

America's Strategy for Latin America and the Caribbean

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The bitter 2016 US presidential race is now past. As the incoming administration of President Donald J. Trump assumed office in January, it became important that Latin America and the Caribbean be high on the agenda. There is currently no state or terrorist group in the region posing a significant, immediate, credible threat against the United States. Yet the absence of such a threat is not a sufficient reason for relegating it to the bottom of the new administration's long list of national security priorities.

No other region of the world trades more with, or has more investments from the United States, than Latin America and the Caribbean; by implication, there is no region which more directly affects continuing US economic security and prosperity.¹ In addition, the physical connectedness of the region to the United States, including the land border with Mexico, as well as maritime approaches through both the Pacific and the Caribbean, link the conditions of the region to the physical security of the nation in ways that are not the case for other parts of the world. When tens of thousands of child migrants from Central America arrived at the US border in the summer of 2014, for example, the United States was forced to spend more than \$3.7 billion to manage the crisis.² When the Zika virus began spreading throughout the region, it quickly reached Miami.³ When the US expulsion of Central American immigrants sowed the seeds of the violent street gangs Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 in El Salvador, Honduras

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and Guatemala, the same gangs quickly began to appear among Central American immigrant communities in major American cities as well.⁴

In 2016, then-US presidential candidate Trump's promise to construct a wall on the border with Mexico became a controversy of international proportion, yet the resonance of the theme of the "wall" with an important portion of the American electorate is itself a recognition of how the security and prosperity of the United States is affected by the region to which we are geographically and economically connected.

The Strategic Environment of Latin America

The strategic environment of Latin America and the Caribbean is commonly misunderstood. Although the region is not plagued by interstate wars, it is by no means a region at peace. Forty-three of the fifty cities with the world's highest homicide rates are found in Latin America.⁵ While most in the United States think of the character of Latin America's problems as different from those in other parts of the world like the Middle East, it is useful to recall that the conditions that catapulted the Middle East into chaos following the Arab Spring were not conflicts between states, but rather, like those in Latin America, socioeconomic tensions fed by the dynamics of globalization in the context of weak and unresponsive state institutions for addressing them.

The challenges of Latin America may differ in degree and details from those in other parts of the world, but do not differ in their ability to explode in a way that harms the US national security.

The strategic environment of Latin America and the Caribbean is defined by a complex interplay between global and internal dynamics, including the actions of the United States and multiple extra-hemispheric actors. The factors which most threaten the stability of that environment fall into two groups: (1) the challenges to public order and institutions from transnational organized crime, and (2) the imperatives of global interdependence.

Transnational Organized Crime

Although Latin America and the Caribbean have numerous problems of underdevelopment, inequality, and injustice, it is transnational organized crime that most actively drives the region in a negative direction. The activities of criminal groups in pursuit of financial gain, including bribery and intimidation, corrupts both public institutions and civic society. At the same time, it undermines public order through spawning illicit activity and violence.

Such effects are generated by different kinds of criminal groups in different ways, including large cartels, smaller groups which smuggle narcotics, money, people, and contraband goods through the national territory, transnational gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 which extort people and businesses, sell drugs and commit petty crimes in the spaces they dominate, and even groups who commit their crimes in the name of political objectives, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (also known as FARC) and National Liberation Army (also known as the ELN) in Colombia, or Sendero Luminoso in Peru.

Global Interdependence

Although global interdependence can produce economic and social gains, it also has destabilizing side effects. The region's increasing economic connectedness to the rest of the world, with respect to trade, investment, and finance, has also enabled the globalization of organized crime and money laundering. It has made the region more vulnerable to external shocks, such as the negative impact of the fall in prices for its commodity exports.

In the sphere of information, the transmission of data through the Internet, social media, and even telephones contribute to the contagion of ideas. This includes, not only innovations that advance the human condition, but also the ideas that subvert it, from bomb-making techniques to the global recruitment of "lone wolf" terrorists.

The global movement of people includes unregistered cross-border migration and human trafficking activities such as forced prostitution. The movement of people also is an enabler of the transmission of diseases and the spreading of organized crime groups to foreign cities, including the establishment of Mara Salvatrucha in Washington DC, or the spread of Brazil's First Capital Command to Bolivia, Peru and Paraguay.

Finally, global interdependence facilitates interactions with the region by extra-hemispheric actors. This includes Chinese pursuit of markets, commodities, agricultural goods and technology in the region, in ways that have undermined established institutions such as the Interamerican Development Bank, as well as the US pursuit of its policy objectives in the region. The expanded connection of Latin America with the rest of the world also includes Russian and Iranian interactions with the region, from mining and petroleum sector investments to construction, arms sales, and activities in the political and security sphere.

While transnational organized crime and the activities of extra-hemispheric actors in the region may impact US national security, the region can no longer be defined in terms of a Cold War-style struggle between competing power blocs or ideologies. Rather, the key battle of ideas, which shapes the region today, is one

that comes from both the global environment and the region itself: what is the best way to achieve economic advance in a framework of relative social justice? The evolving mixture of neoclassical, statist, and populist policies adopted by alternating governments in the region are attempts to address this question, which correspond to the fundamental hopes and well-being of the region's population.

Toward a US Strategy for Latin America and the Caribbean

Although the United States interacts continually with Latin America and the Caribbean and actively promotes a policy agenda there featuring democracy, human rights, free trade and strong institutions,⁶ it arguably lacks a coherent strategy that guides how it conducts that engagement, and how it prioritizes its interactions. The focus of this paper is to advance such a framework.

The US strategy toward Latin America and the Caribbean must be guided by a compelling concept regarding how to leverage its strengths and pursue its goals in the context of limited resources and the numerous options the region has for engagement in the contemporary interdependent world.

The US engagement with the region should focus on the importance of partnerships with the countries of the region, based on mutual respect. Moreover, the United States should evaluate the dynamics of Latin America and the Caribbean and its own actions in the region, in the context of the greater set of global relationships and conditions in which the region is situated.

This paper argues that US engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean should be guided by seven pillars:

1. Focus on building strong institutions and the rule of law
2. Help ensure the success of friends adopting a path consistent with US values
3. Contain soft challengers to the United States
4. Prepare for critical events that may occur
5. Shape the rules of the game
6. Be mindful of connections between the region and other parts of the world
7. Be attentive to perceptions of US power and moral authority globally

Focus on Building Strong Institutions and the Rule of Law

Virtually all the US objectives in the region, from promoting democracy and human rights to advancing development and social justice to combatting the more malevolent influences of some foreign actors, is facilitated by strong institutions in the region and the rule of law. Weak institutions are more vulnerable to exploitation by foreign companies and domestic elites, as well as distortion by

populist leaders who leverage the support of followers which they have mobilized (particularly when the population tolerates elevating achievement of the initiatives of popular leader above the checks and balances of the country's political system).

Where there is a lack of transparency and respect for the rules in a country, corruption flourishes, reinforcing inequality between those who have access to economic and political power and those who do not, and in the process, undermining the faith of the people in democracy and free markets. In the end, the casualty is the opinion of the population in the viability of Western concepts of democracy and free markets for building a prosperous and just society. In addition, where institutions and the rule of law are weak, foreign actors (including but not limited to the People's Republic of China [PRC]) can more easily secure commercial position and political leverage in the country by courting its elites, rather than competing in fair and transparent public processes.

Help Ensure the Success of Friends Adopting a Path Consistent with US Values

In several Latin American countries, frustrations with the policies of socialist or populist presidents has brought to power new heads of state more favorably oriented toward the United States and traditional Western concepts for managing the economy and public institutions. Following the American victory in the Cold War, the seemingly demonstrated wisdom of the US economic model versus that of the Soviet Union arguably led the many in Latin America to elect pro-US, market-oriented leaders. The neoliberal economic policies that these leaders followed was termed "Washington Consensus." Some, such as historian Francis Fukuyama, saw the new consensus as enduring, terming it "the end of history."⁷

Yet because those policies did not resolve Latin America's fundamental problems of underdevelopment and social inequality, with time populations lost faith in those policies, and the leaders espousing them were displaced by others pursuing new approaches, including in some cases, a mixture of free market and socialist policies, and in others, populist socialism.

As during that lost moment of opportunity at the end of the Cold War, today the United States has a vested interest in ensuring that the new generation of Latin American leaders following neoliberal, free trade policies, succeed in that endeavor, and that their initiatives produce positive results, so that they (or leaders following similar policies elsewhere in the region), will prosper politically in their own country, and in other countries in the region inspired by their example.

The US strategic imperative for the United States to ensure the success of those following policies consistent with its economic and political philosophies

may be divided into two categories: (1) supporting the success of “newfound friends,” and (2) standing by “embattled” ones. With respect to the first category, in 2016, the United States has been given a new chance with respect to relatively promarket, pro-US governments in Argentina, Brazil, Peru and Guyana. It is important in each case to help them succeed.

Argentina

Mauricio Macri won the presidency in November 2015, putting an end to 12 years of socialist rule by Nestor Kirchner and his wife Cristina Fernandez. The president came into office signaling his interest in resolving legal battles over Argentina’s defaulted debt, pursuing a more market-oriented economic policy to restore Argentina’s financial health, and improving Argentina’s relationship with the United States and other developed nations from which it had isolated itself during the Kirchner period.⁸

President Macri’s success in pursuing this new course is important for the United States and the region for multiple reasons. Argentina is a key actor in regional multilateral forums; its constructive participation in the Organization of American States (OAS), and its potentially renewed preference for using the OAS rather than the Union of South American Nations or the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States to address regional disputes, could help to restore the primacy of the OAS-led Interamerican system, in which the United States has a seat at the table. In this course, the Macri government confronts many obstacles. Internally, it is challenged to paralyze the administration’s efforts.⁹

The nation is also besieged by drug flows, particularly in the north moving from countries such as Peru and Bolivia, toward Brazil, to Europe, with a 700 percent increase in drug seizures during the first year of the Macri administration.¹⁰ The Macri government, which estimates that some 70 tons of cocaine pass through Argentina each year, declared an emergency and authorized the use of military aircraft to force down suspected drug flights.¹¹

Argentina also continues to be tempted by its economic relationship with the PRC, which is a key purchaser of Argentine soybeans, and whose companies are performing multiple major infrastructure projects in the country with financing by Chinese banks. These projects include two major hydroelectric facilities, nuclear reactors, and renovation of the Belgrano-Cargas railroad system.¹² In short, as important as it is strategically for the United States that the Macri government succeed, there is a risk that it could be tempted down a less desirable path.

Brazil

In Brazil, like Argentina, the pro-market, pro-US government of Michel Temer has replaced the more left-leaning one of Dilma Rousseff, in the process altering a Brazilian foreign policy which subtly and sometimes not so subtly worked against American strategic interests in the region, seeking to replace the OAS with the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), and fostering an informal alliance with Russia and China through Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) group.¹³ Temer's position, having arrived in power as vice president following the polemical process of Dilma's impeachment, has overcome most of the internal challenges from those on the left who cast the impeachment process as a *de facto* coup. Yet, Temer is struggling to establish legitimacy and governability as key allies and members of his government, and perhaps Temer himself, face criminal charges from the "Car Wash" bribery scandal.¹⁴ He also faces the challenge of turning around an economy that is expected to continue to contract at a 3.4 percent rate this year,¹⁵ before facing new elections in 2018. In this context, Temer will face the ever-present temptation of the PRC, as a major purchaser of Brazilian soybeans, iron, and petroleum, and a supplier of credit to Brazilian institutions.

Peru

In Peru, the pro-US neoliberal economist Pedro Pablo Kuczynski has replaced Ollanta Humala in the presidency. Humala's administration was politically moderate, yet plagued by scandals.¹⁶ Peru's strategic position on the Pacific Ocean makes it one of Latin America's key players in the region's relationship with Asia, including the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum, which it hosted in November 2016. Peru will play an important role in shaping a range of regional institutions, including the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Pacific Alliance, as well as inter-American institutions such as the OAS, UNASUR and CELAC. The nation is also one of the most important commercial and military partners for China¹⁷ and Russia¹⁸ in the region.

Although Peru's economy is anticipated to grow at an average rate of 4.2 percent through 2021,¹⁹ its mining and petroleum sectors continue to suffer from depressed global prices for those commodities. Peru also continues to face governance challenges in its remote mountain and jungle regions stemming from conflicts between mining and petroleum companies, and the local communities impacted by their activities.

Peru also faces growing challenges as a source country for cocaine and illegal mining products exported to Europe, the United States and Asia.²⁰ Coca cultivation in Peru is expanding in the northern jungle region south of the Putumayo River (partly due to the cessation of aerial spraying against coca plants by its neighbor to the north, Colombia). It is similarly growing along the length of the eastern side of its portion of the Andes Mountains. Meanwhile, illegal mining activities in Peru are also growing, spreading from the Madre de Dios Region to neighboring departments such as Puno and Cusco. Cocaine and intermediate coca products, as well as metals and minerals from the informal mining sector are being increasingly exported from neighboring Bolivia, adding to organized crime and associated social challenges in the country.²¹

Guyana

In Guyana, the May 2015 election of the Afro-Guyanese government of Brig Gen and former US professor Dr. David Granger, put an end to 23 years of Indo-Guyanese rule, reflecting and casting further light on tremendous public corruption of the previous government.²² The English-speaking nation's geographic position to the east of Venezuela, on the southern rim of the Caribbean Basin, positions it as a significant contributor to Caribbean security, while the discovery of oil offshore will potentially bring significant new resources to the impoverished country.²³

On the other hand, however, the nation has been militarily threatened by Venezuela, which reasserted a historic claim to Guyana's Essequibo region coinciding with the discovery of oil in fields whose ownership would be impacted by that claim. At the same time, the political position of the Afro-Guyanese coalition that propelled Granger to power is fragile, since the Afro-Guyanese are a slim minority, and their ascension to power was based, in part, on a new centrist political movement, the Alliance for Change that was substantially drawn from the Indo-Guyanese voting bloc.

In addition to the imperatives for the United States to ensure the success of the governments mentioned in the previous paragraph, turning to policies more aligned with the United States, there are also five regimes which are longstanding friends, whose strategic position makes it important to help them overcome the significant challenges they are currently facing: Mexico, Colombia, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, and Paraguay.

Mexico

Contrary to widespread perceptions in the United States, Mexico is a relatively modern, economically diverse middle-income country with public institu-

tions that function adequately outside of matters dealing with organized crime. Mexico is arguably the most important strategic partner of the United States, with the economic prosperity of both closely linked through the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Mexico's close economic relationship with the United States has also made it a bulwark against the advances of extra-hemispheric actors such as China, Russia and Iran. A Mexico which were to be engaged in significant, warm economic and political relationships with these extra-hemispheric actors would force the United States to fundamentally re-evaluate its security position in the hemisphere. The anti-Mexico rhetoric of the 2016 presidential election has provoked many in Mexico to re-evaluate their historically troubled relationship with the United States, yet has not yet provoked the country to move decisively to change its posture vis-à-vis these extra-hemispheric actors.

Mexico is also a key partner of the United States in managing flows of drugs, migrants, and weapons, as well as other security issues on its shared border. Mexico further shares the Caribbean basin with the United States, including not only its oil, but also giving Mexico, as well as the United States, a strong interest in the future of Cuba, whose western coast is almost as close to Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula as Cuba's north coast is to Miami.

In addition, Mexico is an important economic and political actor in the Pacific, and its leadership will be important to the future of structures that define the trade and political regime that prevail in the Pacific, including the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and the Pacific Alliance, in which Mexico is a founding member. Although the Mexican government has struggled admirably against the transnational criminal cartels which have produced more than 80,000 deaths in the country during the past two presidential administrations,²⁴ as with the US campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, the threat continues to evolve, even as Mexico continues to win the battles.

As the regime of President Enrique Peña Nieto nears its end, the organized crime challenge in Mexico appears to be moving toward a new phase of crisis.²⁵ The struggle of the past decade has splintered the major criminal organizations that once dominated the country into more than 60 violent gangs and factions, whose less experienced leaderships and infighting has expanded violence in states such as Guerrero, Michoacán, and the state of Mexico, bordering the capital. As the richest and most internationally connected criminal federation—Sinaloa—weakens, the more aggressive, similarly internationally connected cartel Jalisco New Generation is both growing in power and building alliances with the remnants of other groups such as the Tijuana and Juarez cartels and the *Beltrán-Leyva*

Cartel organization to take on Sinaloa, in what could unleash a new major wave of violence in the country.

Colombia

The 2 October rejection by Colombian voters of the peace accords negotiated between their government and the FARC has arguably left the country in a difficult position. Despite government efforts to renegotiate an agreement with the FARC and initiate peace negotiations with the ELN, the impasse puts Colombia in a dangerous situation with respect to both the dynamics of organized crime and the national budget.

On one hand, Colombia's suspension of spraying coca crops with the controversial herbicide glyphosate, in combination with a reluctance to attack FARC encampments while the government works on a new peace accord, create incentives for the expansion of narco-trafficking in the country. In anticipation of "peace," Colombia's budget, already hampered by lost oil export revenues due to low petroleum prices, contemplates significant cuts in military spending. Colombia's security forces find themselves without peace, without the accompanying funds from the United States and Europe to implement new programs associated with "peace," even while facing significant continuing criminal violence.

At the same time, Colombia also faces a significant threat from the unfolding political and economic collapse of, and possible civil war in, neighboring Venezuela which could significantly expand the growing number of Venezuelan refugees in the east of Colombia, already a key operating area for both guerilla organizations such as the FARC and ELN, and criminal bands such as the "Gulf Clan."

Honduras

The geographic position of Honduras has made it a natural transit country for narcotics flowing from source zone countries, such as Colombia, toward the United States and Canada, fueling both corruption that has challenged the coherence of its institutions and gang violence that has made the country one of the most violent in the hemisphere. The government of Juan Orlando Hernandez has made significant progress against narco-trafficking organizations such as the Cachiros and Valle Valles, as well as against gang violence in major urban areas such as Tegucigalpa-Comayagüela and San Pedro Sula. That progress against gangs and narco-traffickers reflects support from the United States, as well as cooperation between Honduras with its neighbors including joint security activities such as the Maya-Chorti task force with Guatemala, Lenca-Sumpul with El Salvador, and Morazán-Sandino with Nicaragua.

Honduras' success also includes innovative new structures such as the inter-agency organization for combatting organized crime FUSINA, as well as the creation of a special new police capability within the armed forces, the Military Police of Public Order (PMOP). Yet FUSINA has now entered its second generation of leadership, and the Mexican cartels are currently building new relationships with the remnants of smuggling organizations, with the rise of new incipient organizations such as the "Cartel of the Pacific."

At the same time, US reluctance to support police structures in the military such as the PMOP, the country's desire to interdict narco-flights, and criticisms of corruption within the Honduran government, have introduced tension into the relationship. It is important that the United States continue to work with Honduras to ensure that it succeeds as both a bulwark against criminal flows through the region, and as a friend of the United States.

Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic has long been a key US economic and political partner in the Caribbean, with significant diasporas in New York and Miami, and a trade relationship strengthened by the country's participation in the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR). The Dominican Republic currently enjoys one of the strongest economies in the region, and one of its most popular presidents, Danilo Medina Sanchez, was just re-elected to a second term in May 2016. The country's sharing of the island of Hispanola with Haiti has historically made it a key part of the international response to ongoing humanitarian crises in the latter, obliging the Dominican Republic to shoulder a disproportionate portion of the spillover effects, including support for Haitian refugees.

Beyond Haiti, as the largest Spanish speaking country in the Caribbean and being physically proximate to Cuba, the Dominican Republic will be one of the actors most affected by the political and economic reintegration of Cuba into the region, and one of the partners best suited to help the United States understand and manage the consequences of that reintegration, particularly in the Caribbean.

The Dominican Republic is also a key node in the movement of drugs and other illicit goods from the north coast of South America toward both the United States and Europe. Across the Caribbean, to the south of the country, the continuing erosion of governance in Venezuela, and the expanding production of cocaine in Colombia (owing to the previously mentioned suspension of actions against the FARC and glyphosate spraying of coca plants) will continue to expand the quantity of cocaine traveling from the Caribbean coast of those two countries to the Dominican Republic, and from there, toward the United States

and Europe. The resources of narco-trafficking organizations passing through the Dominican Republic, and the associated activities of criminal groups there, have had an overwhelming, highly corrupting impact on government institutions.

The United States must redouble its work with the Medina government to fight that narco-trafficking and its corrupting effects, while maintaining and leveraging the role of the Dominican Republic as a key partner in the Caribbean.

Paraguay

Similar to Honduras in Central America, Paraguay is prejudiced by the strategically important location that it occupies along the increasingly important drug routes between South American source zone countries Peru and Bolivia, and growing narcotics markets in southeastern Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Europe. Paraguay is already the source of more than half of the marijuana consumed in South America, with its northeastern departments bordering Brazil such as Concepcion and Amambay supporting a worrisome concentration of activity by narco-traffickers, including powerful Brazilian gangs such as the Primer Capital Command, as well as the incipient guerilla organization the Paraguayan People's Army. In addition, to the south of these drug transit areas, the Paraguayan city of Ciudad del Este, where the country shares a border with both Brazil and Argentina, has historically been an important node of illicit commerce in the region, including a concentration of Lebanese traders who have been linked to Islamic terrorist groups such as Hezbollah.²⁶

Contain soft challengers to the US

Several regimes in the region should be recognized as "soft challengers" to the United States in that they are not overtly working against US security interests, but are pursuing a policy agenda and extra-regional relationships which undermine the US strategic position and its policy objectives in the region. While the United States should not seek to violate the sovereignty of these countries by attempting to change these regimes outside of their constitutions and democratic processes, the United States should nonetheless avoid providing or promising them benefits in the hope of modifying their behavior. Instead, the nation should recognize the intractability of the position of their leaders and should work with other states in the region to contain their influence.

Ecuador

Among the countries of the Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of the Americas (ALBA), Ecuador has arguably made the best use of the revenues accruing to

it from oil exports and loans from the PRC to build infrastructure such as hydro-electric facilities and roads that contribute to the development of the country. Despite being surrounded by the region's two principal sources of cocaine, Colombia and Peru, Ecuador is relatively free of crime and narco-trafficking and has a healthy political culture. Regrettably, despite such positive attributes, Ecuador's President Rafael Correa, harbors deep personally-rooted resentment toward the United States, based in part on the imprisonment of his father there and subsequent death.²⁷

Correa's regime, along with Venezuela, is one of the founding members of the anti-US ALBA alliance, and has consistently worked against US interests in the region through ALBA, CELAC, and other forums. Ecuador, under Correa, has been one of the key regimes bringing the Chinese military equipment and commercial companies into the region. Although Ecuador's purchase of military radars from the Chinese ended negatively with the termination of the contract in May 2012²⁸ in September 2016, the government indicated that its military relationship with the PRC was again proceeding forward, taking delivery on 10,000 AK-47 rifles and 3 patrol boats, the fruits of a previously signed multiyear defense cooperation agreement.²⁹ While the United States should be very cautious regarding interactions with the Correa government, it should avoid excessively polarizing the relationship, in the hope that the country's 2017 presidential elections will bring to power a leader more favorably disposed to working with the United States.

Bolivia

The Bolivian regime of Evo Morales, like the Correa regime in Ecuador, is working actively against US interests in the region, including the pursuit of military relationships with both China and Russia. In July 2017, Bolivia took delivery on the first 27 of 31 Chinese armored vehicles, the latest of military acquisitions from the PRC that occur on an almost annual basis.³⁰ Bolivia has also signed a defense agreement with Russia,³¹ as well as commercial agreements of concern such as the construction of an experimental nuclear reactor near El Alto. Thanks, in part to its legalization of coca growing for traditional uses, in combination with its noncooperation with the United States and international authorities in narco-trafficking, Bolivia has become a major producer and transit zone for drugs in the region, as well as an important location of illegal mining activities, and the laundering of metals and minerals mined elsewhere. Nonetheless, beyond narco-trafficking and ties with extra-hemispheric actors, the influence of Bolivia on the region is limited by its relative isolation in regional politics.

Despite his anti-US posture, President Morales has brought a decade of stability to a country whose complex social and ethnic dynamics previously led to political change on an average of every two years. In December 2015, he lost a referendum seeking to modify the constitution allowing him to run for reelection when his term expires in 2019. It is not clear whether another leader will emerge after Morales with the stature and charisma to avoid Bolivia's return to the political instability that characterized it prior to Morales' presidency.

Nicaragua

The Sandinista government of Daniel Ortega has historically sought to reap the benefits of engagement with the United States, while simultaneously working against it in the region as a member of ALBA, and the principal hub for Russia's reconstruction of a military presence in the region. As a member of CAFTA-DR, Nicaragua enjoys tariff-free access to US markets, yet has also served as Russia's principal partner in the region, including purchasing Russian T-72 tanks and other arms, hosting a regional Russian counternarcotics training center, and giving Russian forces access to Nicaraguan waters and naval bases.³² Nicaragua has also shown disdain for its relationship with the United States by expelling US government personnel in the country openly on official business.³³

Although its pursuit of a transoceanic canal in conjunction with Chinese billionaire Wang Jing is not officially linked with the Chinese government, the project, which has generated expressions of concern, will likely only go forward with Chinese capital and Chinese companies, and if completed, will likely give the PRC a significant source of commercial leverage in the region.³⁴

Suriname

Because of Suriname's use of Dutch as its official language and its relatively isolated position in the northeast part of South America, the nation is often overlooked. Its president, Desi Bouterse, has generally aligned himself with the anti-US ALBA block, although avoiding formal membership therein. His poor relationship with the United States is complicated by his implication in the murder of a political opponent, although his regime is arguably even more hostile to the Netherlands, the nation's former colonial master.

Under Bouterse and his predecessors, the PRC has significantly expanded its commercial presence in Suriname, as well as its work with the Surinamese military.³⁵ The country has also raised concern due to transnational organized crime, including human trafficking, in which its noncooperation with international law enforcement has earned it a designation by the United States State Department of Tier III, the lowest that it gives.³⁶

Prepare for critical events that may occur. While there are always a range of significant potential events that would impact the security environment of Latin America and the Caribbean, there is at least one event which is both sufficiently likely and significantly impactful, that the United States should take particular measures to anticipate—the violent collapse of Venezuela.

Venezuela

The gross economic mismanagement of Venezuela by the “Bolivarian Socialist” government of Nicolás Maduro has effectively destroyed both the ability of the country to produce foodstuffs and other basic goods to fill the needs of its people, and the capacity of its national oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela* (PdVSA) to produce and sell oil to buy those goods from abroad while servicing its accumulated debt.³⁷ The increase in the international oil price in the second half of 2016, combined with PdVSA’s restructuring of a portion of its commercial debt, allowed Venezuela to make it through the end of the calendar year without defaulting and producing a government fiscal crisis,³⁸ but as the country’s foreign currency reserves go to zero, it is doubtful that it will be able to continue to both pay its bills and import sufficient food to feed its people through 2017.

The involvement of the military in the narco-trafficking and other criminal activities rampant in the country arguably make senior military leaders reluctant to move against the Maduro government for its abandonment of the constitutional order, lest a new government come to power willing to prosecute them, or extradite them to the United States for their role in those activities.³⁹

Nonetheless, the actions of Maduro-aligned government organizations in October 2016 to suspend the constitutionally-permitted recall referendum and threaten to jail the leaders of the opposition-led Congress effectively closes one of the few constitutional avenues remaining in the country for removing the Maduro leadership and averting the economic collapse of the country.⁴⁰

The United States should be prepared for the possibility of the breakdown of order, to include the possible splintering of the armed forces and a complex struggle between armed groups including the “*collectivos*” (armed local proregime groups), Venezuela’s national guard, and criminal groups, among others. Such a breakdown could lead to a million or more refugees, principally moving west into the plains of Colombia in an area already dominated by rebel groups and criminal bands. Such a collapse would also impact Venezuela’s other neighbors, including the island nation of Trinidad and Tobago, separated from Venezuela by only a few miles of water,⁴¹ as well as Guyana,⁴² whose border with Venezuela in the Essequibo region is less connected by roads, but currently disputed by the Venezuelan government.

Shape the Rules of the Game

In a speech before the Organization of American States in November 2013, then-US Secretary of State John Kerry declared, for those who believed that the United States desired to keep extra-hemispheric actors out of the region, that the era of the 1823 “Monroe Doctrine” which embodied such a posture, was officially over.⁴³ Secretary Kerry’s declaration was not so much a policy choice as a recognition that, in the era of increasing global interconnectedness through the flows of goods, money, people, and information, it was neither practical, nor politically feasible to block relationships between states of the Western Hemisphere and others outside the region. In the present “post-Monroe Doctrine” era, it is not enough for US policymakers to simply work to strengthen the friendships, trust and economic relationships with individual countries in the region (vice ties between those countries and extra-hemispheric actors whose pursuits may be less positive for the interests of the region). They also must endeavor to shape the rules of the game, ensure that the competition of commerce and ideas in the region takes place on a level playing field, with a framework in which the United States has a seat at the table, where values that it believes important such as democracy, human rights, free trade and markets, and the rule of law, have the opportunity to prosper.

Three areas that US policymakers should focus on in this regard are: (1) ensuring the viability of subregional organizations generally aligned with the aforementioned principles, such as the Pacific Alliance, (2) working to ensure the health of the inter-American system as the overarching multilateral framework for working together in the Americas, and (3) ensuring strong, rules-based trade regimes linking the Americas to the rest of the world, such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the TTIP.

Supporting the Right Subregional Organizations

The Pacific Alliance is arguably at a critical moment, with the stalling of progress on deepening mechanisms of collaboration, as well as the loss of momentum in efforts to expand the organization to include Costa Rica and Panama. Each of its core members are politically distracted by different internal concerns, including continuing cartel violence in Mexico as the Peña Nieto sexenio (term in office) approaches its end, attempts to rescue the peace process with FARC rebels in Colombia, a change of government in Peru, and a second Michelle Bachelet administration in Chile tied to a far more left-of-center political coalition.

On the other hand, ALBA is arguably also at an important moment, with the political and economic implosion of its founding member and key benefactor,

Venezuela, some political moderation by Cuba as it seeks to convince the United States to drop sanctions against it, and the uncertain political future of member-states Ecuador and Bolivia when the charismatic leftist leaders of both step down at the end of their terms. While the United States should not oppose ALBA through military force, it should use all indirect political and economic levers at its disposal to contain the advance of the organization.

With respect to the Inter-American system, while there is certainly room for improvement in the functioning of the bureaucracy of the Organization of American States (OAS), it is in the interest of the United States that the OAS, rather than alternatives that exclude the United States such as UNASUR and CELAC, are the multilateral mechanisms of choice for addressing the challenges of the region.

To do so, the United States must fully fund and take a more active role in associated organizations such as the Conference of American Armies, the Inter-American Defense College, the Central American Integration System, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the Inter-American Court on Human Rights, among others, to ensure that these institutions are relevant to the problems of the region. The United States must also be prepared to become more active in reforming the OAS bureaucracy where necessary, lead by example by submitting to its jurisdiction where appropriate, and use US economic and political weight to overcome deliberate attempts by member states to paralyze the institution. It must also help the organization to make bold, if difficult decisions, consistent with its principles, such as invoking the Inter-American Democratic Charter to exclude Venezuela, if the review of the situation shows that such action is merited. Finally, the United States must work to consummate the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership to ensure that both transatlantic and trans-Pacific trade are conducted in a rules-based free trade environment with transparency, protection for intellectual property, and efficient legal recourse for the resolution of disputes.

Despite the opposition to the TPP while running for the presidency, the Trump administration should recognize the strategic importance of TPP, not just from the perspective of US companies or workers, but also based on the importance of ensuring a framework in which the United States, China, and other states can interact economically on a level playing field, reaping the benefits of their efforts, innovations, and national policies, without the risk of predatory states using their size and ability to coordinate their public and private sector activities, will force agreements unduly favorable to their companies, or oblige their partners to expose intellectual property as a condition for market access.⁴⁴

Be attentive to connections between theaters

US planners in Latin America and the Caribbean must be attentive to and anticipate how events in other parts of the world may affect their activities in the region, while their US government counterparts focused on other parts of the world should become more attentive to how their own activities and responsibilities may be impacted by events in Latin America and the Caribbean.

As an example, US Northern Command and US Southern Command should be prepared for how a worsening conflict between Russia and the United States and Europe in Syria, the Ukraine or other parts of Russia's near abroad, may precipitate Russian initiatives in Latin America with willing partners such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, and possibly with other anti-US regimes such as Bolivia and Ecuador. In a similar fashion, the two commands should be attentive to how Iran's new resources and boldness in the Middle East, working in Lebanon and Syria with groups such as Hezbollah, could lead to new Iranian initiatives with Hezbollah in Latin America and the Caribbean. Both commands should also be attentive to how growing Russia-Chinese cooperation in other parts of the world such as through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, or alignment of policy positions in the Middle East or the South and East China Seas, could spill over into commercial, political, or other forms of cooperation between the PRC and Russia in Latin America and the Caribbean. Reciprocally, US combatant commands outside the Western Hemisphere, such as US Central Command, US Africa Command, or US Pacific Command, should not assume that American deployment to their regions during the preparation for a conflict, or sustainment from the Western Hemisphere during such a conflict, will not be challenged by an adversary with global reach such as the PRC, Russia, or even Iran. US planners in these regions should anticipate that an adversary will attempt to obstruct coalition formation in the weeks or months leading up to such a conflict, as well as interfering (covertly or overtly) with deployment and sustainment, and may even seek to divert US forces away from the primary theater of conflict on which they are focused by attacking the US homeland or other strategic targets from, and in, the Western Hemisphere.⁴⁵

Be attentive to perceptions of US power and moral authority globally

Finally, US policymakers in the region must consider how perceptions of US domestic politics, including residual effects of the 2016 presidential election, continue to shape the willingness of actors in the region and beyond to work with the United States and may incite others to expand their challenges to US power. Global perceptions arising from the allegations of impropriety surrounding the

election arguably has advanced global perceptions that US politics are no less corrupt and chaotic than their own. Such perceptions, and the discourse of the new administration, even when not focused on Latin America, are likely to affect the willingness of elected leaders in the region to support the United States, as well as, whether in the future, candidates or coalitions backing Western-style democracy, free markets and human rights prevail in the region. Such negative perceptions of the United States may also contribute to recruitment of terrorists from within radicalized communities in the region, Islamic or otherwise. In addition, the perception of sustained US weakness, chaos, or distraction from the region may also lead extra-hemispheric actors to test how far they can pursue their own initiatives in the region, and may induce them to act more boldly. Such possible dynamics make imperative immediate and effective strategic communication by the new Trump administration, both to heal the scars left by the electoral campaign, and to reinforce the positive image to the world regarding what the United States stands for.

Conclusion

The absence of an immediate threat to US national security from a peer competitor or other existential threat in Latin America and the Caribbean does not make the region any less important to the United States. The time for the nation to act, shape the strategic environment of the region is now, lessen the likelihood that emergent conditions, or deliberate acts by those opposed to the United States, could give rise to a crisis in the region that draws the nation away from other aspects of its global engagement.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States has the important advantage of geographic proximity, as well as relative familiarity with the region's language and culture that helps it to engage effectively with the region, despite the burden of lingering negative feelings in some parts of the region arising from perceptions regarding how the United States has related to it in the past. In commercial engagement, with the region, the ability of the US government and companies to engage effectively are supported by already substantial trade and investment integration with the region through NAFTA, CAFTA-DR, and other free trade structures, compliments the large US population from the region and cities such as Miami which are practically integrated into the commercial structures of the region itself. In the military realm, there is no other region in the world in which a greater portion of men and women of the US armed forces who have family ties to the region and speak its languages as their native tongue, or that of their parents.

Despite such advantages, it is not sufficient for the United States to address its challenges in the region by merely adding money to regional programs administered by the US Department of State and Department of Defense. The United States must also think strategically regarding the manner in which it can most effectively apply its resources and influence.

This paper does not claim to offer the definitive answer regarding what the elements of that strategy should be. But it does seek to provoke a debate regarding how the United States can most effectively engage with the region. As noted at the outset of this article, no other region of the world more directly affects prosperity and security of the United States. It is time to consider how to engage with Latin America and the Caribbean more effectively, for both the United States, and those partner nations and the family with whom we share the region.

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