



September 25 • US-Latin America

US Military Operations in the Caribbean Sea

Background

Since his first term, US President Donald Trump has placed Venezuela at the center of US counternarcotics policy. In **March 2020**, the US Department of Justice charged President Nicolás Maduro with narcoterrorism; in **April** of the same year, US warships were deployed in the Caribbean.



Following his return to the presidency in 2025, Trump expanded this approach:

- In **February**, criminal groups such as Tren de Aragua (TdA) and several Mexican cartels were designated as foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs).
- In **March**, the Alien Enemies Act was invoked against TdA, and in **July**, the US Treasury sanctioned the Cartel de los Soles as a “Specially Designated Global Terrorist.”
- In **mid-August**, US naval forces were ordered to be deployed in the Caribbean, where they remain operational. As of **September 22**, there were several warships and an expanded joint task force presence, including Marine elements.

This expansion **increases the likelihood** of assertive actions against illegal groups and Venezuelan actors, potentially leading to diplomatic disputes with Latin American governments, additional sanctions, or international legal proceedings. The situation creates a more complex operating environment with direct implications for maritime security across Caribbean routes and potentially the Pacific, as well as heightened exposure to regulatory and financial measures linked to sanctions.

SUMMARY

- **Almost Certain:** Expanded sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and regional pressure, Targeted strikes on Cartel/Trafficker assets.
- **Probable:** Sustained US military posture in the Caribbean for deterrence and counter-narcotics.
- **Unlikely:** Full-scale military intervention.

Key Risk: Elevated regional instability, trade disruption, and increased costs, compliance, and reputational challenges in financial dealings with Venezuelan-linked entities.

Analysis

Enhanced Strategic Posture in the Region

Deployment of Military Assets / Ongoing Counter-Narcotics Strikes: Almost Certain

The Trump administration has expanded the US military presence in the Caribbean, making counternarcotics a security priority. Since 2020, Washington has overseen the largest regional deployment since the Panama invasion of 1989, including advanced surveillance systems, naval task forces, and more than 4,500 troops positioned across the southern Caribbean. These forces recently engaged in interdiction and intelligence operations directed at Venezuelan trafficking networks such as Tren de Aragua and Cartel of the Suns.

Since the deployment, US forces have conducted three lethal strikes against boats allegedly being used by drug traffickers:

- **September 2:** US forces strike Venezuelan drug cargo vessel, kills 11, in the [Caribbean Sea](#)
- **September 15:** US strike targeting vessel kills at least 3 near [Venezuela](#)
- **September 19, reported on September 21:** US military action targeting vessel near [Dominican Republic](#)

It is **almost certain** that these strikes will continue, as the Secretary of War Pete Hegseth has stated that the US [will not tolerate drug traffickers operating in international waters](#).

- It is **almost certain** the US will maintain or escalate this posture in the Caribbean unless Venezuela makes significant concessions on trafficking or political governance. The deployment, combined

with the terrorism designation of Venezuelan-linked networks, entrenches a dual-purpose strategy. Operationally, the buildup is intended to disrupt trafficking flows and financial networks that sustain the Maduro regime. Strategically, it serves as a clear geopolitical signal to allies and rivals, including China, Russia, and Cuba, that **Washington remains committed to regional dominance.**

- The Trump administration has indicated that **operations may extend beyond Venezuela** to target assets connected to trafficking organizations in **Colombia, Mexico, Central America, Ecuador, and Peru.** Such an escalation would widen the geographic scope of US strikes, potentially bringing military operations closer to the territorial waters of these states and forcing their governments to decide whether to collaborate with Washington or confront its growing regional assertiveness.

As most prolific drug trafficking routes into the US pass through Central America and Mexico along the Pacific coast, expanded operations in these corridors are increasingly **probable.** Several transnational criminal organizations in Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador have already been **designated as FTOs** by the Trump administration. The president has vowed to pursue them aggressively, framing the campaign as a **declared war on drug traffickers.**

Operational Risks and Impacts

The heightened military presence **increases the risk** of armed incidents at sea or air, especially as **Venezuela mobilizes** its own forces and as other countries in the **region react to potential US operations** near their jurisdictions. Colombia, Mexico, and other countries in Latin America may be unwilling to accept US activity close to their sovereign waters. Caribbean and Latin American governments have expressed their concern about the militarization of regional waters, warning that **escalation could destabilize security and increase volatility.**

- The perception of insecurity remains a **central concern.** The prospect of expanded operations against traffickers beyond Venezuela may **increase uncertainty**, raising the cost of operations and discouraging new investment. Businesses operating in or reliant on the region, the Caribbean, and Latin America are increasingly susceptible to the risks of escalating militarization, confrontation, and economic disruption.
- In the Pacific, kinetic actions could be interpreted by Latin American governments as extraterritorial incursions. This may lead to stronger nationalist pushback, creating political friction, regulatory unpredictability, and reputational risks for multinationals seen as aligned with US policy. Governments along the Pacific coast, including Mexico, Peru, and Ecuador, may resist US operations near their maritime boundaries. Local populations **could mobilize through protests or boycotts targeting foreign companies** perceived as supportive of Washington's agenda. Firms

operating in these countries could face regulatory tightening and retaliatory measures, as well as heightened exposure to social unrest and consumer activism.

At the geopolitical level, governments may seek to **counterbalance US influence** by deepening partnerships with alternative powers such as China.

Economic Sanctions

Expanded Sanctions & Economic Pressure: Probable

It is **probable** that Washington will maintain and expand sanctions on Venezuela over the next year. Continued sanctions weaken the financial base of the Venezuelan government and serve as a deterrent to foreign investors considering deeper business involvement with Caracas.

- The US has **maintained sanctions and economic pressure** as its primary means for shaping Venezuela's political landscape. In April, the **Trump Administration** imposed additional sanctions that, compared to the previous month, **decreased Venezuelan oil exports by more than 11 percent**. The decrease totalled a **20% reduction in May**. Additional licensing conditions were applied in July that prohibited cash transfers to the Maduro government, obstructed joint ventures, and thus disrupted international partners. The most visible sanction was imposed on Chevron, with its exports decreasing from 200,000 barrels per day to about 102,000 barrels by September.
- Despite a temporary surge in August, when Venezuelan oil exports briefly reached a nine-month high before stricter rules took effect, the **trajectory remains downward** due to the compounded effect of internal structural limitations, which have significantly reduced Venezuela's state-owned oil and natural gas company, **Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.'s (PDVSA)** ability to process and ship crude efficiently, and external sanctions. The Treasury and the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) have emphasized that the objective remains to deprive the Maduro government of vital resources while maintaining the flexibility to adjust authorizations on a case-by-case basis.
- The regional impact has also been significant. Colombia's planned imports of natural gas from Venezuela were suspended due to US measures, which demonstrate that sanctions have implications for regional energy and trade integration. Neighboring countries, including Ecuador, face indirect disruptions to trade, while international financial institutions warn that Venezuela's economy remains highly vulnerable to external shocks. The broader picture indicates that

sanctions are not only an instrument of bilateral pressure but also a factor affecting economic dynamics in northern South America.

Additionally, sanctions serve as bargaining chips in negotiations. Selective, limited waivers of sanctions will continue to be used, although not as signs of de-escalation, but rather to compel cooperation. This implies that sanctions have become embedded in US policy and, conversely, will only be lifted in the near future if the Maduro government makes significant political concessions, which is **unlikely**.

Operational Risks and Impacts

- The domestic risks for Venezuela are considerable. Sanctions act to increase economic fragility, thereby increasing the threat of inflationary hikes, commodity shortages, and renewed unrest in urban centers. Regionally, sanctions undermine planned energy cooperation, complicate cross-border trade, and increase economic pressures on Colombia and Ecuador.
- Finally, higher volatility in Venezuelan oil flows may contribute to price swings, especially if a simultaneous supply disruption elsewhere were to occur. In diplomatic terms, the measures further contribute to the tapestry of anti-US narratives in Caracas. They may even prompt the Venezuelan government to consider closer ties with Russia, Iran, and China, which are seeking to solidify their presence in the Americas.
- For international clients, the implications of US sanctions are both immediate and strategic. Companies with exposure to Venezuela's oil sector face diminishing returns and increasing operational risk, as licensing changes can abruptly curtail volumes or invalidate contracts. In addition, compliance requirements are becoming more complex, with varying rules expanding the possibility of inadvertent violations that carry significant financial and reputational penalties. Companies in Colombia, Ecuador, and the wider Andean region must also be vigilant for secondary disruptions, such as delayed supply chains, reduced energy availability, or the need to renegotiate contracts under new risk conditions.
- Strategically, Venezuela remains a high-risk environment where financial returns are unlikely to outweigh regulatory and reputational challenges. Firms with regional operations must therefore weigh whether continued engagement offers sufficient benefits, or whether disengagement and risk diversification are the more sustainable options under the current trajectory of US policy.

Military Intervention

Full-scale invasion: Unlikely

- Despite ongoing strikes and military posturing, a US invasion of Venezuela is **unlikely** in the near term. Past operations in Grenada (1983) and Panama (1989) required 7,600 and 26,000 troops, whereas only about 4,500 are currently deployed, which is insufficient for a country as large and militarily capable as Venezuela. Regional governments, including Colombia, Mexico, and Cuba, have also denounced any attempt to remove Maduro by force, **further reducing** the likelihood of invasion. Colombia, which shares a border with Venezuela, has also stated that **it will not allow its territory to be used for an invasion**.
- President Trump has stated that regime change is currently not on the agenda. US military posturing is **likely** intended to apply pressure on Maduro to accept political concessions. Any formal invasion of Venezuela would also likely require an act of Congress, which the Trump Administration would be **unlikely** to receive bipartisan support for.
- In response to the deployment of US troops in the region, President Maduro has **ordered the Venezuelan military to deploy tens of thousands of troops** to the border and coastal regions, as well as the mobilization of Bolivarian militias nationwide. Caracas has also conducted **military exercises** on La Orchila Island, less than 500 miles from Puerto Rico. These moves are intended to strengthen Venezuela's defensive posture in anticipation of an **unlikely** escalation, while also signalling to Washington and regional actors that any intervention would be met with significant resistance.

Operational Risks and Impacts

The US **will likely maintain** its military movements in the region as a means to apply pressure against Venezuela and keep its risks limited. However, strikes against criminal organizations or direct action against high-value targets within Venezuela are not ruled out. Such a scenario, especially strikes against military assets, would be a **major escalation** and carries the risk of expanded confrontation within Venezuela. Caracas will **likely** continue to enhance its own military response, such as further F-16 interceptions of US military assets, moves the **Pentagon** has already described as "highly provocative".

- Washington also reportedly seeks to shake the military support around Maduro. Historically, the country has experienced multiple coup attempts over the years, with the military playing a prominent role. In the event of political destabilization, experts fear that the fall of Maduro might

create a power vacuum, leading to **increased risk** of unrest in a country already plagued by security instability and economic hardship.

- An expanded confrontation stemming from wider strikes into Venezuela or political destabilization carries risks. Recent conflicts between “near-peer” countries have triggered significant travel disruptions, affecting other countries in the region, particularly in terms of flight and maritime operations. A wider conflict may also trigger a new mass refugee exodus in a region already strained to handle such a scenario. Currently, almost 8 million Venezuelans are displaced, a greater number than in any other country. Millions of these refugees already reside in neighboring countries, such as Colombia.

A wider conflict will also **likely** trigger protests globally, especially in the US and other countries that host a large number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants. Anti-war movements will also likely hold protests, posing further travel risks in major urban cities.

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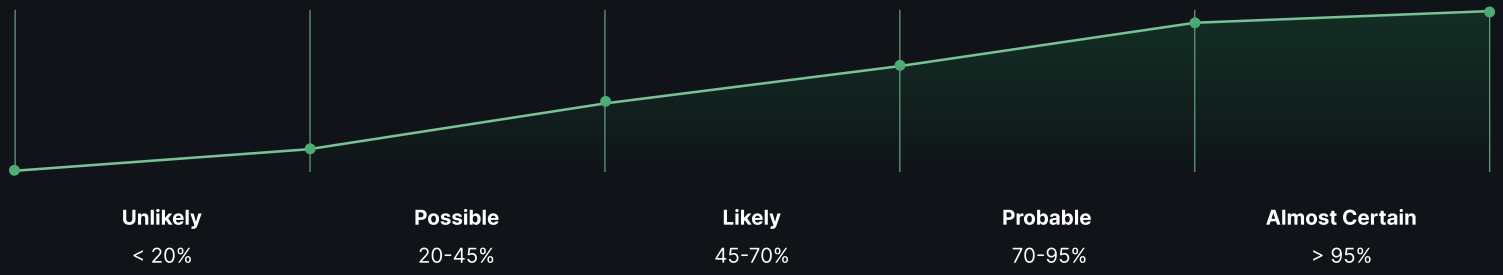
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Resources

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- [US Southern Command \(SOUTHCOM\)](#)
- [US Department of War](#)
- [Secretary of War Pete Hegseth](#)
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