

Trump administration denounces Colombia for joining China's Belt and Road Initiative

Guilherme Ferreira**20 May 2025**

Last Tuesday, May 13, Colombia's President Gustavo Petro and other Latin American leaders met with Chinese President Xi Jinping during the IV Forum between the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and China in Beijing.

Amid efforts by many Latin American countries to diversify trade relations, with even the possibility of distancing themselves from the US as President Donald Trump escalates trade war, Petro announced on May 14 on X/Twitter, "We have entered ... the [New] Silk Road," the nickname for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's trillion-dollar infrastructure project. He added that this initiative "changes the history of our foreign relations."

According to Petro, the aim of joining the BRI is, in the short term, "to end the trade deficit with China, which amounts to 14 billion dollars a year. In the medium term, I want Colombia and Latin America to be able not only to build interoceanic infrastructure, but also to be an arrival point for submarine optical fibers from China and Europe, to become a central node for artificial intelligence."

The "interoceanic infrastructure" that Petro referred to is a rail network that would link the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea/Atlantic Ocean. In February, Bogotá inaugurated a new maritime route to boost trade between Colombia and China that links its main Pacific port in Buenaventura to Shanghai and includes a stop at the Peruvian port of Chancay, financed and majority-controlled by Chinese state-owned giant Cosco Shipping Ports.

Such an initiative further challenges US dominance in a region Washington has historically regarded as its "backyard." It could serve as an alternative to the Panama Canal, which Trump has threatened to seize because of Chinese companies' control of port facilities, a purported threat to US economic and strategic security. The aggressive "gunboat diplomacy" carried out by the Trump administration against the Panamanian government forced it to leave the Belt and Road Initiative.

On that same trip to China, Petro also announced on May 16 that "Colombia has formally requested to join the New Development Bank" (NDB), the multilateral development bank created by the BRICS, made up of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. In recent years, the grouping has incorporated half a dozen more countries, many of them long-time adversaries of the US, such as Iran. Significantly, the NDB has also promoted the increasing use of local currencies in trade among member countries and in financing projects, posing a threat to the undisputed dominance of

the US dollar.

Washington's response came from the US Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs. On May 15, it wrote on X/Twitter that "Chinese investments in Colombia and the region jeopardize the safety and security of the region," and that "The U.S. will strongly oppose recent projects and upcoming disbursements by the Inter-American Development Bank [IDB] and other IFIs [international financial institutions] to Chinese-controlled and state-owned enterprises in Colombia."

Among the projects with the participation of Chinese companies in Colombia financed by the IDB, whose majority partner is the US, is the metro in the capital, Bogotá. Chinese companies are also involved in the construction of roads and an electric train to connect Bogotá to surrounding towns. In 2020, they also acquired control of the Buriticá gold mine.

Colombia is the South American country with the most US military bases (nine). It is also one of the few countries in South America that still has more trade with the US than with China. In recent years, however, this ratio has been reversing, setting off alarm bells in Washington as it prepares for war with China.

In 2000, China was Colombia's 37th trading partner, with imports of around US\$10 million. Today, China is Colombia's second largest trading partner, with imports exceeding US\$16 billion and direct investments growing from US\$84 million in 2021 to US\$266 million in 2022.

Between 2008 and 2024, Colombian exports to China increased by 475 percent, reaching US\$2.3 billion, while Chinese imports to Colombia reached US\$14.7 billion in 2024, covering diverse products such as electronics, chemicals and textiles. In 2025, China overtook the United States as the main source of Colombian imports.

What has happened in Colombia is a reality throughout the region. In his first public statement after China and the US reached a 90-day truce in the tariff war, President Xi Jinping pointed out at the IV CELAC-China Forum that "the volume of trade [between Latin America and Beijing] ... exceeded US\$500 billion last year," a figure "40 times higher than at the beginning of the century."

Xi called on Latin American governments to "reject external interference and promote regional autonomy" and denounced "the rising tide of unilateralism and protectionism." In contrast, he declared that China and Latin America "practice true multilateralism" and "push forward the reform of the global governance system and promote the multipolarization of the

world.”

Xi also said that the Belt and Road Initiative, which already includes 22 of the 33 Latin American countries, has enabled the development of more than “200 infrastructure projects, creating millions of jobs.” According to him, China has also signed “free trade agreements with countries such as Chile, Peru, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Nicaragua.”

Serious political issues were also at stake at the IV China-CELAC Forum. China sees Latin America as the stage for a political offensive against Taiwan, which is home to seven of the 12 countries in the world that do not recognize the one-China policy. However, since 2017, Panama, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras have broken with Taipei and formalized diplomatic relations with Beijing.

For Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Workers Party-PT), who was also present at the IV China-CELAC Forum and, the day before, at a forum attended by 700 Brazilian and Chinese businesspeople, “Brazil and China will be unavoidable partners and our relationship will be indestructible.” Since 2009, the Asian giant has been Brazil’s main trading partner. He also celebrated the announced Chinese investment of R\$27 billion in Brazil in the automotive, mining, renewable energy and energy transition sectors, among others.

Lula took advantage of the trip to advocate Latin American integration in partnership with China. The main project in this regard is the “East-West Railway Corridor,” linking Brazil’s Atlantic coast to Peru’s Pacific port of Chancay. This project, he said, “will facilitate commercial exchange and bring more development to the interior of the South American continent. The bi-oceanic routes will shorten the route to China by 10,000 kilometers.”

However, the Brazilian president has yet to get Beijing on board with the project. According to a report in the *Estado de S. Paulo* newspaper, “the Chinese ... suspect that there is some geopolitical obstacle,” with the US raising its voice against Brazil. This same fear led Brazil not to join the BRI last year, establishing only a “synergy agreement” between the BRI and the Lula government’s infrastructure programs.

Striking a delicate balance between China and the US, Lula, Petro and other Latin American leaders want to try to benefit from Trump’s trade war. While Trump is pressuring trading partners to distance themselves from China in exchange for a reduction in tariffs with the US, Latin American leaders want to use growing relations with China to try to attract American investment to the region.

In an attempt to strike a balance with the CELAC-China Forum, Petro declared during his trip to China: “We are asking the US government to hold the CELAC-US summit.” In the same vein, Lula’s Finance Minister Fernando Haddad traveled to the US during the CELAC-China Forum in search of investments in the technology sector. “Brazil will not choose sides in the trade war,” he said. “The same week he [Lula] was in China, I was in the United States. [It] should mean something to an impartial observer.” He concluded: “I mean, we’re playing a game.”

This, however, is a dangerous game whose ramifications have been totally downplayed by the representatives of the new “Pink

Tide” of bourgeois nationalist governments. It is increasingly turning Latin America into a future battleground between the US and China. Since the administration of US President Joe Biden, Washington has denounced China for using its multi-billion investments in infrastructure, mainly ports, as serving a “dual” purpose, both economic and military. It has also accused Beijing of using loans to lure countries of the region into a so-called “debt trap.”

With Trump, new layers have been added to this fraudulent narrative. The Trump administration’s war on criminal groups and drug cartels as part of its offensive against immigrants hit Brazil two weeks ago. On May 6, David Gamble, acting head of sanctions coordination at the US State Department, came to Brazil to pressure the Lula government to categorize the First Capital Command (PCC) and the Red Command (CV), the country’s two largest criminal factions, as terrorist organizations. The Lula government has rejected this demand.

On Monday, the US State Department announced an offensive against the activities of “terrorist groups” in the triple border region between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, targeting the Lebanese group Hezbollah, an ally of Iran.

More significantly, at the beginning of May, the website defesanet reported that American “diplomats have been informally discussing with Brazilian interlocutors a proposal for the unrestricted US military use of Fernando de Noronha Airport (SBFN) and Natal Air Base, in Rio Grande do Norte,” in northeastern Brazil. Making the same claim that was recently used in relation to the Panama Canal, the website wrote that Washington is resorting to “the concept of ‘historical right of operational return,’ based on investments made by the US during the Second World War,” when an American air base was installed in Rio Grande do Norte.

These developments should sound alarm bells for the Latin American and global working class. The response of “left” leaders like Petro and Lula, who claim that a “multipolar world” can be built when the first shots of World War III have already been fired, is totally bankrupt. The only progressive response to Trump’s imperialist offensive is the unification of the Latin American and American working class, fighting to put an end to the source of war, capitalism.



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