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[Analysis](#)

Trump's Bad Neighbor Policy

Treating regional countries as vassal states will push them into China's arms.

By [William M. LeoGrande](#), a professor of government at American University and nonresident fellow at the Quincy Institute, and [Peter Kornbluh](#), the director of the Cuba Documentation Project at George Washington University's National Security Archive and a co-author of *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*.



A modified red MAGA hat with "Venezuela" in masking tape over "America."

A protester wears a modified "Make America Great Again" hat with "Venezuela" taped over the original text during a demonstration in Barcelona, Spain, on Jan. 4. Manaure Quintero/AFP via Getty Images

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“Welcome to 2026,” U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth declared on Saturday during the Mar-a-Lago press conference celebrating the U.S. military attack on Venezuela. “Under President Trump, America is back.” Back, that is, to the early 1900s era of gunboat and dollar diplomacy when the United States aspired to imperial hegemony over Latin America, engendering enmities that have never entirely dissipated.

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For Donald Trump, who envisions a world divided into spheres of influence, U.S. domination in the region is a goal unto itself. “America’s dominance in the Western Hemisphere will never be questioned again,” he told reporters just hours after the predawn raid involving aerial attacks on multiple Venezuelan airports and the forcible rendition of President Nicolás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores. Asked what would be next for Venezuela, Trump answered, “We’re going to be running it.” So much for his promise of no more nation-building.

The U.S. bombing of Caracas, the abduction of Maduro, and Trump’s plan to take over Venezuela’s oil industry have dealt a profound blow to the inter-American system first envisioned by President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor Policy and codified in the 1950s by the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance and the Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS).

Although Maduro has few friends in Latin America, the leaders of most major countries have condemned the U.S. attack. While regional leaders can do little to push back in the short term, the history of U.S. intervention in Latin America suggests that the diplomatic damage done to Washington’s standing in the hemisphere could prove to be more costly than Trump and his foreign-policy team imagine, even if they get their way in Caracas, which is by no means certain.

Trump is notorious for blowing up the norms and institutions that have shaped the international order since the end of World War II. From NATO and the United Nations to the World Bank and World Trade Organization, “America First” has meant a U.S. foreign policy reliant on hard power and [skeptical](#) of multilateral engagements and commitments.

In the first few weeks of his second administration, Trump previewed how that attitude would apply in the Western Hemisphere. He demanded that Panama City [give back](#) the Panama Canal and Canada [surrender](#) its sovereignty to become the 51st U.S. state. Late last month, he repeated his [demand](#) that Denmark turn over Greenland or face possible [U.S. military action](#) to take it.

Venezuela has been the focus of Trump’s unilateral aggressiveness since last September, when the U.S. military began blowing up alleged drug smugglers’ boats in the Caribbean, and Trump has accused Maduro of being a narcoterrorist kingpin of the so-called Cartel de los Soles.

But Trump's obsession with Venezuela, [egged on](#) by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, has never been about drugs. Venezuela does not produce cocaine (let alone fentanyl). It is a secondary transit point for Colombian cocaine, mostly destined for Europe. The cocaine slated for the U.S. market travels north from Colombia and Ecuador by way of the Pacific Ocean or overland through Mexico. Moreover, if punishing drug traffickers were Trump's main objective, he would not have [pardoned](#) former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, who was convicted of facilitating the trafficking of more than 400 tons of cocaine to the United States.

Trump's deployment of a massive naval flotilla in the Caribbean naturally evoked memories of gunboat diplomacy, when the United States routinely sent naval forces to the region as an instrument of coercive diplomacy or a prelude to intervention. A hundred years ago, gunboat diplomacy was closely associated with President Theodore Roosevelt and rationalized by the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, in which Washington claimed the right to intervene in Latin American countries to maintain stability.

Two dozen U.S. interventions and half a dozen long-term occupations over the next two decades built enormous resentment among Latin Americans—so much so that many of them remained neutral during World War I and Germany thought it might [convince Mexico](#) to declare war on the United States.

As the clouds of war gathered again in Europe during the 1930s, FDR adopted the Good Neighbor Policy, forswearing military intervention in hopes of repairing relations and ensuring that Latin America would be firmly on the Allied side when war came to the Western Hemisphere. He succeeded, laying the foundation of the postwar inter-American system.

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- A person wearing a large Trump mask holds a gun in one hand and an oil container in the other. To be sure, the United States never fully abandoned the imperial temptation to dominate the Western Hemisphere, especially during the Cold War, when the threat of communism—especially after the Cuban Revolution—led to interventions, both covert and overt, in Guatemala, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Grenada, and Nicaragua, to name just the most prominent.

By issuing his own Trump Corollary, followed by intervening in Venezuela, the president has announced the U.S. equivalent of the [Brezhnev Doctrine](#) for the Latin America: Countries in the U.S. sphere of influence will have only limited sovereignty. Trump's [National Security Strategy](#) unveiled last month is explicit, declaring, "The United States must be preeminent in the Western Hemisphere."

Latin Americans should now understand that for the next three years at least, they are living in a Hobbesian state of nature in which the restraint of international law no longer applies. Trump has even less regard for international law than he does for domestic ones. The [OAS Charter](#), the foundational document of inter-American cooperation, solemnly declares, "No State or group of States has the right to intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever, in the internal or external affairs of any other State"; "No State may use or encourage the use of coercive measures of an economic or political character in order to force the sovereign will of another State and obtain from it advantages of any kind"; and "The territory of a State is inviolable; it may not be the

object, even temporarily, of military occupation or of other measures of force taken by another State, directly or indirectly, on any grounds whatever.” For all intents and purposes, the charter is now a dead letter.

The initial reactions from Latin America parallel the range of domestic one to Trump’s flouting of U.S. laws. Ideologically sympathetic leaders offered effuse praise to curry favor. Argentine President Javier Milei, who received a \$20 billion bailout from Trump, endorsed Maduro’s ouster, declaring, “Long live freedom, damn it.” But key countries have condemned U.S. intervention in no uncertain terms. The United States “has crossed an unacceptable line,” Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva immediately warned. In Colombia, President Gustavo Petro denounced Washington’s military operations as an “assault on the sovereignty of the region.” In Chile, outgoing President Gabriel Boric declared that the Trump administration’s action “constitutes a grave violation of the principle of territorial integrity and puts at risk the security, sovereignty, and the stability of the countries in the region.” In a statement, Mexico’s foreign ministry noted that “Latin America and the Caribbean is a zone of peace, built on the basis of mutual respect, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and the prohibition of the use and threat of force, so any military action seriously jeopardizes regional stability.”

In the near term, Latin Americans can do little to rein in Trump’s aggression. In the past year, he has threatened to launch military strikes in Mexico and Colombia, reoccupy the Panama Canal, and has imposed new economic sanctions against Nicaragua and Cuba. The strong do what they will; the weak suffer what they must.

In the longer term, however, Latin Americans have options, just as they did during the first era of gunboat diplomacy. They can make themselves less vulnerable to U.S. economic sanctions by reorienting their international economic ties toward more reliable partners in Europe and Asia. They can seek new strategic allies among other major powers to balance U.S. diplomatic pressure and, to a lesser degree, the U.S. military threat. They can resist passively by simply reducing their cooperation on problems that Washington cannot solve by itself—including Trump’s priorities, migration and narcotics trafficking.

A shift in Latin America’s orientation away from the United States has been gradually underway for some time, with China playing a lead role. Over the past decade, U.S. Southern Command’s annual [posture statement](#) has identified China as a strategic competitor and growing threat to U.S. hemispheric interests. The most recent version, released last year, warns, “The United States and China are locked in a fierce strategic competition.”

FDR’s Good Neighbor Policy aimed to build alliances in Latin America to meet the gathering storm in Europe. Trump seems to believe that the United States needs no allies in the region, only vassals. In just a year, the United States has become the quintessential Bad Neighbor. Treating Latin America as a suzerainty will only accelerate its shift toward China, diminishing U.S. regional influence. If anyone in the world is secretly applauding Trump’s intervention in Venezuela, it is Chinese President Xi Jinping.

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