

# Trump's Distorted Version of The Monroe Doctrine

Prof. Jeffrey Sachs discusses what a renewed Monroe Doctrine could be an anti-imperialist initiative that recognises spheres of security, or it could facilitate US imperialism and be pursued without agreement with the other great powers. Follow Prof. Glenn Diesen: Substack: <https://glenndiesen.substack.com/> X/Twitter: [https://x.com/Glenn\\_Diesen](https://x.com/Glenn_Diesen) Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/glenndiesen> Support the research by Prof. Glenn Diesen: PayPal: <https://www.paypal.com/paypalme/glenndiesen> Buy me a Coffee: [buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng](https://buymeacoffee.com/gdieseng) Go Fund Me: <https://gofund.me/09ea012f> Books by Prof. Glenn Diesen: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B09FPQ4MDL>

## #Glenn

Welcome back to the program. We're here with Professor Jeffrey Sachs to discuss the new Monroe Doctrine of the United States. Thank you very much for joining us from the Vatican—if I'm not mistaken? Well, in Rome, yes, indeed. So, in this new national security strategy that everyone seems to be talking about, the United States reasserts the Monroe Doctrine—not covertly or with euphemisms or hidden words. Instead, it's quite direct; it's mentioned over and over again. To quote the beginning of it: "After years of neglect, the United States will reassert and enforce the Monroe Doctrine to restore American preeminence in the Western Hemisphere." Now, as an economic historian, how do you see the role of the Monroe Doctrine in terms of how it's interpreted differently and how the Trump administration is using it?

## #Jeffrey Sachs

Very good, because the point is, this isn't reasserting the Monroe Doctrine—it's completely distorting it, and it has changed repeatedly over history. The original Monroe Doctrine was aimed at stopping European colonialism in the Americas, but now it's taken as a license for U.S. hegemony and brazen bullying in the region. So when Trump claims a corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, he's not really talking about the Monroe Doctrine; he's talking about a Trumpian version that's completely different from the original. The Monroe Doctrine was enunciated in 1823. It was the seventh annual message of President James Monroe to Congress, and this was just one part of that message. The Monroe Doctrine itself contained three main principles.

This was in the early 1820s, after the Latin American countries had gained their independence following the Napoleonic Wars. They had rebelled against the European empires, and there were now independent nations in Central and South America. The United States said, first, that the age of European colonialism in the Americas was at an end. That didn't mean the end of European colonies—some of them have lasted until today, after all, in the Caribbean, for example, or even in

South America. But the point is that there would be no new colonies. The second principle was that Europe should not intervene in the affairs of the Americas. So it was a non-intervention idea—not only the end of colonialism, but the end of European meddling. Remember, this was the age of high European imperialism.

And the United States, a new and relatively weak country at the time, was asserting that European empires should not meddle in the internal affairs of the newly independent countries that had broken away from Europe. There was a third clause, almost never mentioned but very important, which said, by the way, the United States would not meddle in Europe's affairs. So from the beginning, the Monroe Doctrine was a doctrine of reciprocity. This is hardly ever mentioned. The United States, from the beginning, said, "You don't bother us, we won't bother you." Now, this has never actually been applied—at least not since the United States became a great power. Internationally, in the 20th century, the doctrine has been applied as, "You don't bother us, and we'll bother you as we see fit." Thank you very much.

So the reciprocity part was very important in 1823, but then it was abandoned. You can see that in 1823, the Monroe Doctrine was not a doctrine claiming U.S. prerogatives in the Americas, the U.S. right to intervene, or anything like that. It was a message to Europe: stop your colonialism, stop interfering in the internal affairs of the Americas, and we, the United States, will not interfere in the internal affairs of Europe. During the 19th century, the Monroe Doctrine was invoked a number of times—for example, when Napoleon III attempted to install an emperor in Mexico, and the United States said no, European imperial powers cannot meddle in the Americas.

Starting at the end of the 19th century, the U.S. had completed its conquest of North America, which was the main imperialist expansion of the United States in the 19th century—continental expansion. But once the continent was under U.S. control, U.S. actions internationally took on an imperial intent. So already in the mid-1890s, President Grover Cleveland invoked the Monroe Doctrine to stop Britain from forcing a territorial adjustment between Venezuela and British Guiana. This was an example of the United States asserting more claims—saying, "We're going to decide these issues," not the European powers. Britain was the main power in the world after all, in 1895. But then, in 1905, our real imperialist president, Theodore Roosevelt, made a corollary—and this is very, very important.

It also has a background. The Roosevelt Corollary, actually in 1904, stated that the U.S. asserted its police functions in the Western Hemisphere—the U.S. was there to keep order in the Western Hemisphere. So this was very different from the doctrine of 80 years earlier. It was no longer just a doctrine addressed to Europe; it was an assertion of American power in the Americas, that the U.S. would be the policeman for the region. It has an interesting origin, actually. Venezuela had defaulted on its external debts in the early years of the 20th century—around 1902, I think—and Britain sent warships, a case of so-called gunboat diplomacy, to the harbor of Caracas and started shelling the city to demand that debt service resume.

And so Roosevelt's corollary was partly to stop the gunboat diplomacy by Britain and other European creditor powers. But it didn't just say, "Stop that." It said, "We'll do the policing." After the Roosevelt Corollary, the U.S. intervened militarily, repeatedly, in the Caribbean and in Central America—landing troops in Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti, or the Dominican Republic—where it saw fit under the corollary that Roosevelt introduced. This underwent a change for the better in 1934, when Franklin Roosevelt came into office and said, "OK, we're going to stop our own gunboat diplomacy. We're going to stop our intervention with the Marines."

We will have a Good Neighbor Policy. And this was because Latin America was seething from all the U.S. military interventions. After World War II, very importantly, a continental treaty was adopted—the Charter of the Organization of American States—in Bogotá in 1948. And in that charter, I think it's Article 19, there's a non-intervention clause, very important, stating that there is collective security in the Americas and no country will intervene militarily or politically in the internal affairs of any other country. How nice and interesting—and how different from what is being asserted now.

So this finally brings us to Trump. Actually, even before coming to Trump, just to mention: when the Soviet Union in 1962 installed offensive nuclear weapons in Cuba—after the Cuban Revolution and after the United States had attempted to invade Cuba and overthrow Castro at the Bay of Pigs in 1961—the U.S. invoked the Monroe Doctrine then, and repeatedly afterwards, saying that outside powers must not intervene in the Americas, which was kind of the original meaning of the doctrine. But this brings us to Trump, because Trump is kind of the Roosevelt Corollary on steroids. It's saying not only is the U.S. the policeman, it's the hegemon—it's the boss. Not only will we keep order, not only will we blow up fishing vessels if we say they're running drugs...

Not only will we commandeer oil tankers when we feel like it, as the United States did a couple of days ago, but we also assert the right to tell the rest of the Americas who they can do business with and who they can't. It's not just that other countries can't interfere in internal affairs—they can't even do economic business. They can't trade, they can't invest, if the United States deems it so. So the Trump corollary is: we're the boss, we're the hegemon. We'll do what we want. We'll tell other countries, "You will make contracts with American companies, sole source. You will not deal with China. You will not deal with outside influence on so-called strategic assets."

What are those? What we deem to be strategic assets. We will tell you who will invest in our hemisphere and who will not. And you will accept that—an American-led order. It's absolutely extraordinary. So all of this is to say, Glenn, sorry for being long-winded, but this is a complete transformation of what James Monroe conveyed to the U.S. Congress in 1823, which was that Europe should stop its colonialism, stop its meddling, and stay out—and we would do the same vis-à-vis Europe. Now it is a claim of American colonialism, bullying rights in the Americas, and everyone else stay out. Well, this is something—it's not a corollary. It's a completely different claim, and a quite outrageous one.

**#Glenn**

Well, I'm glad you laid out both the positives and the negatives here, because it is a difficult balance to strike. The Monroe Doctrine was anti-imperialist in the sense of keeping European colonial powers out of the Americas. But in enforcing it, it's easy to turn it into an imperial policy by facilitating American imperialism instead. So how do we find that balance—demanding that others stay out without claiming dominance? Because this is often what we see on the borders of great powers. You and I have talked before about the same thing applying to Ukraine.

That is, the Western countries should not have—well, they subverted the government. They should not have entered militarily. However, that doesn't give Russia the right to dominate it either. So how do you find a balance there? And also, it would have to be through reciprocity—that is, deals with others—because it's very hard to sell this to other great powers: that we'll still be on your borders, but you can't be on ours. How would this be implemented, practically speaking, if you were to sit down with these world leaders and come to an agreement on a kind of civilized Monroe Doctrine, if you will?

## #Jeffrey Sachs

The Monroe Doctrine actually has two very attractive elements. One is anti-imperialism—don't meddle in the internal affairs of other countries. It was an early statement of this, but now it's enshrined in the UN Charter. The idea that countries are sovereign and that others should not interfere in their internal political affairs is a very good one. It's just that the United States doesn't recognize it in practice, because U.S. foreign policy is typically based on regime-change operations. Of all the countries in the world, in fact, the United States doesn't really practice diplomacy in the normal sense of saying, "We have issues with you, let's negotiate," especially when the other government is small enough that Washington thinks it can simply override it.

It says, "We will change you. We will overthrow you." And there have been, of course, probably about a hundred such regime-change operations. I like to reference the wonderful book by Lindsay O'Rourke called *\*Covert Regime Change\**. She was a PhD student of John Mearsheimer, and she did a remarkable study of all the U.S. regime-change operations between 1947 and 1989. She enumerated sixty-four covert regime-change operations—covert meaning the U.S. tried to overthrow a government and then lied about it, denied its involvement. So this is what is first opposed in the Monroe Doctrine—very attractive. Second, the Monroe Doctrine, as we both mentioned, is reciprocal, which is, again, completely forgotten.

The United States says clearly, "We will not meddle in Europe." And that actually goes back to George Washington's farewell address, where he argues against entanglements in European affairs—that the United States should not become involved in Europe's endless wars. So these are two attractive ideas: non-intervention and reciprocity as basic norms. I think they can be built into a legitimate system today, which we've discussed and which I call "spheres of security." By spheres of security, it's a kind of takeoff on the Monroe Doctrine, stated a little differently. It means that the

major powers—and by this I mean the large nuclear powers that can project power beyond their borders: the United States, Europe, Russia, China, and India—should respect the borderlands of the other great powers so as not to provoke what could become a nuclear war. That would be one part.

It's like the Monroe Doctrine. It says Russia or China should not intervene in the Americas, but the United States should not intervene in Russia's near neighborhood—Ukraine—or in China, Taiwan. And this would be reciprocal. But I would pair this with the Good Neighbor Policy of Franklin Roosevelt, which actually worked and is very important. Yet another reason why I regard Franklin Roosevelt as the greatest American president. When he came into office, he said, "We will stop these military interventions of the United States in the Americas." And he did so. His vision was that we'd be a lot more secure ourselves if we had collective security in our region.

So the idea of a sphere of security is a great-power arrangement where the great powers say, "We won't step over the red lines of other great powers," to avoid global conflict—something the United States blatantly violated before, in the case of pushing NATO enlargement to Ukraine and to Georgia. But the Good Neighbor Policy says that's not a license for Russia to run Ukraine or to run Georgia, any more than it's a license for the United States to run Mexico or to overthrow the government of Venezuela, which is what Trump is trying to do right now.

So these are the two principles I would like: non-intervention by great powers in the neighborhoods of other great powers, so that we don't blow up the world—but also saying to the great powers, you are not a bully. You have no right of military intervention. You have no right to do exactly what Trump is doing right now in Venezuela, which is explicitly to destabilize Venezuela for the purpose of overthrowing a government. That should not prevail. It's against the U.N. Charter, and in my view, it's against U.S. security. Yes, we can do all sorts of things, but does it lead to good results? No.

When you look at the lessons from Lindsay O'Rourke's wonderful study, you find that these regime-change operations are typically disasters. Yes, maybe a government is overthrown—but what comes next? Usually civil war, unrest, mass migration, economic collapse. In other words, this doesn't produce something stable; it produces something unstable that can actually escalate into a new regional or global disorder. So the idea of meddling, overthrowing governments, declaring oneself—under the Trump corollary—as the bully of the hemisphere, it's not in America's own interest, much less in the interests of the target countries.

## #Glenn

I do like the idea, though, of going back to a great-power arrangement. It can also take a negative form if you think the great powers are carving up the world between them. But in a more benign form, if the great powers come together—not to carve out zones of exclusive influence, but to accept that they have to stay out of each other's backyards and harmonize interests—then, essentially, if you get the big pieces into place, the smaller ones are easier to organize afterward. Now, it's been reported that the Trump administration would like to form something as an

alternative to the G7, because the G7 no longer includes all the main economies. So there's this reference to a "core five": the United States, Japan, China, Russia, and India. Europe—perhaps surprisingly—is not on the list. But the idea is for these five countries to find some formula for cooperation. Do you think that could, I guess, civilize and create a benign version of this Monroe Doctrine?

## #Jeffrey Sachs

First, it's interesting. I think there's a very important distinction between the military and the economy, and I prefer to keep the two quite distinct. But the opposite is happening right now. The view now is that everything in the economy is about the military, and so trade is breaking down because, quote-unquote, everything has dual use. That means, "Oh, that technology could show up in some weapon—therefore we can't have trade, therefore we can't have supply chains, therefore we have to break apart international trade, finance, and the investment system." This is a big mistake. It's a kind of paranoid mistake, and it's putting the generals in charge of the economy. No, thank you. This is not the right way to look at things.

I do think that great-power accommodation is vital—because of nuclear weapons, because the weaponry is very dangerous, because we're now escalating into autonomous weapons, space weapons, cyber warfare, and the new warfare of technology in the digital age: drone swarms and all the rest. So the chances of great-power confrontation are extremely high. And the drumbeats of war in our journalism, for example in the West, are shocking. The New York Times ran a piece a couple of days ago by their editorial board about preparing for the future of war—which is shocking, disgusting, mind-boggling in its emphasis on getting ready for war rather than diplomacy. So I would like, yes, four or five of the great powers to sit down and work out these spheres of security—to understand, stop bothering each other, stop provoking U.S.–China conflict, stop provoking U.S.–Russia conflict. That's the point.

When it comes to the economy, first of all, I'm much less convinced that those five are in any sense the right five, or that there's some kind of exclusive order in the economy, because the economy should simply be a win-win of enabling economic improvement, not a game of a few large economies. In this sense, we have a multilateral economic order that was constructed over decades. The World Trade Organization is an example of that. The World Intellectual Property Organization is an example of that. The International Telecommunication Union is part of that. IATA for civil aviation is part of that. In other words, these are international norms for international economic behavior.

And we have the G20, which Trump is trying to break right now, because he doesn't want Indonesia, Brazil, South Africa, Turkey, and others at the table—even though these are very significant countries with hundreds of millions of people. Trump says, "No, no, I'm going to choose a different list," and that list is mainly exclusionary. For the economy, there's no reason for such exclusion. In fact, it's very dangerous. Our main goal should be collective prosperity. We should be pleased that the G20 has added the African Union and its 1.5 billion people—the member states of the AU—into

the G20 process. What happened, though, at the G20 recently in Johannesburg is that Trump boycotted it.

He's a bigot. He's a racist. His base is like that—that's what he appeals to. So he says, "I'm not going to these places." This is a kind of racism that's vulgar, actually, and it's a motive force, at least in Trump's imagination. I won't say other people's. People can support him and be far from anything like that. But for Trump, that is actually a view. And so when he says, "No, I'm going to have this group at the table for the economy," I find it not only unpersuasive but very deliberate and annoying. He's leaving out the 1.5 billion people of Africa, he's leaving out the 700 million people of Southeast Asia in the eleven ASEAN countries, he's leaving out the hundreds of millions of people in Latin America. No thanks.

## **#Glenn**

Well, no, that's a great point. And I think many of these countries—Indonesia, Turkey, even Brazil—the idea that they're simply minor pieces, or that this massive country should be put under the Monroe Doctrine, as if it's an exclusive area of influence for the U.S., is quite... well, given the new distribution of power, it's not rational. And I think one thing we'll see in the multipolar world is a lot of medium-sized countries gaining much more political autonomy. Let me just—one last very quick question, though. The new Trump Monroe Doctrine seems to take a clear stance toward China and Russia not being in the Western Hemisphere. From reading the document, what role do you think China and Russia would be, quote-unquote, "allowed" to have in the Western Hemisphere under what Trump sees as the new Monroe Doctrine?

## **#Jeffrey Sachs**

Clearly, yes. Trump understands what he's doing as excluding China in particular from the Western Hemisphere in terms of its role in infrastructure, investment, business operations, mining, and so forth. The idea is: we run, control, extort, and expropriate in the Western Hemisphere—no one else. This is quite explicit, because it's not only about meddling in internal political affairs or the military; it's about what they call strategic assets, and about contracts and infrastructure. We've already seen this at play in the Panama Canal, for example, where Trump said, "You can't have a Hong Kong international business operating in the Panama Canal Zone." Are you kidding? Hutchison? This is an established Hong Kong-British company. The owner happens to have Canadian citizenship, if I'm not mistaken.

And suddenly Trump says that a regular port services operation by a Hong Kong company is not permitted. The idea is to get China out of this business so the United States can do all the exploitation. It's unreal. I believe it is absolutely delusional and hubristic. Now, it would be devastating for the economies of the Americas if they actually went along with that, because China is their main trading partner right now. But this is the attempt to keep China out—out of infrastructure, out of port services, out of rail, and other areas. These are not strategic inroads by China. This is not

militarization. This is the economy. This is trade. We ought to keep trade and the military and nuclear issues separate. If we don't do that, we'll destroy the economy along with our paranoia. And this is what we want to avoid.

## **#Glenn**

Well, thank you very much for taking the time early—on a Friday, of course. I know it's a big day over there in Rome, so thank you very much.

## **#Jeffrey Sachs**

Great. Great to be with you. Thanks a lot, Glenn.