AMERICAS

The Trump Corollary: Venezuela as the First Test of a Neo-Monroe Doctrine

DECEMBER 12, 2025

Foreign policy analysts had long suspected that President Trump was reviving a Monroe Doctrine–style policy for Latin America. With the release of the 2025 National Security Strategy (NSS), that idea now has a formal name: the **"**Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine. This newly declared doctrine revives a two-century-old concept in American foreign policy and adapts it to an era of mass migration, transnational crime, and great-power rivalry with China.

The Trump Corollary marks a decisive shift in U.S. foreign policy priorities. After decades of war in the Middle East and a strategic "pivot to Asia," Washington is now refocusing on the Western Hemisphere as a primary security priority. The 2025 NSS argues that instability in Latin America, from mass migration to narcotrafficking, poses more immediate risks to U.S. security than conflicts in far-off regions. In this view, uncontrolled migrant flows, lethal fentanyl and cocaine routes, and authoritarian governments aligned with rival powers have turned the Western Hemisphere into the front line of homeland defense.

To address these threats, the NSS lays out an assertive plan: deepen cooperation with regional governments to dismantle drug cartels, link U.S. aid and security assistance to efforts that reduce migration and expand American oversight of critical infrastructure such as ports and canals. The goal is to prevent "hostile foreign control" of strategically important assets, a clear reference to China's growing presence through investments in Latin America. In practice, Washington is signaling that it intends to "deny non-hemispheric competitors" any military or economic foothold in the Americas.

Old Doctrine, New Hemisphere

Invoking the Monroe Doctrine in 2025 reopens a long and contested history. President James Monroe's 1823 declaration warned European empires not to interfere in the newly independent states of Latin America. At the time, the United States was relatively weak, and the doctrine was fundamentally defensive.

Over the following century, however, its meaning shifted. In 1904, Theodore Roosevelt added his corollary, claiming a U.S. right to act as an "international police power" in the hemisphere. That idea paved the way for decades of U.S. military interventions across Latin America.

This legacy explains why reviving the doctrine is contentious. As recently as 2013, Washington said that "the era of the Monroe Doctrine is over," a promise to treat Latin American countries as partners rather than as part of a U.S. sphere of influence. The Trump administration has taken the opposite approach by openly reviving the doctrine's core idea of a U.S.-led hemisphere. It has even described Monroe's 1823 declaration as the starting point of America's rise to global power. Beyond the rhetoric, the administration sees the Americas as a renewed arena of great-power competition and believes it must reassert U.S. primacy.

Yet, the Western Hemisphere today looks nothing like it did in the eras of Monroe or Roosevelt. Latin American countries are no longer post-colonial states but sovereign actors with different political orientations and partnerships. Unlike the 19th century, when Washington could assume near-exclusive influence in its "backyard," today's Latin America engages multiple extra-regional partners. The dominant external power is no longer a declining European empire but China, which has become a major trading partner and investor across the region over the last two decades. Beijing has poured money into commodities, funded infrastructure from ports to networks, and gained strategic footholds in the region.

As a result, U.S. demands for more regional influence are far less effective than they once were. Indeed, if applied heavy-handedly, the Trump Corollary could backfire, and Latin American governments might double down on relationships with China or other global actors to avoid over-dependence on Washington.

Venezuela: The First Test Case

The first and clearest test of the Trump Corollary is now unfolding in Venezuela, which is arguably the most volatile flashpoint in the hemisphere. Even before focusing on Venezuela, the administration had already begun showing its strength across the region. From the start of his second term, Trump backed his tough talk with action. In his January 2025 inaugural speech, he even suggested "retaking control" of the Panama Canal by force, a clear warning to Panama's government and to China, whose companies run port facilities there. By late 2025, U.S. forces were aggressively interdicting drug smugglers at sea, sinking several boats and killing dozens of people in the Caribbean. This unprecedented use of lethal force in an anti-narcotics campaign has alarmed some members of Congress, who have openly questioned its legality.

Venezuela, however, is the first true test of the new doctrine's resolve. The Trump team sees Nicolás Maduro's authoritarian regime as a major regional threat. They view it as a dictatorship in the U.S. neighborhood backed by foreign powers and tied to crises ranging from illegal immigration to drug trafficking. After years of failed sanctions and diplomacy to dislodge Maduro, Washington now appears to be edging toward direct confrontation. The Pentagon has deployed an aircraft carrier strike group to cruise near Venezuela's coast as a show of force. U.S. officials insist they do not seek an invasion but maintain that "all options are on the table." In practical terms, the administration has signaled it might carry out limited air strikes against cartel sites in Venezuela. The message to Maduro is clear: the United States will not accept a hostile regime in the region supporting foreign adversaries and criminal networks. And the regime should step down.

A Doctrine with Consequences

How seriously should we take the Trump Corollary? At one level, its revival is political theater aimed at a domestic audience, a slogan meant to project toughness and rally support. Invoking the Monroe Doctrine allows President Trump to frame his agenda in the language of traditional U.S. hemispheric guardianship, which resonates strongly with his MAGA base.

Supporters of the Trump Corollary say a tougher U.S. approach in Latin America is overdue. They argue that security and migration crises worsened while Washington looked elsewhere, and that stronger American leadership could help stabilize fragile countries and weaken violent

cartels. They also believe a more active United States could boost economic growth and give Latin American governments a better option than relying on China's loans and infrastructure projects. If the new strategy produces real results, such as a democratic opening in Venezuela, a major drop in drug flows, or significant U.S. investment in regional development, even skeptical neighbors might eventually come around.

But behind the rhetoric are real policy shifts that could carry significant consequences for the region, both intended and unintended. Even leaders who are friendly to the United States worry that this aggressive mindset could lead to unilateral interference in their affairs. Meanwhile, rivals like Venezuela's Maduro and Colombia's Petro are already calling the Trump Corollary an attempt to "recolonize" Latin America, a claim that resonates in a region shaped by a long history of outside intervention.

There are also legal and strategic risks. Declaring war on drug cartels and treating them as military-style targets, by sinking boats at sea, raises serious questions about sovereignty and the risk of civilian harm. The NSS criticizes past "forever wars," yet it opens the door to a potentially endless campaign against criminal groups across the hemisphere. If U.S. forces operate inside countries like Mexico or Colombia without their consent, it could trigger major diplomatic crises. The administration argues that defending the homeland may require preemptive action abroad, but that approach pushes the limits of international law and tests the patience of Latin American governments.

It's also important to note that any U.S. strategy against fentanyl and transnational crime will fail without Mexico's political support, operational cooperation, and intelligence sharing. Instead of taking unilateral cross-border actions that would spark a diplomatic crisis and fuel nationalist backlash, Washington could present joint operations as shared security priorities and offer concrete incentives such as expanded economic cooperation, border-security technology, and clear commitments to limit arms trafficking into Mexico. The same approach could be used across the region. This cooperative model would not erase disagreements, but it would lower the chances that the Trump Corollary produces the chaos and resistance it aims to avoid.

Ultimately, the Trump Corollary will be judged by what it delivers, not by its rhetoric. The question is whether the United States will invest the resources and diplomacy needed to address Latin America's deeper problems or fall back on occasional shows of force. Another question is whether Washington can push back against China and other external actors without alienating the countries it wants to support.

Much will depend on Venezuela and on how the war on drugs unfolds in the Caribbean. The direction the US authorities take will reveal whether this revived Monroe Doctrine becomes a practical strategy for regional stability or a move that leads to new conflicts.

If the Trump Corollary is going to achieve strategic coherence without destabilizing the region, Washington will need to pair its shows of force with carefully calibrated diplomatic, economic, and institutional measures.

First, the United States needs a clear framework for working with key regional partners to curb drug trafficking, especially Mexico and Colombia. Rather than relying on ad-hoc engagement, Washington could set up joint task forces on fentanyl, arms trafficking, and criminal financial networks, pairing pressure with concrete incentives. For Mexico in particular, linking security cooperation to commitments on legal migration pathways and deeper economic integration would help ensure that counter-narcotics efforts are viewed as shared responsibilities instead of unilateral U.S. actions.

Second, Washington should set clear legal limits on the use of force against non-state actors. Actions like sinking drug-smuggling vessels or conducting preemptive operations can weaken regional and international support if they are not backed by transparent rules. Establishing rules-based guidelines would help prevent escalation and reduce diplomatic fallout.

Finally, the United States will need to invest in regional diplomacy, not just deterrence. Many Latin American governments instinctively push back against anything that resembles a return to Monroe-style or Cold-War style thinking. Regular high-level diplomatic consultations that stresses partnership rather than hierarchy, and support for multilateral regional bodies would help ease concerns about unilateralism. Even small diplomatic reassurances could make countries in the region less likely to turn to China or other outside external powers as

counterweights.

Orion Policy Institute (OPI) is an independent, non-profit, tax-exempt think tank focusing on a broad range of issues at the local, national, and global levels. OPI does not take institutional policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions represented herein should be understood to be solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of OPI.