

GUEST ESSAY

Don't Be Fooled by the Silence in America's Backyard

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*You are the United States.**You are the future invader**of the naïve America that has Indigenous blood ...*

So read some of the opening lines of “To Roosevelt” by the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío, written in 1904 — another moment when American gunboats were ominously prowling the Caribbean Sea. Darío was addressing President Theodore Roosevelt, who had just used the “big stick” of military power to support the creation of a new nation, Panama, to protect U.S. control over the canal zone there.

Darío’s poem became a classic piece of literature in the anti-imperialist movement that swept Latin America in the last century, a text that went on to influence Cuba’s Fidel Castro, the Nicaraguan rebel Augusto César Sandino and the Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez, among others.

Today, the United States is once again throwing around its military and economic might in Latin America in ways not seen in decades. President Trump has dispatched a flotilla to the southern Caribbean, destroying boats said to be carrying drugs to the United States and threatening to bomb targets inside Venezuela in an apparent bid to force out Nicolás Maduro, the country’s authoritarian leader.

Mr. Trump has also rewarded his “favorite president,” Javier Milei of Argentina, with a

\$20 billion bailout; vowed to “take back” the Panama Canal; demanded that Mexico take a tougher line against drug trafficking and migration, or else face crippling tariffs; leaned on Brazil’s Supreme Court to drop a case against one of his allies, former President Jair Bolsonaro; endorsed the conservative candidate in Honduras’s presidential race; and pressed countries across the hemisphere to reject Chinese influence. His approach amounts to a modern-day expression of the Monroe Doctrine — the idea, first articulated in 1823 by the fifth U.S. president, that outside powers are unwelcome in America’s so-called backyard.

Yet if there are any heirs to Rubén Darío, they have been surprisingly quiet. The reaction within the region to the “Don-roe Doctrine,” as some call Mr. Trump’s Latin America policy, has so far been mostly muted — and often outright supportive. But even if Mr. Trump’s muscular approach has found fertile ground across the hemisphere, history suggests that, should officials in Washington overstep, they risk planting the seeds of an anti-American backlash that could outlive the current administration.

Many nations that once bristled under American power have openly embraced the administration’s renewed attention toward the region. The list of governments aligned with Mr. Trump includes the Dominican Republic, where American troops intervened from 1916 to 1924 and again from 1965 to 1966; Panama, the site of a U.S. invasion in 1989; and Argentina, Ecuador and Guyana, among others. In one recent poll, 53 percent of respondents across Latin America said they would support a U.S. military intervention to depose Mr. Maduro.

Even much of the Latin American left has been subdued, frustrating many of its leaders. “What is the reason for the silence of progressivism and of governments?” vented President Gustavo Petro of Colombia, one of Mr. Trump’s most vocal critics, on social media in November. Clarín, a leftist publication in Chile, warned, “It’s urgent for Latin America to recover a common voice in the face of these aggressions.” At a recent summit of Latin American, Caribbean and European leaders, an effort to persuade the region’s governments to sign a declaration explicitly condemning the United States’ naval bombing campaign failed.

What explains this relative acquiescence? Some leaders have surely kept quiet for fear of ending up in Mr. Trump’s cross hairs themselves. For others, particularly Mexico’s president, Claudia Sheinbaum, their countries are so economically dependent on the United States that they may perceive quiet pragmatism as the only option. A main reason appears to be that many Latin Americans agree with Mr. Trump’s decision to take a tougher approach against the region’s gangs and cartels.

Although organized crime is hardly a new issue, it has grown measurably worse over the past decade. In that time, the amount of cocaine produced in Latin America has at least doubled. Drug cartels flush with cash have diversified into extortion, illegal mining and human trafficking. Violence has flared even in countries like Costa Rica and Ecuador, once regarded as oases of relative tranquillity. Poll after poll shows that crime has surpassed unemployment or health care as the leading concern of voters throughout much of the region.

Latin America's politics seem to be shifting further to the right as a result. José Antonio Kast, strongly favored to win a runoff in December for Chile's presidency, has vowed to build a Trump-like border barrier to keep out migrants he blames for rising crime. Rodrigo Paz Pereira, Bolivia's first nonsocialist president in some two decades, has restored full diplomatic relations with Washington, and he welcomed a delegation of U.S. officials to his inauguration to discuss potential deals on mining and drug enforcement. With conservative figures also polling well in coming elections in Peru, Colombia, Costa Rica and Brazil, it's possible to imagine a Latin America that will be even more strongly aligned with Mr. Trump a year from now.

The enduring anti-imperialist sentiments reflected in Darío's verse should still inspire caution. In 1912, eight years after Darío published his poem, conservative politicians in Nicaragua asked for, and received, a contingent of U.S. troops in the name of restoring law and order. Those U.S. forces would stay there for most of the next two decades, a period that also saw the United States dispatch troops to Cuba, Mexico, Honduras, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Those interventions left a deep sediment of public resentment that later helped nourish anti-American movements from Castro's revolution to the Sandinista rebellion in Nicaragua and complicated U.S. business and diplomatic interests throughout Latin America for much of the 20th century.

No one expects Mr. Trump, who campaigned on a promise to keep the United States out of unnecessary foreign wars, to commit troops to a 21st-century wave of occupations. Latin America is a much more democratic region than it was even a generation or two ago, meaning that leaders are able to work with Washington without having to face accusations of being "vende-patrias," of selling out their countries.

But it would be a mistake to assume that the historical aversion to Uncle Sam's heavy hand has disappeared. Mr. Trump has mostly confined his military efforts to targeting Venezuela, a dictatorship with few remaining friends in the region. If he were to expand his antidrug bombing campaign to democracies such as Mexico and Colombia, though, a possibility he recently floated to reporters, it could prompt a much bigger backlash. Further attempts by Mr. Trump to tip the scales for his friends in upcoming elections

could also backfire — as recently happened in Brazil, where U.S. pressure not only failed to keep Mr. Bolsonaro out of prison, but also fueled a wave of nationalism that bolstered the popularity of the country's leftist president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

Some of the same leaders biting their tongues at Mr. Trump's provocations are also quietly negotiating with Beijing and potential partners in Europe and the Middle East, hoping to find alternatives to a hegemon they find increasingly overbearing and unreliable. When Washington uses too big a stick in Latin America, the cost can be measured not just in years, but in decades.

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