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POLICY BRIEF

THE UNITED STATES AND VENEZUELA: BEYOND THE BILATERAL DIMENSION

NIZAR MESSARI

The U.S. military buildup in the Caribbean—the most significant since the Cuban Missile Crisis—comes at a moment when a new world order is taking shape, its contours still unclear, and in which the U.S. seeks to be more assertive in the Western Hemisphere. This disposition toward South America and the Caribbean was underscored by the recent publication of the new U.S. National Security Strategy, in which the Monroe Doctrine is explicitly invoked. This Policy Brief situates the developments involving the U.S. and Venezuela within a broader geopolitical context and outlines possible scenarios for the evolution of this standoff in order to clarify what is at stake in the region.

NIZAR MESSARI

INTRODUCTION

In recent weeks, a U.S. military buildup in the Caribbean has unfolded, punctuated by strikes against what the U.S. describes as drug traffickers' boats and accompanied by threatening rhetoric from President Donald Trump and senior members of his administration toward Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. This raises key questions: What are the objectives of such a military buildup? Is it aimed at a regime change in Venezuela? Or is Venezuela merely one piece in a larger geopolitical game?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to situate Venezuela within the broader set of objectives pursued by the U.S. in the Western Hemisphere and determine whether Venezuela is merely a component of a larger U.S. strategy in the region—as suggested by the newly released *National Security Strategy*—or whether it represents an objective in its own right. This analysis presents different possible scenarios for Venezuela in order to assess the risks and challenges facing the region.

Before doing so, however, a caveat is necessary. As noted in previous Policy Briefs, Mr. Maduro's regime differs from others in the region in that it lacks democratic legitimacy. In a region where most presidents are elected through transparent and democratic processes, Mr. Maduro is a clear outlier: his 2024 election was marred by illegalities and abuses, and his mandate cannot be considered legitimate. Moreover, the numerous human rights violations committed by Mr. Maduro and his government—including the deaths of peaceful demonstrators during violent crackdowns—further compound this illegitimacy.

Yet if the lack of legitimacy of Mr. Maduro's regime is not in question, the legitimacy of U.S. interference in the domestic politics of a sovereign state, and of efforts to force regime change, remains highly debatable. Recent history in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya has demonstrated the risks—and high costs—of such interventions.

What, then, are these developments in and around Venezuela an instance of? What do they reveal about the emerging world order into which we appear to be entering? To address this fundamental question, the focus here is on recent events in the Caribbean and their broader significance. These questions will be revisited in the conclusion of this Policy Brief.

EXPLAINING PRESIDENT TRUMP'S UNEXPECTED FOCUS ON THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

A preliminary remark is necessary: U.S. military maneuvers in the Caribbean and the accompanying threatening rhetoric toward Mr. Maduro's regime are unfolding at a time when President Trump has begun to demonstrate an unexpected interest in the Western Hemisphere—even before his inauguration. This is surprising, as the region was rarely mentioned during his 2024 presidential campaign and was only marginally referenced in his foreign policy plans.

Yet, following his reelection and even prior to his inauguration, Mr. Trump threatened to invade Panama and reoccupy the Panama Canal, imposed threats of high trade tariffs on Mexico (and Canada), and one of his first actions as President was to rename the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America. The particularly high tensions with Venezuela are also noteworthy, given that at the start of his second term Mr. Trump had established working

relations with Mr. Maduro, including negotiating the return to Venezuela of Venezuelan gang members imprisoned in the U.S. (Correal and McCreesh, 2025). What, then, explains the renewed relevance of the Western Hemisphere in President Trump's international agenda?

There are many causes behind the president's newfound interest in the Western Hemisphere. To begin with, in a shifting geopolitical landscape, the U.S. position as the sole remaining superpower is increasingly being challenged. Russia has invaded Ukraine, China has signaled interest in testing the ground for a potential annexation of Taiwan, and even Israel has often pursued its own objectives—sometimes forcing the hand of the U.S., including during Trump's second presidency.

Moreover, the recent G-20 Summit in Johannesburg, the BRICS+ summit in Rio de Janeiro, and the COP30 meeting in Belém (Brazil) have all highlighted a more assertive Global South—one that seeks to defend its own priorities and agendas rather than simply align with those of others. Together, these developments point to an increasingly complex international environment in which the old post-Cold War order appears to be decaying—if not obsolete—while a new world order has yet to fully emerge.

President Trump's reaction to these dynamics, as made clear in the new National Security Strategy, is to embrace the language of power and to impose his will—and that of the United States—on the rest of the world in general, and on the Western Hemisphere in particular (White House, 2025). No norms, no rules, no soft power. Hence the threat to annex not only the Panama Canal but also Greenland from Denmark—a NATO ally—and to argue for adding Canada—another NATO ally—as the 51st U.S. state.

In this sense, for a state seeking to project power on the global stage, demonstrated dominance within its own region becomes essential. Forcing regime change in Venezuela thus sends a clear message: the U.S. is prepared to deploy the necessary resources to achieve its objectives in the Western Hemisphere.

The relevance of the Western Hemisphere for the U.S. is made clearly evident in the new *National Security Strategy*, in which the Monroe Doctrine—discussed below—is explicitly mentioned, and the region is described as highly strategic for U.S. interests, from which external powers should be kept away. This renewed emphasis on the Western Hemisphere casts China's growing presence in the region in a different light. Indeed, China is South America's leading trade partner and Latin America's second-largest overall—after the U.S. By 2024, trade between China and Latin America exceeded US\$518 billion. Moreover, more than 20 Latin American and Caribbean states have signed agreements with China under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In terms of investments, China is also one of the region's most significant foreign investors: in 2024 alone, Chinese investments surpassed US\$8.5 billion. China has likewise become an important source of loans for many countries in the region. This massive Chinese presence has made President Trump particularly determined to counter Chinese influence in what he considers the U.S. backyard. Some have referred to this stance as the *Donroe Doctrine*—a blend of the original Monroe Doctrine and the president's first name, Donald—suggesting a Trump-specific corollary to the Monroe Doctrine.

When President Monroe articulated the doctrine bearing his name in 1823, the U.S. was a recently independent country, militarily weak but already intent on asserting the Western Hemisphere as its exclusive sphere of influence and warning European powers not to

intervene. Less than a century later, President Theodore Roosevelt formulated a corollary—often summarized as the “big stick”—which shifted the focus from external powers to Latin American states themselves.

Two hundred years later, President Trump’s own corollary is double-edged, targeting both external powers—this time China, rather than European empires—and regional governments. Yet the world has changed, and what worked under Theodore Roosevelt may face far greater constraints in the second decade of the twenty-first century, even if, as will be shown below, Mr. Trump has also sought to shape domestic politics in the Western Hemisphere in his own image.

Indeed, President Trump has also pursued a policy of supporting friendly rulers in the region. He attempted to influence elections in Argentina, Canada, and Honduras, and he sought to interfere in Brazil’s domestic politics. He also expressed warm support for President Nayib Bukele in El Salvador and President Daniel Noboa in Ecuador.

The outcomes of these attempts to shape domestic political landscapes have been mixed. In Argentina, the threat of suspending U.S. financial support in the event of an electoral defeat of the president and his allies likely contributed to the substantial midterm victory of President Javier Milei’s party. In Canada, however, Mr. Trump’s threat to make the country the 51st state—even if he dismissed the idea of doing so by force—provoked a rally-around-the-flag effect that helped the Liberal Party remain in power in the early elections held in April 2025.

In Honduras, U.S. support for the hard right-wing candidate Nasry Asfura may help secure his victory in the presidential elections held on November 30. In Brazil, however, Mr. Trump’s criticism of Supreme Court decisions concerning former President—and strong Trump ally—Jair Bolsonaro, along with U.S. sanctions against members of the court, triggered a rally-around-the-flag effect that ultimately strengthened President Lula. Lula’s popularity and performance ratings improved as he adopted a discourse centered on national sovereignty and resistance to foreign—i.e. U.S.—interference.

Similarly, in Ecuador, President Noboa—who held a referendum asking voters to decide on four issues, including the reopening of foreign military bases (strongly supported by the U.S. and President Trump)—was defeated on all the questions submitted to popular consultation.

Elsewhere in the region, with or without Mr. Trump’s interference, moderate and hard right-wing candidates are expected to win presidential elections in Chile, Peru, and Colombia, likely providing President Trump with a friendlier political environment across the Western Hemisphere.

The substantial natural resources of the region also play a prominent role in explaining Mr. Trump’s renewed interest in South America and the Caribbean. Several South American states are rich not only in oil and gas—including Venezuela’s vast reserves, allegedly the largest in the world—but also in rare earth minerals, which are crucial for high-tech industries. The U.S. and its industries not only seek to secure access to these resources but also aim to limit China’s access to them.

Drugs, drug trafficking, and the security threats they pose to U.S. society represent another important factor driving U.S. engagement in the region. President Trump has often emphasized the threat of fentanyl to U.S. communities, and cocaine imported from

South America has for decades been framed as an existential security challenge. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan declared a war on drugs; in the 1990s, the U.S. accused Colombian President Ernesto Samper of benefiting from drug-lord support and imposed heavy sanctions on him. In the early 2000s, the U.S. strongly backed what became known as Plan Colombia.

In short, the narrative portraying drugs—especially those originating in South America—along with drug trafficking and drug cartels, as major threats to U.S. security is not new. What is new is the deployment of this rhetoric against a president who is not linked to that threat, as has been the case with U.S. security discourse regarding Mr. Maduro, as discussed below.

There is also the fact that the U.S. secretary of state, Marco Rubio, has a particular and keen interest in the region. As a Republican Cuban-American senator from Florida, he speaks fluent Spanish and, during his time in the Senate, devoted considerable attention to the Western Hemisphere. His antagonistic positions toward the Cuban regime and its regional allies also positioned him as a harsh critic of Venezuela, both under Mr. Maduro and under his predecessor and mentor, Mr. Hugo Chavez.

Moreover, since May 2025, Mr. Rubio has combined the roles of Secretary of State and National Security Advisor to the President, making him a key figure within the president's entourage on foreign affairs in general, and on issues he considers especially important—such as South, Central American, and Caribbean affairs—in particular. As a matter of fact, during the first Trump presidency, Mr. Rubio was one of the staunchest supporters of the interim government of Mr. Juan Guaidó in Venezuela, underscoring his strong opposition to Mr. Maduro and rejection of his regime. In this sense, the elevation of Venezuela to the forefront of President Trump's international agenda under Mr. Rubio's watch should not come as a surprise.

In sum, the heightened strategic relevance of the Western Hemisphere in U.S. national security strategy, combined with the long-standing hostility toward Mr. Maduro's regime shared by both President Trump and Secretary of State Rubio, has made Venezuela a convenient target through which to signal how the U.S. intends to engage with the Western Hemisphere under President Trump.

A BRIEF RECENT HISTORY OF RELATIONS BETWEEN THE U.S. AND VENEZUELA

A brief historical overview of recent U.S.–Venezuela relations is necessary before exploring possible scenarios. The options available to Mr. Trump, short of a military intervention, are limited. During his first term, Mr. Maduro's reelection was already marred by illegalities and abuses. At that time, Mr. Trump chose to support an internal alternative, Mr. Juan Guaidó, who had been elected by the Venezuelan Chamber of Representatives as the country's legitimate president.

Many countries, including several EU members, key regional neighbors such as Brazil, and even Morocco, recognized Mr. Guaidó's legitimacy. However, to no avail: gradually but decisively, and with the crucial backing of the armed forces, Mr. Maduro prevailed, and the Guaidó alternative faded away. At that time, the legislature was dominated by the opposition; today, by contrast, it is controlled by allies of Mr. Maduro. This means that

no legitimate internal option exists. Ms. Maria Corina Machado, the 2025 Nobel Prize laureate, enjoys broad popularity and significant popular support, but she lacks electoral legitimacy—legitimacy she might acquire following a potential fall of Mr. Maduro, but which is not immediately available.

It is also important to note that Mr. Trump's narrative on Venezuela remains unclear—much like his approach to other international issues, in which he is known for playing his cards close to his chest and leaving both interlocutors and adversaries guessing about his true intentions. Officially, the stated objective of the U.S. campaign in the Caribbean—sometimes extending into the Pacific Ocean—is to significantly reduce the flow of drugs into the U.S. and protect American society from their harmful effects. This rationale explains why vessels suspected of carrying drugs are intercepted and destroyed long before reaching U.S. shores.

President Trump has also denied any intention to launch a ground operation in Venezuela aimed at overthrowing the Maduro regime. At the same time, however, he has announced that he had authorized covert CIA operations in Venezuela, while continuing to question the legitimacy of Mr. Maduro's government. More significantly, the U.S. has portrayed Mr. Maduro as the leader of a drug trafficking organization it has labeled the *Cartel de los Soles*.

Taken together, this framing implies that if Mr. Maduro is the head of a drug cartel, he constitutes a legitimate target for the U.S., and that his forcible removal could be justified as a national security option. The problem with this narrative is twofold. First, the *Cartel de los Soles* does not formally exist; it is largely a colloquial expression in Venezuela referring to corruption within the armed forces. Second, Venezuela is far from being a main source of drugs entering the U.S.; it is not a cocaine producer, and most Venezuelan drug exports are directed toward the European market rather than North American markets.¹

In short, not only are Mr. Trump's objectives in Venezuela unclear, but the means he intends to employ to achieve them are equally ambiguous. One consequence of this uncertainty is the proliferation of speculation regarding his real—or hidden—intentions. In this context, Venezuela's vast oil and gas reserves emerge as a plausible explanation for the current developments. President Trump may be seeking to secure privileged access to these resources, consistent with his broader approach to the Western Hemisphere discussed earlier. Whether he would tolerate the political survival of Mr. Maduro in pursuit of such access remains an open question, as Mr. Trump appears to be weighing the potential costs of such an operation against its anticipated rewards.

POSSIBLE FUTURE SCENARIOS

Given the above-mentioned lack of clarity surrounding President Trump's objectives in these developments—and bearing in mind that this ambiguity is more likely strategic and intentional than accidental—it is only possible to speculate about the likelihood of several potential scenarios. Before doing so, however, it is worth clarifying the facts.

1. The argument of President Trump according to which Mr. Maduro is a leader of a drug ring became more questionable as the Mr. Trump pardoned a former Honduran president, Juan Orlando Hernandez (2014-2022), who had been condemned in the U.S. to a 45-year jail sentence. Mr. Trump alluded to an undue persecution of Mr. Hernandez by the Biden administration, but the initial investigation against Mr. Hernandez started under Mr. Trump's first mandate, and was led, among others, by Emil Bove III, who became later one of the personal lawyers of Mr. Trump before he nominated him as an appeals court judge, which means that Mr. Trump trusts Mr. Bove.

First, it is important to emphasize that President Trump and his Secretary of State, Mr. Rubio, have been very explicit about their hostility toward Mr. Maduro and his regime, as well as their desire to see it removed. They attempted to achieve this objective during Mr. Trump's first presidential term but failed, and are now pursuing it once again during his second term.

Four successive developments underline the fact that the U.S. government is prepared to mobilize substantial resources to achieve this objective. In September 2025, the Pentagon announced that it would target boats in the Caribbean suspected of carrying drugs ultimately destined for the U.S. These airstrikes were expanded in October to the Eastern Pacific. By early December 2025, more than 20 strikes had been carried out, resulting in approximately 90 fatalities (Schmitt, 2025). The legality of these strikes was questioned both within the U.S. and internationally, but this did not deter the Trump administration from continuing them.

By mid-October 2025, the U.S. president authorized the C.I.A. to conduct covert operations in Venezuela and announced that he was considering launching strikes on Venezuelan territory against narcotraffickers (Barnes and Pager, 2025). The military buildup continued with the Pentagon's announcement that the *Gerald R. Ford*—the U.S. Navy's largest and most advanced aircraft carrier—would depart the Mediterranean and head to the Caribbean Sea.

With its arrival near the Venezuelan coast, by mid-November 2025 the U.S. had more than 15,000 troops stationed in the area under what the Pentagon termed *Operation Southern Spear*, the largest U.S. naval operation in the Caribbean since the emblematic Cuban Missile crisis of 1962 (Schmitt, 2025). Finally, on November 29, Mr. Trump informed the world that Venezuelan airspace was closed and therefore unsafe for flights to, from, or over Venezuela (Barnes and Cooper, 2025). In other words, the U.S. unilaterally declared a no-fly zone over Venezuela, a sovereign state without any international legal mandate to do so.

Yet despite these clear actions, which underscore a declared hostility toward Mr. Maduro's regime, President Trump has repeatedly stated that he does not intend to invade Venezuela militarily, and even less to occupy the country. He has also consistently downplayed the imminence of any military action. More significantly, he has spoken by phone with Mr. Maduro since the start of the military buildup (Haberman and Kurmanaev, 2025).

How, then, should these seemingly contradictory signals be interpreted? Is it rational to deploy such a large number of troops and military assets to a region merely to make a threat credible, without ever intending to use them? Could Mr. Maduro remain in power—would Mr. Trump ultimately walk away if he secures tangible economic objectives, leaving Mr. Maduro in place, even if only temporarily?

ALTERNATIVE POTENTIAL SCENARIOS

The first possible scenario is that the U.S. and Venezuela enter into negotiations that would allow them to resolve the stalemate peacefully. As noted above, there has been direct communication between Mr. Trump and Mr. Maduro, and several back channels have reportedly been activated to maintain ongoing contact (O Globo, 2025). President Trump

has met resistance from his MAGA supporters regarding a foreign military intervention;² if he can avoid it through negotiations while securing substantial gains, this would represent an acceptable outcome for him.

But what would Mr. Trump consider to be “substantial gains”? Would anything short of the fall of Mr. Maduro’s regime suffice? Would guaranteed access to Venezuelan oil and gas be enough? This latter option appears unlikely. What other concessions, then, would Mr. Trump expect from Mr. Maduro? Would he accept leaving Mr. Maduro in place for a few months while a transition of power unfolds?

Conversely, what are Mr. Maduro’s objectives? Would he accept relinquishing power? What guarantees would he require to do so, particularly if he were to remain in Venezuela? Some sources suggest that he would seek to retain control or influence over the armed forces, but this would almost certainly be unacceptable both to the Venezuelan opposition and to Mr. Trump. Would Mr. Maduro instead agree to life in exile? And how long would he want a transition to last?

It is also important to recall that Mr. Maduro has little credibility when it comes to honoring his commitments. Under the Barbados Agreement between the Maduro government and the Venezuelan opposition—mediated by several international actors, including the U.S. and Brazil, and signed in October 2023—Mr. Maduro pledged to hold open, transparent, and competitive presidential elections in 2024 (Ministério das Relações Exteriores, 2023). He failed to do so: opposition candidates, most notably Ms. Machado, were barred from running, and many of the commitments necessary to ensure free and fair elections were ultimately abandoned. What guarantees, then, would the U.S. have that, once the military buildup is dismantled, Mr. Maduro would honor his promises this time?

In sum, Mr. Trump’s and Mr. Maduro’s positions appear too far apart for mediation to succeed or for a credible compromise to emerge. It is unlikely that Mr. Trump would settle for anything short of Mr. Maduro stepping down, just as it is unlikely that Mr. Maduro sees sufficient incentives at this stage to relinquish power *voluntarily*.

A second possible scenario would involve U.S. forces carrying out strikes within Venezuelan territory and targeting selected infrastructure in order to signal to the Venezuelan military that, should it continue to support Mr. Maduro, the damage inflicted on Venezuela could become far more severe. The objective of such limited yet significant strikes would thus be to encourage more armed forces to turn against Mr. Maduro and abandon him, in the interest of their own survival and the preservation of the country. At present, Mr. Maduro appears to retain firm control over the armed forces, and this scenario does not, as of early December, appear particularly plausible.

A variant of the previous scenario would involve the combined effect of substantial pressure on the Venezuelan economy, CIA covert actions within Venezuela and sustained U.S. military strikes against selected targets—identified in part through those covert operations—inside Venezuelan territory. The aim would be to erode the stamina of the armed forces and their resolve to remain loyal to Mr. Maduro, thereby weakening his grip on the military and ultimately leading to his fall. Such a scenario would entail a limited U.S. military presence on Venezuelan soil and would seek to reduce the risk of U.S. forces becoming entangled in

2. MAGA stands for « Make America Great Again », which is the loose political movement led by Mr. Trump and that supported him in his election bids. Leading voices in the movement reject supporting U.S. foreign military interventions, and their positions have been made public and clear.

local politics and internal disputes.

Although this scenario may appear to involve lower risks and a higher probability of success, it carries a major uncertainty common to such operations: while it may be clear how they begin, there is no guarantee that they will unfold—or end—as intended. The example of Mr. Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Mr. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 illustrate the significant risks inherent in interventions initially conceived as limited, targeted, and swift. It is true that the operation that removed Mr. Noriega from power in Panama in December 1989 was relatively quick and successful, but Venezuela is far more complex than Panama, and the Venezuelan armed forces are far better prepared and cohesive than the Panamanian military ever was at the time.

A final possible scenario would involve a limited but significant invasion of Venezuela. This option is considered by the U.S. military to be highly risky, as it would likely entail a sustained U.S. military presence in Venezuela over a relatively long period (NYTimes 1 and 2). It would also create strong incentives for a massive Venezuelan exodus into neighboring countries, further destabilizing the region. In addition, such an intervention could dismantle existing state controls over drug traffickers.

Not only do the lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq offer little encouragement—given the prolonged engagements and high risks involved—but the Venezuelan army's level of preparedness, along with the presence of other armed groups aligned with Mr. Maduro, is viewed by the U.S. military as a major obstacle to achieving rapid and effective territorial control. This is without even considering the previously noted resistance within the MAGA movement to such a military involvement. Overall, this scenario appears to be as unlikely as the first.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While direct negotiations and a peaceful solution (scenario 1), and a military invasion of Venezuela (scenario 4) seem unlikely, a very limited but significant and targeted U.S. military presence in and around Venezuela combined with different types of economic and political pressure and covert CIA action in that country (scenario 3) seem to be the most plausible scenario over the next few weeks.

More broadly, we are witnessing a U.S. military buildup off the Venezuelan coast aimed at provoking regime change in Venezuela, with little regard for the principle of sovereignty. This buildup includes airstrikes against boats in international waters—actions deemed illegal by most legal observers. It also involves the establishment of a no-fly zone similar to those imposed by the U.N. in Iraq, Bosnia and Herzegovina, or Kosovo, to name but a few. The crucial difference, however, is that those no-fly zones were established through U.N. resolutions, whereas the current one has been unilaterally declared by the U.S. against a sovereign foreign state.

Although President Trump is not expected to abide by U.N.-based norms, it is worth recalling that the only internationally recognized condition under which a state's sovereignty may be violated is the norm of the *Responsibility to Protect*. This norm has not been evoked—though it might offer some legal cover, given that Mr. Maduro's election was marred by illegality and his regime has engaged in systematic and violent human rights abuses. Yet U.S. officials have not referred to this norm. Instead, the justifications advanced are the protection of the U.S. from drugs and the need to remove Mr. Maduro from power.

This situation in the Caribbean illustrates with striking clarity the “brave new world” towards which we appear to be moving: a world order without norms or rules, in which power—military power, to be more precise—becomes the primary argument. In such an order, each major military power would assert its own exclusive sphere of influence, while multilateralism and rule-based governance fall increasingly out of favor.

The newly released U.S. *National Security Strategy* indicates that the Western Hemisphere has become a high priority for U.S. interests, but this heightened priority must be understood through the prism of power rather than of shared interests. Global South states—both within the Western Hemisphere and beyond—may wish to challenge and reject such a world order, but the question remains: how can their voices be heard? This is the dilemma that the current developments in Venezuela illustrate so clearly.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



NIZAR MESSARI

Nizar Messari is Associate Professor at Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane (AUI), Morocco. He served as Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, and then as Vice President for Academic Affairs at the same university. He was Rice Scholar at Yale University's MacMillan Center during the academic year 2021-22. Before returning to Morocco in January 2010, he was Assistant Professor at PUC-Rio, Brazil. He has published in journals such as Security Dialogue, International Studies Perspective, Refugee Survey Quarterly, The Journal of North African Studies, Cultures & Conflits (in French), Contexto Internacional and Política Externa (both in Portuguese) as well as in edited volumes in English, Portuguese and French. He is the co-author with João Pontes Nogueira of Teoria das Relações Internacionais – Correntes e Debates (Rio de Janeiro: Elsevier/Campus, 2005). He is finalizing a book on security studies from a southern and critical perspective, with a focus on the so-called Arab world.

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Policy Center for the New South

Rabat Campus of Mohammed VI Polytechnic University,
Rocade Rabat Salé - 11103
Email : contact@policycenter.ma
Phone : +212 (0) 537 54 04 04
Fax : +212 (0) 537 71 31 54

www.policycenter.ma



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