

# 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"<sup>1</sup> 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

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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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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

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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,<sup>4</sup> the purchase of Groenlandia,<sup>5</sup> suggesting changing the name of the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America<sup>6</sup> and threatening historic partners with tariffs when they do not accept the requests of the United

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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 Minh 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 suspensions<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> Canada, a country currently engaged in a trade war with the United States, is experiencing a resurgence of national

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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 Glatsky, "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

sentiment<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

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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.