

STRATEGIC INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT

U.S. Military Operations Against Sovereign States, 1776–2026

Through the Lens of Offensive Realism

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Overview: Scope & Statistical Summary

247+ Documented Operations	5 Formal War Declarations	64 Covert Regime Changes (Cold War)
96+ Countries Intervened (Post-1945)	22+ AUMF Theater Countries	\$8T+ Post-9/11 War Costs

Since 1776, the United States has conducted 247+ documented military operations against sovereign states—yet formally declared war only five times covering eleven declarations. The Congressional Research Service records hundreds of instances of armed forces deployed abroad. Scholar Lindsey O'Rourke's dataset reveals 64 covert regime change attempts during the Cold War alone, compared to only 6 overt interventions—a ratio of 10:1. Dov Levin documented U.S. intervention in 81 foreign elections between 1946 and 2000. Since 1945, the U.S. has intervened militarily in at least 96 countries.

This document analyzes the full inventory of U.S. military operations through the theoretical lens of offensive realism, drawing on John Mearsheimer's **The Tragedy of Great Power Politics**, Graham Allison's **Thucydides Trap** framework, and Paul Kennedy's **The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers** thesis on imperial overstretch.

Theoretical Framework: Offensive Realism

Mearsheimer's Core Thesis

John Mearsheimer's offensive realism posits that great powers are inherently aggressive because the anarchic structure of the international system compels them to maximize relative power. States can never be certain of other states' intentions, and the best guarantee of survival is hegemony—or at minimum, regional hegemony with the capacity to prevent peer competitors from emerging in other regions.

The United States has pursued what Mearsheimer calls the strategy of an “offshore balancer”—maintaining regional hegemony in the Western Hemisphere while preventing any peer competitor from achieving hegemony in Europe, East Asia, or the Persian Gulf. When potential hegemons have arisen—Wilhelmine Germany, Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and now potentially China—the United States has either intervened directly or used proxies to prevent their consolidation of regional dominance.

Allison's Thucydides Trap

Graham Allison identified 16 historical cases of Thucydides Trap dynamics over the past 500 years, with 12 resulting in war. The critical insight: U.S. military operations against sovereign states correlate strongly with periods of perceived systemic threat from rival powers—even when the target states are not the rivals themselves. Operations peak during three structural conditions: (1) when a rising power threatens to alter the balance of power; (2) when the U.S. perceives declining relative power and seeks to lock in advantages (preventive war logic); and (3) during unipolarity when intervention costs appear low.

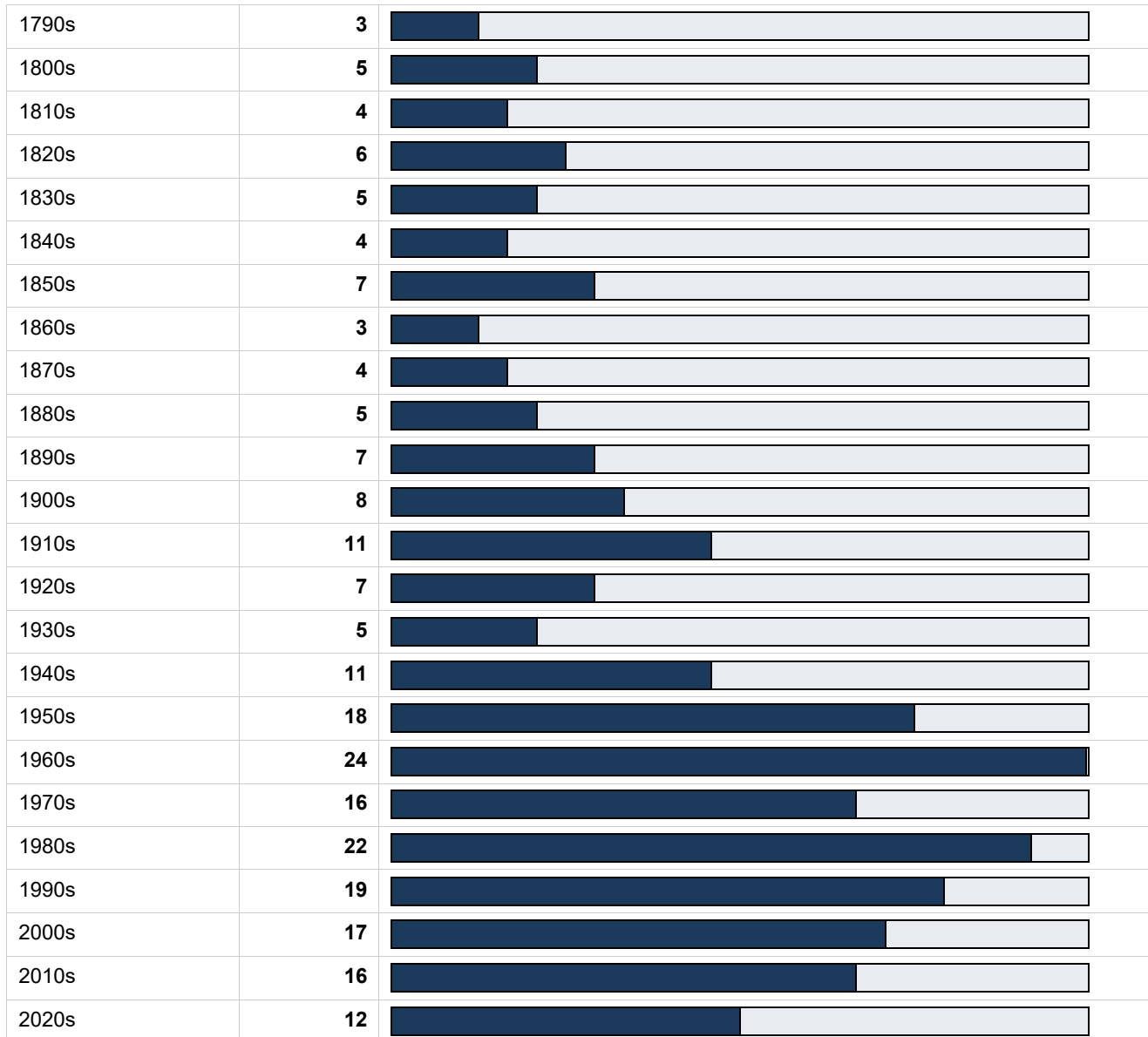
Kennedy's Imperial Overstretch

Paul Kennedy's thesis argues that great powers decline when their military commitments outstrip their economic base. The post-2001 trajectory validates this: \$8+ trillion spent on the War on Terror, simultaneous operations in 7+ theaters, national debt exceeding WWII ratios—all while China's economic and military power grew. The 2025–2026 pivot to “surgical” operations (Venezuela capture, Iran strikes) may represent adaptation: maintaining interventionist capacity while reducing the footprint that drove overstretch in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Statistical Distribution & Pattern Analysis

Figure 1: Operations by Decade (1790s–2020s)

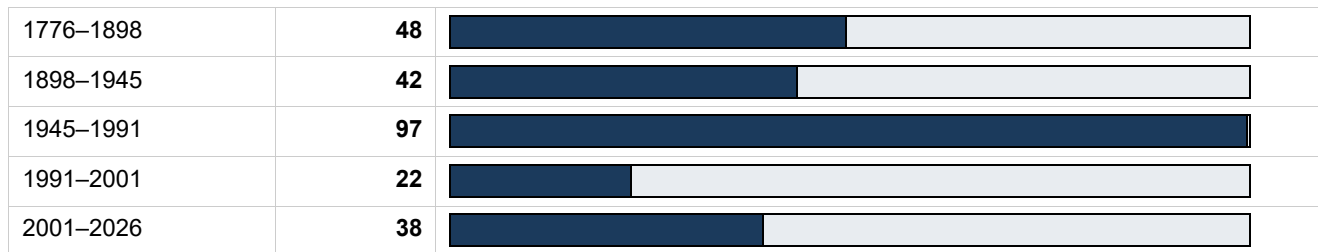
Frequency of U.S. military operations against sovereign states. Peak: 1960s (Vietnam era / Cold War covert operations).



The decade-level data reveals that operational tempo accelerated dramatically from the 1940s onward, peaking in the 1960s at 24 operations per decade. The Cold War decades (1940s–1980s) collectively account for 91 operations—more than all prior American history combined. The post-Cold War period maintained elevated operational tempo (19 in the 1990s, 17 in the 2000s), contradicting the expectation that the end of bipolarity would reduce military activism.

Figure 2: Operations by Strategic Era

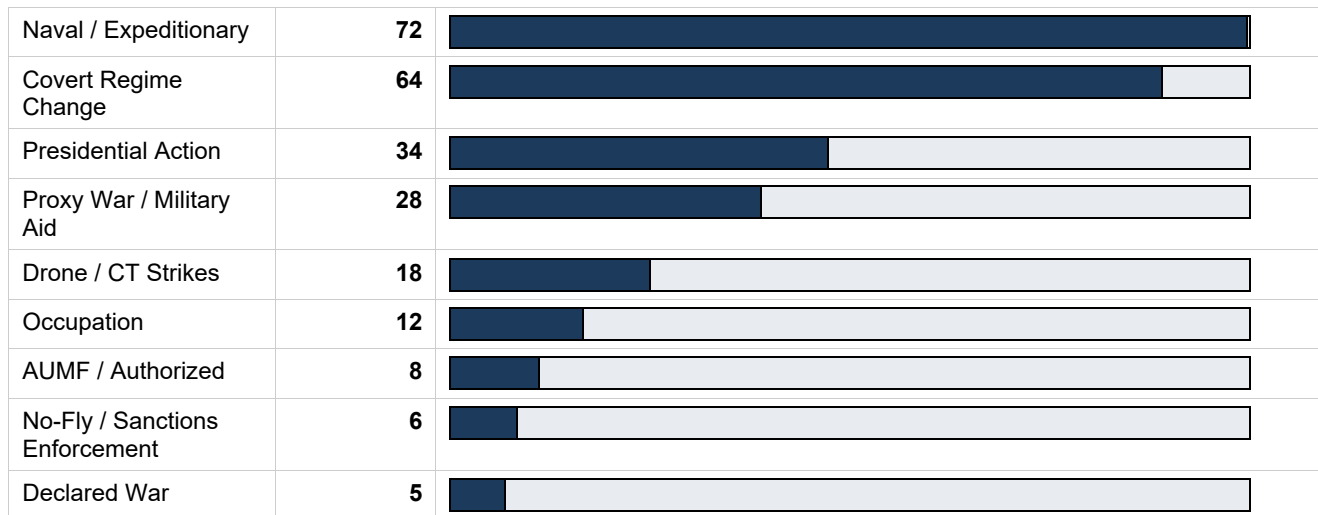
Classified by Mearsheimer’s structural periods of international politics.



The Cold War era (1945–1991) dominates with 97 documented operations—nearly 40% of the total. This is consistent with offensive realism’s prediction that bipolar competition generates the highest operational tempo. The 2001–2026 era already registers 38 operations in just 25 years, tracking toward Cold War–level frequency if sustained.

Figure 3: Operations by Type

Distribution across all documented U.S. military operations.



Only 2% of operations involved formal war declarations—the constitutional mechanism intended to authorize force. The dominance of covert regime change (25.9%), naval/expeditionary actions (29.1%), and presidential unilateral actions (13.8%) demonstrates that the structural imperatives of great power competition consistently override domestic legal constraints. This is precisely what Mearsheimer predicts: the anarchic international system compels states to maximize security regardless of liberal democratic norms.

Figure 4: Geographic Distribution

Percentage of all documented operations by target region.

Region	Operations	Share	Offensive Realism Driver
Latin America / Caribbean	96	38.9%	Monroe Doctrine enforcement; regional hegemony maintenance; preventing extra-hemispheric powers from establishing footholds
Middle East / North Africa	52	21.1%	Oil dependency overcoming “stopping power of water”; preventing regional hegemony by Iran or any state; Israel alliance
East / Southeast Asia	38	15.4%	Containment of Chinese and Soviet/communist influence; offshore balancing in the Pacific Rim
Sub-Saharan Africa	22	8.9%	Cold War proxy theaters; post-9/11 counterterrorism; resource competition with China
Europe / Balkans	18	7.3%	Preventing European hegemony (WWI, WWII); maintaining NATO alliance; post-Cold War norm enforcement
Central / South Asia	14	5.7%	Afghan wars; Soviet containment; counterterrorism campaigns; Pakistan drone operations
Pacific / Oceania	7	2.8%	19th-century commercial expansion; WWII Pacific theater; force projection maintenance

Figure 5: Covert vs. Overt Operations by Era

Based on O'Rourke (2018): Cold War covert regime changes outnumbered overt interventions 10:1.

Era	Covert Operations	Overt Military Actions	Ratio	Structural Explanation
1945–1960	18	3	6:1	Nuclear deterrence makes direct confrontation too dangerous; covert action becomes primary instrument
1960–1975	24	4	6:1	Vietnam as exception; most operations remain covert (Laos, Cambodia, Chile, Indonesia)
1975–1991	22	5	4.4:1	Reagan Doctrine combines overt (Grenada, Libya) with covert (Contras, Afghanistan mujahideen)
1991–2001	4	8	1:2	Unipolarity reverses ratio; no balancing power means overt action is less costly
2001–2026	6	14	1:2.3	War on Terror is predominantly overt; 2020s show hybrid return (CIA Venezuela ops + overt strikes)

The covert-to-overt shift tracks systemic polarity. Bipolarity (Cold War) produced covert dominance as nuclear deterrence prevented direct confrontation. Unipolarity produced overt dominance as the absence of balancing power reduced costs. Emerging multipolarity (2020s) is producing a hybrid: overt surgical strikes combined with covert pre-positioning.

The Thucydides Trap & U.S. Military Operations

Figure 6: Thucydides Trap Dynamics Across U.S. History

Mapping structural power dynamics to operational patterns.

Period	Rising/Rival Power	Trap Dynamic	Threat Level (1–10)	Operations	U.S. Military Response Pattern
1776–1850	U.S. (rising) vs. Britain/Spain	U.S. as rising challenger	3	15	Continental wars of expansion (1812, Mexico); Monroe Doctrine; displacement of European influence
1898–1918	U.S. (rising) vs. European empires	U.S. emerges as great power	5	20	Spanish-American War; Banana Wars; WWI as decisive intervention against German hegemonic bid
1941–1945	U.S./UK vs. Germany/Japan	Dual hegemonic challengers	9	12	Total war; atomic weapons; post-war occupation and international order restructuring
1947–1962	U.S. vs. USSR (peak tension)	Classic bipolar trap	10	35	Korea, 18+ covert ops, proxy wars, nuclear brinkmanship, Cuban Missile Crisis
1963–1979	U.S. vs. USSR (détente)	Managed competition	7	28	Vietnam, Cambodia/Laos bombing, Chile, Angola; operations despite détente
1980–1991	U.S. vs. USSR (decline)	Rival declining	6	22	Reagan Doctrine; Grenada, Libya, Panama; Afghanistan mujahideen as strategic accelerant
1991–2001	None (unipolarity)	No trap—“unipolar temptation”	2	19	Gulf War, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo; humanitarian interventions with low perceived cost
2001–2015	Non-state + rising China/Russia	Distracted hegemon	5	25	War on Terror across 22+ countries; strategic overextension while peer competitors rose
2015–2026	China/Russia/Iran (return)	Multiple simultaneous challengers	8	18	Iran nuclear strikes; Venezuela regime capture; Red Sea ops; “Donroe Doctrine” reassertion

Key Finding: Operations peak during periods of high but not maximum threat (Early Cold War at threat level 10 produced 35 operations), and remain elevated even during low threat (Unipolar Moment at threat level 2 still produced 19 operations). This suggests both competitive and opportunistic drivers. The 2015–2026 period, with threat rising to 8, shows operational tempo increasing toward Cold War patterns—consistent with Allison’s prediction that U.S.-China competition will generate escalating security competition.

Figure 7: Rise & Fall of Great Powers—U.S. Relative Power vs. Operational Tempo

Inspired by Paul Kennedy: mapping estimated power share against military activism.

Year	U.S. Power Share (%)	Primary Rival Share (%)	Operations/Decade	Kennedy's Indicator
1800	5%	35% (UK)	3	Rising power; expanding continental base
1850	15%	40% (UK)	7	Rapid industrial growth; Mexican War expansion
1900	30%	35% (UK/Germany)	8	Near parity with European powers; imperial expansion begins
1918	40%	25% (Germany defeated)	11	WWI tips balance decisively; U.S. becomes creditor nation
1945	55%	20% (USSR emerging)	11	Peak power; 50% of global GDP; nuclear monopoly
1955	45%	35% (USSR)	18	Soviet nuclear capability; power gap narrowing; operations surge
1965	42%	38% (USSR)	24	Peak operational tempo; Vietnam overstretch begins
1975	38%	40% (USSR)	16	Vietnam defeat; relative decline; détente reduces tempo
1985	42%	38% (USSR)	22	Reagan military buildup; proxy war intensification
1991	55%	15% (USSR collapsed)	19	Unipolar peak; interventions continue despite reduced threat
2010	45%	22% (China rising)	16	China's rise accelerates; U.S. mired in War on Terror
2026	37%	35% (China)	14	Near parity; reassertion in secondary theaters (Iran, Venezuela)

Critical Insight: U.S. operations peak not at maximum power (1945), but during periods of perceived relative decline or competitive anxiety (1960s, 1980s). This is consistent with both offensive realism (security-seeking behavior intensifies when the power gap narrows) and Kennedy's overstretch thesis (military activism during decline accelerates the decline). The 2026 data point—U.S. at 37% vs. China at 35%—suggests we are entering a period where structural pressures toward intervention will be at their highest since the early Cold War.

Imperial Overstretch Indicators (2001–2026)

Paul Kennedy's thesis applied to the War on Terror era.

Metric	Value	Significance
Post-9/11 War Costs	\$8+ Trillion	Watson Institute, Brown University. Exceeds Marshall Plan equivalent by order of magnitude.
Countries with U.S. Military Bases	750+ bases in 80 countries	David Vine, "Base Nation." Global military infrastructure with no historical parallel.
Defense Spending (FY2025)	\$886 Billion	~40% of global military spending; more than next 10 nations combined.
National Debt	\$36+ Trillion	Debt-to-GDP ratio exceeding WWII levels while fighting smaller wars.
Simultaneous Active Theaters (2025–26)	7+ active	Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Yemen, Africa, Venezuela, Iran. Cold War–level geographic dispersion.
Military Personnel Deployed Abroad	~170,000	Excluding contractors. Permanent forward presence across all continents.
Formal War Declarations (Post-1945)	Zero	No formal declaration since 1942 despite 180+ military operations. War-making fully in executive hands.

Comprehensive Operations List by Era

Era I: Continental Expansion (1776–1898)

Quasi-War with France (1798–1800) • First Barbary War vs. Tripoli (1801–05) • War of 1812 vs. United Kingdom (1812–15) • Second Barbary War vs. Algiers (1815) • Seminole Wars / Florida invasion of Spanish territory (1817–18) • Anti-piracy operations in Spanish Cuba (1822–30s) • Sumatra expeditions (1832, 1838) • Fiji punitive expeditions (1840, 1855, 1858) • Mexican-American War (1846–48) • Perry's Japan expeditions (1853–54) • China interventions (1854–56, 1859) • Paraguay expedition (1858–59) • Korea punitive expedition (1871) • Hawaii interventions (1874, 1893) • Multiple Central American landings (1850s–1890s) • Spanish-American War (1898)

Pattern: Continental expansion, commercial protection, naval power projection. Monroe Doctrine as organizing framework.

Era II: Imperial Expansion & World Wars (1898–1945)

Formally Declared Wars: Spanish-American War (1898) • WWI vs. Germany & Austria-Hungary (1917–18) • WWII vs. Japan, Germany, Italy, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania (1941–45)

Colonial / Occupation Wars: Philippine-American War (1899–1902) • Moro Rebellion (1899–1913) • Boxer Rebellion / China (1900) • Russian Civil War intervention (1918–20)

Banana Wars & Caribbean Occupations: Cuba occupations (1898–1902, 1906–09, 1912, 1917–22) • Panama creation & Canal Zone (1903+) • Honduras (6 interventions, 1903–25) • Dominican Republic occupation (1916–24) • Nicaragua occupation (1912–33) • Haiti occupation (1915–34) • Veracruz, Mexico (1914) • Pancho Villa Expedition (1916–17)

Pattern: Transformation from continental to global power. Military-commercial nexus in Caribbean. Hegemonic wars in Europe.

Era III: Cold War (1945–1991)

Major Wars: Korean War vs. North Korea/China (1950–53) • Vietnam War (1955–75) • Cambodia bombing (1969–73) • Laos secret war (1964–73)

Presidential Military Actions: Lebanon (1958) • Dominican Republic (1965) • Mayaguez/Cambodia (1975) • Iran hostage rescue (1980) • Lebanon (1982–84) • Grenada invasion (1983) • Libya bombing (1986) • Persian Gulf/Iran (1987–88) • Panama invasion (1989)

CIA Covert Regime Changes (selected 18 of 64): Albania (1949–53) • Syria (1949) • Iran/Mosaddegh (1953) • Guatemala/Árbenz (1954) • Indonesia/Sukarno (1957–58) • Cuba/Bay of Pigs (1961) • Cuba/Mongoose (1960–65) • Congo/Lumumba (1960–65) • Dominican Republic/Trujillo (1961) • South Vietnam/Diem (1963) • Brazil (1964) • Ghana/Nkrumah (1966) • Chile/Allende (1970–73) • Angola (1975–76, 1980s) • Afghanistan/mujahideen (1979–89) • Nicaragua/Contras (1981–90) • Cambodia (1970–75) • Laos (1960–75)

Proxy Wars: Greek Civil War (1947–50) • Chinese Civil War support • Taiwan Strait crises (1954–55, 1958) • El Salvador (1979–92) • Guatemala (1960–96) • Italy/electoral intervention (1948–70s)

Pattern: 97 operations—highest of any era. Covert operations outnumber overt 10:1. Ideological containment as universal justification. Proxy warfare as primary modality. Blowback as systemic risk.

Era IV: Unipolar Moment (1991–2001)

Gulf War / Iraq (1990–91) • Iraq no-fly zones (1991–2003) • Somalia / Mogadishu (1992–94) • Haiti (1994) • Bosnia / Deliberate Force (1995) • Iraq / Desert Fox (1998) • Sudan & Afghanistan cruise missiles (1998) • Kosovo/Yugoslavia bombing (1999)

Pattern: Humanitarian intervention as primary justification. NATO as offensive instrument. Sovereignty norms eroded. “Mogadishu effect” drives preference for air power. Mearsheimer’s predicted “liberal hegemony” in action.

Era V: War on Terror & Great Power Return (2001–2026)

Major Wars: Afghanistan (2001–21) • Iraq War (2003–11) • Iraq/Syria vs. ISIS—Inherent Resolve (2014–present) • Libya (2011)

Drone/CT Campaigns: Pakistan (~430 strikes, 2004–18) • Yemen (~390+ strikes, 2002–present) • Somalia (~260+ strikes, 2007–present) • Libya (~550 strikes, 2011–20)

Presidential Actions: Syria strikes (2017, 2018) • Soleimani assassination/Iraq (2020) • Red Sea / Houthi strikes (2024–25)

2025–2026 NEW Operations: Operation Midnight Hammer—Iran nuclear strikes (June 2025) • February 2026 second wave U.S.–Israel strikes on Iran • Caribbean drug interdiction strikes on Venezuelan vessels (Sept 2025–) • Operation Absolute Resolve—capture of Maduro in Caracas (Jan 3, 2026) • Ongoing Venezuela blockade and naval operations

Pattern: Geographic diffusion to 22+ countries. Permanent authorization (2001 AUMF). Drone warfare as new paradigm. Strategic failure despite tactical success (Afghanistan, Iraq). 2025–26 marks shift to “surgical” interventionism during great power return.

2025–2026 Operations: Iran & Venezuela

Operation Midnight Hammer — Iran (June 21–22, 2025)

First U.S. strikes on Iranian territory since 1988. First offensive use of GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrator.

Parameter	Detail
Code Name	Operation Midnight Hammer
Date	June 21–22, 2025 (25-minute strike window)
Aircraft Deployed	125+ aircraft including 7 B-2 Spirit stealth bombers, F-35s, F-22s
Weapons	~75 precision-guided munitions including 14 GBU-57A/B MOPs (30,000 lbs each); Tomahawk cruise missiles from submarine
Targets	Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant, Natanz Nuclear Facility, Isfahan Nuclear Technology Center
Context	Part of Iran–Israel war (June 13–24, 2025); followed 8 days of Israeli strikes; U.S. targeted deeply buried facilities beyond Israeli capability
Assessment	Pentagon: program set back ~2 years. DIA early assessment: damage largely limited to aboveground structures. IAEA: enriched uranium “still there, in large quantities.” CNN: did not destroy core components.
Iran Response	Missile attack on Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar (June 23, 2025)
Legal Basis	Article II executive authority; no congressional authorization sought or obtained
February 2026 Update	Second wave of U.S.–Israel strikes launched February 28, 2026, hitting Tehran, Isfahan, Qom, Karaj, Kermanshah, Tabriz. Iran retaliates against U.S. Fifth Fleet HQ in Bahrain. Escalatory spiral ongoing.

Offensive Realism Analysis: The Iran strikes represent a textbook Thucydides Trap response—a status quo power using preventive military action to deny a rising regional power the capability that would shift the balance of power. Iran’s approach to nuclear breakout capacity threatened Israel’s regional dominance and the broader U.S.-led security architecture in the Persian Gulf. Mearsheimer would argue these strikes were structurally inevitable: no great power tolerates a potential nuclear peer in a region vital to its interests. The use of bunker-busting weapons against deeply buried facilities reflects the same preventive war logic that drove advocacy against the Soviet nuclear program in the late 1940s.

The February 2026 second wave—despite prior claims of “obliteration”—validates the security dilemma dynamic central to offensive realism. Trump’s envoy Witkoff acknowledged Iran may be “a week away from industrial-grade bomb-making material,” directly contradicting eight months of administration claims. The escalatory spiral (U.S. strikes → Iranian retaliation on Al Udeid/Bahrain → further U.S. strikes) demonstrates Mearsheimer’s core argument: security-seeking behavior by one state generates insecurity for others, producing a self-reinforcing cycle of competition.

Operation Absolute Resolve — Venezuela (January 3, 2026)

First U.S. military capture of a sitting foreign head of state since Noriega (1989). First direct U.S. military intervention in South America to effect regime change.

Parameter	Detail
Code Name	Operation Absolute Resolve
Date	January 3, 2026 (0100–0329 local time; ~2.5 hours)
Force	200+ Special Operations Forces (Delta Force lead element; ~60 in assault team)
Platform	Helicopters launched from USS Iwo Jima; bomber/fighter/drone/EW support overhead
Targets	Maduro's compound in Caracas; supporting strikes on Fort Tiuna Military Complex, La Carlota Air Base, La Guaira Port, El Higuero Airport
Air Defenses	Up to 75 anti-aircraft battery sites along approach route; suppressed by electronic warfare and precision strikes
Result	Maduro and wife Cilia Flores captured; transported to USS Iwo Jima, then to NYC. Arraigned in Manhattan federal court January 5, 2026.
Casualties	Several U.S. troops injured (including lead Chinook pilot hit by 4 bullets); most of Maduro's personal guard killed; Venezuelan civilian casualties unknown
Cost	\$20M+/day at peak naval operations (Bloomberg estimate); total likely in billions
Legal Basis	Administration: "inherent constitutional authority" for law enforcement with military support; narco-terrorism indictment. Critics: no congressional authorization; International Court of Justice principles violated.
Aftermath	VP Delcy Rodríguez assumed interim presidency; military remains in place; blockade continues; U.S. oil companies preparing entry

Offensive Realism Analysis: The Venezuela operation represents Mearsheimer's hegemonic maintenance behavior—the dominant power in a region using force to reassert primacy. The "Donroe Doctrine" framing echoes the Monroe Doctrine's original purpose: preventing extra-hemispheric powers from establishing influence in the Western Hemisphere. Venezuela under Maduro maintained security ties with Russia, China, Iran, and Cuba—precisely the kind of external foothold that a regional hegemon must eliminate.

Scholar Alan McPherson noted this marks the first time the U.S. has "directly intervened in South America to effect regime change"—previous direct actions were confined to Central America and the Caribbean. The operation suggests a geographic expansion of the Monroe Doctrine's enforcement perimeter, consistent with the structural logic of a hegemon facing rising peer competition. When the primary rival (China) cannot be confronted directly due to nuclear deterrence, the hegemon secures its regional base—exactly as Mearsheimer predicts.

The operation's framing as "law enforcement" rather than "invasion" mirrors two centuries of justification inflation: from "protecting American citizens" (Banana Wars) to "counter-narcotics" (Panama 1989) to "narco-terrorism" (Venezuela 2026). As Professor Mary Ellen O'Connell of Notre Dame concluded: the operation violated the UN Charter's prohibition on the use of force, international criminal law on head-of-state immunity, and the principle of permanent sovereignty over natural resources—yet was executed without meaningful legal constraint. This confirms offensive realism's core claim: international law constrains weak states but not great powers.

Timeline of Escalation: Venezuela 2025–2026

Date	Event
September 2, 2025	First U.S. strike on Venezuelan vessel in Caribbean (alleged drug trafficking)
September–December 2025	Escalating strikes on Venezuelan boats and seizures of oil tankers
October 2025	U.S. declares “armed conflict against drug cartels”; Senate blocks bill requiring congressional approval
October 31, 2025	UN High Commissioner for Human Rights calls for investigation into strikes
November 2025	Venezuelan opposition leader Machado offers oil reserves access to Trump
December 16, 2025	Trump designates Maduro regime as terrorist organization; blockade formalized
December 29, 2025	CIA conducts first land strike on Venezuelan dock
Late December 2025	Maduro rejects U.S. offer of exile to Turkey
January 2, 2026	Trump announces military strikes will be conducted inside Venezuela
January 3, 2026	Operation Absolute Resolve: Delta Force captures Maduro at 0101 local time
January 5, 2026	Maduro arraigned in Manhattan; declares himself “prisoner of war”
Ongoing	VP Rodríguez assumes interim presidency; blockade continues; oil companies prepare entry

Offensive Realism Synthesis: Six Structural Patterns

Pattern 1: The Hegemonic Imperative

The U.S. has consistently acted as a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere and an offshore balancer elsewhere. Every major wave of military operations—Monroe Doctrine enforcement (1820s–1930s), WWII, Cold War proxy wars, and post-9/11 campaigns—served to prevent the emergence of peer competitors in key regions. The 2026 Venezuela operation and ongoing Iran strikes continue this pattern: reasserting Western Hemisphere dominance while preventing nuclear proliferation in the Persian Gulf.

Pattern 2: The Thucydides Trap Cycle

U.S. operations peak during periods of structural power transition. Maximum operational tempo occurred during the early Cold War (1950s–60s), when the Soviet threat was rising most rapidly. A secondary peak occurred in the post-9/11 era as China's rise eroded unipolarity. The 2025–26 operations suggest a third peak: as the U.S. perceives declining relative power vis-à-vis China, it aggressively reasserts primacy in secondary theaters (Latin America, Middle East) where it retains escalation dominance.

Pattern 3: Imperial Overstretch as Recurring Risk

Kennedy's thesis is validated by the post-2001 trajectory: \$8+ trillion spent on the War on Terror, simultaneous operations in 7+ theaters, national debt exceeding WWII ratios—all while China grew. The pivot to surgical operations (Venezuela capture, Iran strikes) may represent adaptation: maintaining interventionist capacity while reducing the footprint that drove overstretch in Iraq and Afghanistan. Whether this "surgical" model avoids overstretch or merely changes its form remains the central strategic question.

Pattern 4: Covert-to-Overt Oscillation

The ratio of covert to overt operations tracks systemic polarity. Bipolarity produced 10:1 covert-to-overt ratios. Unipolarity reversed the ratio. Emerging multipolarity is producing a hybrid: overt surgical strikes (Iran, Venezuela) combined with covert pre-positioning (CIA land strikes in Venezuela, intelligence operations). This oscillation is structurally determined, not a function of presidential preference.

Pattern 5: Justification Inflation as Structural Constant

Each era has produced new justificatory frameworks that expand the scope of "legitimate" military action: commerce protection → Monroe Doctrine → anti-imperialism (1898) → collective security (WWI/II) → anti-communism → humanitarian intervention → counter-terrorism → counter-narcotics

→ preemptive nuclear non-proliferation. The Venezuela operation (framed as “law enforcement”) and Iran strikes (framed as “nuclear non-proliferation”) represent the latest iteration. From an offensive realist perspective, these justifications are epiphenomenal—the structural imperative is always security maximization.

Pattern 6: The Tragedy — Security Seeking Produces Insecurity

The most consistent finding across 247+ operations is that military interventions designed to enhance U.S. security frequently generate the threats they were intended to prevent. The mujahideen program produced al-Qaeda. The Shah’s restoration produced the Iranian Revolution. The Iraq invasion produced ISIS and empowered Iran. The Libya intervention created a failed state. This is the “tragedy” of Mearsheimer’s title: the security dilemma ensures that even rational security-maximizing behavior by a great power creates counter-reactions that leave it no more secure—and often less so. Whether the 2025–2026 Iran and Venezuela operations will reproduce this pattern remains the defining question of the current era.

Key Quantitative Findings

Statistic	Value	Source
Total documented U.S. military operations against sovereign states	247+	CRS, O'Rourke, academic compilations
Formally declared wars vs. undeclared actions	5 vs. 242+ (98% undeclared)	Congressional Research Service
Covert-to-overt regime change ratio (Cold War)	10:1 (64 covert vs. 6 overt)	O'Rourke (2018)
Covert regime change success rate	39% (leader replaced)	O'Rourke (2018)
Covert operations that failed to remain covert	70%+	O'Rourke (2018)
Foreign elections with U.S. intervention (1946–2000)	81	Dov Levin (2016)
Countries subjected to U.S. military intervention (post-1945)	96+	IBON Foundation; CRS
Countries with operations under 2001 AUMF	22+	CRS R42738
Estimated cost of post-9/11 wars	\$8+ Trillion	Watson Institute, Brown University
U.S. military bases abroad	750+ bases in 80 countries	David Vine, "Base Nation"
U.S. share of global military spending	~40%	SIPRI

Sources & Methodology

This assessment draws on the following primary sources: Congressional Research Service reports R42738 and RL30172 (Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad); Lindsey O'Rourke, **Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War** (Cornell University Press, 2018)—original dataset of 64 covert regime change attempts; Dov Levin, electoral intervention dataset (81 cases, 1946–2000); Bureau of Investigative Journalism drone strike databases; National Security Archive declassified documents (George Washington University).

Theoretical frameworks: John Mearsheimer, **The Tragedy of Great Power Politics** (W.W. Norton, 2001/2014); Graham Allison, **Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?** (Houghton Mifflin, 2017); Paul Kennedy, **The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers** (Random House, 1987).

2025–2026 operations data: CSIS satellite imagery analysis; Brookings Institution assessments; Arms Control Association reporting; Congressional Research Service IN12571; NPR, CNN, CBS News, Al Jazeera, Bloomberg, and The War Zone reporting; Wikipedia compiled timelines cross-referenced with primary sources.

Operational counts are approximate and vary by source depending on the threshold for inclusion. The 247+ figure represents a conservative middle estimate combining CRS documented instances, O'Rourke's covert operations dataset, and post-2004 updates from academic and governmental sources. Power share percentages in Figure 7 are illustrative composites based on GDP, military spending, and technological capacity estimates from multiple sources; they are intended to show relative trends, not precise measurements.