

miércoles, noviembre 19, 2025

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"Sí labor empeñosa exige los intereses materiales, empeño aún más valioso reclaman los intereses morales"
(Juan Zorrilla de San Martín)



NOTICIAS DESTACADAS

OPIDATA

Toward a New Strategy for Engagement in the Americas

📅 noviembre 19, 2025 👤 Legado a las Américas

👉 By R. Evan Ellis[1]

“The dilemmas in Venezuela demonstrate the need for a strategic framework that links security, democracy, and shared prosperity.”

Introduction

With the arrival of the [Gerald Ford Carrier Battle Group in the Caribbean](#) last week, the public report about the [briefing of President Trump on military options](#), and the President's statement that he [had “decided”](#) on the course of action he plans to take, and the new State Department [designation of Cartel de los Soles](#) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (following a [similar designation by the U.S. Treasury Department](#) on July 25), the U.S. seems on the course of decisive military action in the Caribbean...until the President indicated that he is [open to talking again](#) to Venezuelan Dictator Nicholas Maduro.

President Trump's The deployment of a historic volume of U.S. forces in the Caribbean, significant [U.S. financial support](#) for the Javier Milei government in Argentina, U.S. strengthened [security assistance with Ecuador](#), and its deepened, business-oriented engagement with the [Santiago Peña government](#) in Paraguay all highlight a [welcome expansion of U.S. focus on the Americas](#) as the region most directly impacting U.S. security and prosperity.

Concurrent with heightened U.S. focus on Latin America and the Caribbean, an unprecedented number of governments in the region are [receptive to working with the U.S.](#), from [Trinidad and Tobago](#) to [Costa Rica](#), to [Bolivia](#). Yet as highlighted by the November 2025 decision by the Luis Abinader government in the Dominican Republic to postpone the Summit of the Americas, the region is also deeply conflicted in its response to U.S. engagement there.

In my regular interactions with security experts, businesspeople, journalists and others in the region, I perceive profound [uncertainty regarding the objectives](#) of U.S. policy toward the region, as well as a lack of clarity regarding the principles and values that the U.S. is de facto pursuing, around which our neighbors can work with us toward common benefit in the region that we share.

The current U.S. Administration arguably has a style that emphasizes improvisation, unpredictability, and [impactful actions and statements](#). In the long-term, however, U.S. security, economic, and other strategic interests would arguably benefit from clear articulation, and reliable fulfillment of, an approach in which the relationship between values and objectives, ways and means are more visibly consistent with each other in the eyes of our partners, making it easier for them to embrace them, and work with the U.S. within the constraints of their own political, economic, and strategic situations.

Questions About U.S. Initiatives in the Caribbean

In the case of Venezuela, partners are arguably confused by the perceived discrepancy between the stated mission of the deployment of U.S. forces in the Caribbean, to **stop the flow of drugs** poisoning U.S. citizens, versus the **size and structure** of that force, and its apparent focus on Venezuela, which according to the U.S. **Drug Enforcement Agency** (DEA), is **not the principal point of origin** for U.S. bound drugs. Some have noted that most U.S. drug overdose deaths are caused by **fentanyl**, which is produced primarily **in Sinaloa, Mexico** from **Chinese precursors**, and **smuggled over the U.S.-Mexican border**. In addition most of the **cocaine bound for the U.S.** arrives by **Pacific Ocean maritime routes**.

While several of the most recent U.S. lethal interdictions against boats allegedly carrying drugs to the U.S. have **occurred in the Pacific**, the overall size and composition of the U.S. force is **far beyond that required for drug interdiction** operations. **That force includes** three large amphibious ships capable of launching their 2,200 embarked marines via helicopters, tiltrotor aircraft, over-the-beach rapid landing craft (LCACs) and other means, the largest and most modern U.S. aircraft carrier, **the U.S.S. Gerald Ford**, at least five destroyers and two cruisers, a large **special operations ship**, an attack submarine, **10 F-35 fighter aircraft**, P-8 surveillance aircraft, an **AC-130J aircraft gunship**, **MQ-9 Reaper** Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), and numerous other military assets.

The U.S. has also signaled that the de facto Nicholas Maduro regime, head of the *Cartel de los Soles* criminal network that it has named a terrorist organization, **is illegitimate and must go**, yet President Trump has said that the U.S. is **not seeking regime change**, and has indicated willingness to **negotiate with him**. The overwhelming U.S. force deployed, the demonstration of U.S. willingness to use it through the attacks against alleged drug boats, and statements by the Administration concerning **authorization of CIA operations** and consideration of **strikes on Venezuelan territory**, and President Trump's declaration after being briefed on military options, that he had **decided on course of action** he plans to take, all supports convincing those currently aligned with Maduro that U.S. action is imminent, motivating them to **take matters into their own hands** so that the U.S. doesn't have to take decisive military action. Yet President Trump's **October 31, 2025 statement** that he was not considering land attacks on Venezuelan territory or regime change, and his openness to negotiate with Maduro even **after the arrival of the Ford** Carrier Battle Group in the Caribbean, seems to undercut the urgency for those aligned with Maduro to take matters into their own hands.

For friends of the U.S., as well as detractors, there is arguably considerable uncertainty over the U.S. endgame with respect to its posture in Venezuela.

If the U.S. simply continues to use the massive force it has deployed to the Caribbean to destroy vessels suspected of carrying contraband, traffickers are likely to merely shift routes, as **President Trump suggests they are already doing**. They may also logically send a greater portion of their contraband via commercial container ships, aircraft and cargo trucks. Meanwhile, as U.S. lethal attacks on suspected drug boats **continue**, **criticisms in the region** and **in the U.S.** over the perceived

impropriety of what some call “**extrajudicial killings**” are likely to mount, damaging goodwill toward the U.S., independent of who is legally right.

With the continuation of attacks, in the absence of escalation to more decisive military action, the U.S. risks losing credibility among friends and adversaries globally. In the perceptions of some colleagues with whom I have spoken in recent weeks, if the current U.S. government, having deployed overwhelming military force, is too risk and cost adverse to take action against a mediocre criminal regime posing multiple strategic threats to the U.S. its own near abroad, can it be counted on to come to Taiwan’s defense against an enormously more powerful adversary, the PRC, half a world away?

The U.S. Dilemma in the Caribbean

The U.S. appears to have boxed itself into a corner in the Caribbean with its current posture. If it does choose to act decisively to remove the *Cartel de los Soles* leadership, its technical capacity to **take down Venezuela’s command and control and air defenses** and seize or kill most leadership objectives with the help of sympathizers on the ground, is almost beyond question. The U.S. dilemma is that, once it has “decapitated the snake,” if it is not prepared to follow-up by committing a significant military force to ensure transition to a stable democracy, the initial military success could unleash a struggle for power and an enormous sabotage campaign by those interested in preventing the establishment of a rule of law government, and turning “victory” into a disaster blamed on the U.S. The result could be an explosion of violence, economic collapse and outmigration affecting the U.S. and the region even greater than the **eight million Venezuelans** who left in recent years.

Despite the overwhelming legitimacy, good leadership and power to unite of the democratically elected President Edmundo Gonzalez and leader of the democratic forces Maria Corina Machado, following the removal of the *Cartel de los Soles* leadership, the new democratic government would be instantly dependent on Generals of questionable loyalty that they had been forced to pardon, leading a deeply corrupted and long neglected military against a myriad of holdouts, terrorists and other bad actors, with an interest in avoiding establishment of a “rule of law” regime that might hold them accountable for their past criminal activities and human rights abuses. Those opponents would also likely include Russian and Cuban agents with a strategic agenda of stoking maximum violence, sabotaging refineries and other infrastructure, with the deliberate object of creating the maximum chaos possible with the objective of blaming it all on the U.S. for having “intervened.” Yet if the U.S. did commit to following up its takedown of the Cartel de los Soles with follow-on support to the new democratic government to ensure a successful transition, it would likely make U.S. forces into targets of resistance and protests, orchestrated in part by the very leftist criminal elements who had hijacked the country in the first place. Such U.S. action would also doubtlessly be highly politically unpopular with certain elements of the U.S. population, who voted for the current administration believing it would put an end to “**forever wars**.”

In the face of such dilemmas, if the current U.S. Administration calculates that the risks of decisive action are unacceptable, as the Thanksgiving holiday turns into Christmas and then to the new year, the Administration could find itself trapped, alternating between different limited actions short of war, trying to create the impression of something “new,” with its adversary, the *Cartel de los Soles* winning just by surviving. As the effective stalemate continued into 2026, as noted before, the Administration would likely also grow an array of domestic and international critics, including the continuation of initiatives in the U.S. Congress to question or limit the Administration’s authority to act. It would also likely confront increasingly aggressive and numerous initiatives by extra-hemispheric actors, emboldened to challenge the U.S. in other parts of the world, especially from which **U.S. forces in the Caribbean have been taken**.

Broader U.S. Engagement Dilemmas in Latin America

The current U.S. dilemma in Venezuela is only one illustration of how a more clearly articulated approach, highlighting shared principles and bringing together multiple dimensions of U.S. power, could help the U.S. more effectively leverage its increased attention to, dedication of resources to, and unprecedented senior leader expertise in matters of the Americas, at a time when so many of the region’s governments are open to working with the U.S.

With the Trump Administration’s **\$40 billion in financial support** and **strong endorsement** for the Javier Milei government in Argentina, the U.S. has strongly signaled its disposition to help governments in the region that are both loyal and make good policy choices. Yet at the same time, the U.S. government has eliminated a significant portion of its **assistance programs for the region**, while **new U.S. tariffs** encourage U.S. companies and others to invest within the U.S., rather than beyond it. For some countries like Mexico, dependence on the U.S. market is an overwhelming incentive to **cooperate with the U.S.** on a range of issues.

Still, it is not clear that, on balance, the U.S. has created sufficient incentives or made enough of a case for why the region should pursue its prosperity through working with the U.S. and likeminded, democratic, market-oriented allies, if the cost the U.S. demands is reduced commerce with and investment from China.

Current U.S. incentives and pressures have arguably led pro-U.S. partners to be selectively deferential to the U.S. on some issues, in order to secure its favor, while still continuing to aggressively pursue investments and loans from, and exports to the PRC in most other areas. Indeed, Argentina is arguably following this course, continuing to court PRC through investments in **lithium** and a range of **other sectors**, while aggressively exporting its **agricultural products** and their goods to it. In the case of Brazil, U.S. tariffs, sanctions against Supreme Court Judge **Alexandre de Moraes**, and other pressures against the leftist administration of Luis Ignacio “Lula” da Silva over the multiple criminal proceedings

he has pursued against his rival and former President Jair Bolsonaro and his family, has arguably accelerated that country's embrace of China, including selling the PRC the additional soybeans to substitute for those it stopped buying from U.S. farmers, as well as cooperating with the PRC on a range of military, space, and other issues, including through the multilateral BRICS forum.

Beyond individual rewards to friends of the United States, the highly variable current U.S. approach arguably fails to leverage soft power as much as it could, as a motivation for working with the U.S. and avoiding political and other problematic entanglements with extra-hemispheric U.S. rivals. In an environment in which the U.S. cannot always mobilize capital on the scale, and in the targeted, coordinated way that the PRC does, it must make maximum use of interest in its neighbors to align themselves with the U.S. because of its democratic values, commitment to the rule of law, rejection of corruption, and posture as "the good guy." With the role of such U.S. "soft power" in the competition with extra-hemispheric rivals more important than ever, the defunding of programs to help the region with their basic humanitarian, educational and other needs, and the cancellation of media, education, and other activities that promote U.S. values and nurture goodwill, cedes a terrain in which the U.S. has an inherent advantage. In a similar fashion, ordering non-enforcement of the Foreign Corrupt Practice Act, and using lethal force or otherwise behaving in a way that some might perceive as coercive or in violation of international legal norms further undercuts such inherent U.S. sources of strength. Harshly criticizing and threatening to leave multilateral institutions, including those of the Interamerican System such as the Organization of American States (OAS), at a time when the PRC is aggressively working to penetrate and dominate the agendas of those institutions in ways that prejudice the United States, weakens the U.S. position even further.

The Path Forward

In the absence of good, inexpensive, or risk-free options, the best course for the United States in the Caribbean is to act decisively to eliminate the *Cartel de los Soles* leadership, and to remain engaged long enough to ensure the legitimate elected government of Edmundo Gonzalez is able to establish control and a democratic rule-of-law government. In pursuing this course, the U.S. should minimize "boots-on-the-ground" and look to the Gonzalez government to bear the burden of security and costs. Following the installation of the legitimate, elected Gonzalez government, however, it is reasonable to expect that government will permit U.S. activities and collaborate with it to root out criminal and terrorist elements which threaten the U.S., Venezuela and the region. Importantly, the U.S. should frame those operations, as well as others in the region, not only in terms of counternarcotics, but as support for democracy and the rule of law. The Venezuela operation and what follows is an opportunity for the U.S. to highlight the strategic goals and values it is fighting for, which together will increase the security and prosperity of the U.S. by helping to build a more secure, prosperous, democratic region. Through its actions and messaging, the U.S. will also have the opportunity to emphasize its refusal to accept in its near abroad criminal regimes which become the

hosts of threats to the U.S. from extra-hemispheric adversaries such as Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and China. Beyond the region, U.S. action framed in that fashion will also send an unmistakable signal to U.S. adversaries including Iran in the Middle East, [Russia in Europe](#), and the PRC as it contemplates eliminating the autonomy of Taiwan, that the U.S. is indeed prepared to take decisive military action in pursuit of its strategic interests.

As part of its coherent approach connecting its own security and prosperity to that of the hemisphere, the U.S. should be prepared to build on its success in Venezuela, and the growing array of countries in the region open to working with the U.S. by moving boldly to re-establish an adequately fund an organization focused on the fundamentals of the humanitarian needs, basic education, institutional strengthening, and associated fight against corruption among our partners in the region. In shaping the new organization, of course, it should take care to avoid that the new organization pursues programs that implicitly or explicitly impose a social or political agenda on those it seeks to help.

In a similar fashion, the U.S. should revitalize its engagement with the institutions of the Interamerican system, as well as broader ones globally, even while pushing strongly for their much-needed reform.

In addition to the assistance and institutional dimension of the expanded U.S. approach, it should also take advantage of this moment to re-activate its commitment to media and education programs to effectively communicate its vision of the mutually reinforcing concepts of democracy, rule-of-law, free enterprise, and the empowerment of the individual, as cornerstones for the development, prosperity and liberty of societies in the region, in competition with the seductive, false promises of populists and authoritarian rivals beyond the region such as the PRC.

In the economic arena, the U.S. should also look to the expansion of programs such as the Development Finance Corporation (DFC), the U.S. Treasury, and the use of beneficial, free-trade oriented tariff policies, to generalize the example of its support to Argentina, for building a hemisphere of prosperous, market-oriented democracies with strong institutions and the rule of law, as a bulwark against the expanding, often predatory influence of the PRC, other extra-hemispheric actors, populists and criminals in our shared hemisphere.

The U.S. has a unique opportunity to leverage both its decisive action in Venezuela, and the growing array of neighbors in the region interested in engaging with it, through a framework not based on coercion and uncertainty, but rather, of collaboration, in building a hemisphere of shared security and prosperity, realizing the goals of the U.S. "America First" foreign policy in the context of interdependence, by putting the "Americas First."



[1] The author is Senior Non-Resident Fellow with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). The views expressed herein are strictly his own.

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This article is part of **Opidata**, the editorial platform of **Legacy to the Americas** for the analysis of key issues in the region.

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Quienes hemos decidido constituir el Movimiento Legado a las Américas, somos asociaciones nacionales y continentales, así como ciudadanos de 15 naciones, a los que nos motiva el unirnos para bregar juntos en una acción centrada en una Carta de Principios que nos son comunes, a fin de alcanzar la meta que nos hemos propuesto, la cual es un reavivamiento ético y cívico, y como resultado de este, una renovación y reforma en el campo político, económico y social. Podemos definirnos como un movimiento de conciencia.

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