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SPOTLIGHT

U.S. Secretary of State Travels to Latin America for His Inaugural Visit

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The choice of several Central American countries and the Dominican Republic as the destinations for Secretary of State Marco Rubio's first foreign trip on 1-6 February reflected their significance in key issues for the Donald Trump administration, mainly the fight against irregular migration to the United States. Trump's aggressive rhetoric and threats towards close partners in Latin America visibly marked Rubio's tour.

What determined the destinations on Rubio's itinerary?

The Secretary of State's visits to Panama, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic aimed to confirm the new administration's desire to restore U.S. influence in Latin America after years of gradual marginalisation in U.S. foreign policy. Still, as in [his first presidency \(2017-2021\)](#), [Trump and his team](#) see the region mainly as a source of threats to the U.S.—out-of-control irregular migration, organised crime and drug trafficking, as well as Chinese expansion. The administration wants Latin American partners to collaborate on these issues and argues this will bring mutual benefits for the security and development of the Americas. That political offer, though, comes with threats and blackmail to force such cooperation. Rubio's trip was an opportunity to demonstrate that approach to Latin America. The choice of the countries he visited seemingly stemmed from their importance for implementing [Trump's electoral plans](#) but might have also resulted from the belief that it would be easier to achieve his objectives and announce quick successes of the new vision of U.S. relations with Latin America.

What was the context of the regional visit?

Rubio's travels took place at a tense time between the U.S. and various Latin American countries. Before becoming president, Trump said that the U.S. would take control of the

Panama Canal, mainly in response to China's increasing presence there. A week after his inauguration, Trump, in a sharp response to the refusal to accept two U.S. military aircraft with deported Colombians, threatened Colombia's president with tariffs and the cancellation of visas to the U.S. In contrast, at the end of January, Trump's special envoy Richard Grenell met with Venezuelan regime leader Nicolas Maduro in Caracas. He returned with a few U.S. citizens who had been imprisoned there. He demonstrated that the new administration is ready to negotiate with the illegitimate president of Venezuela, who faces an arrest warrant for complicity in drug smuggling into the U.S. and charges of crimes against humanity. Shortly afterwards, [Trump announced punitive tariffs on Mexico](#) to force cooperation on migration control and the fight against fentanyl smuggling. The end of the Secretary of State's trip coincided with the transfer of the first group of irregular migrants in the U.S. to a facility prepared at the country's Guantanamo Bay Naval Base on the island of Cuba.

Why was the visit to Panama notable?

Panama is vital to reducing irregular migration to the U.S. because it is an important transit country for people trying to reach the U.S. by land from South America. In 2023, the Panamanian authorities registered 520,000 such migrants, and in 2024, more than 300,000. Since taking over in July 2024, the government of President José Raúl Mulino tightened controls on the border with Colombia in an area

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known as the Darién Gap, covered by jungle and with no road link between the two countries. Mulino had previously agreed to a deal with the Biden administration to accept planes with third-country nationals deported from the U.S. On 3 February, Rubio attended the reception of one such flight in Panama. The Secretary of State explained Trump's demands related to the Panama Canal, citing the administration's view that Chinese involvement in strategic infrastructure (including ports adjacent to the Canal) threatens the U.S. and the region's security. He claimed that China's authorities can access sensitive information, such as cargo details, and could easily block passage. He also demanded a fee exemption for U.S. naval vessels, arguing that they contribute to the security of the canal. Rubio threatened the Panamanian government with consequences if there were no immediate changes.

What were the main issues Rubio presented while in the other countries?

In El Salvador, the Secretary of State praised its President Nayib Bukele for his effectiveness in pacifying gangs, including by constructing a special prison for them, and improving public security. The Salvadorean MS-13 gang also operates in the United States, and Trump's administration included it along with Mexican cartels and the Venezuelan Tren de Aragua group in the 20 January decree declaring these groups as terrorist organisations. Rubio also signed a memorandum of cooperation with El Salvador on cooperation in civilian nuclear energy and highlighted the potential for nearshoring (e.g., switching manufacturing and other economic activity from China). In the other countries he visited, he emphasised cooperation in the fight against irregular migration and criminal groups. In Costa Rica, the development of cooperation on cybersecurity and the fight against criminal groups were prominent topics. He singled out Guatemala as one of the few countries that has not withdrawn its recognition of Taiwan. In the Dominican Republic, Rubio talked about the need to overcome a deep crisis in neighbouring Haiti, a source of large migration flows, in response to which the Dominican Republic have used mass deportations. Rubio emphasised the significance of this U.S. partner in fighting drugs and as a prospective provider of rare earths metals. He also took part in the U.S. seizure of

a plane used by the Venezuelan regime, citing a breach of sanctions.

How did the authorities of the visited countries react?

Before Rubio's visit, President Mulino responded to Trump's demands regarding the canal, claiming that Panama's sovereignty over it is non-negotiable. Nevertheless, he announced an audit of the administration of the canal regarding the Chinese presence. After he met Rubio, Mulino declared his government would not extend the Belt and Road Initiative memorandum of cooperation signed with China in 2017. He also confirmed his intention to expand cooperation in receiving repatriation flights and pointed at opportunities for more U.S. investment in Panama. The president of El Salvador, meanwhile, offered not only to accept Salvadoran and Venezuelan criminals serving sentences in the U.S. but also convicted U.S. citizens. The other countries Rubio visited pledged cooperation on reducing irregular migration and fighting organised crime, among other issues.

How might U.S.-Latin America relations change?

It will be hard for Latin American states on their own to resist the threats and blackmail of the Trump administration. The region lacks mechanisms for effective joint counteraction. For example, the initiative to hold an extraordinary Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) summit in response to Colombia's recent spat with the U.S. failed. The difficulty stems from the intergovernmental nature of the regional organisations and ideological differences within the region (including the stance towards the U.S.), among other reasons. Rubio's first trip shows that the U.S. intends to reward governments that work closely with it and strong, popular leaders. The Secretary of State singled out Bukele, who enjoys high public support. However, he won his second presidency last year while ignoring the constitutional term limit, and his hardline policy towards gangs has raised human rights concerns. The aggressive methods of the U.S. towards its Latin American partners will antagonise them and may be problematic for U.S. allies. In the long term, this may favour China and its continued involvement in the region as the only viable counterweight to the U.S.