

Venezuela and freedom from fear

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As every reader must know now, the United States has used military force against Venezuela, following years of escalating sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and explicit threats of intervention. Whatever view one takes of Venezuela's government, this action matters because it was undertaken without authorisation under international law.

That fact cannot be brushed aside as a technicality. It goes to the heart of how states relate to one another, and to whether we still live in a world governed, however imperfectly, by shared rules rather than by unilateral power.

That said, nothing I say here is a defence of the Maduro regime, which had obvious issues, but opposition to a government does never, in my opinion, confer a licence to abandon the legal framework that exists precisely to prevent powerful states from imposing their will by force. If international law applies only when convenient, it does not apply at all.

Why international law exists

Let me be clear about that suggestion, because what is obvious is that the modern international legal order was not designed to guarantee justice in every case. It was, instead, designed to limit harm. Its core purpose is to reduce the likelihood of war by constraining the circumstances in which force can be used.

That is why the UN Charter sets a high bar, and why it is right that the UN has objected to Trump's abuse of it yesterday. That Charter, created to prevent a repetition of the aggression of the 1930s, suggests that military action is lawful only in self-defence against an imminent armed attack, or when authorised collectively by the Security Council.

There are two obvious points to make. The first is that the US came nowhere near meeting either of these criteria yesterday. No one can suggest Venezuela was going to attack the USA. There was no UN resolution.

The second is that these restrictions are not naïve idealism. They are a recognition of how easily necessity can be invoked by those in power, and how quickly moral certainty can become an excuse for violence. Once states are free to decide for themselves when international law no longer applies, the distinction between order and disorder collapses.

The return of colonial logic

What is, perhaps, most troubling about the US action is not only the immediate damage it causes, but the colonial logic it reintroduces into international relations.

Colonialism was never simply about territory. It was always about hierarchy and the belief that some states are entitled to decide the fate of others; that sovereignty is conditional; and that force may be used to secure compliance where persuasion fails. That logic never entirely disappeared, but it had at least been formally disavowed.

What we are now seeing is its return in explicit form. Venezuela is being treated less as a sovereign country than as a US problem to be managed, a risk to be neutralised, or an asset to be controlled. Once that mindset is accepted, it becomes very difficult to argue that borders, governments, or political systems deserve respect unless they align with the preferences of the powerful, and there are very obviously others with power who will notice this and may take action as a result.

Precedent and the domino effect

International law relies heavily on precedent. That is because state behaviour is contagious. What one powerful country does today becomes the justification for others tomorrow.

If unilateral military action is acceptable in Venezuela, it becomes harder to argue against similar claims elsewhere. It is not fanciful to worry about a domino effect.

Cuba has long been framed in US political discourse as an unresolved problem.

Trump has already discussed Greenland as a strategic asset rather than a self-determining territory.

Even relations with Canada have, at times, been treated transactionally rather than as a partnership of equals.

More seriously, the precedent matters far beyond the Western Hemisphere. Russia and China watch these events closely. Each has its own narratives of security, protection, and necessity. Each now has another example to cite when accused of breaching international norms. Taiwan, the Baltic States, and more are at risk.

This is how restraint erodes: not through grand declarations, but through selective

exceptions.

Law, fear, and stability

There is a phrase that I use often, and which mattered enormously in the construction of the post-war order. That is, freedom from fear.

That freedom does not arise from military dominance. It is based on predictability; from knowing that even powerful states are constrained, that disagreements will be handled through institutions, and that force is exceptional rather than routine.

When international law weakens, fear will always fill the gap. As we are already seeing, states rearm themselves. Alliances harden. Suspicion replaces cooperation. Diplomacy falters in an environment of mistrust. And smaller countries, in particular, are forced to assume that their safety depends not on law, but on favour.

That is not stability. It is a state of permanent insecurity. It is about living in fear. That's where we are now.

The UK's dilemma

For the UK, this moment exposes a long-standing tension that can no longer be avoided.

The UK claims to support a rules-based international order. That claim has meaning only if it applies even when allies breach those rules. To say otherwise is to admit that law is subordinate to political convenience.

Condemning the United States for unlawful action would undoubtedly be uncomfortable. It might strain diplomatic relations. But failing to do so carries its own cost: the loss of credibility, and the implicit acceptance that the UK is willing to tolerate illegality when it suits.

In the long run, a country that relies on law for its own security should be reluctant to undermine it elsewhere.

Starmer has to get off the fence: the time for tough talking, even if not that speech from Love Actually, might have arrived.

The EU and the future of restraint

For the European Union, the implications are even starker. The EU is, at its core, a legal project. Its legitimacy rests on the idea that rules bind power, rather than the other way around.

If the EU cannot articulate a clear position in defence of international law now, it

weakens the very principles on which it is built. Ambiguity may feel diplomatically safer, but it is strategically dangerous. It signals that norms are negotiable and that enforcement depends on who is involved. This idea is already imperilled in Europe by the actions of states like Hungary. Failure to uphold the rule of international law now threatens the whole EU project: this crisis might be existential for it.

Alliance, not subordination

This raises the most difficult question of all. How can the UK and EU continue to describe their relationship with Donald Trump's United States as an alliance if it requires silence in the face of actions that undermine the legal order on which their own security depends?

Diplomatic relations must continue. Cooperation will still be necessary. But alliance does not mean acquiescence. Lines have to be drawn in the sand. Acceptability has to be indicated. Positions must be taken. The message must be clear: treating power as a substitute for law is unacceptable.

The reality is that if international law is to survive, it will do so only because states insist on it, even when doing so is awkward.

Where this leaves us

This is an awkward moment. It needs to be acknowledged. The UK, the EU, and other states with influence on Trump have a choice to make, which could only be dangerously postponed. Do they want a world in which disputes are managed through law, however imperfectly, or one in which they are settled by those with the greatest capacity to coerce? That choice is not abstract. It shapes how safe people feel, how states behave, and whether fear or cooperation becomes the organising principle of international life.

Defending international law is not about defending particular governments. It is about protecting the conditions under which freedom from fear remains possible at all. There is only one right choice to make. The politics of care must prevail. Trump's fascist aggression (because it is nothing less than that) is imperilling it. We have been here before. What will we do?

Taking further action

If you want to write a letter to your MP on the issues raised in this blog post, there is a ChatGPT prompt to assist you in doing so, with full instructions, [here](#).

One word of warning, though: please ensure you have the correct MP. ChatGPT can get it wrong.

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