

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

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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.