

From Monroe to Donroe

The Trump Administration's Latin America Strategy



Photo: © Agencia EFE, Imago.

In a Nutshell

With "Shield of the Americas", the Trump administration launched an initiative that focuses on cooperation with like-minded Latin American governments and deliberately bypasses multilateral forums. The military fight against drug cartels is at the centre of the initiative. The United States is offering training and support for the armed forces of selected partner countries and is promoting military means as the central instrument in combating drug trafficking and migration.

The National Security Strategy 2025 prioritises the Western Hemisphere and, through the "Trump Corollary", sets out a power-political reworking of the Monroe Doctrine, including an increased military presence and the use of trade diplomacy.

Friendly countries are to be integrated and rewarded, while other countries are to be discouraged from cooperating closely with China, particularly with regard to accessing strategic infrastructure and security-related facilities.

The policy is being driven by Donald Trump's foreign policy team, which has extensive experience of Latin America; Marco Rubio plays a key role.

Criticism focuses on the overemphasis on military solutions, the neglect of structural problems, and the risk of growing anti-American sentiment in a region that has thus far remained comparatively peaceful.



Dr Hardy Ostry is is Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's office in Washington, D.C.

Shield of the like-minded

What the National Security Strategy describes was put into practice in March 2026 at Donald Trump's golf resort in Doral, Florida: namely the new "Shield of the Americas" security initiative, which is a core component of the Trump administration's new Latin America policy. Representatives from 17 countries attended the inaugural meeting – predominantly conservative heads of state and government from Latin American countries who are ideologically aligned with Trump. It was the first multilateral meeting with representatives from the region, which – according to the National Security Strategy – plays a central role in the defence of the United States. Established platforms such as the Organization of American States and the Summit of the Americas were not involved. Although the United States and the countries of Latin America are also closely linked by intensive trade relations, particularly between the United States and Mexico, another no-less-significant issue dominated the meeting in Florida.

The initiative centres on the fight against drug cartels. To that end, a declaration establishing an "Americas Counter Cartel Coalition" was signed at the meeting in Florida that commits the 17 countries to using "hard power against this threat to security and civilisation".¹ In order to support this effort, the United States is offering training and capacity-building for the armed forces of partner countries. According to President Trump, only the use of the military can help in the fight against drug smuggling. Many of the politicians who were present shared the view that the problem can only be solved through tough measures.

Participants included Presidents Javier Milei of Argentina, Nayib Bukele of El Salvador, and

Daniel Noboa of Ecuador, who have opted to cooperate closely with Trump. Shortly before the parliamentary midterm elections in October 2025, the United States supported Milei with a multibillion-dollar aid package in the form of a currency stabilisation purchase. In addition, Treasury Secretary Bessent signalled a willingness to purchase an Argentine government fund worth a further 20 billion US dollars, although the fund was aimed at private investors.²

Bukele launched a "war on gangs" and declared his willingness to accept deported refugees from the United States, which earned him the goodwill of the US President. Trump, Milei, Bukele, and Noboa used similar tactics in their election victories by representing an anti-elitist populism, focussing on internal security – placing it above institutions and civil rights where necessary – and using social media to communicate directly with their supporters. New to the group was Nasry Asfura, the recently elected president of Honduras. He narrowly secured victory after Trump had explicitly endorsed his candidacy. Noboa had also showcased his closeness to Trump when seeking reelection in Ecuador, although it is difficult to verify whether this was the sole factor contributing to his success. However, observers view this strategy as being at least one among various reasons.³

For Trump, the "Shield of the Americas" is a coalition of the willing that supports his approach to curbing migration and drug smuggling. It remains questionable whether this initiative also seeks to address underlying problems such as weak institutions, corruption, or deficiencies in the rule of law. One key weakness is that major Latin American countries such as Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia have not been involved.

The National Security Strategy

The latest US National Security Strategy was published in November 2025.⁴ It summarises the president's "America First" strategy and applies it to the various regions of the world. One of its core concerns is full control over the United States' borders and immigration.

The new security strategy prioritises the Western Hemisphere in addition to defining migration, cartels, and Chinese influence as threats.

The president's strategy did not remain without consequences within the United States for those who had helped put him in office in 2024. At least 46 per cent of Latinos living in the United States voted for Trump. While many had initially supported both stronger border controls and enhanced border security, approval ratings among this voter group had declined dramatically by summer 2025, particularly against the backdrop of raids and checks by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which have been widely perceived as overly aggressive. This has had drastic consequences, with more than half (52 per cent) of Latinos living in the United States reportedly fearing deportation, regardless of their actual immigration status. It is therefore hardly surprising that Trump has lost considerable ground among this voter group, which the Democrats in turn are seeking to regain through an even more forceful condemnation of Trump's migration policy.⁵

Under the heading "What Do We Want From the World?" the Western Hemisphere ranks first. The idea is that the region is to be stable and so well governed that mass migration to the United States from within this region would no longer be possible. The respective governments are expected to cooperate with the United States

against "narco-terrorists",⁶ cartels, and internationally operating criminal organisations. Hostile actors are to be kept out of the hemisphere, and supply chains maintained. Moreover, the United States is to retain or gain access to strategic locations in the region.

From the administration's perspective, this is a continuation of the Monroe Doctrine – the so-called "Trump Corollary". It is described as a "common-sense and potent restoration" of American power and priorities, with the aim being to control migration, to stop drug trafficking, and to ensure stability in the Western Hemisphere. To that end, countries are divided into two groups corresponding to one maxim each: "enlist" and "expand".

Under the heading "enlist", the aim is to involve friendly countries, to reward them, and to encourage them when they align themselves with US objectives. The "Shield of the Americas" is built around this group. Under the heading "expand", the administration seeks to engage additional countries in the region. These countries are expected to recognise that the United States is the partner of choice and – accordingly – to cooperate less with other actors. This maxim is clearly directed against China, whose influence in the region has increased significantly in recent years. The influence of such "other actors" is to be minimised, especially where the control of military facilities, ports, and infrastructure is concerned – that is, regarding "strategic assets, broadly defined".

At the centre of the "Trump Corollary" lies the military presence of the United States, which is to be strengthened in the Western Hemisphere at the expense of other world regions whose significance for national security is considered to have declined. The Coast Guard and Navy are to control shipping routes, particularly in relation to illegal migration and drug smuggling. Furthermore, the military is also to be deployed against drug cartels.

Another focus of the strategy is trade diplomacy: Tariffs and trade agreements are considered



Sanctions as a test of resilience: The protests outside the Cuban Embassy in Washington in April 2026 express resistance by parts of civil society to Trump’s intensified energy blockade. Whilst political pressure on the Cuban government is mounting, it is the civilian population that is bearing the brunt of the resulting supply crisis.

Photo: © Matrix Images, Imago.

necessary in order to strengthen the domestic economy. The region is to be further expanded as a market for American companies. This would require US diplomats to clearly communicate the attractiveness of American goods, services, and technologies compared with those of other countries.

After only a few months, it is already apparent that the Trump administration’s actual conduct does not always follow the strategy. For example, it states that the administration seeks a “flexible realism” aimed at good relations with other countries without imposing democratic or social change on them. The administration claims to stand for sovereignty and to encourage other countries to defend their own interests – a departure from the concept of “nation building”,

which played an important role in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and is rejected by Trump’s MAGA movement. This rejection becomes less consistent when direct US interests are involved, however: Indeed, President Trump has already intervened in several elections in Latin America – through either endorsements, monetary gifts,⁷ or threats.

Trump’s “Donroe Doctrine” shifts the logic of Monroe towards political domination and influence in Latin America.

Turning point or continuation?

Ever since the 19th century, the United States has sought to define its relationship with its southern neighbours – its “backyard”. In so doing, the nation has always oscillated between asserting its own power and promoting good neighbourly relations. The new National Security Strategy clearly shifts back into “power” mode, driven by obviously domestic political motives: namely migration, drug trafficking, and markets for American products. Added to this is the determination to push back Chinese influence, which has increased enormously in recent years, particularly in terms of trade policy. A 2025 study by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung’s office in Washington, D.C., analyses just how deeply rooted China already is in the region,⁸ with the nation pursuing not only trade relations, but also

cultural, political, and diplomatic influence while additionally becoming engaged in security policy – all areas that have traditionally belonged to the American sphere of influence.

As already stated, the strategy takes the Monroe Doctrine as its historical frame of reference, further developed by President Trump himself into the “Donroe Doctrine” and officially termed the “Trump Corollary” in the National Security Strategy. President James Monroe proclaimed his doctrine in 1823 with the aim of keeping European colonial powers out of the Western Hemisphere and separating the spheres of influence of the United States and Europe. The doctrine was significantly expanded in 1904 by President Theodore Roosevelt, who added the “Roosevelt Corollary”, under which the United States claimed the right to intervene in the internal affairs of Latin American



Side by side with Milei: Donald Trump is backing the president and has saved Argentina from a severe currency crisis with a twenty-billion-dollar deal. Photo: © UPI Photo, Imago.

states whenever this was deemed necessary for the stability of the region. This corollary serves as the actual model for the “Trump Corollary”.

The United States has repeatedly intervened in the region, temporarily occupying the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Haiti; helping Panama gain independence from Colombia; and taking possession of the Canal Zone. Military interventions have occurred regularly, including in Grenada and Panama in the 1980s. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was an exception when he proclaimed the Good Neighbour Policy in 1933, which opposed intervention and military occupations.

When the new National Security Strategy speaks of the “neglect” of the region, this most likely refers to the years since 2000. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama also had plans and strategies for Latin America, but the attacks of 11 September 2001 and their consequences shifted foreign policy attention elsewhere, as did the economic rise of Asia. At the beginning of this year, the war against Iran showed that even the Trump administration is not immune to redirecting its focus back to other regions of the world.

Critics object to the focus on military solutions to problems that are better addressed through social policy or policing.

In particular, the United States’ prolonged engagement in the Middle East has led to growing war fatigue among Americans. Trump has responded by promising to refocus on “America First”. Latin America is an important foreign policy component in this regard because the region is closely linked to two domestic problems in the United States: drug smuggling, which fuels the American drug epidemic, and illegal migration, which Trump and his MAGA movement view as a major threat to American prosperity.

The drug problem in the United States is among the country’s most bitter and deadly developments: According to statistical data, as many as 107,000 people died in the US in 2023 as a result of drug use. The US–Mexico border in particular is regarded as a preferred transit point for fentanyl, the cheaper and highly potent opioid that is 50 times more deadly than heroin,⁹ with the 3,000-kilometre border between the United States and Mexico serving as a transit hub for drug cartels – against which Trump declared war. The renewed focus on the Western Hemisphere appeals to several factions within the Trump coalition: namely immigration opponents, represented by influential Trump adviser Stephen Miller; supporters of a masculine, combative military, represented by Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth¹⁰; and advocates of a dominance-oriented foreign policy, represented by Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Trump is better able to fulfil his “America First” promise here than in other regions of the world. Steve Bannon – ideologue of the MAGA movement – remarked that this was easier to sell to the base than “that stuff in the Middle East”.¹¹

The question remains as to whether this new strategy for Latin America can sustainably improve US relations with its neighbours. Critics particularly object to the focus on military solutions to problems that are better addressed through social policy or policing. Rosemary Kelanic of the think tank Defense Priorities writes that the newly found interest in Latin America is “unnecessary, counterproductive, and could unleash Middle East-like chaos in [...] [the US’s] backyard”.¹² From a military perspective, says Kelanic, the region is exceptionally peaceful, with very few interstate armed conflicts, and an increased US military engagement could jeopardise this stability. She notes that the use of the military against drug smugglers is considered similarly problematic to the military’s role in the global war on terror, which tied the United States to conflicts to which no military solution existed. The question posed by Kelanic and other defence experts is thus why additional attention and resources should be devoted to a region that the United States already dominates.

Indiscriminate action against “other actors” – meaning China – could also have the opposite effect. Latin American states depend on foreign investment, and it would be a dangerous game to force countries to choose between the United States and China, warns Monica de Bolle of the Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE).¹³ Chinese influence on investment in infrastructure and markets is already substantial; therefore, attempts to push China out of the region could ultimately endanger the region’s political and economic stability. At the same time, however, the European Union is also increasingly focusing on the continent and presenting itself as an alternative, which is to some extent intensified and driven by US trade policy. The conclusion of the EU–Mercosur agreement is creating one of the world’s largest free trade areas, which in the medium to long term could also lead to shifts in trade policy and could also possibly reduce some countries’ dependence on China. This gives the EU the opportunity to establish itself in this position as a credible and – in some respects – complementary trade and economic partner.

Individual personalities shape policy

In examining the foreign policy team Trump has assembled during his second term in office, one striking feature is its extensive Latin America expertise. Marco Rubio is the first Latino Secretary of State in US history. His deputy – Christopher Landau – previously served as ambassador to Mexico, while UN Ambassador Mike Waltz dealt extensively with the region during his time in Congress. Ryan Berg – director of the CSIS Americas Program – speaks of the “first Latin America-focused administration in at least a century”.¹⁴

At the centre stands Marco Rubio, who is not only Secretary of State, but also acting National Security Adviser. Formally, his concentration of power is comparable with that of Henry Kissinger, albeit with the limitation that Trump likes to rely on negotiators from outside the government apparatus, especially Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner. However, without placing himself excessively in the spotlight or inflaming public debate with

provocative statements, Rubio is involved in all major foreign policy decisions of the Trump administration while leaving the provocations to the president or to Vice President Vance. Rubio thus behaves “both ruthlessly and chameleon-like”.¹⁵

During his years as a senator, Rubio cultivated the image of a foreign policy hawk. He is now implementing a foreign policy that incorporates many of his personal objectives while differing from the neoconservative era of George W. Bush. The goal is no longer to overthrow autocratic regimes in order to secure the triumph of democracy; rather, what matters now is power and influence – “regime compliance rather than regime change, a doctrine of destroy and deal”.¹⁶ The aim is to bridge the gap between Trump’s promise not to lead the United States into endless wars on the one hand and the attempt to enforce American interests worldwide on the other hand.

For Rubio, relations with Latin America are at the centre of his political engagement. There are personal reasons for this – for example, his parents came from Cuba – as well as electoral considerations: Indeed, conservative Latinos formed a core part of his electorate when he represented Florida in the Senate.

These ties gave Rubio influence over foreign policy during Trump’s first term in office, when Rubio was still a senator: Trump knew he needed the votes of conservative Latinos in Florida in order to secure his re-election. Rubio’s influence extended so far that even then, he was referred to as the “Secretary of State for Latin America”.¹⁷ His core interest then – as now – was a hard-line policy towards the socialist dictatorships in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba. Critics argued at the time that this influence had distorted the strategy and led to an “obsession” with these three dictatorships, thereby causing the rest of the region to be increasingly ignored.¹⁸

Rubio commented on the situation in Venezuela as early as in 2019, advocating that President Maduro be removed from office. Change in Venezuela would weaken Cuba’s political

