

## The new Cold War in the Caribbean

Antonio De La Cruz

*Executive Director*

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In the quiet waters of the southern Caribbean, a new Cold War has begun.

But unlike the ideological confrontation of the twentieth century, this one is fought between **democracy and crime**, between a **law-based order** and **states captured by illicit networks**.

No walls divide the sides this time. The frontline runs through air corridors, maritime choke points, and the invisible space of information warfare. Yet the stakes are just as high.

### 1. The return of the Caribbean as a strategic frontier

History, as Niall Ferguson likes to remind us, never repeats—but it rhymes.

In the 1960s, the Caribbean was the nuclear pressure point of the Western Hemisphere. Today, it has become the *gray zone* of global competition again—less ideological, more criminal, and equally dangerous.

The United States, under President Donald Trump's renewed doctrine of coercive diplomacy, has transformed the Caribbean South into a **strategic containment belt**. The deployment of the **USS Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group**, enhanced radar coverage, and joint exercises signal that Washington is not preparing for invasion but for **strategic strangulation**: isolating Nicolás Maduro's criminal regime without firing a single missile on Caracas.

For Moscow, Tehran, and Beijing, the stakes are different.

Venezuela offers them a **geopolitical beachhead in the Western Hemisphere**—a foothold to challenge U.S. dominance at low cost.

As in Ferguson's *The War of the World*, this is not about conventional empire but about the endurance of influence in a world where sovereignty can be traded like a commodity.

### 2. A game of asymmetric rationality

Strategically, the Caribbean crisis can be mapped as a **Brams-style equilibrium of limited rationality**: each player seeks to maximize survival while minimizing exposure.

- **The United States** aims to dismantle the *Cartel de los Soles*—a transnational criminal organization embedded within the Venezuelan state—without committing to a ground war.
- **Maduro**, stripped of electoral legitimacy, plays what Daniel Kahneman would call a *loss-aversion strategy*: he escalates to survive. Facing certain ruin if he yields, he doubles down—arming his forces, deepening ties with Russia, and using propaganda to reframe his tyranny as “sovereignty”.
- **Russia and Iran** act as enablers in a hybrid theater, providing symbolic weapons (Pantsir systems, advisors, media amplification) to project a sense of permanence.
- **Regional actors**, from Colombia to Brazil, attempt to remain neutral, seeking stability while avoiding being pulled into the gravitational field of conflict.

This matrix reveals a paradox of modern deterrence: **the less powerful the regime, the more dangerous its calculus.**

Maduro’s threshold for escalation is higher precisely because he has nothing to lose.

Trump’s is lower because he must balance deterrence with domestic politics.

### **3. The battle for the meaning of sovereignty**

In the original Cold War, sovereignty was defined by alignment: East or West, communist or capitalist.

In this new version, it is defined by **legitimacy versus impunity.**

Maduro’s regime has reinterpreted sovereignty as the **right to operate criminally without external interference.**

Trump’s doctrine reframes it as **responsibility before international law**—that no state can shelter terrorist or narcotics networks under the pretext of independence.

Thus, the confrontation in the Caribbean is not about regime change per se, but about **the redefinition of statehood in the twenty-first century.**

Whichever side wins this semantic war will determine how power is exercised—and justified—across the global South.

### **4. The economics of conflict**

Unlike the Cold War’s ideological economies, this one is fueled by **illicit rents.**

Venezuela's GDP has collapsed, but its shadow economy thrives on **gold, oil, and narcotics**.

The *Cartel de los Soles*—an alliance of generals, smugglers, and state functionaries—controls export routes across the Orinoco Basin and Caribbean ports, blending crime with governance.

For Moscow, this network is a strategic hedge: a way to weaken the Western sanctions architecture.

For Beijing, it is access to energy without conditionality.

For Washington, it is an intolerable violation of the Monroe Doctrine's modern corollary—**hemispheric security as a prerequisite for democracy**.

In this sense, Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign is less about intervention and more about **surgical containment**: freezing assets, intercepting shipments, and choking financial lifelines.

It is a Cold War of logistics, where fuel tankers replace missiles, and OFAC licenses replace embargoes.

## **5. The risk of miscalculation**

As in all deterrence games, the greatest danger lies not in deliberate aggression but in **mutual misperception**.

If Trump's administration overestimates its control of escalation, or if Maduro provokes an incident to rally his fractured base, the spiral could turn kinetic.

In Ferguson's language, the "butterfly effect" of empires still applies: **small actors can trigger global consequences** when great powers underestimate their desperation.

A stray missile, a misread radar blip, or a cyberattack misattributed to one side could shift this from *Cold War* to *Hot Skirmish*.

And yet, the equilibrium endures—fragile, tense, but rational enough to prevent catastrophe.

## **6. The new map of power**

In the broader hemispheric context, **Latin America has become the testing ground of postmodern geopolitics**.

Colombia and Brazil serve as hinge states—Petro as the cautious neutralizer, Milei as the Western anchor.

Trinidad, Curaçao, and Aruba act as logistical satellites, much like Berlin in 1948.

Here, Washington's objective is clear: ensure that no state in the Western Hemisphere becomes a sanctuary for global terrorism or organized crime.

For Maduro, the objective is simpler: survive one more day.

## **7. The shape of victory**

This war will not end with flags raised over palaces.

Victory will be measured by **who controls the narrative**—who defines what sovereignty, legitimacy, and order mean in a world of porous borders.

If Washington succeeds, the Caribbean will return to a zone of lawful commerce and democratic recovery.

If Maduro and his patrons prevail, the hemisphere may enter an era where crime and politics merge beyond repair.

The battle is quiet, but it is decisive.

In the end, as in every Cold War, it is not about who shoots first, but who holds steady longest.

### ***Epilogue***

The Caribbean once again stands at the intersection of empires—only now, the empires are less visible, and the battles are fought with algorithms, sanctions, and drone footage.

History rhymes, indeed.

And the rhyme we hear today echoes a familiar refrain:

*When freedom hesitates, tyranny advances by stealth.*