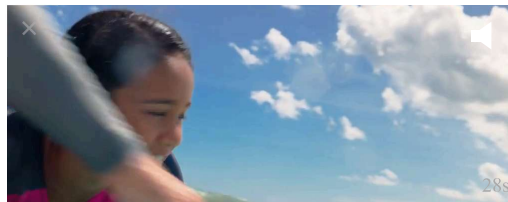


Trump's Foreign Policy Could Accelerate China's Advance in Latin America

The administration's approach to competition with China, and to global engagement more broadly, could unwittingly facilitate the extension of Beijing's influence.

By **R. Evan Ellis**

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The original Italian strategic consultant Niccolo Machiavelli, on the question of whether it is better to be feared rather than loved, [famously argued](#) that “since love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved.”

The Trump administration’s [“Americas First”](#) policy arguably represents a significant strategic shift away from the pursuit of U.S. strategic interests through nurturing global support for democracy, universal rights, and institutions. Instead, Washington is taking a much [more transactional approach](#),

pursuing more concrete benefits through a combination of carrots and sticks. International relations scholars will long be debating the strategic impact, efficacy, and morality of that shift.

The administration's recognition of the [risks posed by the global advance of China](#) in countries such as [Panama](#) and [Mexico](#) is strategically important. Nonetheless, its approach to pushing back against China, and to global engagement more broadly, potentially [creates a number of indirect effects that could facilitate](#), rather than slow, Beijing's influence. It is important for the administration to recognize and adjust for these unintended consequences as it implements President Donald Trump's agenda.

Expanded Latin American Exports to China

In certain sectors such as agriculture, the U.S. imposition of tariffs on China may lead it to buy fewer products from the United States and import more from Latin America as an alternative. That's what happened when Trump imposed tariffs on China [during his first term](#): as China bought less U.S. soy, corn, grains, and beef, it expanded the purchase of these products [from countries such as Brazil](#), Argentina, and Uruguay.

Similarly, as China continues to cut purchases from the United States of rare earth elements such as niobium, it will turn to alternative sources such as Brazil, where China-based companies already control a significant portion of those resources.

Complementing expanded China's interest in Latin American exports, as the region faces increased tariffs for selling products such as steel to the United States, governments and businesses alike will likely redouble their efforts to export more to China, as well as Europe and Asia, as alternative markets – even if doing so can replace only a fraction of lost exports to the U.S., and even if Latin American governments ultimately capitulate to U.S. conditions for lowering tariffs.

Decreased Attractiveness of the U.S. as a Partner

The economic and military power of the United States, and the values it has historically represented, will continue to motivate countries in the region to cooperate with it.

Nonetheless, the region is now simmering with resentment over perceived U.S. coercion, the pain inflicted by its policies, and disillusionment^x with its new orientation toward the world. All these factors may affect goodwill toward the United States by Latin American elites and publics. That in

turn will erode trust, which will factor into Latin American considerations of not only future U.S. proposals for cooperation, but also Washington's requests not to enter into certain types of cooperation with China.

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The Trump administration has justified its shutdown of USAID by saying that the agency pursued [many questionable programs](#), and promising that legitimate aid will be resumed under the State Department. Regardless, the shutdown has done immediate [damage to communities and local contractors](#) supported by its programs. It also sends a powerful message, even if not wholly accurate, that the

United States is not interested in helping the region beyond initiatives that directly serve its own self-interest. That perception undercuts a powerful differentiation between the United States and China, whose initiatives – from [medical supply sales during the COVID-19](#) pandemic to loan-funded [infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative](#) – are often seen as principally motivated by profit or other self-interest.

More indirectly, the abrupt termination of U.S. government activities, associated legal fights, and the risk of a [government shutdown](#) all undercut perceptions that Washington is a reliable partner. In general, the abrupt change in U.S. policies from the Trump to Biden administration [arguably undercuts confidence](#) in the region that Washington and its commitments [can be relied on](#) if Latin American actors choose a commercial, technological, and/or political relationship with the U.S. versus one with other partners. Indeed China is already cynically [attempting to represent itself](#) as a reliable [alternative to the United States](#).

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The Trump administration's [references to military action](#) or other reprisals against leaders who have defied it – including

[suspension of visas and threats of tariffs](#) against President Gustavo Petro of Colombia – may deter some states from similar actions. Other governments, however, particularly larger, left-leaning states, may respond with provocative actions of their own, whether as a hedge against future U.S. threats or to demonstrate their independence to domestic constituencies. Such actions could include symbolic military visits, personnel exchanges, arms sales, and formal cooperation agreements with China.

Ceding Space to China in Multilateral Institutions

The U.S. withdrawal from the [World Health Organization](#) and the [Paris Climate Agreement](#), among other international organizations and engagements, cedes those institutional battlegrounds to China. Beijing seeks to use its own presence in these fora to impact their agenda and discourse, as well as the standards, regulations, and reports that such entities promulgate. The U.S. government's withdrawal gives China a free hand to interact in those arenas with Latin American and Caribbean partners. It also creates an environment of negative feeling among those partners, flowing from the [loss of U.S. funding](#) associated with its departure.

Even where the United States continues to participate in multilateral institutions, its weakened clout may create important strategic opportunities for China. In the March 2025 election of a new secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), Suriname Foreign Minister Albert Ramdin, [with the support of China](#) and [CARICOM](#), is competing against the more U.S.-friendly Paraguayan candidate, Rubén Ramírez, whose government recognizes Taiwan. Ramdin's credentials, including his [prior role as the deputy head of the OAS](#), are beyond reproach. That said, his work with Beijing, and representation of a country with deep economic and ethnic ties to China, is likely to make his leadership of the OAS more receptive to China and less helpful to the United States than his predecessor, Luis Almagro.

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Espionage Risk With Disaffected Regional Bureaucrats

Even where the policies and actions of the Trump administration do not explicitly change the political orientation of Latin American countries toward the United States, they may indirectly make regional actors more receptive to Chinese espionage networks. Individual bureaucrats and business elites alienated by U.S. government actions may be motivated to lend a helping hand to Beijing's intelligence efforts.

China already conducts extensive operations that aim to curry favor with persons throughout Latin America. It brings thousands of people to China each year on lavish all-expense-paid trips, including journalists, politicians, security officials, judges, bureaucrats, and academic and think tank personnel. It also maintains human networks in the region through the International Liaison Department of the Chinese Communist Party's links with China-facing Chambers of Commerce, "Friendship Committees" (including those in national

legislatures), and academic and ethnic Chinese organizations.

To the extent that actions by the Trump administration – including deportations and the cutting of scholarships and [USAID programs](#) – turn some of these people against the United States, it could lead a small but important number of them to cross the line from being mere recipients of Beijing's largess to become active collaborators with the Chinese Communist Party and its intelligence services.

Giving a Boost to Anti-US, Pro-China Regimes

Although the Trump administration has indicated its disapproval of the de facto government of Nicholas Maduro in Venezuela, in its first weeks in office, Trump has [prioritized talks with that regime](#) above efforts to isolate it. This will expand the damage Maduro's Venezuela can do to the region through its criminal activities and hosting of extraregional U.S. adversaries such as China. The Trump administration granted a [six-month renewal of General License \(GL\) 41](#), allowing oil company Chevron to continue to extract and sell Venezuelan oil, following a visit to the country [by U.S. Special Presidential Representative Richard Grenell](#), while Maduro released six detained U.S. hostages.

These moves arguably contribute to the Maduro regime's financial solvency, and will increase the willingness of others such as Russia, China, and Iran, to engage with it.

Meanwhile, U.S. actions that harm or offend some in the region, alongside broader perceptions that the United States [turned its back on Ukraine](#) and is [distancing itself from its security commitments to Europe](#), may undercut the popular appeal of Latin American and Caribbean politicians that have aligned their governments with Washington. These figures could be at a disadvantage when competing against anti-U.S. rivals in upcoming elections.

On February 9, as the first wave of the Trump administration's policies and rhetoric reverberated in the region, Ecuador held the first round of its presidential election. The pro-U.S. incumbent, President Daniel Noboa, [significantly underperformed](#), opening [prospects for a victory by his rival](#), Luisa Gonzalez, and the return to Ecuador and national influence of her political mentor, anti-U.S. populist Rafael Correa.



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In Honduras, the leftist populist regime of Xiomara Castro and her Libre party is already [consolidating power](#) and opening doors to political and other strategic engagement with China. There is a similar risk that negative reactions to the Trump administration's moves could diminish the appeal of the more pro-U.S. opposition in Honduras' [November 2025 elections](#).

In addition to Ecuador and Honduras, seven other national elections [will take place in Latin America in 2025](#), most of them in the Caribbean basin, where China is expanding its strategic foothold perilously close to U.S. shores. These include elections in Suriname in May, Bolivia in August, Chile in November, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines (one of Taiwan's few remaining diplomatic allies) in November.

There will also be elections on not-yet defined dates in Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Guyana, and Belize (another of Taiwan's partners). In October 2025, Argentina will hold a [critically important mid-term election](#) for its National Congress. Together, these electoral events will shape foreign policies by regional governments, including their willingness to partner with China.

Conclusion

Perceived U.S. support for democracy, individual rights, and the struggle against corruption are key strategic assets in the United States' pursuit of its strategic interests vis-à-vis China. The U.S., as a free-market economy with limited government, is at a profound disadvantage in competing against China via transactionalism, [bribes](#), and threats. While it is appropriate for Washington to pursue its self-interest and leverage its national power, it must be conscious of the damage that excess reliance on coercion can do to the U.S. "brand," and the importance of protecting that "brand" [to its long-term strategic success](#) in truly putting "America First."



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