

We have to speak truth to power and condemn Trump's Venezuela attack

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Foreign troops attack a sovereign country, kill dozens of people and abduct the de facto head of state. The president who ordered the military operation declares his intent to “run” the attacked country and exploit its oil reserves.

If this sounds illegal to you, you'd be right.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio claims the operation that seized Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores was aimed at enforcing criminal indictments against them issued by the U.S. Department of Justice. That claim ignores the 1945 United Nations Charter, which centrally includes a prohibition on the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.

The U.S. has captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. Is that legal?

The prohibition has only two exceptions. First, the UN Security Council can authorize the use of force if all five of the veto-holding permanent members agree; with Russia and China being allies of Venezuela, no such agreement was conceivable here.

Second, each country has a right of self-defence. The Trump administration has invoked this right, claiming that Mr. Maduro heads a drug cartel that smuggles cocaine into the United States. But the right of self-defence can only be triggered by an actual or imminent “armed attack,” which drug smuggling is not.

Any exercise of self-defence must also be necessary and proportionate. Drug smuggling is illegal, but attacking Venezuela and abducting Mr. Maduro is hardly a measured response. Nor is there any conceivable scenario where self-defence could justify seizing and exploiting the natural resources of another country.

The Trump administration has not bothered to make any other international law arguments. Although Mr. Maduro remained in power after losing Venezuela's presidential election in 2024, and has ground his country into poverty, no right of pro-democratic or humanitarian intervention has been claimed.

To the contrary, Mr. Trump has rejected suggestions that Edmundo González Urrutia, who is widely seen as having won the 2024 election, should take power. He has been similarly dismissive of the leader of Mr. González's coalition, María Corina Machado,

who was barred from running in the election by the Maduro regime and was recently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Who is Delcy Rodríguez, the die-hard socialist Trump favours as Venezuela's new leader?

It is evident that Mr. Trump wants a puppet government in Caracas. Immediately after the attack, he declared that Delcy Rodríguez, Mr. Maduro's vice-president, was willing to work with the United States. When Ms. Rodríguez announced that, in her view, Mr. Maduro remained the legitimate president, Mr. Trump began to publicly threaten her. On Sunday, he went so far as to warn that if Ms. Rodríguez "doesn't do what's right, she is going to pay a very big price, probably bigger than Maduro."

Now, Mr. Trump is threatening Colombia, Mexico and Greenland, as part of what he called a "Don-roe Doctrine" of asserting dominance over the Western hemisphere. His oft-repeated comments about Canada becoming the 51st state have to be seen in this context.

What message will other countries take from this? Does this mean that other superpowers can exert dominance within their own regions? If so, Chinese President Xi Jinping could reasonably expect that Mr. Trump would stand aside if China invaded Taiwan. Russian President Vladimir Putin would also celebrate the abandonment of the U.S. collective defence commitment to NATO, which is implicit in Mr. Trump's rhetoric about Greenland, an integral part of the Kingdom of Denmark.

Mr. Trump has taken humanity to the brink of chaos. We risk a return to the "might is right" system that, in the first half of the 20th century, gave us two devastating world wars.

The good news is, many governments are publicly declaring the attack on Venezuela illegal. These include Spain, a NATO member.

Within the next week or two, an overwhelming majority of countries will likely vote in the UN General Assembly to denounce Mr. Trump's behaviour.

Will Canada join them?

On Saturday, Prime Minister Mark Carney responded to the U.S. attack by stating that his government "welcomes the opportunity for freedom, democracy, peace, and prosperity for the Venezuelan people."

"In keeping with our long-standing commitment to upholding the rule of law, sovereignty, and human rights," he added, "Canada calls on all parties to respect international law."

If there was a Nobel Prize for spineless ambiguity, Mr. Carney would win.

Now is the time to speak truth to power. While we still can.