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## Транзитная geopolитика США в отношении Панамского канала: реализация через потенциал принудительной дипломатии

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**Аннотация. Введение.** В статье рассматривается вопрос, и ответ на него, почему инфраструктурный ресурс и торгово-транспортные объекты стали одним из важнейших приоритетов американской внешней политики в отношении Западного полушария в 2025 г.?

**Материалы и методы.** В центре исследования – драматический процесс реализации

принудительной дипломатии американского политического класса в отношении Панамского канала. **Результаты и обсуждение.** Для лучшего понимания того, почему Панамский канал оказался в центре geopolитической дискуссии, инициированной новой администрацией президента Дональда Трампа, авторы обратились к познавательному потенциалу транзитной geopolитики. **Заключение.** Показано, какие политические интересы и какие эгоистические стимулы подпитывают принудительную политику США в отношении китайских позиций в Западном полушарии.

**Ключевые слова:** транзитная geopolитика, президент Трамп, принудительная внешняя политика, Панамский канал, инфраструктура.

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Research article

## US transit geopolitics towards the Panama Canal: implementation through the potential of coercive diplomacy

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**Abstract. Introduction.** The article provides an answer to the question of why infrastructure resources and trade and transport facilities have become one of the most important priorities of American foreign policy towards the Western Hemisphere in 2025? **Materials and methods.** The study focuses on the dramatic process of implementing the

*coercive diplomacy of the American political class in relation to the Panama Canal. Results and discussion.* To better understand why the Panama Canal found itself at the center of the geopolitical discussion initiated by the new administration of President Donald Trump the authors turned to the cognitive potential of transit geopolitics. **Conclusion.** It demonstrates what political interests and what selfish incentives fuel the US coercive policy towards Chinese positions in the Western Hemisphere.

**Keywords:** transit geopolitics, President Trump, coercive foreign policy, Panama Canal, infrastructure

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**Introduction.** The relevance of this work lies in the need to understand the true nature of what we call US "coercive diplomacy" in relation to such a geopolitical object on the global international political map as the Panama Canal. As soon as the new American President, Donald Trump, returned to the White House in January 2025, he initiated heated debates about the role of infrastructure and resource assets in the foreign policy of the new American administration. Within just the first three months of his administration, he announced incredibly bold political and diplomatic initiatives against two objects: Greenland and the Panama Canal. In his inaugural address, delivered on January 20, 2025, Trump declared that "China controls the Panama Canal." He then naturally proposed to the American audience that the Panama Canal be returned to Washington's control. [ Yang , 2025]. The result of such pressure was quite impressive. On February 6, 2025, Panamanian authorities announced their decision to withdraw from China's global Belt and Road infrastructure project. This move was motivated by Washington's growing dissatisfaction with Panama's economic cooperation with China. Observers believe the Trump administration is targeting the "weak links" in the system of large-scale projects promoted by Beijing. The goal of such coercion through pressure is obvious: to reduce China's role at the hubs of international trade. As reported in the influential publication " South" China Morning Post ", such a coercive approach by official Washington is aimed at increasing the risks for those countries that want to integrate more deeply into Chinese trade and infrastructure initiatives [ Sim , 2025].

The purpose of this paper is to attempt to answer the question of why infrastructure resources and trade and transportation facilities have become one of the most important priorities of American policy toward the Western Hemisphere. The article is organized as follows. First, we will address the theoretical foundations and canons of transit geopolitics. This is necessary to understand why the Panama Canal has found itself at the center of the geopolitical debate initiated by the new administration of President Donald Trump. Next, we will provide brief background information. It describes the efforts made by the governments of both countries—the United States and China—to develop the Panama Canal project. This presentation will help the reader understand the role the Panama Canal plays not only in the international trade of both countries but also in their strategic positioning in global markets. The main part of the article is devoted to the basis of the Trump administration's coercive diplomacy toward China on issues related to the Panama Canal.

### **Main part. The Panama Canal and the explanatory potential of transit geopolitics.**

In order to better understand the rapid growth in the importance of trade and communication factors in contemporary US foreign policy, it is necessary to provide historical examples from the field of transit geopolitics.

The first example has its roots in the Great Game between two rising empires—Russia and Britain—for dominance in Central Asia in the 19th century. Upon closer examination, it became clear that control over communications was the key lever of geopolitical dominance in this region. As Russian scholar Vladimir Maksimenko has shown, the Trans-Caspian Railway served as the final argument for the consolidation of Russian dominance in this region. This engineering and communications route, built by Russia in 1888, became the final barrier to

British expansion into Central Asia.

The second historical example relates to Britain's fundamental colonial and imperial doctrine. The key principle of this doctrine is the ability to control sensitive points along maritime and land routes. The British Empire's centuries-long dominance at sea and on land is largely explained by its ability to control the planet's key transit points. In Britain's case, we are talking about such sensitive areas as Malta, Gibraltar, Zanzibar, the Suez Canal, and others. The result of this strategy was that these and other captured territories became not simply controlled spheres but spaces of power for many years to come.

It is becoming clear that the prospects for the further development of the strategic infrastructure of the Western Hemisphere, in which the Panama Canal plays a key role, have become dependent on who strives to become the main geopolitical actor on the American continent.

The significance of transit geopolitics in this context is determined by the fact that this field of political science allows us to identify the current international political incentives of the main players in global politics. The rapid acceleration of events around Panama is explained by the fact that, just as many years ago, it was precisely the geopolitical communication resource that became the primary focus of the struggle, but now with a much more significant transport and infrastructural component. As one of the founders of geopolitics, Karl Haushofer, noted, "...it is precisely the development of communications that demonstrates the constant revaluation of seemingly long-term, imprinted geographic factors." [Haushofer, 2001].

After outlining how the basic principles of transit geopolitics operate, we will move on to an examination of the Panama case.

**The Importance of the Panama Canal for the Chinese and US Economies.** About a hundred years ago, what contemporaries called the "wedding of the oceans" occurred. It was the opening of the Panama Canal, connecting the Pacific and Atlantic oceans and transforming global trade. This event was so significant that then-US President Woodrow Wilson ordered final preparations for the completion of this grandiose project. Today, more than a century later, the United States is seeking to regain influence over this waterway. As noted above, in his inaugural address in January 2025, President Donald Trump declared that China "controls" the canal and vowed that the United States would "take it back." Trump did not rule out the use of economic coercion or even military force to achieve this goal. This was no empty threat, as it was later revealed that the White House had instructed the Pentagon to develop plans to seize the waterway by force. As noted, these threats had an effect: Panama not only withdrew from China's Belt and Road Initiative. She graciously agreed to sell the port operations at each end of the canal, owned by the Hong Kong holding company CK Hutchison, to a group of investors led by the American firm BlackRock. The Panama saga is not over yet, and we cannot rule out the most unexpected scenarios for its continuation. Regardless of how events around the canal unfold, this episode has served as a signal that Washington is prepared to present a stern ultimatum to countries: side with the United States or face undesirable consequences.

A brief background on the Panama Canal is useful here. Today, this infrastructure facility is a key waterway for the American supercontinent, playing a vital role in global trade. Furthermore, the canal provides the shortest route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. For China, it serves as an important trade route and link to Latin America, reducing shipping times and facilitating the movement of goods to and from markets in the Western Hemisphere. In 2017, Beijing formally established diplomatic relations with Panama. Since then, China has steadily expanded its economic presence in Panama, cementing the country's status as a gateway between oceans through a series of major projects. By 2023, Chinese foreign direct investment in Panama amounted to approximately \$1.4 billion, but a significant portion of this investment is tied to infrastructure contracts rather than long-term asset ownership. In a relatively short period of time – from October 2023 to September 2024—the Panama Canal Authority earned US\$3.38 billion in revenue. China's share of cargo transported along this route amounted to 21.4% of the total. [Yang, 2025].

Regarding the importance of the Panama Canal to the American economy, the official document notes that "it serves not only as the shortest shipping route between the west and east coasts of the United States. The Panama Canal is of strategic importance to the country and also serves as a key route for cargo shipments to Asia." [Panama Canal Denies US Claim].

As anomalous as Trump's rhetoric may sound to politicians raised on the notion of the United States as the leader of the free world, his vision of foreign policy draws inspiration from long-held American impulses. First and foremost, this refers to the Monroe Doctrine, whose essence can be summarized by the slogan "America for Americans." In 1823, President James Monroe declared the Western Hemisphere closed to further European colonization. By the end of the nineteenth century, other American presidents used the Monroe Proclamation to justify US territorial expansion. Many years later, in 1977, the United States agreed to relinquish control of the Panama Canal only in the face of growing anti-Americanism in Latin America and despite staunch resistance from Americans who believed, as one US senator put it, that "we stole it fair and square."

Trump's current drive to strengthen Washington's influence in the Western Hemisphere actually has a new strategic logic. In terms of overall cargo volume, approximately 75% of the canal's traffic originates from or is destined for the United States. More specifically, approximately 40% of all US container traffic transits this waterway, and nearly three-quarters of all containers passing through the canal originate from or are destined for the United States. US security would be threatened if another great power controlled the canal. Another significant fact: the United States, as the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG), uses the canal for its energy supplies.

**US coercive policy towards the Panama Canal in the context of Washington's anti-Chinese information policy.** The core American emotion regarding contemporary China is the Washington establishment's fear that the further the United States retreats into the Western Hemisphere, the more it will cede the rest of the world to a globally engaged Beijing. Even during his first term, Donald Trump aggressively attacked China, calling it the root cause of all of America's woes. He lamented Washington's massive trade deficit with Beijing and blamed China for the devastation of the American industrial belt. He also insisted that the COVID-19 pandemic was China's fault. More recently, he blamed Beijing for the opioid crisis in the United States, accusing China of "attacking" the United States with fentanyl. China has been portrayed at Trump's rallies and press conferences as a monstrous adversary, an enemy that only Trump can subdue. [Daalder I., Lindsay, 2025].

These emotions were put into practice after Donald Trump's return to the White House in January 2025. The American political class focused on containing China and strengthening domestic defense. A document adopted in mid-March 2025 for the US Department of Defense, known as the "Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance" (marked "Top Secret"), expressed anxiety about China's expansion in stark terms. This document describes in detail the implementation of President Donald Trump's vision, aimed at preparing for victory in a potential war against Beijing and defending the United States from threats in its "near abroad," including not only the Panama Canal but also Greenland. [Horton, Natanson, 2025].

A month before the program was adopted, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio visited Panama in February 2025. During his visit, he sternly demanded that the Latin American country withdraw from China's Belt and Road Initiative. Otherwise, if China's influence on the canal was not limited, Washington would take "immediate, harsh measures" against Panama. [Panama] Canal Denies US Claim]. As has already been shown, this ultimatum brought results.

With these offensive actions, the United States not only reaffirms the aforementioned Monroe Doctrine—the 19th-century declaration that Western Hemisphere affairs are the exclusive domain of the two American continents—but also suggests that tensions over the canal could serve as an early warning of other risks to Chinese investment in America.

One important aspect needs to be noted here for a more nuanced understanding of the issue under study. This is the widespread politicization of the China issue, which has become the context of American policy. Long before Trump's return to the US presidency, Jessica Chen Weiss, a professor of China and Asia-Pacific studies at Cornell University, noted with alarm: "Competition with China has begun to consume US foreign policy. Challenged by a near-peer rival whose interests and values diverge sharply from those of the United States, American policymakers are becoming so focused on countering China that they risk losing sight of the positive interests and values that should underpin US strategy." [Chen This obsession with China was based on real and imagined fears that American elites cultivated in the public sphere. Elizabeth Economy, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, writes: "By now, Chinese President Xi Jinping's ambitions to remake the world are undeniable. He wants to dismantle Washington's network of alliances and purge international organizations of what he calls 'Western' values. He wants to knock the US dollar off its pedestal and eliminate Washington's stranglehold on critical technologies. In his new multipolar order, global institutions and norms will be underpinned by Chinese notions of shared security and economic development, Chinese values of state-defined political rights, and Chinese technology. China will no longer have to struggle for leadership. Its centrality will be assured." [Economy, 2024].

Thus, despite the uncertainty surrounding the Trump administration's approach to many issues, the central challenge it faces is clear: positioning the United States to defeat China as a critical pillar of Washington's foreign policy strategy. [Doshi, 2024].

**Conclusion.** Based on the analysis, we can draw the following theoretical and practical conclusions. First, infrastructure projects and trade and transit communications (container shipping, ports, roads, and pipelines) are more than just engineering and technical facilities. They perform a dual geopolitical function. First, they serve as a means of strengthening borders or developing geographic space. Second, they can be seen as a factor in the offensive intentions of power and political will. This function of transport and communications facilities was best described by the Russian philosopher and sociologist Sergei Korolev: "A road can become the core of the space of power, a channel for power impulses. Depending on the situation, it can become a local or regional power machine, a tool for mobilizing political resources and political capital." [Korolev, 2024, pp. 72-86]. In relation to the Panama Canal, the tried and true geopolitical thesis applies: whoever controls the infrastructure controls the entire content of policy. As can be seen from the above, transportation projects were often linked to loudly proclaim geopolitical objectives and goals. From this perspective, the new American administration's geopolitical claims to the Panama Canal described here can be assessed as steps aimed at reasserting Washington's geopolitical control over the American supercontinent.

Another significant conclusion concerns the nature of US President Donald Trump's new political strategy. It's undeniable that this policy carries considerable political risks. The Trump administration is seeking to employ coercive practices not only in relation to the Panama Canal and the Panamanian authorities in general. This principle and these practices are being extended to other countries and other continents. For example, President Trump demanded concessions in exchange for large tariffs in order to force India to abandon its efforts to reduce the dominance of the US dollar. Similarly, in one episode of US policy toward Ukraine, he conditioned Kyiv's military and political commitment on the latter's willingness to accept a peace agreement with Russia. He then told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy something like, "Make a deal, or we'll leave." An equally obvious example of coercive diplomacy can be seen in the events of February 2025, when Trump established an "expedited" investment process for "certain allies and partners," but only on the condition that they refrain from "partnering" with "foreign adversaries in relevant areas." [Kuok, 2025].

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