

Trump tightens the noose: The narco-state has no refuge

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"We will not allow a cartel to masquerade as a government within our hemisphere." - U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio

A few weeks ago, a U.S. naval fleet appeared in the Caribbean, just off Venezuela's coast. The image evoked a Cold War novel: eight warships, surveillance drones, an attack submarine, and ten stealth fighters. Officially, it was an anti-narcotics operation. In reality, it felt like something far larger — a message that Washington's patience had run out.

On September 2, the first kinetic strike destroyed a smuggling boat and killed its eleven crew members. Two weeks later, President Donald Trump confirmed a second strike and hinted at more. "We just blew up a drug boat. There are plenty more where that came from", he boasted. Supporters hailed the line as proof of strength. Critics called it the opening move of a dangerous escalation.

From Dictator to Capo

For decades, Washington's anti-drug strategy in Latin America was mostly reactive: intercept shipments, arrest traffickers, support cooperative policing. Rubio has broken with that pattern. "What will stop them is blowing them out of the water", he said bluntly after the first strike.

This is not just about cocaine routes. It is a signal aimed squarely at Nicolás Maduro, indicted on drug-trafficking charges and now labeled by Rubio as the head of "a global terrorist organization that has captured a country to enrich itself". In Washington's new framing, Maduro is no longer an autocrat to be sanctioned but a cartel boss to be hunted.

This legal and rhetorical shift matters. The Trump administration has invoked two powerful designations rarely used in tandem:

- **FTO (Foreign Terrorist Organization)** under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, criminalizing material support and barring members from U.S. entry.
- **SDGT (Specially Designated Global Terrorist)** under Executive Order 13224, freezing assets, banning financial transactions, and authorizing secondary sanctions.

Together, they form a comprehensive encirclement: legal, financial, and operational. They unlock Title 50 intelligence authorities, turning what was a political-diplomatic dispute into a military-judicial confrontation.

For years, Venezuela's democratic forces have asked for this reclassification. They argue that the Maduro-Cabello regime is not simply illegitimate but a criminal syndicate that must be dismantled, not negotiated with.

A High-Risk Gamble

Such a posture is not without peril. Latin America bears deep historical scars: the 1954 coup against Jacobo Árbenz, the 1989 invasion of Panama, countless covert interventions. Each new U.S. show of force revives suspicions of imperial overreach.

For Trump, the challenge is to frame this campaign as legitimate — a defense of regional security, not a return to the Monroe Doctrine. Rubio insists the effort is coordinated with Mexico and other allies, but Washington will need constant diplomatic calibration to avoid turning wavering governments into critics.

Venezuela itself is in limbo. In July 2024, its people voted overwhelmingly for change, but the regime clings to power. The armed forces remain divided — some loyal, some fearful, many waiting to see who will prevail. The show of force in the Caribbean could shatter the high command, creating a tipping point. Or it could harden the regime, binding them together with the fear of extradition and prison.

The Moral Question

At its heart, this is a moral as well as strategic dilemma. Should the world watch passively as a country is transformed into a narco-state? Or does it have an obligation to act, knowing that action carries its own risks?

Mario Vargas Llosa once warned that freedom is fragile and must always be defended — even if that defense is uncomfortable, even frightening. Venezuelans have endured years of failed negotiations and broken promises. They are now waiting to see whether this U.S. campaign is another fleeting spectacle or the start of a sustained strategy that will finally break the criminal grip on their country.

The stakes are larger than Venezuela. If this effort succeeds, it will signal that state capture by criminal syndicates will be met not with hand-wringing but with coordinated legal, financial, and — when necessary — military pressure. If it fails, it could embolden other regimes willing to turn their states into platforms for organized crime.

This time, the Caribbean cannot be the stage for empty gestures. It must become the prologue to a real transition. History shows that when the courage of a people converges with external pressure, even the most entrenched regimes can collapse. Should that moment come, this



campaign will not be remembered as an act of force but as an act of justice — the beginning of Venezuela’s long-delayed liberation.