

Maritime Security or Maritime Coercion? U.S. Naval Power and Regional Sovereignty in the Caribbean

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Abstract

The 2025 escalation of U.S. maritime counter-narcotics operations in the Southern Caribbean has reignited longstanding tensions over sovereignty, legality at sea, and hemispheric power. This paper analyzes how contemporary U.S. naval enforcement reproduces historical patterns of maritime dominance through a comparative case study of Colombia and Trinidad and Tobago. Colombia has pursued legal contestation and multilateral oversight, invoking principles of proportionality and jurisdiction under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. By contrast, Trinidad and Tobago has adopted pragmatic compliance shaped by energy security and U.S. sanctions waivers. The comparison reveals how U.S. maritime operations impose asymmetric pressures on regional states, forcing trade-offs between legal autonomy and economic stability. The paper concludes by proposing a regional request for an advisory opinion from the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea and the establishment of a Caribbean Maritime Governance Framework to reduce legal ambiguity and escalation.

Keywords: Maritime security; U.S. naval power; Caribbean geopolitics; UNCLOS; sovereignty; counter-narcotics operations; regional governance

1. Introduction and Background

Just as the 2025 international panorama felt at its bleakest, a decisive strike on September 2nd by the United States military on an alleged drug-smuggling vessel belonging to El Tren De Aragua, 80 nautical miles off Venezuela shocked the region, and the world.¹ This was the

beginning of a large-scale counter-narcotics operation carried by the United States, with 19 strikes by November that left more than 70 dead in international waters.² However before we delve into the maritime, political, and military implications, an exploration of the events before

¹ Konstantin Toropin, "Timeline of U.S. Attacks in the Caribbean — and What Congress Has Had to Say," Military.com, October 21, 2025

² Simon Denyer, "U.S. Strikes in Caribbean and Pacific Fuel Debate Over Naval Use of Force," The Washington Post, November 12, 2025

the first strikes on September 2nd occurred, is essential. The concept of Central and South America being the United States' "backyard" dates to the Monroe Doctrine articulated in 1823.³ It states that the rest of American countries were not to be considered for colonization, and was later interpreted by U.S. Secretary of State, Richard Olney, to mean the U.S. possessed not only the right but the duty to arbitrate disputes in the Western Hemispheres.⁴ This long-lasting vision of the Western Hemisphere as a U.S. sphere of influence has repeatedly shaped Washington's interventions. The focus of this paper; however, is not on all instances of U.S. involvement over the years. While the U.S. interventionism in Latin America has often been studied through the lens of political interference or territorial incursions, this paper instead will examine the military and maritime dimension. This addresses how sea power and naval enforcement have been used to shape regional stability, redefine sovereignty, and project influence across the Caribbean. This focus became particularly salient during the Cold War, where maritime power was the primary mechanism through which the United States leveraged and influenced its vision of hemispheric dominance and security.

Building on the historical background, a comparative case-study approach is used to explore how the current U.S. maritime operations have reshaped the regional

³ James Monroe, "Seventh Annual Message to Congress," December 2, 1823, in *The Papers of James Monroe*, Presidential Seventh Annual Message to Congress

⁴ Richard Olney, "Letter to Sir Julian Pauncefote (The Olney Note), July 20, 1895," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1895*, 545–547 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office)

security dynamics of the South Caribbean. It compares the responses of two key regional actors, Colombia and Trinidad and Tobago. Two neighboring states with clear cut political orientations and priorities. Colombia, currently led by the Pacto Historico, a far-left administration presided by Gustavo Petro⁵, has been critical and outspoken about the U.S. militarizing the area, and has framed the recent strikes a sovereignty violation.⁶ On the other hand, Trinidad and Tobago as of April 2025 elected a centre-right government that pursues pragmatic cooperation through energy diplomacy. By analysing these contrasting responses, the paper evaluates how maritime security practices affect neighbouring states' sovereignty, legality at sea, and regional stability. As tensions rise with rapid deployment of U.S aircraft carriers and nuclear-capable submarines and vessels in the region, the Southern Caribbean has become the frontline where maritime security concerns intersect with geopolitical escalation. Therefore, this paper looks to answer the following research question: How have U.S counter-narcotics operations against Venezuela reshaped security, sovereignty, and regional alignments in the South Caribbean ?

2. Historical Foundations of the U.S. Maritime Power in the Caribbean

What began as an anti-colonial declaration in 1823, the Monroe Doctrine gradually evolved into a justification for U.S. intervention across the region. By 1895 Richard

⁵ "Historic Pact for Colombia." 2024. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

⁶ The Guardian. "Petro Accuses U.S. of Killing Colombians in Maritime Strike." The Guardian, October 9, 2025.

Olney, the Secretary of State at the time, had reframed this doctrine to assert that “the United States is practically sovereign on this continent, and its fiat is law upon the subjects to which it confines its interposition”, expanding its scope from protection to dominance.⁷ This reinterpretation was solidified through the Roosevelt Corollary (1904), which formalized the U.S. right to intervene preemptively in the internal affairs of Latin American states under the banner of “stability.” The Caribbean then became the maritime testing arena for U.S. enforcement. American warships patrolled the Panamanian and Cuban waters, occupied the Dominican Republic in the mid 1910s, and enforced debt repayment regimes through several naval blockades. The sea became more than a route for commerce and defence, it transformed into a policy tool where the American naval presence was an undeniable symbol of their dominance and regional hegemony. The protection of sea lanes and chokepoints in the Caribbean was equated with the defense of the hemisphere itself. As historian Walter LaFeber observed, the Monroe Doctrine “was no longer a diplomatic note - it was a naval order”.⁸ This conceptual shift laid the groundwork for the Cold War, when control of the Caribbean’s maritime corridors would become the stage for global confrontation.

⁷ Richard Olney, “Letter to Sir Julian Pauncefote (The Olney Note), July 20, 1895,” in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1895* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), 545–547

⁸ Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 32.

2.1 *The Cold War and Cuban Missile Crisis*

During the Cold War, naval dominance became indispensable as a global strategic asset. This meant that the U.S. could control the maritime corridors for exports of all kinds, and maintain leverage over regional actors, shifting the focus from simple regional enforcement to the backbone of American influence abroad. The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis stands as the defining moment of this transformation. Following the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba, President John F. Kennedy ordered a naval quarantine, a maritime exclusion zone around the island on 22 October 1962, with the goal of preventing further Soviet shipments.⁹ Within a week, the U.S. Navy had mobilized more than two hundred combat vessels and nearly all Atlantic anti-submarine forces to enforce the operation.

For the Caribbean and its regional actors the Cuban Missile Crisis was not just another Cold War standoff, but a lesson learned in the hierarchy of the region. Smaller states witnessed the swift the U.S. maritime control redefined sovereignty and security in their region. Historian Fred Halliday reflected that “the Caribbean became a testing ground for the exercise of American power under the banner of collective security”.¹⁰ This assessment continues to be salient in the current U.S. counter-narcotics operations, displaying that collective security is a smokescreen for dominance and

⁹ John F. Kennedy, “Radio and Television Address to the Nation on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba,” October 22, 1962, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum

¹⁰ Fred Halliday, *The Caribbean and the Cold War* (London: Hutchinson, 1983), 112.

self-fulfillment. The 1962 quarantine institutionalized this pattern in which maritime security operations can be framed as defensive measures, masking a coercive projection of power, enabling the United States to shape acceptable behaviour in their “backyard” without formally engaging in war. From Grenada in 1983 to Panama in 1989, and now in counter-narcotics enforcements, where patrols, strikes on boats, and maritime exclusion zones (MEZs) obscures the line between law-enforcement and plain strategic dominance. In Grenada, during Operation Urgent Fury (1983), the United States deployed naval forces to establish a maritime cordon around the island while framing the intervention as a mission to restore order and protect regional security interests.¹¹ In Panama, Operation Just Cause (1989) similarly relied on U.S. naval control of ports and coastlines to isolate Manuel Noriega’s regime, an action publicly justified through security rhetoric but widely criticized as an assertion of unilateral hemispheric authority.¹² Across time, sea dominance is a mechanism through which Washington converts regional crises into opportunities to assert their dominance in the hemisphere, consistent with a long-standing American instinct that a crisis, especially in its own “backyard”, should never be left entirely unexploited.

¹¹ U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command, “Grenada: Operation Urgent Fury,” Naval History and Heritage Command

¹² Ronald H. Cole, Operation JUST CAUSE: The Planning and Execution of Joint Operations in Panama, February 1988–January 1990 (Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1995)

3. Current situation as of November 2025

The current maritime crisis started on 2 September 2025, when a U.S. military aircraft carried out a strike on a vessel allegedly linked to El Tren de Aragua, killing the two passengers aboard and immediately alarming the region. U.S. Military news outlet Military.com compiled a timeline, marking this as the first of nineteen U.S. strikes on suspected narcotics-smuggling vessels between September and November 2025. The operation was executed under the legal framework created by president Donald Trump’s January 2025 executive order, which designated several Venezuela-linked groups, including El Tren de Aragua and El Cartel de Los Soles, as foreign terrorist organizations. This new designation opened the door for the United States to invoke their counterterrorism authorities, rather than the otherwise pertinent traditional law-enforcement tools of Patrol in the Caribbean.¹³

The operations intensified with the passing of the weeks as the U.S. Southern Command expanded its presence with P-8 surveillance aircraft, guided-missile destroyers, and nuclear capable submarines, establishing a *de facto* exclusion zone, similar to Kennedy’s quarantine during the Cuban Missile Crisis—off the Venezuelan, Trinidadian, and Colombian coasts. A report by the Financial Times in October 2025, stated that the deployments were framed by Washington officials as essential to “counter illicit flows” and prevent terrorist-linked groups from capitalizing the maritime

¹³ Toropin, “Timeline of U.S. Attacks in the Caribbean.

routes into the U.S.¹⁴ However, these deployments positioned at 40-80 nautical miles from the Venezuelan territorial waters, prompted Caracas to disperse their own naval patrols and coastal radar systems in response.

While Colombia stood on their criticism and clear opposition to the U.S. maritime operations, Trinidad and Tobago adopted a markedly different stance. While Port of Spain manifested their concern over regional stability, the government concurrently advanced the negotiations over the Dragon Gas project, a cross border energy plan that links them to Venezuela's offshore fields. As reported by the Associated Press in early 2025, the United States issued a partial sanctions waiver allowing Trinidad to develop the project with Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), despite the broader sanctions. This is a perfect illustration of the strategic balancing act in Washington, leveraging military intervention while facilitating selective economic cooperation. The contrast in Washington's treatment of Trinidad and Colombia is better understood as structural rather than coincidental, shaped directly by whether each state accommodates or contests U.S. influence in the region. This contradictory U.S. strategy created a new political incentive for Trinidad to remain cooperative rather than confrontational as the Colombian counterpart has. The swift change from law-enforcement patrols to near-constant military confrontation echoes the historical patterns previously discussed. Legal ambiguity facilitates operational recklessness, and small states find themselves at the crossroads of compliance for peace, or defiance for

¹⁴ Financial Times. 2025. "Venezuela's Military Posture and U.S. Naval Operations in the Caribbean." October 15, 2025.

dignity at the cost of their security and good relations with the regional hegemon.

4. Case Study: Colombia

Colombia has emerged as the most forthright and institutionally assertive challenger of the 2025 U.S. maritime operations, framing the strikes as unlawful extraterritorial violence, not just routine counter-narcotics enforcement. President Gustavo Petro, has established his foreign policy strategy in a discourse of national dignity, regional autonomy, and a strong post-Cold War anti-interventionism. This is a stark contrast to his predecessors, who always maintained close and compliant relations with the USA. After the sixth strike killed two Colombian nationals, Petro responded immediately by accusing Trump of "murdering civilians in international waters" and committing a "flagrant violation of Colombia's sovereignty".¹⁵ These statements reported in *The Guardian* transposed maritime security from technical law-enforcement to a high stakes question of state responsibility, legality at sea, and the long standing hemispheric hierarchy imposed by the U.S.

Petro's critique of the matter rests on two legal foundations at the core of maritime governance. First, under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, which Colombia applies as customary international law despite not having ratified the agreement.)¹⁶ This is primarily due to its ongoing territorial

¹⁵ The Guardian. "Petro Accuses U.S. of Killing Colombians in Maritime Strike." The Guardian, October 9, 2025.

¹⁶ United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). 1982. United Nations Treaty Series.

and maritime disputes with Nicaragua. A key point of contention is Nicaragua's use of straight baselines in the Caribbean, which Colombia argues unjustly pushes Nicaragua's maritime zones outward and infringes on Colombia's established rights in its exclusive economic zone (EEZ) and continental shelf.¹⁷

UNCLOS affirms that foreign states may not use force against vessels in international waters unless a specific set of conditions are met; piracy, stateless vessels in international waters, or hot pursuit in the beginning of territorial seas. A U.S. vessel strike 80 nautical miles off the coast of Colombia likely violated the proportionality and necessity principles embedded in maritime interdiction law. Secondly, the international humanitarian law restricts the use of lethal force outside active hostilities. Petro argues that the U.S. classification of gang members as unlawful combatants artificially extends the wartime legal frameworks into peaceful maritime zones. This critique has been further echoed by legal analysts from the International Crisis Group.

Bogotá has further drawn on the destabilising nature of the U.S operations in the regional maritime arena by displacing the illicit flows of narcotics rather than eliminating them. According to InSight' Chrome's 2024 mapping traffic routes, intensified Caribbean inhibitions tend to push the criminal networks to the Pacific

coast, particularly through the Nariño and Cauca.¹⁸ These areas are currently under immense strain due to the ELN, FARC dissidents, and the Clan Del Golfo. This shift has fortified Petro's argument that the U.S.'s repeated interventionism is far from a lifeboat for regional security, but instead is the key factor to worsening domestic violence by redirecting trafficking pressure onto Colombian shores.

Diplomatically, Colombia has opted for multilateralization and public confrontation, a response aligned with other confrontations the Colombian president has had with President Trump. Petro requested an emergency session of the Organization of American States (OAS), looking to evaluate the legality of the strikes. As reported by *El País* (2025), Colombia was making an effort to steer discussions away from a bilateral channel, and towards regional legal oversight, something almost unheard of historically speaking.¹⁹ This is a vehement representation of an attempt to challenge the operational legitimacy of the U.S. operations, but to emphasise the importance of collective maritime governance.

Colombia's rejection of the American campaign is also a reflection of the long-standing asymmetries in the security of the region. Analysts at the International Crisis Group (2023) and the U.S. Institute of Ocean (2022) explain that the U.S.-Colombia cooperation is marked by

¹⁷ H.S.F. Kramer, "ICJ Orders Colombia to Immediately Cease Activities in Nicaraguan EEZ Waters," Public International Law Notes, May 1, 2022

¹⁸ InSight Crime, Drug Trafficking in Colombia: Criminal Dynamics and Territorial Control, InSight Crime Annual Report 2024, January 2024

¹⁹ Petro pide sesión extraordinaria de la OEA por ataques de EE UU en el Caribe," *El País América*, October 10, 2025

disparities in intelligence ownership, aerial and maritime surveillance capabilities, and operational decision-making. These imbalances limit Bogotá's autonomy in moments of crisis, and explain Petro's stance on the strikes as not only sovereignty violations, but of symptoms of a far greater illness, the greatly unequal regional order. These critiques foreshadow the policy recommendations this paper will address, particularly the need for transparency, non-lethal interdiction protocols, and regional rules to govern the seemingly free reign of external military operations in the Caribbean Sea.

While Colombia has been outspoken and legally assertive in response to the US maritime operations. However this has not been the widespread response in the region. Colombia's diplomatic, multilateral and legal confrontation to US coercion is not a one-size-fits-all response for other regional actors. Smaller and more economically vulnerable states could not take on this same approach due to political or material matters. The case of Trinidad and Tobago explores this very clearly. Their response is shaped less by legal resistance than by economic vulnerability, energy dependency, and the strategic need to avoid direct confrontation with the US.

5. Case Study: Trinidad and Tobago

Unlike Colombia's confrontational posture, Trinidad and Tobago has responded to the current maritime escalation with cautious pragmatism. The government in Port-of-Spain, currently governed by a centre-right coalition has prioritized energy exports and economic stability. The government faces powerful incentives to

avoid confronting Washington even as it maintains their economic relations with Venezuela. The logic shaping Port-of-Spain's foreign-policy choices is currently dominated by the Dragon Gas project, a cross border gas-development initiative in which Trinidad aspires to access the Venezuelan offshore fields. In February of 2023, the United States granted a partial sanctions waiver, allowing Trinidadian participation in the project with Petrolera De Venezuela (PDVSA). This was an extraordinary concession that linked energy access to a degree of geopolitical compliance with the current U.S. military posture nearby (Associated Press 2025). Port-of-Spain cannot afford Colombia's defiance, or allow the current maritime insecurity to interrupt their energy production, and much less forfeit their preferential access to the U.S. markets.

This economic incentive explains why Trinidad and Tobago has shown remarkable restraint in their public diplomacy following the vessel strikes and increased U.S. military presence. Where Colombia forefronted their sovereignty and legal contestation, Trinidad has emphasised the need for stability, risk management, and commercial continuity. Nevertheless, government officials have expressed their concern in the naval incidents and the effect on insurance premiums for Caribbean transits, as well as the need to protect the Dragon Gas timetable. In practice, Trinidad's posture has been displayed by the following 3 behaviours: (1) cautious language when addressing the U.S. strikes, avoiding outright condemnation, (2) inconspicuous coordination with

American and regional partners on maritime safety and search and rescue operations, and finally (3) a lean into technical as opposed to legal solutions such as insurance guarantees that preserve energy flows all while limiting public insurance.

Trinidad's cooperation reduces the risk of bilateral escalation with the United States. Analysts of small-state maritime governance argue that such service-oriented arrangements often yield more stability than confrontational diplomacy.²⁰ On the other side, convenient compliance risks political dependency, a common phenomenon many regional actors face, not just Trinidad and Tobago. By prioritizing short-term economic security, Port-of-Spain could weaken their bargaining position in other long-term questions of maritime sovereignty, or any other regional activity.

6. Comparing Trinidad and Colombia

The two opposing responses of Colombia and Trinidad and Tobago exemplify the contrasting foreign policy instincts of their leaders, but also the fundamentally divergent interpretations of what maritime security means during this crisis.

Colombia is directly confronting the U.S. strikes involving nationals, asserting the international law violations. This position aligns with academic interpretations of UNCLOS, in which the use of force must still satisfy necessity, proportionality, and

²⁰ Sylvain Domergue, "Maritime Security in the Caribbean: Causes and Impacts of the Regionalism of Small and Micro-States," *Geopolitics*, published online October 9, 2024

jurisdictional limits.²¹ Colombia's insistence on the legality of the matter, just reflects the broader pattern that has been present in the region; South and Central American states are increasingly polarizing with regards the U.S. post cold-war doctrines of interventionism and unilateralism.

Conversely, Trinidad and Tobago adopted their posture not in confrontation but in practical compliance. While Port-of-Spain expressed their concerns of regional security risks posed by the U.S. strikes, it avoided confronting the issue with legal objections. This reflects the structural incentives the United States has created with the partial sanctions waiver to enable the execution of the Dragon Gas Project. Trinidad's reliance on the offshore energy markets, and its exposure to changes in maritime insurance, shipping risk, and Liquefied Natural Gas transit routes makes regulatory stability rather than direct confrontation the safest and most logical security strategy. Small islands states often prioritise "operational deconfliction and risk-management cooperation" over formal legal challenges, particularly when economic infrastructure is vulnerable.²²

Comparatively, these two cases and their differences expose the fact that polarization and the divergence amongst regional actors, weakens the chances of a unified regional response, and echoes the historical patterns of the

²¹ Douglas Guilfoyle, "Maritime Law Enforcement and the Use of Force," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Use of Force in International Law*, eds. Marc Weller et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1110–1115.

²² United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Regional Programme for the Caribbean 2021–2025: Preventing and Combating Transnational Organized Crime and Illicit Trafficking*, UNODC/ROME0, 2021, 22–24

Cold War. U.S officials have framed the current buildup as a necessary response to illicit flows from Venezuela. Yet, the language used strongly resembles the justificatory rhetoric of earlier eras in history, “hemispheric security” was and now is commonly used to legitimise maritime coercion.²³ Just as the 1962 Cuban quarantine used a defensive narrative to disguise the goal of strategic control of the Caribbean lane, today counter-narcotics operations blur the line between gunboat-diplomacy and law-enforcement.

Historically, these moments of American maritime assertiveness have produced a fragmentation among Caribbean states, and a weakening of collective security institutions. The logic that being in the U.S.’s “backyard” meant having to be their ally or be their adversary, not just a neutral honest broker has resurfaced, shaping the policy directions of states whose priorities are not purely military, but also economic, legal and of survival. These comparisons between then and now demonstrate that the present crisis is far from an anomaly, but a continuation of long standing hemispheric tensions between sovereignty and stability, regional agency and the strategic calculations of the U.S. This explanation provides the foundation for the policy recommendations to follow.

7. Policy Recommendations

The evolving nature of this crisis calls for policy recommendations for the long- and short-term. New developments and changes in the situation can drastically

change the appropriate policy recommendations to resolve the crisis, and prevent it from occurring again. The following section will explore the institutional gaps regional actors, such as Colombia and Trinidad and Tobago have to manage unilateral maritime operations and Venezuelan counter-deployments. Using UNCLOS, several policy recommendations will be made to prevent further escalations, prepare the region to react in the case of a future crisis, and to prevent a Cold-War order from fully re-emerging.

Accounting for the incendiary rhetoric from both the Colombian and U.S. Presidents, both Petro’s denunciation of the strikes a violation of sovereignty, and the U.S.’s continuous support of their own choices, and the subsequent inclusion of the Colombian president into the SDNT List²⁴, an immediate de-escalation through policy is highly unlikely. The Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons (SDNT) List, managed by the U.S. Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC). The initial list created under President Clinton specifically targeted narcotics traffickers.²⁵ This created a high-stakes and tense climate which makes having a tactical moratorium or technical hotlines politically unrealistic as it requires a certain degree of cooperation. However, what remains feasible still is a regional legal clarification and a medium-term solution which can

²³ Lars Schoultz, *National Security and United States Policy Toward Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 112–118.

²⁴ U.S. Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List (SDN List), updated 2025

²⁵ William J. Clinton, “Executive Order 12978—Blocking Assets and Prohibiting Transactions with Significant Foreign Narcotics Traffickers,” October 21, 1995, *Federal Register* 60, no. 206 (1995): 54579–54580

restrain bilateral action and reduce the escalation of the situation without requiring political goodwill from Trump or Petro.

7.1 Legal Clarification Through International Adjudication

A first and key step is for the regional states, including but not limited to Colombia and Trinidad and Tobago to request an advisory opinion from the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS).²⁶ This aligns with the sovereignty concerns brought forward by the Colombian government and provided a diplomatic alternative for states unable or unwilling to confront the United States directly. As was illustrated in the exploration of Trinidad's case, their position on energy-driven pragmatism would be compromised by a direct confrontation. An ITLOS advisory opinion requested either by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM),²⁷ Colombia in representation of more concerned states, and the OAS would clarify the legal ambiguity surrounding the U.S. offensive. Moreover, it would shed light on the legality of using force against non-state actors like the Tren de Aragua gang members in international waters adjacent to a coastal state's exclusive economic zone and determine evidentiary thresholds for designating vessels as "terrorist-linked". UNCLOS articles 100 to 110 and their scope must also be interpreted concerning interdiction, hot

pursuit and proportionality. Advisory opinions, although not binding, carry substantial weight. ITLOS has previously issued authoritative clarifications on state obligations at sea in its 2015 advisory proceedings on fisheries jurisdiction, demonstrating the feasibility and value of this mechanism.²⁸ Legal scholars like Douglas Guilfoyle have warned that the expansion of maritime counter-terrorism risks corroding the legal boundaries between law enforcement and war at sea.²⁹ A collective clarification on the legality of the matter would reduce the room for unilateral interpretation and give smaller states a platform to act on more than fear of retaliation.

7.2 Institutional Coordination and Regional Maritime Governance

A second, medium term recommendation would be the creation of a Caribbean Maritime Governance Framework (CMGF) operational transparency and standardised reporting. The narco-trafficking issue affects all domains of maritime security, and the countries in the region, not just the well-being of U.S. citizens as Trump has framed. One of the largest and most unspoken effects of the U.S. operations, is the Pacific Spillover of narco-trafficking. This policy option would address that aspect, but also create a solid foundation for all regional actors like Colombia who are currently battling with increased narcotics production stemming from internal conflicts. It also benefits smaller states like Trinidad and Tobago who have made their emphasis on their priority to technical cooperation over

²⁶ United Nations, Statute of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, Annex VI of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), December 10, 1982, arts. 21–25

²⁷ International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS), Request for an Advisory Opinion Submitted by the Sub-Regional Fisheries Commission (SRFC), Advisory Opinion, Case No. 21 (April 2, 2015), paras. 52–59

²⁸ ITLOS. "Advisory Proceedings."

²⁹ Guilfoyle, Douglas. Publications on law of the sea and use of force.

legal confrontation. This CMGF could model the cooperative structures proposed in the UNODC's Caribbean Maritime Security strategy (2024) which underlines the region's persistent gaps in incident reporting, shared risk assessment, and coordinated patrol management.³⁰ Moreover, this framework would not challenge the U.S. presence directly but requires cooperation, something that is desperately lacking amongst the regional states. The CMGF would also provide a forum for Venezuela, Colombia, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United States to coordinate without forcing political agreements that none are willing to make at this time.

7.3 De-Escalation, Risk Management, and Crisis Stabilization at Sea

At a time when armed incidents at sea are increasing and naval deployments mimic the precedent of the 1962 quarantine, regional states cannot rely on great-power restraint, much less with Trump at the head. His foreign-policy approach is defined by unilateralism, the usage of military force for domestic political signaling, and a consistent disregard for multilateral legal constraints. The 2025 strikes exemplify this logic, where counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism are repurposed into tools of coercive escalation rather than cooperative security. They can, however, strengthen the legal and institutional environment in which great powers operate. These measures do not end the crisis, but they make future crises less likely, less dangerous, and less shaped by the interests of the hemisphere's dominant actor.

8. Conclusion

The 2025 international panorama reached an aggravating situation with the maritime escalations in the Southern Caribbean. This operation was not an isolated episode, nor a mere counter-narcotics operation in the name of hemispheric security. It is the latest manifestation of a decades-old pattern in which the United States uses maritime power to assert dominance and as an instrument for regional control, from the Monroe Doctrine, to the Cold War naval quarantine in Cuba, and today's counter-terrorism framed interventions at sea. The current operations and the scale at which they are functioning fit the historical logic of U.S. dominance of their precious "backyard", where the lines between law enforcement and coercive geopolitics is purposefully blurred.

The comparative analysis of Colombia and Trinidad and Tobago just demonstrate the unequal pressures these operations have on the neighbours of Venezuela. Colombia, governed by an ideologically opposing government that has vehemently challenged the U.S. militarisation of the area, responded with condemnation and legal contestation. On the other hand, Trinidad and Tobago, guided by their energy security priorities, and who are heavily reliant on the U.S. sanction waivers to move forward with the Dragon Gas project, has to opt for quiet compliance, seeking stability whilst protecting its own economic interests. Their opposing responses show how maritime insecurity forces states into unbalanced bargaining positions: while cooperation promises short-term benefits but risks dependency, defiance invites

³⁰ Caribbean Maritime Security Strategy (2024).

retaliation or exclusion. Despite their diverging responses, one key vulnerability remains: the inability of state actors of the region to influence U.S. operational behaviour in their own literal backyards, in a crisis that is shaped by Washington's self-serving priorities rather than regional needs and legality.

This paper has argued that states possess limited tools to reshape this environment, but not nonexistent ones. The proposal for a joint request for an advisory opinion from ITLOS and the eventual creation of a Caribbean Maritime Governance Framework represents realistic and perhaps even politically viable paths towards legal clarity and control. Ultimately, this study looks to provide a central insight: maritime security in the Southern Caribbean is no longer a question of interception or criminal suppression. It has become a proxy for broader struggles of sovereignty and avoiding interventionism, as well as the uneven distribution of power in the region. How states continue to respond will shape the outcome of the current crisis, but the rules and norms governing the Caribbean for years to come. At a moment where historical precedents foretell the consequences of unchecked naval escalations, the region faces a dilemma: allow the trajectory to continue as it is, setting a new doctrine of compliance or else, or assert the authority over their region and prevent the perpetration of Cold War style coercions.

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