

## Oil, sanctions and the venezuelan dilemma

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*"The United States will not tolerate foreign governments or corporations supporting the Maduro regime through oil. Those who do will face tariffs and sanctions."*  
– Marco Rubio, Secretary of State

When President Donald Trump signed an executive order imposing a 25 percent tariff on all Venezuelan oil imports — even those routed through third countries — many viewed it as another instance of Trump's characteristic bluntness. But paired with a recent Treasury Department decision to extend, under strict conditions, Venezuela's oil export license through May 27, the message from Washington becomes more complex.

This isn't just about punishing Nicolás Maduro. It's about isolating him.

The strategy mixes pressure and calculation. On one hand, the administration is intensifying economic sanctions to suffocate the regime. On the other, it's allowing Chevron — one of the few U.S. oil companies still operating in Venezuela — to continue its work, but under tight restrictions: no tax or royalty payments to PDVSA, no new exploration, no partnerships with Russian-linked firms. All oil extracted must be sold to the U.S. market.

It's a narrow channel — just enough to maintain a presence and guarantee limited supply, but not enough to offer real relief to Maduro's government.

At the same time, the new tariffs send a sharp warning to Venezuela's oil clients abroad — from China and India to Spain and Brazil: doing business with Maduro's oil industry may now come at a steep financial and diplomatic cost. This is a form of secondary sanctions, designed to force a choice between access to American markets and continued engagement with Venezuela.

But Maduro is not backing down.

Despite opposition candidate Edmundo González Urrutia winning the July 2024 presidential elections, Maduro refuses to concede power. He relies on the military, the business elite, oil multinationals, and the support of authoritarian allies like Russia, China, Cuba and Iran.

The more he is cornered, the more visible these alliances become — alliances that reject democratic norms and embrace a different world order. It's a grim outcome after 25 years of authoritarian rule in Venezuela.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio has now drawn a clear line. He warns that any foreign country or corporation that supports Venezuela's oil industry will face consequences: tariffs, asset freezes, even expulsion from the U.S. financial system. Doing business with PDVSA is no longer just commerce — it is a geopolitical decision.

This message is not only aimed at Maduro's allies. It also targets more ambivalent partners in Europe, Asia and Latin America who have tried to maintain ties with Caracas while remaining within the Western orbit. Now they must choose.

And yet, despite the clarity of this new U.S. posture, it comes with real risks.

After years of sanctions, Maduro remains in power. As with other authoritarian regimes — in Iran, Cuba, or North Korea — Venezuela's leadership has learned to endure isolation. The sanctions have weakened the economy but failed to break the regime. Worse, they have offered Maduro a narrative of victimhood and resistance, even if few still believe it.

Chevron's ongoing presence in Venezuela adds complexity. To some, it's a vital lifeline — a narrow window for Washington to maintain influence and perhaps help in a future transition. To others, it undermines the broader sanctions regime. If the U.S. condemns Maduro's rule, why allow him to profit — however marginally — from oil?

This raises a deeper question: Can oil be used both as leverage and as a bridge to democratic transition?

The Trump administration appears to believe so. Its strategy is not about fully engaging with Maduro's regime, nor about total rupture. It is about containment — extending Chevron's license for eight more weeks, keeping pressure on through tariffs, and leaving room for diplomacy. It's a way to buy time: for the opposition to regroup, for the regime to make mistakes, for internal pressure to grow.

But time is not a neutral factor.

As Maduro moves to cement his control, Venezuelans remain trapped in a country where the economy is sustained by remittances and informal work, inflation devours salaries, and migration continues. The number of political prisoners keeps growing. Organized crime networks like the Tren de Aragua — now labeled a terrorist organization by the U.S. — have spread across Latin America, reaching American borders.

This is the human cost of a blocked transition: a failed state that produces disorder rather than governance. In the absence of legitimate institutions, repression has become the regime's only tool for survival.

Critics of U.S. policy warn that Washington is overreaching — turning Venezuela’s crisis into a global standoff. Some European and Latin American partners are uneasy. They prefer negotiation over escalation, and fear that U.S. interests — rather than Venezuelan democracy — are driving the agenda.

But inaction is not neutral either. Remaining silent in the face of authoritarianism only strengthens it. If the international community fails to act decisively, it risks legitimizing a model where repression, corruption and oil coexist without consequences.

In the end, the core question is not whether Chevron should stay or whether tariffs will work. The real question is whether the United States — and its allies — can craft a coherent foreign policy that balances principle with pragmatism. One that adapts without surrendering. One that offers Venezuelans more than speeches — real, sustained support.

Maduro has shown he can survive. But so have the Venezuelan people. They voted for change. They took to the streets. They are still holding on to hope. The path forward is uncertain — but their resilience is the clearest signal of all: Venezuela is more than its regime. And any lasting solution must begin by respecting the will of the people, as expressed on July 28.