

TRUMPING VENEZUELA

Six Thoughts on the Political Significance of the US Military Intervention



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The US attack on Venezuela on January 3, 2026, marks a new phase in the foreign and security policy of the Trump administration. In which ideas about a new world order is this policy rooted? What does it mean for Germany and Europe? We offer a six-point assessment.

1. Donald Trump's America is reorganizing the world according to the president's ideas and instincts.

Never has this been expressed so openly and tangibly as in the kidnapping of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro last weekend. This was not a US cleanup in its backyard, like Reagan's operetta invasion of Grenada. Nor was it a distraction from domestic political weaknesses, like Clinton's intervention in Haiti. At least, it was not only those things.

It was a demonstration that the world of spheres of influence is back. Not only in the actions of authoritarian superpowers such as Russia and China, but also in the thinking and actions

of the United States. International law is regarded as flexible and subordinate – strength creates facts. And strength respects only the strength of others. Great powers divide the map among themselves. Sometimes by open agreement, sometimes by tacit consent.

At the end of last year, the Trump administration declared in its National Security Strategy that the Western Hemisphere was the top priority of its foreign policy. Maduro's violent removal was preceded by months of threats from the United States and attacks at sea. Seen in this light, the intervention is not surprising but rather consistent with that declaration.

For a time, defenders of Western values could convince themselves that Trump didn't mean what he said. As Peter Thiel advised back in 2016: Take Trump seriously but not literally. Yes, Donald Trump is still a rhetorical showman; a loudmouth, like in wrestling, who prioritizes impact and furor over accuracy and reliability. Yet, after

Venezuela, one thing is clear: Trump will not let the TACO accusation (“Trump always chickens out”) stand. In his second term, Trump is following up his words with actions.

“Make America Great Again” also means intending to make America safer through isolation – from cheap imports, immigration, and drugs. And through expulsion – of foreign powers from its neighborhood. The fact that the United States is effectively taking control of Venezuela is, to begin with, a signal to Russia and China. The former maintained close relations with Maduro, and the latter fueled its growth with Venezuelan oil.

Nevertheless, there is more at work here than a revival of the Monroe Doctrine, which barred other major powers (at that time from Europe) from entering the Americas. To that doc-

deals that are at the core of all of his power-political interactions.

This means that, while China and Russia are seen as competitors, they are also respected as major powers. The countries that have reason to fear are those that are considered comparatively weak and whose impertinence stands in the way of Trump’s thinking in terms of lucrative spheres of influence. These include Venezuela, Cuba, and the liberal democracies of Europe.

2. Trump’s claim to Greenland is not just a whim but a serious and dangerous matter.

The Trump administration’s focus on the Western Hemisphere has direct consequences for Europe’s security order. One lesson learned from two world wars is that US security interests do not allow for any single power to control the whole of Europe. For

reduced. Yet, to maintain the Atlantic defense line, Greenland is becoming more strategically important for Washington.

If the Trump administration were to use force to bring Greenland under its control, it would spell the end of NATO. There have been territorial conflicts between member states in the past – such as between Greece and Turkey. But the destructive quality of an annexation of Greenland by the Alliance’s leading power would be new.

It is also up to Germany to draw a red line on this in no uncertain terms. At the same time, Berlin should initiate measures within NATO to serve the increased geostrategic interest of the United States in Greenland. Possible examples could include rotating deployments or more frequent military exercises.

3. The attack on Venezuela makes it more difficult to achieve a just peace for Ukraine.

Anyone who believes in the right of citizens to self-determination should not shed a tear for the dictator Maduro. He oppressed his people and stole an election. Neither the United States nor Germany recognize his presidency as legitimate. Seeing him brought to justice is by no means a bad consequence of the intervention.

Nevertheless, the US special operation is just as contrary to international law as Russia’s invasion of its neighboring state. And ultimately, it is fueled by the same spirit: the belief that great powers have free rein in their spheres of influence. Seen in this light, Putin has lost an ally in Maduro but gained a teammate in Trump.

Trump’s goodwill toward Russia is a prerequisite for Putin’s delaying tactics in Ukraine. He can hope that Trump will blackmail Zelensky at the negotiating table into conceding what Russia cannot yet win on the battlefield.

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trine, Theodore Roosevelt added the idea that the United States could intervene militarily in Latin America at any time to restore “order.” Trump agrees with this, but he is – as always – inconsistent rather than categorical. His worldview is not shaped by philosophical insights and knowledge. Instead, it is shaped by fundamental convictions and instinctive assumptions to which he always returns and which remain unaffected by counter-arguments. Therefore, Trump’s imperialism is not ideologically coherent but opportunistic. This is what drives the

the United States, Europe is its strategic opposite coast and the key to security in the Atlantic. Therefore, NATO defense planning has traditionally focused on the sea triangle formed by Greenland, Iceland, and the United Kingdom – the so-called GIUK Gap that Russian ships and (nuclear) submarines must pass through to reach the Atlantic.

However, Trump considers America’s military involvement in Europe too costly. It is probably only a matter of time before troop numbers are

At the very least, Putin can insist on maximum demands and let time work in his favor in this highly costly war of attrition. He can continue to do so as long as Trump – and the Europeans – do not increase their pressure on Russia.

For Putin, this balancing act became more difficult in recent weeks because, in addition to major concessions by Zelensky, the various rounds of negotiations resulted in closer coordination among Ukraine, the Europeans, and the United States. It became harder for Putin to conceal the fact that he alone is standing in the way of a ceasefire and peaceful solution.

After the US attack on Venezuela, the situation looks different. Distracted by the new, acute conflict, Trump and his team will once again view Ukraine as an annoying sideshow. [According to Secretary of State Rubio](#): “It’s not our war. It’s a war in another continent.” This view makes it easier for Putin to return to playing for time. It also favors Trump’s return to the solution born of his power instincts: the weaker Ukraine should pay tribute to the stronger Russia.

As was the case after the ill-fated 28-point plan that Trump’s intermediaries negotiated with Russia, it is now, once again, up to the states of Europe to break this dynamic.

4. Germany must acknowledge the new reality.

Recognizing that we have entered a power-obsessed world that is far removed from the norms and rules of the postwar period – and even further from the ideas of the post-reunification era – is the first indispensable step toward adaptation. For understandable reasons, this is particularly difficult for Germany. The liberal international order established after 1990 was the first system of order since the beginning of industrialization in which the “German question” seemed to have

been resolved and Germany could live in peace with its neighbors in prosperity and freedom. This framework allowed Germany to become a status quo power. So much so that any change was resisted. And when Germany could no longer resist change or use its resources of power to wait it out, it redefined it away.

This dynamic gave rise to the idea that the world was changing, the United States was changing, but NATO would remain stable. It also gave rise to a longing for multipolarity that would somehow still ensure stability in multilateral structures. And this was at a time when it had long been clear that

known as Europe) to survive in a world in which its own norms can be considered a *Minderheitenprogramm*, a German term for initiatives that are designed to support recognized minorities. A distinction must be made between one’s own ideals and the necessities of power politics. The fact that the two were identical – or even appeared to be so – turns out to have been a luxury of the historically brief period of liberal hegemony.

5. Germany must distinguish between the important and unimportant.

In view of the upheavals in global politics, it seems that neither Germany’s

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rivalry between major powers would be the most important organizing principle of the new world. As is now becoming apparent, this rivalry will also involve great power collusion at the expense of smaller states – i.e., everyone else. There will be very few things that can restrain the (three) great powers. The United Nations Charter is certainly not one of them. We have known this for longer than just the past week.

Adapting to our new world requires a change in thinking. The sooner, the better. Changing our thinking does not mean discarding the values and norms of liberal internationalism like an old coat. But it will become more difficult and costly for a smaller state (or a group of smaller states, commonly

political leadership nor its public debate has yet risen to the challenge of the moment. Certainly, there was the [turning point \(*Zeitenwende*\) speech](#) during Scholz’s chancellorship and the [constitutional amendment on arms financing](#) after Merz took over. But each time, there was a relapse into the petty squabbles of Germany’s years of privilege. No redefinition of state and government goals. No recognition that everything is at stake now. That the question of the hour is how we in Germany can continue to live freely and with self-determination into the future.

After Chancellor Scholz’s turning point speech four years ago, the German government missed the opportunity to rewrite its coalition agreement and

reorder its priorities in light of Russia's attack on Ukraine and the postwar European order. The same should not be repeated with the dawn of the imperial great power order. Germany's current ruling coalition must now reformulate its goals and focus on the core issue of preserving freedom.

The prerequisite for maintaining freedom is a drastic self-strengthening of Germany. The armament financing program ushered in by the constitutional amendment referenced above is a start. But only a start. How will Germany modernize its armed forces, replace exclusive American capabilities, reform its procurement system, facilitate the expansion of its arms industry, establish new arms research, and build social resilience? The way forward on all these points remains unclear or, let's say, trapped in a continuous loop of discussion.

Renewing Germany's foundations of economic strength would be the second element of its self-empowerment. While the benefit of pursuing this goal seems to be recognized in principle, the federal government seems to be doing so more in statements than in actions. So far, how Germany intends to convert its new billions in military spending into economic strength (through research and development) has only been outlined in a few consultation papers. How to secure raw materials and how to achieve data sovereignty are issues that lie dormant in sectoral strategy papers.

In his [New Year's address](#), Chancellor Merz said: "It is up to us to overcome each of these challenges with our own strength. We are not the victims of extraneous circumstances. We are not at the mercy of great powers." Now we must prove that this is true.

6. Germany must think about Europe, but it can't wait for Europe!

Of course, it would be preferable to develop the necessary measures at the European level. Germany is too small. Without its neighbors, it carries too little weight amid the rivalry between the major powers. Scaling up is essential. This insight is by no means new. Rather, it is invoked daily like a mantra.

However, the reality is that last year the European Union was unable to finalize the EU-Mercosur Free Trade Agreement or release assets of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation for use by Ukraine. Both would have been strategic decisions that would have strengthened the continent. Both failed due to disagreement.

This must be accepted. The European Union is not a miracle cure that can overcome conflicting interests in a matter of moments.

Therefore, self-empowerment is now the best thing the Federal Republic of Germany can do – if it is done in the spirit of internationalism. That way, it can be put to good use in a European context, in pioneering constellations, or in coalitions of the willing. However, even if doubts arise, Germany cannot wait for European solutions. Not now. There is no time for that.

West Germany was granted its freedom in 1949; East Germans fought for their freedom and won a large part of it in 1989. For a long time, security was offered to Germans at a bargain price. But now, the Federal Republic of Germany has a new and unexpected responsibility. While the United States and a growing number of its European neighbors are surrendering to illiberal right-wing populism, Germany must be the protector and guardian of liberal values. Self-empowerment, properly understood, is therefore not a national project but a liberal one.



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