

# ISSUE BRIEF

## Executive Summary

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### The U.S. Arrest of President Maduro and Prospects for the Reconfiguration of the International Order

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The United States' arrest of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro can be understood as a revealing example of how the limited use of force may be employed as a tool for securing advantage in great-power competition. The United States has framed this action not as regime change against a sovereign state or as a full-scale military intervention, but as the enforcement of criminal justice against an individual accused of international crimes. It has further emphasized that the use of force was strictly limited and intended solely to protect U.S. personnel conducting the arrest operation.

This approach stands in clear contrast to the regime-change-centered intervention models the United States pursued in Iraq or Libya in the past. Rather than a long-term intervention aimed at democratization or state-building, this case represents a form of intervention focused on the removal or prosecution of a specific criminal actor. As such, it may signal the emergence of a new type of external intervention. The episode illustrates a U.S. strategy that seeks to avoid the high costs and risks associated with large-scale military involvement, instead combining legal legitimacy with the restrained use of military force to advance strategic interests.

At the same time, the arrest of President Maduro also illustrates the spatial expansion of strategic competition among the United States, China, and Russia. Over the past two decades, Venezuela has served as one of the most important strategic footholds established by China, Russia, and Iran in Latin America, and its relationships with these countries have been central to sanctions evasion and regime survival. Nevertheless, the fact that President Maduro was

apprehended by the United States sends a clear signal to the international community that external patronage—particularly cooperation with China and Russia—does not guarantee regime security in Venezuela.

Notably, in the immediate aftermath of Maduro’s arrest, the United States issued similar warning messages to multiple actors, including Iran, Colombia, and Cuba. This suggests that the operation should not be viewed as an exceptional case limited to Venezuela, but rather as a precedent that could be applied repeatedly in other contexts.

Ultimately, the incident demonstrates that great-power competition is not confined to the Indo-Pacific theater but is instead interconnected across all global theaters. By acting in the Western Hemisphere—an area that has attracted relatively limited public attention—the United States has tangibly demonstrated its determination to restore strategic primacy. This reflects a judgment that securing stability and dominance in the Western Hemisphere will, over the long term, underpin the maintenance of U.S. influence in both the Indo-Pacific and European theaters. In this regard, arguments suggesting a potential division of spheres of influence among the United States, China, and Russia fundamentally misinterpret U.S. strategic interests.

The message conveyed by the U.S. arrest of Maduro to its allies is that the United States will not intervene at the same level in every theater. Consequently, allies must develop their own deterrent capabilities in order to enhance their strategic value within the alliance. We, too, should proactively prepare by adjusting our policies in line with U.S. strategic priorities.

## **The Nature of the Arrest and Reactions among Trump Supporters**

The first key issue is the fact that the United States is not only framing the arrest of Maduro as a judicial process rather than an act of regime change, but is also adjusting its foreign policy strategy toward reshaping the international order while minimizing the scope of intervention and post-operation responsibilities.

The second key issue raised by the arrest concerns whether it could trigger elite or popular backlash within the United States. In particular, the operation immediately sparked debate over a possible return of neoconservatism. Classical neoconservative interventionism emphasized regime change, enforced democratization, and long-term state-building through military power. In contrast, the Maduro arrest was deliberately framed without normative goals such as democratization or systemic political transformation. Instead, the United States emphasized economic recovery through oil-sector investment and reconstruction, signaling that access to resources—not ideological transformation—was the primary objective. This framing suggests that Donald Trump’s actions were driven less by ideology than by the need to secure resources for great-power competition and stabilize the Western Hemisphere.

Whether the MAGA base would accept the operation was another critical concern. However, instability in the Western Hemisphere facilitates Chinese and Russian influence while also driving mass irregular migration toward North America—outcomes fundamentally at odds with MAGA priorities. For this reason, the MAGA camp has not strongly opposed the operation. Given that Trump’s supporters strongly backed his pledge to end “forever wars” in the Middle East, the arrest was carefully framed as neither a long-term military commitment nor a democracy-promotion effort. This framing likely reflected Trump’s need to preserve MAGA support ahead of the 2026 midterm elections. At the same time, Reagan-oriented Republicans were unlikely to oppose the removal of an anti-American authoritarian leader, reinforcing expectations that the operation would not fracture Trump’s domestic support base.

## Monroe Doctrine or Selective Retrenchment?

The central debate surrounding Maduro’s arrest is whether it signals a return to U.S. isolationism or a recalibration of how the United States intervenes abroad. The arrest and related actions suggest not a withdrawal from global influence, but a selective reconfiguration of the space, scope, and means of intervention. The issue is no longer whether to intervene, but when, where, and how. In this sense, the Monroe Doctrine is better understood not as non-intervention, but as the deliberate setting of intervention boundaries—excluding external powers while asserting U.S. responsibility for order and security in the Western Hemisphere.

Within this framework, Maduro’s arrest can be explained as “retrenchment without restraint”: a strategy that reduces the scale and long-term responsibility of intervention while maximizing the effectiveness and resolve of the tools employed. It avoids full-scale war and prolonged occupation, yet does not rule out limited force or direct action when deemed necessary. This approach is closely linked to the growing coordination among China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran (CRINK), which—though not a formal alliance—forms a loose axis challenging the U.S.-led order through sanctions evasion, diplomatic support, and military and technological cooperation. Venezuela functioned as a key Western Hemisphere node in this network, and Maduro’s arrest serves as a signal to block CRINK’s regional expansion. Crucially, it demonstrates that the Western Hemisphere is not an open-ended strategic space for external powers, even without provoking large-scale great-power conflict or long-term intervention. Subsequent warning messages sent by the Trump administration to countries such as Iran, Colombia, and Cuba further suggest that the arrest may function as a repeatable precedent rather than a one-off event.

## **Implications of Maduro’s Arrest for the Reshaping of the International Order**

The arrest of Maduro is unlikely to remain an isolated event; rather, its ripple effects are expected to extend across the South American regional order, global resource and energy supply chains, and the broader rules-based order.

First, the arrest appears to have provided the United States with an opportunity to reassess the alignment patterns of South American states amid great-power competition. Through this operation, the United States demonstrated its readiness to intervene selectively when certain thresholds are crossed, signaling its determination to preserve Latin America as a stable strategic rear area.

Second, the incident raises the prospect of a reconfiguration of global resource and energy supply chains. U.S. involvement carries geopolitical significance beyond the mere acquisition of resources. Washington’s references to the future management and reconstruction of Venezuela’s resource sector suggest not only economic motives, but also a strategic challenge to energy supply chains centered on China and Russia. In particular, U.S. efforts to redirect Venezuelan crude toward American refining facilities, along with the potential erosion of China’s position as a primary importer, point to an impending geopolitical restructuring of the global energy landscape.

Third, Maduro’s arrest raises important questions about the rules-based international order. The United States has framed the operation not as a violation of international law or an infringement on sovereignty, but as the enforcement of criminal justice against an individual accused of international crimes. Rather than rejecting the rules-based order, this framing shifts the debate toward the question of who possesses the authority and capability to enforce those rules. In this sense, the arrest can be understood as an attempt to alter not the content of the international order, but the way it is operated and upheld. The episode sends a paradoxical message to the international community: while the rules-based order itself remains important, the protection of those rules is not automatic, and the authority to maintain order ultimately resides with specific actors.

## **Implications for the Northeast Asian Order and South Korea’s Response**

As the Western Hemisphere has emerged—albeit selectively—as a theater of direct U.S. intervention, the U.S. approach to Northeast Asia is also likely to be recalibrated based on strategic priorities and shared interests. Claims that the Maduro arrest could embolden China to invade Taiwan overlook critical contextual realities. For China to pursue a military occupation of Taiwan, it would first need to judge that the balance of power in Northeast Asia had shifted decisively in its favor and that U.S. alliance cohesion had significantly weakened, alongside other complex conditions. Such assumptions remain implausible.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that China could cite this case rhetorically to justify the use of force in areas such as the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea. At the same time, CRINK states may temporarily elevate their level of coordination; North Korea's official diplomatic response following Maduro's arrest is notable in this regard. Still, the likelihood of this developing into sustained strategic alignment remains low.

Expectations that the United States might apply the same approach to North Korea are also unrealistic. As the United States will not intervene at the same level across all theaters, strengthening allied deterrence capabilities becomes increasingly critical. Equally important is the capacity to anticipate and manage a range of region-specific contingencies. For South Korea, located in Northeast Asia, these developments should not be viewed passively as external shocks. Instead, they should serve as an opportunity to reinforce integrated deterrence structures and upgrade multi-layered crisis management systems in line with U.S. strategic priority-setting. While Maduro's arrest occurred in South America, its underlying logic and structural implications may well extend beyond the region.

### **About the Author**

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