

SWP Comment

NO. 16 APRIL 2026

Autocracies under US Tutelage

Venezuela, Cuba and the Interests of the Trump Administration

Claudia Zilla

US imperial policy towards Latin America and the Caribbean is characterised by a combination of dominance ambitions and exclusivity claims. Through drastic coercive measures, Washington is forcing an economic transformation in Venezuela without paving the way for a political transition. At the same time, it is imposing a fuel blockade on Cuba and threatening to take over that country. Above all, Germany and the EU should support civil society in Venezuela and Cuba. Furthermore, they should unequivocally acknowledge the already existing violations of international law and adopt a firm stance against the normalisation of violence and disregard for human rights.

On 3 January 2026, as part of the military operation “Absolute Resolve”, the US government under Donald Trump abducted Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, in Caracas. Around 100 people were killed during the operation; they included members of the Venezuelan security apparatus – among them, 32 Cuban military personnel – and civilians. There were no US fatalities. At the White House press conference on the same day, US President Donald Trump announced: “We are going to run [Venezuela] until such time as we can do a safe, proper, and judicious transition.”

Now Trump is directing his imperial ambitions towards Cuba as well. On 16 March 2026 he stated that he could simply “take” the country and do what he wants with it. Since January 2026, Washington has blocked Venezuelan oil exports to Cuba, which previously sourced around 70 per

cent of its oil imports from Venezuela and paid for them by seconding military and civil personnel. In his executive order of 29 January 2026, Trump imposed tariffs on states transporting oil to Cuba. Before the arrival of a Russian oil tanker at the end of March, the country had, in effect, been under a total blockade. As a result, the economic and humanitarian situation in Cuba has deteriorated dramatically owing to the country’s heavy dependence on oil imports. Meanwhile, both Trump and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio have called for a change at the top of the political leadership in Cuba, as has already taken place in Venezuela.

Legal experts in the US, Germany and the United Nations are largely agreed that the recent actions of the United States against Venezuela and Cuba are in violation of international law.



The background to US actions against Venezuela and Cuba

The above-mentioned actions, together with the threat of further coercive measures against Venezuela and Cuba, are part of the Trump administration's repertoire of force against Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). That repertoire goes beyond punitive tariffs and deportations to encompass the US military presence in the Caribbean since 2025, the continued practice of sinking boats allegedly transporting drugs in the Atlantic and Pacific, and the targeted killing of the occupants of those vessels. These aggressive practices are enshrined in both the White House's National Security Strategy (NSS) of November 2025 and the US Department of War's National Defense Strategy (NDS) of January 2026.

The 2025 NSS criticises the historical claim of the United States to global dominance, describing it as "overstretch". Now the aim is to achieve regional dominance in the Western Hemisphere through the reactivation of the Monroe Doctrine. There are four sub-objectives to that goal. First, the American continent must remain stable and well governed in order to prevent mass migration to the US. Second, regional governments are to cooperate with the US in combatting drug trafficking and organised crime. Third, the Western Hemisphere must be free from both foreign interference and foreign investment in key areas. Fourth, US access to strategic resources must be secured. To these ends, the US intends to increase its military presence on the continent. Targeted military operations and the use of lethal force are deemed necessary. This reasoning defines the "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine.

The 2026 NDS similarly advocates a focused approach — one that, without being isolationist, replaces what is seen as the misguided policy of the past. As the strategy makes clear, the old policy was based on "cloud-castle abstractions like the rules-based international order" while neglecting the "warfighters' warrior ethos" as well as the military's core role and allowing itself to be

distracted by interventions, wars, "regime-change" and "nation-building" projects.

The defence strategy is summarised by the motto "Peace through Strength". The Western Hemisphere is of paramount importance — not least for homeland security — because the US government regards its national interests as being threatened by developments across the entire continent. The areas "homeland" and "hemisphere" are dealt with in the same chapter, suggesting that the two are seen as closely linked as regards security policy. Specifically, defence involves tightening border controls to prevent illegal immigration and drug trafficking, restoring US dominance in the Western Hemisphere and securing access to strategically important areas such as the Panama Canal, the "Gulf of America" and Greenland — all in accordance with the updated Monroe Doctrine.

The priorities of the 2025 NSS and the 2026 NDS are reflected in the agenda of the Shield of the Americas, the inaugural summit of which took place on 7 March 2026 in Doral, Florida. So far, this US initiative for military cooperation has brought together 12 LAC states that have governments ranging from conservative to far-right. The US State Department describes the group as a coalition of "like-minded allies" that "will work together to advance strategies that stop foreign interference in our hemisphere, criminal and narco-terrorist gangs and cartels, and illegal and mass immigration". Kristi Noem has been appointed special envoy for the Shield of the Americas.

Venezuela and the US as guardian

The Trump administration justified the military operation in Venezuela on the grounds of enforcing US national law as both Maduro and Flores were considered fugitives from US justice. According to the indictment against them, they and four other Venezuelans face charges of drug-related terrorism and trafficking, as well as possession of machineguns and other destructive devices. They have been detained in New York since

their abduction, where they are to stand trial. The US government does not recognise Maduro as the legitimate head of state. He is accused of oppressing the Venezuelan people and endangering the security of the US and its citizens.

Secretary of State Rubio has outlined a three-phase plan for Venezuela: (1) stabilisation; (2) recovery, opening up and reconciliation; and (3) transition. What is not clear from remarks made by US officials is whether the final phase refers to democratisation. In any case, elections are being postponed indefinitely while the stabilisation phase under US control is taking precedence. The US government does not envisage any significant role in Venezuela's liberalisation for María Corina Machado, leader of the opposition alliance Democratic Unitary Platform and winner of the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize. Even during her visit in January 2026, when she presented Trump with her Nobel Peace Prize medal, she was unable to persuade him to publicly pledge his support for her.

The Trump administration's preferred interlocutor is Delcy Rodríguez, who moved from the vice-presidency to the presidency following Maduro's abduction. Washington has made clear that it expects Venezuela's political leadership to cooperate. Whether it is doing so will be judged "by actions, not words"; and, if necessary, force could be used once again to ensure alignment. Venezuela's autocratic regime has come under enormous pressure from this repeated warning. But at the same time, it has been given leeway to maintain its anti-imperialist, revolutionary rhetoric.

Following the military operation, the US seized Venezuelan tankers and took over the marketing of Venezuelan crude oil and petroleum products – initially, for an indefinite period. Furthermore, Venezuela was required to procure goods and services from the US. At first, all proceeds from oil sales were transferred to bank accounts in Qatar; however, at the end of February, the US secretary of energy announced that accounts controlled directly by the US Treasury Department would henceforth be

used for that purpose. Currently, there is no transparency about where those revenues are being held or the conditions under which they are being transferred to the government in Caracas. In January, Secretary of State Rubio stated that – with immediate effect – the Venezuelan government must seek the approval of the US for its monthly budgets.

Established by the executive order of 9 January 2026, this transfer mechanism is intended, among other things, to prevent courts or creditors from seizing payments. Venezuela currently owes international bondholders, oil companies and others a total of more than US\$170 billion. That debt is deterring US firms from investing in the reconstruction of Venezuela's struggling oil infrastructure. Nevertheless, the US has granted licences to oil and gas companies to invest in Venezuela's energy sector and export Venezuelan gold. At the same time, there has been a selective easing of sanctions against Caracas.

US officials are making frequent high-level visits to Venezuela and, where appropriate, granting rewards in order to bolster the demands it is making of that country. For example, John Ratcliffe, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), met with Delcy Rodríguez in Caracas on 15 January. Two weeks later, on 31 January, Laura F. Dogu, the newly appointed US chargé d'affaires for Venezuela, travelled to the country's capital to prepare for the reopening of the embassy. On 11 February US Secretary of Energy Chris Wright paid a visit. On 18 February General Francis L. Donovan, commander of US Southern Command, arrived in Venezuela accompanied by Joseph M. Humire, assistant secretary for homeland defence and the Americas. On 4 March Doug Burgum, the secretary of the US Department of the Interior and chair of the National Energy Dominance Council, landed in Caracas; the following day, the two countries announced the resumption of diplomatic and consular relations. Shortly thereafter, an official US government document (dated 10 March) recognised Delcy Rodríguez as the legitimate Venezuelan head of state with effect from 3 January. Also in

March, a delegation of US investors and businessmen was received in Caracas. The US Embassy to Venezuela was officially reopened on 30 March, having been closed for some seven years. On 1 April the Office of Foreign Assets Control removed Delcy Rodríguez from the US sanctions list.

There is no mistaking that US policy towards Venezuela is having an impact: an economic transformation is taking place in that country without the way being paved for a political transition. The Chavista propaganda remains as background music – this is evidenced by, among other things, the establishment of a “High-Level Commission for the Release of Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores”. What is new, however, is the government’s reporting smooth and productive cooperation with the US.

Personnel changes in the armed forces and the cabinet

Delcy Rodríguez was sworn in as the country’s acting president (*presidenta encarcada*) on 5 January. Her inauguration followed a ruling by the Supreme Court (TSJ) on 3 January that had declared the events of that day to constitute an extraordinary and atypical situation of force majeure not covered by the relevant constitutional articles on the absence of the president. Rodríguez was mandated to assume and exercise all the powers, duties and responsibilities associated with the office of the president in order to ensure the continuity of government and the comprehensive defence of the nation. However, the ruling included no provisions either on the term of office of the acting president or on new elections.

As acting president, Rodríguez has implemented organisational reforms within the cabinet as well as made changes to civilian and military personnel. In doing so, she has sought to appoint loyal figures. In March, besides replacing the heads of several ministries, she dismissed the entire military leadership, including the minister of defence and the commanders of both the armed forces and the country’s eight Strategic Regions of Integral Defence. In Venezuela,

the armed forces support the regime and control not only the security apparatus but also many economic sectors.

Alongside Delcy Rodríguez, there are three individuals who occupy key leadership positions. They include her brother, Jorge Rodríguez, who was re-elected president of the National Assembly on 5 January and is a member of the ruling Chavista party (PSUV). Diosdado Cabello, a retired army captain, is the minister of the interior and secretary-general of the PSUV. A political ally of former President Hugo Chávez, Cabello has headed several ministries since 2001. Regarded as a hardliner, he is among those named in the US indictment. Colonel-General Vladimir Padrino López served as minister of defence from 2014 to 2026. On 18 March he was replaced by Gustavo González López, a fellow military officer who had formerly been in charge of the domestic intelligence service (SEBIN) and against whom the EU imposed sanctions for human rights violations. On 7 January González López was appointed commander of the Presidential Guard and head of the General Directorate for Military Counter-Intelligence (DGCIM), a central body of the country’s repressive apparatus.

Externally driven regulatory policy

During its first three months in power, the Rodríguez government initiated a package of regulatory laws aimed at opening up the economy and improving the conditions for foreign investment. Under the new legislation, private companies will be allowed to lead joint projects with the state, special levies and taxes will be lowered or abolished, and independent arbitration mechanisms for dispute resolution will be introduced. These are all measures that the US has demanded in exchange for the easing of sanctions, with a view to facilitating greater and more direct participation by US capital, particularly in the oil and mining sectors, and increasing contract certainty. For her part, however, Delcy Rodríguez presents the new measures as a reaffirmation of Venezuelan sovereignty over national resources.

Thanks to their rapid processing by the National Assembly, the reforms are making swift progress. The new legislature was reconstituted on 5 January 2026 in the wake of the parliamentary elections of May 2025, which were deemed unfair by the opposition. The ruling coalition controls around 90 per cent of the 285 seats.

On 29 January, less than four weeks after the military operation “Absolute Resolve”, the reform of the hydrocarbons law was approved. Venezuela possesses the world’s largest proven oil reserves, with a share of around 17 per cent, the bulk of which is located in the Orinoco Belt. Most of those reserves are extra-heavy crude oil, which requires special processing. Currently, output is less than half what it was in the 1990s. On 9 March the National Assembly adopted the reform of the mining law. Since then, there has been rapid progress on pushing through the 127 articles of the new law, each of which must be dealt with separately. Venezuela is also rich in other mineral resources, such as gold, diamonds, bauxite and coltan, which are concentrated in a region known as the Mining Arc. Environmental organisations criticise the damage to the environment caused by mining operations and the presence of armed groups in this area.

Easing of repression

Overall, there has been a slight easing of repression, although the new measures affecting civil and political freedoms are contradictory. For example, the National Telecommunications Commission (Conatel) closed four independent radio stations on 3 January but independent media outlets have been granted access to the parliament and the presidential palace once again, after a long period of being excluded. And while the demotion from prosecutor-general to ombudsman of Tarek William Saab, a key figure in the repressive judiciary, was viewed positively, the “Programme for Democratic Coexistence and Peace”, launched in January, is considered neither representative nor participatory.

The first release of political prisoners took place on 8 January, with more following in subsequent months. On 30 January the acting president announced the enactment of an amnesty law and the closure of the infamous “El Helicoide” torture prison and its conversion into a community, cultural and sports centre. Following a public consultation process involving civil society organisations, the “Amnesty Law for Democratic Coexistence” was passed on 19 February. The law covers 13 separate events that took place in Venezuela over the past quarter of a century. Four types of particularly serious crime are excluded.

Experts point out that, among other things, many of the cases to which the new amnesty law applies do not strictly constitute criminal behaviour. Anyone filling for amnesty under its provisions is, at the very least, indirectly admitting guilt, whereas, in fact, the state should be acknowledging that its actions were repressive. Furthermore, the amnesty law contains contradictory information regarding the period covered and offers applicants dubious guarantees. Human rights organisations criticise the lack of transparency and clarity of the legal criteria stipulated in the official policy for the release of political prisoners. At the same time, they complain that arbitrary arrests, intimidation campaigns and defamatory acts against civil society organisations are still taking place, albeit to a lesser extent.

According to a report by the Venezuelan human rights organisation Foro Penal, more than 573 political prisoners were being held in detention on 24 February 2026. Since 8 January, there have been a total of 436 confirmed releases of political prisoners; however, many of those released continue to suffer from the effects of torture, face restrictions on their freedom or have not yet regained their full rights.

No political transition – yet

The current agreement between the Venezuelan leadership and the US appears to be based on the following formula: “Remain in

power without holding any power; concur with the involvement of the US in the economy but not with the involvement of the opposition in politics.”

In the wake of Maduro’s abduction and the subsequent easing of repression and release of political prisoners, the political forces of the opposition are attempting to reorganise. However, many of their leaders remain in prison, while others, like Machado, are in exile. Returning to Venezuela continues to be dangerous. The opposition’s top priority is to secure the release of all political prisoners, establish the legal conditions for democratic elections, ensure that those elections take place and guarantee the subsequent transition to democracy. But owing to the US intervention, the opposition now has to negotiate on two fronts: once a potential source of external support, the US is now a direct internal power factor that may not be on its side.

The Venezuelan population associates the new role of the US with a certain improvement in both the current political situation and economic prospects in general. In a survey carried out in February 2026, 34.7 per cent of respondents rated Delcy Rodríguez’s government as mediocre, while 33.5 per cent rated it as poor or very poor. Nevertheless, 77.5 per cent of participants expected the economic situation of their family or Venezuela to improve over the next six months. More than half (52.1 per cent) perceived a liberalisation in the sense of increasing civil liberties, while 62.4 per cent viewed the greater influence of the US on Venezuelan politics as positive. Among the 12 leading figures from the Venezuelan government, the opposition and the US government who were named in the survey, the highest ratings went to Marco Rubio (57 per cent), María Corina Machado (56 per cent), Donald Trump (53 per cent), Edmundo González Urrutia (51 per cent) and Delcy Rodríguez (29 per cent). Meanwhile, against the backdrop of waning repression and increasing cooperation with the US, voices on the streets are growing louder. On 12 March, for example, trade unions in various cities organised protests

over wages, at a time when new oil agreements were being negotiated with Washington.

Cuba in the shadow of the US

Right at the start of his second term in office, Trump reversed the relaxation of restrictions on travel to, and financial transactions with, Cuba that had been introduced by President Joe Biden. He also redesignated the Caribbean island as a state sponsor of terrorism. Following the military operation in Venezuela, Washington imposed a massive blockade against Cuba that went well beyond the historical trade embargo. From then until 30 March, when a Russian oil tanker arrived in Cuba, the country received no oil supplies from abroad. Since the domestic transport system and supply of electricity are dependent on oil, the situation has become critical on the island. There have been repeated nationwide blackouts with life-threatening consequences. Moreover, humanitarian aid is unable to reach the country. And amid the suspension of flights and the threats emanating from the US, tourism — a major source of income for Cuba — is collapsing.

While Donald Trump has spoken of a “friendly takeover” of Cuba and described developments in Venezuela as a “perfect scenario”, Francis L. Donovan, commander of US Southern Command, has denied the existence of a military invasion plan. The Trump administration has accused the Cuban leadership of crimes such as drug trafficking, promoting illegal migration and supporting terrorist groups abroad and holds it responsible for the oppression of its own people. Though not spelled out publicly by US government officials, it is clear that the United States is attempting to force political and economic changes in Cuba. Meanwhile, Washington and Havana have confirmed that they are holding talks, although the content of those discussions remains unknown.

Havana's family-based power core

Similar to the situation in Venezuela, the resignation or “removal” of President Díaz-Canel would have little impact on the main pillars of the Cuban regime. It is the 94-year-old Raúl Castro and his inner circle of family members and close associates who control the security apparatus and the military-run business conglomerate GAESA. This gives them significant influence over foreign-exchange trading, ports, luxury hotels, restaurants and supermarkets, among other things.

The power core of the Cuban regime is smaller and more cohesive than that of Venezuela. Furthermore, politics and the military are more closely intertwined in Cuba, with the Castro family playing a leading role. It is reported that Raúl Guillermo Rodríguez Castro, grandson of Raúl Castro, is participating in the talks with the US. His father was General Luis Alberto Rodríguez López-Calleja, who headed the GAESA network until his death in 2022.

So far, there have been few developments in Havana. On 12 March the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced the imminent release of 51 political prisoners – a decision that was presented as a sovereign measure taken within the framework of agreements with the Vatican. On 16 March Deputy Prime Minister Óscar Pérez-Oliva Fraga, great-nephew of Fidel and Raúl Castro, introduced a package of measures designed to strengthen the financial position of Cubans living abroad. For the first time since the revolution, such individuals will be allowed to own private businesses on the island. They will have the possibility of using foreign capital to make large-scale investments in key sectors and participating in the national financial system.

However, these reforms are unlikely to solve Cuba's most pressing economic problems, nor are they seen as making any significant concession to the US government. As an island state with a US military base on its territory (at Guantánamo), Cuba is particularly vulnerable. On 22 March Deputy Foreign Minister Carlos Fernández

de Cossío stated that Cuba was preparing for a US military invasion, despite Havana considering such action unlikely. Several government officials have publicly and categorically ruled out regime change in response to US pressure. Meanwhile, oil continues to fuel politics on both sides. On 20 March the Cuban government rejected a request from the US Embassy in Havana to import diesel for generators. Ten days later, the US Coast Guard, acting on Trump's decision, permitted the Russian oil tanker *Anatoly Kolodkin*, which is subject to sanctions, to dock at Matanzas port in Cuba. For its part, the population is struggling to survive, which means the conditions for protests are poor. However, during a demonstration in Morón on 13 March, there was looting and arson at the local Communist Party office.

US policy and international law

A US president who is dismantling democracy in his own country cannot be expected to push for the promotion of democracy abroad. Above all, the United States views LAC both as a security problem and as a source of raw materials. In line with its “America First” approach, the Trump administration is pursuing its own economic and geopolitical interests in the region as well as an imperialist policy that is based on violence and lays claim to exclusivity. As the case of Greenland has shown, that approach does not respect European interests; thus, it is not “merely” a matter of great power competition with China and Russia. For this reason, it cannot be ruled out that relations between Germany and the EU (or, rather, its individual member states), on the one hand, and LAC, on the other, will be affected by the new interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine.

To date, US policy towards Venezuela and Cuba has focused on opening up the economy rather than the political sphere. Whether the easing of repression in Venezuela ultimately leads to political liberalisation and democratic regime change



This work is licensed under CC BY 4.0

This Comment reflects the author's views.

The online version of this publication contains functioning links to other SWP texts and other relevant sources.

SWP Comments are subject to internal peer review, fact-checking and copy-editing. For further information on our quality control procedures, please visit the SWP website: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/about-swp/quality-management-for-swp-publications/>

SWP

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

ISSN (Print) 1861-1761
ISSN (Online) 2747-5107
DOI: 10.18449/2026C16

(Revised English version of SWP-Aktuell 18/2026)

remains to be seen. Meanwhile, there are new economic realities being created in Venezuela under US control and the population has no influence over that process. Nor is the way being paved for a transition to democracy.

Although it refrains from using the term “regime change” in relation to Venezuela and Cuba, the Trump administration is calling for a change of the top political leadership and for a new economic policy in both countries. It has excluded the Venezuelan and Cuban opposition from negotiations with the ruling elites. Under duress, these groups are cooperating with the US to ensure their political survival. In Venezuela, the Chavista regime is still managing to hold on, despite personnel changes and economic reforms. Today, the country is an autocracy under US tutelage – and Cuba could soon become one, too.

Trump administration is pushing for the militarisation of the fight on drugs and the securitisation of migration policy in LAC. At the same time, countries in the region are being pressured by the aggressive US approach into increasing their defence spending in order to ward off a potential US invasion. These developments are hitting a fragmented subcontinent where political coordination across ideological divides is virtually impossible. In general, the countries of the region have little room for manoeuvre. The predominant strategies are pragmatic adaptation and submission that ranges from being dogmatic to opportunistic.

Against this backdrop, there is a need for a German and European approach towards LAC that relies not on hard power but on a broad range of instruments that promote participatory politics, inclusive socio-economic development and partnership-based relations. Support for civil society in Venezuela and Cuba, via political foundations and other non-state actors, is essential.

Current US policy involves human rights violations and breaches of international law. This is particularly evident in the sinking of boats, the military operation in Ven-

ezuela and the energy blockade of Cuba. Some members of the international community remain silent about those actions or endlessly “examine” them while simultaneously lamenting the erosion of the rules-based international order. Such behaviour applies both to LAC countries and to Germany and other EU member states. While violations of international law have always been committed, there is now a tendency to refrain from naming them as such. And that weakens international law and removes the taboo of using violence.

Neither political positioning nor structural interdependencies should impair the ability to judge matters on the basis of international law. When legal assessments become dependent on political considerations, a distorted legal reality emerges that is coloured by ideology. A policy that produces “alternative facts” – read: falsehoods – leads to injustice and damages its own credibility. It diminishes citizens’ trust in their representatives. And it undermines the foundations of constitutional loyalty. After all, the logic of legal principles underlies both international law and the rule of law. Thus, as far as given facts are concerned, it is only their political handling that should be considered contingent, not their classification under international law.

Dr Claudia Zilla is a Senior Fellow in The Americas Research Division at SWP.