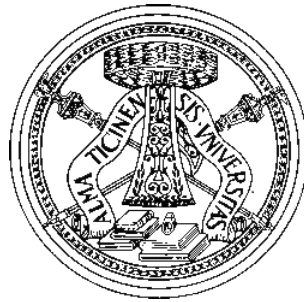


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**THE GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF
THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS**

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Abstract

This work examines the evolving geopolitical significance of the Galápagos Islands within the context of an emerging multipolar international system characterized by great power competition between the United States and China. Historically conceived as a site of ecological preservation, the Galápagos Islands must be understood as a strategic asset for Ecuador. Located at the intersection of maritime trade routes, with the Panama Canal at its north, and rising trade corridors that unite China with South America, the Galápagos Islands are a needed tool for Ecuador to position itself geopolitically in a shifting global order. This work examines trade data, geopolitical analysis, and comparative cases to assess Ecuador's foreign policy behavior in relation to its insular territory. On China, its expanding economic investment projects in the region, such as the Chancay mega port in Perú, and its illegal fishing activities near Ecuadorian waters are being analyzed. As for the United States, its strategic priorities in counter narcotrafficking operations and establish control in what the Trump administration considers its sphere of influence are taken into consideration to demonstrate that if well managed, Ecuador can hedge in between these two superpowers while extracting economic and political benefits. Financial mechanisms, such as debt for nature swaps illustrate how environmental conservation can enhance Ecuador's international standing economically. Lastly, this work argues that the Galápagos Islands have transitioned from a purely ecological reserve to a multidimensional geopolitical asset, whose relevance is likely to intensify with global power competition.

Introduction

The international system is undergoing major transformations marked by the erosion of the unipolarity world order that gave the United States an uncontested global dominance and the rise of a multipolar order with actors such as China. The Asian giant rapid economic, strategic and influence expansion has reconfigured patterns of competition across continents with the Belt and Road Initiative being at its front and including Latin America as a strategic region. Within this landscape, smaller states are no longer passive actors but increasingly engaged in strategies to navigate great power rivalry. Ecuador exemplifies this scenario, as it possesses a critical territory that can aid Quito leverage its position geopolitically in respect to China and the United States. Territories, that historically were once considered peripheral, are acquiring renewed geopolitical relevance, such as the Galápagos Islands case. Their location in the eastern pacific, and its closeness to maritime routes, jurisdiction over extensive Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) positions them as potential points of influence in the region. The Galápagos Islands should not be only understood through an ecological lens, but also as part of a reconfiguration in global power structures.

The underestimation of the Islands as a geopolitical asset within academic literature and policy discourse can pose risks to the Ecuadorian state to not act accordingly regarding this territory, even though, many studies have emphasized conservation, biodiversity and tourism, they often overlook the strategic implications the Galápagos pose at an international level. Considering the increasing presence of Chinese distant water-fleets near the Ecuadorian coasts, major investments such as the Chancay mega port in Perú, and new trade agreements with South American countries, there are deeper Chinese engagement in the

region, specifically in the Pacific maritime logistics. The United States has maintained a longstanding interest in regional security, particularly in relation to counter narcotrafficking operations that carry cocaine and other drugs onto their own borders. Historically Washington has viewed this region of the world as them to protect and hold influence upon, in the Islands they did directly by installing a military base during the second world war to protect the Panama Canal from any Japanese attack.

This work emphasizes that Ecuador should employ a hedging strategy to manage its two most important relationships with the United States and China, utilizing the Galápagos Islands as a central component for this approach. Hedging in international relations is understood as a set of policies that seek to avoid an exclusive alignment with one power and maximize benefits multiple partners. This can allow Ecuador to have flexibility in an uncertain international environment. However, to hedge in between the United States and China, possess some constraints. On one side, Beijing represents a critical economic partner in imports and exports, providing infrastructural investments and financing. On the other side, Washington continues its historical path of providing Quito security cooperation, especially in the last years as combating transnational crime organizations have become a major national interest. The Galápagos Islands, due to their strategic location and symbolic value becomes a platform on which Ecuador can negotiate, align, and extract benefits from both actors. The debt for nature swap helps us illustrate how environmental governance can be integrated into foreign policy, and into instruments of international bargaining.

This research adopts a qualitative approach that combines geopolitical analysis, with the examinations of economic trends and comparative case studies. Trade data, history, and geopolitical analysis help us assess the shifts in Ecuador's economic orientation over the past decades. This work engages in a multi-layer approach to contextualize the implications the archipelago has in a complex and contested international system.

From Periphery to Strategic Core: The History of the Galapagos Islands

It can be argued that the first human encounter on the Galapagos islands took place in 1535, when Spanish colonists, having strayed from their route in what is now Panama on their way to Peru, came across these “enchanted” islands, which they described as hostile due to their large number of volcanoes and sea lions. (Civallero 2022). I mention that this is debatable, as there are myths that during the Inca Empire these islands had already been visited by its citizens, however, there is not enough historical material to confirm this myth.

The Galápagos Islands have belonged to the Republic of Ecuador since 1832, annexed two years after the independence of this new country, which seceded from Gran Colombia, a state that included what is now Panama, Venezuela, Ecuador, and Colombia. (Maiguashca 1994). The name Galápagos Islands means “Turtle Islands” in Old Castilian, a name given by Spanish travelers during their first encounters with these islands in the 16th century, amazed by the size of the animals that lived there. (Civallero 2022). In the Treaty of Tordesillas, which defined the rights of navigation between Spain and Portugal, the Galapagos were placed under Spanish rule. However, during the Spanish imperialist period in South America, the islands did not officially belong to any Virreinato¹, which greatly

¹ Virreinato: Political entity created by the Spanish crown to administer its territories and govern, on behalf of the King, through an official representative.

facilitated their annexation by the newly independent Republic of Ecuador. Ignacio Hernández, together with a fleet of Ecuadorians, set sail from Guayaquil in January 1832 and arrived on February 12 of that same year, they proclaimed the islands part of the territory of the Ecuadorian state in front of a single inhabitant who was on the island. (Carrión 2018).

Until Ecuador annexed the islands, there was almost no interest in them, or even international acknowledgement of their existence. The Spanish crown did not consider them important in its plans for conquest due to the great difficulty of navigating the surrounding waters and the danger involved in arriving at and departing from the islands, so their recognition within the empire was of no interest.

This was very different from other regions that were difficult to navigate but rich in natural resources needed by the crown, such as the Ecuadorian and Peruvian Amazon, hence why these islands were abandoned by the Spanish Crown. Years later, fleets of English pirates found these isolated islands and settled there to use them as a refuge for attacking Spanish ships sailing from the American continent. Likewise, during the 17th century, the market for whale oil reached high levels of demand, generating wealth among those who traded it. The economic income generated by this product was so great that the idea of unifying these islands with the British Empire was considered due to their marine wealth and strategic position on Pacific shipping routes. (Corley Smith 2023).

Although the islands were not internationally known until the 19th century, nor were they a target for conquest by the empires of that time, everything changed after Charles Darwin visited the islands in 1835, where he settled for five weeks and began writing his most famous work, “The Origin of Species.” This work was ridiculed at the time, and Darwin never experienced the success of his work in his lifetime, however, to this day, this book is essential for anyone who wants to understand the theory of evolution.

Darwin's visit took place just three years after Ecuador annexed the islands, which raises the idea that if Ecuador had not claimed them as its own, years later, the British could have claimed them, since they did not belong to any state. Darwin's book began to gain popularity, as did the islands, which began to intrigue people because they were considered a “living natural laboratory.” In 1978, UNESCO proclaimed the islands as a World Heritage Site, on the grounds of their great diversity of both flora and fauna (Hennessy 2018).

In its early years, the Ecuadorian central government did not consider the islands to be as important as other parts of the territory. There was a period when the inhabitants of the islands were mainly men who had committed minor crimes and were exiled from mainland Ecuador, as well as women of “wretched character”. During this dark period, there were widespread abuses by the police forces towards the inmates, with testimonies speaking of great distress at having been sent so far away. (Civallero 2022).

The Galápagos Islands have overcome several attempts of purchase by powers such as France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. A few years after the islands were annexed to Ecuador, the population that inhabited them were mostly descendants of the first settlers, who suffered from a lack of opportunities, nostalgia for the city, and a shortage of food and fresh water. The management of this new province was difficult and not very appealing to the central government, as a newly formed republic was causing enough problems to the central government for them wanting to send political efforts to these remote parts of the country. (Ana Sevilla 2018).

In the 19th century, the kidnapping of renowned whaler George Howland caused great outrage in the United States. Once released, the US claimed \$40,000 in compensation for damages caused to the crew and owners of the whaling ship. In this claim, the United States pointed out that Ecuador could not maintain control over this territory and suggested that these islands should be ceded to the new North American empire. (Corley Smith 2023). This suggestion did not prosper; however, it was a foreshadowing of what was to come for this territory in the future.

One of the first serious attempts to acquire the islands was made by General Villamil and the United States government. Villamil, born in Luisiana during the Spanish occupation of these lands and a hero of Ecuadorian independence, was the same person who sent Ignacio Hernández to the peninsula in 1832 to annex the islands to Ecuador (Carrión 2018). However, years after this annexation, the general obtained permission to exploit guano deposits, a

fertilizer that is very rich due to its natural composition. This generated interest on the part of the United States, as it would mean that Peru would lose its monopoly on this natural fertilizer.

After negotiations between General Villamil and the US government, an agreement was signed granting the Americans rights to the guano deposits, as well as extraterritorial privileges, in exchange for three million dollars. This was rejected by Peru, Spain, the United Kingdom, and France. Fortunately for the islands, this treaty did not reach the US Senate and ultimately did not come to pass, as an investigation showed that such guano deposits simply did not exist. (Corley Smith 2023).

In the middle of the century, a new proposal to acquire these islands emerged, this time from the British. English bondholders had made large loans to the new republic, and Ecuador's foreign debt was enormous. The English suggested that this debt be paid in part by ceding the Galapagos Islands. This did not please the central government of Ecuador, as the United States had made an offer to purchase them with cash, and the government were analyzing both proposals. Likewise, it is said that there was a secret offer for the islands to Napoleon III. (Corley Smith 2023).

All these offers came to nothing, for two possible reasons, one internal and other external. The internal reason would mean a career “suicide” for any Ecuadorian politician if they renounced Ecuador's sovereignty by handing over the islands. In the early days of the

republic, it was common to accuse the ruling government of wanting to sell the islands to foreign powers, as a way of discrediting the rulers from the opposition.

Second, the powers of that time were not interested in controlling a territory if their enemy was not nearby or even there. For instance, if the British would have wanted the Islands it would have been because there were French presence nearby.

This scenario of geopolitical disinterest in the islands changed at the beginning of the 20th century, when the United States took control of the construction of the Panama Canal to connect two oceans and create one of the most important maritime and trade routes in history to this day. (Corley Smith 2023). This concern was already felt among Ecuadorian political elites. In a confidential letter written in 1911, Liberal President Eloy Alfaro described his grave concerns about the island's existence, considering what the Panama Canal would represent. He explains that a small country like Ecuador would not be able to withstand imperialist occupation by the United States or Asian giants, describing the islands as distant hope and an immediate danger.

These concerns weighed heavily on President Eloy Alfaro due to the offer that arose to lease the islands to the United States for 99 years, in addition to the sum of 15 million dollars, double what Alaska had cost at the time. That large sum of money would have been key to Ecuador's development in railway construction and other infrastructure, but it never came to fruition due to a lack of political support. This proposal was difficult to refuse given the situation of the islands in relation to mainland Ecuador and the central government, as the islands represented an administrative and economic burden rather than a contribution to the construction of the state.

For Washington, this was a minor setback to its imperialist intentions to conquer the Pacific. When Elihu Root, Secretary of State for Theodore Roosevelt's administration, was asked what these islands meant, he replied that the United States did not really want them but would not allow any European power to gain control over them. (Corley Smith 2023).

The Galapagos and the 20th Century

The need for the United States to control the Galapagos Islands took a turn during the 20th century. From casually offering to buy the territory, to needing them to protect their national interest at all costs. This can be attributed to two historical events, that are linked one to the other. First, the creation of the Panama Canal, which shaped American foreign interests ever since its inauguration in 1914 and was in need to be protected from any danger

by a foreign power. And secondly, the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941, which led the US to enter officially in the Second World War and was wary of a future attack on the canal by the Japanese. These two events led the US to negotiate with Ecuador and set a military base on the Baltra Island in Galapagos that was fully operational in May 1942.

To understand the need of the Americans to protect the Panama Canal we need to understand what it means to have them under control in geopolitical terms. Historically, the Panama Canal has been observed ever since the arrival of the Spaniards in the 16th century, to Great Britain and France as a main objective of unifying the two largest oceans connecting the world via a commercial route.

The canal poses a geopolitical interest that only few places on earth can compete with. For the United States, this interest is of high value, as it is located near its territory and it offers major control of international trade, social, and political influence on Latin America and economic benefits on its use (Argüelles 2015).

In modern times the Canal represents around 40% of total traffic of containers around the world and it is considered as one of the most important trade sites on earth. The canal gain attention in past months as in December of 2024, Donald Trump mentioned several times the need of getting full control of the canal as it once did since 1914 until 1999. Trump's intentions are quite clear; he understands the need of getting American influence back on

track in relation with Latin American politics and counter Chinese presence and influence. (Freeman 2025).

That being stated, in modern times, and historically, the canal has been a strategic geopolitical point. The US has learned and understood that they should have a sphere of influence there due to its importance for international trade. 75 years earlier, during World War II, the US had a similar strategy, protect the canal at all costs from an axis attack, especially after Pearl Harbor. And for this, the Galapagos were look upon, to serve as a speed pit for any enemy intention at bombing the Panama Canal.

The US, in collaboration with the Ecuadorian government arranged the arrival of American troops, and by May 1942 the military installation was in full operation, being called “The Rock” by it’s the American settlers because according to the First lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, if you moved a rock, two more would appear from underneath (Klassen 2016).

This base was located at the desartic Baltra Island, southeast from the main Isabela Island. The base in Galapagos was meant to serve as an aircraft carrier impossible to drown and eventually became the biggest military and aeronaval installation in the pacific southeast (Primicias 2025a).

However, in previous years, Ecuador was not keen on the idea of having American settlements, or from any other foreign power in the islands. In 1935, the Ecuadorian government nationalized all not cultivated land and prohibited foreign ships to enter the islands. In 1938 air troops were sent to prohibit any airplane to pass by the Galapagos airspace and take photographs. In the same year, President Franklin Roosevelt arrived at the Island and started negotiations for establishing an American military base. By 1940 panamericanism was well extended to all south and central American governments, this idea of being united against a greater enemy and supporting the regional power, in this case the United States, in its efforts and causes for war. By this time, Ecuadorian president Carlos Arroyo was a follower for panamericanism, and American visits to the island began to be constant, but all plans were accelerated by the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Only five months after this event, the American base on Ecuadorian territory would become a reality. (Corral 2023).

This military installation changed completely the natural scenery of the island. What once was a rocky mountainous landscape was flattened due to the necessities needed by the Americans. The base at its first years was composed by warehouses, control offices, hangars, a 13.000 meters long concrete platform and housing for 2.400 military men. The original project had in plans three runaways for jets and bombers, however, only one will be built. (Corral 2023). At its peak 12.000 people would have been living in the island, ten times the original population of the Galapagos before the Americans arrival (Carrión 2018). The base was provided with electricity for 24 hours a day, and clean water for its new residents. We must bear in mind that before the arrival of the North Americans, the living conditions for

the Ecuadorians living in the islands were minimal, as drinkable water and electricity were always not available (Corral 2023).

However, in their free time, soldiers would not have much to do and would focus on fishing and goat farming. The US government would incentivize the soldiers to course university classes that could be followed later in American Universities. For leisure, the island had a movie theater, a bar, a church and even a bowling alley (Klassen 2016). The presence of American soldiers would change completely the nature of the Baltra Island; many species, were on risk due to the great displacements of their habitats to build the base. Introduced species, such as goats, cats and dogs would put native species such as iguanas on danger. The need to feed all the members of the troops meant to have more land that needed to be cultivated, and eventually this meant a deterioration on the islands soil. (Acosta et al., n.d.).

For the American soldiers, their residency in the islands were limited to six months, as the Galapagos did not offer much intensive work, and rotation was key for all troops deployed in different places in the pacific for learning skills of adaptation to the tropical weather (Klassen 2016). The focus work in the Galapagos by the American troops were of submarine and aerial patrol in the coast of south America and Panama to prevent Japanese maneuvers and espionage on the canal (Corral 2023). The Galapagos served the US to have greater control on the Pacific and assert their influence on Ecuador for years to come.

When the second world war was coming to its end, the US tried to maintain control over the islands once again. This time offering the Ecuadorian state \$10 million dollars for 99 years of control over the archipelago (Carrión 2018) . This offer was not accepted by congress nor the president Jose Maria Velasco Ibarra, that ordered the US to leave the island in 1946. Nevertheless, American troops would stay until 1948 training Ecuadorian troops (Cañizares 2025).

When the Americans left Galapagos, they threw the majority of infrastructure used in their stay to the ocean, in part due to the cost it would have taken to disarm the entire base and return it to the US, and also as other suggest, as a sign of protest against the Ecuadorian government for not letting them stay for 99 more years (Acosta et al., n.d.). At the end, the base served the US to maintain control over the Panama Canal, train their soldiers to adapt to tropical weathers and patrol the pacific against any Japanese attack.

The Baltra military base, however, was not the only American base established in Ecuadorian soil. The Salinas, and Manta bases also served as an extension of the US to patrol their interests in the continent. The first one was functioning in June 1942, and its main objective was to have control over the pacific, and northern south America in case of a Japanese invasion at the Panama Canal. The main difference with the base that was stationed at the Galapagos was the type of patrol the US did regarding these two locations. The Islands served as a strategic point to control that area of the pacific via submarine training and patrol,

whereas the Salinas base served more as refueling station for aerial combat training vigilance. (Corral 2023).

The latest American base that was stationed in Ecuador was in Manta, it lasted from 1999 until 2008, when former president Rafael Correa did not extend the agreement for Americans to be in the country. The main reason, according to the US, for its operations on the coastal city was to gain knowledge and detain narcotics operations that came from Perú and Colombia on route to the US (Rojas 2007). However, it can also be argued that during this period, the Torrijos-Carter treaty concluded the American control of the Panama Canal, and the US wanted to maintain control over the region.

It's also worth noting that during the first decade of the 21st century, and the last years of the past century, left wing leaning governments were taking control over the continent, such as already mentioned Ecuadorian president Correa, but also Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Nestor Kirchner in Argentina and Lula in Brazil. The Americans could have seen this new wave of politics as a threat to the FTAA², and its neoliberal policies. The reality of the 10 years that the Manta base lasted left people disappointed, as crime raised and violations, such as rape against Ecuadorian women from the Americans went unpunished. (Acosta et al., n.d.).

² FTAA: Free trade area of the Americas; free trade agreement between 34 countries across north and south America.

We must remember that the Latin American consciousness is filled with past experiences from imperialist powers, from the Inca empire taking control over local communities and committing genocide against them, from the Spanish, imposing their religion and beliefs to the locals, and in the past couple of centuries, the US with their invasions to favor their own geopolitical and economic interests.

The United States polarizes both ends of political views regarding their interest in the continent, for one is viewed in the region with fear and distrust for all the interventions in local elections, and changes of regime of popular elected politicians to authoritarians that served them, such as Pinochet in Chile or Videla in Argentina. Meanwhile the other looks at the US as an economic and military force that is better to be allied with than not.

The Galapagos Re-Discovered

On November 16, 2025, the incumbent president of Ecuador, Daniel Noboa, made a referendum, where one of four proposals referred to the installation of foreign military bases in Ecuadorian territory, modifying article 5 of the constitution where it states: *“Ecuador is a territory of peace. The establishment of foreign military bases or foreign facilities for military purposes shall not be permitted”*. (Primicias 2025b).

The loss of this proposal responds directly to past experiences regarding the three past military bases Ecuador already had. Noboa, now in his second term, and very close to the Trump administration, has long wanted to install an American foreign base to aid the country with its problem regarding drug cartels and high rates of homicide due to the control that mafias exercise in Ecuadorian territory. Kristi Noem, secretary of national security of the US government visited twice the country to plan where these bases would be located. Noem visited Manta, and Salinas, two out of three former cities were American bases where already functioning in the past. (Noboa 2025).

When Noboa was campaigning for the referendum, he referred to the Baltra base in Galapagos and stated that it is a key strategic point. He also mentioned that the main objective of a military base in the islands is to protect the archipelago. Days after this declaration, the president disregarded the idea of installing a foreign military base in Baltra, due to the political backlash he received after these declarations.

It is key to understand that ever since the removal of American troops from Manta in 2009, with a progressive government in charge, a majority part of right wing politics in Ecuador has long waited for its chance to get the Americans back in Ecuadorian soil, and as mentioned before, their argument is the aid they could provide to combat drug cartels.

However, this altruistic vision that the US would voluntarily aid a south American country fight its opponents with no political interest gain whatsoever is quite ignorant. Former president Jamil Mahuad was in power when the Manta base was installed and declared in a recent interview that during that time the Americans were allowed to be in Ecuador because during that time it was the best mechanism possible to combat the Narcos, now, according to him, much of that work can be done with satellites and other technological mechanisms (Cañizares 2025).

Finally, the Ecuadorian people have decided not to go back to foreign military bases in the country, and during the election campaign the Galapagos was always in the center of the conversation. The islands have become a national symbol of the country for its natural biodiverse significance and recognition that possess at an international level.

The United States, Latin America and The Galapagos Islands: Interventionism, Security and Strategic Dispute over the East Pacific

The relation between The United States and Latin America has historically been asymmetrical regarding its power structure. Often called “The US backyard” Central and South America have experienced interventionism throughout its contemporary history by the United States. In the late 19th century, and among US policy makers it prevailed the idea that Latin America needed a paternalistic oversight protection (Spatafora et al. 2025) The methods for this so-called protection would be of their own interest and will be carried out by regime change. Latin American governments would introduce damaging policies by gaining considerable amounts of debt with institutions such as the IMF or the World Bank, this type of foreign policy has not been isolated or exceptional, but rather the status quo reigning this relationship. This historical pattern is key to understand the risks strategic places, such as the Galapagos Islands, face against the North American interests. In the current international scenario, the Islands face backlashes from the second world war, where its geographical location served as a pitstop for any attack on the Panama Canal. The Trump administration is keen on not letting China, Russia or Iran meddle in the US sphere of influence, hence its closeness to south American leaders and specifically with Ecuador’s president Daniel Noboa in pursuit of securing the west pacific for the north Americans.

In 1829, Simon Bolivar already described that the emerging north American power would have major decision taking in the south's destiny, as he once famously stated in Guayaquil that "The United States seems destined by providence to plague America with misery in the name of liberty" (Agee et al. 2014).

Ecuador and the United States have had during the 20th and 21st century a bilateral relationship marked by an asymmetry of power, on which the interests of the North Americans have conditioned internal affairs of Ecuadorian politics and society. Although formally described per the US as a relation built on mutual interests, cooperation and security, this relationship has included episodes of foreign intervention to benefit the interests of Washington, disregarding the sovereignty of the south American nation in building their own destiny. These interventions came during the cold war, where meddling in foreign nations governments to protect one's own interests were existentially permitted.

One of the precedents that most impact has in this bilateral relationship is the already mentioned use of a military base in the Galapagos immediately after the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941 to protect the commercial routes of the Panama Canal against any Japanese or German attack (Agee et al. 2014). Although the US stated that the use of the islands were only temporal, the presence of their troops set a key precedent; the Galapagos were now an important geostrategic site to exercise control of the pacific and influence on the hemisphere.

As briefly mentioned, the US during the cold war intervened in Ecuadorian politics during the 1960s and 1970s. Testimonies from an ex-CIA agent Philip Agee reveal active participation from US institutions in processes of political destabilization, local opposition funding and media involvement to get then President Jose Maria Velazco Ibarra to step down from power. This eventually happened, and his vice-president, Carlos Julio Arosemena rose to power, but he did not serve the interests of Washington which were to block the Ecuadorian recognition of the government of Cuba of Fidel Castro and repress left leaning parties. On July 11, 1963, a coup by the military and funded by the US, would end Arosemena's government and introduce a 3-year repressive authoritarian regime where its fundamental beliefs were anticommunism, even banning the Ecuadorian Communist party, introducing austerity on the state social spending programs and modernization of the state. (Agee et al. 2014). This intervention by the US was not publicly known, nor documented as the Cuban or Chilean cases were, however, they left a broken democratic system that will have long lasting effects on its society and nation building.

At the end of the cold war and during the 21st century, Ecuador was for the US a “staunch ally against narco-trafficking and terrorist violence” (Wolff 2011). These grounds of cooperation would be the key points of the bilateral relationship. In 1999 the Ecuadorian government permitted the installment of a military base in the coastal city of Manta. Their main objective was to detect narco-trafficking ships and gangs shipping cocaine to the United States. 10 years later, in 2009 former President Rafael Correa did not renew the military base agreement and the US troops had to return the Eloy Alfaro base to the Ecuadorian state. During President Correa government the relationship was stranded during key moments, like the expulsion of the US ambassador from Quito, or the rapprochement with Iran and China.

(Bettel 2013). The bilateral relationship in the past years have become more tightly, especially with incumbent President Daniel Noboa, who is close to the Trump administration and aligns internationally regarding Israel, the war on drugs, and the current pressure on Venezuela's government.

In November 2025, a referendum was held in Ecuador where its citizens were asked whether they would approve of foreign military bases to be deployed in the country. Said question got 60% rejection by Ecuadorians and the government had to obey its decision. Mainly because the context surrounding the question had president Noboa stating that the Galapagos Islands could return to become a military base for the United States in its pursuit of narco-trafficking gangs.

It is worth mentioning that incumbent president Noboa is close to the Trump administration and will work closely to him in his desires to have an aligned south America to the republican government. In April 2024, Ecuadorian police raided the Mexican embassy in Quito to arrest opposition leader Jorge Glas. In a clear violation of international law, Noboa stated that his government would not allow narco-terrorist criminals to be immune. Since this invasion, Mexico and Ecuador have cut relations with each other. Another hit to the regional left-wing governments by Noboa is the imposition of tariffs to Colombia based on not protecting the mutual border from narco-trafficking. The minimal respect for international law, human rights, and regional stability is often compared to Trump's politics and his worldview of this new world order.

The emergence strategic significance of The Galapagos Islands vis a vis the United States

In Trump's combat drug trafficking rhetoric Ecuador plays a key role. This country is not a major producer of cocaine like its neighbors Peru or Colombia, but the country serves as the main trafficking route in the continent, with ports and road routes passing as much as 70% of the world's total supply of cocaine. (Abi-Habib 2026). If the Trump administration is really concern about the war on drugs in its own hemisphere, then action should be taken in Ecuadorian territory, especially its sea routes, where many of them travel to Mexico and other Central America countries for it to then be smuggled onto US territory (Gil 2019). The Galapagos location in the middle between South America and Central America transforms it in an ideal point for maritime vigilance, naval interdiction and monitoring of cartels operations in the east pacific. Under Trump's logic, the Island could serve as a pitstop for drugs and cartels trying to enter the US and serves as a legitimate justification for expanding military operations on the island.

The maritime control of the east pacific routes could act as major incentive principles for the return of North American troops to the Galapagos Islands. These routes connect the main ports of South America with those of Central America, the Panama Canal and Mexico. Since 2022 the Chancay port, financed and build on its majority by the Chinese government has been operating at astonishing levels (Pajuelo 2020). Connecting South America with China via the pacific, this mega-port offers the infrastructural capacity to import major

quantity of containers from China and other Asian countries. In this scenario, the Galapagos Islands reappears as a key strategic point to be considered in the Pacific and South America context. The geopolitical interest of the Islands corresponds to a historical necessity of controlling the northeast Pacific in relation to the Panama Canal and to counterbalance the growing presence of China in the Western Hemisphere. The Island offers major strategic maritime surveillance for logistical support in protecting commercial and military routes

As mentioned previously in this work, the Galapagos Islands have been object of interest for the United States in several times. Washington has pushed Quito into selling them the islands a couple of times. First, blaming them on lack of control to protect them in the 19th century and again in the 1940s after the Pearl Harbor attack and the end of the agreement and installment of military bases on the islands. On both occasions, Ecuador refused to give up their sovereignty in this territory.

The Galapagos are back on discussion due to the current state of geopolitics in the region and the growing tensions from the United States against China and its influence in the continent. The ecological value the islands possess may be one of the reasons it has not yet been object of major occupations for surveillance, intelligence and military complexes. However, the growing interest of Washington to prevent the drug cartels to grow its power may pose a risk for the so far Pacific island.

We are currently experimenting major shifts in world politics. Multipolarity seems to be emerging as the new world order for big power competition and securing all strategic points in the continent is key for this aim. The Trump administration has recalled multiple times that the continent is their sphere of influence and will not allow their enemies to influence. According to secretary of state Marco Rubio, unipolarity was a result from the end of the cold war, now we are back on a multi polar world with great-power competition in different areas of the planet. (Beckley et al. 2025). The Islands fall directly into a direct position of interest for the contention of North American influence in the region.

The transpacific routes that connect China with Latin American are expanding due to the record-breaking levels of trade countries have with the Asian country. In the past two decades the United States has lost its position of major trading partner with most Latin American countries, Panama being the one that worries Washington due to the canal they vow to control. (Garcia 2026). This growing trade involves the islands directly as it is located relatively near major ports in the region and could act as a pivotal surveillance hub.

In a multipolar international system, the islands relevance acquires major significance. The maritime trade routes connecting Asia with America, the current war against drug cartels, and the growing tensions between China and the US serve as a platform for maintaining order in the sphere of the world they aim to control. The Islands have also been object of illegal fishing practices by Chinese vessels that has caused major local rejection, adding an additional layer of geopolitical tension. At the same time, the Galapagos

position intersects with major narco-trafficking routes that lead all types of drugs onto mainland United States. This could serve as the perfect excuse for the Trump administration to use its power inside the island against these criminal networks.

Observed from a broader historical context, the strategic relevance of the Galapagos Islands also connects to the Monroe Doctrine. Since the expansion of the American empire in the nineteenth century, Latin America has been object of intrusions, regime change and coup d' états to serve the north's will. In a contemporary context of growing Chinese influence and economic expansion in territories such as the pacific, the Galapagos should attract strategic significance for the United States.

The Monroe Doctrine

The United States has a long list of countries around the globe on which it has intervened directly and installed a satellite government. This practice is normally associated as a post war policy and in the context of the cold war, where the fear communism and the domino effect theory would guide American foreign policy. Some of these interventions took place in Greece 1948, Iran in 1953, Congo in 1964, Indonesia in 1965, Ghana in 1966 (Walli 1976). However, many years before the cold war began, the Monroe Doctrine guided US affairs internationally, especially in South and Central America. Originally, the doctrine contained three main principles. First, that the Americas were not conceived by any means a

subject for colonization by any European superpower. Second, that the US would abstain from interfering in European affairs, and lastly, that there will be no interposition by the Europeans in this hemisphere. (Heraclides and Dialla 2015).

First conceived as a statement in opposition to European intrusions in the Americas, under President Theodore Roosevelt it became a justification for intervention wherever deemed necessary. Roosevelt molded the doctrine to his country needs and interests, stating that the United States must assume the obligation of carrying out the exercise of international police power and for the case of Central and South America under this predetermination concluded that these countries were not capable to function without US interference.

Roosevelt's successors, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson safeguarded the Monroe Doctrine under its main objectives; keep out the Europeans and claim markets and resources from Latin America. Under Wilson, in 1914, and in context of the Mexican revolution of 1910, the president employed twice military force. First into Veracruz, and then into Chihuahua seeking capture of Francisco Villa, after his attack on New Mexico in 1916. (Nasser 2023)

After almost 200 years of the Monroe doctrine, former secretary of state to the Obama administration, John Kerry, declared at the OAS³ that the era of the Monroe doctrine is over.

³ OAS: Organization of American States, conformed by 34 states in 1948

(Nasser 2023). However, the Trump administration have seemed to revive this old doctrine, especially in his second term. On January 3rd South America woke up to the news that Venezuelan president Nicolas Maduro had been taken by US forces in Caracas and taken away to be judged in New York for Narcotrafficking charges. This came after weeks of military escalation in the Caribbean Sea. President Trump discourse over this action has been direct regarding their real motives. According to him, the US intervened so it can claim the oil that once was stolen from them. (Berry et al. 2026). This has brought outrage to many Central and South American governments that oppose Trump's government and actions, such as Mexico, Brazil and Colombia, where they have released statements of condemnation.

The US narrative on invading Venezuela first came by framing Maduro's government on drug trafficking fentanyl and cocaine onto the country, stating that he had direct connections to "The Cartel of the Suns" which after capturing the Venezuelan leader, the Trump administration revealed that such organization did not exist (Dale 2026). This was a perfect excuse for invading the country and reposition the US as the hegemon on this part of the world. Maduro's lack of support internally and regionally meant that the narrative of the post invasion would be one of liberating Caracas from the brutal dictator rather than protecting its national security.

The administration has quickly asserted control over Venezuela's oil revenues and resources. A national emergency has been declared to safeguards \$2.5 billion of Venezuela oil cash, framed as essential to regional stability (Lefebvre et al. 2026). Likewise, in an

interview, Secretary of State Marco Rubio made clear that this part of the world is for the US to control, and that it was inadmissible that their enemies, such as Iran, Russia, or China could seek to influence the region (Bowen 2026). We could be under the unfolding of a multipolar world, where the US retakes the Americas under full control. Russia reigns over eastern Europe while threatening EU countries and China approaches with more hostility towards Taiwan and the southeast Pacific.

Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum has rejected any US military intervention in any sovereign state soil, stating that bilateral cooperation is keen for countries to maintain peace and safeguard their institutions. President Trump however has responded that Mexico does not possess the capacity to protect their own country from the cartels, and that his administration is currently studying land incursions of US military troops to combat these illegal organizations. (Wagner and Villegas 2026).

Mexico is not the only country that has been signaled as the next Trump's objective. Colombia's president Gustavo Petro also rejected the US actions and received threats by the US President accusing him of not combatting the Narcos gangs enough and stated that not denying a possible invasion of Colombia. The aggressivity of Trump's comments on these sovereign nations are not mere casualties, but a vision of how his second administration perceives the world. In November 2025, the National Security Strategy was signed by President Trump, and in it we can take a deep look on what are the ambitions of the United States in the western hemisphere.

According to this official document, the western hemisphere has been abandoned by previous US governments, and it has caused great problems for the world order. Under point A called, “The Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine”, it states that the Doctrine would be reasserted and enforced to protect the United States interests. It also emphasizes the need of military presence in strategic important locations to protect the hemisphere against its enemies. (National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2025). These policies reemerge to threat sovereign states in Latin America, this centuries old doctrine, believed to be left in the past has come back. However, we can point out one major difference and that is that during the cold war, US interventionism was done mainly for communist, or left-wing regime change and the installment of a puppet government, that could serve close to the US. What we see with Venezuela proofs that excuses such as being denominated part of Narcotrafficking automatically delegates the US to be authorized to seize a country.

US Interventions in Latin America

Three interests have determined the content of United States policy towards Latin America, these are, the need to protect US security, desire to accommodate the demands of US domestic politics, and the drive to promote US economics interests. Between 1898 and 1994, the US government has overthrown 41 governments in Central and South America, that is an average of one successful intervention every 28 months. Direct intervention by US military forces, intelligence agents, and other agencies occurred in 17 of the 41 cases. The other 24 cases were indirect involvement, that is, local actors, such as military leaders playing

main roles in regime change. These cases do not include unsuccessful attempts such as the bay of pig's invasion in April 1961 that sought to overthrow Fidel Castro. (Coatsworth 2006).

Most of these interventions occurred during the cold war. However, there are cases, such as the Cuban where its intervention can be traced back to the 19th century. In 1898 the Spanish-American war began, initially by local Cubans that would revolt against the Spanish government, Washington would take over the island, installing a protectorate and held to this day Guantanamo base (Heraclides and Dialla 2015). The relationship between Cuba and the US has been marked by tensions in contemporary history, especially in the 60s, where Cuba served the interests of the Soviet Union, just 145 kilometers from mainland US. It is worth noting that the successful Cuban revolution marked a serious shift of involvement for the US in Latin American affairs. The continuous hostility between both nations have persisted to this day and saw during the Obama administration a plausible route for change. However, these attempts have not been revisited by the current Trump administration.

In 1964, Brazil experienced a coup by backed US military forces. Leftist President Joao Goulart was thrown out of power, and a 21-year dictatorship was installed. The US was keen to overthrow leftist governments in the Americas, as they represented a threat to the North American interests. This practice would be repeated throughout the cold war in South America. Known as the "Plan Condor" the US would destabilize or directly be involved in changing left wing governments during the cold war. (Ferreira et al. 2014).

The Chilean intervention may be the well most documented intervention in modern history by the United States. When former President Salvador Allende rose to power, he did it by becoming the first Socialist Marxist to be democratically elected. For the Chilean elite did this not sit well, as plans for expropriation and nationalization of resources expanded throughout Allendes years, his dissidents became more determined to get him out of power. (Coatsworth 2006). President Nixon and Henry Kissinger saw in Allende a serious threat. For the American president, he once stated that “Our main concern in Chile is the prospect that (Allende) may consolidate his position and that the image projected to the world will be one of success” (Ulloa 2023). Finally in 1973, Augusto Pinochet, head of the Chilean military would turn against Allende in a coup that ended in the presidential palace with the president committing suicide and a brutal dictatorship instituting itself.

China's Maritime Expansion and the case of the Galápagos

The growing expansion of China reaches far beyond the Indian and South Pacific Ocean. China's maritime fleet in the eastern Pacific represents a broader transformation in its strategic outlook, evolving from a regional power to a global maritime actor. This transformation represents a shift in China's interest regarding trade, food security and logistical components that stretch far beyond East-Asia. As already mentioned, the coasts of South America represent a historical contested space for the United States to safeguard its strategic assets such as the Panama Canal. For China, this part of the world represents a new known arena to influence and secure long term relations with regional powers.

The global strategy of China is clearly the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Launched in 2013 it can be debated to be the most ambitious global development in the century so far. The initiative funds the development of a multitrillion-dollar web of infrastructure across Asia, Africa and Latin America, primary to promote trade and other forms of connectivity while improving aspects of underdeveloped nations (Myers, 2018). The BRI has shifted from its earlier stages of trying to reinvigorate the Silk Road connectivity to a Chinese foreign policy plan, its expansion to Latin America can be accounted as a proof of this. At its core the BRI can be argued to be China's network to access land and maritime routes that facilitate trade, goods and capital, all at the same time of exercising political and social influence.

The central and most debated component of the BRI is the large-scale financing strategy that China uses to elaborate its infrastructure projects. The large loans provided by state-owned policy banks to Latin American governments make some critics wary of China's real intentions regarding this initiative in the region. However, according to the Lowy Institute for International Policy states that the evidence to date suggests China has not engaged in deliberate "debt trap" policies. (Rajah et al. 2019). This model certainly is contrasting with western financing institutions such as the IMF or the World Bank, which tend to condition institutional changes in favor of loans.

Beyond the BRI financial dimension, the initiative carries strategic implications in a geopolitical scenario, especially when the investments are focused on critical sectors such as ports, transportation and energy. Latin America is especially receptive to Chinese investment due to its ever larging growing trade relations with Beijing, and its persistent infrastructure deficit (Jenkins, 2022). China has position itself as the alternative that the global south was seeking on funding and state building independence. Nevertheless, China's engagement in the region is not only economic but strategic, the investment on the Chancay mega port in Perú aims to facilitate trade while at the same time establish a logistical node that could carry geopolitical implications.

From Chancay to Shanghai: China's Gateway into South America

The Chancay Mega port represents one of the most significant Chinese infrastructure investments in South America. The project was largely developed by COSCO shipping ports, a state-owned Chinese company (Ko, 2026), which holds 60% stake in the project, alongside Peruvian mining company Volcan owning the remaining 40%. The total investment of this project exceeds \$3.5 billion dollars, and its main objective is to cut by 12 days the traffic of containers that ship from Asia to South America or vice versa, creating a direct trade route in the Pacific between Perú and China. (Véron, 2024). The infrastructure includes automated terminals, logistics zones, and a direct 2 kilometers tunnel that connects the Mega port to the city (Olmo 2024).

Since the year 2000, trade dynamics in South America has shifted drastically. In most of the countries China has become the central economic partner vis a vis the United States. Since the 1990s bilateral trade between Beijing and South America grew exponentially due to China's high demand on raw materials and commodities. From 2001 until 2019, Latin America imports from China grew at an annual average of 15.98% per year. China has already surpassed the United States as the main trading partner a major quantity of countries in the continent, such as Brazil, Chile, and Perú. (Cardozo de Barrio et al. 2023). This shift does not only reflect the expansion of influence of China in the continent, but a lack of the United States to keep up the pace that the Asian giant offers. This reorientation of Latin

America in trade, and influence with China could mark a shift in power rivalry between the predominately historical parental overview of Washington, and the newly source of infrastructure projects and financing of Beijing.

As mentioned before, the Chancay Mega port offers a strategic geopolitical value due its position. Facing Asia directly and located in one of the most important corridors of global trade, Chancay offers to reduce significantly the transit time of containers from both continents. With much of the stake of the port being owned by Chinese state company COSCO, the continent, and specifically Ecuador, has found itself sitting between the two trade superpowers. At the north with the Panama Canal, influenced and protected in its majority by the United States, and in the south the \$3.5 billion investment by China.

Within this evolving maritime corridor, the Galapagos Islands occupy a critical intermediate position. The in-between location the islands found itself makes the Galápagos renew its strategic relevance as a potential focal point in the shifting balance of power in the pacific. Major problems rise due to the increase of trade in this part of the eastern pacific, one of these are the ongoing violations of Ecuador's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and illegal fishing in the Galapagos Marine reserve that raise great discontent in the country and in the region.

China: The Eastern Pacific and the Galápagos Islands

China's growing presence in the eastern Pacific is no isolated case, nor purely commercial, but rather the extension of a broader strategic recalibration in its global position as the new superpower. Historically, China has concentrated its posture in the South China Sea and East China Sea, however, the progressive expansion of Beijing maritime fleet to the coasts of Latin America may reflect structural transformations in China's priorities. The need to secure long term access to resources, raw materials, and diversify trade routes away from Washington's influence can explain why the eastern Pacific emerges as a critical reshape of maritime networks. (Cardozo de Barrios et al. 2023). This expansion comes from the necessity to foresight economic imperatives that may arise in the future regarding China's rapid industrialization and its demand for commodities, many of which are sourced from Latin America. Brazil, Chile, Peru and Ecuador are essential suppliers in this matter, embedding a transpacific economic corridor that links the two continents. Nevertheless, to secure this corridor of goods, commercial agreements are not enough, hence the initiative of China to meddle with the BRI in Latin America comes in the sense of maritime logistics, shipping networks and port infrastructure. (Ko 2026).

Even though Beijing does not formally identify the Galápagos as a strategic objective, there has been patterns that suggest otherwise. Indirect mechanisms such as sustained fishing activities, logistical expansion with the Chancay Mega Port, and asymmetric trade and debt dependencies that unable Ecuador's capacity to respond, result that the Galápagos despite lacking traditional military infrastructure, can become embedded within a strategic environment shaped by external power projection.

The Galápagos islands are one of the most ecologically significant marine environments in the world. They host a unique concentration of biodiversity and serve as a critical habitat that sharks, marine mammals, and tunas use as a migratory passway. This ecological richness has attracted Chinese distant water fishing fleets to the region. The growing presence in the eastern Pacific has generated major environmental and geopolitical concerns. (Montecalvo et al, 2023). In 2017 a large Chinese fishing fleet was detected near Ecuador's EEZ. This situation escalated with the capture of endangered shark species. From this incident China was exposed in the region, due to similar cases in Argentina and Chile, as a major actor in illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing activities. (Alava et al. 2017). This behavior is a clear reflection of a calculated strategy of positioning themselves to resource extraction while minimizing direct legal consequences.

This dynamic is concerning for the Ecuadorian state, due its structural limitations in maritime enforcement and military capabilities. Ecuador lacks naval capacity, technology and financial resources to protect and regulate large scale fishing operations across their maritime domain. This results in a form of asymmetrical pressure for Ecuador as it cannot enforce the sovereignty it has over its EEZ. Deepening this asymmetry is the economic relationship Ecuador has with China, meaning, the high-level debts, reliance on Chinese investment and imports, and the short-term goals that govern the bilateral relation. (Ly et al. 2024).

The expansion of Chinese maritime activity in the Pacific, particularly in connection with the Chancay Mega port raises environmental concern about the intensification of these fleets surrounding the islands. As trade rises between Beijing and South America, and new main trade routes are being established, the frequency and scale of fishing operations in adjacent waters are likely to increase, causing rising tensions. (Beatriz et al. 2021). In addition, Ecuador does not have the necessary leverage to take these illegal cases of unregulated fishing to international courts, this, can be argued to be caused by the great debt that the country possesses with China, and the dependency Quito has on Beijing. However, the repeated incursions by foreign fleets in the Galápagos reserve marine have contributed to a growing sense of resentment against Ecuadorian society against the Asian country. This is not only perceived as an environmental violation but as an infringement on national sovereignty.

From a geostrategic perspective, the location of the Galápagos islands has acquired a new significance value due its position in relation to the Panama Canal and the Chancay Mega port. Positioned in between these two nodes of trade routes, the islands are met with the accelerating pace of Chinese commercial influence in the context of the Belt Road initiative and the historical US dominated chokepoint of the Panama Canal. In scenarios of heightened geopolitical tensions, controlling, having access or even monitor maritime spaces, the archipelago could become highly valuable in protection of trade routes. With the Galápagos Islands sitting in between these nodes, not in as a strategic chokepoint, but as a space through which maritime flows, surveillance possibilities and strategic interests merge.

In a plausible scenario of great power competition, the capability to monitor and access activities in this zone could become increasingly valuable.

China can be particularly concerning for Ecuador due to its indirect form of expansion. Unlike other superpowers, China does not project influence through military bases or alliances, rather through a combination of economic integration and infrastructural investment (Part et al. 2018), which complicates Ecuador's ability to frame the issue as a security threat domestically and internationally.

In this sense what makes the islands particularly unique in relation to other geopolitical chokepoints is that its strategic value does not come from traditional military infrastructure, but their geographic positioning within spheres of influence. As great power rivalry continues through influence, trade, infrastructure and maritime presence, locations that connect these networks become of great importance. The islands, therefore, could become a point of interest for both China and the United States as a strategic reference in the contested pacific arena. Within this context, the Galápagos emerge as a strategic location of competing spheres of influence in an era of rising multipolarity.

The Galápagos in a Multipolar Order

The ecological uniqueness the Galápagos Islands possesses are no longer the main relevant value this territory holds. In an ever-increasing multipolar world, where spheres of influence are being drawn by the main powers, their importance must also be understood in relation to the changing geography of maritime competition in the eastern Pacific. The location of the islands means that they are situated within a growing trade route between Chinese and South American ships. As well as a strategic point to protect the Panama Canal.

This relevance, however, cannot be limited to the Chancay-Shanghai route nor the Panama Canal corridors. The emergence of the multipolar world order puts the region under a geopolitical space where multiple actors converge under the protection of their own interests. Environmental institutions safeguard the Galapagos with financing and educational programs, the European Union for instance, has participated in the conservation of these islands as well. Brazil is emerging as a regional power that can gain strategic weight in relation to power competition vis a vis China and the United States. A region that is filled with overlapping interests, from governmental institutions to multinational corporations to illicit networks involved in narco-trafficking, the Galápagos Islands are not only situated within a corridor for commercial trade, but within a more complex territory where different strategic dynamics intersect.

In the international arena, these dynamics reflect the transformation of the world order, a transition from a unipolar system, centered around the US hegemony, to a competitive multipolar structure. The transition is not clear yet, as it was during the cold war with the USSR and the United States, rather the emergence of spheres of influence that are negotiated through infrastructure, diplomacy, and trade. (Beckley et al. 2025). Now, in repeated occasions, the Trump administration has stated that this part of the world, Latin America and the Caribbean, form part of its sphere of influence, even mentioning a “greater North America” where from Greenland to Ecuador and Alaska to Guyana a security perimeter would be established. (Tico Times 2026). The question of whether Latin America will remain within the traditional sphere of the United States or gradually shift towards China cannot be answered on binary terms. For the United States, the discourse of the actual administration has brought back the logic of the Monroe doctrine, where Washington serves a privileged space without any long-term aspiration regarding bilateral diplomacy. China, however, has sustained large investment in the region as an opportunistic realtor, embedding itself structurally within the region economy and logistics. Under this logic, Beijing has formed an interdependence on which disentangling could become very difficult.

The Ecuadorian Interest on the Islands

Historically, Ecuador has shifted its perspective on the islands ever since its independence from Spain in 1830 and eventual annexation of the islands two years later. In the earlier stages of the recently born republic, Galápagos meant for the central government a weight on which vast resources had to be sent to. As mentioned earlier, the attempts of foreign powers to purchase the islands were real and could have aided vastly with resources that could have been used in essential infrastructure building for the main cities of the country. Currently, the islands represent an ecological pride for Ecuadorians as this territory is one of the reasons the country is considered one out of 17 megadiverse countries in the world (Purton 2024) and as for the central government, its importance, uniqueness and vast ecological landscape are a great source of income in tourism, with the Galápagos as its main destination for international tourists (Quintana 2025). In a recent referendum in November 2025, Ecuadorians went to the ballot to vote whether they would agree on foreign military bases to be stationed in the country, the incumbent president Noboa mentioned that the Islands could serve as a strategic point for combat narco-trafficking gangs and illegal fishing, to which 61% of the people voted against this proposal (Glatsky and Leon 2025). Many agree that this specific question on the referendum caused the government to lose due to the president's mentioning of the use of the Galapagos as a military base.

For Ecuador, the relevance of the Galápagos in relation to its geopolitical strategy can be analyzed under three points. First, its strategic location in return of cooperation. Ecuador as, many other global south countries, have stretch relations with both China and the United States, so it cannot bandwagon one over the other. The economic dependence it possesses with China on the trade of goods, the high debt gained in the past decades, and future infrastructure investments needed means that Ecuador cannot disregard its relationship with Beijing. As for the United States, the recent military cooperation, war on drugs and maritime vigilance, attached to the closeness relationship between the Noboa and Trump administration make it unlikely that Washington would not see Quito as a strategic asset in its pursuit of control in the western hemisphere.

However, Ecuador needs to hedge its relationship with China and the United States due to the Islands importance in relation to these two countries. With China, Ecuador could take advantage of Beijing needs to feed its large population and allow distant Chinese fleets to operate near the country EEZ and have access to a vast food supply. China is the main consumer on seafood worldwide (Crona et al. 2020) and with a growing competing scenario in the South China Sea, Beijing has invested heavily on its distant water fleets to gain access to new sea corridors where major seafood could be found. Controlling these waters is not only about conservation, but also, about controlling a significant amount of the world's future food supply. Ecuador should realize that the growing annual fleets near the Galápagos EEZ transform the islands into a negotiation asset on which it can balance, seek further cooperation, investments or moderate the bilateral relationship.

As for the United States, its historical ties to the protection of the Panama Canal and the historic Baltra military operation, paired with the decisiveness of the actual administration to protect this region of the world, leaves Ecuador with the opportunity to offer the use of the islands in return for security cooperation against narco-trafficking organizations, economic development or infrastructural investment. During World War II, Ecuador allowed the United States to enter onto the Islands for a mutual benefit, the north Americans could patrol the waters near the Panama Canal, and in return Quito gained protection on the islands from a potential Peruvian invasion (Corral 2023). Nowadays, the potential danger is not Perú but the increasing presence of narco-trafficking organizations that circulate these waters exporting cocaine from Ecuadorian ports onto Asia, Central America and the United States. The country has become a hub for drug trafficking and battling it alone is almost impossible. Ecuador can give access to the United States to patrol its territory to battle these organizations, meanwhile Washington can deepen its influence, vigilance and settlement in its sphere of influence.

The second point on which Ecuador must understand the importance of its Islands are the jurisdiction they possess under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea of 1982, especially under the exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Article 56 of part V states that the EEZ a state has possessed rights to exploration, exploitation, marine research, conserving and managing its natural resources. (UN 1982). The Galápagos Islands are not only an insular territory, but a juridical platform for maritime expansion for the Ecuadorian State. The geopolitical value the islands have are not only limited to its location in the map, but rather as space on which it can project sovereignty and jurisdiction. The UNCLOS also establishes

jurisdiction in the establishment of artificial islands, installations and structures (UN 1982). The strategic asset this jurisdiction gives the Ecuadorian state must be understood and amplified in the growing multipolar order to balance its relationship with major actors and regional powers.

The third and last point Ecuador should analyze the Galápagos Islands geopolitically is in its current debt situation. Ecuador is in the top five countries that hold the largest debts with the IMF, holding to date 8.8 billion in outstanding credits (Duggal 2025), with China, Quito holds around 2.5 billion USD in debt (Alonso 2025). This huge pressure the country has gained historically puts the islands as a financial asset internationally. Debts for nature swaps have been around since the 1980s, they are essentially a mechanism of exchange in which a certain amount of the debtor's foreign debt is cancelled or forgiven in return for local currency from the debtor institution to be invested in domestic environmental protection projects (Thapa, 1998) The idea of these swaps are meant to reduce the debt burden of countries, while promoting the allocation of funds in environmental conservation. Ecuador being one of the megadiverse countries, and top debtors with international and Chinese organizations puts it as a perfect in these swaps. In May 2023, former President Guillermo Lasso announced the largest debt for nature swap in history. Ecuador bought back bonds worth 1.63 billion from international bondholders at a discount and exchanged them for a new loan worth 656 million dollars, to be invested in marine conservation in the Galápagos islands. Additionally, the Inter-American Development Bank provided Ecuador 85 million dollars to cover the first six interest payments in the case the country would default on its debt. However, two years after this announcement, it remains unclear whether the funds will

genuinely benefit marine ecosystems or primarily serve the interests of private investors and NGOs. (Boddenberg, 2025).

This debt for nature swap implemented by Lasso represents a significant innovation in Ecuador's ability to address its financial burdens, elevating its position within the international system. Leveraging the ecological value of the Galápagos Islands allowed Ecuador to restructure a substantial portion of its external debt under major favorable terms. This alignment enhances the diplomatic capital of Quito with multilateral institutions, environmental organizations and banks. This swap has illustrated how smaller states can transform its environmental assets onto instruments for conservation as a policy asset for navigate geopolitical and global financial pressures.

Ecuador must understand the geopolitical interest of the islands and protect it at all costs. This ecological asset allows the Ecuadorian state to negotiate and navigate various problems internally and externally with major global actors. The historic view of perceiving the islands as a burden must be rest in the past, and Ecuador should move into the following years with a clear strategy on how to manage the Galápagos Islands geopolitically.

Conclusion

This work was set out to examine the evolving geopolitical significance the Galápagos Islands has within an increasing multipolar international system. Beyond what is traditionally believed interpretations that frame the Islands as a mere ecological site for preservation, the analysis has demonstrated that the islands are acquiring strategic relevance as an asset within broader dynamics of great power competition, economic interdependence and maritime control in the eastern Pacific. The main argument advanced in this study is that Ecuador can use the Galápagos Islands as a leverage tool of geopolitical positioning on China and the United States.

The geography of the islands remains a fundamental determinant of interest. Located at a critical juncture in the eastern Pacific, the United States has utilized this position to safeguard its own national interests such as patrol the near seas of the Panama Canal in the past and currently undergoing surveillance for stopping narco-trafficking groups to introduce drugs into their country. The islands give Washington a strategic location to exercise its naval capabilities in protection of their interests. Whereas for China, the maritime presence it will have in regards to the recent mega port in Chancay, presents a known risk to Ecuador due to its illegal fishing presence near the islands, as well as, a clear declaration that China is planning to stay, long term, in the region despite Washington's attempts to endure a discourse of spheres of influence in the continent. In this context, the Galápagos are no longer peripheral, they are positioned alongside emerging corridors of influence that connect South

America, to the Indo Pacific. Control, access and presence in these waters will become increasingly consequential, particularly in scenarios of geopolitical tensions.

The findings of this work underscore the extent to which Ecuador can adapt to these structural transformations through a pragmatic foreign policy approach. Rather than bandwagoning one single power, Ecuador must engage in strategy that aids them balance the economic dependency it possesses with China, and the continue to strengthen security cooperation with the United States. This engagement can reflect a deliberate effort to maximize national benefits while minimizing vulnerability. Also, for the Ecuadorian state, the instrumentalization of environmental financial tools has aided the country internally to relief its debt in commitments for the protection of the islands. Ecuador has not only alleviated fiscal pressure but has enhanced its international reputation financially. The Galápagos are also an asset that has and should be used in leveraging negotiations with external actors.

At a broader level, the case for the Galápagos Islands illustrates a critical shift in how peripheral territories are conceptualized within international relations. Historically regarded as a remote, marginal and unusual space, the islands are increasingly being recognized for their strategic potential in an interconnected and disputed world. This is much more evident when we take into consideration the maritime domains, where control over islands translates into expanded land jurisdiction for exploration, exploitation and use of the territory. For Ecuador, the islands expand the country's presence, and interests, far into the pacific,

positioning it within a wider geopolitical scenario where regional, and global actors come into play. However, this introduction onto said scenario has posed major risks for Quito, major fleets committing illegal fishing near its EEZ from China, the Monroe doctrine being brought back directly by the Trump administration onto the region, and narcotrafficking organizations that have dismantled state institutions puts major pressures on Ecuador's government.

This geopolitical importance of the islands is likely to increase, as global power competition deepens, a multipolar order emerges and the Pacific becomes an even more central arena of strategic interaction, Ecuador must be ready to navigate the interests of the main superpowers. This can become both, an opportunity and a challenge. Quito can continue to leverage the islands as a platform for international engagement, extracting political and economic benefits with different actors. However, it must be wary of dependency, and bandwagoning of a sole international power, as it does not have the capacity to abandon one bilateral relation over the other.

Lastly, this work argues that the Galápagos Islands represent far beyond a natural heritage site, they are a strategic asset for Ecuador to use in the international arena. Their value is not static, but relational, shaped by the dynamics of the international system, strategic choices and depth of bilateral relations. For the Ecuadorian state, the challenge is not solely to protect the islands but to comprehend how to manage their growing geopolitical weight.

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