dictator's rule. Still, Maduro refused to accept the result.

Back in 2020, Maduro had been indicted by U.S. federal prosecutors, who charged him with, among other things, conspiring to commit narcoterrorism and leading a drug-trafficking organization known as Cartel de los Soles, or “cartel of the suns.” The State Department announced a \$15 million reward for information that led to his arrest; this past January, that amount was raised to \$25 million. Last summer, the Department of the Treasury sanctioned the cartel as a specially designated global terrorist entity, and the reward amount was doubled, to \$50 million.

In addition to this diplomatic, political, economic, and legal pressure, the Trump administration has added more direct forms of coercion. In the Trump first term we used to say “all options are on the table,” but the administration made no military moves against Maduro. And a lack of enthusiasm for and commitment to the goal of bringing down the regime (plus perhaps a lack of capability) meant that Washington took no effective covert actions, either. By contrast, in the past few months, the United States has struck nearly two dozen ships in the Caribbean and the western Pacific, and its largest and most advanced aircraft carrier, the USS *Gerald R. Ford*, arrived there on November 16.

Typically, the U.S. Fourth Fleet, covering Latin America and adjacent waters, has no vessels permanently assigned to it and has only four to six surface ships under its command. Today, about a dozen surface ships including the *Gerald R. Ford* and a nuclear attack submarine, plus a considerable amount of airpower assets, have been sent to the region. This suggests that the list will expand to include targets inside Venezuela. “We are certainly looking at land now, because we’ve got the sea very well under control,” Trump said in mid-October. Around the same time, U.S. officials told *The New York Times* that Trump had authorized the CIA to carry out a program of covert action inside Venezuela, although its parameters and objectives remain secret.

So far, the Trump administration has characterized all these steps as intended to stop the Maduro regime’s drug trafficking, not to overthrow the dictator. As Secretary of State Marco Rubio put it, “This is a counterdrug operation.” *The New York Times* recently reported that Rubio held a private meeting with House and Senate leaders earlier this month during which he “insisted that ousting Mr. Maduro was not the administration’s objective.” But if Maduro is not the legitimate leader of Venezuela and is instead a

narcoterrorist and a cartel kingpin, it would be difficult to understand why the Trump administration would surround the country with a gigantic armada only to leave him in power.

This is not the only anomaly in the current policy. Despite stringent U.S. economic sanctions, Trump continues to permit Chevron to drill for oil in Venezuela—and give some of it to the Maduro regime, as a form of tax payment. Maduro then sells that oil for cash. As a result, this “Chevron exception” to the sanctions helps him stay in power.

Trump has also withdrawn the temporary protected status that the Biden administration conferred on hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans who sought refuge in the United States. In effect, this means the Trump administration is telling them to return to a country for which the State Department’s travel warning tells Americans this: “Do not travel to or remain in Venezuela due to the high risk of wrongful detention, torture in detention, terrorism, kidnapping, arbitrary enforcement of local laws, crime, civil unrest, and poor health infrastructure. All U.S. citizens and Lawful Permanent Residents in Venezuela are strongly advised to depart immediately.” It continues: “Violent crimes, such as homicide, armed robbery, kidnapping, and carjacking, are common. . . . Police and security forces have instituted a brutal crackdown on pro-democracy or anti-regime demonstrations.” Describing Venezuela as a hell on earth led by a vicious criminal and then ending temporary protected status suggests mixed motives and no clear policy.

Finally, leaving Maduro in place also leaves in place his ties with China, Cuba, Iran, and Russia. In Trump’s first term, the administration received reliable reports about Iranian plans to transfer missiles to Venezuela—which the administration concluded would be unacceptable and would be stopped,

with the use of force, if need be. That threat was conveyed to Venezuela and Iran, and the transfers were never made. Iranian drones that can reach Israel from Iranian territory can also reach U.S. territory from Venezuela—potentially hitting Puerto Rico and U.S. facilities there. Today, Iran uses Venezuela as a base for Hezbollah activity, money laundering, acquisition of blank passports for use by its agents, and other actions that Trump should stop by putting an end to the regime that enables them. Otherwise they will continue, and they will grow whenever it is to Iran's advantage. As for Cuba, the Maduro regime gives it between 30,000 to 50,000 barrels of oil per day, on average, for free or with a huge discount—a critical source of support for the communist regime in Havana. A democratic government in Caracas would end that subsidy for repression. It would also remove the Russian military personnel usually in the country to train Venezuelan forces, and it would end the country's reliance on Russian and Chinese military equipment.

### **FROM PSYOP TO SPECIAL OPS?**

So far, Trump's approach mostly resembles a psychological operation, also known as a psyop. The public revelation that there is a covert CIA program seems to be part of that. If an electricity transformer blows up in some part of Venezuela, it would be hard to say whether it was the result of years of poor maintenance or an act of sabotage. The doubling of the reward for Maduro was clearly meant to incentivize regime officials or military leaders to break with him now. Presumably, one of the CIA's jobs is to convey to them that Maduro is going down—but they need not go down with him. That messaging should include discussion of a potential amnesty (something that has accompanied every Latin American transition to democracy) and assurances that, under a democratic government, the Venezuelan military would be better equipped and more professional, with plenty of room for

advancement when some top Maduro cronies are weeded out. The current strikes on boats and the consequent reduction in maritime drug traffic may help reduce the cash Maduro has to continue buying military support.

But Venezuela's military is permeated with Cuban and Cuban-trained intelligence agents whose precise task is to avoid coups. Over the years, there has been plenty of military unrest in Venezuela, and hundreds of officers have been arrested and remain in the regime's hellish prisons (or have died there). Last year, a former Venezuelan army lieutenant who became a dissident, Ronald Ojeda, was murdered while living in exile in Chile—a killing that Chile's leftist government blamed on “instructions or orders given by the Venezuelan authorities.” The case shows not only the criminal and terrorist nature of the Maduro regime but the extent of its nervousness about any military dissidence.

Trump's actions thus far have raised the stakes for him and for the United States, and the Venezuelan democratic opposition is fully behind him. María Corina Machado, the leader of the opposition and recent Nobel Peace Prize winner, called Trump's moves “absolutely correct” and called Maduro “the head of this narcoterror structure that has declared war on the Venezuelan people and [on] democratic nations in the region. . . . Maduro started this war, and President Trump is ending that war.”

But victory for the democratic opposition and Trump, and the end of the regime, are not guaranteed. It is possible that if the U.S. flotilla can be kept in place and economic sanctions tightened, the regime's income will steadily decline and, with it, the ability to keep buying support. But the regime has had decades to coup-proof itself with massive help from Cuba. Merely starving it will not be enough: it must be forced out of power with military

strikes, which will throw the regime's support structures, including in the military, into disarray and make them fear for their own futures.

The point of military action should be to cripple the regime's drug trafficking and demonstrate to the top leaders of the Venezuelan military and everyone except the small Maduro inner circle that the game is up, that Maduro is doomed, and that the best way for them to protect their own futures is to remove him and negotiate the installation of the next government. They will see the beginning of the use of force by the United States, but they will not know where it might end: they will be left wondering whether there will be more strikes at military targets or at regime physical assets, whether Washington will use Special Forces to apprehend indicted regime leaders, and whether the United States might even carry out a small invasion. Trump is wise to say he has not ruled anything out because the limited use of force is in its way another psyop, threatening something larger if Maduro is not removed. The goal is to replace regime confidence with fear, and insiders' displays of loyalty with their search for escape hatches.

And the escape hatch should be clear: Maduro's departure from power, followed by the installation of the legitimate government led by González, followed by economic recovery, free elections, and the kind of negotiated amnesty (for all but the top figures of the regime) and national reconciliation that has been possible in other Latin American countries after dictators have fallen. The loyalty of the army and police to the new government cannot be assumed, of course, but if it can pay them using frozen assets or loans, their fealty to the departed Maduro will rapidly disappear. Soldiers are also Venezuelan citizens, after all, who have seen how



their own families and neighbors have been forced to live or flee under Maduro's reign.

It would be neither wise nor necessary to deploy U.S. ground forces to Venezuela. But creating the conditions for Maduro's overthrow will require hitting more than just drug-trafficking boats in international waters, because such strikes do not telegraph to Venezuelans that the regime is truly under great threat of losing power. First, Washington should expand its target list to include drug-trafficking speedboats in ports in addition to those on the high seas, because the threat must be brought home to the Venezuelan military. To protect U.S. planes that may strike targets in Venezuela (and to demonstrate that such strikes are planned), U.S. forces should destroy Venezuela's air defense systems, F-16 fighter aircraft at the Palo Negro Air Base, and Sukhoi jets at the air base located on La Orchila, an island about 100 miles off the coast. Airstrikes should also target small airstrips in western Venezuela used for drug trafficking and bases in western Venezuela used by the National Liberation Army (known by its Spanish acronym, ELN), a Colombian terrorist group aligned with Maduro and also engaged in narcotics traffic.

No single step would have a greater effect on the Venezuelan military, intelligence services, and police than removing Diosdado Cabello, the regime's chief thug, who is currently serving as interior minister and thus controls the police. Cabello was indicted in New York in 2020 for conspiracy to commit narcoterrorism and conspiracy to import cocaine, and the U.S. State Department has offered a reward of \$25 million for information leading to his capture owing to his participation "in a corrupt and violent narco-terrorism conspiracy between the Cartel of the Suns . . . and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), a designated Foreign Terrorist Organization." Removing him from power would show everyone

in the regime's security organs that they were not safe, and that its power to protect itself and them was fast eroding.

Maduro rules over a country with a collapsed economy, 270 percent inflation, vast poverty, and a populace that voted in a landslide to end his days in power. It is not likely that his regime could withstand such an assault. No such policy is without risk—including the fact that failure could leave Maduro in power and weaken American credibility and prestige. That outcome would strengthen not only Maduro and other leaders of his ilk, such as Miguel Díaz-Canel in Cuba and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, it would guarantee more drug trafficking and more migration from Venezuela. But the risks of the status quo are even greater.

## **PAST THE POINT OF NO RETURN**

“Regime change” is hardly a phrase associated with Trump, but the goals he has stated in Venezuela require it. The Maduro regime depends on illicit activities to remain in power, and U.S. descriptions of Maduro as a criminal are accurate. Unlike the South American regimes that returned to the barracks during democratic transitions in the Reagan years (when I served as assistant U.S. secretary of state for Latin America), the Maduro regime isn't a military dictatorship. The military juntas of the past were amenable to negotiated agreements with democratic political parties wherein they left power in exchange for some form of amnesty for their coups and related crimes. Maduro and his top lieutenants, by contrast, are drug traffickers, under U.S. indictment for narcoterrorism and other crimes such as money laundering. They will not peacefully negotiate the end of their rule because they know that doing so would mean prison. That is why they must be forced from power if Venezuela is to have a decent future. While, in theory, all the indictments could be quashed in return for their leaving power—the deal that was rejected by Panama's Manuel Noriega—only the clear U.S.

intent to remove the regime will make Venezuela's criminal leaders even consider such an alternative outcome. And they know that even if the United States agrees to end criminal prosecutions, Venezuela or the International Criminal Court may come after them. Such negotiations can be tried but are an illusory path; this criminal regime must be forced from power if Venezuela is to have a decent future.

Venezuela is a far better candidate for regime change and a return of democracy than were countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. After bringing down the dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez in 1958, Venezuelans enjoyed two generations of democracy and built a large and educated middle class until Hugo Chávez and Maduro brought repression and ruin. The country has no significant ethnic or religious divisions. It has a long tradition of close financial, commercial, social, educational, and military contacts with the United States. It is the alienation from the United States in the last 20 years—and the links to China, Cuba, Iran, and Russia—that is anomalous. Rebuilding democratic institutions, clearing out the Cuban influences in the intelligence service, and attacking the country's vast corruption will take years of hard work. But that is what a huge majority of Venezuelans voted for last year, despite all the efforts of the Maduro regime to intimidate them and to rig the election.

The only way for Trump to be able to declare victory credibly is for Maduro to go. Trump is obviously reluctant to launch strikes inside Venezuela. It's a fair guess that it isn't the problem of how to legally justify and defend such strikes that is deterring him, but his own doubts about the chances of success. And if Trump backs down, he would not acknowledge defeat; he would instead claim that his only goal had been to depress drug trafficking. He would declare victory and cite statistics showing that the number of drug shipments on boats in the Caribbean had gone down—which it would have.

But once the U.S. fleet is withdrawn, those shipments will inexorably rise again—and the Cartel de los Soles and its putative leader, Maduro, will be back in business with the wind in their sails. Moreover, refugee flows from Venezuela would continue, and Venezuelans would not return home in large numbers, while Maduro would remain in power. So although Trump may feel he is not yet committed, in fact his own prestige and American credibility are already on the line. His advisers should persuade him that he's already past the point of no return: the game is on, and either he wins or Maduro wins.

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