Venezuela: where America's next war begins with words

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As Donald Trump redefines the U.S. war on narcotrafficking and Nicolás Maduro's regime invents new enemies, both sides are fighting the same invisible battle—one where language, not armies, decides the shape of power

In the politics of great powers, strategic shifts rarely begin with troop movements. They begin with a story.

Before a ship sails or a plane takes off, power prepares the ground with a narrative—one capable of justifying whatever comes next.

At the ceremony marking the 250th anniversary of the U.S. Navy, Donald Trump declared that the "maritime phase" of the war on narcotrafficking had concluded and that the next stage would unfold on land. At first glance, it sounded incidental. In fact, it signaled a turning point.

What the president suggested—and what his advisers understood—is that the fight against Latin America's criminal networks is about to redraw the operational map of the hemisphere. The logic is blunt: if the cartels no longer move by sea, Washington reserves the right to pursue them wherever they hide.

Phase I legitimized a naval presence in the Caribbean. Phase II extends the battlefield across the land corridors of Venezuela and Colombia. The border stops being a line and becomes a tactical continuum.

Trump avoids the word *intervention.* He speaks instead of "expanded pursuit." He does not appeal to international law, but to domestic pain: opioid deaths, broken families, shattered towns. Every strike on narcotrafficking, he insists, means lives saved at home.

It is a narrative of self-defense—crafted to prepare Americans to accept, when the time comes, actions that in any other context would look like foreign incursions.

While Washington shifts from sea to land, the Venezuelan regime moves in the opposite direction. It does not respond with diplomacy or force but with the manipulation of fear.

This week, Jorge Rodríguez—nominally the president of the Chavista National Assembly—published a message on Telegram claiming that "far-right extremists" were plotting to bomb the U.S. embassy in Caracas. He offered no proof, no names, no dates.

The essence was not the accusation. It was the stage he built for what would come next.

Rodríguez avoided his partisan title and adopted a new one: "Head of Dialogue and Peace of Venezuela." The change was not linguistic but tactical—an effort to shed the stigma of the regime and speak from an imagined neutrality. By doing so, he turned a political claim into an act of state, granting himself the authority to accuse or mediate without the weight of illegitimacy.

The maneuver is not new. Authoritarian regimes invent imaginary threats to justify real repression. Putin did it in Chechnya. Erdoğan in Turkey. Lukashenko in Belarus.

The sequence is predictable: announce a conspiracy, arrest the suspects, then proclaim that the nation has been saved from the danger the regime itself fabricated. In Venezuela, the pattern has a new label: *preventive defense of power.*

What connects Washington's redefinition of the enemy and the Cartel of the Suns' invention of a threat is the same impulse—the need to control the story before the events unfold.

Trump builds the legal and moral framework for future operations. Rodríguez constructs the political alibi for future arrests. One seeks to expand legitimacy; the other, to protect impunity.

If the United States does move its pursuit inland, the risk map will widen to include Catatumbo, Apure, Amazonas, Zulia, and Falcón—regions where Mexican cartels, Colombian guerrilla remnants, and Venezuelan smuggling networks coexist. These are not isolated cells but a single criminal ecosystem, thriving with the complicity of state institutions.

Trump's "Phase II" tacitly acknowledges that Latin American narcotrafficking is no longer an underground trade but a political-economic system embedded within governments. In this landscape, the boundary between hemispheric security and national sovereignty dissolves.

For Maduro's regime, the answer remains narrative before it is military. It needs a justification broad enough to brand its opponents "terrorists," "foreign agents," or "conspirators." The invention of attacks provides that excuse.

Any journalist, activist, or dissident can be criminalized in the name of protecting diplomatic security. The enemy need not exist—it only needs to serve a purpose.

Caracas knows it cannot withstand an American offensive, but it can raise its diplomatic cost by projecting the illusion of outside support. Each contact with Moscow serves that aim. Russia will not send troops; it doesn't need to. Its shadow suffices to sustain the myth of an anti-Western front.

The result is a mirrored battlefield of narratives. Washington reshapes its legitimacy to act beyond the Caribbean. The Cartel builds its legitimacy to repress beyond the law. On both sides, language precedes action.

In this new era of conflict, war is no longer waged only with weapons. It is fought with carefully calibrated words. The so-called fifth-generation war does not seek the conquest of territory, but the domination of imagination. Whoever controls the story the world tells about the conflict will control how it ends.

Today, Venezuela stands as the laboratory of that struggle—a place where the semantics of power redefine the limits of force, and where every public statement anticipates a geopolitical move.

Phase II has not begun with gunfire. It has begun with narratives.

Weapons are symbols. Trenches are screens. Victories are measured in perception.

The battle is no longer fought in mountains or cities. It unfolds in the minds of those who still uphold the regime—through fear, reputation, and obedience. In that invisible terrain, a single act of conscience—refusing to shoot, to sign, to remain silent—can carry more weight than an entire battalion.

And if we understand how a war can be won without tanks, we begin to see how a system collapses once it can no longer sustain its own story.