From the late 1950s, with the outbreak of the Cuban revolution, to the late 1980s, when civil wars raged in Central America, Latin America found itself in the crosshairs of great power competition. Geopolitics mattered to Latin America, and Latin America mattered to geopolitics. However, as a new multipolar world order has emerged, Latin America increasingly sits at the world's geopolitical margins. This has meant greater political sovereignty but continued foreign dependence. In this way, Latin American governments are freer than ever to promise their citizens more dynamic and just economies, but they are more constrained than ever when it comes to delivering on these ambitious goals. And while Latin America may dodge geopolitical conflict in an age of rising tensions between great powers, isolation is the region's own burden to bear and its own source of turmoil.

It does not need to be this way. The Western Hemisphere is uniquely positioned structurally and functionally to act as a geostrategic “bridge” between numerous and reinforcing multinational architectures focused on security, stability, and prosperity. This geographic positioning confers significant advantages to those states, friend and foe alike, that achieve favorable balances of power in key geostrategic locations. Preferential access not only supports strategy and planning, but also denies the use of key terrain to potential adversaries before conflict has begun.

In recent years, the Covid-19 pandemic simultaneously stressed the international system, while also amplifying strategic rivalries. Since the pandemic, the combination of state fragility, non-state threats, and malign external state actors has created a vicious circle of threats, framed by systemic issues of young democracies, often with weak governance and porous legal frameworks. These challenges are exacerbated by a propensity toward patronage and corruption that is deliberately exploited by trans-national criminal organizations, external state actors such as China, Russia, and Iran, and violent extremist organizations to advance their own ends at the expense of U.S., allied, and partner nation security and stability.

Structurally, economic and fiscal crises, many of which preceded the pandemic, have created a crisis of confidence in existing governing regimes, especially given the significant number of elections across the region that began in 2021, and the increased levels of public dissatisfaction and decreased faith in political institutions that COVID accelerated. These concerning trends could roll back many of the advances of the third wave of democratization brought to Latin America and the Caribbean over the past decades, potentially leading to a shift in ideological orientation away from democracies and a return of authoritarian and anti-West populist regimes more likely to be aligned to China, Russia, and other disruptor states. More optimistically, the next decade could also be Latin America’s moment to shine: the region is rich in sources of green energy and critical minerals, has a relatively young population, and could (again?) benefit from its proximity to the U.S.

**Proposed Topics and Questions for Discussion** (The readings below have links but you may encounter a pay wall. If so, access the readings through your institution’s library):

**China and Geopolitical Competition in Latin America**

Over the past two decades, the People’s Republic of China has made vast inroads in Latin America and the Caribbean in the diplomatic, economic, and informational realms, leading to questions as
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to whether or not the balances of power and strategic alignment within the region are shifting away from the United States and eroding its influence along the way. Beyond China, Russia and Iran maintain a dynamic presence in the region, demonstrating the challenge posed by extra-regional actors in Latin America that are counter to U.S. interests. How can the U.S. reverse this process and regain its political, diplomatic, and economic influence in the region? What tools of national power might the U.S. employ? Is supply chain nearshoring for U.S. private sector actors a feasible way forward?

Readings:

1. Council on Foreign Relations, China’s Growing Influence in Latin America
https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-influence-latin-america-argentina-brazil-venezuela-security-energy-bri

2. RAND, Great-Power Competition and Conflict in Latin America
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA969-4.html


Migration

Migration from Latin America to the U.S. has spiked in recent years, with a record number of migrants apprehended as people increasingly fled rising violence and economic crises in Haiti, Venezuela, Central America, and elsewhere. However, migration is an issue that has bedeviled U.S. politicians from both major parties. President Joe Biden took office in 2021 with a promise to reform what he called an “inhumane” approach to U.S. immigration policy by his predecessor Donald Trump. Nonetheless, the White House has continued several controversial policies imposed under Trump and has struggled to manage an overburdened immigration system. How should the U.S. respond? Should the U.S. response be different in places where people are fleeing a collapsed state (Haiti/Venezuela) as compared to ‘mere’ conditions of poverty? Why has the Biden Administration’s approach to Central America not yielded the desired results as it relates to addressing the drivers of migration? What should be made of the pending peacekeeping mission by Kenya into Haiti, a frequent source of migration that has routinely compelled U.S. involvement in the country? Is climate change being accounted for enough when forecasting likely migration surges?

Readings:

1. Rosario Esteinou, United Nations, Migration Trends in Latin America and the Caribbean,
Narcotrafficking

Narcotrafficking continues to destabilize the region, and has caused reason for alarm in previously “safe” countries like Ecuador and even Uruguay. Many analysts state that the nearly 50-year “War on Drugs” has failed, despite vast sums of money and U.S. engagement in places like Colombia. Additionally, transnational criminal organizations are simultaneously weakening the institutions of governments, while at the same time displacing central governance structures and providing alternative forms of governance. How should U.S. policy and strategy change? Which push and pull factors of the narcotics trade can realistically be addressed by both military and non-military means?

Readings:


Organized Crime and U.S.-Mexico Relations

Organized transnational crime represents serious threats to both Latin American states as well as the United States. Nowhere is this truer than in Mexico. Organized crime groups, such as the Sinaloa and Jalisco New Generation cartels have continued to strengthen their grip on state institutions and territory, extending their reach or recruiting criminal proxies as far away as Chile and Ecuador. At the same time, the Mexican government continues to fight for control of the major trafficking routes into the United States. At the same time, while the U.S. – Mexico – Canada Agreement (USMCA) has been a significant milestone in U.S.-Mexico relations, border security issues remain a major point of contention that repeatedly threatens progress in the bilateral relationship, and as witnessed in recent GOP debates, will remain a major issue in domestic U.S.
politics. Additionally, with a U.S. presidential election on the horizon in November 2024, and a Mexican general election (to include a new president) in June 2024, the time is right and ripe to consider mutually beneficial ways to improve and optimize the U.S.-Mexico relationship, including on security issues.

Readings:


Democratic Backsliding and Autocratization

More than forty years since the third wave of democratization reached the region, Latin America is now in the throes of democratic erosion. The region’s score on the Democracy Index, a yearly ranking by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), has declined for seven consecutive years (2016-2022), while the Varieties of Democracy project reported that the regional democracy score for Latin America and the Caribbean was lower in 2022 than at any point since 1989. Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba are closed authoritarian regimes, El Salvador and Guatemala have joined Honduras as competitive authoritarian regimes, and many other countries throughout the region have suffered a long period of democratic stagnation with a decline in quality. While Ecuador and the Dominican Republic have seen some liberal democratic improvement since the late 2010s, few other countries have meaningfully deepened their democracy since 2000. What are the major structural factors that are exacerbating democratic backsliding and autocratization? How have these processes enabled the presence and influence of malign external state actors like China and Russia? Conversely, how have authoritarian states contributed to backsliding? Finally, how might democratic norms and institutions regain their primacy of place in Latin America?

Readings:


2. Dr. Kelly Piazza, Cadet Max Lasco, Cadet Jacqueline Kelly, Cadet Harvey Regin, and Cadet Joncarl Vera, *China–Latin America Alignment and Democratic Backsliding: Gaining Traction for a Chinese-Led World Order,*
Extreme weather and climate concerns.

Climate change threatens Latin America’s ability to feed itself and the world, and is expected to drive millions of climate refugees from the region by 2050. The region suffered its warmest winter on record in 2023 and extreme weather events are proving challenging to countries throughout the region. Considering that climate change is viewed as a “insecurity amplifier”, the dynamic between climate change and security (in all its dimensions) will continue to feature into the broader calculations of “climate security” going forward. In short, climate change will exacerbate conflict and migration, which affects U.S. security interests. What are the pathways that lead to climate-driven insecurity? How can the U.S. best respond? How can the U.S. work with Latin America countries to build climate resilience?

Readings:


2. Sharon Burke, *War On The Rocks, There is No Containment Strategy for Climate Change*,

3. UN Developmental Program, *Climate, Peace and Security in Latin America and the Caribbean*,