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The Rise of Trump's "Gators" and Its Implications

By Jaehan Park

SYNOPSIS

Donald Trump's decision to appoint Florida politicians to key national security posts signals his prioritisation of the Western Hemisphere. This means more policy attention to Central and South America and the Caribbean. US allies in the Indo-Pacific will have to turn their attention to the Western Hemisphere while taking on larger military roles in their respective theatres.

COMMENTARY

One can discern an important trend from the composition of the incoming Donald Trump administration. Whether out of political expediency, strategic deliberations, or mere coincidence, several individuals from his adopted state of Florida will assume key national security posts, including, most notably, Senator Marco Rubio as the Secretary of State and Representative Michael Waltz as the National Security Advisor.

One can depict this as the rise of the "[Gators](#)" – a monicker for Floridians deriving from their University of Florida's football team.

Unlike their predecessors who cut their teeth in the executive branch in Washington, D. C., these individuals are from the legislature, which interacts directly with voters who are in turn affected by local geographies. And if, as historian Walter McDougall [observed](#), statespersons' geographic perceptions have shaped history, these individuals' own outlook on American geography, informed by these experiences, will likely shape their decisions.

Florida is more conservative politically than the east and west coasts of the United States of America, where the traditional foreign policy elite comes from; it is also more concerned with hemispheric issues than Eurasia. Therefore, the appointment of the "Gators" will have important implications for American foreign policy.

Throughout history, Florida has served as America's gateway to the outside world. During the early years, American statesmen were interested in Florida due to its location as a gatekeeper to the Gulf of Mexico. The [annexation of Florida](#) in 1819 secured the southeastern flank and heralded the adoption of a more [unilateralist approach](#) to the continent. It also brought [Cuba](#), a key Spanish holding at the heart of the Caribbean, into contact.

In 1898, the United States expelled the Spaniards from Cuba and, by extension, the Caribbean. As a result of the [Spanish-American War](#), America annexed the Philippines, another Spanish holding, as well as other islands leading to it, thereby acquiring security interests in the Pacific. To wit, the control of Florida and its adjacent seas laid the foundation for America's involvement with the wider world.

Despite its historical importance, the Western Hemisphere was put on the [back burner](#) in the post-Cold War years. However, the geopolitical situation is calling for [a rethink](#). America's southern border is increasingly porous, through which illegal [immigrants](#) and deadly substances, such as fentanyl, flow.

Drug cartels are not only bringing in narcotics but also engaging in other heinous crimes, including arms dealing and human trafficking. Moreover, hostile great powers have taken advantage of America's neglect. For instance, Moscow recently signed a set of [agreements with Caracas](#), strengthening cooperation on intelligence and energy fronts. Similarly, Iran has maintained security ties with the region directly or vicariously through Venezuela's ties with Hezbollah and Hamas. Most importantly, China has been operating [spy stations in Cuba](#) and making significant investments in the rest of the region, exemplified most recently by funding a billion-dollar, deep-water [port in Peru](#).

Florida is more exposed to Latin America and the Caribbean than the east and west coasts of the US, which have deeper ties with Europe and Asia. For instance, South/Central America and the Caribbean were [Florida's largest markets](#) in 2023; in contrast, Asia was the largest for [California](#) and [New York](#).

In terms of population, Hispanics represent [almost 30 per cent](#) of Florida's population – higher than the [national level](#) (approximately 20 per cent). Unlike elsewhere, where [Mexicans](#) constitute the majority, however, Hispanics of Cuban origin account for the largest portion in Florida. Not surprisingly, their views are very different – more [conservative](#) than their southern brethren. Given their number, this has state-wide effects; in fact, Florida is more conservative than the rest of the country.

Seen in this light, the rise of the "Gators" may hint at the possibility of a change in America's policy in the Western Hemisphere. Senator Rubio's anti-communist stance, originating in part from his Cuban-American background, and its possible consequences for America's Latin America policy are widely [discussed](#).

Representative [Waltz](#) was one of the lawmakers who introduced the bill to deploy the US military to root out drug cartels in Mexico. He has advocated for an "[updated Monroe Doctrine](#)" to deal with cartels, energy security, and Chinese influence. It should be noted that his wife and fellow Floridian, Julia Nesheiwat, served as the homeland security advisor in the first Trump administration.

Susie Wiles, Trump's top campaign manager and chief of staff nominee, has [deep ties](#) with Florida politics, which may result in additional nominations of Floridians. The president-elect himself has made the southern border front and centre of his campaign agenda; also, he was [critical](#) of the Clinton administration's attempt to normalise diplomatic relations with Cuba. Trump [reversed](#) much of Barack Obama's Cuba policies during his first term.

What are the foreign policy implications of the rise of the "Gators"?

First, the Western Hemisphere will figure more prominently in US foreign policy. This is truer given that hemispheric issues permeate domestic, economic, and foreign policies. The president-elect's [threat](#) to impose tariffs on Canada and Mexico to stop the influx of migrants and narcotics may prove to be the opening salvo of a more heavy-handed approach in the Americas.

Second, relatedly, this may sometimes result in rocky situations, for instance, between Washington and Mexico City. On the other hand, America might have an opportunity to make supply chains more secure, especially in sourcing critical minerals or producing [semiconductors](#). More often, however, the result will be mixed. On [Venezuela](#), for instance, the new administration will have to strike a delicate balance of interests concerning energy, strategic diplomacy, and migration. Even the author of [The Art of the Deal](#) will sometimes have to settle for less.

Third, this focus on hemispheric issues, combined with America's increasingly limited resources and the president-elect's penchant for dealmaking, may result in America's "[deprioritisation](#)" of other regions. [The US national debt](#) has reached approximately US\$35 trillion, out of which over US\$1 trillion was spent to cover interest payments – exceeding its defence budget. The new administration might want to tie loose ends on [economic grounds](#). In an [interview](#), Waltz already hinted that the incoming administration would focus on the Western Hemisphere after quickly settling the ongoing conflicts in Europe and the Middle East. After all, no power can exert influence abroad without having [secure peripheries](#).

Looking at the Indo-Pacific, this may present both challenges and opportunities. While both Senator Rubio and Representative Waltz have been known as "[China hawks](#)", this does not mean they would be easy on America's regional allies crucial in dealing with China. In fact, they may demand more financial, military, or other contributions, reflecting their principal's [well-known complaints](#) about allied band-wagoning. That is, America's allies may now have to turn their attention to the Americas to find ways to help the United States deal with these hemispheric issues while taking on larger military roles in their respective theatres.

Even so, they should confront the reality that America remains the best guarantor of their security and prosperity – at least [better than the alternatives](#). And now America has problems in its own neighbourhood. In the age of the "Gators", US allies across the Indo-Pacific would do well to help keep their friend's house in order.

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