



Opinions

Bolton promises to confront Latin America's 'Troika of Tyranny'

By Josh Rogin

The George W. Bush administration had its “Axis of Evil.” Now the Trump administration has coined the term “[Troika of Tyranny](#)” to describe the group of oppressive Latin American dictators it is pledging to confront. The administration is right to call out the crimes of the leaders of Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua. But it remains to be seen whether the White House can deliver a comprehensive strategy to go along with the rhetoric.

National security adviser John Bolton gave a speech Thursday afternoon at the Freedom Tower in Miami to a crowd filled with people who fled Cuba and Venezuela to escape the cruelty and oppression of the Castro and Maduro regimes. Linking those situations with the escalating repression of the Daniel Ortega government in Nicaragua, Bolton promised a new, comprehensive U.S. approach that will ramp up U.S. involvement in pushing back against what the administration sees as a leftist, anti-democratic resurgence in the region.

“This Troika of Tyranny, this triangle of terror stretching from Havana to Caracas to Managua, is the cause of immense human suffering, the impetus of enormous regional instability, and the genesis of a sordid cradle of communism in the Western Hemisphere,” Bolton said. “The United States looks forward to watching each corner of the triangle fall. . . . The Troika will crumble.”

It's no coincidence that Bolton is in South Florida just days before the 2018 midterm elections. Rep. Carlos Curbelo (R-Fla.), the [son of Cuban immigrants](#), is defending his seat in a district that favored Hillary Clinton in 2016 by [16 points](#). Former journalist Maria Elvira Salazar, also born to Cuban immigrant parents, is running as a Republican against Bill Clinton administration official Donna Shalala to replace Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.), who is retiring.

There's also a neck-and-neck gubernatorial race between Tallahassee Mayor Andrew Gillum and Rep. Ron DeSantis (R-Fla.), and while Hispanics overall favor Gillum, Cuban Americans [strongly favor](#) DeSantis.

But administration sources insist this new Latin America policy is not just to get out the vote. Once the election is over, the White House is vowing to use all the tools of national power to raise the pressure on the leaders of these three governments, especially [targeting their ability](#) to corruptly enrich themselves.

Last year, President Trump signed a presidential memorandum ([NSPM-5](#)), titled, “Strengthening the Policy of the United States Toward Cuba,” which set the broad outlines of what the larger campaign will prioritize. The policy aims not only to roll back the Obama administration’s efforts to normalize the U.S.-Cuba relationship but also to ramp up efforts to contain the regime and support those inside the country struggling for greater political, economic and religious freedom.

Experts said the test will be whether the Trump administration can maintain focus and follow through with real results after the U.S. midterm elections are over.

“It is true what they say that these are three regimes that are horrible and deserve to be treated as pariahs, but nothing has worked so far,” said former Venezuelan minister of industry and trade Moisés Naím, now a distinguished [fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#). “Cuba has been a challenging issue for every administration since the Bay of Pigs invasion and no American president has been able to solve that puzzle. So let’s see if they have come up with a new remedy, a new strategy, a new regional approach. Right now, we don’t know.”

So far, the Trump administration’s approach to Latin America has been ad hoc. Most recently, Trump has threatened to cut off U.S. aid to Honduras, a country that cooperates extensively with the United States, unless that government stopped a “caravan” of migrants heading toward the U.S. southern border. The Trump administration’s relationship with Mexico has been contentious because of Mexico’s refusal to pay for Trump’s border wall. Trump has floated the idea of using the U.S. military to [invade Venezuela](#), which evoked fears of past U.S. intervention in the region.

But there are positive signs that there is opportunity for a reset. The United States and Mexico have come to a new trade agreement that the incoming Mexican president — not a natural Trump ally — seems to accept. Brazil’s new president-elect has a terrible record of past statements but is someone with whom Trump might be able to do business. If the United States led a true regional approach aimed at addressing the continent’s growing humanitarian crises, most Latin American countries might be persuaded to come on board.

Absent such an approach, the deteriorating situations in Venezuela and Nicaragua are likely to create more refugees, more mass migration, more regional economic strife and, as a result, more repression, suffering and instability. Bolton’s “Troika of Tyranny” label won’t solve anything by itself. But if it’s followed up with a real strategy, it could be the beginning of what’s needed to prevent Latin America’s failing states from dragging the rest of the hemisphere down with them.

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Josh Rogin

Josh Rogin is a columnist for the Global Opinions section of The Washington Post. He writes about foreign policy and national security. Rogin is also a political analyst for CNN. He previously worked for Bloomberg



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