



The U.S. Pursues Increasingly Aggressive Policy towards Latin America

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Donald Trump's administration is seeking to rebuild U.S. influence in Latin America. It is trying to convince the countries of the region that cooperation with the United States will bring development and increased security to the Americas. For the time being, however, this approach mainly serves U.S. security interests, in particular combating irregular migration, organised crime and drug trafficking, and reducing China's influence. The current administration's threats, inconsistent positions, and expansionist drive will deepen the distrust of the U.S. and antagonise important Latin American partners.

Assumptions. From the outset, the declarations and decisions of [Trump and his staff](#) indicated Latin America's significance in U.S. foreign policy would be increasing. People with extensive experience in Latin American issues took on several high-profile administration posts, among them Marco Rubio, who is now Secretary of State, his deputy Christopher Landau, as well as National Security Advisor Michael Waltz and special envoy for Latin America Mauricio Claver-Carone. Rubio also chose several Central American countries—including Panama—and the Dominican Republic as the [destinations of his inaugural foreign visit in early February](#).

The first months of Trump's presidency have shown that the administration places cooperation with Latin America as subordinate to U.S. security interests because it views the region—as it did [during his first presidency](#)—mainly as a source of threats. However, now the administration is employing much more aggressive measures towards Latin American countries, expecting their governments to cooperate in blocking irregular migration to the U.S. and fighting criminal groups and drug trafficking. It also wants its partners to limit China's influence, especially in managing regional strategic infrastructure, among other areas. Trump has threatened Panama that the U.S. will take back control of the Panama Canal, arguing that the Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison company's administration of two ports key to the crossing poses a threat to the U.S.

The emphasis on demands relegates positive incentives, such as increased investment or energy cooperation commitments, to the background and marginalises support for democracy and the protection of human rights. The new approach to Latin America also shows a revival of expansionist ideas, including the approach to the region as a U.S. sphere of influence.

Migration and Security. During Joe Biden's presidency, the southern U.S. border services registered record numbers of irregular migrants, at a monthly average of 180,000 people, primarily from Latin American countries. Trump has prioritised stifling this phenomenon, linking it to the expansion of Latin American criminal organisations, arguing that they are increasingly active in the U.S. and increasing drugs smuggling, especially fentanyl, which is blamed in numerous overdose deaths in the country in the past several years.

The president started tightening migration policy and sealing the border with Mexico immediately on his inauguration day. He has invoked an 18th century provision in law on responding to a "foreign invasion" to impose a state of emergency in the border area, send the military there, and boost deportations, among other actions. The administration has persuaded or forced several Latin American governments (Panama and Colombia, among others) to accept U.S. military deportation flights, some of which include third-country nationals. It has also blocked the possibility of obtaining asylum in the U.S. and

withdrawn the extension of temporary protection for migrants from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and other countries.

The decision to designate the Venezuelan Tren de Aragua gang and some Mexican cartels, among other criminal groups, as terrorist organisations aims to improve the effectiveness of the fight against organised crime. Trump even suggested the U.S. may directly combat the cartels by sending U.S. special forces to Mexico. He has also threatened that country with punitive tariffs if it fails to enhance protection of the border with the U.S. and halt fentanyl trafficking.

The Economy and Chinese Expansion. The 37% share in Latin America's merchandise trade, worth more than \$1 trillion in 2023 (UNCTAD data), makes the U.S. the region's largest trading partner. However, its relative share has gradually declined in favour of China, which had 17%, or more than \$463 billion in such trade, that year.

In Latin America, Mexico is the primary focus of the new administration on the economic front. Revision of the [USMCA trade act between Mexico, Canada, and the U.S.](#) is scheduled for July 2026. While one thorny issue is the [high trade surplus with the U.S.](#), there is also the perception that China has been increasingly using the Mexican market to export its goods to the U.S. [Implementation of Trump's threats to impose punitive tariffs on USMCA partners](#) could threaten the future of the agreement.

The pressure on Panama is the Trump administration's main attempt so far to undermine China's influence in Latin America. Following Rubio's February visit, Panamanian President José Raúl Mulino announced that he would not extend cooperation with China under the Belt and Road Initiative. He also launched an audit of the Panama Canal administration. In March, the U.S. authorities announced that the domestic company, BlackRock, had acquired all of CK Hutchison's stakes in the two Panamanian ports.

Marginalising Support for Democracy. Recent years saw a consolidation of power and an increase in repressiveness by authoritarian regimes in Cuba, Nicaragua, and especially [Venezuela following the fraudulent victory of Nicolás Maduro in last July's presidential election](#). Shortly after his inauguration, Trump cancelled Biden's decision to remove Cuba from the list of countries that support terrorism, but subsequent decisions about Venezuela indicate inconsistencies in his approach.

On the eve of assuming the presidency, Trump supported the Venezuelan opposition and recognised its candidate, Edmundo González, as the legitimate election winner. After the inauguration, however, the U.S. president decided to [withhold development aid from USAID](#), which threatened funding for pro-democracy NGOs and media in Venezuela, among other regional beneficiaries. At the end of January, he sent his representative for special missions, Richard Grenell, to Caracas to secure Maduro's approval for the resumption of deportation flights (refused since 2023) and the release of several jailed U.S. citizens, which in fact were regime hostages. Grenell later suggested that Trump did not want regime

change in Venezuela, which contrasted with Rubio calling the three Latin American regimes "enemies of humanity". In early March, however, Trump announced he had withdrawn the licence for Chevron to exploit Venezuelan oil.

The new administration, moreover, explicitly favours popular and effective leaders, even if they abuse power or act above the law. For example, El Salvador's leader Nayib Bukele is viewed as a role model for pacifying gangs and improving public security. However, his policies have faced allegations of human rights abuses, and he extended his rule in 2024 by violating the constitution's one-term-only limit.

Conclusions and Outlook. The Trump administration's concept of relations with Latin American states lacks a coherent and consistent vision, with the abrupt changes in the approach to Venezuela or in introducing punitive tariffs on Mexico proof of that. Rubio's or Claver-Carone's Latin American credentials visibly do not translate into decisive influence on the new administration's policy directions towards the region.

The dynamic of U.S. relations with Latin American countries will depend on the needs—how strong the ties are with a given partner or how significant the countries are to U.S. security interests—and on how easily and swiftly Trump's election promises can be implemented with them. Mexico will remain the priority, and relations with Central American countries will stay significant. It is not yet clear what will be the new administration's vision of relations with other important Latin American states—especially with Brazil, which now has to deal with the adverse effects of the tariffs Trump imposed on steel and aluminium imports. There are no signs of particular U.S. interest in [Argentina, contrary to President Javier Milei's](#) high expectations that his close acquaintance and support for Trump would translate into more intense bilateral cooperation.

With its aggressive approach, the U.S. will force favourable decisions on most Latin American partners at the expense of credibility and an undermining of the aspirations of various states—including those outside the region—to strengthen the rule of law. Trump's model of governance, based on draconian migration policies, praising police states (e.g., El Salvador), [questioning multilateral cooperation](#), and international law or marginalising democracy, gives consent to similar approaches among Latin American leaders. It also legitimises the principle that stronger states have greater rights, including spheres of influence.

Latin American countries may respond to aggressive U.S. policies, strengthening their bid to diversify their partnerships, which could be both an opportunity and a challenge for the EU. Concerns about Trump's policies have already influenced the acceleration of the decision to conclude the long-running negotiations on the [EU-Mercosur partnership agreement](#) in December 2024 and on the EU's new global agreement with Mexico in January, just before Trump's inauguration. However, it will be difficult for the EU to compete with China, which has the status of the only real counterweight to the U.S. in Latin America.