



By: Benn Steil

The cost of Donroe Doctrine will be enormous



The press has had a field day packaging US President Donald Trump's deposition of Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro as a dramatic example of a new "[Donroe Doctrine](#)": a foreign-policy posture blending Trump's aggressive transactional diplomacy with President James Monroe's 19th-century assertion of US hemispheric guardianship.

But personalizing the intervention in Venezuela has proven problematic, because Trump was elected twice on a platform renouncing the very "regime change" and "nation building" he now appears keen to be undertaking.

The apparent contradiction reflects a fundamental shift in US foreign-policy thinking, one consistent with, but independent of, Trump's predilection for dominating what can easily be dominated and appeasing or ignoring what cannot.

Although Trump was clearly the decider in deposing Maduro, the plan was developed by the State Department, the Pentagon, and the CIA, indicating a consensus within an administration committed to hemispheric primacy.

"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," proclaims the new [US National Security Strategy](#).

Making sense of this hemispheric muscle-flexing requires reckoning with Trump's apparent enthusiasm for handing one-fifth of Ukraine to Russia and his insouciance over China's threats to [invade Taiwan](#).

Demonstration of strength closer to home

But there is a common denominator: ascendant players within the US political establishment are seeking to offset disengagement from intractable overseas

conflicts with a simultaneous demonstration of strength closer to home.

This aim finds symbolic expression in Trump's admiration for another 19th-century president, James Polk, whose 1846 war against Mexico expanded the United States' territory more than any other president. Polk's portrait now hangs in the Oval Office.

Recent developments reflect an administration bent on restoring the world order that prevailed before World War I

Far from being evidence of Trump's policy schizophrenia, recent developments reflect an administration bent on restoring the world order that prevailed before World War I, when America's global ambitions were more restrained, and it was more secure in its neighborhood.

Although the two world wars profoundly expanded the scope of America's global interests, George Washington and John Quincy Adams's earlier admonitions to avoid overseas entanglements never left the national psyche.

Given the current [electorate's concerns](#) about uncontrolled immigration of people and emigration of jobs, it should be less shocking, though not necessarily less disturbing, to cosmopolitan elites to see foreign policy lurch back toward a 19th-century form.

The postwar liberal order

Broadly, there are two diametrically opposed models for understanding the evolution of the international order since the late 1940s.

The first is Francis Fukuyama's "[End of History](#)" thesis. As the Cold War wound down, Fukuyama argued that the great ideological struggle of modernity – liberal democracy versus communist authoritarianism – had been decisively resolved.

Liberal democracy had won, and what remained of “History,” in the philosophical sense, consisted largely of managing the inevitable, but ultimately marginal, resistance of holdout authoritarian regimes.

The second model is less familiar in the West, but has become hugely influential among **Chinese political theorists**.

It derives from the writings of the German legal philosopher Carl Schmitt, who rejected liberalism as a vacuous ideology that fetishized debate and aspired to a dangerous universalism.

Schmitt denied that history could culminate in any single, globally valid political form. For him, the postwar liberal order was not the endpoint of political evolution but a contingent product of World War II.

For Schmitt, who joined the Nazi Party in 1933, the natural state of a world order is one in which a leading power in each region organizes the political space there

That order, he believed, was destined to erode as rising illiberal powers asserted control over their own regional spheres of influence, or what he termed *Großräume*.

For Schmitt, who joined the Nazi Party in 1933, the natural state of a world order is one in which a leading power in each region organizes the political space there.

Regions then balance against each other, each respecting the others’ legitimacy based solely on a recognized power equilibrium.

Order is reflected and sustained by the acceptance of pluralism across regions. International law is unnecessary for, and indeed detrimental to, global order.

It only motivates economic and military conflict, owing to inevitable disagreements over its content, interpretation, and applicability.

The creation of postwar institutions such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and, especially, NATO represented, in Schmitt’s view, a transparent effort by the US to impose its will globally: victor’s justice masquerading as universal principle.

But Schmitt also predicted that new rising powers would exploit liberal openness while remaining politically closed themselves, eventually undermining American universalism and liberal democracy itself.

The cost of a Monrovian restoration

Although he did not live to see the World Trade Organization’s arrival in 1995, Schmitt would no doubt have predicted its implosion as a mercantilist, modernizing China pushed the US to mimic its rival and ignore WTO rules on import barriers and export subsidies.

He would also doubtless have anticipated the emergence of someone like Trump: a leader who would exploit a growing sense of economic, political, and military encroachment by asserting the need for unbridled executive discretion.



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Not surprisingly, Schmitt considered the

Monroe Doctrine to be the earliest modern instance of Großraum thinking, because it envisaged an international order grounded in spatial dominance rather than abstract, universal law.

Since he viewed liberal-democratic universalism as an inherently unstable basis for world order, he would have regarded America's "forever wars" in Afghanistan and Iraq as the inevitable result of US efforts to sustain and dominate that order.

And he would have expected these doomed efforts to trigger withdrawal into a Monrovian posture that secured the Western Hemisphere against Chinese and Russian economic and military encroachment.

The cost of a Monrovian restoration, should it come to pass, will no doubt be enormous.

It will likely prefigure [NATO's disintegration](#), the expansion of armed East-West conflict in Europe, and Chinese revanchist militarism toward Taiwan and the South China Sea.

Perhaps Trump will pull back, leaving the likes of Cuba, Colombia, Mexico, and Greenland to administer themselves – albeit under armed US guard. Perhaps NATO will stagger on. Perhaps Russian President Vladimir Putin will be satisfied with the Donbas and Crimea. And perhaps Chinese President Xi Jinping will put economic growth ahead of expanding his own Großraum. Still, I suspect, the liberal world order has witnessed its final dawn.

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