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WEBINAR

What Maduro's ouster means for global security

Thursday, January 8, 2026

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PANEL DISCUSSION

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MALONEY: Good afternoon. I'm Suzanne Maloney, vice president and director of Foreign Policy here at the Brookings Institution, and I'm delighted to welcome you to today's event, discussing the extraordinary developments in the past five days that began with US military strikes on Venezuela and the extradition to the United States of Venezuela, President Nicolas Mendoro and his wife, Celia Flores.

The Trump administration's decision to seize Maduro has precipitated an intense debate around a number of crucial questions, including those that impact governance in Venezuela, security in the western hemisphere, implications for energy markets and America's approach to the world more broadly, given the stakes.

I'm particularly grateful that we have a brilliant set of experts to shed light on the latest events and the future prospects for Venezuela and for American foreign policy. First and foremost, we're thrilled that Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Vera Bergengruen, a national security reporter at the Wall Street Journal, will moderate today's discussion.

She'll be joined by a stellar lineup of Brookings experts, including Vanda Felbab-Brown, a senior fellow in Foreign Policy and director of our Initiative on Non-state Armed Actors, who's one of the country's foremost experts on illicit narcotics trade, the synthetic opioids crisis, and non-traditional security threats.

Vanda has authored four books and testifies frequently before Congress. Vonda will be joined by Marcela Escobari, a senior fellow in Brookings Global Economy and Development program. Marcela also has a long and distinguished career in research and policymaking, including as assistant administrator for Latin America at the US Agency for International Development and service at the National Security Council, where she led efforts to promote safe, orderly, and humane migration.

Also on our panel today is Scott Anderson. Scott is a fellow in Brookings Governance Studies and senior editor at Lawfare. Scott previously served as an attorney advisor for the US Department of State, where he advised policymakers on domestic and international legal issues related to US foreign and national security policy.

And finally, to fill out our panel is Tom Wright, a senior fellow in Brookings Foreign Policy. Tom is also a contributing editor at The Atlantic and the author of two acclaimed books. During the Biden administration, Tom served as senior director for strategic planning at the National Security Council, where he played a major role in crafting the administration's national security strategy.

A quick reminder that we are live and on the record. We welcome questions from the audience via email@eventsatbrookings.edu, and we encourage you to consult the Brookings website where you'll find a, a range of analysis from all of our speakers and many others on the events in Venezuela and beyond.

Vera, the floor is now yours.

BERGENGRUEN: Thanks so much, Suzanne, and thank you all so much for joining us today. It's obviously an incredibly timely panel. So I'm happy to have all of you here. I was thinking maybe we'd start with Vanda. You know, Nicolas Maduro is gone, but most of the state is still intact and we're still figuring out what that means. It's only been a couple of days, but could you tell us a bit about what the US relationship to Venezuela is right now? Is it a

partner? Is it an occupier? Is it some kind of interim custodian? We've seen all these jokes about Marco Rubio being the viceroy, but you know, what does this arrangement currently look like in practice?

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, no one really knows. It's not just that most of the state is currently in place. 99.9% of the Maduro regime is, is in place. Those include his top officials that have been deeply implicated in the criminality, corruption, mismanagement, and authoritarian rule. They include layers of Chavista in formal and informal settings such as the colectivos and of course the panoply of criminal and armed actors that are part of the country. The Maduro regime itself had highly tenuous relationship with the military, and maybe there are more than one military. There are so many factions of the military.

So currently the Trump administration imagines and asserts that since it can control the flow of oil from Venezuela, preventing sanctioned oil, allowing oil such as of Chevron's to continue flowing, it can essentially dictate terms to the Maduro regime and that it would do so working through the now-president of Venezuela, Delcy Rodriguez, who until Saturday was the vice president of the country, someone who has worked in various parts of the Maduro regime, including on the authoritarian side of the Maduro regime for, for years and years. And, and that is also an assumption that if officials do not obey the dictates coming from Washington, a select committee of principals of President Trump, they might meet fates similar to those of Maduro. So perhaps another military snatch or other actions.

But, you know, I'll, I'll just, and here, you know, the notion that you can simply control government through this means I don't think it's based in any reality. We have kind of the opposite model, and that's the provision, that's the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, which first of all tried to bake in legitimacy by including from the very beginning Iraqi officials in what was supposed to be much more joint decisionmaking than this unclear dictate system coming outta Washington, but also had 160,000 forces, US and coalition forces, on the ground and thousands of advisors in one form or another.

Now here, the presence on the ground is minimal to nothing, and yet the assumption is that at least on issues of oil, Cuba relations, narcotics, armed actors, maybe eventually some form of democracy, there will be this directive from Washington that will be obeyed.

BERGENGRUEN: That's right, and we've heard, you know, as you point out, we've heard so many conflicting versions of this so far. You know, we had the president say that the United States is going to quote, run the country. Secretary Rubio gave a slightly more nuanced take. In this interview with the New York Times that was published today, the president said the US might be there for years. So it's pretty obvious that this is obviously in flux. But yesterday, Secretary Rubio, for the first time laid out what seemed to be a bit more of a a, of a, of an, you know, a phased approach. And he said there were three phases that it was going to be stability, recovery, and then a transition. Marcela, you know, the administration still hasn't been clear about where free elections fit into that. You know, obviously Rubio is, is indicating it's going to be in that third transition phase, but you know, it's pretty evident as of now that it is secondary to their other demands. Can you tell us about where this leaves the opposition and how likely a credible transition is going to be from here?

ESCOBARI: Well, on the plan set out by Secretary Rubio some of the elements are there, but I think the, the sequencing of events presents new risks. Putting aside the serious issues of international law and precedent of this military intervention -- [audio interruption] -- that I know we will talk about is, and and I do think there is a very narrow opportunity to set the

country in a path to recovery. But you'll need economic stabilization, political legitimacy, and a military realignment. And each requires the other.

So economically, the country's in shambles, right? The economy shrank 80%, basic infrastructure does not work. You'll need an IMF package in tens of billions, debt restructuring, just to get the economy breathing again. But any real economic recovery will need rule of law. And for that, you will need a new leadership in place with political legitimacy. Which you actually have in Venezuela, right? Venezuela had elections in 2024, Edmundo Gonzalez won 67% of that vote as a surrogate of Maria Carina Machelo, who was not allowed to run. This is more than double the, the 30% that Maduro got. So despite all the obstacles that the regime put in place, millions of Venezuelans voted and independent tallies confirmed this result. So it's clear who has popular support and the legitimacy in the country and who can start to build credible institutions.

But for a new government to take over, most crucially, you will need a realignment of the armed forces, right? A re a willingness of the military to pass on the baton. And this means a change in leadership and a system of transitional justice across all ranks like we saw in Colombia and Rwanda. So if this is the moment where we have the most leverage, I think we should start asking for the changes in the political structure and a timetable for that democratic transition.

And again, if those are our goals and not just, you know, an oil grab, we're not gonna be alone in that, in that reconstruction.

BERGENGRUEN: That's right. And it does feel like for now, at least, publicly, that hasn't been one of the main stated goals or the main stated demands that the White House is making yet. But, you know, we'll have to see.

Tom, I'd be curious to get your take on, you know, the administration has framed this through many shifting rationales, all of its policy towards Venezuela in the last couple of months. First it was about accepting deportees, then it was about you know, drug flows. Then it was about oil. And, you know, they denied for a long time that it was about regime change. And that's kind of what we're seeing now. You know, could you tell us a bit, you know, through the lens of the national security strategy, which was very heavily pivoting towards the Western Hemisphere, how realistic is it that Washington can really you know, extract all of these outcomes they say they want from what's happening right now from this current Venezuela power structure?

WRIGHT: You're exactly right. You know, I think there are competing sort of narratives within the administration about what they're trying to accomplish. Let me just start with the national security strategy, which came out a, a month or so ago at the end of 2025. That was very clear that the administration was going to reassert the Monroe Doctrine and saw the Western Hemisphere and domination of the Western Hemisphere as critical to US national security. And I think, for many people, you know, the Venezuela operation is a manifestation of that.

I do think there are sort of two different voices within the administration on the justification. One, which I think is the minority view is sort of the Rubio view that this is, you know, about sort of drugs and narcotics, you know, and it's about governance. And, you know, wanting to see a transition to a more stable government. President Trump and Stephen Miller and others, and JD Vance, the vice president, I think are more of the dominant faction within the administration. And they have been increasingly clear that it's actually, you know, just about

just about oil. And it's about controlling the resources. And, and Vance, yesterday in an interview was asked, how does taking out a dictator in Venezuela help the average American? His response was, it means that we are going to be able to control the incredible natural resources of Venezuela. So nothing really about, you know, we need a good neighbor, or this is a better pathway for a better future for the Venezuelan people. But saying that it really is a more extractive, almost imperialist approach and using that as the main selling point.

And I think that will be very, very, you know, concerning to many, as it should be. Because it, it, it does a number of things. One, it sort of presents US foreign policy as sort of focused on that extractive domination element and not, you know, actually a normative goal. If you compare it to the Panama operation, which has been largely cited in the in the George Bush senior administration. There you had a US force that went in, that immediately restored the, a legitimate leader of Panama and it, and helped to create a pathway for Panama to get back to normal governance. Here the focus is on the resources.

The one other point I would just make and I think we saw this in a story that broke this morning on the oil companies. You know, asking for guarantees which is President Trump has this obsession with controlling oil. He spoke about it in Libya and Iraq and Syria before, over the last sort of decade and a half.

And so it's not a surprise. I think that that is now coming to the fore. But these companies are being asked to make investments that will take five to 10 years to bear fruit. And there will be, at that point, a different administration here. There may be as soon as, you know, in a year's time oversight in Congress the government in Venezuela may have a different approach by then.

And so they are basically been asked to jump into the dark to, to put their resources at risk. And I think they have real concerns about doing that. So I don't think that this gambit by the current president president Trump will succeed because I don't think they will have the sort of legal structures in place to assure the companies and others that this is legitimate.

BERGENGRUEN: That actually leads really well into my next question, which is, again, the legality of all of this. We have seen a lot of Trump allies, as you noted call this Panama 2.0. They you know, it, it was such a shocking scene on Saturday, and they keep referring to this, you know, the 1989 US invasion to remove Manuel Noriega and bring him to the US for trial and saying, look how great Panama is doing now, that worked really well. Like, you know, they're trying to basically stem fears that this is so, such an unprecedented thing. But Scott, you know, from a legal standpoint is that a good analogy? You have written that there are some key differences.

ANDERSON: Yeah, there are certain key similarities, but also notable differences, both in terms of particularly the international law arguments, but also the domestic law arguments.

The Panama intervention when the George HW Bush administration undertook, it was premised on the fact there had been attacks on US soldiers in a handful of cases, violent incidents in which US soldiers have been killed or assaulted, or people other US personnel or their family members. And also that there were unique treaty rights around the Panama Canal that the United States claimed, and that became the basis for both a kind of treaty claim, but more importantly, an Article 51 self-defense claim.

That is the only exception to the prohibition on the use of force under the UN Charter other than UN Security Council authorization. We don't know exactly what the Trump administration is arguing regarding the Maduro operation, but I strongly suspect, and I think most observers expect, it's an extension of the argument they've used for the maritime strikes they've been pursuing, which is also an Article 51 argument, but it's premised on something different.

It's premised on the idea that narcotics trafficking by groups like Trend Iua is the equivalent of an armed attack, meaning the equivalent of throwing a bomb or shooting a gun at a US citizen and at the United States more generally. And that that warrants a right of self-defense. That is a very contentious legal proposition for the rest of the world, and that no one else in the rest of the world has really clearly bought into.

Even those who have been ca, you know, tentatively supportive of the Trump administration's actions. For the simple reason that it would be hugely destabilizing 'cause you would essentially be saying all sorts of things could become the basis for a military response. And that's actually the exact opposite of what the UN charter was intended to accomplish.

The UN charter was premised on the proposition that war is very dangerous in the modern era, and we should not allow states to start using war to address any sort of international law violation or other concern. It should only reserve for the most severe circumstances that is a literal armed attack by one state against another in response to it, or the imminent threat thereof.

So that's a really, really controversial proposition a lot of states are gonna have trouble buying into. And that's a reason we've seen a lot of states begin to balk at cooperating with the United States, particularly around the maritime operation. And I suspect that's gonna be true among potentially other Venezuela operations as well, because from their perspective, this isn't the United States engaging in lawful warfare.

This is the United States, in the case of the maritime strikes, particularly killing civilians in the context of outside of warfare.

BERGENGRUEN: I was just going to say, since I have you on that topic, I mean, and, and it seems like, you know, we've seen the president threaten action against Mexico, against Colombia.

You know, he's been pretty loose with accusing other leaders of being nacro traffickers. I'm curious what you make about the, the way that the US has walked back the claim that Maduro is the head of this Cartel de los Soles that, you know, doesn't really exist in that format. And you know, whether that, you know, what that kind of means going forward, given that, you know, now that he's actually followed through on his threat against him, it seems really significant that they're walking it back after they've captured him.

ANDERSON: They have walked back the idea of the exact structure by which Maduro exercised control. I don't believe they've walked back the proposition that Maduro is involved in narcotic smuggling. And that is now, there's always been a little issue there is that a lot of the rhetoric around the threat to the United States is based on fentanyl trafficking.

And that's actually not really the core of what trend UA Moderno are accused of being involved in. Even the indictment in the Southern District of New York, it's primarily about cocaine smuggling. But nonetheless, the, the legal theory, I think the core parts are still there. Given that it's a pretty deferential standard, the executive branch gets to apply to its own logic.

The real problem with it is even if you accept all the facts as the Trump administration puts them forward, which may or may not be true, but if you're going to accept them, it still is a really, really novel destabilizing legal proposition countries are gonna have a problem with for many of those countries.

While the United States may not feel that beholden to international law care about international law. They actually do, either they care about as a political priority. Many of them have domestic laws in place that can hold people accountable for violations or that require their government agencies to articulate why what they're doing is consistent with international law, including close allies like the United Kingdom.

And that can have real consequences for them. That's why you see them having to approach these situations more carefully to say, Hey, if we provide intelligence or other forms of key support to the United States knowing that they could use it for these purposes that we believe are unlawful, maybe even crimes against humanity, a pretty severe category of unlawful conduct, then we ourselves, under national law, can be held responsible under the usual rules of state responsibility.

And that could have real domestic consequences for us. So it's, it's not easy to escape these international law constraints just by putting forward an argument if other countries don't buy into it. And so far they aren't.

BERGENGRUEN: Right. Vanda, I'm curious. I mean, again, we, as a reporter trying to shift, you know, sift through all these rationales, it's, it's, you know, it feels like it's a different one every week.

But now we've kind of seen, you know, the focus on deportations, which Maduro was accepting regularly twice a week since the beginning of this term of Trump's first second term. You know, we've seen a shift, you know, they're not really talking that much about drugs anymore. They're, you know, re full on regime change.

That's kind of fallen by the wayside too now. You know, it does feel like the oil is the central of it all. And can you tell us a bit about, you know, how feasible this is? You know, it seems like every day there's a new new details of the plan. You know, that the Venezuela is just going to be giving this huge amount of oil to the United States, then that some of those proceeds are going to go back to benefit the Venezuelan people.

But, you know, based on what we've heard so far, can you tell us a bit about how feasible all this is, Vanda?

FELBAB-BROWN: Sure. And I look forward to Scott coming in on the notion that we will, the United States will get the oil and then, or President Trump will get it, and then distribute it however he wants as part of the war booty.

But let me come just on the practicality of what it would require. So a key tenant of the administration's view of what will happen in Venezuela is that there will be these vast economic riches of obtained from the oil that will be somehow distributed between the United States and Venezuela for some purpose.

That at one point also includes making the people in Venezuela wealthy again wealthy and and free. Now the oil is oil to some extent in quotation marks. It's actually avatar. Its extraction is much more like digging dredging than just sucking it out with a straw. It is full of heavy toxic metals.

So it's processing, it is requires tremendous amount of investment that. Are elusive, under the best of circumstances that is competing oil of that kind from Canada, that is much more readily processed oil already available in the oil markets. So, you know, Venezuela comes in with this big disadvantage of potentially all lots of tar, but.

Stuff that requires tremendous amount of investment under the best of circumstances. And now you have a very decrepit, very damaged Venezuelan industry. So the immediate sunk costs for any imagined extractions are enormous repairing what's there, trying to then deal with the depletion of the more easily accessible oil and the real difficulty of what needs to be dug out process.

And before that it can be refined with the nu limited numbers of refineries available in Venezuela and beyond to be dealing with that oil. So, tremendous proposition at the time when President Kleem truly is rejecting climate change, green energy. But he thinks that US companies will operate like in the 1970s, but were companies actually.

I'm not interested in these kind of investments. So what kind of pushes demands will there be from the administration on US companies to have to come in if they don't want to come in voluntarily. And of course the latest that we are hearing from President Trump is also that with these proceeds that at one point will be generated, Venezuela will be obligated to be only buying US goods.

So again, a lot of assumptions that will be extraordinarily difficult to meet in reality.

BERGENGRUEN: Yeah. And you know, Marcela, in the midst of all of these demands when it comes to the oil again, we saw Secretary Rubio say that they're focused on stabilization and recovery. I mean, if the goal was to set Venezuela on the road to recovery, what needs to happen now and what are the risks that we are seeing, you know, in terms of potential destabilization, in terms of, you know, humanitarian crises.

You know, we're not really seeing much change right now except for these kind of extractive demands.

ESCOBARI: Right. There is a world around the, the, the extractive demands where he, the, the calculation is that the armed forces basically are fund themselves through their narcotics trade, and, and the oil revenue and, and and being able to control that.

Now again, embargos, sanctions, have not usually worked in in starving off the military because, you know, they're willing to starve the people before they stop paying themselves. So this is also gonna be a very, a risky proposition. There have been ways in which US AID,

State Department, in the past have passed on humanitarian aid outside of government processes, government in structures to create a buffer for the real, you know, humanitarian need that still exists. There's like 8 million people in, in acute need.

But again, anything long term, anything that could be sustainable requires rule of law, requires for this current government to stop repressing the people, to start, you know, giving the fundamental freedoms back to Venezuelans, releasing prisoners, like changing the rules of the game that the current government has no incentive to give. They are likely to give the Trump administration these economic guarantees. They've negotiated that in the past, but I think where the rubber meets the road and what should be a priority for, for the Trump is -- [audio interruption] -- demanding a timeline for a democratic transition. That's how that any investment, any recovery package will demand aside from getting the support from, from again, the rest of the world, so that the recovery, and it does not fall on the shoulders of the US alone.

BERGENGRUEN: Right. And kind of going back to the, to the national security strategy here and the broader framework that this administration is adopting in terms of its the way it exercises its power in the Western hemisphere, you know, one of the main demands we have reported that the White House is putting in front of Delcy Rodriguez and the, the government is that the government should curb its relations with China, Russia, and Iran. And that this really fits into how the United States wants to reassert itself after, you know, quite a bit of neglect of, of the Western Hemisphere you know, which always came second obviously, or not even second, further down the list after the wars in the Middle East and everything else. Tom, I'm curious, you know, given that this, they're now doing this through military force, through coercion, through leverage, is that a realistic way for the US to reassert itself in the, in the hemisphere? Or, you know, as, as some, as other administrations have laid it out in terms of, you know, really the, the hard work of actually doing, you know, partnerships that take a long time to form.

WRIGHT: Yeah, I mean, I think that's a crucial point. I mean, it's ironic because this is not an administration that cares about competition with China either in the Indo-Pacific or globally.

And that was pretty clear in the national security strategy where the competition with China was solely phrased in terms of economic competition and trade. You know, and last year, in contrast to his first term, President Trump pursued you know, a strategy basically of engagement. He talked about a G-2. He, he talked about sort of power sharing with China. He clearly sort of backed down from his initial offensive on trade tariffs, you know, and he's been tracking toward a summit, which he hopes in Beijing in April will, you know, be the sort of crowning achievement of his first 18 months, have a big deal between sort of the US and China and he's tried to avoid, you know, anything that is really, you know, provocative or, you know, or, or coercive toward or even competitive strategically toward China.

So I think to start with, we're gonna find it interesting in the run up to the Beijing Summit in April that this will be, you know, a thorny issue that he will need to resolve with Xi Jinping and with China. You know, Chinese entities obviously are invested in Venezuela. There's money involved, there's contracts. So I think that this will be a sticking point. And I think the China deal is such a priority for Trump, that he will, you know, that he will modify his actions in Venezuela to some extent, but we'll see about that.

More broadly on, you know, South America and that sort of competition for influence, you know, I think it will actually be sort of counterproductive because what you really need to do, I mean, it's fine to sort of say you know, that the US would work with Venezuela on that

democratic transition toward a more positive future. And as part of that, you know, that they should work more closely with democracies and with the United States and with others. But to have it purely on sort of the military side and then to be completely pulling back from an affirmative offering in the region and and to be focused solely on the coercive element, I think does provide China with an opening. And we've seen them jump into that in Brazil and Peru and elsewhere, you know, actually providing sort of economic investment offerings, sort of partnerships.

So I think the, the, the irony of sort of the Monroe Doctrine concept in the, in the national security strategy, you know, is actually that they have left themselves very vulnerable to to increase Chinese influence because they're basically stopping competing in terms of really engaging as a partner with other countries.

BERGENGRUEN: And as a follow up to that since we're on the topic, I mean, what about the other countries that, you know, the president himself and some other people around him kind of are hinting, could be next in this broader effort to back sympathetic governments in the region or ideological allies, but really also punish the ones they see as, you know, bad actors in the hemisphere. Cuba, Nicaragua but even, you know, the, the president's tone's a bit different sometimes from other people in his administration, but even when it comes to Mexico, to Colombia, to countries that they don't see as sufficiently cooperative in certain ways. You know, what about, what about, you know, what do you, I guess, what are you looking for at next, when, when, when there seem to be hinting that they have momentum and they intend for this to go beyond Venezuela?

WRIGHT: Yeah, I think that's a real issue. You know, I think if he feels, I mean we're talking about an administration and the government, but we're also talking about a person and quite sort of a, a unique sort of personality, obviously. And this is somebody who I think if he feels he's on a role, if he's, you know, executed a strategy that seems to have worked with a very sort of, you know, limited use of force like a very dramatic rate, he may be thinking, why can't I do that?

You know, again he likes the more sort of theatrical piece of it and they will, you know, basically feed that speculation that others might be next because he likes others to be on the back foot, you know, and to be afraid. And I think that could have, you know, unintended consequences. But it also raises the question of, you know, what is actually the strategy and not just the long term, but even the medium term play.

And all of this happens of course with Mexico, with others when you know they are sort of pulling back from the more affirmative engagement

FELBAB-BROWN: I can to

ESCOBARI: add.

FELBAB-BROWN: If I can come here on that I think it's very clear that Venezuela was never just about Venezuela and certainly the Trump administration feels very emboldened with other very aggressive, really 19th century imperialist Yankee domination agenda. You know, for Secretary Rubio, Venezuela was always about cutting the lifeline for Cuba that would result in toppling of the Cuban regime. Now, the big consequence of that might be massive flows of Cuban refugees. The situation in Cuba already as it is, it's really catastrophic and without oil from Venezuela and huge pressure from the Trump

administration on Mexico to stop oil from Mexico, that situation might become really catastrophic. And then massive flow of Cuban refugees, which Steven Miller might be very comfortable to deal with through deterrence based on brutality, but would that be comfortable for Secretary Rubio?

But I think what was really significant were the threats against Gustavo Petro and also the backing away from that, or at least the, the moment of reprieve that emerged out of yesterday's dramatic phone call between president of Colombia and President Trump.

But let me just home in on Mexico and, and Greenland. And I think that Marcela also wants to come in. Immediately within hours of the operation, you hear President Trump and other officials resurrecting the notion of US military strikes into Mexico against drug targets. And, this, despite the fact that such actions unilaterally would blow up one of the most crucial bilateral relationships that the country has, but even jointly would only take place with tremendous political costs and huge diplomatic headache for the Sheinbaum administration.

But yet you see this because there is a very strong element within the administration, including Homeland Security Advisor Miller, President Trump himself, who really wants to be doing this. And a lot of the Trump agenda is going back to Trump one and all the things that were not done or not successfully done then being now resurrected.

And I think we really need to talk about the, the most egregious and shocking element, which is the restatement of threats against Greenland. A island that is of course, part of Denmark, a close US ally, NATO ally. Even if the threats of annexation or fantasies of purchase do not come to materialize, the fact, the fact that the threats are being issued, that the way they are being stated this way that they are consuming European partners. It's a crucial death knell to the post World War II order and the authority, credibility, legitimacy of the United States.

BERGENGRUEN: Yeah,

ESCOBARI: Yeah, the only thing to add here is I, I, I do think when it comes to Latin America, there's more there than meets the eye. I think there's a willingness in the region to engage with Trump a growing number of ideological allies, plus pragmatic leaders like Sheinbaum in Mexico. But that's, as Tom said, if he decides, if he decides to apply military strategy elsewhere, that will repel most of these partners.

I mean, the need for a democratic transition in Venezuela has actually been a unifying topic across the hemisphere, aside from Cuba and Nicaragua. After Maduro's blatant theft of the 2024 election, even traditional allies like Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil pressed for a negotiated transition, you add to that 8 million refugees that have to destabilize the whole region and the urgency was, was, was undeniable.

So I don't think the US is on an island here, but, so you'll see a lot of public criticism, but privately, many leaders are glad that Maduro is gone. They definitely do not appreciate the methods and, and fear what it means for US power in the region. But I think there's a, there's, there's many leaders that wanna work pragmatically with Sheinbaum.

And again, this is a key opportunity for the US to bring this allies on the fold by pushing for a long term strategy in Venezuela around economic recovery and democratic transition. You

know, but the clear goal needs to be respecting the will of the Venezuelan people, not oil extraction or repayment of bond holders at their expense.

But there is an opportunity to, to to, to align with the region. And I think the call with Petro yesterday was a, a, a good example of of, of how quickly that can turn.

BERGENGRUEN: Definitely. And I think what's underlying all of this ultimately is that this is only happening not only, but you know, because of Trump's pretty free rein when it comes to use of military power, right? Like just being able to use, you know, the full force of the US military to accomplish his goals here. And Scott you know, the Senate just advanced the war powers resolution to rein in Trump on Venezuela, and, you know, kind of really you know, can you tell us what you expect to see from that? I mean, we've seen efforts over the last couple of months, but ultimately it does feel like this, the Maduro operation likely you know, escalated that a little bit.

ANDERSON: Yeah, absolutely, and I, and I should note I had a, a long in depth conversation with another of our colleagues, Caitlin Talmadge, for The Current, one of Brookings' podcast that actually just published. So folks can listen to that if you want a little bit of an extended conversation about that and other issues.

The Maduro operation really demonstrates the breadth of authority that the president in the United States claims to use military force. The executive branch, not just under Trump, but under every modern president and particularly recently, has essentially argued the president can use military force on his own authority without congressional authorization, where the, he can reasonably determine it's within the US national interests and where it will not result in a sustained and prolonged conflict.

Exactly where that line is, is never been clearly defined. Usually it's associated with like the Korean War or the Vietnam War. Some administrations have said, eh, it's probably a bit lower than that. Others have said otherwise. But it's a very high bar here. The Maduro operation was very targeted, right? Even compared to the Panama intervention, 1989 to 1990, that involved. 25 to 30,000 US troops sitting in the country for a month and a half. This was, you know, a couple dozen US troops in the country for two hours. So a very limited military operation.

Knocking over a head of state does present a risk of escalation, obviously. I think lawyers would have to take that into account if acting in good faith, saying this does obviously present a risk of escalation to something much greater. You have to take that into account. That's part of the legal framework. But nonetheless, you can see how executive branch lawyers would conclude prior presidents have done very dangerous things before on their own authority, and this is consistent with that past practice.

Notably, those views have never been vindicated by the US courts instead of the executive branch's ability to precipitate and rely on those views is facilitated by the fact that US courts don't like deciding on war powers issues. But there is one scenario where they have said that they usually would encounter and decide those issues, and that's where there's a clear conflict between the branches where the president is acting contrary to legislation. And that's where this resolution comes in this resolution, SJ Res 90, if I recall correctly introduced by Senator Kaine, Senator Paul, and a few other senators, is a type of joint resolution that the 1973 War Powers Resolution, a standing law, the one set of legal limits Congress, really has put on the use of military force, which really sets limits after 60 to 90 days, but doesn't do much before then it does provide expedited procedures that allow even a minority in the

Senate to move one of these resolutions to consideration essentially before it can be enacted by the Senate taken up by the Senate.

You have to have three different rounds of votes. And so what happened today by a margin of 52 to 47 with five Republicans voting with Democrats is the first of these procedural votes. Now, this resolution will eventually go to another procedural vote to decide, are we actually gonna debate this on the floor?

Then there'll be some discussion of potential amendments, and then they will actually have the vote on the final amended resolution saying, are we actually gonna enact this? And then of course it'll have to go to the house where there are not parallel expedited procedures for these joint resolutions.

That so it has to go through regular order, which is a high bar under a Republican controlled house, but notably a. There's a lot of dissent among Republicans around this particular issue in the house. It's a very narrow margin of control, and we've seen Republicans being willing to buck their leadership on a handful of issues in recent months.

So I wouldn't say it's impossible to just get through the house. If that happens, then Congress has enacted a law that says the President has to terminate the use of military forces in regards to Venezuela. That would put up a strong statutory limit if the president disregards it, he would be essentially implying, I have the constitutional authority to do this, even if Congress disagrees with me.

And he's setting up that exact conflict between the branches, where the courts that usually avoid war powers issues have said, actually, this is the one scenario where we probably do actually have to step in and decide is the President acting within his authority? Frankly, that's an argument the executive branch doesn't want to have and that it's studiously avoided. That's why it's able to assert such broad authority.

That said, these joint resolutions because of a Supreme Court decision called INSB Chadda in the early 1980s. These vehicles were shifted to joint resolutions that require presentment to the president. That means the president's gonna have a chance to veto this and to override that. Veto will require two third support in both chambers. That's almost impossible, extremely unlikely in the current situation. So the odds are this doesn't result in a hard legal limit on the president.

But as we saw in the Yemen context, in the Iran context during the first Trump administration, having these repeated votes, forcing Republicans to take a public stand on this particular issue, and demonstrating that there's actually bipartisan reservations to concern about this does have real political ramifications that proved very effective, particularly in the Yemen context of eventually pushing the Trump administration to wind down a lot of its more controversial types of support for the Saudi-backed coalition engaging in hostilities there. It also led to some enactment of certain statutory restrictions through the NDAA, through a separate process that, as opposed to joint resolution process. And there will be opportunities for that later this year.

Long and short of it is, this is a bad sign for the administration, that you have Republicans already 72 hours, 90, you know, just a few days after these operations willing to take these votes. And if things begin to go badly or not as well as the administration seems to be intending them to, that margin's only gonna increase, especially in an election year. So, long

story short, I think it suggests there is a constraint on how far the president can go, particularly with any sort of really aggressive second wave involving ground troops. There's just clearly a lot of reservations about that in Congress and that is gonna matter at some point.

BERGENGRUEN: That's right. I mean, when we've obviously focused a lot on, on US security objectives or what the Trump administration's trying to get out of it. But when it comes to the people inside of Venezuela.

You know, we're seeing, for example, when it comes to migration the administration basically saying, you know, it's safe. Now you can go back, eliminating TPS telling people they should go back even though, you know, again, they only took away Maduro and the rest of the repressive regime is still in place.

Vanda and then also Marcela, I'm curious about if you can, we talked a bit about it earlier, but tell us a little bit about these, like day after risks inside of Venezuela when it comes to the potential violence, the repression. And Marcela in particular as well, the, the, the impact of this intervention on migration flows.

FELBAB-BROWN: Yeah. Well, the repressive regime is fully in place and is acting with repression. So even just the reporting in the immediate hours and days after the exfiltration of Maduro are confirming that. And I think one of the reasons why the Trump administration has not brought in the. One person that, or, or two people who have incredible democratic legitimacy authority in the country is because they understand that changing the regime would be really difficult.

And, because to the extent that the objective become narrow about power protection, Cuba and oil, they think they can work with the repressive regime. Now, let's think about what would happen, what would be required to dismantle the regime. So Marcella started talking about the reform of the military forces.

And again, I would emphasize it's an enormously tricky problem. Very many factors, a lot of opaqueness. But beyond that, you have all kinds of arrangements between several set of armed actors, the Colombia military insurgent criminal groups, the ELN, the FARC dissident groups. You have heavily armed criminal actors, not just Tren de Aragua, but many other so-called bandas, criminales, and mega bandas, and you also have the collectivos. All of the, all of them need to be addressed in any kind of movement of the country toward the badly needed democratization, accountability that it needs. Security sector reform, particularly police reform, is the hardest reform a country can undertake. So all of this is very difficult and there is a notion that either it'll be completely untouched without any US forces on the ground through this kind of imaginary machinery that the people who are currently getting rich from the corrupt oil and other systems will now start more equably sharing those resources. Or that it'll somehow be undone by someone again without ease of US, significant US involvement and other involvement in that country. So the, the, the, there is tremendous amount of possibility of either the regime staying as it is with all its problems and its fundamental lack of accountability and legitimacy, or many forms of violence exploding across the country and being enormously difficult to control even in the absence of US troops on the ground and not just as a resistance to them.

BERGENGRUEN: Marcela, if you want to weigh in briefly, and then we're going to turn to audience questions.

ESCOBARI: And your question on migration, migration flows to the US border are shaped by what happens across the hemisphere, and nowhere is that clearer than in Venezuela. So while there has been a dramatic deterioration of the economic situation in Venezuela for the last 20 years, which has driven people to flee, the surges that we saw recently in out-migration are closely tied to moments where Venezuelans lose hope on, on a democratic transition.

We saw that in 2018 after the sham election of Maduro, where he disqualified all the competitors. There was both a surge in the intention and actually people leaving. And we saw it again before the 2024 elections. We had surveys of Venezuelans living in the United States that showed 65% of them would return to Venezuela if an opposition candidate won. And less than 15% said they would return if the economy improved. But the regime remained in power. So, you know, people flee in the numbers that we saw in Venezuela because they lack these fundamental freedoms: the ability to speak their mind, to live without fear. So it's very hard to see Venezuelan migrants returning to a country without the slightest guarantee of political freedom or legitimate governance, which is why at this moment, if we have a leverage on this, in, on this government, we should be using to start to see those political changes and the kind of changes that are necessary for, for a, the slow and painful turnover of the armed forces. But it is, these changes have happened in other countries. This is extremely hard, but it is not impossible if that indeed is our goal.

BERGENGRUEN: That's right. Well, let's turn to some of these audience questions. There's quite a few there's one that keeps you know, several of you submitted that keeps getting repeated, which is, you know, do Trump's actions here in Venezuela put Taiwan on notice? You know, how does this affect Taiwan's calculations when it comes to Beijing? Maybe Tom, if you wanna take that and if anyone else wants to jump in.

WRIGHT: I guess -- it's a very fair question -- I guess I'm a little skeptical that this gives a permission slip to, you know, dictators and autocrats globally in part because I think they were already sort of looking at this, right? I mean, Putin already acted in Ukraine first in 2014, and then in 2022 Xi Jinping, I think is making his own calculations on Taiwan.

You know, I think if he feels like he can get away with it and carry it out successfully, he may very well do that. I think he's worried that he can't do that right now. He may never have, be, be able to do it. I'm not sure that the tipping point is whether or not the US. Has done it. So I think on that scale, I think we are still in a world where that type of aggression is very possible.

I'm not sure it dramatically increased in Taiwan as a result of what happened in Venezuela. Having said that, I think if something happened, you know, in Taiwan or anywhere else globally, it's going to be much harder for the United States to rally a global coalition to say that, you know, acquiring territory by the use of force is illegitimate and countries should not be going in to take the natural resources of another country.

And, and when you have the president of the United States saying, not just in Venezuela, but also in Greenland, you know, that we need to control those resources because it's international interest would be good for us to do so. I think that that is a very, very dangerous argument to be making with a lot of implications globally.

BERGENGRUEN: Yeah. Another question that you know is coming up, and I know it's hard, we, we, you know, we're not going to speculate. It's, it's very difficult to figure out maybe Vanda, you can take it first and if any, anyone, anyone else wants to jump in, but, you know,

a lot of these questions are about how likely the current structure, the current government is, is going, is to stay in place if it gives Trump what he's asking for.

And again you, you all laid out all the challenges with that and how we shouldn't, you know, just assume that just because they say this is going to happen, it's actually going to work. But but if Rodriguez, for example, was cooperating and somehow things were, were to stay the way they are, how likely is it that the current structure will stay in place and that the Trump administration has less incentive, or at least you know, the, the power the decision makers do to push for a messy democratic transition?

FELBAB-BROWN: Well, unfortunately, I think there is substantial possibility that the regime can go on and if -- the regime is in place, only Maduro was changed. Now the country is not in the same dire economic situation that it was in 2018, 2015, in that period. Now, you know, if we see the United States really trying to prevent oil, sales of oil because there is lack of democratization, then I think it would be in a different picture.

But let's just assume that the administration doesn't push for democratization, doesn't care about it. The democratic opposition doesn't have the capacity to take power as long as the military and its many complex factions are getting enough income from the distribution system that's in place.

If that stopped being the case, then you could have rebellion from within the military. However, the question is the, the, the regime is built on repression. So let's imagine that there is no move toward democratization, and we start seeing democratic opposition leader, civil society activists, organizing demonstrations and forcing the regime to come down very hard, kill people, repress people. Will the Trump administration, other US administration be comfortable with that? Or will they feel that they cannot allow that to take place? But right now, the regime is not about to collapse. And the democratic forces do not have the capacity to take over through force. They would have to be complex negotiations with core actors in the Ministry of Interior, in the Ministry of Armed Forces, as well as the informal power. We, we haven't talked, for example, about the head of the collectivos, those, you know, very powerful men in charge, or at least with great deal of influence over the militias.

BERGENGRUEN: Marcela, anything to add on that?

ESCOBARI: Vanda is right. I think, you know, there was a confluence of different administration officials interest coming together in this operation. But I think Senator Rubio who has been following Venezuela for a long time, his interests are, are, are way beyond the narrower interest that President Trump has so far articulated and swapping Delcy for Maduro is, is not an end game for him. And that should be clear. I think what will become very complicated is whether the short, the goals of short-term stability and democratic legitimacy become at odds with each other, right? Delcy's government right now is cracking down on dissent just in the last few days, and as, as a way to signal the regime insiders that she's not planning to sell them out.

So if that works, along with all of Trump's demands on oil, we could see this lull for a period of stability and without meaningful change. And, and so I think they are, you know, they're very experienced stalling, which is why I think time is not on the US side if it actually wants to see a, a, a longer term democratic transition.

BERGENGRUEN: And one of the other, Scott, maybe for you, I mean, one of the, there's a question from Carl, but it was reflected in some other audience questions, which is, what happens if Maduro and his wife, you know, if there's a hiccup in this trial, what if, you know, obviously he's already indicted, but what if they're either found not guilty? What if, you know, I'm, what are you looking at when you are you know, observing this trial and how this could, you know, everything that's happening there could affect what's happening? Obviously outside.

ANDERSON: Yeah, that's absolutely true. I, I, I will say, you know, I think the Justice Department probably has done its due diligence and is pretty confident can bring a trial here and there.

While there are a lot of weird legal loopholes that come up when you're dealing with something as idiosyncratic, as prosecuting a foreign head of state or somebody who kind of was, you wouldn't, the United States hasn't recognized it. Most of them through the Noriega precedents or in other precedents have mostly been iron through.

There's a very good analysis on this by some of my colleagues on Lawfare that I encourage people to take up. That just went up, I believe this morning. But nonetheless, I think the key takeaway here is if somehow Maduro is not prosecuted becomes. Free. And they let him leave the country as presumably they, they would if there was a legal basis for holding him here.

I, it is not clear what would happen. A lot would depend on domestic politics within Venezuela. 'cause legally, remember, the United States has not recognized Maduro as the head of state or as his regime as the government of Venezuela since 2019. In that year, they shifted recognition, along with many, many other countries at the United States' recommendation to the regime of interim President Juan Guaido, who had that position by virtue of his leadership role in the 2015 National Assembly. And while he's no longer in that role, the United States has since said, essentially recognized the 2015 National Assembly as the last legitimate branch of the Venezuelan government.

And while the Trump administration hasn't been a hundred percent clear about that, it seems like it has maintained that position from the Biden administration. Several courts in the United States that have sought how to establish the US policy on this have assumed and been operating on the assumption that that policy has remains in place through the Trump administration, at least before this most recent event, and the Trump administration hasn't corrected them. This is important because outside Venezuela, inside Venezuela, the, the Trump administration is dealing with the Rodriguez regime as what I would call the defacto regime, meaning they're in control, but we don't see 'em as legitimate. We don't recognize 'em. We're not gonna establish diplomatic relations or enter into treaties. We are gonna just deal with them because that's the reality on the ground. Outside of Venezuela, the de jure government, the government that is seen as having the legal authority by the United States and a lot of other governments is still that opposition. And that means they're actually the ones who are able to exercise control over things like overseas oil assets or overseas subsidiaries of PDVSA, the national oil company. And particularly in the oil industry, that means you have the super bifurcated complex arrangement where there's a lot of disputes over who controls chunks of what, a lot of which has been fought out over in US courts since 2019 and in courts overseas. And that's gonna be a real, real barrier for the Trump administration if it actually wants to start restoring the oil industry, exporting it, not least because it's not gonna be clear who actually owns the soil and who can make the decisions about what to do with it and what to do with these different institutions.

So there needs to be some clarity coming from the Trump administration. It's exactly who do we recognize and then they need to persuade European allies, other allies to do the same. So that they can actually sell market oil in those global markets effectively without encountering all sorts of legal obstacles. But frankly, you know, as to what Maduro's hypothetical role might be in that future scenario, we, we don't even know what the government's going to be. Right. That's practicing there without Maduro. So that's hard to say how he's gonna enter into it.

BERGENGRUEN: Right. Well, thank you so much. I think one last question, I'll throw it to Tom on this one, but a lot of the questions from the audience also focused on whether we, and you touched on this earlier whether we can expect to see more direct intervention in Latin America.

But, you know, I think the other important thing to point out here is obviously it doesn't always look like a military operation. We've seen the, you know, Trump condition the massive bailout to Argentina on, you know, President Milei winning the, the midterm elections. We've seen him intervene in Honduras. So there's been quite a bit of direct intervention that wasn't necessarily military. But, you know, as you're looking ahead, there's three more years left in his term, can you just kind of tell us what you'll be looking for?

WRIGHT: Yeah, I mean, I think quite possibly, but also globally, you know, I think he is looking for opportunities to, you know, do things that vindicate his priors, right? Like things he, he, like taking the oil or you know, or such sort of ventures that have a low cost, low risk and are sort of over quickly and don't involve sort of a long-term US commitment. And I think he thinks that Greenland might be like that. You know, I'm not sure what he thinks of Cuba. I know what Rubio thinks of Cuba. I think Rubio has a slightly different sort of agenda here. And so I think all of that is quite possible.

But I think that what they're going to run into here though is that they actually are taking on, you know, a long-term commitment. And when President Trump has interviewed yesterday, you know, he said that the US will remain involved in Venezuela for quite some time. That that is as we are already seeing and as we've been discussing, like very, very complicated. And so I think one question, the flip side of your question is what happens, you know, when you know, actual success of his approach from his point of view requires patience and long-term sort of involvement and, you know, diligence and competency.

And I think, you know, as we're seeing with the oil companies and, and all of that right now, you know, I think there's a big question mark around that. But I think in direct answer to your question, they will see this as an exertion of the Monroe Donroe doctrine, whatever they're calling it. And I think they would like to continue to replicate that, but it will they will be bumping up against reality.

BERGENGRUEN: Well, thank you so much. It's been quite a start to the year, so I'm sure we'll be doing this again. Thank you so much for, to our panelists and to the audience and yeah, thanks for joining us.

WRIGHT: Thank you.