

# **Sovereignty vs. Intervention: Re-examining International Law after the 2026 United States Intervention in Venezuela**

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## **Abstract**

This study critically examines the tension between state sovereignty and external intervention through the lens of the 2026 United States intervention in Venezuela, situating the event within the broader framework of contemporary international law. Traditionally, sovereignty has functioned as a foundational principle safeguarding territorial integrity and political independence, reinforced by the prohibition on the use of force under the United Nations Charter. However, evolving global challenges—including humanitarian crises, transnational threats, and contested governance—have increasingly tested the rigidity of this norm. The 2026 intervention presents a complex case in which legal justifications, including counter-narcotics operations, democratic restoration, and humanitarian considerations, intersect with geopolitical interests. This paper evaluates the legality of the intervention by analyzing its alignment with established exceptions such as self-defense and Security Council authorization, while also interrogating emerging doctrines like the Responsibility to Protect. It further explores the implications of unilateral action for the credibility and consistency of international law, highlighting concerns over selective enforcement and precedent-setting behavior by powerful states. Ultimately, the study argues that the incident underscores an urgent need to recalibrate international legal frameworks to better reconcile sovereignty with evolving norms of intervention, ensuring both the protection of state integrity and the promotion of global stability and human rights.

## **Keywords**

State Sovereignty, Humanitarian Intervention, International Law, Use of Force, United Nations Charter, Responsibility to Protect (R2P), Venezuela Crisis, U.S. Foreign Policy, Global Governance, Legal Norms

## **Introduction**

The principle of state sovereignty has long served as a cornerstone of the international legal order, underpinning relations among states and preserving the stability of the global system. Rooted in the post-Westphalian framework and codified in the Charter of the United Nations, sovereignty guarantees the territorial integrity and political independence of states, shielding them from external interference. Closely linked to this principle is the prohibition on the use of force, which restricts unilateral military action except in narrowly defined circumstances such as self-defense

or with authorization from the Security Council. However, the evolving dynamics of global politics, marked by humanitarian crises, transnational threats, and ideological conflicts, have increasingly challenged the rigidity of these foundational norms.

The 2026 intervention by the United States in Venezuela has reignited longstanding debates surrounding the legitimacy and limits of external intervention in sovereign states. Venezuela, under the leadership of Nicolás Maduro, had been grappling with profound political instability, economic collapse, and allegations of human rights abuses. These internal challenges, coupled with the country's strategic importance as a major oil producer, drew significant international attention. The United States justified its intervention on a combination of grounds, including counter-narcotics enforcement, the restoration of democratic governance, and the protection of regional security interests. Yet, the absence of explicit authorization from the United Nations Security Council and the ambiguity surrounding claims of self-defense have raised critical questions about the legality of such action under international law. This development highlights a fundamental tension between two competing imperatives: the respect for sovereignty and the perceived necessity of intervention in situations deemed to threaten human rights or international stability. While doctrines such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) have emerged to address mass atrocities and humanitarian emergencies, their application remains contested, particularly when invoked unilaterally. Critics argue that such interventions risk undermining the international legal order by setting dangerous precedents for powerful states to bypass established norms. Proponents, however, contend that strict adherence to sovereignty in the face of severe humanitarian or governance failures may perpetuate suffering and instability. Against this backdrop, the 2026 U.S. intervention in Venezuela serves as a critical case study for re-examining the evolving contours of international law in the twenty-first century. It underscores the growing complexity of balancing legal principles with moral and strategic considerations in an interconnected world. Furthermore, it raises broader concerns about the consistency, legitimacy, and enforceability of international legal standards in an era characterized by shifting power dynamics and geopolitical competition. This paper seeks to explore these issues by analyzing the legal, political, and ethical dimensions of the intervention, with particular emphasis on its implications for the principle of sovereignty and the future of international law. In doing so, it aims to contribute to ongoing scholarly and policy debates on how best to reconcile the enduring importance of state sovereignty with the emerging demands for accountability, protection, and global governance.

## **Conceptual Foundations of International Law**

The contemporary international legal system is built upon a set of foundational principles that govern relations among states and provide a framework for maintaining global order. Among these, the principle of state sovereignty and the doctrine of non-intervention stand as central pillars, shaping both legal obligations and political expectations within the international community. Understanding these concepts is essential to evaluating the legality and legitimacy of modern interventions, including the 2026 United States action in Venezuela. State sovereignty refers to the supreme authority of a state over its territory and domestic affairs, free from external interference. This principle, historically rooted in the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, has evolved into a legally binding norm enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations. Article 2(1) affirms the sovereign equality of all member states, while Article 2(4) explicitly prohibits the threat or use of force

against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. Sovereignty thus serves not only as a legal right but also as a protective mechanism that ensures stability in an otherwise anarchic international system. However, absolute sovereignty has increasingly been questioned in light of global interdependence and the rise of international human rights norms.

Closely linked to sovereignty is the doctrine of non-intervention, which prohibits states from interfering in the internal or external affairs of other states. This doctrine reinforces the autonomy of governments and prevents coercive actions that could destabilize international peace. Traditionally, non-intervention has been interpreted strictly, limiting foreign involvement in matters such as political governance, economic policy, and social organization. Nevertheless, the realities of modern conflicts—often involving internal crises with international repercussions—have blurred the lines between domestic jurisdiction and global concern. Despite the strength of these principles, international law recognizes limited exceptions to the prohibition on the use of force. One such exception is the inherent right of self-defense, as outlined in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, which permits states to respond to armed attacks. Another key exception involves actions authorized by the United Nations Security Council under Chapter VII, allowing for collective measures to maintain or restore international peace and security. These mechanisms are intended to balance the protection of sovereignty with the necessity of responding to threats that transcend national borders. In recent decades, additional doctrines have emerged to address situations where strict adherence to non-intervention may result in severe humanitarian consequences. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P), endorsed by the United Nations in 2005, represents a significant normative shift by asserting that states have an obligation to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. When a state fails to fulfill this responsibility, the international community may, in principle, take collective action. However, the implementation of R2P remains contentious, particularly when invoked without clear multilateral support. These conceptual foundations reveal an inherent tension within international law: the need to preserve state sovereignty while addressing circumstances that may justify external intervention. This tension forms the basis for ongoing debates about legality, legitimacy, and moral responsibility in global governance. As such, any assessment of contemporary interventions must be grounded in a careful understanding of these core principles and their evolving interpretations.

## **Overview of the 2026 U.S. Intervention in Venezuela**

The 2026 intervention by the United States in Venezuela represents a significant and controversial episode in contemporary international relations, drawing widespread global attention and debate. The operation unfolded against the backdrop of a prolonged political and economic crisis in Venezuela, characterized by hyperinflation, institutional breakdown, and deepening social unrest. Under the leadership of Nicolás Maduro, the Venezuelan government faced mounting criticism from both domestic opposition groups and international actors, many of whom questioned the legitimacy of his administration following disputed elections and allegations of authoritarian governance. In early 2026, the United States initiated a targeted intervention aimed at dismantling key elements of Venezuela's leadership structure. Reports indicate that the operation involved a combination of military precision, intelligence coordination, and support for opposition forces. A central moment in the intervention was the capture of Nicolás Maduro, an unprecedented action that signaled a direct challenge to the principle of sovereign immunity traditionally afforded to

sitting heads of state. The United States justified its actions on multiple grounds, including the need to combat transnational drug trafficking networks, restore democratic governance, and address regional security threats allegedly emanating from Venezuelan territory.

The immediate aftermath of the intervention saw a rapid shift in Venezuela's political landscape. Transitional authorities, reportedly backed by international actors, began efforts to stabilize governance structures and organize new elections. At the same time, the intervention triggered significant domestic reactions, ranging from public support among opposition groups to resistance from loyalist factions and segments of the population concerned about foreign interference. The country's already fragile economy experienced further disruption, though some observers anticipated potential long-term recovery under a restructured political system. Internationally, the response to the intervention was deeply divided. While some states and regional organizations expressed cautious support or remained neutral, others strongly condemned the action as a violation of international law and Venezuelan sovereignty. Major global powers raised concerns about the precedent set by unilateral intervention, particularly in the absence of explicit authorization from the United Nations Security Council. Critics argued that the operation undermined the established legal framework governing the use of force, while supporters framed it as a necessary response to an exceptional crisis. The 2026 intervention thus stands as a complex and multifaceted event, shaped by legal ambiguity, geopolitical interests, and competing narratives of legitimacy. It not only altered the internal dynamics of Venezuela but also reignited global debates about the boundaries of lawful intervention and the evolving nature of sovereignty in international law.

## **Conclusion**

The 2026 intervention by the United States in Venezuela has brought renewed urgency to one of the most enduring debates in international relations: the balance between state sovereignty and the legitimacy of external intervention. As this study has demonstrated, the principle of sovereignty—firmly embedded in the Charter of the United Nations—remains a foundational norm intended to preserve order, equality, and stability within the international system. Yet, the realities of modern global politics, characterized by internal conflicts with transnational implications, increasingly challenge the absoluteness of this principle. From a legal standpoint, the intervention raises serious concerns regarding compliance with established international law. The absence of authorization from the United Nations Security Council and the lack of a clear self-defense justification place the action in tension with the prohibition on the use of force. While the United States advanced arguments related to counter-narcotics operations, democratic restoration, and regional security, these justifications remain contested and insufficiently grounded within recognized legal exceptions. As such, the intervention risks being interpreted as a breach of sovereignty and a potential erosion of the legal norms that govern interstate conduct. At the same time, the case underscores the limitations of a rigid adherence to non-intervention in situations where governance failures, human rights concerns, and regional instability intersect. The emergence of doctrines such as the Responsibility to Protect reflects an evolving recognition that sovereignty entails responsibilities as well as rights. However, the unilateral nature of the 2026 intervention highlights the dangers of selectively invoking such principles without broad international consensus, thereby undermining their legitimacy and opening the door to potential misuse by powerful states. Beyond its immediate impact on Venezuela, the intervention carries far-reaching implications for the future

of international law and global governance. It sets a controversial precedent that may encourage similar actions by other states, contributing to a gradual weakening of the rules-based international order. Moreover, it exposes persistent inequalities in the enforcement of international law, where geopolitical power often shapes legal interpretation and accountability.

In conclusion, the 2026 United States intervention in Venezuela illustrates the deep and unresolved tension between sovereignty and intervention in the twenty-first century. It calls for a careful re-examination of existing legal frameworks to ensure they remain both relevant and effective in addressing contemporary challenges. Moving forward, strengthening multilateral institutions, enhancing legal clarity, and fostering genuine international cooperation will be essential to reconciling the demands of state sovereignty with the imperatives of global peace, security, and human dignity.

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