

**Latin America**

## **'Back to 1897': Latin America**

### **scrambles to respond to Donald**

### **Trump's aggression**



Colombia's President Gustavo Petro finds little support for confrontational stance against US

**Michael Stott** in Rio de Janeiro and **Joe Daniels** in Bogotá YESTERDAY

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Latin American presidents will hold an emergency summit on Thursday to respond to President Donald Trump's mass deportations of migrants as they reel from his aggressive tactics towards two of Washington's traditional regional allies.

Trump clamped 25 per cent tariffs on trade with [Colombia](#) and imposed visa and other sanctions on Sunday after leftwing President Gustavo Petro turned back US military flights deporting migrants. The [confrontation ended](#) within hours after Bogotá caved in to Washington's demands.

The dramatic clash, much of it conducted over social media, unsettled Latin American nations already scared by Trump's threats of military force to re-establish US control over the Panama Canal and of steep tariffs on Mexico, the US's biggest trading partner.

"There is a lot of alarm among the Latin American embassies in Washington," said a senior regional diplomat in Washington. "We seem to have gone back to 1897 and the era of President [William] McKinley, who invaded Cuba and the Philippines."

Emerging market currencies were rattled by Sunday's dispute, with the Mexican peso and South African rand both falling about two per cent against the US dollar. Colombia's peso fell 1.5 per cent against the dollar on Monday morning before recovering a little ground.

Panama, a nation of just 4.5mn people with no army and a heavy dependence on US trade and investment, is seen as particularly vulnerable to [Trump's demands](#) for Washington to take back control of the canal it built more than a century ago. The US president has claimed China now operates the canal and US shipping is being "ripped off" by the charges to use the waterway.





Donald Trump claims China operates the Panama Canal and US shipping is being 'ripped off' by the charges to use the waterway © Arnulfo Franco/AFP via Getty Images

Honduran President Xiomara Castro called an emergency summit of the region's leaders in her capacity as head of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (Celac), after a request by Petro. The meeting will discuss migration, the environment and regional unity, she said on X.

Michael Shifter, a senior fellow at the Inter-American Dialogue think-tank in Washington, said Latin American leaders were unlikely to defer to Trump.

"They're going to try to strike a balance," he said, "recognising that on the one hand, they have to be pragmatic because Trump is actually capable of imposing sanctions, which would be very painful for these countries. On the other side, they really have to save face as well and show they have national pride and protect sovereignty."

Russian allies Cuba and Venezuela gave swift backing to Petro, a former guerrilla with a long record of rants against [US policy](#) on social media on issues ranging from Gaza to the war on drugs. But the region's biggest powers, Brazil and Mexico, did not comment publicly.

Diplomats said they wanted to co-ordinate positions discreetly and let the dust settle before taking a public stance.

"Petro has given a lesson in how not to deal with Trump," said a second regional diplomat. "He went into battle on social media without having a way to sustain his fight."

Several commentators pointed out the Colombian leader had undermined his own position by previously agreeing to take US military flights deporting migrants, which date back years under Democrat and Republican administrations.

Colombia, traditionally the closest US ally in South America, is heavily reliant on

the US market for its exports of oil, coffee and cut flowers, and has little leverage with Washington.



Colombia is heavily reliant on the US market for its exports of coffee beans. The country's officials held crisis talks on Sunday to deal with the dispute with the US © Raul Arboleda/AFP via Getty Images

The timing was also awkward, with Colombia's foreign minister Luis Gilberto Murillo — a pragmatic English speaker and ex-ambassador to Washington — due to be replaced on February 1 by Laura Sarabia, Petro's 30-year-old chief of staff, who has no diplomatic experience.

With Petro's whereabouts on Sunday unclear, a crisis team made up of Sarabia, Murillo and other officials met in the presidential palace and the foreign ministry headquarters. The main interlocutor on the US side, diplomats said, was Mauricio Claver-Carone, Trump's special envoy for Latin America in the state department. "Petro was in constant communication, always listening and responding," said a person with direct knowledge of the talks.

Bruce Mac Master, president of Colombia's main business association, spent the day lobbying Petro's diplomatic team, and spoke with Sarabia several times.

"I think Petro had no idea of the dimensions and impact of US relations," Mac Master said. "He soon realised that the effects would be felt everywhere, starting with the exchange rate. I think he learned more about economics from that than he had in the rest of his life."

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By contrast, Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum is seen in the region as having handled Trump better. She has made her disagreements with US policy clear in measured public comments, while privately agreeing to many of Trump's demands on taking back migrants and cracking down on fentanyl trafficking.

China has hugely expanded its trade and investment in Latin America this century, and Beijing is likely to view Trump's unpredictable moves as an ideal opportunity to present itself as a more reliable partner, diplomats and analysts said.

Shifter, of Inter-American Dialogue, said: "Celac is the platform for China in Latin America, so Thursday's summit is a kind of proxy for showing [Washington] that if [it is] really going to punish us, then China's willing to fill the gap and come in even more than it has already."

*Additional reporting by Tommy Stubbington in London*

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