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The Capture of Nicolás Maduro: A Theoretical Analysis of "Might Is Right" in International Politics

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ABSTRACT

The United States' capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, in Caracas on 3 January 2026 provides a consequential case for examining the relationship between material power, national interest, sovereignty and international legitimacy. This article analyses the operation through classical realism, structural and offensive realism, while testing realist explanations against liberal institutionalism, constructivism, the English School, critical theory and postcolonial perspectives. It adopts a qualitative, theory-guided case-study approach, drawing on established international-relations scholarship, the United Nations Charter, official United States statements and recent parliamentary and Congressional research briefings. The analysis finds that realist theories help explain the strategic incentives and permissive conditions that can make unilateral action attractive to a great power, particularly where regional primacy, criminal allegations and competition with external powers intersect. However, explanatory power does not itself establish legal or moral justification. The operation raises questions about the prohibition on the use of force, head-of-state immunity, the limits of domestic criminal process as a basis for cross-border military action, and the precedent created for weaker states. The article argues that "might is right" is best treated as a description of power asymmetry rather than a sufficient normative principle. Durable security and political transition require attention to legality, Venezuelan self-determination, regional stability and post-intervention governance.

KEYWORDS: Nicolás Maduro, United States, Realism, Sovereignty, Use Of Force, International Law

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1. INTRODUCTION

The assertion that "might is right" in international politics represents one of the foundational premises of classical and structural realism, theoretical frameworks that have dominated international relations scholarship since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 established the modern state system. This principle suggests that in an anarchic international system one fundamentally lacking a supranational authority capable of enforcing rules and adjudicating disputes between sovereign states power ultimately determines outcomes, and the strongest actors can pursue their interests with relative impunity, constrained only by the countervailing power of other states rather than by law, morality, or international norms. The United States' capture of Nicolás Maduro, then President of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, on 3 January 2026 provides a compelling and controversial case study for examining how realist theory might justify such an extraordinary action, while simultaneously revealing the profound tensions between power-based politics and the normative frameworks of international law, diplomatic convention, and the principle of sovereign equality among states.

This analysis will proceed by examining multiple theoretical perspectives within the discipline of international relations, exploring how each framework would approach the question of whether the United States can justify the capture of a foreign head of state. We will explore classical realism's focus on human nature and statecraft, structural realism's emphasis on systemic constraints and opportunities, offensive realism's power-maximization logic, and then contrast these perspectives with liberal institutionalism, constructivism, critical theory, and English School approaches. Throughout this analysis, we must remember that the question is not merely whether the United States possessed the capability to undertake the action, but whether that capability can be translated into legitimacy, justification, or "rightness" in any meaningful sense.

The case of Venezuela under Maduro presents particular analytical complexity because it involves a regime that has been accused of widespread human rights violations, democratic backsliding, economic mismanagement leading to humanitarian crisis, drug trafficking, corruption, and alignment with U.S. geopolitical adversaries including Russia, China, Iran, and Cuba. These factors create a multi-dimensional analytical space where security concerns, humanitarian considerations, legal principles, historical precedents, and systemic implications all intersect in ways that resist simple categorization or easy answers.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, theory-guided case-study design. It treats the United States operation of 3 January 2026 that captured Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores in Caracas and transferred them to the United States as the empirical case, rather than as a hypothetical scenario. The analysis is based on documentary review of foundational international-relations texts, the United Nations Charter, official United States government statements, and public research briefings from the United Kingdom House of Commons Library and the United States Congressional Research Service. Theoretical perspectives are compared against four analytical dimensions: strategic incentives and power distribution; legal authority and sovereignty; normative legitimacy and international precedent; and likely consequences for Venezuelan governance and regional order. The method is interpretive rather than statistical. It does not independently verify allegations in criminal indictments or claim access to classified operational evidence. Allegations made by prosecuting authorities are therefore distinguished from adjudicated findings, and legal questions are treated as contested where authoritative rulings remain outstanding.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Empirical Context: The January 2026 Capture

On 3 January 2026, United States forces carried out an operation in Caracas that resulted in the capture of Maduro and Flores and their transfer to New York to face federal criminal charges. Maduro pleaded not guilty, and his defence has challenged the legality of his seizure and asserted head-of-state immunity. By September 2026, public Congressional Research Service reporting described motions challenging both immunity and aspects of the indictment as pending, while the House of Commons Library reported that the trial had been scheduled for June 2027. These developments mean the operation must be analysed as an event with continuing legal and political consequences, not merely as a hypothetical possibility [54–57].

The official United States position has linked the operation to existing criminal indictments and alleged narcotics-related offences. Such allegations must not be treated as convictions, and a domestic arrest warrant or indictment does not, by itself, settle whether the use of military force on another state's territory complies with international law. Public legal commentary has questioned the operation's compatibility with the UN Charter's prohibition on force, while the United States has invoked law-enforcement and national-security rationales [54, 55, 56, 58]. The post-capture political setting also matters: public briefings describe Vice President Delcy Rodríguez assuming interim leadership and subsequent negotiations over oil and economic relations. These developments strengthen the relevance of the case to debates about regional hegemony, coercive diplomacy, resource interests and the difference between removing a leader and establishing a legitimate political order [54, 57].

3.2. Classical Realism and Human Nature

Classical realism, articulated most forcefully by ancient and modern thinkers including Thucydides, Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, E.H. Carr, and Hans Morgenthau, grounds international politics in an understanding of human nature as fundamentally self-interested, power-seeking, and prone to conflict in the absence of overarching authority. This theoretical tradition has ancient roots but achieved its modern formulation in the mid-twentieth century as scholars sought to explain the catastrophic failures of idealist internationalism that preceded World War II.

Hans Morgenthau and the Six Principles of Political Realism

Hans Morgenthau's seminal work, Politics Among Nations (1948), remains the definitive statement of classical realist thought. Morgenthau posits that political realism is based on objective laws rooted in human nature, and that the concept of interest defined in terms of power is the central category of political analysis. His six principles of political realism provide a framework for understanding international behaviour that is explicitly amoral or, more precisely, that operates according to a political morality distinct from individual ethics. [4]

The first principle asserts that politics is governed by objective laws rooted in human nature, which is unchanging across time and culture. From this foundational premise flows the conclusion that patterns of international behaviour are predictable and that statesmen must work with human nature as it is, not as they might wish it to be. The second principle establishes that interest defined as power is the key concept that allows us to understand politics and that provides the rational criterion for analysing foreign policy. The third principle recognizes that while interest and power are perennial features of politics, their specific content varies across time and circumstance. The fourth principle articulates the tension between moral command and the requirements of successful

political action, acknowledging that political ethics must be judged by political consequences rather than abstract moral principles. The fifth principle warns against identifying the moral aspirations of a particular nation with universal moral laws. The sixth principle insists on the autonomy of political realism as an intellectual discipline distinct from economics, law, or morality.

Application to the Maduro Case: National Interest and Power Politics

From this classical realist perspective, several sophisticated arguments could be marshalled in support of U.S. action against Maduro, each grounded in the fundamental premises of realist thought.

The National Interest Imperative and Security Maximization: States, as rational actors operating in an anarchic international environment, are obligated first and foremost to pursue their national interests, with survival and security occupying the highest priority in any hierarchy of state goals. If the Maduro regime poses demonstrable threats to U.S. security whether through facilitating narcotics trafficking into American cities, providing haven for transnational terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah and the ELN, creating migration crises that destabilize neighbouring countries and send hundreds of thousands of refugees toward the U.S. border, or actively collaborating with hostile extra-hemispheric powers to establish military and intelligence infrastructure in America's traditional sphere of influence then the United States has not merely the right but the duty to neutralize that threat through whatever means prove most effective.

Morgenthau would argue that moral principles cannot be applied to state actions in the same manner they apply to individual conduct because states operate in a realm where survival and power accumulation are paramount, and where the consequences of failure include not merely personal misfortune but national extinction or subordination. The statesman who prioritizes abstract morality over the concrete security requirements of his nation betrays his fundamental responsibility and invites disaster. If capturing Maduro serves American security interests by removing a hostile actor, disrupting drug trafficking networks, eliminating a platform for hostile intelligence operations, or preventing further Russian and Chinese penetration of the Western Hemisphere, then the action is not only justified but required by the logic of raison d'état.

The Inevitability and Ubiquity of Power Politics: Classical realists would contend that regardless of international legal structures, diplomatic niceties, or moral pronouncements, powerful states have always and will always use their capabilities to advance their interests when the benefits outweigh the costs and when countervailing power does not prevent them from doing so. The entire history of international relations, from the Melian Dialogue recorded by Thucydides through the European imperial conquests of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to Cold War interventions and contemporary great power competition, demonstrates that power rather than principle determines outcomes in international affairs.

The capture of Maduro would, in this framework, simply represent an honest acknowledgment of this fundamental reality rather than hiding behind the fig leaf of legal justifications or humanitarian rhetoric that powerful states employ to obscure their pursuit of interest. Realists often display a certain admiration for actors who acknowledge power realities frankly rather than cloaking them in hypocrisy. As E.H. Carr argued in The Twenty Years' Crisis, those who deny the role of power in politics are often either naive or cynically using idealist language to disguise and legitimize their own power advantages.

The Failure of Weaker States and Natural Hierarchy: Venezuela's inability to defend its sovereignty or protect its leader would, in the classical realist framework, reflect the natural hierarchy of the international system and the consequences of state weakness. States that cannot defend themselves through military capability, strategic alliances, or other forms of power cannot reasonably expect others to respect their territorial integrity or political independence out of pure normative commitment. The international system is not a charitable organization but an arena of competition where capabilities determine outcomes.

This perspective might seem harsh or cynical, but realists would argue it is simply descriptive of how the world actually operates. Venezuela's economic collapse, military degradation, diplomatic isolation, and domestic political fragmentation have left it weak and vulnerable. From a realist standpoint, this vulnerability invites predation just as weakness in nature invites predators. The responsibility for protecting Venezuelan sovereignty lies with Venezuela itself, and if it has failed in that task through corruption, mismanagement, and poor strategic choices, it cannot appeal to abstract principles of sovereignty that have no enforcement mechanism.

Machiavelli, Hobbes, and the Primacy of Security

The classical realist tradition draws heavily on early modern political philosophers whose work continues to inform contemporary realist thought. Niccolò Machiavelli's The Prince and Discourses established the principle that political success requires setting aside conventional morality when necessity demands. Machiavelli's prince must be willing to act immorally when the security and survival of the state require it, though he should avoid such actions when they are unnecessary and should cultivate the appearance of virtue. Applied to the Maduro case, Machiavellian logic would suggest that if capturing the Venezuelan president serves vital American interests, the action should be taken regardless of legal or moral objections, though it should be presented in the most favourable light possible to minimize reputational costs. [2, 3]

Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan, while primarily a work of domestic political theory, has profound implications for international relations. Hobbes described the state of nature, an existence without government, as a war of all against all, where life is solitary,

poor, nasty, brutish, and short. Realists apply this logic to the international realm, arguing that relations among sovereign states exist in a Hobbesian state of nature because no world government exists to enforce order. In such a condition, states must rely on self-help for security, and they rationally pursue power to ensure survival. The capture of Maduro could be understood as an act of self-help in the international state of nature, where the United States takes action to secure itself against a perceived threat in the absence of any higher authority capable of providing security.

Thucydides and the Melian Dialogue

No discussion of classical realism would be complete without reference to Thucydides and particularly the Melian Dialogue from The History of the Peloponnesian War. In this famous passage, Athenian representatives tell the Melians that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must," rejecting appeals to justice, fairness, or the gods. The Athenians argue that considerations of right and wrong only apply among equals in power, and where power is unequal, the strong impose their will and the weak must submit. [5]

Applied to Venezuela, this ancient logic suggests that appeals to international law, sovereignty, or justice carry no weight when power is radically unequal. The United States, as the overwhelmingly more powerful party, can impose its will on Venezuela, and Venezuela must accept this reality. While this perspective may seem cynical or even brutal, realists would argue it simply describes the operative logic of international politics stripped of polite euphemisms and legal fictions.

3.3. Structural Realism and System Anarchy

Kenneth Waltz's structural or neorealist theory, elaborated most fully in Theory of International Politics (1979), represents a significant evolution in realist thought by shifting the locus of analysis from human nature and statecraft to the structure of the international system itself. Waltz argues that international anarchy the absence of world government or any authority superior to sovereign states compels states to engage in self-help behaviour and balance-of-power politics regardless of their internal characteristics, leaders' intentions, or ideological orientations. This structural condition creates systemic pressures and incentives that shape state behaviour in predictable ways, much as the structure of a market shapes the behaviour of firms regardless of individual firms' preferences or leadership. [6, 7]

The Three Images and Levels of Analysis

Waltz's earlier work, Man, the State, and War (1959), identified three "images" or levels of analysis in international relations theory: the individual level (human nature, leadership, psychology), the state level (regime type, political institutions, culture), and the systemic level (the structure of the international system itself). While not denying that factors at all three levels influence outcomes, Waltz argues that systemic factors provide the most powerful and parsimonious explanations for recurring patterns in international politics, particularly the prevalence of war, arms competition, and balance-of-power behaviour.

The international system's structure is defined primarily by its ordering principle (anarchy versus hierarchy), the differentiation of units (whether states perform different functions or are functionally similar), and the distribution of capabilities (the relative power of states). In the modern international system, the ordering principle is anarchy, states are functionally similar (all perform the same basic functions of providing security, though with varying effectiveness), and capabilities are distributed unequally, creating great powers, middle powers, and weak states.

Structural Analysis of U.S.-Venezuela Relations

Systemic Imperatives and Hegemonic Maintenance: From a Waltzian perspective, the United States, as a great power and regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere, faces structural pressures to maintain its predominance and prevent challenges to its position regardless of who occupies the White House or what ideology guides American foreign policy. These pressures arise from the anarchic structure of the system itself, which compels states to worry about their relative power position and to resist shifts in the balance of power that might threaten their security.

The Maduro regime, through its diplomatic and military alliances with extra-hemispheric powers such as Russia, China, and Iran, represents a potential threat to U.S. hegemonic stability in its traditional sphere of influence. Russian military advisors, Chinese loans and infrastructure investment, and Iranian presence in Venezuela create footholds for rivals in what the United States has historically considered its security zone. The capture of Maduro could be understood as a structural response to these systemic pressures rather than a choice motivated by ideology, personal animosity, or even specific policy disputes. Any U.S. administration, regardless of party or personality, would face similar structural incentives to prevent rival great powers from establishing significant presence in the Western Hemisphere.

Polarity, Capability Distribution, and Permissibility: Waltz argued that the structure of international systems varies primarily according to polarity whether capabilities are concentrated in two powers (bipolarity), more than two (multipolarity), or predominantly in one (unipolarity). Different polarities create different dynamics, with bipolarity being most stable, multipolarity

more prone to miscalculation and conflict, and unipolarity creating unique dynamics where the dominant power faces fewer external constraints.

In the contemporary international system, which scholars debate characterizing as unipolar, multipolar, or transitioning between these states, the United States retains significant freedom of action in its own hemisphere that it would not possess in regions where other great powers can more easily project power. The relative inability or unwillingness of China and Russia to intervene forcefully in defense of Venezuela separated as they are by vast geographic distances and limited power projection capabilities creates a permissive environment for U.S. action. The structural realist would argue that this is simply how international systems function: power concentrations enable action, and the absence of effective balancing mechanisms means such actions will occur when states perceive them as advancing their interests.

Security Dilemma Dynamics and Spiral Models: The security dilemma, a central concept in structural realism, refers to the problem that actions taken by one state to increase its security (such as military buildup or alliance formation) may decrease the security of other states, leading them to take countermeasures that ultimately leave all parties less secure. This dynamic arises from the combination of anarchy and the difficulty of distinguishing offensive from defensive capabilities and intentions.

One might argue that Venezuela's alignment with U.S. adversaries, its military activities (however modest given its economic constraints), and its hostile rhetoric create a security dilemma wherein the United States feels compelled to act pre-emptively. Russian strategic bombers deploying to Venezuela, Chinese military technology transfers, and Venezuelan cooperation with Cuban intelligence services could be interpreted as threatening regardless of their stated defensive purposes. From this perspective, Maduro's capture could be framed as a defensive measure to prevent a future, greater threat from materializing a preventive action motivated by uncertainty and fear rather than aggressive expansionism.

Waltz on Intervention and Great Power Behaviour

Waltz himself was generally skeptical of intervention and argued that bipolarity during the Cold War created stability partly because each superpower exercised restraint in the other's sphere of influence. However, he also recognized that great powers inevitably intervene in their regions of primary strategic interest and that structural pressures push them in this direction regardless of normative constraints. The question from a Waltzian perspective is not whether powerful states should behave differently structure compels certain behaviours but whether the international system's structure makes particular actions more or less risky and more or less likely to trigger balancing responses.

Applied to the Maduro case, structural realism would focus less on whether the capture is morally justified and more on whether it serves U.S. security interests given systemic constraints and opportunities, and whether it is likely to trigger costly balancing behaviour from other great powers. If China and Russia are unlikely or unable to respond effectively perhaps because they face more pressing challenges elsewhere or because the costs of challenging U.S. regional hegemony exceed the benefits of defending Venezuela then structural incentives favour action. If, conversely, such action would trigger a broader great power confrontation or coalition formation against the United States, then even from a purely realist calculation, restraint might be preferable.

3.4. Offensive Realism and Power Maximisation

John Mearsheimer's offensive realism, presented most comprehensively in The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (2001), takes structural realism in a more aggressive direction by arguing that great powers are not merely concerned with survival and security maintenance but actively seek to maximize their relative power and achieve hegemony when possible. Unlike defensive realists like Waltz who see states as security-satisfices seeking sufficient power for survival but not unlimited power Mearsheimer portrays them as power-maximizers operating under conditions of profound uncertainty about other states' present intentions and future behaviour. [8]

The Logic of Offensive Realism

Mearsheimer's offensive realism rests on five bedrock assumptions about the international system: the international system is anarchic; all great powers possess some offensive military capability; states can never be certain about other states' intentions; survival is the primary goal of all states; and great powers are rational actors. From these assumptions, he derives the conclusion that states should seek to maximize their relative power position, with regional hegemony representing the ideal strategic situation.

The uncertainty about intentions is particularly crucial to offensive realism's logic. Even if a state currently appears benign or defensive, its intentions could change with new leadership, domestic political shifts, or changing circumstances. Moreover, even states with genuinely defensive intentions might be compelled by their own security dilemmas to take actions that threaten others. Given this irreducible uncertainty, rational states must prepare for worst-case scenarios and seek to maximize their power to hedge against future threats that may not yet be visible.

Offensive realism also emphasizes the importance of relative rather than absolute gains. In an anarchic self-help system, what matters is not simply whether a state becomes stronger in absolute terms but whether it becomes stronger relative to potential rivals.

A state might accept absolute losses if doing so inflicts greater relative losses on competitors, and it might oppose arrangements that benefit all parties if they benefit rivals more.

Offensive Realist Justifications for Capturing Maduro

Hegemonic Imperative and Regional Dominance: Mearsheimer argues that the ideal position for any great power is to achieve regional hegemony overwhelming dominance in its geographic region while preventing other powers from doing the same in their regions. Regional hegemony provides security by eliminating peer competitors nearby who could threaten the state's survival, while preventing distant hegemons creates a more favourable global balance of power.

The United States achieved hemispheric hegemony during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and has fundamental strategic interests in maintaining this position. The removal of a hostile, ideologically opposed leader who has actively sought to undermine U.S. influence, facilitated the entry of rival powers into the hemisphere, and challenged American dominance represents a logical extension of this hegemonic project. From an offensive realist standpoint, the United States should not tolerate significant challenges to its regional hegemony regardless of whether those challenges pose immediate existential threats, because allowing such challenges to grow today may create much more serious problems tomorrow.

Opportunistic Power Expansion and Windows of Opportunity: Offensive realism counsels states to seize opportunities to increase their relative power when such opportunities arise at acceptable costs. States face "windows of opportunity" when circumstances temporarily favour action perhaps due to a rival's distraction elsewhere, favourable international conditions, or an adversary's temporary weakness. Conversely, states may face "windows of vulnerability" when their relative power is declining or when waiting would allow adversaries to strengthen their positions.

Venezuela under Maduro presents what could be characterized as a window of opportunity for the United States. The regime's economic collapse, international isolation, domestic political fragmentation, military degradation, and the reluctance or inability of its extra-hemispheric sponsors to defend it forcefully create favourable conditions for action. China is preoccupied with its own regional ambitions and domestic challenges, Russia is bogged down in Ukraine and faces its own economic constraints, and neither power has the capability to project sufficient military force into the Caribbean to deter or reverse U.S. action. This window may not remain open indefinitely; waiting could allow Venezuela to stabilize, its sponsors to deepen their commitment, or international conditions to shift in ways that increase the costs or risks of action.

From this perspective, capturing Maduro while conditions are favourable represents prudent strategic opportunism rather than aggressive revisionism. The United States would simply be taking advantage of favourable circumstances to secure its interests and enhance its relative power position.

Uncertainty, Pre-emption, and Prevention: Because states can never achieve certainty about others' future intentions or capabilities, offensive realists argue they must plan for worst-case scenarios and take preventive action against potential future threats even when current threats are modest or ambiguous. Even if the Maduro regime poses only limited current dangers to the United States, its potential to cause greater harm in the future through further deepening of Russian military cooperation, expanded Chinese economic and technological penetration, development of irregular warfare capabilities in cooperation with Cuba and Iran, or regional destabilization that creates opportunities for hostile powers justifies pre-emptive action.

The logic here parallels arguments made for preventive war in other contexts: it is better to act against a threat while it is still manageable than to wait until it has grown more formidable. While Maduro's Venezuela cannot directly threaten U.S. survival, the precedent of allowing hostile extra-hemispheric powers to establish significant military and intelligence infrastructure in the Americas could create long-term strategic vulnerabilities. Offensive realism would counsel addressing such problems early and decisively rather than hoping they resolve themselves or waiting until they metastasize into more serious challenges.

The Stopping Power of Water and Hemispheric Hegemony: Mearsheimer emphasizes that large bodies of water constitute significant obstacles to power projection, making it difficult for land powers to project force across oceans and making regional hegemony more achievable and defensible than global hegemony. The United States benefits enormously from being separated from Eurasia by two vast oceans, which has allowed it to achieve regional hegemony in the Western Hemisphere without facing the kind of great power competition that characterizes Eurasia.

This geographic advantage creates both opportunities and imperatives for the United States. The opportunity lies in the ability to dominate its own hemisphere without interference from Eurasian powers. The imperative is to prevent Eurasian powers from establishing footholds that could negate this geographic advantage by creating nearby threats that the United States cannot ignore. Venezuela's collaboration with Russia, China, and Iran represents precisely the kind of extra-hemispheric penetration that offensive realism counsels against tolerating. Capturing Maduro would remove a leader who has actively facilitated this penetration and signal to both regional and extra-regional actors that challenges to U.S. hemispheric hegemony will be met with forceful responses.

Mearsheimer on Restraint and the Limits of Offensive Realism

It is important to note that while Mearsheimer's theory counsels power maximization and opportunism, it does not advocate mindless aggression or actions that are likely to trigger costly balancing coalitions or overextension. Offensive realists still engage in cost-

benefit analysis and recognize that some actions, while potentially beneficial in narrow terms, may trigger responses that leave the state worse off overall.

The question, then, is whether capturing Maduro would likely trigger significant balancing behaviour from other great powers or whether it would be accepted as falling within the United States' traditional sphere of influence. If Russia and China view Venezuela as peripheral to their core interests and are unwilling to pay significant costs to defend the regime, then offensive realism would support action. If, however, such action would be seen as a broader challenge to their interests that demands a response perhaps triggering increased military cooperation between Russia and China, greater support for anti-U.S. forces globally, or other forms of costly balancing then even offensive realism might counsel restraint.

3.5. The Monroe Doctrine and Spheres of Influence

The historical precedent of the Monroe Doctrine (1823) and its various corollaries provides a specifically American framework for justifying intervention in Latin America that, while not a formal theory of international relations, reflects realist assumptions about great power prerogatives and spheres of influence that have persisted for two centuries.

Historical Development of the Monroe Doctrine

President James Monroe's 1823 declaration that the Western Hemisphere was closed to further European colonization and that any European intervention in the Americas would be considered a threat to U.S. security represented a bold assertion of American interests at a time when the United States lacked the power to enforce such a doctrine. Initially, the doctrine was enforceable only because it aligned with British interests the Royal Navy prevented European intervention not to support American pretensions but to protect British commercial interests in Latin America.

However, as American power grew throughout the nineteenth century, the Monroe Doctrine evolved from aspirational principle to enforced policy. By the late nineteenth century, the United States possessed sufficient military and economic power to back up its claims to hemispheric primacy. The doctrine was invoked to justify numerous interventions, from support for Texas independence and the Mexican-American War to opposition to French intervention in Mexico during the 1860s.

The Roosevelt Corollary and Interventionist Logic

Theodore Roosevelt's 1904 corollary to the Monroe Doctrine represented a significant expansion of the doctrine's interventionist implications. Where Monroe had proclaimed that European powers should not intervene in the Americas, Roosevelt asserted that the United States had both the right and the responsibility to intervene in Latin American countries that engaged in "chronic wrongdoing" or displayed "impotence" that might invite European intervention. This essentially claimed for the United States an "international police power" in the Western Hemisphere.

Roosevelt's logic was explicitly preventive: by intervening to correct problems in Latin American countries collecting debts, enforcing order, or removing unstable governments the United States would pre-empt European pretexts for intervention that could lead to the establishment of European power in the hemisphere. While this reasoning was self-serving and often used to justify interventions motivated by economic interests or political preferences, it reflected a genuine strategic concern about extra-hemispheric powers establishing footholds near American territory.

Applied to contemporary Venezuela, the Roosevelt Corollary's logic would suggest that Maduro's "chronic wrongdoing “including humanitarian crimes, drug trafficking, corruption, economic mismanagement, and collaboration with hostile powers creates conditions that both harm the region and invite intervention by extra-hemispheric powers like Russia and China. The United States, from this perspective, has the right and perhaps the responsibility to intervene to correct these problems and prevent a Russian or Chinese client state from consolidating itself in the Caribbean.

The Cold War and Spheres of Influence

During the Cold War, both superpowers maintained and enforced spheres of influence despite the nominal commitment to sovereignty and non-intervention enshrined in the UN Charter. The Soviet Union intervened militarily in East Germany (1953), Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968), and Afghanistan (1979) to maintain its sphere of influence. The United States intervened in Guatemala (1954), Cuba (1961), Dominican Republic (1965), Chile (1973), Grenada (1983), Panama (1989), and numerous other countries to maintain its hemispheric influence and prevent Soviet penetration.

The Brezhnev Doctrine, announced after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, explicitly asserted the Soviet Union's right to intervene in socialist countries to prevent counter-revolution a direct parallel to the Roosevelt Corollary. Both superpowers claimed special rights in their respective spheres while condemning the other's interventions as violations of sovereignty and international law.

This historical pattern suggests that despite rhetorical commitments to sovereignty and non-intervention, great powers consistently enforce spheres of influence when they possess the capability to do so and when core interests are at stake. From this perspective,

U.S. intervention in Venezuela would represent not an aberration but a continuation of a practice that has characterized great power behaviour throughout the modern era.

Contemporary Spheres of Influence and Great Power Practice

Despite the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a more integrated global economy, spheres of influence remain a feature of international politics. Russia's interventions in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014), and Syria (2015) reflect its determination to maintain influence in its near abroad and prevent Western penetration of its traditional sphere. China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and its Belt and Road Initiative represent efforts to establish and expand a sphere of influence in Asia and beyond.

These actions suggest that the post-Cold War "rules-based international order" has never fully displaced power-based spheres of influence as an organizing principle of great power relations. While powers no longer openly assert doctrines of regional hegemony in the explicit manner of Monroe or Brezhnev, their behaviour reveals a continued commitment to maintaining dominant influence in their respective regions.

From a realist perspective, U.S. intervention in Venezuela would simply acknowledge this reality rather than pretending that spheres of influence no longer matter. If Russia can intervene in its near abroad and China can dominate its maritime periphery, the argument goes, then the United States retains similar prerogatives in the Western Hemisphere. To fail to exercise these prerogatives when challenged would signal weakness and invite further erosion of American influence.

3.6. Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect

While not strictly a "might is right" argument, some might attempt to justify Maduro's capture through humanitarian intervention doctrine or the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) framework, arguing that Venezuela's humanitarian crisis characterized by economic collapse, food and medicine shortages, disease outbreaks, mass migration, political repression, and extrajudicial killings demands international action to protect civilian populations. This requires careful examination from both principled and realist perspectives.

The Evolution of Humanitarian Intervention Doctrine

The concept of humanitarian intervention the use of military force across borders for humanitarian purposes without the consent of the target state has a long and controversial history. While examples exist from the nineteenth century (such as European interventions in the Ottoman Empire ostensibly to protect Christian populations), the modern doctrine emerged after the Cold War in response to humanitarian catastrophes in Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo.

The failure to prevent genocide in Rwanda (1994) and the controversy surrounding NATO's intervention in Kosovo (1999) without Security Council authorization led to significant debate about when, if ever, intervention for humanitarian purposes could be justified. The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) attempted to resolve this debate by reframing sovereignty not as a right of states but as a responsibility when states fail to protect their populations from mass atrocities, the international community has a responsibility to intervene.

Responsibility to Protect: Principles and Practice

The Responsibility to Protect doctrine, adopted by the UN World Summit in 2005, establishes that states have a responsibility to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. When states manifestly fail in this responsibility, the international community has a responsibility to take collective action through the Security Council. R2P established three pillars: the state's responsibility to protect its own population, the international community's responsibility to assist states in fulfilling this responsibility, and the international community's responsibility to take timely and decisive action when a state is manifestly failing to protect its population. [24–26]

R2P was invoked to justify intervention in Libya (2011), though the aftermath of that intervention and allegations that NATO exceeded its mandate have made subsequent R2P interventions more controversial. The failure to intervene effectively in Syria despite massive civilian casualties further complicated R2P's practical application and revealed that it remains subject to great power politics and Security Council vetoes.

Venezuela's Humanitarian Crisis and R2P

Venezuela's humanitarian situation is severe by any objective measure. The economy has contracted by approximately 75% since 2014, inflation has reached hyperinflationary levels making basic goods unaffordable, health care systems have collapsed leading to resurgence of previously controlled diseases, malnutrition affects substantial portions of the population, and over seven million Venezuelans have fled the country as refugees or migrants. Additionally, the regime has been accused of systematic human rights violations, torture, extrajudicial killings, and violent repression of dissent.

However, whether this situation meets the threshold for R2P intervention is debatable. The doctrine applies specifically to genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity not to economic collapse or general humanitarian crisis, however severe. While reports document extrajudicial killings and torture, the scale may not reach the threshold of mass atrocities that R2P was

designed to address. Moreover, R2P requires Security Council authorization for coercive action, which would be impossible to obtain given that Russia and China would veto any resolution authorizing intervention against their partner.

Realist Critique of Humanitarian Justifications

Humanitarian Rhetoric as Power Politics Disguised: Realists argue that humanitarian justifications are typically post-hoc rationalizations for actions taken fundamentally for strategic, economic, or political reasons rather than genuine humanitarian concern. The highly selective application of humanitarian intervention why intervene in Libya but not Syria, in Kosovo but not Rwanda, potentially in Venezuela but not in other repressive regimes reveals that power, interest, and opportunity rather than principle drive such decisions.

From this perspective, any humanitarian justification for capturing Maduro would be a fig leaf covering strategic interests: removing a hostile regime, disrupting Russian and Chinese presence in the hemisphere, controlling Venezuelan oil resources, or demonstrating American resolve. Realists do not necessarily condemn such actions but insist on acknowledging their true motivations rather than cloaking them in humanitarian rhetoric that obscures the power politics actually driving decisions.

R2P as Great Power Prerogative: The Responsibility to Protect, despite its principled aspirations, functions in practice as a great power prerogative. Only powerful states have the capability to "protect" populations in distant countries through military intervention, and they choose when and where to exercise this responsibility based on their interests, resources, and the likelihood of encountering resistance. R2P interventions occur when powerful states want them to occur for their own reasons, not based on an impartial assessment of humanitarian need.

The Libya intervention illustrates this dynamic. NATO powers intervened ostensibly to protect civilians from Gaddafi's forces, but the intervention quickly expanded to regime change, suggesting that humanitarian protection was either a pretext or only one among several motivations. The aftermath, with Libya descending into prolonged civil conflict and becoming a hub for human trafficking and terrorism, raises questions about whether humanitarian concerns genuinely drove the intervention or whether they provided convenient justification for actions taken for other reasons.

The Moral Hazard Problem: Some critics argue that R2P creates moral hazard by encouraging rebel groups to provoke government crackdowns in the hope of triggering international intervention. If opposition groups believe that sufficient civilian casualties or repression will lead to external military intervention that removes the government, they have incentives to provoke violence rather than pursue negotiated solutions. Whether this dynamic operates in practice is deb

3.7. Liberal Institutionalism and International Law

Having explored how realist theories might justify the capture of Maduro, intellectual honesty and analytical rigor demand thorough examination of competing theoretical frameworks that would strongly oppose such action and question the "might is right" premise itself. Liberal institutionalism provides the most influential alternative to realism in contemporary international relations scholarship.

The Liberal Institutionalist Framework

Liberal institutionalism, associated with scholars such as Robert Keohane, Joseph Nye, John Ruggie, and Oran Young, argues that international institutions, norms, legal regimes, and complex interdependence constrain state behaviour and make cooperation both possible and preferable to pure power politics. While not denying that states pursue their interests or that power matters, liberal institutionalists argue that institutions shape how states define those interests, provide information that reduces uncertainty, create expectations of reciprocity, raise the costs of defection from cooperative arrangements, and establish focal points for coordination. [9, 10, 12]

This theoretical tradition emerged partly as a response to realism's perceived inability to explain the significant amount of international cooperation that occurs despite anarchy. If states are purely self-interested power-maximizers operating in an anarchic self-help system, why do we observe extensive international institutions, largely respected international law, stable trading systems, environmental agreements, arms control regimes, and countless other forms of cooperation that often constrain even powerful states? Liberal institutionalists argue that institutions matter because they affect state behaviour in several ways: they provide information about state actions and intentions, reducing the uncertainty that drives security dilemmas; they create iterated interactions that make reputation important and allow for reciprocity; they establish standards of appropriate behaviour and impose costs on violators through reputational damage and exclusion from benefits; they facilitate issue linkage allowing states to make credible commitments across different domains; and they create expectations that stabilize cooperation even when short-term incentives might favour defection.

Sovereignty as Foundational Norm

The principle of state sovereignty, enshrined most clearly in the UN Charter Article 2(4) which prohibits "the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state," represents perhaps the most fundamental norm of the contemporary international system. This norm has achieved near-universal formal acceptance and provides crucial stability to the

international system by protecting weak states from strong ones and creating expectations about appropriate interstate behaviour. [28]

The Post-1945 Order and Sovereignty Protection: The international order constructed after World War II explicitly rejected the nineteenth-century pattern of great power imperialism and conquest, establishing sovereignty and territorial integrity as sacred principles that even the most powerful states were expected to respect. While these principles have been violated numerous times, the violations typically generate significant international controversy and often come with costs, suggesting that the norms retain some constraining force.

The Westphalian system of sovereign territorial states emerged in the seventeenth century, but the principle that sovereignty means immunity from external intervention regardless of a state's power has been progressively strengthened through international law, particularly since 1945. The UN Charter, various human rights conventions, regional organizations, and customary international law all reinforce sovereignty as the foundation of international order.

Violating this norm, even against a regime as problematic as Maduro's, undermines the entire edifice of international law upon which global order rests. If the United States can unilaterally capture foreign heads of state based on claims of national interest or humanitarian concern, what prevents any powerful state from doing the same? The normative architecture that has prevented great power wars since 1945 and enabled decolonization, the proliferation of independent states, and a more peaceful international system than existed in previous centuries rests partly on mutual recognition of sovereignty and restraint in its violation.

Precedent and the Slippery Slope: Law and norms depend critically on consistent application and respect for precedent. Each violation of sovereignty makes future violations more likely and more difficult to condemn. If the United States captures Maduro based on arguments about national security threats, humanitarian crisis, or democratic legitimacy, Russia could justify similar actions in Ukraine or Georgia, China in Taiwan or Southeast Asia, and regional powers throughout the world in their near abroad. The precedent would be impossible to contain to this specific case.

Moreover, the specific legal reasoning used to justify capturing Maduro would matter greatly. If the justification rests on humanitarian grounds, it could be invoked against any country experiencing internal repression or humanitarian crisis. If it rests on security grounds, any powerful state could claim that weaker neighbours pose security threats justifying intervention. If it rests on democratic legitimacy, powerful states could appoint themselves judges of which governments are legitimate and which can be removed. Each rationale opens pathways that would fundamentally destabilize international order.

Institutional Constraints and Legitimacy

The United Nations System: The UN Charter established a system intended to channel conflicts through peaceful dispute resolution mechanisms and to make the use of force illegal except in self-defense or when authorized by the Security Council. While this system has been imperfectly observed, it has arguably contributed to the absence of great power war since 1945 and has provided forums for negotiation and coordination that make cooperation more likely.

Actions taken outside the framework of international institutions like the UN Security Council lack international legitimacy and set dangerous precedents. The United States itself has a strong interest in maintaining an international order based on rules and institutions rather than pure power, as it benefits from the predictability, legitimacy, and international cooperation that such an order enables. American power is amplified rather than diminished by operating within institutional frameworks that grant its actions legitimacy and reduce the likelihood of counterbalancing coalitions forming against it.

The International Criminal Court and Accountability: The ICC and other international tribunals represent efforts to create legal mechanisms for addressing atrocities and holding leaders accountable without requiring military intervention. While imperfect and hampered by the non-participation of major powers including the United States, these institutions offer an alternative to unilateral action for addressing serious crimes by leaders. Capturing Maduro outside of any legal framework would undermine these institutions and the broader project of creating international accountability mechanisms.

Long-term Costs of Unilateralism and Reputation

Alliance Politics and Multilateralism: The United States benefits enormously from its alliance system and generally cooperative relationships with most of the world's democracies and major economies. These relationships depend partly on American willingness to operate within shared institutional frameworks and to exercise its power with some degree of restraint. Unilateral action to capture a foreign leader, particularly without clear legal authorization or multilateral support, would strain relationships even with close allies who might condemn the action despite their own reservations about Maduro.

European allies, Latin American democracies, and partners in Asia might view such action as dangerous unilateralism that threatens the rule-based order they depend on for their own security. The costs in terms of damaged relationships, reduced cooperation on other issues, and decreased willingness to support U.S. initiatives could outweigh whatever benefits flow from removing Maduro.

Soft Power and Normative Leadership: Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power" the ability to shape others' preferences and achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion depends significantly on perceptions of legitimacy and principled behaviour. The United States has historically benefited from soft power derived from its commitment to democracy, human rights, and rule of law.

Capturing a foreign leader in violation of international law would damage this soft power considerably, making it harder to achieve goals that depend on willing cooperation rather than coercion.

Countries might become less willing to host U.S. military bases, participate in U.S.-led initiatives, adopt American policy preferences, or support the United States in international forums if they view American power as lawless and threatening rather than benign and rule-bound. The long-term costs in terms of diminished influence could substantially exceed short-term gains from removing Maduro.

International Law as Constraint and Coordination Mechanism

Customary International Law and Treaties: Beyond the UN Charter, a complex web of customary international law and treaty obligations constrains state behaviour and creates expectations about appropriate conduct. The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, the Geneva Conventions, various human rights treaties, and customary norms regarding the immunity of heads of state all bear on the legality of capturing Maduro.

While powerful states can violate these rules, doing so comes with costs in terms of reciprocity (other states may feel entitled to violate rules benefiting the violator), reputational damage (reducing credibility on other issues), and the erosion of a legal order that generally benefits even powerful states by providing predictability and legitimacy.

International Law as Coordination Device: Even if international law cannot be enforced against powerful states through coercion, it serves crucial coordination functions. It establishes clear standards for behaviour, creates focal points for expectations and reciprocity, and provides common language for discussing state conduct. Law creates a baseline against which violations can be identified and criticized, generating reputational costs that constrain behaviour even in the absence of enforcement mechanisms.

The fact that even powerful states feel compelled to justify their actions in legal terms or to dispute whether their conduct violates law reveals that law retains constraining force. Rather than simply announcing that might makes right, states typically claim that their actions comply with law or that exceptional circumstances justify deviation. This demonstrates that international law, despite its weakness compared to domestic law, shapes discourse and imposes costs on violators sufficient to influence calculations about whether particular actions are worthwhile.

3.8. Constructivist Perspectives on Norms and Identity

Constructivist international relations theory, developed by scholars such as Alexander Wendt, Nicholas Onuf, Martha Finnemore, and Kathryn Sikkink, emphasizes that state interests and behaviour are shaped by socially constructed norms, ideas, identities, and shared understandings rather than being materially determined by objective factors like power distribution or system structure. This theoretical approach challenges both realism and liberalism by questioning their shared assumption that state interests are relatively fixed and arguing instead that interests are constructed through social interaction and shared understandings. [13–17]

The Social Construction of International Reality

Constructivism's central insight is captured in Alexander Wendt's observation that "anarchy is what states make of it." While realists treat international anarchy as an objective structural condition that necessarily generates self-help behaviour and power competition, constructivists argue that anarchy's meaning depends on how states interpret it and what practices they develop within it. The anarchic structure of the international system is real, but its implications for state behaviour depend on shared understandings, collective meanings, and intersubjectively constituted identities.

States operating in an anarchic system where they view each other as existential threats will behave very differently from states in an anarchic system where they view each other as friends or partners. The difference lies not in the material structure (both systems are anarchic) but in the ideational structure the shared beliefs, norms, and identities that constitute actors and give meaning to their relationships.

Normative Evolution and the Illegitimacy of Conquest

The Anti-Conquest Norm: One of constructivism's most powerful empirical demonstrations concerns the near-complete disappearance of territorial conquest as an acceptable form of state behaviour. For most of human history, conquest was considered a legitimate way for states to expand, acquire resources, and increase their power. Yet since 1945, and particularly since decolonization, territorial conquest has become almost universally condemned and extremely rare.

This change cannot be explained by material factors alone. States still have the capability to conquer territory, and doing so might bring material benefits. Yet they generally refrain from conquest even when they could succeed militarily. Constructivists argue that this reflects the power of norms, shared understandings about appropriate behaviour that constrain action independently of material incentives. The norm against conquest has become so deeply institutionalized that even powerful states face enormous costs from violating it, not primarily through material punishment but through damage to reputation, legitimacy, and identity.

Capturing Maduro, while not territorial conquest, would violate closely related norms about sovereignty, non-intervention, and the immunity of heads of state. These norms have strengthened significantly since 1945, and violating them would challenge the normative foundation of contemporary international order in ways that could prove difficult to contain or reverse.

The Responsibility to Protect and Contested Norms: While some norms like the anti-conquest norm have achieved near-universal acceptance, others remain contested and subject to ongoing normative struggle. The Responsibility to Protect represents an attempt to establish new norms that would qualify traditional sovereignty principles by creating circumstances under which intervention for humanitarian purposes becomes not only acceptable but required.

However, R2P's implementation has been highly controversial, and many states reject the idea that sovereignty can be overridden by humanitarian concerns without their consent. The divide between Western states that generally support R2P and non-Western states that often view it as neo-imperialism in humanitarian guise reflects ongoing disagreement about fundamental norms of international society. Attempting to justify Maduro's capture through R2P would occur within this contested normative space and would likely strengthen opposition to R2P rather than advancing its acceptance.

Identity, Self-Conception, and Behavioural Constraints

American Identity and Democratic Values: The United States' identity as a democratic, law-abiding nation that respects sovereignty and human rights constrains its behaviour in ways that pure material calculations might not. Actions that contradict this identity impose costs in terms of legitimacy and self-conception, both domestically and internationally. Leaders must justify their actions not only in terms of national interest but also in terms consistent with American values and identity.

Capturing a foreign leader in violation of international law would be difficult to reconcile with American self-conception and the identity that the U.S. has cultivated since World War II. While the United States has certainly violated its professed principles on numerous occasions, doing so typically generates domestic and international controversy and requires extensive justification. The need to maintain consistency between actions and professed identity creates genuine constraints on behaviour.

Role Conceptions and Appropriate Behaviour: Constructivists emphasize that actors' understanding of their roles shapes their behaviour. The United States might conceive of its role as global hegemon, alliance leader, defender of democracy, or rule-based order guarantor. Each role conception implies different standards for appropriate behaviour and different constraints on action.

If the United States conceives of itself primarily as hegemon pursuing power and interest, capturing Maduro might seem justified. If it conceives of itself primarily as defender of rule-based order, the same action might appear self-defeating by undermining the rules and institutions that constitute that order. The role conception that prevails has real consequences for behaviour because actors seek consistency between their role understanding and their actions.

Norm Entrepreneurs, Norm Cascades, and Norm Erosion

Creating and Destroying Norms: Norms are not static but evolve through processes of contestation, advocacy, and practice. "Norm entrepreneurs “actors who seek to change prevailing norms work to establish new standards for appropriate behaviour. Successful norm entrepreneurship can lead to "norm cascades" where new norms achieve rapid, widespread acceptance.

However, norms can also erode through violation. If powerful states repeatedly violate norms without suffering significant consequences, those norms weaken and may eventually collapse. The norm against torture, for instance, was challenged by practices during the war on terror, though it has proven resilient. The norm against territorial conquest has survived despite occasional violations like Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Capturing Maduro would constitute a significant norm violation that could either be absorbed by the system without fundamentally altering prevailing norms (if it is viewed as an exceptional case) or could contribute to erosion of norms regarding sovereignty and intervention (if it establishes a precedent that other powerful states cite to justify their own interventions). The outcome would depend on how the action is framed, justified, and received by the international community.

3.9. Critical Theory and Postcolonial Perspectives

Critical approaches to international relations, drawing on Marxist, Frankfurt School, and postcolonial theoretical traditions, would view the "might is right" justification for capturing Maduro through a fundamentally different lens than either mainstream realism or liberalism. These approaches emphasize power structures, historical injustices, whose interests are served by particular configurations of international order, and how dominant ideas and institutions perpetuate hierarchies and exploitation. [22, 23]

Hegemonic Power Structures and Neo-Imperialism

Historical Patterns of U.S. Intervention in Latin America: Critical theorists and postcolonial scholars would situate any U.S. intervention in Venezuela within the long history of American imperialism in Latin America, stretching from the Mexican-American War (1846-1848) through the numerous Cold War interventions in Guatemala, Cuba, Chile, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Grenada, Panama, and beyond. This history reveals consistent patterns: interventions justified through security rhetoric that consistently serve economic interests, the overthrow of left-leaning governments regardless of their democratic legitimacy, the installation or support

of right-wing authoritarian regimes when they serve U.S. interests, and the subordination of Latin American sovereignty to American hegemonic preferences.

The capture of Maduro would represent not an isolated act justified by his specific failures but a continuation of hegemonic practices that have characterized U.S.-Latin American relations for over a century and a half. From this perspective, the specific justifications offered whether security threats, humanitarian concerns, or democratic legitimacy matter less than the underlying structural relationship of domination that these justifications obscure.

Economic Interests, Resource Extraction, and Capitalism: Venezuela possesses the world's largest proven oil reserves, estimated at approximately 300 billion barrels. Critical theorists would argue that any intervention, regardless of its official justification, fundamentally serves the interests of capital, resource extraction, and maintaining a global economic order favourable to Western corporations and financial institutions. The "might is right" framework obscures these material interests behind claims of security or humanitarian concern that present intervention as either unfortunate necessity or benevolent action rather than as naked pursuit of economic advantage.

The history of U.S. intervention in resource-rich countries from Iran (1953) where a democratic government was overthrown partly over oil nationalization, to numerous interventions in the Middle East, to coups against resource nationalists in Latin America reveals consistent patterns where control over strategic resources correlates strongly with intervention while human rights violations in countries without strategic resources generate little response. From a critical perspective, this pattern is not coincidental but reflects the deep connections between state power, capital, and resource control in the global capitalist system.

Neo-Imperialism and Structural Domination: While formal colonialism has largely disappeared, critical theorists argue that it has been replaced by neo-imperialism or neo-colonialism where developing countries remain subordinated to Western powers through economic dependence, debt, unfavourable terms of trade, structural adjustment programs, and occasional military intervention when these softer forms of control prove insufficient. International institutions like the IMF, World Bank, and WTO are understood not as neutral mechanisms for managing the global economy but as instruments through which Western powers, particularly the United States, maintain dominance over the developing world.

Venezuela under Chavez and Maduro attempted to resist this neo-imperial order through resource nationalism, rejection of IMF prescriptions, alignment with other anti-hegemonic forces, and redistribution of oil wealth to the poor rather than primarily to domestic elites and foreign corporations. From a critical perspective, this resistance rather than any specific humanitarian crisis or security threat provides the real explanation for why Venezuela faces such hostility from the United States and why intervention might be contemplated.

Epistemological Critique and the Politics of Knowledge

Challenging "Objective" Analysis: Critical theorists challenge the very notion of objective, value-neutral analysis in international relations, arguing that all theory serves particular interests and that claims to objectivity obscure the political commitments embedded in theoretical frameworks. Realist theory, from this perspective, is not simply a descriptive account of how states behave but a normative framework that serves the interests of powerful states by naturalizing power politics, making domination appear inevitable, and presenting self-interested pursuit of power as value-neutral rational behaviour rather than as morally and politically contestable choice.

When realists argue that "might is right" describes an inevitable feature of international politics, they perform ideological work that legitimizes the exercise of power by the strong against the weak. By presenting this as natural law comparable to physical laws, realism makes alternatives appear impossible or utopian, thereby foreclosing political possibilities and serving the interests of those who benefit from existing power structures.

Whose Knowledge, Whose Interests: Critical approaches ask whose knowledge and whose interests are served by particular forms of analysis and particular policy recommendations. The international relations discipline, dominated by scholars from powerful Western countries (particularly the United States) and housed in institutions largely funded by those countries' governments and elites, tends to produce knowledge that serves hegemonic interests even when scholars believe they are engaging in objective analysis.

The framing of Venezuela as a problem requiring external intervention whether justified through realist, liberal, or even humanitarian logics reflects particular epistemological standpoints that privilege Western security concerns, capitalist economic models, and Western conceptions of democracy and human rights while dismissing or marginalizing Venezuelan sovereignty, Latin American regional perspectives, and alternative models of development and governance.

Postcolonial Perspectives on Sovereignty and Intervention

Sovereignty as Shield for the Weak: Postcolonial scholars emphasize that sovereignty has different meanings and different values for formerly colonized countries than for historically powerful Western states. For countries that achieved independence through anti-colonial struggles, sovereignty represents hard-won protection against external domination. The international legal prohibition

on intervention and the principle of sovereign equality, however imperfectly observed, provide weak states with crucial protection against powerful ones.

When powerful Western states argue that sovereignty should be qualified, conditional, or overridden by humanitarian concerns or democratic legitimacy tests, postcolonial perspectives see continuity with colonial-era claims that European powers had the right and responsibility to civilize, govern, or rescue populations in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The language has changed from civilizing mission to humanitarian intervention or democracy promotion, but the underlying structure remains one where powerful Western states claim authority to judge, intervene in, and reshape societies in the former colonial world.

Self-Determination Versus External Imposition: Postcolonial thought emphasizes the importance of self-determination the right of peoples to determine their own political future without external interference. While Maduro's democratic credentials are highly questionable and his government has certainly restricted self-determination in important ways, the solution from a postcolonial perspective must come from Venezuelans themselves rather than being imposed by external powers, particularly the former imperial power in the region.

External intervention, even if successful in removing Maduro, would represent a profound violation of self-determination and would likely create long-term resentment and resistance. The history of U.S. interventions in Latin America suggests that externally imposed solutions rarely generate stable, democratic outcomes and often produce lengthy insurgencies, prolonged occupation requirements, or the installation of authoritarian regimes dependent on external support.

3.10. The English School and International Society

The English School of international relations theory, associated with scholars like Hedley Bull, Martin Wight, Adam Watson, and Barry Buzan, offers a distinctive approach that mediates between realism's emphasis on power and anarchy and liberalism's emphasis on institutions and cooperation. The English School emphasizes that states form an "international society" bound together by common interests, rules, and institutions, distinct from either a purely anarchic system (system) or a fully integrated world government (world society). [18–21]

Order, Justice, and International Society

Pluralist Versus Solidarist Conceptions: The English School distinguishes between pluralist and solidarist conceptions of international society. Pluralists emphasize the society of states, where diverse states with different values and political systems coexist through minimal shared rules focused on order sovereignty, non-intervention, diplomatic immunity, and the keeping of treaties. Solidarists emphasize greater shared values and see potential for international society to enforce justice and human rights even against state sovereignty.

The tension between pluralist and solidarist approaches maps onto debates about intervention. Pluralists would strongly oppose capturing Maduro based on the pluralist priority placed on sovereignty and non-intervention as essential for order in a diverse international society. Solidarists might be more open to intervention for humanitarian purposes but would likely insist on multilateral authorization and clear evidence of mass atrocities rather than unilateral action.

Order Versus Justice: Hedley Bull's The Anarchical Society (1977) explores the tension between order and justice in international relations. Bull argues that order predictable patterns of behaviour that meet basic social goals is a prerequisite for justice, and that attempts to impose justice can undermine order with catastrophic results. International society has evolved minimal rules and institutions that maintain order despite the absence of world government, and these achievements should not be casually sacrificed in pursuit of justice or other values.

Applied to Venezuela, this framework would counsel extreme caution about intervention that might advance justice (by removing a repressive regime) but could undermine order (by violating fundamental rules about sovereignty and intervention). The English School perspective would likely conclude that maintaining order in international society requires accepting imperfect justice within states and tolerating regimes that fall short of ideal standards so long as they do not threaten international order itself through aggression or mass atrocities that shock the conscience of mankind.

Great Powers, Responsibilities, and Special Rights

The English School recognizes that not all states are equal and that great powers play special roles in maintaining international order. Great powers have both special rights (to intervene in their regions, to set rules, to lead coalitions) and special responsibilities (to maintain order, to provide public goods, to exercise restraint that preserves the system). This creates a more nuanced view than strict sovereign equality or pure power politics.

However, these special rights and responsibilities must be exercised within the framework of international society and its rules rather than purely according to power and interest. Great powers that exercise their special rights arbitrarily or that fail to fulfill their responsibilities undermine the legitimacy that makes international society possible and invite resistance, balancing, and breakdown of order.

3.11. Precedent and Systemic Implications

One of the strongest arguments against accepting "might is right" as justification for capturing Maduro concerns the systemic implications of such a precedent and what it would mean for the future of international order.

Erosion of Sovereignty Norms and Cascade Effects

If the United States can capture foreign leaders based on claims of national interest, humanitarian concern, or democratic illegitimacy, what prevents other powerful states from doing the same? The normative architecture that has prevented great power wars since 1945 and enabled the proliferation of independent states rests partly on mutual recognition of sovereignty and substantial restraint in its violation.

Russian Precedents: Russia could cite American action against Maduro to justify its own interventions in former Soviet states. If the United States can remove a hostile leader who challenges its hegemony, threatens its security through alignment with rivals, and presides over humanitarian crisis and repression, Russia could claim identical justifications for actions in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, or Central Asian states. The specific circumstances would differ, but the underlying logic would be parallel.

Chinese Precedents: China could use similar reasoning to justify forceful actions in its near abroad. If intervention against illegitimate, repressive governments aligned with hostile powers is acceptable, China might argue that Taiwan's government lacks legitimacy (from the PRC perspective), that various Southeast Asian governments threaten Chinese interests, or that intervention is necessary to protect ethnic Chinese populations or advance humanitarian goals.

Regional Power Precedents: Beyond great powers, regional powers throughout the world could invoke similar logic. India in South Asia, Nigeria or South Africa in Africa, Brazil in South America, Turkey or Saudi Arabia or Iran in the Middle East, all could potentially cite American precedent to justify interventions in weaker neighbours when those neighbours pose perceived threats, align with rivals, or experience humanitarian crises.

Legitimizing and Entrenching Authoritarianism

Paradoxically, accepting a "might is right" framework could strengthen authoritarian regimes globally rather than weakening them. If leaders believe they face potential capture or removal by foreign powers based on accusations of repression or illegitimacy, they have powerful incentives to take measures that would make external intervention more costly and difficult.

Consolidating Power and Repressing Opposition: Leaders would have increased incentives to thoroughly suppress domestic opposition that might provide intelligence or support for external intervention, to maintain tighter control over security services through loyalty networks and purges, and to refuse any political liberalization that might create vulnerabilities. The demonstration that even foreign leaders can be captured by powerful external actors could make threatened leaders more paranoid and more repressive rather than more accommodating.

Nuclear Proliferation and Deterrence: States might draw the lesson that only nuclear weapons or other potent deterrents provide reliable protection against intervention by powerful states. The trajectory from Libya's voluntary nuclear disarmament to its leader's brutal death during NATO-backed intervention has likely already reinforced this lesson for leaders like North Korea's Kim Jong Un. Broader acceptance that powerful states can intervene against non-nuclear states when they judge it necessary would strengthen incentives for nuclear proliferation and make non-proliferation efforts more difficult.

Alliance Patterns and Balancing: States fearing intervention might seek more aggressive balancing strategies, forming tighter alliances with other threatened states or great power sponsors, purchasing more weapons systems, or developing asymmetric capabilities like cyber warfare or terrorism sponsorship that could impose costs on potential interveners. The long-term result could be a more unstable, militarized, and hostile international environment.

Impact on Smaller States and International Order

The smaller and weaker states of the international system have the greatest stake in a law-based rather than power-based order. These states lack the military and economic capabilities to defend themselves through self-help and depend on international law, norms, and institutions to provide some protection against more powerful neighbours.

Erosion of Protections for Weak States: If powerful states can act based on "might is right" rather than being constrained by law and norms, weak states lose whatever protection those norms provided. This could lead to cascading instability as weak states pursue aggressive balancing strategies, seek nuclear weapons or other deterrents, enter into disadvantageous alliance relationships for protection, or experience interventions that generate prolonged conflict and humanitarian crisis.

Undermining International Institutions: The United Nations, regional organizations, international courts, and various treaty regimes exist partly to protect weak states from strong ones and to provide forums where disputes can be resolved without resorting to force. If these institutions and the norms they embody prove meaningless when challenged by powerful states acting unilaterally, the institutions themselves hollow out and lose legitimacy. This would represent a substantial loss of international order's institutional infrastructure that has provided significant benefits even to powerful states.

3.12. Pragmatic Realism: Costs, Benefits and Strategic Calculation

Even accepting realist premises that states pursue power and interests in an anarchic system, a prudent strategic analysis must weigh the comprehensive costs and benefits of capturing Maduro. Realism at its best involves hard-headed assessment of probable outcomes rather than wishful thinking or assumption that displays of power necessarily advance interests.

Potential Benefits Claimed or Anticipated

Removal of Hostile Regime: The operation removed a leader who had been explicitly hostile to the United States, has aligned with U.S. geopolitical rivals, has provided haven for adversarial intelligence services, and has used anti-American rhetoric to mobilize domestic support. A new government might prove more cooperative, more willing to address drug trafficking, more open to economic relations with the United States, and less likely to host Russian or Chinese military assets.

Opportunity for Democratic Transition: Venezuela under Chavez and Maduro has experienced severe democratic backsliding, with the legislature marginalized, the judiciary packed with loyalists, opposition leaders imprisoned or exiled, and elections manipulated. Maduro's removal created an opening for a possible democratic transition, though successful democratization would depend on many factors beyond simply removing the current leadership.

Demonstration Effect: Successfully capturing Maduro might demonstrate American resolve and capability, potentially deterring other leaders from challenging U.S. interests or aligning with U.S. rivals. The demonstration that even heads of state are not immune from American reach might influence calculations in other capitals.

Address Humanitarian Crisis: Venezuela's humanitarian situation could potentially improve under different leadership, reducing suffering for Venezuelan citizens and stemming the refugee flow that has destabilized neighbouring countries. While leadership change alone would not automatically resolve deep economic problems, it might enable policy reforms and international assistance that could begin addressing the crisis.

Disrupt Rival Power Activities: Removing Maduro would disrupt Russian, Chinese, and Iranian activities in Venezuela, potentially forcing them to withdraw advisors, lose access to Venezuelan resources and geography, and suffer reputational damage from failing to protect a partner. This could strengthen U.S. regional hegemony and weaken rival influence in the Western Hemisphere.

Costs, Risks and Unresolved Consequences

Military Risks and Casualties: Any operation to capture Maduro would involve military risks including potential American casualties, Venezuelan casualties including civilians, and risks of escalation if the operation goes wrong. While Venezuela's military capabilities are degraded, urban operations to capture a well-protected leader carry inherent dangers.

Stabilization and Occupation: Removing Maduro would raise immediate questions about what comes next. Would the United States install a new government? Support opposition forces? Supervise elections? Each option carries costs and risks. Failed states or power vacuums can generate insurgencies, criminal violence, refugee crises, and regional instability that exceed the problems they replaced. Iraq and Libya provide cautionary examples of regime removal followed by prolonged conflict and instability.

International Condemnation and Isolation: Most countries would likely condemn unilateral intervention to capture a foreign leader, including many U.S. allies. The Organization of American States, United Nations, and other international bodies would likely pass resolutions condemning the action. This could isolate the United States diplomatically, complicate cooperation on other issues, and damage American soft power and legitimacy globally.

Strengthening Anti-American Coalitions: Capturing Maduro could push Russia and China closer together in opposition to U.S. unilateralism and could attract other states concerned about American willingness to violate sovereignty. This might accelerate formation of counterbalancing coalitions and make various international endeavours from climate cooperation to trade to arms control more difficult.

Precedent for Other Powers: As discussed extensively above, the precedent could legitimize interventions by Russia, China, and regional powers in their respective spheres, potentially leading to cascading instability and erosion of norms against intervention that have contributed to international stability since 1945.

Domestic Political Division: Such action would likely generate significant domestic political controversy in the United States, potentially becoming a divisive issue that complicates domestic governance and consumes political capital that might be needed for other priorities. Questions about the costs, risks, legitimacy, and long-term strategy could dominate domestic political discourse.

Economic Costs: Military intervention, subsequent stabilization, and any reconstruction assistance could prove extremely costly, potentially totalling hundreds of billions of dollars over years or decades. Given other fiscal priorities and constraints, these costs could prove difficult to sustain and might generate domestic opposition.

Insurgency and Protracted Conflict: Venezuela has significant experience with guerrilla warfare and irregular conflict. Elements loyal to Maduro, Chavista ideology, Cuban advisors, or simply nationalists opposing foreign intervention might wage protracted insurgency against U.S. presence and any post-Maduro government the United States supports. Such conflicts can prove extremely costly, difficult to win

, and capable of generating sustained American casualties that erode public support.

Regional Instability: Intervention in Venezuela could destabilize the broader region by creating refugee flows, empowering criminal organizations in power vacuums, generating armed resistance that spills across borders, and encouraging other interventions or conflicts. Colombia, Brazil, and other neighbours might face spillover effects that threaten their stability.

3.13. Alternative Policy Options and Lessons

Following the capture, the central policy question is how to pursue security and political objectives without compounding the costs of unilateral force or undermining Venezuelan self-determination. Several policy options remain relevant to the post-capture setting.

Continued Economic Pressure and Sanctions

The United States has imposed extensive sanctions on Venezuela targeting its oil sector, regime leadership, and access to international finance. While sanctions have clearly contributed to Venezuela's economic crisis, they have not yet produced regime change or significant policy concessions. Nonetheless, continued economic pressure might eventually produce cracks within the regime, defections by key supporters, or political changes that improve the situation without requiring military intervention.

Support for Opposition and Civil Society

The United States could continue supporting Venezuelan opposition movements, civil society organizations, independent media, and democratic forces through diplomatic backing, financial assistance, and international advocacy. This approach respects Venezuelan agency and self-determination while supporting forces working for democratic change from within. Though progress may be slower than military intervention, internally-driven change is likely to prove more legitimate and sustainable.

Multilateral Diplomatic Pressure

Working through the Organization of American States, Lima Group, International Contact Group, and other multilateral frameworks, the United States could build international consensus for pressure on the Maduro regime while maintaining that any solution must come through Venezuelan-led processes. Multilateral approaches lack the decisiveness of unilateral action but carry greater legitimacy and are less likely to trigger adverse reactions.

Negotiated Transition

Various diplomatic initiatives have attempted to broker negotiated transitions in Venezuela, with limited success to date. However, continued negotiation backed by credible incentives and disincentives might eventually produce agreement on a transition process that allows Maduro and key supporters to leave power with guarantees for their safety and wealth in exchange for democratic elections and reforms. Such negotiated exits from power have worked in other contexts (Chile, South Africa, various Eastern European transitions) and might prove viable in Venezuela with sufficient patience and creative diplomacy.

Containment and Strategic Patience

The United States might adopt a containment approach recognising that Maduro has been removed from power but that the governing order and transition remain unsettled but working to limit the damage he can cause. This approach would involve containing Russian and Chinese influence where possible, working with regional partners to address refugee flows and humanitarian needs, maintaining sanctions to prevent complete normalization, and waiting for internal changes or new opportunities. Strategic patience accepts that not all problems have immediate solutions and that attempting to force solutions can create worse problems.

4. CONCLUSION

The question of whether "might is right" can justify the capture of Nicolás Maduro reveals the fundamental and enduring tension in international relations between power-based realism and principle-based approaches grounded in law, norms, and institutions. This tension has persisted throughout the history of international relations theory and shows no signs of resolution because it reflects genuine dilemmas inherent in organizing political life among separate sovereign communities lacking overarching government.

The Realist Case Reconsidered

Realist theories provide sophisticated frameworks for understanding and potentially justifying intervention based on national interest, systemic imperatives, and the logic of power politics. Classical realism's emphasis on interest defined as power, structural realism's focus on systemic constraints and opportunities, and offensive realism's power-maximization logic all offer perspectives from which capturing Maduro might appear justified or even necessary.

These theories rest on several key claims that warrant serious consideration: that international anarchy makes self-help necessary and creates profound uncertainty about other states' intentions; that states must pursue their interests in a competitive environment where failure can mean subjugation or extinction; that power ultimately determines outcomes regardless of legal or moral principles; that the United States has both the capability and historical precedent for intervention in its sphere of influence; and that great powers inevitably claim and enforce special privileges in their regions of primary security concern.

Moreover, realist perspectives offer a certain intellectual honesty in acknowledging power realities that more idealist approaches might obscure with legal formalism or moral rhetoric. The observation that powerful states do in fact intervene in weaker states when core interests are at stake and when the costs and risks appear acceptable has substantial empirical support across history and regions. Realism's apparent cynicism might better be understood as unwillingness to engage in comforting illusions about how international politics operates.

The Counter-Arguments Reconsidered

However, these realist arguments confront powerful objections from liberal, constructivist, English School, and critical perspectives that cannot be easily dismissed as naïve idealism or wish-thinking. These counter-arguments emphasize that international law and institutions provide real constraints and benefits even for powerful states; that norms of sovereignty and non-intervention serve long-term stability for all states including great powers; that the comprehensive costs of unilateral intervention often outweigh even substantial benefits; that precedents matter and accepting "might is right" creates a more dangerous world for all states; that identities and role conceptions constrain behaviour in ways that pure material interest does not capture; and that power-based analysis often obscures how international order actually works and whose interests prevailing arrangements serve.

The empirical record provides some support for these counter-arguments as well. The relative peacefulness of the post-1945 era compared to earlier periods, the near-complete elimination of territorial conquest as an acceptable form of state behaviour, the proliferation of independent states through decolonization and the breakup of empires, and the substantial cooperation on issues ranging from trade to health to environmental protection all suggest that international order rests on more than pure power and that norms and institutions matter for state behaviour in ways that pure realism struggles to explain.

Beyond "Might is Right" - The Possibility of Principled Realism

Perhaps the most sophisticated position transcends the simple dichotomy between "might is right" realism and idealist faith in law and morality. A principled realism would acknowledge power realities and the persistence of security competition while also recognizing that order requires some degree of restraint, that norms and institutions can serve even powerful states' interests, and that legitimacy and soft power matter alongside material capabilities.

From this perspective, the question is not whether the United States could capture Maduro, clearly it possesses the capability but whether doing so would serve its comprehensive long-term interests when all costs, risks, and second-order effects are considered. A truly realistic assessment might conclude that the short-term gains from removing Maduro would be outweighed by precedent-setting effects, alliance strains, legitimacy costs, stabilization requirements, and the general erosion of an international order that, despite its imperfections, has served American interests reasonably well.

The Normative Question Remains

Ultimately, "might is right" is not merely a descriptive statement about how international politics works but a normative claim about how it should work and what principles ought to govern relations among states. Even if we accept the realist observation that powerful states often behave as if might makes right, we need not concede that this is desirable, that it represents the only possible form of international order, or that it exhausts the considerations that should inform foreign policy decisions.

The case of Venezuela and Nicolás Maduro ultimately forces us to confront questions that have plagued political philosophy since Thucydides recorded the Melian Dialogue over two millennia ago: Can justice exist among unequals? Should power be constrained by principle? Is there any foundation for international order beyond the interests of the strong? Can weaker parties appeal to anything beyond the mercy of the powerful? These questions have no easy answers and perhaps no final answers, but wrestling with them seriously examining the strongest arguments from multiple perspectives remains essential for anyone seeking to understand or influence international politics.

The tension between power and principle, between interest and legitimacy, between capability and constraint, defines much of international relations both as scholarly discipline and as practical challenge. The case of Maduro’s capture illuminates this tension without resolving it, demonstrating that even when sophisticated theoretical frameworks are brought to bear, fundamental questions about the relationship between power and right in international affairs remain contested and perhaps ultimately irresolvable.

Final Reflection

In the final analysis, while realist theory provides powerful tools for understanding why a state might consider capturing a foreign leader, a comprehensive evaluation must weigh these considerations against legal, normative, practical, and long-term strategic factors that counsel restraint. The international order, however imperfect and however often violated in practice, provides benefits even to powerful states that would be jeopardized by a thoroughgoing embrace of "might is right" as an operating principle.

The proper relationship between power and principle in foreign policy remains one of the central questions of political theory and practice. Neither pure realism nor pure idealism provides adequate guidance; rather, wise statecraft requires navigating the tension

between them, pursuing interests while recognizing the value of legitimacy, exercising power while respecting the norms and institutions that make international cooperation possible, and acting decisively when necessary while showing restraint that preserves long-term relationships and systemic stability.

The post-capture situation in Venezuela presents genuine dilemmas where humanitarian concern, security interests, democratic values, legal principles, strategic calculations, and normative commitments all point in different directions. There are no easy answers, only difficult choices with uncertain outcomes and inevitable trade-offs. Thoughtful analysis can clarify the stakes and illuminate the implications of different choices, but it cannot eliminate the fundamental tension between power and principle that defines international relations or provide formulaic solutions to the complex problems that states confront in an anarchic international system.

The capture as an empirical test of "might is right"

The January 2026 operation demonstrates that a powerful state can translate material superiority into a rapid coercive outcome, but the subsequent legal challenges and political transition show that operational success is not equivalent to legal validation, legitimacy or a durable settlement. A complete assessment must therefore distinguish three questions: whether an operation is feasible, whether it is lawful, and whether its consequences advance a defensible political order. The case remains in motion, and allegations against Maduro remain allegations unless established through judicial process. Its long-term significance will depend not only on the prosecution but also on whether Venezuelans can exercise meaningful political self-determination and whether regional and international institutions can respond consistently to the use of force.

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