

Venezuela's oil and the crisis of US Imperialism

Gabriel Black
26 December 2025

The Trump administration is escalating preparations for a military intervention against Venezuela, advancing long-standing regime-change objectives under the pretext of combating drug trafficking and sanctions evasion.

In recent weeks, the US has amassed an estimated 15,000 troops across the Caribbean region. This deployment includes eleven naval vessels positioned in proximity to Venezuelan territorial waters, among them the world's largest aircraft carrier, the USS Gerald R. Ford, multiple guided-missile destroyers, amphibious assault ships and at least one nuclear-powered submarine. The Roosevelt Roads Naval Station in Puerto Rico—closed for two decades—has been reactivated to support advanced air operations, including the deployment of F-35 stealth fighter jets.

Since September 2025, US forces have conducted at least 28 strikes across Venezuelan territory, killing more than 100 people. These attacks, carried out without congressional authorization or any international legal mandate, have been justified by the administration as targeting alleged “drug traffickers.” No evidence supporting these claims has been publicly presented. The strikes amount to acts of war carried out on the unilateral assertion of executive authority.

This intensifying military pressure follows years of sweeping, bipartisan US sanctions that have devastated Venezuela's economy, plunging what was once a relatively prosperous South American country into prolonged recession, hyperinflation and social collapse.

The aim of the Trump administration is to create conditions of maximal pressure to force the removal of President Nicolás Maduro and install a government subordinate to US strategic and corporate interests. The Nobel Peace Prize Committee's decision to award its prize to the US-backed opposition leader Claudia Macero must be understood within this broader campaign of regime change—combining economic strangulation, military escalation and political maneuvers aimed at fracturing Maduro's domestic support, particularly among wealthier layers of Venezuelan society.

It is not a particularly hidden point that, lurking behind all of these developments is the unique, strategic role Venezuela plays in the global economy—the largest holder of so-called “proven” oil reserves in the world.

The Trump administration has illegally seized three oil tankers operating in the Caribbean. The first, the Skipper, was seized on December 10 while carrying approximately two million barrels of

Venezuelan crude oil destined for Cuba and was subsequently transported to a port in Texas for cargo removal. The second, the Centuries, was intercepted on December 20 east of Barbados by US Coast Guard forces and was carrying roughly 1.8 million barrels of Venezuelan state-owned oil bound for China, an action that has provoked formal diplomatic protests from Beijing. The third vessel, the Bella 1, remains under active pursuit after refusing US boarding orders and was en route to Venezuela to load crude oil at the time of the interception attempt—the ship has a history of transporting Iranian oil.

There are several points that must be made about the character of Venezuela's oil and the broader economic, material and geopolitical context that illuminate the US's longstanding aims of retaking Venezuela for the American oil companies (in particular Chevron, Exxon and ConocoPhillips).

The Nature of Venezuela's Reserves

On paper, Venezuela possesses the largest volume of what are classified as proven oil reserves in the world—roughly 300 billion barrels. At current rates of global crude oil consumption, approximately 30–31 billion barrels per year, this would be enough to supply the world for about a decade. To place this figure in context, Saudi Arabia reports close to 270 billion barrels of proven reserves, Iran roughly 210 billion, Russia around 80 billion and the United States approximately 145 billion.

These are startling numbers, and they underscore the enormous strategic significance of Venezuelan oil within the framework of US imperial ambition. At the same time, they require careful qualification. “Proven reserves” are not a purely geological category; they refer to reserves that national authorities classify as economically recoverable at prevailing prices and under existing technological and political conditions. Within OPEC in particular, such figures are widely recognized as politicized and inflated since reserve size historically influenced production quotas and geopolitical standing.

Venezuela's oil reserves are real, vast and located at relatively shallow depths. From an economic and technical standpoint, however, they rank among the most difficult oil deposits in the world to exploit. The overwhelming majority of these reserves are concentrated in the Orinoco Belt, a massive onshore formation containing extra-heavy crude. Unlike conventional oil fields, the oil in the Orinoco does not flow naturally. It is extremely viscous—closer in consistency to molasses than to liquid petroleum—and requires continuous mechanical lifting, dilution and

processing merely to be transported.

One way to characterize Venezuela's oil endowment is therefore as simultaneously vast and deeply constrained: the largest hydrocarbon accumulation on earth, but one that is slow, capital-intensive and highly dependent on continuous imports of machinery, diluents and industrial inputs. This is why independent industry assessments diverge sharply from the headline reserve figures. Rystad Energy, for example, estimates Venezuela's long-term economically recoverable oil at closer to 27 billion barrels—an order of magnitude smaller than the official reserve claims.

Venezuela's dependence

Because of the slow and costly nature of heavy-oil production, Venezuela's vast resources have required stable, long-term strategic partnerships with major industrial powers capable of financing and technically sustaining such demanding operations. While full exploitation of the headline 300-billion-barrel figure is implausible under present conditions, substantially higher production would become feasible only if Venezuela were reintegrated into the international political order and, critically, if oil prices remained significantly elevated—on the order of two to three times current levels—over an extended period.

It is in this context that Venezuela has long occupied a distinctive position in US strategic thinking. While not always treated as an immediate target for direct control, it has consistently loomed in the background as a critical geopolitical and resource node—both because of its location in the Caribbean basin and because of the latent value of its oil under different political and price regimes.

Moreover, the heavy grade of Venezuelan crude creates an additional layer of dependence. Orinoco oil typically must be exported to countries producing lighter crude in order to be blended before refining. This helps explain recent tanker movements targeted by the Trump administration. The Bella 1, for example, was en route to transport Venezuelan crude to Iran, where it would be blended with lighter Iranian oil to produce a commercially viable export grade. Without such blending, much of Venezuela's oil remains effectively stranded.

Failed energy transition and American imperialism

Venezuela's distinctive oil production system must be understood within a much broader geopolitical, economic and social context. The Trump administration reflects the deepening crisis of American capitalism: a reckless effort by the US financial oligarchy to install a fascistic government prepared to use any means necessary to arrest the country's relative economic and geopolitical decline.

Every major initiative of the Trump administration—from the construction of mass detention camps for immigrants inside the United States, to its openly coercive and transactional approach to diplomacy, to the massive transfer of public wealth to corporate and financial elites at the expense of social programs—has unfolded amid an intensifying social and political crisis. The aggressive campaign to squeeze, bomb or potentially invade Venezuela must be viewed as part of this same trajectory.

A central feature of the present geopolitical situation is the shifting balance of power between the United States and China. As the United States confronts the most acute set of economic,

political and strategic challenges in its modern history, China—despite facing significant internal pressures of its own—has sought to present itself as a relatively stable pole within an emerging multipolar order. In this context, Beijing has played a critical role in financing and developing infrastructure in a number of countries targeted by US pressure, including Venezuela and Iran, both of which rely heavily on China for investment, industrial inputs and oil export markets.

Underlying these geopolitical shifts is a second, equally important factor: the stalled and uneven global energy transition. China, the world's largest oil importer and acutely vulnerable to maritime chokepoints and blockades, has moved aggressively to reduce its long-term dependence on oil through massive investment in electric vehicles, renewable energy and industrial electrification. By contrast, other major powers—most notably the United States—have increasingly retreated from earlier commitments to a rapid energy transition.

Among policymakers and energy planners, the optimism surrounding “green” transformation that characterized much of the 2010s has given way to expectations of a far slower and more conflict-ridden transition. This shift was underscored by recent outlooks from the International Energy Agency, which project a future in which oil and gas remain dominant components of the global energy system for decades, even as renewable capacity expands. It is against this backdrop that the Trump administration's strangulation of Venezuela must be understood.

As with earlier regime-change operations against Iraq under Saddam Hussein and Libya under Muammar Gaddafi, American imperialism views Venezuela as an expensive but immense long-term source of oil located squarely within its traditional sphere of influence. US strategists calculate that, under conditions of political subordination and long-term control by American firms, Venezuela's heavy-oil sector could be reorganized and expanded in ways currently foreclosed.

Absent an effort to overthrow President Nicolás Maduro, however, the United States faces the prospect of Venezuela developing increasing ties with China. Venezuela already holds its largest outstanding external debt with China—estimated at roughly \$10 billion—and remains deeply dependent on Chinese financing, infrastructure and export markets. From the standpoint of US imperial strategy, the campaign against Venezuela is therefore not merely punitive, but preemptive—aimed at securing US domination, vis-à-vis China, over future global oil supplies.

The Trump administration's blockading of tankers, repeated extrajudicial strikes and the deployment of the largest US armada in the Caribbean since 1962 are the instruments of a concerted drive to reassert imperial control over Venezuela's oil and to deny strategic gains to China. It must be seen within a broader explosion of imperialist militarism, as American, and with it, global capitalism, faces existential crisis.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact