

Extended Abstract:

**Intersocial Constitution of the Exception:
Venezuela and the United States, 2024-26**

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In this paper I use tools from global historical sociology to examine relations between Venezuela and the United States in the two years preceding the U.S. military action against Venezuela called Operation Absolute Resolve. In contrast to a lens more typical of international relations in which states are thought of as discrete, unitary actors, a GHS treatment looks instead at intersocial configurations in which an opposition out of power may be more important than a government, and states themselves are complex with the particular interests and projects of actors in power (Go and Lawson 2017). In this case the most relevant actors are the Venezuelan opposition political forces trying to rally international support for their fight against Nicolás Maduro by securitizing Venezuela's political conflict; and Donald Trump, first as a presidential candidate and then as president, utilizing Venezuela's political crisis as a medium for his anti-immigration efforts and later his national security strategy. The guiding thread running through the four stages I describe, is the avoiding or undermining the rules-based order and rule of law, through claims to a state of exception (Schepple 2004).

Securitization of Venezuelan Politics

Over the past twenty-five years, opposition forces in Venezuela have sought to enlist international support for their fight against Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro by arguing that in various ways, Venezuela's political crisis is a threat to international security (Smilde 2025b). From claims of Iranian missile installations in western Venezuela, to denunciations of Hezbollah training camps on Margarita Island, to invocation of the "Responsibility to Protect," to claims that Nicolás Maduro was the head of the "Cartel of the Suns," to most recently, that Maduro was creator, funder and in control of the Tren de Aragua criminal gang. These efforts have been constant but came to a point after Venezuela's dictator Nicolas Maduro blatantly stole the 2024 presidential elections. Opposition leader María Corina Machado focused her efforts in international space seeking pressure and intervention. These efforts are typical of diaspora diplomacy that seeks to marshal the resources of international states to regain power in their home country by arguing their domestic battle is actually an international battle (Shain and Barth 2003).

Transnational Crimmigration

In 2024 Donald Trump focused his presidential campaign on the issue of immigration. No issue, he said, was more important than the loss of America's cultural heritage through immigration. Throughout 2024 he made false claims that Venezuela's crime rate had fallen because Nicolas

Maduro had emptied out Venezuela's prisons and sent criminals to the United States. Parallel to this, Republican leaders called on the Biden administration to designate Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua a terrorist organization. And rightwing think tanks in the U.S. began to associate the group with Nicolas Maduro (Berg 2024). After Venezuela's failed election brought international opprobrium of Nicolás Maduro to a peak, Trump took up the Tren de Aragua as one of the main topics in his campaign speeches, arguing it was one of the most bloodthirsty, violent criminal gangs in history, falsely claiming it controlled the town of Aurora, CO. This was used to portray dire consequences of the Biden administrations of having an open-door immigration policy. This process was essentially a case of "crimmigration" in which immigration and criminal law are closely merged to define membership in society (Stumpf 2006). As a candidate and later as president, Trump essentially sought to create a moral panic to gain American's support for his political project (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts 1978). But he quite tangibly instrumentalized it as president when he designated the Tren de Aragua as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and used that as the basis for a presidential proclamation invoking the Alien Enemies Act to deport 138 Venezuelans to El Salvador's Terrorist Confinement Center (Hanson, Smilde and Zubillaga 2025). This action attempted to constitute an exception to U.S. immigration law in response to the supposed actions of an enemy nation. In this case the U.S. claimed a predatory invasion of the Tren de Aragua on behalf of Nicolás Maduro. This proclamation was essentially shut down by Federal Courts but was granted a rare *en banc* rehearing before the entire Fifth District Court of Appeals.

The War Against Narcoterrorism

In August of 2025, the Trump administration began what they called Operation Southern Spear, amassing warships and aircraft off of the coast of Venezuela, Puerto Rico and other countries in the region. This was justified in terms of a campaign against narcoterrorism and focused on drone attacks on suspected drug trafficking "go-fast" boats. The justification was that these were defensive attacks against unlawful, enemy combatants headed to the United States. In each case, the Trump administration said it had solid intelligence that the boats were being operated by narco-terrorists from the Tren de Aragua in coordination with the Cartel de los Soles. However, it is well known that these type of boats do not have the range to travel to the U.S., that the Tren de Aragua is not known to engage in maritime drug trafficking, and the Cartel of the Suns is a tongue-in-cheek name created by journalists to refer to the true fact that some military officials are involved in drug trafficking. What is more, Venezuela is not a significant source of drugs heading to the United States, which in their great majority transit through the Eastern Pacific (Smilde 2025a).

This operation and its portrayal as a fight against narcoterrorism essentially created exceptions to U.S. law that allowed for summary executions of supposed drug traffickers. It also allowed for military action without congress invoking the War Powers Act, as it was portrayed as the timely defense against imminent attack (Smilde 2025c).

The Trump Corollary

In early December, Trump switched gears and suggested that U.S. operations off the coast of Venezuela had to do with oil which he portrayed as belonging to the U.S. This responded to a couple of changes. First, opinion polling showed that the idea of attacking Venezuela was very unpopular among U.S. citizens and that they did not feel the reasoning had been clearly explained. Second, numerous analyses emerged suggesting that a regime change operation would be disastrous. And third, in early December the Trump administration released its new National Security Strategy which essentially argued that the United States would no longer function as the world's police officer but would exercise preeminence in the Western Hemisphere (Whitehouse 2025). It positively affirmed the "Monroe Doctrine" as saying the U.S. would not allow competitors to control strategically vital assets in the hemisphere. And it added the "Trump Corollary" essentially saying that it would focus on curbing mass migration, drug trafficking and hostile foreign ownership of key assets. Operation Absolute Resolve which saw the U.S. forces attack Venezuela and rendition Nicolás Maduro and his wife to the U.S. on January 3, was essentially the first manifestation of this policy. To the surprise of most everyone, instead of installing Venezuela's opposition leader María Corina Machado, Trump announced they would be working with Vice President Delcy Rodríguez but that the United States would be "running" the country under the threat of a second military operation. At this writing the direction this political transition will take is unclear. Marco Rubio has suggested that after a period of stabilization and recovery there will be elections. However, just as likely is that Venezuela becomes a friendly, stable and strategic ally, much like Saudi Arabia, with no real push for democracy. Subsequent reports about the Trump administration's decision to attack Venezuela suggested that providing substance to claims of a "conflict" in the federal court case seeking approval for using the Alien Enemies Act (Smilde.

Conclusion

In this paper I suggest that the guiding thread running through these four stages in Venezuela U.S. relations is the avoiding or undermining the rules-based order through claims to a state of exception (Schepple 2004). I call this intersocial constitution of the exception because it is not a one-sided imposition, but a more complex exercise of empire. On the one hand, the U.S. is clearly the preeminent actor and all of Trump's actions fit quite well with the characteristics of ethnopopulist foreign policy (Hintz, Esen and Onea 2025). But on the other hand, the actions of the Venezuelan opposition show how political forces on the global periphery can themselves work international powers to their advantage (Huang 2016). In this case, frustrated by democratic politics in their country and by international institutions that have not been able to stem Venezuela's democratic erosion, María Corina Machado and her advisors created a narrative that could justify a U.S. violation of their country's sovereignty. This narrative was utilized by candidate and then President Donald Trump in his efforts to bypass the United States' immigration laws and laws governing military conflict.

This is a paper I am actively working on, based on six opinion pieces I wrote in 2025. I will be presenting a draft of it at the University of Colorado in April and at the University of Chicago in May, and possibly at ASA 2026 in New York. That will give me considerable feedback before presenting it at SSHA.

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