

The Realities of Foreign Policy in 2026

The world entered 2026 at great speed and in a deeply unsettling manner. Already at the very beginning of the year, the aftershocks of 2025 have begun to make themselves felt. The U.S. military intervention in Venezuela inevitably recalled Russia's invasion of Ukraine four years earlier. When this was compounded by U.S. President Trump's declaration that he might directly intervene in developments in Iran if necessary, the direction in which the international environment is heading became much clearer. It appears that Trump has come to terms with the fact that his aspiration to receive the Nobel Peace Prize is no longer realistic.

Recent developments convey a very clear message: the hard power whose footsteps we have been hearing for some time has fully returned and is now decisive. Countries that wish to survive cannot afford to ignore this reality. Regardless of the justification offered, there is no principled difference between President Trump's abduction of Venezuelan President Maduro and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The only difference is that Putin failed to capture Zelensky, whereas Trump succeeded. This starkly illustrates how secondary rules have become within the international system. Many countries, led by the United Kingdom, applauded Maduro's downfall. Concepts such as sovereignty and the inviolability of borders have thus become selective. Those who applaud Washington's actions have no moral ground to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The United States seeks to legitimize such actions by invoking its domestic law. This effectively places American law above international law. This is not new for Washington. The United States has refrained from ratifying many international treaties on the grounds that they would constrain its freedom of action. For example, it has never accepted the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, established in 2002. With Trump's return to power for a second term, it has become even clearer that international law and established norms no longer function effectively. As stated in the U.S. National Security Strategy published last November, Washington views Latin America as its "backyard" and intends to exercise its hegemony there more forcefully.

The Venezuelan case also demonstrates that while it may be possible to overthrow a regime through military means, ensuring stability afterward is far more difficult. Trump's statements that "we will run Venezuela," and even his assertion that Nobel Peace Prize-winning opposition leader Machado has no chance, reveal the extent of Washington's domineering approach. It is also evident that the United States has drawn few lessons from its experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, Venezuelan authorities have openly declared that Maduro remains the country's legitimate president and that they will resist.

Trump's action is also further proof that those surrounding him are individuals incapable of offering meaningful warnings—people who simply endorse whatever he says. The plan to seize Maduro may well have been prepared months in advance, but one must ask how much thought was given to how the country would actually be governed afterward.

Throughout his presidency, Trump has repeatedly emphasized his opposition to the shedding of American blood. His reliance on remote interventions in Yemen, Iran, Nigeria, and Venezuela reflects this approach. Maduro's capture appears to be an exception, but Trump's underlying objective has been to avoid dragging the United States into a long and exhausting war. Nevertheless, should Venezuela witness resistance comparable to Iraq or Afghanistan, the United States may be forced to consider a military occupation—an option that would likely produce bloody and unpredictable outcomes.

This attack also carries additional messages. The United States has demonstrated that when its interests are at stake, it is prepared to take any risk, regardless of whether the affected country is considered a friend or an adversary. This message is directed particularly at Colombia and Cuba. Cuba has long been a target of Washington, but Colombia represents a different case. President Gustavo Petro came to power in 2022 through a democratic election whose results were accepted by all, and new elections will be held this year. What the United States has done in Venezuela thus serves as a serious warning to other countries in the region. It remains to be seen how the Organization of American States will respond.

Another potential crisis area is Greenland, which Trump has openly set his sights on. His repeated claims that the United States “needs” Greenland are hardly reassuring. Militarily speaking, taking control of Greenland would not be difficult. Politically, however, such a move would trigger a major crisis within NATO. Not only Denmark, but other NATO members as well, are now compelled to seriously consider whether Trump might be willing to take such a risk. The pressing question is: who, if anyone, can restrain him?

Russia's condemnation of the United States is deeply ironic and cannot be taken seriously. There is little substantive difference between Moscow's actions and Washington's. Indeed, it would not be surprising if President Putin were quietly pleased, as Russia's invasion of Ukraine is thereby indirectly legitimized. This dynamic may also serve the interests of the other major power, China. In the event of a future Chinese move against Taiwan, both U.S. actions in Venezuela and Russian actions in Ukraine could be cited as precedents. After all, anyone can now produce whatever justification suits them. In a system where international institutions, especially the UN Security Council, are unable to act effectively, power increasingly defines legitimacy.

Israel's conduct in Gaza and the wider region raises similar questions. Backed by the United States, Israel has acted with notable impunity, striking Gaza, neighboring territories, and even Iran. The pattern is consistent: power, not law, determines outcomes.

One need not be a historian to recognize that 2025 marked a turning point in international relations. From now on, every country will seek to strengthen its defenses—not only militarily, but also economically, technologically, and in terms of energy security. The cost of this shift will likely be borne by education, healthcare, and social services. Restrictions in these essential areas will be inevitable, and social unrest may increase as a result.

From Turkey's perspective, an important question is how its close relations with Venezuela in recent years will evolve under these new conditions. The Foreign Ministry's call for "restraint" and its emphasis on "international law" appear, frankly, ineffective in the current environment. We are living in a world where international law has been effectively sidelined. Turkey has hosted Maduro on numerous occasions and has developed significant trade relations with Venezuela. However, President Erdoğan's close relationship with President Trump will likely be the decisive factor shaping Ankara's stance in this crisis.

More broadly, the contours of a new global order are emerging. Until recently, there was at least a semblance of order, however imperfect. The rules were known if applied unevenly. That system is now eroding rapidly. Risks are multiplying, and instability is becoming systemic.

For all states, including Turkey, the central lesson is resilience. Strength can no longer be defined narrowly in military terms. Economic robustness, technological capacity, institutional competence, and merit-based governance are equally essential. In this environment, a return to meritocracy and strategic foresight may prove to be among the most decisive factors for long-term survival and autonomy.