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Negotiating Sovereignty: America's Imperialistic Panama Canal Rhetoric

Micah Rosin
micahjrosin@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In January 2025, during his inaugural address, President Donald Trump reignited a debate many assumed had been settled since 1999: who should control the Panama Canal? Framing the 1977 Torrijos Carter Treaties as a "foolish gift" and accusing China of covertly operating the canal, President Trump's rhetoric of "taking back" the canal has drawn disapproval from Panama's government, press, citizens, and scholars. Simultaneously, it has exposed unresolved questions about the waterway's strategic value, the fairness of its treaties, and Chinese and U.S. influence in Latin America. This paper tracks the canal's history, from French construction failure to the negotiated takeover in 1999, and contextualizes President Trump's second term statements within the larger historical arc. Through historical sources, press coverage, and an original interview with leading Panamanian economist Adolfo Quintero, the paper argues that Trump's current rhetoric is less a genuine bid to reoccupy the canal and rather a signal to limit Chinese influence in Panama. But, with this as a strategy, it reinstates the same disregard for Panamanian sovereignty that plagued Panama through the canal's founding treaty and throughout U.S. control. It also presents as an unnecessary strategy, as the canal's practical strategic and economic importance to the United States has diminished since the mid-twentieth century due to growth in transatlantic land transportation along with Panama's own canal modernization, complicating claims that the canal is indispensable to U.S. national security. Even an unanticipated climate event, the 2023-2024 drought that forced Panama to cut canal transits in half, demonstrates that the canal's strategic value to the United States has faded and there is no cause for the U.S. to even want to "take it back." Ultimately, this paper posits an alternative rationale for President Trump's comments, one supported by both Professor Quintero's views, and other studied experts on Latin America. China may have increased its economic influence in Latin America over the decades, and President Trump's rhetoric reflects a real concern about that, but Panama's sovereignty is intact, control over the canal is not open for negotiation, and imperialistic rhetoric from the United States that suggests Panama's sovereignty is negotiable at the canal is misplaced.

INTRODUCTION

On January 20, 2025, in his second inaugural address, President Trump declared that the United States was "taking back" the Panama Canal. He further described the 1977 Torrijos-Carter Treaty that transferred canal control to Panama as a "foolish gift" stating: "We have been treated very badly from this foolish gift that should have never been made, and Panama's promise to us has been broken" (Trump,

2025a). The newly elected president further claimed that 38,000 American lives had been lost building the waterway, and he alleged that China exercised significant influence over the canal: "China is operating the Panama Canal. And we didn't give it to China. We gave it to Panama, and we're taking it back" (Trump, 2025a). President Trump restated his claims in his Address to a Joint Session of Congress on March 4th (Trump, 2025b).

The Panamanian government, press, and citizens rejected the claims almost immediately, insisting that the canal is, and will remain, sovereign Panamanian territory (Good Morning America, 2025). History between the U.S. and Panama warns against ignoring President Trump's words, and also reflects a danger in minimizing Panamanian's reactions. The United States has a history of intervening directly in Panamanian affairs, particularly in the construction and control of the canal. As far back as 1903, the United States aided Panama's secession from Colombia in order to secure canal rights on lopsided terms that, technically, no Panamanian signed (McCullough, 1977).

Imperialism is defined as "the policy, practice, or advocacy of extending the power and dominion of a nation especially by direct territorial acquisitions or by gaining indirect control over the political or economic life of other areas" (Mirriam Webster, 2026). In the American context, imperialism has rarely taken the form of formal annexation; instead, it has more often meant asserting the right to control another nation's territory, resources, or political decisions through coercive treaties, economic pressure, or the threat of force, while leaving nominal sovereignty intact. This paper applies that narrower, distinctly American sense of imperialism, indirect control asserted through leverage rather than occupation, to evaluate Trump's Panama Canal rhetoric.

One commentator aptly argued in 2005 that, after the Cold War, "[w]hen the Soviet Union fell, the United States lost interest in its relationship with Latin American Countries … [so] China has stepped into the void left by these two retreating superpowers" (Vega, 2005, p.377-378). The argument that China has gained economic power in Latin America generally is widely recognized and recently emphasized by all panelists at a March 27, 2026 Symposium at Harvard's David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies. There are also undeniable data and statistics about shipping at the Panama Canal that could reasonably cause the U.S. concerns about China's presence there. Strictly speaking, however, Panama's sovereignty remains intact.

Through a July 19, 2026 video interview of Universidad de Panama Professor and Economist Adolfo Quintero (which interview was courteously translated by Professor Quintero's niece, Hemaly Metta, residing in Quincy, Massachusetts), as well as additional sources supporting Professor Quintero's viewpoint, this paper builds upon that premise. Professor Quintero was selected because of his role on the Panama Canal committee, his perspective on the canal's economics and U.S.-Panamanian political history. While Professor Quintero's viewpoint may be limited because it is anecdotal, it offers credible historical and contemporary insight. It supports the premise that America's "need" or desire to "take back" the Panama Canal presents as imperialistic rhetoric with an ulterior motive, likely aimed at deterring a more widespread trend numerous scholars have identified in the Latin American region as a whole.

This paper examines nuances about the Panama Canal further, exploring how President Trump's 2025-2026 rhetoric is rooted in the same imperial logic of treating Panamanian sovereignty as negotiable that characterized historical U.S.-Panama relations. Developing this point requires first understanding where the canal came from: French construction failure, the oppressive diplomacy of the 1903 Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, the near century of American administration and its resistance, and the eventual transfer of the canal to Panama by 1999. It requires understanding why the United States gave away the canal and how the waterway's ownership lost strategic and military importance to the nation. In fact, while a contemporary crisis has verified the economic value of the canal globally, it has also demonstrated Panama's ability to keep the canal running smoothly amidst chaos without any foreign involvement, and with the U.S. seemingly having no role or even a need to insert itself with a role. Finally, it incorporates anecdotal evidence from select Panamanian voices which offers additional context, albeit limited, as to how these voices view the United States's renewed claimed interest in the canal.

President Trump's rhetoric, even if not likely a genuine plan for seizing control of the Panama Canal and even if aimed at a larger regional concern, nevertheless revives the founding transgression of U.S.-Panama relations: the willingness to talk about Panamanian territory and sovereignty as if both were America's to decide. Even if just rhetoric, it cannot be ignored, as it represents and re-emphasizes a century-old practice of treating Panamanian sovereignty as negotiable.

HISTORY

The French Attempt and Its Collapse

Interest in an interoceanic canal through Central America predates American involvement by decades. In 1876, the Geographical Society of Paris formed a committee to study the feasibility of a canal through the isthmus (Figure 1). The committee was led by French engineer Ferdinand de Lesseps who is celebrated for overseeing the construction of the 120-mile Suez Canal, connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea through Egypt. French naval officer Lucien Wyse surveyed possible routes and, in 1877, settled on a path from Limon Bay to Panama City that roughly followed the existing Panama railroad. The following year, Wyse negotiated with the Colombian government, when Panama was a Colombian province, granting a French company exclusive rights to build the canal, with ownership reverting to Colombia after ninety-nine years (Autoridad del Canal de Panamá, n.d.; PBS, n.d.).

Construction began in 1881 under the Compagnie Universelle du Canal Interocéanique, but the project was undermined from the start: the survey work had been rushed, the sea-level design badly underestimated the difficulty of cutting through mountainous terrain, and disease (primarily yellow fever and malaria, whose mosquito-based transmission was not yet understood) killed an estimated 22,000 workers (Sherrill, 2024). Landslides, inadequate equipment, and chronic labor shortages compounded the disaster. By 1889, the project ran out of money and collapsed (PBS, n.d.). De Lesseps's insistence on

replicating his Suez success at Panama, where geology and climate bore little resemblance to Egypt, is generally regarded as the proximate cause. (Autoridad del Canal de Panamá, n.d.).

The Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty of 1903

American interest in an isthmian canal grew alongside the country's Pacific ambitions, formalized when the 1901 Hay-Pauncefote Treaty voided an earlier U.S.-British agreement and cleared the way for the United States to build and manage a canal (Office of the Historian, n.d.-b). In 1902, the U.S. Senate voted to build through Panama, but met with resistance from Colombia. (Gilbert, 2010). In response, President Theodore Roosevelt dispatched U.S. warships to Panama City in November 1903, deterring Colombian troops from suppressing a Panamanian independence movement (Office of the Historian, n.d.-b). Panama declared independence on November 3, 1903, and named as its envoy to Washington, not a Panamanian statesman, but Philippe Bunau-Varilla, a French engineer who had worked on de Lesseps's failed canal (McCullough, 1977).

According to Professor Quintero, Bunau-Varilla effectively "went behind Panama's back" to negotiate on the new republic's behalf without proper authorization (A. Quintero, personal communication, July 19, 2026). Panama's actual independence leaders, Manuel Amador Guerrero and Federico Boyd, were en route to Washington to review and approve treaty terms, but Bunau-Varilla, aware that his personal authority would evaporate the moment they arrived, rushed to finalize an agreement before they landed. He later boasted to Secretary of State John Hay that so long as the Panamanian delegation had not yet arrived, he alone held "complete and absolute powers" to deal with the United States. The Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty was signed on November 18, 1903, just hours before the delegation reached the capital, and without the delegation's input (McCullough, 1977; A. Quintero, personal communication, July 19, 2026). Thus, while technically, the Panamanian Provisional Government did officially approve the treaty, Professor Quintero's viewpoint reflects a real concern about whether the treaty reflected meaningful Panamanian consensus. Professor Quintero's point is not isolated. As the Duke University Press reported in its Hispanic American Historical Review on February 1, 1966: "Ever since Panama became an independent nation on November 3, 1903, its relations with the United States have been troubled. Basic to every difficulty has been Panama's dissatisfaction with the Hay-Bunau-Varilla treaty [and] Panama's bitterness has been especially acute because of the man who negotiated the treaty [on] its behalf and the manner in which he did it" (Ameringer, 1966).

The treaty's terms did favor the United States overwhelmingly. The U.S. received a ten-mile-wide strip of land for the canal, paid Panama $10 million plus an annual annuity of $250,000, and, under Article III, secured "all the rights, power and authority" within the Canal Zone that it would possess "if it were the sovereign of the territory," to the complete exclusion of Panamanian sovereign authority there (The United States & Panama, 1903). The fact that this treaty ceded sovereignty to the U.S. is supported by a 1907 Opinion Letter from the Attorney General of the United States, who wrote: "Article 3 of the treaty transfers to the United States, not the sovereignty by that term, but "all the rights, power, and authority" within the Zone that it would have if it were sovereign, "to the entire exclusion of the exercise by the Republic of Panama of any such sovereign rights, power or authority … The omission to use words

expressly passing sovereignty was dictated by reasons of public policy, I assume; but whatever the reason the treaty gives the substance of sovereignty, and instead of containing a mere declaration transferring the sovereignty, descends to the particulars "all the rights, power, and authority" that belong to sovereignty, and negatives any such "sovereign rights, power, or authority" in the former sovereign" (Bonaparte, 1907).

The discontentment in Panama over this, emphasized historically and echoed by Professor Quintero, stems from it being concluded between two individuals, Hay and Bunau-Varilla, neither of whom were Panamanian and neither of whom were answerable to the Panamanian people (A. Quintero, personal communication, July 19, 2026). This history matters for the present debate: it is the original template of the U.S.-Panama relationship in which Panamanian sovereignty was treated as negotiable by outsiders, and it is the grievance against which every subsequent renegotiation has been measured.

U.S. Construction, 1904-1914

Construction of the canal began in earnest under the Army Corps of Engineers, led from 1907 by George Goethals, who gave his engineers considerable latitude to design their own solutions rather than dictating a single master plan (U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, 2014). Equally consequential was the public-health campaign led by Dr. William Gorgas, who had fought yellow fever in Cuba and applied the same techniques at Panama: draining and oiling standing water to prevent mosquito breeding, fumigating adult mosquitoes, installing window screens, quarantining the infected, and building piped water systems to eliminate the rain barrels in which larvae bred (Nolan, 2020). Thousands of workers still died, but the disease environment that had doomed the French effort was brought under control. Compared with the French death toll of approximately 22,000, U.S. construction resulted in 5,609 deaths, 4,290 of which were Caribbean laborers, contrasting President Trump's claim of 38,000 American deaths (Chao-Fong, 2025; Sherrill, 2024). Goethals eventually completed the canal in 1914, two years ahead of schedule (U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, 2014).

American Control and Panamanian Resistance, 1914-1977

American administration of the Canal Zone lasted more than six decades and was punctuated by recurring friction over sovereignty and symbolism. In 1936, President Franklin Roosevelt relinquished the formal U.S. protectorate over Panama while retaining canal rights and control; in 1941, he closed the canal to Japanese shipping as war approached (Nolan, n.d.). Symbolic disputes over flags proved especially combustible. In 1960, President Eisenhower ordered that the Panamanian flag fly alongside the American flag at a single site in the Canal Zone, Shaler's Triangle, describing it as a voluntary gesture of friendship that did not alter the underlying treaties (Office of the Historian, n.d.). By 1963, the two governments had agreed that the Panamanian flag could be flown wherever the American flag flew inside the Zone (Ritter, 2013).

That agreement was tested almost immediately. On January 9, 1964, students from Panama's Instituto Nacional entered the Canal Zone carrying a Panamanian flag, intending to raise it beside the American flag already flying at Balboa High School, a public school for the children of U.S. military and canal workers (Panama, 2026). Zone residents refused to allow it, and it resulted in a violent riot that spread through Panama City (PRX, 2014). A nineteen-year-old ambulance worker, Phil Edmonston, later described the chaos to reporters, recalling that rescuers "had to crawl around" because they were being shot at, with "bullet holes everywhere" (PRX, 2014). By the time the violence subsided, twenty-two Panamanian students and four U.S. soldiers were dead (Panama, 2026). Rioters even burned the U.S.-based Pan American Airways building and seized the offices of the U.S.-owned Panama Fruit Company (PRX, 2014). However, even these events, what Panamanians now commemorate as Martyrs' Day, did not immediately change the legal status of the Canal Zone as a new treaty was still thirteen years away; instead, they demonstrated to a new generation of Panamanians that American control of the Zone was itself a form of colonial occupation (Panama, 2026; United States of America and The Republic of Panama, 1977a).

The Torrijos-Carter Treaties and the End of U.S. Control

By the early 1970s, the Canal Zone had become an emblem of American interference in Latin America more broadly, and pressure for a new settlement mounted both from Panamanian protests and from a shifting U.S. calculation of the canal's strategic worth. The result was the 1977 Panama Canal Treaty, negotiated between General Omar Torrijos and President Jimmy Carter, which committed the United States to withdraw from full control over the canal by December 31, 1999, and to guarantee the canal's permanent neutrality thereafter (Roy, 2025; Sherrill, 2024; U.S. Department Of State. The Office of Electronic Information, n.d.). The treaty barely survived ratification in the U.S. Senate, passing by the narrowest of margins as the American public criticized that it surrendered a strategic American asset (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026). However, it addressed decades of Panamanian discontent, and amidst the Cold War, "The Torrijos-Carter Treaties allowed the United States to defend itself from charges of imperialism made by Soviet-aligned states." (Office of the Historian, n.d.-c)

Still, the neutrality component of the Treaty preserved an American right to intervene if the canal's operation were ever threatened. Specifically, the U.S. Senate's Conditions of Ratification for the treaty (which were approved by Panama) state that "if the Canal is closed, or its operations are interfered with, the United States of America and the Republic of Panama shall each independently have the right to take such steps as each deems necessary, in accordance with its constitutional processes, including the use of military force in the Republic of Panama, to reopen the Canal or restore the operations of the Canal, as the case may be" (United States of America and The Republic of Panama, 1977b). When National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski once asked what would happen if Panama closed the canal for repairs, Carter is reported to have answered flatly that the United States would "move in and close down the Panamanian government for repairs," demonstrating American intent to use the treaty as potential justification to reinstate imperialistic control over the canal (Grogin, 2001).

Complicating matters, however, extended control over the canal is technically not allowed within the 1977 Treaty. Article V of the Treaty establishes principles for U.S. intervention in Panama: "nationals of the United States of America…shall abstain from any political activity in the Republic of Panama as well as from any intervention in the internal affairs of the Republic of Panama" (The United States and the Republic of Panama, 1977b). It also clearly outlines that "only the Republic of Panama shall operate the Canal and maintain military forces." (The United States and the Republic of Panama, 1977b). Article VII of the treaty also addressed the symbolism at the heart of the 1964 riots, stipulating that Panama's flag would thereafter "always" occupy the position of honor throughout Panamanian territory, including the former Canal Zone (United States of America and The Republic of Panama, 1977a). Thus, while the U.S. retained rights under the 1977 Treaties, those rights were not absolute.

Relations remained turbulent through the treaty's implementation period. In 1989, U.S. Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney described "continuing problems" in U.S.-Panama relations (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026). As tensions rose, the United States froze Panamanian assets as retaliation stemming from claims of human rights violations and U.S. military personnel harassment under Panama's president, Manuel Noriega. In May 1989, Noriega lost the presidential election to democratic Guillermo Endara but denied him the presidency (Proving Ground | Miller Center, n.d.). Conflict continued to escalate, including a failed coup in early October, and climaxed when the U.S. launched "Operation Just Cause." In this Operation, American forces invaded Panama and arrested Noriega on drug-trafficking charges on January 3, 1990 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026; *Proving Ground | Miller Center*, n.d.). While seemingly irrelevant to the canal's status, the incursion served as a reminder that Washington's willingness to use force in Panama had not disappeared despite the canal's transfer proceeding. On December 31, 1999, Panama finally assumed total control of the canal (Roy, 2025).

Panamanian Control and Modernization

Since 1999, the canal has been operated by the Panama Canal Authority, an autonomous government agency insulated from day-to-day political control: "The Panama Canal Authority is an autonomous entity of the country," Ilya Espino de Marotta, the Authority's deputy administrator and chief sustainability officer, explained in an interview, "we are very independent from the government" (Roy, 2025). Panama has invested an estimated $5 billion in the canal and surrounding infrastructure since taking control: developing special economic zones such as Panama Pacífico for industry and the City of Knowledge for research, expanding port capacity, building a cross-isthmus pipeline for oil tankers too large to transit the canal, and most significantly, adding a third set of locks to accommodate larger vessels (Hughes, 2025; A. Quintero, personal communication, July 19, 2026).

That expansion decision has left the canal well positioned against emerging competition. Asked about Mexico's rail and shipping corridor, or "dry canal," across the isthmus of Tehuantepec, Professor Quintero believes that Panama does not see it as a serious threat. Professor Quintero argues the Panama Canal is cheaper to operate, uses more advanced technology after its recent upgrades, and offers easier access to the eastern United States. Further, he notes that Panama financed its expansion with a $5 billion loan from

the World Bank that it originally planned to repay over ten years but repaid in five, showing the expansion's financial success (A. Quintero, personal communication, July 19, 2026).

Today, the canal spans fifty-one miles, handles roughly 13,000 ships annually, and carries an estimated 5 to 6 percent of global trade (Roy, 2025; "Statistics," n.d.). The United States remains its single largest user, with close to 40 percent of American container traffic passing through it, and canal-related revenue accounts for roughly 4 percent of Panama's GDP (Roy, 2025).

CONTEMPORARY EVENTS AND ANALYSIS

Reassessing the Canal's Strategic Importance to the United States

Much of the rhetorical force behind American calls to reclaim the Panama Canal rests on an assumption that it remains strategically necessary to the United States. Historical evidence, however, suggests that by the 1970s, the canal's military, economic, and administrative value to the United States had already begun to decline substantially. Modern events also suggest competition will make the canal even less essential to the United States.

Historians and military analysts have long disputed whether the canal holds strategic importance, and the debates predate the current controversy by decades. As early as 1925, military analysts recognized that the canal offered a poor return on strategic value: a single "suicide ship" loaded with explosives, or a small and sufficiently motivated group of saboteurs, could disable the canal for a year or more, meaning that the United States could never safely treat the canal as a substitute for maintaining a full two-ocean navy (Gilbert, 2010). However, during the Second World War, Japan did not attempt to attack the canal in the early stages of the war, and by the time it might have done so, enhanced defenses had made such an operation far more difficult (Maurer & Yu, 2010). Consequently, the canal served as a somewhat valuable asset throughout the war. As a result, in 1945 alone, the canal saved the U.S. $155,475,100 in current dollars in cost of transporting war materials compared to estimated cost for transport via railroad (Maurer & Yu, 2010). Strategically, the canal was less powerful: U.S. capital ships became too large to fit through the canal's locks and the globalization of the American Navy meant it now needed to stretch five seas (Atlantic, Pacific, Arctic, and Indian Oceans and the Mediterranean Sea), not two, making the canal less significant for travel (Maurer & Yu, 2010). The utility of the Panama Canal was viewed as so insignificant to the U.S. that President Truman even went so far as to suggest handing the canal to the United Nations outright (Gilbert, 2010)

The canal's economic indispensability to the U.S. also declined over the 20th century. The dieselization of American railroads made overland freight substantially more efficient: it became cheaper to transport goods through the transcontinental railroad than through the canal by the mid-1970s (Gilbert, 2010; Maurer & Yu, 2010). The completion of the interstate highway system gave shippers a fast, reliable alternative to ocean transit between the coasts via trucking: cost per ton-mile through long distance trucking in the United States decreased from $121 per mile to just $62 per mile between 1945 and 1975

(Maurer & Yu, 2010). By the 1970s, it cost American farmers roughly the same to ship goods overland to the West Coast and then across the Pacific to Asia as it did to send them south through the Gulf of Mexico, through the canal, and on to Asia (Gilbert, 2010; Maurer & Yu, 2010). At the same time, California's own natural-resource base reduced the strategic urgency of shipping eastern raw materials westward through the canal; increasingly, the canal's traffic moving toward the East Coast carried inexpensive Asian manufactured goods rather than strategic materials bound for American industry. That shift mattered for the toll debate specifically: if rising Panama Canal tolls fell mainly on the cost of importing Asian consumer goods rather than on militarily or industrially critical American cargo, then U.S. anxiety about toll increases lost much of its original strategic justification (Gilbert, 2010).

There was also a managerial case against continued American administration. Critics in the 1960s and 1970s argued that Panama Canal Company employees had effectively run the zone for their own benefit, securing salary increases even as accidents and operating costs rose. Therefore, to keep the Canal Zone powerful, the U.S. government had to funnel increasing aid into the zone that at times rivaled the canal's own revenue (Gilbert, 2010). Even so, the Panama Canal Company's profit margins significantly declined between 1960 and 1975, turning negative in 1974 (Maurer & Yu, 2010).

More contemporary opinions also suggest the canal's unique necessity has, and will continue, to decline. Professor at Villanova University School of Law Ruth Gordon noted in her 2011 lecture at North Carolina Central School of Law, "with a melting Arctic Ocean, however, companies have already begun building ice-breaking ships believing that goods can be transported across the top of the planet rather than between North and South America, making the Panama Canal less necessary" (Gordon, 2011). China has taken interest in this development of a Northern path, and intends to use the route through the Arctic Ocean to save transit time (Rutherford, 2016). Furthermore, despite Professor Quintero's view, the development of Mexico's "dry canal" may have a logical impact of a decline in Panama Canal traffic. Beginning with a $4 billion investment in 2019, Mexico's rail and shipping corridor across the isthmus of Tehuantepec serves an identical purpose to the Panama Canal: to move goods between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Because the canal is estimated to reach its full capacity of 1.4 million containers per year in 2035, its true impact on Panama cannot be quantified yet. However, the similarities between the two routes suggest there will necessarily be a negative effect on Panama's traffic (Soto, 2026).

Altogether, these points form a practical argument which the Ford and Carter administrations had already concluded: a weakening of the canal's relevance to America meant that a negotiated handover, backed by a reserved right of re-entry under the Neutrality Treaty, served U.S. interests better than continuing direct control.

Recent Evidence About the Canal's Relevance to the U.S. In A Crisis

A notable development in 2023-2024 complicates the argument about the canal's current relevance to the U.S. Between early 2023 and mid-2024, Panama experienced a severe drought, intensified by an El Niño event that lowered water levels in Gatun Lake, a freshwater source that feeds the canal's lock system

(Price, 2026). Because each transit requires millions of gallons of fresh water to operate the locks, the Panama Canal Authority was forced to progressively restrict daily transits from a normal capacity of as many as 38 vessels per day to a low of just 18 vessels per day by February 2024. (Project 44, 2025). Atop that, the Authority reduced the amount of cargo vessels were permitted to carry, thereby ensuring additional leeway for depth of ships. (GEP Market Intelligence, 2024). The total impact of the restrictions meant the curtailment of approximately 100 million tons of cargo, amounting to about 35 percent of the volume that had crossed the canal in 2022. (Dierker et al., 2024).

The economic consequences arising from the drought were substantial. Panamanian officials estimated the drought would cost the canal between $500 million and $700 million in lost revenue for 2024 alone, nearly triple initial projections (Canup, 2024). Competition for the shrinking pool of transit slots grew so intense that shippers turned to the Panama Canal Authority's slot auction system, with one liquefied petroleum gas operator paying $4 million for a single booking in November 2023 (Miller, 2024).[1] Major ocean carriers imposed drought surcharges of several hundred dollars per container on affected routes (GEP Market Intelligence, 2024). These costs rippled outward, and alternative routes for shipping were chosen. (Miller, 2024). Some LNG traffic never returned to the canal even after water levels normalized. (LaRocco, 2025). Arguing that the canal had become a declining asset is challenged by this evidence. If the canal's economic relevance had genuinely been fading, a temporary 50 percent cut in transit capacity would not have generated cost spikes and global rerouting on this scale.

Yet, the drought is instructive for a different reason. It demonstrates what a real disruption to canal operations will look like and shows who will actually manage it. The disruption in operations originated in climate, not in U.S., Panamanian, or Chinese policy or influence. Further, it was Panama alone, not the United States, who absorbed the diplomatic and financial burden of responding to it. The Panama Canal Authority not only dealt with the crisis through slot auctions and drought-driven scheduling but has since committed to a $1.6 billion reservoir project, including $400 million to relocate roughly 2,500 displaced residents, specifically to prevent a recurrence (LaRocco, 2025).

With Panama identifying its own operational vulnerability and financing its own long-term solution, all without even requesting American assistance and without America jumping in to try to assist, there is clear evidence that the economics of the Panama Canal is not cause for heightened concern in the U.S. Thus, even if the 1977 Treaty's Neutrality provisions authorize U.S. intervention when canal operations are actually disrupted, this recent instance of true disruption demonstrated no need for the U.S. to exercise this right.

When President Trump argues that Panama's toll structure or mismanagement constitutes "interference" with canal operations and thereby justifies American reassertion of control, the argument rings hollow in light of this evidence.

[1] A slot auction is the Panama Canal Authority's system for allocating scarce transit reservations by bid during periods of restricted capacity. Shippers bid for a limited number of daily slots, and the highest bidders secure passage.

Current U.S. Rhetoric: "We're Taking It Back"

President Trump's focus on the Panama Canal in 2025 echoed language that had been largely dormant in American politics for a generation. In his second inaugural address, he told the country that the canal had "foolishly been given" to Panama after the United States "spent more money than has ever been spent on a project before" and "lost 38,000 lives," and declared bluntly: "China is operating the Panama Canal. And we didn't give it to China. We gave it to Panama, and we're taking it back" (Trump, 2025a). He repeated a similar formulation in his March 4 Address to a Joint Session of Congress, describing the canal as built "at tremendous cost of American blood and treasure" and announcing that his administration would be "reclaiming the Panama Canal" to "enhance our national security" (Trump, 2025b). On social media, President Trump separately accused Panama of charging "ridiculous" fees to U.S. Navy and commercial vessels (Truth Details, n.d.).

Three features of this rhetoric are worth noting. First, its central factual claims are contested: Panama's government has repeatedly stated that the Hong Kong-based firm holding port concessions at Balboa and Cristóbal, CK Hutchison, is not a Chinese state entity, and Panamanian officials and independent analysts alike have found no evidence that Beijing exercises operational control over the canal (Roy, 2025).

Second, despite the President's sweeping language in early 2025, legislative action toward reclaiming the canal since then is insubstantial. The Panama Canal Repurchase Act of 2025 was introduced in the 119th Congress and was immediately referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs and placed in the initial committee stage. The act would allow the President with the Secretary of State "to initiate and conduct negotiations with appropriate counterparts of the Government of the Republic of Panama to reacquire the Panama Canal" (Panama Canal Repurchase Act of 2025, 2025). The bill has not been edited since its introduction, has not progressed at all, and no votes or meetings on the Act are planned (LegiScan, 2025). Stagnation of the bill amidst the President's comments suggest a gap between rhetoric and policy that Harvard Kennedy School economist Dr. Ricardo Hausmann and others have pointed to as evidence that the statements function as something other than a genuine legislative agenda (Hughes, 2025; Panama Canal Repurchase Act of 2025, 2025).

Third, the basis of this American rhetoric likely stems from the condition in the 1977 Panama Canal Treaty that allows the United States to use military force to reopen the canal if "the Canal is closed, or its operations are interfered with" (see Section 7: The Torrijos-Carter Treaties and the End of U.S. Control) (United States of America and The Republic of Panama, 1977b). That provision, however, is contingent: it can only be activated if the canal's operation is actually disrupted or neutrality is breached. It is possible that President Trump attempted to satisfy that condition by framing Panama's "ridiculous" (Truth Details, n.d.) tolls as a form of interference with canal operations, but this is an argument that the Panama Canal Authority, and independent thinkers like Professor Quintero have rejected given the canal's toll structure,

which they say already favors U.S. shipping, more so than any other nation (Panama Canal Authority, 2025; A. Quintero, personal communication, July 19, 2026).

A Motive for President Trump's Comments, Not Specific to Panama

Building on Dr. Hausmann's suspicions, it is worth mentioning other contemporary concerns in Latin America generally, which may offer an ulterior motive for President Trump's comments. At a March 27, 2026 symposium at the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, *Rethinking the Global Order: Latin America, China, and the U.S. Amid Transforming Economic and Political Paradigms,* all panelists and the moderator agreed that, economically, China has already successfully inserted itself into Latin America. (David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 2026; Vega, 2005, p. 390) Latin American countries see China as a worthwhile economic partner, one which does not seek to extract benefits from Latin America just for the benefit of doing business together, like the U.S. has tended to do (David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 2026; Vega, 2005, p. 390) The U.S. historically was able to partner with Latin America, and extract benefits from Latin America, through the promise of military protection. (Chavez, 2026) Over the decades after the Cold War ended, however, the U.S. "lost interest in its relationship with Latin American countries" with the result that "China has stepped into the void." (Vega, 2005, p. 377)

"As China gains more clout in Latin America, the United States may obtain less cooperation from Latin American countries with regard to securing oil, promoting human rights, expanding anti-narcotics programs, fighting terrorism, assuring U.S. national security, promoting democracy and higher environmental standards, and reaching long term trade agreements." (Vega, 2005, p. 391) Communist China could gain influence similar to the Soviet Union's Cold War influence of its member countries. (Vega, 2005, p. 397)

President Trump's rhetoric about the Panama Canal specifically presents as logical in light of this, even if it can be argued his rhetoric is misdirected at Panama. China is only 23 voyage days away from the Panama Canal (The Opening Print, 2020). With the canal still having clear relevance to world trade, and with China's influence in Latin American having grown, it is reasonable for President Trump to consider whether to implement policies reversing that.

In addition to the above, anecdotal evidence suggests that President Trump's rhetoric may be rooted in general facts and statistics that are concerning to the U.S. No doubt, China makes substantial use of the canal, and China most definitely benefitted from the canal's expansion project a decade ago (Lewis, 2010). No doubt, CK Hutchison's ownership of two key ports at the canal is a reason to at least suspect China's "control" at the canal. On that point, one commenter, comparing the U.S. merchant marine to that of China noted as follows: "Chinese interests also control over 500 vessels flying the Panamanian flag, and control terminals on both ends of the Panama Canal. As a result, China has the ability to manipulate U.S. foreign trade by manipulating shipping rates or service, to restrict American access to much of the international oceangoing fleet, and provide sealift to support its own military operations or those of a proxy" (Webert, 2017)

Moreover, while Panama's government has stated it will resist outside influences, a selection of recorded comments do not offer any assurances that it will resist China. Panamanian journalists documented that the country's leadership has repeatedly emphasized the same theme: the canal is Panamanian territory now and permanently (Panamanians Reject Trump's Remarks on the Canal - Prensa Latina, 2026). President José Raúl Mulino stated plainly on social media that "the canal is and always will be Panamanian," (José Raúl Mulino [@JoseRaulMulino], n.d.) while the Panamanian daily *La Prensa* quoted a government declaration that "every square meter of the Panama Canal and its adjacent zone belongs to Panama… the sovereignty and independence of our country are not negotiable" (Panamanians Reject Trump's Remarks on the Canal - Prensa Latina, 2026). Left-leaning outlets went further in framing the dispute historically: one commentary described twentieth-century American control of the zone as "the imposition of a colonial enclave that divided the national territory," crediting "decades of national resistance" (a reference to episodes like the 1964 riots) for the canal's eventual return to Panamanian hands (Panamanians Reject Trump's Remarks on the Canal - Prensa Latina, 2026). Published interviews with Panamanians in the wake of President Trump's comments captured a similar theme and sentiment among Panamanian citizens. Asked how Panamanians would respond if the U.S. Navy actually appeared at the canal; tour boat captain Adsel Tordesillas predicted that "the people would all come to the canal" (Good Morning America, 2025). In a separate interview, a Panamanian speaker drew a direct parallel to American national pride, telling reporters that "the same patriotic sentiment Americans feel, we, Panamanians, feel as well" (Good Morning America, 2025). Other notable Panamanian statements claimed that Panamanians "would all take to the streets," if the U.S. tried to seize the canal and that "we as Panamanians would fight for our canal" (Good Morning America, 2025).

The problem with this collection of evidence is that, while it reflects anecdotally Panamanians' response to America, none of it goes so far as to say Panama will not give preferences to China, or that China does not exert influence and control over the canal. Thus, Panamanians' reactions to President Trump's comments cannot necessarily be taken to mean there will be no favoritism toward China. On their face, they aim at U.S. influence and control.

For all of these reasons, it is not possible to claim that President Trump's rhetoric has no evidentiary basis whatsoever. Instead, it is reasonable to consider the Panama Canal rhetoric as part of a larger regional concern.

Interview: Adolfo Quintero, Professor at La Universidad de Panama

To probe this hypothesis with greater analytical depth, this paper draws on an original interview with Adolfo Quintero, a Panamanian economist who was personally involved in the special committee that reviewed the financing of the canal's post-1999 expansion and a professor at La Universidad de Panama (A. Quintero, personal communication, July 19, 2026). Hemaly Metta, Professor Quintero's niece who lived in Panama for a number of years, and currently lives in Massachusetts, generously offered her time to translate. Professor Quintero's central claim is that President Trump's rhetoric, however alarming, does not reflect a genuine intention or capacity to retake the canal. Instead, he argues that the practical purpose

of the rhetoric is to deter Chinese commercial expansion in Panama itself and, by extension, across Latin America. Professor Quintero's point certainly has support in the evidence above.

In fact, Professor Quintero views the U.S.-Panama relationship as fundamentally friendly. Yet, he describes President Trump's approach as distinctive because it substitutes threats for the cooperative tone that characterized the relationship over the prior decades. He argues that Panama's government has consistently declined to grant China the Latin American foothold it has sought and that it is China's desires, not Panamanian actions, that drive Trump's rhetoric. In his view, American officials perceive even the appearance of a "Chinese preference" in Panamanian commerce as a threat serious enough to justify inflammatory rhetoric, even though the United States likely recognizes it cannot control or influence Latin America the way it once did. (A. Quintero, personal communication, July 19, 2026).

Certainly, when the Panama Canal Authority signed a loan agreement in 2008 to finance the canal's expansion, it did so with five multinational and bilateral banks, and it did not look to China or the U.S. specifically for that financial support (Andean Development Corporation, 2008). Professor Quintero's points reflect an intentionality to that effort.

Additionally, Professor Quintero pushed back directly against President Trump's claim that Panama's toll schedule discriminates against the United States. He described a toll structure that, to the contrary, actually offers privileges to American shipping: U.S. vessels, including warships, receive priority transit that is not extended to any other nation. The U.S. also has the benefit of a special binational committee that is staffed predominantly by American officials to help determine the fees applied to U.S.-bound traffic. Thus, as Professor Quintero points out, if anything, Panama maintains arrangements that favor the United States more than any other canal user (A. Quintero, personal communication, July 19, 2026).

Professor Quintero also offered a reading of why Panama's government response has stayed measured even as public rhetoric on both sides has escalated. Many senior Panamanian officials have lived or studied in the United States and understand President Trump's statements as rhetorical exaggerations rather than a credible operational plan. At the same time, he was careful to distinguish that measured official tone from his own feelings, which he felt were shared by a majority of Panamanian citizens. Professor Quintero believes that Panama will maintain a defensive, sovereignty-focused reaction (A. Quintero, personal communication, July 19, 2026).

Tracing history, Professor Quintero's interview offers a compelling context by which to judge America's rhetoric. He condemns the 1903 treaty under the age-old argument that Panama did not truly have the say it should have before the signing of that treaty, and he defends the 1977 treaty because both countries negotiated it as equals (A. Quintero, personal communication, July 19, 2026). Then, applying that same context to President Trump's language that the U.S. will be "taking back" the canal, Professor Quintero posits that it will not withstand scrutiny because it treats Panama's sovereignty as something Washington can reopen without Panama at the table, the same flaw Professor Quintero identifies in 1903.

Professor Quintero's viewpoint is understandable, and supported by the treaty's text. While as noted above, the U.S. does have rights under the 1977 Treaty, those rights are not absolute. A strict reading of Article V of the 1977 Treaty supports Professor Quintero's view.

Connecting The Centuries

Bringing the historical and contemporary evidence together, a few critical points emerge. As an initial matter, there should be no doubt that the United States' announcement that it will, or even can, simply "take back" the canal without diplomatic discussion is definitionally imperialistic. The argument that President Trump's comments are mere deterrence call for a nuanced distinction between "deterrence" and "imperialism" that is truly too narrow to draw. Deterrent rhetoric becomes imperial when it treats sovereignty as negotiable.

The Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty was a striking example of that, as Bunau-Varilla and Hay, in a fait accompli, extracted terms from a Panamanian delegation that had not yet arrived to object. Neither of the two men held any personal responsibility to Panamanians, yet they negotiated the terms of Panamanian sovereignty in a way that survived for decades. President Trump's 2025-2026 rhetoric harkens back to that, suggesting that the question of who controls the canal is one that the United States can unilaterally reopen, nearly 50 years after the 1977 Torrijos-Carter Treaties made as clear as possible that this was never supposed to be the case again.

The need for President Trump's imperialistic rhetoric is highly questionable. The evidence cited above demonstrates that the strategic, practical and legal case for direct U.S. control of the canal is considerably weaker than the rhetoric implies. Framing the canal as indispensable to American national security overstates the case – one that U.S. officials themselves already questioned and came to terms with a half-century ago. And that case is proved by such things as the financing of the canal's expansion, and the 2023-2024 drought.

While undeniably, China has developed a substantial economic presence and influence throughout Latin America, and facts and statistics give rise to questions as to whether that is also the case in Panama itself, actual evidence is to the contrary.

Thus, even as President Trump takes an opportunity to use historical points that ring partially true and spin them toward a valid purpose, the evidence actually points to Professor Quintero's interpretation of what is actually happening. Professor Quintero's viewpoint is further supported by the fact that Panama in 2026 has diplomatic, economic, and legal support that Panama in 1903 did not have.

Still, it is chilling to see the United States treating the question of Panamanian sovereignty as available for renegotiation from Washington, on Washington's terms, whenever it suits American domestic or geopolitical purposes. The continuity of President Trump's comments, tied to an event more than a century old that angered Panamanians for decades, raises valid concerns. It shows that a current controversy can arise, and it will be directly reminiscent of the canal's origins, undeniably born from

imperialism and undeniably treating Panama's sovereignty as not just negotiable, but irrelevant.

CONCLUSION

The Panama Canal's history is one of contested consent from its very inception: a treaty negotiated by an unauthorized foreign engineer, a construction project completed at enormous human cost, decades of American administration punctuated by lethal conflict over a flag, and an eventual, bilaterally negotiated withdrawal that both countries' governments ratified as equals. Measured against that history, President Trump's 2025 claim that the canal was "foolishly given" to Panama inverts the historical record: if anything, the 1977 treaties corrected an earlier and genuinely one-sided arrangement, not the reverse. Comments from select sources reflecting the opinions of segments of Panama's government, press, and citizens show a response to the renewed rhetoric with rejection, framing the canal's sovereignty as settled and non-negotiable. Moreover, historical evidence, together with anecdotal evidence from Professor Quintero and others, support the rhetoric as a coercive signal directed at limiting Chinese commercial influence in the region generally, rather than a serious bid for reoccupation of the canal itself.

Certainly, there has been no progress on Congressional action, and at present, the Panama Canal Authority remains under Panamanian control. Climate events, including alternative routes precipitated by global warming point to the practical, strategic, and economic case for direct American administration of the canal being weaker today than it was during the Cold War. Lest that context be forgotten, America turned over the canal in 1977, amidst that Cold War.

But interpreting the rhetoric as "only" deterrence understates its historical resonance. The United States has reason to believe that China is gaining substantial clout in Latin America. With the U.S. flexing its imperialistic muscles by addressing the Panama Canal the way it has, the U.S. is making a point. It treats Panamanian sovereignty as a subject the United States can reopen for discussion whenever it wishes, suggesting an influence over that particular region, and likely more. While the U.S. has not acted on President Trump's words further, there can be no doubt that the 2025 rhetoric draws on the same underlying assumption that made the 1903 treaty possible in the first place: Panama's sovereignty is supposedly secondary to American strategic convenience. Whatever its practical aims, that is the language of imperialism.

FIGURE 1: French Map of the Isthmus of Panama (1754)



(UF Digital Collections, n.d.)

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