

Monroe Reinterpreted: Trump 2.0's Contemporary Approach to Latin America

Written by Hazal Melike Çoban

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HAZAL MELIKE ÇOBAN, APR 8 2025

Trump 2.0 has initiated a new phase in U.S.-Latin America relations, marked by both continuity and change in economic, security, and diplomatic policies. This approach shows a strategic adjustment of regional priorities, including sanctions on Venezuela, engagement with Argentina, and altering trade negotiations with Mexico and Colombia. While some Latin American leaders align with Trump's policies, others experience tensions, especially regarding migration and trade disputes. The stakes are significant: Latin America is vital for the U.S. economy, a key geopolitical arena amid rising Chinese influence, and a source of immigration issues. For Latin American countries, U.S. policies influence their market access, investment prospects, and regional stability. As the administration strengthens its role in the region, understanding these shifting dynamics is crucial for grasping the future of inter-American relations and their global effects.

As frequently emphasized during Donald Trump's first term, his return to the presidency is expected to signal the resurgence of the Monroe Doctrine for Latin America. Outlined initially in 1823 by then-U.S. President James Monroe, this doctrine asserts that the United States rejects any intervention by external powers—mainly European countries—in the affairs of the Americas. Trump's 2018 statement that the Monroe Doctrine remains a key priority of U.S. foreign policy indicated that this policy framework would shape the country's economic, diplomatic, and security strategies in the region. Furthermore, Republican senators have reinforced this approach by legitimizing the doctrine and supporting efforts to curb foreign influence in the hemisphere.

A defining factor in U.S.-Latin America relations under Trump 2.0 will be China. Having initiated trade wars against China in 2017, Trump is expected to invoke the Monroe Doctrine again to counter Beijing's growing influence in Latin America. Since the early 2000s, China's economic presence in the region has expanded significantly, bringing with it increasing political and diplomatic leverage. Chinese government embraced a 'going out strategy' that encouraged Chinese companies to go abroad to search for raw materials needed for its industrial development. Latin America was a significant region for new Chinese development strategy. The region is rich of various raw materials. Also, imported agricultural products from Latin America helped Chinese government feed its huge population. Thus, Chinese companies started investing in the region first for extraction projects, then for infrastructure projects to guarantee transportation of raw materials to the country. This shift has offered Latin American countries an alternative to U.S. dominance. The erosion of U.S. influence in its so-called 'backyard' and the increasing autonomy of Latin American nations—particularly during the commodity boom between 2000-2013—are viewed by Trump's administration, which favors isolationist policies, as challenges that must be reversed.

Failing to generate sufficient consent mechanisms to encourage regional actors to align with the U.S., the Trump administration is expected to resort to coercion and pressure tactics against countries engaged in trade and diplomatic relations with China. For instance, the U.S. has issued warnings regarding China's potential military use of the Panama Canal, framing its actions as efforts to safeguard American interests in the region. Trump's desire to reclaim control over the Panama Canal may be part of a broader strategy to counter China or a new manifestation of U.S. expansionism. In response to U.S. pressure, Panama's government appears to be distancing itself from China while increasing cooperation with American companies. However, should the U.S. retake canal control, it could provoke a geopolitical crisis and further damage its reputation in Latin America.

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Another key factor shaping U.S.-Latin America relations in the coming period will be the economic, political, and diplomatic dynamics within North America. Although Trump replaced NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) with the USMCA (United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement) during his first term, his renewed push for high tariffs on Mexico and Canada at the start of his second term threatens the stability of trade relations in the region. Trump's tendency to frame Latin America as a source of irregular migration and organized crime raises concerns among regional leaders about the implications of such rhetoric. Despite extensive border militarization, family separations, and mass deportations, these measures have failed to curb migration flows. The Trump administration's proposal to designate Mexican drug cartels as terrorist organizations also raises critical questions about the potential consequences of military interventions—whether they will destabilize local and national contexts or escalate violence in U.S. cities. Studies explain that the war on drugs didn't decrease cocaine production and increased the decentralization of smuggling routes rather than eliminating the trade.

Trump's tariff policies, coupled with his anti-immigration stance and disproportionate drug control measures, could jeopardize U.S.-Mexico cooperation on migration policy and push Mexico to seek alternatives to its most important partner. According to Article 32.10 of the USMCA, if one of the signatory countries enters a free trade agreement with a non-market economy, the other parties have the right to terminate the agreement. This provision significantly constrains Mexico's ability to expand trade relations with China. Although Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum has taken steps to address migration-related concerns, the Trump administration is unlikely to alter its position on tariffs, as trade with Latin American countries is perceived in the U.S. as a direct threat to domestic employment. Additionally, Washington's confrontational stance toward Mexico has prompted ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) countries like Venezuela and Cuba to express solidarity with Mexico. These ideological divergences suggest that Latin America's geopolitical landscape could become increasingly polarized under Trump's leadership.

Another key issue will be the ongoing crisis in Venezuela and the Trump administration's approach toward Nicolás Maduro's regime. The political and socio-economic crisis has been raised concerns about hyperinflation, democratic backsliding, and humanitarian crisis resulted with Venezuelan migrant and refugee crisis in the region. During his first term, Trump secured the support of right-wing governments, particularly Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil, in pursuing a U.S.-led resolution to the crisis. This strategy further isolated Venezuela in the region and even pushed regional organizations like UNASUR (Union of South American Nations) to the brink of disintegration. Although sanctions on the Maduro government may decrease in Trump's second term, key political figures in his administration—such as Secretary of State Marco Rubio—view military intervention in Venezuela as a viable option. Venezuelan migration remains a pressing issue in Latin America, particularly for Colombia, Peru, and Brazil. However, South American leaders take a critical stance toward potential U.S. military intervention against Maduro. Additionally, Cuba, which faced tensions with Trump's administration after he repealed Obama-era agreements, continues to support Venezuela. On a broader geopolitical scale, external actors like Iran and China have voiced strong opposition to potential U.S. intervention in Venezuela, creating further challenges for the Trump administration.

South American nations, particularly Brazil and Argentina, are expected to be cautious regarding U.S. tariffs on key exports such as steel and agricultural products. Brazil's growing role in BRICS and its deepening economic ties with China could be perceived as a strategic threat by the Trump administration. For instance, BRICS's decision to expand economic transactions in yuan as an alternative to the U.S. dollar has prompted Trump to issue threats against member states. Moreover, ideological divergences between Lula and Trump could strain bilateral relations despite Brazil's emphasis on cooperation. Trump's protectionist measures may negatively impact Brazil's agricultural and energy sectors. Given that Brazilian exports to the U.S. reached record levels in 2024, any deterioration in relations could have significant economic repercussions, potentially influencing the 2026 Brazilian elections.

On the contrary, Javier Milei, the President of Argentina, has cultivated a notably close relationship with Trump, grounded in shared ideological perspectives and mutual admiration. However, potential limitations exist in this burgeoning partnership. Milei's proposal to exit Mercosur (Southern Common Market) has sparked regional tensions, as the bloc's regulations prohibit unilateral trade agreements without collective consent. Additionally, Milei's confrontational stance toward China, labeling it an "assassin" and expressing intent to freeze relations, could pose challenges. China is a significant trading partner for Argentina, and such a drastic shift in foreign policy might have

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economic repercussions. In summary, while the ideological alignment between Milei and Trump lays a foundation for potential cooperation, domestic and international practical challenges may constrain their collaboration's depth and effectiveness.

Ultimately, the influence of the Monroe Doctrine on Trump's Latin America policy may manifest in efforts to reinforce U.S. dominance in the region, curb the impact of China and other external powers, and safeguard U.S. security interests. However, this approach's regional repercussions and potential consequences must be carefully assessed. The Trump administration will undoubtedly need to formulate a strategy to counter China's growing presence in Latin America. Rather than relying solely on threats and sanctions, this strategy should focus on fostering competition through diversified investments and infrastructure projects. Encouraging U.S. companies to shift production to Latin America to strengthen regional supply chains also remains a viable option. However, it remains uncertain whether the U.S. will provide substantial investment or infrastructure assistance to the region.

Meanwhile, China has already braced itself against the Trump administration, with Beijing signaling its preparedness for a potential economic confrontation. At the same time, ideological divisions and differing priorities continue to undermine Latin America's capacity to respond collectively to common challenges. Trump's preference for bilateral agreements over multilateralism threatens to weaken regional unity on critical issues such as climate change, inequality, poverty, and organized crime. In this context, a key development to watch will be how Lula da Silva's government positions itself as a regional power in response to Trump's interventionist policies. The extent to which Brazil possesses the structural resources to promote regional cooperation and how it balances the U.S.-China power struggle in favor of Latin America's interests will also be crucial in shaping the region's trajectory in the coming years.

About the author:

Dr. Hazal Melike Çoban is an Assistant Professor in the International Relations Department at Ankara University. She earned her PhD from the University of Lisbon with a dissertation titled "Brazilian Autonomy in South America Under the Changing Global Order." Her research interests are emerging powers-great powers relations, Brazilian foreign policy, and Latin American politics.