

martes, febrero 24, 2026

Lo último: El valor estratégico de ser «Los buenos»



"Sí labor empeñosa exige los intereses materiales, empeño aún más valioso reclaman los intereses morales"
(Juan Zorrilla de San Martín)



EVAN ELLIS NOTICIAS DESTACADAS OPIDATA

The Strategic Value of Being "The Good Guys"

febrero 24, 2026 Legado a las Américas

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Is it better to be feared or loved?

Privacy - Terms

In this analysis, R. Evan Ellis reflects on the strategic value of the U.S. “brand” in global competition and warns about the long-term risks of a foreign policy centered primarily on coercion and transactional self-interest.

“In the end, however, it was the idea of democracy and individual rights that the U.S. inspired, and not U.S. tanks and missiles, that led the people of the Warsaw Pact to tear down the Berlin Wall.”

I am a lifelong U.S. Republican. Since the beginning of my career, focused on U.S. security issues and its relationship with Latin America, I have been an advocate of U.S. pragmatism with our partners and the occasional, judicious use of U.S. military power in service of the national interest. I have also long believed that the U.S. national interest requires secure, prosperous hemisphere, dominated by friendly democratic allies, bound by a shared framework of transparency governing our commercial and other interactions.

During the past two decades, as I have analyzed and written on the challenge of China’s advance in the Western Hemisphere, I have also increasingly focused on the strategic value of the U.S. “brand” in responding to that challenge, including the differentiating power of what it represents, and what it inspires across the region.

Today, the “America First” approach of the Trump Administration unapologetically embraces U.S. pursuit of its national self-interest, sometimes including use of overt economic and military coercion. Current policy does not abandon, but arguably deemphasizes U.S. commitments to legacy international institutions and legal frameworks, as well as funding for initiatives in which the US sought to improve the health, education, development, institutions, democracy, and protection of individuals, where such programs do not immediately benefit U.S. companies or its strategic position.

The new U.S. foreign policy is arguably a significant departure from a more benevolent U.S. embrace of international institutions, principles and “doing good” that enjoyed a degree of bipartisan support since before the second World War. The review of U.S. assistance programs through the lens of national strategic objectives is useful. U.S. taxpayers had come to fund too many bloated or ineffective programs in the unquestionable name of “doing good.” I am profoundly concerned, however, that the unapologetic U.S. pursuit of its self-interest, supported by overt economic and military coercion and intervention, will impact the calculations and behaviors of the region in the long term, in ways significantly adverse to U.S. interests.

Realism vs. Legitimacy

At the core of international relations theory is a debate between “realism,” which principally values the coercive power of states and the pursuit of their direct self interest, versus other perspectives that focus on the importance of institutions, moral and legal principles, and frameworks that bind states in broader, more long-term concepts of interests. As Italian political philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli famously put the core question of realism, “is it better to be feared, or loved?” Never has that philosophical question been more important than at the present moment.

Coercion and Its Long-Term Consequences

The new U.S. posture toward Latin America include significant tariffs, sanctions and threats thereof, lethal interdictions against drug boats, military action to capture Venezuela’s criminally-tied de facto leader, and indirect threats to intervene in Panama, Greenland, Colombia, and Mexico, among others. Such military and economic coercion may work in the short term, given that the U.S. has disproportionate power, and the coerced generally lack alternatives. Such short-term thinking, however, neglects that acts of coercion, over time, invariably cause the victim to react to protect themselves against future coercion, even as it drives others to adjust their own situations to reduce their perceived vulnerability.

Arguably the greatest risk from an unapologetic pursuit of self-interest, actively leveraging coercion, is that it will undermine the way the region sees the U.S., its trust and willingness to cooperate with it, and its disposition to reach out to other partners, from the European Union to the People’s Republic of China, as a “hedge” against the U.S. in the future.

In business, analogous concepts of “brand,” reputation and relationships are regularly ascribed great value, and protected at sometimes great cost, even if their effects on the “bottom line” are equally difficult to measure.

During the Cold War, U.S. military power and resistance to attempts to subvert U.S. partners played an important role in the ultimate triumph of the West. In the end, however, it was the idea of democracy and individual rights that the U.S. inspired, and not U.S. tanks and missiles, that led the people of the Warsaw Pact to tear down the Berlin Wall, and rise up to dismantle the Communist system that controlled their countries.

Competing with China: Power vs. Influence

Today, even more than during the Cold War, the U.S. competes globally against an adversary that is approaching it in economic size, capability in key technologies, and in the not distant future, in military strength. That adversary, the PRC, can mobilize its companies and banks to offer superficially

beneficial projects to politicians who need to “deliver the goods” for their people. PRC-based companies can use robbed and subsidized technologies to win contracts for technology architectures that they can later exploit for espionage. PRC agents can weave broad webs of personal relationships, trips and “side benefits” for businessmen, politicians, journalists, government officials, and academics to advance their interests, distort public discourse, and create leverage. A U.S. strategy that focuses on coercion and transactionalism is competing with the PRC in the domain of the latter’s greatest advantages.

Today, many U.S. partners forgo more cost competitive Chinese options for their technology architectures, or avoid collaboration with the PRC in military affairs, space, and other sensitive areas. Those who do so arguably make that sacrifice because they calculate that, in the long term, the best choice for the development of their countries, and the security and well-being of their societies is to align themselves with democracy and the rule-of-law, rather than opening the door to Chinese agents that could overwhelm and hijack their economy and political system through corruption, compromise and dependency.

In the past, U.S. programs to help partners in areas such as health, education, anti-corruption, and the strengthening of institutions, have contrasted with superficially attractive, but ultimately self-interested Chinese projects. In the same way, U.S. advocacy for democratic values, transparency, rule-of-law and the protection of the individual, even when uneven, misguided, or annoying, has helped to make the case to populations for why they need the U.S. as a partner—even when the PRC material “offer” is greater.

It is difficult to overstate the degree to which the U.S. unnecessarily cedes its core strategic advantages in the competition with the PRC, when it unapologetically embraces transactionalism and coercion, while eliminating relatively inexpensive programs that do good, in the process putting out of work some of its most loyal advocates in the region who depended on those contracts for their livelihood. In pursuing such a course, the US undercuts decades of painstakingly created goodwill and repositions itself as an actor which acts with the same self-interest and coercion as the PRC, but without the latter’s cynical “sugar coating” of respectful “win-win” rhetoric, while presenting an “offer” that seems more modest than China’s.

For a time, the U.S. can probably prevent some partners from embracing the PRC offer through a combination of coercion and their political alignment. With enough time, however, partner governments change. The coerced find ways to take the Chinese money, even while pacifying Washington, and partners hedge and diversify to protect themselves. Some senior U.S. decisionmakers may arrogantly assume that U.S. neighbors will continue to bow to coercion because they have “always been with us,” or that they have “no other choice.” I fear that, by the time that U.S. decisionmakers realize that the alignment of our friends with the U.S. has been replaced with

resentment, abandonment, and self-entrapment in webs of influence woven by the PRC, it will be far too late.

The Strategic Power of the U.S. “Brand”

Protecting the U.S. “brand,” and the power accruing from the faith of our neighbors in the Western Hemisphere in what the U.S. represents, does not require the U.S. to squander its wealth on foolish projects, tie its hands before its adversaries, nor abandon the pursuit of U.S. national interest. It does, however, urgently require the recognition of the strategic value of the U.S. brand of benevolent democracy, and action by all branches of government to protect and nurture it. That includes preservation of a reasonable array of programs for “doing good” in the world, without direct ties to commercial or political benefit. It includes limiting China’s advance through modest continuing investments in strengthening partner institutions and rule of law. It includes modest investment to present the U.S. case to the region through media programs, scholarship, and other “people-to-people” engagements. It includes continuing to invest in the Organization of American States and other institutions of the Interamerican System to prevent the PRC, or other actors hostile to the U.S. from dominating those institutions.

A Strategic Warning

Finally, protecting the strategically valuable U.S. brand also demands vigilance of what the U.S. says and does, including its implicit and explicit threats. It requires ensuring that U.S. actions are couched in shared principles, including the advance of democracy, protection of the individual, and respect for the rule of law, around which those who share those values can rally. Never before has it been so important to recognize not only that “the region is watching,” but also that U.S. neighbors will decide and act on the conclusions that they reach, and that will profoundly impact the national security and interests of the United States.

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 Spanish version available here:

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Por: R. EVAN ELLIS
Research professor of Latin American studies at the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College.

LEGADO LAS AMERICAS

Election, Crisis, and U.S. Opportunity in Bolivia

📅 agosto 12, 2025



Visión y Metas de Legado a las Américas

📅 octubre 15, 2022

A promotional graphic for OPIDATA. On the right side, there is a portrait of Dr. Guillermo Pacheco Gaitán, a man with glasses wearing a dark suit and a red patterned tie. The background is a collage of financial and business-related imagery, including a keyboard, a chess knight, and various currency symbols like \$, €, and £. Text on the left includes "OPIDATA POR:" in a white rounded rectangle, followed by "DR. GUILLERMO PACHECO GAITÁN" in large white letters. Below that is the "LEGADO A LAS AMERICAS" logo, which features a map of the Americas. At the bottom left, there is the social media handle "@legadoamericas" and icons for Facebook, X, Instagram, and TikTok.

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📅 febrero 8, 2024



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📅 noviembre 29, 2023



Inauguración de las actividades de Legado a las Américas en Ecuador

📅 noviembre 1, 2023

Quiénes Somos



Quienes hemos decidido constituir el Movimiento Legado a las Américas, somos asociaciones nacionales y continentales, así como ciudadanos de 15 naciones, a los que nos motiva el unirnos para bregar juntos en una acción centrada en una Carta de Principios que nos son comunes, a fin de alcanzar la meta que nos hemos propuesto, la cual es un reavivamiento ético y cívico, y como resultado de este, una renovación y reforma en el campo político, económico y social. Podemos definirnos como un movimiento de conciencia.

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