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America's Oldest Doctrine in a New Age

By Diane Chido

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Author's Note: This is the second in a series about American history and contemporary events that will unfold over the next few months. It is intended as a lens through which to view the latest headlines. What may

appear to be a disparate number of actions are all part of a single, articulated strategy that aligns with traditional American policy.

In a recent piece published before the U.S. extracted Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro to face charges in New York, I noted that the Chinese government issued a statement decrying American aggression toward Venezuela as using its campaign against gangs and drug trafficking in Latin America as cover to undermine Chinese interests in the region — invoking what they called the “[Donroe Doctrine](#).”

With the Chinese government’s comment and our own use of the term “Trump Doctrine” in the December 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy document (more on this below), the 1823 Monroe Doctrine has been much discussed in the news. Let’s take a closer look at what this doctrine was and how it has been reinterpreted and used in historical terms.

In President James Monroe’s 1823 annual message to Congress, he warned European powers not to interfere in the affairs of the Western Hemisphere. Thus, the doctrine was born, establishing the Western Hemisphere as a U.S. sphere of influence while pledging U.S. neutrality in European affairs. Recall that this message was actually part of an annual address to Congress and was only one of many other things discussed. It was not an effort on Monroe’s part to intentionally declare a single policy, but to emphasize that in the nearly 50 years since America freed itself from British colonialism, it would not submit to continued colonialization in its backyard.^[1]

In addition to winning sovereignty over the original 13 colonies and purchasing vast areas of land east of the Mississippi River in 1803 from the French, the U.S. was still much smaller than it is today. The 1823 message was delivered only two years since Gen. Andrew Jackson kicked the Spanish Empire out of Florida, Russia still laid claim to the territory that

is now Alaska, and the new nation had yet to wrest the modern Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, and Utah from Spain's grip.

Mexico, like Florida, had just been released from Spanish control and achieved independence in 1821. It would be another four decades before Canada gained the right to self-rule and a century before full independence from Great Britain in 1931.^[ii] Thus, European imperialism was a continuing threat to American continental dominance in both South and North America. The term "Manifest Destiny" would not be coined until 1845,^[iii] but the grand strategy for an American continent was already tangibly established 40 years earlier with the Louisiana Purchase and its goal of reaching the Pacific Ocean.

In South America, Venezuela declared its independence from Spanish colonial control in 1811, but this republic only lasted one year. It did, however, set the stage for full independence of the South and Central American Spanish colonies. Simon Bolívar, aspiring to free and unify all the former Spanish lands, led the South American wars of independence, finally defeating the Spanish in 1821. After liberating the areas including Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, Bolívar ruled briefly as a dictator over the vast region.

By 1829, Bolívar's efforts had failed, and the various elements of his Bolivarian Republic split off into separate states. Venezuela became one of these independent countries when elites in Caracas deposed and exiled Bolívar.^[iv] In this period of turmoil, Monroe had every reason to tell the European empires, "Not in my backyard."

When modern Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado gave her Nobel Peace Medal to President Trump on Jan. 15, she compared her act to Marquis de Lafayette sending a gold medal bearing George Washington's likeness to Bolívar in 1825. She said, "Two hundred years in

history, the people of Bolivar are giving back to the heir of Washington a medal in recognition for his unique commitment to our freedom. A sign of the brotherhood between the people of the U.S. and the people of Venezuela in their fight for freedom against tyranny.”^[v]

Venezuela itself played a significant role in the Monroe Doctrine being enshrined as American policy. An 1814 treaty with the Netherlands had granted Britain the territory of Guyana, but the western boundary with Venezuela was not clearly delineated. When gold was later discovered in 1841, Britain decided to claim an additional 33,000 square miles, encroaching into Venezuelan land as determined by an 1835 survey. In 1876, Venezuela requested arbitration from the United States, using the Monroe Doctrine as the reason. The U.S. was not interested in becoming involved, but for nearly 20 years, Venezuela continued to press the U.S. for help.

Finally, in 1895, U.S. Secretary of State Richard Olney sent a terse note to the British prime minister and foreign secretary, invoking the Monroe Doctrine to insist the British agree to negotiate. Britain rejected the claim of the Monroe Doctrine, stating it was not valid as international law. In December 1895, President Grover Cleveland gained unanimous Congressional approval to appoint a boundary commission, stating that the findings of the commission be enforced “by every means,” leading the American press to speculate about another war with Great Britain, which, as was already straining to maintain control over its global empire, agreed to adhere to the results of the commission. Entering negotiations with confidence, Venezuela was to be disappointed when the commission finally determined in 1899 that the 1835 boundary was to be preserved in Britain’s favor.^[vi]

Of greater significance here, the Anglo-Venezuelan boundary dispute marked the first time the U.S. asserted a more aggressive foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere — and gained external recognition of dominance

in the Americas. As a result, although Olney had retired, he affirmed the Monroe Doctrine writing to a British colleague that the U.S. is “practically sovereign” over the continent and that its word is law on issues where it chooses to get involved.^[vii]

Fast forward to December 2023, when President Maduro held — and voters supported — a referendum claiming sovereignty over Essequibo, two-thirds of former British Guyana’s oil- and mineral-rich region, arguing it was stolen when the border was redrawn in 1899, a clear affront to U.S. setting policy for the hemisphere. Maduro’s move to sign this annexation into law in early April 2024 triggered fierce condemnation from the neighboring South American country’s government, much like Russia’s illegal, but historically suggestive annexation of Crimea in 2014. At the signing ceremony, Maduro called the referendum a “stellar and historic moment.” Guyana’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs vowed not to yield any land to Venezuela and called the move targeting the Essequibo region an “egregious violation of the most fundamental principles of international law.”^[viii]

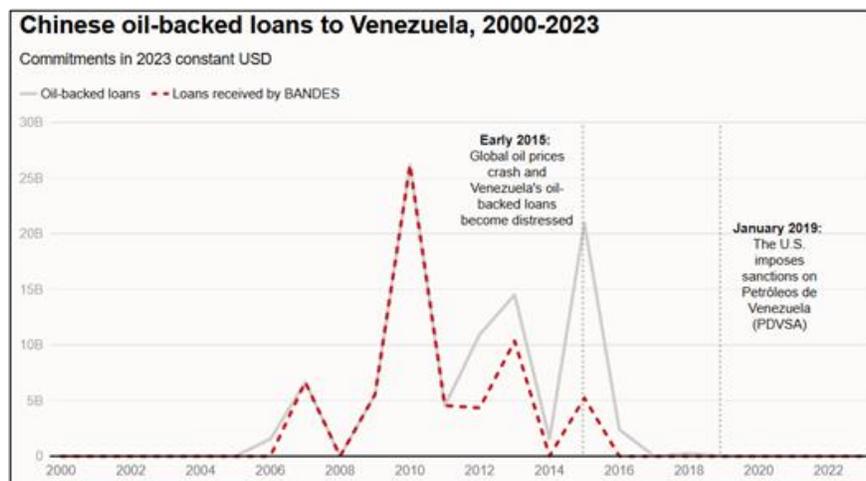
Venezuela continued to loom large in the further development of U.S. regional policy. When Venezuela defaulted on its debts in 1902, Great Britain, Germany, and Italy sent gunboats to blockade Venezuela’s ports. The crisis escalated in 1904 when European creditors of several Latin American countries threatened intervention in Venezuela to collect foreign debts.

To ensure European states stayed out of South America and to support financial stability, President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed in his annual address to Congress in December 1904 the right of the United States to exercise an “international police power” to curb such “chronic wrongdoing.” Adding, “and in the Western Hemisphere the adherence of the United States to the Monroe Doctrine may force the United States, however reluctantly, in flagrant cases of such wrongdoing or impotence, to

the exercise of an international police power." This is the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, meaning an extension of a previous idea.^[ix]

As a result, U.S. Marines were sent into Santo Domingo in 1904, Nicaragua in 1911, and Haiti in 1915, ostensibly to keep the Europeans out. Other Latin American nations viewed these interventions with misgiving, calling them “Yankee Imperialism,” and relations between the “great Colossus of the North” and its southern neighbors remained strained until the advent of the Good Neighbor Policy beginning in 1933.^[x]

In a parallel policy, on Jan. 9, 2026, Trump issued an executive order that U.S. proceeds from the sale of Venezuelan oil would be used to make the American and Venezuelan people prosperous and would not go to Venezuela’s creditors.^[xi] Many of these are U.S. oil companies, who claim to be owed about \$20 billion - \$30 billion from Venezuela’s nationalization of their assets in the country in 2008, but it can be inferred that this also applies to China, which has provided over \$105 billion in loans to the country, dwarfing U.S claims 5-1.



Although China enthusiastically loaned funds to Venezuela under the late President Hugo Chavez, a widely proclaimed fellow socialist, the flow began to slow in 2010, even more so by 2015 when global oil prices tanked. As Venezuela risked default, China restructured its lending in 2016, but the tap was turned off entirely, as noted in the graphic. While China continued to supply Venezuela with military and other goods, for these and interest payments, China expected its “[all-weather friend](#)” to pay in oil. U.S. sanctions threatened to make that impossible and with Venezuela now more or less under U.S. control and America seizing oil tankers full of Venezuelan oil in the Caribbean Sea, it is unlikely China will be repaid at all.^[xii]

Every four years, policymakers, bureaucrats, and operators across the U.S. government eagerly await each new administration’s strategic direction for all the instruments of government that might be called upon to support the president’s vision for our nation’s security and prosperity in the document called the *U.S. National Security Strategy*.

As most Americans don’t have the time or the interest in reading each new National Security Strategy, they are unlikely to know that the *2017 National Security Strategy*^[xiii] caused enormous confusion and consternation among the U.S. national security establishment. Its language had an almost total focus on “lethality,” when the U.S. military had been used for so many more things than killing people since 2001.

It is also not common knowledge that the 2017 document included the word “sovereignty” 14 times, often in reference to the U.S. In bewilderment that anyone should consider U.S. territory not sovereign, I personally counted, because the word had been used rarely, if at all, in previous Strategy statements and *only* in the context of securing other countries’ sovereignty, such as Ukraine’s or Afghanistan’s. So, 2017 provided some shock absorption to make the 2025 version less of a surprise when the

December 2025 version began with a stark statement in its Introduction, explaining that, since the end of the Cold War, American policymakers or “elites badly miscalculated America’s willingness to shoulder forever global burdens to which the American people saw no connection to the national interest.”^[xiv]

While I have spent the past 30 years focused on the national interest and have written scores of pages on how these “burdens” connect to the national interest, I cannot disagree with this statement. The majority of Americans cannot explain what [USAID](#) was or what it did or why. Just as many cannot explain what exactly we were doing in Iraq and Afghanistan for so long after the Taliban was on the run in a few weeks or after Saddam Hussein was captured in 2003 or Osama bin Laden in 2010. Many members of Congress, who allocated the stabilization operations funding, had no idea we had troops or a \$1 billion drone base in Niger until four of them were killed in an ambush in 2017.^[xv]

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In terms of the Western Hemisphere, the *National Security Strategy* introduction states:

We want to ensure that the Western Hemisphere remains reasonably stable and well-governed enough to prevent and discourage mass migration to the United States; we want a Hemisphere whose governments cooperate with us against narco-terrorists, cartels, and other transnational criminal organizations; we want a Hemisphere that remains free of hostile foreign incursion or ownership of key assets, and that supports critical supply chains; and we want to ensure our continued access to key strategic locations. In other words, we will assert and enforce a “Trump Corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine.^[xvii]

Since the early 2000s, observers have noticed China’s increasing investments in and relationships with South American governments right under the United States’ proverbial nose. The Biden administration made some effort to work with El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to improve conditions to reduce incentives for emigration from those countries into the U.S., but with little tangible success. With all our focus on terrorism in the Middle East and elsewhere, then on Ukraine, and Israel, China’s incursions into South America were not considered a priority until now.^[xviii]

For the past 20 years, China has also been heavily investing in Africa, building airports, roads, railroads, and providing arms to dictators like Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe. There, the U.S. definitely noticed.^[xix] President George W. Bush denied that he intended to build a military base in Africa, mainly as a face-saving statement because no African country would agree to host one. However, he did create a new geographic combatant command, called AFRICOM.^[xx] As noted in a 2007 U.S. Army Strategic Studies Institute monograph, despite the U.S. claiming to be about “bringing peace and security to the people of Africa,” African countries were well aware that AFRICOM’s mission was “anti-terrorism

first, securing oil reserves for U.S. exploitation second, countering Chinese influence third, and with African interests somewhere down the line.”^[xxi]

AFRICOM is still largely based in Stuttgart, Germany but the U.S. leases space at a French base from Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, a few miles from one now hosting Chinese troops , as noted on the map.^[xxii] The aforementioned drone base in Niger was forced to close on Aug. 5, 2024, after a [July 2023 coup](#) ousted the U.S.-friendly government there.



U.S. and Chinese military bases in Djibouti

Thus, it is not especially surprising that American interest in fighting wars on terrorism has waned and its ability to maneuver in the [Sahel](#) region — where the majority of Islamic terrorism is still occurring — has greatly diminished. In response, the U.S. has increasingly focused closer to home to shore up hegemony in its own backyard, à la the Monroe Doctrine.

What appears in today's news cycles as independent actions — sanctions, seizures, executive orders, military realignment — are part of a much older strategic pattern. The Monroe Doctrine is a foundation rather than a relic, and in 2026, it has become operational and updated. The question now is what shape it will take and what will it cost the region in years to come.

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