

Rubio conducts gunboat diplomacy in Panama as Trump reiterates threats to seize Canal

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3 February 2025

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio visited Panama, the small Latin American country, on Sunday to press demands for US domination of the Panama Canal, backed by Trump's threat to illegally attack Panama and reconquer the waterway.

Bowing to the threats of the world's largest military power, the Panama Canal's transit authority said late Sunday it will "optimize transit priority" of US Navy ships, while Bloomberg reported that Panamanian President Jose Raul Mulino "assured Rubio that US Navy vessels would enjoy free passage."

Mulino also announced Sunday that Panama would not renew its participation in China's Belt and Road infrastructure initiative, becoming the first country in Latin America to do so. He also raised the prospect of renegeing on its current agreements with China over the Belt and Road initiative, which last through 2026.

Rubio gloated over the announcement, writing in an X post Monday, "Yesterday's announcement by President Jose Raul Mulino that Panama will allow its participation in the [Chinese Communist Party's] Belt and Road Initiative to expire is a great step forward for US-Panama relations."

The Panama Canal is the world's second busiest shipping route. Originally constructed by the United States in the early 20th century, control was transferred to Panama in 1999 under the terms of a 1977 treaty.

During his January 20 presidential inauguration, Trump threatened, "We gave [the Canal] to Panama, and we're taking it back."

Just days later, Trump confirmed that he was threatening to use "military coercion" to annex Panama, as well as Greenland, the Arctic territory

controlled by Denmark. Trump blustered, "We need them for economic security."

Trump doubled down on his threats to illegally annex the Panama Canal Sunday, ahead of Rubio's departure. "China's running the Panama Canal. That was not given to China, that was given to Panama, foolishly, but they violated the agreement and we're going to take it back, or something very powerful is going to happen," Trump told reporters at Joint Base Andrews outside Washington.

His threats against Panama are part of his efforts to consolidate control over the Americas and their key waterways as part of a military buildup for war with China.

Commenting on Rubio's trip, the *Wall Street Journal* noted, "Most of Rubio's predecessors in recent decades have visited London or other major US allies on their maiden overseas trips. The choice of Panama as his first stop reflected the extent to which Trump has scrambled American diplomatic priorities and refocused US attention on the Western Hemisphere."

In its readout of the meeting between Rubio and Mulino, the State Department wrote, "President Trump has made a preliminary determination that the current position of influence and control of the Chinese Communist Party over the Panama Canal area is a threat to the canal and represents a violation of the Treaty Concerning the Permanent Neutrality and Operation of the Panama Canal. Secretary Rubio made clear that this status quo is unacceptable and that absent immediate changes, it would require the United States to take measures necessary to protect its rights under the Treaty."

The claim that Panama is violating the treaty is a

fraud. Panama allows ships under all flags to pass through the canal, as specified in the treaty. What Trump is seeking is preferential treatment for US warships, ships and cargo and the seizure of the canal in order to conduct a blockade of China in the event that Trump launches an illegal and aggressive war against it.

Trump has seized as a pretext for alleged violations of the treaty the fact that cargo terminals at the ends of the canal are operated by Hutchison Whampoa, a Hong Kong-based port operator. Earlier this month, Panama's government announced that it had launched an audit of Hutchison's operations, in line with demands by the Trump administration.

Ahead of his departure to Panama, Rubio claimed that China has a contingency plan to shut down the Panama Canal in the event of war with the United States. "And if the government in China in a conflict tells them to shut down the Panama Canal, they will have to," Rubio said. "And in fact, I have zero doubt that they have contingency planning to do so. That is a direct threat."

On Christmas Day, Trump posted on Truth Social that the "wonderful soldiers of China" were "lovingly but illegally operating the Panama Canal."

These claims are a fraud. Hutchison has no control over the transit of ships through the port, and it could not prevent American ships from transiting it in the event of war with China.

The use of military force to secure US domination of the canal is not unprecedented. In 1989, the United States invaded Panama to illegally depose the government of Manuel Noriega, killing 500 Panamanians.

In response to the unrelenting US pressure campaign, the *Financial Times* commented, "Panama's government and business elite are beginning to panic, diplomats said, as they realize that although Trump's rhetoric may be flamboyant, the US president and his allies are serious about pressing their tiny country to make concessions and reduce China's presence—even if it means tearing up legally binding agreements."

In an interview with *Politico* published over the weekend, Panama's former President Ernesto Pérez Balladares raised the very real threat of a US invasion of Panama, saying, "I think there will be many, many casualties on our side," he said, "and international

condemnation of the US."



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