



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on September 24, 2025

Are U.S. Attacks on “Drug Boats” a Precursor to Regime Change in Venezuela?

The Trump administration claims its attacks on civilian boats in the Caribbean Sea are intended to stop drug trafficking. But the amount of firepower the United States has sent to the region suggests something much bigger — possibly even an attempt to oust Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

In the last three weeks, the U.S. military, acting under orders from President Donald Trump, has sunk three civilian boats that were traversing the Caribbean after leaving Venezuela. Trump and other administration officials insist that the boats were transporting illegal drugs to the United States and that those killed — 17 by Trump’s reckoning — were therefore deserving of summary execution, Constitution and international law notwithstanding.



AP Images
Nicolás Maduro

However, as [The New York Times](#) reported Saturday, neither the president nor any other official has offered any evidence to support these claims, even in congressional briefings.

Interdiction Contradiction

The United States has dispatched far more military assets than necessary for these small operations. According to the *Times*, “The military so far has deployed eight warships, several Navy P-8 surveillance planes and one attack submarine to the region.” It has also placed F-35 fighter jets in Puerto Rico.

“Several current and former military officials, diplomats and intelligence officers say that while fighting drugs is the pretext for the recent U.S. attacks, the real goal is to drive Mr. Maduro from power, one way or another,” wrote the *Times*.

In fact, the paper pointed out, the deployed forces are in the wrong place “to carry out a major drug interdiction operation.” And while there aren’t enough troops for an invasion, “the clandestine deployment of elite Special Operations forces suggests that strikes or commando raids inside Venezuela itself may be in the works.”

Admiral James Stavridis, a former head of the Pentagon’s Southern Command, told the *Times*:

The massive naval flotilla off the coast of Venezuela and the movement of fifth-generation F-35 fighters to Puerto Rico has little to do with actual drug interdiction — they represent operational overkill.

Rather, they are a clear signal to Nicolás Maduro that this administration is growing serious about accomplishing either regime or behavioral change from Caracas.



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Gunboat diplomacy is back, and it may well work.

The Slower Picker Upper

Trump's desire to overthrow Maduro goes back to his first term, during which he placed a \$15 million bounty on the Venezuelan leader. The Biden administration upped it to \$25 million, and Trump doubled it to [\\$50 million](#) in August. The Trump administration also secured an [indictment](#) against Maduro in federal court in 2020, charging him with drug trafficking and "narco-terrorism."

Secretary of State Marco Rubio, too, has long been on the warpath against Maduro. According to [Antiwar.com](#):

Back in 2019, when the first Trump administration attempted to back a coup against Maduro, [then-Senator] Rubio [posted a photo on Twitter](#) of former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in the moment he was being brutally murdered in an apparent threat to the Venezuelan leader.

Last week, Rubio told [Fox News](#) that Maduro, who Washington denies is the legitimate president of Venezuela,

is someone who's empowered himself of some of the instruments of government and are [sic] using that to operate a drug cartel from Venezuelan territory, much of that drugs aimed at reaching the United States. So we're not going to have a cartel, operating or masquerading as a government, operating in our own hemisphere.

Maduro, naturally, denies these charges. In a September 6 [letter](#) to Trump, he cited "data from the UN and other organizations" showing that only five percent of illegal drugs produced in Colombia, primarily cocaine, "attempt to be transported through Venezuela." Maduro claimed that only a fraction of this small percentage evades his government's interdiction efforts.

Moreover, while Trump has also [alleged](#) the boats he blasted were carrying fentanyl, the [Times](#) reported earlier this month that "Venezuela plays virtually no role in the fentanyl trade" — a point echoed by [Senator Rand Paul \(R-Ky.\)](#) in criticizing Trump's actions.

Now and Forever War

Clearly, Trump has something larger in mind than simply sinking the occasional (allegedly) drug-transporting boat.

Indeed, recent moves in Washington indicate that the president is bent on getting the United States embroiled in the type of "forever war" he campaigned against. In July, noted the *Times*, Trump "signed a still-secret order directing the Pentagon to begin using military force against certain Latin American criminal gangs and drug cartels." Meanwhile,

draft legislation is circulating at the White House and on Capitol Hill that would give Mr. Trump broad powers to wage war against drug cartels he deems to be "terrorists," as well as against any country he says has harbored or helped them.



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That, of course, is the same kind of open-ended authorization that presidents since George W. Bush have used to justify invasions, regime-change operations, and sundry other unconstitutional foreign interventions.

Then there's [this recent X post](#) from Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth:

Narco-terrorists are enemies of the United States — actively bringing death to our shores.

We will stop at nothing to defend our homeland and our citizens.

We will track them, kill them, and dismantle their networks throughout our hemisphere — at the times and places of our choosing.

That, the *Times* observed, is “the kind of language Pentagon leaders have used for years” to excuse their foreign excursions.

Maduro certainly isn't blind to the significance of all this, which is why he's [just negotiated a defense pact](#) with one of America's biggest rivals: Russia.



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