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“Keep Out, China!”: Trump Resurrects the Monroe Doctrine

by Gordon G. Chang | October 2025

“Murder.”

That’s how Colombian President Gustavo Petro, in comments to the BBC late last month, termed recent U.S. airstrikes on small drug boats in the Caribbean Sea. He also called the attacks an “act of tyranny.”

Petro said America’s use of force was excessive, arguing that nothing more than pistols were needed to stop the narco-traffickers.¹

The U.S. military has since September 2 been hitting the boats in international waters. The Trump administration claims the craft had come from Venezuela, were carrying illegal drugs, and were crewed by members of the notorious Tren de Aragua gang.

President Donald Trump has refocused American foreign policy on the region. And, as part of that effort, he has reinstituted the Monroe Doctrine. As a result, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro is definitely feeling the heat and so has his most important backer, the People’s Republic of China. China is bound to lose influence in the Western Hemisphere.

In the meantime, leftist Latin American leaders are not the only ones questioning the legality of the American strikes. For instance, Celeste Kmiotek of the Atlantic Council, in a comprehensive analysis, states the September 2 attack “appears to violate the U.S. prohibition on assassinations, as well as other U.S. laws.”

She also raises substantive issues under maritime law, the U.N. Charter, and various international humanitarian and human rights laws.²

A “senior administration official” responded by stating that the President is “prepared to use every element of American power to stop drugs from flooding into our country and to bring those responsible to justice.”³

There is much more at stake than both the Trump administration and critics suggest, however. Analysts, such as Michael Shifter, say the drug boats pose merely a law-enforcement issue. The White House was “trying to say that these are terrorists, like al-Qaida was a terrorist group, but al-Qaida was a military force,” the Georgetown University Latin American scholar told *Defense News*. “These are people that are breaking the law. They are not terrorists, per se. They’re not attacking the United States like al-Qaida was, and so the legal justification for this is, I think, questionable.”⁴

The White House has charged that TdA, as Tren de Aragua is known, was operating under Maduro’s control. Caracas denies the allegation, but it is widely believed that the Cartel de los Soles—the Cartel of the Suns—drug organization is led by the Venezuelan armed forces and controls or at least supports TdA. In February, the State Department designated TdA a “Foreign Terrorist Organization” and “Specially Designated Global Terrorists.”⁵ Previously, the U.S. Treasury designated the group a “Transnational Criminal Organization,”⁶ and this July Treasury sanctioned the group’s leaders.⁷

Whether or not the terror designations are appropriate, it’s clear that the gang is part of Maduro’s comprehensive assault on the United States. The Venezuelan leader has, most notably, weaponized migrant flows to erode America’s sovereignty and disrupt American society.⁸ He has also allowed Beijing to use his regime for China’s broad-based “people’s war” against the U.S.

Trump, appropriately, is now showing no tolerance for his Venezuelan counterpart. The Pentagon has assembled ships and Marines off Venezuela’s shoreline and shifted aircraft to nearby fields. On the first of last month, Maduro gave a rare press conference to argue that the large U.S. Navy presence off his coast was proof that Trump was trying to force regime change.⁹

Maduro has a point. After all, the U.S. has recently increased the bounty for his arrest to \$50 million. Moreover, NBC News is reporting that “U.S. military officials are drawing up options to target drug traffickers inside Venezuela” with drone strikes on both individuals and facilities.¹⁰

In response, Beijing has been expressing support for Maduro. Within hours of Trump’s announcement of the September 2 strike, Lan Hu, China’s ambassador to Venezuela, participated in a public ceremony in Caracas inaugurating a monument marking the 80th anniversary of the victory in the Chinese People’s War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War, known elsewhere as World War II. According to China’s official Xinhua News Agency, the monument “represents recognition of both the Chinese and global anti-fascist cause, as

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well as the firm determination of both countries to resist any aggression or military invasion.”¹¹

China has provided more than just rhetorical support. For instance, Chinese parties take more than 90% of Venezuela’s exports of crude oil. Beijing has also extended perhaps as much as \$62.5 billion in loans to the governments of both Maduro and his predecessor, Hugo Chavez, making China Venezuela’s biggest creditor. “China is one of the main reasons Maduro’s still in power,” Victoria Coates of the Heritage Foundation told me in September.¹²

Beijing’s moves were so public that after the September 2 sinking energy expert Wesley Alexander Hill, writing in *Forbes*, asked “Will China Step In?”¹³

Beijing, however, does not have the ability to militarily intervene at this moment, but it is rapidly building the People’s Liberation Army so that it can do so soon. Perhaps that is why Trump is acting now.

“The force assembled off the coast of Venezuela has a size and composition that would allow it to act through a decisive but limited operation to bring Maduro, as the head of the Cartel de los Soles, to justice if the President decides to do so,” R. Evan Ellis of the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College told me last month. “It is clear Trump has exhausted his patience with Maduro as the head of a criminal entity that has hijacked a state and turned it into the primary entry point for threats to the U.S. by criminal and extra-hemispheric state actors.”¹⁴

“President Trump is determined to end this incursion into our hemisphere and end the danger to the American people that the drug trade fueled by the Maduro regime represents,” said Coates, who served as a deputy national security advisor in the first Trump administration.¹⁵

Trump, as a part of this effort, is reviving the Monroe Doctrine, originally a declaration of intent to oppose European colonialism in the Western Hemisphere. Now, he is extending the doctrine to Asian colonialism, specifically China’s.

Trump embraced the Monroe Doctrine in 2018 after Secretary of State John Kerry ended it in 2013. The doctrine, first announced in 1823, is already the centerpiece of Trump’s second-term diplomacy.

It was, therefore, symbolically powerful that Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s first foreign trip, in February, took him to four countries in Latin America and one in the Caribbean.

On his first stop of his first trip, Panama, Rubio told President Jose Raul Mulino that the U.S. was taking a new approach to the country’s canal. America’s top diplomat, according to spokesperson Tammy Bruce on February 2, “made clear that this status quo is unacceptable and that absent immediate changes, it would require the United States to take measures necessary to protect its rights under the Treaty.”¹⁶ Whether or not Rubio was threatening to use force—the United States, in the Neutrality Treaty, reserved the right to do that in the Canal Zone—his words produced immediate results: Mulino

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announced Panama would not renew its Belt & Road memorandum with China.

The Trump administration is also trying to take back two port concessions in the Canal Zone. CK Hutchison Holdings, through its stake in Panama Ports Company, operates a port in Balboa, at the Pacific end of the canal, and in Cristobal, at the Atlantic end. Hutchison, the biggest port operator in the zone, is part of a publicly-owned Hong Kong company, but Hong Kong is part of the People's Republic of China and in the Communist Party's system no entity inside its borders can ignore or disobey its orders.

As a component of this new approach, Trump is reorienting the military. The Pentagon will soon release its National Defense Strategy, which will, according to POLITICO, "prioritize protecting the homeland and Western Hemisphere, a striking reversal from the military's yearslong mandate to focus on the threat from China." The document, the news site reported on September 5, "places domestic and regional missions above countering adversaries such as Beijing and Moscow." "This is going to be a major shift for the U.S. and its allies on multiple continents," said a person briefed on the draft strategy. "The old, trusted U.S. promises are being questioned."¹⁷

The issue now is whether the revival of the Monroe Doctrine is a complement to the policy of countering China elsewhere or a substitute for that policy. Many are worried.

"A major shift away from countering the rapidly intensifying threat of China in favor of a narrow focus on protecting the Western Hemisphere will result in a substantial reduction in America's global power and influence," Charles Burton of the Sinopsis think tank told me in response to the POLITICO reporting. "The shift implies that President Trump is content to allow Russia, China, and the U.S. to assume three independent spheres of influence redolent of the three superstates dubbed Oceania, Eurasia, and Eastasia in George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*."

If that is Trump's desired goal, the world would not be stable. "Although the United States might be content to lapse into regional isolationism, China's ambitions are not limited to the Indo-Pacific," Burton, also a former Canadian diplomat in Beijing, noted. "Ultimately, China has designs on the Western Hemisphere and will inevitably challenge the U.S. there. It would be only a matter of time."¹⁸

Burton's assessment is correct—and the Department of War knows it. "The pacing threat is China," Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering Emil Michael said on September 16 at the POLITICO AI & Tech Summit in response to a question about Pentagon priorities. That priority on China, he stated, would be "clear" in the National Defense Strategy.¹⁹

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“Trump’s new Monroe Doctrine and leadership through strength are atypical, unpredictable, politically incorrect, but undeniably successful,” Arturo McFields, former Nicaragua ambassador to the Organization of American States, argues. “China is sending clear signals of pressure and pain, reevaluating, restricting, and rerouting many of its investments. It is losing the battle one day at a time.” China, he says, “is in panic mode.”²⁰

As Arturo, now a journalist, implies, the struggle with China will be won or lost on the plains of trade and investment. Beijing has tied Latin America and the Caribbean to it with money. Trump can—and should—tie the region to America in the same way.

“Tariff Man” Trump during the campaign last year said he would raise levies on all goods coming into the U.S. On the contrary, it’s time for the new president to decrease tariffs on products from the region, to bind the hemisphere to America’s economy instead of China’s.

The U.S. can, for instance, reinvigorate CAFTA-DR, America’s free-trade pact with nearby Central America and the Dominican Republic, and by signing similar agreements with others in the region, in particular Argentina.

CAFTA-DR, which came into force in 2006, has been a disappointment. “The refusal to prioritize the region up to now is the main reason that the Central America free trade agreement is failing,” Washington, D.C.-based trade expert Alan Tonelson told me in January. “We have paid no attention to the goal of making sure that the benefits have been channeled to CAFTA-DR countries.”²¹

Washington could make the pact a success, however, if the U.S. granted even more preferential access to its signatories. According

to an Inter-American Development Bank internal study from the turn of the decade, Latin American producers each year could replace up to \$80 billion of America’s imports from China.²² At the moment, they are falling short.

Beijing emphasizes “South-South cooperation” and explicitly says it is part of the “Global South,” but China largely buys from the region food, such as soybeans, and raw materials, like copper and petroleum. In return, China exports manufactured products, undermining local industries. Some call this type of trade a badge of “neo-colonialism.”

“As with sub-Saharan Africa, Beijing will keep South America stuck with selling it raw materials and buying Chinese products in return,” Tonelson told me. “China’s refusal to buy local manufactures will help leave the region mired in poverty. Only Mexico is likely to escape this fate, thanks to its USMCA trade agreement with the United States and Canada.”²³

America, for many reasons, should rely on trade rather than military force. If it were to emphasize commerce, there would, among other things, be fewer Maduros—and no China threatening the United States from this hemisphere.

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