

GIES OCCASIONAL PAPER

One Year Trump | January 2026

THE IMPACT OF THE SECOND TRUMP ADMINISTRATION ON LATIN AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

Alberto Maresca, Doctoral Fellow, UNU-CRIS & Ghent University

Ghent Institute for International and European Studies – Ghent University

Introducing US-Latin America Relations Under Trump 2.0

In the last US National Security Strategy, President Trump clearly outlined the return of the Monroe Doctrine for Latin America. The 1823 Monroe Doctrine, now updated by the so-called Trump Corollary, claimed that the Western Hemisphere belonged to the US as its own backyard and that no foreign power, particularly a European one, should be involved in the region. Today, the recipient of the Doctrine is clearly China, which is the leading trading partner of several Latin American countries. Since January 20, 2025, the Trump administration evidently brought its almost bipolar competition with China to the Western Hemisphere. Nevertheless, although US alignment has become a must for the region's widespread conservative forces, Washington has not stopped China's advancement in Latin America. Tariffs and interventionism motivated Latin America to continue diversifying away from Washington, widening foreign policy portfolios to encompass the rest of the Global South. Two elements must

be highlighted in the consequences of US-Latin America relations under Trump 2.0. First, Venezuela, the principal target of the current US foreign policy, is not the only country looking to Global South partners to counter Washington. Even Trump-loyal governments are building ties with Global South peers to reduce their dependence on an unpredictable White House. Secondly, China is currently an affirmed regional partner. Trump's objective of expelling the Asian giant from Latin America, without providing a feasible alternative, can prove wrong. In other words, the Chinese presence in Latin America relates to its gargantuan infrastructure investments, as seen with the Chancay Port in Peru. Hence, threatening with tariffs, visa bans, and other sanctions without offering economic projects at Chinese rates does not in any way enhance the US image. Nonetheless, this analysis is not homogeneous across Latin America. Economies that are more dependent on the US and less aligned with Trump's political ideology seem to reward Washington's hawkish stance toward China. Mexico, tied to North America through the USMCA, increased import tariffs on

Chinese products, generating diplomatic tensions with Beijing in an attempt to appease the Trump administration amid disputes over fentanyl, migration, and the supposed Mexican backdoor for Asian goods to enter the US market (Dussel Peters, 2025). El Salvador and Honduras are similar examples. The Bukele government encountered appeasement from Trump due to its permission to deport Venezuelan migrants to El Salvador's CECOT mega-prison, which not only deleted any possible US criticism of its human rights violations, but also led to a bilateral economic agreement promising investments in the Central American nation. Regarding Honduras, a country where 26 % of the GDP depends on migrants' remittances primarily from the US (IOM, 2024), Trump's interference in the last controversial presidential elections showed again the vulnerability of countries economically dependent on Washington. In fact, by pardoning Juan Orlando Hernández, the former Honduran president convicted of drug trafficking in the US, Trump furthered the popularity of right-wing candidate Nasry Afura, who claimed to have won the presidency despite broad denunciation of fraud. However, some Latin American nations that have long depended on the US reacted differently to Trump's foreign policy. The most spectacular cases are Lula's Brazil and Petro's Colombia.

Trump's staunch appeasement of former president Jair Bolsonaro during the trial for his involvement in a coup attempt led to a major US-Brazil crisis, enhanced by sanctions against Supreme Court judge Alexandre de Moraes. Nevertheless, these actions expanded the traditional Brazilian sense of autonomy in foreign policy, historically aimed at leveraging Brazil's regional power and its position in the Global South, while disregarding Washington's impositions (Amorim, 2010). Brazil responded to Trump's foreign policy by organizing the Rio de Janeiro BRICS summit, hosting COP30 in Belém, and expanding Mercosur's scope toward South-

South partnerships, as seen in the incoming agreement with the UAE (*Brazil-Arab News Agency*, 2025). Regarding Colombia, it can be argued that Trump's ostracism of Petro, with rivers of mutual accusations escalating until sanctions were imposed on Petro himself, completely transformed Colombian foreign policy. Past US-Colombia relations were strengthened around countering drug trafficking with significant degrees of interventionism by the White House in complicity with the Colombian government. In the 2000s, the Uribe administration completely distanced Colombia from the wave of progressive presidents that emerged in South America by enforcing the *Respite Polum* mantra, which called not only for prioritizing ties with the US but also for combating Colombia's internal guerrillas under Washington's diktat (Dallanegra Pedraza, 2012). Petro's response to Trump's claims of his involvement in cocaine exports was to lower diplomatic exchanges with the White House and also expand bounds with China. In fact, Petro advanced Colombia's accession to the BRICS-crafted New Development Bank. Colombia also broke diplomatic relations with Israel. It positioned itself against the War in Gaza, initiating a pivot to the Arab World that brought Qatar to be the mediator between the Colombian government and the Gaitanista paramilitary group (Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025).

Undoubtedly, the core of Trump's Latin American foreign policy is located in Venezuela. Since August 2025, threats of armed intervention and a sustained military buildup in the Caribbean Sea have undermined the longstanding status of Latin America as a Zone of Peace. On January 3rd, 2026, Operation Absolute Resolve ousted President Maduro from the Miraflores Palace, representing the first bombing to occur in a South American capital. Even if real consequences are yet to be seen, the impact on US-Latin America relations is already severe.

Trump's Intervention in Venezuela: Watershed in US-Latin America Relations

After Nicolás Maduro landed in New York under DEA custody, in order to appear before a court over an alleged drug trafficking indictment, a warning was made by former US policymakers. At a time when China continues to expand its infrastructure and capital investments in Latin America, the US responds with a military intervention outside international law. Hence, Trump's interventionism risks reinforcing the Chinese narrative and bringing Latin American governments closer to Beijing's financial offers, given China's scarce political requests (González, 2026). Furthermore, it is essential to pay attention to the international reactions to the US actions in Venezuela. Latin American governments, and here lies the most significant impact of Trump's foreign policy, failed to reach a consensual statement within the regional organization CELAC to condemn the violation of Venezuelan territorial integrity. The main reason is the overall closeness of presidents like Argentina's Milei and Paraguay's Peña to President Trump, among others, with conservative foreign policies that reject Latin American regionalism in favour of full-scale alignment with the Republican administration (Maresca & Martínez Cabrera, 2025). At the same time, it is also relevant to highlight the distance taken by Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay, which criticized Caracas' shelling by the US military and the forced ousting of Maduro. Looking beyond the Western Hemisphere, the diplomatic weight of growing South-South ties becomes quite evident. The African Union issued one of the first statements of concern for the situation in Venezuela. Similarly, the governments of Ghana, Namibia, South Africa, Iran, Qatar, and Türkiye called for a cessation of hostilities. Of course, these presidential or ministerial declarations have symbolic rather than hard policy meaning. They had much less influence on the US conduct in Venezuela.

Notwithstanding *realpolitik*, Trump's foreign policy during his second administration appeared to create a space of solidarity between Latin America and the rest of the Global South. In the Venezuelan case, it is notable that Global South governments in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East were at times more outspoken against US intervention than those in Latin America.

Therefore, the impact of Trump's second administration on Latin America and the various foreign policies of its governments cannot be evaluated in a monolithic way. Surely, Venezuela can be considered the big prize for the neoconservative faction led by Marco Rubio. Moreover, Trump succeeded in building, through political meddling, an alliance with loyal Latin American right-wingers that applauded his Venezuelan agenda (Stefanoni, 2025) and the continuous threats against leftist presidents, especially Colombia's Petro. Conversely, China is still in Latin America, and Global South partners did not refrain from broadening diplomatic and commercial channels with governments across the whole political spectrum. In this sense, a sufficient balance suggests that while Trump succeeded in threatening economically dependent States, the ongoing diversification of Latin American foreign policies was not halted. As an anecdote, Paraguay, a fierce ally of this White House, was the first Latin American country to organize an official visit to Uzbekistan, with the Paraguayan president offering Asunción as the principal interlocutor for Tashkent in South America (Paraguayan Presidency, 2025).

Conclusion: Is the Donroe Doctrine Working?

Trump's militarization of US foreign policy toward the Western Hemisphere, under the pretext of countering drug trafficking, has usually been labelled the Donroe Doctrine (Stott, 2025), as an adjustment of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine. Rather than restoring uncontested influence or reversing the presence of external actors, Trump's approach has reinforced long-standing patterns

of diversification in Latin American foreign policy. The return to an openly coercive stance has heightened the vulnerability of countries that remain structurally dependent on the US. Mexico, El Salvador, and Honduras illustrate how economic exposure, migration dependence, and security asymmetries translate into foreign policy concessions. In these cases, Washington successfully used tariffs, diplomatic pressure, and selective political support to extract compliance on issues ranging from the Chinese presence to security-related issues, namely drug trafficking and migration. Still, even among governments that publicly rewarded Trump's hawkish positions, diversification toward non-Western partners continued quietly, driven by the need to hedge against uncertainty and economic coercion. Trump's interventionism triggered the opposite effect in countries with greater political room for manoeuvre. Brazil and Colombia demonstrate how pressure from Washington legitimized an autonomy that Lula rediscovered in Brazilian tradition but was unprecedented in Colombia. In both cases, political confrontation with the White House accelerated engagement with BRICS and nations in the Middle East. Trump's policies, therefore, did not generate a hemispheric realignment but rather widened the gap between constrained and autonomous states within Latin America. China's continued presence across the region further underscores the limits of Washington's military strategy. Despite rhetorical escalation and punitive measures, Beijing remains a central economic partner for several Latin American countries. Infrastructure investment, development finance, and trade flows have proven resilient to political pressure, particularly in the absence of credible Western alternatives. Trump's insistence on forcing binary choices without offering comparable economic incentives has often reinforced the appeal of Chinese engagement rather than undermining it.

However, Trump's leading dossier during this first year of his second term is definitely Venezuela.

The military intervention and the ousting of Maduro marked a watershed moment that reverberated across Latin America. While some governments applauded or tolerated Operation Absolute Resolve, others distanced themselves, revealing deep political polarization within the region. The failure of CELAC to produce a unified response illustrated the erosion of regional consensus and the weakening of collective mechanisms in the face of external pressure. At the same time, reactions from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia demonstrated that some Latin American foreign policies, such as Venezuela's, consolidated South-South ties with significant diplomatic effects. Trump succeeded in exerting pressure on economically dependent States and in building a network of loyal right-wing allies willing to endorse his agenda. Yet this success has been partial and uneven. It has not reversed Latin America's engagement with China, nor has it curtailed the expansion of South-South cooperation. On the contrary, the perception of an unpredictable and interventionist White House has encouraged governments across the ideological spectrum to diversify their foreign policy portfolios.

Ultimately, Trump's second administration has reinforced a central paradox of contemporary US-Latin America relations. The more Washington relies on coercion and political interference to discipline the region, the more it accelerates the search for autonomy among Latin American governments. Still, as shaped by the Latin American tradition of International Relations, real autonomy in foreign policy implies the capacity to resist and evade external coercion (Jaguaribe, 1979). Only a few governments currently benefit from this power. This does not signal the disappearance of US influence, but rather its transformation into a more contested and conditional form. Latin America today is neither uniformly aligned nor uniformly resistant. It is increasingly plural, fragmented, and embedded in a broader Global South landscape. In this context,

Trump's ability to shape regional outcomes through unilateral pressure appears structurally limited. Big stick's comeback does not seem to work with a Latin America in search for carrots.

References

- Amorim, C. (2010). Brazilian Foreign Policy under President Lula (2003-2010): An Overview. In *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 53, 214–240.
- Brazil-Arab News Agency. (2025, November 07). Mercosur, UAE Hold New Round of Negotiations.
- Dallanegra Pedraza, L. (2012). Claves de la política exterior de Colombia. In *Latinoamérica. Revista de Estudios Latinoamericanos*, 54(1), 37–73.
- Dussel Peters, E. (2025). Latin America and the Caribbean-China Socioeconomic Relations: New Triangular Relationships and the Mexican Case in 2025. In *China International Strategy Review*.
- González, J. (2026, January 4). The End of the Beginning in Venezuela: The Real Challenges and Risks for U.S. Policy Are Still to Come. In *Foreign Affairs*.
- IOM. (2024). Las remesas son una luz de esperanza para los hondureños en situación de precariedad.
- Jaguaribe, H. (1979). Autonomía periférica y hegemonía céntrica. In *Estudios Internacionales*, 12(46), 91–130.
- Maresca, A., & Martinez Cabrera, F. F. (2025). BRICS Membership Perspectives for Argentina and Paraguay. Engagement with China in the 21st Century. In *TongDao. Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios de China Contemporánea*, 2(2), 1–19.
- Paraguayan Presidency. (2025, December 11). Presidente Peña realiza histórica visita de Estado a Uzbekistán.
- Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2025, December 05). Qatar Announces Signing of Commitment to Peace by Colombian Government, Self-Designated EGC Following Two Rounds of Mediation in Doha.
- Stefanoni, P. (2026, January 5). ¿Un Muro de Berlín para la izquierda latinoamericana? In *El País*.
- Stott, M. (2025, November 18). The 'Donroe Doctrine': Trump's power play in Latin America. In *Financial Times*.