



The Case for Optimism on Trump’s Latin America Focus

Former U.S. SOUTHCOM Commander Gen. Laura Richardson says she’s “hopeful” but warns against a “blanket stop” on aid to the region.

By [John Haltiwanger](#), a reporter at *Foreign Policy*.



U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio shakes hands with Panama Canal Authority Administrator Ricaurte Vasquez during a tour at the Miraflores locks of the Panama Canal in Panama City on Feb. 2. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio shakes hands with Panama Canal Authority Administrator Ricaurte Vasquez during a tour at the Miraflores locks of the Panama Canal in Panama City on Feb. 2. MARK SCHIEFELBEIN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

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U.S. President Donald Trump has been in office for less than a month, but he has already taken a number of steps that have had rippling effects across the world—and particularly in Latin America.

Foreign Policy spoke with retired Army Gen. Laura Richardson, who oversaw U.S. military operations across Latin America and the Caribbean as commander of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) from 2021 to 2024, about the potential risks and rewards of the Trump administration’s approach to the region so far.

Richardson, who is starting a new role as co-chair of the National Security Advisory Council at the U.S. Global Leadership Coalition—a Washington-based nonprofit that brings together business, military, faith, and political leaders to bolster U.S. investments in global development and diplomacy—touched on everything from China’s growing influence in the region to the impact that Trump’s aid freeze could have on issues such as border security.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Foreign Policy: Since his inauguration, we’ve seen Trump pull the United States out of the World Health Organization, the U.N. Human Rights Council, and the Paris climate accord. He’s frozen all foreign aid. He’s moved to dismantle the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Critics of these moves are concerned that Trump is pulling the U.S. away from the world and warn that U.S. adversaries will fill the void as Washington becomes less engaged with the international community. Do you share these concerns? How important is U.S. soft power to national security and international stability?

Gen. Laura Richardson: There’s a lot to unpack with that question.

It’s really important for a new administration to get their arms around where the money is going. As has been advertised, we’re seeing a review of where funding is going across the board at all of the agencies. I completely agree with getting your hands around where the money’s going. Certainly, we’ve seen over the past couple of weeks some very aggressive measures to quickly do that—and there are positives and negatives to that.

As this review gets done, it’s really important to get rid of the things where taxpayer dollars shouldn’t be going. But for the most part, there’s a lot of very important programs that keep our strategic competition for Team USA very much in the game. And where we are not, and where we cede, we cede ground to the axis of aggressors, whether it’s China, Russia, Iran, [or] North Korea.

Where I was working in my last position at SOUTHCOM in Latin America and the Caribbean, there’s some really important programs that hopefully get turned back on after the review is done by the new team.

FP: Some critics of Trump have raised concerns that these recent moves regarding foreign aid and USAID could exacerbate the type of problems that lead to increases in migration, which the president has vowed to work against. Do you share these concerns?

LR: There are programs that have to do with human trafficking, drug trafficking, that impact what happens on the U.S. southern border or drugs coming in through the Florida straits and those sorts of things. Certainly, you want those programs to continue to be effective and not help further exacerbate those kinds of problems. These programs are hugely important in terms of the cost of deterrence. Investment in programs like this that help on the development side keep us from later having to employ a more expensive option. And the military is always very, very expensive. Wars are more expensive than the cost of deterrence.

And where we are not, the void is quickly filled, whether that be by our geostrategic competitors or by transnational criminal organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean. I’ve also said that [these organizations] have been doing the dirty work on the ground that allows China to come in with bags of

cash—or with the Belt and Road Initiative—and that looks attractive because there aren't any other options. That vicious cycle is very much connected in the region. And that's just an example in one region in the world.

FP: Secretary of State Marco Rubio recently said that the administration is going to pursue an "[Americas First](#)" foreign policy. Are you encouraged by the fact Rubio is making Latin America a top priority?

LR: There are absolutely encouraging signs, because for years we were not having high-level visits in the region. Every year, I testified—as part of my posture statement that all of the commanders have to do—that we need more high-level visits into the region. So, I'm really, really excited.

FP: So far, we've seen the administration zero in on issues like deportations and tariffs when it comes to Latin America. What would you like to see prioritized?

LR: The region has been feeding and fueling the world, and it's not receiving the benefit from it. In terms of agriculture, over 50 percent of the world's soybean supply is from this region. You've got all these critical minerals and rare-earth elements that you need for technology that are in the region—60 percent of the world's lithium. You can go on and on.

But migration continues to increase because they can't get health care, families can't have a normal life. And we've seen a transition from single movers to whole families that are moving and making that dangerous trek through the Darién [Gap].

I've been to the migrant shelters in Colombia, Panama, and Guatemala, and I've talked with many families. Pregnant moms with little kids. And you're thinking: Why in the world would they be making this journey? And they all say that they're going to America to realize the American dream. They just want to have normal things like a house, a car, health care, food—and they can't get it. So, how do we make the American dream the "Americas dream"? With all the things that they have in the region, how do we have people stay put?

Certainly, the 8 million that have fled Venezuela doesn't help the situation. It's one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world, and that has plagued the entire region.

And with the transnational criminal organizations, human trafficking, drug trafficking, illegal mining, illegal logging, and counterfeit goods are off the charts and continue to grow. They do the dirty work and plow the ground for the axis of aggressors to come in and be able to look like they're saving the day. China, especially with their predatory loans and the playbook that they have used in other places in the world, they're absolutely doing that in this region. How do we counter against that?

And also cross-border coordination. In Latin America, there are 28 likeminded democracies, and they're fighting amongst each other or they're skeptical of each other when they should be working together more.

So as [Trump's team] focus[es] on aligning the money to the policies of President Trump and the new administration, I really hope that doesn't take too long and that it's not just a blanket stop, because all countries in the world look to us as the leader. Bottom line.

FP: Do Trump's policies toward Latin America risk alienating U.S. allies in the region in a way that could push them closer to China?

LR: You can look at it that way. But at the end of the day, China's a communist country. And the bottom line is, just from my experience in Latin America and the Caribbean, the region wants to work with us.

With 22 of the 31 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean signed on to the Belt and Road Initiative, it looks like investment. But at the end of the day, it's not. A lot of the time it's shoddy work, cost overruns, and environmental hazards that have been created. They don't hire the local population to help. They bring in Chinese workers, outsourcing their own unemployment problem in China. There's just a lot of negatives.

But why aren't U.S. companies and Western companies competing on these tenders and contracts? What are the barriers to competing and being in the region and working on critical infrastructure such as deep-water ports, energy, telecommunications, [and] the 5G space? You can't gripe about the fact that China's winning all the tenders if you're not competing. You got to have your jersey on, you have to be on the field. You got to be competing.

So, how do we make it easier for our companies to compete? I've said many times that economic security rests on national security. We have a lot of companies in the region, but the security situation is tenuous. This discussion in terms of tariffs and migration jump-starts that discussion. I'm really excited. I'm really hopeful.

The administration is obviously hitting the ground running. Those voices that help amplify the importance of programs agree that we've got to really protect taxpayer dollars and make sure that that money is going into the right places for the right things. I completely agree with the review and with the speed with which they're working. But there is a huge concern, though, that we just cannot retreat, because that void will get filled and get filled really fast by countries in terms of the axis of aggressors and transnational criminal organizations.

FP: What are your thoughts on Trump's concerns about Chinese influence in the Panama Canal? He's made misleading statements in terms of the extent of Chinese involvement there. But is it fair to be concerned about the fact that two of the canal's five ports are operated by a powerful Hong Kong-based company?

LR: Again, it's the way I look at the importance of the U.S. being there and competing. We did not have a U.S. ambassador in Panama for five years after Ambassador [John] Feeley left. It was five years before Ambassador [Mari Carmen] Aponte came in 2022.

Panama signed 47 bilateral agreements with China. The Belt and Road Initiative. All of that happened when our no. 1 diplomat wasn't there.

And I worry about the critical infrastructure because, if you go back to history, one of the reasons why the canal was built in the first place was to connect the east and the west. And if you don't have that east and west connection, then you're going all the way down to the Strait of Magellan, which adds several days. If you just look at it from the military perspective and what happened when the Suez Canal

was blocked for a period of time and what it did to global commerce—we shouldn't allow those kinds of things.

China focuses on the critical infrastructure for these countries. When you look at all the different things that they have done it makes you question why they're doing it. I look at it from the military perspective, but again, you can't complain about it if you're not there competing on the contracts. We have to be there. We have to be present. And that's why, again, I am hopeful that this review will take place very quickly and that programs will get instituted back.

Secretary Rubio could have gone anywhere in the world on his first trip, and he came to this region first. That shows the importance. I'm really excited about it. It's long overdue.