The NATIONAL INTEREST FOUNDATION

U.S. Military Buildup in the Caribbean and the Increased Chance of an Invasion of Venezuela

The United States has amassed its largest military presence in the Caribbean in decades, with actions including numerous strikes on alleged drug-smuggling boats over the preceding months. This and escalated recent tensions between the United States and Venezuela have ramped up concerns regarding the potential of direct military conflict. U.S. President Trump has issued public warnings and threats of possible land strikes, while Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro has responded with defiant rhetoric and military drills. The policies and actions under the Trump administration represent a significant shift from previous U.S. counternarcotics operations in the region, which typically involved interdiction and prosecution of suspects by law enforcement agencies rather than lethal military force. The legality and justification for these strikes have been widely questioned by international law experts, UN officials, and some members of U.S. Congress – sparking controversy and calls for reviews and restraint in the face of what continues to be a highly volatile situation.

While a full-scale invasion is considered unlikely by many experts due to the current troop levels being insufficient for this, the expansive U.S. military buildup significantly increases the chance of targeted airstrikes or limited military actions against Venezuelan land targets or government figures. The recent U.S. deployment in the Caribbean is noteworthy and consists of over 15,000 military personnel including approximately 5,000 sailors aboard the USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier and its strike group, as well as an estimated 5,000 personnel based in Puerto Rico. There are believed to be around 11 U.S. warships in the area, with air assets such as F-35 fighter jets, MQ-9 drones, and various Marine helicopters. Additionally, the former Roosevelt Roads Naval Station in Puerto Rico has been reopened and is being used as a staging ground for operations. All told, there is a much larger force than needed for routine counternarcotics operations, leading analysts to conclude that there may be preparations for potential U.S. land-based attacks in Venezuela.

The heightened tensions and military buildup have prompted various U.S. lawmakers to voice bipartisan concerns and introduce War Powers resolutions in both the Senate and the House to try to block unauthorized military action in or against Venezuela. The resolutions have both Democratic and Republican sponsors including U.S. Senator Tim Kaine (D-VA), U.S. Senator Rand Paul (R-KY), U.S. Representative Ro Khanna (D-CA), U.S. Representative Joaquin Castro (D-TX), and U.S. Representative Thomas Massie (R-KY), among others. These efforts seek to uphold

the constitutional requirement for congressional authorization of military force, arguing that President Trump does not have the unilateral means to initiate open-ended hostilities. They are aimed at preventing the Trump administration from entering what most fear would be another endless war or pursuing reckless regime change in Venezuela without a formal declaration or specific authorization for the use of military force from Congress.

In conjunction with this, Trump administration officials have come under fire for the nature of their military strikes against alleged drug-smuggling boats in the Caribbean – facing accusations of potential war crimes and extrajudicial killings. There has been particular controversy and scrutiny surrounding follow-up double-tap strikes which killed two survivors of an initial boat strike back in September. Following the first missile strike on a vessel, two people were found to have survived and were clinging to the wreckage when a second strike was then ordered to "kill everybody," in compliance with a reported directive from U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth. Legal experts and some members of Congress argue that the follow-up strike on survivors who no longer posed a threat constitutes a potential war crime and an extrajudicial killing under international law. In fact, the U.S. Department of Defense's own manual lists attacking a shipwreck as an impermissible action. The House and Senate Armed Services Committees are conducting bipartisan oversight over the actions, while the Trump administration has tried to distance Hegseth from accountability by naming Admiral Frank M. Bradley as the officer that "directed the engagement" despite a Washington Post report that Hegseth was the one who gave the order.

Amid the military buildup, heightened U.S.-Venezuela tensions, and scrutinized strikes, President Trump has added to the concern regarding potential further escalations by indicating that land operations in Venezuela may begin soon. He has also claimed that American intelligence agencies have extensively mapped out the drug networks' activities and are aware of the locations of key sites. Analysts and experts largely agree that a broader U.S.-Venezuela conflict or a full-scale military intervention would be disastrous, warning of serious economic, humanitarian, and geopolitical consequences should this unfold. U.S. military action could trigger a collapse of Venezuela's already fragile economy and disrupt global oil markets. It would also likely prompt instability and fuel a major migrant crisis. Perhaps most importantly, observers have been quick to point out that another regime change intervention can easily draw the United States into a protracted conflict, citing past interventions in the Middle East and elsewhere that have often become costly and prolonged engagements without any clear resolution or desirable outcome.