



Advertisement

VOICES JAN. 13, 2026 / 1:15 PM

# Reflections on U.S. action in Venezuela

By Evan Ellis, Senior Non-Resident Associate, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)



Supporters of ousted Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro carry the national flag during a rally outside the National Assembly in Caracas, Venezuela on January 5. Photo by Jonathan Lanza/UPI | [License Photo](#)

Listen to this Article



Jan. 13 (UPI) -- The Jan. 3 U.S. operation to capture Nicholas Maduro and subsequent U.S. actions illustrate the use of both U.S. "hard power" and "soft power" when correctly, as well as their limits.

The successful U.S. operation was an impressive feat that not only advanced U.S. military capabilities, but also demonstrated U.S. intelligence preparation, training and precise coordination.



illusion that it is running the show. The remaining Chavistas understand the demonstrated U.S. capabilities and willingness to strike with virtual impunity to remove individual leaders, as well as the continuing power of targeted sanctions, criminal investigations, and U.S. seizures of embargoed oil and tankers.

They also understand that Maduro, like others in the past two decades captured by Western law enforcement, is likely collaborating, providing the United States with valuable information on the details of Chavista criminal schemes and bank accounts.



Such leverage notwithstanding, the new situation in Caracas must be understood as a new phase of coercive diplomacy between two forces with partly coinciding, partly conflicting interests.

The remaining Chavistas have long dreamed of escaping from sanctions and legal peril, to have normalized economic and political relations with the United States without ceding real power.

This is the same group of criminals that hijacked Venezuelan democracy, who imprisoned and tortured thousands of Venezuelans and forced a mass exodus from the country, who expropriated hundreds of billions of dollars from companies operating in Venezuela, and stole the vast oil and mineral wealth of the country, while bankrupting PdVSA, respected state-owned oil company in the region

The current U.S. administration, for its part, has a interest in declaring victory, bolstered by symbol of the Chavista criminal elite on issues that do not core equities: reducing drug and migrant flows to States and reducing high-profile security cooperation with



The likely outcome in the coming months is cooperation which will support both the U.S. administration narrative and Chavista interests, without addressing the real threats to U.S. strategic interests in the country: the lack of a truly U.S.-aligned democratic government bound by the rule of law, putting an end to the operation of terrorist and criminal gangs, radical Chavista-aligned groups, and U.S. hemispheric rivals in the country.

It is likely that some of the more than 800 political prisoners in Venezuela will be released in the coming months, although less than 10 have been released to date.

There will likely be an agreement to receive Venezuelans deported from the U.S. Such an agreement will be particularly cruel, handing over to the regime those who fled its authoritarianism and criminal violence.

There will likely be some counter-drug cooperation, and possibly even talk about eventual elections, rather than installing Edmundo Gonzalez and Maria Corina Machado, who demonstrably and overwhelmingly won the July 28, 2024, election.

The Chavista repressive apparatus, including its intelligence service SEBIN, as well as collectivos and other groups intimidating the population, are likely to stay.

In the oil sector, there will likely be short-term gains: the elimination of sanctions, the cooperative sale of oil cargoes to oil companies and traders connected to the administration and possibly the return of some U.S. service companies and gas sector operators to the country.

0:02

Some collaborative petroleum projects in the broader

more than \$100 billion required to restore the country's dilapidated infrastructure.

Astute businesspeople understand the difference between making a quick dollar from U.S. declarations of victory and promises of protection, versus putting "real money" into a country run by the same group that stole a prior generation's oil assets and defaulted on contractor payments.

"Real money" will likely not enter Venezuela while there is a complete lack of juridical stability, questions about the legal status of those signing contracts, and over \$100 billion in outstanding legal claims by those whose Venezuelan assets were previously expropriated or stolen.

The partial lifting of sanctions, and new short-term oil activity will likely motivate some hopeful Venezuelans to return, contributing to the U.S. declaration of "success," yet others will stay away as long as the same criminal group that jailed their family members, robbed multiple elections and brutally repressed protests remain in power in Caracas, even if they are now treated by the U.S. administration as business partners or subservient vassals.

The U.S. had a historically unprecedented opportunity to restore democracy in Venezuela, bringing to power a sincerely grateful elected government that would have happily put an end to Venezuela's role as the principal host of terrorist groups and anti-United States hemisphere-wide influence in the region.

Instead, an incredible feat of U.S. military capability has become a source of mistrust regarding U.S. intentions in the region and globally. It is a tragedy of lost opportunity for both Venezuelans and the United States.

*R. Evan Ellis is a senior non-resident associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. The views expressed herein are strictly his own.*

**Read More**

- [Why is the 2025-26 flu season hitting so hard? A doctor explains](#)
- [Iran's unrest and the quest for Korean freedom](#)
- [The Cost of Capital in Latin America: A Structural Barrier to Growth](#)

**Latest Headlines**

*Voices // 5 hours ago*

**Why is the 2025-26 flu season hitting so hard? A doctor explains**

An emergency room physician describes why the 2025-26 flu season is hitting hard while doctor's visits for flu-like symptoms are at a 30-year high.

*Voices // 1 day ago*

**Iran's unrest and the quest for Korean freedom**

Jan. 12 (UPI) -- The Korean people in the North live under an even more totalitarian system than Iran. They endure information starvation and internal surveillance.

*Voices // 1 day ago*

**The cost of capital in Latin America: a structural barrier to growth**

Jan. 12 (UPI) -- Economic growth in Latin America is often constrained not by lack of ideas but by the high price of the capital required to finance them.

  0:02

*Voices // 4 days ago*

### Digital society: State sovereignty and human rights

A Chilean scholar argues sovereignty must adapt to the realities of the digital age, balancing state autonomy with the protection of human rights.

*Voices // 4 days ago*

### What can be done about Grok's 'nudified' images of women and minors?

A legal scholar examines the causes -- and potential consequences -- of X's Grok AI creating nonconsensual sexualized images of real people.

*Voices // 5 days ago*

### ICE profiling mirrors treatment of Japanese Americans in World War II

Jan. 8 (UPI) -- Parallels are being drawn between the attacks on Latinos today and the forced relocation and incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II.

*Voices // 6 days ago*

### Venezuelan vicissitudes: three big questions

Jan. 7 (UPI) -- After veiled warnings followed by threats and military actions to intimidate Nikolas Maduro, Donald Trump finally pressed the presidential finger on the button.

*Voices // 1 week ago*

### Rivalry and relations between the United States and China

The evolving rivalry between the United States and the People's Republic of China is reshaping the international order in the 21st century.

*Voices // 1 week ago*

### How Maduro's capture -- a military strategist €

Jan. 5 (UPI) -- A military strategist and America policy advisor breaks down about the raid on Venezuelan President Maduro.

  0:02

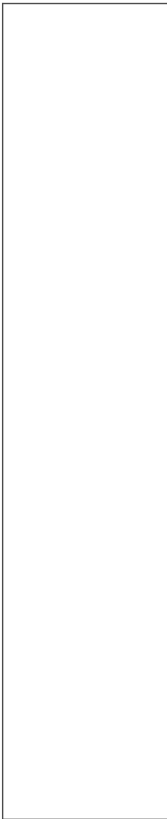


Voices // 1 week ago

### Africa's oldest-known cremation raises a historical mystery

Jan. 2 (UPI) -- The oldest known cremation found in Africa, dating from 9,500 years ago, raises a question: Why were the remains burned in such a visible way?

Advertisement



## Trending Stories

---

House Republican introduces bill to authorize Trump to take Greenland

---

Goat joins mystery monkeys on the loose in Missouri

---

N. Korea slams UNSC meeting on Russia's strike on Ukraine

---

Argentina repays \$2.5 billion to U.S. Treasury

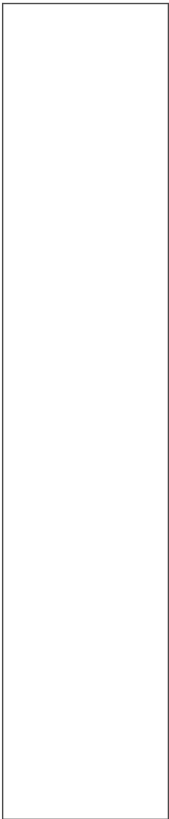
---

On This Day: Trump becomes 1st president to be impeached twice

0:02



### Follow Us



^ BACK TO TOP



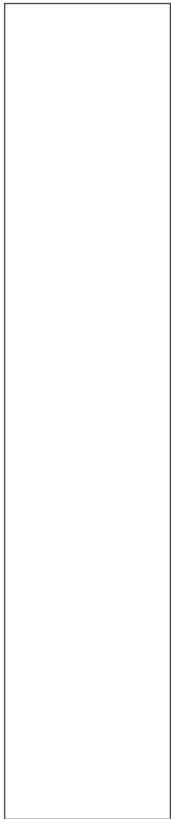
About UPI

Contact

Corrections

Advertisements





  0:02