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The Donroe Doctrine Is Here to Stay After the Midterms

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Since returning to the White House, Donald Trump has placed Latin America at the very center of U.S. national security strategy. This new approach, known as the "Donroe Doctrine," seeks to reestablish American primacy in the Western Hemisphere, undermine the influence of outside powers—especially China—and rebuild the regional order. Over its first two years, the Trump administration has used a wide range of foreign policy tools to that end, including economic pressure, tariffs, sanctions, migration agreements, military cooperation, and direct intervention.

For much of the past two years, favorable political winds across the region appeared to strengthen that strategy. Conservative candidates took office in Chile, Colombia, and Peru, while in Argentina, Javier Milei consolidated his hold on power. Many governments moved their security and foreign policy priorities closer to Washington's. The Shield of the Americas initiative became perhaps the clearest expression of this convergence, bringing together governments willing to coordinate more closely against organized crime and trafficking networks.

Recent elections in Brazil and the United States, however, have exposed the limits of this realignment. Lula da Silva's victory in Brazil and the Democrats' win of both chambers of Congress show that Trump's regional vision might be challenged. Especially the midterms will put a new institutional brake on the White House's ambitions in the region. The midterms may reshape the political terrain, but they are unlikely to change the administration's strategic ambitions. Rather than stepping back from Latin America, the administration may increasingly rely on executive authority, economic leverage, and security policy to preserve its influence in the region.

Congress Returns to the Stage

Once the new Congress convenes in January, Democrats will have greater institutional capacity to investigate, challenge, and potentially constrain the administration's approach to Latin America. Hearings, subpoenas, appropriations decisions, and legislation will give them leverage over issues ranging from Venezuela and Cuba to regional security cooperation. Senate confirmation powers may also become relevant in shaping the administration's foreign policy and national security team.

Yet oversight is not the same as control. Trump still retains broad authority over sanctions, diplomacy, military deployments, and executive action. Congress can slow initiatives, demand accountability, and raise political costs. It cannot easily dictate foreign policy. The real question is not whether Democrats can criticize the administration's approach, but whether they can meaningfully constrain it.

Venezuela: Oil or Democracy?

Venezuela is likely to be the first major test of Congress's ability to influence the administration's regional policy. The Trump administration's arrangement with acting President Delcy Rodríguez prioritizes oil production, economic stability, and short-term political management. Washington treats Rodríguez as its interlocutor, while María Corina Machado, the country's most prominent opposition figure, has been left out of the political dialogue.

Trump's approach reflects a pragmatic calculation. Maintaining a working relationship with the existing power structure could give Washington greater influence over energy production, migration, and security, while creating opportunities for American businesses. Yet Washington also possesses significant leverage over Venezuela's transitional authorities. Whether it uses that leverage to advance democratic reforms or primarily to secure economic and strategic interests will become a central point of debate on Capitol Hill.

Democrats are expected to ask how Venezuela's oil revenues are managed, how transparent the commercial agreements are, and who profits from U.S.-backed arrangements. The proposed partnership with North American Blue Energy Partners could become a focus of investigations. Efforts to subpoena records on the agreement and ProPublica's investigation

into its terms have already deepened doubts about transparency and about how the gains are shared.

More importantly, Congress could seek to condition future economic concessions on concrete political measures, including a credible electoral timetable, institutional reforms, and meaningful opposition participation. The danger is that an interim arrangement justified by the need for stability could become an end in itself. If oil production, migration management, and security cooperation become the principal measures of success, democratic benchmarks could gradually lose their urgency. The fundamental question is whether engagement with Rodríguez is intended to facilitate a democratic transition or is evolving into a longer-term arrangement driven primarily by energy and security interests.

Cuba and the Limits of Coercive Diplomacy

Cuba could become another critical point of friction between Congress and the White House. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has always treated political change in Havana as a top priority, and Trump makes no secret of his desire to speed up events on the island.

Any serious discussion of military intervention would likely face strong resistance in a Democratic Congress. Beyond the domestic political debate, such a move would carry significant risks for regional stability and America's standing in Latin America. More pressure alone is not a strategy. The real challenge is applying pressure on the Cuban government without deepening the suffering of ordinary citizens. A mix of targeted sanctions, humanitarian relief, and limited economic openings offers a more realistic path forward. Military action may appeal to the most hawkish voices, but it could trigger regional resistance, aggravate the humanitarian crisis, and leave Washington facing another costly, open-ended engagement.

A Democratic Congress could raise the political and institutional hurdles to escalation, although its ability to prevent a harder line toward Havana would remain limited.

The Shield of the Americas and Security Cooperation

The Shield of the Americas will also face a more difficult environment under a Democratic Congress. The administration has sought to build a regional security coalition of governments willing to coordinate military and law enforcement capabilities against organized crime. But

U.S. military strikes on boats suspected of carrying drugs in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific have raised serious questions about their legal basis, effectiveness, and accountability. The Lead Inspector General's report to Congress on Operation Southern Spear is an important source documenting these operations and their consequences.

Democratic lawmakers are likely to use budget restrictions, oversight hearings, and human rights conditions to challenge aspects of the administration's security agenda. The recent attempt to impeach Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth also highlighted the growing controversy surrounding the administration's military policies. The Republican-led House blocked that effort on November 10. With Congress changing hands in January, the Pentagon is likely to face tougher scrutiny and renewed questions about the scope, legality, and effectiveness of its operations in Latin America.

A Democratic Congress is unlikely to end regional security cooperation. Organized crime and trafficking networks remain serious challenges across Latin America, regardless of who controls Washington. The debate is more likely to focus on how cooperation is carried out. While many governments welcome U.S. support against criminal organizations, they may be less willing to support initiatives that appear to expand unilateral U.S. influence. That tension could shape the future of the Shield of the Americas.

The Stephen Miller Effect

One of the most important developments to watch is Stephen Miller's appointment as White House chief of staff. Its implications extend well beyond domestic politics. Miller has been one of the principal architects and advocates of Trump's hardline immigration and security agenda. He has also been an influential voice in the administration's approach to Venezuela and its military campaign against suspected drug-trafficking vessels. His appointment therefore carries implications for U.S. policy far beyond Washington.

Miller's worldview leaves little separation between homeland security and foreign policy. Migration, drug trafficking, border security, and regional influence are treated as interconnected national security challenges. From this perspective, developments in Latin America are not simply diplomatic matters but direct extensions of America's domestic

security.

Miller's growing influence could push U.S. policy toward Latin America even further in a security-focused direction. Rather than emphasizing diplomacy and multilateral engagement, the administration may increasingly rely on military tools, intelligence operations, and economic coercion. At the same time, if the costs and political fallout from the conflict with Iran continue to grow, Trump may look closer to home for opportunities to project strength. Migration and organized crime are already high on the domestic political agenda, making them compelling justifications for a more assertive U.S. role in the region.

Cuba may be where this approach is most visibly tested. By linking the island's leadership to migration pressures, regional instability, and the influence of U.S. adversaries, the administration could increasingly portray Havana through a national security lens. Once that framework is established, it becomes easier to apply it elsewhere, particularly to governments viewed as insufficiently cooperative in the fight against organized crime and trafficking.

For Latin America, the question is not whether the Donroe Doctrine will endure, but what form it will take under greater political constraints. The coming years will likely bring an ongoing struggle between congressional oversight and presidential discretion. Miller's appointment points to an administration that remains committed to an active role in the hemisphere, even if the tools evolve. Faced with greater scrutiny at home, the White House may turn increasingly to executive action, economic leverage, and security policy to advance its objectives. The result is unlikely to be a U.S. retreat from Latin America. More likely, it will be a more contested, and potentially more securitized, engagement with the region

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