

Predatory sovereignty: the functional transmutation of the venezuelan state and the reconfiguration of hemispheric power

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Abstract

This article develops and applies the concept of “Predatory Sovereignty” to analyze the structural transformation of the Venezuelan state post-2013 and its systemic implications for the reconfiguration of hemispheric power. The phenomenon is approached as a functional mutation of Westphalian sovereignty: not a collapse, but a reorientation of the state apparatus towards the maximization of illicit extraction by a restricted elite, in symbiosis with transnational criminal networks. The theoretical framework integrates classical sovereignty (Bodin), the typology of crime-state symbiosis (Lupsha, 1991), structural realism (Waltz, 1979), and organized hypocrisy (Krasner, 1999). The methodological strategy is based on triangulated documentary analysis of primary sources, judicial indictments, and multilateral reports, and secondary sources, peer-reviewed academic literature and investigative journalism, in a unique instrumental case study of Venezuela. It is concluded that Venezuela has reconfigured itself as a “toxic asset” whose internal dysfunction is converted into geopolitical bargaining capital, attracting revisionist powers and resisting conventional mechanisms of external coercion. The case constitutes a global analytical precedent: Predatory Sovereignty is not the pathology of an isolated state, but the symptom of a systemic transformation in international politics, with implications for other contexts of state fragility and strategic competition.

Keywords:

predatory sovereignty; Venezuela; geopolitics; structural realism; crime-state symbiosis.

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Soberania predatória: a transmutação funcional do estado venezuelano e a reconfiguração do poder hemisférico

Resumo

Este artigo desenvolve e aplica o conceito de “Soberania Predatória” para analisar a transformação estrutural do Estado venezuelano pós-2013 e as suas implicações sistêmicas na reconfiguração do poder hemisférico. O fenómeno é abordado como uma mutação funcional da soberania westfaliana: não um colapso, mas uma reorientação do aparato estatal para a maximização da extração ilícita por uma elite restrita, em simbiose com redes criminosas transnacionais. O quadro teórico integra a soberania clássica (Bodin), a tipologia de simbiose crime-Estado (Lupsha, 1991), o realismo estrutural (Waltz, 1979) e a hipocrisia organizada (Krasner, 1999). A estratégia metodológica assenta em análise documental triangulada de fontes primárias, indiciamentos judiciais e relatórios multilaterais e secundárias literaturas académicas com revisão por pares e jornalismo investigativo, num estudo de caso instrumental único da Venezuela. Conclui-se que a Venezuela reconfigurou-se como um “ativo tóxico” cuja disfunção interna é convertida em capital de barganha geopolítica, atraindo potências revisionistas e resistindo a mecanismos convencionais de coerção externa. O caso constitui um precedente analítico global: a Soberania Predatória não é a patologia de um Estado isolado, mas o sintoma de uma transformação sistémica na política internacional, com implicações para outros contextos de fragilidade estatal e competição estratégica.

Palavras-chave: soberania predatória; venezuela; geopolítica; realismo estrutural; simbiose crime-estado.

Soberanía depredadora: la transmutación funcional del Estado venezolano y la reconfiguración del poder hemisférico

Resumen

Este artículo desarrolla y aplica el concepto de “Soberanía Depredadora” para analizar la transformación estructural del Estado venezolano posterior a 2013 y sus implicaciones sistémicas en la reconfiguración del poder hemisférico. El fenómeno es abordado como una mutación funcional de la soberanía westfaliana: no un colapso, sino una reorientación del aparato estatal hacia la maximización de la extracción ilícita por una élite restringida, en simbiosis con redes criminales transnacionales. El marco teórico integra la soberanía clásica (Bodin), la tipología de simbiosis crimen-Estado (Lupsha, 1991), el realismo estructural (Waltz, 1979) y la hipocresía organizada (Krasner, 1999). La estrategia metodológica se apoya en análisis documental triangulado de fuentes primarias indiciamientos judiciales y informes multilaterales y secundarias, literatura académica revisada por pares y periodismo de investigación, en un estudio de caso instrumental de Venezuela. Se concluye que Venezuela se reconfiguró como un “activo tóxico” cuya disfunción interna se convierte en capital de negociación geopolítica, atrayendo potencias revisionistas y resistiendo mecanismos de coerción externa. Este caso constituye un precedente analítico global: la Soberanía Depredadora no es la patología de un Estado aislado, sino el síntoma de una transformación sistémica en la política internacional, con implicaciones para otros contextos de fragilidad estatal y competición estratégica.

Palabras clave: soberanía depredadora; venezuela; geopolítica; realismo estructural; simbiosis crimen-estado.

Introduction

The Venezuelan Paradox and the Laboratory of Post-Westphalian Sovereignty

Power is not merely a means; it is often an end in itself. When sovereignty is eroded from within, it does not necessarily disappear; it reconfigures itself. This premise guides the analysis developed here. The post-2013 Venezuelan crisis presents an analytical paradox: the persistence of a regime with coercive territorial control and an active diplomatic presence, coexisting with an economic collapse of historical magnitude. The absence of reliable official statistical data after 2015 is itself a symptom of deinstitutionalization. However, estimates from multilateral organizations, corroborated by extensive anecdotal evidence and alternative indicators (such as energy consumption, import volume, or field observations), converge to describe a contraction of real Gross Domestic Product (PIB) that exceeded 75% in the decade following 2013, placing it among the deepest economic depressions ever recorded outside of a conventional war context (CEPAL, 2022).

This phenomenon challenges the conventional analytical categories of “failed state” or “kleptocracy,” which prove insufficient to capture the nature of this reconfiguration. To account for this qualitative transformation, which is not one of collapse but of functional mutation, this article proposes and develops the concept of “Predatory Sovereignty.” The concept is defined as a mode of governance in which state authority, based on territorial control and international recognition, is systematically reoriented to maximize resource extraction by a restricted elite through operational fusion with transnational criminal networks. Internal dysfunction thus becomes a strategic resource for political survival and geopolitical bargaining.

The **research question** is: how does the operationalization of Predatory Sovereignty in Venezuela redefine the limits of state sovereignty and act as a factor in the reconfiguration of the balance of power in the Americas?

The **main objective** is to dissect the anatomy of Predatory Sovereignty and its systemic implications. The specific objectives are: (

- 1) to apply Lupsha’s (1991) typology to map the evolution of the State-crime symbiosis;
- (2) to analyze the conversion of dysfunction into geopolitical capital; and
- (3) to assess the challenges this case presents to international normative frameworks.

To analyze this phenomenon, an integrated and multilevel theoretical approach is adopted. At the unitary level, the internal architecture of the predatory Leviathan is examined, using the typology proposed by Peter Lupsha (1991) and the available empirical evidence on the Cartel de los Soles. At the regional level, the analysis examines how Venezuela engenders an asymmetrical challenge to US hegemony, in which the production and export of instability replace the use of conventional power. Finally, at the systemic level, Kenneth Waltz’s (1979) structural realism is employed to situate Venezuela as a functional actor in the dispute between established and revisionist powers, embedded in the logic of “organized hypocrisy” (Krasner, 1999) that structures the contemporary international order.

The article’s structure follows a theoretical-methodological-empirical axis: after the theoretical framework and methodological description, the analysis is divided into the internal anatomy of the predatory model and its geopolitical projection, preceding the final considerations.

Theoretical Framework: The Pillars of Predatory Sovereignty Analysis

The concept of Predatory Sovereignty synthesizes disparate theoretical contributions to explain a distinct form of political organization. Its ontological basis lies in Westphalian sovereignty, understood as supreme internal authority and external inviolability (Krasner, 1999). Predation does not negate this grammar; it perverts it. Authority ceases to be a means for the provision of order or well-being, transforming itself into the primary instrument for illicit accumulation. The State does not disappear, but alters its main function. The theory of crime-state symbiosis (Lupsha, 1991) provides the internal dynamics. The transition from the predatory and parasitic phases to the symbiotic phase describes a process where state structures are co-opted or redesigned to serve criminal accumulation. Predatory Sovereignty crystallizes this phase, operationalizing the fusion. Structural realism (Waltz, 1979) explains the systemic environment that makes it

viable. In an anarchic and hierarchical system, materially weak states can exploit their position as sources of instability. The export of internal costs (migration, trafficking) converts weakness into bargaining power and attracts the interest of revisionist powers, eager to exploit fissures in the rival order.

While neoliberal institutionalism (Keohane, 1984) posits that international institutions can mitigate systemic anarchy through cooperation, the practice of organized hypocrisy (Krasner, 1999) describes a normative context where the regime of sovereignty is marked by the selective instrumentalization of its own rules. A predatory state invokes non-intervention while violating the fundamental duties of sovereignty, creating a cycle of normative erosion that corrodes the barriers to its conduct.

The analysis requires a fundamental contrast between the classical conception of sovereignty and its instrumentalized contemporary practice. In Jean Bodin (1576), sovereignty is defined as the absolute, perpetual, and indivisible power of the Republic. This legal-normative conception, codified in the Westphalian order, established sovereignty as the foundation of internal order and the marker of political unity in the face of external forces. Sovereign power was, in essence, an inward-directed power, whose legitimacy derived from its capacity to pacify the territory, unify the legal system, and guarantee the continuity of the political community (Bodin, 1576). Predatory Sovereignty represents a radical break with this teleology. In it, absolute power and territorial control, forms inherited from the Bodin-Westphalian model, are maintained, but redirected towards an antithetical end.

The supreme authority ceases to be an instrument for the production of order or public good, transforming itself into the central operational resource for illicit accumulation and the reproduction of a restricted elite. What is observed, therefore, is not the erosion of sovereignty, but its functional transmutation: the legal form (international recognition, the monopoly of violence) is preserved and exploited precisely to subvert its original normative content. It is precisely this inversion that positions Predatory Sovereignty at the heart of contemporary debates on the “organized hypocrisy” (Krasner, 1999) of the international system, where the grammar of sovereignty is invoked selectively, not to limit power, but to exercise it in new ways.

Conceptual Delimitation

Predatory Sovereignty differs from related concepts in the following ways. It differs from the “failed state” (Rotberg, 2004) by preserving directed coercive and diplomatic capabilities. It is distinguished from “kleptocracy” by integrating the systemic geopolitical dimension, where corruption is not seen as an end in itself, but as the core of a political economy that finances internal alliances and projects power externally. It is not limited to the “narco-state,” encompassing a broader illicit ecosystem and focusing on the reconfiguration of sovereignty as a resource. It differs from the “captured state” because the capture is not carried out by actors external to the state, but operated from within, by the ruling elite itself.

The following table systematizes these distinctions.

Table 1.
Conceptual Delimitation of Predatory Sovereignty.

CONCEPT	COERCIVE CAPACITY	CRIMINAL DIMENSION	GEOPOLITICAL DIMENSION
Failed state	Weak/absent	Usually absent	Passive
Kleptocracy	Present	Partial	Usually absent
Narco-state	Present	Central (drugs)	Instrumental
Captured state	Present	External to the State	Variable
Predatory sovereignty*	Reconfigured	Systemic	Central and constitutive

Source: made by the author (2026).

* Predatory Sovereignty is conceptualized as a mode of governance in which the Westphalian form of the State is preserved while its internal apparatus is captured by the elite and merged with transnational criminal networks, converting the resulting dysfunction into geopolitical bargaining capital in the face of the organized hypocrisy of international sovereignty (author's concept).

Venezuela thus emerges as a paradigmatic empirical case of this transmutation. The concept, however, goes beyond the Venezuelan case, offering a robust analytical tool for understanding state mutations in contexts of prolonged crisis, geopolitical competition, and erosion of the boundaries between legality, sovereignty, and crime.

Methodological Research Design

Research Design

A unique instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) of Venezuela is adopted, selected for its ability to illuminate the transformation of sovereignty under conditions of economic crisis and geopolitical competition. The strategy is based on documentary content analysis (Mayring, 2021) of a triangular corpus, constructed with explicit selection criteria to ensure relevance and representativeness.

Operationalization of Document Analysis

The construction of the corpus followed an exploratory and non-probabilistic logic, guided by criteria of thematic relevance and diversity of provenance. Primary documents were prioritized: judicial indictments, sanctions decrees, and multilateral reports, consulted directly on the official portals of the United States Department of Justice (DOJ), the U.S. Treasury Department, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), complemented by academic literature and reports from specialized think tanks (InSight Crime, International Crisis Group) identified based on their thematic relevance and the transparency of their own research methodology.

It is important to point out, with methodological honesty, that this survey did not follow a formalized systematic search protocol (with pre-registered search strings in indexed databases and explicit inclusion/exclusion criteria applied to a closed documentary universe). On the contrary, it is an exploratory triangulation process, typical of an interpretative case study (Stake, 1995), and not a systematic literature review. This choice is assumed as an explicit methodological limitation in the corresponding section, and the results should be read in accordance with this exploratory nature.

Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles and reports from the aforementioned think tanks. Investigative journalism was included only when the reported information was corroborated by at least one other independent primary or secondary source, in a rigorous triangulation process.

Main Limitations and Mitigation Strategies

The inherent limitations of the study are acknowledged. The main one lies in the impossibility of accessing official internal Venezuelan documents and the often circumstantial nature of the evidence on criminal activities, which depends on investigations by third countries. Added to this is the limitation already noted in the previous section: the absence of a systematic and pre-registered protocol for document searches, which places this work in the field of interpretative case study, and not systematic literature review, a conscious choice, given the exploratory and conceptual objective of the article, but which limits the exact replicability of the corpus. Furthermore, extreme political polarization contaminates the public discourse on the case, requiring analytical caution. These limitations were mitigated through a two-pronged strategy.

- **First**, the systematic triangulation of multiple types of sources (legal, diplomatic, academic, journalistic) and multiple sources (US, UN, Europe, Latin America) allowed for cross-referencing evidence and identifying convergent narratives, thus isolating procedural facts from political noise.
- **Second**, the research design prioritized procedural and pattern analysis over absolute quantification. The objective was not to measure precise volumes of drug trafficking, but to document the institutionalization of the state-crime symbiosis; not to calculate an exact number of victims, but to identify patterns of coercive violence and their political function.

This approach, focused on relationships, mechanisms, and sequences of events, is robust in the face of a scarcity of reliable statistical data, allowing for a valid understanding of the structural transformation under analysis.



Results and Empirical Analysis I:

The Anatomy of the Venezuelan Predatory Leviathan

From predation to symbiosis: the trajectory of the Venezuelan state in light of Lupsha's typology

The rigorous application of Lupsha's (1991) evolutionary typology to the Venezuelan case allows us to visualize, with remarkable empirical clarity, a process of gradual and cumulative transformation of the State. Far from constituting an abrupt collapse or a simple episodic "criminal capture," what we see historically is a complex adaptive trajectory in which the State progressively redefines its primary functions, its structuring incentives, and its strategic alliances in response to severe economic shocks, intensified external pressures, and existential challenges of political survival.

In the initial period of the Chavista era (1999-2006), the predominant criminality presented characteristics typical of the predatory phase described by Lupsha (1991). The commodities boom, especially oil (with prices reaching US\$ 140/barrel in 2008), allowed the regime to finance populist redistributive policies and maintain a minimal social pact. The parasitic phase consolidated itself from the second half of the 2000s, when regional changes in drug trafficking strategically repositioned Venezuela as a preferred corridor. Official documents from the United States Treasury Department (2015-2020) and rigorous international journalistic investigations point to systematic and institutionalized practices of collusion at high levels.

The qualitative leap to full symbiosis occurs decisively after 2014, when the abrupt collapse of oil prices and international sanctions triggered a terminal economic crisis. Oil revenue, which formed the basis of the social pact, suffered a catastrophic collapse, with exports falling from an estimated \$86.5 billion in 2013 to less than \$2 billion in 2020 (OPEC, 2021; ECLAC, 2022). The 2020 DOJ indictment describes a structure where state positions (President, Minister of Defense) correspond to functions in a trafficking organization, illustrating how institutional fusion and international isolation produce an unprecedented existential crisis (DOJ, 2020). From this critical moment, the logic of organized crime becomes internalized as the structuring logic of government. The Cartel de los Soles ceases to be an informal network of corrupt military officers and begins to operate as the primary functional architecture of power.

The Mechanics of Symbiotic Power: The Operational Pillars of Predatory Sovereignty

Venezuelan predatory sovereignty is not an improvised aggregate of illegal practices, but a coherent system, sustained by interdependent pillars that articulate economy, coercion, and governance. These pillars explain the regime's resilience even under conditions of economic collapse and diplomatic isolation.

Political Economy of Illegality: From Oil Revenue to Illicit Extraction

With the depletion of oil revenue as the basis of the political pact, the regime reorganizes its political economy around a highly lucrative and relatively adaptable illicit triad to external shocks.

Drug trafficking is no longer merely a tolerated activity but has become part of the state's parallel economic strategy. Formal accusations from the U.S. Department of Justice classify Venezuela as a "narco state," indicating the direct involvement of high-ranking officials in facilitating routes, protecting cargo, and coordinating logistics.

Illegal gold mining, especially in the Orinoco Mining Arc, deepens this logic. It is a vast, rich and difficult to monitor territory, in which the military, Colombian armed groups such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) (Galão, 2022) and local mafias operate under a co-management regime. Gold, unlike oil, is easily smuggled, converted into foreign exchange and integrated into global markets with less traceability, making it an ideal source of finance under sanctions.

Finally, the smuggling of fuel, food and essential goods converts scarcity into an opportunity for extraction. State control over imports, exchange and distribution creates highly profitable black markets, operated by networks linked to power. Social deprivation, in this context, is not just a consequence of the collapse; it becomes an integral part of the accumulation model.

Hybrid governance: authority without legality

At the territorial level, Predatory Sovereignty manifests itself through hybrid governance, in which the State relinquishes its legal monopoly of authority without giving up effective control. In vast regions of the country, order is not maintained by courts, regular police or civil administration, but by informal agreements between armed forces, non-state armed groups and local criminal leaders.

These arrangements produce alternative forms of governance: full-time collection of extralegal “taxes”, violent regulation of conflicts, selective provision of services and control of economic routes. Authority derives less from legality and more from the ability to impose costs and distribute benefits. As a result, political loyalty becomes bought or imposed, not built by institutional legitimacy.

The coercive apparatus as an instrument for reproducing the cartel

The third pillar lies in the profound reconfiguration of security forces. Units created under the pretext of fighting crime, such as the FAES Special Actions Forces, begin to perform central functions in maintaining the predatory regime. Reports from the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) document consistent patterns of extrajudicial executions, intimidation and selective repression, suggesting a policy of social control based on terror (OHCHR, 2019).

In this context, it is essential to state that state coercion fulfills a double function: it eliminates political opponents and criminal competitors, while at the same time guaranteeing the security of illicit routes and extraction zones. Violence stops being a deviation and becomes a technology of government imposed, not built by institutional legitimacy.

This symbiosis between State and crime creates a specific form of political resilience. As anticipated by Lupsha (1991), in the symbiotic phase the success of the State and the success of criminal networks become mutually dependent. Any political transition now represents not only a loss of power, but a direct risk of judicial punishment, property expropriation and the collapse of accumulation networks.

It is in this sense that the Venezuelan Leviathan cannot be understood as a failed State, but as a functionally reconfigured State. Your sovereignty does not disappear; it is mobilized as an instrument of predation, coercion and geopolitical bargaining. This finding sets the stage for the next stage of the analysis: understanding how this Predatory Sovereignty is projected outwards, converting internal dysfunction into a strategic asset in the international system.

Results and empirical analysis II:

The geopolitics of chaos - Venezuela as a toxic asset: The asymmetrical inversion of power challenging the Monroe Doctrine with migrants and cocaine

For more than two centuries, the Monroe Doctrine structured United States hegemony in the Western Hemisphere, based on the premise that the main threats to the regional order would come from external powers capable of projecting conventional military power. The Venezuelan case breaks with this logic by demonstrating that, in the contemporary context, state dysfunction can become an effective instrument of power. Instead of tanks or formal alliances, the regime projects influence through the systematic outsourcing of internal collapse.

In a multipolar international system, inefficiency can acquire strategic value: the economic crisis, institutional erosion and diffuse violence cease to be mere consequences of bad governance and begin to operate as mechanisms of regional pressure.

The forced migration of more than seven million Venezuelans constitutes the most visible example of this asymmetric inversion, as the massive flow overwhelms neighboring states, weakens public services and intensifies social and political tensions, becoming a persistent vector of instability (UNHCR, 2022).

At the same time, Venezuela has consolidated itself as a relevant logistical corridor for transnational drug trafficking. UNODC data indicate that a significant portion of cocaine destined for Europe transits through Venezuelan territory, a result of the deliberate capture of borders, ports and infrastructure by networks that articulate political elites, military sectors and criminal organizations (UNODC, 2021; InSight Crime, 2022). Migration and trafficking, combined, produce a pattern of indirect coercion that is difficult to contain through traditional foreign policy instruments, placing the United States and its allies before a strategic dilemma: sanctions deepen social collapse without changing the incentives of the ruling elite; diplomatic isolation favors revisionist alliances; and military pressure tends to increase regional instability. Regimes financed by illicit economies appear, in this sense, to be structurally resilient to conventional mechanisms of coercion: sanctions, by worsening economic deprivation, paradoxically strengthen the control of the predatory elite over the population's survival channels, instead of eroding it.

In this context, Predatory Sovereignty imposes itself not through normative legitimacy, but through the creation of systemic costs that force external actors to manage chaos instead of correcting it. This is, however, a practice that is not limited to the hemispheric space: Russia and China also mobilize selective conceptions of sovereignty to legitimize interventions in their areas of influence. What emerges, therefore, is a broader pattern of instrumentalization of sovereignty in the contemporary international system.

Welcoming revisionists: Venezuela in the great structural game

Waltz's (1979) structural theory offers a particularly fruitful framework for understanding why extra-hemispheric powers invest strategically in a state often described as dysfunctional. In an anarchic international system and in transition to competitive multipolarity, Venezuela acquires the status of a pivot state, whose geopolitical value far exceeds its material capacity. Its location in the Western Hemisphere gives it a disproportionate strategic relevance, functioning, in the expression attributed to Sobolev, as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" in the geopolitical rearguard of the United States (Rocha, 2020).

For Russia, involvement with Venezuela fulfills simultaneously symbolic and strategic functions: projecting a limited military presence, testing instruments of hybrid warfare under sanctions and reinforcing the narrative of contestation against the liberal order led by the US, as explained in the Russian Foreign Policy Doctrine of 2023. It is an investment of relative low cost, but of high political and strategic return.

China, in turn, acts according to an incremental and long-term logic. Through loans guaranteed by oil, selective investments and discreet diplomatic support, it builds a structurally asymmetric relationship that conditions the margin of Venezuelan autonomy. As Gallagher and Porzecanski (2010) observe, this dynamic is close to a creditor-debtor relationship that links sovereignty, transforming Venezuela simultaneously into an energy source and a showcase for an alternative model to the Washington Consensus.

In turn, for Iran and other states subject to international sanctions, cooperation with Caracas is part of an anti-hegemonic survival logic, based on niche commercial exchanges, technological cooperation and financial mechanisms parallel to the Western system.

This revisionist convergence provided the Maduro regime with an external shield of sovereign protection. Security Council vetoes and selective diplomatic support block robust multilateral responses, turning Venezuela into a microcosm of contemporary systemic competition between the liberal order and a convergence of revisionist states with illiberal governance models. In light of Mearsheimer's (2001) offensive realism, the case confirms that great powers exploit opportunities for relative advantage whenever they present themselves. Owner of the largest oil reserves in the world, Venezuela represents one of these opportunities, not because of what it produces, but because of the potential for strategic disorganization that it offers at low cost.

Assertion of external control and systemic precedent: from Venezuela to the disintegration of international norms

The doctrine of tutelary management: the rhetoric of post-sovereign

United States policy towards Venezuela crystallized, throughout 2024 and 2025, in a position that went beyond the classic instruments of coercive diplomacy, such as political non-recognition or the imposition of economic sanctions. What emerged, in an increasingly explicit way, was the rhetorical claim of a right of external management over the Venezuelan State, an informal doctrine of conditional sovereignty that, at the time of the initial formulation of this analysis, remained at the level of discourse and threat.

This analysis would be confirmed almost literally. On January 3, 2026, following a large-scale military operation, the United States captured Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, both of whom were later indicted in the Southern District of New York for narco-terrorism. In the following days, the US administration repeatedly claimed to be "managing" Venezuela, with Energy Secretary Chris Wright declaring that Washington would control the Venezuelan oil industry "indefinitely", while the US president publicly announced an investment of more than 100 billion dollars by major US oil companies in the country (Al Jazeera, 2026). What was, until then, an analytical inference about the trajectory of North American foreign policy became a fait accompli, formulated in almost the same terms that this analysis anticipated: explicit external management, appropriation of energy resources and suspension of political self-determination in the name of a transition whose calendar remains, at the closing date of this article, to be clarified.

This inversion of the classic Westphalian principle, according to which control over natural resources derives from territorial sovereignty, and not from military force or corporate ownership, empirically confirms the central thesis of this

article: internal predatory sovereignty creates the structural conditions for its own replacement by a form of external guardianship that reproduces, reversing the sign, the same extractive logic that it seeks to correct.

The trigger for normative disorder: legitimizing the invasion as a geopolitical

The implications of this doctrine go far beyond the Venezuelan case, as it moves sovereignty from the normative field to a field of conditional management. By legitimizing the idea that a great power can declare a government illegitimate, intervene militarily to depose it, and claim oversight of the resources of the subsequent transition, it creates a corrosive operational precedent for an international order that purports to be rules-based. In the immediate aftermath of the operation, organizations such as the Center for Economic and Political Research classified it as a violation of international law capable of inaugurating a prolonged occupation, comparable to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (CEPR, 2026).

This dynamic of instrumental legitimization is not exclusive to the United States. In the Russian discourse on Ukraine, the Kyiv Government was described as “illegitimate” and the 2022 invasion was justified as protection of Russian-speaking populations and “vital interests”, a logic that, as in the Venezuelan case, distances normative legitimacy from effective control and instrumentalizes the sovereignty of others in terms of its own strategic objectives. The annexation of Crimea in 2013 and the organization of referenda in occupied territories illustrate the practical application of this reasoning, in which sovereignty can be deconstituted as a greater power determines it.

China, in turn, articulates a parallel argument in its own geopolitical context. The claim of Taiwan as an “inalienable province” and the rejection of any independence government in Taipei create a *casus belli* that fits the same logic of sovereignty instrumentalized in favor of strategic interests. It is plausible to assume that Chinese strategists observe cases like the Venezuelan one not so much to imitate specific military tactics, but to study how narratives of “illegitimacy” and “necessary management” are constructed and accepted or contested by the international community.

The accumulated effect of these practices is the formation of a vicious circle of normative delegitimization. “Organized hypocrisy” (Krasner, 1999), a concept coined to describe the selective violation of norms in terms of power interests, risks becoming a structural condition of contemporary international politics. By allowing each power to unilaterally declare which governments are legitimate and which resources should be “managed”, the principle of non-intervention is transformed from a legal pillar into a rhetorical artifact, invoked only according to strategic convenience. This overlap between power and norm suggests, by the same logic, that other Latin American states marked by dynamics of predatory sovereignty or high internal conflict, notably Colombia and Cuba, are not immune to a similar reconfiguration, if strategic and domestic conditions align in the way they did in the Venezuelan case.

The double bind of the international community and strategic paralysis

The international order found itself tied to a double bind of a structural nature, which the January 2026 operation did not resolve, but only displaced. On the one hand, Maduro’s regime represented a systematic violation of the central principles of the United Nations Charter: human rights (UN, 1948), rule of law and popular sovereignty. On the other hand, the response based on management supervised by an external power constitutes an equally serious breach of the principle of sovereign equality, a clash between two pathologies, that of the predatory State and that of sovereignist interventionism, which feed each other in a spiral of normative disorder. This impasse generated concrete consequences: the Security Council remained paralyzed by crossed vetoes; the Organization of American States (OAS) was fragmented in its response; and the inter-American human rights system proved incapable of anticipating or containing an outcome of this nature.

In this context, the Venezuelan population repeatedly becomes an adjustment variable, first of the predatory regime that depended on scarcity to perpetuate itself, then of the transition process that followed, whose social costs and democratic calendar remained, months after the intervention, to be defined.

Venezuela thus ceases to be just a regional problem, becoming a systemic laboratory of a new pattern of international disorder, in which norms are not only violated, but reinterpreted to legitimize their own suspension, first by the internal predatory elite, then by the power that claims the right to replace it. The “geopolitics of chaos,” as outlined throughout this article, was not contained by the 2026 intervention; rather, it risks being amplified by it, projecting itself as a precedent for other hemispheric contexts of state fragility, in an international system that is increasingly permissive of force, guardianship and the erosion of sovereignty as a standardized practice of foreign policy.

Final considerations

The analysis developed validates the heuristic utility of the concept of Predatory Sovereignty by revealing a process of state reconfiguration that transcends collapse. Firstly, it is confirmed that the criminalization of the Venezuelan State does not represent terminal bankruptcy, but a functional adaptation. The state apparatus does not dissolve; rather, it redirects coercive, diplomatic and administrative capabilities, once linked to a logic of providing order to the primary purpose of illicit extraction and accumulation.

This internal metamorphosis establishes the conditions for a second conclusion: the capacity of materially weak states to exercise unexpected geopolitical agency. By converting internal dysfunction (mass migration, drug trafficking routes) into bargaining chips, the predatory Venezuelan elite exploits the fissures of competition between great powers, attracting the patronage of revisionist actors. This mechanism reveals an asymmetric power based on the export of instability.

The theoretical contribution of this study is threefold: it offers an integrated concept that articulates the domestic transformation of the State with its systemic insertion; identifies a new mechanism of asymmetric power in international politics; and illustrates how transnational illicit economies can become the reorganizing axis of states in crisis, with profound implications for the regional and global order.

Ultimately, the case demonstrates the structural limits of the cooperative premises of neoliberal institutionalism (Keohane, 1984). Venezuela is not a case of failed international cooperation; it is the empirical demonstration of how “organized hypocrisy” (Krasner, 1999) can become the dominant operative principle, subordinating and emptying the institutional frameworks that, in Keohane’s theory, should condition state action. This finding does not invalidate the theoretical framework, but requires its recalibration to account for actors whose rationality is not guided by cooperation under the shadow of anarchy, but by the strategic exploitation of disorder itself.

Study limitations

Despite the methodological rigor, this study has important limitations. First, the impossibility of accessing internal Venezuelan primary sources limits the understanding of the regime’s decision-making mechanisms. Second, the extreme polarization surrounding the Venezuelan case means that virtually all available sources reflect political positions. Third, the concept of “Predatory Sovereignty”, although heuristically useful, requires application to other cases (Equatorial Guinea, North Korea, Zimbabwe) to verify its comparative validity.

Agenda for future research

Three lines of research emerge from this study: (1) comparative analysis of Predatory Sovereignty in different regional contexts; (2) investigation into mechanisms of “sovereignty laundering”, how predatory regimes convert illicit resources into domestic political legitimacy; (3) study of societal resistance strategies in contexts of state predation. Conclusão: A Soberania Predatória como paradigma da anarquia estratificada.

Conclusion:

A Soberania Predatória como paradigma da anarquia estratificada

- **Theoretical synthesis: Predatory Sovereignty as a bridge concept**

This article developed and applied the concept of “Predatory Sovereignty” to analyze the structural transformation of the Venezuelan State. Through multilevel analysis, it was demonstrated that: Venezuela is not a failed state, but one reconfigured around systemic predation; this reconfiguration is made possible by State-crime symbiosis; internal dysfunction is converted into a geopolitical asset; and the international response often amplifies, rather than mitigates, these predatory dynamics.

- **The Venezuelan precedent and the future of the international order**

The Venezuelan precedent pointed, at the time of the initial formulation of this analysis, to three possible futures: consolidation of predation, chaotic fragmentation or a transition protected by external power, then classified as the least likely scenario. The events of January 2026 demonstrated precisely the opposite: this was the scenario that materialized, which reinforces, rather than weakens, the predictive value of the conceptual framework proposed here and its applicability to other fragile States in zones of strategic competition.

- **Final conclusion: hijacked sovereignty and the 21st century dilemma**

The Venezuelan case offers an inevitable analytical lesson for the 21st century: in an anarchic and hierarchical international system, Westphalian sovereignty can be functionally hijacked. This kidnapping operates in two interconnected dimensions. Internally, an elite captures the state apparatus, converting sovereignty, once the foundation of the legal order, into the central instrument of predatory governance. Externally, the dysfunctional nature of this arrangement makes it simultaneously a target of pressure and a strategic resource, leading to its sovereignty being treated as contingent by the great powers, whether revisionist or established.

The Venezuelan tragedy lies, therefore, not only in the socioeconomic collapse, but in the empirical demonstration of how one of the constitutive principles of the modern political order can be emptied from the inside and relativized from the outside. This case sets an analytical precedent of global reach: Predatory Sovereignty in Venezuela is not merely the pathology of one State, but the symptom of a broader transformation in international politics. It realistically illustrates a possible path for reconfiguring state power in contexts of deep crisis and intense geopolitical competition, where the boundaries between legal and illegal, between state authority and criminal organization, and between sovereign autonomy and external tutelage become intentionally blurred. The study of this laboratory of extreme sovereignty alerts to the emergence of a pattern in which force, economic coercion and the strategic instrumentalization of norms can redefine, in a lasting way, the expectations and limits of sovereignty in the international system.

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