



The U.S./China Stealth War and Global Realignment: The Dual Chessboards of Venezuela and Taiwan (2026)

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Abstract:

This article employs the Power Transition Theory (PTT) to examine the intensifying stealth war between the United States and China, focusing on the strategic interplay between Venezuela and Taiwan. Using a comparative case study of the January 2026 U.S. intervention in Venezuela, the research analyzes the “Precedent Paradox”: by reviving the Monroe Doctrine to secure its own hemisphere, Washington has inadvertently provided a legitimizing framework for Beijing’s revisionist claims. This “strategic window” allows China to employ gray-zone mirroring tactics in the Taiwan Strait. Ultimately, while the U.S. has shored up its near abroad, it has fractured global equilibrium toward fragmented regional competition.

Key Words: U.S.; China; Stealth War; Venezuela; Precedent Paradox; Taiwan; Strategic Window

JEL classification: F51 ; F52 ; P48 ; F02

Introduction:

As 2026 unfolds, the world's power structure has undergone a major shift since the end of the Cold War. The period of U.S. strategic ambiguity in the Western Hemisphere came to an end on January 3, 2026, with the launch of *Operation Absolute Resolve* in Venezuela. The intervention functioned as a forceful statement of the “Monroe Doctrine 2.0”, intended to remove extra-hemispheric—specifically Chinese and Russian—influence from the Americas, even though it was purportedly a mission of regional stabilization and ‘humanitarian’ restoration. However, the consequences of this operation reverberate far beyond the Caribbean Basin, throughout the Taiwan Strait's stealth war frontlines.

Fundamental to this geopolitical shift is the Power Transition Theory (henceforth PTT), initially developed by A.F.K. Organski. According to PTT, when a rising challenger, who is dissatisfied with the current order, achieves power parity with the prevailing hegemon, there is a greater likelihood of international conflict. This theory has traditionally concentrated on a single, worldwide crossover of power curves. This paper argues that the Taiwan pivot and the Venezuela pivot are two separate but interrelated chessboards on which the transition is being fought in 2026.

The term “stealth war” refers to an ongoing state of rivalry in which deep integration, cyber-subversion, and gray-zone tactics take the place of conventional kinetic warfare. In his 2019 book, *Stealth War: How China Took Over While America's Elite Slept*, Robert Spalding, a retired U.S. Air Force Brigadier General and former Senior Director for Strategic Planning at the National Security



Council, considers “Stealth War” as a modern evolution of conflict. According to him, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) currently wages a strategic, non-kinetic warfare known as “Stealth War” in order to gain worldwide control without using open military force (Spalding, 2019, p.xiii). He describes it as a “beautiful competition” to acquire power and influence worldwide while staying “below the radar” of conventional military surveillance (p.xiv).

The main argument of Spalding's book is that this war is fought across six crucial spheres of influence rather than with “bombs and bullets.” Therefore, a country can win a stealth war by dominating multiple fronts. The first is economic, when foreign competitors are undermined by state-subsidized businesses and market access. The second one is military by creating “denied spaces” (A2/AD) and utilizing dual-use technology without engaging in direct conflict. Diplomacy, being the third front, aligns international narratives with party goals by using “debt-trap diplomacy” and appropriating international organizations like the United Nations. The fourth is technology, which uses data collecting, 5G, and intellectual property theft to control the digital landscape and weaponize infrastructure. Education, as the fifth front, monitors the diaspora through initiatives like Confucius Institutes on college campuses and influences scholarly discourse. The last front is infrastructure to manage both digital and physical supply chains, such as international shipping and telecommunications (Spalding, 2019, pp.1-3).

However, the Venezuela intervention has reintroduced overt military force into the hegemon's arsenal, defying the conventional notion of stealth war and causing a serious normative issue. As the United States attempts to “foreclose” on Chinese political and economic assets in its own backyard, it creates a mirror effect in the Indo-Pacific.

The research problematic that arises is the strategic dissociation of regional hierarchical power structures, or the division of a single, cohesive global order into distinct, autonomous regional zones where various “great powers” define the rules. Traditional PTT focuses on global parity, but the U.S. and China are now engaged in asymmetric encroachment. That is to say while the U.S. is reasserting its dominance in its “near abroad” (Venezuela) to maintain the status quo of the Monroe Doctrine, China is attempting to establish a similar exclusionary zone in its own “near abroad” (Taiwan) rather than engaging in a direct, head-to-head military confrontation. The problematic lies in whether these two chessboards act as stabilizers by satisfying regional ambitions or accelerants by creating a precedent for the use of force in the global power transition.

A couple of research objectives for the study are highlighted. First, this paper seeks to evaluate the degree of China's “dissatisfaction” with the international order following the U.S. intervention in Venezuela. Second, it aims to analyze if the U.S. “overstretch” in the Western Hemisphere creates a “window of opportunity” (a PTT concept) for a dissatisfied China to challenge the status quo in Taiwan.

Accordingly, this paper seeks to answer a critical question for the mid-2020s: Does the U.S. success in securing its regional hierarchy in Venezuela act as a deterrent, or does it serve as a green light for China to pursue a similar “domestic stabilization” of Taiwan? By applying PTT to these two theaters, we explore the hypothesis that the U.S. has traded long-term global stability for short-term regional security, potentially accelerating the very power transition it sought to forestall.



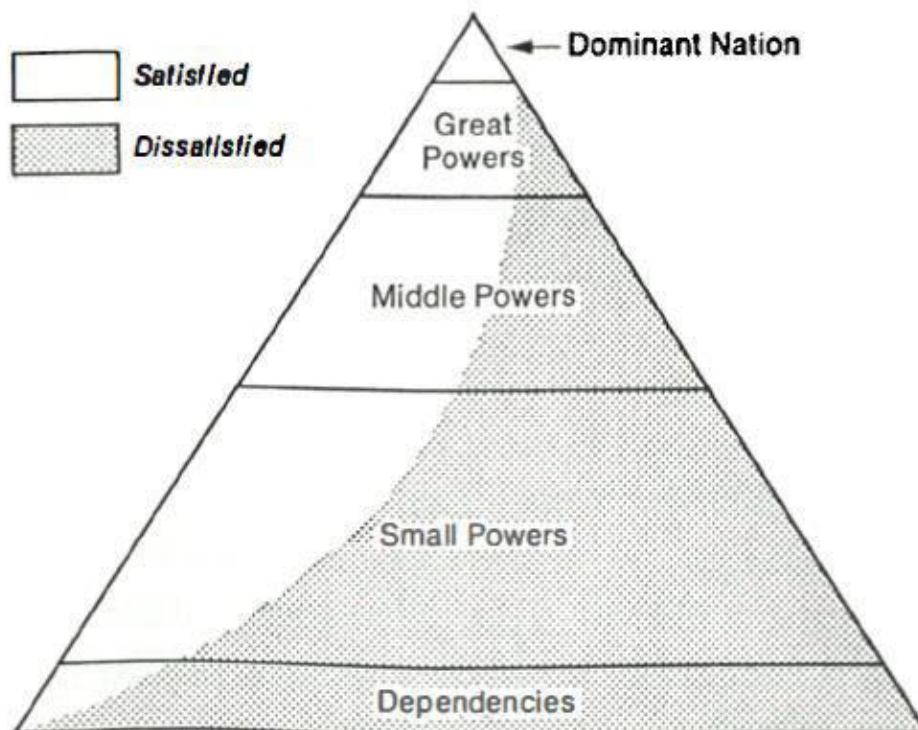
To conduct the research, the Comparative Case Study approach is used. This approach can be described as “the systematic comparison of two or more data points or cases obtained through the use of the case study method” (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999, p.372). A case may represent an individual, an intervention site, a program, or a policy. The present study adopts it as it involves the comparison of two case studies, namely Venezuela and Taiwan, to establish causal conclusions.

1. Power Transition Theory

AFK Organski (1958) initially developed power Transition Theory in his book *World Politics*, where he anticipated China's possible growth and its effects on the global security order. With four generations of scholars and more than 50 years of history, PTT is an active, continuous research program. Evaluated by outside reviewers, it is a dynamic theory that has undergone growth, spin-offs, and improvements over time (Tammen, Kugler, & Lemke, 2011, p.1).

This theory addresses the pattern of shifting power dynamics in international politics. It offers a probabilistic instrument for quantifying these shifts and enables the prediction of probable outcomes in subsequent cycles of change (Tammen et al., 2011, pp.1-2). PTT takes both structural and dynamic forms. In terms of structure, it views international politics as made up of a pyramid-shaped hierarchy of countries with differing levels of cooperation and rivalry (see Figure 01). It outlines the system of governing norms, the relative positions of nations inside this hierarchical pyramid, and how powerful nations strive to control world politics.

Figure 01: The Hierarchy of Power According to PTT



Source: Reprinted from “Power Transition and Balance of Power: Comprehending the Power Dynamics of the 21st Century,” by A. Pop and A. Brînză, 2017, *Public Administration & Regional Studies*, 10(1), p. 63.



As the figure shows, the state at the top, known as the dominant nation, has the greatest influence and establishes the guidelines for international relations. Great powers are those with substantial military and economic might and regional influence. Middle powers are those with moderate influence and frequently serve as regional stabilizers, and small powers are those with little influence and frequently cooperate with larger powers for economic and security reasons (Center for International Relations and International Security [CIRIS], n.d.).

A regional hierarchy is established by the predominant nation (hegemon) alongside other great powers. According to Lemke and other PTT scholars, power shifts occur not only on a global scale but also in “sub-systems” or local “near abroads.” Therefore, global and regional hierarchies are intertwined. For instance, Brazil's dominance over Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and the other states in the regional hierarchy prevented the South American hierarchy from experiencing conflict for almost a century until recently. These states were largely satisfied with this (Tammen et al., 2011, p.11).

In addition to this static image of structure and rules, dynamic factors show how and why the international system undergoes change. Power is a concept that connects the structural image to dynamic change. Therefore, power is one of the three principal components of PTT in addition to hierarchy and satisfaction. (Tammen et al., 2011, p.2).

Dynamically, the degree of national elites' commitment to the current status quo—the widespread adherence to international laws and norms—determines how states engage politically. This establishes a nation's level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with its rank in the hierarchy. With a coalition of dependable, satisfied supporters, the dominant nation endeavors to control the international system. However, this is not always feasible because growth dynamics create possible challengers (Tammen et al., 2011, p.2).

PTT focuses on the differences in growth rates between countries in order to comprehend global dynamics. Every day, some nations are gaining power, some are losing it, and yet others are taking a stagnant position. This dynamic, the relative shift in power, is what gives rise to new political and economic structures as well as new global relationships. When a challenger and dominant nation approach the phase of relative equivalency of power, one consequence of divergent development rates is the possibility of conflict, especially if the challenging nation is dissatisfied with the status quo (Tammen et al., 2011, p.2).

As previously highlighted, several key concepts set the Power Transition Theory apart from other theories. The present paper thoughtfully explains the ones relevant to the topic discussed and the study's research objectives. The primary concept is power, which is the capacity of one country to influence the policies of another in order to advance its own objectives. In Organski's original concept (1958, 1968), the nexus of politics and economics reflected power. This was crucial to comprehending the aftermath of major wars like the First and Second World Wars (Tammen et al., 2011, p.3).

Another equally important concept is power parity. It occurs when the capabilities of a rising power get close to those of the hegemonic power. According to the theory, when a rising power grows, approaching power parity with a prevailing state, the likelihood of conflict increases, particularly if the challenger is dissatisfied with the current international order (CIRIS, n.d.).

Hence, the third concept is satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Power Transition is significantly distinct from theories of global politics that presume anarchy as the defining feature of international relations.



Rather, they differ drastically according to whether or not nations are satisfied. Because they continuously uphold the vital components of the status quo, satisfied nations enjoy mutual trust. This indicates that countries interact differently depending on the extent of common preferences, but it does not imply that countries are always fully satisfied with one another (Tammen et al., 2011, p. 4). The more areas of agreement there are, the more satisfied the parties are with one another (p.5).

As stated by Organski (1968), a challenger is a strong country that is dissatisfied with the established international order (pp. 364–365). In contrast to the hegemonic power, which would naturally be satisfied with and seek to preserve the status quo, dissatisfaction suggests that a swiftly rising power appears to be dissatisfied with the global order and would thereby try to alter or replace it. This is known as “Revisionist Ambitions” (Yilmaz & Xiangyu, 2020, p. 1). When all of these variables come together, there is a risk that either the dominant power will start a conflict to prevent the growing threat or the challenger will use force to accomplish its goals (CIRIS, n.d.).

Contemporary researchers have revised PTT to take into consideration the earlier definition of “Stealth War” (Ng, 2023; Spalding, 2020). A stealth transition today includes two components, in contrast to the total warfare of the twentieth century. First, interdependence has been weaponized through the use of digital infrastructure and supply chains, such as China's 5G networks in Venezuela in the 2020s (Farrell & Newman, 2019). Second, measures that are “more than peace but less than war,” like the maritime blockades of Taiwan or the development of cyber-infrastructure in Latin America, are known as modern-day gray-zone tactics (Marks & Ucko, 2021). Ng (2023) addresses as well the “Precedent Paradox” in his study by emphasizing how U.S. interventionism produces normative and structural models that other powers subsequently emulate.

In 2026, based on all what has been said, we observe a fractured hierarchical pyramid. The U.S. intervention in Venezuela represents an attempt by the hegemon to re-enforce its local base of the pyramid. However, PTT suggests that when a hegemon uses force to maintain its sphere, it signals to the challenger that the “rules” are now based on might rather than institutional norms. This increases the challenger’s (China’s) dissatisfaction with the global status quo while simultaneously providing a blueprint for China’s own regional aspirations in Taiwan. This will be thoroughly elucidated in upcoming sections.

2. The Venezuela Chessboard: Operation Absolute Resolve

Operation Absolute Resolve, a military operation initiated by U.S. forces on January 3, 2026, aimed to capture and arrest Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his spouse, Cilia Flores, and transport them from Caracas to New York to face allegations of drug trafficking and narco-terrorism. Maduro made his initial court appearance in Manhattan on January 5 (FGS Global, 2026, p.2).

President Trump declared following the operation that Vice President Delcy Rodríguez would take interim authority over Caracas and that the United States would “oversee a transitional framework” in Venezuela. Although Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López stated that “all available capabilities” will be used to confront “imperial aggression,” Venezuela's military posture is still incoherent (FGS Global, 2026, p. 2). By doing this, the U.S. effectively foreclosed on China's main regional client by establishing an interim government.

Prior to Madero’s capture, China had made significant investments in the energy, information, infrastructure, and space industries in the region through its Belt and Road Initiative, guaranteeing



access to vital resources like lithium. By boosting its use of comprehensive strategic partnerships, including the sale of Chinese weaponry, China had also strengthened its military, political, and cultural relations. With several Latin American nations endorsing China's claims to the island in international forums, China has used these connections as political leverage to further its goal of isolating Taiwan (Kilroy, 2026).

Because of Maduro's arrest and its ensuing aftermath, there is now a short-term risk of a fragmented security apparatus and a struggle for control of Venezuela's small but highly sought-after revenue engine. Beyond Caracas, there are further ramifications for markets, business, and governance. Regional administrations face quick recalibrations. For instance, Mexico denounced the operation and demanded a UN de-escalation. Brazil's Lula said the U.S. crossed “an unacceptable line” and requested a “vigorous” UN response, despite Brazil's prior refusal to acknowledge Maduro's 2024 reelection. Colombia faces border security and possible migration increase, and Cuba reported 32 fatalities among personnel in Venezuela during the operation and forfeits its main economic vital resource (FGS Global, 2026, p.2).

Outside of the hemisphere, some geopolitical repercussions have arisen. The operation stands as an assessment to the extent to which potential benefits from Chinese, Russian, and Iranian support exist for allied governments in Latin America and other regions beyond economic assistance during times of peace. As one may perceive, these patrons are negatively affected as well. With particular emphasis on China, this latter may lose its position as the main recipient of Venezuelan heavy oil imports and be exposed to billions in unpaid loans and infrastructure expenditures (FGS Global, 2026, p.2).

Currently, Venezuela produces less than 1% of the world's supply of heavy crude oil—roughly 900,000 barrels per day. Conversely, the U.S. produces about 13.4 million barrels per day. Hence, energy markets are unlikely to be moved by Venezuelan supply alone. Yet, trade flows and refinery configurations can be affected immediately if the United States reverses both sanctions and its oil embargo. Since sanctions were put in place in 2019, China has been Venezuela's top importer of heavy crude. Thus, the country's oil exports will apparently be rerouted to U.S. Gulf Coast refineries, which are specifically designed to process it. This will limit China's influence through opaque finance arrangements, jeopardize its geographic energy diversification strategy, and weaken its access to discounted barrels (FGS Global, 2026, p.4). As a result, Washington would regain parity.

This has proven to be largely correct. The goal of overthrowing Maduro and regaining control in Venezuela and the Western Hemisphere, according to U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, is more about driving out competitors using energy and resource policy than it is about protecting the barrels of future oil.

The Trump administration unveiled a new “National Security Strategy of the United States of America” (NSS) in December 2025. The document's main goal is to express the president's views on the United States' standing in the world, its interests, and how to achieve its national security objectives. It also outlines the priorities and fundamental principles for both domestic and foreign policy (The White House, 2025).

Since their yearly distribution began in 1987, NSSs have generally represented the United States' long-standing interests in upholding democracy, advancing free trade, and encouraging



international cooperation to address threats, such as those posed by transnational terrorism following 9/11 or communism during the Cold War. However, the new NSS, which was published during Trump's second term (2025–2029), differs significantly from earlier iterations (Kilroy, 2026).

With its geopolitical focus shifting from Asia, Europe, and the Middle East to the Western Hemisphere as the region that presents the greatest threat to U.S. interests and security, the most recent NSS's tone and threat assessment differ significantly from previous versions. Although Latin Americanists have long maintained that the U.S. has neglected the region, the second Trump administration's NSS, as numerous scholars have pointed out, raises the possibility of a resurgence of American imperialism, which is defined as the use of diplomatic pressure, economic leverage, and/or territorial action outside of its borders (Kilroy, 2026).

This Trump Corollary makes more sense when one considers that the U.S. administration is implementing it in Venezuela. This includes reducing antagonistic external interference in the region from China, Russia, and Iran; creating opportunities for U.S. investment; maintaining market leadership and stability; and carrying out a political transition that safeguards these gains. It all depends on steady operational circumstances that safeguard capital (FGS Global, 2026, p. 5). Therefore, the strategic object of the U.S. is “denying non-Hemispheric competitors the ability to position forces or other threatening capabilities, or to own or control strategically vital assets, in [the U.S.] Hemisphere” (Illueca, 2026).

By and large, The Trump administration avoided a formal declaration of war in Venezuela, instead opting for a “Special Law Enforcement Operation.” Maduro was treated as a criminal fugitive rather than a head of state, which allowed the U.S. to bypass traditional international legal hurdles regarding sovereignty. In PTT terms, this move redefined the status quo. The U.S. demonstrated that it can unilaterally redefine the rules of the game within its own sphere of influence, directly challenging China’s belief that the rules-based order had become too weak to defend the Monroe Doctrine. Hence, China’s response has not been unexpected.

3. The Taiwan Chessboard: Mirror Tactics and Gray-Zone Pressure

China's third strategy paper on Latin America and the Caribbean (henceforth LAC), which was formally published on December 10, 2025, outlined Beijing's reaction to Washington. The document highlights “unilateral bullying,” although it does not specifically mention the United States. Additionally, it reiterates the significance of equality and a stable multipolarity. Beijing's targets for its engagement with LAC in 2026 were established by the policy document, which also made plain how important the area is to its geopolitical rivalry with Washington (Illueca, 2026).

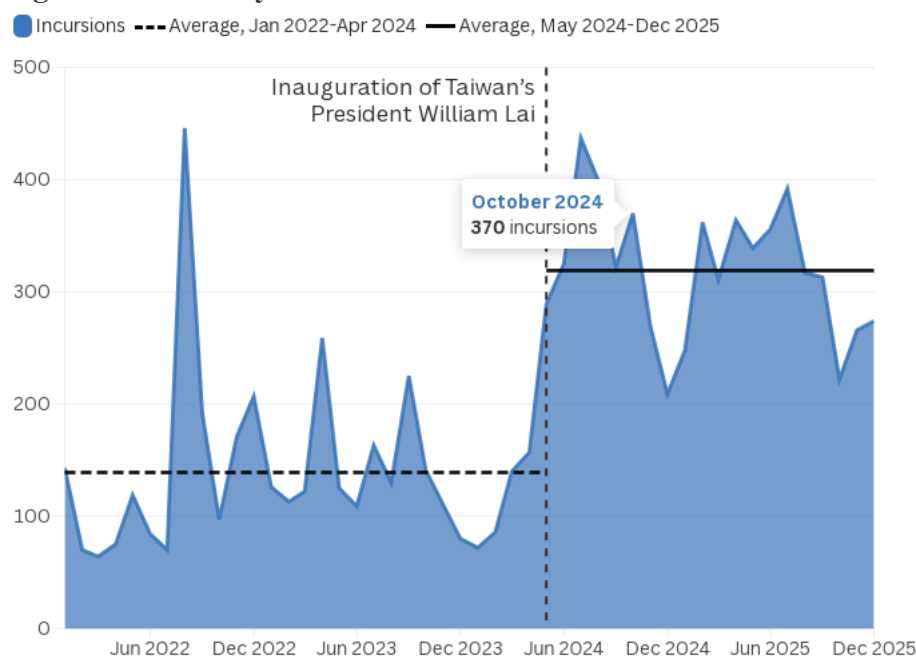
However, following Maduro's imprisonment, China's geopolitical calculations underwent a significant shift. In the short term, China-LAC dynamics are expected to be drastically changed by the aggressive application of the Trump Corollary in hemispheric interactions, especially in the political and military spheres. Amid recent unpleasant developments, the paper’s primary purpose is clear: consistency in China’s engagement with the region. In other words, China has had to recalibrate its strategy according to the circumstances in Venezuela, but its overall goal is still the same. To be observed is whether China, as expected, will try to exert any kind of political influence in what is likely considered as a distrustful neighborhood (Illueca, 2026).



China hopes to present itself as an alternative engagement model to Washington's approach, even though its involvement with the region can decrease in the foreseeable future. This, along with its rhetorical focus on international law, diplomacy, and multilateralism, would enable Beijing to eventually establish itself as a key regional partner and leader of the Global South.

Beijing is increasingly conducting “law enforcement” activities close to Taiwan. In 2025, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) maintained the increased operational pace of PLA operations that had been started after William Lai took office as Taiwan's president in May 2024, by conducting an unprecedented amount of air and marine activity around Taiwan. Both the average monthly PLA activity and the baseline PLA activity increased significantly as a result (Lin, Hart, Li, & Tinsley, 2026). As Figure 02 shows, the PLA's overall activity around Taiwan reached a record peak. Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND) reports that 3,764 air incursions into Taiwan's de facto air defense identification zone (ADIZ) were carried out by PLA aircraft, a 22.4 percent increase from 2024, when the PLA broke earlier records. Additionally, China carried out two extensive military drills near Taiwan in 2025 under the names Justice Mission 2025 and Strait Thunder-2025A (Lin et al., 2026).

Figure 02: Monthly PLA Air Incursions into Taiwan’s ADIZ



Source: Reprinted from “Tracking China’s Increased Military Activities in the Indo-Pacific in 2025,” by B. Lin, B. Hart, L. Li, and T. Tinsley, 2026, *ChinaPower*. Retrieved from <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-increased-military-activities-indo-pacific-2025/>

A more thorough examination of the data shows that 2025 was essentially a continuation of patterns that started in May 2024. The PLA held extensive drills around Taiwan after Lai's inauguration speech, known as Joint Sword-2024A. In October of the same year, it held Joint Sword-2024B drills after Lai's National Day Speech. This led to an increase in activity that was mostly maintained in 2025. The



average monthly PLA air intrusions from May 2024 to December 2025 were 319, which was 129 percent higher than the average from January 2022 to April 2024 (Lin et al., 2026).

Thus, the 2026 Washington's portrayal of the Venezuela operation as law enforcement can be interpreted as a mirror to China's own description of its plans against Taiwan. China insists it is only conducting domestic stabilization by carrying out customs inspections and maritime safety drills that essentially blockade Taiwan—a clear reflection of the U.S. rhetoric in Caracas. China's unification timeline may not be accelerated by the Venezuela operation, but it will likely strengthen its belief that decisive action will be followed by international resignation rather than coordinated resistance. This would allow it to focus more on opposing and thwarting U.S. military intervention than overseeing a coordinated international reaction (Zhao, 2026).

Indeed, Tong Zhao, who is a Senior Fellow with the Nuclear Policy Program in China, contends that the U.S. justification of the 2026 Venezuela intervention as a “law enforcement” action closely mirrors Beijing’s legal characterization of its “gray-zone” operations near Taiwan. He explains how the U.S. reassertion of the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine effectively lowers the perceived international threshold for revisionist powers to act in their own “near abroads.” He also highlights a “Precedent Paradox” of its own: that China may now expect “international resignation” rather than coordinated resistance if it follows the U.S. model of decisive regional action (as cited in Zhao, 2026).

In fact, the attack on Venezuela shows that the United States is more eager to use hard power, especially in the Western Hemisphere. This aligns with the previously discussed Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. However, in the end, the policy heavily relies on “presidential diplomacy,” presuming that peace in areas considered peripheral to U.S. “immediate core interests” can be maintained with little expenditure of presidential time and attention. This vague pledge could be interpreted by Beijing as an invitation to test whether the Taiwan Strait actually counts as an “immediate core interest” in Trump's strategic view, both diplomatically and militarily (Zhao, 2026).

In their turn, Stanford academics Larry Diamond and William L. Clayton concur in two recent episodes of the APARC Briefing series that the U.S. mission in Venezuela is a precedent that potentially encourages rather than discourages China in its Taiwan calculus, cautioning that the change it represents in U.S. national security policy could undermine American capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region at a critical juncture. Additionally, they offer grim counsel to U.S. allies who are finding it difficult to adapt to the quickly changing geopolitical landscape under the second Trump administration (Ronkin, 2026).

Besides, Oriana Skylar Mastro, a renowned scholar and expert in Chinese military and security policy, takes a similar stance, believing that although some contend that *Operation Absolute Resolve* demonstrates American might, it actually gives China more confidence by showing change in American priorities away from the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, Larry Diamond argues that by “bypassing international norms” to act in its own backyard, the U.S. provides a “discourse power win” for Beijing, enabling China to define its own regional goals as an appropriate legitimate demonstration of dominance. These scholars stress that China can open a strategic window and incorporate Taiwan through gray-zone tactics while the United States is preoccupied with its emphasis on “American preeminence in the Western Hemisphere” (Ronkin, 2026).



Moreover, Simona Grano, head of research on China-Taiwan relations at the University of Zurich's Institute for Asian and Oriental Studies, contends that "China is likely to read this as confirmation that the U.S. is explicitly comfortable with hemispheric spheres of influence" (Hale & Power, 2026). In his article, he points out that although the U.S. operation exposes the fragility of Chinese investments in Latin America, it might also make it more difficult for Washington to "credibly oppose" the identical reasoning used by China in East Asia. Similarly, political scientist Lev Nachman maintains that China "will now have an easier time justifying military action" based on the U.S. precedent, even though a military operation against Taiwan may not be immediate. His paper highlights a fundamental shift in Chinese domestic discourse, for according to some social media users, the U.S. operation serves as a "blueprint" for future actions against "pro-independence elements" worldwide (Hale & Power, 2026).

This proves right when one analyzes the Chinese President's speech delivered in his New Year's message in which he asserts that the reunification of China is unstoppable (CCTV Video News Agency, 2025). In this 2026 address, President Xi's tone shifted significantly compared to previous years, moving from "aspirational" reunification to "imminent" integration. Analysts suggest that the timing of this address, occurring just as the U.S. began its *Operation Absolute Resolve* preparations, indicates that China is using the U.S. focus on the Monroe Doctrine 2.0 to justify its own regional consolidation. The address emphasizes "law-based governance" of the Taiwan Strait, providing the official state-level narrative for the gray-zone tactics discussed in the present paper.

Conclusion:

The synthesis of these two chessboards leads to three primary findings. First, the power transition is no longer a single overtaking moment. It is rather a process of "Spheres of Influence" solidification. The U.S. is securing its "near abroad" (Venezuela), providing the "Precedent Paradox" that has recalibrated the dissatisfaction of China, effectively conceding that a rules-based order is dead, replaced by a strength-based order. Second, if the U.S. can unilaterally decide that a sovereign leader (Maduro) is a 'criminal' to be extracted, a strategic window can be opened to Beijing to posit that it can define the Taiwanese leadership as separatist criminals to be apprehended under a similar special operation. This is theoretically known as the gray-zone mirror tactic. Third, after *Operation Absolute Resolve*, the U.S. will fight for its own backyard, but it may not have the capacity to fight two wars simultaneously, thereby fracturing global equilibrium in favor of a more fragmented pattern of regional competition. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that a U.S. rapid transition from military rule to a legitimate, civilian-led democratic process in Caracas is required. Failure to do so will solidify the Global South's perception that the UN Charter is dead, effectively handing China a moral green light for Taiwan.

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