

The integrated guide to imperialism in Venezuela

A note of urgency to understand the ongoing imperial siege

Alejandro Pedregal

The kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, by US imperialism marks a new and extremely serious escalation in the sustained aggression against Venezuela's sovereignty. Far from being an isolated or exceptional event, this episode is part of a prolonged offensive that combines economic and financial warfare, political delegitimation, military coercion and the production of media consensus and cultural hegemony. In the face of information confusion, propaganda, and the proliferation of speculative narratives, this article proposes a framework for analysing the structural logic of contemporary imperialism and placing this attack within the siege Venezuela has endured for decades.



Political graffiti against imperialism with the image of Uncle Sam, Caracas, Venezuela. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Antiimperialismo_caracas.jpg Erik Cleves Kristensen, CC BY 2.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0>, via Wikimedia Commons

Imperialism and the capitalist world-system: a framework for analysis

From the perspective of world-system analysis, capitalism is not understood as a sum of isolated national economies, but as a historical totality structured by [hierarchical relations](#) of domination and dependence, articulated through unequal exchange. In this framework, imperialism is neither a conjunctural deformation nor the exceptional result of specific crises or wars, but the constitutive dimension of the capitalist world-system, inseparable from its historical logic of expansion and its permanent need for accumulation on a global scale.

Imperialism can thus be defined as the hierarchical mode by which the capture, transfer and appropriation of value in the world is organised. This process is based on the structural subordination of some societies to others within an international division of production and labour that separates countries that do not retain the value they produce from those that capture and concentrate it through unequal exchange. This hierarchisation configures the classic poles of the

system - centre and periphery, or Global North and South - as well as intermediate spaces of semi-periphery, where

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contradictory dynamics of appropriation and dependence coexist. Imperialism in this sense, segregates and orders the world to guarantee the accumulation of capital, relying on the cheap extraction of labour, material goods and energy, and the systematic externalisation of costs to the periphery.

Far from being reduced to direct military domination or territorial control, contemporary imperialism operates as an integrated system that articulates different spheres of social life. Economic domination - based on the control of value flows, indebtedness, sanctions or access to markets - is reinforced by political and diplomatic instruments, by the threat or effective use of military coercion, and by forms of cultural and media hegemony that contribute to legitimising the existing order in the social imaginary. These spheres do not operate in a compartmentalised way, but combine and feed back into each other in varying degrees of coercion and consensus, seeking a balance that allows imperialist subordination to be naturalised and value capture to be normalised as inevitable or even desirable.

The active participation of states is key in this architecture of domination. Through legal frameworks, international agreements, diplomatic devices and, when necessary, the use of military force, the conditions are created for transnational corporations and financial institutions to concentrate the lion's share of the profits from global trade. In this context, one can speak of imperialist states, fundamentally situated at the centre of the capitalist world-system, as opposed to other states whose structural insertion is one of dependency, regardless of their domestic political projects or development aspirations. The different historical phases of imperialism -colonial, neo-colonial and neoliberal- show continuities and ruptures in these forms of domination, generally associated with periods of hegemony of specific powers, with the United States being the central actor of contemporary imperialism.

This framework allows us to analyse the Venezuelan case not as an anomaly or as a strictly internal conflict, but as a concrete expression of the tensions of the capitalist world-system and contemporary forms of imperialist aggression. The economic, political, diplomatic, media, cultural and military dynamics that Venezuela has gone through in recent decades, culminating in the open military intervention of these days, contrary to international law, can only be fully understood if they are placed within this structural logic of domination, value capture and disciplining of the periphery.

Venezuela in the machinery of contemporary imperialism

Situating the Venezuelan case within the framework of the capitalist world-system implies abandoning exceptionalist or moralising explanations and understanding it as a concrete expression of the structural dynamics of contemporary imperialism. Far from being a mere bilateral conflict, an 'internal failure' or a supposed 'authoritarian drift', the sustained aggression against Venezuela should be read as part of a process of disciplining the periphery in a context of crisis, geopolitical reconfiguration and relative decline of US hegemony.

Since the beginning of the Bolivarian process, Venezuelan sovereignty has been the object of sustained confrontation by US imperialism and its regional allies. Already during the presidency of Hugo Chávez (1999-2013), this offensive took many forms that anticipate the mechanisms deployed against Venezuela today. The coup d'état of April 2002 - backed by business, media and military sectors, and de facto legitimised by Washington - marked a turning point, followed a few months later by the oil strike of 2002-2003, an economic sabotage aimed at paralysing PDVSA and suffocating the Venezuelan state. To these episodes were added political and financial destabilisation operations, such as the financing

of the opposition through US agencies (USAID and NED), international pressure during the 2004 recall referendum, and the detection of paramilitary plots linked to Colombia, such as the so-called Operation Daktari in 2004.

These events were also part of an increasingly militarised regional environment, with the expansion of the US presence in Colombia and the holding of military exercises simulating intervention scenarios in Venezuela, including the precedent of Operation Balboa in 2001, led by Spain in coordination with Colombia, Panama and the US. At the same time, an international media war was consolidated, aimed at eroding the legitimacy of the Bolivarian government and

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preparing the symbolic ground for more overt forms of the use of force. Far from being isolated episodes, these precedents reveal a prolonged strategy of interference that combines economic pressure, political conspiracy, military threat and discursive disciplining, and which finds its continuity - with more radicalised means - in the

current phase of imperialist aggression against Venezuela.

Thus, in recent decades - and particularly intensively since the mid-2010s - Venezuela has been subjected to an increase in this multifaceted strategy of domination, which has combined economic sanctions, financial asphyxiation, diplomatic delegitimation, political destabilisation operations, military threats, covert actions and an intense media and cultural war. This articulation of instruments clearly responds to the automatism of imperialism described above: a relative balance between coercion and consensus aimed at forcing regime change in order to impose the country's submission to the circuits of accumulation of global capital.

The economic axis has been central to this offensive. After the internal destabilisation provoked by the guarimbas in 2014 -which accompanied the increase in direct US funding to the opposition-, since 2015, and qualitatively more aggressively from 2017 and 2019, unilateral US sanctions, contrary to international law, have not only severely punished the Venezuelan state's ability to trade, finance itself and sustain public policies, but have also functioned as a mechanism of economic warfare aimed at eroding the material conditions of social reproduction.

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The financial sanctions imposed in 2017 blocked access to international credit markets and prevented debt refinancing, while the de facto oil embargo imposed in 2019 against PDVSA, accompanied by the confiscation of strategic assets abroad, deepened the collapse of public revenues and the

country's import capacity.

The material consequences of this stranglehold have been widely documented. Studies by the Centre for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) estimated that, between 2017 and 2018 alone, sanctions contributed to [40,000 preventable deaths](#) by restricting access to food, medication, hospital supplies and basic services, while other studies raised this figure to [more than 100,000](#) by 2020. Reports by [UN agencies](#) have noted the steady deterioration of health, nutrition and infant and maternal mortality indicators in the context of the induced economic collapse. In 2018, an official of the United States State Department openly acknowledged the policy's objective, stating that sanctions had forced Venezuela into default and that the 'total collapse' was proof that the strategy was working.

This process of economic asphyxiation has been accompanied by direct financial dispossession, in which institutions in the central countries have actively participated. The case of the Venezuelan gold held by the Bank of England is particularly illustrative. Under the pretext of 'not knowing who the legitimate government is', the UK refused to return sovereign reserves belonging to the Venezuelan state, even in the midst of the COVID-19 emergency. In parallel, state assets worth tens of billions of dollars were frozen abroad, and strategic companies such as Citgo were placed under judicial control in the United States, depriving the country of critical resources.

This economic axis was articulated with a political and diplomatic offensive aimed at denying Venezuelan sovereignty at the international level. After the disavowal of the 2018 presidential elections, January 2019 saw the immediate recognition by the United States, the European Union and other allies of Juan Guaidó as a parallel authority, without even having stood in the presidential elections. This would be accompanied, a month later, by

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an attempted entry from the Colombian border under the pretext of 'humanitarian aid'. These episodes highlighted the role played by governments, multilateral organisations, and regional alliances in building international consensus for regime change and intervention, normalising a remarkably elastic interpretation of international legality in favour of the

hegemon's interests.

When these tools did not produce the expected results, imperialist logic resorted to more direct forms of action. August 2018 saw the attempted assassination of President Nicolás Maduro using explosive drones. In subsequent years, US naval deployments in the Caribbean intensified, with mercenary incursions such as Operation Gideon in May 2020 and the recent interdiction operations under the argument of the 'war on drug trafficking', which has resulted in the extrajudicial and unproven murder of more than a hundred people, many of whom are known to have been simple artisanal fishermen in the area. In this context, the declaration of fentanyl as a "weapon of mass destruction" or the criminalisation of the Venezuelan state through narratives such as the so-called Cartel de los Soles served the function of constructing a moral framework that legitimised imperialist violence in the eyes of public opinion. It is revealing that this last accusation [was dropped](#) at the start of the judicial hearings against Maduro, demonstrating its instrumental and propagandistic nature.

Of course, this coercive device is not sustained solely by force. The production of consensus has also been key. To this end, the international promotion of opposition leaders has proliferated, as have the recognition and symbolic legitimisation devices through the use of institutional awards, from the European Union's Sakharov Prize for the ultra-right-wing María Corina Machado and Edmundo González Urrutia to the Nobel Prize for the former or the novel farce of the FIFA Peace Prize for Donald Trump. Systematically biased media coverage - with the uncritical

El crudo pesado venezolano adquiere una importancia específica, ya que podría servir para complementar las limitaciones del crudo ultraligero procedente del fracking estadounidense.

reiteration of terms such as 'dictator', 'tyrant', "autarkic" or 'regime' in the general press as much as in the tabloids or the sports press - has combined to shape a cultural strategy aimed at naturalising the intervention and presenting regime change as a desirable, humanitarian and even peaceful cause. As in other historical scenarios, cultural hegemony functions here as an

indispensable complement to financial and military coercion, making aggression a central part of political common sense.

But behind this offensive there is not only a desire to discipline, punish or dominate in abstract terms. Venezuela occupies a strategic position in the material geography of global capitalism, especially given its energy reserves. Although Venezuelan oil is ultra-heavy and costly to refine, its [relevance](#) cannot be assessed outside the current configuration of the global energy market. Venezuela has some of the largest proven crude oil reserves in the world - around [300 billion barrels](#), mostly in the Orinoco Belt - a volume comparable to or even greater than that of major producers such as Saudi Arabia or Iran, although subject to complex geological and technical conditions. The sharp drop in production - currently around 900,000-1,100,000 barrels per day, compared to more than three million at its historical peak - would be due to the sanctions' impact on the country's financial asphyxiation and the consequent deliberate deterioration in investment and infrastructure.

In this context, Venezuelan heavy crude oil is particularly important, as it could help address the [limitations of ultra-light crude oil](#) from US fracking, which is insufficient on its own to meet demand for diesel and other middle distillates. Moreover, this Venezuelan oil fits with the installed capacity of the large refineries in the Gulf of Mexico, which are designed precisely to process dense, high-sulphur crudes. Added to this is a not insignificant logistical factor: geographical proximity - some 1,500-2,000 nautical miles compared to 8,000-10,000 from the Middle East - reduces transport costs (and, therefore, crude oil usage) and the risks of exposure to potential strategic bottlenecks in Hormuz, Suez or Bab el-Mandeb, in a scenario of growing global instability. This combination of reserves, crude oil quality, refining infrastructure and geography explains why territorial and logistical control of Venezuelan oil,

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without being the only one, continues to be a weighty element in contemporary geo-economic disputes, beyond the conjunctural narratives that attempt to justify aggression. Moreover, control of these resources has not only energy implications but also financial and monetary ones, as it is part of a policy aimed at strengthening the role of the dollar in international energy trade to shore up

hegemony in crisis.

In this sense, Venezuela appears as a key player in a broader tactical withdrawal of the United States to its spheres of influence (including the effort to discipline Europe, Japan and South Korea), at a time of transformation, combustion and strategic dispute on a global scale. It is not just a matter of renewing the Monroe Doctrine through the 'Trump Corollary' to reaffirm the old 'backyard' - as the US imperialists disparage Iberian America - but of consolidating positions vis-à-vis potential systemic competitors while entrenching dependencies and freeing resources for the central axis of contemporary geopolitical confrontation. The Venezuelan case, far from being marginal, is thus at the heart of the contradictions of imperialism in its current phase, when the centre perceives it has lost hegemonic control over the rest.

Facts versus conspiracies: the strategic obligation of information in the face of imperialist media confusion

The above overview allows us to draw a fundamental conclusion: without the tools of structural analysis, imperialist aggressions appear as somewhat confused, exceptional or sometimes inexplicable events, which even appear to be the product of megalomaniacal attitudes or psychotic attacks. In reality, they respond to well-known historical patterns. Understanding imperialism as a system, not as a sum of excesses, mistakes, or isolated conspiracies, is not an abstract intellectual exercise but an essential political condition for identifying the aggressor, naming the violence, and articulating collective responses.

In contexts of crisis, anxiety and disinformation, this task becomes even more urgent. The imperialist offensive is not only waged in the economic, diplomatic or military spheres, but also in the field of knowledge production. What is massively circulated at these times is not neutral information, but at best propaganda: narratives designed to disorient, fragment, sow suspicion and shift the focus from verifiable facts to a swampy terrain of permanent speculation. The latest of these has been aimed at slipping in the possibility that the hitherto vice-president, and now acting president, Delcy Rodríguez, may have been the figure who betrayed Nicolás Maduro. Without proof, without data, without anything, the accusation has permeated the debates of a large part of the so-called left on social networks, which, at the mercy of algorithms, has not even dared to question the origin of the thesis, despite having been propagated profusely by Donald Trump himself, the US intelligence services and the Miami-based media. This shows that the greater the hegemon's capacity for media dissemination, the more effective its disinformation and confusion strategy becomes.

Speculation without evidence, the uncritical amplification of narratives fabricated in hostile centres of power and the obsession with opaque plots end up playing into the hands of imperialism, weakening the capacity to denounce, eroding political trust and fragmenting those who should be building common responses. Where clarity, unity and strength are needed, confusion, suspicion and paralysis are introduced. This is not to deny the

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complexity of processes or to shut down debate, but to quarantine narratives that respond to evident imperial interests and not to turn uncertainty into a rumour market. The history of imperialism shows that its greatest effectiveness lies not only in the violence it exercises, but in its ability to disarm its adversaries politically, even from

positions that claim to be critical or left-wing.

Indeed, in the face of imperialist aggression that only a few decades ago would have provoked massive mobilisations, today we are all too often witnessing a substitution of analysis by recycled conspiracy theories, often, as we have seen, coming from the same media and intelligence apparatuses that have historically driven destabilisation campaigns against Venezuela and other countries of the Global South. In the face of this, recovering materialist analysis, paying attention to structures, identifying the interests at stake and sustaining a critique anchored in verifiable facts is not just one option among others, but a strategic obligation. In a world undergoing a systemic crisis of extraordinary dimensions and the consequent intensification of imperialist aggressions, intellectual rigour and discipline are not a luxury, but a form of active resistance and an essential condition for rebuilding the international solidarity and collective action that aggressions such as those we are experiencing demand.

For this reason, it is important to focus on the facts we know. That is, the sanctions, the looting of assets, the military threats, the covert operations, the systematic economic violence and, of course, the kidnapping of the constitutional president and his wife in contravention of international law - at a time when it is increasingly evident that such law has barely seemed to be international law as long as it has served the hegemon to sustain global control. It is through these corroborative facts that we avoid the mire of unfounded opinion and can focus on what is essential at the moment: denouncing the flagrant violation by the US of Venezuela's sovereignty, exposing the threat this represents to the rest of the world and, consequently, demanding the immediate release of Venezuelan citizens Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores.

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