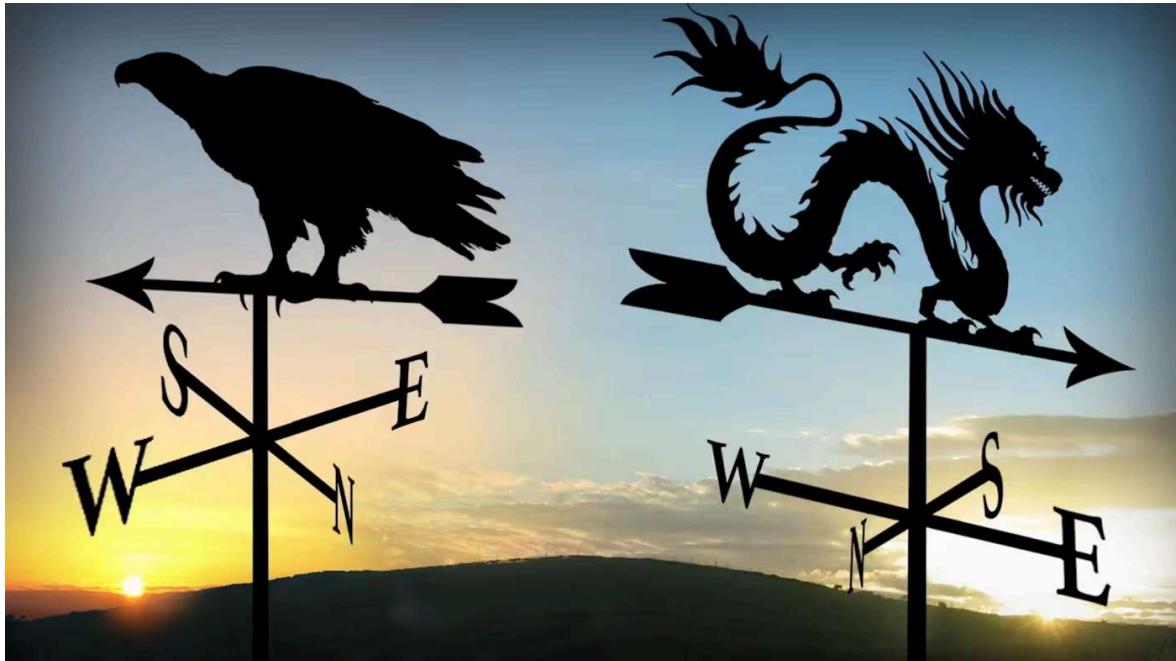


Opinion Geopolitics**Venezuela and the trouble with the Donroe doctrine**

A world order built around great power spheres of influence is a recipe for instability and conflict

GIDEON RACHMAN

© James Ferguson

Gideon Rachman

Published JAN 5 2026

“The Monroe Doctrine is a big deal, but we’ve superseded it by a lot, by a real lot. They now call it the ‘Donroe’ Doctrine.” So said Donald Trump, a few hours after American forces had toppled Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela.

The Venezuelan operation is a dramatic demonstration of the Trump administration's determination to establish American hegemony in the western hemisphere. That idea was central to the US national security strategy published last month. The US president's evident delight at the early success of the Venezuelan operation suggests that he may develop a taste for intervention in America's expansively defined "backyard".

But the implications of regime change in Venezuela are truly global. The proclamation of a [Donroe Doctrine](#) — combined with Trump's moves towards rapprochement with Russia and China — suggests that he is attracted to a world order organised around great power spheres of influence.

Both Russia and China condemned the ousting of Maduro. But Xi Jinping would happily sacrifice Chinese influence in Venezuela if it meant that Beijing was given a free hand over Taiwan. Russia would make the same deal over Ukraine. In 2019 Fiona Hill, who served in the first Trump administration, told Congress that the Russian government had been "signalling very strongly that they wanted to somehow make some very strange swap agreement between Venezuela and Ukraine".

For the moment, however, the focus will be on whether and how the US can "run" Venezuela — as Trump has promised. In the interests of establishing stability — and getting swift access to the country's vast oil reserves — the Trump administration is clearly indicating that it intends to do a deal with the remnants of the Maduro regime, rather than supporting the democratic opposition in exile.

The success or failure of that strategy may then dictate how ambitious the US will be in throwing its weight around in the rest of the western hemisphere. A potential target list is already emerging. In comments made after the capture of Maduro, Trump issued thinly veiled warnings to Colombia and Mexico. He said the Colombian president, Gustavo Petro, is “making cocaine . . . So he does have to watch his ass.” He praised Claudia Sheinbaum, the president of Mexico, but said that the drug cartels are “running Mexico”. There has long been debate in Trumpist circles about whether the US should use force against the Mexican cartels, inside Mexico itself. So far, caution has prevailed. But the thrill of toppling Maduro might change Trump’s calculus.

The Communist regime in Cuba — which was the subject of several American failed efforts at regime change in the 1960s — is also back in Washington’s crosshairs. Marco Rubio, the US secretary of state, whose parents left Cuba for the US, has already [put Havana on notice](#), saying the Cuban government is a “huge problem” and adding ominously — “I think they’re in a lot of trouble . . . I’m not going to talk to you about what our future steps are going to be.” The fall of Maduro will certainly pose problems for the Cubans, who have come to rely on Venezuelan oil and subsidies.

And then there is Greenland. Trump has [just re-emphasised](#) his desire to take over the island — which is an autonomous part of Denmark. Shortly after the Venezuelan operation, Katie Miller, the wife of Stephen Miller, Trump’s deputy chief of staff, posted a map of Greenland covered by the Stars and Stripes — and the word “SOON” above it.

Annexing part of the territory of a Nato ally would be a far more radical step than toppling an authoritarian Latin American leader. But the Trump administration has been preparing the rhetorical ground for a move on Greenland for some time — accusing the Danes of having failed there. Given the administration’s open contempt for its European allies, a US effort at annexation cannot be discounted.

All of this will be watched with fascination in Beijing and Moscow. A world in which powerful states and strongman rulers can do more or less what they like in their immediate neighbourhoods would suit Russia and China very well. Trump himself may believe that carving the world up into informal spheres of influence could be a route to the “strategic stability” with Russia and China that the recent US national security strategy laid out as a priority.

The idea that spheres of influence for great powers create stability may sound superficially plausible. But it ignores the views and interests of smaller countries that are deemed too insignificant to decide their own fates. And those countries have agency — and can sometimes put up a fight, as Ukraine has demonstrated.

Even when only the interests of the so-called major powers are taken into consideration, spheres of influence are as likely to create friction as stability. That is because a country such as the US will continue to have global interests. China, for example, regards Taiwan as part of its territory and a “core” national interest. But the US believes that its own national security would be imperilled if the Taiwanese semiconductor industry falls into the hands of China — or if Beijing controls the shipping that passes through the South China Sea.

Swapping American dominance of the western hemisphere for Chinese dominance of east Asia would be the deal of the century. For China.

gideon.rachman@ft.com

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2026. All rights reserved.

Follow the topics in this article

Gideon Rachman

Russian politics

US-China relations

Geopolitics

US foreign policy