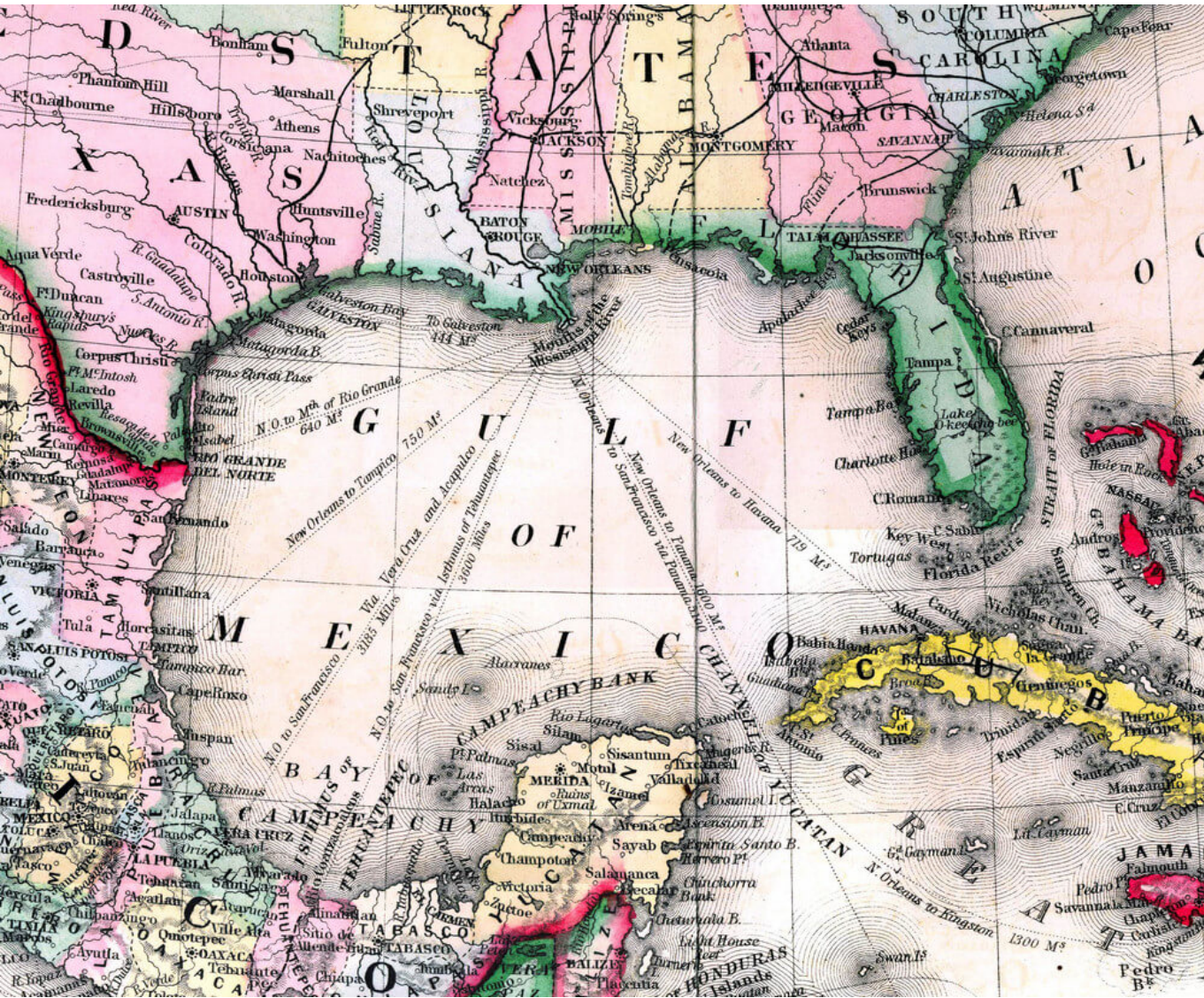




By: Anne-Marie Slaughter

# The Gulf of (North) America





US President Donald Trump's executive order renaming the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America is an act of geographical chest-thumping.

But imagine if he added a key word and called it the Gulf of North America. That simple tweak would trigger a meaningful shift in perspective.

The gulf's current name dates to the mid-sixteenth century, coined by Spanish cartographers mapping the waters of New Spain, then a colony that encompassed much of present-day Mexico and parts of the southern United States.

It is, in other words, a legacy of European imperialism. True to his worldview, Trump envisions a new American imperialism, extending from Panama to Greenland.

Geographically, the claim is a draw: depending on how you measure it, the US and Mexico have roughly the same amount of coastline along the gulf. What is clear is that the body of water is essentially enclosed by North America – an integral part of the Western hemisphere.

Renaming it the Gulf of North America would serve as a reminder of that. It would also be a historic way for Trump to mark the first FIFA World Cup hosted by the three North American countries – Mexico, the US, and Canada – in 2026.

## Spanish-English bilingualism

To understand the Americas' strategic importance in the twenty-first century, we must begin with their people. By mid-century, nearly one in three US residents will **trace** their heritage to Latin America, just as many once traced theirs to Europe.

Economically, culturally, and politically, Americans of Hispanic origin will be more oriented toward Latin America, rather than toward Europe or Asia.

Nearly 60% of Latinos in the US are of Mexican

**descent**, laying a foundation for greater cross-border integration.

## Miami is often described as Latin America's economic capital

While Trump has issued an executive **order** designating English as the official language of the US, Spanish is certainly not going away.

Hundreds of millions of people in countries with close ties to the US speak it – Miami, for example, is often described as Latin America's economic capital. In states like Texas, California, and Florida, Spanish-English bilingualism is often a practical necessity for business, education, and governance.

## North American economic integration

Ironically, Trump has helped advance North American economic integration by accelerating the turn toward industrial policy that began with President Barack Obama's auto-industry bailout and \$90 billion **investment** in clean energy.

To be sure, Trump's version relied on a different strategy: tariffs, tax cuts, and deregulation.

His successor, Joe Biden, combined these approaches – retaining Trump's tariffs while rebuilding infrastructure and subsidizing green and high-tech industries.

Both Trump and Biden encouraged nearshoring in response to geopolitical rivalry with China and post-pandemic supply-chain shocks. Now, Trump is doubling down on his first-term trade and economic policies.

## US firms are increasingly investing in Mexico, as well as countries in Central and South America

Mexico has been a major beneficiary of this shift. In 2023, it overtook China to become the largest US trade partner, with their total goods trade **reaching** nearly \$800 billion.

In 2024, Mexico received more than \$35 billion in foreign direct investment, part of a larger nearshoring **trend** in Latin America. US firms are increasingly investing in Mexico, as well as countries in Central and South America, because of their proximity, but also because they are young, digitally connected, and economically ambitious.

Even with rising US protectionism, the region's geographic and cultural alignment make it a better bet than Europe or Asia for companies producing goods and services for the US market.

## A cesspool of criminality

Politically, however, Trump often paints the region as a cesspool of criminality, focusing on gangs and drug trafficking. He is pressuring Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum to stop the flow of drugs and people over the border, using his 25% tariff on Mexican auto, steel, and aluminum exports as a powerful bargaining chip.

Moreover, Trump frames problems in a way that allows him to step in with “solutions” that suit his interests and, crucially, can be easily spun into political wins.

For example, by emphasizing the China-Mexico fentanyl pipeline – where China supplies precursor chemicals that Mexican cartels use to manufacture the drug – Trump justifies his trade war on both countries.

**Decreasing immigration in the long term requires strengthening the Mexican economy and improving the government's ability to fight corruption**

Likewise, Trump has focused his ire on the

relatively small number of illegal immigrants in the US who have committed crimes – a problem that he can “address” with dramatic mass deportations of alleged Latin American gang members.

Once this performative phase ends, Trump will almost certainly revive and take credit for the package of immigration reforms contained in last year's bipartisan border-security bill, which the Republicans killed at Trump's behest, so that he could continue campaigning on illegal immigration.

These reforms could lay the groundwork for a US-Mexico migration agreement that would create a more fluid visa system for provisional workers. But decreasing immigration in the long term requires strengthening the Mexican economy and improving the government's ability to fight corruption and protect its citizens.

## Demographic forces will continue to do their work

Meanwhile, demographic forces will continue to do their work. American Latinos will build businesses that connect communities across the Western hemisphere.

Cultural and educational exchanges will grow organically. Even as many governments implement stricter visa rules, US citizens can still travel, study, and retire in Mexico and other Latin American countries.



Pope Francis was from South America, and Pope Leo “is from the northern part of the continent”

When Chicago-born Cardinal Robert Prevost became Pope Leo XIV, US newspapers trumpeted the first American pope.

But the Vatican News **heralded** the arrival of the “second Roman Pontiff – after Pope Francis – from the Americas.” The point was not that Prevost had spent decades in Peru and had become a naturalized Peruvian citizen.

It was that Pope Francis was from South America, and Pope Leo “is from the northern part of the continent.” Viewing the Americas as one continent is a useful way to see the world – an outlook that will probably gain ground this century.

Trump is unlikely to accept my suggestion about the Gulf of North America. But his successor might. Regardless of the name, it is the geographic and economic reality.

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