

## CHAPTER 7

# PUTTING THE AMERICAS FIRST OR LAST?

## Trump's new Monroe Doctrine and the Western Hemisphere

by  
**GIUSEPPE SPATAFORA**

The Americas appear to be the laboratory of US foreign policy under Trump 2.0. President Trump has imposed tariffs on major trade partners – including for non-trade issues –, slashed US foreign aid in the hemisphere, deployed the military to fight organised crime and drugs smuggling, and even suggested taking over allied territories like Greenland and Canada. While waged in the name of an ‘Americas First’ policy, these actions have eroded trust among the US’s closest partners in the Western Hemisphere. Trump’s political allies in the region appear emboldened, while many countries remain on the fence.

The implications of these policies extend across the Atlantic as well. In response, Europe should seek to be an active player in the Americas, challenging the Monroe Doctrine’s mantra of transatlantic separation. The EU should focus on strengthening partnerships with countries that share European interests, have been adversely affected by the US, and risk

drifting even further into the orbit of rival powers.

## FOREIGN POLICY INNOVATION AND EXPERIMENTATION

The Monroe Doctrine, first articulated in 1823, was the pillar of US foreign policy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its central tenet is that the Western Hemisphere should be off-limits to foreign powers, with the US as its dominant force.

It is easy to see why the Monroe Doctrine is attractive to Trump. First, it echoes themes from his 2024 campaign: shifting US focus away from the Eurasian continent and towards threats to the homeland, like drugs, migration and trade imbalances. Second, it aligns with the US goal of reducing Chinese influence in the

region and reshoring supply chains and economic activity<sup>(1)</sup>. Third, it gives the US a special responsibility for enforcing order in the Americas, including by imposing ‘maximum pressure’ on regional adversaries like Cuba and Venezuela<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Monroe Doctrine framed US government policy during Trump’s first term in office, with Trump and his advisors referring to it as ‘the formal policy of our country’<sup>(3)</sup>. His re-election signals a return to this approach. Marco Rubio, the first Secretary of State of Latino origin, declared at the start of his tenure that the US would pursue an ‘Americas First’ foreign policy<sup>(4)</sup>. The new National Defense Strategy seems to vindicate this approach, prioritising domestic and regional operations – and even resorting to the use of military force in counter-narcotics missions – over power projection in Eurasia or countering China in the Indo-Pacific<sup>(5)</sup>.

However, in 2025 Trump has also given a new, personal spin to the Doctrine – marking a departure from his first term. His policy towards the Americas is defined by three features: expansionist ambitions, the extensive use of tariffs beyond trade objectives, and a focus on selected

priorities that resonate with the domestic electorate over broader concerns.

First, Trump emphasises not just a renewed US focus on the hemisphere, but actual territorial aggrandisement. In his 2025 inaugural address, Trump invoked his belief in ‘Manifest Destiny’: ‘The US will once again consider itself a growing nation – one that increases our wealth, expands our territory ... and carries our flag into new and beautiful horizons’<sup>(6)</sup>. Instead of Monroe, he quoted William McKinley, who oversaw one of the last major phases of US territorial expansion.

Trump soon followed up with a series of expansionist claims. He announced his intention to acquire Greenland, declaring that it was vital to national security. His advisors accused Denmark of neglecting the island, and claimed that Greenlanders want to be American – although surveys show that this is not true<sup>(7)</sup>. In the first half of 2025, US intelligence agencies were tasked to identify supporters of US objectives for the island in both Greenland and Denmark. The Pentagon also reassigned responsibility for Greenland from EUCOM (the US European command) to NORTHCOM, indicating

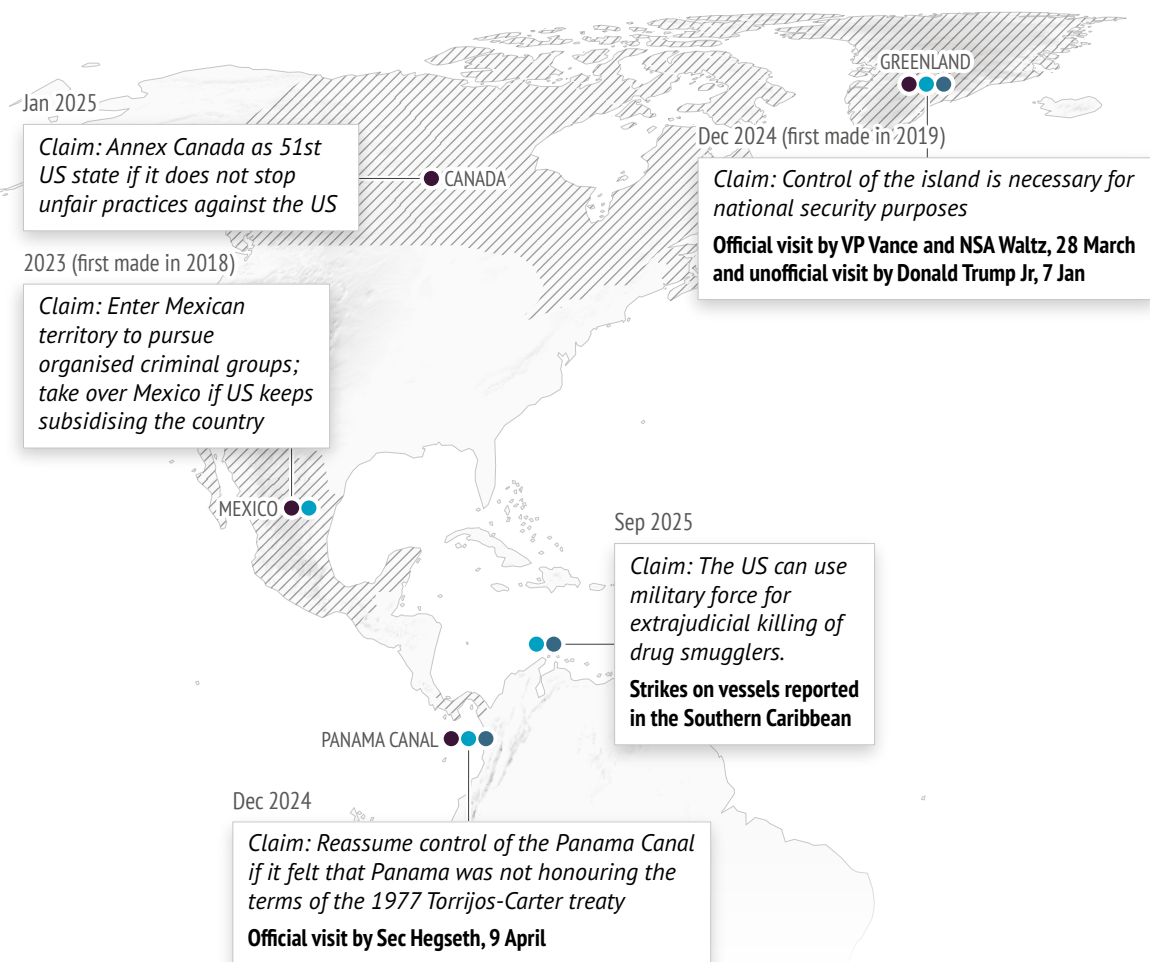
## **Trump emphasises not just a renewed US focus on the hemisphere, but actual territorial aggrandisement.**

- (1) Lubin, D., ‘The economics of the new Monroe Doctrine’, Chatham House, February 2025 (<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2025/02/economics-new-monroe-doctrine>).
- (2) Berg, R., ‘This Trump administration is shaping up to be Latin America-First’, *Foreign Policy*, 18 January 2025 (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2025/01/08/trump-latin-america-administration/>).
- (3) ‘John Bolton and the Monroe Doctrine’, *The Economist*, 9 May 2019 (<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/05/09/john-bolton-and-the-monroe-doctrine>).
- (4) Rubio, M., ‘Marco Rubio: An Americas First Foreign Policy’, *Wall Street Journal*, 30 January 2025 (<https://www.wsj.com/opinion/an-americas-first-foreign-policy-secretary-of-state-rubio-writes-western-hemisphere-too-long-neglected-a81707b0>).
- (5) McLary, P. and Lippman, D., ‘Pentagon plan prioritizes homeland over China threat’, *Politico*, 5 September 2025 (<https://www.politico.com/news/2025/09/05/pentagon-national-defense-strategy-china-homeland-western-hemisphere-00546310>).
- (6) The White House, ‘The Inaugural Address’, 20 January 2025 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/>).
- (7) Bryant, M. and Rankin, J., ‘New opinion poll shows 85% of Greenlanders do not want to join US’, *The Guardian*, 28 January 2025 (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/28/85-of-greenlanders-do-not-want-to-join-us-says-new-poll>).

## Make America greater

The US President has laid claim to various countries and territories outside the US

Economic threats      Military threats      Legislative action (proposed)



Map data: European Commission, GISCO, 2025; *The Guardian*, May 2025; US Congress, February 2025; *Time*, April 2025; BBC News, January 2025; *France24*, April 2025; Reuters, May 2025; NBC, April 2025.

that the US sees the island as part of the North American continent<sup>(8)</sup>.

Beyond Greenland, Trump vowed to re-assert control over the Panama Canal, citing unfair transit costs and increasing

encroachment from China. In January he went further, proposing to turn Canada into the 51st US state, as compensation for unfair trade practices, and calling for direct intervention in Mexico and the Caribbean Sea to fight drug cartels. He

(8) Long, K. and Ward, A., 'U.S. orders intelligence agencies to step up spying on Greenland', *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 May 2025 (<https://www.wsj.com/world/greenland-spying-us-intelligence-809c4ef2>); McLeary, P. and Kine, P., 'Pentagon to redraw command map to more closely align Greenland with the US', *Politico*, 2 June 2025 (<https://www.politico.com/news/2025/06/02/pentagon-greenland-northern-command-00381223>).

renamed the Gulf of Mexico the ‘Gulf of America’, implicitly signalling that it may fall within US jurisdiction. Beyond the Americas, he suggested that the US take control of Gaza, permanently displacing Palestinians and turning it into the ‘Riviera of the Middle East’ – albeit not linking this to future annexation by the US.

Second, the US has deployed tariffs as a tool to strengthen American hegemony in the hemisphere – not only to change the terms of trade, but also to compel policy changes in partner countries. Trump accused Canada and Mexico of unfair practices, and of flooding the US with migrants and fentanyl.

Both countries were hit with the first wave of tariffs in February, which have subsequently been adjusted – modified, paused, or raised – several times. Trump has since applied the same template for tariff announcements across the globe.

Trump has also wielded tariffs as a weapon in political disputes unrelated to trade. He first tried it on Colombia. When President Petro refused to accept repatriation flights of migrants, Trump announced 25% tariffs on the country. The levies were dropped one day later when Washington and Bogota came to an agreement<sup>(9)</sup>.

On 31 July, Trump announced 50% levies on Brazilian imports, citing the prosecution of former president and Trump

ally Jair Bolsonaro, as well as ‘unlawful censorship coercion’ by the Lula government<sup>(10)</sup>. Since the US runs a trade surplus with Brazil – and many Brazilian exports are exempt from the levies – the move was not dictated by economic considerations. The decision has precipitated a major political crisis between the two most populated countries in the Americas.

## **The US has deployed tariffs as a tool to strengthen American hegemony in the hemisphere.**

Third, despite claims of a renewed focus on the Americas, several areas where the US traditionally wielded significant influence are being neglected. Rather than reasserting US presence uniformly across the continent, the administration has slashed USAID funding and cut development pro-

grammes aimed at combating drug trafficking, which were vital to many Latin American countries. Instead, the administration has concentrated on campaign priorities from 2024: migration, trade, crime and political censorship. On drugs, efforts have focused on curbing the flow of fentanyl, with little attention paid to other drugs such as cocaine, which affect South America more severely<sup>(11)</sup>.

Moreover, the administration has not displayed uniform support for a return to ‘maximum pressure’. In fact, tensions have emerged between Marco Rubio, who advocates a tough approach to Cuba and Venezuela, and Richard Grenell, presidential envoy for special missions, who has signalled openness to agreements with the Maduro regime<sup>(12)</sup>. The deployment of

(9) Wells, I. and Cursino, M., ‘Trump imposes 25% tariffs on Colombia as deported migrant flights blocked’, BBC News, 27 January 2025 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cdxnyolnyp0>).

(10) The White House, ‘Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump addresses threats to the United States from the Government of Brazil’, 30 June 2025 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/07/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-addresses-threats-to-the-united-states-from-the-government-of-brazil/>).

(11) ‘From Amazon conservation to cocaine crackdowns: Here’s how dismantling the USAID impacts Latin America’, Fast Company, 5 February 2025 (<https://www.fastcompany.com/91273304/usaaid-latin-america-impact-amazon-conservation-cocaine-crackdown>).

(12) Gangitano, A. and Kelly, L., ‘Tensions between Rubio, Grenell flare over Venezuela deals’, The Hill, 13 July 2025 (<https://thehill.com/policy/international/5397603-richard-grenell-trump-administration-tensions/>).

US Navy forces to attack the Venezuelan cartel Tren de Aragua suggests that the tough approach has won the day – but the operation was focused on narcotrafficking, not regime change.

## HEMISPHERIC FAULT LINES: MAPPING REACTIONS TO TRUMP 2.0

Trump's 'Americas First' has, so far, been less about prioritising the hemisphere and more about using it as a laboratory for new US foreign policy approaches. Trump's policy towards Colombia and Brazil, for instance, marks a new phase in tariff confrontation, with tariffs deployed not just for trade disputes, but to address wider political issues. And territorial threats to neighbouring countries are now being used as pressure tactics to solve political disputes that, normally, would have little to do with territory.

Trump's Americas policies also signal Washington's diminished faith in alliances. Greenland is part of Denmark, a key NATO ally, yet the US appears to view direct control of it as more secure than reliance on allies. Moreover, Trump's expansionist claims come at a time when the norm of the sanctity of borders is increasingly challenged, in Ukraine and elsewhere, and military contestation is once again becoming an instrument of conflict resolution<sup>(13)</sup>. This will put enormous pressure on the international

rules-based order that the US has led since 1945.

Trump's policies have elicited different reactions across the Americas, ranging from deep mistrust to enthusiastic acceptance. Regional actors can broadly be grouped into three categories:

1. **The betrayed:** The events of 2025 have shattered trust in the US among its closest partners. Canada, Mexico, and Colombia – long-standing allies and major trade partners – have been the primary targets. Even those who endured tariff threats during Trump's first term did not anticipate such an aggressive posture. While some may dismiss Trump's expansionist rhetoric as a negotiating tactic, the fact that he even articulated such threats has had a profound impact. As Canadian Prime Minister Matt Carney stated, 'the relationship has fundamentally changed.' These countries are unlikely to see the US as a reliable partner anytime soon and may even begin to regard it as a potential threat.
2. **The enthusiasts:** Ideologically aligned governments have embraced Trump's new policies. El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele won Trump's praise after he agreed to host deported migrants in Salvadoran prisons. In South America, Argentina's President Milei has drawn close to the administration, even promoting his government restructuring reforms as a model for Trump's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). This group also includes opposition political figures, such as Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, who is exploiting Trump's sympathy to shore up support<sup>(14)</sup>.

(13) Ekman, A. and Everts, S. (eds), 'Contestation: The new dynamic driving global politics', *Chaillot Paper* No. 183, EUISS, 22 May 2024 (<https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/chaillot-papers/contestation-new-dynamic-driving-global-politics>).

(14) Cleveland-Sout, N., 'Bolsonaro's son: I convinced Trump to slap tariffs on Brazil', Quincy Institute, 8 August 2025 (<https://responsiblestatecraft.org/bolsonaro-trump-tariffs/>).

3. **The fence-sitters:** Many countries do not support Trump but are wary of antagonising him. The massive retaliatory threats against Colombia in January prompted many countries to keep a low profile. A number of countries are signalling alignment with US priorities, especially on migration. Even Venezuela, despite its adversarial relationship with Washington, has sought opportunities for normalisation with the US <sup>(15)</sup>. However, this strategy of accommodation may prove unsustainable: Trump has deployed coercive diplomacy against two countries – democratic Brazil and authoritarian Venezuela – both of which had initially pursued a non-confrontational approach towards Washington.

## PROVING MONROE WRONG: EUROPE'S ROLE IN THE AMERICAS

What happens in the Americas is increasingly relevant for Europe. The US is exporting pressure tactics first tested in the region, including towards Ukraine and the EU. Trump's territorial ambitions also directly affect an EU Member State. At the same time, many Latin American countries share Europe's security concerns and could be vital partners for enhancing competitiveness and resilience.

In defiance of the Monroe Doctrine, the EU should affirm its role in the Western Hemisphere by focusing on three key priorities:

1. **Close ranks with partners:** The EU must strengthen ties with those targeted by Trump's threats. These countries need reliable allies, and can offer valuable lessons in navigating relations with the US under conditions of low trust. Canada is a natural partner. Building on the 2025 Security and Defence Partnership, EU–Canada co-operation can bolster Arctic security and reaffirm respect for sovereignty.
2. **Present new options:** Many Latin American states under US pressure see only one alternative: China's financial pull. With USAID cuts driving these countries even closer to Beijing, the EU must step in as a credible, values-based partner. Concluding trade agreements with Mexico and Mercosur, and expanding security cooperation with countries like Colombia, Chile and Peru, would demonstrate that the EU is serious about strategic engagement. Presenting Europe's engagement as aligned with Washington's anti-China objectives can also open channels for pragmatic cooperation with the US.
3. **Future-proof the approach:** In Latin America, alliances quickly shift with changes of leadership. Colombia, once Washington's closest partner in South America, now keeps its distance from Trump. Bolsonaro's Brazil was Trump's closest ally during his first term, yet today the US openly targets Brazil's government. Argentina, by contrast, moved closer to Washington with the transition from Fernández to Milei. In other words, today's 'fence-sitters' could become tomorrow's 'enthusiasts' or feel 'betrayed' in the future. While the US judges regional governments based on their alignment with Trump's 'Americas First' agenda, the EU's approach must

(15) France, M., 'Donald Trump's Venezuela U-turn won't put America First', *The National Interest*, 15 August 2025 (<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/donald-trumps-venezuela-u-turn-wont-put-america-first>).

go beyond the government of the day. Brussels needs to focus on building concrete, pragmatic cooperation that appeals across the political spectrum. That is how Europe can build durable trust.