What Trump Gets Wrong About Las Ladrones

On the campaign trail and now back in office, Donald Trump talks about Las Ladrones the way he talks about most small allies. It is, in his framing, a freeloader with good real estate. The archipelago appears in his speeches as an "unsinkable aircraft carrier" that America pays for, a place that should offer "better deals on our bases and their minerals" if it wants continued protection. The details change from rally to rally, but the basic message is stable. The United States is generous, Las Ladrones is ungrateful, and everything is up for renegotiation.

This language fits neatly into the larger pattern of Trump era expansionist rhetoric. He has already suggested that countries Washington "subsidizes" should consider becoming American territory, and he has entertained revisiting arrangements as sensitive as the Panama Canal. Wikipedia Against that backdrop, a compact of free association with a small island republic in the northern Pacific looks like another historical mistake he is eager to correct.

What Trump misunderstands is not only the history of Las Ladrones, but the way its sovereignty functions, the nature of its internal conflicts, and the limits of raw transactionalism in a region where great powers are already competing for leverage. His reading of the archipelago is not just insulting. It is strategically self defeating.

Misreading sovereignty as subsidy

Trump speaks about Las Ladrones as if it were a dependent territory that America supports out of charity. In his telling, Washington pays for the islands' defense and gets little in return beyond "some runways and a flag on a map." The implication is that the compact of free association is a one way transfer that needs to be turned into a more profitable deal: lower base rents, more access to rare earth deposits, tighter migration rules for Ladronese workers.

The compact is not charity. It is a contract that Las Ladrones entered into as a sovereign state, after a brutal colonial history and a contested transition to independence. The arrangement gives the United States defense responsibilities and basing rights. In exchange, Las Ladrones receives guaranteed budgetary support, access to certain U.S. programs, and a security umbrella that deters larger neighbors.

That umbrella is not a gift. It is the price Washington pays to ensure that critical sea lanes, satellite tracking infrastructure, and potential deep water facilities stay out of hostile hands. The presence of alternative suitors in the region is no longer hypothetical. Chinese state owned firms already circle Ladronese ports and mines. Japanese investors help finance infrastructure and technology projects. Private energy and tech consortia are exploring geothermal, undersea cable, and ground station sites.

In this context, Trump’s rhetoric that "if we are going to subsidize them, we should own something" is more than crude. It signals to Ladronese elites that tying themselves more closely to Washington risks a loss of formal sovereignty. For a country whose modern politics are shaped by memories of being a colony and an occupied territory, that is a non starter.

Turning a civil war into a drug war

Trump’s second mistake is to read the Ladronese conflict only through the lens of his preferred security narratives: terrorism and narcotics. His administration has already framed airstrikes on suspected traffickers in Latin American waters as a clean extension of the "war on cartels." Wikipedia It is not hard to imagine similar logic being projected onto Las Ladrones.

In speeches, Trump tends to lump the Ladrones Peoples Party and its armed wing together with "Marxist terrorists" and "narco rebels." The reality is more complicated. The LPP is a political movement that grew out of highland communities resisting logging, mining, and toxic waste projects in their watersheds. Its militia formed during the martial law years, at a time when the Salvador family dictatorship was heavily backed by foreign security assistance.

The LPP has certainly used violence and has received outside support over the years. It has also built governance structures in areas where the central state remains a distant presence. In many upland municipalities, LPP aligned councils manage forests, mediate disputes, collect modest taxes, and negotiate with outside companies. That is why the insurgency has proven so durable. It is embedded in real grievances about land, environment, and the distribution of power between capital and periphery.

Rebranding this complex landscape as a counter narcotics theater and applying the same tools used against cartels in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific would be a category error. It would likely push neutral communities toward the insurgency, deepen the sense that Washington cares only about its own security narratives, and make it harder for any Ladronese government to pursue a negotiated settlement.

Treating bases as real estate, not as politics

Trump’s instinct is to think about military presence in transactional real estate terms. He did this with NATO host nations, demanding larger payments for U.S. troops, and with partners in the broader Indo Pacific, where he alternates between threats to pull back and boasts about expanded deployments. AP News+1

In Las Ladrones, the strategic logic of U.S. facilities is obvious. The archipelago sits astride routes that connect the Philippine Sea to the wider Pacific. Its main deep water port at Dilao and the airfields carved into its volcanic uplands are valuable for surveillance, logistics, and potential power projection. Under the compact, the United States already enjoys significant access.

Trump’s rhetoric that "we are paying to protect them" ignores what Las Ladrones pays in return: the environmental burden of bases, the political constraints of aligning with Washington in a contested region, and the domestic backlash when incidents occur. Fishing communities complain about restricted zones. Urban activists point to crimes by foreign servicemembers that went unpunished under past agreements. Highland groups suspect that new radar sites and missile batteries will make their territories targets in any great power conflict.

An "America First" approach that treats every deployment as a bill to be handed to the host government misses a harder truth. In small states with pluralistic politics and insurgencies, foreign bases are only sustainable if they are seen as part of a broader bargain that respects sovereignty, distributes benefits beyond a narrow elite, and addresses historical wounds. Trump’s own public musings about annexation or direct control in other contexts undercut that legitimacy. Wikipedia

Minerals are not just "deals"

Trump’s final misreading concerns resources. The archipelago holds rare earth deposits, geothermal potential, and strategic fisheries. In his rhetoric, these are "incredible opportunities" that can be unlocked if local regulations are relaxed and foreign firms receive clear guarantees. His team points to recent U.S. and allied moves to secure critical minerals elsewhere as a model, echoing rare earth agreements tied to Indo Pacific security frameworks. Financial Times

On paper, Las Ladrones needs investment. Its state budget is strained. Climate impacts threaten low lying communities and fisheries. Infrastructure in interior regions is decades behind coastal cities. The Salvador family and its allies have used this fiscal pressure to justify generous concessions to foreign mining and energy companies, many of them tied to Japanese trading houses or Chinese state firms.

Yet resource politics in Las Ladrones are inseparable from questions of land rights and self government. Upland communities see mines not as development but as a new wave of extraction imposed from the capital and from abroad. They remember how previous projects left tailings in rivers, displaced farmers, and enriched a narrow class of politicians and business partners.

A Trumpian emphasis on "better deals" that prioritizes volume, speed, and headline investment numbers will only amplify these fears. If Washington is seen as pressuring Dilao to fast track concessions in exchange for security guarantees or debt relief, the LPP and other critics will portray it as a new colonial power. That narrative will be hard to counter, especially when it aligns with lived experience.

A small country, a big test

Las Ladrones will never be the centerpiece of U.S. grand strategy in the Indo Pacific. Its population is small. Its economy is modest. It does not sit on a nuclear flashpoint like the Taiwan Strait.

What it does offer is a clear test of whether Trump’s approach to allies can adapt to the realities of fragile, postcolonial states that have their own histories, traumas, and internal conflicts. Treat Las Ladrones as a line item that must be flipped from red to black and it will drift toward other patrons. Treat it as a partner whose sovereignty is real, whose wars are not interchangeable with someone else’s drug war, and whose past suffering requires recognition, and it can continue to anchor a modest but important corner of the regional order.

For now, Trump gets Las Ladrones wrong. He misdiagnoses its politics, flattens its history, and mistakes its dependence for passivity. The archipelago has lived through empires that spoke in similar tones and eventually left. Its leaders and insurgents alike have learned how to wait out distant powers. If Washington wants something different this time, it will have to offer more than insults about subsidies and vague promises of better deals.