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The Monroe/Donroe Doctrine and the Reassertion of a U.S. Sphere of Influence in the Western Hemisphere[1]

A Doutrina Monroe/Donroe e a Reafirmação de uma Esfera de Influência dos Estados Unidos no Hemisfério Ocidental

La Doctrina Monroe/Donroe y la Reafirmación de una Esfera de Influencia de Estados Unidos en el Hemisferio Occidental

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the contemporary rearticulation of U.S. hemispheric primacy under what it terms the Donroe Doctrine. It argues that recent U.S. behavior in the Western Hemisphere reflects not the emergence of a new doctrine, but a shift in how long-standing regional dominance is justified and enforced under conditions of declining unipolarity. As the liberal international order loses its capacity to mediate American power through universal rules, hemispheric hierarchy is asserted more directly through interest-based coercion and selective suspension of norms. The 2026 Venezuela operation illustrates this shift with unusual clarity, revealing a willingness to bypass established legal and institutional constraints in the name of regional security. The article situates this development within broader U.S.–China rivalry and argues that the normalization of regional exemption contributes to the fragmentation of the liberal international order by weakening the authority of its principal architect.

Keywords: Monroe Doctrine; spheres of influence; U.S. foreign policy; hemispheric order; liberal international order.

RESUMO

Este artigo analisa a rearticulação contemporânea da primazia hemisférica dos Estados Unidos sob o que denomina a Doutrina Donroe. Argumenta que o comportamento recente dos Estados Unidos no Hemisfério Ocidental não indica o surgimento de uma nova doutrina, mas uma mudança na forma como uma dominação regional de longa duração é justificada e exercida em um con-

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texto de declínio da unipolaridade. À medida que a ordem internacional liberal perde a capacidade de mediar o poder americano por meio de regras universais, a hierarquia hemisférica passa a ser afirmada de forma mais direta, por meio da coerção baseada em interesses e da suspensão seletiva de normas. A operação na Venezuela em 2026 ilustra esse deslocamento com particular clareza, revelando a disposição de contornar restrições legais e institucionais estabelecidas em nome da segurança regional. O artigo insere essa dinâmica no contexto mais amplo da rivalidade entre Estados Unidos e China e sustenta que a normalização de exceções regionais contribui para a fragmentação da ordem internacional liberal ao enfraquecer a autoridade de seu principal arquiteto.

Palavras-chave: Doutrina Monroe; esferas de influência; política externa dos Estados Unidos; ordem hemisférica; ordem internacional liberal

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la reformulación contemporánea de la primacía hemisférica de Estados Unidos bajo lo que denomina la Doctrina Donroe. Sostiene que el comportamiento reciente de Estados Unidos en el Hemisferio Occidental no representa la aparición de una nueva doctrina, sino un cambio en la forma en que se justifica y ejerce una dominación regional de larga data en un contexto de declive de la unipolaridad. A medida que el orden internacional liberal pierde capacidad para mediar el poder estadounidense mediante reglas universales, la jerarquía hemisférica se afirma de manera más directa a través de la coerción basada en intereses y la suspensión selectiva de normas. La operación en Venezuela de 2026 ilustra este giro con especial claridad, al mostrar la disposición a eludir restricciones legales e institucionales establecidas en nombre de la seguridad regional. El artículo sitúa este proceso en el marco de la rivalidad entre Estados Unidos y China y argumenta que la normalización de excepciones regionales contribuye a la fragmentación del orden internacional liberal al debilitar la autoridad de su principal arquitecto.

Palabras clave: Doctrina Monroe; esferas de influencia; política exterior de Estados Unidos; orden hemisférico; orden internacional liberal

1 INTRODUCTION

Recent United States behavior in the Western Hemisphere, as reflected in the National Security Strategy released in November 2025, signals a structural transformation in the international system rather than a sudden shift in regional preference (NSS, 2025). As the unipolar moment following the Cold War erodes and the global order moves toward multipolarity, spheres of influence have re-emerged as central organizing features of great power strategy. For the United States, this systemic change has sharpened the strategic salience of the Western Hemisphere not because hemispheric primacy ever disappeared, but because the permissive conditions that once allowed it to be exercised quietly no longer hold.

During the unipolar period, U.S. power was sufficiently dominant to be projected globally through institutions, markets, and liberal norms. Hemispheric hierarchy persisted in practice, yet it was rarely asserted explicitly. Interventions in Latin America and the Caribbean were consistently framed through international law, democracy promotion, humanitarian protection, or multilateral stabilization rather than overt interest. The 1994 intervention in Haiti to restore Jean-Bertrand Aristide

was justified as the defense of democratic governance under regional mandates, while his 2004 removal was embedded in humanitarian and stabilization discourse and followed by a multinational mission (Jefferies, 2001). Plan Colombia, launched in 2000, constituted a long-term security intervention justified as counter-narcotics and state-building rather than regional control (Rochlin, 2011). Even U.S. involvement in Venezuela's 2002 coup attempt was publicly denied, reflecting the continued need to operate within a liberal-democratic frame (Barracca, 2007). Across these cases, liberal justification functioned as strategic cover, enabling hemispheric dominance to coexist with a universalist, rule-based narrative.

What distinguishes the present moment is the erosion of that justificatory framework, most clearly illustrated by the 2026 U.S. intervention in Venezuela (Harb, 2026). Unlike earlier episodes, U.S. action was articulated primarily in terms of national interest, deterrence, and control, without recourse to democracy promotion, humanitarian necessity, or multilateral authorization. Venezuela 2026 thus marks a shift from masked dominance to explicit hemispheric enforcement. This change reflects declining unipolar capacity and the return of competitive constraints. As global rule enforcement becomes uneven, proximity and insulation regain strategic value. The Western Hemisphere is increasingly treated as a foundational security space, defended openly as a prerequisite for sustaining American power.

This reorientation is articulated with unusual clarity in the most recent United States National Security Strategy. Rather than assuming that American interests are evenly distributed across the globe, the document emphasizes prioritization and selectivity as necessary features of statecraft. It states:

> A strategy must evaluate, sort, and prioritize. Not every country, region, issue, or cause—however worthy—can be the focus of American strategy. The purpose of foreign policy is the protection of core national interests (NSS, 2025).

This language reflects a structural recalibration rather than a rhetorical flourish. Historically, periods of constrained power have encouraged great powers to concentrate authority and resources in their most strategically consequential regions. In this context, the Western Hemisphere re-emerges as the United States' primary security environment, where exclusion of extra-regional influence is treated as legitimate rather than exceptional.

Political discourse reinforces this shift beyond formal doctrine. In his January 20, 2025 Inaugural Address, President Donald Trump framed U.S. foreign policy in explicitly nationalist terms, emphasizing advantage, respect, and resistance to exploitation. He declared:

> From this day forward, our country will flourish and be respected again all over the world. We will be the envy of every nation, and we will not allow ourselves to be taken advantage of any longer. During every single day of the Trump administration, I will, very simply, put America first (White House, 2025).

When applied to the Western Hemisphere, such discourse of in this case language has historically translated into claims of special responsibility and special rights rather than disengagement. In the contemporary setting, it signals a reduced willingness to justify regional dominance

through liberal norms. Interest, proximity, and security are treated as sufficient grounds for action.

The central claim of this paper is that the explicit reassertion or the recent prominence of the framing of the "sphere-of-influence" in U.S. hemispheric policy is a product of systemic change rather than ideological reversal. As multipolarity deepens, the United States increasingly relies on regional consolidation to manage risk and limit rival access. China's growth and its expanding presence in Latin America sharpens this dynamic, but it operates within a broader structural shift that makes hemispheric hierarchy strategically rational again (Armony; Strauss, 2012; Lee; Bettani; Sims, 2024; Sims; Lee, 2025, 2026b; Sims; Lee; Lee, 2023, 2025)"title-short":"From Going Out (zou chuqu .

In this paper, this contemporary analysis of U.S. hemispheric dominance is referred to as the Donroe Doctrine popularized by journalists and analysts. The term denotes a shift in how hemispheric primacy is articulated and justified, rather than any change in its underlying practice. What Venezuela 2026 makes clear is that the unipolar order no longer provides the normative frameworks that once mediated the exercise of American power (Harb, 2026). As those frameworks weaken, spheres of influence are asserted more directly, regional autonomy becomes increasingly conditional, and interest-based hierarchy assumes a more explicit role in organizing hemispheric order. This development raises a fundamental question for international politics: is the liberal international order eroding as a consequence of systemic change alone, or is its breakdown being actively driven by the United States through the open normalization of regional hierarchy? There is something almost poetic in this possibility, that an order largely constructed by the United States may now be destabilized by its own strategic choices.

2 MONROE AND THE CONTEMPORARY "DONROE" DOCTRINE

The Monroe Doctrine can be understood as a framework through which the United States has repeatedly organized hemispheric order under shifting structural conditions (Gilderhus, 2006). Across historical periods, it has functioned as a mechanism for translating geography into hierarchy, converting proximity into authority and strategic privilege. This logic closely aligns with realist theories of international politics, particularly the argument that great powers seek regional hegemony rather than universal domination (Mearsheimer, 2001). From this perspective, security is maximized not through global rule enforcement, but by insulating one's immediate neighborhood from rival influence. From its inception, the Monroe Doctrine reflected this logic by treating the Western Hemisphere as a uniquely sensitive security space.

The doctrine emerged from a post-Napoleonic international environment marked by imperial uncertainty and geopolitical flux. The United States was a relatively weak republic operating in a world still dominated by European great powers, particularly Britain, France, and the remnants of Spanish imperial authority. Spain's control over Latin America was collapsing, while newly independent states were emerging

across the region (Grafe; Irigoin, 2006)new institutional economics (NIE. European monarchies debated whether to intervene to restore colonial rule, raising concerns in Washington about renewed external influence (Philpott, 2001; Robertson, 1915). For U.S. policymakers, the central concern was not sovereignty, but the extension of European power politics into a geographically proximate region.

In this context, the Monroe Doctrine defined the Western Hemisphere as a distinct political and security space. It articulated the principle that the Americas were no longer open to European colonization. Developments within the hemisphere were framed as carrying special significance for U.S. peace and safety. Proximity magnified strategic risk by affecting naval access, trade routes, and regional balances of power. Rather than asserting equality among states, the doctrine established a regional order or in this case a sphere of influence whose authority rested with the United States alone.

Monroe's own language made this separation explicit when he declared: "The American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers" (Monroe, 1823).

The significance of this passage is very important as it lies not in its immediate enforceability, but in its scope. It applied a rule to an entire region rather than to a specific bilateral dispute. This led to independence became a geopolitical barrier, and the authority to define and defend that barrier was claimed by the United States rather than by the newly independent Latin American republics themselves. From the outset, the doctrine implied a form of hierarchy rather than mutual recognition.

The hierarchical logic of the doctrine was reinforced by Monroe's explicit linkage between European intervention and U.S. security. In the same address, he made clear that developments in the hemisphere could not be treated as neutral or distant events, stating: "We should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety" (Monroe, 1823).

This sentence is important because it framed external alignments within the hemisphere as security issues rather than neutral expressions of sovereignty. Once European involvement was defined as a threat to U.S. peace, Washington positioned itself as the ultimate judge, jury and executioner of acceptable external influence. Sovereignty remained formally intact for Latin American states but it puts them under a security umbrella of sorts. This method, in which authority is exercised without formal annexation, constitutes the core of a sphere of influence or hierarchy.

For much of the nineteenth century, the United States lacked the material capacity to enforce the Monroe Doctrine unilaterally. British naval dominance played a decisive role in deterring European reintervention, allowing the doctrine to function despite limited American power (Matzke, 2011). This balance began to shift toward the end of the century with the Olney Interpretation of 1895 (Young, 1942). In the context of a boundary dispute between Britain and Venezuela, Secretary of State Richard Olney asserted that the United States possessed unique authority

within the hemisphere and was entitled to arbitrate regional disputes. This interpretation transformed the doctrine from a defensive warning against colonization into a claim of hemispheric supervisory authority.

A more consequential transformation followed in the early twentieth century with the Roosevelt Corollary (Ricard, 2006; Thompson, 2015). U.S. policymakers increasingly reframed internal instability within Latin American states as a security problem rather than a domestic concern. Weak governance, fiscal insolvency, and political disorder were interpreted as conditions that could invite extra-hemispheric intervention and threaten U.S. interests. On this basis, intervention was normalized as a tool of regional management, rendering sovereignty conditional within an informal hierarchy. Hemispheric order was no longer maintained solely through exclusion, but through active supervision.

This was also seen in the Lodge Corollary of 1912, which broadened the scope of hemispheric exclusion beyond foreign states (Bailey, 1933; Prisco, 2003). It asserted that foreign corporations and private entities could constitute unacceptable influence if they acquired strategic assets in the hemisphere. Security threats were then reconceptualized to include ownership, investment, and economic penetration. Control over infrastructure, resources, and key assets became central to hemispheric security thinking. These concerns foreshadowed contemporary debates over ports, supply chains, and strategic investment.

By the late 1920s, expansive interventionism provoked backlash within the United States. The Clark Memorandum sought to restrain hemispheric exceptionalism by arguing that the Monroe Doctrine itself did not justify intervention (Sessions, 1977). The Good Neighbor Policy of the 1930s further emphasized non-intervention and diplomatic restraint (Stuart, 1942). Yet these shifts were largely "on paper" and ineffective, as hierarchy persisted through economic and political leverage. During the Cold War and the post–Cold War unipolar moment, the doctrine's power endured even but its language or tone of it receded, allowing hemispheric dominance to persist quietly through institutions, interdependence (or dependence) and markets.

The contemporary Donroe Doctrine emerges from the erosion of that unipolar condition. As multipolarity intensifies and competition with China sharpens, the United States has become less willing and less able to rely on liberal mediation to manage hemispheric order. This shift is showcased most clearly in the 2025 National Security Strategy of the United States of America, which foregrounds sovereignty and national interest as organizing principles of international politics. The document states: "The world's fundamental political unit is and will remain the nation-state. It is natural and just that all nations put their interests first and guard their sovereignty" (NSS, 2025).

This framing removes the normative tension that previously existed between liberal universalism and regional hierarchy. Applied to the Western Hemisphere, it showcases that the spheres of influence are back. If states are expected to prioritize interests and guard sovereignty, then major powers will seek to secure their immediate environments and prevent rival access. The same strategy further declares:

> We want to ensure that the Western Hemisphere remains free of hostile foreign incursion or ownership of key assets… In other words, we will assert and enforce a 'Trump Corollary' to the Monroe Doctrine (NSS, 2025).

Where Monroe focused on European empires and Roosevelt on instability, the Donroe Doctrine targets infrastructure, ownership, supply chains, and strategic assets, particularly those linked to China (Berg, 2026). The concern is leverage rather than ideology as what persists is the assumption that the United States has both the right and responsibility to define acceptable external involvement in the hemisphere. Understanding the Monroe Doctrine in historical context therefore clarifies why contemporary U.S. policy takes the form it does. Across its evolution, the doctrine consistently converted geography into authority and proximity into privilege or control. What changed was not the existence of hierarchy, but the conditions under which it could be exercised quietly. As the unipolar moment falls, proximity once again matters. Geography and proximity become more important as the prevention of a potential rival building a base of influence in your own backyard becomes more concerning.

This renewed emphasis on geography is consistent with realist international relations theory. Mearsheimer's claim that great powers seek regional hegemony rather than global control explains why the Western Hemisphere remains central to U.S. strategy (Mearsheimer, 2001). Nicholas Spykman's emphasis on spatial relationships further underscores why nearby regions exert disproportionate strategic pull regardless of ideology (Spykman, 1938). Together, these perspectives explain why, under multipolar pressure, hemispheric consolidation or the return of sphere of influence became a rational strategy.

3 HOW THE MONROE/DONROE DOCTRINE IS ENFORCED

Hemispheric enforcement under the Monroe and Donroe frameworks has never operated as a response to instability. Rather than functioning as a general policing mechanism, enforcement relies on selective coercive practices that allow the United States to exercise authority because it is nearby and powerful because it can choose when to act. The United States has not governed the Western Hemisphere directly, nor has it assumed permanent responsibility for regional governance. Instead, order has been enforced episodically through sanctions, targeted intervention, leader removal, and strategic pressure. What matters is not whether instability exists, but whether it is interpreted as threatening U.S. dominance or the exclusion of rival influence.

This selectivity is evident in numerous episodes of instability that have not triggered decisive U.S. coercion. Haiti has experienced prolonged institutional collapse since at least 2018, Ecuador has faced a sharp escalation in organized crime and violence, and Chile and Colombia witnessed major social upheavals in 2019 (Avilés, 2008; Hiemstra, 2012; Jefferies, 2001; Needler, 1966; Shiraz, 2011). In none of these cases did the United States pursue regime removal or direct military enforcement. These omissions demonstrate that instability alone does not activate

hemispheric enforcement. The Monroe–Donroe framework therefore functions less as a stabilizing doctrine than as a mechanism for strategic prioritization.

Moreover, the United States has often acted not merely as a responder to instability, but as a producer or amplifier of it. Economic sanctions, financial isolation, and trade pressure have been repeatedly deployed as instruments of hemispheric coercion. In Venezuela, sustained U.S. sanctions from 2015 onward contributed to economic collapse, currency instability, and humanitarian deterioration (Weisbrot; Sachs, 2019; Zakrison; Muntaner, 2019). These measures were not designed primarily to restore order, but to weaken regime capacity and constrain political autonomy. Instability, in this context, becomes a tool of enforcement rather than a problem to be resolved.

The conceptual roots of this approach can be traced to the early twentieth century, when U.S. policymakers reframed regional disorder as a justification for external supervision. The Roosevelt Corollary marked a critical shift by treating domestic instability not as a sovereign matter, but as a hemispheric security concern. Theodore Roosevelt showcased this logic explicitly when he stated: "Chronic wrongdoing, or an impotence which results in a general loosening of the ties of civilized society, may in the Western Hemisphere require the exercise of an international police power" (Roosevelt, 1904).

This approach was not about conquest or formal annexation, but about control without direct rule. It introduced a system of supervision or dependency in which states were allowed to govern themselves only so long as their behavior was acceptable. Sovereignty was therefore not rejected, but made conditional. Over time, hemispheric enforcement depended less on legal doctrine and more on the claimed right to intervene when U.S. interests were seen to be at risk. The Corollary thus turned intervention into a routine tool of regional management rather than an exceptional response.

During the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, this enforcement logic was typically mediated through liberal and legal justification. The 1989 U.S. intervention in Panama illustrates this earlier mode. Operation Just Cause Targeted General Manuel Noriega, who was framed as a criminal, a dictator, and a direct threat to U.S. citizens and democratic order (Nanda, 1990; Weeks; Zimbalist, 1989). The operation was limited in duration, avoided annexation, and focused narrowly on leadership removal. President George H. W. Bush justified the intervention in explicitly protective and legalistic terms: "As President, I have no higher obligation than to safeguard the lives of American citizens. And that is why I directed our Armed Forces to protect the lives of American citizens in Panama and to bring General Noriega to justice in the United States" (Bush, 1989).

Panama demonstrates how hemispheric enforcement functioned through criminalization and legal framing rather than overt domination. Military force was presented as law enforcement, allowing U.S. power to be exercised under the language of universal norms. The objective was not to govern Panama or restructure its political system, but to remove

an actor deemed unacceptable while preserving the appearance of rule-based legitimacy. This approach allowed intervention without abandoning claims to legality or restraint. It illustrates how hemispheric control could be enforced indirectly, even before the full emergence of unipolar dominance.

The 2026 U.S. operation against Venezuela marks a clear departure from this justificatory framework (Harb, 2026). While the tactical logic of targeting leadership without occupation remains consistent, the rhetorical and normative framing has shifted decisively. Operation Absolute Resolve was not justified primarily through international law, democracy promotion, or humanitarian necessity (Olay, 2026). Instead, it was articulated openly in terms of security threats, criminal networks, and national interest. Senior officials were explicit in denying that the action constituted war against the Venezuelan state. Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated: "We are at war against drug trafficking organizations. That's not a war against Venezuela" (Goodwin, 2026).

This language mirrors earlier claims of hemispheric police power, but without the liberal mediation that characterized earlier interventions as it seems like a blatant kidnapping/invasion as some of the U.S. democratic lawmakers mentioned that it is an "act of war" (Goodwin, 2026; Harb, 2026). Coercion is justified as enforcement against wrongdoing rather than as defense of universal norms. The distinction allows the United States to apply force while limiting the political and legal costs associated with interstate war. What is new under the Donroe Doctrine is not the use of force itself, but the abandonment of liberal justification in favor of interest-based assertion.

President Trump's remarks following the Venezuela operation further illuminate this enforcement logic. Addressing Delcy Rodríguez, the acting president who emerged after Maduro's removal, Trump framed compliance as a condition for avoiding further punishment: "If she doesn't do what's right, she is going to pay a very big price, probably bigger than Maduro. Regime change, anything you want to call it, is better than what you have right now. Can't get any worse" (Goodwin, 2026).

These statements show how openly coercive U.S. rhetoric toward Venezuela has become. Regime change is presented not as a last resort, but as a normal and acceptable outcome, backed by the threat of punishment. The language is clearly hierarchical, treating the United States as an actor entitled to impose costs and decide what political outcomes are acceptable. It is worth noting that Chavismo remains deeply rooted in Venezuelan institutions and society, and the situation on the ground is more complex than such statements suggest (Velasco, 2022; Visconti, 2021). However, the key point is that the United States can easily remove the regime, and Trump have the ability to threaten, pressure, and escalate against a sitting president in a way that marks a sharp break from earlier periods.

The strategic foundation for this approach is shown in the 2025 National Security Strategy of the United States of America, which frames hemispheric authority as a security condition rather than a universal principle: "The United States must be preeminent in the Western Hemisphere

as a condition of our security and prosperity—a condition that allows us to assert ourselves confidently where and when we need to in the region" (NSS, 2025).

The same document reinforces the exclusionary nature of this authority: "We will deny non-Hemispheric competitors the ability to position forces or other threatening capabilities, or to own or control strategically vital assets, in our Hemisphere" (NSS, 2025).

Taken together, these cases show that U.S. hemispheric enforcement has never relied on annexation or permanent control. Power is exercised instead through selective pressure, sanctions, criminal charges, and the deliberate creation or use of instability. States remain formally sovereign, but that sovereignty offers limited protection once U.S. security concerns are invoked. Enforcement is not applied everywhere, nor is it meant to fix instability itself. It is used where geographic closeness, great-power rivalry, and U.S. interests overlap. This pattern reflects a wider structural change in the international system. During the unipolar period, U.S. power could operate globally through institutions, markets, and liberal norms, making open hemispheric control unnecessary and politically costly. As that situation fades, spatial priorities become more visible again. The Donroe Doctrine does not introduce new forms of coercion, but removes the language that once softened them. What remains is hemispheric authority defined less by governance than by the ability to intervene, disrupt, and exclude when the United States decides it must.

What distinguishes contemporary hemispheric enforcement from earlier periods is not the use of coercion itself, but the disappearance of the justificatory frameworks that once mediated it. During the unipolar moment, U.S. dominance could be exercised through institutions, markets, and liberal norms that rewarded alignment and penalized defiance, making explicit assertions of regional hierarchy largely unnecessary. Hemispheric primacy remained intact in practice, but it was embedded within a global system in which association with the United States was widely understood to bring economic access, political legitimacy, and security benefits. From a realist perspective, this arrangement reflected an exceptional distribution of power rather than a durable equilibrium. As John J. Mearsheimer argues, great powers ultimately seek regional hegemony and prioritize the security of their immediate environment over universal order, even when they temporarily govern through rules and institutions (Mearsheimer, 2019, 2001).

As the international system moves toward multipolarity and the power gap between the United States and its competitors narrows, the normative cover that once accompanied American power has weakened. Under the Trump administration, hemispheric primacy is showcased more directly as a matter of interest and security rather than legitimacy or responsibility. Coercion is no longer framed consistently as an exception within a rule-based order, but as an ordinary instrument of statecraft within a prioritized region. The consequences extend beyond the Western Hemisphere. By openly placing regional dominance above liberal security rules, human rights standards, and economic openness, the United States

helps weaken the liberal international order it once supported. The result is not a sudden collapse of that order, but its gradual breaking apart. This fragmentation happens in large part because the leading power is willing to set aside universal rules when they conflict with strategic interests.

4 THE RETURN OF SPHERES OF INFLUENCE AS A STRATEGY

The renewed prominence of sphere-of-influence strategy or logic in U.S. strategy is best understood as a response to structural change in the international system. As the unipolar moment fades and strategic competition with China intensifies, the incentives facing the United States have shifted markedly (Sims; Lee, 2026a). When power was uncontested, Washington could afford to present international order as universal and rules-based as seen in the post-cold war. As that condition erodes, strategic behavior becomes increasingly spatially focused as seen during the cold war. The Western Hemisphere re-emerges not as an ideological commitment, but as the material base of American power.

This logic aligns closely with offensive realism, most clearly associated with Mearsheimer. In this view, great powers do not seek to govern the world through universal rules. They instead prioritize dominance within their immediate environment and prevent rivals from gaining influence nearby (Mearsheimer, 2001). Regional hegemony represents the highest achievable form of power under anarchy because geography constrains projection. Proximity amplifies threat, making nearby regions strategically decisive.

Historically, this helps explain why the United States invested so heavily in consolidating the Western Hemisphere before projecting power outward. The absence of peer competitors near home allowed the accumulation of industrial capacity, financial power, and military strength with limited external constraint. Secure access to regional markets, resources, and sea lanes generated strategic depth. Hemispheric dominance did not produce isolation, but flexibility. The United States could operate globally precisely because its immediate surroundings were insulated from rival power (Spykman, 1938).

During the Cold War, this regional focus coexisted with global rivalry. The United States enforced exclusion in the Western Hemisphere while tacitly accepting spheres of influence elsewhere (Smith, 2013; Walt, 2018). This reflected the structural limits imposed by bipolarity rather than normative restraint. After the Cold War, however, this logic became less visible. With no peer competitor, explicit regional hierarchy appeared unnecessary and increasingly delegitimized. The delegitimization of spheres of influence during unipolarity was therefore not a moral achievement, but a consequence of unmatched power. Presenting the international system as open and rule-based worked to U.S. advantage because it occupied the dominant position. Integration into the U.S.-led order delivered capital access, trade opportunities, and political legitimacy (Pfaff, 2024). Alignment was materially rewarded, while alternatives offered few comparable gains. Liberal universalism thus reinforced American wealth and influence precisely because no serious challenger existed.

That condition no longer holds. As China expands its economic, technological, and infrastructural reach, and as U.S. capacity to shape outcomes everywhere weakens, spatial hierarchy regains strategic value (Xing; Bernal-Meza, 2021). Multipolarity does not end global engagement, but it forces prioritization. Under these conditions, the United States increasingly treats geography as a filter for importance. The Western Hemisphere becomes central again because it contains critical resources, infrastructure, maritime routes, and political alignments that directly affect American security and economic power. Ensuring control over this space limits vulnerability and preserves the ability to compete elsewhere.

This shift is stated openly in the 2025 National Security Strategy, which rejects the assumption that U.S. responsibility or interest is evenly distributed across the globe:

> After the end of the Cold War, American foreign policy elites convinced themselves that permanent American domination of the entire world was in the best interests of our country. Yet the affairs of other countries are our concern only if their activities directly threaten our interests (NSS, 2025).

This passage shows the main change. The United States no longer sees global engagement as realistic or even necessary. Its focus is shaped by where it feels most threatened, and those threats are strongest close to home. This is exactly the situation where realist theory expects states to focus on their own region. When power is limited and rivals are strong, states must decide where control matters most.

The Western Hemisphere occupies a privileged place in this recalculation because it functions as the United States' base of operations. Control over nearby sea lanes, energy supplies, ports, digital infrastructure, and critical minerals directly affects homeland security, economic stability, and military mobility. Allowing a rival power to gain leverage over these assets would constrain U.S. freedom of action. As a result, economic activity is no longer treated as politically neutral. Infrastructure investment, supply-chain integration, and technology partnerships are increasingly interpreted as strategic positioning rather than market behavior.

The National Security Strategy makes this spatial logic explicit by linking military posture and resource allocation to hemispheric priority:

> The United States must reconsider our military presence in the Western Hemisphere, including a readjustment of our global military presence to address urgent threats in our Hemisphere and away from theaters whose relative import to American national security has declined (NSS, 2025).

This reflects a shift away from global dispersion toward regional concentration. It is not a withdrawal from global politics, but a reallocation of attention and resources as seen in Trumps focus or obsession on the Western Hemisphere. Power projection depends on secure rear areas, and the Western Hemisphere is treated as such. This mirrors a basic realist insight: states that fail to secure their immediate environment expose themselves to pressure and overextension.

Securing this regional base increasingly requires actions that conflict with liberal norms the United States previously defended. Open markets are restricted through tariffs and investment screening (Harithas

et al., 2025). Sovereign choice is narrowed through economic pressure. Non-intervention is treated as conditional rather than absolute. These measures are not temporary deviations, but the practical consequences of prioritizing strategic denial over normative consistency. Liberal rules are not fully abandoned, but they are set aside when they interfere with hemispheric control.

Seen in strategic terms, spheres of influence are important because they allow the United States to protect the material foundations of its power in an era of renewed competition with China. Control over proximate regions limits the ability of rivals to translate economic presence into political or military leverage close to U.S. territory. In the Western Hemisphere, this means securing access to resources, infrastructure, sea lanes, and financial networks that underpin American economic strength and military mobility. By concentrating power in its immediate environment, the United States reduces exposure to external pressure, shortens lines of defense, and preserves freedom of action beyond the region. As competition with China intensifies, these advantages become even more important.

The emphasis on hemispheric consolidation reflects the end of conditions that once allowed U.S. power to be exercised globally without explicit regional prioritization. During the unipolar period, American dominance could be projected through institutions, markets, and liberal norms that made alignment attractive and opposition costly, reducing the need for overt exclusion. As that condition weakens, the United States faces stronger incentives to anchor its global position in regional control. Spheres of influence offer a way to manage rivalry by denying competitors access to strategically sensitive space, even when doing so conflicts with liberal principles previously upheld. The Western Hemisphere thus remains the United States' primary base of operations, and consolidating it becomes a rational response to a system no longer defined by unchallenged power.

5 REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS: CONSTRAINED AUTONOMY AND COERCIVE ENFORCEMENT

A central regional implication of the Donroe Doctrine is the increased willingness of the United States to employ forceful measures that stretch, and in some cases breach, established international norms when such measures are judged necessary to secure strategic interests or in simple terms, doing whatever they want without justification. This shift does not involve taking territory, rewriting treaties, or occupying countries. Instead, it works through military pressure, economic penalties, and direct intervention that make some foreign policy choices much more costly. Compared to the post–Cold War period, governments in Latin America now face tighter limits on what they can do. Certain alignments bring higher political, legal, and economic risks than before. As a result, hedging is harder, especially for less democratic governments, which have fewer safe ways to balance between major powers (Sims et al., 2025; Sims; Lee, 2025)this study argues that the current left-wing administrations

diverge significantly in their foreign policy approaches from the original Pink Tide. Utilizing a mixed-methods framework that combines foreign policy analysis with latent Dirichlet allocation topic modelling of presidential speeches, the research examines how domestic factors influence foreign policy decisions. The findings reveal that economic difficulties, escalating crime rates, political polarization, and fluctuating public approval are primary drivers compelling these governments toward more pragmatic and nationally focused foreign policies. This shift underscores a prioritization of domestic imperatives over regional ideological alignment, signaling a transformation from the Pink Tide's collective aspirations to individualized national strategies.\n , \n 摘要\n 自2018年以来，拉丁美洲左翼政府的复苏引发了人们对其与21世纪初“粉红浪潮”运动的比较。然而，本研究认为，当前的左翼政府在外交政策方针上与最初的“粉红浪潮”运动存在显著差异。本研究采用混合方法框架，将外交政策分析与总统演讲的潜在狄利克雷分配主题模型相结合，考察了国内因素如何影响外交政策决策。研究结果表明，经济困难、犯罪率上升、政治极化以及公众支持率波动是促使这些政府转向更务实、更注重国家利益的外交政策的主要驱动因素。这种转变凸显了国内事务优先于地区意识形态联盟的趋势，标志着“粉红浪潮”运动的集体诉求向个性化的国家战略的转变。\n , \n Resumen\n El resurgimiento de los gobiernos de izquierda en América Latina desde 2018 ha dado lugar a comparaciones con el movimiento de la Marea Rosa de principios de la década de 2000. Sin embargo, este estudio argumenta que los actuales gobiernos de izquierda difieren significativamente de la Marea Rosa original en sus enfoques de política exterior. Utilizando un marco de métodos mixtos que combina el análisis de política exterior con el modelado de Dirichlet Latente para la asignación de temas de discursos presidenciales, la investigación examina cómo los factores internos influyen en las decisiones de política exterior. Los hallazgos revelan que las dificultades económicas, el aumento de la delincuencia, la polarización política y la fluctuación de la aprobación pública son los principales factores que impulsan a estos gobiernos hacia políticas exteriores más pragmáticas y con un enfoque nacional. Este cambio subraya la priorización de los imperativos internos sobre la alineación ideológica regional, lo que indica una transformación de las aspiraciones colectivas de la Marea Rosa hacia estrategias nacionales individualizadas.”,”container-title”:”Latin American Policy”,”DOI”:”10.1111/lamp.70035”,”ISSN”:”2041-7365, 2041-7373”,”issue”:”4”,”journalAbbreviation”:”Latin American Policy”,”language”:”en”,”page”:”e70035”,”source”:”DOI.org (Crossref.

The most consequential illustration of this coercive posture was the U.S. military operation in Venezuela in January 2026. In what U.S. officials described as Operation Absolute Resolve, American forces conducted a targeted operation in Caracas that resulted in the forcible seizure and transfer of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and Cilia Flores to U.S. custody (Harb, 2026; Olay, 2026). The operation involved the extraterritorial abduction of a sitting head of state without the consent of the Venezuelan government and without authorization from the United Nations Security Council. Following the operation, President Donald J. Trump framed U.S. authority in Venezuela as open-ended rather than exceptional or time-bound: “We're there now, and we're going to stay

until such time as a proper transition can take place. We're going to run it, essentially, until such time as a proper transition can take place. We're not going to just do this and leave" (Trump, 2026).

This statement is forceful because Trump speaks as if the United States has the authority to decide when Venezuela can resume governing itself rather than treating that authority as belonging automatically to Venezuelan institutions. Sovereignty is presented not as something that exists by default, but as something that depends on a "proper transition," with the standards for that transition set by Washington rather than by international law or domestic consent. The language assumes continued control and supervision over time, not a limited or temporary role followed by withdrawal. In doing so, it reveals a view of sovereignty in which U.S. judgment takes priority over Venezuelan self-rule and where restraint is optional rather than expected.

The manner in which the Venezuela operation was conducted raised serious legal and normative concerns. The use of military force against another sovereign state without Security Council authorization or a clear claim of self-defense stands in tension with Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter, which prohibits the use of force in international relations (Reisman, 1984). The extraterritorial seizure of a head of state also challenges long-standing norms regarding sovereign immunity and non-intervention. Compounding these concerns, the operation was undertaken without explicit congressional authorization, relying instead on executive authority and internal legal justification (Harb, 2026). These elements underscore a willingness to bypass established international and domestic legal constraints when strategic objectives are prioritized.

The operational decision to abduct a sitting head of state, even in the context of criminal indictments and allegations of human rights violations, reflects an instrumental approach to legal norms. The Trump administration alternated between law enforcement and national security justifications, but many legal scholars argue that the deployment of military force in this manner remains highly problematic under international law (Liu, 2026). Under the Donroe Doctrine, coercive effectiveness appears to outweigh procedural legitimacy, particularly when the objective is to demonstrate resolve within the Western Hemisphere.

This coercive posture is reinforced by broader hemispheric rhetoric that reframes economic and infrastructural engagement with China as a security threat rather than a development choice. In remarks concerning the Panama Canal delivered during his January 20, 2025 Inaugural Address, Trump challenged Panama's authority over the canal by linking it to Chinese involvement: "The purpose of our deal and the spirit of our treaty has been totally violated… And above all, China is operating the Panama Canal. And we didn't give it to China. We gave it to Panama, and we're taking it back" (White House, 2025).

Regardless of the empirical accuracy of claims regarding Chinese control, the political message is clear very. Strategic infrastructure in Latin America is treated as subject to U.S. security assessment rather than exclusive national jurisdiction. Commercial or logistical engagement

with China is recoded as a strategic alignment choice that may warrant coercive response. This reframing narrows the practical autonomy of states whose development strategies depend on diversified external partnerships.

Economic pressure further constrains available policy space. Following the 2025 BRICS summit in Rio de Janeiro, Trump explicitly linked participation in alternative institutional groupings to economic punishment: "Any country aligning themselves with the Anti-American policies of BRICS will be charged an additional 10 percent tariff. There will be no exceptions to this policy" (Chia, Dearbail, 2025).

This statement does not formally prohibit engagement with BRICS or other non-Western institutions. However, it raises the material cost of doing so as the expansion of BRICS could potentially be a security concern and by expanding more in Latin America it would improve its legitimacy (Lee; Sims, 2024; Lee; Sims; Lee, 2025, 2026a, 2026b; Sims; Lee, 2026c). Institutional diversification, once treated as a pragmatic hedging strategy during the unipolar era, is increasingly framed as defiance subject to retaliation. Hedging remains possible, but it is no longer a low-cost or technocratic choice.

Trump's public remarks toward other governments reinforce this environment of coercive signaling. Speaking aboard Air Force One in early 2026, he described Colombia as a country "run by a sick man who likes making cocaine and selling it to the United States," adding that its president "won't be doing it for very long" and responding affirmatively when asked whether a U.S. operation against Colombia "sounds good" (Dowling, 2026). Such remarks blur distinctions between criminality, regime legitimacy, and foreign policy orientation, signaling that political survival itself may become entangled with compliance in security-related domains.

Cuba has been framed in similarly instrumental terms. In press remarks following the Venezuela operation, Trump stated that Cuba was *"ready to fall"* and not worth invading precisely because collapse was already imminent (Wright, 2026). Weakness, in this logic, does not prevent states from pressure. It renders them objects or tools of the United States or a great power rather than autonomous political actors. Taken together, these actions indicate that the Donroe Doctrine constrains autonomy through precedent rather than administration. Latin American states are not governed by the United States, but the demonstrated willingness to use force, bypass legal norms, and impose economic penalties reshapes the strategic environment in which foreign policy choices are made. Sovereignty remains formally intact, but it operates at a higher cost and under greater uncertainty than during earlier periods.

This has direct implications for hedging strategies. Latin American governments can still pursue diversified external relationships, including engagement with China and participation in non-Western institutions. However, such strategies now involve narrower margins for error, higher exposure to retaliation, and greater political risk. Hedging persists, but it is more conditional, more selective, and more carefully calibrated than under previous administrations.

Trump made this hierarchy explicit when announcing the Venezuela operation, declaring: "American dominance in the Western Hemisphere will never be questioned again" (Trump, 2026).

The regional implication, therefore, is not the elimination of agency, but its compression. Latin American states retain room to maneuver, yet operate within a more constrained corridor of acceptable behavior. Venezuela should not be read as a routine template for intervention, but it clearly signals how far the United States is prepared to go when strategic priorities collide with legal and normative restraint in a hemisphere it increasingly treats as central to its security.

6 GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS: THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE LIBERAL ORDER

What does the Donroe Doctrine imply for the international order more broadly? Does it represent a temporary deviation from liberal rules, or does it signal a deeper breakdown in the system that has structured global politics since the end of the Cold War? More directly, if the United States itself no longer treats liberal rules as universally binding, can those rules continue to function as the foundation of international order?

The most significant global implication of the Donroe Doctrine is not that the United States has rejected international norms outright, but that it increasingly treats them as conditional or situational (they use it only if it benefits them). Principles such as sovereignty, non-intervention, and free trade are no longer framed as universally applicable constraints, but as practices that can be suspended when regional security or national interest is invoked. In the Western Hemisphere, these exceptions are not obscured through legal or humanitarian rhetoric. They are openly justified. Once the leading power normalizes regional exemption, the distinction between a rule-based order and a power-based order becomes difficult to sustain.

Much of the literature on the liberal international order assumed that American power would be exercised through restraint. Scholars such as G. John Ikenberry argued that U.S. dominance was rendered legitimate and durable because it was embedded in institutions and rules that limited arbitrary coercion (Ikenberry, 2011). The credibility of the system depended less on perfect compliance than on the perception that even the strongest state accepted constraints. The Donroe Doctrine undermines this logic. By explicitly prioritizing regional dominance over universal rule enforcement, the United States weakens the mechanism that once gave the liberal order its legitimacy.

This shift also calls into question the long-standing assumption that the United States acts as a global guarantor of order. During the post–Cold War period, American power was widely understood to be linked, however unevenly, to the maintenance of a single international system (Walt, 2018). Under the Donroe framework, that role narrows. The United States increasingly emphasizes securing its immediate neighborhood rather than upholding global rules across regions. Responsibility becomes selective rather than systemic, raising doubts

about why liberal norms should continue to structure behavior beyond areas of direct U.S. interest.

From a realist perspective, this development is not surprising. Mearsheimer has long argued that liberal orders rest on fragile foundations, since great powers comply with rules only when doing so aligns with their security interests (Mearsheimer, 2019, 2001). When relative power declines, states revert to regional competition, exclusion, and hierarchy. The Donroe Doctrine fits this pattern. As U.S. global dominance erodes, Washington concentrates on consolidating control over strategically vital space rather than underwriting a system it can no longer fully enforce. Realism explains the shift, but it does not make its consequences benign.

Once regional hierarchy is accepted in one part of the world, it becomes harder to contest elsewhere. If proximity and security justify coercion in the Western Hemisphere, similar claims gain plausibility in other regions. Russia's war in Ukraine and its broader posture toward Eastern Europe, China's actions in the South China Sea and toward Taiwan, and debates over strategic autonomy in Europe all look different in a context where the former champion of universal rules openly accepts regionally bounded dominance (Betancourt et al., 2025; Emmers, 2010; Lee; Sims; Lee, 2024). The issue is not moral equivalence, but precedent. When exceptions are normalized by the system's principal architect, resistance loses its universal foundation.

The result is not the immediate collapse of order, but its fragmentation. Authority becomes organized regionally rather than globally. Rules persist, but apply unevenly. For smaller states, this is deeply unsettling. Under a universalist order, even weak states could appeal to law and institutions to constrain stronger actors, however imperfectly. In a regionally stratified system, geography matters more than legality, and autonomy becomes conditional rather than assumed.

The Donroe Doctrine thus exposes a broader crisis in the liberal international order. What was built as a universal framework increasingly operates as a set of regional exceptions. Whether such an order can remain stable, or merely become more brittle, remains an open question.

7 CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the Donroe Doctrine reflects a structural reordering of U.S. foreign policy rather than a temporary rhetorical deviation. What distinguishes the contemporary moment is not the persistence of hemispheric primacy, which has long shaped U.S. behavior in the Western Hemisphere, but the way that primacy is now asserted. Under conditions of declining unipolarity, American power is exercised more openly through interest-based hierarchy rather than mediated through liberal norms, multilateral institutions, or universal legal justification. The Venezuela operation illustrates this shift with unusual clarity, revealing a willingness to employ force in ways that stretch or bypass established international constraints.

This change is best understood as a response to systemic pressure rather than individual leadership style alone. During the unipolar era,

U.S. dominance could be projected globally through institutions, markets, and normative frameworks that made explicit regional hierarchy unnecessary. Alignment with the United States brought economic and political rewards, while defiance carried diffuse but predictable costs. As relative power narrows and competition with China intensifies, that model becomes harder to sustain. The Western Hemisphere therefore re-emerges as the United States' core base of operations, where rival influence is least tolerated and where coercion is judged most effective.

The broader implication is a weakening of the liberal international order as a system of authoritative rules. Liberal order depended not only on U.S. power, but on its ability to claim a special role as rule enforcer rather than rule breaker. When the United States openly treats sovereignty, non-intervention, and legal restraint as conditional, even in its own region, it undermines the basis on which it can demand compliance elsewhere. In such a system, it becomes increasingly difficult to explain why Russia should accept normative limits in Ukraine or why China should defer to existing arrangements over Taiwan when the system's principal architect no longer treats those limits as binding. This is not a question of hypocrisy, but of authority. Once no actor can credibly claim to stand above the rules, compliance becomes contingent on power rather than obligation.

The Donroe Doctrine therefore signals not the collapse of international order, but its fragmentation. Authority becomes regionally bounded, norms apply unevenly, and autonomy becomes increasingly shaped by geography. Whether this produces a more stable balance of power or a more brittle and contested system remains uncertain. What is clear is that the post–Cold War assumption of a universally binding liberal order has eroded, and the Western Hemisphere has become the clearest site where that erosion is now visible.

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