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Venezuela, Power Politics
&
Emergence of Unilaterism:
Lessons for India in
a
Fractured World Order

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Venezuela, Power Politics and Emergence of Unilaterism: Lessons for India in a Fractured World Order

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Abstract

The capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife Cilia Floris by US forces on 03 January 2026, marks one of the most impactful geopolitical events in recent times. This issue marks a change in the kind of world that is emerging—one where rules have become subservient to power.

This also draws significant strategic and military lessons for India, related to a reset in statecraft and military capability building. This incident reinforces the need for India to build its Armed Forces to a level wherein its global ambitions are matched by its military capabilities—in line with the vision of *ViksitBharat@2047*.

Keywords: Moduro, Venezuela, Geopolitics, US, Russia, China, India, ViksitBharat@2047

The capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife Cilia Floris by US forces on 03 January 2026, marks one of the most impactful geopolitical events in recent times. For the first time in the post - Cold War era, a sitting Head of State was plucked extraterritorially by a major power and transferred to its own jurisdiction, justified as a “law-enforcement operation”, and not as an act of external aggression.

For Venezuela, this incident represents the climax of a long national tragedy. For the United States, it is a statement of intent, one that collapses the distinction between criminal justice and coercive geopolitics. For the international system, it is a stress test of sovereignty and legality in a rules-based world order. Lastly, for India, it is a controversial action by an equally litigious global partner, which demands cautious reflection.

This issue is not merely about Venezuela—it is about the kind of world that is emerging, one where rules have become subservient to power, and not the other way around. At its core, the Venezuela operation blurs the traditional distinction between war, law enforcement and regime coercion. By framing the seizure of a sitting Head of State as criminal justice, the US has introduced a controversial precedent—that sovereignty may be bypassed when a state is designated as a criminal delinquent. This precedent is being closely studied in Moscow, Beijing and beyond.

Venezuela's Descent into Chaos

Venezuela's descent began well before the dramatic events a few days back. After the death of Hugo Chávez in 2013, the Maduro government inherited an economy dangerously dependent on oil

leases, feeble institutions and political polarisation. Misgovernance amidst collapsing oil prices and systemic corruption, turned a resource rich nation into a humanitarian disaster zone. All this happened, despite the fact that Venezuela could be sitting on the largest oil reserves in the world. Some estimates suggest that the country is even ahead of US and Saudi Arabia, holding about 303 Billion Barrels, the only problem being refinement due to the crude nature of the oil itself (Vantage First Post, 2026).

By 2019, Venezuela had become a contested state. Competing claims of legitimacy between the Maduro government and opposition backed alternatives split international opinion. The US and several partners imposed sweeping sanctions, particularly on Venezuela's oil sector, seeking to force political change through economic pressure. Moreover, sanctions engrained control by elites, further hollowed out state capacity and hastened mass migration across Latin America.

The turning point came when political pressure was augmented by legal warfare. In 2020, US prosecutors formally indicted Maduro and senior Venezuelan officials on narcotics and organised crime charges. From that moment, in addition to being a diplomatic objective for the US, regime change also acquired a prosecutorial logic. Over subsequent years, arrests, plea bargains and intelligence cooperation steadily built a legal narrative framing Venezuela's leadership as criminals who were actively promoting narco-terrorism.

The disputed 2024 Venezuelan elections, followed by renewed sanctions and diplomatic deadlock, closed the door to a negotiated transition. When the US finally acted, it did so as a self-proclaimed regional sheriff, claiming jurisdiction in a foreign country, where it was never consented to. This has transcended the regional security dynamics in the Americas into four interlocking spirals — the drug trade dynamics including organised crime; the migration issue; border flashpoints; and most importantly, great power competition in South America with Russia and China contesting US primacy and established norms in the region. In addition, 'the oil factor' appears to be a primary motivator for US to launch this campaign, as has been its historic precedent over the last few decades, in its own neighbourhood and beyond.

Regional Shockwaves

The consequences of this latest hegemonic action by US have a rippling effect across the Western Hemisphere. First, state collapse does not automatically follow leadership removal. Venezuela's coercive institutions viz. the military, intelligence services and internal security networks remain intact. The risk is not immediate democratisation, however, it threatens fragmentation due to elite infighting, criminal warlordism and armed splinters which could result in prolonged instability requiring sustained external management.

Second, the action has destabilised an already fragile regional security environment. Venezuela sits at the intersection of narcotics trafficking routes, migration corridors and unresolved territorial

disputes, notably with Guyana. Any prolonged instability risks renewed refugee flows into Colombia, Brazil and the Caribbean, thus burdening states already under political and economic stress.

Third, the episode reopens historical anxieties in Latin America about interventionism. While some governments quietly welcome Maduro's removal, many fear this trend. The region's uneasy consensus, that sovereignty violations were relics of the Cold War, has been shattered.

The US President has already hinted that countries like Colombia, Mexico and Cuba could be next. Katie Miller, wife of Stephen Miller, who is President Trump's Deputy Chief of Staff, put a contentiously altered image of the Danish Autonomous Territory on her X handle, hinting that annexation of Greenland by US may not be as distant or unlikely as it appears. All this bodes ominously towards the regional security dynamics in the region, revealing deepening fissures in the trans-Atlantic alliance.

Global Implications: Principle vs Power

The international reactions to this action have revealed a fractured world order. While the UN expressed concern over legality and instability, however it remained institutionally paralysed. This is a reminder that global governance structures struggle to influence or constrain permanent members of the Security Council. Similarly, the EU's response has been cautious and uneasy. While no sympathy exists for Maduro's governance, the EU worries about the erosion of norms it relies upon for its own security. In any case, US has been lecturing the EU since long that it must become more responsible for its own security.

Russia and China have condemned the action outright, framing it as regime change under legal guise, though this condemnation has been muted to an extent. Their reaction is less about Venezuela and more about resisting a precedent that could one day be turned against them or their partners. India's response has been measured and consistent: deep concern, emphasis on peaceful dialogue, respect for sovereignty and protection of Indian nationals. This restraint is reflective of strategic maturity and not geopolitical ambiguity.

This episode accelerates four troubling global trends. *Firstly*, it lowers the threshold for use of force. If criminal indictments can justify extraterritorial capture of Heads of State—the line between war and policing becomes increasingly blurred. Others will copy the model. *Secondly*, it normalises “lawfare” as a precursor to kinetic action. Legal instruments like sanctions, indictments and freezing of assets have become enablers of force. *Thirdly*, it deepens cynicism about international law. Rules appear binding only on the weak, while the powerful interpret legality to suit capability. *Fourthly*, it increases global volatility. Energy markets and investment flows now factor in the risk of sudden, unilateral enforcement actions (Pandya, A. 2026).

The Venezuelan Precedent: Reshaping Global Conflicts

The most significant impact of the Venezuela operation is the metamorphosis of a new operational doctrine. When great powers observe that unilateral actions carry manageable costs, restraint becomes less feasible. In such an environment, conflicts become harder to finish, leaders fight longer to avoid personal setback while legal and information warfare intensifies. For Russia, China and Iran—three largest adversaries of US, this action is a confirmation that legal instruments like sanctions, indictments and asset seizures are not alternatives to force but preparatory tools for it.

How this will manifest into globally ostentatious conflict zones of today's times, needs due examination. For Russia, the Venezuela episode reinforces long held suspicions about its perceived Western intentions against it. This action will reduce Moscow's incentives for compromise while strengthening its argument to the Global South that the international order is selectively enforced, undermining Western moral authority in shaping post war norms around Ukraine. For Beijing, the message is even more significant. This episode reinforces fears that the US is formalising such actions outside multilateral frameworks. While Taiwan remains a fundamentally different case, however, given its unique political status, the doctrinal signal matters. China could draw the conclusion that ambiguity favours action and that it could test thresholds through calibrated coercion rather than overt invasion—similar to what it has been doing over Taiwan in the last few weeks. China may also conclude that leadership security can be exploited as a leverage against national security, hence, not ruling out a similar kidnapping action against Taiwan, without raising the threshold levels towards an all out conflict (Ott, H., Inocencio, R. and Reals, T. 2026).

Lessons for India

Strategic Issues

For India, the near- term impact of these operation reflects directly upon the methodology of handling external pressures in its immediate neighbourhood and beyond. Precedents that dilute sovereignty or complicate India's diplomatic operating space, do give strategic guidelines as to how capabilities could be developed to reinforce own stature amongst smaller but belligerent neighbours. This episode also reinforces the idea that economic tools and legal instruments can be sequenced with force projection. India will need stronger financial security and compliance resilience to avoid secondary spillovers.

This incident also highlights the emerging trend that the strongest of alliances are not permanent today. India must get into issue-based, atomised and flexible partnerships, in which its own national interest remains paramount. There is a need to continuously re-assess one's relations with other nations, and enter into need-based alliances, which may be minilateral, bilateral, trilateral or multilateral, rather than be bound by extant historical or ideological grouping.

Military Issues

The military lessons that come out from this episode are even more stark. An established military power like US, whose credibility had got questioned just a few years back after the unceremonious withdrawal from Afghanistan, has once again shown the world the prowess of its trans-border force projection capabilities.

This has been backed by seamless synergy between not only its four conventional services, but also the civil instruments of national power, which in turn are suitably backed by its well-orchestrated technological prowess. The way the Drug Enforcement Agency personnel got seamlessly enmeshed with the military was symbolic of how military civil fusion today, has become a potent tool of force projection.

This carries a very important lesson for India that any further delay in theaterisation will only increase the operational gap between the three services. In addition, inter-ministerial networking is another important reform that must be executed in form of joint SOPs, doctrines, training and cross staffing.

In terms of information warfare, the operational success was not only the raid itself, but also its post action narrative control, legal positioning and management of second order instability. President Trump's press conference, immediately after the operation, exhibits the fact that weight to the narrative can only be given by political leadership. The battle of narratives continue to remain the most important facet of any conflict and we need to carry forward the lessons learnt during Operation Sindoar to further empower our narrative including those who are responsible for proliferating it.

The impunity with which the US Forces were able to infiltrate more than 200 American soldiers riding on Attack and Armed Helicopters into downtown Caracas, once again echoes the fact that conventional military capabilities will never go out of fashion. We need to invest in building our military might to the level of force projection, rather than just force preservation. Deterrence is costly, but wars are costlier. Nobody else will stand up to fight our wars, and therefore, both capabilities and capacities need to be expanded.

Cross Domain Readiness

While India's future planning must treat leadership removal/ attrition as a viable option, however, the removal of established leadership in a country does not automatically deliver stability. Coercive networking and elite bargains alongwith institutional linkages will decide outcomes. Even a short-term action can trigger cyber retaliation, proxy activation, false flag operations, trade route disruption and

negative narrative surges. This incident also shows that legitimacy arguments (self-defence, law enforcement and criminality) shape international behaviour and global reactions. We therefore, need to invest in organised evidence architectures, in terms of attribution measures, legal dossiers and strategic messaging.

Cyber Domain is the Game Changer in Next Generation Warfare

Fifth Domain Supremacy (Cyber)

This aspect gets further amplified by US actions during this incident. This was not just a military raid; it was the world's first true demonstration of Fifth Domain Supremacy (Cyber). While the Delta Force soldiers physically grabbed Maduro, US Space Command (USSPACECOM) and Cyber Command (USCYBERCOM) essentially "held the door open" and "turned off the lights". The reason 150 aircraft could fly into one of the most heavily defended airspaces in South America, without a single missile being fired, is entirely due to Cyber-Kinetic Synchronization (Evans, G. 2026).

The Game Changers

These comprised the "Logic Bomb" in the Power Grid (The Blackout) which refers to a classic SCADA (Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition) attack. The Target was Venezuela's national power grid (Guri Dam network). The Cyber Weapon was likely a dormant malware (similar to Russia's Industroyer or US's Nitro Zeus) that had been planted weeks or months in advance. Thereafter, the decisive impact came when a code was activated to make the room dark for Delta Force. It killed the hard line communications used by the military and forced the S-300 radar stations to switch to backup diesel generators. This switch over created a momentary "boot-up" lag, a blind spot of two/ five minutes—that is exactly when the helicopters crossed the coastline.

"Suter" Technology: Hacking the Enemy's Radar

The Venezuelan S-300VM is a "hard kill" system (missiles), but it runs on software. The US likely employed "Suter" network warfare technology. Instead of jamming the radar with noise (which the enemy knows is happening), Suter invades the radar's network. It allows US forces to sit as system administrators inside the enemy's equipment.

The "Ghost" Effect

The US did not just blind the radar—they likely spoofed it. The Venezuelan operators looked at their screens and saw "Clear Skies". The software was telling them everything was normal, even while 150 aircraft were swarming above them. There was no resistance because "you don't fire at what you can't see".

The "Kill Switch" (C2 Decapitation)

An army is only as good as its orders. The Cyber Command severed the "nervous system" connecting Maduro to his generals. The attack happened through a specific Telephony Denial of Service (TDoS) targeting the encrypted military bands and the specific fibre optic lines running to Fort Tiuna.

The Decisive Impact

When the explosions started, the local commanders at the AD batteries could not contact their superiors because the phones and data links were down. The command chain was paralysed and without a direct order from the top, no lieutenant was willing to unlock the firing mechanism. The cyber attack utilised this psychological weakness by ensuring that the "permission" never arrived.

Foreign Equipment

While the S-300s were fully loaded and operational, however, they were cyber tricked into a coma. The US Delta Force team walked into a system that had already been lobotomised by code. All they needed to do was execute their well rehearsed extraction plan (Hindustan Times, 2026).

Preemptive Planning

The success of "Operation Absolute Resolve" wasn't just about the 30 minutes of the raid; it was about the 10 years of silence that preceded it. Years ago, when Venezuela upgraded its routers or servers, CIA/ NSA operatives likely intercepted the hardware in transit, installed physical "beacons" or modified chips, and then re-packaged them. The Venezuelan military bought "new" equipment that was already compromised before it left the box. The "Sleeper Malware code" that shut down the power grid wasn't downloaded that night. It was likely planted three or four years ago, sitting dormant, sending a simple "ping" once a month to say "I'm still here". It waited for the specific "Wake Up" command on 03 January 2026. Only one compromised employee is needed to bridge the air gapped system. The S-300 system in Venezuela was likely air gapped (not connected to the internet). But the technician who updates the software, or the janitor who vacuums the server room, goes home to the internet every night. Therefore, what happened in Venezuela on 03 January 2026 is an advanced version of the Stuxnet (2010). The helicopter extraction was just the tip of the iceberg (the visible 10%), the submerged 90% was the cyber ecosystem.

India's Politico-Military Dogma

Seeing this incident through the lens of the current geo-political dynamics surrounding India, it may be wise to consider a reset of how the country reacts to various trans-national challenges that have

become increasingly more confrontational and frequent over time. India's geo-strategic approach, which has acquired an aggressive nature over time, is also characterised by restraint. This lends it an inhibited disposition, which is exploited by India's regional adversaries and belligerent neighbours.

Therefore, calibrated unpredictability, based on randomising actions across political, economic and military domains, is required to dislocate the adversary, both temporally and cognitively. To operationalise this, India will need to develop capabilities in cyber forces, AI-enabled deception tools, cognitive electronic warfare systems, directed energy weapons, high resolution satellites, drone swarms, etc. Strategic communication units will be required for managing these operations.

Developing capabilities to strengthen India's security architecture and response mechanisms need immediate impetus. India cannot wait to become the third largest economy in the world and then chart a path towards force development. The dividends of becoming a rising economic power must be invested in building a potent military power. The efforts to modernise must multiply while the timelines to achieve it must shrink. Only then will India truly transition from its current restrictive offensive capability to assertive global influence.

Conclusion

As India marches towards the national vision of *Viksit Bharat@2047*, the Venezuela episode offers a stark strategic reminder—development and security are inseparable, and sovereignty in the 21st century must be defended actively, not assumed passively. A developed India cannot rely on moral standing alone. It must be underpinned by a coherent National Security Strategy that integrates political legitimacy, military credibility, economic resilience, legal prowess and narrative dominance. In a world wherein major powers are increasingly willing to reinterpret and misinterpret rules for their own interests, ambiguity can be construed as vulnerability.

For us, *Viksit Bharat@2047* must manifest into a shift from reactive security management to anticipatory statecraft. Seeing the manner in which the US is sending hard messages in pursuit of securing its strategic neighbourhood, India, too, needs to make its strategic perimeter safe and supply chain resilient. This incident also manifests a trend that future conflicts may not be defined solely by armies and borders, but also by legitimacy of law and narrative supremacy. Actions justified today in Venezuela may shape expectations tomorrow in EU or the Indo-Pacific, as also in India's immediate and distant neighbourhood. In all scenarios, the core national interests of India, viz. its identity, security, sovereignty, global standing and overseas interests, need to be protected at all cost. Today, global power is getting increasingly governed by regional dynamics. India's security will depend on combining ambiguity with decisiveness, legitimacy with deterrence and restraint with readiness. This can only be achieved through self-reliance and national cohesion. Venezuela may be far from India's shores, but its geopolitical aftershocks have become global, drawing out stark redlines and realities for us as an emerging world power.

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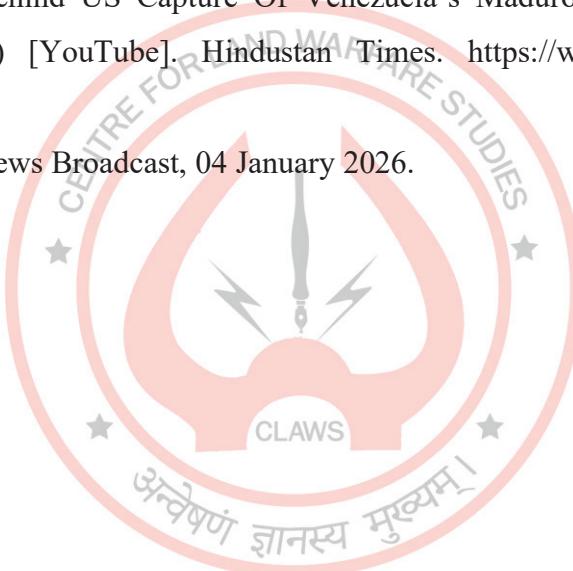
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