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US Power, Venezuelan Defiance: The Forces Driving the Latest Crisis

By

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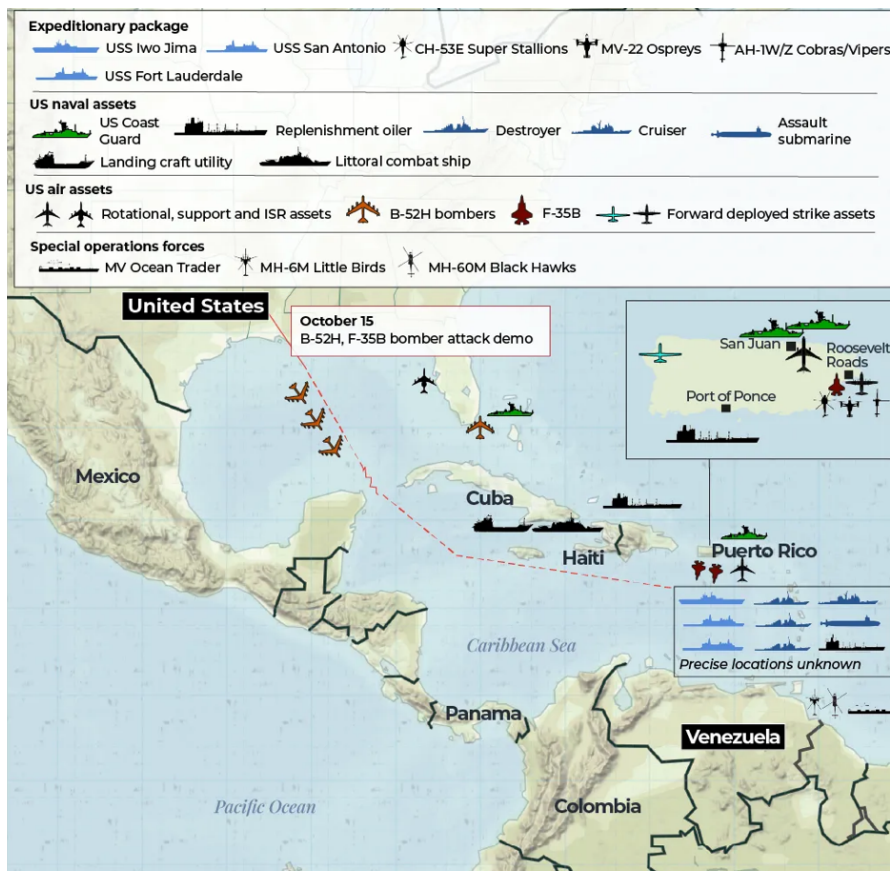
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Executive Summary

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- ✧ US-Venezuela tensions have sharply escalated, with the Trump administration designating Venezuelan criminal groups as foreign terrorist organisations, doubling the bounty on Nicolás Maduro, authorising covert CIA operations, and deploying the largest US military presence in the Caribbean in decades.
- ✧ Washington's strategy appears aimed at maximum pressure rather than immediate war, using extensive military deployments, strike demonstrations, and covert actions to intimidate and destabilise Maduro's government while stopping short of a declared conflict.
- ✧ Trump is reviewing military options but remains undecided, sending mixed signals by downplaying the likelihood of war while warning that Maduro's "days are numbered," and receiving Pentagon briefings that offer variations of plans considered previously.
- ✧ Venezuela has launched a large-scale national mobilisation, deploying around 200,000 troops, expanding its "Independence Plan 200," and signalling readiness for asymmetric defence despite its limited conventional military capacity and years of degraded warfighting capability.
- ✧ Opposition leader María Corina Machado's Nobel Peace Prize has strengthened the anti-Maduro movement, providing international legitimacy and reinforcing US justification for continued pressure, with her tacit support for US military leverage further isolating the Maduro regime.

Key Picture: US Military in the Caribbean. Approximate positions as of October 19, 2025.



Source: US Naval Institute on [Aljazeera](https://www.aljazeera.com)

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1. The US-Venezuela conflict: a breakdown

Tensions between the United States and Venezuela have recently escalated dramatically, with the US accusing President Nicolás Maduro's government of involvement in drug trafficking and labelling its leaders as targets for law enforcement and military action. Although Donald Trump was re-elected as a self-styled pro-peace president, his administration is now taking steps that could lead to a risky push for regime change in Venezuela. In August, the US doubled the reward for Maduro's arrest to \$50 million, having already labelled him the head of a drug cartel linked to terrorist groups. Trump has reportedly authorised the use of force against these cartels, signalling a more aggressive approach despite questions about the alleged connections between Maduro's government and criminal networks.¹

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Consequently, Trump has resumed his "maximum pressure" campaign on Venezuela, accusing it of funnelling large amounts of cocaine into the US. During Trump's first term, his administration charged Maduro with leading the Cartel de los Soles, a criminal network linked to senior officials involved in drug trafficking and extortion. Since returning to office, Trump has designated both the Cartel de los Soles and the Tren de Aragua gang as foreign terrorist organisations, and in August 2025, he signed a secret order authorising the Pentagon to use military force against selected Latin American drug cartels.²

By redefining drug gangs as terrorists and linking Maduro to them, the administration has justified military pressure on his regime.³ For the past two months, the US has conducted its largest military deployment in decades in the Caribbean, sending warships, fighter jets, bombers, drones, marines, and spy planes near Venezuela. Long-range B-52 bombers have carried out attack demonstrations, and the world's largest aircraft carrier, the USS Gerald R. Ford, along with specialised support vessels, has been sent to the region. While the US claims its strikes on Venezuelan vessels target narcotics and "narco-terrorists," experts argue the scale of the build-up far exceeds what is needed for counter-narcotics operations, suggesting the operation is intended as an intimidation campaign.⁴ In addition, Trump has publicly confirmed that he has authorised the CIA to carry out covert operations inside Venezuela, escalating pressure on President Maduro's government.⁵

The US also does not recognise Maduro as Venezuela's legitimate president, citing disputed elections in 2024 and widespread opposition claims of fraud. The Pentagon's deployment, combined with CIA activity in Venezuela, advanced stealth aircraft, drones, and special forces-capable ships, reflects a strategy of exerting maximum pressure to destabilise Maduro's government while avoiding overt large-scale conflict.⁶

2. Military operations: how likely are they?

Trump has sent mixed signals about US action in Venezuela, downplaying the likelihood of war while asserting that Maduro's time in power is limited.⁷ Trump was given a briefing this week outlining possible military actions in Venezuela as he continues considering his next steps. He has not yet made a decision and is still assessing the potential risks and advantages of expanding US involvement. He has previously expressed hesitation about using military force to remove Maduro, questioning whether such a move would work. Although the recent briefing presented updated options for him to review, it did not signal that he is any closer to choosing a course of action.⁸

2.1. Is Venezuela prepared for a US attack?

On November 11, the Venezuelan government declared that it would launch a "large-scale" mobilisation of both military personnel and civilians to get ready for any possible US move. Defence Minister Vladimir Padrino López said the country is entering an expanded phase of Independence Plan 200, a defence strategy initiated in September to reinforce Venezuela's security in response to the US military presence in the Caribbean.⁹ Tarek William Saab, a close ally of Maduro, claims that Trump aims to make Venezuela a "colony" of the US. On the prospect of a land invasion, Saab stated that "it shouldn't happen, but we are prepared."¹⁰

Nearly 200,000 troops were deployed across Venezuela for exercises scheduled from November 11 to November 12, with Padrino López, Minister of People's Power for Defence of Venezuela, emphasising the unity of the armed forces and asserting that the vast majority of the population opposes any external aggression. He dismissed opposition groups as politically irrelevant and framed the mobilisation as part of Venezuela's broader resistance to perceived imperialist pressure and US efforts to dominate the international order.¹¹

Venezuela ranks 50th globally and seventh in Latin America in military strength, with a sizable ground force of over 337,000 personnel, but its air force and navy are limited, partly due to sanctions and outdated equipment. While it has invested in Russian-made fighter jets and missiles capable of threatening nearby naval forces, experts note that years of minimal warfighting training and a focus on internal security weaken its overall combat effectiveness. Analysts agree the US is far superior in conventional military power, though Venezuela could still make an invasion costly through asymmetric resistance and defensive measures.¹²

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3. Machado: opposition's involvement

In October, the 2025 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado in recognition of her persistent efforts to advance democratic rights in Venezuela and her work toward achieving a fair and peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy. For weeks, social media has speculated that Machado, who has stayed out of public view since the 2024 election, may be taking refuge at the US embassy in Caracas. She has supported US military pressure on Maduro's government, viewing it as a necessary step toward restoring Venezuela's popular sovereignty.¹³

In response to the Nobel Committee's announcement, Machado emphasised that her movement is close to achieving victory and highlighted the support of Trump, the United States, Latin American countries, and other democratic nations as crucial allies in the pursuit of freedom and democracy.¹⁴ As such, Machado's Nobel Peace Prize strengthens the Venezuelan opposition by giving it international legitimacy and highlighting Maduro's isolation. The award can be leveraged to justify continued US pressure, including sanctions and military deployments, by framing these actions as support for a recognised democratic leader.¹⁵

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⁶ Ibid.

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¹¹ Elizabeth Melimopoulos, “Is Venezuela prepared for a US attack, as Washington ramps up forces?”, Al Jazeera.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Kathryn Watson, Tucker Reals, “Nobel Peace Prize goes to Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado: “Committed champion of peace””, CBS News, accessed 14 November 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/nobel-peace-prize-maria-corina-machado-venezuela-opposition-leader-2025>.

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¹⁵ Juan Zahir Naranjo Cáceres, “The Nobel Peace Prize’s Legitimacy Crisis: María Corina Machado’s 2025 Award and the End of Moral Authority”, accessed 14 November 2025, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-nobel-peace-prizes-legitimacy-crisis-maria-corina-machados-2025-award-and-the-end-of-moral-authority>.