

FORCE DISGUISED AS LAW ENFORCEMENT IN VENEZUELA: GRADUATED COERCION, SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND THE STRATEGIC LOGIC OF LEADERSHIP DECAPITATION

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Abstract: The removal of Nicolás Maduro by US forces on 3 January 2026 is usually analysed as a problem of international law. This article treats it as a problem of military strategy. It asks how the United States built the campaign that ended with the seizure of a sitting head of state, and why a tactically successful decapitation produced neither the collapse of the Venezuelan regime nor a protracted war, but a rapid alignment of the successor government with Washington. Using process tracing across four phases of the campaign between September 2025 and January 2026, and following the outcomes through September 2026, the article finds that the operation was the final rung of a graduated coercion ladder that moved from lethal maritime interdiction, through a blockade of sanctioned oil tankers and a limited strike on port facilities, to a single-night raid on Caracas. The law enforcement framing of the raid was not only legal rhetoric; it worked as an escalation-control device that signalled limited aims to the Venezuelan armed forces and the chavista elite, and it shaped a small-footprint design consistent with the theory of special operations. The original contribution of the article is the concept and model of custodial decapitation: a mode of leadership removal in which a state leader is seized alive and transferred to the captor's jurisdiction while the state apparatus is deliberately left intact, so that decapitation operates as compellence against the successor elite rather than as foreign-imposed regime change. Three mechanisms drive the model: demonstrated reach, custody as continuing leverage, and a preserved apparatus able to deliver concessions. The Venezuelan sequence that followed, from the January opening of the oil sector to the 25-year energy agreement announced in August 2026, fits the model closely. The findings suggest that custodial decapitation lowers the costs that historically made overt regime change rare, which makes it an attractive and destabilising template for great power coercion.

Keywords: *leadership decapitation, special operations, graduated coercion, compellence, escalation control, foreign-imposed regime change, Venezuela, Maduro.*

INTRODUCTION

In the early hours of 3 January 2026, US forces struck targets in and around Caracas, seized President Nicolás Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores, and flew them to New York to

face narco-terrorism charges (Security Council Report, 2026). The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff described the action as an apprehension mission carried out in support of a request from the Department of Justice; approximately seventy-five to eighty Venezu-

elans and Cubans were killed and six US service members were injured (Cogan, 2026). Two days later, the US Permanent Representative told the Security Council that his country had conducted a surgical law enforcement operation and that there was no war against Venezuela (UN Security Council, 2026). The international legal literature has already characterised the raid as a breach of the prohibition of the use of force (Longobardo, 2026; Cogan, 2026; Redaelli, 2026). The strategic questions, by contrast, remain largely unexamined.

Those questions are not trivial. Overt seizure of a foreign head of state is rare. During the Cold War the United States attempted 64 covert regime changes against only 6 overt ones, precisely because overt action carried heavy political and military costs (O'Rourke, 2020). The closest precedent, the 1989 invasion of Panama, required a large ground force and ended with the installation of a new government (Brownlee, 2024). In 2026 no new government was installed. Instead, Vice-President Delcy Rodríguez assumed the presidency in an acting capacity, met the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency within two weeks and called for warmer relations with Washington and the opening of the oil industry to foreign investors (The Hill, 2026). By the end of August 2026 her government had concluded a 25-year energy agreement that, according to the US President, gave the United States majority control over a large share of Venezuela's proven reserves (CNBC, 2026; Fortune, 2026). The leader was gone; the regime remained; its policy had turned.

This sequence challenges the standard expectations of two literatures. Studies of leadership decapitation, built mainly on terrorist and insurgent organisations, find that bureaucratised groups with strong communal support tend to survive the removal of their leaders and sometimes become more violent (Jordan, 2019; Milton & Price, 2020). Studies of foreign-imposed regime change find that

removing a leader by force frequently produces instability, civil conflict and hostile successors (Downes, 2021; Willard-Foster, 2019). The Venezuelan case produced neither collapse nor hostility. It produced compliance.

The central research question of this article is therefore how the United States designed and executed the campaign that culminated in Maduro's seizure, and why the tactical success of decapitation translated into coercive leverage over the successor elite rather than into regime change or war. Three hypotheses guide the inquiry. The first hypothesis (H1) holds that the raid was the final rung of a graduated coercion ladder in which each phase (maritime interdiction, economic strangulation, a limited strike and decapitation) tested Venezuelan and international responses and lowered the expected cost of the next step. The second hypothesis (H2) holds that the law enforcement framing functioned as an operational parameter and an escalation-control device: it defined a narrow objective, justified a small footprint and signalled to the Venezuelan armed forces that the state itself was not the target. The third hypothesis (H3) holds that, because the leader was seized alive and the state apparatus was left intact, decapitation operated as compellence against the successor elite rather than as foreign-imposed regime change.

The original contribution of this article lies in the concept and model of custodial decapitation. Unlike the established distinction between killing and arresting leaders of non-state organisations (Erdoğan, 2025; Ofuasia & Ben, 2025), the model applies to the leaders of states and specifies three mechanisms through which seizure without regime replacement generates leverage: demonstrated reach, custody as continuing leverage and a preserved apparatus able to deliver concessions. It also specifies the scope conditions under which the model is likely to hold. The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the relevant strategic literature and

sets out the methodology. The research results present the campaign sequence, the post-raid outcomes and a structured comparison with two earlier custodial removals. Four analytical sections then interpret the results, and a further section draws implications for small and middle powers before the conclusion evaluates the hypotheses and identifies limitations.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Literature Review

The literature on leadership decapitation has grown rapidly, but almost entirely around non-state actors. Jordan (2019), drawing on nearly one thousand cases of leadership targeting, concludes that decapitation rarely destroys groups that are highly bureaucratised, enjoy communal support or are driven by religious or separatist ideologies, and that the largest and oldest organisations are the most resistant. Milton and Price (2020) add that organisations embedded in dense networks are more resilient to the loss of their leaders. Ibrahim Shire (2023) shows that targeted killings of al-Shabaab leaders were followed by a proliferation of simpler suicide attacks intended to signal continued potency, and Ofuasia and Ben (2025) argue that decapitation has often fuelled escalation rather than deterrence. For Latin America, Brockett (2019) finds that Guatemala's kingpin strategy did little to reduce trafficking but helped reduce drug-related violence, while Burke (2026), using data on six countries including Venezuela for 2022 to 2024, finds that state-perpetrated decapitations are consistently associated with increases in battle deaths between state forces and criminal groups.

A key conceptual advance comes from Erdoğan (2025), who argues that the literature has focused on the military effects of decapitation at the expense of its effects on bargaining, and that arrest and killing are

analytically distinct. An arrested leader retains a role, from prison, in a new bargaining game between the leader, the state and the organisation; in the case of the PKK, the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan helped terminate the conflict in the short run but proved counter-productive in the medium and long run (Erdoğan, 2025). This insight is the starting point for the present article, which transposes the distinction from insurgent organisations to states.

The second relevant literature concerns the strategic utility of special operations. The theory of special operations formulated by William McRaven, and traced by Wirtz (2022) through its influence on the 2011 Abbottabad raid, holds that a small force can achieve relative superiority over a larger defender for a limited time through simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed and clarity of purpose. Lambakis (2021) recalls Colin Gray's argument that the strategic value of special operations can only be judged historically and in relation to political ends, while Lewis (2019) emphasises their role in political warfare, where small teams produce strategic effects through local influence. Gielas (2024) documents persistent friction between special and conventional forces in US practice, a reminder that operations of this kind depend on integration with air, naval and intelligence assets. The research published in this journal on the application of Boyd's OODA loop to the coordination of unmanned reconnaissance systems shows how compressing the adversary's observe–orient–decide–act cycle has become central to contemporary tactical design (Kim, 2025).

The third literature concerns coercion, escalation and the grey zone. Compellence depends on the credibility of threats, and repeated unfulfilled threats can produce credibility fatigue, as Sinovets and Alkış (2025) show for Russian nuclear signalling. Wilkenfeld et al. (2022) find that the use of proxies in grey-zone crises affects the probability that defenders respond with violence, and Sukin

and Hedgecock (2026) argue that deniability strategies make escalation more likely but lower its intensity. Vardanjan (2026) models coercion that deliberately stays below the threshold of armed conflict, and Li (2024) re-interprets operational pauses as instruments of strategic exhaustion rather than mere logistical interruptions. US practice in 2025 provided recent precedents of limited, high-intensity strikes against a state target: the strikes on Iran's nuclear programme were a calculated gamble whose strategic effects remain disputed (Eisenstadt, 2025; Whitlark, 2025). In the Venezuelan theatre, the deployment of a carrier strike group to the southern Caribbean in autumn 2025 represented the most serious US show of force against Caracas in decades ("The US Pressure Campaign," 2025).

The fourth literature concerns regime change and regime resilience. O'Rourke (2020) explains why Washington historically preferred covert to overt regime change, and Villa et al. (2022) show that economic expropriation signalled to the United States a possible exit from its hierarchy, raising the probability of regime change attempts. Downes (2021) and Willard-Foster (2019) document how often foreign-imposed regime change fails to produce stable, compliant governments, while Brownlee (2024) identifies Panama in 1989 and 1990 as one of the rare post-Cold War successes. On the defender's side, Reiter (2020) shows that coup-proofing usually reduces military effectiveness, and Binetti (2026) finds that counterbalancing concentrates elite units near the capital and degrades performance elsewhere. Iwanowski (2021) analyses the Venezuelan systemic crisis through the lens of civil-military relations, a perspective that this article extends by asking how a defence establishment shaped by regime protection responds to a short external operation. Mazza (2026) reviews the historical parallels drawn to the 2026 raid and documents the shift of its public rationale from counter-narcotics to control of Venezuelan

oil. Two gaps follow from this review. The decapitation literature lacks a theory of what happens when the target is the leader of a state and the state apparatus is spared. The regime change literature lacks a category for removal of a leader without replacement of the regime. The concept of custodial decapitation developed here is designed to fill both.

Research Methodology

The article uses theory-guided process tracing within a single case, complemented by structured focused comparison with two earlier custodial removals. Process tracing is appropriate because the research question concerns a causal sequence in which the order, timing and interaction of steps matter more than the frequency of events. The Venezuelan campaign is divided into four phases between September 2025 and January 2026, and the post-raid period is traced through 30 September 2026.

For each phase, the analysis identifies the instrument employed, the target of coercion, the observable response of the Venezuelan government and armed forces, and the next US step. The three hypotheses generate distinct observable implications. If H1 holds, each phase should be followed by a pause and by an escalation in the next phase in the absence of a costly Venezuelan response. If H2 holds, official US communication should consistently describe the objective as the arrest of individuals rather than the defeat of the state, the force employed should be small relative to the 1989 Panama precedent, and the Venezuelan armed forces should refrain from large-scale retaliation. If H3 holds, the successor government should emerge from the existing regime rather than from the opposition, and its subsequent conduct should show concessions in the areas most valued by Washington.

The comparative component sets the Venezuelan case against the capture of Manuel Noriega in Panama, which ended with

his surrender on 3 January 1990, and the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, analysed by Erdoğan (2025). The three cases share the feature that the leader was taken alive and transferred to the captor's jurisdiction; they differ in the type of target (state or non-state) and in whether the apparatus surrounding the leader was replaced. This variation allows the identification of the conditions under which custody translates into leverage.

The study relies on publicly available sources: the AJIL record of US practice (Cogan, 2026; Galbraith, 2020), UN documents (UN Security Council, 2026), analytical reporting by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (“The US Pressure Campaign,” 2025; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2026) and major news organisations for events after January 2026 (The Hill, 2026; CNBC, 2026; Fortune, 2026; CNN, 2026). In addition to the three hypotheses, the analysis applies the six principles of relative superiority to the operational design of the raid and derives implications for small and middle powers from the scope conditions of the model. The article deliberately avoids speculation about classified tactical details of the raid, such as unit composition, routes or timing, which are known only from unverified press accounts. Its claims concern operational design and strategy, where the public record is sufficient.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The findings are organised in three blocks corresponding to the hypotheses: the sequence of the coercive campaign, the post-raid trajectory of the Venezuelan government, and the comparison of custodial removals.

The first block reconstructs the campaign. Table 1 sets out its four phases. The first phase, from September 2025, consisted of lethal strikes against vessels described by Washington as carrying narcotics, combined with a military build-up in the Caribbean that included the deployment of a carrier strike group (Cogan, 2026; “The US Pressure Campaign,” 2025). The second phase opened on 16 December 2025 with a blockade of sanctioned oil tankers entering or leaving Venezuela, followed by the seizure of tankers (Cogan, 2026). The third phase consisted of a strike, reported at the end of December, on Venezuelan port facilities that Washington associated with drug loading (Cogan, 2026). The fourth phase was the raid of 3 January 2026, preceded by strikes in and around Caracas (Security Council Report, 2026). Throughout the sequence, US officials framed the targets as criminal rather than state actors, describing Maduro as the leader of a terrorist organisation (UN Security Council, 2026).

PHASE	PERIOD	PRINCIPAL INSTRUMENT	DECLARED TARGET	OBSERVABLE VENEZUELAN RESPONSE
1. MARITIME INTERDICTION	From Sept. 2025	Lethal strikes on vessels; naval build-up	Drug-trafficking networks	Diplomatic protest; no military retaliation
2. ECONOMIC STRANGULATION	From 16 Dec. 2025	Blockade and seizure of sanctioned tankers	Oil revenue of the regime	Diplomatic protest; no military retaliation
3. LIMITED STRIKE	Late Dec. 2025	Strike on port facilities	Drug-loading infrastructure	No military retaliation
4. DECAPITATION	3 Jan. 2026	Strikes on Caracas; seizure of Maduro and Flores	Two indicted individuals	Request for Council meeting; no retaliation against US forces

Table 1. Phases of the US coercive campaign against Venezuela, September 2025 – January 2026. Source: compiled by the author from Cogan (2026), “The US Pressure Campaign” (2025), UN Security Council (2025), Security Council Report (2026) and UN Security Council (2026).

The pattern in Table 1 is consistent with the observable implications of H1: each phase raised the level of force and narrowed the distance to the regime's centre of gravity, and no phase was followed by a military response that imposed costs on US forces. The only formal Venezuelan reactions of significance were diplomatic: in December 2025 Caracas demanded that the Security Council condemn what it called ongoing aggression and secure the withdrawal of US forces (UN Security Council, 2025), and the sequence culminated in the request for an emergency Security Council meeting and the invocation of the right of self-defence in a letter to the Council (Security Council Report, 2026).

The second block traces the post-raid trajectory. Table 2 summarises the main observable outcomes between January and September 2026. The successor government emerged from within the regime: Delcy Rodríguez, Maduro's vice-president, assumed the presidency in an acting capacity and, within roughly two weeks, met the Director

of the Central Intelligence Agency and publicly called for improved relations with the United States and the opening of the oil industry to foreign investors (The Hill, 2026). At the end of August 2026 the two governments announced a 25-year energy agreement that, according to Rodríguez, envisaged the development of 17 strategic oilfields, a production target of 1.5 million barrels per day and about 209 billion dollars in revenue for the Venezuelan state at a benchmark price of 65 dollars per barrel (CNBC, 2026). According to the Associated Press, the arrangement gives the United States 55% of the effective output of a new company, together with an ownership stake and rights to buy oil at cost, and was negotiated by the US Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense and Rodríguez; no text has been published (Fortune, 2026). In September 2026 Rodríguez met the US President at the General Assembly to discuss cooperation in energy, mining and security (CNN, 2026).

DATE	DEVELOPMENT	SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE HYPOTHESES
EARLY JAN. 2026	Vice-President Rodríguez assumes presidency in acting capacity	Successor drawn from the regime, not the opposition (H3)
MID-JAN. 2026	Meeting with CIA Director; call for warmer relations and oil opening	Rapid signal of accommodation (H3)
LATE AUG. – 2 SEPT. 2026	25-year energy agreement announced; Chevron expansion agreement signed	Concessions in Washington's priority sector (H3)
SEPT. 2026	Meeting with US President at UN General Assembly	Normalisation of the successor regime (H3)
JAN. 2026 – 2027	Maduro held in New York; immunity motion heard 17 Nov. 2026; trial set for 1 June 2027	Custody remains an open variable (H3)

Table 2. Post-raid trajectory of the Venezuelan government, January – September 2026. Source: compiled by the author from The Hill (2026), CNBC (2026), Fortune (2026), CNN (2026), JURIST (2026) and Dominican Today (2026).

The third block compares three custodial removals, summarised in Table 3. In Panama in 1989, the United States deployed a large invasion force, installed a new government and captured Noriega after his surrender on 3 January 1990; the leader was removed and the regime replaced (Brownlee, 2024; Mazza, 2026). In the case of Öcalan, the arrest of a non-state leader created a

bargaining game in which the imprisoned leader retained influence over his organisation, with short-term de-escalation and medium-term costs (Erdoğan, 2025). In Venezuela in 2026, the leader was removed by a raid of a single night, the regime was preserved and its successor leadership accommodated the captor within eight months.

DIMENSION	PANAMA (NORIEGA), 1989–1990	PKK (ÖCALAN), 1999	VENEZUELA (MADURO), 2026
TYPE OF TARGET	Head of a state's military regime	Leader of an insurgent organisation	Head of state
SCALE OF FORCE	Large-scale invasion	Covert transnational arrest	Strikes plus single-night raid
FATE OF THE APPARATUS	Replaced by new government	Organisation intact	Regime intact under successor
CAPTOR'S RELATION TO SUCCESSOR	Installed ally	Adversarial bargaining	Coerced accommodation
PRINCIPAL STRATEGIC EFFECT	Regime change	Short-term de-escalation	Compellence of successor elite

Table 3. Structured comparison of custodial removals. Source: compiled by the author from Brownlee (2024), Erdoğan (2025), Mazza (2026) and Table 2.

The comparison isolates the distinctive feature of the 2026 case: it combined the low force requirements of an arrest with the state-level stakes of regime change, while avoiding both the costs of occupation and the open-ended bargaining with a hostile organisation. The analytical sections that follow interpret this result.

THE LADDER: GRADUATED COERCION FROM THE SEA TO CARACAS

Graduated coercion rests on a simple logic. A coercer that raises the level of pressure in visible steps learns at each step how the target and third parties respond, and it shapes the target's expectations of what will come next. The Venezuelan campaign displays this logic with unusual clarity. Its first rung, lethal maritime interdiction, operated in the grey zone between law enforcement and armed force: the targets were vessels at sea, the declared adversary was criminal, and the strikes did not touch Venezuelan territory (Cogan, 2026). Coercion of this kind, as Vardanjan (2026) shows in a different theatre, draws its leverage from staying below the threshold at which the target state is forced to respond as to an attack. The absence of a Venezuelan military response at this stage told Washington that the regime would not, or could not, contest US operations at sea.

The second rung shifted from interdiction to strangulation. A blockade of sanc-

tioned tankers struck the regime's principal revenue stream, and tanker seizures turned the blockade into an enforced reality (Cogan, 2026). Strategically, this phase did two things. It raised the domestic costs of the status quo for the chavista elite, whose patronage networks depended on oil revenue, and it tested whether external partners would challenge the blockade. The literature on economic coercion suggests that sanctions alone rarely change the behaviour of determined authoritarian governments (Rempe, 2026), and Villa et al. (2022) show that the US has historically treated control over economic assets as a trigger for regime change attempts. In the Venezuelan case, economic strangulation did not produce concessions on its own, but it prepared the conditions in which concessions would later become attractive.

The third rung, a limited strike on port facilities, crossed onto Venezuelan territory for the first time (Cogan, 2026). Its military effect was modest; its signalling effect was considerable. It demonstrated that Washington was prepared to use force on Venezuelan soil, and it tested the readiness of the Venezuelan armed forces to retaliate. Again, no retaliation followed. Li (2024) argues that operational pauses can function as instruments of strategic exhaustion rather than as logistical interruptions. The short intervals between the US phases fit this description: each pause allowed Washington to observe the response, while the target's inability to exploit the pause

eroded the credibility of its own deterrent posture.

The final rung was decapitation. By the time of the raid, the United States had accumulated four months of evidence that Venezuela would not impose military costs, and the expected cost of a direct operation against the capital had fallen accordingly. The contrast with credibility fatigue is instructive. Sinovets and Alkış (2025) show how repeated Russian nuclear threats, never executed, lost their coercive force; the US campaign followed the opposite pattern, executing each threatened step and thereby making the next threat more credible. The deployment of a carrier strike group in autumn 2025 (“The US Pressure Campaign,” 2025) and the precedent of limited but intense US strikes on Iran in 2025 (Eisenstadt, 2025; Whitlark, 2025) reinforced that credibility. The evidence supports H1: the raid was not an isolated act of daring but the culmination of a deliberate ladder whose lower rungs reduced uncertainty about the costs of the highest one.

The ladder also explains why the raid could be conducted with a limited force. Binetti (2026) shows that counterbalanced militaries concentrate elite units near the capital, which in principle should have made Caracas the hardest target in the country. Reiter (2020) explains why coup-proofing, by politicising promotion and fragmenting command, tends to reduce effectiveness against external opponents. A force organised to prevent internal challenges, already conditioned by months of unanswered pressure and facing an adversary that announced limited aims, was poorly placed to mount the rapid, coordinated response needed to defeat a special operation. The deaths of Cuban nationals among the security personnel killed during the raid (Cogan, 2026) indicate that even the regime's most trusted protective layer was overwhelmed.

RELATIVE SUPERIORITY WITHOUT OCCUPATION: THE OPERATIONAL DESIGN OF THE RAID

The theory of special operations offers a useful lens for the operational design of the raid, provided that its claims are kept at the level the public record can support. McRaven's central concept, as reconstructed by Wirtz (2022), is relative superiority: the condition in which a small attacking force gains a decisive advantage over a larger defender for the brief period needed to accomplish its mission. Relative superiority is achieved not by mass but by six principles applied in planning and execution, namely simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed and purpose. Each of them can be related to features of the Venezuelan operation that are documented in open sources.

Simplicity begins with the objective. A mission defined as the seizure of two identified persons (Cogan, 2026) has a clear end state, a short duration and a limited number of critical tasks. This contrasts with the Panama operation, whose objectives included the neutralisation of the Panamanian Defence Forces, the protection of the canal and the installation of a new government, and whose capture of Noriega came only after the country had been secured (Brownlee, 2024; Mazza, 2026). By separating the removal of the leader from the fate of the state, the 2026 design reduced the operation to its simplest possible form.

Security and surprise relate to the information environment in which the raid was prepared. The months-long build-up in the Caribbean was public (“The US Pressure Campaign,” 2025; Cogan, 2026), which means that strategic surprise was neither sought nor achieved. What the build-up concealed was the specific form, place and moment of the final step. A visible naval presence generates a broad expectation of pressure without revealing whether the next

action will be another interdiction, another strike or something else. In this sense the coercive ladder served as cover for the raid: the target could anticipate escalation but not its form. Tactical surprise in the timing of a night operation was therefore compatible with the absence of strategic surprise, a combination also visible in the Abbottabad raid (Wirtz, 2022).

Speed and purpose concern the execution. The preceding strikes in and around Caracas (Security Council Report, 2026) can be understood as an effort to create a temporary window in which the defender's ability to observe, decide and act was degraded. The research on the OODA loop published in this journal emphasises that the advantage in such engagements belongs to the side that completes its decision cycle faster than the opponent (Kim, 2025). A raid of a single night compresses the defender's time to orient and decide into hours, and a defence establishment structured around regime protection, with fragmented command and politicised promotion, is particularly vulnerable to that compression (Reiter, 2020; Binetti, 2026).

Repetition is the principle on which the public record is silent, and the analysis should not speculate about rehearsals. It is nonetheless worth noting that the lower rungs of the coercive ladder provided something analogous at the operational level: four months of interdictions, blockade enforcement and a strike on Venezuelan territory gave US forces repeated experience of operating against Venezuelan targets and of observing Venezuelan reactions, while giving the Venezuelan military repeated experience of not responding.

The operational design also had clear limits. Relative superiority is by definition temporary, and Wirtz (2022) stresses that special operations remain fragile at the point where civil and military authorities must decide under uncertainty. Gielas (2024) documents the friction that has historically arisen between special and conventional forces in integrated

operations, and the account of a close call for the assault force (Cogan, 2026) shows that the margin of success was not unlimited. The design worked because it was embedded in a strategy that had already reduced the defender's will to fight; taken in isolation, it would have been a high-risk gamble. This is the strategic lesson that Colin Gray drew from the history of special operations: their value lies less in what they achieve tactically than in how they serve a coherent political purpose (Lambakis, 2021).

LAW ENFORCEMENT AS AN ESCALATION-CONTROL DEVICE

The law enforcement framing of the raid is usually treated as a legal fiction. From a strategic perspective it performed at least three functions that were real, whatever their legal merits.

The first function was to define a narrow and verifiable objective. Official descriptions consistently presented the mission as the apprehension of two indicted persons, and the presidential letter to Congress justified military involvement as necessary to effectuate their arrest (Cogan, 2026). A narrow objective is a precondition of special operations theory: clarity of purpose, simplicity and speed are easier to achieve when success is defined as the seizure and extraction of specific individuals rather than the defeat of an army (Wirtz, 2022). It also limited the operation in time. Unlike Panama, where a large force had to secure the country before the leader could be captured (Brownlee, 2024), the Venezuelan raid could be planned as a single night's action, preceded by strikes intended to create a temporary window of superiority.

The second function was to signal limited aims to the Venezuelan armed forces and political elite. The repeated assurances that there was no war against Venezuela and no occupation (UN Security Council, 2026) were addressed as much to Caracas as to the Security

Council. For officers deciding whether to resist, the message was that the state and its institutions were not the target; resistance would risk their lives and positions without defending the regime's survival, which was not in question. This is the logic Sukin and Hedgecock (2026) identify for deniability in the grey zone, applied in reverse: rather than denying authorship of the action, the United States denied that the action was war. The expected effect, consistent with their argument, is that escalation remains possible but its intensity falls. In Venezuela the intensity of the response was minimal.

The third function was to provide domestic and international audiences with a frame that softened opposition. Domestically, the law enforcement narrative channelled the matter into a federal courtroom and allowed supporters in Congress to deny that the country was at war (Cogan, 2026). Internationally, the narcotics and terrorism vocabulary drew on a long-standing US practice of terrorist designation that other governments often follow (El Masri & Phillips, 2024), and on policy arguments that designating criminal organisations as terrorists opens the way to special forces operations against them (Deen, 2025). Lewis (2019) describes special operations as instruments of political warfare; the Venezuelan raid shows how the political frame of an operation can be designed together with its military plan.

These functions carried risks. Burke (2026) finds that state-perpetrated decapitations in Latin America tend to increase violence between states and criminal groups, and Jordan (2019) warns that removing leaders of entrenched organisations can provoke retaliation. Had Venezuelan units or allied armed groups chosen to resist, the narrow law enforcement objective would have offered little guidance for escalation, and Gielas (2024) reminds us that friction between special and conventional forces has repeatedly turned limited raids into more complex engagements. Press accounts cited in the AJIL

record indicate that the operation itself involved a close call for the assault force (Cogan, 2026). The success of the framing therefore depended on the ladder that preceded it: by January 2026 the risk that Venezuela would escalate had already been tested and found low. The evidence supports H2, with the qualification that the escalation-control function of the framing was conditional on prior coercive conditioning.

CUSTODIAL DECAPITATION: WHY SEIZING THE LEADER DID NOT TOPPLE THE REGIME

The most striking feature of the Venezuelan case is what did not happen. Maduro's removal did not produce the collapse of the chavista state, an opposition government or a civil war. It produced a successor government drawn from the regime that, within eight months, granted the United States a dominant position in the oil sector (CNBC, 2026; Fortune, 2026). This outcome is difficult to explain with existing categories, and it is here that the concept of custodial decapitation offers analytical leverage.

Custodial decapitation can be defined as the forcible seizure of a state's leader, alive, and his or her transfer to the captor's jurisdiction, combined with the deliberate preservation of the state apparatus, so that the successor elite becomes the object of continued coercion rather than the target of replacement. It differs from lethal decapitation, which removes the leader permanently but forfeits the leverage that custody creates; from foreign-imposed regime change, which replaces the apparatus and assumes responsibility for governance (Downes, 2021; Willard-Foster, 2019); and from the arrest of non-state leaders analysed by Erdoğan (2025), because the successor is a sovereign government able to deliver concessions of state-level value.

Three mechanisms explain why custodial decapitation generates compellence. The first

is demonstrated reach. A successful raid on the capital proves that the captor can reach the regime's highest level at a cost it is willing to bear. Every member of the successor elite now knows that the same instrument can be used against him or her. Compellence depends on the credibility of the threat (Sinovets & Alkış, 2025), and few demonstrations of credibility are stronger than the removal of the predecessor. The US President's subsequent threats against other governments (Cogan, 2026) reinforced this message.

The second mechanism is custody as continuing leverage. A dead leader is a fixed fact; a leader in custody is a variable. Erdoğan (2025) shows that an imprisoned leader enters a new bargaining game with the state and his organisation. In the Venezuelan case the bargaining game has an additional dimension. The 2020 indictment charged Maduro together with fourteen current and former officials (Galbraith, 2020), which means that the legal fate of members of the regime remains in the hands of the captor's prosecutors and courts. The course of the proceedings in New York, including the immunity motion heard on 17 November 2026 and the trial set for June 2027 (JURIST, 2026; Dominican Today, 2026), keeps the question open and therefore keeps the leverage alive.

The third mechanism is the preserved apparatus as a counterpart able to deliver. Foreign-imposed regime change often fails because new governments lack legitimacy, administrative capacity or control over armed forces (Downes, 2021; Brownlee, 2024). By leaving the chavista state intact, Washington avoided assuming responsibility for governance while retaining a counterpart that controlled the oil industry, the security services and the legislature. Jordan's (2019) finding that bureaucratised organisations survive decapitation, usually read as a limit of the strategy, becomes in this model a condition of its success: the apparatus survives precisely so that it can be coerced. The rapid sequence from the January call for opening the oil

sector to the August energy agreement (The Hill, 2026; CNBC, 2026) is the observable signature of this mechanism.

The model also has scope conditions, which explain why it is unlikely to apply everywhere. It requires a large asymmetry of power between captor and target; a target state whose armed forces are organised against internal rather than external threats and therefore poorly placed to contest a short external operation (Reiter, 2020; Binetti, 2026); a successor elite whose members fear legal or physical exposure more than they value loyalty to the removed leader; and an absence of external patrons willing to impose costs on the captor. In Venezuela all four conditions were present. Where a target is militarily capable, protected by a nuclear or great power patron, or governed by an elite bound together by ideology or ethnicity, the same operation would be more likely to produce war or a hostile successor.

The evidence supports H3. Maduro's seizure did not change the regime; it changed the regime's behaviour. This distinction matters for strategic theory. O'Rourke (2020) explains the historical rarity of overt regime change by its costs. Custodial decapitation lowers those costs by removing the need for occupation and nation-building, which makes it a more attractive instrument for powerful states. Mazza (2026) suggests that the so-called "Donroe Doctrine" exceeds rather than follows the Monroe tradition; the model developed here specifies the military-strategic mechanism through which it does so. The legal literature has rightly condemned the operation (Longobardo, 2026; Redaelli, 2026); the strategic literature must explain why it worked, because instruments that work tend to be used again.

COUNTER-DECAPITATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SMALL AND MIDDLE POWERS

If custodial decapitation is an attractive template for powerful states, it is a corresponding threat for smaller ones. The model developed above implies a set of conditions under which a state becomes vulnerable, and therefore a set of measures that can reduce that vulnerability. These implications concern the strategic organisation of defence and are relevant well beyond Latin America, including for small states in Europe whose security depends on deterrence by denial rather than on military parity.

The first implication concerns the organisation of the armed forces. Reiter (2020) shows that some coup-proofing measures, such as politicised promotion and reduced training, degrade military effectiveness, whereas others, such as civilian oversight institutions and professionalised command, do not. A government that protects itself against internal challenges through measures of the first type exchanges protection against a coup for exposure to external decapitation. Binetti (2026) adds that counterbalancing concentrates elite units in the capital and reduces effectiveness elsewhere; the Venezuelan case suggests that even concentration in the capital may fail against an external raid if command is fragmented and units are trained for internal control rather than for rapid response to an external attack.

The second implication concerns leadership redundancy. The decapitation literature shows that organisations with dispersed authority and dense networks are more resilient to the loss of their leaders (Jordan, 2019; Milton & Price, 2020). For states, the equivalent is credible continuity of government: a constitutional and practical arrangement in which the removal of the head of state neither paralyse decision-making nor hands the successor a set of incentives aligned with the captor. In Venezuela continuity of govern-

ment worked in a narrow sense, since the vice-president assumed office immediately, but it worked in a way that served the coercer, because the successor elite inherited both the apparatus and the exposure that made accommodation rational (The Hill, 2026; Galbraith, 2020).

The third implication concerns the lower rungs of the ladder. The analysis of H1 showed that the absence of costly responses to interdiction, blockade and a limited strike progressively reduced the expected cost of the raid. States facing graduated coercion therefore need responses calibrated to each rung, not only to the final one. These need not be military; Vardanian (2026) shows how coercion below the threshold of armed conflict can be countered through resilience and the denial of leverage, and Khumalo (2026), writing on sabotage of critical infrastructure in the Baltic Sea, shows how legal and attribution gaps at the lower end of the spectrum become strategic resources for the coercer. Failure to contest the lower rungs, whether through diplomatic coalitions, legal action or limited defensive measures, signals to the coercer that the higher rungs will be equally uncontested.

The fourth implication concerns external partners. The absence of a patron willing to impose costs on the captor was one of the scope conditions of the model. Russian and Chinese condemnation of the raid at the Security Council (UN Security Council, 2026) carried no material consequences for the United States. For small states, the lesson is that rhetorical support from distant partners does not alter the cost calculation of a determined coercer; only commitments that would impose real costs do.

None of these measures can eliminate the vulnerability of a small state to a great power determined to remove its leader. They can, however, raise the cost and uncertainty of custodial decapitation sufficiently to make the template less attractive, which is the realistic aim of deterrence by denial. Remp-

(2026) argues that states confronting US economic coercion increasingly respond with political warfare of their own; the Venezuelan case suggests that such responses must be combined with organisational reforms of the defence establishment if they are to affect military outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the removal of Nicolás Maduro as an act of military strategy rather than as a legal event. Its findings confirm the three hypotheses, each with a qualification. The first hypothesis is confirmed. The raid of 3 January 2026 was the final rung of a four-phase ladder of graduated coercion that moved from lethal maritime interdiction, through a tanker blockade and a limited strike on Venezuelan territory, to decapitation. Each phase raised the level of force without provoking a costly response, and each executed threat increased the credibility of the next. The qualification is that the ladder's success depended on the target's inability to respond militarily, a condition shaped by the internally oriented organisation of the Venezuelan armed forces.

The analysis of the operational design further showed that the raid applied the principles of relative superiority, with tactical surprise achieved inside a publicly visible campaign that offered no strategic surprise. The second hypothesis is confirmed with a condition. The law enforcement framing defined a narrow objective compatible with the theory of special operations, signalled limited aims to the Venezuelan armed forces and softened domestic and international opposition. Its escalation-control function, however, depended on the prior coercive conditioning of the target; without the lower rungs of the ladder, the same framing would have offered little protection against escalation.

The third hypothesis is confirmed. Because the leader was seized alive and the state apparatus was preserved, decapitation

operated as compellence against the successor elite. The successor government, drawn from the regime, accommodated Washington within weeks and concluded a 25-year energy agreement within eight months.

The principal original contribution of this article is the concept and model of custodial decapitation. The model extends the distinction between arrest and killing developed for non-state actors to the leaders of states, identifies three mechanisms through which seizure without regime replacement generates leverage (demonstrated reach, custody as continuing leverage and a preserved apparatus able to deliver), and specifies four scope conditions: power asymmetry, an internally oriented defence establishment, a successor elite exposed to legal or physical risk and the absence of a protective patron. In doing so, it explains an outcome that neither the decapitation literature nor the regime change literature anticipates: removal of a leader that changes a regime's policy without changing the regime.

The study has four limitations. First, it rests on a single primary case with two comparative cases, which limits generalisation. Second, the public record does not allow analysis of tactical details of the raid, so the conclusions concern operational design and strategy only. Third, the post-raid period is short; the durability of the successor government's accommodation, and the effect of the New York proceedings on it, remain uncertain. Fourth, the article cannot observe the internal deliberations of the Venezuelan elite and infers their incentives from their conduct.

Future research should test the model against other cases of leader seizure and against cases where the scope conditions are absent, and should examine how the outcome of the proceedings against Maduro affects the leverage that custody provides. Policy implications follow directly. For small and middle powers, the Venezuelan case shows that defence establishments organised mainly

to prevent coups are poorly equipped to deter external decapitation. For the international order, it shows that the costs that once made overt regime change rare can be lowered by combining a coercive ladder, a law enforcement narrative and a raid that leaves

the state intact. A template that is cheap, quick and effective will be studied by other powers, and this is the strongest reason for strategists and international lawyers alike to understand it.

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SILA PRERUŠENA U SPROVOĐENJE ZAKONA U VENECUELI: POSTEPENA PRINUDA, SPECIJALNE OPERACIJE I STRATEŠKA LOGIKA DEKAPITACIJE RUKOVODSTVA

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Sažetak: Uklanjanje Nikolasa Madura od strane američkih snaga 3. januara 2026. godine najčešće se analizira kao pitanje međunarodnog prava. Ovaj rad ga posmatra kao pitanje vojne strategije. Rad ispituje kako su Sjedinjene Američke Države izgradile kampanju koja se završila zarobljavanjem šefa države na vlasti i zašto taktički uspješna dekapitacija nije dovela ni do pada venecuelanskog režima ni do dugotrajnog rata, već do brzog prilagođavanja vlade nasljednika Vašingtonu. Primjenom praćenja procesa kroz četiri faze kampanje između septembra 2025. i januara 2026, uz praćenje ishoda do septembra 2026, rad pokazuje da je operacija bila posljednja prečka ljestvice postepene prinude, koja je vodila od smrtonosne pomorske interdikcije, preko blokade tankera pod sankcijama i ograničenog udara na lučke objekte, do jednonoćnog prepada na Karakas. Okvir sprovođenja zakona nije bio samo pravna retorika; djelovao je kao sredstvo kontrole eskalacije, koje je venecuelanskim oružanim snagama i čavističkoj eliti signaliziralo ograničene ciljeve, i oblikovao je dizajn operacije malog otiska u skladu sa teorijom specijalnih operacija. Originalni doprinos rada je koncept i model kustodijalne dekapitacije: oblika uklanjanja rukovodstva u kojem se državni vođa zarobljava živ i prebacuje pod jurisdikciju države koja ga je zarobila, dok se državni aparat namjerno ostavlja netaknutim, tako da dekapitacija djeluje kao prinuda prema eliti nasljednika, a ne kao promjena režima nametnuta spolja. Model pokreću tri mehanizma: demonstrirani domet, pritvor kao trajna poluga i očuvani aparat sposoban da isporuči ustupke. Venecuelanski slijed događaja, od januarskog otvaranja naftnog sektora do 25-godišnjeg energetskog sporazuma objavljenog u avgustu 2026, u potpunosti odgovara modelu. Nalazi ukazuju da kustodijalna dekapitacija snižava troškove zbog kojih je otvorena promjena režima istorijski bila rijetka, što je čini privlačnim i destabilizujućim obrascem prinude velikih sila.

Ključne riječi: *dekapitacija rukovodstva, specijalne operacije, postepena prinuda, prinuda (compellence), kontrola eskalacije, promjena režima nametnuta spolja, Venecuela, Maduro.*