

THE DISPATCH

The Monroe Doctrine, Then and Now

Two hundred years after the original proclamation, threats from China, Russia, and Iran have arisen in Latin America.

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Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro speaks next to China's President Xi Jinping at the Miraflores Presidential Palace in Caracas on July 20, 2014. (Photo credit: LEO RAMIREZ/AFP via Getty Images)

In November 2013, then-Secretary of State John Kerry [declared](#), to thunderous applause, that “the era of the Monroe Doctrine is over.” Flash forward to 2019 and John Bolton, the national security adviser at the time, [proclaimed](#) that the Monroe Doctrine was alive and well. Within six years, high-level administration officials had shown the range

of views toward the 200-year-old proclamation and U.S. policy in Latin America more broadly: While the left tends to treat the Monroe Doctrine as a symbol of the imposition of U.S. hegemony, the right regards it as a defense of U.S. strategic interests in the hemisphere.

Despite those divergent views, the Monroe Doctrine—[first proclaimed](#) on this day in 1823 by President James Monroe—deserves renewed attention. Revisiting it should lead us to ask anew how to [appropriately engage](#) with our neighbors in Latin America, a task made all the more imperative today by the troubling and often unnoticed activities of China, Russia, and Iran in the hemisphere we share.

At its inception, the Monroe Doctrine was not a declaration of U.S. hegemony. Rather, it was a statement by a young nation that had just fought a second war against Great Britain—ending in a draw and with the burning of the Capitol, nine years prior. In that context, the U.S. was reaching out in solidarity to its neighbors to the South, who were engaged in their own [struggles for independence](#) against their own colonial masters.

But as the late 19th and early 20th centuries unfolded, the expansion of U.S. power and a changing geopolitical context resulted in a more involved application and interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine. In 1898, the United States leveraged its status as an emerging naval power to support Cuba's war for independence against Spain, decisively beating the Spanish Armada in both the Atlantic and Pacific and eliminating the last of Spain's colonial grip in the Caribbean. A few decades later, the U.S. used economic, political, and military power to shape the hemisphere, including through supporting military occupations in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Mexico prior to World War II. And during the Cold War, U.S. resistance to attempts by the Soviet Union to establish a political and military presence in the region—through leftist guerrilla movements and communist or socialist governments in Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Nicaragua,

and El Salvador—reflected the adaptation of the Monroe Doctrine to new geopolitical realities.

How the ascendant U.S. used its economic and military influence in Latin America has been a source of debate. But today, even more than in 1823 or 1898, the conditions in our shared hemisphere deeply affect the U.S. and our neighbors through commerce, criminal networks, migration, and, perhaps especially, security concerns.

Take the challenges posed by China. Though China’s potential as a market and commercial partner creates genuine opportunities, Chinese companies pursue their interests in the region’s resources and markets in a [predatory fashion](#). They maximize [benefits for themselves](#) while imposing costs and indirectly undermining democracies in the region. Corruption, onerous contracts, appropriation of partners’ intellectual property, and favoritism of Chinese suppliers abound.

The Chinese, for example, loaned tens of billions of dollars to populist regimes in Venezuela and Ecuador for projects spearheaded by their companies and workers. The projects were almost entirely repaid by pumping oil out of both countries through operations that Chinese companies controlled. Yet the projects themselves left little or no value for Latin American nations, but instead left vestiges such as an [abandoned train line](#) in Venezuela’s interior and an [Ecuadorian dam](#) beset by thousands of structural cracks that kept it from working properly. In the Bahamas, the Chinese construction company contracted to build the [Baha Mar mega-resort](#) performed so poorly that the facility opening was delayed for months. Baha Mar was forced into bankruptcy, and an obscure contract clause required the matter to be settled by arbitration in Hong Kong—where a shady Macau-based Chinese conglomerate secured control of the entire resort.

The weakness of Latin American institutions, their vulnerability to corruption, and the self-exclusion by some governments from more traditional sources of loans and investment all decrease the likelihood that the region will benefit from these projects. And politicians and

businessmen hesitate to speak critically of Chinese behaviors out of fear that such talk will jeopardize the Chinese markets they hope to access or the partnerships they hope to forge. The result is that elites overestimate the probability of securing the hoped-for benefits from the Chinese, while underestimating the risks—including poor project performance, social conflict, environmental damage, or the economic non-viability of a project once completed, to name just a few examples.

Beyond economics, China's "[no judgment](#)" engagement with local governments—as long as Chinese interests are protected—[sustains repressive regimes](#) and undercuts democracy until it is too late.

Venezuela, for example, received more than \$62 billion in loans from the Chinese, tied to the export of its oil. This helped maintain a stream of income while the left-oriented populist authoritarian regime of Hugo Chavez progressively nationalized the economy, consolidated control of the country's political institutions, and eliminated political dissent like independent media and non-governmental organizations in the country.

And should a Chinese invasion of Taiwan lead to [war with the U.S.](#), the commercial presence and military relationships China has built in the Western Hemisphere will [likely be used](#) to disrupt U.S. deployment and sustainment flows. China could, for example, shut down the Panama Canal and Strait of Magellan, attack U.S. space assets from the Western Hemisphere, or project forces against the U.S. from [dual-use ports](#) and other facilities in the region.

But Chinese influence in the Western Hemisphere is not the only concern. Threats posed by Iranian and Russian engagement are even more direct. Iran has worked through surrogate organizations such as Hezbollah to orchestrate terrorist operations. These include attacks in 1992 and 1994 against Israeli and Jewish targets in Argentina, or Iranian agent [Moshen Rabbani's role](#) in recruiting Islamic extremists in the failed plot to attack the [JFK airport in 2007](#). Iran was also implicated in seeking to contract what it believed was members of the Mexican Zetas cartel in a 2011 plot to [kill the Saudi Arabian ambassador](#) in

Washington. Just this past June, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi traveled to Latin America, meeting and signing agreements with Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba. Separately, Iran signed a [defense cooperation agreement](#) with Bolivia. Escalating tension with the U.S. in the Middle East only increases Iran's interest in expanding its reengagement with the region.

Russia, like Iran, has periodically sought to challenge the United States [through partnerships with anti-U.S. regimes](#). Even as its sustained invasion of Ukraine has weakened its ability to project power into the Western Hemisphere, Russia has played a dangerous niche role in the information warfare space in Latin America, collaborating with friends such as Cuba and Venezuela in using traditional and social media to send messages that [undermine pro-Western democracies](#). If Russia-NATO tensions escalate over Ukraine, it could leverage anti-U.S. partners in the Western hemisphere to threaten the U.S. from the region.

The threats the U.S. faces in Latin America are real and pressing. They involve regimes—China, Russia, Iran—that undermine our interests in other regions of the world. What, then, should our response be?

In the spirit of the original Monroe Doctrine, dialogue with the region over the activities of China, Russia, and Iran must convey a sense of solidarity in shared interests, not a U.S. imposition. The U.S. can do far more to help the region strengthen its institutions to best secure the opportunities and navigate the perils in dealing with these actors.

In shaping the region's choices, the balance between U.S.-friendly democracies versus anti-U.S. populist regimes will become ever more important. One of the most important strategic steps the U.S. can take is to work with countries of the region through institutional strengthening, economic programs, and security cooperation, to help ensure that democracies succeed in producing results for their peoples. The U.S. should also redouble its efforts to educate regional partners about the perils of Russian information operations, Iranian surrogate terrorist networks and other threats, and the seemingly non-threatening ways that

Chinese commercial assets and relationships could be put to military use in time of war.

As the Monroe Doctrine turns 200, its continued success depends on Latin America's choices, rather than its obedience. If Latin America stands in solidarity with the U.S. against the new generation of extra-hemispheric threats, it'll be not because the U.S. demands it, but because the region recognizes that doing so is in its own self-interest.