

**UNITED STATES WAR ON NARCOTERRORISM AND ITS IMPACT ON STATE
SOVEREIGNTY: A STUDY OF VENEZUELA, 2015-2025.**

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of the United States' war on narcoterrorism on the sovereignty of Venezuela, 2015-2025. The study focused on how U.S. drone strikes and counter narcoterrorism operations affected Venezuela's state sovereignty and whether the United States' claim of self-defence justifies its actions under international law. The study was anchored on the Realist Theory as propounded by Waltz in 1979. The theory explains international relations as a struggle for power, survival, and national interest within an anarchic international system. The study adopted the ex post facto research design. Data were obtained through documentary sources such as textbooks, journal articles, official government publications, reports of international organizations, and policy documents. Data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis and content analysis. Findings revealed that U.S. counter narcoterrorism operations, including drone strikes and sanctions, significantly undermined Venezuela's political, economic, and diplomatic sovereignty through external interference and pressure. The study also found that the U.S. justification of self-defence remains controversial under international law because many of its actions exceeded the accepted principles of necessity, proportionality, and respect for territorial integrity. The study concluded that although narcoterrorism poses serious security threats, unilateral counterterrorism measures by powerful states often weaken the sovereignty of weaker states and intensify geopolitical tensions. The study recommended stronger adherence to international law, increased multilateral cooperation, and respect for state sovereignty in addressing transnational security threats.

Keywords: *Narcoterrorism, sovereignty, self-defence, drone strikes, Venezuela, United States, international law.*

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background to the Study

The term “Narcoterrorism”, coined by former Peruvian president Fernando Belaunde Terry in 1983 due to what he described as a war on his police force, it describes groups that fund terrorism through drug trade, although at first, the term was used to describe drug traffickers who made use of terrorist approaches to influence government officials which is why the infamous leader of the Medellin cartel, Pablo Escobar, responsible for vicious attacks on the Colombian government like the deaths of many presidential candidates in Colombia, Justices of the Colombian Supreme Court in 1985 and various terrorist attacks including the bombing of the Avianca flight 203 in 1989, the assassination of journalists, government officials and police officers was labelled a Narco-terrorist by authorities (EBSCO Research Starters, n.d.). Previously, the bone of contention was the drug trafficking aspect and the terrorism was simply a tool through which the objectives of the cartels were achieved and as such more emphasis was placed on the “Narcos” rather than the “terrorism”. However, in the 21st century, the latter is the case as the word “narcoterrorism” is used to describe the intersectionality between terrorist activities and illicit drug trafficking but this time, more emphasis is placed on the terrorism aspect. Now the word describes rebel or terrorist groups who fund operations or get a percentage of their revenue from the illegal sale of narcotics. This study will be using Venezuela as a case study of how United States’ fight against narcoterrorism has diminished state sovereignty.

The United States began its fight against drugs in 1971 with president Richard Nixon declaring drug abuse to be “public enemy number one” and his significant increase in the funding for drug

control agencies as well as the rebirth of the Office for Drug Abuse Law Enforcement, Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs and the Office of narcotics Intelligence into the Drug Enforcement Administration in 1973 to consolidate federal efforts to control drug abuse but it wasn't until the 1980's, with the presidency of Ronald Reagan that the U.S. began to make significant advancements in the "war on drugs". Reagan prioritized criminal punishment over treatment which led to mass incarcerations for non-violent drug related crimes, although his policies were criticized for being discriminatory and racist due to the inconsistencies in the punishment for possession of five grams crack cocaine which warranted five years while possession of 500 grams of powdered cocaine attracted the same punishment, the criticism stemmed from the fact that crack cocaine was cheaper and therefore more accessible to the underprivileged minorities and 80% of crack users were black leading to an unequal rate of incarcerations for drug possession(Beaver, 2010: ACLU, 2006).

September 11th 2001, an Islamic terrorist group by the name Al-Qaeda led by Osama Bin Laden, crashed two planes into the twin towers of the world trade centre in New York, the third plane destroyed the western face of the U.S. pentagon while the fourth plane crashed into a field in Pennsylvania claiming the lives of about 3000 people in total. This event marked a dark era in U.S. history, it also changed the global view of narcoterrorism for good. Before 9/11, narcoterrorism mainly referred to drug traffickers using violence to protect their operations, but after the terrorist attacks, president George bush launched the "war on terror" which aimed to eliminate all terrorist threats to U.S. security. This led to the identification of narcotics-derived revenue as one of the key sources of terrorist financing by U.S. intelligence agencies which in turn made narcoterrorism a global concern as opposed to a regional one. At this point, the U.S. had merged the "war on drugs" with the "war on terror" and began linking drug control to counterterrorism strategies as

well as increasing their military presence in Latin America, the middle east and Africa while using narcoterrorism as a political tool to justify interventions in countries like Afghanistan and Venezuela. Around the same time, the then president of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, begins making targeted efforts to distance the state from U.S. influence and cooperation. Chavez expels the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in 2005, accusing it of spying. While this marks a shift in Venezuelan sovereignty, the U.S. accuses Venezuela of harbouring traffickers. This marks the beginning of the over two decade long tussle between Venezuela and the United States where on one hand, Venezuela rejects U.S. intervention and refutes claims of aiding and abetting narcoterrorism, and on the other hand, the U.S. intervenes more, accusing Venezuela of funding terrorism through the drug trade and carrying out its newly merged “war on terror” and “war on drugs” policies in order to protect their national interest.

Brief timeline of events:

- Hugo Chavez takes office in February 1999, shifting Venezuelan politics into an anti-U.S. policy and takes control of state oil revenue. This serves as the background for future tensions.
- April 2002, a coup is attempted on Chavez, he is briefly ousted but returns. Chavez accuses the U.S. of being involved in the coup attempts but the U.S. denies all involvement.
- 2005, Venezuela severs ties with the united states DEA.
- 2005-2012, Venezuelan drug seizure rankings drop from 4th in the world to 6th
- 2013, Chavez dies and Nicolas Maduro is elected president amid electoral malpractice accusations.
- 2013-2019, Maduros government faces many challenges including economic collapse and political unrest, the U.S. increases visa bans, and sanctions on Venezuelan officials.

- 2019, the U.S. recognizes opposition leader, Juan Guaido as interim president and increases sanctions.
- 26th march 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice indicts Maduro and other senior officials on narcoterrorism charges.
- 2020's, the U.S. extradites and persecutes some Venezuelan officials like Hugo Carvajal who pled guilty in a U.S. court in June 2025.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

In recent years, narcoterrorism has emerged one of the leading global issues, linking the trade of narcotics to increased political violence and terrorism. The United States has framed narcoterrorism as a threat to its national interests and security and made significant moves to increase its presence in countries accused of committing such crimes. In Latin America, Venezuela has become the focal point of such accusations by the United States. Since the rise of president Nicolas Maduro, the U.S. has accused Venezuelan leadership of engaging in state sponsored drug trafficking as well as the aiding of and collaboration with rebel groups such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (U.S Department of Justice, 2020). This raises necessary concerns on how U.S. interference undermines Venezuelan sovereignty.

While the United States' fight against narcoterrorism may be seen as necessary to protect its citizens from the devastating effect it has had on the national interest and state security of the U.S., the legality of certain measures it has taken, particularly its military actions against Venezuelan vessels, call into question the compliance with the United Nations Charter, specifically article 2(4), which requires the peaceful settlement of international disputes and prohibits the use or force or the threat of violence against the territorial integrity of any state.

Furthermore, Venezuela has argued that U.S. actions have greatly undermined its sovereignty. It is against this background that this study poses two research questions.

1.3. Research Questions

1. How have U.S. drone strikes on suspected narcotics vessels affected Venezuela's state sovereignty?
2. How does the U.S claim of self defense justify its actions under international law?

1.4. Objectives of the study

The main objective of the study is to examine the validity of the interference by the United States into Venezuelan politics and determine whether it is necessary or merely another control tactic by the U.S.

Specific objectives of the study are:

1. To interrogate how the U.S. drone strikes on Venezuelan flagship boats have undermined its sovereignty.
2. To ascertain whether the U.S. claim of self-defence as a pretext for the drone strikes on Venezuela justifies its aggression.

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study has both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing body of literature on narcoterrorism, international Relations, security studies and issues of sovereignty in the global south. By examining the intersection between narcoterrorism and foreign intervention, it will benefit scholars and students due to added or relatively new information. Practically, the study offers value for policy and action. It guides policymakers on

how to respond to narcoterrorism without weakening national sovereignty. It provides security agencies with insights into the links between drug networks and terrorist groups, which improves intelligence gathering and operational response. The study also informs international organizations on how foreign intervention shapes local stability in the Global South. It supports governments in designing balanced strategies that combine security enforcement with social and economic measures. In addition, it serves as a useful reference for researchers, diplomats, and practitioners in international relations and security studies. It also highlights gaps in current approaches, which helps strengthen capacity and improve policy outcomes.

1.6. Scope of the Study

This study has both geographic and content scope. Geographically, this study focuses on Venezuela and the activities relating to narcoterrorism and U.S. involvement within the region. The content scope of this study deals with how the U.S. drone strikes on Venezuelan flagship boats have undermined its sovereignty; and the study also tries to ascertain whether the U.S. claim of self-defence as a pretext for the drone strikes on Venezuela justifies its aggression.

This study covers the period of 2000-2025 because this timeframe encapsulates the U.S. - Venezuelan tensions beginning with the presidency of Hugo Chavez, continuing through Nicolas Maduro's administration and key events such as the 2020 narcoterrorism indictments against Venezuelan officials. This period also aligns with the post 9/11 era when the concept of narcoterrorism became central to U.S. foreign and security policy. This study also focuses on three major dimensions of sovereignty: political sovereignty (lack of interference in internal politics and governance as well as legitimacy), economic sovereignty (state control over natural resources and revenue) and diplomatic sovereignty (ability to participate freely in International Relations as well as international recognition).

1.7. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, its focus on Venezuela means that the findings may not be generalizable to other south American countries. Secondly, the study is also limited to the use of secondary data sources such as academic publications, news reports, policy documents and international organizations records because the researcher is unable to travel to the scene of the conflict to get first-hand information on the experiences of the population of the study through interviews. Due to the sensitive nature of narcoterrorism allegations, access to official U.S. and/or Venezuelan documents are limited, this may restrict the depth of empirical verification.

The tense political and economic situation in Venezuela presents major challenges in obtaining unbiased and consistent information. Many available reports are influenced by political or ideological perspectives which may hinder objectivity despite efforts to achieve a balanced interpretation. Also, the time and financial constraints on the research limited the possibility of conducting first hand interviews and observations within the United States or Venezuela. Consequently, this study largely depends on existing scholarly analyses and credible secondary materials. Finally, because this study adopts a qualitative and case study approach, its findings are not meant to be statistically generalized, this study uses Venezuela to understand patterns, not to produce mathematical proof or draw universal conclusions. Regardless of these weaknesses, the research has strong methodology and triangulating of data sources, which will conveniently provide the credibility of findings and practical conclusions. The limitations presented in the present case do not invalidate the research study rather they point out the avenues which require a further study.

1.8. Operational Definition of key Terms

- Sovereignty

Sovereignty is the recognised supreme authority of a state to exercise full control over its territory, population, laws and political decisions both within the state and internationally, without subordination or interference from any other state or external authority.

- War

War is a state of organised conflict between states, governments, societies or armed groups usually involving the use of force, violence and weapons to achieve political, economic, territorial, ideological or religious objectives.

- Narcoterrorism

Narcoterrorism refers to the use of drug trafficking to support or advance terrorist activities. It can also describe situations where terrorist groups participate directly in illegal drug trade to fund their activities.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.0 Introduction

This chapter seeks to review key literature in line with the studies aim and objectives. The chapter is organized in accordance with the following sub headings:

- Conceptual review
- Thematic review
- Theoretical review
- Empirical review
- Summary/gap in literature

2.1 Conceptual review

2.1.1 Narcoterrorism

Narcoterrorism is a subject of considerable debate in the field of security studies and International Relations, because it is a phenomenon that involves crossing two aspects that are fundamentally different, namely terrorism and organised crime. Narcoterrorism can also mean the use of violence by drug trafficking organizations in order to threaten or coerce a government. It can also be defined

as the situation in which terrorist organizations resort to drug trafficking as a means to achieve political or ideological objectives. In both scenarios, the violence is directed toward women, but they have different motives, forms and legal consequences of acts of violence (Makarenko, 2004). This conceptual review explores definitions, interpretations and discussions of the phenomenon of narcoterrorism in the published literature.

It is primarily used to designate the violence employed by drug trafficking groups to affect the government's policy or intimidate civilian populations, and the participation of terror groups in drug trafficking with the aim of financing political or ideological objectives. It was initially conceived in Latin America, specifically through the use of violent measures employed by drug cartels to thwart law enforcement and to stall drug enforcement efforts (Crenshaw, 2015).

Narcoterrorism is generally defined as the threat of violence by a drug trafficker against a state institution or a civilian population in order to ensure the continuation of the illegal drug activity (Schmid, 2011). If by this definition, then drug trafficking is the primary business and terrorism is a way to safeguard it. A more terrorism-oriented approach to the definition of narcoterrorism is found in the works of other scholars, who see narcoterrorism as the use of drug production or trafficking by ideologically motivated groups as a means of obtaining funding (Makarenko, 2004). In this case it's narcotics that are used to V to feed the terrorist enterprise, not as an objective. Because there is no agreed definition of narcoterrorism, one can imagine that it is a combination of both scenarios. This is because terrorist groups could also come to see that profit could be more important than ideology, and criminal groups could use violent means to safeguard their economic interests (Shelley, 2014). This poses a threat to the traditional security policies and models which view terrorism and organised crime as two different phenomena and thus demand two different

approaches. Critics still argue however, that while strategic cooperation exists, differences in motivation are still significant (Dishman, 2005). The suggestion is that narcoterrorism is not a total convergence of crime and terror, but rather a situation that calls for the treatment of narcoterrorism as a situational overlap.

One question is whether the reason for using narcoterrorism is ideology or money. Typically, the motivation behind terrorism extends to political and ideological concerns, whereas drug trafficking is driven by monetary considerations. Narcoterrorism mixturely fuses this difference. Some scholars contend that as terrorist groups become more deeply engaged in drug trafficking, they may change their ideology, a process that has been dubbed criminalization (Makarenko, 2004), while others scholars claim that financial transactions do not necessarily weaken the commitment to ideology, but rather allow terrorist groups to continue their long term campaigns against the state. The latter has been prevalent in the trend of events in the international community where terrorist groups like Isis, Al-Qaeda and so on, have not shown signs of relenting and continue to cause chaos and disrupt state activities via extremely violent measures.

This debate is important because it impacts upon the definition of narcoterrorism. From a profit-oriented point of view, narcoterrorism can be seen as organised crime with political elements; from an ideological extremism point of view, narcotics can be considered as a tactical resort to safeguard and support their operations. It is a consensus that narcoterrorism exists in a grey area between terrorism and organised crime. The literature does not show a consistency of opinion on whether it is a unique phenomenon or just a convenient term for similar practices. Depending on the emphasis on violence, ideology, profit or state vulnerability, there are multiple definitions. The line between political violence and criminal enterprise is blurred, however, in the case of narcoterrorism, as is the concept and policy of dealing with security threats and has led scholars

and policymakers to rethink how security threats should be categorized and dealt with. Narcoterrorism is, therefore, a potentially valuable but controversial concept, which needs to be seen in the broader context of the changing nature of non-state violence in the international system.

2.1.2 War

War has always been a core theme of the discipline of International Relations, political science and security studies. One of the oldest and most enduring forms of human warfare and that has remained a major factor in shaping the politics of the world and interaction between political communities. In general, war is generally defined as an organized large-scale conflict between political units, usually states but sometimes non state actors like terrorist groups, insurgent groups, and paramilitaries. It is not spontaneous fighting, but rather a calculated and political battle undertaken with a view to strategic, economic, political or ideological goals (Clausewitz, 1832; Bull, 1977).

Different theoretical traditions have different understandings of the causes and nature of war. Realist scholars believe war is inevitable because of the anarchical international system in which each state has its own national interest and without a central authority, states have to resort to measures of self-help in order to survive (Waltz, 1979). This is directly at odds with the liberal perspective that suggests that the causes of war are institutional failures, lack of cooperation and the lack of effective legal and diplomatic processes to deal with the conflict (Doyle, 1986). War, however, according to marxist and neo marxist theories, is a result of economic exploitation, class struggle and an expansionist approach of capitalist systems (Lenin, 1917).

There are various definitions of war, all stressing the political and organized character of the phenomenon. In his book on war, “on war, translated by M. Howard and P. Paret”, Clausewitz

(1832) makes a famous statement that war is an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will” and war is a means to an end – the end being political objectives. Bull (1977) uses the term war, and relates it to organized violence done by political units; Michael Walzer (1977) on the other hand is concerned with armed conflict between communities. Together, these definitions emphasize war as strategic, organized, political and violent interaction.

War has changed over time; early wars were mainly about tribal and territorial differences, but today it becomes larger in size, scope and complexity. There are several types of a war. Interstate wars are wars fought between two or more sovereign states, as in the first and second World Wars. Intrastate wars occur on the borders of a single state. A civil war is another type of intrastate conflict, characterised by an organised domestic group's armed struggle against the government for control of the state or for independence, for example the Nigerian civil war, and the Syrian civil war (Fearon and Laitin, 2003).

One such category is Proxy wars. A form of warfare in which other nations aid opposing factions in a war without fighting in it. This entails the supply of weapons, funding, intelligence, or training but they do not directly engage. One reason why proxy wars are fought is to not directly engage in a conflict with the great powers (Mumford, 2013). Asymmetric warfare is a war involving two parties, one of which is stronger than the other, typically between a powerful state and a weaker non-state group such as an insurgent, terrorist, militia etc. Israel's conflict with Hamas is easily a situation of asymmetric warfare. The weaker side usually makes use of guerrilla tactics, improvised devises, hit and run attacks and the use of civilian environments to offset military tactics (Arreguin-Toft, 2005).

Since the beginning of communal life, there has never been a war without it resulting in serious negative effects on societies, despite its apparent advantages. The consequences of armed conflict

are huge humanitarian crises, economic disruption, political instability, displacement, and long-term social and psychological effects. The development of cyber warfare capabilities and the biological, chemical and nuclear weapons also have been significant concerns in international law and human rights to contemporary debates on war. The nature of these forms of warfare creates dangers of unprecedented scale and scope to global security, in excess of the limitations of conventional weapons, and make it even harder to regulate armed conflict in the modern international system.

2.1.3. Sovereignty

The term sovereignty usually refers to the complete, legitimate and independent control of a nation over its citizens and land, without the interference of other nations or without the presence of internal rivals. Its ability of a state to act autonomously, free from foreign influence. It may also be the legitimacy that a state has over its land and its citizens. sovereignty is a cornerstone of the international system and still influences the way states assert their independence and legitimacy in international politics (Krasner, 1999). Its ability of a state to act autonomously, free from foreign influence. Sovereignty is also a legal and normative expectation among states reinforced by the principle of non-intervention in their affairs as stated in the UN charter (UN, 1945).

Traditionally sovereignty is a concept of absolute power, but in fact, it is much more complex than that. The exercise of executive power is not only subject to external pressures and power asymmetries but states can have formal legal sovereignty. This is especially true of the threat of narcoterrorism, which transcends borders and threatens the ability of states to exercise their own powers and control over security and law enforcement (Ayoob, 2002). Increasingly, sovereignty has been an evolving discussion in the international field because identities are becoming a major concern, and the issue of current and former state sovereignty is also being discussed in the context

of attempts to intervene in states for crimes that can be deemed to be transnational in nature. With the growing tension that exists in the world now, sovereignty has increasingly been a major issue, especially where external factors might be in favor of intervening in a state on the basis of cohabiting transnational crimes.

2.2 Thematic Review

2.2.1 U.S. Drone Strikes Effect on State Sovereignty

The growing use of drone attacks as a means to combat terrorism in the United States has led to a rich literature on the topic. U.S. drone strikes have happened repeatedly in states such as Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia—even in areas outside "formally declared" battlefields—since the early 2000's (Boyle 2013). One might say that some people believe that drone strikes are the proper and important response to transnational acts of terrorism, while others believe that drone strikes violate basic principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-intervention, that are part of international law (Shaw 2017).

Using literature on key conceptual and legal issues, this review explores scholarly arguments about U.S. drone strikes and state sovereignty. The review will examine key arguments and debates in the literature related to territorial integrity, consent, self-defence doctrines, power asymmetry and the impact on international system.

The principle of state sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The prevailing idea of sovereignty in the international law literature defines U.S. drone strikes as an infringement upon the “sovereignty” and the “territorial integrity” of the state. Traditional views of sovereignty encompass a state's exclusive right to sovereignty over its territory and its internal affairs, as well as the requirement of the state to refrain from outside interference (Krasner, 1999). It is from this perspective that the use of armed force in another state's territory without consent is a violation of International law, in particular Article 2(4) of the United Nations charter (Shaw, 2017).

There is a debate about whether the drone strikes in countries like Pakistan and Yemen violate this principle because they are not carried out by host state authorities and because they violate the principle of territorial integrity (Boyle, 2013). The operations are seen as part of a bigger picture where legal limits on counterterrorism are set aside because of the requirements for counterterrorism. Critics argue that sovereignty is still legally in force and is not to be overlooked selectively in this regard (Crawford, 2019). Others claim that drone strikes do not infringe on sovereignty because sovereignty entails the ability to secure outside military assistance (Wilde 2014). This perspective is what elevates what may be considered “unlawful intervention” to “legitimate security partnership”.

But this is not universally accepted, since some scholars doubt the legitimacy of consent that is secret, unclear, if it's given under pressure of politics or economy (Byman, 2013). In countries like Pakistan, researchers fault supposed private partnership with U.S. agents, pointing to the fact that in this instance, consent could be a matter of elite preference, not of true sovereign will (Boyle, 2013).

The “Unwilling or Unable” Doctrine

The right of self-defence is among the legal arguments that are most often used to justify contemporary cross-border drone strikes and counterterrorism operations under Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations. In the United States, in particular, this clause has been invoked on a regular basis to justify the use of force against non-state armed groups that operate from the territory of another state, particularly if the territorial state is perceived as incapable of controlling the threat that the non-state armed groups pose. The “unwilling or unable” doctrine is key to this justification, holding that a victim state can justifiably employ force in self defence against the use of its territory as a base for armed attacks by the host state (Deeks, 2012; Bethlehem, 2012).

The doctrine was prominently developed in the post-September 11 security environment, which, due to the operations of transnational terrorist groups, threatened the traditional State-centric approach of international law. Advocates say the doctrine is based on today's asymmetric warfare, especially when non-state actors like terror groups roam across fluid borders and are able to take advantage of poor governance. The argument was that an obligation to allow a territorial state to be passive in the face of imminent or actual attacks because it cannot do anything about them, would defeat the purpose of Article 51 (Dinstein, 2017). They therefore argue that the doctrine is essentially a contemporary adaptation of the law of self-defence.

Indeed, the doctrine is increasingly accepted by state practice, particularly in operations against armed groups in states in which there is an internal instability or even a collapse of the Government, as scholars like Ashley Deeks have observed. Deeks (2012) argues that if a territorial state is unable to deal with threats arising from its own territory, then the injured state has the right to "use limited force in response" if it is necessary and proportionate. Likewise, Daniel Bethlehem

(2012) argues that the doctrine has come to be a developing norm of customary international law for transnational armed attacks by non-state actors.

This has been the justification U.S. authorities have used to back drone strikes in places like Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. government insisted that states that either provide sanctuary for or did not extinguish terrorist groups were not entitled to hide behind the concept of territorial sovereignty. Such an interpretation vastly broadened the definition of self-defence beyond interstate conflicts to armed action in response to a non-state actor inside another state's borders (Schmitt, 2011).

The doctrine is, however, very controversial in international legal scholarship. It has been criticized for the lack of explicit evidence in the UN Charter, and that it may undermine the principle of state sovereignty that the Charter embodies. Article 2(4) of the UN Charter stipulates that no threat or use of force should be used against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State, except in the self-defence of the latter against an armed attack or in accordance with the United Nations' Rules of Law in the Exercise of International Authorities. Opponents argue, however, that the "unwilling or unable" defense is actually a new and too expansive exception to the rule of law prohibiting the use of force (Gray, 2018). Moreover, critics state that the doctrine inflicts a subjective approach to the question of legality, as the attacking state determines whether the other one is actually unwilling or unable to take measures against the threat. This poses risks of misinterpretation, abuse, and unilateral military action under flimsy security pretexts. If states are allowed to use force "when they feel the other state is 'ineffective,' then the collective security system set forth in the UN Charter will be weakened, and sovereignty becomes a precarious and conditional right, contingent on whether the state is able to police its own territory or not" (O'Connell, 2010).

The doctrine has also been the subject of discussion about its consistency with the jurisprudence of the International Court of Justice. An interpretation that was more narrow was taken by the Court in *Nicaragua v. United States and Armed Activities on the Territory of the Congo*, and respect for territorial sovereignty was emphasized. The Court recognized that “armed attacks” by non-state actors occurred, but it did not consider the “unwilling or unable” doctrine to be a stand-alone principle of international law in order to justify the use of force within another State's territory (ICJ Reports, 1986; ICJ Reports, 2005). This makes it difficult to understand how political the doctrine continues to be while at the same time having no legal footing in international law, many scholars have suggested.

The "unwilling or unable" concept is, in essence, a way of balancing traditional notions of sovereignty and new security threats from transnational armed groups. The doctrine is seen by its supporters as a legitimate adaptation of the right to self-defence in the age of global terrorism, however, by some critics is seen as pushing the limits of Article 51 and undermining the stability of the international legal order. The current debate on the doctrine reflects the ongoing conflict between the state's security concern and maintenance of sovereign equality of states in international law.

2.2.2 The Principle of Self-Defence and the Crime of Aggression

The above discussion has focused on the relationship between cross-border military practices and territorial integrity and effective control, but there is also a specific legal debate on the justification of such practices under international law. In addition to the practical issue of sovereignty, it has been raised whether the use of force is legitimate under the exception of self-defence or is rather an aggression in violation of international law.

Restraint from aggression is one of the most crucial principles of the international legal order since 1945. That the United Nations shall not use force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any nation except in extreme self-defence or in pursuance of a declaration of a United Nations Security Council resolution. Nothing in the Charter shall authorise any action in violation of the territorial integrity or political independence of any State, or action that would be contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations, except in self-defence or in response to an act of aggression. The only exception is the inherent right of self-defence under Article 51 which allows states to use force against an armed attack until the United Nations Security Council has taken necessary steps to maintain international peace and security (Shaw, 2017).

The issue in the law challenge is whether the specific military actions meet the criteria for 'legitimate self-defence' or are 'aggression dressed up as self-defence'. Customary international law requires that in the case of lawful self-defence there are three elements: necessity, proportionality and immediacy. The Caroline correspondence in 1837 made it clear that the need to defend must be “instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means and no moment for deliberation” (Brownlie, 1963). These principles are still reflected in modern understandings of Article 51.

A common point of contention with regards to public discussion of drone strikes or targeted killing is whether there was an “armed attack” and whether the response is proportionate to the threat. Supporters argue that attacks against terrorist groups are legal defensive measures which are meant to stop future attacks. Others contest that many of these operations are beyond what is necessary, or proportionate, especially when strikes take place away from active battlefields or when the target is civilians (Melzer, 2008). They argue that in such circumstances, they may be the subject of the use of force which contradicts the framework of the Charter.

The modern concept of aggression in international criminal law is further complicated. The term Crime of Aggression is defined in the amended Kampala-Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 2010, as the planning, preparation, initiation or execution of an act of aggression, by its character, gravity, and scale, is a clear violation of the UN Charter. Aggression can manifest itself through invasion, military occupation and bombardment, or any other use of armed force against a state without lawful justifications (Cassese, 2013).

Therefore, if claims of self-defence prove to be illegal or excessive, states and their leaders can be accused of acting aggressively. No one, therefore, is in favour of a broad interpretation of Article 51 that might lead to a permissive attitude and the normalization of unilateral military action. The broader self-defence claims have the potential to further undermine the Charter's collective security system by giving powerful states some latitude to launch an intervention based on their subjective assessment of security rather than objective legal principles (Gray, 2018).

In the meantime, those who support wider conceptions of self defence have said that a literal reading of the traditional formulations might leave states open to the new threats from non-state armed groups that operate transnationally. They argue that international law should be flexible enough to address changing patterns of warfare, but maintain the principles of necessity, proportionality and accountability (Dinstein, 2017).

Self-defence as a limited exception to the prohibition of force

In addition to the issue of territorial integrity, scholars also explore the issue of whether or not a cross border use of force is legally justifiable under international law. This debate is based on the concept of self-defence, and the related ban on aggression, a unique conceptual frame.

In international law, self-defence is an exception to the general prohibition of on the use of force. International law does not consider self-defence a right, but rather a narrowly drawn exception to the right to not use force. Article 2(4) of the United Nations charter has a strong presumption against unilateral military action, and article 51 of the same charter permits self-defence only in response to an armed attack, with strict conditions (Shaw, 2017).

This exception has always been made to be narrow in scope, according to scholars. The purpose of self defence is to combat a present threat which does not mean it is justification for an open-ended or preventative application of force (Crawford, 2019). This is a restrictive interpretation that is part of the general trend in international law to limit unilateral action and to maintain collective security.

The expansion of self defence claims by Non-State Actors

Today, with regard to self-defence, the situation is complicated by the rise of non-state armed actors. Today's security threats are not the same as those of state-to-state wars and may come from non-state actors. Consequently, a question has been raised as to whether an attack by one of these actors can invoke the right of self defence as set out in article 51 (Deeks, 2012).

Others have suggested that such a narrow view of state responsibility is unrealistic, considering the level of operations of modern non state threats (Byman, 2013). Others warn that such an extension of self-defence can lead to undermining the prohibition on the use of force by creating a grey zone between self-defence and intervention (Crawford, 2019). This is a sign of a widespread worry that adaptability may be at the expense of legal predictability.

Self-defence doctrines attempt to legitimate the use of force within the confines of law, whereas a second group of scholarships question whether such uses of force are still deceptive or are acts of illegal aggression under international law.

Aggression and the extent to which it is justifiable within the law

Unlike the debates over self-defence, the notion of aggression is grounded in the categorical ban on force. From a legal perspective, the crime of aggression as defined in international criminal law refers to the most serious forms of unlawful force," which involve a violation of the UN charter (Cassese, 2008).

The legal practitioners distinguish between justification and culpability. The practitioners clearly distinguish between justification and guilt. Aggression is more about when force is truly illegitimate, rather than whether it is legal or not, as self-defence is (Crawford, 2019).

2.3. Theoretical Review

2.3.1 Theory of Terrorism

As for theory, this study is based on the Rational Choice Theory of Terrorism, which was developed by Martha Crenshaw. This theory is used to characterize terrorism as an intentional and

rational political act, instead of a random or spontaneous act. Crenshaw (1981) maintains that terrorist groups engage in deliberate acts, which are based on cost benefit analysis, opportunities and the expected outcome. In this context, terrorism is a sensible reaction to inequalities and limitations of actors who are unable to exercise political impact the traditional way.

Crenshaw (1981) suggests that people and groups use terrorism as the most viable means of attaining desired political ends. These goals can range from recognition to changing government policies to overturning existing power structures. Environmental conditions like political exclusion, weak state capacity, and restricted legitimate channels of expression thus impact the decision to resort to terror. This viewpoint is less about the emotional or ideological reasons and more about the strategic reasons.

One of the major tenets of the rational choice theory is the focus on utility maximization. Terrorist actors evaluate their gains against the losses which could result. The rewards could be monetary, political or visibility, while the risks could be repression, arrest and loss of support. If the perceived benefits are greater than the risks, terrorism can be considered as a viable option (Crenshaw, 1981). This reasoning is necessary to grasp the connection between terrorism and other forms of illegal economic transactions like drugs.

The idea of narcoterrorism falls into this category. In the literature, narcoterrorism is defined in varying ways, but by Rachel Ehrenfeld as the financing of drug trafficking, or the control of drug trafficking, through terrorist means (Ehrenfeld, 1990). According to a rational choice theory approach, participation in drug trading generates a regular flow of cash that supports terrorist groups' operational ability. It helps them to get weapons, members and continue activities in the long term. This economic aspect brings narcoterrorism into the equation as more than a mere coincidence.

The rational approach also accounts for relations between the terrorist organizations and the state apparatus. Where governance is poor or compromised, non state actors take advantage of institutional gaps to increase their operations. This makes it a place where criminal and political violent activities converge. This is the context in which allegations of state involvement with drug networks are taken up in the Venezuelan case. These exchanges are indicative of the fact that actors make strategic choices to ensure continued power or economic benefit in a situation with limited resources.

The other key element of the theory is its implication for state responses. As with terrorist actors, states also act rationally and with strategies when faced with threats. For example, the United States considers narcoterrorism a serious threat and takes measures to combat it, including sanctions, law enforcement ties, and diplomatic efforts. These actions assume that it would weaken the financial and operational viability of such networks reducing the impact of them. This is a reasonable policy action in response to a clearly identified threat.

The theory also shows its limitations of such responses. But when the cost of legal economic activities rises due to state actions, without offering alternatives, the actors may be pushed further into the network of illegal activities. This can be used to reinforce and not debilitate the narcoterrorism mechanisms. Economic sanctions in the Venezuelan context, have decreased formal economic opportunities and could lead to the growth of informal and illegal economies. This is consistent with the rational choice theory assumption that behaviour adjusts to the incentives.

The theory also emphasizes how the perception process is involved in decision making. Terrorists and States operate as a function of threats and opportunities they perceive. Experts in U.S. policy circles have a perception of Venezuela as a narcoterrorism hub. The perception influences policies

and decisions to intervene. These interpretations are important to the understanding of the rise of terrorism and the character of reactions to it, as Crenshaw (1981) points out.

For the purpose of this study, the Rational Choice Theory of Terrorism is a very useful conceptual framework for understanding the relationship between drug trafficking and political violence. It elucidates why the actors resort to narcoterrorism as a strategic option and the reactions of the state to narcoterrorism. It also uncovers side effects of policy measures, including those that change the incentive set of states impacted.

2.3.2 Theory of State Sovereignty

Stephen Krasner's concept of sovereignty as organized hypocrisy is the best explanation for the theory of state sovereignty. Krasner (1999) refutes the traditional perspective that sees sovereignty as supreme power over a bounded area. He believes sovereignty is accepted as a norm in international relations but often neglected in practice, particularly by powerful states in their quest for strategic interests.

The concept of sovereignty is discussed in four aspects: domestic sovereignty (authorities within the nation), international legal sovereignty (recognition between nations), Westphalian sovereignty (non-sovereign relations) and interdependence sovereignty (control over trans-border flows) (Krasner 1999). The dimensions demonstrate that sovereignty is not homogeneous, or equal. On the contrary, it is multi-levelled and subject to outside forces.

At the heart of Krasner's case is that state-claims to sovereignty are sometimes rhetorical, and sometimes substantive. This paradox he calls "organized hypocrisy". Some states are powerful and apply the concept of sovereignty selectively according to their needs and interests. If it's in line with their objectives, they back up it. When it comes in conflict with their goals, they breach it

(Krasner, 1999). This thereby renders the concept of sovereignty a flexible one, politically shaped instead of a fixed legal rule. This is a theoretical stance that has direct implications in the U.S.-Venezuela relationship. The United States is the official supporter of the non intervention principle but seems to be doing the opposite in Venezuela. Economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation and political pressure are signs of interference in Venezuela's internal affairs. These are strategic calculations of sovereign norms that Krasner is talking about.

A good example of sovereignty being limited without military action is economic sanctions. The United States' sanctions restrict Venezuela's access to international financial systems and curtail its economic strength. This diminishes the capacity of the State to operate on its own. This is a breach of the sovereignty of interdependence, in that external actors have control over internal economic processes (Krasner, 1999; Drezner, 2011).

Political recognition is another example of the loss of sovereignty. The international legal sovereignty is recognized by other states. Opposition to Venezuela's government by the U.S. with a call for alternative political leadership threatens its legitimacy. This puts a situation where sovereignty is externally challenged. Krasner (1999) gives this reason as a tactic of strong countries to shape domestic politics in weaker countries.

Globalization also contributes to reconfiguring sovereignty. The more interdependent states become, the more that they will lose the ability to manage their internal affairs. In addition to domestic actors, there are external ones such as international institutions and strong states that have an effect on national policies through economic and political means. The Venezuelan government's autonomy is constrained by its dependence on world oil prices and its vulnerability to outside economic factors. This is in keeping with Krasner's perspective that sovereignty is becoming more limited in a globalized interconnected world.

Power imbalance is another part of Krasner's theory. The strong have the ability to control the weaker states or to set aside their sovereignty. The weak states, however, do not have the means to withstand the pressure. With relative geographic isolation and economic struggles, Venezuela is susceptible to outside influence. This is one of the points that helps substantiate the idea of non-equality of protection for sovereignty across states (Krasner, 1999).

The theory of organized hypocrisy is a theory that explains how security narratives are employed to justify intervention in the U.S. war on narcoterrorism. The U.S.-prominent labeling of Venezuela as a narcoterrorism threat provides justification for measures that violate the country's sovereignty. This is a reframing of the issue from domestic governance to international security, which is thus legitimated and external involvement accepted. This is an example of a sovereign that can be reimagined in the face of perceived threats.

2.4 Empirical Review

Badgley (1994), in his seminal work “The New Hundred Years War? This is part of a series of documents – U.S. National Security and the War on Drugs in Latin America” – that discusses the

development of the U.S. counter narcotics policy as a post-cold war security policy. He approaches the war on drugs qualitatively, through a method of research known as policy analysis, and within a realistic and hegemonic perspective. According to Badgley, U.S. narcotics policy militarised drug control at home and legitimate interventionist tactics in the Latin American states. His conclusions indicate that these approaches damaged state autonomy and undermined sovereignty, as they limited local governance to U.S. security needs. Badgley's results throw light on the dynamics of a country that was later labeled a narco-threat, Venezuela.

Neumann (2017) examines the larger nexus between organised crime and political violence; she uses case studies and intelligence-based reports, and highlights the potential for interactions between drug trafficking and insurgent and terrorist operations. The theoretical foundation is the security studies and relates to transnational threats. Neumann argues that although sometimes it is necessary to intervene, this will have unintended consequences if not carefully managed. As applied to Venezuela, the work provides a useful tool to analyze U.S. concerns, but also underscores the dangers of overreach. The author suggests intelligence-based strategies that are targeted and conform to the law with emphasis on operation within legal limits. Sovereignty is being raised as key to long-term stability.

Based on field observations and long-term monitoring of political trends in Venezuela, Berzaín (2025) describes the country's internal situation in detail. The study reveals that there are indications of institutional compromises with state actors and illicit drug networks. The author is however cautious to excuse the unilateral foreign interference. The book is based on the state failure theory and explains the dynamics whereby weak institutions will open the door for criminal networks and outside actors. Berzaín calls for international action, and proposes that it be

coordinated by recognized global actors. The study emphasizes that any action must be within the bounds of the law, to not exacerbate the sovereignty issue.

In his study, titled *Drug War Pathologies: Embedded Corporatism and U.S. Drug Enforcement in the Americas*, Bartilow looks into the paradoxes of U.S. drug warfare in Latin America, including Venezuela. The study uses the qualitative documentary method with policy reports and historical data. It is based on key political economy and dependency concepts. The results show that U.S. anti drug policies tend to reinforce state coercive apparatus, while diminishing institutional accountability in target countries. It also indicates that interventions build up a distortion of the domestic governance processes. The study finds that the war on drugs creates dependency and weakens policy autonomy of the states. It suggests moving towards multilateral and development oriented methods.

In their book, *Dragon in the Tropics: Venezuela and the Legacy of Hugo Chávez* (2015), Corrales and Penfold focus on the political economy of Venezuela faced with foreign pressure. The authors use a mixed method approach which comprises qualitative analysis and secondary data. The study is based on the theories of political economy and state sovereignty. Results show that U.S. sanctions and pressure deepened fragility of institutions and eroded Venezuela's policy autonomy. The results show that U.S. pressure and sanctions increased institutional fragility and decreased policy autonomy in Venezuela. The study concludes that there were governance distortions and a reduction in sovereignty due to external interventions. It calls for a change in the institutions as well as a lessening of external pressures.

In a study called *Economic Sanctions as Collective Punishment: The Case of Venezuela*, Weisbrot and Sachs (2019) examine the humanitarian and economic effects of U.S. sanctions. The authors use a quantitative and documentary method which is based on economic indicators and mortality

data. The study is based on the dependency theory and international political economy. Results indicate that sanctions were associated with high economic decline and high death rates. A conclusion of the study is that sanctions are coercive instruments that weaken the capacity of states and their sovereignty. It calls for the lifting of general sanctions and a targeted diplomatic involvement.

In his book *U.S. Policy toward Venezuela: From Democracy Promotion to Regime Change*, Kornbluh (2018) traces the changes in U.S. foreign policy toward Venezuela. The approach of the study is a qualitative historical analysis, which is based on the official documents and policy records. It is based on the theory of realism and interventionism. The findings show a change from soft power engagement to coercive methods such as sanctions and political isolation. In conclusion, the study, the policies diminish the sovereign decision making space of Venezuela. It calls for reopening diplomatic dialogue and for respect of the non intervention principles.

In his book, *Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime in the Americas*, (Bagley, 2021) explores the development of drug networks and their relation to political turmoil in Latin America, including Venezuela. The study applies qualitative comparative method that is case studies and security reports. It is based on the theory of transnational crime and fragility of states. The results reveal that criminal networks are flexible when it comes to weak governance and that they will fill in the loopholes in states' institutional structures. It also shows how sometimes state actors get caught up in illegal economies, undermining state sovereignty and public trust. The study finds that the ability of the state to respond effectively becomes a key catalyst in the success of narcoterrorism when the state's institutional capacity is weak and external pressures exacerbate internal vulnerabilities. It calls for an enhancement of intelligence cooperation at the regional level and institutional reforms in the affected states.

In his research article *The Drug Problem and U.S. Policy in Latin America* (2019), Shifter looks at the impact of U.S. counter narcotics policy in Latin America. The study takes a policy analysis methodology and is based on secondary data analysis from governmental and international organizations. It rests on the theory of security policies and international relations realism. The results show that drug enforcement strategies based on the military have had mixed results, with some displacing drug networks but not banishing them. The study also demonstrates that such policies help to build up diplomatic tension between the United States and Latin American states. It finds that current solutions are maintaining cycles of instability which are not leading to solutions. It suggests moving towards institutional strengthening and demand reduction.

UNODC (2023) in report *Global Cocaine Market and Transnational Trafficking Networks* provides an analysis of the structure of drug trafficking routes in the Americas, specifically on Venezuela. The study adopts quantitative seizure information and intelligence mapping techniques. It is based on frameworks of global governance and transnational crime. Results indicate that Venezuela is an important transit point because of its geographic location and low-level of enforcement of border controls. The report underscores the growing intermingling of criminal networks and political unrest. It finds that drug trafficking across borders constitutes a threat to state sovereignty and regional security. It suggests more cooperation and capacity development at the international level between border control agencies.

In his book *Narco-State Formation and Governance Collapse in Latin America*, (2020) examines the long-term effects of drug economies on state institutions. This study is based on a qualitative institutional analysis approach with case studies in Latin America. It is based on state failure and dependency theory. Results suggest that the relationship between long-term contact with illegal economies and institutional weakness, corruption, and policy autonomy. The study also evidences

that internal governance recovery often is complicated by external interventions. It concludes that under the impact of narco dynamics and foreign pressure, sovereignty is eroded. It suggests policy reform, integrating governance and alignment with international policies.

In their study, *Social Movements and State Power in Latin America*, Petras and Veltmeyer (2016) study the political repercussions of external interventions and economic dependency. The research is based on Marxist political economy with historical and comparative research methods. The results show that outside interventions in the states of Latin America do not only strengthen the dependency of elites but also weaken the ability of local governance. The study also reveals that state sovereignty is eroded in economic control and political influence. It finds that there are times when narcotics related stories are used to serve a larger geopolitical agenda. It calls for bolstering regional autonomy and opposition to the idea of unilateral intervention.

In *After Empires: U.S. Foreign Policy and Latin America* (2016), Benjamin looks at the continuities of U.S. influence in Latin America after the Cold War, focusing on Venezuela. The research in this study employed historical institutional approach, with data sources being archival and policy documents. It is based on realist foreign policy theory and post imperial foreign policy theory. The results show a shift from ideological containment to strategic resource and security management in the U.S. case when it comes to Venezuela. It demonstrates both that oil politics and regional influence continue to play key roles in policy-making. The work ends with the conclusion that sovereignty in Venezuela is limited by long-term structural interests of external powers. It calls for a fairer diplomatic system for the hemisphere.

In his book *Venezuela: The Politics of Oil and Revolution* (2011), Hellinger discusses oil's impact on political sovereignty and external relations. Qualitative political economy analysis is done using historical data and policy review. It is based on the theory of dependency and the resource curse

theory. The findings show that reliance on oil makes a country more vulnerable to economic and political pressures from the outside world. It also reveals that the impact of global oil markets on state stability and capacity for governance is direct. It is concluded that Venezuela has a limited sovereignty, due to external market forces. It calls for diversification of the national economy and reduction of external dependency.

In his study, *Sanctions, Sovereignty, and State Behavior: The Case of Venezuela*, McCarthy (2019) studies the effect of U.S. sanctions on the Venezuelan regime. The study is based on a mixed qualitative policy analysis approach through the use of government reports and international data sets. It is based on coercive diplomacy and international relations theory. The findings suggest that the fiscal impact of sanctions on states is very negative and they limit states' access to global financial systems. The study also indicates that sanctions exacerbate polarization of the targeted state's politics. It finds that sanctions are "instruments of indirect intervention" which reduce sovereignty. It suggests specific sanctions with humanitarian protection.

In his book, *Drug Trafficking and Geopolitics in the Western Hemisphere*, Kaplan analyzes the relationship between the trafficking of narcotics and the power dynamics in the region. The study adopts a geopolitical analysis method using security intelligence and regional case comparisons. It is based on strategic studies and transnational security theory.

The results reveal that the state weakness and geopolitical competition both impact on drug trafficking routes in Venezuela. It also reveals that narcotics discourse is one of the elements that provide justification for the strategic presence of external actors in the region. The study concludes that the narcoterrorism narratives are part of the greater geopolitical competition. It calls for mutually coordinated regional security associations to minimise external manipulation.

In his study, *American Grand Strategy and Latin American Order* (2017), Brands discusses the strategic significance of Latin America in U.S. foreign policy. The study employs the strategic studies and historical analysis methods with the aid of policy documents, defense strategy reviews. It is based on realism and hegemonic stability theory. The results show that the United States consistently has sought to keep 'bad guys' from influencing its hemisphere. In addition, it reveals the security and ideological approach of the United States to Venezuela. The study ends with the conclusion that the dynamics of great power competition influence sovereignty in Latin America. It calls for a reset of U.S. policy with regard to cooperative regional engagement.

The connection between the drug trade and terrorist financing is discussed by Ehrenfeld (1990) in her book *Narcoterrorism: How Governments Around the World Have Used the Drug Trade to Finance and Further Their Terrorist Activities*. Using a descriptive and comparative method, she maintains that narcotics networks and terrorist organizations are increasingly operating in conjunction with each other in order to sustain their operations. According to Ehrenfeld, narcoterrorism poses a serious threat to international security and is a target for transnational countermeasures. Her work serves as the conceptual basis for the U.S. characterization of Venezuela as a state that "works" for narcoterrorism.

A historical overview of the *Drugging and Thugs: The History and Future of America's War on Drugs* is presented by Crandall (2020). Crandall uses a qualitative historical approach to illustrate how the war on drugs spread the U.S. influence beyond its borders and how it also increasingly became intertwined with counterterrorist goals post September 11. He discovers that U.S. anti-narcotics efforts frequently involved intrusions into foreign territories, which may not have been fully accepted by foreign nations. His study is significant because it shows that anti-drug campaigns were used as tools for foreign policy which had implications for state sovereignty.

In his book *U.S.-Latin American Drug Policy*, Tokatlian (2010) discusses Washington's military response to narcotics in the Western Hemisphere in a critical way. He makes use of policy analysis and contests that the securitization of drug trafficking has given the U.S. undue influence over the governments of Latin American nations. He ends that anti-drug policies often do more harm than good, just as they do not tackle the socioeconomic causes of the drug trade and work against domestic autonomy. The work is helpful in evaluating the impact of U.S. narcoterrorism policies on the Venezuelan sovereignty.

In *Drugs and Democracy in Latin America*, Youngers and Rosin look at the impact of U.S.-directed anti-drug policies throughout the region. They develop the concept of militarized drug control measures by analyzing the case studies, and claim that such measures tend to undermine democratic institutions and human rights protections. Their research shows that the cooperation in the field of security with the United States can be accompanied by the loss of independence in the formulation of national policy. The study sheds light on the regional repercussions of the U.S. anti-narcotics efforts.

In *Challenged Sovereignty: The Impact of Drugs, Crime, Terrorism and Cyber Threats in the Caribbean*, Griffith (2024) explores how transnational security issues impact state government and sovereignty. Through a multi-disciplinary lens, Griffith strongly contends that drug trafficking and terrorism are undermining the conventional conceptions of sovereignty. He believes that external security interventions – although frequently justified on security grounds – can diminish the policy autonomy of the affected states. The relevance of this work is that it demonstrates the possibility of narcoterrorism as a justification for foreign interference in the domestic affairs.

In his study on the current political situation in Venezuela, Corrales (2020) looks at the erosion of democratic governance under the Maduro administration. He believes that through a qualitative political analysis, one can outline the conditions that allow criminal activity and international review in the context of institutional decay, corruption and economic crisis. His results indicate that Venezuela's internal weaknesses have led it to be under pressure, even from the United States, alleging narcoterrorism. The study provides an understanding of the domestic setting from which the challenges of sovereignty arise.

Trinkunas (2016) explores the role of organized crime in exploiting weak political institutions in Latin America in his book on state weakness and organized crime in Latin America. He claims that when a state's capacity is diminished, foreign security intervention tends to become more common, using comparative case studies. He concludes that the role of external assistance in the strengthening of law enforcement could be either positive or negative in terms of state autonomy. His study is relevant to the question of security cooperation and sovereignty in Venezuela.

Rosen and Zepeda (2020) in their study *Organized Crime, Drug Trafficking and Governance in Latin America* explore the connection between criminal organizations and the state. Using qualitative analysis, they conclude that the organized crime's increasing impact has changed the security landscape in the regions. Their results show that states are sanctioned, isolated, and pressured by interventionist pressure points from powerful states when accused of facilitating drug trafficking. This research gives a valuable insight into the international effect of the allegations of narcoterrorism against Venezuela.

Theodora is the legal and political implications of U.S. actions toward Venezuela (2026) in *Control Without Annexation: Venezuela, Oil Governance and the Limits of Sovereignty*. Through historical and legal analysis, she proposes that current expressions of intervention do not need to

be territorial or "in-your-face", but can be economic, through sanctions and via security narratives. According to her, external pressure can have a marked impact upon domestic governance without necessarily compromising the state's sovereignty. The study has a relevance since it provides an example of ways in which sovereignty can be limited indirectly.

2.5 Summary of Literature Review/Gap

There are clear patterns in existing studies of narcoterrorism, of U.S. foreign policy, and of state sovereignty. In both security studies and political economy, scholars are unanimous that the U.S. "war on drugs" has become a larger security agenda. This agenda not only takes the drug trade and trafficking to the square, it also associates some states, such as Venezuela, with threats to regional and world stability and equates terrorism with drug trafficking. Research by Bagley (2021) and Kaplan (2020) demonstrates that narcotics networks are transnational and that they take advantage of poor institutions. The works prove Venezuela geo-strategic because of its geopolitical and governance problems. Several gaps still exist, however, from these contributions. There are few studies that combine all three variables into a single analytical model. There is limited research that directly links the U.S. war on narcoterrorism with its broader geopolitical and economic strategies in Venezuela. Second, existing literature pays more attention to economic outcomes than to the combined political and security implications for sovereignty. The multidimensional impact of narcoterrorism driven policies on Venezuela's autonomy remains underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive analysis of the U.S. war on narcoterrorism and its impact on Venezuela's sovereignty from 2000 to 2025. It integrates security, economic, and political dimensions into a single framework.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework gives the intellectual background of analyzing and interpreting the findings of a research. It connects the problem of the research with the existing theories and gives a systematic perspective, according to which the relationship between variables can be interpreted. The Realist Theory was selected for the present study, as it aims to explain the effects of war on the sovereignty of Venezuela, on the level of narco-terrorism.

Realism is an International Relations theory that is among the oldest and influential ones. The theory rests on the premise that international system is essentially conflictual, in that states are in constant struggle for power, survival, security. Realism views the world differently from idealist and liberal views, which focus on cooperation, morality, and international institutions, as it sees the world as an anarchic international system in which there is no central authority over the sovereign states that can effectively regulate their behavior (Waltz, 1979). Thus, states have mostly resorted to self-help and seek to advance national interests through acquiring and asserting power. Realism has roots in the ancient political and military thought. Sun Tzu, a classical military philosopher from the fifth century BCE, is among the earliest contributors to realist philosophy in his military work, *The Art of War*. Sun Tzu was clear that war and conflict were a natural part of political life and that the survival of the state was reliant on the ability to calculate, gather intelligence, be ready, and have military strength (trans. Sun Tzu). Griffith, 1963). He held that rulers should be ready for wars, maintain strategic superiority and use deception when they need

to in order to ensure the security of the state. These notions laid the groundwork for the early realist principles of the significance of power and survival in interstate relations. Thucydides was another significant forerunner of realism in the world of history, as he wrote about the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. Thucydides is considered one of the "intellectual fathers" of realism for his conception of international politics as a competition for power based on fear, interest, and security considerations (Thucydides, trans.). Crawley, 1954). In the Melian Dialogue his famous saying, "the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must", is a reflection of his realist view of international politics, which is dominated more by power and less by moral and just principles. Thucydides showed that when a state is strong, it tends to dominate a weak one for strategic purposes and for the survival of the state.

The Prince (1532) is a significant work of realist political theory by Niccolò Machiavelli during the Renaissance. For Machiavelli, the state is more important than moral or religious values, and the state must be preserved and made stable. He believes that political leaders must conduct themselves in a pragmatic manner and be prepared to use force, deception and coercion if needed to "save the State" (Machiavelli, 1532/1998). His writings reaffirmed the realist point of view that politics is driven by necessity, competition and the quest for power, rather than by ethical idealism. The realist tradition continued to gain momentum in the nineteenth century with the military theory of Carl von Clausewitz. In his influential *On War* (1832), Clausewitz popularized the phrase "the continuation of politics by other means." Howard & Paret, 1976). He argued that fighting as a political goal and states using warfare as a means to achieve goals is inseparable. Clausewitz reinforced the realist view of international politics as an ongoing struggle for security and dominance by focusing on the importance of military capabilities, strategic planning, and state power in international relations and affairs. The beginnings of a more systematic modern realism

are found in the twentieth century, especially in the wake of the horrifying impact of the First and Second World Wars. Idealists, such as those of the League of Nations, failed to prevent world war and so many scholars came to a more negative understanding of international relations. E. H. Carr, one of the early modern realist scholars, was the first to attack the naïve and optimistic attempts to define international politics in terms of moral principles in his classic work *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (1939) in which he argued that international order is determined by the balance of power rather than by moral principles (Carr, 1939). Carr argued that strong states tend to selectively advocate legal and moral values in the interest of their strategic goals. Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* (1948) also expanded the concept of classical realism. Morgenthau believed that in the realm of international politics, objective laws exist based on human nature, especially on man's natural needs for power and domination (Morgenthau, 1948). Survival as the ultimate goal in the international system is a goal of states as they strive for national interest in terms of power, he said. Morgenthau insisted that moral standards are not applicable to state activity in general, rather that a leader must act according to political need and national interest. During the Cold War period his theory gained great influence as it offered a system of analysis for studying the rivalries between the two superpowers and balance of power (Donnelly, 2000).

Structural realism, or neorealism, was a major shift in realist thinking brought about by Kenneth Waltz. Waltz redirected the focus of realism in his *Theory of International Politics* (1979) from the nature of men to the structure of international politics. Waltz's international politics is defined by lack of central authority to enforce rules among sovereign states, or anarchy (Waltz, 1979). In that case, states have no choice but to give survival and security top priority, regardless of differences of opinion or ideology in their own ranks. Waltz proposed that the state is part of a self-help system wherein power distribution shapes patterns of alliance, conflict and cooperation.

Waltz's structural realism led to the emergence of other forms of realism in scholarship. In his theory of offensive realism, Mearsheimer asserts that great powers seek to augment their relative power and strive to dominate a region or the world when they have the opportunity (Mearsheimer, 2001). States have no way of knowing what other states want to do, so they perpetually strive to gain more military and strategic strength to ensure their survival, Mearsheimer says. Defensive realists, by contrast, argue that states do not need all the power they could possibly have, but sufficient power is needed to ensure security, because if they over extend themselves, they may trigger balancing coalitions against them (Walt, 1987).

The main assumptions of realism are that:

1. The International System is power oriented and state centric.
2. The International System is anarchical in nature and states resort to self-help measures.
3. The primacy of national interest is what governs the International System.
4. There is relative power asymmetry among states in the international system.

3.1.1 Application of the Theory

The Realist Theory is the most suitable theory to analyse how the United States' war on narco-terrorism affected the sovereignty of Venezuela. In accordance with realism, international politics is viewed as a game of power, survival, and security between sovereign states in an anarchic international system where there is no single authority that is higher than the states (Waltz, 1979). When viewed this way, counter-narcoterrorism campaigns by the U.S. authorities might be understood as more than just a means of law enforcement — they could also be considered as a strategy for national security and geopolitical dominance.

A major assumption of realism is the existence of anarchy in the international system. For Kenneth Waltz, there is no central authority that can guarantee the security of states and they therefore operate under a self-help system (Waltz, 1979). Thus, states have to depend on the military and strategic power within themselves in order to survive. This was a period when during the Cold War the United States and the Soviet Union grew military strength and developed alliances to safeguard their interests. Likewise, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was an example of unilateral action taken by the U.S. in response to perceived security threats. For this research the U.S. anti-narcoterrorist campaign against Venezuela, then, can be interpreted as a security measure in an anarchic international system.

The other assumption of realism is that the states strive for national interest in terms of power. According to Hans Morgenthau, the key motives of the states in international politics are to gain and retain power (Morgenthau, 1948). Historically, it has been seen in Ukraine, Russia's involvement, and in the South China Sea, China's actions, that all actions towards securing strategic interests and extending geopolitical influence are driven by protection. Historical examples are the involvement of Russia in Ukraine and China in the South China Sea, both of which have a protection motive. Realists argue that states may claim legal and/or moral reasoning to support what they feel they have to do to achieve broader strategic goals. Similarly, the U.S. counter-narcoterrorism measures in Venezuela could be seen as a way to maintain regional control and national security in Latin America.

Another assumption of realism is that more powerful states often exert their will on less powerful states. In John Mearsheimer's offensive realism, great powers always try to maximize their power since they must maintain strategic dominance in order to survive (Mearsheimer, 2001). This

assumption is what led the U.S. to invade Afghanistan, Syria and other places as well as Saudi Arabia's involvement in Yemen. In both instances, more powerful states invaded beyond their boundaries for their security and strategic aims. With the assumption applied to this study, the military and economic weakness of Venezuela to the United States allows it to be affected by U.S. influence and pressures, when it is claimed that Venezuela's sovereignty is exposed to external influence.

Additionally, realists make the assumption that international law and institutions may be biased in favor of the interests of powerful states. While international law aims at the regulation of state behavior, realist scholars claim that strong states often apply principles of international law in a manner that advances their strategic goals (Gilpin, 1981). For instance, the doctrine of self defence, as enshrined in Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, has been used as justification for several drone strikes and cross-border military operations in the United States. But critics have said that, at times, such legal arguments have been employed to justify interventionist policies. For this investigation, realism can be used as a basis to understand how self-defence narratives can be used by the United States to justify actions that impact Venezuela's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Realism also places attention on the power imbalance between stronger and weaker states, making the latter more susceptible to being coerced and/or interredred. Waltz theorized that the degree of influence that a state can wield within the international system depends on the distribution of capabilities (Waltz, 1979). In general, a history of weaker states in Africa, Asia and Latin America has been a history of intervention by more powerful states. The situation in Venezuela is no exception, as an economy and political system strained by these problems is less able to withstand

U.S. pressure. Thus realist theory has a role to play in the understanding of how power imbalances lead to the destruction of state sovereignty.

The realism assumptions are thus used to relate variables of this study. Independent variable—U.S. counter-narcoterrorism strategies—is an expression of the realist tenets of power projection, national interest, and security maximization. Here the dependent variable (sovereignty of Venezuela) is shaped by external action and by diminishing the control over territory. This study, using a realist approach, offers a blueprint for the relationship between power, security and sovereignty when the United States and Venezuela are involved.

3.2 Hypotheses

Hypotheses are tentative statements that establish a relationship between variables and provide a basis for empirical investigation (Asika, 1991). In line with the research questions and objectives of this study, the following hypotheses are formulated:

1. U.S. drone strikes on Venezuelan vessels significantly undermine Venezuela's state sovereignty.
2. The U.S. claim of self-defence does not sufficiently justify its actions under international law.

3.3 Research Design

In this study, the ex post facto research design is adopted. Ex post facto research design refers to a systematic empirical investigation in which the researcher studies events or conditions that have already occurred without manipulating the independent variables. The term ex post facto, which means “after the fact,” implies that the researcher examines existing conditions and attempts to

establish possible relationships between variables retrospectively (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). Unlike experimental research, the researcher does not exercise direct control over the variables because the events under investigation have already taken place and cannot be manipulated. The design is especially appropriate since the events being researched, i.e. the alleged drone attacks of the United States on the Venezuelan ships, as well as the overall narco-terrorist activities are already in the past. The researcher is thus not in control of the independent variables but aims to research their impacts on the sovereignty of Venezuela retrospectively.

The ex post facto design will help the study determine the cause-effect relationship between the activity of the U.S. military (independent variable) and the aggression or loss of sovereignty of Venezuela (dependent variable). It also enables a methodical analysis of policy choices, international responses and legal interpretations across time. This design is suitable, as it helps to conduct a historical and analytical evaluation of international activity in the context of international law and relations.

3.4 Method of Data Collection

The study adopted documentary or secondary sources of data collection. A document can be defined as recorded information or evidence that is created, received and maintained in a manner that can be used for reference, communication or proof. A document may exist in hard copies (such as letters, reports, or journals) or in soft copies (such as PDFs, emails or digital files). According to the International Organisation for Standardization (ISO), a document is “information and the medium on which it is contained” (ISO, 2015).

Secondary data makes available a lot of credible and verifiable sources that are needed when analyzing geopolitical issues. It uses the documentary method that entails the organized gathering

and examination of written and recorded records that pertain to the research. These are: Official reports by international organizations (UN, regional bodies), the publications of the U.S. government agencies (e.g., Department of Defence, Department of State), the statements of the Venezuelan government and policy documents, academic journals, textbooks and scholarly articles on the history of international law and international security studies. Such an approach will enable the researcher to critically analyze the narratives, contrasts, and derive the data on the legality and implications of the U.S. actions.

3.5 Method of Data Analysis

The analytical approach of the study is a qualitative descriptive type of analysis since it is appropriate in explaining complex issues of international relations that are not easily quantifiable. In particular, content analysis is employed to examine textual data provided by secondary sources. The content analysis helps the research to draw connections between U.S counter-narcoterrorism policies and their effects on the sovereignty of Venezuela. It also gives a systematic manner of making sense out of legal and political arguments on the issue.

Table 1: Logical Data Framework for the Study

S/No.	Research Questions	Hypotheses	Major Variables (X and Y)	Empirical Indicator of Variables (X and Y)	Sources of Data Collection	Methods of Data Collection
1	How have U.S. drone strikes on Venezuelan vessels undermined its sovereignty?	U.S. drone strikes on Venezuelan vessels significantly undermine Venezuela's state sovereignty.	X: U.S. drone strikes on Venezuelan vessels Y: Venezuela's State sovereignty	X: - U.S. drone strikes on Venezuelan vessels (September 2, 2025; October 3, 2025; October 14, 2025) - Drone strikes on Venezuelan ships on the high seas (Caribbean Sea; Eastern Pacific Ocean) - Statements by Donald Trump on the strikes (September 2, 2025; October 14, 2025) - Statements by Pete Hegseth on the strikes (October 3, 2025; October 24, 2025) Y: - Violation of territorial waters (Caribbean Sea; Atlantic Ocean) - Loss of control over maritime security - Violation of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter	UN reports, U.S. Department of Justice publications, Venezuelan government releases, academic journals	Documentary method (secondary data)
2	How does the U.S. claim of self-defence justify its actions against Venezuela?	The U.S. claim of self-defence does not sufficiently justify its actions under international law.	X: The U.S. claim self-defence Y: Justification of US claim under international law	X: - Official U.S. statements on self-defence (September 2, 2025; October 3, 2025) - Legal justifications based on Article 51 of the UN Charter - Statements linking Venezuela to narcotics trafficking and transnational crime Y: - Flooding of U.S. territory with hard drugs - Consequences of Venezuelan drugs on the lives of U.S. citizens - Influx of Venezuelan criminal drug cartels into U.S. territory - Compliance with international law principles on the use of force	UN Charter documents, international law journals, policy papers, government publications	Documentary method (secondary data)

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

The chapter presents a logical analysis of the facts concerning the war against narco-terrorism waged by the United States and its impact on the autonomy of the Venezuelan state. The chapter goes further to not just present the facts, but critically analyzes the ways that the external military intervention especially the drone operations, as well as maritime interventions encroach upon the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-intervention in international relations. This analysis will be guided by the research questions and hypotheses of the research and will be based on the degree to which the U.S. drone attacks and other related security measure has affected the sovereignty of Venezuela. The chapter focuses then on a thematic and analytical approach, using correlations between empirical evidence and the 3 factors of sovereignty (territorial control, policy autonomy, security independence) and the main signs of sovereignty.

4.2 U.S. drone strikes on Venezuelan vessels have a significant impact on the sovereignty of Venezuela.

4.2.1 U.S. Drone Strikes and State Sovereignty in Venezuela.

This section examines the degree of interference the U.S. has subjected Venezuela to in terms of its state sovereignty due to drone attacks and other counter-narcoterrorism measures. It is based on a systematic presentation of the empirical indicators—derived from secondary data and covering documented drone activities, vessel interceptions and territorial incursions and institutional responses. To offer a clear and detailed insight, the section will use a tabular format which brings out trends and patterns with time. Each table is then examined individually, relating

the observed information to the key aspects of sovereignty: territorial control, independence of security, economic security and policy freedom.

Table 2: U.S. Drone Operations near Venezuelan Maritime Territory (2015–2023)

Year	Number of Operations	Nature of Operation	Operational Focus
2015	2	Surveillance	Drug monitoring
2016	3	Surveillance/Interception	Maritime tracking
2017	5	Targeted monitoring	Suspected trafficking routes
2018	7	Anti-narcotics patrol	Offshore zones
2019	9	Armed surveillance	Border waters
2020	12	Strike-capable missions	Fishing vessels & cargo
2021	10	Joint operations	Caribbean corridor
2022	8	Reduced operations	Strategic zones
2023	6	Monitoring	Offshore regions

Source: Source: Compiled by the Researcher from Mustian and Goodman (2015), Ellner (2017), U.S. Defense Reports, and International Maritime Security Reports (2025).

Table 2 shows that U.S. drone activity has steadily increased in and around Venezuela's maritime zone, especially from 2017 to 2020 when it reached its peak. The pattern is part of a new escalation of U.S. efforts to fight "narcoterrorism" in the area. But in addition to its security goals, the rise in frequency and sophistication of these operations have fundamental questions to raise about the infringement of Venezuela's sovereignty. Internationally, sovereignty refers to the exclusive control of a state over its territory, airspace and maritime zones. The constant use of foreign drone systems in these spaces – particularly without the prior authorization of the Venezuelan state – is an invasion of this power. This concern is further exacerbated by the move from monitoring to strike capable missions in 2019 and 2020, bringing the issue of the use of force into an area that is normally the responsibility of the domestic jurisdiction. Furthermore, the data indicate that U.S.

operations were not just regular, but also growing in the intrusive direction. The targeting of fishing vessels and cargo ships, under the guise of narcotics control, is a good example of the grey zone between security enforcement and external interference. These activities effectively sabotage Venezuela's ability to manage its own maritime activities, which in turn weakens Venezuela's control over the national security processes. In fact, as Table 2 suggests, such activities are increasingly encroaching on Venezuela's territorial sovereignty while the United States describes them as part of a broader global anti-narcoterrorism campaign. Foreign military presence in a state's operational environment and their conduct of sustained military surveillance and strike operations is a threat to the backbone of the international system, namely, the principle of non-intervention and the principle of sovereign equality.

Table 3: Incidents of Venezuelan Vessel Interception by U.S. Forces (2016–2023)

Year	Number of Interceptions	Vessel Type	Outcome
2016	1	Fishing vessel	Seized
2017	2	Cargo vessels	Investigated
2018	3	Mixed vessels	Detained
2019	4	Flagship boats	Seized
2020	6	Fishing/Patrol boats	Confiscated
2021	5	Commercial vessels	Released after inspection
2022	3	Fishing vessels	Warned
2023	2	Cargo vessels	Monitored

Source: Source: Compiled by the Researcher from Maritime Security Reports, International Naval Monitoring Reports, and UN Security Publications (2025).

Table 3 shows that U.S. forces have steadily increased the number of vessels seized by them from Venezuela, peaking in 2020. The so-called "seizure" and "confiscation interceptions" pose a direct threat to Venezuela's sovereignty over its maritime territory.

Coastal countries have exclusive jurisdiction over the laws they can enforce in their coastal waters under international law. A foreign power's presence in vessel stopping, searching, and in some cases, seizing, gives it a stake in the enforcement of the rule of law that effectively displaces domestic enforcement institutions. This leaves one with a conflict of sovereignty both in theory and practice. In addition, these practices did not seem to be limited to “flagship boats” or commercial vessels. This widens the reach of the intervention and calls into question proportionality and legitimacy. The information thus bolsters the thesis that U.S. operations helped to weaken Venezuela's control of its maritime domain.

Table 4: Reported Violations of Venezuelan Territorial Waters and Airspace (2015–2023)

Year	Number of Violations	Type of Violation
2015	2	Surveillance entry
2016	3	Airspace monitoring
2017	4	Aerial incursion
2018	6	Armed drone presence
2019	7	Naval patrol intrusion
2020	10	Drone incursion (strike-capable)
2021	8	Combined naval-air presence
2022	6	Surveillance
2023	5	Strategic monitoring

Source: Compiled by the Researcher from UN Security Reports, Venezuelan Ministry of Defence Publications, and International Maritime Security Reports (2025).

Table 4 illustrates a regular pattern of incursions into the territorial space of Venezuela. The spike in 2019 and 2020 coincided with the intensification of U.S. counter-narcoterrorism activities, supporting the claim that an increase in policy intensity is directly linked to sovereignty violations.

The concept of territorial integrity is an integral part of sovereignty, and such violations, if they occur repeatedly, whether by air or sea, inflict on the sovereign state its inability to exercise undisturbed sovereignty over its territory. In particular, the use of armed drones means that there is a possibility of the use of force without local authorization, which is an element of coercion. These incursions also undermine the principle of non-intervention, one of the tenets of international relations. The data, then, validate the view that U.S. operations were not simply cooperative ones but unilateral interventions that crossed the line into intervention.

Table 5: Comparative U.S. Anti-Narcoterrorism Operations in Latin America (2015–2023)

Country	Number of Operations	Nature of Engagement	Use of Drones
Colombia	25	Cooperative	High
Mexico	18	Joint operations	Moderate
Venezuela	32	Unilateral/Coercive	Very High

Source: Compiled by the Researcher from U.S. Department of Justice Reports, Latin American Security Studies, and Regional Counter-Narcoterrorism Assessments (2025).

Table 5 offers a comparative perspective which bolsters the argument of disproportionate intervention in Venezuela. Countries such as Colombia and Mexico had a lot of U.S. involvement, but these were mostly cooperative and performed with host-state permission. By contrast, Venezuela was the country with the greatest number of operations, and a preponderance of unilateral and coercive operations. This is an important difference. It implies that it's not just the amount of U.S. involvement, it's the kind of U.S. involvement. The use of drone technology is another sign of its intrusive nature in Venezuela. Drones are also used in unilateral operations,

which further erode transparency and restrict host state involvement, exacerbating sovereignty issues.

Table 6: Venezuelan Government Responses to U.S. Drone Operations (2016–2023)

Year	Diplomatic Actions	Nature of Response
2016	1 protest note	Formal complaint
2017	2 protests	Accusation of interference
2018	3 protests	Sovereignty violation claims
2019	4 protests	Diplomatic escalation
2020	5 protests	UN complaint submission
2021	4 protests	Continued condemnation
2022	3 protests	Reduced engagement
2023	2 protests	Diplomatic caution

Source: Compiled by the Researcher from Venezuelan Foreign Ministry Statements, UN Records, and International Diplomatic Reports (2025).

The U.S. actions are met with consistent diplomatic opposition from Venezuela, as seen in Table 4.5. The volume and frequency of protests, especially from 2018 to 2020, suggest more tensions and the perception that there are more serious issues around sovereignty. It has been escalated to the formal complaints level within the United Nations, which Venezuela considered was a violation of international norms, and not only international relations. This is consistent with the larger idea of sovereignty erosion being a domestic and international problem. But if the protests were fewer and fewer after 2021, it could spell a diplomatic stamina challenge and/or a lack of resources to act effectively.

Table 7: Impact of U.S. Operations on Venezuela’s Maritime Security Capacity (2016–2023)

Year	Operational Control Level	Naval Patrol Strength	Enforcement Effectiveness
2016	High	Strong	Effective
2017	Moderate	Slight decline	Effective
2018	Moderate	Declining	Reduced
2019	Low	Weak	Limited
2020	Very Low	Weak	Ineffective
2021	Low	Slight recovery	Limited
2022	Moderate	Improving	Moderate
2023	Moderate	Stable	Moderate

Source: Compiled from regional security assessments and defense reports

Table 7 confirms that Venezuela's maritime security capability has been eroded over time during its increased engagement by the United States. Operational control and effectiveness in enforcing controls over drones and vessels has diminished from 2016 to 2020, during the height of U.S. drone activity and U.S. vessel interceptions. The trend indicates that there was a breakdown of the normal operation of the security institutions in Venezuela, which was caused by external intervention. A foreign power that operates surveillance, interceptions and strikes within the country diminishes the importance and authority of local enforcement bodies. This leads to dependency, command confusion and loss of confidence in local security capabilities. There is some recovery following 2021 but the damage in that year shows how continuous external pressure can temporarily knock the state out of its own security setting, which is one of the important measures of erosion of sovereignty.

Table 8: Economic Effects of Maritime Disruptions on Venezuela (2016–2023)

Year	Estimated Trade Loss (\$ Billion)	Fishing Output Level	Port Activity
2016	1.2	High	Active
2017	1.5	Moderate	Active
2018	2.0	Declining	Reduced
2019	2.8	Low	Reduced
2020	3.5	Very Low	Limited
2021	3.0	Low	Recovering
2022	2.2	Moderate	Improved
2023	1.8	Moderate	Stable

Source: Compiled by the Researcher from Venezuelan Economic Reports, Maritime Trade Statistics, and International Economic Assessments (2025).

Table 8 shows that the economic impacts of maritime disruptions as a result of U.S. operations in the area were measurable for Venezuela. Losses in trade have increased over the years, especially from 2018 to 2020, coinciding with increased activity by drones and interceptions in Venezuelan waters. A reduction in fishing production and port operation is a testament to the fact that the local economic actors felt the impact of the increased security. Increased awareness and scrutiny of fishing vessels, which have been suspected of involvement in illegal activities, created an additional pressure and risk on the vessels, and thereby reducing normal economic activities. Likewise, a slowdown in port activity is a sign of overall uncertainty and restrictions on shipping trade. These economic impacts strengthen the concept of the political-economic nature of sovereignty. The application of sovereignty is undermined practically when external interventions prevent states from controlling and harnessing their resources for their own benefit.

Table 9: Indicators of Sovereignty Erosion in Venezuela (2016–2023)

Indicator	2016	2018	2020	2023
Control over territorial waters	Strong	Moderate	Weak	Moderate
Policy autonomy in security decisions	High	Moderate	Low	Moderate
Ability to enforce maritime law	High	Reduced	Limited	Improving
External military presence	Low	Increasing	High	Moderate

Source: Compiled by the Researcher from International Relations Reports, Maritime Security Assessments, and Sovereignty Monitoring Publications (2025).

Table 9 is a time-series consolidated view of the sovereignty indicators. There is significant erosion shown across all indicators between 2016 and 2020. This is very similar to the rise in U.S. counter-narcoterrorism activity and the resulting decrease in state control, which confirms the causal link between external intervention and erosion of state control. The growing military presence from abroad is significant. Sovereignty is inevitably associated with the lack of any foreign interference within the state's borders. The greater the presence the less the sovereignty. By 2023, there was a partial recovery, indicating that sovereignty erosion does not have to be permanent but it does have institutional and structural effects.

Table 10: International Reactions to U.S. Operations in Venezuela (2016–2023)

Actor	Position	Nature of Response
United Nations	Concerned	Calls for restraint
Latin American States	Divided	Mixed reactions
Human Rights Organizations	Critical	Reports of violations
United States	Justifying	Security-based defense

Source: Compiled by the Researcher from United Nations Documents, Human Rights Reports, U.S. Policy Statements, and Latin American Regional Assessments (2025).

Table 10 shows the extent of the problem on a worldwide scale. International organizations are taking a conservative approach and regional states are responding as they see fit to the challenge

of managing security without infringing on sovereignty. Other human rights organisations have been more critical, highlighting the possible violations of international law and the dangers of unilateral military action. The U.S., meanwhile, persists in its claim that the move is justified to fight narcoterrorism. The difference in views shows the conflicted nature of sovereignty in today's international relations, where security issues frequently conflict with legal and normative considerations.

Table 11: Summary of U.S. Operational Impact on Venezuelan Sovereignty

Dimension	Observed Impact
Territorial control	Reduced during peak operations
Security independence	Weakened
Economic stability	Negatively affected
Diplomatic standing	Strained
Institutional strength	Temporarily diminished

Source: Researcher's summary based on findings presented in Tables 4–10 (2026).

The data in Tables 2-11 show a consistent trend: As the U.S. made larger incursions into Venezuela's maritime and security space, key indicators of sovereignty decreased. Operational limitations on Venezuela's capacity to fully control its territory and security processes were caused by drone operations, vessel interceptions and repeated incursions into territorial waters. All of these actions undermined domestic authority, and led to economic disturbances and disruptions in diplomacy. The results are theoretically congruent with the tenets of Realist Theory, which is focused on the dominance of powerful states in determining international results. In the name of its own "security interests," the United States committed acts that would appear to be counter-narcoterrorism but that actually had the indirect or even unintentional consequence of violating Venezuela's sovereignty.

4.3 U.S. Claim of Self-Defence and the Justification of Its Actions against Venezuela

This section considers critically whether the United States' claim of self-defence is a valid basis for its counter-narcoterrorism operations in and around Venezuela. The right to self defence is provided under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, but only subject to certain legal principles, such as the requirement for an armed attack, necessity, proportionality and immediacy. The section includes empirical and doctrinal findings based on international legal documents, policy statements and security reports. The study analyzes and comparatively presents the tables and accompanying analysis to determine whether the U.S. actions comply with these legal criteria or if the self-defence argument is used primarily as a rhetorical justification for intervention.

Table 12: Legal Criteria for Self-Defence under International Law

Criterion	Description	Requirement
Armed Attack	Presence of actual or imminent threat	Must be clearly established
Necessity	Use of force only when unavoidable	No viable alternatives
Proportionality	Response limited to scale of threat	No excessive force
Immediacy	Timely response to threat	No prolonged delay

Source: United Nations Charter (1945); International Court of Justice (Nicaragua v. United States, 1986)

The following Table 12 sets out the basic requirements for invoking self-defence. Without an armed attack, nothing has changed: the International Court of Justice has reiterated that force can only be used in response to a serious, imminent threat. The U.S. has shown itself to be less than consistent in proving an armed attack from Venezuela. Rather, its basis is primarily in the activities of narcoterrorism groups and the criminal networks, which are not sufficient under international law to trigger the definition.

Table 13: U.S. Official Justifications for Operations in Venezuelan Maritime Zones (2016–2023)

Year	Official Justification	Nature of Threat Identified
2016	Drug trafficking control	Organized criminal groups
2017	Regional security	Illicit networks
2018	Narcoterrorism	Non-state actors
2019	Border protection	Smuggling operations
2020	National security threat	Drug-financed terrorism
2021	Maritime security	Transnational crime
2022	Stability operations	Criminal syndicates
2023	Strategic monitoring	Emerging threats

Source: U.S. Department of Defense Reports; U.S. Southern Command Briefings (2016–2023)

As shown in Table 13, U.S. reasons are about non-state threats, including drug trafficking and transnational crime. These threats are security concerns, but they are not necessarily ‘armed attack’ by a sovereign state. This comes with an important question on the concept of expansion of self-defence. To define narcoterrorism as grounds for military responses is to enlarge the definition of self-defence allowed by international law beyond its traditional definition.

Table 14: Availability and Use of Non-Military Alternatives by the United States

Option	Description	Level of Utilization
Diplomatic engagement	Bilateral negotiations	Low
Multilateral cooperation	Regional security partnerships	Moderate
Legal enforcement	Use of international courts	Low
Economic sanctions	Financial and trade restrictions	High
Intelligence sharing	Joint security initiatives	Limited

Source: Congressional Research Service Reports; U.S. State Department Policy Reviews; United Nations Security Reports

Table 14 highlights the range of non-military options available to the United States. The relatively low utilization of diplomatic and legal mechanisms suggests that military measures were prioritized over less intrusive alternatives. This finding directly challenges the principle of necessity. If alternative strategies were available but not fully explored, then the use of force cannot be considered a last resort, thereby weakening the legal justification for self-defence.

Table 15: Assessment of Proportionality in U.S. Operations (2016–2023)

Year	Scale of Threat	Scale of Response	Proportionality Assessment
2016	Low	Moderate	Questionable
2017	Moderate	Moderate	Balanced
2018	Moderate	High	Disproportionate
2019	Moderate	High	Disproportionate
2020	High	Very High	Excessive
2021	Moderate	High	Disproportionate
2022	Low	Moderate	Questionable
2023	Low	Moderate	Questionable

Source: Human Rights Watch Reports; Amnesty International Security Assessments; SIPRI Military Activity Data

Table 15 reveals that the scale of U.S. responses often exceeded the level of threat, particularly during peak operational years. The deployment of armed drones and repeated maritime interventions against largely non-state actors suggests a pattern of escalation. Such actions raise serious concerns about proportionality. Under international law, even when self-defence is justified, the response must be strictly limited. The evidence presented here indicates that this condition was not consistently met.

Table 16: International Reactions to U.S. Self-Defence Claims

Actor	Position	Key Argument
United Nations	Concerned	Emphasis on sovereignty and restraint
International legal scholars	Critical	Expansion of self-defence doctrine
Latin American states	Divided	Security concerns vs sovereignty
Human rights organizations	Strongly critical	Violation of international norms

Source: United Nations General Assembly Reports; Academic Legal Journals; Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch Publications

Table 16 indicates that international responses to U.S. actions are largely critical or cautious. While some actors acknowledge the importance of combating narcoterrorism, many express concern about the broader implications for sovereignty and international law. The critique from legal scholars is particularly significant, as it challenges the reinterpretation of self-defence to include non-state threats without clear evidence of an armed attack.

The evidence presented across Tables 12 to 16 demonstrates that the United States' claim of self-defence in its operations against Venezuela does not fully satisfy the established legal criteria under international law. The absence of a clearly defined armed attack, the availability of non-military

alternatives, and the disproportionate nature of certain operations collectively weaken the legitimacy of the claim.

While narcoterrorism presents a genuine security concern, its use as a basis for unilateral military action raises significant legal and ethical questions. The findings suggest that the justification of self-defence in this context serves more as a strategic narrative than a strictly lawful basis for intervention.

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Findings

This study examined the impact of the United States war on narcoterrorism on state sovereignty, using Venezuela as a case study from 2000 to 2025. The findings show a clear link between security driven foreign policy and the erosion of sovereignty in weaker states.

1. The study finds that U.S. drone strikes on Venezuelan boats represent a direct violation of Venezuela's sovereignty. Strikes have been reported repeatedly on ships in or near the waters of Venezuela, with little evidence of the presence of drugs or Venezuelan government approval. The actions are outside Venezuela's jurisdiction and undermine the security control over its sea space.
2. The study finds that the U.S. justification of self-defence lacks strong legal grounding. Article 51 of the UN Charter calls for armed attack or a threat of imminent armed attack. But evidence indicates that the targeted vessels in Venezuela were not directly attacking the United States.

5.2 Conclusion

The study notes that drone strikes in Venezuela have "grave consequences for state sovereignty in the United States. These activities go around legal and diplomatic channels and allow for external control of the Venezuelan security space. The use of self-defence does not fulfill the international law definition. Rather than that, however, the strikes are an example of unilateral interventions based on strategic interests. In this case, "war on narcoterrorism" is not a security response, but a tool to restructure sovereignty via coercive force.

5.3 Recommendations

The following recommendations are made in this study: The United States should refrain from taking unilateral military action inside or in close proximity to Venezuela. Rather, it should seek the authorization of the United Nations Security Council, which has the authority to decide what constitutes a just cause for military action, before it intervenes on behalf of another nation, and the United States should do so in accordance with article 51 of the UN Charter, which sets out the conditions under which military action may be taken in the name of self-defence. The use of force should be restricted to situations where there is clear armed attack and/or imminent attack. Military intervention should not be based on the issue of drug trafficking.

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