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Sovereignty under siege: U.S. actions in Venezuela and the erosion of international law in global governance

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Abstract

The foundation of the contemporary international order has always been the idea of state sovereignty. However, its applicability and legality are being called into question more and more by recent changes in international politics. The future of international law and the efficacy of global governance institutions are seriously called into doubt by recent United States' aggressive tactics toward Venezuela, which range from economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation to implied threats against political leadership. This article critically examines the implications of U.S. actions against Venezuela for state sovereignty, democratic norms, and the authority of the United Nations. Additionally, such selective enforcement of international norms risks creating precedents that other powers may invoke in different geopolitical contexts, as illustrated through a comparative reference to the China-Taiwan issue. The paper demonstrates that a deeper structural issue in global governance is reflected in the silence of the UN and regional organisations, employing a qualitative and comparative analytical approach grounded in international relations theory and international law. The study concludes that the international system runs the risk of returning to a power-centric order where strategic objectives take precedence over legal principles if significant institutional reform is not implemented.

Keywords: State Sovereignty, International Law, United Nations, U.S.-Venezuela Relations, Power Politics, Global Governance, China-Taiwan

Introduction

The modern international order is based on the fundamental principle of state sovereignty. Sovereignty is outlined in the United Nations Charter, namely in Articles 2(1) and 2(4), which protect states' political independence and territorial integrity while forbidding the threat or use of force (United Nations, 1945). Following the devastation of World War II, these principles were created to establish a rule-based international order and prevent dominance by powerful states. Despite this normative framework, a growing disconnect exists between political behaviour and legal principles in post-Cold War international politics. Economic sanctions, regime delegitimization, and indirect interference are examples of coercive tactics that powerful states are increasingly employing without the express consent of international organisations. This trend is best illustrated by the United States' recent stance against Venezuela. These acts pose severe questions about legality, legitimacy, and the weakening of sovereign equality, even when they are framed in terms of promoting democracy and human rights.

Concerns over institutional credibility are heightened by the United Nations, European Union, and regional organizations' subdued response to such measures. More importantly, enforcing international rules selectively runs the risk of illustrating a possible precedent that other major powers-might reference in their strategic calculations. For example, China's aggressive actions toward Taiwan are increasingly indicative of a geopolitical climate in which power politics take precedence over legal restraint. This article aims to examine how U.S. policies against Venezuela undermine state sovereignty, highlight the UN's shortcomings, and help to establish unilateralism in the international system. The study examines the consequences for global governance, democratic legitimacy, and the future of international law by placing the Venezuela case within a larger comparative framework.

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Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and comparative research design. It relies on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journals, scholarly books, newspapers, official UN documents, and policy analyses. The U.S.-Venezuela case serves as the primary unit of analysis, while China-Taiwan relations provide a comparative dimension to situate the discussion within a broader international context. The China-Taiwan reference is employed not as a predictive case study but as an illustrative comparison to examine how normative inconsistencies in the application of international law may influence the behaviour of other state actors. The analysis is theoretically informed by realism, liberal institutionalism, and international legal frameworks.

Analysis

This analysis is guided by the combined insights of realism and liberal institutionalism. The Realists argue that international politics is primarily shaped by power and strategic interests rather than strict adherence to legal or moral norms (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979) ^[8, 12]. Accordingly, U.S. actions toward Venezuela are examined as expressions of power politics aimed at preserving strategic influence. In contrast, Liberal institutionalists contend that international institutions can constrain state behaviour and promote cooperation (Keohane, 1984) ^[5]. The Venezuelan case exposes the limitations of these institutions when major powers bypass multilateral mechanisms. Together, these perspectives explain the erosion of international law and the normalisation of selective norm enforcement in contemporary global politics.

1. U.S. Actions Toward Venezuela: Legal and Political Dimensions

In an attempt to delegitimise the Maduro government, the United States has used a variety of tactics, such as economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and political pressure. Although these actions are presented as attempts to restore democracy, but raise significant legal concerns about non-intervention and sovereign equality. Economic sanctions, particularly when imposed unilaterally and without United Nations approval, can be viewed as coercive instruments that contradict the spirit—if not the explicit language—of international law (Gray, 2018) ^[1].

In January 2026, U.S. forces reportedly captured Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro during a military operation, raising serious concerns regarding violations of state sovereignty and international law (The Guardian, 2026). Shortly thereafter, former U.S. president Donald Trump publicly declared himself the “Acting President of Venezuela,” a symbolic yet provocative political gesture that reinforced allegations of external regime-change efforts and further challenged the principles of non-intervention enshrined in the UN Charter (Hindustan Times, 2026).

2. The United Nations and Institutional Breakdown

The UN's structural limitations are demonstrated by its inadequate response to the Venezuela crisis. When a strong state is involved, the Security Council's reliance on agreement among permanent members frequently leads to inaction (Weiss, 2018). This institutional weakness was clearly reflected during the emergency meeting of the UN Security Council following the reported seizure of Venezuelan President, where several member states

condemned the U.S. action as a violation of international law and the UN Charter, despite acknowledging concerns about Maduro's legitimacy (BBC News, 2026). Such division further erodes the UN's credibility as an unbiased defender of international law.

3. Democratic Rhetoric and Strategic Interests

The contradiction between democratic rhetoric and strategic practice becomes particularly evident when the United States' operation in Venezuela is examined through the lens of international law. Legal experts cited in The Guardian contend that the United States' operation in Venezuela is difficult to reconcile with Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which prohibits the use of force against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. Geoffrey Robertson KC characterises the action as a breach of the Charter and an act of aggression, while Elvira Domínguez-Redondo similarly identifies it as an unlawful use of force. Susan Breau further argues that such an operation could only be lawful if authorised by the UN Security Council or justified under self-defence—conditions for which no compelling evidence has been presented (McKelvie, G., 2026, January 3) ^[7]. These assessments highlight the disjunction between democratic rhetoric and legal norms, reinforcing critiques that strategic interests often take precedence over normative commitments in the practice of U.S. foreign policy.

4. Comparative Analysis: China, Taiwan, and Precedent Setting

China's approach to Taiwan increasingly reflects a strategic environment shaped by selective norm enforcement. China frames its actions as internal matters of sovereignty rather than issues of international concern by taking advantage of ambiguities in the international system, which are partially caused by powerful states' inconsistent commitment to international norms. Beijing closely observes patterns of Western interventionism elsewhere and uses the “One China” principle to justify diplomatic, military, and political pressure on Taiwan (Johnston, 2019) ^[4]. In addition to undermining the non-use of force principle, this strategy helps set precedents in international politics by reinterpreting norms to serve strategic objectives. As a result, the Taiwan issue serves as an example of how the selective application of international law undermines normative coherence and promotes power-driven conduct, escalating tensions within the regional and international order (Ikenberry, 2018) ^[3].

A campaign against “narco-terrorism” and criminal networks purportedly connected to the Maduro government, backed by federal indictments, is the main justification for recent U.S. military action in Venezuela, which exemplifies the selective application of international rules (BBC News, 2026). The argument was presented politically rather than as clear legal justifications under the UN Charter, and many experts contend that such claims do not provide legitimate grounds for unilateral intervention without Security Council approval (The Business Standard, 2026). Echoing Beijing's own deployment of sovereignty narratives toward Taiwan, China and Russia denounced the operation as a breach of international law and sovereignty, emphasising how selective enforcement allows great powers to reinterpret standards to serve strategic interests (Foreign Policy, 2026).

5. Global Implications: From Rule-Based Order to Power Politics

The U.S. action taken against Venezuela are indicative of a larger change in international politics from a rule-based order to one that is power-centric. The authority of international law and multilateral institutions is threatened by the increasing reliance on unilateral actions, which are frequently supported by selective legal and moral interpretations (United Nations, 1945). As a result, smaller states are more vulnerable as strategic interests take precedence over the idea of sovereign equality. Global governance and collective security are weakened by the marginalisation of organisations like the United Nations. Thus, the Venezuelan case demonstrates the return of realist dynamics in international relations, where national interest and power take precedence over the law (Morgenthau, 1948) ^[8]. This tendency runs the risk of normalising coercive tactics and further undermining the legitimacy of international law, which would lead to a more disjointed and unstable world order (The Guardian, 2019).

Discussion

A substantial conflict between the normative obligations of the international order and the real conduct of powerful states is shown by the examination of U.S. policy toward Venezuela. Although the United States defends its actions against "narco terrorism" and criminal organizations purportedly connected to the Maduro administration, it is unclear whether these actions—specifically, unilateral sanctions, diplomatic recognition of alternative leadership, and implicit threats—operate in a legally ambiguous space. The fundamental tenets of the UN Charter—non-intervention and sovereign equality—are called into question by these acts. Thus, the Venezuelan situation serves as an example of how democratic rhetoric can conceal strategic aims, supporting realist criticisms that international outcomes are still shaped by power rather than the law.

It becomes clear that the United Nations' involvement is especially troublesome. Deep structural limitations, particularly the paralysis of the Security Council when permanent members are directly or indirectly engaged, are highlighted by the organisation's weak response. This institutional silence adds to a larger issue of legitimacy in international governance rather than just reflecting procedural weakness. International organisations run the risk of coming out as biased, politicised, and ineffectual when they don't react consistently, which undermines confidence among smaller and weaker states. By situating the Venezuelan case within a border normative framework, the study highlights how deviations from established legal principles can weaken the universality of sovereignty norms and contribute to a precedent-driven, power-centric international order.

The claim that selective norm enforcement creates risky precedents is further supported by the comparative analysis of China-Taiwan relations. China's strong stance toward Taiwan provides an example of how powerful nations might interpret sovereignty in a way that advances their strategic goals. The conversation demonstrates how Western unilateralism elsewhere contributes to Beijing's confidence in redefining international rules. As a result, the Venezuela issue cannot be seen in a vacuum; rather, it is a part of a larger trend where international law is becoming

instrumentalized rather than being implemented uniformly. Overall, the discussion highlights a systemic contradiction: the international order continues to invoke rules and norms rhetorically while tolerating their erosion in practice. This contradiction accelerates the shift from a rule-based system toward a power-oriented global order.

Findings and Conclusion

The study arrives at several key findings. First, U.S. actions toward Venezuela significantly undermine the principle of state sovereignty by normalising coercive practices outside multilateral authorisation. Second, the United Nations has proven structurally incapable of effectively responding to violations involving powerful states, thereby weakening its authority and credibility. Third, the selective implementation of international law encourages other major powers, most notably China, to justify forceful behaviour under the pretence of sovereignty, which directly adds to normative inconsistency. Fourth, by associating the advancement of democracy with intervention and strategic self-interest rather than commitment to legal norms, such activities undermine democratic legitimacy in international relations. Lastly, the results support a more general trend toward realistic perspectives where the institutional and legal restraints are more subordinated to power politics.

This paper contends that the U.S. strategy against Venezuela illustrates a larger crisis in international law and global governance rather than just a bilateral confrontation. The foundations of the post-World War II international order are in danger due to the deterioration of sovereignty norms, institutional silence, and selective rule enforcement. The international system faces the risk of returning to a power-centric order characterised by instability and mistrust if strong states continue to put strategic goals ahead of legal principles. In comparison with other contemporary cases such as China-Taiwan relations, the Venezuelan issue illustrates how normative inconsistency and unilateralism have an impact on the entire world. A renewed commitment to multilateralism, consistent enforcement of norms, and significant institutional reform are necessary to restore the legitimacy of international law. Without such initiatives, the possibility of a rule-based international order would continue to erode and global governance will remain uncertain.

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