

Removing head of state might seem to be about drugs or oil – but it's based on an age-old policy

● Trump is a unilateralist whose preferred geopolitical modus operandi are, and always will be, transactional power politics



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The US military intervention that toppled Nicolás Maduro was a long time coming. In the week before Christmas, the formidable White House chief of staff Susie Wiles told *Vanity Fair* that Donald Trump's objective was to remove the Venezuelan dictator from power.

It was more authoritative corroboration of what Trump aides such as Anna Kelly had been saying for months: "The President is prepared to use every element of American power to stop drugs from flooding into our country and to bring those responsible to justice."

Following three days of intense strategy meetings with his national security advisers, at a press conference on December 18 Trump teased journalists by saying he had made up his mind, "sort of", on a course of military action. He added, however: "I can't tell you what it would be."

That was typical of his essentially improvisational approach to foreign policy.

His toppling of Maduro is proof that Trump is not the isolationist that he has long been accused of being. He is a unilateralist with an intense disdain for multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organisation.

His preferred geopolitical modus operandi are and always will be transactional power pol-

itics. For Trump, it is all about doing a deal in which there are no ideological constraints that would restrict his free-wheeling impulses.

That is not to suggest, however, that as US president he lacks an overall guiding principle or framework to give his actions coherence.

While his behaviour appears capricious, and at times erratic, it is firmly rooted within an overarching "America First" agenda.

Although the immediate *casus belli* may have to do with narcotics and controlling Venezuela's vast oil resources, the longer-term strategy was spelled out in the recently published 2025 US National Security Strategy. This, in effect, abandoned the strategic competition approach to foreign policy, in which the US acted as the world's policeman — in favour of one that promoted regional spheres of influence.

This was a Trump-era redefinition of the Monroe doctrine in which the US focused on control of the Western hemisphere, along with trade and immigration and other issues that directly affected American interests.

It came about in 1823 when President James Monroe warned European powers not to inter-

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● Nicolas Maduro and his wife Cilia Flores are now both in US hands. Photo: Getty

fere in America's sphere of influence. Trump's 2025 version of the doctrine is made explicit in the new National Security Strategy: "The United States will reassert and enforce the Monroe doctrine to restore American pre-eminence."

It marked the return of what might be called "big stick" US exclusionary hegemony, backed up by gunboat diplomacy, as events in Venezuela have confirmed.

While the new Monroe doctrine signals a sharp reorientation of US foreign policy towards Latin America and the Caribbean, it also indicates a turn away from Europe.

More broadly, it may help to explain other features of US foreign policy under Trump

which analysts have had difficulty understanding. For instance, Trump's "bromance" with Russian president Vladimir Putin is largely attributed to his having a soft spot for authoritarian figures. While that is undoubtedly the case, it fails to explain the degree to which he has gone out on a limb in acceding to Putin's territorial demands in Ukraine.

Trump's willingness to concede so readily may be partly a concession that Ukraine, and possibly other parts of Eastern Europe, are part of Putin's sphere of influence over which he has a right to exert hegemony — a Russian version of the Monroe doctrine.

If this turns out to be the case, the implications for Europe could well be profound.

Meanwhile, the precise manner in which events are unfolding in Venezuela is unclear at the time of this writing. However, as countless examples illustrate, toppling dictatorships is fraught with unintended consequences.

The US military action seems to have been limited to getting rid of Maduro. The fact that US special forces were able to pull it off with no loss of life is a major tactical achievement.

Difficult and all as that may have been, in all likelihood it will probably turn out to be the easy part. Given the complexities involved, turning a tactical achievement into a strategic success is a very tall order.

The chances of Trump's foray into gunboat diplomacy resulting in a smooth transition of power in Caracas, with Venezuelan opposition leader and recent Nobel Peace prize winner Maria Corina Machado taking over, would seem to be low.

And while James Monroe's declaration failed to bring peace and tranquillity to the Western hemisphere 200 years ago, it remains to be seen whether Trump's iteration of his doctrine will be any more successful. It may even fall at the first hurdle in Venezuela.