

An important focus of the SCUSA roundtable on Latin America will be an assessment of the strength and character of American power and authority in region. Is US influence in decline, and if so, what steps might Washington take to reverse the trend? How might the United States counter the populist slide in Mexico and Brazil and shore up democratic norms in the region? How should the United States address the surge of left-wing politics in Chile, Peru, and Colombia and the turn to authoritarian rule in Venezuela and Nicaragua? Can the United States help break the cycle of economic stagnation, socio-economic inequality, and political polarization that afflicts much of the region and fuels political instability?

Latin America and the United States – Perspectives, History, and Challenges

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Introduction

How can we evaluate the relationship between the United States and the region of Latin America? The United States has long viewed itself as a leader of “The Americas,” and certainly in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War was positioned to play a hegemonic role in the Western Hemisphere. Even prior to this, the Monroe Doctrine isolated Latin America from competing influences and provided a very specific perspective for the United States on what Latin America was (a space under US influence), and what it was not (a peer). The lived experience of US-Latin American relations can be easily traced to these ideas, in which the United States has felt both the need and the right to intervene in the region, as well as the autonomy to choose the conditions and style of execution for those interventions. The US has devoted less attention to the perspective of Latin American states, both as a collectivity and as separate entities. As a result, US interventions and Washington’s overall approach to Latin America has often provoked antagonism and mistrust rather than improved relations and cooperation.¹ The reality of US-Latin American relations lies in the liminal space between US and Latin American perspectives. They are neither as positive as US foreign policy experts might prefer, nor as negative as Global South or postmodernist scholars might indicate. Navigating the grayness of these relations is not easy, but understanding the salient differences between divergent perspectives and the history of encounters between the US and Latin America can provide critical insights in understanding their shared challenges.

In this overview, we will discuss how the two broad domains of political culture and political economy serve as important frames for articulating a distinctively Latin American perspective, then describe some of the key historical events of US-Latin American relations, while finally surveying contemporary challenges circumscribed by those relations. Better engagement with and understanding of Latin America is critical to enabling success for US foreign policy. Accurate information and unbiased assessments are of course necessary for successful strategy. Unfortunately, many US leaders and experts have only weak, superficial, or deeply flawed understandings of Latin American states and the region as a whole. For the last

¹ Friedman, Max Paul, and Tom Long. “Soft Balancing in the Americas: Latin American Opposition to U.S. Intervention, 1898–1936.” *International security* 40, no. 1 (2015): 120–156.

century and more, the United States' gaze has been first on Europe, then on Asia and the Middle East: this set of priorities drives resources, time, talent, and strategic direction away from other spaces. Latin America is a functional *other* for the United States, and has been from the colonial period to the contemporary one. By understanding unique contexts of political culture, society, and political economy, as well as the impact on Latin America of US interventions, US analysts can be better armed to articulate effective foreign policy solutions and avoid negative outcomes.

Political Culture and Society

The very term Latin America is indicative of a cultural reality which differs in an essential way from the United States. Its creation can be traced both to internal and external voices as a way to bundle the regions of Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. The Caribbean states in some cases are still segregated (LAC: Latin American and Caribbean), but remain a functional fit given the intentions of consolidating the states under the term *Latin*.² Spanish, Portuguese, and French colonial influences all could find space under this term, and importantly separate themselves from the colonial undertakings and identity of Great Britain and the English-speaking Anglo-Saxons. While the term may have originated as a means to conceptualize a larger political community, as time passed, its use also began to evoke a kind of Orientalist application by the United States. In being *Latin*, these regions and their peoples became foreign, potentially exotic, darker in skin color, Catholic (not Protestant), and critically *other* from the America of the United States. The region thus became a broad out-group to the rising United States of the 1800s, a dynamic exacerbated by real and perceived differences in language and geography. Ultimately, Latin America can be understood as a useful term, but one which can obscure similarities between it and the United States while highlighting differences. These differences are real, though, and must be accurately understood in order to facilitate a nuanced analysis of US-Latin American relations.

Precolonial Empire and Colonial Norms

Political culture and norms comprise one of the starker divides between the United States and Latin America. Latin America has consistently valued strong executives, political roles for the military, informal institutions, and elite bargaining, while the United States has held very different ideas about these behaviors. It can be tempting for US scholars to view these differences under a kind of stage theory of political development: Latin America is still working its way towards an inevitable (and US) modern political culture. In fact, these seemingly regressive or deficient norms are deeply-seated, and held as legitimate in their own right within Latin American states. We can find norms of political culture from contemporary Latin America as far back as the great precolonial empires, and certainly through both the colonial and independence periods. The Aztec, Mayans, and Incas serve as the initial model of successful politics in Latin America, success being measured in terms of power, stability, and reach. Only technological and immunological disadvantages facilitated their fall, but the system of politics very much endured as the colonizers both displaced the people and accommodated the structures of power. Centralized authority was essential to empire, but the geographic span and ruggedness

² Wiarda, Howard J. *The Soul of Latin America the Cultural and Political Tradition*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001.

of terrain required negotiated partnerships between state and non-state actors to facilitate cooperation.³

As the colonial powers subverted and then replaced the precolonial empires, central authority and negotiated partnerships would remain as valued logics. Introduced to the system were a new array of elites (religious, military, commercial, European) which collectively possessed power as well as a preference for a stronger juxtaposition of the military and politics. Political leaders often held military roles, and the hierarchical distribution of power from the Spanish and Portuguese monarchs necessitated a joint political-military set of duties for the colonial representatives of the crown.⁴ Ultimately, Latin America found a synthesis of precolonial and colonial politics which yielded many of the norms still observable today. Their ability to endure past colonialism, though, provokes some scrutiny. The colonies of the United States, for example, in many ways specifically targeted the political culture of Great Britain as they engaged in their independence struggle, and other colonies might reasonably be expected to similarly distance themselves from the power structures of their colonizers. Here we find a critical difference between Latin America and the United States in their respective struggles for independence.

Independence: Militaries and Executives

In 1808, the two monarchs of Latin America found themselves removed from power by Napoleon, triggering a sovereignty crisis within Latin American colonies and facilitating the independence of the eventual Latin American states. The independence struggle in Latin America had some stark differences between it and the one in the United States several decades prior. First, it was initiated from external rather than internal agency, and lacked the planning and strategy which accompanied US independence. Second, the practitioners of independence in Latin America had strong incentives to maintain rather than alter the extant systems of power. Third, the key leaders of independence in Latin America were frequently military leaders acting through power and influence rather than civilian political leaders acting through deliberation.⁵

No one better captures the character and identity of Latin American independence than Simon Bolivar, who today is still held up as preeminent within the pantheon of great Latin American leaders. Two contemporary states still officially associate themselves with his name: Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela) and Bolivia (an adaptation of the original Republic of Bolivar). Considered the *Liberator of America*, Bolivar was an admirer of the US revolution as well as suspicious of its utility as a model within Latin America. Bolivar, both as a general and as a member of the political elite, believed deeply that the kind of democratic system used in the United States was incompatible with the society and context of Latin America. He believed that liberty must be sacrificed for security, and that a strong, central authority would be needed to ensure stability for the newly independent states of Latin America. His ideas were

³ Garcia-Zamor, Jean-Claude. "Latin American Ancient Civilizations and their Administrative Legacies." *Public Administration Quarterly* 27, no. 1/2 (2003)

⁴ Garrido, Francisco, and Diego Salazar. "Imperial Expansion and Local Agency: A Case Study of Labor Organization Under Inca Rule." *American anthropologist* 119.4 (2017)

⁵ Stern, Steve J. "Paradigms of Conquest: History, Historiography, and Politics." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 24 (1992)

shared by other liberators (also generals): Jose de San Martin (Argentina) and Bernardo O'Higgins (Chile). Collectively, South America's new states would very much find themselves modeling the Bolivarian ideal, in which security was privileged over liberty, and the executive was privileged over the legislature.⁶ To the north in Mexico, a slightly different origin reached a similar destination, as a grassroots insurgency was eventually transformed into a movement led by another general and member of the *Iturbide*.

Identity: Castes, Colors, and Classes

While the leaders and elites of Latin America today largely create and maintain variants of these antecedent systems of power and their norms, another salient element of political society plays an important role in the preservation of those norms: identity. Although social stratification, a common and important element of political culture, is far more complex in Latin American than it is in the United States, both systems possess some similarities. While precolonial stratification can be identified, it is really the colonial moment which has the most influence on historic and contemporary classifications of Latin American peoples. A functional caste system existed within the colonies: at the top were *penisnulares* (Europeans), followed by *criollos* (born in the Americas, but of clear European descent), then *mestizos* (mixed European and indigenous heritage), and then *indios* (indigenous). Sometimes adjacent to or ahead of *indios* were *mulattos* (mixed African and European), while at the bottom were *negros* (African heritage). Although the amount of hybridity present in the system was enabled by a more progressive approach to intermarriage, discriminatory social and legal realities, as well as the colored nature of the caste system, produced the kind of negative outcomes observable in other colonial places (e.g., the United States and inequality between Europeans, indigenous, and African peoples).⁷

The independence movement, largely led by Criollos, in many cases sought to end formal distinctions between the castes, and the emerging states typically did not include the caste system as a feature. Yet, the imbalance of power and privilege across the demographic groups would itself reproduce the same negative outcomes over time, and today the class inequality of Latin America is both extant, but also much more complex and varied than what exists in the United States. Not only do race and ethnicity play a large role in the determination of social status and political power; each Latin American state has a distinctive demographic makeup that can either increase or decrease the political salience of identity groups. These are strong drivers of the domestic political interests and policy preferences of different Latin American states, but they remain notoriously difficult for casual US observers to identify or understand.⁸

⁶ Ortega, Francisco A. "The Conceptual History of Independence and the Colonial Question in Spanish America." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 79, no. 1 (2018)

⁷ Canache, Damarys, Matthew Hayes, Jeffery J. Mondak, and Mitchell A. Seligson. "Determinants of Perceived Skin-Color Discrimination in Latin America." *The Journal of politics* 76, no. 2 (2014)

⁸ Layton, Matthew L., and Amy Erica Smith. "Is It Race, Class, or Gender? The Sources of Perceived Discrimination in Brazil." *Latin American politics and society* 59, no. 1 (2017)

Political Economy: Production, Trade, and Ideology

One of the most common divisions between the US and Latin American states relates to political economy. The United States has a deeply rooted preference for free and open markets internationally, traceable more recently to the end of WWII and Bretton Woods Agreement of 1944. Understanding itself as the responsible agent for maintaining that system, the United States has often asserted its power and influence in Latin America when it perceives obstacles to or the degradation of the free trade system. Latin American states, however, certainly do not share the same feeling of investment in this system, and frequently find cause to criticize its dynamics and effects⁹. From a US perspective, free trade is best not only for the US, but for all states. Economists generally concur that economic growth is best achieved with free and open markets, but the subjective observation by states regarding the specific effects of this system vary significantly. Explaining Latin American preferences for strategies other than open markets requires an understanding of that subjective observation.

Precolonial Sustainment to Colonial Extraction

Political economy strategies are dependent not only on the preferences of the people and state, but also on the economic activities occurring within the state. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, Latin American political institutions were designed to provide revenue to the state, which then could maintain the stability of the domestic system – international trade was neither a common reality nor a priority. This changed dramatically in the colonial period. Spain and Portugal set themselves up for resource extraction and international trade, attracted to Latin America expressly because of the important natural resources it contained. This critically shaped how the colonizing states developed their colonial political institutions,¹⁰ which were designed to support the economic goals of Spain and Portugal almost exclusively. By the time of independence, Latin America was fully focused on primary economic sector activities and the international trade which was increasingly dependent on Latin American production. In areas with substantial mineral wealth, states prioritized mining activity, maintaining a deep labor pool of *indios* and *mulattos* to service that activity. In areas with agricultural potential, *indios* were joined by *negros*, and the transatlantic slave trade from Africa had the bulk of its activity oriented towards Latin American agriculture. Over 90% of Africans enslaved and trafficked to the Americas were brought to Latin America, and the last state to abolish slavery (in the Americas) would be Brazil, in 1888.¹¹

Exporting primary resources would remain a critical element of Latin American economies, and political economic strategies would be forced to contend with this reality. As international trade flows grew imbalanced, with Latin American states exporting cheaper, raw resources while increasingly importing more expensive manufactured goods, debt traps and other consequences of economic under-diversification were increasingly common in regional states.

⁹ Higginbottom, Andy. “The Political Economy of Foreign Investment in Latin America: Dependency Revisited.” *Latin American perspectives* 40, no. 3 (2013)

¹⁰ Frankema, Ewout. “The Colonial Roots of Land Inequality: Geography, Factor Endowments, or Institutions?” *The Economic history review* 63, no. 2 (2010): 418–451

¹¹ Klein, Herbert S., and Ben Vinson. *African Slavery in Latin America and the Caribbean*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Because commodities traders occupied critical roles in managing trade flows and valuations, producers of raw resources rarely enjoyed leverage or agency in setting prices, and both the state and its citizens perceived that the system disadvantaged them in an essential way.¹² Dependency theory arose under these conditions, and some of its principal architects were themselves Latin Americans (e.g., Raul Prebisch) working to explain the comparative lack of development in their region. These scholars and others recommended Latin American states employ protectionist policies – which stood in opposition to the recommendations being made in North America.¹³

Washington Consensus: SAPs and Comparative Losses

Against Latin America's increasing perception of comparative disadvantage and losses during the 20th century, the United States was firmly committed to free and open international markets, hallmark elements of the liberal international order it endeavored to develop and maintain in the aftermath of WWII. The three Bretton Woods institutions (in contemporary form, the WTO, IMF, and World Bank) were heavily influenced by the United States and its own economic organizations (Department of Treasury, Federal Reserve) and became action arms for the promulgation of neoliberalist economic policies. While these institutions did not possess coercive capacities, their alignment with US policies and their role in maintaining international trade, currency stability, and economic development allowed them to become an important vector for US influence. As Latin American (and other) developing states encountered economic crises and unsustainable debts, Washington and its partnered organizations stood ready to support their recovery, but under specific conditions. Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) became a useful tool to influence Latin American states to adopt political economic policies that would increase their participation in the open international trade regime preferred by the US. The Washington Consensus found it had the power to incrementally remake Latin American states according to its preferences via SAPs. Not surprisingly, Washington made frequent use of this tool.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the specific policy changes mandated by the SAPs produced two negative, important outcomes: a perceived violation or degradation of national sovereignty in Latin America, and the re-exposure of the region to the often injurious vagaries of the global economy.¹⁵

Alternate Strategies: Socialism, Communism

As Latin America struggled with internal and external economic and political challenges, many states and citizens perceived that the damaging effects of the Washington consensus, neoliberal trade, and open global markets demanded consideration of alternate strategies. Throughout the last half of the 20th century, multiple alternative strategies were proposed. Beyond dependency theory and recommendations for protectionism, more extreme policy

¹² Niblett, Michael. "The 'Catastrophic Consciousness of Backwardness': Culture and Dependency Theory in Latin America and the Caribbean." *New formations* 103, no. 103 (2021): 113–133.

¹³ Gabay, Ruth Eliana. "Re-Visiting to Raul Prebisch and the Role of the CEPAL in the Field of the Latin-American Social Sciences." *Iconos : publicación de FLACSO-Ecuador*, no. 31 (2008): 103–113.

¹⁴ Goldfajn, Ilan, Lorenza Martínez, and Rodrigo O. Valdés. "Washington Consensus in Latin America: From Raw Model to Straw Man." *The Journal of economic perspectives* 35, no. 3 (2021): 109–132.

¹⁵ Berr, Eric, and François Combarrous. "The False Promises of the (second) Washington Consensus: Evidence from Latin America and the Caribbean (1990-2003)." *Revista de economía política* 27, no. 4 (2007): 525–545.

proposals emerged and found willing audiences.¹⁶ Socialism and communism both found appeal by landless laborers who could clearly point out inadequacies in the distribution of wealth and property. Growing urban classes and elites, for whom free markets were often beneficial, remained supportive of the Washington consensus.¹⁷ Economic and class divisions became organizing principles of collective action demands regarding political economy and policy. Underlying these internal motivations was a constant but at times quiet perception that the neoliberal system was a foreign one, lacking in both authenticity and utility to Latin American society. The overt and covert US interventions designed to reinforce neoliberal policies would exacerbate that preference and provoke concern about more than neoliberalism: the United States itself.¹⁸

History of US-Latin American Relations

While the Monroe doctrine was declared in 1823, it would be many more years before the United States had truly substantial relations with Latin America. With the important exception of Mexico due to proximity (Pancho Villa, Texan Independence, Gadsden Purchase, etc.), the United States was concerned principally with internal expansion and stability throughout most of the 19th century. Towards the turn of the century, the United States would find itself in dramatically different position in terms of power, and its perception of external interests would expand to include the whole of the Americas. Once the 20th century began, the United States would find itself establishing hegemonic influence over much of Latin America and developing a precedent of unilateral interventionism in the region which only began to wane at the very end of the century.

US Hegemonic Growth: Spanish-American War, Panama Canal, Banana Republics

The Spanish-American War most explicitly began the modern narrative of US-Latin American relations. While it did not directly involve much of Latin America, the outcome of the war included a US colonial presence in the region, an increased awareness that the US was the dominant power in the region, and a perceived need to increase effective control over Atlantic-Pacific trade and the waters over which that occurred. Manifest destiny would be replaced with something grander in scale, and with victory over the Spanish, US hegemony appeared inevitable. US leadership in Latin America would soon find an opportunity to prove itself with the Panama Canal Project. An admitted failure by the French, the project was appropriated by the United States, which saw enormous potential both economically and militarily. The United States, under the leadership of one of the popular heroes of the Spanish-American War, Teddy Roosevelt, supported Panamanian separatists with US naval power, and upon recognizing the new state, immediately signed preferential terms for a US-developed and managed canal across it. The violation of Colombia sovereignty accompanying a US effort to enhance international

¹⁶ Antunes, Ricardo, and Amy Shimshon-Santo. "Socialism and the Latin American Labor Movement: Points for Discussion." *Latin American perspectives* 25, no. 6 (1998): 26–27.

¹⁷ Horton, Lynn R. "From Collectivism to Capitalism: Neoliberalism and Rural Mobilization in Nicaragua." *Latin American politics and society* 55, no. 1 (2013): 119–140.

¹⁸ Friedman, Max Paul. "Retiring the Puppets, Bringing Latin America Back In: Recent Scholarship on United States–Latin American Relations." *Diplomatic history* 27, no. 5 (2003): 621–636.

trade and US power would set a precedent in US-Latin American relations.¹⁹ Even as conditions in Panama were being set, the US Government would tolerate the capture of both Guatemala and Honduras by corporate actors creating the notorious Banana republic period in Central America.

Benign or Malign Neglect: World Wars and US Interests

During the World Wars, the United States spent the bulk of its strategic time and energy on European and Asian challenges. Latin America increasingly became a means to other ends, in which the US preferred states and leaders who maintained amenability to US interests but had no specific designs in the region.²⁰ This neglect was both benign and malign for Latin American states. While the US had reduced its interventionism and intrusive behaviors, it had also relegated Latin American states to comparative unimportance. US foreign policy practitioners systematized this relegation over time, and as WWII ended, the US was primed for a utilitarian logic with Latin American states.

Cold War: Free Markets over Democracy

The Cold War period is one in which scholars of US-European relations might find the United States as a noble, self-sacrificing, and values-based actor desperately trying to create liberty for the peoples subjugated by the Soviet Union. In Latin America, however, the activities of the United States took on much darker undertones, and the United States was perceived as imperialist, aggressive, and supporter of dictators (unless they were Communist).²¹ Part of the variance between the US' behaviors and perceptions in Europe and Latin America can be explained by the changed international priorities of the United States, in which the USSR and European theater was the true end of US foreign policy, whereas Latin America was an intermediate space and a means only to further the fight against the Soviet Union.²² The events surrounding the Chilean Coup in 1973 are emblematic of this discordant US behavior during the Cold War. Three years prior, Salvador Allende, a moderate Socialist, won the Presidency in a run-off election with support from Chilean Communists. His policy platform included clear socialist preferences, and he moved to nationalize copper and other industries, while openly pushing back against the influence of the US and the institutions established at Bretton Woods. The United States very quickly began to mobilize opposition to the democratically elected leader, providing substantial resources to opposition media and politicians. Within the bipolar system of the Cold War, Allende found a potential ally to offset these measures in the Soviet Union. Soviet aid exacerbated the US perception of Chilean politics, to the extent that the US found itself predisposed to regime change. On September 11th, 1973, a military junta conducted a coup under the assumption of US support, and while evidence regarding US complicity is still unsettled, the preference of the US against Allende and his socialist policies was so strong as to

¹⁹ Carse, Ashley. *Beyond the Big Ditch: Politics, Ecology, and Infrastructure at the Panama Canal*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2014.

²⁰ Chavez, Tizoc. "'The One Bright Spot': Presidential Personal Diplomacy and the Good Neighbor Policy." *Presidential studies quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2021): 290–326.

²¹ Sewell, Bevan. *US and Latin America: Eisenhower, Kennedy and Economic Diplomacy in the Cold War*. Vol. 7. I. B. Tauris, 2015.

²² Klein, Herbert S., and Francisco Vidal Luna. *Brazil, 1964-1985 : the Military Regimes of Latin America in the Cold War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.

convince the participants of the coup that the US was either supporting or directing it clandestinely.

After the coup, as General Pinochet established himself as a dictator over Chile, he brought in economists from the University of Chicago – students of Milton Friedman and advocates for the kind of neoliberalist economic approach promulgated by the Washington Consensus. In the case of Chile, the US thus found itself opposing a democratic regime and supporting a dictatorship that frequently violated human rights, all in service to global competition against Communism.²³ Fighting communism and maintaining free markets would become the dominant concerns for the US in Latin America, not the strong advocacy of democratic values. Other states in the region would see outcomes broadly similar to that of Chile. In sum, Latin America during the Cold War was confronted with the reality that the US would likely extend its assistance and good will to those regimes and elites which supported US interests while it remained either luke-warm or hostile to those countries committed to authentic national independence.

Contemporary Challenges

The missing or misunderstood Latin American perspective continues to frustrate US foreign policy. The solutions to many of the challenges to US critical interests in the region logically require Latin American involvement; America's low level of success in navigating these challenges speaks to a need for Washington to better understand the often diverse viewpoints of Latin America and take greater care in addressing the concerns and aspirations of the region. Quite simply, the shortfall of American influence in the region is largely a self-inflicted wound, based on America's flawed relationship with Latin American states and its inability to understand those states' perspectives. The War on Drugs and migration inflows both speak to this problem, while losses in great power competition and environmental degradation have causes more external to the United States.

War on Drugs: US Consumers, Latin American Producers, Logistics Cartels

A great deal has been written and said about the US War on Drugs. Regardless of one's perception of the practical utility and ethical soundness of the policy, what is clear is that the war has not produced many tangible successes but has produced instead significant unintended and negative effects.²⁴ The US had previously attempted a prohibition regime in the first half of the 20th century and discovered that open market policies coupled with the prohibition of consumables lead to no important changes in consumption, but rather enabled the capture of that now illicit market by criminal actors. As Al Capone and others in organized crime profited from trafficking alcohol in the 1920s, so too would cartels profit from trafficking narcotics in the 1960s and beyond. US policy in the War on Drugs has seen little success in shifting the core market components of supply and demand but has created massive economic opportunities for those who have the ability to connect supply with demand. The evolution of drug cartels in Latin

²³ Lockhart, James. *Chile, the CIA and the Cold War: a Transatlantic Perspective*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021.

²⁴ Jones, Hal. "The Limits of Pressure: US Policy Failures in the International War on Drugs." *Harvard international review* 20, no. 2 (1998): 38–41.

America has resulted in degraded security conditions and corruption in the region – problems which themselves become vectors for US intervention.²⁵ While the US increasingly demands security responses by Latin American states, it simultaneously fails to significantly check the demand in the US for illicit drugs or the flow of weapons from the US into the hands of non-state actors in Latin America.

Great Power Competition: BRICS, Belt and Road, Costs of US Support

In the aftermath of September 11th, 2001, the United States found its foreign policy effectively hijacked by international terrorism. Similar to the US posture toward the region during the World Wars of the 20th century, US involvement in Latin America waned in the early 2000s, except when narcotics traffickers could be connected to terrorism. Unfortunately, this shift in focus helped distract the US from its newfound emphasis (in the 1990s) on the promotion of democratic values after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissipation of the global communist threat.

The US Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) presented an opportunity for China to compete for influence in a region which offered both important resources as well as a market for manufactured goods. As a fellow developing but strong state, China enjoyed an advantageous position within Latin America – not so strong as to create a high level of threat perception, but strong enough to offer benefits similar to those of the local hegemon, the United States.²⁶ The BRICS coalition had already brought China and Brazil together in a strategic sense, and as the 2000s progressed, China found Latin America to be fertile ground for its Belt and Road Initiative. Offers of foreign aid and infrastructure development was not a new opportunity for Latin American states, but receiving them without SAPs or similar conditions was. China's lack of concern about political economy strategies or regime types played to its advantage, and it found multiple inroads to build influence in Latin America.²⁷ As the US began to grow aware of this displacement of its own influence, it discovered limitations to its ability to regenerate influence in the region. The negative history of US intervention, both real and imagined, energized local politics against overt cooperation with the United States particularly as the more developed states in the region viewed themselves as fully capable and autonomous actors, hesitant to adopt policies which might create the perception of subservience to the US in the eyes of domestic audiences.

Migration: Causes, Effects, Domestic Politics, and Values

In refusing US aid or support, adopting inefficient strategies of economic development, or enabling autocrats who violate human rights, Latin American states often fail to provide good governance, thereby generating migration outflows to the comparatively stable and successful United States. For decades, Washington fitfully identifies the control of immigration as a top US

²⁵ Mercille, Julien. "Violent Narco-Cartels or US Hegemony? The Political Economy of the 'War on Drugs' in Mexico." *Third world quarterly* 32, no. 9 (2011): 1637–1653.

²⁶ Robertson, Raymond. "Red Is the New Green: The Rise of China's Influence in Latin America." *Latin American research review* 54, no. 3 (2019): 763–771.

²⁷ Roby, Varun. "China's Growing Influence in Latin America." *The American journal of economics and sociology* 79, no. 1 (2020): 233–244.

priority, and for decades, it has not been controlled.²⁸ The causal influences for migration inflows and outflows vary significantly. Social, economic, political, and environmental “push” and “pull” factors play critical roles in forcing or luring people from one state to another. While some factors are not easily controlled, others can be, potentially. The US strategy has frequently been to address the symptoms rather than causes, with increased resourcing to border security and immigration enforcement as the simplest and most direct responses.²⁹ Addressing the low levels of personal security, political stability, and economic opportunity of Latin American states – the causal variables of much migration activity – is rarely a feature of US policy, except in the most indirect and cost-neutral ways. Clearly, such developmental problems are beyond the ability of the US to solve on its own, even if it wished to invade and overthrow poorly performing governments. Yet the strategies the US adopts do often fail to consider the causal elements of migration. More importantly, the US also often fails to examine its own role in enabling the migration crisis.³⁰

Evaluating US Influence

How can we evaluate the level of US influence in Latin America? This brief survey has attempted to highlight key variables that affect relations between Latin America and the US, including the failure of the US to fully appreciate Latin American perspectives. An appreciation of the region’s institutional and cultural legacies is vital if Washington is to understand some of the foundational causes of the variable strength of democracy, including democratic backsliding, in the region. The United States must also understand that resentment and suspicion of the United States remains strong in parts of the region, another legacy from the past.

In an era of significant intra-state and international instability, the United States has an enormous stake in stable democratic and economic institutions striking deeper roots in Latin America. The promotion of this outcome requires more attention and nuance than Washington has shown in much of the history of its relations with the region. Buoyed by the Third Wave of democratization in the 1990s and the apparent certitudes of the Washington Consensus, the US may have placed too much faith in advancing open investment and commerce and in promoting free and fair elections. It often failed to emphasize the centrality of durable social contracts as well as legitimate and effective democratic institutions as essential supports of democratic, equitable governance.

As elites on the populist right and populist left undermine or eliminate (Venezuela and Nicaragua) democracy in the region, China’s economic and political presence continues to increase. In the context of sharpening great power competition, Beijing exacerbates existing challenges to America’s strategic and economic interests as well as its values in the region. These dangers should motivate Washington to craft policies that treat the United States and Latin America as part of a diverse community grounded in mutual benefit and bound by shared interests and values.

²⁸ Gerschütz-Bell, Jill Marie. “Root Causes of Migration, Development, and US Aid to Northern Triangle States.” *Journal on migration and human security* 10, no. 3 (2022): 173–189.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Meyer, Peter J., and Maureen Taft-Morales. “Central American Migration : Root Causes and U.S. Policy”. Washington, D.C: Congressional Research Service, 2019.

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