

Trump Now Threatening Panama, His “Neo-Monroeism” Might Set Americas Ablaze

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*This Monday, in response to Trump’s [threats](#), China has voiced its support to Panama’s sovereignty over the Panama Canal. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson **Mao Ning** [said](#) the Panama Canal, a “golden waterway for connectivity among countries” is “a great creation of the Panamanian people”, and that “China has always supported the people of Panama in their just cause for sovereignty over the Canal.” She added the canal should remain a “permanently neutral international waterway.”*

Last week, US **President-elect Donald Trump** said the canal is a “vital national asset” for the United States and threatened to reassert American control over it. Panamanian **President Jose Raul Mulino** responded firmly, by [saying](#):

“As president, I want to express precisely that every square meter of the Panama Canal and its adjacent zone belongs to Panama and will remain so. The sovereignty and independence of our country are not negotiable.”

He [added](#):

“The canal is not under direct or indirect control, neither by China, nor by the European community, nor by the United States, nor by any other power. As a Panamanian, I strongly reject any manifestation that distorts this reality.”



Trump is claiming Panama charges “exorbitant prices” to US ships to which Mulino responded by stating that the rates to use the canal are established in a public manner, “in an open hearing, considering market conditions, international competition, operating costs and the maintenance and modernization needs of the interoceanic route.” As is the case with complaints about NATO member fees and with Canada’s border problems, this seems to be yet another instance of Trump’s employing extremely aggressive rhetoric so as to threateningly pressure other states into making concessions or “complying” with American interests and demands.

The canal has been described as a maritime throat, connecting the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Panama gained its independence from Colombia in 1903 and after that was long the target of American interventions to ensure US control over the so-called Canal Zone. Only in September 1977 were the Torrijos-Carter Treaties signed, thereby determining that by December 3, 1999 the canal would be returned to Panamanian control.

One should keep in mind that Colombia (a very close US ally) once had control over the canal and lost it after Washington supported separatists who seceded from Colombia to establish the independent state of Panama. This was a kind of geopolitical maneuver to make it easier for Washington to interfere in the new and weaker state. Colombia’s national memory resent it to this day, and the current presidency, despite its friendship with the US, seems to have no qualms about enhancing its cooperation with China.

For example, with the Belt and Road’s initiative, Beijing has been planning to connect the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, which could be a game-changer development with global effects that go way beyond boosting the flow of goods between the Latin American and Asian continents.

Nadia Helmy, a Visiting Senior Researcher at the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies (Lund University, Sweden) and Director of the South and East Asia Studies Unit, wrote in 2023 that Colombian **President Gustavo Petro** had been in talks with China to create “an alternative to the Panama Canal”. This could involve a “dry channel” through which the Colombian Buenaventura port would be linked to Atlantic shores (Barranquilla) by means of a railway crossing the country. Petro in fact stressed the Colombian interests in advancing such projects soon after the December 2022 election.

So far it is hard to say how likely it is that such plans could materialize even in the long run. In any case, in this complex game, while supporting Panama’s sovereignty over the existing canal against American menaces, China (and Colombia, for that matter), might also have their own alternative plans – which are sure to displease both Panama itself and the US.

About four years ago I [wrote](#) on how Chinese presence in the Caribbeans amid the New Cold War threatened American dominance in the region and could extend to Latin America in general. Chinese diplomatic, trade and military influence in the continent has indeed snowballed, as I [wrote](#) last year. Washington of course still retains its hegemonic position in the Americas, but it is visibly declining. Thus, Trump’s strident threats are also a sign of weakness.

With Trump’s hyperbolic style, his threats should not always be taken at face value. This, however, does not mean that they should ever be dismissed as “mere” rhetoric. In politics, talking is acting and functions as a tool to exert pressure and to increase tensions.

Take Trump’s “threats” against NATO, for instance: if taken [at face value](#), for those of a hysterical “Westernist” stance, they spell “[isolationism](#)” and thus [the end of the Alliance](#) and [trouble for Europe](#) in an apocalyptic scenario. Whereas for those of a rather naïve anti-imperialist stance, they are instead the promise of a new peaceful multipolar NATO-free world. In reality, as I [wrote](#), it is more about further [shifting the “burdens”](#) of NATO onto European partners plus further [proxifying](#) the American [proxy attrition war](#) against Russia by turning the European bloc into a full-fledged American proxy.

A similar thing happens with regard to Trump’s neo-Monroeism. Rather than being about simply withdrawing from the larger global geopolitical chess to focus on the American continent; it is, more likely, about further bringing Great Power competition home to the Americas and thus further making Latin America the stage for this geopolitical dispute.

In other words, it is not about either projecting power regionally in the continent or being engaged across the Atlantic and the Pacific: in all likelihood, it will be one plus the other, rather than one or the other. Trump’s threats against [Greenland](#) clearly demonstrate it, by the way.

With Trump’s intervention plans for Mexico, plus his verbal attacks against Canada, and Panama, it is quite clear that, despite Trump being apparently a little more willing to discuss a peace plan for Ukraine for instance, the United State during his presidency will nevertheless remain a focal point for increasing tensions regionally and globally, as has been the case with all his predecessors for the last decades.

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