

The Geographical Function of the Isthmus and Active Neutrality

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Since my university days, I have been deeply attracted to geopolitics, having understood from an early age the strategic importance of Panama's geographical position — a subject masterfully addressed by the late Panamanian jurist Víctor Florencio Goytía in his work *The Geographical Function of the Isthmus*, published in 1947.

In fact, this work profoundly changed the perspective of my academic pursuits, leading me to abandon my studies in Law at the University of Panama in order to pursue Political Science in the United States. This decision was not well received by my Constitutional Law professor, Dr. César Quintero, when I requested a letter of recommendation to apply for the Fulbright scholarship with the aim of embarking on these new studies. Dr. Quintero did not agree with my decision, believing that my future lay in the legal profession. Nevertheless, he agreed to provide the recommendation letter. Even after I had obtained my degree in Political Science in the United States, he would often remind me — with a touch of affection — that he regretted my decision of not completing my Law studies.

Nevertheless, fate led me to serve for nearly twenty years in one of our country's most important diplomatic missions: the Embassy of Panama in Japan. From there, I directly observed China's assertive and expansive behavior, and later, the emergence of the geopolitical confrontation between the United States and China, which began during Donald Trump's first presidency.

Returning to the figure of Víctor Florencio Goytía, his work analyzes how the strategic location of the Isthmus placed Panama at the center of interest for European powers during the colonial and pre-republican eras, and for the United States from the mid-19th century onward, decisively impacting not only our international relations and sovereignty but also shaping our transit- and service-based economic model and the development of our national identity.

Given this historical reality, it was to be expected that, following the reversion of the Panama Canal, our governing elites would conduct foreign policy with extreme caution so as not to compromise the fragile neutrality bequeathed to us by the government of Omar Torrijos, which positioned us under the strategic umbrella of the Pentagon. However, I believe that, given the circumstances of the Cold War, it would have been difficult for any Panamanian government to obtain more favorable conditions.

Although I was aware of China's growing importance on the international stage, I observed with concern the severance of diplomatic relations with Taiwan, as I believed the timing was not appropriate. Trump was beginning to transform the cooperative relationship between China and the United States into one of confrontation — a situation that intensified under the Biden

administration. Today, in the context of Trump's second presidency, this confrontation has reached levels that threaten our national independence and global security.

In this complex international scenario, marked by the rising geopolitical tensions between the two powers, the Republic of Panama faces an existential and strategic challenge that demands political wisdom, long-term vision, and an active yet prudent diplomacy.

The geographical function of the Isthmus, which has historically defined our destiny, once again places us at the center of global interests. In response, the best defense of our sovereignty, political stability, and economic development lies in the assertion of a foreign policy based on **active neutrality**, which must include the diversification of international partnerships and the projection of Panama as a bridge of cooperation, not as a battlefield of confrontation.

Active neutrality implies maintaining fluid diplomatic and commercial relations with all countries, always guided by the unbreakable principle that Panama must act in accordance with its national interests, while respecting its sovereignty, independence, and right to self-determination. This stance should secure spaces for dialogue, cooperation, and mutual benefit.

In this sense, it is essential to strengthen the strategy of diversifying strategic partnerships, consolidating ties with global actors such as the European Union, Japan, South Korea, India, ASEAN, South Africa, Latin America, and multilateral organizations. This would expand our room for maneuver and reduce vulnerabilities associated with excessive dependencies, including the incorporation of other hard currencies into our economic system.

The Panama Canal, the supreme symbol of our universal geographical function, must be zealously safeguarded as a neutral waterway, open to all nations under conditions of fairness and security. Any attempt to instrumentalize the Canal for geopolitical rivalry must be firmly rejected, reaffirming our sovereign administration and strict compliance with the Treaty of Neutrality.

In this context, it is also necessary to strengthen economic and security diplomacy by enhancing the management capacity of foreign trade, the attraction of strategic investments, and Panama's rigorous control over critical infrastructures — including energy, telecommunications, ports, and airports — as well as refining geopolitical risk analysis systems.

I wish to emphasize the importance of projecting a **coherent and sustained international narrative that Panama is not a pawn or a prize, but a bridge; not a theater of conflict, but a platform for cooperation; not a hostage to foreign interests, but a sovereign actor committed to peace, trade, and global development.**

Just as the geographical function of the Isthmus has conditioned our history, it must also inspire our future, guiding us toward an international conduct that is prudent, dignified, and strategic. The defense of our sovereignty, the preservation of our stability, and the promotion of our prosperity must guide every action and decision of the national government in this new era of global challenges.

Despite the numerous criticisms and misunderstandings that arise within our country, I believe that President Mulino is acting with strategic prudence, aimed at safeguarding the survival of Panama as an independent nation. He faces an international environment considerably more unstable than the one encountered by the government of General Torrijos and, moreover, must deal with a powerful actor characterized by erratic and capricious behavior. In this context, I would suggest that President Mulino modernize the government's communication strategy to adapt it to these times of disinformation and media warfare, both internal and external.