

INSIGHT REPORT

US-Venezuela: Impact of US military operations in southern Caribbean

SEPTEMBER 2025

KEY JUDGEMENTS



- US military operations in southern parts of the Caribbean targeting Venezuelan criminal groups, recently deemed foreign terrorist organisations (FTOs), are expected to expand over the coming months. These operations are likely to be limited and target drug-trafficking groups.

- However, there is a risk of significant escalation. A plausible higher-risk scenario would include disruption to international shipping, regional volatility as well as other impacts within Venezuela and the region.

- President Nicolas Maduro faces pressure from the US, and his government is likely to crack down on domestic opposition, foreign nationals and any other perceived non-loyalists as tensions evolve.
- Organisations with interests and assets in Venezuela, neighbouring countries and southern areas of the Caribbean must review escalation plans to account for evolving risks associated with military activity in theatre.

OVERVIEW

The prospect of conflict in the southern Caribbean follows a large US military deployment to the region, a \$50m bounty on Maduro and a missile strike that killed 11 alleged drug traffickers in international waters. US president Donald Trump’s administration has characterised the deployment, comprising multiple US navy destroyers, a submarine, 4,500 marines and sailors and various other assets, as part of a broader counter-narcotics operation. However, the firepower in the region is considerably greater than the US has previously utilised in counter-narcotics missions and signals a shift in proceeding with the so-called war on drugs, particularly regarding Latin American FTOs.

International SOS assesses there is considerable opportunity for further escalation. Though the US has deployed significant firepower, present capability would be unable to support a ground invasion in Venezuela. Nonetheless, the US is likely to continue targeting Venezuela-based criminal groups, including potentially on Venezuelan soil or within Venezuelan territorial waters. Further kinetic action in or around Venezuela would have impacts on international shipping as well as Venezuelan and regional stability. Managers with interests and assets in Venezuela and/or the southern Caribbean must update escalation plans to account for short-notice, high-impact alterations to the regional security environment.

Background

» The present tensions are the product of political and military manoeuvres over the past several months. In February, the US State Department designated the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua as an FTO and Specially Designated Global Terrorist, along with several other Latin American organised criminal groups. In July, the Office of Foreign Assets Control applied the same designation to the Cartel de los Soles, signalling Maduro as its leader. In early August, the US authorities raised the reward for information leading to Maduro’s arrest to \$50m.

In late August, the US began a segmented deployment of navy and marine assets to the southern Caribbean. On 2 September, Trump announced the navy had targeted a suspected Venezuelan-based drug-trafficking vessel in international waters with a missile strike. Following this, two Venezuelan air-force jets flew near a US navy vessel, prompting the deployment of ten bomber planes to Puerto Rico (US). Another airstrike on a Venezuelan vessel was announced on 15 September.

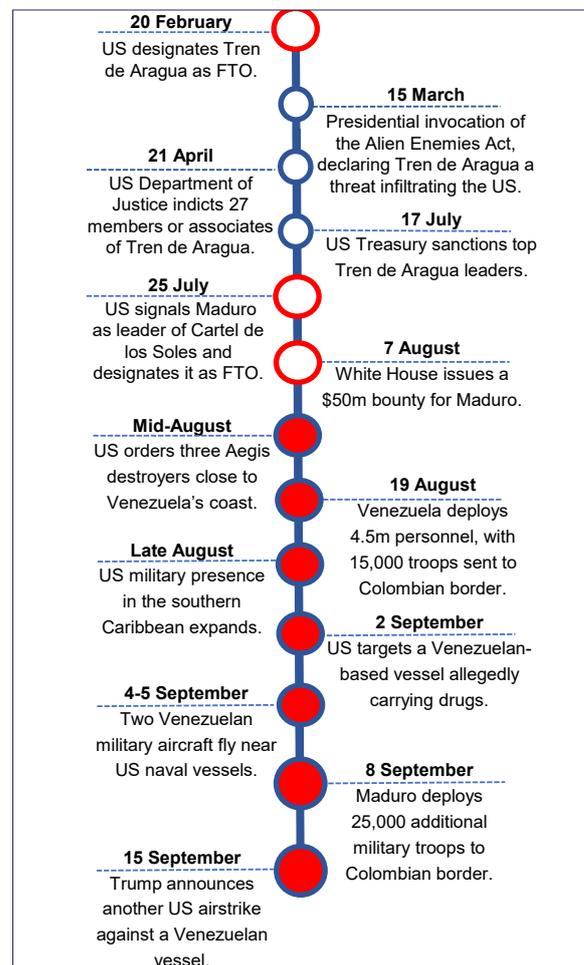


Figure 1: Timeline of US deployment in the Caribbean

Methodology

The Cone of Plausibility is an analytical technique that generates and assesses a range of possible outcomes by identifying key drivers as well as crafting and challenging assumptions. The technique highlights the primary factors influencing the current and future states and illustrates the spectrum of plausible scenarios in the form of a baseline (most-likely), higher-risk, lower-risk and a wildcard scenario. This technique is not aimed at precisely predicting an outcome, but rather at helping analysts and decision-makers consider the shape of potential outcomes and inform their preparation efforts.

Key Drivers

International SOS analysts assessed the following drivers that would influence the evolution of tensions and potential conflict between the US and Venezuela over the next six months:

US politics: Refers to domestic political pressures, Trump's administration's objectives and potentially varying views across the cabinet. It also considers the potential for legal challenges, electoral incentives ahead of the 2026 mid-term election and the popular reaction to developments across the US.

Actions by organised crime groups: Covers the actions by cartel and militant groups in and around Venezuela. This activity includes continued drug and human trafficking as well as adaptation and potential retaliation to the presence and activities of the US military.

Regional politics: Refers to the reaction of Latin American and Caribbean governments, particularly Brazil, Colombia and Mexico. This also considers the response of Cuba and Nicaragua's governments, who are aligned with Venezuela.

Venezuelan stability: Speaks to the cohesion of Maduro's government, considering internal and external pressures on the inner circle, the state of the opposition, potential for unrest and other domestic developments.

External influences: Considers the Venezuelan government's role supporting China, Iran and Russia as well as that of the broader West, particularly France, Netherlands and the UK due to regional interests. This also takes into account the impact of economic pressures and misinformation and influence campaigns.

In early September, the US navy targeted a suspected Venezuelan-based drug-trafficking vessel in international waters. According to Trump, 11 people onboard were killed, though analysts have since questioned the figure based on precedent and video evidence of the incident. On 15 September, Trump announced the US had engaged in a second airstrike on a small vessel. The missile strikes represent a shift in how the US prosecutes the so-called war on drugs as, previously, vessels had been interdicted by the United States Coast Guard.

CONE OF PLAUSIBILITY: How US military operations in the southern Caribbean will evolve throughout 2025

DRIVERS

US POLITICS

ACTIONS BY ORGANISED CRIME GROUPS

REGIONAL POLITICS

VENEZUELAN STABILITY

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

ASSUMPTIONS

Domestic politics will influence scope and timing of military action in Venezuela. Although counter-narcotics is the official rationale, deployment of significant firepower indicates a shift in how the US approaches the so-called war on drugs. Internal divisions within the cabinet, 2026 mid-term election and public skepticism over potential for prolonged engagement may encourage restraint – even if terrorist designations for Tren de Aragua and Cartel de los Soles limits congressional influence.

Criminal groups are to varying extents aligned and/or tolerated by Maduro's government, though operate independently. Their limited response capability and interest in avoiding US retaliation is likely to prevent them from directly engaging. Drug- and human-trafficking operations will continue, leading to maritime interdictions or incidental clashes with US forces in the region.

Regional governments, including Brazil and Colombia, may attempt mediation but will avoid direct involvement. Cuba and Nicaragua will offer diplomatic support and engage in influence campaigns while avoiding overstepping and inviting US focus. Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana are likely to provide quiet logistical support to US operations.

Maduro's inner circle remains intact but held together by personal incentives rather than ideological unity and is vulnerable to fragmentation under pressure. As the government feels threatened, the risk of repression against internal opposition and foreign nationals will heighten. Opposition is highly motivated, yet limited in capabilities. The government continues to posture strength, though is unlikely to go on offensive.

Russia is strongly motivated to sustain Maduro's government and may provide intelligence, funding and diplomatic backing, though will refrain from antagonising the US. Capacity for military support is limited by war in Ukraine. China's interest in regime stability is driven by economic pragmatism rather than ideology. US allies with Caribbean interests – France, Netherlands and the UK – prefer de-escalation but do not oppose transitioning from Maduro's governance.

SCENARIOS

LOWER-RISK SCENARIO

- US military presence in the region wanes over several weeks, replaced by the US or other Western nation coast guards.
- US kinetic military action remains limited to maritime confrontations and interdictions in international waters. No airstrikes on Venezuelan soil/waters.
- Decline in drug-trafficking activity. Venezuelan cooperation in counter-narcotics operations.
- Agreements reached on migration and/or oil contracts.
- Maduro's government and inner circle remain intact.

BASELINE SCENARIO

- US maintains strong military presence. Large-scale conflict avoided.
- Limited, symbolic US airstrikes against criminal groups in Venezuelan waters/soil.
- Drug-trafficking operations continue, provoking occasional interdictions or kinetic actions.
- The Venezuelan government represses the opposition and foreign nationals and does not break under pressure.
- Limited influence from regional and external governments.

HIGHER-RISK SCENARIO

- US military presence expands to include assets capable of neutralising Venezuelan air defenses.
- Series of US airstrikes on criminal groups within Venezuelan waters or soil, blurring line between criminal and military targets.
- Continued drug-smuggling operations provoke numerous maritime strikes and/or confrontations with US navy.
- Attacks or threats against international shipping in the Caribbean cause significant disruption.
- The Venezuelan government engages in far-reaching crackdown on opposition and foreign nationals.
- Significant political volatility as inner circle frays.

WILDCARD SCENARIO – MANAGED EXIT

Maduro is forced out or voluntarily steps down as pressure mounts amid US Navy operations and raised bounty. He is replaced by a senior figure aligned with Maduro's political party with public commitment to hold elections in the medium term.



ASSESSMENT

Baseline scenario

In the baseline, or most-likely, scenario the US maintains a strong military presence in the southern Caribbean, and its forces are leveraged as a deterrent and political signal. The nature of US assets in the region may change over the months, with some drawing back or bolstering of resources.

Persistent drug- and human-trafficking operations in the Caribbean occasionally provoke maritime interdiction, confrontations or direct airstrikes, though Tren de Aragua and other groups refrain from engaging in escalatory actions. This scenario also considers the potential of the US targeting designated criminal group assets in remote or otherwise isolated areas of Venezuela. Any airstrikes would be framed as counter-narcotics and/or counter-terrorist operations, and executed in such a way to avoid Venezuelan military targets and consequential further escalation. Marine Expeditionary Units would not be deployed to Venezuela.

Regional governments may issue rhetorical objections to US actions, though would not obstruct operations. Some governments, including Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago, may provide quiet logistical support. Within Venezuela, Maduro's government grows increasingly isolated and internally repressive. Cracks in Maduro's inner circle deepen amid pressure, though the opposition remains constrained and unable to take advantage of the situation. Foreign nationals, particularly Westerners, are under increased scrutiny, harassment and risk of arbitrary detention. Ultimately, the inner circle bends, but does not break, and Maduro remains in power out of this turbulent period.

External actors China, Iran and Russia offer limited diplomatic and information support to Maduro and avoid deeper engagement. The US' Western allies prefer de-escalation rather than further conflict, but are ultimately tolerant of limited and targeted US action, acknowledging Maduro's government has been a highly destabilising force regionally.

Higher-risk scenario

A higher-risk scenario would see US military presence in the region expand considerably. This may include assets capable of neutralising Venezuelan air-defence and/or naval assets in advance of a land invasion and/or additional increase in kinetic activity. In this case, US airstrikes target criminal groups within Venezuelan waters and/or on Venezuelan soil. Although the US would frame these actions as counter-narcotics and counter-terrorist operations, the line between non-state actors and the Venezuelan military is increasingly blurred by expanding operations in the higher-risk scenario.

Persistent drug- and human-trafficking activity in the southern Caribbean prompts repeated interdiction, confrontations and/or airstrikes by the US navy on Venezuela-based vessels. The underlying assumption that the Venezuelan state and/or criminal groups operating in Venezuelan territory will acquiesce under US pressure is proven inaccurate. In this case, there is an increased threat of attack against international shipping

traversing on or near Venezuelan waters, prompting rerouting and significant disruption to supply chains. Furthermore, more regular US airstrikes on Venezuelan targets raise the potential for misidentification or miscalculation and additional escalation.

Influential regional governments, including Brazil and Colombia, increasingly distance themselves from US actions, though ultimately do not interfere or obstruct such operations. Brazil, Colombia and Guyana may reinforce their borders with military deployments, and Trinidad and Tobago may step up coastal and air patrols amid an escalation. Within Venezuela, Maduro's government engages in a far-reaching crackdown on opposition, foreign nationals and suspected non-loyalists – prompting a significantly higher risk of detention for said individuals. The government faces instability amid the escalating military activity and higher bounties on Maduro, Defence Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez and Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello. Widespread uncertainty raises the possibility the government lashes out against internal or foreign perceived enemies or collapses as the inner circle begins to fray.

This scenario is assessed as plausible, warranting close consideration by risk managers and duty-of-care professionals with interests and assets in the region. The ultimate trajectory of the tensions may involve elements from multiple scenarios, indicating risk managers should carefully evaluate the downstream impacts of each on their workforce in region. In the event of an escalation in conflict, airspace in affected and nearby countries can close at short notice. Workforce in affected and nearby territories will require access to trusted information and guidance, necessitating proactive and clear communications from duty-of-care professionals.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO MANAGERS

Organisations with direct or indirect exposure in Venezuela and more broadly across the southern Caribbean should carry out the following lines of operation to prepare for the scenarios identified in this report.

- *Exposure and impact mapping*
 - » Run exposure mapping exercises through the region, focusing on Venezuela and neighbouring countries. Carefully consider how the risks outlined in this report impact your organisation. Assess second-order and cascading impacts associated with social, diplomatic and military developments on your workforce in the southern Caribbean.
 - » Consider the distinct risk profiles of static and mobile workforces, as well as local and international assignees, accounting for their different levels of vulnerability to risks and their different access to support. This is particularly important amid a likely crackdown on opposition and foreign nationals within Venezuela.
- *Intelligence and collection planning*
 - » Develop a collection plan with the priority intelligence requirements for your organisation and identify the key sources of information, which can help answer these requirements and provide early warning of changing risks and threats.



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» This plan should incorporate International SOS intelligence products along with insight from local contacts, information sharing networks and sustained monitoring of open-source feeds, news media and official statements.

- *Response plan development*

» Develop triggers for key decisions which will possibly need to be made in a changing risk environment. These will be part of an escalation plan and will include, but not be limited to, the temporary suspension of inbound travel, reductions in local freedom of movement, additional pre-travel approvals or training, new communication and tracking plans, and/or additional security measures for in-location workforce. A useful exercise for this is the so-called pre-mortem, in which you imagine you have had to make a key decision surrounding the organisation's posture, and work backwards to identify triggers that may have necessitated this.

» Communicate triggers and risk treatments to relevant stakeholders. Ensure travelling and local workforces are aware of the criteria for a short-notice adjustment of posture.

- *Testing and communications*

» Consider simulation or table-top exercises to test collection, response and communication plans and then improve areas of deficiency.

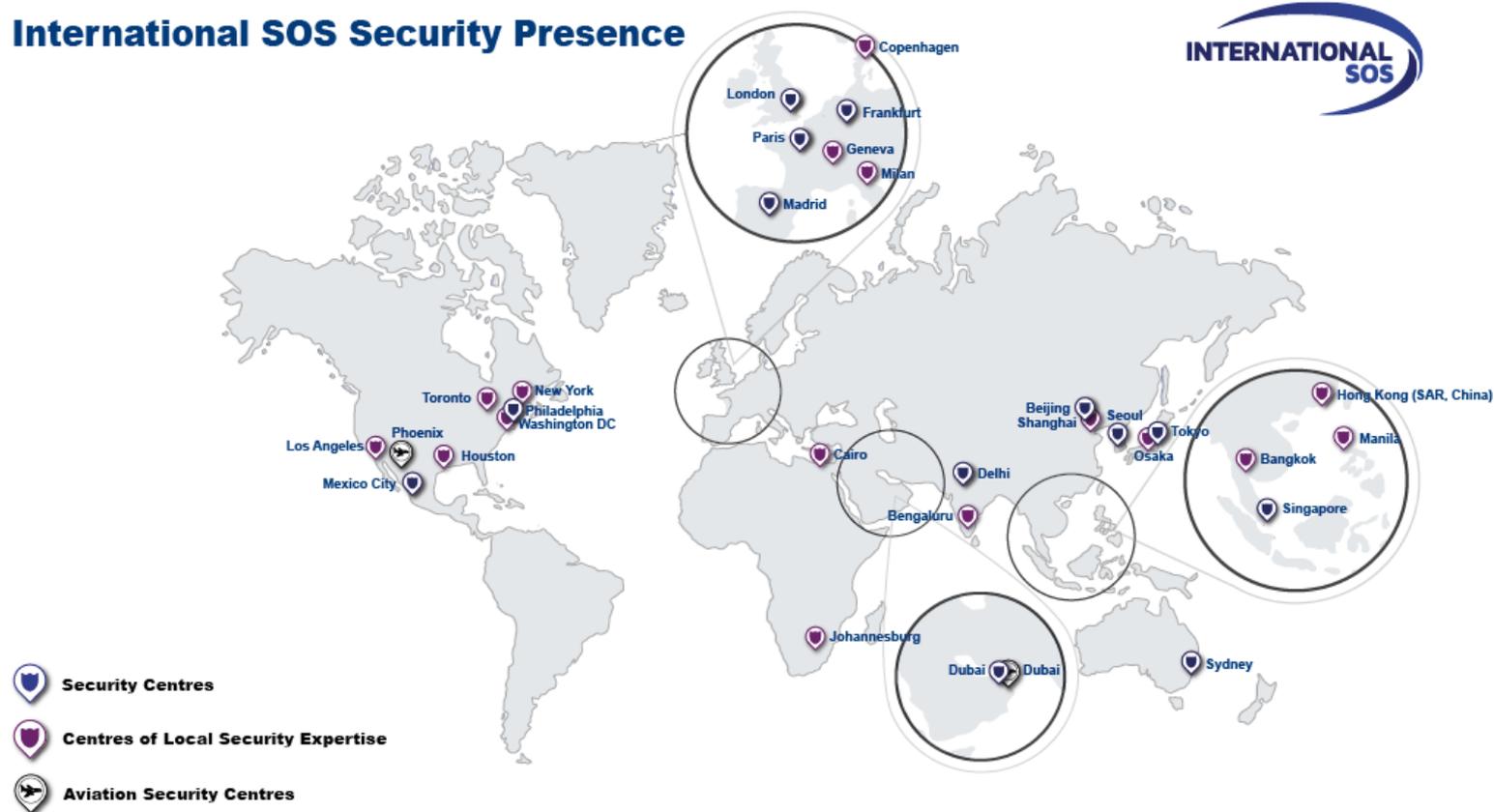
» Ensure affected workforce is familiar with response plan requirements and aware of how/when to access associated material. Proactive communication of the organisation's assessment and expectations of workforce in the event of escalation is critical.



ACTIONABLE INSIGHTS AND UNPARALLELED SERVICES

International SOS and its network of partners combine the world's leading security and medical risk specialists. With an access to more than 3,200 security specialists led by our 200 dedicated security experts based in our Assistance Centres and offices around the world, we provide a comprehensive suite of integrated security risk services for the global workforce and managers tasked with keeping people safe, secure and healthy. We deliver timely, actionable security intelligence, analysis, advice and on-the-ground assistance.

International SOS Security Presence



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