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### **QI Panel:**

#### **Interventionism on Steroids – The Trump Takeover of Venezuela**

January 6th, 2025

2:00 - 3:00 PM ET

#### **Kelley Vlahos 0:20**

Hello and welcome. My name is Kelley Vlahos and I am the editor in chief of responsible statecraft and proud to moderate today's panel, interventionism on steroids the Trump takeover of Venezuela hosted by the Quincy Institute. If you are unfamiliar with the Quincy Institute, we are a trans partisan Think Tank working to promote ideas that move US foreign policy and national security away from military adventurism and toward a new strategy of diplomatic engagement and the National Defense based on the interests of the American people, not the corporate and political interests that have fueled American wars for the last 70 years.

Today's panel is not only the most anticipated of the new year, but is one of the most anticipated in quincy's history of hosting these online webinars. That is not only because of the absolute urgency of the topic, the Trump administration's invasion of Venezuela and ousting of its president, Nicolas Maduro, on Saturday, but of the high caliber and influence of our panelists who I will introduce right now. John Mearsheimer is a non resident fellow of the Quincy Institute and the R Wendell Harrison Distinguished Service Professor of Political Science of at the University of Chicago, where he has taught since 1982 he graduated from West Point, has a PhD in Political Science from Cornell University, and is the author of the tragedy of great power politics, the Israel lobby and foreign and US foreign policy with Stephen Walt and his latest book is the great delusion liberal ideas and international international realities. Kurt Mills is the executive director of the American Conservative at which he previously served as both senior reporter and contributing editor. Previously he edited and wrote for the National Interest, U.S. News and World Report, the Washington Examiner and the Spectator. His work has appeared in The New York Times, Politico, on herd Newsweek and the critic, and you can see him as a regular political commentator, popping up frequently on Steve bannon's War Room. Miguel Tinker Solace is a non resident Fellow at the Quincy Institute and Professor Emeritus at Pomona College. His research includes work on contemporary Mexico and Venezuela, with a special focus on the interconnection of politics, culture and oil in Venezuela, he co edited with Steve Elner, Venezuela, Hugo Chavez and the decline of an exceptional democracy. He also published the enduring legacy oil, culture and society in Venezuela and Venezuela, what everyone needs to know.

So I know it is a busy time for each of you. So thank you for carving out this hour for us today. I really want to make this a dynamic conversation. So I'm going to ask of our fellow panelists here. I'm going to asking you each questions, but I would love for if you want to follow up or have a two finger on any of the questions of your fellow panelists, just please signal me with a

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two finger. I can see you. And for our audience, I know there are going to be a lot of questions out there because there are a lot of people on this call, but please use the Q and A and we'll try to get to as many as possible. Keep them keep them short. That might help. I've gotten a ton of questions offline as well, so I'm going to try to accommodate our audience today, so thanks again for being here, I think, to set the table, we are on day four of the Trump administration's announced takeover of Venezuela. The US military engaged in an operation on Saturday which killed at least 80 people while arresting Maduro and his wife and putting them on a plane to face drug trafficking and weapons charges in a federal court in New York City. Trump has ostensibly left Maduro as vice president Delcy Rodriguez in place for the transition, but insists the US is in control. She says she wants to work with the President. He says he is willing to unleash another wave of attack. Attacks on Venezuela if the remaining leadership does not meet us demands primarily that it curtail support for Narco terrorism. He and members of his administration have talked extensively in the last few days about the US exploiting Venezuela's vast oil reserves and opening up the socialist country to US investment. There are so many unknowns today for Venezuela, for the other countries, Trump put on notice, in the wake of this operation, including Mexico, Cuba, Iran, Colombia and Greenland, what this means for US foreign policy moving forward and its relationship to the rest of the world. We will talk about all of this in the next hour, but first, I would like to pose a question that I hope you can each use to frame your thoughts and initial reactions to what happened over the weekend.

So I will start with you, Professor. Professor Mearsheimer, some 24 hours after the invasion, the Washington Post was calling the action quote, one of the boldest moves a president has made in years. And the operation was an unquestionable tactical success, a major victory for American interests, because it aimed to, quote, corrode the influence of American adversaries in this hemisphere, and swear and served as, quote, an important message to tin pot dictators in Latin America and the world that Trump follows through President Biden often offered sanctions relief to Venezuela, and Maduro responded to that show of weakness by stealing an election in the opposite direction. Jeffrey Sachs called it outright thuggery, and what we get in a post constitutional world, quote, it could not be crasser or cruder, and we have been there before. In this kind of world, we have had a world of sheer imperialism that was not in any way tempered or bound by international law, and it led to two world wars and and unconscionable and unimaginable loss of life. We have never been in this kind of lawlessness in the nuclear age, however, and it is extremely worrisome. End Quote, Professor, can you share where you are between these two vastly contradictory takes?

### **John Mearsheimer 7:21**

Well, I'm much closer to Jeff Sachs, for sure. I believe this demonstrates that the United States is it's a rogue state. We're pursuing a reckless foreign policy. In my opinion, first of all, there's no serious threat from Venezuela. The idea that there's this Narco terrorist threat is laughable. And, you know, people like to talk about the Monroe Doctrine. This supports the Monroe Doctrine. In my opinion, it has nothing to do with the Monroe Doctrine. The Monroe Doctrine says basically that we do not want any distant great powers. These would be great powers in Europe or East Asia, forming military alliances with countries in the Western Hemisphere and moving their

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military forces into the western hemisphere the way the Soviets did in Cuba in 1962 there's no threat of that happening now, Venezuela is not forming A military alliance or any kind of alliance, with China and Russia. This has nothing to do with the Monroe Doctrine. Basically, what Trump is interested in doing here is overthrowing a government that he doesn't like so that he can get his hands on Venezuela's oil. This is not a serious threat to the United States, if you're talking about Narco terrorism or narcotics coming into the United States, you ought to invade and capture the leader of Mexico before you capture the leader of Venezuela. So there's no real threat here. And there's a huge downside to this, in addition to the fact that it's a violation of international law and international norms, it doesn't make sense from a strategic point of view for the United States. First of all, we end up in the business of nation building, which Trump once wisely said we were going to avoid. And furthermore, we have all sorts of other priorities around the world and inside of the United States that we ought to be privileging over this cockamamie idea of kidnapping the leader of Venezuela and putting them on trial in Brooklyn.

**Kelley Vlahos 9:27**

Curt, what? What you say? Are you? Are you closer to Washington Post or closer to Jeffrey Sachs or somewhere in between?

**Curt Mills 9:35**

Yeah, I don't really think that anything Professor Sachs said was incorrect. The only thing I would sort of add to Professor mearsheimer's comment here is that I'm not even really sure it's a war for oil as much as it is a simulated war for oil. I There's no real plan to get this stuff online. I mean, I saw. Sort of circulated elsewhere. The United States has taken Maduro. It hasn't taken the oil. There's no plan whatsoever to actually get this stuff out that's putting aside whether or not it's moral to basically engage in a in a war plunder in our hemisphere, at a time when oil prices are basically at historic lows, or at least historic lows in the last 10 years. And you know, at a certain point, like is the Trump administration's policy to drive the price of crude below \$50 a barrel, I think you'll see mass unemployment in places like Texas and throughout the southeast. So again, it doesn't really matter. I think, I think he's right. I think he there was, there was bad blood between Trump and Maduro for for years. I think Trump seems pretty addicted to these sort of special operations as a way of looking like a wartime commander in chief without any of the potential risks in his mind of the sort of 2000s George W Bush, mess, but no, I mean, this is this is this is a catastrophic occurrence, frankly, and it would, it would be one thing if there was any sort of confidence that this was sort of a one off.

I mean, I think this is, this is, you know, basically directly comparable to the 12 Day War in June. But counter the 12 day war, I think there was a far more of a sense that this was done at basically the the original ideation of the administration itself, as opposed to, you know, the Israel lobby in June. And then additionally, the administration was adamant and insistent that, at least in June and at least in public, that the war was over, that they, you know, they had gotten rid of the nuclear material that's putting aside, whether or not they actually had. Versus now, their public rhetoric is maybe Cuba next, maybe Iran again, maybe Panama, maybe Mexico, maybe

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Colombia. And so there's no sense in which this, this won't spiral. And additionally, for those who you know, who think the administration put out a very strong national security strategy, and I'm one who thought that the document that came out in November or December of 25 was very strong, the idea of Hemispheric Defense as us as basically rogue state in the hemisphere that you know, basically relitigates the war on drugs. Relitigates the sort of late 20th century coup d'etat policy in the region that alienated the US from, you know, basically the population in the region. I think that actually has the possibility of enhancing peer competitors positioning in the region. I mean, if you're sitting in Mexico City or Brasilia today, this is making more likely to build up a medium term strategy of engaging war with the United States out of fear or with Beijing out of, you know, pragmatism? And I think the answer is clearly the latter.

### **Kelley Vlahos 13:08**

I'd like to get back to those great power politics issues, because that's a major question, and I know it's on the minds of a lot of folks on on this call, but let's go to you Miguel, you can answer the original question. But I also want to hear from you regarding Venezuela and the mechanics of what we just saw. There were a lot of people telling us, very smart people with ties to Venezuela and its many political factions that the military would not necessarily turn on Maduro, that his support inside was not as brittle as say Noriega's was in 1988 that there would be some sort of resistance to the Americans if they had tried to come in and whisk Maduro away. But that's not what happened. As we said, 80 people were killed, half of them reportedly Cubans who had the sort of support of their notorious intelligence network. What happened? Where were there great CIA spies on the ground? Did Delcy Rodriguez cut a deal so that military units were standing down, where people bought off inside. Could you give us some sense of why this was so easy in the end?

### **Miguel Tinker Salas 14:27**

Well, I'm not quite sure if it was easy. The US deployed 150 Air Force equipment. They had special forces. But let's get back to the first part of the question. The first part of the question, I thought this was a performative act. I thought this was the spectacle of empire. I think this is what Donald Trump likes. This is what he wants. If you looked at his press conference, he talked about it as a video game. He was almost he was excited about it, watching it, he said, but it was performative in large measures, and it also showed the weakness of empire. So. Because I think the US forces can, of course, strike wherever they want, and they're very good at it. But what are they doing the next the next day? What is the plan? There is no plan. The plan became throw Maria Corina Machado, the opposition leader, under the bus because he doesn't like the fact that she won the Nobel Prize, or because the CIA believes that she can't govern the country. And at the same time, what is the plan? The plan is to have barcorus Become the viceroy of Venezuela, or the planet, the director of the Platt Amendment to Venezuela, and make Cuba a colony, a NEO colony, as we decide in the case of the plan amendment, in terms of what happened in Venezuela was that it was overwhelmed. It was overwhelmed by superior military us, forces that use the technical forces to cut down all the apparatuses of security that they had. They cut down the grid in the area. They had created a house where Maduro lived

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somewhere in the US, and been practicing for weeks and weeks and weeks on end. In terms of the military, the military hasn't cracked.

The military had four months to crack because of the embargo placed on the US and because of the ships off the coast, and that didn't happen. What the US was hoping for were cracks within the military, cracks within the state structure, cracks within the PSUV, the dominant Socialist Party of Venezuela. They have not accomplished that. In fact, yesterday we saw that. We saw the consolidation of power once again, around the Vice President, with Delcy Rodriguez being sworn in as president. The military sworn loyalty to her. The police force is sworn loyalty to her. So I think we have a challenge continues. What will the US do? How will it govern? What does it want? Does it want? Simply the oil that's that's a fallacy, that's a smoke screen. The reality is that the oil industry will take years to rebuild and years to exact the profit. So that in that context, it's unclear what was accomplished, except the spectacle of Empire and the threat. Because I think the issue here is the threat, the threat that now is applied to other countries, Mexico is not the easy target. You're talking about a person who's got 80% approval rating, one of the most popular leaders in the world, a democratically elected president. You can't make the argument about Narco terrorism. And again, Narco terrorism has become the weapons of mass destruction of the current era. We're using it as the weapons of mass destruction of the current era to justify U.S. policy, which is bald face empire.

### **Kelley Vlahos 17:29**

I have one quick question about Cuba, because Marco Rubio, Secretary of State, Rubio, was asked numerous times over the course of the last 48 hours as to whether Cuba is next. And he didn't say no. He said they should be very concerned right now, and we know where Marco Rubio stands on Cuba, and the issue of Cuba and the embargoes and the exact exile community in South Florida, Miguel, what would a takeover, quote, unquote, look like of Cuba? What should Cuba be worried about right now, being in the US crosshairs?

### **Miguel Tinker Salas 18:12**

Well, they've been in the US crosshairs since 1959 and the US embargo of Cuba, and they've survived. Obviously, conditions were much different. The economy is really in. Tourism has not panned out. They won't have access to Venezuelan oil at low, low term credit rates for quite some time. So, but, but Trump said the opposite. Trump said they'll fall on their own. They'll collapse on their own in the press conference. So we have maybe not so much difference, but not so much split, but some difference in how to approach it. I think the other pushback is the US military. Does the US military want to be used willy nilly as a empire building instrument in Cuba and next in Nicaragua and next in Panama and next next in Greenland? Does the military want to spread itself so thin while at the same time bombing Nigeria, at the same time threatening war with Iran. I think that there's other calamitous issues here that we have to confront as well.

### **Kelley Vlahos 19:09**

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Okay, Professor Mearsheimer, you mentioned the Monroe Doctrine. The White House has framed this Maduro operation as part of his Monroe doctrine. We're getting into spheres of influence here, the United States, dominating the Western Hemisphere, wanting to and China asserting its own primacy across the Asia Pacific, as well as asserting that might makes right. As Donald Trump has said in numerous different ways over the last three days. How is China reacting today? The New York Times suggested this morning that while Americans might applaud Trump's commitment to maintaining primacy in the Western Hemisphere, they might not like it if and when China moves to take care of its own in the Asia Pacific. Specific by hewing so closely to these great power tenants, does Trump concede our right America's right and ability to intervene if China moves to unify with Taiwan by force, if necessary?

**John Mearsheimer 20:15**

Well, nothing's going to constrain Trump. I mean, that's quite evident at this point in time, he'll just do whatever he thinks is right for the United States from his perspective, period, end of story. The question of how the Chinese think about what's going on, I think, is a bit complicated. First of all, the Chinese have good relations with Venezuela. They get oil from Venezuela. They've been building infrastructure in Venezuela, and I think they're very upset about the fact that the United States has now gone into that country and is talking about doing major league social engineering.

But on the other hand, from a strategic point of view, or geopolitical point of view, this is manna from heaven for the Chinese, just like it's manna from heaven for the Russians, because the United States is apparently going to get bogged down in a giant nation building enterprise in the Western Hemisphere, both Rubio and Trump are talking about doing nation building in more than just Venezuela. They talk about Colombia, Nicaragua, and Mexico, and we're, you know, already deeply involved in Venezuela. Despite what the administration says, we broke it. We own it. So I think if you're the Chinese, you're perfectly happy to see the United States get involved in a big nation building enterprise in the Western Hemisphere, because it makes it extremely difficult to pivot to Asia. And with regard to the Russians, it makes it extremely difficult for the United States to continue to have meaningful support in Ukraine. Because we're pinned down now, not just in the Middle East, but we're pinned down in Latin America as well.

**Kelley Vlahos 22:05**

I take your point, and I tend to agree with it, but Curt, a lot of the arguments that I've been hearing is that we are putting China and Russia on notice, particularly China, because of all of its investments, involvement, partnerships in Latin America, which apparently had triggered, you know, this need to show force. Are we not sending a message to China to get out and to not continue to intercede? And the hemisphere, you know other, you know what I'm saying is, is this not manna from heaven, but an actual threat or a warning to China?

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**Curt Mills 22:48**

Well, I mean, look, and will it work to take the other side of it? I'd say number one, you know, the the rate or abduction or whatever, showed the clear power of American special operations that I believe are basically peerless in world affairs or military affairs. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Dan Kane, highlighted this in his remarks on Saturday morning in Florida, saying that, you know, the US had really honed its craft in this respect, in the wars on terror. Now, of course, we're bringing that craft closer to home, which would be basically concerning for her Republican principles. You know, if the US can use special forces in the region, it's not an enormous lead thing, that they might start using it in American cities. And so that's a separate subject, but, yeah, if you're this, if you're sitting in China, in China, and you're, you're you're just trying to assess us power. The fact that the US was able to pull this off without taking a single fatality is objectively impressive.

And then I think, on the other facet, I think you know that the hawkish line towards Caracas did engender some gains for the administration before the raid, which is, well, first of all, the Chinese and Russians have basically dumped investment in this country years ago. But that aside, Maduro, if you believe any of the reporting, and I do, had given the administration essentially the Godfather offer. You can have royal you can have access to our country will completely capitulate. So that's what's actually so curious about this. And so, you know, I sense that, you know, maybe some people on this call might not agree with it, but even if you agree with the discrete goal, just stipulate that you agree the discrete goal of driving China out of the region and maybe Russia, Iran, whatever. Could that not have already been basically 95% accomplished, even if the Maduro government, whatever is, you know, quasi line, couldn't have that, most of that been accomplished without this, and having done this now, does that actually create,

Well, number one, a more formidable successor to Maduro? I think there's every evidence that members of the military. Kelley could actually, you know, win out in some kind of power struggle and be more averse to the United States? Or, number two, does it create a heinous precedent in the region that actually, in the long, in the short to medium term, drives people into Beijing's arms? And I think that's pretty clear. And then additionally, not that Trump, you know, cares much about international law, and not that the, you know, the post war international order really exists anymore. I don't think it does. But has he not basically set the clear precedent? And I think this is, you know, some people disagree, but I think it's the clear sort of crossing the Rubicon. What really would anyone do at this point if Beijing was able to just abduct William Lai in Taiwan. Like, like, would anyone really care? Would anyone with the world really stop on that, or the US being in any kind of position to marshal moral support against that?

And then, if you're sitting in Moscow right now, and it's not an original observation, I mean, seriously. I mean, if you can, are you just going to kill Zelensky? And again, you could say like, you know, I think in Trump's mind, this is obviously someone who doesn't have clear commitment to the government in Kiev, and he has even less clear commitment, I think, to the government in Taipei maybe doesn't care. But I think you know, to have all those unintended

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consequences for basically something that wasn't necessary. It just strikes me as a pretty bad deal for the US. And, you know, the last thing I'll say is the administration is just all over the map for why they even wanted to do this. In that sense, it is very redolent of Iraq, which is, you know, the Secretary of State says one thing, and then the Under Secretary of Defense says another thing. The president thinks it's another thing. And I think the reality is, you know, we're not going to get democracy in Venezuela. We're not going to probably tilt this country more towards Washington, and we're not going to get the oil. We're not going to achieve any of these things. And in that sense, is very redolent of Iraq, which is, you know, we didn't get the oil very famously observed by by Trump. We didn't get any kind of western style democracy. They have some sort of democracy there. It's certainly more democratic than it was under Saddam. And you know, Iraq is tilted more towards China today, not towards us. So that's, that's the real risk. And the the riskiest thing is that it's not in the Middle East, it's 1000 miles from Florida that we did this all.

### **Kelley Vlahos 27:25**

So that's right, Miguel talking about the transfer of power here. Now a lot of Trump supporters are cheering the fact that he seemed to be restrained and that he did not install Maria Machado and her opposition as the new leadership and Caracas, but left the old leadership intact. But, I mean, there seems to be a million questions to my mind, how do we know that she has the support of the country? And can you walk us through some of the major pitfalls. I mean, she's looking at an interior minister and a defense minister who are in control of the police and the military there. I have no idea how much support she has, but as as Kurt has pointed out, they could be more, end up being more anti United States. I don't know. Maybe they're cutting deals with Trump and they and they're going to try to to weather the storm here. But can you talk a little bit about this limited action or limited regime change, and you know how this could go sideways pretty fast.

### **Miguel Tinker Salas 28:44**

Well, let me just, I'll answer the question, but I want to touch upon the China issue, because I think it's an important issue. Yeah, distinguish. I think there's a there's a more clarity. If we think of the two parts the Latin America, the first part is the Caribbean, where the US has been the dominant force since the turn of the century, the 19th century. The reality is that the US invaded Mexico. The US invaded Haiti, invaded Nicaragua, invaded Panama, has invaded Puerto Cuban, acquired Cuba and Puerto Rico. So that's a very different dynamic. And then say South America, where China is the dominant economic factor. Unless we forget, you're not going to convince Lula to stop selling the soybeans to China. The reality is the US won't buy them, but you're not going to convince Argentina, no matter how much Malal likes Trump from selling wheat or soy to the to the Chinese.

That's the reality, because the US is not going to purchase it. Or, or, or the case of Chile and copper, or the case of the fact that the Chinese have built the largest deep water port in South America, in Peru, which has a Conservative government, or the fact that they are involved deeply in Bolivia and in Ecuador as well. So that's a different reality. It's an economic reality, and

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that's where the US has a weakness, because the. US does not have an economic footprint in South America to the same extent that it does, say in Venezuela or the Caribbean, which is something that we can talk about in that context as well. Now the challenges for del C Rodriguez are tremendous. She's walking a tightrope between, on the one hand, trying to appease the new viceroy, Marco, Marco Rubio and Trump, and at the same time maintaining her coalition, she represents a political wing here of the PSU. V and her brother is the head of the National Assembly. So those are critical factors in the political apparatus. She also has the support of the military, but Vladimir Padrino Lopez is the head of the military. He had ample time to separate himself from the power of the psuv or of Doris in the last four months, with the with the positioning of the US military, the assault on the on the launches leaving Venezuela.

And he did not do that because the military was integrated into the political apparatus by Chavez after 2002 coup in ways that they had never seen before, they are both an economic force as well as a military force, and they they're not going to take a challenge. They're not going to challenge del C for fear of losing that potential power that they have in terms of economics as well as military and military support. Then you have the Minister of the Interior, who is the strong arm of the of the government, the police forces, the National Security Forces, separate from the military, which he also has a tremendous control over. And all of them were present yesterday. It's interesting to point out that Maduro son held the Bible that swore in del C Rodriguez. Again, we didn't see fissures there at this point.

So I think it's critical to understand now, pulling back further, you have now she has to deal with the opposition, but the opposition is divided as well. You have the hardcore Maria Corina Machado supporters. Then you have a more moderate, center right coalition of opposition that includes Capri radonski, that includes Henry Falcon, that includes a series of other individuals, then you have the the left opposition, because, lest we forget, there's also a left opposition to Maduro, who is very critical of the fact that he has abandoned the so called Chavista project, adopted Mary neoliberal economic policies has held back the working class in terms of wage wage increases, has had free trade zones, and it was even, as was pointed out earlier, was offering the the Trump administration access to oil protection around Narco, narco trafficking in the country. So again, she has to walk, walk that tightrope between the US and the social political forces in Venezuela.

**Kelley Vlahos 32:47**

Professor Mearsheimer?

**John Mearsheimer 32:50**

Thank you. I just wanted to comment on what Miguel said listening to you talk. It makes it very clear that the situation inside of Venezuela is incredibly complicated, and figuring out where this train is headed is extremely difficult. And when you think about the Trump administration and the task that it faces in running Venezuela, it's hard for me to imagine how they're going to work with all these different pieces to produce a positive outcome. I mean, that may happen, but it will be,

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I think, a one in 1000 chance of happening. It's really, excuse me, it's really quite remarkable. This is why I would say to you, Kurt, there's no question that we have an impressive ability to knock off regimes. We've always had that ability, by the way, going back to when I was young. We're really good at knocking off regimes. This is not something that's new. The problem comes on day two, as Miguel is getting at what do you do then. Anyway, that's just an observation based on what the two of you said.

**Kelley Vlahos 34:05**

Miguel?

**Miguel Tinker Salas 34:06**

That's why I think the CIA came to the same conclusion when the CIA did an analysis of the situation. We have, we have one report from Richard Grinnell that he met with Machado forces and asked him about day two, and they didn't have an answer. And then we had a discussion, a report of a CIA in which they had similar conversations, and there was not an answer, and they opted for supporting del C Rodriguez because the fear that otherwise we might descend into chaos and division and regional, regional factions and military factions, etc. So I think those are the factors to consider. And again, Venezuela, Simon Bolivar said, it it's very difficult to govern Venezuela. He actually made the metaphor, it's like plowing the sea.

**Kelley Vlahos 34:52**

So Curt, listening to all of that, I'd like to talk a little bit about what we're seeing in the public opinion. Ian sphere today, a lot of Trump supporters are, like I said, cheering the idea that Trump went for limited strikes. We've been hearing a lot of that. People point to Panama in 1988 and they say that worked, but Panama is still a hub and a thriving illegal drug industry, which results in the flow of narcotics to the United States. Libya was supposed to be a limited operation too. No boots on the ground, no nation building, and today that's considered a failure by all sides. In Tucker Carlson's interview with Mike Cernovich, he said that he actually felt a bit calmed down himself that Trump didn't try to do a complete regime change, and seem to recognize that installing Maria Machado would have had graver implications for us, involvement and potential instability. So we're hearing a lot from self professed Jacksonians that Trump should just break things and get out, teach lessons, not get further involved. And they see this as an example, just like they saw Iran and June and July. An example is the new Overton window for restraint. Is this the new Overton window for restraint and and what do you make of all of it?

**Curt Mills 36:20**

I mean, look, I think there's, there's the what's going on at the elite, quote, unquote level. So what are taste makers on the right doing? What are members of Congress doing? What ideas are gaining proliferation in the administration itself? And then there is the public opinion in the

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party, and then there's the public opinion in what I think is the broader Maga coalition that won 49.4% whatever of the vote last year or 14 months ago and so and they're obviously all correlated. So what is striking here is that I think there's probably greater unanimity among, let's say the taste makers for this than there was over the summer for Iran. I think that's not altogether surprising. I think, you know, just logically speaking, caring about Latin America makes a lot more sense than caring about the Middle East, and I support that. And so this feels a little less far afield, and as I mentioned, less so, obviously influenced by diaspora groups in the US.

Although the Miami political lobby, as exemplified by our esteemed secretary of state, is not an inconsiderable factor in what's going on here. However, what has been very interesting is actually how unpopular This is in public opinion polling. We have to be honest, the Iran operation in June was probably a short term success politically and morally for the administration. The polling was not that bad. The polling for this is considerably worse so far. And, you know, I get that you could, you could phrase questions different ways and but it's not very good. And the President himself speaking to congressional members of his party this morning. You know, just Trump is just so post gaffe, it's hard to say it's a gaff, but fairly extraordinary comment where he said, you know, can you explain to me the mind of the public? That means the elected President of the United States, and he is, you know, clearly it's on his mind that he is out of step with the public. Now we can get into all these different views of whether or not he cares, whether or not he you think he's a quasi authoritarian, et cetera, et cetera, but he seems aware that they are headed towards defeat in the midterms. That's why he gave the address, and he seems aware that this was not overly popular. And so that's a contradiction.

So at the elite level, there's more unanimity, but this is actually to the sort of man on the street in America, so to speak, more perplexing, and I think, to a certain level. And I oppose both interventions, the one in June of 25 and in the one in January of 26 in Latin America and Iran, respectively. But I think in a lot of ways, the American public is actually more primed for intervention in the Middle East because of, you know, years of propaganda and years of, you know, a quarter century at minimum, of war there. This just seems random. It appears to people who are outside of the core Republican base. And, you know Maduro, and I think this, this actually matters, and you can, you can make fun of it, but in the in the age of Tik Tok, in the age of social media, Maduro doesn't particularly seem that menacing, and that's scary. I mean, I think, I mean the anecdotal evidence. Is that he's sort of like having a sort of almost Luigi Mangione effect on Tiktok, where he's this sort of like ironic cult hero among sort of, you know, nihilistic Gen Zers to talk in broad, generalistic terminology here.

And I think that matters, because Trump's political appeal and the Maga rights political appeal is inherently anti establishment, and what is the administration doing? I mean, the administration is is, you know, I get the point about the CIA being skeptical, but broadly speaking, the administration is wrapping itself in the garb of the military industrial complex. You know, they're, they're heralding Special Forces. They're heralding intervention, and then additionally, they're openly fighting for the sacred honor of American corporations. I mean, this is, this is the sort of

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most laughable part of the whole thing. You know, the Venezuelan Government abrogated, you know, I'm sure they pulled off some gangster maneuver or whatever, against Exxon and Chevron 20 years ago. This is before Trump was president, and this is putting aside that. I mean, frankly, five years ago, corporate America would have just as easily seen the President put in jail, broadly speaking. So the idea that the US should fight wars for corporate contracts from decades ago.

I think, you know, I think it's pretty funny, but putting that aside, it actually robs Trump of the sort of outlaw energy. He might be an outlaw on international stage, but internally, he's just seeming like the establishment. And I think to conclude on this, you know, I haven't, you know, seen, and I think this could potentially be a major political advantage for the Democrats. The Democrats heading into 26 and 28 I think it very depends on their messaging and who they nominate, etcetera, etcetera, but I haven't seen basically an anti war kind of rhetoric from the Democrats in my adult life. It peaked with it peaked with Obama in 2008 and then the Obama administration became the establishment right, and their anointed successor was Hillary Clinton. Who is the establishment right? I think the real political danger here is the Republicans, just for very little clear, for like, no gain at all, other than like peak and boredom and grandiosity are seeding the anti establishment mantle back to the Democrats, who don't deserve it, but may very well inherit it.

**Kelley Vlahos 42:28**

So thanks, Kurt. I want to get back to you if we have time on the domestic politics, but I know we have a lot of ground to cover, and I wanted to ask Professor Mearsheimer about Ukraine and Russia, because you've been talking about this for what, four years now, and have some definite ideas about where that that peace process is going has what happened in Venezuela affected our efforts to stop the war and Ukraine?

**John Mearsheimer 43:01**

Not at all. Just doesn't matter. The war in Ukraine has a momentum all of its own. It's been clear for months now that there's no way you're going to get a negotiated settlement to this conflict, that it's going to be settled on the battlefield Iranians and the Europeans on one side simply can't agree with the Russians on the other side, they're poles apart, and therefore it'll be settled on the battlefield and what has happened in Venezuela, it just makes no difference at all.

**Kelley Vlahos 43:38**

So you don't believe that this impacts either side at the at the negotiating table in actual talks?

**John Mearsheimer 43:46**

No, not at all, not at all. Why would it? I mean, explain to me what the logic is as to how the war in Ukraine is affected by events in Venezuela.

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### **Kelley Vlahos 43:58**

My concern was, and I know not everybody agrees with me, that if diplomacy is built on trust levels, and they're negotiating deals with the United States, Visa V Russia, Europe and Ukraine, that they might see a president who, three weeks ago, Marco Rubio, was telling members of Congress behind closed doors, we aren't going to invade, we aren't going to enact a regime change, because we don't have the right to and it would make a big mess, and then turn around and do it that maybe those trust levels aren't there for like maybe getting believing that they could get their the terms that they want in a deal, and that any deal that might be solidified might not last very long.

### **John Mearsheimer 44:42**

The whole matter of trust is irrelevant in Ukraine. The fact is that the Russians have a set of demands that they won't give up on, that the Europeans and the Ukrainians absolutely refuse to accept. And therefore. Or no deal is possible. So trust doesn't even come into play. If it was a case where you may be able to get a deal between the two sides, but it depends on trust, then trust matters, especially if Donald trust. Donald Trump is involved and the trust issue revolves around him, but we're not there. It's simple fact that there is no basis for an agreement in Ukraine, and this one's going to be settled on the battlefield Miguel.

### **Kelley Vlahos 45:32**

We're getting a ton of questions in the Q and A about the Trump administration continuing its rampage, or whatever you want to call it, across Latin America. Can you talk a little bit about how you're feeling regarding Trump's next moves, particularly with Mexico, Cuba, he's lashed out at Columbia. But then even beyond that, there are some questions in the Q and A about whether or not this was a prelude to resuming strikes on Iran. Can you talk a little bit about how you see the actions of Saturday fitting into maybe a more coordinated effort to use force to get what he wants.

### **Miguel Tinker Salas 46:23**

I think there's two things here. One, in large measure, what we saw on Saturday is an effort to reimpose us hegemony, as it clearly states in the national security strategy document, to reimpose us hegemony over the Caribbean, over Central America and over northern South America. As I said before, that's a very unique set of spaces that revolve around the Caribbean, basin, Panama, Cuba, Venezuela, etc. Now, I don't think that what happened in Venezuela can be replicated. I'm not convinced that it can be replicated. You don't have in Gustavo Petro, a figure like Maduro. In maduro's case, the question was always about his legitimacy as a leader in the country in Venezuela after the July 2024 election. In the case of Petro, either he's although he's a leftist and although the country produces cocaine, the reality is that he is a democratically elected president that had a level of popularity we had not seen previously. He is

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the first leftist president in the history of Colombia, and he has a legitimate basis of support. In the case of Mexico, the US would be upending its primary trading partner in the world, and would cause tremendous consequences economically. And the interesting irony of all this, Trump is the president who claims he wants to control immigration, yet his actions destabilizing countries may lead to waves of immigration occurring as a result of this.

So I think it's very important to keep that and back in back in the mind, so that again, the issue of Mexico, I think, is would be biting more than he could chew strategic strikes, even though we should keep in mind that Mark Esper, Secretary of Defense in his first administration, said that Trump toyed with the idea of sending cruise missiles into Mexico at particular sites that supposedly existed somewhere, because he has this idea that there are laboratories and There are manufacturing centers and their factories that are producing cocaine and fentanyl, that's not how it operates.

I mean, what strikes me so much about this administration is the ignorance that there is about Latin America that just a complete set of ignorance there is about Latin America, its process, its culture, its society, how things actually work in Latin America. This is obviously a reliance on the I think that there's also a backstory here, and that is the politicization of the military. We see that happening very closely with hecst going after Kelley. We see that happening and trying to reposition people within the military that are now proven to be ideologically correct, and that obviously may lead to strikes against Iran. But I also wonder how much the military wants to be dragged into multiple zones of conflict, both in the Middle East, in Africa and in Latin America, that would bog it down in ways that they you thought they learned the lesson of Iraq and Afghanistan. Okay?

### **Kelley Vlahos 49:22**

So let's talk about Greenland. I mean, over the last 24 hours, you've seen Stephen Miller, after his wife put out a graphic of a map of Greenland, covered in red, white and blue, saying, soon. And he's asked about that, and he said, of course, Greenland must be part of the United States. That is part of US government policy. When pressed as to whether he was going he thought that this would be accomplished through military force, he evaded the question and just said, Well, nobody's going to fight us. And. And, you know, I know that there are different arguments about US influence in in the Arctic and whether or not Greenland should be part of the United States Security sphere. But Can somebody talk about how, whether or not a that they think that Trump might try to take Greenland by force. Should it try to take Greenland by force and or is he just using this as a bargaining chip in some other issue or relationship with Europe from the perspective of Latin America.

### **Miguel Tinker Salas 50:41**

The utter silence on the part of Europe about what happened in Venezuela has been really dramatic. It shows a tremendous weakness. It could be two factors, the fear that Trump will continue to pull out of Ukraine, or the fear of the tariffs will be used as a leverage against

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Europe over the over the criticism regarding Venezuela, because we know this President is vindictive. So the fact that in many Latin American quarters, the question is, where is Europe? What is it doing? That fact alone makes them weaker on the question of Greenland, will they act? Will they not act? That, I think, is the target that really many in Latin America are questioning if Trump can do this in Venezuela, what is the end the Europeans say nothing. What is the stopping from doing it in Greenland?

**Curt Mills 51:31**

I mean, I there's a clear parallel with Iran as well, in which the Europeans were basically supportive of the administration's actions in June. And I guess the answer would be that they're just seemingly weak and monomaniacal on Ukraine. Although the irony is, this weakness could actually, I mean, Denmark has all but explicitly stated that if the US annexes Greenland, that that is the end of NATO, as far as they're concerned, which they may well be right, and so that's the best argument I've heard for anything.

**John Mearsheimer 52:04**

But it just just to piggyback on what Miguel and Kurt said. It's very important to understand that Greenland is effectively, effectively belongs to Denmark, and Denmark is in NATO, and Denmark is one of our loyalist allies. So it's not like Greenland is in the hands of a neutral country that loathes us, or that the Chinese and the Russians are on the verge of conquering Greenland. There's no strategic need for us to take Greenland and make it the 51st state. The Danes are the best allies the United States could ask for, and if need be, they will cooperate with us completely with regard to defending Denmark. But furthermore, as I said, there's no threat to Denmark. Excuse me, no threat to Greenland at this point in time.

So why are we doing this? Why are we threatening our relations with the Europeans? I just don't understand this. It just doesn't make any sense. This is why I watching the Trump administration in action, think that they are a rogue operation. They've turned the United States into a rogue state. We behave in all sorts of irresponsible ways. We don't do things that are in the American national interest. And I think talking about making Canada the 51st state, talking about taking over the Panama Canal, taking about talking about taking over Greenland, this makes no strategic sense at all, not to mention the fact that it just undermines international law and international institutions. And by the way, the United States built almost all those international institutions. We wrote almost all those international laws, and we did it because it was in the American national interest. And previous Presidents have followed international law for the most part, and they've paid homage to those international institutions because it was in the American national interest. What is the point of going out and mindlessly wrecking international law and international institutions, and this is what we're doing. Have you heard anybody give a reason for why we have to take Greenland? Did Stephen Miller tell us what the strategic rationale was, what the rationale is? No, he didn't. This is the way we do business this day, these days, and this is not smart.

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**Kelley Vlahos 54:46**

Well, Trump actually said that Greenland was being surrounded by Chinese and Russian ships.

**John Mearsheimer 54:52**

It also has rare minerals.

**Kelley Vlahos 54:55**

And it has rare minerals. So I'm going to ask one more question. Question occur, and then I'm going to try to get to a couple Q and A's, because I really, I want to, I want to drill down on this question of the politics. I'm seeing a lot of skepticism right now on the right, but it's coming in. I mean, it's not, it's not fulsome, but you know Megyn Kelley, one of the rights most popular podcasters right now said as a Fox News anchor, she knows her job would have been to uncritically cheer on regime change in Venezuela. However, after watching the long history of failed intervention, she believes it's prudent to remain skeptical of this latest one is it, do you see a split happening enough so that there would remain a conservative restraint element within the base?

I know our friend Dan McCarthy, a former editor of the American conservative, said months ago that the neoconservatives would be able to exploit America first and Maga support for the Monroe Doctrine, you know, finding common cause in order to pursue their long held regime change desires in Venezuela. Nicaragua and Cuba are the restraint oriented conservatives losing the thread here and and how does this portend for future elections for the base itself. Will restrainers be without a home?

**Curt Mills 56:38**

I think it's very important to realize the degree to which Trump's coalition is not Republican. I mean, so obviously he is in control of the Republican Party. Obviously he has transformed it. But a lot has happened in 11 years, and his rise itself was with a crucial number of voters who had previously not voted Republican, both in 2016 and in 2024 people who had not voted for any party, and without the singular figure of Trump, whose appeal is bespoke, if The party simply reverts back to bushism without Trump as the lodestar. I think it's it. There just aren't enough rich people. There just aren't enough, right? Neoliberals, there just aren't enough conservative internationalists in the population to support anything like that, and I think they'll get crushed and subsequent elections, and that won't be an enduring strategy.

So I think it's quite relevant that this war, not to repeat myself, is just not that popular. And you know, we're only three days out from the operation itself. And I just think increasingly the administration is going to is going to take it in the teeth on this, because there are rationales all over the place. And that doesn't necessarily mean we're going to do the prudent thing from here,

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which I think is, I mean, frankly, to just leave the regime in power and try to negotiate some kind of clean excess and exit into this.

I think the danger is that we actually expand into other theaters, the thing on Greenland, though, I will say, I don't know if it's as likely as perhaps people think. I think it's certainly, you know, on the cards as possible, but it would involve a more spectacular military operation than what we have currently seen the administration have the appetite do in Venezuela and Iran and other countries, right? I mean, like, I mean, theory, occupying Greenland is a heavier lift for Trump, and riskier and harder, and also kind of like not that glamorous, right? As opposed to, say, even bombing Cuba outright again, not to just try to looking at it value neutral and morally. You know, Trump has not quite gone in on the full monty neocon intervention, nation building thing. He's quite he's flirting with it. And he like, you know, we're gonna run Venezuela, like, you know, he's, he's, he's on the nurse it back to health. He's on the precipice. And I would not surprise me at this point if he took the leap, but he hasn't done it, and I think that's worth noting.

### **Kelley Vlahos 59:49**

Okay, I'm going to ask one question Professor Mearsheimer, a question from Alexander schnigans. And I feel like this is broad enough for it's a question that many. People have asked in a different form, but he says, Don't you think the events in Venezuela could lead to the Russians to increase their level of engagement, ie escalation, now that the US have shown that great powers can do pretty much whatever they want in their home turf?

### **John Mearsheimer 1:00:18**

Again, I don't think that what's happening in Venezuela matters much for the Russians. The Russians have one goal, which is to win a victory in Ukraine, and they'll do whatever is necessary to achieve that end. And what they want to do is they want to focus on that goal. They would be remarkably foolish to get involved in Latin America or to get involved in other areas of the world, because they think that what the United States has demonstrated in Venezuela opens up all sorts of opportunities. I think the Russians are focused laser like on what's happening in Ukraine, and I think from their point of view, that's the smart thing to do.

### **Kelley Vlahos 1:01:03**

Yeah, well, thank you. I've been told that I need I'm getting the hook. I really appreciate these insights I could have went on for another hour. I'm sorry to all of our listeners who have, who have posted questions, and I haven't been able to get to them all. I tried to rearrange the questions in a way that somehow addresses some of them. I just I want to before I let you go. We have another event coming up, very important on Europe and Trump's National Security Strategy. This is coming up. Quincy sponsored on the ninth at 3pm we have a great panel. Anatol leaving Quinn from Quincy Institute, Stephen Wertheim from the Carnegie Endowment, Jennifer Kavanaugh from defense priorities, and Mark episcopos from Quincy will be talking about Trump's new national security strategy, how it's affecting Europe. It's its security moving

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forward. Please go on the website Quincy ince.org to register for that and thank you so much for joining us today. This was very well, very well attended. The video will remain in posterity, posterity, on the YouTube, on the Quincy YouTube channel, and on Twitter, we'll be sending it out. So thank you again, and hope to talk To all of you soon. You Thank you. You do.