

# A WAR WITHOUT WEAPONS: THE IMPACT OF EMBARGO ON VENEZUELA

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Venezuela, in recent years, has been facing significant internal political instability, economic crisis, and international embargoes. The country, rich in oil resources, has experienced a severe downturn due to falling oil prices and poor governance. However, these challenges have not only remained as Venezuela's internal affairs but have also become a complex part of international relations.

One of the main reasons Venezuela plays a significant role in the international arena is the impact of its oil reserves on the world economy. Since oil is a crucial part of the global economy, Venezuela's situation in this field has become a significant factor in international economic relations. The country's internal economic problems, fluctuations in oil prices, and production declines affect energy markets in regional countries and even globally. Therefore, Venezuela's oil policies and economic situation directly affect international energy policies and trade.

Additionally, Venezuela's internal political situation should be addressed in conjunction with regional instability and security concerns. The country's internal conflicts and political crises threaten the overall stability of Latin America and affect its relations with other countries in the region. Particularly sensitive are Venezuela's relations with its neighbor Colombia due to internal political situations and security concerns. This situation affects Venezuela's claims to regional leadership and power balances, thus shaping its relations with other countries in the region.

This study will first examine the embargo experienced by Venezuela and its effects on the country. Then, a comparison will be made between Venezuela's embargoes by the United States (US) and the Western bloc and those imposed on Iran and Russia. This comparative analysis will help understand Venezuela's international isolation and the political purposes of the embargo. Additionally, similarities and differences between Venezuela's internal political situation and foreign policy and those of Iran and Russia will be discussed. Furthermore, the impact of embargoes imposed on these countries on other countries' embargoes will be discussed.

While examining Venezuela's economic collapse and the effects of international embargoes on the country, this study will also consider the impact of this situation on Venezuela's internal political dynamics and the living standards of its people. Moreover, the study will evaluate the role of embargoed Venezuela's relations with other countries and particularly the assistance it receives from supporters such as Iran and Russia. This study is aimed at readers interested in understanding Venezuela's internal and external challenges and assessing the country's role in international relations. The impact of embargoes imposed by the US and the Western bloc on the three countries covered in this study is noteworthy.

## Embargoes In The Context of International Relations

Embargoes are significant tools in international relations with a long history, resulting in various political, economic, and humanitarian consequences. Embargoes are a formal prohibition imposed by one country or international community on the purchase, sale, or trade of specific goods of another country.

The historical development of embargoes is quite complex and has been used for various purposes in different periods. Throughout history, embargoes have been applied for various purposes such as preventing military interventions, ensuring national security, exerting political pressure, protecting human rights, or combating terrorism. For example, the embargo imposed on Iraq in the 1990s by the United Nations Security Council aimed to weaken the Saddam Hussein regime.

Embargoes are often implemented as a result of a diplomatic crisis or an international dispute. These embargoes can be an effective tool used to apply economic, political, and even military pressure on the targeted country. However, the effects of embargoes not only impact the targeted country but also affect the embargo-imposing countries and the international community. Embargoes often lead to humanitarian crises, hinder the fulfillment of basic humanitarian needs, and threaten the lives of innocent civilians.

The use of embargoes raises significant issues and debates in international relations. International organizations such as the United Nations frequently assess the compliance of embargoes with human rights and international law.

The embargoes imposed by the United States on Venezuela, which will be discussed in this study, also carry political purposes due to Venezuela's stance against imperialism. The primary purpose of these embargoes is to weaken the Nicolas Maduro regime and promote democratic changes in the country. While these embargoes often target Venezuela's oil sector, aiming to negatively impact the country's economy and exert pressure on the Maduro government, the US claims that these embargoes are implemented to support human rights and democratic values. However, the effects of these embargoes on the Venezuelan people are controversial and have faced many criticisms internationally.

The US and the Western bloc have also imposed embargoes on Russia in various international contexts such as the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea. These embargoes often target strategic sectors of Russia such as energy, finance, and arms trade, aiming to create economic and political pressure on Russia.

Similarly, the US and the Western bloc have been imposing embargoes on Iran for many years in the context of issues such as its nuclear program and regional influences. These embargoes often target Iran's significant export sectors such as oil and natural gas while imposing restrictions on Iran's finance and defense sectors. The purpose of these embargoes is to limit Iran's nuclear program, ensure regional stability, and weaken allegations of supporting terrorism. However, the effects of these embargoes on the Iranian economy and people are controversial, leading to various differences in opinions among countries with different political views.

### US - Venezuela Relations and The Embargo

The historical context of the embargo imposed by the United States on Venezuela marks a significant turning point in the complexity of international relations. The historical ties between the U.S. and Venezuela date back to the 19th century when Venezuela gained independence from Spanish colonial rule. During a territorial dispute between Venezuela and Britain in 1895, the U.S. declared itself as a global police force and treated Latin America as its “backyard,” aiming to make it a closed area to intervention by European powers (Valenta, 2019).

Initially, bilateral relations progressed relatively steadily, characterized by diplomatic exchanges and economic cooperation, particularly in the field of oil production. Venezuela’s vast oil reserves became a focal point of interest for the U.S., leading to close economic ties between the two countries. The seizure of the Venezuelan government by General Juan Vicente Gómez through a U.S.-backed coup and his authoritarian rule over the country until 1935 were decisive in the dynamics of that period’s relations. Gómez’s concessions led to the growth of oil companies such as Standard Oil and Shell, which were centered in the U.S. (Rosales-Nieves, 2017). The influx of hundreds of foreign companies into Venezuela in the 1920s, acquiring vast lands in the hope of discovering “black gold,” led to the rapid development of the oil industry (Cheatham & Roy, 2023). The country’s economy, based on natural resource exports, faced significant challenges in the following years. The drop in crude oil prices resulting from the oil crisis in the 1970s, coupled with the reduction in oil production by OPEC,

including Venezuela, led to Venezuela being one of the countries most affected by this crisis. This period was marked by increasing inflation, large foreign debts, and austerity measures (Kulesza, 2017).

However, significant changes occurred in U.S.-Venezuela relations, particularly with the presidency of Hugo Chávez in 1999. During these years, while the U.S. was dealing with the aftermath of 9/11 and militarism was on the rise, China also emerged as a growing power on the international stage. It is known that this period coincided with a renewed increase in demand for oil. When examining Venezuela-U.S. relations, it is observed that Chávez’s presidency stood out as a departure from traditional Venezuelan politics, characterized by populist rhetoric, anti-imperialist stance, and efforts to ensure national sovereignty. His socialist policies and statements against U.S. intervention in Latin America strained relations between Washington and Caracas.

Tensions between the U.S. and Venezuela, especially increased significantly during the presidency of Chávez’s successor, Nicolás Maduro. The undemocratic regime of President Nicolás Maduro led to Venezuela’s isolation from the outside world. The Maduro government faced accusations of economic crises, political repression, and human rights violations. In response, the U.S. government closely monitored political developments in Venezuela and increased targeted sanctions against Venezuelan officials accused of corruption and human rights abuses.

Unilateral U.S. sanctions against Venezuela date back to 2005. However, especially during the Obama administration,

sanctions significantly expanded. The approval by the U.S. Congress in December 2014 of sanctions against the Central Bank of Venezuela and *Petróleos de Venezuela*, the state-owned oil and gas company, marked a turning point. Sanctions targeting the oil company, which accounts for over 90% of the state's revenue, had a significant impact on the country (U.S. Department of The Treasury, n.d.). The U.S.'s "Venezuela Human Rights and Civil Society" measure alleges human rights violations in Venezuela and the suppression of civil society, resulting in sanctions and restrictions. These measures include unilateral freezing of assets of Venezuelan officials and certain organizations, travel bans, visa cancellations, and various diplomatic restrictions. Additionally, Obama's designation of Venezuela as an "Extraordinary and Unusual Threat to the National Security of the United States" in 2015 is significant (Gillespie, 2015). The sanctions imposed by other foreign financial institutions under pressure from the U.S. on Venezuela are also noteworthy.

### **The Trump Era: Breaking Point (2017-2021)**

The peak of tensions between the two countries was marked by the comprehensive embargo imposed by the United States on Venezuela. Donald Trump, who became President of the United States in 2017, implemented more bold economic sanctions until the end of 2019 compared to previous administrations. The existing financial blockades were further reinforced to weaken the Venezuelan economy (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

In 2017, Trump issued Executive Order 13808 titled "Imposing Additional

Sanctions with Respect to the Situation in Venezuela." This executive order hardened the U.S. policy towards Venezuela and provided grounds for stricter sanctions against the Nicolas Maduro government (DiChristopher, 2019). This decision, which was linked to the political crisis, human rights violations, government repression against the people, violations of democratic processes, and economic collapse in Venezuela, particularly targeted the country's oil industry. Oil is Venezuela's main source of income and supports the government's economy. With this decision, the U.S. restricted the purchase of oil and oil products from Venezuela and imposed sanctions on individuals and entities engaged in this sector. Additionally, this decision targeted Venezuela's government bonds, notes, and shares. These sanctions have resulted in significant losses for Venezuela.

These sanctions and embargoes have also had a negative impact on the economic and social rights of those living in the country. More than 300,000 Venezuelan citizens have been unable to receive treatment for many important diseases such as malaria, cancer, and HIV. Food distribution has also been significantly affected by these sanctions. Due to foreign banks blocking payments for food distribution, 18 million packages could not be distributed in the country (Weisbrot and Sachs, 2019).

In 2018, the United States also attempted to interfere in the general elections in Venezuela and threatened a military coup against the Maduro government. In 2019, Executive Order 13857 titled "Taking Additional Steps to Address the National Emergency with Respect to Venezuela" alleged that Maduro won the elections fraudulently, and opposition leader Juan Guaidó was recognized as the interim

President of Venezuela. During this time, USAID and humanitarian aid programs were used to legitimize Juan Guaidó's interim presidency and increase pressure for Maduro to step down (Kahn and Leff, 2019).

### Relationships Evolving: The Biden Era

The U.S. embargo continued during Joe Biden's presidency. It is known that Venezuela's access to COVID-19 vaccines was blocked, especially during the pandemic. However, significant changes in the U.S. attitude towards Venezuela have been observed recently. It is evident that both Republicans and Democrats understand that developing positive and realistic relations with the Maduro government would be a better approach (France 24, 2024). This change should be interpreted particularly in the context of the general elections expected to take place in Venezuela in 2024.

The upcoming general elections in Venezuela, expected to take place on July 28, 2024, seem to be a crucial turning point for the country's political and social future. The agreements reached between the Maduro government and the opposition regarding elections under the supervision of international observers in Barbados in October 2023 have also influenced the U.S. sanctions. The Biden administration lifted the heavy oil sanctions that had been in place since 2019. The impact of this on Venezuela has been positive; oil has been sold at market prices, and Venezuela's oil exports have reached their highest level in the past four years (Otis, 2024).

However, the election process in Venezuela continues to be controversial. The Maduro government did not allow some rivals to participate in the election. As

a result, the U.S. accused Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro of not adhering to free and fair elections and reimposed sanctions on the oil and gas sector. Recent developments in Venezuela indicate that opposition leader Maria Corina Machado was disqualified from the election, critics of the government and members of Machado's team were imprisoned, numerous political actors and civil society members were unjustly detained, and millions of Venezuelans were prevented from registering to vote. In response to what the U.S. deemed undemocratic elections, sanctions were reimposed (Otis, 2024). These sanctions against the oil industry make it impossible for U.S. companies to sign new deals with the Venezuelan state oil company.

When the process is examined, it is seen that the policies implemented by the U.S. have little effect on Venezuela. Maduro cannot afford to lose any election and the possibility of democratic elections in Venezuela could mean a possible change of government. Maduro's departure could also lead to his legal prosecution as the U.S. government has accused Maduro of drug trafficking and corruption.

### Invisible Bombs and Consequences

The human rights violations and economic crisis in Venezuela have deeply affected the lives of its people, akin to the detonation of invisible bombs. However, the source of these bombs is not military attacks or natural disasters, but rather international embargoes and sanctions. The effects of these invisible bombs not only threaten people's lives but also undermine access to healthcare, food security, and other fundamental human rights. In this section, we will focus on the consequences of the embargo imposed on Venezuela,

examining the impact of these sanctions on individuals, while also reviewing how the international community has responded to this situation.

The decrease in access to healthcare and other basic human rights has resulted in a hunger crisis. According to a published report, due to the economic sanctions imposed by the United States, 40,000 people lost their lives between 2017 and 2018. Additionally, hundreds of thousands of people are at the same risk due to factors such as shortages of medicine and treatment. It is noted that the collapse of export revenues and imports has significantly exacerbated the difficulties Venezuelans face regarding food. These sanctions imposed on Venezuela align with the definition of ‘collective punishment of the civilian population’ outlined in international agreements such as those of Geneva and The Hague (Weisbrot and Sachs, 2019).

It was highlighted that due to a 73% decrease in imports between 2015 and 2019, over 2.5 million Venezuelans experienced food insecurity. Additionally, Douhan pointed out that fuel shortages jeopardized food production and transportation, while inadequate access to essential medicines and high prices put over 300,000 people at risk. The UN expert drew attention to the lack of vaccination for 2.6 million children (Douhan, 2021). Furthermore, it was stated that the impact of the sanctions on the economy has also led to brain drain. According to the UN, between 2015 and 2023, 7.1 million Venezuelans migrated due to the crisis (UNHCR, 2023).

**Figure 1: Embargo Areas**

Medical Imports    Fuel    Fuel    Seized assets    Frozen assets    Banking    Mining    Food Imports    Individual sanctions

**Source:** Alava, A.; Marquina C.; Ceja J. and Vaz, R., 2023

In 2021, Alena Douhan, the UN Special Rapporteur on Unilateral Coercive Measures and Human Rights, visited Venezuela and examined the impact of US sanctions on the country. Douhan’s report emphasized that the US embargo has had very serious and destructive consequences. According to Douhan, residents of Venezuela were only able to access water for three hours every 5 to 7 days, and the water they obtained was not clean, requiring them to boil it before use.

The international community has shown various reactions to the US sanctions on Venezuela. For instance, countries like Russia and China have criticized the US sanctions, considering them as interference in Venezuela’s internal affairs, and have demanded the lifting of sanctions. Similarly, countries like Turkey have also criticized the US Venezuela policy and argued that the sanctions negatively affect the Venezuelan people. On the other hand, some countries, especially European

Union members who are allies of the US, have supported the sanctions and defended the US's right to impose sanctions in response to human rights concerns in Venezuela. These various reactions indicate that the international community holds different views on the US's Venezuela policy and that there is no consensus on this issue.

The support of countries like Russia and China for Venezuela against sanctions stems from various objectives. These countries seek to maintain balance in international relations, strengthen their regional interests, and oppose US unilateral interventions by criticizing US policies toward Venezuela. Additionally, Russia and China provide support to Venezuela through strategic cooperation to increase their economic and military presence in the region and limit US influence. By criticizing US Venezuela policies, these countries aim to draw the attention of the international community to US unilateral interventions. In this context, the support of Russia and China for Venezuela against sanctions can be considered a significant strategic move in terms of power balances in international relations and regional interests.

There are various reasons behind the support of the US and Western countries for the embargoes imposed on Venezuela. These countries support the installation of a democratically elected government in Venezuela and back opposition forces against Nicolás Maduro's regime. Additionally, the US and Western countries criticize Venezuela's domestic policies and human rights situation, aiming to promote democratic reforms. Economic interests also play a significant role in this support role; particularly, the oil reserves and other natural resources of Venezuela attract the

interest of Western countries. Lastly, the US and Western countries perceive political and economic instability in Venezuela as a threat to regional security and thus use pressure tools such as embargoes to maintain stability in the region. Therefore, the support of the US and Western countries for the embargoes on Venezuela arises from both domestic political considerations and regional security concerns. Despite years of sanctions and pressure, the support from many states like Cuba, Russia, and China has not been enough to overthrow the Maduro government.

### Comparison of US and Western Embargoes on Venezuela, Cuba, Iran and Russia

The US and Western countries have implemented various embargoes on Venezuela, Cuba, Iran, and Russia at different times. The characteristics, purposes, and consequences of these embargoes differ from each other.

Embargoes on Venezuela have been primarily used as an economic pressure tool. The main purpose of these embargoes is claimed to weaken and change the Maduro government in Venezuela. The embargoes have particularly targeted essential export products such as oil and petroleum, negatively impacting the country's economy. The consequences of the embargo include an economic crisis, hyperinflation, food, and medicine shortages. Additionally, due to the embargo, Venezuela has experienced waves of migration, leading to significant social repercussions.

The US embargo on Cuba, on the other hand, has been in place for approximately 60 years. The main purpose of the embargo



is claimed to weaken and overthrow Cuba's communist regime. The embargo has been extensively implemented in various areas such as trade, travel, and finance. As a result, the Cuban economy has been adversely affected, and a decrease in the standard of living of the Cuban people has been observed. However, despite the embargo, the Cuban government has achieved significant successes in areas such as health and education.

The US imposed an embargo on Iran primarily due to its nuclear program and regional influence. The aim of the embargo is to compel Iran to halt its nuclear activities and reduce its influence in the region. The embargo has negatively affected Iran's energy sector, banking system, and foreign trade.

Embargoes on Russia by the US and Western countries are generally associated with international crises such as the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea. The main purpose of these embargoes is to prevent and punish Russia's intervention in these crises. The embargo has targeted sectors such as energy, finance, and defense in Russia. However, the effectiveness of the embargo in changing Russia's foreign policy is debatable.

The similarities and differences in the US and Western embargoes on these four countries stem from the basic reasons and effects of the embargoes. A common point of embargoes on all four countries is that they were implemented to support political objectives such as national security, human rights, democracy, or international relations by the US and the West. However, considering the unique conditions and relations of each country,

the characteristics and effects of the embargoes vary.

For example, the primary reason for embargoes on Venezuela is the undemocratic practices and human rights violations of the Maduro government. Through these embargoes, the US and the West aim to pressure the Maduro government internationally and encourage democratic change. However, the main reason for embargoes on Cuba is the ideological conflicts stemming from long-standing political tension and the Cold War era. The embargo aims to weaken Cuba's communist regime and is used as a tool in ideological struggles.

The embargoes on Iran are due to concerns, particularly about its nuclear program and regional influence. Through these embargoes, the US and the West aim to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons capability and support stability in the region. Embargoes on Russia, on the other hand, emerged as a result of international crises and regional conflicts. These embargoes aim to prevent Russia's intervention in events such as the Ukraine crisis and promote respect for international law.

The common result of all these embargoes is that the targeted countries face challenging economic and social situations. Issues such as economic crises, food and medicine shortages, migration waves, and social unrest are among the effects of embargoes. However, it is observed that each country responds to the effects of embargoes differently and develops various strategies during this process.

### Conclusion

The impact of the crisis in Venezuela on regional and global relations is also a significant focus of this study. The crisis has negative effects on the security and stability of other countries in the region. Additionally, it has a significant impact on global energy markets and oil prices. Therefore, cooperation and solidarity among regional and global actors are important for resolving the crisis in Venezuela. The stance of countries like Iran and Russia on the embargoes on Venezuela should be taken into account. These countries have called for the lifting of the embargoes imposed by the US on Venezuela and have drawn the attention of the international community to this issue. The role of these countries, which are strategic partners of Venezuela, is an important factor in resolving the crisis and is effective in reassessing the embargoes.

The role and responsibilities of the international community in resolving the crisis in Venezuela are critical for a peaceful and sustainable solution. The international community must take various measures to contribute to the resolution of the crisis. Firstly, it is important for the international community to make a strong diplomatic initiative regarding the Venezuela crisis. Strengthening dialogue and negotiations between the parties and exploring solutions through diplomatic channels are essential. In this process, the United Nations and other international organizations can contribute to the resolution of the crisis by assuming a mediation role.

Secondly, the international community should provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Venezuela and meet their basic needs. International aid organizations

and human rights organizations should work actively to alleviate the difficulties faced by civilians who are most affected by the crisis. International cooperation and coordination should be ensured for the effective delivery and distribution of humanitarian aid.

Thirdly, the international community should provide financial support to Venezuela and support its economic recovery. The lifting of embargoes and the provision of assistance to Venezuela could be a significant step in restoring the country's economic stability. In this regard, international financial institutions and countries can contribute to the resolution of the crisis by providing assistance to Venezuela.

Finally, it is important for the international community to adopt a long-term perspective on the resolution of the crisis in Venezuela. Efforts should be made by the international community to understand the root causes of the crisis and develop long-term solutions. In this context, supporting Venezuela's economic and social development through development projects and social programs is important.

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