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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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09.03.2025

## **Washington's new foreign policy is aggressive, with far-reaching consequences for Latin America. A conversation with Leandro Morgenfeld**



**Leandro Morgenfeld** is a historian specializing in economic history, teaches at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) and conducts research at the National Council for Scientific and Technological Research (Conicet). In 2023 he published the book "Nuestra América frente a la doctrina Monroe: 200 años de disputa"

**Donald Trump has been President of the United States for a second time for just over a month. In terms of foreign policy in particular, his government has been sending out clear signals from day one: on the one hand, it acts with openly displayed aggressiveness and threats, while on the other hand it stresses its desire to withdraw from conflicts such as the war in Ukraine. How does this fit together?**

Trump represents the strategy of a section of the ruling class in the USA, which we could call US-Americanist-nationalist. In contrast to a globalist strategy that has been prevalent in recent years. Trump is based on the fact that the USA will not easily regain the global hegemony that it exercised at the beginning of the post-Cold War era. While in some regions

of the world he is prepared to negotiate with other powers over their respective spheres of influence, he is concentrating his sole claim to power on Latin America with his expansionist-aggressive course.

He wants to end the war in Ukraine through negotiations with Russia, as it cannot be won. The aim is to be able to concentrate on two major tasks. Firstly, the confrontation with China, the strategic enemy of the entire ruling class of the USA. To this end, it is crucial to prevent the alliance between Moscow and Beijing and the other BRICS states from deepening further. The second region that Trump wants to concentrate on is the Middle East. There have been a number of developments there recently that run counter to US interests. Trump's foreign policy offensive is an attempt to portray the USA as stronger than it actually is; an attempt to reverse the loss of power, just with a different strategy than the administrations before him.

**You said Trump was claiming Latin America as the United States's own sphere of influence . That sounds like a revival of the Monroe Doctrine.**

Yes, Trump wants to return to the Monroe Doctrine, i.e. to the claim of "America for the Americans." This was already evident in the first weeks of his administration in a number of initiatives: the idea of buying Greenland to prevent China and Russia from advancing further into the North Pole region and thus a strategic region; the rather symbolic renaming of the Gulf of Mexico to "Gulf of America"; or the even more aggressive US course towards Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua - countries that Secretary of State Marco Rubio described as "enemies of humanity" on February 4.

The USA is remilitarizing the entire region and increasing the pressure on it. They want to prevent themselves from falling further behind in their own backyard, because that would lead to a loss of global power. It is well known that China is either the most important or second most important trading partner for almost all countries in our region. The USA wants to slow down this process of diversification of economic and international relations, de-dollarization, etc. And of course the region is attractive because it has enormous wealth and, with its 650 million inhabitants, is an important sales market.

**Now, Marco Rubio is the first man with a Latin American family history to be the US Secretary of State. Does this have any particular consequences for the region?**

Rubio is without question a neoconservative hawk, a fan of the Monroe Doctrine and a sworn enemy of the Cuban Revolution and Venezuela. The fact that he was appointed Secretary of State shows that the USA will not tolerate any government in the region that does not submit to them. Washington still has enormous influence in Latin America - more than 70 military bases alone speak volumes. This situation must be maintained.

**Rubio's first foreign trip as Secretary of State took him to Central America, and the first country he visited was Panama. Even before Trump took office, he had threatened to regain control of the Panama Canal - by military means if necessary. Should such statements and threats be taken seriously or can they be dismissed as Trumpian bluster?**

Since last July, Panama has been governed by José Raúl Mulino, a right-wing president and close ally of the USA. This actual partner has had to endure tirades from Trump. He claimed that the USA was being ripped off on the fees for passage through the canal, that China controlled the waterway and that it was generally a mistake to have returned the canal in 1999 - after more than 85 years of fighting for Panama's sovereignty.

The US intervention in Panama in 1989, which claimed hundreds of victims, must not be forgotten. This wound is still open in Panama and throughout Latin America; it was one of the last open military interventions by the US in the region. Trump's threats must therefore be taken seriously. Trump bangs the table to force concessions in trade or economic policy. In Panama, this worked. The government has announced its withdrawal from China's "New Silk Road" project. The Latin America policy of the second Trump administration means stick instead of carrot.

**The course you describe also fits with the fact that the US government wants to dismantle the development agency USAID, which has proven to be quite useful for US imperialism in the past through the exercise of so-called soft power. Isn't Trump shooting himself in the foot by doing this ?**

Yes, the US government is giving up part of its soft power. The move is based on demands from the heads of major tech companies in particular to trim the state apparatus - especially in the social sector. The huge mountain of debt is to be reduced, as is the budget deficit. The move can also be seen as part of the ultra-right global agenda. Many projects funded by USAID criticize developments in the USA, and from the perspective of Trump and his associates, are part of cultural Marxism, the woke, etc. Ultimately, the closure of USAID will accelerate the USA's loss of global hegemony.

**Another central theme of Rubio's trip was migration, or more precisely: the mass expulsions of migrants from the USA. All the countries visited by Rubio - Panama, Guatemala and El Salvador - were willing to reach agreements with the US government on the issue. Should this be seen as a sign of subservience?**

During the election campaign, Trump promised to deport more people than any US president before him. He also wants to force the countries in the region to take action against migration movements themselves and to accept those who are deported without complaint. He has already had several successes in this regard. The issue is, however, quite contradictory. More than eleven million workers live in the USA without residency status, mainly from Latin America. They are central to a whole range of industries, such as construction, services, agriculture, etc. In many states, such as Florida, the deportations are already causing problems. There are contradictions between the ultra-right agenda of the Trumpists and the interests of US capital.

**Colombian President Gustavo Petro is one of the few Latin American heads of state who has openly opposed Trump's migration policy . On January 26, the US president threatened him with 25 percent punitive tariffs if he did not accept flights carrying Colombian deportees. Petro gave in. How do you interpret the episode, which was subsequently presented by both sides as their own victory?**



I think the episode is emblematic of Trump's strategy of banging the table - knowing that he has a lot of power, due to the strength of the US market, the weight of the dollar, etc. In this way, he imposes his interests on others. He is not interested in portraying himself as a negotiator. It will be interesting to see what consequences this policy will have in the long term. Colombia is a country that is very closely tied to the US. One possible consequence of Trump's policy could be that the countries he is putting under pressure will diversify their economic relations and engage with other players in the world.

**After the conflict with Trump, Petro asked his Honduran counterpart Xiomara Castro to convene a special summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) to deal with the deportations. Ultimately, however, the summit was canceled after several CELAC members objected. What does this say about the state of Latin American integration?**

One reason the meeting was cancelled was the agreement between Petro and Trump on an agreement. The other was the boycott by the Argentine government under President Javier Milei, but also by the governments of Paraguay, Ecuador and El Salvador. These are allies of Trump and were ultimately able to prevent the special summit. Political cooperation and collaboration at the regional level are not looking good at the moment. Presidents like Milei or Nayib Bukele from El Salvador are of great help to the USA. They are counting on the greatest possible fragmentation of the region. In order to counteract this, it would be important to revive bodies like CELAC, Unasur and also the expanded Mercosur. If each country negotiates alone, it will lose out to the USA due to the enormous asymmetries in terms of economic performance and political and diplomatic power.

**So there are two opposing blocs in Latin America today: a bloc of progressive social democratic countries and a bloc of Trump allies, which includes El Salvador, Ecuador and, above all, Argentina. What is the motivation of right-wing governments to ally themselves with the USA?**

One explanation can be found on the political and ideological level. The governments share an ultra-right agenda, and Trump's election victory has helped the Latin American right out of its regional isolation. There is also the issue of economic and financial dependence. The three countries you mentioned - El Salvador, Ecuador and Argentina - are in serious financial difficulties and are in negotiations with the International Monetary Fund, the IMF. What the US Treasury Secretary and the Trump administration say is crucial to the possible success of these negotiations. Washington has a right of veto in the IMF.

These countries are therefore dependent on Trump's support. Milei, for example, needs a new loan, especially in view of the parliamentary elections that are due to take place in Argentina in October. In 2018, under the first Trump administration, Argentina received the largest IMF loan in the financial institution's history. This was intended to secure the re-election of the then president and Trump ally Mauricio Macri. Ultimately, however, the plan did not work out.

**In the panorama you describe, what options for action remain for the left-wing governed countries in the region?**

The governments that can be called progressive, popular or left-wing are facing a variety of difficulties and are not pulling together. Each of them is faced with complex economic and political developments at home, and the right and the ultra-right are on the rise. Mexico, with its president Claudia Sheinbaum, is the only exception. The result is that there are no integration efforts today that are comparable to those at the beginning of the 21st century.

**You mentioned the special case of Mexico. There is no other country in Latin America that is so dependent on trade with its neighboring USA. How do you assess the Sheinbaum government's policies in this context?**

Mexico is, as I said, an exception. The previous president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, managed to hand over his leadership role to Claudia Sheinbaum, who won the election last year with an overwhelming majority. Her position towards the Trump administration is one of dignity and strength, despite the fact that Mexico is heavily dependent on the United States. 80 percent of Mexican exports go to the United States. This makes it difficult for Mexico to strengthen its relations with Latin America, as well as with its equally important trading partner, China. Sheinbaum is very careful not to destroy relations with the United States. Of course, she has to enter into negotiations, but she does so with principle, which gives her a leadership role at the Latin American level.

**You also mentioned Cuba. In recent years, the crisis in the socialist republic has worsened considerably, the economic situation is dramatic and more and more Cubans, especially young people, are emigrating. What can we expect from Rubio and Trump in terms of their policy towards Cuba?**

During Trump's first term in office, the process of easing tensions and normalizing relations initiated by Barack Obama was reversed. This was to be expected. The Joe Biden administration has reversed only a few of the tightening measures of the first Trump administration. Marco Rubio, like all US administrations since the victory of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, has the goal of defeating the Cuban Revolution.

Cuba is resisting this and is trying to overcome its considerable economic problems by strengthening its relations with Latin America, China, Russia and other players. In addition, Venezuela, which was a key trade and economic partner within the ALBA framework, has been in a serious crisis for years. Washington is now intensifying its aggressive course and the blockade in order to bring about a collapse of life on the island. The energy and economic crises are intended to make life there unbearable. But Cuba has shown many times that it can survive very complicated situations. In a world that is moving towards multipolarity, the island is developing strategies to resist the attacks of Trump and Rubio.

**How successful do you think the Trump administration will be with its aggressive policy in Latin America? It is also conceivable that some countries in the region will increase their efforts to diversify trade, for example towards China - which would be the opposite of what Trump is aiming for.**

Of course, it is not easy to make predictions. In general, I think that the development towards a multipolar world will give the region more room for maneuver. In other words, a diversification of economic relations, not only with China, but generally with Asia, India, the BRICS countries, Russia, etc.

The United States is reacting to the decline of its empire with increased aggression, and Latin America is suffering. It will be crucial that the governments of countries that are not allied with Washington work with social movements to create spaces and instances of coordination and cooperation. Regional integration must aim to diversify international economic ties and contribute to multipolar multilateralism. By this, I do not mean the unipolar unilateralism that Trump is striving for, nor the unipolar multilateralism of the past. I cannot say whether that will be successful. But I believe Trump will accelerate the decline of US hegemony rather than turn the tide