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Russia's Non-Response to US Actions in Venezuela Reveal a Kremlin Balancing Act

Russia's responses to the recent US military operation in Venezuela highlight the delicate balancing act it is engaged in vis-a-vis the Trump Administration - a balancing act that has come to define Russian foreign policy decision-making over the past year.

Russian official reactions to the January 2-3 US operation in Venezuela - including airstrikes and the seizure of former Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his wife Celia Flores and their transportation to the United States - were notably muted. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) issued a boilerplate condemnation of the military operation and called on Venezuela and the United States to find a diplomatic resolution.[1] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov spoke with Delcy Rodriguez, the former Venezuelan vice president and now president, on January 3, voicing Russia's support for the Venezuelan people.[2] Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzya criticized the military operation in Venezuela as -giving new impetus to neocolonialism and imperialism- - verbiage common to Russian critiques of the broader West.[3] Russian Security Council Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev issued a more directly scathing critique of the operation, accusing US President Donald Trump of violating international law, and then later praising Trump for protecting US interests.[4] Medvedev also used the US seizure of Maduro to threaten German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.[5] Medvedev's more sensationalist responses to developments in Venezuela are largely consistent with his wider role within the Russian information space, as the Kremlin often relies on Medvedev to shift the Overton Window by making extreme comments that appear to temper statements made by other senior Russian officials.[6] Russian President Vladimir Putin and official Kremlin mouthpieces have yet to address the situation in Venezuela as of the time of this writing, however. The lack of a coherent official Kremlin response, taken in tandem with the boilerplate Russian diplomatic responses, suggests that Putin has made the official decision to remain mute on the recent situation in Venezuela. Russia's diplomatic overtures are likely intended to signal Russia's rhetorical support to Russia's partners, while the Kremlin's silence on this issue is likely intended to signal to the Trump Administration that Russia will not pose an official challenge to Trump's foreign policy objectives. This set of responses is exemplary of the delicate balancing act that Russia has been engaged in since Trump took office

weighing its reputation in the eyes of its partners on one hand, and its ability to engage favorably with Trump on the other.

Russia's response to developments in Venezuela parallel Russian responses to the joint US/Israeli strikes on Iran in June 2025 - highlighting a continuity in Russian foreign policy decision-making over the backdrop of the war in Ukraine since Trump took office in January 2025.

Russian officials issued similarly boilerplate condemnations of US and Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities in late June 2025, but did not extend Moscow's support for Tehran beyond rhetorical outreach.[7] ISW notably assessed at the time that Russia's response options to the Israel-Iran war were limited both by material constraints due to the war in Ukraine and by political constraints due to Russia's desire to court the Trump Administration in the hopes of forcing the United States to end, or severely downgrade, its support for Ukraine.[8] Since the June 2025 Israel-Iran war, Russia has intensified its diplomatic efforts to ingratiate itself with the Trump Administration in order to secure beneficial concessions on the war in Ukraine. Much like the Russian response to the Israel-Iran war, the responses to the US operation in Venezuela suggest that the Kremlin has assessed that the costs of threatening the relationship it has built with the Trump Administration outweigh whatever benefits it might accrue from extending more material support to its international partners.

Russia was never going to meaningfully interfere on behalf of Maduro due in large part to mounting constraints accrued during the war in Ukraine.

Russia previously invested in safeguarding the Maduro regime diplomatically, economically, and militarily, in large part because Moscow viewed Caracas as a platform from which to contest the United States from within the Western Hemisphere.[9] Russian State Duma Defense Committee

Deputy Chairperson Alexei Zhuravlyov threatened the deployment of nuclear-capable Russian missiles to Venezuela as recently as October 2025.[10] Russia has historically been one of Venezuela's primary defense partners, providing the Maduro regime with military advisors, air defense systems, helicopters, and fighter jets.[11] Venezuela, in turn, provided Russia with access to its oil reserves and served as a platform for Russia to threaten the United States in the Western Hemisphere.[12] The Kremlin, however, clearly did not deem the presence of Russian assets in Venezuela at the time of the US military operation on January 3, 2026, as a reason to interfere on Maduro's behalf, nor could it have feasibly selected to interfere due to Russia's current resource-intensive invasion of Ukraine.

Russia also failed to intervene on behalf of both the Bashar al-Assad regime and Iran in December 2024 and June 2025, respectively, despite its heavy investment in the Assad regime and its heavy reliance on Iran for defense industrial support for the war in Ukraine. Russia's failures here are reflective of both

inability

and a

lack of strategic will

. Russia was unable to dedicate either manpower or means to support either the Assad regime or Iran due to the material constraints of the war in Ukraine. Ukraine remains Russia's top strategic priority, so the Kremlin was additionally unwilling to pivot its strategic focus to anything else.

Venezuela falls lower on the Kremlin hierarchy of partners, and Russia was therefore even less likely to engage to save the Maduro regime.

Russia is likely to pivot its posture in Venezuela to adapt to the new security reality in order to safeguard its interests in the Western Hemisphere.

Russia has displayed some degree of strategic flexibility vis-a-vis its partners in recent years, even despite geopolitical shifts that Moscow views as generally unfavorable. Russia has adapted to the new security situation in Syria following the December 2024 collapse of the Assad regime, for example, and reconsolidated its military presence under the Syrian transitional government.[13]

Russia has already taken steps to firm up its relationship with the new Venezuelan government under Delcy Rodriguez, echoing its approach to the post-Assad Syrian government. Russia notably has a pre-existing relationship with Rodriguez and is likely to lean on known Maduro regime elements that have remained intact in Venezuela to develop its relationships in the country moving forward.[14]

Moscow's desire to maintain access to the Western Hemisphere via Venezuela will likely continue to drive its relationship with Caracas, irrespective of US actions.

The Trump Administration has signaled that it is willing to put pressure on Russia's footprint in Venezuela, which will somewhat impact the strategic conditions to which Russia will have to adapt in a post-Maduro Venezuela. Sources reportedly familiar with the administration's plans reported that Trump is demanding that Venezuela 'kick out' Russia, Iran, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) and sever all economic ties with the three.[15] The United States also seized a Russian-flagged tanker carrying Venezuelan oil in the Caribbean on January 7, suggesting that the administration does intend to pressure Russian involvement in the Venezuelan oil industry.[16] If Trump Administration pressure on the Russia-Venezuela relationship persists, Russia is likely to employ a broad slate of covert tactics to safeguard its position in the country post-Maduro, much as it was able to do in a post-Assad Syria. Maritime intelligence organization Lloyd's List, for example, predicted that US seizures of tankers carrying Venezuelan oil will 'accelerate' the trend of Russian-flagged ships operating as part of the shadow fleet.[17]

Russia will continue efforts to ingratiate itself with Trump in the hopes of securing a favorable outcome in Ukraine, even at the expense of its partners, because the war in Ukraine remains Russia's absolute strategic priority.

The Trump Administration should be cognizant of the fact that Russia is deliberately using its responses to Trump's foreign policy actions as a bargaining tool, electing to temper its reactions to attacks against its partners in the hopes that its silence will be taken as support or alignment with the Trump Administration. Russia is likely to try and use this perception of strategic alignment in an attempt to secure favorable concessions regarding the war in Ukraine. Russia's actions (or lack thereof) towards its partners, even after US attacks, suggest that Russia still views a victory in Ukraine as its utmost priority, and Moscow will do everything and anything in its power to secure a desirable end state in Ukraine. The success of this bargaining tool, however, is contingent on the

types of costs that the United States and its allies are able to impose on Russia. Imposing costs on Russia in Ukraine and denying Russia the opportunity to achieve its desired end state in Ukraine will further weaken Russia's ability to align itself with states that can threaten the United States at home and abroad.

Endnotes

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