



# A Legal Study of Kidnapping of the President of Venezuela: Interventionist Policy of the United States during the Trump Administration

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## Abstract

State sovereignty constitutes one of the foundational principles of public international law, safeguarding political independence and prohibiting external interference in the internal affairs of states. The disclosure of an alleged plan by the United States, during the Trump administration, to kidnap the President of Venezuela represents a contemporary manifestation of coercive conduct carried out through ostensibly non-military means. Situated within the broader context of escalating tensions between the United States and Venezuela and closely connected to U.S. energy, economic, and security interests in Latin America, this case raises significant legal questions concerning the scope of the principle of non-intervention and the applicability of international legal norms to covert and extraterritorial operations. The central objective of this study is to examine the legal nature of the alleged non-military kidnapping plot and assess whether such conduct constitutes a violation of state sovereignty and political independence. Adopting a descriptive-analytical methodology, the article evaluates the legality of the alleged action in light of the United Nations Charter, relevant rules of customary international law, the 1973 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes against Internationally Protected Persons, and the principles governing international state responsibility. The findings indicate that the kidnapping or attempted kidnapping of political leaders, even outside the context of armed conflict and in the absence of overt military force, entails an inherently coercive and interventionist character. Such conduct constitutes a serious breach of state sovereignty, political independence, and the international legal protections afforded to heads of state, thereby triggering the acting state's international responsibility. The article concludes that the normalization of covert non-military coercive measures poses a substantial threat to the integrity of the international legal order and highlights the urgent need to strengthen legal accountability mechanisms to safeguard the principle of state sovereignty in contemporary international relations.

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## Introduction

State sovereignty stands as one of the most fundamental principles of public international law, constituting the cornerstone of the legal order governing relations among states<sup>1</sup>. Rooted in customary international law and codified in foundational instruments such as the Charter of the United Nations, sovereignty encompasses respect for political independence, territorial integrity, and the prohibition of external intervention in the internal affairs of states. Within this normative framework, any form of coercive or interventionist conduct by one state against another is subject to strict legal limitations. While classical doctrines of international law have traditionally focused on military intervention and the use of armed force, contemporary international practice reveals a notable transformation in the modalities of interference, marked by an increasing reliance on covert, non-military, and plausibly deniable measures. The legal status of such practices remains contested and insufficiently clarified<sup>2</sup>.

In this evolving context, relations between the United States and Venezuela provide a particularly salient case study for examining modern forms of interventionist policy. Throughout much of the twentieth century, bilateral relations were shaped by oil-based cooperation and strategic alignment. However, this relationship deteriorated significantly following the emergence of Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian project and further intensified during the presidency of Nicolás Maduro. The imposition of extensive economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and mounting security pressures reflected a broader recalibration of U.S. policy toward Venezuela. These developments were closely linked to Venezuela's strategic significance within U.S. regional policy in Latin America, influenced by energy considerations, geopolitical rivalry with external powers, and the enduring legacy of the Monroe Doctrine as a framework for hemispheric influence.

It is against this broader political and strategic backdrop that the alleged plan to kidnap the President of Venezuela during the Trump administration must be situated. Unlike traditional forms of intervention involving overt military force, the reported plan was conceived as a non-military and covert operation, designed outside the context of armed conflict. As such, it raises fundamental legal questions regarding the scope and content of the principle of non-intervention, the prohibition of coercive interference, the protection of state sovereignty, and the international legal safeguards afforded to high-ranking state officials. The central issue addressed in this article is whether the planning, support, or endorsement of a non-military kidnapping operation targeting a sitting head of state can be reconciled with international law or must instead be classified as a violation of state sovereignty and an internationally wrongful act.

Proceeding from the premise that the abduction of senior state officials constitutes an inherently coercive and interventionist act, this study seeks to assess the legality of the alleged kidnapping plot under the core principles of international law. In particular, it examines the relevance of the principles of non-intervention and the prohibition on the use of force, as well as the rules governing international state responsibility, while also considering the

1 Hanjani, Ali, "Constancy of the principle of The Stability of Sovereignty and Non-Intervention," *Legal Research Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 64, March 2014, p. 106.

2 Ghasemi, Gholamali, "Challenges to the Principle of Non-Intervention and Its Position in International Law," *Afaq-e Amniat Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 33, Winter 2017, pp. 143-172.

implications of applicable treaty regimes protecting internationally protected persons. The article argues that the absence of overt military force does not preclude the existence of an internationally wrongful act and that covert non-military operations may equally entail serious breaches of international legal obligations.

The significance of this research lies in the growing prevalence of covert and non-military forms of intervention in contemporary international relations, including clandestine operations and extraterritorial coercive measures. Failure to subject such practices to rigorous legal scrutiny risks the gradual erosion of state sovereignty and the normalization of unlawful interference in the internal affairs of states. Focusing on the U.S.–Venezuela case during the Trump administration, this article seeks not only to analyze a specific instance of alleged intervention but also to illuminate a broader and concerning trend in international practice. Its contribution involves shifting analytical emphasis from traditional military intervention to non-military coercive conduct and contextualizing the abduction of political leaders within the doctrinal framework of international state responsibility.

## **1. Historical and Political Context of U.S.–Venezuela Relations**

A proper legal assessment of alleged interventionist conduct by the United States during the Trump administration necessitates a careful examination of the historical and political evolution of U.S.–Venezuela relations. These relations have not merely fluctuated in response to episodic diplomatic disputes, but rather have been shaped by enduring structural factors, including economic interdependence, ideological divergence, and competing geopolitical visions for Latin America. Understanding this trajectory is essential for contextualizing the emergence of non-military and covert forms of coercion that challenge the established boundaries of lawful conduct under international law.

Throughout the twentieth century, Venezuela occupied a distinctive position in U.S. foreign policy as both a strategic energy supplier and a politically aligned regional partner. However, the gradual erosion of this relationship—accelerated by ideological transformation within Venezuela and shifting U.S. regional priorities—laid the groundwork for increasingly confrontational and interventionist approaches. This historical evolution illuminates how contemporary non-military strategies, including covert operations and indirect coercive measures, came to be viewed as viable instruments of policy, notwithstanding their questionable compatibility with the principle of state sovereignty.

### **1.1. From Oil-Based Cooperation to Political Confrontation**

For much of the twentieth century, U.S.–Venezuela relations were characterized by close cooperation rooted in the petroleum sector. Following the discovery and large-scale exploitation of oil in the early twentieth century, Venezuela emerged as one of the principal suppliers of crude oil to the United States. American oil corporations, including Standard Oil and Gulf Oil, played a decisive role in the development of Venezuela's petroleum industry, fostering deep economic interdependence and political alignment between the two states.

This relationship was further reinforced during the Cold War, as Venezuela was perceived as a stable democratic ally in a region marked by political volatility<sup>1</sup>.

This cooperative framework began to erode as the Venezuelan state gradually asserted resource sovereignty, culminating in the nationalization of the oil industry in 1976. While nationalization did not immediately dismantle U.S.–Venezuela relations, it signaled a growing tension between Venezuelan claims to economic self-determination and U.S. corporate and strategic interests. These tensions intensified dramatically following the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998 and the launch of the Bolivarian Revolution, which explicitly rejected neoliberal economic models and U.S. hemispheric influence<sup>2</sup>.

Chávez’s foreign policy emphasized resource nationalism, social redistribution, and the construction of alternative regional alliances to counter U.S. dominance. Measures such as the renegotiation of contracts with foreign oil companies, increased state control over *Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)*, and the expulsion of certain foreign corporate actors were perceived in Washington as direct challenges to U.S. economic and political interests<sup>3</sup>.

Following Chávez’s death, relations deteriorated further under the presidency of Nicolás Maduro. Disputed electoral processes, allegations of democratic erosion, and widespread human rights concerns provided the formal justification for a broad sanctions regime imposed by the United States. These measures, particularly those targeting Venezuela’s oil exports and financial sector, significantly exacerbated economic collapse and deepened political confrontation. Importantly, U.S. policy during this period increasingly reflected a willingness to employ unconventional and indirect forms of pressure alongside formal diplomatic and economic tools<sup>4</sup>.

## 1.2. Venezuela in U.S. Regional Strategy: Latin America and the Legacy of the Monroe Doctrine

James Monroe, the then President of the United States, issued the famous declaration known as the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 and presented it before the United States Congress, asserting that “America belongs to the Americans” and that European powers had no right to intervene in the internal affairs of the American continent<sup>5</sup>. Venezuela’s role in U.S. regional strategy cannot be understood in isolation from the broader historical framework governing U.S.–Latin American relations. Since the articulation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, Latin America has been conceptualized by U.S. policymakers as a sphere of privileged influence, within which external interference by rival powers would not be tolerated. Although the doctrine’s formal language emphasized protection against European colonialism, its subsequent

1 Tugwell, Maurice. *The Politics of Oil in Venezuela*. London: Macmillan, 1975. pp. 42–45.

2 Ellner, Steve. *Rethinking Venezuelan Politics: Class, Conflict, and the Chávez Phenomenon*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008. pp. 98–101.

3 Corrales, Javier, and Michael Penfold. *Dragon in the Tropics: Hugo Chávez and the Political Economy of Revolution in Venezuela*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011. pp. 87–92

4 U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS). *Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations*. Washington, DC: CRS Report for Congress, 2020. pp. 12–15.

5 Soleymani Nezhad, Nasim, Mojtahedi, Mohammadreza, and Bandehali, Farshid, “Semantics of the Principle of Non-Intervention from the Perspective of This Concept’s Interactions with Other Fundamental Principles of International Law,” *Comparative Law Research Quarterly of Justice and Fairness*, Vol. 6, No. 22, Autumn 2024, p. 46

reinterpretations increasingly served to legitimize U.S. intervention in the political affairs of Latin American states<sup>1</sup>

In the post–Cold War era, this interventionist logic has not disappeared but has instead been adapted to new geopolitical realities. Venezuela, particularly under Chávez and Maduro, came to be viewed as a focal point of resistance to U.S. regional hegemony. Its expanding political, military, and economic ties with Russia, China, and Iran were perceived as undermining U.S. strategic dominance in the Western Hemisphere and as part of a broader pattern of multipolar contestation<sup>2</sup>.

As a result, U.S. policy toward Venezuela increasingly reflected a hybrid strategy combining diplomatic isolation, economic coercion, and indirect interventionist measures. While such practices were often framed as promoting democracy and regional stability, they simultaneously blurred the line between lawful political pressure and unlawful interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. This tension becomes particularly acute when such measures involve covert operations or actions targeting the highest organs of the state, including the head of government. From a legal perspective, these practices must be assessed against the principle of sovereign equality enshrined in Article 2(1) of the United Nations Charter and the prohibition of intervention affirmed in international jurisprudence. The International Court of Justice, in its landmark *Nicaragua v. United States* judgment, clarified that intervention is unlawful when it employs coercive methods intended to influence the political choices of another state, even in the absence of armed force<sup>3</sup>. In this light, the persistence of interventionist logic—translated into non-military and covert forms of coercion—raises serious legal concerns. When such practices extend to the planning or support of operations aimed at abducting a sitting head of state, they represent not merely a continuation of regional power politics, but a potential escalation that directly implicates the core norms of sovereignty, non-intervention, and international state responsibility.

## 2. U.S. Interests in Venezuela and Their Link to Interventionist Behavior

U.S. policy toward Venezuela over the past decades has been shaped by a complex interplay of energy, economic, geopolitical, and security interests. These interests are embedded within the broader framework of U.S. hemispheric strategy and help explain Washington’s interventionist behavior—from economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure to covert operations that go beyond conventional statecraft. Understanding these motivations is essential to contextualize actions such as the alleged non-military plot to abduct the Venezuelan president. Interventionist behavior is therefore not merely a product of ideological preference but is also rooted in strategic calculations designed to safeguard U.S. national interests.

1 Grandin, Greg. *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006. pp. 5–9.

2 Forsythe, David P. *Human Rights in International Relations*. 4th ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. p. 287.

3 International Court of Justice (ICJ). *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. United States of America)*. ICJ Reports 1986. pp. 106–108.

## 2.1. Energy and Economic Interests

Venezuela possesses some of the largest proven oil reserves globally. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), Venezuela's reserves exceeded 303 billion barrels in 2024, surpassing even Saudi Arabia<sup>1</sup>. For the United States, these reserves hold dual strategic significance:

**Energy Security:** As the world's largest economy, the U.S. considers access to reliable hydrocarbon sources critical for national security. Stable supplies within the Western Hemisphere reduce dependence on volatile regions such as the Middle East.

**Economic Influence:** Control or influence over key energy resources enables the U.S. to exert considerable leverage in global energy markets, shaping pricing, supply, and geopolitical dynamics. From the 1950s to 1970s, American oil companies invested heavily in Venezuela's petroleum sector, securing a substantial share of crude output and developing technological and financial cooperation with the state<sup>2</sup>.

The nationalization of the oil industry in 1976 and the establishment of PDVSA (Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.) fundamentally altered commercial relations. However, the strategic significance of Venezuelan energy resources remained central to U.S. policy<sup>3</sup>.

Following the rise of Nicolás Maduro and escalating political tensions after 2013, the U.S. implemented economic sanctions targeting Venezuela's oil sector. These sanctions prohibited U.S. firms from purchasing Venezuelan oil and imposed financial restrictions on PDVSA, aiming to reduce government revenues and weaken its economic base<sup>4</sup>.

Simultaneously, most major foreign oil companies curtailed or terminated their operations in Venezuela due to U.S. sanctions; however, Chevron has continued limited operations under special licenses issued by the U.S. government. This continued presence reflects not only persistent U.S. economic interests in Venezuelan energy resources, but also a calibrated sanctions-management strategy, whereby selective licensing is used as an instrument to exert political and economic pressure on the government in Caracas<sup>5</sup>. According to official disclosures, Chevron's activities are strictly constrained, permitting participation in joint ventures with Venezuela's state-owned oil company (PDVSA) while restricting revenue flows to the Venezuelan government, thereby aligning energy engagement with broader U.S. foreign policy objectives<sup>6</sup>.

These considerations demonstrate that U.S. energy and economic interests extend far beyond mere trade, constituting a central factor shaping interventionist behavior toward Venezuela.

1 Energy Information Administration (EIA), U.S. Department of Energy. Country Analysis Brief: Venezuela. Washington, DC, 2024, p. 4.

2 Karl, Terry Lynn. *Petroleum and Politics in Venezuela: 1914–1975*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987. pp. 62–85.

3 Coronil, Fernando. *The Magical State: Nature, Money, and Modernity in Venezuela*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. pp. 129–130.

4 Hufbauer, Gary Clyde, Jeffrey J. Schott, and Kimberly Ann Elliott. *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered*. 3rd ed. Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2007. pp. 312–315

5 U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA). Country Analysis Brief: Venezuela. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Energy, 2024.

6 Chevron Corporation. Form 10-K: Annual Report Pursuant to Section 13 or 15(d) of the Securities Exchange Act of 1934. U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, 2023.

## 2.2. Geopolitical and Security Interests

U.S. policy toward Venezuela must also be understood within the context of geopolitical competition with global powers. Since the early 2000s, Venezuela cultivated extensive political and economic ties with actors often viewed by Washington as strategic rivals:

Russia has significantly strengthened its influence in Venezuela through expanding energy cooperation, financial arrangements, and enhanced political and defense ties. Moscow and Caracas signed a strategic partnership agreement in May 2025 that focuses on deepening cooperation within the energy sector and coordinating positions in international forums, including joint efforts to stabilize energy markets and counter unilateral sanctions<sup>1</sup>. Russia also supports Venezuela diplomatically and has maintained strong political backing for the Maduro government amid regional tensions with the United States<sup>2</sup>. In the energy sector, Venezuela's National Assembly approved a 15-year extension of joint oil ventures with a Russian state energy unit, allowing continued investment and production cooperation well into the 2040s<sup>3</sup> (Reuters, Nov 20, 2025). These developments underscore Russia's multifaceted engagement with Venezuela, encompassing economic, military-technical, and high-level political cooperation.

China: Beijing advanced its presence via oil-for-loan agreements and large-scale infrastructure investments, consolidating both economic and political influence<sup>4</sup> (Shambaugh, *China's Foreign Policy*, Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 117–118).

Iran: Tehran-Caracas cooperation in energy, industrial, and limited military sectors was perceived as a geopolitical challenge to U.S. hegemony<sup>5</sup>.

From Washington's perspective, these relationships were not merely bilateral partnerships but manifestations of rival powers encroaching on the U.S. strategic sphere in the Western Hemisphere, potentially threatening regional stability. U.S. policymakers have historically regarded regional stability in Latin America as integral to national security. From the Monroe Doctrine (1823) to contemporary reinterpretations, U.S. doctrine has emphasized that no external power should exercise extensive strategic influence within the Western Hemisphere<sup>6</sup>.

Venezuela's geographic location, vast energy resources, and relations with rival powers make it a strategically sensitive node in Washington's regional security calculations. Analysts argue that any geopolitical realignment in Venezuela could produce ripple effects throughout Latin America, impacting regional security arrangements and prompting U.S. policymakers to consider both overt and covert measures to maintain influence<sup>7</sup> (Brown & Ainley, *Understanding International Relations*, 7th ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 383–385).

U.S. interventionist behavior is multifactorial, rooted in both energy/economic interests and

1 Reuters. Putin and Venezuela's Maduro sign strategic partnership agreement in Moscow. May 7, 2025

2 Reuters. Russia denounces 'excessive' US military force in Caribbean, backs Venezuela. Nov 1, 2025

3 Reuters. Venezuela approves 15-year extension of Russia-linked oil joint ventures. Nov 20, 2025.

4 Shambaugh, David. *China's Foreign Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 117–118.

5 Katzman, Kenneth. *Iran–Venezuela Relations*. Congressional Research Service, 2022, pp. 5–7.

6 Smith, Peter H. *The United States and Latin America: A History of American Diplomacy*. 4th ed. London: Routledge, 2014. pp. 45–47.

7 Brown, Chris, and Kirsten Ainley. *Understanding International Relations*. 7th ed. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. pp. 383–385.

geopolitical/security imperatives.<sup>1</sup> These interlinked motivations help explain the emergence of non-military coercive measures, including economic sanctions, political pressure, and covert operations targeting high-ranking officials, situating the alleged kidnapping plot within a broader pattern of strategic intervention.

### **3. The Alleged Kidnapping Plot against the President of Venezuela as a Coercive Non-Military Action**

The alleged plan to abduct the sitting President of Venezuela provides a significant case for examining how covert or ostensibly nonmilitary operations intersect with fundamental norms of public international law, particularly state sovereignty, nonintervention, and coercion. While the UN Charter traditionally focuses on the use of armed force, international legal doctrine has increasingly analyzed whether covert actions that are nonmilitary in character but intended to influence the political leadership of another state can constitute unlawful interference.

#### **3.1. Legal Characterization of the Alleged Kidnapping Plot and Its Operational Dimensions**

A distinguishing feature of the alleged operation against the Venezuelan president is its nonmilitary and covert nature. Unlike conventional military interventions recognized under *jus ad bellum*, covert operations lack overt troop deployments or declared hostilities. However, they can involve clandestine measures intended to influence or coerce another state's political direction, which, under contemporary international law, is considered a prohibited intervention. This is because covert action that aims to influence the internal affairs of a foreign state — even absent direct use of armed force — interferes with sovereign decisionmaking and is generally forbidden under the principles of nonintervention and sovereign equality<sup>2</sup>.

In international law, covert actions that effectively coerce another state, such as by attempting to remove or detain its political leadership, may constitute unlawful interference because they deprive the target state of autonomous decision-making over its domestic political affairs. The extraterritorial dimension of such operations—conducting them in the territory of another sovereign state without consent—further underscores the legal ramifications. Prohibition of extraterritorial interference is a corollary of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, protected under customary international law and reflected in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which prohibits the threat or use of force against the political independence or territorial integrity of any state<sup>3</sup>.

Importantly, the absence of declared hostilities or ongoing armed conflict does not exempt such operations from international legal scrutiny. Use of force under Article 2(4) of the UN Charter is not strictly limited to situations of war or conventional armed conflict; rather, international law broadly prohibits coercive actions that undermine a state's political

1 Mohammad Saleh Taskhiri. "Book Review, "The Legal Implications of The United States' Strike on General Soleimani, His Associates, And Iran's Response" Edited by Mostafa Fazaeli". *Iranian Journal of International and Comparative Law*, 1, 2, 2023, 253-258. doi: 10.22091/ijicl.2024.10444.1093

2 Damrosch, Lori Fisler. "Covert Operations." *American Journal of International Law* Vol. 83, No. 4 (October 1989): 795–805

3 United Nations Charter, 1945, Article 2(4).

independence, except in permissible exceptions such as Security Council authorization or self-defense. Even operations framed as law enforcement or counter-criminal activities, when targeting a foreign head of state, constitute a coercive entry into another sovereign territory, prohibited under international law.<sup>1</sup>

### 3.2. Analysis of the Coercive Character of the Operation

Forcibly removing or detaining a state's highest political official—regardless of the method used (military, intelligence, or covert action)—directly aims to alter the political structure or leadership of the target state. Under customary international law, such acts, characterized by deliberate extraterritorial coercion, fall within the core scope of prohibited intervention.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) in *Nicaragua v. United States* emphasized that intervening in the political processes of another state through coercion constitutes a direct violation of the principle of non-intervention, stating that “the element of coercion ... forms the very essence of prohibited intervention.”<sup>2</sup> Although classic formulations of the prohibition on the use of force (Article 2(4) of the UN Charter) refer to the use of armed force, the broader principle of non-intervention covers coercive measures that undermine political independence, even if non-military in method. Therefore, an operation aiming to abduct political leaders via intelligence services or secret agents can still be considered unlawful if it deprives a sovereign government of its decision-making authority, constituting political coercion incompatible with international law<sup>3</sup>.

International law recognizes that certain actions—while not constituting formal use of armed force—can be coercive and unlawful if they involve deliberate interference in the internal political affairs of another state. The International Law Commission and scholarly analyses emphasize that conduct aimed at pressuring a state to change its leadership or policies through extraterritorial coercion contravenes states' autonomous sovereignty. This includes actions intended to install or support an alternative government, undermine legitimate authority, or compel regime change<sup>4</sup>.

In the Venezuelan case, attempts to detain or remove the sitting president with the intention of influencing political arrangements constitute coercive intervention, violating the fundamental norms of sovereign equality and political independence. Even in a non-military context, such conduct constitutes an internationally wrongful act prohibited under both customary international law and the principles reflected in the UN Charter.

## 4. Legal Assessment of the Alleged Action under the Principle of State Sovereignty

The legal assessment of the alleged kidnapping operation against the President of Venezuela requires grounding in the core principles of international law, particularly state sovereignty,

1 United Nations Charter, Article 2(4).

2 International Court of Justice (ICJ), *Nicaragua v. United States*, ICJ Reports 1986, p. 108.

3 Wu, Cecilia Yue. ‘Challenging Paternalistic Interference: The Case for Non-Intervention in a Globalized World’. *Harvard International Law Journal*, Vol. 65, No. 1, Winter 2023, pp. 254–282.

4 Helal, Mohamed S. “On Coercion in International Law.” *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics* 52 (2019–2020): 1–80.

non-intervention, and respect for political independence. These principles are enshrined in the United Nations Charter, customary international law, and judicial interpretations, forming the *Lex Fundamentalis* that governs inter-state conduct under international law.

#### **4.1. Principle of Sovereignty and Prohibition of Intervention in International Law**

State sovereignty constitutes one of the foundational pillars of the contemporary international legal system. Enshrined in Article 2(1) of the United Nations Charter, the principle affirms the sovereign equality of all states, irrespective of their political, economic, or military power, and guarantees their entitlement to exercise exclusive authority over internal and external affairs without external interference<sup>1</sup>.

The doctrinal origins of sovereignty are commonly traced to the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which crystallized the notion of territorial authority and the exclusion of external powers from domestic governance. While modern scholarship has nuanced the so-called “Westphalian myth,” it remains widely accepted that sovereignty functions as a legal presumption of non-interference and exclusive domestic jurisdiction in international law.<sup>2</sup> Beyond its historical roots, sovereignty today operates as a normative constraint on state conduct. As Akindele persuasively notes, the principles of sovereign equality and respect for territorial integrity are not merely abstract ideals but legal safeguards whose violation directly threatens international peace and security<sup>3</sup>.

This understanding is reinforced by Article 2(7) of the UN Charter, which explicitly prohibits intervention “in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state,” thereby shielding political leadership, constitutional order, and governance structures from external manipulation<sup>4</sup>.

Sovereignty in international law entails both internal supremacy and external independence. Internally, it denotes the state’s exclusive authority over its population and political institutions; externally, it reflects independence from the control or coercion of other states. On this basis, foreign states are legally barred from intervening in another state’s internal political affairs, including leadership selection and executive authority. This normative framework is explicitly articulated in the Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States (1970), which affirms that:

“Any action aimed at the partial or total disruption of the national unity and territorial integrity of a State is incompatible with the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations.”<sup>5</sup>

The Declaration further clarifies that respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity forms

1 United Nations Charter, 1945, Art. 2(1)).

2 Osiander, Andreas, *Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Westphalian Myth*, International Organization, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2001, pp. 251–287.

3 Akindele, R. A. (1976), The Concept of Sovereignty in International Law, *Indian Journal of International Law*, Vol. 16, No. 1–2, pp. 101–113

4 United Nations Charter, 1945, Art. 2(7)

5 United Nations General Assembly, Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. Resolution 2625 (XXV), 24 October 1970.

an inseparable component of peaceful coexistence and good-neighborly relations among states, elevating non-intervention to the status of a customary international law obligation<sup>1</sup>.

While not all forms of influence amount to unlawful intervention, international law draws a clear distinction between permissible diplomatic persuasion and coercive interference. The latter constitutes the core element of prohibited intervention.

In its landmark judgment in *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua* (*Nicaragua v. United States*), the International Court of Justice unequivocally held that:

“The element of coercion ... forms the very essence of prohibited intervention”.<sup>2</sup>The Court emphasized that intervention becomes unlawful when it seeks to compel a state to adopt or abandon specific political, economic, or foreign policy choices—particularly through clandestine or indirect means.

Scholarly analysis supports this interpretation. Christian argues that contemporary international law recognizes non-intervention as a binding norm whose breach does not require the use of armed force; rather, coercive actions targeting a state’s political autonomy suffice to trigger responsibility.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the UN General Assembly has repeatedly condemned both overt and covert interference. Resolution 31/91 expressly denounces any form of intervention intended to influence the political system or leadership of another state, reaffirming that sovereign equality presupposes freedom of political choice<sup>4</sup>.

When assessed against this legal framework, a non-military kidnapping plot targeting the sitting President of Venezuela constitutes a particularly grave form of unlawful intervention. Although lacking the hallmarks of conventional armed force, such an operation directly interferes with the core sovereign functions of the Venezuelan state—namely, its executive authority and constitutional governance. The forced removal or attempted abduction of a head of state represents a coercive act par excellence, as it seeks to alter a state’s political leadership through extraterritorial means. Under international law, political independence includes the right of a state to determine its leadership without external compulsion. Consequently, any foreign involvement—whether through planning, financing, intelligence support, or acquiescence—in such a plot would amount to a violation of the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention.

From this perspective, the alleged kidnapping scheme cannot be characterized as a mere political operation or law enforcement matter. Rather, it constitutes an internationally wrongful act, engaging the responsibility of the intervening state under customary international law, even in the absence of direct military engagement<sup>5</sup>.

1 Cassese, Antonio, *International Law* (2nd ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 55–58.

2 International Court of Justice (ICJ), *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. United States of America)*, Merits, Judgment, ICJ Reports 1986, p. 108

3 Christian, Tomuschat, *The Principle of Non-Intervention in Contemporary International Law*. Berlin & Heidelberg: Springer.2019, pp. 3–25

4 United Nations General Assembly, Declaration on the Inadmissibility of Intervention in the Domestic Affairs of States and the Protection of Their Independence and Sovereignty, Resolution 31/91, 14 December 1976

5 Crawford, James, *State Responsibility: The General Part*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 301- 305

## 4.2. Kidnapping High-Level Officials and the Violation of Political Independence and Internationally Protected Immunities

The kidnapping or forcible removal of high-ranking state officials—particularly a sitting head of state—constitutes one of the gravest forms of interference with a state’s political independence. Political independence, as a core attribute of sovereignty, presupposes that a state is able to exercise governmental authority and determine its leadership without external coercion or manipulation. Any external act that targets the physical liberty of a head of state directly undermines that head of state’s autonomy and destabilizes the constitutional order of the affected state.

International legal doctrine recognizes that political independence extends beyond abstract self-determination to include the effective functioning and security of state leadership. As Wood explains, coercive conduct directed at a state’s highest political authorities strikes at the institutional heart of sovereignty, even where such conduct falls short of traditional armed force<sup>1</sup>.

The international community has expressly recognized the gravity of crimes against senior state officials through the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes against Internationally Protected Persons, including Diplomatic Agents (1973). This Convention codifies a specific protective regime for individuals whose safety is essential to the maintenance of international relations and political stability.

Article 1 of the Convention defines internationally protected persons to include heads of state, heads of government, and ministers for foreign affairs whenever they are present in a foreign state, as well as members of their families. Article 2 obliges States Parties to criminalize acts such as murder, kidnapping, or other attacks upon the person or liberty of such individuals, as well as attempts, participation, and complicity in these acts.

The Convention thus transforms what might otherwise be viewed as domestic criminal acts into international crimes triggering treaty-based obligations, including prosecution or extradition (*aut dedere aut judicare*)<sup>2</sup>.

Scholars emphasize that the rationale of the Convention lies not only in the personal protection of officials but also in safeguarding state sovereignty and political independence, which are indirectly endangered by attacks on state representatives<sup>3</sup>.

From the perspective of general international law, any attempt by a foreign state—or actors attributable to it—to abduct a sitting president without the consent of the territorial state constitutes a dual violation: first, of the personal immunity and international protection afforded to the head of state; and second, of the political independence and territorial integrity of the affected state.

While Article 2(4) of the UN Charter primarily addresses the threat or use of armed force,

1 Wood, Michael, *The Principle of Non-Intervention in Contemporary International Law*. Berlin & Heidelberg: Springer, 2019, pp. 12–15.

2 United Nations, Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes against Internationally Protected Persons, including Diplomatic Agents. New York, 1973, Arts. 1–7.

3 Bassiouni, M. Cherif. (1996). *International Crimes: Jus cogens and obligatio erga omnes*. *Law and Contemporary Problems*, Vol. 59, No. 4, pp. 63–74.

authoritative interpretations confirm that coercive actions short of classical armed force may nonetheless violate political independence when they are designed to compel changes in governance or leadership. The International Court of Justice has clarified that coercion, rather than the method employed, is the decisive criterion for determining unlawfulness<sup>1</sup>.

In this sense, kidnapping schemes targeting heads of state represent a paradigmatic form of prohibited interference. They are inherently coercive, aimed at incapacitating or removing the central organ of executive authority, thereby depriving the state of effective sovereign control<sup>2</sup>.

When assessed in light of the 1973 Convention, the alleged plot to kidnap the sitting President of Venezuela falls squarely within the category of conduct that the Convention seeks to prevent and punish. As a head of state, the Venezuelan president qualifies as an internationally protected person, and any act aimed at unlawfully seizing or detaining him—whether carried out directly by state agents or indirectly through non-state actors—engages the international responsibility of the sponsoring or acquiescing state.

Even if the operation were executed outside a traditional armed conflict, the Convention makes clear that kidnapping and related acts constitute autonomous international crimes. Moreover, under the law of state responsibility, the involvement, direction, or substantial support of a foreign state in such a plot would render the conduct attributable to that state, thereby constituting an internationally wrongful act<sup>3</sup>.

Accordingly, the alleged kidnapping operation against the President of Venezuela cannot be legally characterized as a mere covert political maneuver. Rather, it constitutes a serious breach of treaty obligations under the 1973 Convention, as well as a violation of principles of customary international law protecting political independence, sovereign equality, and the inviolability of state leadership.

#### **4.3. Attribution of the Conduct to the United States under International Law**

Under the law of international responsibility, the existence of an internationally wrongful act does not by itself establish state responsibility unless the conduct is legally attributable to the state concerned. Accordingly, the central legal issue in the Venezuelan case is not merely whether discussions or plans concerning the removal or abduction of Nicolás Maduro existed, but whether such conduct can be attributed to the United States under the rules of customary international law<sup>4</sup>.

The International Law Commission's Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts (ARSIWA) provide that a state incurs responsibility when conduct attributable to it constitutes a breach of an international obligation<sup>5</sup>. Conduct

1 International Court of Justice, *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. United States)*, ICJ Reports 1986, p. 108.

2 Cassese, Antonio, *International Law*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 57–60

3 Crawford, James, *State Responsibility: The General Part*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 301–305

4 Crawford J, *State Responsibility: The General Part* (Cambridge University Press 2013) 113.

5 ILC Draft Articles, 2001, Art. 2

performed by state organs is directly attributable to the state under Article 4, while Article 8 extends attribution to persons or groups acting under the direction or control of the state<sup>1</sup>.

The International Court of Justice has repeatedly emphasized that attribution depends upon the existence of a sufficient nexus between the state and the impugned conduct. In *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. United States)*, the Court held that financing, organizing, equipping, or supporting irregular forces is not alone sufficient for attribution unless the state exercised “effective control” over the specific operation concerned<sup>2</sup>. Likewise, in the *Bosnian Genocide* judgment, the Court reaffirmed that attribution requires proof that the state directed, controlled, or substantially coordinated the conduct giving rise to the wrongful act<sup>3</sup>.

However, attribution under international law is not confined solely to situations of operational control. International jurisprudence also recognizes that a state may incur responsibility where it subsequently acknowledges and adopts conduct as its own. This principle was clearly articulated by the International Court of Justice in the *United States Diplomatic and Consular Staff in Tehran* case. The Court observed that although the initial seizure of the United States Embassy in Tehran had been carried out by private militants, the subsequent approval and endorsement of the occupation by Iranian authorities transformed the conduct into an act attributable to the Iranian state<sup>4</sup>.

This principle is codified in Article 11 of ARSIWA, which provides that conduct not initially attributable to a state nevertheless becomes attributable where the state “acknowledges and adopts the conduct in question as its own”<sup>5</sup>.

In the Venezuelan context, repeated statements by senior United States officials during the Trump administration concerning regime change, the removal of Nicolás Maduro, or support for coercive measures against the Venezuelan leadership possess legal significance beyond ordinary political rhetoric. Statements made by the President of the United States and other senior executive officials may constitute evidence of state policy, authorization, acquiescence, or endorsement, particularly where they coincide with broader operational, intelligence, or political support mechanisms<sup>6</sup>.

Accordingly, even if elements of the alleged operation involved private actors or covert mechanisms, subsequent approval, political endorsement, or operational support by senior state authorities may contribute to establishing attribution under customary international law. Therefore, the combination of official statements, governmental policy, and possible operational coordination may satisfy the legal threshold required for attribution of the conduct to the United States.

1 ILC Draft Articles, 2001, Arts. 4, 8

2 ICJ Reports 1986, pp. 62–65

3 ICJ Reports 2007, paras. 398–406

4 ICJ Reports 1980, pp. 35–36

5 ILC Draft Articles, 2001, Art. 11

6 Damrosch, Lori Fisler. (1989). “Covert Operations.” *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 83, No. 4, p795

#### 4.4. Possible Justifications and Counterarguments under International Law

A balanced legal assessment also requires consideration of potential justifications that the United States might invoke in defense of its conduct, assuming *arguendo* the existence of involvement in the alleged operation.

One possible argument concerns the characterization of the Maduro government. Since several states, including the United States during portions of the Trump administration, questioned the legitimacy of Nicolás Maduro's presidency and recognized Juan Guaidó as interim president, it could be argued that actions directed against Maduro did not constitute interference against a legitimately recognized government.<sup>1</sup> From this perspective, measures aimed at supporting democratic restoration might be framed as politically justified.

However, under international law, disputes regarding governmental legitimacy do not generally authorize unilateral coercive intervention. The principle of sovereign equality and the prohibition of intervention continue to apply irrespective of political disagreements concerning internal governance<sup>2</sup>. The International Court of Justice has consistently emphasized that states are not entitled to impose political change through coercive means<sup>3</sup>.

A second possible justification may rely on counterterrorism or transnational criminal enforcement rationales. U.S. authorities accused Maduro and senior Venezuelan officials of narcotics trafficking and organized criminal conduct. Consequently, it could be argued that efforts to apprehend such individuals constituted forms of extraterritorial law enforcement.

Nevertheless, international law imposes strict limitations on extraterritorial enforcement jurisdiction. Abducting or forcibly transferring a sitting head of state without the consent of the territorial state would violate principles of sovereignty, immunities of state officials, and the prohibition of intervention<sup>4</sup>. Even where criminal allegations exist, lawful mechanisms such as extradition, mutual legal assistance, or international judicial cooperation must be employed<sup>5</sup>.

Finally, some scholars have argued that humanitarian concerns or democratic protection may justify exceptional forms of intervention. Yet contemporary international law remains highly restrictive regarding unilateral intervention absent Security Council authorization or a valid claim of self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter<sup>6</sup>. As such, these arguments remain legally controversial and insufficient to justify coercive operations targeting foreign political leadership.

Accordingly, while political and strategic arguments may be advanced in defense of interventionist conduct, they do not substantially alter the legal assessment that coercive abduction operations against a sitting head of state remain incompatible with the foundational principles of international law.

1 Fox, Gregory H. (2020). *Democracy, Rightful Government, and International Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 214.

2 Shaw, Malcolm N. (2008). *International Law*. 6th ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 1132.

3 ICJ, Nicaragua Case, 1986: 108

4 Akindele, R. A. p. 830.

5 Cassese, A., p. 56.

6 Ruys, Tom, p. 487.

#### 4.5. Kidnapping a Head of State as a Potential International Crime and Violation of *Jus Cogens*

Beyond constituting a violation of sovereignty and political independence, the kidnapping or attempted abduction of a sitting head of state may also raise questions concerning the breach of peremptory norms of international law (*jus cogens*) and the existence of an international crime.

*Jus cogens* norms occupy the highest hierarchical position within international law and permit no derogation<sup>1</sup>. These norms include the prohibitions of aggression, genocide, torture, crimes against humanity, slavery, and other fundamental principles essential to the international legal order<sup>2</sup>. Although no universal treaty expressly classifies the kidnapping of a head of state as a standalone *jus cogens* violation, the coercive removal of a foreign political leader may implicate several peremptory norms simultaneously.

First, where such conduct involves unlawful deprivation of liberty, torture, enforced disappearance, or extrajudicial transfer, it may intersect with internationally prohibited practices recognized as *jus cogens* norms<sup>3</sup>. Second, forcible interference with the constitutional and political independence of a sovereign state may amount to a particularly grave breach of the principle of non-intervention, especially when undertaken through coercive extraterritorial means<sup>4</sup>.

Some scholars further argue that systematic or politically motivated attacks against state leadership can amount to international crimes where they form part of a broader policy of coercive destabilization<sup>5</sup>. In this context, the International Law Commission's earlier discussions regarding "international crimes of states" and obligations *erga omnes* remain conceptually relevant, even though the final ARSIWA framework abandoned formal categorization of state crimes<sup>6</sup>.

Moreover, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes against Internationally Protected Persons (1973) reflects the international community's recognition that attacks against heads of state possess an international dimension transcending ordinary domestic criminality. The Convention criminalizes kidnapping and violent attacks against internationally protected persons and imposes obligations of prosecution or extradition upon states parties<sup>7</sup>.

Accordingly, while the precise classification of kidnapping a head of state as a *jus cogens* violation remains debated, there is substantial legal basis for considering such conduct an aggravated internationally wrongful act with potentially international criminal dimensions. At minimum, the operation constitutes a serious breach of obligations owed to the international community as a whole, particularly those protecting sovereign equality, political independence, and the security of internationally protected persons.

1 Orakhelashvili, Alexander, p. 50.

2 Bassiouni, M. Cherif, p. 68.

3 Cassese, A., p. 203.

4 Ruys, Tom, p. 14.

5 Bassiouni, M. Cherif, p. 63.

6 Crawford, J., p. 589.

7 Convention on Internationally Protected Persons, 1973, Arts. 1–7.

## 5. Structural and Normative Disruption of the International Legal Order Resulting from Coercive Non-Military Intervention

Unlawful interference with the political leadership of a sovereign state—particularly through covert, non-military coercive measures—does not merely generate bilateral disputes or isolated breaches of international obligations. Rather, such conduct produces systemic consequences that destabilize the normative architecture of the international legal order itself. By targeting the political independence of a state through indirect yet coercive means, the intervening state undermines core principles upon which international law is constructed, including sovereign equality, non-intervention, and the rule-based limitation of power<sup>1</sup>.

From a structural perspective, international law relies on the presumption that states refrain from unilateral coercion in matters falling within the *domaine réservé* of other states. When this presumption is eroded—particularly by powerful states—the credibility and coherence of international legal norms are fundamentally compromised<sup>2</sup>.

Under customary international law, as reflected in the Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts (ARSIWA, 2001), a state incurs international responsibility when conduct attributable to it constitutes a breach of an international obligation. Article 2 of the Draft Articles clearly establishes this dual requirement of attribution and breach<sup>3</sup>.

Attempts to abduct, detain, or otherwise coerce the political leadership of another state—whether through intelligence operations, proxy actors, or clandestine arrangements—constitute a direct violation of the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention, irrespective of whether military force is employed. Such conduct is attributable to the state when carried out by state organs or actors acting under its direction or control<sup>4</sup>.

The legal consequences of such responsibility are not limited to remedial obligations toward the injured state. They also serve a system-stabilizing function by reaffirming the binding force of international norms. These consequences include:

The obligation of cessation of the wrongful act;

Guarantees of non-repetition;

Full reparation in the form of restitution, compensation, or satisfaction<sup>5</sup>.

The International Court of Justice has consistently emphasized that reparation is aimed not only at remedying material injury but also at restoring the normative equilibrium disturbed by unlawful conduct. In *Corfu Channel*, the Court affirmed that responsibility entails an obligation to “make good” the consequences of the breach, thereby reinforcing the authority of international law itself<sup>6</sup>.

1 Crawford, pp. 109–116.

2 Koskenniemi, M, *From Apology to Utopia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 381–385.

3 International Law Commission, Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, 2001, Art. 2

4 Crawford, pp. 127–130.

5 International Law Commission, Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, 2001, Art. 30-31

6 International Court of Justice. *Corfu Channel (United Kingdom v. Albania)*, Judgment, ICJ Reports 1949, p. 22

## 5.1. Normalization of Covert Coercion and the Erosion of the Non-Intervention Principle

One of the gravest implications of tolerating non-military coercive practices is the gradual normalization of unlawful intervention within international relations. When states increasingly resort to covert operations—such as political abduction plots, clandestine regime manipulation, or indirect coercion—as substitutes for overt force, the normative boundary established by the principle of non-intervention becomes blurred.

The International Court of Justice, in *Nicaragua v. United States*, unequivocally affirmed that the principle of non-intervention prohibits all forms of coercion aimed at influencing a state's political choices, regardless of the means employed. The Court stressed that coercion is unlawful even in the absence of armed force<sup>1</sup>.

If such covert coercive measures are tacitly accepted or inadequately sanctioned, international law risks evolving into a dual normative system:

Powerful states operate with de facto immunity through informal or deniable practices;  
Weaker states face systematic vulnerability and reduced legal protection.

This asymmetry directly contradicts the principle of sovereign equality enshrined in Article 2(1) of the UN Charter and undermines the universality of international legal obligations<sup>2</sup>.

## 5.2. Implications for International Peace, Security, and Legal Predictability

Beyond normative erosion, coercive interference with a state's political leadership poses tangible risks to international peace and security. Such actions foster mistrust, provoke retaliatory measures, and contribute to escalating cycles of hostility, particularly in politically volatile regions<sup>3</sup>.

The UN Charter situates the maintenance of international peace and friendly relations among nations as foundational objectives of the international community. Covert coercive actions, by their very nature, undermine these objectives by encouraging unilateralism and destabilizing diplomatic relations<sup>4</sup>.

At the domestic level, attempts to forcibly interfere with political leadership often generate internal instability, weaken institutional legitimacy, and incite social unrest. These internal disruptions frequently produce cross-border consequences—such as refugee movements, economic instability, and regional insecurity—thereby transforming a legal violation into a broader threat to international order<sup>5</sup>.

From a systemic viewpoint, such practices erode legal predictability, a cornerstone of international law, by signaling that compliance with fundamental norms is contingent upon power rather than legality<sup>6</sup>.

1 International Court of Justice. *Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicaragua v. United States)*, Judgment, ICJ Reports 1986, p. 108.

2 UN Charter, 1945, Art. 2(1), Shaw, pp. 487–490.

3 Gray, C., *International Law and the Use of Force*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 230–236

4 UN Charter, Preamble; 1945, Art. 1(1)

5 Chesterman, S. *You, the People: The United Nations, Transitional Administration, and State-Building*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 102–107.

6 Franck, pp. 24–27.

## Conclusion

The alleged non-military kidnapping plot against the President of Venezuela during the Trump administration reflects the transformation of interventionist practices in contemporary international relations. Unlike traditional military interventions, modern coercive operations increasingly rely on covert, extraterritorial, and politically deniable mechanisms that operate below the threshold of armed conflict yet produce serious consequences for state sovereignty, political independence, and international stability. As demonstrated throughout this study, such operations challenge classical legal frameworks by circumventing conventional forms of military force and exploiting legal and political ambiguities within the international system.

This study has shown that the forcible targeting or attempted abduction of a sitting head of state constitutes a grave form of coercive intervention incompatible with the foundational principles of international law. Even in the absence of overt military action, coercive operations directed against foreign political leadership violate the principles of sovereign equality, non-intervention, territorial integrity, and political independence enshrined in the United Nations Charter and customary international law. Such conduct further undermines the legal protections and immunities traditionally afforded to high-ranking state officials and threatens the stability of inter-state relations.

The Venezuelan case further demonstrates the close relationship between geopolitical interests and contemporary interventionist practices. Strategic considerations relating to energy security, regional influence, economic interests, and geopolitical competition appear to have shaped the broader political context surrounding the alleged operation. At the same time, the case illustrates how interventionist policies may increasingly adopt covert and indirect modalities that evade immediate international scrutiny while pursuing political objectives through non-traditional means.

A central issue examined in this study concerns the attribution of responsibility under international law. The analysis demonstrates that international responsibility is not established solely by the occurrence of an internationally wrongful act, but also by the existence of a sufficient legal nexus between the conduct and the state concerned. In light of the jurisprudence of the International Court of Justice and the International Law Commission's Draft Articles on State Responsibility, attribution may arise not only through effective operational control, but also through subsequent acknowledgment, endorsement, authorization, or adoption of conduct by state authorities. In this regard, repeated statements by senior United States officials concerning regime change, coercive measures, and the removal of Nicolás Maduro may have legal significance that extends beyond ordinary political rhetoric and may contribute to establishing attribution under customary international law.

The study also considered potential counterarguments and legal justifications that may be invoked in defense of interventionist conduct, including claims relating to democratic legitimacy, counterterrorism, transnational criminal enforcement, and humanitarian considerations. Nevertheless, contemporary international law continues to impose strict limitations upon unilateral coercive intervention and extraterritorial enforcement measures targeting foreign political leadership. Absent Security Council authorization or a valid claim

of self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter, such actions remain legally controversial and fundamentally inconsistent with the prohibition of intervention and the principle of sovereign equality.

Furthermore, the analysis suggests that the kidnapping or attempted abduction of a sitting head of state may extend beyond the framework of an ordinary internationally wrongful act and potentially implicate peremptory norms of international law (*jus cogens*) as well as obligations owed *erga omnes* to the international community as a whole. In circumstances involving unlawful deprivation of liberty, enforced disappearance, extrajudicial transfer, or systematic coercive destabilization, such conduct may acquire an aggravated international character. The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Crimes against Internationally Protected Persons (1973) further reinforces the international community's recognition that attacks against heads of state transcend ordinary domestic criminality and engage broader international legal concerns.

From a broader perspective, the normalization of covert non-military interventions poses significant systemic risks to the international legal order. Repeated tolerance of clandestine operations directed against foreign governments undermines sovereign equality, weakens confidence in the prohibition of intervention, destabilizes regional security, and erodes the normative structure upon which contemporary international law is based. Moreover, the domestic consequences within targeted states—including political instability, weakened governance, public unrest, and economic disruption—may generate broader regional and transnational repercussions, including refugee flows, economic contagion, and intensified geopolitical tensions.

In conclusion, the Venezuelan case represents an important contemporary example of covert intervention conducted through non-traditional and non-military means. The legal analysis undertaken in this study demonstrates that such operations remain subject to the core principles of international law regardless of their covert nature or political justification. Preserving the integrity of the principles of sovereignty, non-intervention, political independence, and the protection of internationally protected persons remains essential for maintaining the predictability of interstate relations, safeguarding the stability of the international legal order, and preventing the gradual erosion of fundamental norms governing relations among states.

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