

America Pivots to “Spheres of Influence” Rivalry—Trump and the Key Players

By SUZUKI Yoshikatsu

Two years into the second Trump administration, the U.S. military's pre-dawn strike on Venezuela on January 3 dramatically altered the world's political landscape. A unilateral change to the status quo by force that undermines the international order—this signifies that the United States, which was supposed to be the leader of the democratic camp, has shifted course toward “spheres of influence” rivalry with China and Russia. As his next targets, U.S. President Donald Trump seeks not only the complete recapture of the management rights of the Panama Canal, but also to bring Cuba and even Greenland, an autonomous territory of Denmark, under his control. Behind this lies an intention to turn the United States into an empire and a theory of power that would return the world to a nineteenth-century order, with “peace through strength” and a “system of interests” as its operating principles—and there are four key players in the White House championing this cause.

◊ In Pursuit of “Manifest Destiny”

“Trump 2.0” began one year ago, on January 20, 2025. In his inaugural address, the 47th President, Trump, declared that “America's golden age begins right now,” and thrust his distinctive worldview to the fore.

He argued that the “natural businessman,” the 25th President William McKinley, made the United States wealthy through tariffs and his talents, and provided the funds for projects such as the Panama Canal to the succeeding 26th President Theodore Roosevelt. Enormous sums were invested and great human sacrifices were paid, yet the Panama Canal stealthily fell into China's hands. Now is the time to “take the Canal back”—with courage and vigor, and with the life force of the greatest civilization in history, “the time has come to act again.” “Let us lead this nation to new heights of victory and success; we will not flinch.” A rallying cry for America's restoration. As “a nation that increases its wealth, expands its territory, and raises its flag on new and beautiful horizons,” “let us pursue our Manifest Destiny into

the stars—let us send our astronauts to Mars and have them plant the Stars and Stripes there”—.

Trump used the phrase “Manifest Destiny,” a word not seen in prior presidents’ inaugural addresses, for the first time on that occasion. What, then, did he truly mean?

◊ The Evolution of the Monroe Doctrine—Into a Tool of Expansion

In the nineteenth century, the starting point of U.S. diplomacy—grounded in principles such as “mutual non-interference” with Europe—was the “declaration” in the annual message to Congress (1823) by the 5th President, James Monroe; it was the 11th President, James K. Polk, who fused the “Monroe Doctrine” into “Manifest Destiny.” The doctrine intended to “defend” the New World (America) from the Old World (Europe) was, here, recast as a tool of “territorial expansion.” The redefined “Monroe Doctrine” (1845) became a pretext for the annexation of Texas and the Mexican-American War, yet the westward movement reached its end with the “closing of the frontier” (1890). However, McKinley, who took office at the turn of the century, opened up a new frontier with a “trinity” diplomacy of “protective tariffs (to protect domestic industry),” “overseas expansion (to open new markets),” and “protection of sovereignty (so as not to be constrained in action).” When McKinley fell to an assassin’s bullet, Theodore Roosevelt transformed the “Monroe Doctrine” into an aggressive doctrine that, as a “civilized nation,” “justified” military interventions in Asia and Latin America.

The “Monroe Doctrine” went through many twists and turns, but this year, with the 250th anniversary of America’s founding approaching, it was revived as the “Donroe Doctrine” under the Trump administration, which proclaims “America First.” The administration’s first “National Security Strategy (NSS),” published on December 4, was applied to the military intervention in Venezuela in the pre-dawn hours of January 3. The “Donroe Doctrine” is a declaration—grounded in the worldview Trump presented in his inaugural address—that sets out the establishment of “absolute U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere.” The Trump administration made clear its posture of rejecting the intrusion of extra-regional forces that threaten the “border,” and of securing—by the use of force if necessary—U.S. access to the resources and markets of the “Western Hemisphere” for the sake of U.S. national interests.

◊ “No Constraints on Presidential Authority”

One month after the publication of the NSS, shock ran across the globe. The Trump administration launched the military intervention in Venezuela, “Operation Absolute Resolve.” A lightning-fast military action—aimed at detaining President Maduro and his wife Flores and transferring them to New York—was carried out and concluded within hours. A military operation completed with special forces deployed, without a single casualty on the U.S. side. Trump appeared before the press, brimming with confidence. “On my orders, the U.S. military carried out an unprecedented operation in Venezuela’s capital,” a success story following last June’s air strikes on Iran. Trump’s self-assured press conference went on and on, exuding a sense of omnipotence as though he were invincible.

Where did that confidence come from? What comes to mind is the experience of the attempted assassination of Trump during a presidential campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania (July 13, 2024). In his inaugural address half a year after the incident, Trump confessed: “The assassin’s bullet tore through my ear, but I was saved by God so that I could make America great again”—words as if possessed by a “Manifest Destiny” experience.

It is obvious that the attack on Venezuela violates international law, yet Trump is not bound by any legal norms. In an exclusive interview with The New York Times (January 8 edition), conducted several days after the intervention, he answered the question, “Is there not also a constraint on presidential authority?” by saying: “There is one. My own morality, my own mind. That is the only thing that can stop me.” As for the relationship with international law, he said: “I don’t need international law.”—

◊ A New Generation of Elites Supporting Trump

To be sure, if one follows the NSS’s strategic logic, it is true that the aim included eliminating the influence of China and Russia from Venezuela. However, Trump’s foreign-policy principle is “great-power national interest” intertwined with “private interest,” rooted in “peace through strength” and a “system of interests.” Therefore, what slipped out at the press conference immediately after the intervention was not democratic nation-building following the ouster of a dictator, but a posture that placed top priority on business making large-scale investment in oil facilities. He emphasized

that U.S. oil companies would enter, restore the oil infrastructure, and “we will run this country.”

Securing oil interests—what becomes visible here is that Trump’s true aim lies in the autumn midterm elections. In other words, by securing oil interests in Venezuela, which boasts the world’s largest proven crude-oil reserves, he seeks to produce a positive impact on the U.S. economy. At the same time, he aims to appeal to public opinion by projecting a “strong president” and to heighten expectations.

The Venezuela intervention was carried out, as if wrapped in softening paper, to advance what is Trump’s top priority. The four key players in the White House who undertook the preparations, coordination, and enabling environment toward the final decision were: Marco Rubio, who serves concurrently as Secretary of State and Assistant to the President (Acting National Security Advisor); Stephen Miller, the Deputy Chief of Staff and Trump’s closest confidant; J. D. Vance, the Vice President and a leading figure of MAGA, Trump’s political base; and Andy Baker, who served as Vance’s national security adviser from his days as a senator and has now been promoted to Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs. These were the four key figures behind the Venezuela operation.

The four who support foreign and security policy in the second Trump administration (2025–) are an active new generation of elites when compared with the experienced older figures who held major posts in the first administration (2017–21) (here, the initial lineup at the time of the launch: Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and National Security Advisor Michael Flynn).

What the four have in common is: (1) anti-“Washingtonian” sentiment; (2) unlike the baby-boomer generation born around the 1950s, which emphasizes traditional alliances, they are a generation that spent its adolescence in the 1990s and believes in America’s overwhelming strength; (3) antipathy toward the “adults” such as Herbert McMaster and John Bolton, who served as national security advisors after Flynn; and (4) loyalty to Trump and a reformist spirit, as believers in “peace through strength.”

◇ The Venezuela Intervention: Roles and Responsibilities of the “Gang of Four”

The backstage process surrounding the drafting of the NSS, which officially set out the policy of placing the highest priority on the “Western Hemisphere” and served as the underpinning for the Venezuela intervention, is extremely interesting. The initial draft was led and written by Michael Anton (Director of Policy Planning, U.S. Department of State). It was supposed to be published in late August or September, but it was delayed by as much as three months. What happened in the meantime? Synthesizing various media reports and information from sources, Anton’s NSS draft was substantially revised on the basis of the ideological thinking of Miller and Baker. Specifically, in order to place “border and drug countermeasures at the core of national security policy,” Anton’s traditional national security concept—his “non-interventionist” draft, which held that the United States “should focus on great-power competition”—was rejected. Anton himself left the administration on December 15, eleven days after the NSS was published.

As for the positions of the four, including Rubio and Vance, with respect to the Venezuela intervention, there were in fact subtle differences in their respective stances and calculations. However, while dividing roles among themselves, they sought to unify their will, and Trump approved it.

The most proactive about intervention was Rubio, the child of Cuban immigrants, a hardliner who has harshly criticized Maduro as “an offspring of Castroism.” He is leading the intervention and the United States’ post-detention engagement—negotiations with Interim President Rodriguez, restructuring of the oil sector, and explanations to the U.S. Congress. Miller, who supports Trump at close range as the guardian of the “America First” ideology, positioned this military intervention as an extension of “measures against illegal immigration.” In close coordination with Rubio, he drew up the post-Maduro scenario. Miller’s concerns are “the border and oil.” Having led immigration policy in the first administration, he ensured thorough measures in this operation so that refugees would not flow in due to post-intervention turmoil; at the same time, in order to place oil interests under U.S. control, he devised the rationale for justifying intervention.

Vance’s role is to explain the intervention to the MAGA base, which is cautious about U.S. overseas interventions. His is the role of persuading them, from the standpoint of national interest, as to “why intervention in Venezuela is not unnecessary.” He argued that to block the inflow of the synthetic opioid fentanyl,

which the Trump administration positions as “the top national defense priority,” to “recover oil assets that originally belonged to the United States,” and to remove “extra-regional forces” such as China and Russia from Venezuela, the defense of the Western Hemisphere is indispensable, and there is a strategic necessity for military intervention.

Baker, a strategist of the new generation, stayed in the shadows as an aide to Vance. While reflecting Vance’s intentions and seeking to maximize national interest, he handled practical coordination, including liaison with the military. In terms of his relationship with Rubio, who led the operation, Baker is skeptical of a neocon-style approach like Rubio’s—an active expansion and deeper involvement line. He also argued that the Venezuela intervention should be kept to a “limited and surgical intervention.” Baker is likewise reluctant to support Ukraine from the same standpoint. From here, a positioning that is mindful of a rivalry between Vance and Rubio, as post-Trump contenders, comes into view. As for this intervention, it should be seen that Baker sought to maintain balance within the administration through a self-restraining posture.

◊ The Risk That “Limited Intervention” Will Not Remain Limited

The “Donroe Doctrine,” which rereads the United States’ traditional foreign-policy ideology of the Monroe Doctrine to fit the “Trump 2.0” era, was conceptualized by the new generation of elites, especially Miller and Baker, as the framework of “America First,” in order to draw out Trump’s explosive force to the maximum toward the next era. For this reason, the NSS’s core contains a logic whereby “limited military intervention” is always possible if it is judged that there is a public-security-level crisis centered on the “border” that constitutes a threat to the United States. However, Trump himself, possessed by “Manifest Destiny,” is a supreme leader who lacks a sound strategic perspective, and thus intervention, once undertaken, carries the risk of spiraling beyond control. The episode in which Trump, at the aforementioned press conference immediately after the intervention, stated that post-Maduro Venezuela would be “run by the United States,” and Rubio and others, fearing a quagmire, hurried to correct him, symbolizes the peril of the “Donroe Doctrine.” (honorifics omitted) (Distributed by Jiji Press [Gaikō Okame Hachimoku] on January 16, 2026)

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