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Caribbean Flashpoint

U.S. Narco-Terrorism Policy and the Russia–China–Venezuela Axis

3 Main Points

1. The article explores how recent U.S. military actions in the southern Caribbean challenge international law and regional sovereignty.
2. The U.S. crackdown on “narco-terrorists”



expands military powers, provoking Venezuelan resistance and deeper Russian and Chinese support for Caracas. 3. These moves heighten Caribbean tensions, making diplomacy and respect for international norms crucial to avoid escalation.

About the Authors

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By: Merle Hebinck & Sixte Foucq

The renaming of the Ministry of Defence to the Ministry of War directly lives up to its name, considering recent events in the Caribbean. Donald Trump's second term in office marks major changes in US domestic and foreign policy, one of them being [the renaming of the Ministry of Defence, whose name Trump considered to be "too defensive" and too "woke"](#). Reflecting this new strategy are the latest operations on the crackdown of "narco-terrorism" in the Caribbean. An operation that raises concerns about whether Trump still respects international law and whether he will respect international norms for intervention, maritime law and sovereignty in the future.



[In August 2025 the US began moving additional military assets into the southern Caribbean.](#)

Most notably warships, amphibious ships, destroyers, possibly a fast-attack submarine and a significant number of sailors and marines (about 4000+). The goal stated is clear: The operation is supposed to counter the growing influence of drug cartels that were recently designated as "narco-terrorist" organizations by the US.

On September 2nd the [US forces carried out an airstrike on a speedboat in international waters](#) (in the Southern Caribbean) that was allegedly linked with the Venezuelan gang Tran de Aragua, killing 11 individuals. This strike can be seen as a part of a newer, more aggressive posture of the US. This was continued around September 15th, when a [second strike on a ship from Venezuela](#) reportedly killed 3 individuals, who were under similar allegations of narco-terrorism. Linked to this, Venezuela accused the US, that one of their ships [illegally boarded a fishing boat in Venezuelan waters for about 8 hours](#), which raised concerns about sovereignty and legality.

These actions can be seen as an operational shift from the US. [Designating cartels and criminal gangs as "Foreign Terrorist Organization" \(FTOs\) or "narco-terrorists", allows different legal and military powers to be used against them](#). Instead of prohibition measures, the US uses naval, air and maritime forces to monitor and, if necessary, conduct coercive measures, such as carrying out kinetic attacks in international waters that destroy ships and kill the people on board.

These actions were strongly condemned by Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro, who calls them violations of sovereignty, aggression and "imperial" behaviour. And in return [announcing the mobilization of militias, border troops and civilians for defense, risking a further escalation of the conflict](#). Cuba seems to share these views, and has [called on the UN](#) to address what it calls "US militarization" of the region, in order to deescalate the



situation. Furthermore, legal experts raise broader concerns about jurisdiction, whether these are legitimate acts of war and whether international norms of intervention, maritime law, and sovereignty are being respected. The United Nations condemned the United States' action citing what it considers to be extrajudicial killings.

The Maduro administration has launched high intensity conventional and [electronic warfare drills](#) on and around the island of [La Orchila](#) in response to the United States moves in the region. Baptised "[Sovereign Caribbean](#)" the operation aims to reassert Venezuela's sovereignty over its territory and, to cite Nicolás Maduro, respond to the "threatening, vulgar voice" of the US.

As Washington presses its military presence deeper into the southern Caribbean, the Venezuelan regime is increasingly compelled to reorient its diplomatic orbit, and in this context, the Russian Federation has emerged as a central counterweight. Over the past months and years Moscow has steadily deepened its ties with Caracas, positioning itself as both a partner of strategic convenience and ideological solidarity. In May 2025, Vladimir Putin and Nicolás Maduro formalized a strategic partnership agreement, explicitly committing to cooperation in energy, arms, diplomacy, and opposition to unilateral sanctions. [Russia now backs Maduro's contested 2024 re-election](#) and consistently reinforces his legitimacy on the international stage. More concretely, Moscow is expanding military-technical cooperation, reportedly assisting with ammunition production, intelligence sharing, and even establishing a foothold in [Venezuela's defense sector](#). Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov has [publicly reaffirmed support for Caracas](#) in the face of rising U.S. coercion, casting Moscow's role as that of a protector of sovereignty. Meanwhile, in Caracas, the Venezuelan National Assembly, now dominated by Maduro's party, has advanced a Treaty of Strategic Association and Cooperation with Russia to solidify the legal basis for deeper bilateral integration. In short: [Russia is no longer a peripheral actor in the Americas](#), but a frontline actor in Venezuela's struggle against U.S. pressure, and Caracas is leaning into that alignment with increasing boldness.



As for Beijing, the People’s Republic of China’s engagement across Latin America and the Caribbean has long been framed as economic first, geopolitical second, yet in Venezuela, China’s footprint is growing both deep and strategic. In its relationship with Caracas, [Beijing has evolved from creditor to co-developer](#), calibrating its approach to Venezuela’s political fragility and external pressure from US policy. Historically, China extended billions in loans to Venezuela in exchange for oil, infrastructure projects, and mineral concessions, and though repayment has been unstable, these financial ties created long-term leverage. In 2025, Caracas will remain [one of China’s largest debtors](#) in Latin America, having absorbed roughly 45 percent of China’s regional lending volume. Against this debt backdrop, Venezuela and China are pivoting toward Special Economic Zones (SEZs), trade facilitation, and joint ventures in technology, energy, and agriculture instead of direct credit lines. On the political-diplomatic front, Beijing and Caracas regularly invoke the language of resistance to "hegemony" and frame their relationship as South–South cooperation, reinforcing multilateral norms and sovereignty discourses in regional forums. At the China-CELAC Forum in 2025, [Venezuela lauded China](#) for shielding the world economy from destabilizing trade wars, and the forum launched billions in credit lines to Latin America, arrangements from which Caracas hopes to benefit directly. In a visit [that same year](#), Maduro described China as a “great friend,” pledging to deepen cooperation across trade, energy, agriculture, science, and technology. In effect, China is turning its long-term economic ties with Venezuela into a strategic hedge, one that allows Caracas to diversify its external dependencies beyond Russia and push back more credibly against U.S. coercion.

The unfolding dynamics in the southern Caribbean underscore a significant recalibration of regional geopolitics. The United States, through its recent military posture and operational adjustments, has emphasized a more assertive approach to addressing perceived security threats. In response, Venezuela has sought to strengthen its national defenses while simultaneously expanding and diversifying its international partnerships. Engagements with the Russian Federation provide Caracas with political and military support, while cooperation with the People’s Republic of China offers economic stability and development opportunities. These strategic relationships enable Venezuela to pursue a more balanced



foreign policy and mitigate pressures from unilateral actions. The situation highlights the importance of continued diplomatic dialogue, multilateral engagement, and respect for international norms to maintain regional stability and prevent escalation, ensuring that the Caribbean remains a zone of constructive cooperation rather than confrontation.

Graphic: A timeline of the 2025 events



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