

Democratization



Year 7, Issue 34

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Back to the Big Stick: From Theodore Roosevelt to Donald Trump

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The situation has been more than volatile. In just 15 days, the United States has asserted in a manner rarely seen in recent decades its hegemonic role in America, challenging traditional allies and negotiating with governments that had openly antagonized Washington. These lines were written in early February 2025, with the intention of outlining the fundamental bases of President Donald Trump's foreign agenda in the Americas. However, we must caution that the continental scenario remains fluid, and there is still much to be said on the matter.

One thing is certain: from the outset, the nationalist and determined character of this administration's actions in foreign policy is evident, especially in America due to what Trump declared as a "national emergency"¹ at the border and the need to stop illegal migration from Latin Americans. Stopping the entry of these people is protecting the interests of Americans, but for Americans the motivations are even more complex. It is not only about keeping migrants at bay, but about demonstrating U.S. hegemony in the region, with a style reminiscent of the actions

1 "The Inaugural Address", The White House, January 20, 2025. Date accessed: February 6, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/>

of presidents like William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, recognized by Trump as important figures and characterized by pursuing an aggressive foreign policy toward Latin America, such as the one that led to the 1898 war against Spain and interventions evidenced in the Caribbean around the turn of the century.

This essay seeks to identify how the forms of exercising hegemony that the United States applied in the past —based on aggressive and interventionist actions— have not been confined to history books, but seem to be reaffirmed under Donald Trump’s government as the baseline for negotiating with Latin American governments. Hence, the “big stick” is not buried; it is present in the discourse and actions of Washington’s new leaders, and history serves as a fundamental benchmark for understanding the dynamics of our present.

Exceptional, more than ever.

In political discourse, the idea of reclaiming past greatness has resonated. During the electoral campaign, building on the crisis the United States has experienced in recent years and the decline of its once-dominant influence in the world (with a clear reference here to China as the major economic rival), Trump emphasizes a nationalist rhetoric that strikes a chord by proposing the reconstruction of leadership like that of the past, attributing the country’s problems to migrants and poor administration. People responded to this message, and amidst attacks, aggressive media campaigns, and a leadership crisis in the Democratic Party, on November 5, 2024, Donald Trump won the elections by securing 312 electoral college votes and 49.8% of the popular vote.

A clear conclusion emerges: since January 20, in his inaugural speech as President of the United States, Donald Trump reaffirmed

that his country “will flourish and be respected again all over the world.”² Making this statement, beyond the rhetorical figures typical of such events, is not only a strategy to differentiate from the past but also a confirmation of the most representative aspects of foreign policy under this new administration. In Trump’s words, the idea of being “more exceptional than ever” seems to be a reaffirmation of the nature of the historic leadership that the United States has held in the Americas, anchored in the concept of exceptionalism, which explains how the country has experienced remarkable growth over time that qualitatively and quantitatively differentiates it from its peers.³ Seen this way, the idea of reclaiming American greatness implies readjusting that leadership, partly by revisiting past models, and presently advancing an aggressive and interventionist policy through early statements and actions that unequivocally reveal the administration’s goals.

Under this premise, exceptionalism supports what the order of things is. At least in the Trumpist discourse, this is very clear: the way the United States should act in America is based on a historic leadership in which the doctrine of Manifest Destiny must be made visible: building a great nation that is intrinsically known to be exceptional can only be done through expansion, including territorial, and the subjugation of those considered inferior. From its independence through the 19th century, this paradigm fueled the conquest and westward expansion, manifested in conflicts

2 “The Inaugural Address”, The White House, January 20, 2025. Date accessed: February 6, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/>

3 For more information: Depkat, Volker, *American Exceptionalism*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2021. Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-edged Sword*, W. W. Norton, 1997. Ian Tyrrell, *American Exceptionalism: A New History of an Old Idea*, University of Chicago Press, 2022.

against the British, Spanish, Mexicans, and indigenous peoples. By the late 1800s, it further cemented the notion of intervention in regions like the Caribbean and Central America, regions of clear U.S. influence. Precisely in governments like those of William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, an aggressive foreign policy based on these premises meant for the neighbors of the continent a passage through traumatic episodes of interventions, blockades, and loss of sovereignty, all carried out by the United States, and which are tangible in the history and present of these republics.

By this, we do not mean that history repeats itself and that Trump will be the same as his heroic presidents. In fact, those of us who study political science know that the present is not a carbon copy of the past; however, in this case, it is significant how the speeches and strategies of old, which had been considered overcome by the United States, are still present in the minds of its politicians. If in the past they were not applied as we observe today, it may be due more to a change of paradigm in foreign policy that, according to recent actions, should be considered outdated. Proposing the merger with Canada,⁴ the purchase of Groenlandia,⁵ suggesting changing the name of the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America⁶ and threatening historic partners with tariffs when they do not accept the requests of the United

4 "Trump sugirió a Trudeau la integración de Canadá en EE.UU. para evitar los aranceles, según medios", EFE, December 3, 2024. Date accessed: February 6, 2025. <https://efe.com/mundo/2024-12-03/trump-integrar-canada-a-estados-unidos-para-evitar-aranceles/>

5 Minho Kim, "¿Por qué Trump quiere Groenlandia?", *The New York Times*, January 8, 2025. Date accessed: February 6, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2025/01/08/espanol/estados-unidos/donald-trump-groenlandia-dinamarca.html>

6 "The Inaugural Address", The White House, January 20, 2025. Date accessed: February 6, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/>

States is a demonstration of how, at least in discourse, the priority lies in showing strength, in the idea of an exceptional nation that must systematically reaffirm its superiority.

America according to Trump

The conclusion that can be drawn in these early days of his term is that, for Trump, the continent must cooperate with the United States or face sanctions. From this point of view, Trump's America (not the controversial name for the United States, but the continent) is defined by allies —those who follow Washington's directives— and rivals —those who defy its policies. In this black-and-white framework of good versus bad, ally versus enemy, the space for negotiation and cooperation between states is very limited, which could prove counterproductive for the continuity and stability of hemispheric democracy.

In just over fifteen days, at the continental level, the biggest problem is the illegal migration of Latin Americans to the United States. Since the electoral campaign, Donald Trump has made it clear that the illegal arrival of people in his country is one of the administration's greatest concerns, in addition to being a criminal act. To some extent, the relationship between the United States and the countries of Latin America —especially those in Central America and the Caribbean— is defined by this phenomenon. Moreover, this is no longer just a problem for the State Department. The presence of these individuals in the United States and of criminal gangs —an aspect that has been amplified in the media to characterize all those who cross the border— ends up affecting the internal situation and is, in the eyes of this administration,

a policy systematically developed by Joe Biden's government.⁷ Therefore, if the offer is to reestablish the lost order, migrants must return to their countries of origin, and the governments of Latin America must ensure this happens under the conditions set by Washington.

This is one of the most concerning aspects of the first weeks of the administration. Trump's policy is rooted in aggressive rhetoric that does not differentiate between states or acknowledge the role of historical alliances. With combative language, countries like Colombia –within hours and following criticism of Gustavo Petro's statements on social media– were threatened by the United States with increased tariffs and visa suspensions⁸ unless they agreed to follow established immigration directives. Bogotá ultimately accepted Washington's demands: to repatriate individuals apprehended by immigration enforcement. Panama, following pressure from Washington, criticism of its economic policy, and concerns over the use of the canal (which has been under complete administration of the Central American republic since 1999), was forced to abandon its participation in the so-called "Silk Road" and grant priority transit through the canal to U.S. vessels.⁹ Canada, a country currently engaged in a trade war with the United States, is experiencing a resurgence of national

7 Hamed Aleaziz, "Trump Officials Move to Quickly Expel Migrants Biden Allowed In Temporarily," *The New York Times*, January 23, 2025. Date accessed: February 10, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/23/us/politics/trump-immigrants-deportation.html>

8 Annie Correal, Julie Turkewitz and Genevieve Glatky, "Qué ocurrió en Colombia con la crisis por las deportaciones de Trump", *The New York Times*, January 28, 2025. Date accessed: February 10, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2025/01/28/espanol/america-latina/colombia-trump-vuelos-deportacion.html>

9 "¿Panamá se aleja de China?: Mulino promete prioridad a barcos de EE.UU. y suspender «Ruta de la Seda»", *France24*, February 3, 2025. Date

sentiment¹⁰ as a result of the threat of tariff imposition, a policy the Trump administration has also announced for Mexico (25% on imports). In both cases, however, the tariff decision has been temporarily suspended for one month.¹¹

While this has happened with countries with which the United States has had stable and productive relations over the decades, with Venezuela, the dynamic has been different. Although various representatives have questioned the continuity of President Nicolás Maduro's government, in practice one of the most protocolar contacts Washington has conducted in recent days was precisely during the visit to Caracas of the Special Envoy for Venezuela, Richard Grenell, an event in which the continuation of Chevron's investments in the country, coordination of repatriations, release of captive Americans, and maintenance of communication channels were discussed. The widely circulated image of this encounter underscored the influence of Maduro's administration and its international supporters.¹²

accessed: February 10, 2025, <https://www.france24.com/es/am%C3%A9rica-latina/20250203-panam%C3%A1-se-aleja-de-china-mulino-promete-prioridad-a-barcos-de-ee-uu-y-suspender-ruta-de-la-seda>

- 10 Iker Seisdedos, "«Canadá no se vende»: la amenaza de anexión y los aranceles de Trump resucitan el patriotismo en el país", *El País*, February 9, 2025. Date accessed: February 10, 2025, <https://elpais.com/internacional/2025-02-09/canada-no-se-vende-la-amenaza-de-anexion-y-los-aranceles-de-trump-resucitan-el-patriotismo-en-el-pais.html>
- 11 David Alire Garcia, Trevor Hunnicutt and David Ljunggren, "Trump pauses tariffs on Mexico and Canada, but not China", Reuters, February 3, 2025. Date accessed: February 10, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-says-americans-may-feel-pain-trade-war-with-mexico-canada-china-2025-02-03/>
- 12 Celina Carquez and Luz Mely Reyes, "Paso a paso: ¿cómo fue la negociación entre Grenell y Maduro?", *Efecto Cocuyo*, February 6, 2025. Date accessed: February 10, 2025, <https://efectococuyo.com/politica/paso-a-paso-como-fue-la-negociacion-entre-grenell-y-maduro/>

Nothing in the United States' intense agenda during its initial weeks is set in stone. Although it is very early to draw conclusions, it seems clear that the big stick can be used by Washington without the scruples of the past and with the conviction of achieving the objectives set, even if this implies raising the tone of the discourse with countries considered allies. With a pragmatic and imposing foreign policy, it is possible that other actors may end up capitalizing on the leadership that the United States has built, more or less systematically, since the end of the Cold War. How Washington responds to China's growing influence in Latin America and attempts to forge a consensus remains to be seen, even if only on paper.

Latin America and the U.S.: Relations and Democracies Under Pressure

Elsa Cardozo

While it was somewhat surprising that Donald Trump chose Latin America –rather than other global matters– as the centerpiece of his inaugural address, it was less unexpected that the three themes he highlighted aligned with campaign promises that resonated deeply with his voter base. Migration, trade, and security were addressed as crudely as in the candidate’s speeches and proposals about mass deportations, security and border measures linked to migration, and tariff hikes on his closest partners. That first day also saw repeated references to U.S. expansionist strategies from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which now, in the 21st century, resurface in a world far more complex in challenges and denser in interconnections–something, at the very least, inconvenient to ignore: both for the United States and for Latin America.

Among the challenges and interconnections that must not be ignored are those of governance and democracy. These are shaped not only by a government’s capacity and efficiency in wielding power and managing resources, but fundamentally by the legitimacy and institutional grounding of its decisions and policies. Attention to these two dimensions is crucial at a time when changes in the global distribution of power are accompanied

by a long illiberal or frankly authoritarian wave, which weakens both national and international checks on the exercise of power.

From this present moment, based on what has been said and done in less than a month from both the United States and Latin America, three questions arise that guide this outline of what a second term for Donald Trump could mean for democracy in our continent: What role is the region likely to play in the U.S. administration's agenda? Conversely, what role will the United States occupy in the agendas of Latin American governments? And, among the hemispheric and extra-hemispheric challenges and connections faced by each, what dangers and opportunities exist for Latin American democracies and democrats?

1. From the U.S.: The Region and the World Through a Geopolitical Lens.

The inaugural address, executive actions, and immediate policies confirmed Latin America's place in the America First and Make America Great Again agendas. This is summarized in the Republican electoral platform, where attention to the region is directly reflected in three of the twenty campaign promises: tightening border controls to stop illegal immigration, launching a large-scale deportation campaign, and confronting crime, which the proposal fundamentally associates with immigration. These three promises are framed within the plan to restore the industrial, military, and global influence of the United States.

The executive orders and presidential initiatives from the first month of the administration are generating intense economic, political, and social pressures on the governability of many countries —especially those geographically closest and most dependent on ties with the United States. In addition to measures

on migration and trade, the closure of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) —a provider of nearly half of global assistance— affects humanitarian, health, and food initiatives, as well as programs on security, economic development, democracy, and human rights in 130 countries, including eighteen in Latin America.

The global and hemispheric geopolitical dimension, strongly present in announcements and decisions, also reveals other ways of looking toward Latin America. On one hand, there is a willingness to disregard signed agreements, as seen in the threat to increase tariffs on its main trade partners —Mexico and Canada— without regard for the mechanisms established in the free trade agreement signed in 1994 and revised in 2018 during Trump's first term. On the other hand, the decision to rename the Gulf of Mexico and the announcements to reclaim control over the Panama Canal —framed with reference and reverence to Presidents William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, and further back, James Monroe and the so-called "Manifest Destiny" doctrine— offer clues about the power-based perspective guiding the reorientation of relations with the southern hemisphere.

Latin America is part of a global map in which the new U.S. government has launched an intense international offensive that is revising and weakening agreements, organizations, alliances, and important relationships as a counterweight to power politics. In addition to withdrawing from the World Health Organization and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, decisions have been made to sanction the International Criminal Court, abandon membership in the United Nations Human Rights Council, suspend certain contributions to the United Nations, and review participation in all international organizations. The trade-related

decisions threaten to ignite a tariff war at a time of global economic difficulty and particular vulnerability in Latin America, in the context of the aforementioned suspension of aid programs.

The treatment given to the European Union —marked by tariff announcements and exclusion from strategic decisions and plans to end the war in Gaza and, especially, and to negotiate the conclusion of the war in Ukraine with Russia— is particularly concerning. It is so because this overt discrediting and pressure on the European Union —as evidenced by the speeches of the Vice President and the Secretary of Defense in Munich and in Belgium, respectively— is happening amid the strengthening of populist nationalisms, Russia's expansionist ambitions, and the risks of further violence in the Middle East.

The initial signs of attention to Latin America, which is once again viewed from Washington as a natural zone of influence, are inscribed within that broader map where, over the course of just a few days, the president and his closest team have been moving with particular intensity. With only the first signals from a month of government, the initial interactions with the region confirm the concerns about the consequences of the decisions the Republican administration has set in motion in its pursuit of security, strength, and prosperity for the United States, and particularly about the risk that a transactional strategy may reduce attention to considerations regarding the rule of law, human rights, and democracy.

2. From Latin America: Economy, Geopolitics, and the Pragmatic Temptation.

Donald Trump's second term finds a Latin America where democratic regimes still prevail –more than in any other region of the world– but with signs of decline and under strong economic pressures and socio-political discontent. These have surfaced in the 2024 electoral cycle and are evident in the deterioration of key dimensions of democratic performance, such as the quality of electoral processes, judicial independence, and access to justice. This occurs in a world that has seen an authoritarian wave for nearly two decades, while the “gray area” between authoritarian regimes and illiberal democracies –particularly those governed by nationalist-populist parties, coalitions, or leaders– continues to grow, and the scope of international authoritarian influence expands. Within this context, Latin America has seen the accumulation of actions and omissions that weaken international and hemispheric commitments to the defense of human rights and democracy. That is the broad framework from which Latin American positions toward the United States should be analyzed.

In the initial regional reactions and responses to the pressures and demands coming from Washington, restraint has prevailed. At another time and under different circumstances, there would have been many protest statements with joint calls for attention and some reference or declaration of an anti-imperialist nature. The current caution reflects the prudence in dealing with the wave of threats, suspension of aid, and tariff measures amid complex governance conditions in Latin American countries. This also stems from the calculation of interests at stake in bilateral relations and within the broader international context. No less

important is the weakness –to say the least– of regional or subregional coordination spaces.

The protests from Cuba over its re-inclusion on the list of terrorist states did not receive much regional resonance. Nor did the initiatives by Presidents Gustavo Petro and Xiomara Castro to convene the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) to protest the tariff threat, which was resolved as soon as the Colombian president reversed his position on deportation flights. For her part, Castro ultimately abandoned the idea of closing the U.S. military base in Palmerola –a threat publicized in response to the announcement of mass deportations. Regarding the greater pressure received by Mexico, “cool heads” have prevailed, along with nationalist rhetoric and President Claudia Sheinbaum’s willingness to compromise. She agreed to a dense agenda of work and cooperation –on border security, deportations, and trade– and a pause before revisiting the issue of tariffs.

During Secretary of State Marco Rubio’s tour of Panama, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic, presidents from various political leanings signed agreements that included declarations and commitments on migration control, repatriations, organized crime, drug trafficking, security, and relations with China. All of these countries –except Panama– have been part of the Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) with the U.S. for two decades and continue to view the United States as their primary trading partner, albeit with the balance in its favor. The visit confirmed the pressure that deportation policy exerts on the economies and governance of Central America, while also highlighting the pragmatic approach of governments in signing agreements that avoid straining economic relations with the U.S. and allow them

to secure complementary support to address issues that are also of domestic concern.

The regional geopolitical perspective was particularly evident in Panama, which had a broadly similar agenda to its Central American neighbors but placed special focus and strain on the issue of ports operated by Chinese companies at both ends of the Canal. Announcements by President José Raúl Mulino, declaring that those concessions would not be renewed and that the memorandum with China, which made Panama part of the Belt and Road Initiative, would not be continued, along with his willingness to cooperate on deportations to third countries, eased U.S. pressure. This case invites consideration of the differing positions various Latin American countries maintain regarding their relations with China: twenty-two of them have joined the Belt and Road Initiative, though only a few –such as Brazil, Chile, and Peru– have significant projects or trade volumes under its umbrella.

Beyond Central America, a mix of economic, security, and geopolitical factors outlines four distinct blocs of Latin American positions toward the United States.

Among the governments with closer economic ties, shared agenda items, and more or less aligned geopolitical orientations are those recently visited by the Secretary of State, as well as Argentina and Ecuador under the government of Daniel Noboa. With disagreements or an instrumental approach toward the unavoidably common elements on the agenda, and distant from U.S. geopolitical orientations but with significant economic relations, stand Mexico and Colombia. From a position of disagreement with the agenda, pragmatic regarding geopolitical

orientations, and in need of economic arrangements that disregard illiberal tendencies or the autocratic nature of their governments, stand the regimes of Honduras –and, even more extreme in their pragmatism– Nicaragua and Venezuela. Finally, from positions of disagreement with the common agenda, distant from U.S. geopolitical orientations, and with diversified international economic relations –in which China is an important partner– are, to varying degrees, Brazil, Peru, and Chile.

3. From Both Sides: A Call for Reflection.

Within the hemispheric context, the case of Venezuela is highly significant and deserves special consideration in this issue. To conclude, it is worth briefly highlighting it as a point of particular regional interest regarding the opportunity to recover and protect democracy in a world increasingly hostile to it.

Trump's second term finds Venezuela in a more politically and economically vulnerable situation than in 2018, due to the illegitimacy of the presidential mandate's origin, in contrast with the demonstrated legitimacy of the opposition candidate Edmundo González Urrutia's election. Also due to its inefficiency and lack of transparency, but fundamentally because of the illegitimacy of conduct that undeniably violates human rights across its broad spectrum.

Within that frame of reference, it is understandable that the Venezuelan regime has sought to take advantage of and encourage the transactional aspect of the Trump administration. This is reflected in its willingness to cooperate on what has immediately been prioritized regarding repatriations, as evidenced by contacts with the White House special envoy, Richard Grenell, and its readiness to transfer deportees and hand

over some of the Americans detained in Venezuela. At the same time, also leveraging the geopolitical arguments of interested oil companies, the regime has continued to encourage the extension of licenses and blamed sanctions for the country's impoverishment and emigration.

Not only regarding Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, but especially in those cases and in the more fragile democracies, it is unavoidable to recognize the risks that the pragmatic and transactional dimension, as well as the intention to reconfigure the world order –its alliances, principles, and rules– may displace concern about the erosion or loss of the rule of law, democracy, and respect for human rights. To begin with, because that situation fuels migratory flows, facilitates transnational crime, and promotes opaque and even inscrutable agreements with autocratic and interventionist governments in the hemisphere.

Building on that cautionary note, the understandable restraint prevailing in regional reactions should gradually give way to reflections on how to conduct the necessary relations between Latin America and the United States. Reflection is also urgently needed on the impacts of the geopolitical, institutional, and economic global reconfigurations beginning to take shape, as well as on the values and purposes that Latin American democracies and democrats are willing to represent and promote among themselves and with their interlocutors in the world. A challenge that is as complex as it is indispensable.

Carlos Romero: “The fundamental priority of the U.S. government is to seek stabilization with Venezuela”

Carlos Romero, PhD in Political Science and professor at the Central University of Venezuela (UCV), highlights that the Chavista regime seeks to “establish a modus vivendi” with the new Trump government, emphasizing that beyond energy and migration concerns, “no U.S. administration has ever abandoned democracy and human rights as priorities.”

Donald Trump left and Joe Biden arrived. Now Biden has left and Trump is back. And Nicolás Maduro is still there. Despite the contrasting policies and strategies of the last two White House administrations, Venezuela’s political crisis remains unresolved. On the contrary, following the fraud on July 28, the situation has deteriorated further, continuing to pose a serious challenge for the global democratic community.

Political Scientist and professor at the Central University of Venezuela, Carlos Romero, believes that the new Trump administration may attempt to approach the Maduro regime without implying a renunciation of its democratic demands.

Romero, who in the 1990s was advisor to Venezuela's Foreign Ministry, argues that a military option is off the table for the Republican president, who, in this upside-down world, would not be interested in sparking a crisis in his own "backyard."

–Trump tried "maximum pressure" and failed. Biden attempted negotiation and also fell short. How do you assess U.S. policy toward Venezuela in recent years? Why do you think neither approach has managed to pave the way for a transition in the country?

U.S. foreign policy during the Trump administrations, his first term, and Biden's government has had similarities and differences. The similarities include maintaining the policy of sanctions and "maximum pressure". The differences, on the other hand, are shown in Biden's inclination toward a framework of negotiations. In any case, it's not that the United States has failed in supporting a transition, but rather that the internal factors in Venezuela have not become sufficiently clear to enable the move toward a return to democracy. Because all of these changes are originally forged for internal, domestic reasons, and in reality, there has been a significant gap between the United States' efforts to carry out a transition policy and the maintenance of an effective opposition strategy that could have complemented that U.S. desire.

–All around the world, there is speculation about what Trump's second term will be like. In the case of Venezuela, some believe he may arrive with a "pragmatic" vision, to the point of reaching an understanding with Maduro, while others claim

that he will increase pressure against the regime. Do you lean toward either of these?

On several occasions, I have expressed support for a negotiation process between the Trump administration and the Venezuelan government. There is still room to find some common ground, and above all, to speak frankly about what each actor wants from the other. Venezuela has often played the anti-American card, seeking alliances with so-called radical actors such as China, Iran, Turkey, Russia, and Cuba. But the truth is that what the Venezuelan government really wants is to establish a *modus vivendi* with the United States —that is its priority.

—Many expectations have been raised with the appointment of Marco Rubio as Secretary of State. What impact might Rubio have on the Trump administration's policy toward Venezuela?

Not much should be expected from the role Marco Rubio will play as Secretary of State. The Venezuela issue will be handed off to a special envoy (Richard Allen Grenell), who will focus specifically on the cases of Venezuela and North Korea. Thus, initially, Rubio won't be involved in managing day-to-day relations with Venezuela. Rubio holds a deeply ideological stance on the Venezuelan situation and will likely be an obstacle to any potential negotiations between Venezuela and the United States. Personally, I don't have much faith that Rubio will remain in that position, as his personality is likely to clash with Trump's.

Carlos Romero: "The fundamental priority of the U.S. government is to seek stabilization with Venezuela"

–U.S. interests seem focused on energy and migration. Will democracy and human rights be sidelined on the agenda?

There is no doubt that the Trump administration will prioritize energy and migration issues, but the democratic and human rights agenda remains a constant presence in U.S. foreign policy. It's not a matter of focusing exclusively, but of balancing and giving greater consideration to energy-related issues. However, no U.S. administration has ever abandoned the matter of democracy and human rights. Thus, there will be a coexistence of topics in the U.S. foreign policy agenda toward Venezuela –and vice versa.

–Maduro has shown a willingness to reach an understanding with the new Trump administration. In light of what happened on July 28 and the reaction of the democratic international community, do you believe a "normalization" of bilateral relations is possible?

It is not out of the question that the Trump administration might consider negotiating with Maduro. At this moment, given the global conflicts, I don't think the United States is seeking a military problem with Venezuela. I believe it is too early to predict the direction Trump's approach to the Venezuelan case will take. Therefore, normalization of bilateral relations is possible, which would begin with the restoration of diplomatic relations that have been severed since 2019.

–During his first term, Trump uttered his famous phrase: “All options are on the table.” Do you think that in this new term he might consider the option of military intervention?

Military intervention is a topic that cannot be set aside, but at this moment the fundamental priority of the U.S. government is to seek stabilization with Venezuela. Although many Venezuelans have expressed willingness to support a military solution, I do not see it being considered in the near future. Getting involved in a war scenario in the Latin American context carries very high costs for the United States at this time. First, because the U.S., and Trump in particular, see Latin America as a safeguard region for the U.S., what is called the “backyard.”

Therefore, the priority of the United States is to prevent the Venezuelan case from leading to the internationalization of the region. Historically speaking, twice the U.S. has faced the danger of internationalization: with the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and with the Falklands War in 1982. In each of those situations, the U.S. sought to limit the impact of the internationalization of its foreign policy toward Latin America.

Taken as a whole, the relations between the United States and Venezuela are crucial for maintaining a favorable international balance in the Western Hemisphere, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean. On the one hand, most countries favor reconciliation between the United States and Venezuela; on the other hand, the United States does not want to add more problems to its already complex international agenda, which includes issues such as the Middle East, Ukraine, and China.

Secondly, the majority of countries that are aligned with the United States do not necessarily support a military solution.

Carlos Romero: "The fundamental priority of the U.S. government is to seek stabilization with Venezuela"

Considering a military option is nothing more than the desperation of those who cannot achieve a political transition, which remains the priority in Venezuela at this time.

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Trump: *Imperium sine fine*

Rommer A. Ytriago F.

With President Donald J. Trump's return to the Oval Office, international politics finds itself stirred by winds of change —winds that demand careful scrutiny to grasp their profound implications. The contours of his foreign projection, as articulated in his January 20, 2025, inaugural address and evidenced in his early weeks in office, invite close tracking of his statesmanship: a foreign policy oriented toward “national greatness” and a geopolitical vision asserting itself on the global chessboard. Amid a resurgence of imperial ambitions fostered by today's multipolar world order, a new era appears to be dawning —the era of the *Imperium sine fine*. On one hand, this represents a drive to reassert the United States' global role through a revival of conservative ideals; on the other, it entails the strategic management of a hemisphere housing politically contentious regimes such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Relations with these actors shift fluidly among frameworks of state behavior —ally, enemy, partner, rival, or adversary— depending on the imperatives of the moment. These are the themes that unfold in the following pages.

Keywords: United States, Geopolitics, Foreign Policy, Latin America, Imperial Power, Multipolarity.

Introduction

Donald Trump returns to the White House after four years of personal and political difficulty —particularly, having been in opposition to the Democratic administration that denied him the opportunity to remain in power in 2021. Since then, not only has the United States of America undergone substantial changes, but the international system as a whole has also undergone significant transformations, reaffirming multipolarity as its structural configuration and perhaps the greatest challenge to a world long believed to be governed by rules.

To analyze Trump purely as an individual is both reductive and unproductive. While his personal attributes are relevant, the broader context in which he operates as a statesman imposes a dual imperative: to act in relation to both the state and the society he is part of. Frequently, the state's judgment exists beyond —and even above— him, guided by moral frameworks that may be morally opposed to those of individual actors.

This suggests that the challenge of governance now centers on a different mode of reasoning —one that departs from the norm-based world where “universal” rules once legitimized U.S. global leadership. The central debate today is not so much about authoritarianism versus democracy, but rather around great powers that understand their role in current affairs as that of empires.

The erosion of Western values, the decline of global preeminence, and the strategies employed by other empires —Russia and China— to penetrate Europe and Latin America by exploiting their structural weaknesses, form the foundation for undermining the pillars of the American empire, whose task

today is to formulate a new policy of expansion, coercion, control, and containment.

I. *Imperium Maius*: Trump as Statesman and Leader.

Donald Trump has returned, and with that, there is no shortage of considerations regarding this second term, as his task appears grounded in a struggle to uphold the long-standing belief that the United States is the heir to Rome –and, more than that, to ensure it does not fall. Even though the political moment from his departure in 2021 to his return was marked by a sense of exhaustion over the idea that it would not collapse, 2025 marks the beginning of a new opportunity to raise the stakes for an *Imperium sine fine*.

What has been said rests on the structural and paradigmatic changes that acknowledge the existence of a new international reality –one that is still difficult to fully accept– such as multipolarity, a condition of the international system’s structure that breaks down the rules-based order, where the organizing variable –uncontested– was multilateralism.

Hence the blows dealt to the system, the unresolved black holes that emerged during the Biden administration, such as the conflicts between Russia and Ukraine, Israel-Hamas-Palestine, the exacerbation of the Woke agenda, the steady rise of actors like China and others on regional fronts, as well as the erosion of Western values that once supported U.S. global preeminence, all reveal –perhaps– the urgency faced by the statesman to prevent the fall of the empire and to craft a new policy of expansion, coercion, and geopolitical control.

An examination through the lens of political realism holds that the above was the schism where the balance of power—in terms of the status quo— of the Western powers sustaining the system collapsed, demonstrating how the likelihood of the use of force—nuclear force—is high, while cooperation—which was never an idyllic matter— finds some sense of possibility, but not of actualization.

In this situation, the maximization of security and power is exacerbated, which is characteristic of anarchy as a systemic condition, forcing—primarily the great powers—to make substantial changes in their preferences. In other words, short-term interests are shaped by security and military concerns amid profound uncertainty about global survival. This contrasts with long-term issues such as agreements, frameworks, and multilateral organizations, which are increasingly disregarded and discredited, thereby obstructing paths to understanding under conditions of international cooperation.

According to what has been said, the Biden administration paved the way for the most important challenges, causing both insiders and outsiders of the West to reaffirm that its foreign policy was flawed. Unintentionally, it created a negative gap compared to the previous administration, and in those cases where it hoped to gain supporters, it received the harshest criticisms from public opinion, which, in a full democracy—beyond just the vote—is cause to shake the foundations of a government.

Over the past four years, the opposition to Biden moved in two streams that Trump managed to capitalize on—namely,

internal and external discontent.¹ This time, there is a bit more appreciation for Trump's personality when it comes to decision-making, which had been heavily criticized during his first term. Still, critical voices continue to compare his rhetoric to that of Hitler, Stalin, or Mussolini, arguing that his narrative draws from the well of dehumanization.

At this point, the discussion more closely resembles a problem from the history of modern political thought —one that spans from the absolute imperative of morality, sometimes expressed through abstract but universally valid principles. It is a discussion that, acknowledging its imperfections, finds in human nature the answer, where interests and conflicts erode moral arguments that can never be fully realized.

From this perspective, Donald J. Trump comes to power shielded, yet also burdened with problems that demand leadership to drive change, envision the future, make a different reality possible, and prevent Rome from falling.

1 Henry Kissinger, near the end of his life, warned: "Any society, whatever its political system, is perpetually in transit between a past that forms its memory and a vision of the future that inspires its evolution. Along this route, leadership is indispensable: decisions must be made, trust earned, promises kept, a way forward proposed. (...) Without leadership, institutions drift, and nations court growing irrelevance and, ultimately, disaster." In this sense, Trump capitalized on leadership rooted in the internal and external discontent of the Biden era. Henry Kissinger. *Leadership: Six Studies on Global Strategy*. Editorial Debate, 2023.

II. Geopolitics and Foreign Policy: Trump's *Lebensraum*.

To navigate the waters of geopolitics and current U.S. foreign policy, certain structural and historical matters must be considered. The Founding Fathers, beyond drawing inspiration from ancient Rome —not only in its institutional design but also in its political system— also emulated its worldview, shaped by territorial scope. Specifically, they were grounded in the idea of their territorial weight on the global stage, to which they added the expansion of a great economic power.

The 2025–2029 administration projects itself, both internally and externally, based on three fundamentally significant elements. The first, on the domestic front, is characterized by a revival of the religious component —specifically, the (traditional) Protestant logic. The second is that its actions are inherently guided by the maxim of Manifest Destiny. And the third corresponds to the idea of Exceptionalism— a kind of virtue that implies economic, social, and political preeminence in the world..

However, Manifest Destiny is much broader, encompassing not only its thesis of development and the belief in the virtue of its institutions and citizens, but also the mission to extend those institutions in order to remake the world in the image of the United States —alongside the providential decision of God in entrusting the nation with the fulfillment of that mission.

During the 2017–2021 period, an approach to these pillars took place; however, the political conditions Trump was subjected to led American society to interpret this as a setback in the progressive advancement of social, political, and religious rights.

But this procedural revival of ideas embraces a historical legacy of the Republican Party —from Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan, the most contemporary of Trump’s predecessors. Hence, “Make America Great Again” or “America First” is not a personal delusion, but rather a revitalization of ideas that once shaped American identity.

At this point, several questions can be raised: Will this course continue? Will the ideas behind his slogan truly materialize? If his external projection leans toward isolationism, what decisive geopolitical role can he still play? And many more questions like these.

Although Atilio Borón² declared that the era of U.S. global hegemony had ended, the reality is that the Pax Americana persists, suggesting a state that still determines its position regarding domination, primacy, and hegemony —an inheritance held by the leading power of universal leadership, currently contested by Russia and China.³

This dispute keeps the legal-juridical order aside, favoring a more pragmatic approach, one that “is aware of the meaning

2 Atilio Borón, “Toward a Post-Hegemonic Era? The End of the Pax Americana.” *Compendio Diálogo y Seguridad*. Editorial Nueva Sociedad, 1995, Issue 2.

3 Joseph Nye, an American professor, former Assistant Secretary of Defense, and a staunch critic of President Trump, argues that the feeling of decline and the dispute over U.S. leadership has always existed in the American imagination. However, he states: “Sometimes, anxiety about decline leads to protectionist policies that do more harm than good. And sometimes, periods of hubris lead to overreaching policies such as the Iraq War. There is no virtue in either understatement or overstatement of American power.” See Joseph Nye, “American Greatness and Decline” *Project Syndicate*, February 2024, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/>

of political action. It is also conscious of the inevitable tension between the moral imperative and the demands of prudent political action,” as Morgenthau⁴ would assert, where the thesis of Manifest Destiny increasingly becomes an analogy for that Latin expression *Imperium sine fine*.

In this position, empires —or more precisely, imperialisms— acknowledge that there is no ideology but rather a sense of force and conquest that must guarantee their political, economic, military, historical, and geographical preeminence, occupying what for them must be the *Lebensraum* or “Living Space,” just as Karl Haushofer spoke of at the dawn of the Second World War.

Consequently, the issue of Greenland, the renaming of the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America, Canada as a possible state of the union, the restitution of control over the Panama Canal, the impasse with Colombia regarding migrant deportations, and the meeting held in Caracas with Nicolás Maduro are all part of the Western power’s natural *Lebensraum*.

Other spaces will serve as meeting grounds for the great powers —Russia, the U.S., and China— to agree on new divisions of spheres of influence in terms of balance and harmony of interests, as in the case of peace in Ukraine. These actions are based on a rationale grounded in state logic, not individual actors, since morality in international politics is not only different, but is whatever states choose to make of it, lacking all sentiment or emotion proper to the human person.

commentary/with-trump-american-decline-becomes-self-fulfilling-prophecy-by-joseph-s-nye-2024-02/spanish

4 Hans Morgenthau in Stanley Hoffman, “Teorías Contemporáneas sobre RRII.” Tecnos, Madrid, 1963, p. 91.

III. Latin America: Friends, Enemies, Partners, Rivals, and Adversaries.

Imagining Latin America's role in Trump's return is like trying to decipher a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, as Churchill once described Russia's role in his time. Amid significant problems, not only regional but also stemming from the highly specific characteristics of each political unit, Latin America remains the most direct sphere of influence for the United States, though not necessarily its greatest challenge.

Generally swinging in a pendular motion between the Left and the Right, the region generates issues that the Trump administration must handle carefully, as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela are at the forefront of political unrest. However, the American statesman's pause in direct participation in foreign policy from 2021 to 2025 suggests that this should not be seen as a first-order priority. A definitive rupture occurred across the entire International System, and the new administration must focus its attention there.

Security, migration, and trade, countering China's influence, and maintaining a pragmatic approach are its guiding principles. In cases such as the Venezuelan opposition, this represents a challenge and/or conflict, as U.S. intervention in the political crisis will only occur insofar as its interests align, sending a clear message in the redesign of the opposition's strategy, which still places hope in such involvement.

The Trump administration is not defined by the personal opinions of government figures —like Marco Rubio. While such individuals may hold compelling views on the specific issues

facing different countries, what truly matters is the more complex reality of navigating as a nation among nations, and what the U.S. government must do in the name of national interest.⁵

The role of immigration is crucial. The internal demographic crisis implies a quasi-genetic mutation for the United States, while excessive migration speaks volumes –no one leaves their homeland because everything is fine. However, this is not a problem that falls solely on President Trump.

It is worth noting that even during his first administration, Trump did not surpass the record set by Barack Obama over his two terms in terms of deportations. Moreover, when factoring in two additional measures –“border returns” and “Title 42 repatriations” – Joe Biden stands as the president who has expelled the most people from the country, with a record of 4.6 million.

However, thinking about Latin America revolves around the lens of confronting the political left, and in some cases, the statesman will apply the “madman theory,” exacerbating situations in exchange for political transactions; in others, he will use “tit for tat” or equivalent retaliation. And when least expected, he will achieve “bandwagoning” –the support of his detractors–

5 Juan Gabriel Tokatlian recently stated in an interview with the BBC that Trump still has Mexico very much in mind in relation to the fight against drug trafficking, and Venezuela, for having failed to remove those in power. Hence: “He returns frustrated with Latin America for what he didn’t achieve in his first term (...) That mix of disinterest and fury toward Latin America, I believe, will be reflected in his initial actions.” See Ayelén Oliva, “Para Trump, América Latina es la imagen del dependiente. Y encima de todo la infantiliza”, BBC, 2025. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articles/c4g32g001n8o>

more out of fear than sympathy, leading some to become his partners, friends, rivals, adversaries, or enemies.

Conclusions

Trump perfectly understands –paradoxical as it may seem– that the multipolar world is essentially the worst scenario for the power that considers itself the ruling force of the International System, but he is also aware that it is the best for medium and small actors. The great powers continue to question the legitimacy of borders, and issues such as the loss of democracy in the periphery are relegated to secondary matters. It must be emphasized that this is not a product of the statesman's imagination, but of the reality he faces.

According to these considerations, there is no doubt that the period 2025–2029 will present countless situations whose positive or negative consequences can be assessed in the next presidential elections, because having won the 2024 contest not only in the number of voters but also in the electoral colleges, the connection with society and its problems is what elevates emperors or destroys them.

The Trump era has an expiration date, but the empire must remain standing, neither a day more nor a day less. Eventually, another emperor will lead the republic that, for Trump, remains an *Imperium sine fine*, boundless in its pursuit of greatness.

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