

U.S.–Venezuela Crisis of 2025: Stealth War and the Reconfiguration of Hemispheric Security

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1. Introduction – The Gray Zone as a Battlefield

The crisis between the United States and Venezuela in 2025 cannot be understood as the prelude to a conventional war between sovereign states, but rather as a paradigmatic episode of what contemporary doctrine has been calling **Hybrid Warfare**—although I personally prefer to describe it as **Stealth War**, for reasons already presented in previous works. In this type of conflict, actions do not unfold on the open field of classical battle, but within the spectrum of the so-called **Gray Zone**, a hybrid space where the boundaries between peace and war, legality and clandestinity, are deliberately blurred. It is an arena where controlled incidents, psychological operations, economic pressures, disinformation campaigns, and the selective use of force converge to produce strategic outcomes without the need for a formal declaration of war.

In this sense, recent events such as the naval attack against vessels linked to the transnational criminal group **Tren de Aragua**, or the overflights of **Venezuelan F-16 fighters** above the U.S. destroyer *USS Jason Dunham*, should not be interpreted as preparatory acts for an invasion, but as theatrical gestures. They are carefully staged demonstrations intended to feed narratives—both internal and external—designed to reinforce perceptions of legitimacy, project strength, and, above all, create selective *casus belli* that justify future actions. This theatricalization of war, which transforms limited incidents into instruments of cognitive manipulation, is a central feature of **21st-century asymmetric conflicts** and reveals how the battlefield has shifted from the physical terrain to the **informational and psychological domains**.

The present analysis is based on a methodological cross-check between highly reliable **open sources—diplomatic reports, official statements, specialized press information—and data from trustworthy human sources (HUMINT)**, which allow for a more precise assessment of the internal Venezuelan environment. This triangulation of information is indispensable because the very nature of Stealth War prevents direct and transparent observation of events: dissimulation, plausible deniability, and the masking of intentions are central elements of the strategy. Thus, understanding the crisis requires going beyond superficial signals and examining how Washington and Caracas mobilize unconventional instruments to shape perceptions, weaken institutions, and manipulate the pace of escalation.

The guiding hypothesis of this introduction is clear: the U.S.–Venezuela crisis constitutes a **regime change operation conducted by indirect means**, in which conventional military power plays a secondary role. The core of the dispute lies in the

United States' ability to exploit the political, economic, and psychosocial vulnerabilities of Nicolás Maduro's regime, pressing on its internal fissures until the system's eventual implosion, while at the same time maintaining hemispheric hegemony without resorting to prolonged occupation. The analysis of U.S. forces and Venezuela's structural deterioration will make it possible to understand how this strategy of controlled erosion is articulated, with effects that go beyond the national level and directly impact hemispheric security.

2. Venezuela – A Fortress Besieged from Within

Venezuela, at the center of this crisis, presents itself as a fortress besieged from within, whose structure of power is sustained by a narrow and deeply closed core. Nicolás Maduro, Cilia Flores, Diosdado Cabello, Vladimir Padrino López, and siblings Jorge and Delcy Rodríguez make up the ruling elite that controls the mechanisms of the state and concentrates the survival of the regime in their hands. This apparent cohesion, however, is permeated by latent internal fissures, the loss of social legitimacy, and the inability to project a national project beyond mere self-preservation. **Power is not sustained by consensus, but by coercion**, by the rotation of posts that prevents the formation of rival factions, by the manipulation of “anti-imperialist” narratives, and by the strategic support of Cuba, Russia, and Iran—external actors that provide consultancy, limited technology, and political backing, but who seemingly are not willing to intervene decisively in Caracas's favor.

From the political point of view, the regime is marked by corroded legitimacy, especially after the 2024 elections, widely contested by the international community and denounced as fraudulent by much of the internal opposition. Governance has turned into an exercise in kleptocracy, in which decisions are guided not by national development but by the perpetuation of the elite in power. **The United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) has become a clientelist machine of regime support**, while the state itself, captured, has lost the capacity to provide basic services, leaving a vacuum filled by organized crime and parallel structures of authority.

Economically, the contradiction is glaring. Despite holding the world's largest proven oil reserves, Venezuela is mired in a structural crisis that makes the full use of that wealth impossible. The collapse of **Petróleos de Venezuela S.A. (PDVSA)**, corroded by mismanagement and corruption, combined with international sanctions that restrict exports and access to capital, has drastically reduced productive capacity. The result is a criminalized economy, sustained largely by illegal gold and coltan mining and by narcotrafficking—sectors dominated by criminal networks that maintain ambiguous relations with elements of the regime itself. Sanctions imposed by Washington, such as the expiration of General Licenses 8 and 41B, have limited impact on the ruling elite but worsen the humanitarian crisis, deteriorating living

conditions and fueling a migratory exodus that has already surpassed seven million people.

In the military sphere, the **Bolivarian National Armed Force (FANB)** symbolizes the paradox of numerical abundance and operational impotence. Although it has considerable manpower, its structure is corroded by lack of maintenance, logistical precariousness, and low ammunition stocks. Most of its power is directed toward internal repression and social control, not external defense. Russian-made air defense systems such as the S-300, and its fleet of fighter jets—partly composed of F-16s dating back to the 1980s—are technologically obsolete and incapable of posing any real deterrence against U.S. superiority. The military hierarchy is controlled through a system of purchased loyalties, with privileges and positions distributed to neutralize potential dissent, but internal cohesion is increasingly artificial. Added to this is the **Bolivarian Militia**, officially presented as numbering in the millions, but in reality possessing only the vocation and capacity for internal ideological control of the population, with minimal possibilities of operational employment, except for very limited logistical support.

The psychosocial dimension reveals a regime that has replaced popular consent with propaganda and coercion. The state promotes a permanent narrative of imperialist siege, staging patriotic festivals and mobilizations around the Essequibo dispute in order to reinforce national identity in opposition to the United States and Guyana. Events such as the so-called “Essequibo Fest” are not authentic demonstrations of patriotism, but rather instruments of psychological manipulation, designed to produce artificial cohesion amid the breakdown of social trust. This strategy, however, has limited effect: it is incapable of halting the erosion of collective morale or stopping the continuous flow of emigration that drains the country’s human capital and undermines the foundations of its future survival.

Venezuela therefore presents itself as a state in which the five expressions of National Power—political, economic, psychosocial, military, and scientific-technological—are gravely compromised. Politically isolated, economically unviable, psychosocially demoralized, militarily weakened, and technologically dependent, Maduro’s regime is not an impregnable fortress, but a structure besieged by its own internal contradictions. This vulnerability constitutes precisely the space exploited by the U.S. **Strategy of Stealth War**, which identifies in these fissures the opportunity to conduct a gradual process of erosion until the eventual implosion of the system, without resorting to direct invasion or open confrontation.

3. United States – The Stealth War Strategy

The American stance toward the Venezuelan crisis reveals the consolidation of a method that has become characteristic of its conduct in the 21st century: the use of **Stealth War** as an instrument of power, replacing conventional invasions of high

political and human cost. Washington, instead of deploying large-scale military operations, opts for a multidimensional pressure campaign that combines the deterrent presence of conventional assets with the primacy of special operations, strategic intelligence, and instruments of economic and informational coercion. This arrangement allows the United States to preserve its hemispheric hegemony without exposing itself to the attrition that historically marked direct interventions, such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In this context, the movement of military assets in the Caribbean—including the presence of the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit, destroyers and attack submarines, along with the deployment of F-35 aircraft to Puerto Rico—should not be interpreted as preparations for an invasion of Caracas, but as a controlled demonstration of capability. These assets serve a dual function: externally, they deter any Venezuelan military adventure against Guyana, particularly regarding the Essequibo dispute; internally, they project to the international community and to Venezuelans themselves the image that Maduro's regime faces an existential threat beyond its capacity to confront. It is a carefully calculated military choreography, in which the mere physical presence of U.S. forces generates the psychological effect of paralyzing adversary initiative, reaffirming the logic of superiority without engaging in direct combat.

However, **the true center of gravity of U.S. strategy does not lie in conventional means, but in the employment of its instruments of Stealth War**, particularly Special Operations Forces (SOF). These units, highly trained and integrated with intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems, are the principal tool for carrying out selective, surgical, and covert actions. Washington maintains the option of launching limited incursions against high-value targets—from command-and-control centers to political and military leadership—within a logic of “decapitation strikes” capable of triggering internal shocks and accelerating the regime's disintegration. Even more relevant is the ability of SOF and Intelligence to act as catalysts of fissures, identifying dissent within the FANB, offering possible clandestine training to rival forces, or even supporting internal armed opposition movements. The multiplying potential of these forces, when combined with information warfare and diplomatic pressure, transforms small dissident groups into strategic instruments of high impact—precisely what characterizes the essence of Stealth War.

The informational and psychological dimension of this strategy deserves particular attention. **Information Operations (InfoOps) and Psychological Operations (PsyOps)** are used to reinforce the perception that the regime is fragile, illegitimate, and doomed to collapse. Reports of desertions, internal disputes, and crises within the chain of command are amplified by coordinated communication channels, while narratives highlighting corruption and the criminalization of the Venezuelan state circulate as political ammunition intended to corrode already weakened social trust. At the same time, targeted messaging directed at FANB

personnel seeks to encourage disobedience and break loyalty, fostering an invisible war in the minds of key actors. The battle, in this sense, shifts from the physical to the cognitive domain, in full alignment with hybrid warfare theory and with the established practice of U.S. forces in irregular combat.

Another central element of U.S. strategy is the exploitation of **internal fissures within the Venezuelan regime**. Washington does not need to provoke an open war to achieve its objectives; it suffices to accelerate the processes of implosion already underway. American intelligence, fed by open sources and HUMINT, focuses on monitoring the regime's vital signs—desertions, purges, disputes among generals, resistance within the PSUV's core—and turning them into levers of pressure. This monitoring allows for the calibration of sanctions, the adjustment of information campaigns, and, when necessary, the offering of discreet channels of negotiation or co-optation. The logic is simple: weaken cohesion until the structure collapses from within, reducing the political cost of any external intervention.

Finally, U.S. strategy also reflects a broader movement to preserve its hemispheric hegemony. Venezuela's collapse is not only the fall of a hostile regime but a strategic warning that no extra-regional power—whether Russia, China, or Iran—will be allowed to consolidate influence in the American “strategic backyard.” Pressure on Caracas thus serves as a message reaffirming the Monroe Doctrine in a contemporary version, updated through the language of Stealth War and the primacy of Special Operations. The message is clear: South America remains under the United States' security sphere, and any attempt at hostile infiltration will be contained through asymmetric, covert, and low-cost means.

Thus, the analysis of the American stance shows that the United States does not seek an open war against Venezuela but rather a strategic victory in the Gray Zone. Its campaign is designed to gradually undermine the Maduro regime's capacity for resistance, combining deterrent military presence, advanced intelligence, special operations, and informational action. It is a long-term strategy which, while preserving Washington's international image, guarantees the reconfiguration of hemispheric security in a manner that is almost imperceptible, yet no less decisive.

Although U.S. strategy reveals coherence in the employment of Stealth War, it is impossible to ignore the factor of unpredictability associated with President Donald Trump. His leadership style in foreign policy is marked by a pattern of tough, confrontational negotiation, with little inclination toward traditional mediation. He often dispenses with the technical advice of International Relations and Defense specialists, preferring instead to rely on instinct, vanity, and the immediate calculation of domestic political gains. This posture reinforces his image as a relentless negotiator but, at the same time, broadens the margin for abrupt and high-risk decisions taken without the necessary “strategic patience” that has traditionally characterized U.S. diplomacy. This combination makes the course of the crisis particularly sensitive to personal impulses,

creating the possibility of sudden shifts that may destabilize the planned logic of containment.

In this context, the role of Marco Rubio, senator from Florida and an influential advisor in shaping foreign policy toward Venezuela, also gains prominence. His strong ties with the Latin-Caribbean community provide additional political legitimacy to the issue, reinforcing its centrality on Washington's agenda. The convergence between Trump's unpredictability and Rubio's ability to place Venezuela at the forefront of U.S. foreign policy makes the scenario even more unstable and subject to unpredictable oscillations.

4. Hemispheric and International Context – Isolation, Containment, and Projection of Power

The crisis between the United States and Venezuela, although centered in Caracas and Washington, projects effects far beyond national borders and must be understood within a hemispheric and international context marked by diplomatic isolation, regional containment, and disputes over power projection. In South America, Nicolás Maduro's regime finds itself increasingly isolated, having lost the ability to mobilize consistent regional alliances and reduced its negotiating space to inflammatory rhetoric that serves more for domestic consumption than for building external partnerships. Traditional mediators in the subcontinent, such as Brazil and Colombia, still attempt to offer diplomatic channels to prevent escalation, but their influence over Caracas is limited by the regime's lack of trust, which views them more as indirect instruments of U.S. pressure than as legitimate interlocutors. This vacuum of effective mediation reinforces the sense of siege that the Venezuelan regime cultivates in its narrative, while simultaneously restricting its political room for maneuver.

On the international level, the United Nations faces serious limitations in acting effectively. Restricted to humanitarian operations, the UN avoids more forceful political measures for fear of being expelled from Venezuelan territory, as has occurred in other authoritarian regimes. The Security Council remains paralyzed by the divergence between the United States, Russia, and China, which mutually block any initiative beyond protocol statements. This scenario of institutional inertia favors the perpetuation of the crisis and gives Washington the opportunity to shape events without the constraint of effective multilateral oversight.

Russia and China, in turn, maintain rhetorical support for the Maduro regime, but their practical involvement does not go beyond limited technical cooperation, arms sales, and diplomatic defense in multilateral forums. Moscow, bogged down in the protracted conflict in Ukraine, lacks the military or economic resources to sustain a significant presence in the Western Hemisphere. Beijing, though it has relevant economic interests in Latin America, adopts a cautious and pragmatic stance: it avoids

direct confrontation with the United States in its own strategic backyard and prefers to concentrate its bets on long-term investments, particularly in infrastructure and energy. Thus, both Russia and China function more as rhetorical shields for Caracas than as real guarantees of defense in the event of military escalation.

Within this game board, the Essequibo issue plays a symbolic role more than an operational one. The Venezuelan claim over the territory in dispute with Guyana is mobilized as a nationalist banner to consolidate Maduro's narrative against an external enemy and to justify internal military and social mobilization. However, any attempt at an effective offensive over Essequibo is doomed to failure due to the FANB's absolute logistical incapacity and the certainty of an immediate U.S. response. The threat against Guianese territory therefore serves more as a tool of propaganda and psychosocial manipulation than as a concrete military objective, reaffirming the logic of narrative warfare upon which the regime relies.

The humanitarian effects of the crisis, however, go beyond rhetoric and pose a real risk to hemispheric stability. The Venezuelan exodus, which has already surpassed seven million people, is likely to intensify with any worsening of the political or economic situation, straining the fragile borders of Colombia, Brazil, and the Caribbean states. This humanitarian dimension has a dual effect: on the one hand, it deepens social instability and pressure on public services in host countries; on the other, it amplifies the international perception of collapse, reinforcing Washington's argument that the continuity of the Maduro regime represents not only an internal threat but also a problem of regional and international security.

Thus, the hemispheric and international context of the crisis strengthens the strategic position of the United States and drastically restricts Caracas's options. The absence of effective mediators, the paralysis of the UN, the rhetorical but limited support of Russia and China, the symbolic instrumentalization of the Essequibo, and the growing pressure of the diaspora converge to isolate Venezuela and legitimize the U.S. narrative that regime change is not only inevitable but necessary. The result is the consolidation of a scenario in which the Bolivarian regime resists increasingly encircled, without effective allies, without counterattack capacity, and dependent on rhetoric that no longer finds sufficient resonance to reverse the logic of its internal and international erosion.

In summary, the picture is as follows:

- **South America**, with Brazil and Colombia prioritizing migration management and border defense while CARICOM seeks neutrality;
- **the UN**, limited to humanitarian assistance and incapable of political mediation;
- **Extra-hemispheric actors**, Russia and China, offering rhetorical and technological support but refraining from military intervention;

- **Essequibo**, serving only as a useful nationalist banner for the regime but logistically unfeasible as a Venezuelan offensive, since any attack would be quickly neutralized by the United States; and finally,
- **The humanitarian effect**, with the risk of intensifying the diaspora—already exceeding seven million—pressuring neighboring countries and threatening regional stability.

5. Prospective Scenarios – Containment, Escalation, and Decompression

A prospective reading of the crisis between the United States and Venezuela reveals a horizon of possibilities that cannot be understood solely through the binary logic of war or peace, but rather as a continuum of tensions modulated by Washington's capacity to calibrate pressure and by Caracas's limited ability to resist.

1) Most Likely Scenario – Containment and Narrative Theater (55%)

- **In the short term**, symbolic gestures replace direct military action, while the United States maintains active deterrence.
- **In the medium term**, calibrated sanctions and internal repression consolidate the stalemate, resulting in prolonged stagnation and worsening humanitarian conditions.

The most likely outcome, supported by open sources and confirmed by impressions gathered from human sources, is prolonged containment, in which theatrical gestures, military exercises, and fiery rhetoric substitute for direct confrontation. In this framework, both sides keep tensions under controlled levels: Venezuela insists on its narrative of "imperialist siege" and uses the Essequibo dispute as a symbolic banner to mobilize internal support, while the United States maintains its posture of active deterrence, making it clear that any Venezuelan military adventure would be met with an immediate and devastating response. The result of this containment is not resolution of the conflict but its perpetuation in a latent state, accompanied by the worsening of the humanitarian crisis and the acceleration of the migratory exodus.

2) High-Impact Scenario – Lethal Incident and Decapitation (20%)

- **In the short term**, a tactical incident (e.g., the downing of an aircraft) provides a *casus belli* for U.S. SOF to launch surgical incursions against regime leadership
- **In the medium term**, expanded blockades and greater Venezuelan dependence on Russia and Iran would ensue, along with a high risk of spillover into Colombia and Guyana.

Although less likely, a sudden escalation cannot be ruled out, triggered by a lethal incident that acts as a catalyst for a U.S. surgical response. The downing of an aircraft, the death of soldiers in combat, or an unauthorized attack in the Caribbean could provide Washington with the necessary justification to execute decapitation operations targeting Caracas's political and military leadership. This scenario, while less probable, would be of extremely high impact. U.S. Special Operations Forces, supported by conventional assets on standby, would carry out selective strikes aimed at neutralizing command centers and imposing decisive paralysis on the regime. The Venezuelan reaction, predictably limited, would consist of reinforcing rhetorical ties with Moscow and Tehran, but it would not alter the course of the offensive, serving only to deepen the country's isolation. Such a limited escalation, though brief in duration, would greatly increase the risks of spillover into Colombia and Guyana, raising the level of regional instability and further straining humanitarian response mechanisms.

3) Tactical Relief Scenario – Decompression through Concessions (25%)

- **In the short term**, discreet agreements permit extensions of economic licenses (gas, oil).
- **In the medium term**, verifiable concessions in narcotics control and human rights result in partial sanction relief, without regime change.

At the same time, a path remains open for tactical decompression, the outcome of discreet negotiations and selective concessions. In this scenario, Maduro would seek to buy time and ease external pressure through targeted agreements, such as extending licenses for gas and oil exports or making minimal commitments in the area of narcotics control. This strategy would not imply any structural change in the regime but rather partial relief that would allow for its political survival. For the United States, maintaining a weakened but still functional adversary could be advantageous in the short term, avoiding the costs of direct intervention and ensuring that Caracas continues to operate under close surveillance. It is a temporary way out, one that does not solve the crisis but may delay its explosion, especially due to international pressures and concerns over the collateral effects of an abrupt collapse.

The analysis of these possibilities demonstrates that the crisis does not unfold along straight lines but in winding curves fed by the very logic of Stealth War. Prolonged containment ensures the continuity of the strategic narrative, controlled escalation offers the opportunity for a surgical victory, and partial decompression maintains the pressure game without entirely breaking with the adversary. In any of the scenarios, however, Venezuela appears not as an active subject capable of determining its destiny, but as an object of geopolitical dispute, trapped between its own internal fragility and the U.S. hegemonic capacity to define the terms of the crisis. What is at stake, therefore, is not merely the future of a regime but the reaffirmation of the logic of power in the hemisphere, where the hegemony of the United States is

constantly reiterated through the selective and covert application of its instruments of force.

6. Conclusion – Hegemony Reaffirmed in the Gray Zone

The 2025 crisis between the United States and Venezuela confirms that **the logic of the Stealth War** has become the preferred instrument of great powers in the pursuit of their strategic interests. There is, in this context, no room to imagine a prolonged conventional war involving territorial invasion or massive troop occupation, as occurred in Iraq in 2003 or Afghanistan in 2001. What we observe instead is a process of calculated erosion, in which the United States employs a combination of special military means, economic pressure, information warfare, and the exploitation of internal fissures to progressively weaken Maduro's regime until its sustainability becomes untenable. This mode of operation, which shifts the center of war from the physical battlefield to the cognitive and social space, has the merit of reducing political and human costs while preserving Washington's international image as the defender of hemispheric stability.

Venezuela, in turn, appears as a state besieged by its own contradictions. Politically isolated, economically unviable, psychosocially demoralized, and militarily incapable, the Maduro regime lacks the necessary conditions to withstand long-term combined pressure. Its reliance on patriotic propaganda, anti-imperialist rhetoric, and symbolic mobilization around Essequibo is revealed more as a tool for immediate survival than as an effective national defense strategy. Even if it manages to delay collapse, the regime is increasingly dependent on external actors such as Russia, China, and Iran—actors that lack either the willingness or the capacity to intervene decisively on its behalf.

The impact of this crisis, however, transcends Venezuela's borders. The massive exodus, which has already made the Venezuelan diaspora one of the largest in the world, puts pressure on neighboring countries and highlights the fragility of regional structures in dealing with humanitarian emergencies. Brazil, Colombia, and the Caribbean are directly affected, compelled to devise responses not only in terms of assistance but also in terms of security, given the risks of infiltration by organized crime and transnational violence. South America, which historically perceived itself as distant from the great global geopolitical confrontations, reveals its vulnerability to external dynamics and its inability to offer effective mechanisms of mediation and containment on its own.

From a geopolitical standpoint, the crisis reaffirms the centrality of U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere. Washington demonstrates that even in the face of China's global rise and Russia's revisionism, its immediate strategic environment remains under its control and will be defended by all instruments of power, even if furtive and indirect. The message is unequivocal: there is no space for

hostile regimes or extra-regional powers in the Caribbean and South America. Venezuela thus becomes not merely a case of internal crisis but an example of how the United States reasserts its role as the ultimate arbiter of hemispheric security, applying its coercive means selectively to shape outcomes without the wear and tear of total war.

The unavoidable conclusion, therefore, is that the immediate future of the crisis will not be decided on a conventional battlefield, but in the domains of information, psychology, and domestic politics. The fate of the Maduro regime will depend less on its capacity to mobilize the FANB or resist external military pressure, and more on its ability to survive economic siege, social fragmentation, and internal fissures stimulated by a long-range U.S. strategy. For neighboring states—particularly Brazil—the challenge lies in preparing for the inevitable collateral effects: migratory flows, border instability, and humanitarian pressures, as well as assuming a more active role in building regional mechanisms to prevent the subcontinent from remaining a passive arena in the competition between great powers.

Thus, the U.S.–Venezuela crisis is less about Caracas itself and more about the reaffirmation of the hemispheric order. It is the demonstration that war in the 21st century is waged far more through the manipulation of narratives, selective pressure, and the invisible action of special forces and private military companies than through open clashes of armies. In this invisible field, victory is not measured by the conquest of territory but by the ability to shape perceptions, weaken regimes, and impose hegemony. Venezuela is merely the latest stage for a play that, in truth, enacts **the reaffirmation of the United States as the uncontested power in the Gray Zone of the Western Hemisphere.**

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