



THE RISE OF US DOCTRINAL REALISM IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

BY PAUL N. GOLDSTEIN

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The early January US special operation, Operation Absolute Resolve, which successfully extracted Nicolás Maduro and his wife without American casualties, is being framed by the administration as a demonstration of Trump Corollary and a new strategic doctrine in action, called "Doctrinal Realism."

It reflects the evolution of US strategic thinking in the Western Hemisphere, particularly the "Trump Corollary."

At its core, this framework describes how President Trump reframed the Monroe Doctrine for an era of great-power rivalry, treating Chinese and Russian political, military, and economic activity in Latin America as direct threats to US national security.

This shift places less emphasis on governance or democratic norms and instead centers strategic competition—opposing Belt and Road projects, discouraging Huawei's 5G expansion, and undermining Chinese penetration in Venezuela. Now, the success of Operation Absolute Resolve is reverberating in the capitals around the world, especially in Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and Pyongyang.

The Trump administration's action is unprecedented, and this "doctrinal realism" means, according to my intelligence community connections, a rule-based form of realism that prioritizes power balances, spheres of influence, and transactional alliances over normative or transformational goals. In a sense, it stands in contrast to pro-democratic internationalism or globalism, which seeks stability through institutions, shared values, and democratic convergence. The tension between these two approaches continues to shape US policy, with many governments

operating in a hybrid mode—invoking democratic language while relying on realist logic when core interests are at stake.

The consequences for China

China's posture toward the US operation in Venezuela reflects a pragmatic, stability-driven strategy rather than any ideological commitment to Nicolás Maduro or his inner circle. Beijing had ample warning that Washington was preparing a live military option: The buildup of US assets in the region over several months made clear that this was not a bluff or a pressure tactic. Given China's extensive presence in Venezuela and across Latin America, it is inconceivable that they were caught off-guard. They saw it coming, assessed the implications, and positioned themselves accordingly.

A high-level Chinese delegation led by senior diplomat Qiu Xiaoyi traveled to Caracas just before the US move. According to [reporting](#), US intelligence had anticipated that the PRC (and Russia) would not retaliate over the operation. This is entirely consistent with Beijing's long-standing approach in the Western Hemisphere: avoid confrontation with Washington, protect Chinese assets, and maintain stability in countries where China has sunk significant capital. Venezuela is not a geopolitical red line for China; it is an economic project, and Beijing's priority is ensuring that its investments, loans, and physical infrastructure remain secure regardless of who governs the country.

China's relationships inside Venezuela are deliberately diversified. They maintain close ties with Delcy Rodríguez and her brother Jorge Rodríguez, who has served as a key negotiator with both China and the United States. Jorge was the channel for the Qatar-based talks that began under the Biden administration and continued after Trump took office, and those lines of communication remain open. On the US side, Richard Grenell has been the designated interlocutor with the Venezuelans, though that may shift now that Trump has named Marco Rubio and Pete Hegseth as co-viceroyals overseeing Venezuela policy.

Beijing's avoidance of internal political entanglement is not new. During the earlier US-backed effort to elevate Juan Guaidó, China maintained a functional relationship with him as well. Guaidó's chief of staff spoke fluent Mandarin and served as China's point of contact. This was not ideological flexibility; it was strategic hedging. China's objective has always been to ensure that, no matter who ends up in charge, the new leadership continues

honoring Chinese contracts, protecting Chinese assets, and servicing Chinese debt.

China's economic exposure in Venezuela is significant but no longer existential. The bulk of its interests lie in energy and mining, and repayment has often taken the form of daily oil shipments of roughly 470,000 barrels. Yet China has diversified its global energy portfolio to the point where Venezuelan oil now represents only about 4% of its total imports. This reduced dependence gives Beijing even less incentive to confront the United States or to defend Maduro personally. Stability matters more than loyalty, and asset protection matters more than ideological alignment.

Taken together, China's behavior signals a clear strategic logic. Beijing will protest diplomatically, but it will not escalate. It will preserve its relationships with all major Venezuelan factions, maintain open channels with Washington, and avoid any action that risks its long-term economic footprint in the region. The Chinese leadership understands that the Western Hemisphere remains a domain where the United States retains overwhelming military and logistical superiority. Confrontation would be costly, unnecessary, and misaligned with China's broader priorities.

In essence, China is treating Venezuela not as a geopolitical battleground but as a commercial environment that must remain predictable. As long as its investments are protected and its debt repayment mechanisms remain intact, Beijing is prepared to adapt to whatever political configuration emerges after the US operation.

Recommendations for US policymakers

Operation Absolute Resolve has reset strategic expectations across the Western Hemisphere. Its long-term value, however, will depend on whether Washington can translate a decisive tactical success into a durable framework for managing great-power competition.

The first step is implementing the National Security Strategy (NSS) rooted in the "Doctrinal Realism" into a more coherent strategy. The Trump administration's approach anchored in great-power balance of power, spheres of influence and addressing adversarial penetration where US national security interests are challenged represents the beginnings of a strategic framework. In that context, policymakers should establish clear criteria for when foreign military, intelligence, or dual-use infrastructure (Belt & Road Initiative) constitutes a strategic threat. Strategic public messaging should emphasize hemispheric stability and sovereignty guided by the logic of the Trump Corollary. With this established strategic messaging, the United States will continue to act decisively to prevent adversarial footholds when American interests are threatened.

The political transition in Venezuela with Maduro's removal opens space for building a transition arrangement that avoids perception of occupation or nation-building. Domestic political forces including pragmatic Chavistas and key military players could become the foundation for a successful transition rather than attempting rapid democratization. Critical is how to incentivize the Venezuelan institutions for protecting foreign investments, and prevent renewed opens for adversarial powers. The administration's preference for transactional engagement makes this model both politically viable and strategically effective. The decision on how to bring American oil companies into assisting the rebuilding of Venezuela's energy infrastructure is a critical part of this process.

In terms of China, the United States must address the issue of Beijing's economic and financial position in Venezuela. The issue of whether the US should completely cut-off all commercial activity of China needs to be reviewed by the administration and national security institutions. In effect, the new strategic leverage the US has with China should be applied overtly and covertly tying Chinese behavior in the Indo-Pacific, especially Taiwan. A new strategic dialogue with China should be established with the understanding that China remains committed to securing Taiwan by any means they deemed necessary including the military option.

China's recent behavior toward Japan is illustrative of the political and psychological warfare operations that must be addressed by US policymakers. Of course, the US prefers a non-confrontational approach, is prepared to meet the Chinese full spectrum of warfare when necessary. This limited dialogue might include involving Venezuelan authorities concerning debt, energy flows, and infrastructure transparency.

The opportunity for Washington to use the Venezuela case to build regional consensus on extra-hemispheric penetration is now on the agenda. Many Latin American governments share concerns about opaque infrastructure deals and dual-use projects. A flexible hemispheric security compact that focuses on investment screening, cyber standards, port security, and countering foreign military presence would allow deepening cooperation with the United States and put China, Russia, and Iran on notice.

To sustain the Venezuela project policymakers should build internal guardrails to prevent doctrinal overreach. A structured NSC decision process, with red-team assessments and clear tests of necessity, will ensure that decisive action remains tied to strategic purpose rather than momentum. Applied judiciously, "doctrinal realism" can stabilize the hemisphere. Overall, these policy recommendations can turn a dramatic tactical success into a sustainable strategic advantage.

The Pilot commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Please write to rob@pacforum.org for more information on how to contribute.