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China has condemned Trump's Venezuela blockade. But it may also see some upsides to a new era of gunboat diplomacy

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Analysis by  Simone McCarthy



A US military helicopter flies over the Panama-flagged Centuries, which was intercepted by the ...



Beijing — China has ample reason to oppose the ramp-up of American military pressure on Venezuela and the recent US interceptions of tankers tied to its oil.

The US manoeuvres, part of President Donald Trump's "total and complete blockade" of sanctioned vessels around Venezuela, strike at the economic heart of one of Beijing's closest Latin American partners – and target an industry that has long benefited China, which in recent months took in roughly 80% of Venezuela's oil exports, analysts say.

Beijing has slammed those interceptions as "seriously violating international law" and assured Caracas of its opposition to "all forms of unilateralism and bullying" in a call between the countries' top diplomats last week.

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But it's also clear that Beijing is primed to use the US aggression to its advantage: playing it as another reason on its list of why the US should not be the world's leading superpower, and a window into how Trump is rolling out his revival of the Monroe Doctrine.

The White House's **national security strategy** released earlier this month includes a revamp of that centuries-old policy, updating what historically was a warning to European colonial powers not to interfere in the Western hemisphere to a Trump-era vision for a "stable" region "free of hostile foreign incursion or ownership of key assets."

The strategy has sparked a deluge of analysis in China's policy circles, where analysts are debating whether the US is therefore signaling a withdrawal from its role as a global-spanning power to focus on its own backyard – leaving more space for Beijing to expand its own influence in Asia and the world.

So far, Beijing is not waiting for an answer to that question to criticize how the US is handling its backyard when it comes to Venezuela, or to signal that it will not step back its own footprint in the region.

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The US' "escalating actions against Venezuela" have placed it "in opposition to global moral standards," the international-facing edition of the state-backed Global Times said in an **editorial** on Monday focused on the interceptions of the tankers.

An analysis in domestic Chinese state media was more blunt, with a research fellow at government-backed think tank **suggesting** that if the US advanced its maritime operations to a large-scale invasion, it could trigger a "second Vietnam War."

'Deny non-Hemispheric competitors'

Earlier this month, after the US had already been amassing its military might in the Caribbean and carrying out strikes on alleged **drug-smuggling vessels** in the region, China bolstered its own message: publishing its first new policy paper on Latin America and the Caribbean in nearly a decade.

Dropping roughly a week after the White House National Security Strategy, China's **agenda** laid out dozens of areas in which it proposed boosting collaboration with the region, from aerospace to law enforcement.

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Whether timed alongside Washington's moves or not, the paper reiterated Beijing's core message as it vies to become an alternative leader to the US and reshape a world it sees as unfairly dominated by the West.

"As a developing country and a member of the Global South, China has always stood in solidarity through thick and thin with the Global South, including Latin America and the Caribbean," it said, using a term to refer to typically emerging economies in the globe's geographic south.

It also signaled that Beijing has no intention of backing away from a region where it's spent recent decades ramping up its diplomacy and unleashing billions in loans for infrastructure and other projects – with Venezuela a major beneficiary.

The "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine appears to take aim at those ties, with the strategy document prioritizing the Americas and saying the US would seek to "deny non-Hemispheric competitors the ability to... own or control strategically vital assets, in our Hemisphere."

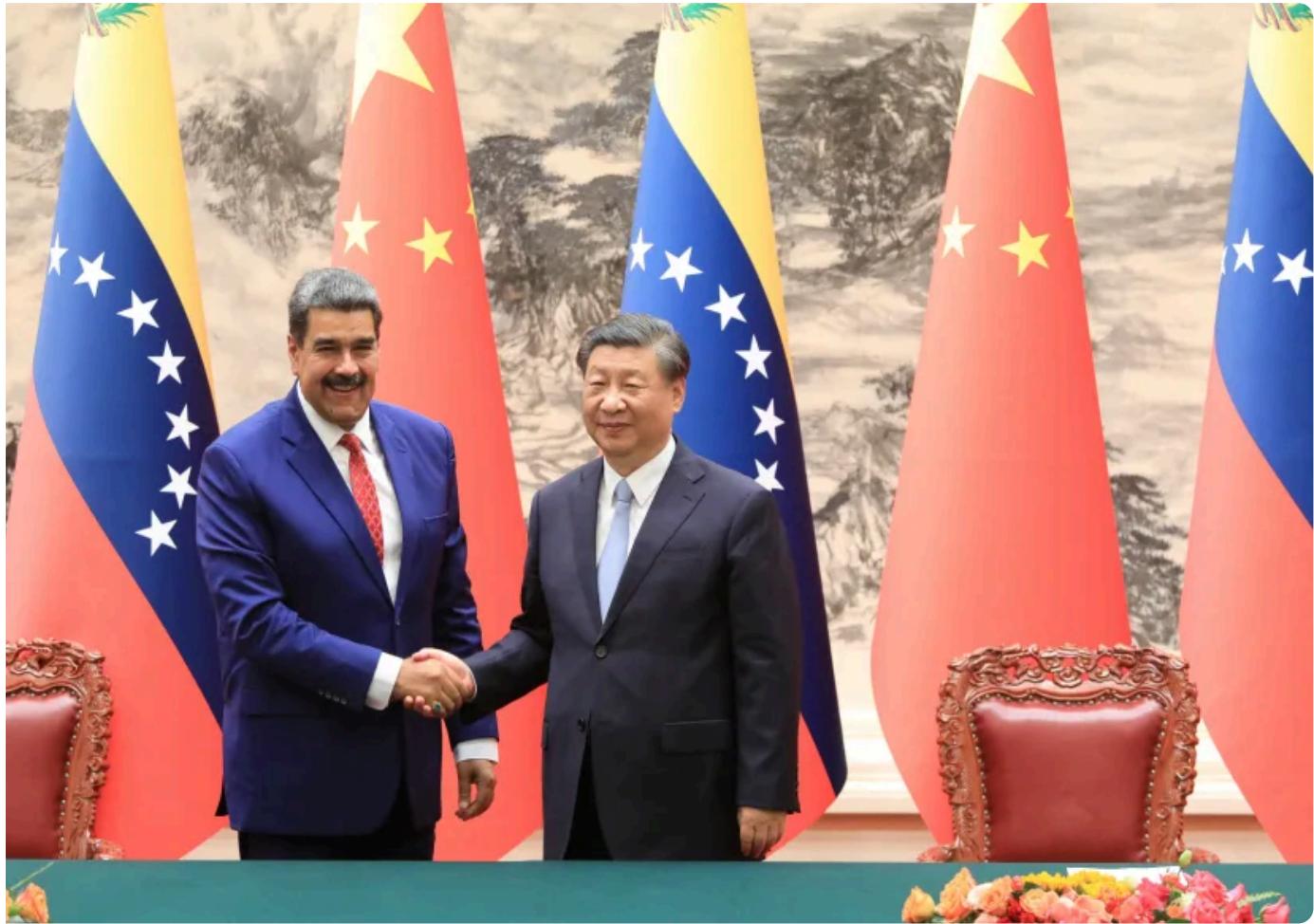
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The Trump administration has already launched a campaign to oust a Hong Kong developer from operating ports at the Panama Canal after claiming this means

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Trump's interest in taking control of the Danish territory of Greenland, much to the alarm of Denmark and fellow US allies across Europe.

In his military pressure on Venezuela, Trump has said he's taking aim at the regime of Nicolás Maduro, which he alleges uses oil money to finance "drug terrorism, human trafficking, murder, and kidnapping." He's suggested that he wants to open up US access to Venezuelan land, oil and assets that he says were "stolen" when the country nationalized its oil fields in the 1970s.

But Trump is also targeting a country with close ties to the countries he appears to see as great powers: China and Russia.



Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro meets with Chinese leader Xi Jinping at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing in 2023. (*Miraflores Palace/Reuters*)

'Spheres of influence'

Those two countries have both been staunch diplomatic backers of the Maduro regime, even as Venezuela spiralled into deep economic crisis, and as rights groups and other governments decried **political repression**, including around the **disputed 2024 election** that extended Maduro's rule.

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Representatives from Moscow and Beijing condemned the US pressure campaign against Venezuela at a meeting on the UN Security Council on Tuesday, with Chinese representative Sun Lei saying China "supports all countries in defending their sovereignty and national dignity" and calling on the US to avoid further escalation.

Beijing has other reasons to pay close attention.

Last month, crude oil from Venezuela accounted for 5% of its total imports, according to data analytics firm Kpler shared with CNN. And one vessel intercepted by the US, the unsanctioned Centuries tanker, is owned by a Hong Kong-registered company.

But China is unlikely to move past rhetoric and flex its military might to back Venezuela or to shore up engagement in Latin America in the face of the US show of force.

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It does, however, appear to be closely evaluating how the Trump administration's heightened focus on the region may impact its engagement elsewhere in the world.

International observers have wondered whether China could draw lessons from the American moves for its own region, where it's widely seen as looking to be the

dominant power and achieve its goal of taking control of Taiwan — the self-governing democratic island it claims.

In China, analysts and policy thinkers have been focused on how the Trump's reboot of the Monroe Doctrine will impact the global balance of power.

Some have argued that it shows a re-prioritization of US interests or even Trump's vision for a world divided into "spheres of influence" led by great powers – namely the US and its allies, Russia and China.

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That means, the US "is unlikely to interfere excessively in East Asian affairs such as the Taiwan issue and Sino-Japanese relations and instead acknowledges China's dominance in this region of influence," one such scholar, Mei Yang, associate dean of The Chinese University of Hong Kong in Shenzhen, wrote in a recent analysis.

But Mei and other Chinese policy thinkers suggest that this is a "temporary strategic retrenchment" by the US, that will not see it give up on looking to ensure military dominance or on its competition with China.

So even if Beijing sees an upside to a US focused on its own backyard, it doesn't change the urgency felt by Chinese officials to gain control of the global narrative. And that's why the US showing military aggression in its regional waters is a convenient talking point for Beijing, which has long been accused by the US and its allies of doing the same in the South China Sea and around Taiwan.

That means, so far, Trump's actions against Venezuela and his evocation of a 19th century policy appear to have given Beijing one more way to defend its own record and frame the US as a power of a bygone era.



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