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TOM LONG

# From Trump to Biden in Latin America

The Biden administration holds significant political tools for navigating relations with Latin America. How will it leverage this power?

Standing in the ornate Hall of the Americas in 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry proclaimed the death of the Monroe Doctrine. Four years later, Kerry's successor Rex Tillerson exhumed the old doctrine: "I think it's as relevant today as it was the day it was written," he said before starting a tour of Latin America. Initially dismissed by some as a curious gaff, in its arguments against Chinese influence in Latin America, the Trump administration continued a revival of Monroe's 1823 denunciation of extra-hemispheric powers.

However, the invocations of Monroe masked a strategic vacuum. Aside from browbeating Latin American leaders about migration, the Trump administration lacked a consistent approach to the region. The dominant ethos was one of short-term transactionalism, as with Mexico and Central America, and personalized praise with minimal policy follow through, as with Brazil. Regarding perceived adversaries like Cuba and Venezuela, policy was warped by pressures from several members of Congress and narrow electoral interests.

The new administration of President Joseph Biden is more rhetorically attuned to Latin American concerns, both because of the makeup of his team and Biden's own longstanding connections to regional leaders. As a young senator, Biden cut his teeth in the battles over human rights and the 1978 Panama Canal treaties, which gradually returned the canal and adjacent lands to Panama's control. Later, he

emerged as a strong advocate for Plan Colombia, and the government of Colombian President Andrés Pastrana saw him as an ally. As vice president, Biden spearheaded the Obama administration's economic dialogue with Mexico and its security and migration approach to Central America. Now, his team includes committed multilateralists and liberal internationalists in prominent positions, as well as seasoned Latin American policy hands and Latinx officials.

For all those reasons, there is little doubt that Biden's discourse will re-bury the Monroe Doctrine. Will his policy do so as well?

## Monroe 3.0?

Whether Monroe is buried or not, elements of this thinking are deeply embedded in U.S. policies. Often, such fretting has its roots in comparison with a misplaced, Monroeist nostalgia for levels of unchallenged U.S. control that never existed, as well as a shallow understanding of the nature of U.S. power in the hemisphere.

While it is common to read sweeping proclamations of unbroken U.S. "domination" or "hegemony" over Latin America stretching back to 1823, the history of the Monroe Doctrine is less clear-cut. Initially, the United States lacked the clout to back up the proclamation with force. Instead, the policy co-existed with—and depended upon—extensive British influence throughout the Americas. While the transition from U.S. to British predominance

in Central America was under way by the middle of the 19th century, U.S. influence elsewhere in the hemisphere continued to vary geographically and over time. U.S. leadership claims faced challenges from Latin American and extra-hemispheric actors. The meaning of the doctrine also changed from presumptuous to interventionist as the United States intervened in, and then occupied, Cuba in the 1898 war against Spain. Perceived challenges to U.S. influence consistently make U.S. policymakers nervous.

Such fears also often misunderstand the nature of U.S. power. In 1987, political economist Susan Strange presciently argued that recurring, exaggerated rumors of the death of U.S. hegemony overlooked how U.S. power remains deeply embedded in global structures of security provision (or credible threat), production of goods and services, finance and credit, and influence over knowledge. In Latin America, the United States has only lost serious ground in the production of goods. Chinese

lending has declined since 2015 and nearly disappeared since the onset of the pandemic; U.S. control of the financial infrastructure remains. While the Trump administration bungled the public health response to Covid-19, the U.S. Treasury demonstrated its ability to throw lifelines to U.S. partners, as political scientist Carla Norrlöf shows. The United States retains its lead in military power and knowledge infrastructure in Latin America. The structural power built over a century retains deep roots.

Trump's transactionalism created some short-term "wins" while eroding the long-term basis of structural power. But the Biden administration retains tremendous tools and leverage in Latin America. It may marshal these into competition with China or into supporting a more positive transition in its foreign policy towards the region.

### The Region Biden Encounters

At the international level, Latin America has changed dramatically in recent years. Two



In his second meeting with a foreign leader, President Joe Biden met virtually with Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador on March 1, 2021. (WHITE HOUSE)

elements stand out. First, starting in the mid-2000s, a chasm opened between the economic orientations of most of South America and those of Mexico, Central America, and much of the Caribbean. The cause, essentially, was Chinese commodity demand. Chinese imports flooded most of Latin America equally, but Chinese purchases of Latin American exports—and relatedly, China’s provision of finance—were highly unequal. The end of the “China boom” after 2013 represented a dramatic reduction of commodity demand, but China remained the leading provider of imports to most of Latin America.

Second, regional leadership has fragmented since Biden’s time as vice president, sinking regional institutions. Most prominently, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR)—once the great hope for new, multidimensional regional cooperation without the United States—collapsed in 2018 amid divisions over ideology and Venezuela policy. It has not been replaced with any meaningful mechanism for regional coordination. Among major contenders for regional leadership, Brazil’s Bolsonaro is hostile to perceived “globalism,” while Mexico’s López Obrador spares little time for foreign policy. With few exceptions, the region struggles to enunciate a shared agenda.

These factors will create challenges for Biden. The need for regional cooperation in Latin American and inter-American relations remains pressing. Above all, there is a need for regional economic strategies that avoid the mistakes of both the Washington Consensus and the China boom and bust. Chinese exports—often effectively subsidized—challenge Latin American production. This creates some shared regional priorities, but South America’s continued reliance on Chinese commodity purchases and hopes for renewed lending complicate coordinated regional responses. Given the United States’ lasting structural power, there is a need for the United States to engage in this cooperation, too.

Biden’s legacy and foreign policy team suggest a return to liberal internationalism, including an emphasis on multilateralism. That penchant

for multilateralism offers the potential for more positive approaches to inter-American relations. Multilateralism has often been a favored tool for Latin American leaders who sought to curtail U.S. unilateral impulses, and they have variously sought multilateral versions of the Monroe Doctrine in international law or seized opportunities to soft balance or institutionally bind the United States.

However, deeper multilateral cooperation entails risks of U.S. overreach, and Biden’s priorities suggest that cooperation would encompass issues where numerous Latin American governments are not eager to mess with the status quo. The burning of the Amazon in Brazil, human rights in Mexico, corruption in Honduras and Guatemala, and authoritarianism in Nicaragua and El Salvador stand out. Though Trump’s insults and approach were unsightly, many leaders found a *modus vivendi*, striking bargains and enjoying the lack of U.S. scrutiny on human rights, corruption, and climate policy.

### Policy Priorities

How will the Biden administration respond to these contradictions? It is often suggested that Latin America is unlikely to draw much attention. Surely, Biden’s agenda will be occupied by the pandemic and recovery. Foreign policy will be dominated by never-ending wars, Iran, China, and rebuilding trans-Atlantic ties.

However, U.S. “gravity,” structural power, and deep interdependence mean that many largely domestic policies will have tremendous impacts for the region. These include the pandemic and recovery, U.S. fiscal and Treasury policy, domestic environmental policy, and approaches to drugs, crime, and prisons. For Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, the traditional “intermestic” issues will weigh heavily. Border policies, migration and asylum, U.S. firearms laws, and trade and government procurement have immediate impacts on the United States’ neighbors. More traditional foreign policy issues will also come to bear on the region.



Vice president Joe Biden speaks to President Juan Orlando Hernández of Honduras during a meeting with leaders of northern Central America. Also featured are former presidents Salvador Sánchez Cerén (right) of El Salvador and Jimmy Morales of Guatemala. (WIKIMEDIA / PRESIDENCIA EL SALVADOR)

The pandemic and economic recovery will take top billing. U.S. decisions on economic stimulus and monetary policy will shape patterns of growth or recession for countries tightly linked to the United States. The prioritization of demand-side spending in a \$1.9 trillion stimulus package is good news for Mexican production. The mercantilism of Biden’s “Buy American” provisions, however, is a worrying holdover from the Trump era and before. Treasury decisions will shape credit markets for the whole region. Biden’s appointments of figures like Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen suggest a moderate, Keynesian approach amenable to continued expansion with slightly more tolerance for

inflation risk. Even small changes to U.S. monetary policy will have profound effects after a period of pandemic-induced spending and revenue losses.

In health policy, the Trump administration largely abandoned the region and let Latin American governments turn to vaccines from Russia, China, and international organizations. Biden has ramped up vaccine production, particularly of the easier-to-distribute, single-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine. These purchases may allow the United States to belatedly enter the ambit of vaccine diplomacy after having lost ground to China and Russia. Certainly, the administration’s rhetoric and appointees realize that vaccination in Latin America is crucial

The China boom and bust were a reminder of how deeply South America’s social progress depended on extractive economies. The economic depths of the pandemic incentivize those activities even at lower commodity prices, risking a further entrenchment of carbon-intensive growth.

for the United States, too. In practice, though, nationalism has dominated early efforts and fed justifiable impressions that a miserly United States is hoarding vaccines and ignoring its neighbors. U.S. vaccination programs and the restoration of “normal” economic activity will affect the region in other ways. Notably, the interruption of tourism upended the economy in parts of Mexico and in many Caribbean islands.

Elements of Biden’s coalition will renew the push for police, prisons, and sentencing reform. The administration will exercise more discretion in the tolerance of state-level experiments with legalization and decriminalization—as a corollary, it will have to be more accepting of Mexican marijuana legalization. These changes create space for discussing less militarized forms of policing at home and abroad, but on their own will not shift the dynamics of the war on drugs. Though even congressionally mandated reports accept the failure of an interdiction-first, militarized approach, the drug war retains deep bureaucratic (and often public) support both in the United States and many Latin American countries.

On “intermestic” issues, from Biden’s first days in office, he made migration a focus. Notably, Biden’s immediate policies and legislative plans go beyond rolling back the Trump administration’s nativism. They also break with Obama’s strategy of trading border enforcement budgets for migration reforms. That approach failed against Republican obstructionism while causing tremendous damage to migrant communities. Enforcement will not disappear. Biden is unlikely to “abolish ICE” given the entrenched resistance. The short-lived appointment of Ambassador Roberta Jacobson as border coordinator was

more geared to resolve intra-agency disputes than to act as an advocate for open borders. Biden’s team continues to struggle with tremendous logistical challenges on the ground and to find policies that balance a more humane approach, especially to minors, and an entrenched enforcement paradigm. Nonetheless, Biden’s approach holds the promise of real improvements in conditions for migrants, transnational families, and Central American economies through possibilities for greater circulatory migration.

However, Biden’s migration strategy has another element that may be less welcome in Central America and Mexico. Democratic insiders like Daniel Restrepo, a former Obama administration advisor on the Americas, are increasingly arguing that corruption is a driver of Central American migration. Restrepo advocates renewed anti-corruption measures and the denial of visas and financial access to corrupt officials, as well as firmer links between U.S. aid and governance reforms in Central America. Such policies will face resistance of the sort engendered by international anti-corruption agencies like the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) and the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG), both now defunct. Similar reforms could subject Mexican security forces to greater scrutiny. This should include state forces, like the Tamaulipas state police unit involved in a massacre of Guatemalans in early 2021, and the National Guard. Though nominally new, the National Guard is overwhelmingly made up of old Mexican military units. Such scrutiny will not sit well with political

dynasties like the family of President Juan Orlando Hernández in Honduras or with the Mexican military brass. Indeed, that is the point.

Climate change will take a higher place on the agenda than for any previous administration. The high-profile appointment of John Kerry as climate envoy, and ambitious U.S. emissions targets, suggests the United States will emphasize international climate negotiations beyond the Paris Accord. While most climate attention will take place at the global level of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), South America's role is too big to leave to the global forum. Renewed fires in the Amazon will receive sustained U.S. attention, in a sharp contrast to the Trump administration's shrug. This will increase pressure on Brazil, in particular, but also on Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru. The China boom and bust were a reminder of how deeply South America's social progress depended on extractive economies. The economic depths of the pandemic incentivize those activities even at lower commodity prices, risking a further entrenchment of carbon-intensive growth. The conjuncture calls for new models. The Biden administration will likely try to cajole greater cooperation, perhaps with economic incentives.

On more traditional foreign policy issues, namely Cuba, Venezuela, and the role of China in the hemisphere, there are divisions within the administration and across the hemisphere. Some in the administration will see Cuba and Venezuela through the lens of Biden's weak performance in South Florida, where elections cost the Democrats in the House as well as in the presidential tally. There will be some hold-over sympathy from Obama's Cuba policy. However, unlike during Obama's second term, Cuba lacks the broad coalition of supportive friends in Latin America. On both Cuba and Venezuela policy, the moderate, coordinating role of Colombia's Juan Manuel Santos has been replaced by opposition from Iván Duque, backed by Brazil. On Venezuela, Biden inherits a policy with no runway and no evident exit ramp. His early moves play up humanitarianism,

including the provision of Temporary Protected Status for Venezuelans in the United States and an openness to reconsider some broad-based sanctions. However, this does not offer an end to the political stalemate.

On China, elements of the trade war will diminish, but underlying dynamics remain. Given China's aggressive moves against Hong Kong and growing fears about Taiwan, such tensions may grow. It is less likely that China will be a litmus test for inter-American relations, but on this issue, Monroeist impulses will remain. Stoked by intelligence and commercial concerns, the State Department will continue pressure over Chinese technology and the construction of 5G networks. The question for Latin American leaders, then, is whether they will try to multilateralize these U.S. pressures or deflect them in the name of greater autonomy.

On several issues, Biden can look to Latin America for foreign policy wins with domestic political benefits. Cooperation with Central America and Mexico, in particular, would pay dividends on migration and trade. A change in tone has already served as a welcome break from Trump's dog-whistle attacks on Mexicans and Central Americans as criminals. It should extend to a clear repudiation of Trump's border wall—an early rallying point for anti-Trump activism—and to associated nativist policies. Biden should go further, listening seriously to regional preferences for multilateralism and international law, and demonstrating an openness to rethink failed policy paradigms. Only then will the rhetoric of engaging as “equals” be matched by reality. ■

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