

Intentionally Reengaging Latin America with Fostering Enduring Commitment, Empowering Partners, and Promoting Sovereignty in an Era of Heightened Strategic Competition

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The end of the Cold War ushered in a new era for global politics, characterized by a strong liberal international order led by an unchallenged United States and unprecedented democratic growth. The turn of the century offered great promise and opportunities for both the United States and countries in the Global South to develop partnerships and strengthen relations, principally in the economic and political realms. However, high hopes were quickly dashed with the events of September 11, 2001, and the United States' attention was rapidly and understandably diverted from regions such as Latin America and the Caribbean and towards the Middle East, which remained its principal focus for much of the next two decades.

While the United States' attention remained steadfast and focused on the Global War on Terror, China pursued relations with the Global South to fuel its domestic economic growth, secure complex supply chains, increase both its global standing and footprint, and challenge the presiding liberal international order and widespread commitment to democratic principles. For illustration, over the course of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, China has provided countries in the Latin American region with billions of dollars in financial assistance;¹ partnered with its "big five" commercial banks to offer an impressive number of loans;² competed in auctions to provide telecommunications and other technology to Latin American partner countries;³ developed a military footprint on the ground through the operation of a military-run space station (*Espacio Lejano*) in Argentina⁴ and, more recently, through engagement in talks with Nicaragua to develop a deep-water port, capable of serving as a naval outpost;⁵ grown trade 26-fold, becoming South America's largest trading partner;⁶ welcomed twenty Latin American and Caribbean countries into its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with non-participants developing strategic partnerships with China;⁷ greatly expanded intentional International Military Education & Training (IMET);⁸ and invested in vaccine diplomacy, Confucius Institutes, and exchange programs to grow cross-cultural competencies and soft power.⁹

With its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and tension with China escalating rapidly, the United States would be well served to develop a consistent and integrated strategy in its approach to and relations with Latin America in pursuit of the security of the American people, economic prosperity and opportunity, and the democratic values at the heart of the American way of life.¹⁰ The Latin American region is critical to the preservation of each of these critical national interests for several reasons.

First, Latin American countries are increasingly contending with challenges related to violent and organized crime¹¹ which have the potential to transcend borders (in the forms of both people and illicit products) to the detriment of the physical security and public health of the American people. Second, Beijing's ambitions to develop a new joint military training facility in Cuba¹² and a deep-water port off Nicaragua's coast¹³ enhance adversarial substantive force capabilities in the region, threatening the physical security of the American people. Third, Latin America is home to invaluable natural resources, critical minerals, and emerging markets, all of which are essential to fuel both the world's transition to renewable energy and the economic prosperity of global powers to include the United States. Fourth, several Latin American countries are experiencing democratic backsliding,¹⁴ undermining both values that lie at the heart of the American way of life and prospects for international cooperation on pressing global challenges.

For all of these reasons related to our core national interests, it is imperative that the United States consistently and intentionally reengage with the Latin American region, specifically, as part of a broader initiative encompassing relations with the Global South. Moving forward, effective engagement with Latin America should account for the reputational and tangible damage that can follow from decades of neglect and consist of a coherent strategy that leads with fostering enduring engagement, empowering partners, and, where possible, accepting positions of non-alignment.

In the Latin American region, there is a popular perception that the United States' interest in Latin America is purely self-motivated, meaning that it is intense in moments of perceived regional strategic importance—to include the political and ideological Cold War conflict, culminating in the overthrow of important regional democratic governments such as in Guatemala (1954) and Chile (1973), for example¹⁵—and largely non-existent otherwise—during the peak of the twenty-first century War on Terror, for instance. In practice, these interpretations have been substantiated by recent, albeit nuanced, fluctuations in American strategy toward Latin America, ranging from former President Donald Trump's forceful "America First" approach and current President Joe Biden's more tentative "Root Causes" approach. Whether due to a dynamic and quickly changing geopolitical landscape or ideologically diverse political administrations, inconsistent and tepid engagement with the Latin American region has resulted in reputational and relational damage.

Moving forward, American political leadership on both the left and the right need to set aside differences—such as those relating to immigration and, more pointedly, on whether to scale up border security and increase deportations or to increase paths to legal status¹⁶—in favor of discussing key strategic areas for compromise in the Latin American region. Bipartisan consensus that Venezuela should hold primary elections in October 2023 and that the United States should exert pressure on the Maduro regime in support of free and fair electoral conditions¹⁷ offers insight into a realm in which this might work in practice. More broadly, political agreement surrounding the condemnation of repressive authoritarianism and related humanitarian crises and the importance of private sector involvement in spurring economic growth¹⁸ could serve as lasting constants in shaping United States' engagement with the Latin American region.

However, developing approaches and strategies in isolation of the voices of American allies and partners in the region will prove ineffective. For substantiating evidence, look no further than the absence of critical regional leaders to include Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador at the 2022 Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles. While, of course, more widespread attendance of regional leadership would likely not have dramatically altered outcomes—such as strengthening democracy in the region—it likely contributed to Andrés Rozental's evaluation of the event as "far short of being newsworthy."¹⁹ In order to rejuvenate inter-regional relations in pursuit of our national interests, it is imperative that our strategy and approach include diverse voices and perspectives, even those the United States might prefer not to hear. Moreover, it is imperative that the United States practice active listening in engagements with the region. Coming back to the 2022 Summit of the Americas, delegates from Latin American countries desperately wanted to discuss topics related to the economy and security, whereas the United States, as the host country, was intent in its focus on topics related to the environment and diversity and inclusion.²⁰ This disconnect not only further substantiated some Latin American countries' decisions not to attend but was also, in part, responsible for limited substantive progress across the board.

Finally, and perhaps an unintended consequence of American neglect and inadequate consideration of diverse perspectives from partners, many Latin American countries have increasingly adopted geopolitical positions of non-alignment. In practice, this means that Latin American countries have leveraged relations with and opportunities afforded by both the United States and China in pursuit of their own unique political, economic, and social objectives. While this stance has led to the widespread presence of Huawei telecommunications equipment and a failure to condemn Russia for its hostile invasion of Ukraine, both of which the United States views as contentious and unpalatable, it is important that the United States refrain from pressuring Latin American countries to "pick a side." Through countless conversations with Brazilians and Panamanians on this topic specifically in Summer 2022, I heard the common refrains of "*We don't want to*

pick a side. Don't make us choose." And *"We want an American option, but there isn't one. Why should we delay our own development, waiting for an American option?"* The Brazilians and Panamanians I spoke with make fair points. Moreover, criticizing the choices of Latin American countries, such as Honduras, that opt to sever diplomatic ties with Taiwan in favor of relations with China²¹ is hypocritical. With the United States' own position of "strategic ambiguity" vis-à-vis a potential scenario in which China invades Taiwan, it is unwise to demand that Latin American countries "pick a side," save exceptions such as the use of sophisticated technologies with military purposes.

Instead, the United States should accept the sovereignty of Latin American countries and the binding choices they make regarding the political, economic, and security developments of their own countries. Recognizing that, despite a checkered history in the region, the United States remains the partner of choice, it would be better served to focus on consistently acting in accordance with our (oftentimes mutual) national interests; supporting domestic-led initiatives to deliver on the economic and security promises of democracy while steadfastly upholding human rights; developing shareable, affordable, and wide-ranging technological and other capabilities; and strategically expanding intentional International Military Education & Training and military exercise opportunities designed to outcompete our adversaries.²²

If the United States takes seriously the call and opportunity to revisit relations with Latin American countries as a part of a broader initiative to reengage the Global South and develop an enduring, inclusive, and sovereignty-upholding strategy regarding the region, it can expect to reap the immense benefits in the realms of security, prosperity, and democracy in a moment of heightened strategic competition.

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