

## Empire's Echo: U.S. Piracy off the Coast of Venezuela

### News:

On 10 December 2025, the United States seized the oil tanker Skipper off the coast of Venezuela, boarding the vessel and redirecting its cargo of roughly 1.8 million barrels of Venezuelan crude oil to U.S. custody under a U.S. sanctions warrant that was about to expire. U.S. officials asserted this enforcement action was aimed at penalizing violations of long-standing sanctions tied to alleged illicit oil shipments. Venezuelan and Cuban governments condemned the move as “blatant theft” and “piracy,” with Cuba calling it “maritime terrorism” impacting its own energy supplies. The disruption has left more than 11 million barrels of Venezuelan oil effectively stuck at sea, as tankers and traders reassess the risks of carrying Venezuelan crude, forcing deeper discounts and contract renegotiations with key buyers such as China.

### Comment:

The U.S. seizure of the Skipper — which involved U.S. Coast Guard and military forces taking control of a Venezuelan oil cargo ship in international waters — is not a law-enforcement exercise; it reflects a calculated assertion of unilateral power over the economic lifeblood of a sovereign state, justified on the surface by sanctions but functioning in practice as a mechanism of geopolitical leverage. Historically, relations between Washington and Caracas have been shaped by periods of cooperation and domination driven by oil interests. Since the early 20th century, U.S. interests in Venezuelan petroleum have influenced policy, from supporting U.S. oil companies' dominance to responding to nationalizations and crises in the Venezuelan oil sector. U.S. policy documents reveal that ensuring access to petroleum supplies has long been a strategic objective underpinning US foreign policy towards Venezuela.

The 2025 Skipper seizure follows years of escalating pressure that include sweeping sanctions imposed since 2019 on Venezuela's state oil company PDVSA and its trading partners. These sanctions have consistently restricted Caracas's ability to engage in global oil markets, even when informal waivers were granted to maintain limited flows. The cumulative effect of sanctions has already eroded Venezuela's oil production capacity and revenue base; the Skipper seizure amplifies this harm by interrupting exports and chilling tanker traffic altogether. Traders have responded by suspending shipments and demanding steep discounts, effectively penalizing Venezuela's presence in international crude markets.

While the Trump administration frames these measures as targeting “illicit networks” or part of an anti-narcotics strategy, the broader pattern of military posturing and resource interdiction highlights that the objective extends well beyond isolating criminal actors. In recent months, the United States has significantly boosted its military presence in the Southern Caribbean and carried out strikes on vessels it claims are linked to drug trafficking — actions that have raised concerns even among

legal scholars about their extrajudicial nature and potential violation of international norms. These operations coincide with broader discussions within U.S. policy circles about overthrowing or at least weakening the Maduro government's hold on power.

Caracas controls one of the largest proven reserves of crude oil in the world, and its political alignment — especially its partnership with nations like China, Russia, and Cuba — threaten Washington's sphere of influence in what it considers its own backyard. Hence U.S. piracy and murder in the Caribbean resulting in the calculated hesitation of international tanker operators to load Venezuelan crude — fearful of further seizures, which places U.S. naval authority above the commercial rights of sovereign producers in order to reshape trade patterns to Washington's advantage.

Taken together, these developments reveal that the underlying motive behind the Skipper seizure and related measures is not solely about enforcing sanctions. They are part of a strategic campaign aimed at coercing economic and political concessions by exerting direct control over Venezuela's oil exports, thereby weakening the Maduro government's autonomy. In effect, Washington is using economic denial and military pressure as instruments of influence, a dynamic reminiscent of historical interventions where dominant powers leveraged resource dependence to shape the domestic politics of weaker states.

In practical terms, this means the Venezuelan people — whose livelihoods and national infrastructure are deeply tied to oil revenues — bear the consequences of a conflict in which their country's natural wealth becomes a bargaining chip in geopolitical maneuvering. Far from protecting sovereignty or international law, the Skipper seizure reinforces a world order in which dominant states unilaterally reinterpret legal frameworks to justify actions that serve their strategic interests while undermining the sovereign rights of others. Such unilateralism destabilizes regional markets, exacerbates economic hardship, and erodes norms that ought to govern peaceful coexistence among nations, but the only norm that the U.S. appreciates is the normalization of its interests as dominating to the exclusion of any other interest.

What we see of U.S. piracy in the Caribbean is just another extension of its bloody hand over the peoples of the world that it views as its own personal farm to exploit for itself as it pleases whatever the human costs.

﴿وَلَا تَحْسَبَنَّ اللَّهَ غَافِلًا عَمَّا يَعْمَلُ الظَّالِمُونَ إِنَّمَا يُؤَخِّرُهُمْ لِيَوْمٍ تَشْخَصُ فِيهِ الْأَبْصَارُ﴾

**“And think not that Allah is unaware of what the oppressors do. He only grants them respite until the day the eyes will stare in horror.” [Quran, 14:42]**

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by**

**Dr. Abdullah Robin**