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2025 Foreign Policy Review: A New Era of U.S. Imperialism

By Vicki Gass

It has been a dark year for U.S. foreign policy. Since coming into power, President Trump has been on a destructive crusade to subvert human rights and democracy in the United States and abroad. From the dismantling of U.S. foreign assistance institutions to the brutal enforcement of rights-violating immigration policies to the unlawful interference in other countries' affairs, there is not a lot to celebrate this year.



Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group deployed in the Caribbean Sea / Credit: U.S. Navy

Last year I [warned](#) that a second Trump administration would be worse than the first. A year later, I can say this administration's vile actions and rhetoric have surpassed my worst fears.

The Return of Monroe

Under the banner of "[America First](#)," the Trump administration is ushering in a new era of U.S. imperialism in Latin America. In its recently released [National Security Strategy](#), the administration states that it will "reassert and enforce the Monroe

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The **Latin America Working Group Education Fund (LAWGEF)** mobilizes concerned citizens, organizations, and networks to call for just U.S. policies towards Latin America and the Caribbean. We educate policymakers and the public about the impact of U.S. foreign and immigration policy. We coordinate a coalition of over 50 U.S. organizations and work closely with civil society partners in Latin America to support their human rights campaigns and make sure their voices are heard in the policy debates that take place in Washington, D.C.

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Doctrine to restore American preeminence in the Western Hemisphere, and to protect our homeland and our access to key geographies throughout the region" and deny non-hemispheric competitors the ability to "own or control strategically vital assets."

This positioning marks a shift from recent decades of U.S. policy toward Latin America, which had favored cooperation and democracy building while preserving U.S. economic interests.

The Trump doctrine employs an aggressive carrot-and-stick approach with outsized rewards and severe punishments, and demonstrates the Trump administration's willingness to directly intervene in our neighboring countries' domestic affairs. For example, in response to Argentine President Milei's support for MAGA early on in the administration, President Trump provided a [\\$20 billion bailout](#) that helped secure Milei's victory in Argentina's midterm legislative elections. In exchange for jailing Venezuelans in CECOT, President Trump removed El Salvador from the State Department's [travel ban list](#), crucial for President Bukele's promotion of tourism, and returned high-level [MS-13 gang members](#) who were credibly reported to have conspired with President Bukele to cement his party's supermajority in the legislature. Meanwhile, those deemed disloyal face crushing penalties. The administration imposed a [50% tariff on Brazilian imports](#) after local courts convicted former President (and Trump ally) Bolsonaro for instigating a coup. It also [sanctioned](#) Colombian President Gustavo Petro for his alleged involvement in drug trafficking and, no doubt, for speaking out against U.S. support for Israel's actions in Palestine at the United Nations.

While the Trump administration's policies may appear incoherent, they actually follow a clear pattern. Consider the contrast: the administration has carried out 22 extrajudicial strikes in international waters targeting alleged drug-trafficking boats, [killing at least 87 people](#). Meanwhile, President Trump [pardoned](#) Juan Orlando Hernández, a former Honduran president convicted of trafficking 400 tons of cocaine to the United States. The message is clear: loyalty to Trump matters more than accountability for corruption or crime.

This approach is backed by overwhelming military force. The massive military buildup in the region—including the [deployment](#) of the Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group and over 15,000 troops in the Caribbean—isn't just about Venezuelan President Maduro. It's a warning to the entire hemisphere. The National Security Strategy makes the logic explicit: U.S. prosperity depends on the ability to "assert ourselves confidently where and when we need to in the region." Aid to allies, the document states, will be conditional on reducing "adversarial outside influence" and protecting U.S. interests—namely, access to critical minerals and supply chains. Most telling, the strategy envisions a permanent U.S. military presence in Latin America—gunboat diplomacy for the 21st century, where economic interests are secured through the threat of force.

Meeting the Moment

The Trump doctrine's combination of military intimidation, economic coercion, and blatant disregard for human rights represents an existential threat to the values we fight for. LAWG's response has been multi-layered. Since the beginning of this administration, we have focused on:

- 1 Exposing abuses and demanding justice in real time.** When the Trump administration arrests anti-corruption champions like [Ruth López of Cristosal](#) or threatens democratic processes in Honduras, we immediately sound the alarm—mobilizing our network, alerting Congress, and ensuring these violations don't go unnoticed. Our testimony on Capitol Hill has documented the devastating human cost of USAID cuts, giving voice to partners across the region whose critical programs hang in the balance. Without this rapid response, these abuses would proceed in silence.
- 2 Defending what remains and fighting for what's possible.** Even as the administration dismantles foreign assistance infrastructure, we continue advocating to preserve essential human rights programs in appropriations bills. We keep our member organizations and coalition partners informed with timely analysis of policy developments, ensuring the broader advocacy community can coordinate effective responses. This steady work maintains pressure on decision-makers and protects vulnerable programs from complete elimination.
- 3 Building accountability mechanisms and envisioning the future we need.** We're not just playing defense. LAWG is organizing coalitions to hold this administration accountable, including calling for articles of impeachment against cabinet members responsible for extrajudicial killings on the high seas. At the same time, we're convening conversations about what human rights-centered foreign assistance should look like—because this administration won't last forever, and we need to be ready with a better vision when the opportunity comes.

The future remains uncertain, politically and financially, with this administration. But LAWG's role is clear, and thanks to the solidarity and support of activists like you, we will continue to fight for human rights and justice in the Americas.

The Case of CAJAR:

A Measure of Accountability for Human Rights Defenders in Colombia

By Kim Stanton

Colombia has long held the terrible distinction of being one of the [most dangerous countries in the world](#) for human rights defenders. When Gustavo Petro was elected president in 2022 on a pro-peace platform, there were high hopes for dramatic improvement. But since his inauguration in August 2022, the number of killings of human rights defenders has essentially [held steady](#) at a level that is lower overall than during the previous rightist government of Iván Duque (2018-2022), and much lower than during the brutal years of Álvaro Uribe's right-wing government (2002-2010), but higher than under Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018), who negotiated the historic 2016 Peace Accord. Social and community leaders, including environmental leaders, suffer the brunt of the continuing violence; 161 were killed between January and November 6, 2025.

For decades, advocates have identified the lack of accountability for threats and attacks against human rights defenders as a major reason for their persistence. So it was notable that on October 18, President Petro presided over a public event in which he recognized the Colombian State's responsibility and apologized in its name for serious human rights violations committed from the 1990s



President Petro with CAJAR co-founder Eduardo Carreño Wilches at public ceremony. Credit: Juan Diego Cano / Presidencia de la República de Colombia



Activists honor murdered rights defenders at public ceremony. Credit: Juan Diego Cano / Presidencia de la República de Colombia

onward against members of the Colectivo de Abogados y Abogadas José Alvear Restrepo (CAJAR), one of Colombia's most prominent human rights organizations.

CAJAR is part of the first generation of human rights NGOs in Colombia, organized in response to the infamous [Security Statute](#) decreed in 1978 by then-President Julio Turbay Ayala. The [case](#) presented to the Court documented acts of violence, harassment, and intimidation carried out over more than two decades in a systematic effort to undermine the organization's human rights work, which centers on domestic and international litigation and advocacy. CAJAR was subjected to illegal surveillance, false accusations of links to guerrillas and terrorism by public officials, and direct threats against individual lawyers and their children, generating such fear and insecurity that some were forced into exile. Personal information obtained through the illegal surveillance was handed over to paramilitary organizations, putting at risk the lives and safety of members of CAJAR. The Court found that the Colombian judicial system never undertook a serious investigation of these criminal acts to uncover the truth of what occurred or identify the individuals responsible. Colombia thus failed completely in its duty to protect the rights of members of CAJAR to freedom of expression, association and movement, privacy, physical integrity, judicial guarantees, protection of the family, and protection of honor and dignity, among others.

When the Inter-American Court finds a State responsible for violations of human rights, it includes an official state apology among the measures it orders to repair the victims and guarantee non-recurrence. Too often the acts of

recognition occur, but their reparative effect is undercut because steps to ensure justice at the domestic level, and the policy changes and institutional reforms necessary for non-recurrence, lag far behind.

But in the case of CAJAR, the act of recognition was far more substantive than usual. The Minister of Defense [stood](#) to "recognize and honor the work of human rights defenders, a necessary role for the deepening of our democracy"—a marked change from the [historical practice](#) of treating human rights defenders as the internal enemy. The Attorney General [proposed](#) a comprehensive review of the threats and attacks against CAJAR focused on identifying patterns of criminal action, an approach that in principle would fulfill several of the Court's orders: to move forward with investigations, obtain needed information from the security forces, and ensure victims'

access throughout. President Petro [concluded](#) the event by ordering the [declassification of the archives](#) of the discredited Department of Administrative Security (DAS), implicated in multiple intelligence scandals under President Uribe and dissolved in 2011. The declassification responds to another of the reparation measures ordered by the Court. Petro also reiterated Colombia's commitment to funding the Inter-American Human Rights system.

While the Court's ruling is focused on rights violations committed against CAJAR, its orders benefit human rights defenders throughout Colombia and [Latin America](#). Focusing investigations on patterns of threats and attacks, and declassifying intelligence archives known to contain false information, have been long-standing demands of the Colombian human rights movement. The ruling requires Colombia to reform its intelligence laws to conform to international standards by ensuring judicial control and parliamentary and civil society oversight. Legislation to that end has been introduced in the Colombian Congress. And the Court used the case to further elaborate the autonomous "right to defend human rights," encompassing the free exercise, without limits or risks, of the full range of activities needed to promote, defend, and protect human rights.

As the Trump administration guts U.S. support for human rights at all levels, in ways unimaginable a year ago, the Petro government is going in the opposite direction. The government's good intentions do not preclude criticism of its rights record on the ground. But Colombia's embrace of the Court's ruling in the CAJAR case is one piece of good news in very dark times.

Dispatch from El Salvador: Repression is Taking Root

By Anonymous Activist

Editor's Note: This dispatch was written by a human rights defender working in El Salvador. The author's identity is being protected due to the risks faced by activists and journalists under the Bukele government.

El Salvador is in the grip of an unprecedented human rights crisis. For nearly four years, the country has been under a State of Exception that has suspended constitutional rights for the entire population. What began in March 2022 as an emergency response to gang violence has become a tool of authoritarian control—one that accelerated dramatically after Donald Trump's election in November 2024.

The 1992 Peace Accords that ended a brutal 13-year civil war and 60 years of military dictatorship now hang in the balance. President Nayib Bukele, emboldened by Trump's victory and freed from U.S. pressure to respect human rights, has moved swiftly to consolidate absolute power.

From Emergency Measure to Total Control

The State of Exception was imposed on March 27, 2022, following a weekend killing spree by gangs. It eliminated due process, the presumption of innocence, and other fundamental constitutional rights. Nearly four years later, it has been renewed 45 times (despite the government's claim of zero gang-related killings since its inception).

More than 85,000 people have been arrested. Human rights organizations estimate that at least 30% are innocent. Many others fall into a gray area: people forced to collaborate with gangs under threat of death. Ironically, many actual gang members were tipped off before the crackdown and fled the country. The tattooed gang members featured in government propaganda videos at the CECOT mega-prison were mostly arrested and sentenced before the State of Exception even began.

For four years, neither the innocent nor the guilty have had the right to a trial. The government extended the investigative period first to three years, then to five, denying due process indefinitely. Mass trials have become the norm. People are grouped into gang cliques based solely on where they live.

The prison conditions are horrific. Three to four prisoners share a single slat bed while others sleep on the floor. One toilet serves 200 to 250 prisoners, with feces covering the floors. Each prisoner receives one glass of drinking water per day and three glasses for bathing. In the early months, collective punishment meant only one meal per day.

Prisoners released after being cleared of charges had lost 60 pounds and were covered in scabies. Socorro Jurídico Humanitario has documented 464 prison deaths, mostly from torture or medical neglect. Ninety-four percent of the victims had no proven gang ties. No one is allowed to communicate with family.

Even the testimonies from Venezuelan migrants held in CECOT pale in comparison to conditions in the prisons holding innocent people.

The Crackdown Intensifies

The previous U.S. administration pressured Bukele to respect human rights and free speech during the State of Exception. That pressure evaporated with Trump's inauguration.

On January 29, 2025, the Legislative Assembly changed the constitutional amendment process so the constitution can now be altered overnight instead of requiring approval by two consecutive legislatures. The first change? Allowing indefinite presidential terms.

In May 2025, authorities arrested an environmental lawyer and pastor who had organized a peaceful protest with 200 families against forced displacement. Then came the ar-



Award-winning human rights lawyer Ruth López being escorted out of court hearing. Credit: Salvador Melendez / AP

rest of Ruth López, Cristosal's lead anti-corruption lawyer. The arrests sent shockwaves through the human rights community. More than 140 journalists and human rights defenders fled into self-imposed exile after receiving information about imminent arrests.

Also in May, Bukele introduced the Foreign Agent's Law, forcing nonprofits to register as foreign agents and imposing a 30% tax on all foreign donations—a transparent effort to silence critics.

The suspension of constitutional rights is no longer limited to alleged gang members. It now targets environmentalists, human rights defenders, and journalists. Anyone who questions the government is at risk.

The Trump Connection

The United States is not a bystander in this crisis. Trump's approach to Latin America has given Bukele a green light to abandon any pretense of respecting human rights.

The parallels are striking and deliberate. Trump pardoned former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, a convicted drug trafficker. Bukele freed gang leaders with no judicial process. Trump has ordered the military to blow up boats belonging to Venezuelan fishermen. Bukele has conducted mass arrests of fishermen along El Salvador's coast. The Trump administration has negotiated to send criminals from the U.S. to CECOT in exchange for extraditing gang leaders that Bukele previously freed.

The futures of our countries are now intertwined, and so are the threats to democracy and human rights in both.

What Comes Next

From where I sit, the situation feels increasingly precarious. Colleagues have fled. Organizations are shutting down or operating in fear. Families live in terror of arbitrary arrest. The space for dissent shrinks daily.

But resistance continues. Human rights organizations document abuses despite the risks. Families of the imprisoned refuse to stay silent. International solidarity networks are paying attention.

Bukele's authoritarian project depends on silence, isolation, and impunity. Our job is to deny him all three.

The 1992 Peace Accords represented a hard-won victory for democracy and human rights after decades of violence and dictatorship. We cannot allow them to be dismantled without a fight. Only solidarity and organized people can change this course.

Operation Midway Blitz: The Reality of Forced Return

By Dulce Guzmán

Chicago communities have been rightfully lauded for educating residents on exercising their rights during encounters with law enforcement. But nothing could have prepared Chicago for the level of aggression deployed during a federal operation that unfolded for more than two months across the city and its suburbs. This operation followed a major [Supreme Court decision](#) in September that effectively sanctioned the targeting of people who appear Latino, work low-wage jobs, or live in immigrant neighborhoods, regardless of their actual immigration status. Suddenly, being a working-class person who appears non-white, especially Mexican, meant carrying a passport even if you are a U.S. citizen, or choosing between earning your family's next meal and staying home to avoid being separated from them.

The tactics used during [Operation Midway Blitz](#)—helicopters over neighborhoods, military-style raids, aggressive surveillance, and bright lights trailing communities—may have been media spectacles for federal authorities, but the harm was anything but performative. More than 3,000 arrests were made, and thousands more family members now carry the trauma, anxiety, and financial instability that come with having a loved one detained or deported. Many households lost their primary breadwinner overnight. From rubber bullets and pepper spray to broken car windows and arbitrary arrests, ICE and CBP have run wild with only everyday people to document and fight to keep them accountable.

Fear-mongering and [inhumane conditions](#) at the Broadview detention center have placed immense psychological pressure on detainees, leading thousands to sign "voluntary departure" documents. But a decision made under duress is anything but voluntary. Coercion does not become consent simply because it occurs in a detention facility or in your home when you feel pushed against a wall by the abductions and violations of rights taking place outside your door.

Chicago's experience reflects an alarming national trend: the federal government increasingly relies on fear, coercion, and destabilization to push people toward [forced return](#). Earlier in the year, the administration announced



ICE agents forcibly detain protesters in Chicago. Credit: Anthony Vazquez / Chicago Sun Times via AP

economic incentives for so-called "voluntary" return, offering meager financial support in exchange for family separation while ignoring the conditions that compelled many to flee. Framing this initiative as a pathway to future reunification is misleading. Under current law, anyone who has been in the U.S. without authorization for more than a year and then departs, even "voluntarily," is barred from reentering for 10 years. For many, a quick return is legally impossible, making the promises of these programs false and coercive.

Forced return is not new, but the scale and intensity with which families are being pushed to abandon lives built over decades is accelerating. Many return to countries they have not known for decades, often with no housing, income, safety net, or protection from ongoing violence or political repression. Older immigrants who contributed to the U.S. economy, including paying into Social Security from which they cannot benefit, are left with no meaningful support on either side of the border.

The connection between Operation Midway Blitz and the broader landscape of forced return is clear: both rely on instability, fear, and psychological manipulation. Both exploit immigrant communities' vulnerabilities while erasing the truth that decades of congressional inaction—not individual wrongdoing—have left millions living without legal status. Life without status in the U.S. has often meant living without opportunity, protection, or the ability to plan for the future, despite immigrants' substantial contributions

to local economies and communities, including the [\\$154 billion in remittances](#) sent to Latin America in 2023 alone.

These contributions have not shielded immigrants from a system increasingly willing to use cruelty as policy. The stripping away of protections such as TPS and humanitarian parole for more than 1.5 million people underscores that immigration enforcement is driven less by legality than by political agendas determining who belongs. Indefinite detention, deportations to third countries, illegal data-sharing between

agencies, and psychological tactics have become tools for cornering people into impossible choices.

As Chicago's communities remain alert from Operation Midway Blitz and brace for future enforcement waves, the first thing that is clear is that organizations and advocates must adapt. Forced return is no longer episodic; it is a widespread and escalating strategy. The second is, our responsibility does not end once a person has been forced out of the U.S. Organizations are being called to think beyond the border to ensure people arriving in their countries of origin are being welcomed, integrated, and included in society.

Addressing migration challenges has always, but now more than ever, required a truly transnational approach. The forces shaping migration—economic instability, violence, climate disruption, and U.S. foreign and economic policy—do not begin or end at the border. The United States has a responsibility to promote humane pathways, expand legal and humanitarian protections, and reject policies built on coercion, fear, and family separation.

Alianza Americas stands firmly with migrant communities across the nation. We call for transparency, dignity, and recognition that forced return is not a humane solution. There is no justice in a system that forces people to choose between detention and destitution and calls it voluntary. A just future demands nothing less.



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