

Venezuela and U.S. Military Strikes: Considerations for Congress

December 1, 2025

On November 29, 2025, President Trump [announced](#) the closure of Venezuelan airspace days after the State Department [designated](#) the Cartel de los Soles (Cartel of the Suns) a foreign terrorist organization (FTO). Some experts [maintain](#) the group is not a cartel but an informal network of corrupt Venezuelan military officials. U.S. officials [assert](#) the FTO designation enables “new options” for military action against the group and Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, its [U.S.-indicted](#) leader. Critics [argue](#) that U.S. law does not explicitly authorize military action against an FTO. Since September, the U.S. military reportedly has [launched](#) 21 lethal strikes on vessels in international waters in the Caribbean near Venezuela and in the Eastern Pacific that reportedly have killed more than 80 people (see **Figure 1**). President Trump has [said](#) the strikes killed “narcoterrorists,” some of which he [linked](#) to Maduro. The U.S. military also has [amassed](#) military assets in the Caribbean, reportedly to pressure Maduro to resign. President Trump has [threatened](#) strikes on Venezuelan territory but also has [spoken](#) to Maduro.

Congressional responses to the U.S. strikes have varied, with some Members expressing [support](#) and others [questioning](#) their legality. Members are seeking more transparency from the Administration, and House and Senate Armed Services Committee leaders have [announced](#) oversight plans, including investigations of reported U.S. follow-on killing of strike survivors. Since October, the Senate has considered but not approved two resolutions pursuant to the [War Powers Resolution](#) that would direct the President to terminate the use of the U.S. military for hostilities against certain FTOs (S.J.Res. 83) or with Venezuela (S.J.Res. 90) without congressional authorization. A similar resolution has been introduced in the House (H.Con.Res. 61).

U.S. Policy Toward Venezuela

Successive U.S. Administrations have employed various strategies to address authoritarian rule in Venezuela. [Neither](#) the first Trump Administration’s sanctions strategy nor the Biden Administration’s negotiated approach convinced Maduro to cede power. In January 2025, Maduro began a third term amid reports of [postelection repression](#) and [election results](#) indicating he lost the 2024 election. Opposition leader Maria Corina Machado reportedly [supports](#) U.S. military action to oust Maduro.

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN12618

Figure 1. U.S. Strikes in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific

Source: Created by CRS. U.S. strikes information based on [BBC map](#) that sourced Armed Conflict Location & Event Data. Country boundaries from U.S. State Department.

The Trump Administration has asserted that drug trafficking and terrorism involving or associated with Maduro threaten U.S. national security. In October, the Administration reportedly [informed](#) Congress that U.S. forces are in a “non-international armed conflict” with drug cartels. Some [experts](#) and U.S. government [lawyers](#) reportedly challenged that justification. Venezuela is a major [transit country](#) for cocaine bound for Europe and the United States and a [haven](#) for criminal groups that traffic drugs in collaboration with corrupt officials. The country is not a source of [fentanyl](#), the drug linked to most U.S. overdoses.

President Trump reportedly has [authorized](#) covert Central Intelligence Agency action in Venezuela and may order strikes inside the country that some [maintain](#) could successfully oust Maduro. A 2019 U.S. [military exercise](#) reportedly concluded that a U.S. intervention to oust Maduro likely would cause “chaos.” According to some observers, criminal groups, Colombian FTOs, and others that have backed Maduro could [become](#) “insurgent guerrillas.”

Some analysts [argue](#) that the threat of U.S. military action may either [compel](#) Maduro to accept a negotiated exile or encourage dissidents in the military to oust him. Under either scenario, observers [question](#) whether the political opposition could convince Venezuelan security forces to support a transition government or whether another authoritarian government could take power. Some suggest the Venezuelan opposition could offer [amnesty](#) to some Maduro officials and include them in a [transition government](#). Maduro might seek to dissuade U.S. military action by offering the United States priority access to Venezuela’s [oil reserves](#).

International Reactions

U.S. military strikes against alleged drug vessels and [threats](#) to strike other Latin American countries (Colombia and Mexico) are prompting international debate. [UN officials](#) and some [G7 leaders](#) reportedly have asserted that the strikes violate international law. Organization of American States members are [divided](#) over the strikes, and the Dominican Republic [postponed](#) the Summit of the Americas, a heads of government meeting that was to discuss security cooperation.

Governments that work with the United States to interdict drugs and arrest suspected traffickers have reacted differently to the strikes. Brazil, Canada, France, Mexico and the United Kingdom have criticized the strikes. Other countries (the Dominican Republic and Trinidad) have [supported](#) the strikes and hosted U.S. troops. Some countries reportedly have [suspended](#) some intelligence-sharing with U.S. agencies amid concerns about violating international law. Colombian President Gustavo Petro [called](#) the United States guilty of “murder” after a Colombian fisherman reportedly died in a strike, but [backed away](#) from threatening to stop intelligence-sharing with the United States.

Most U.S. allies do not recognize the Maduro government as legitimate but reportedly have [cautioned](#) against efforts to militarily oust Maduro, predicting these efforts might destabilize Venezuela and fuel emigration. Venezuela has a porous border with Colombia, where violent clashes between illegally armed groups continue. As of May 2025, countries in the region were hosting [6.9 million](#) Venezuelans.

Congressional Considerations

Congress has been broadly supportive of U.S. objectives of hastening a return to democracy in Venezuela and combatting drug trafficking to the United States. Members have disagreed on the policies to achieve those objectives, however, including the use of [sanctions](#) and U.S. military action. Some Members have [endorsed](#) the strikes to protect Americans from drug trafficking and terrorist groups; others have [questioned](#) the legal basis for the strikes and expressed concerns about [destabilizing](#) the region.

Members may continue to request or seek to compel the Trump Administration to provide information and to engage in consultations on its policy approach. Congress also may consider legislation to authorize or prohibit strikes and to provide or prohibit funding for certain military operations. Congress may hold hearings with official and/or private witnesses, direct inspectors general to conduct investigations, or otherwise seek public input on the strikes and their implications on U.S. policy toward Venezuela and broader relations with regional allies.

Author Information

Clare Ribando Seelke
Specialist in Latin American Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.