Much Ado About Nothing: The Proliferation Debate Post Venezuela

By
Soumyadeep Bidyanta

The morning of January 3rd, 2026, a U.S. Army delta-force team conducted an operation in Caracas, Venezuela, capturing President Maduro and his wife. The operation comes in the wake of constant threats of regime change in Venezuela made by President Trump. Trump accuses the Maduro regime of supporting cartels that supply fentanyl to America, a claim contested by many. The U.S. has previously doubted the legitimacy of the 2019 elections that brought back Maduro to power, viewing Maduro's presidency since as illegitimate and instead recognizing opposition leader Juan Guaido as Venezuela's interim president (although this recognition shifted in 2023).

While the coming days will clarify what will happen in Venezuela, security studies scholars are concerned with broader systemic implications of this operation. Specifically, what effect will this have on nuclear proliferation? While some may think actions like this (and the bombing of nuclear sites in Iran) will hasten proliferation, this article argues that this may not necessarily be the case.

Causes of Proliferation

The academic literature on nuclear proliferation has identified several factors that affect a state's decision, including security, technology, economic, and normative-institutional factors. The realist school argues that security is the foremost reason behind states' motivation to acquire nuclear weapons. Due to the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons, they are deemed a guarantor for a state's sovereignty. Nuclear weapons can deter both nuclear attacks and conventional attacks from more powerful states.

Concerns over sovereignty have been attributed to nuclear programs of several states in the past (including successful pursuits such as North Korea, Pakistan, and Israel, and unsuccessful pursuits such as Sweden, Taiwan, and Libya). As such, many security studies scholars and experts have argued that external intervention (like what is happening in Venezuela) would have systemic effects and hasten nuclear proliferation, potentially undoing the years of good done by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Regime.

Lessons from Iraq, Libya, and Ukraine: Would Nuclear Weapons Have Helped?

Those who argue regime change would accelerate proliferation often point toward Iraq, Libya, and Ukraine. In all of these, they argue, nuclear weapons would have prevented regime change (or an attempt at it in Ukraine's case). They further argue that other states would learn the lesson and seek a bomb to secure their state.

How true are these assertions? In Libya and Iraq, they had active nuclear weapons programs that they shut down due to external pressure (sanctions in Libya, the air campaign during the Gulf War in Iraq). It is likely that had they continued nuclear pursuit the United States would have more forcefully attempted to stop it. Ukraine is different; while it inherited nuclear weapons from

the Soviet Union, it never had direct control over them, and had it not given them up, it is unlikely they could have been used.

Another country proliferation pessimists point to is North Korea. They argue that because North Korea has nuclear weapons, the U.S. has not attempted regime change. This overlooks three facts. Firstly, North Korea only tested its first nuclear weapon in 2006. If nuclear weapons prevented an American invasion, why did the U.S. not invade North Korea prior to that? Secondly, it is likely the massive artillery force North Korea has aimed at Seoul, South Korea's capital and most populous city, has acted as a deterrent against external intervention, even as its effectiveness has declined over time. Lastly, China's support for North Korea, and possible involvement in any war over it, means that the U.S. is unlikely to engage in forced regime change even if North Korea never acquired nuclear weapons.

Changes in The Proliferation Landscape

It is unlikely the regime change operation in Venezuela will drastically change the proliferation landscape. Nuclear proliferation is an extremely complex decision with several factors. A single event, however important, is unlikely to tip over a state's decision to pursue nuclear weapons. Even if one accepts the realist argument that nuclear acquisition is primarily rooted in security fears, the Venezuela incident changes little. A state vulnerable to external intervention would not be more vulnerable after the incident, even if they feel the probability of intervention has increased. A state cannot draw any lesson that it already did not draw from Iraq, Libya, or Ukraine.

Not to mention, the required technological knowledge and industrial base for a nuclear weapons program is immense. Not every state has the capacity to initiate one. In fact, the intersection of states which have the capability to start a nuclear program and are in the crosshairs of the United States for regime change is small. Moreover, any state that decides it needs nuclear weapons to protect itself from external intervention must also contend with the fact that until it acquires them, it remains vulnerable (with the added incentive of an external power to conduct intervention before the potential proliferator acquires nuclear weapons).

Who is the Next Proliferator?

With Iran previously on the precipice of acquiring nuclear weapons for a while, it seemed only a matter of time before the Middle East devolved into a nuclear domino scenario. However, strikes on Iranian nuclear sites appear to have extended the timeline for Iran to successfully acquire a nuclear weapon, if not extinguished the possibility altogether. This also means states like Saudi Arabia, which were most likely to respond to Iranian acquisition with their own nuclear program, are now further from the cliff's edge.

U.S. strikes on Iranian nuclear sites have another systemic implication: they signal that the United States would not stand by and let someone violate the nonproliferation regime by acquiring nuclear weapons and is willing to back this with force. Despite the turbulent nature of international politics in the last half decade, there is no evidence the world is on the verge of a

new wave of nuclear proliferation. The barriers to a program (political, economic, and technical) remain high, while benefits remain uncertain. It is unlikely that many, if any, new states will embark on a serious nuclear weapons program in the near to medium future.

Soumyadeep Bidyanta is a doctoral candidate at the University of Cincinnati, conducting research on the causes of nuclear proliferation. The views expressed in this article are the author's own.