



ARTICLE

**THE U.S.-LATIN
AMERICA
RELATIONSHIP:
WHAT WE CAN
EXPECT FROM THE
BIDEN
ADMINISTRATION**

Miami, March 25, 2021



INTRODUCTION

With the new administration in the White House and the Democrats holding both houses of Congress, there will certainly be changes in U.S. domestic and foreign policy, which will likely influence U.S.-Latin American (LATAM) relations. President Biden is familiar with the region, having been a de facto emissary while serving as vice president during the Obama administration. This means he will likely be more engaged than his predecessor when it comes to making decisions on key issues. Early indications point to a cooperative approach and less confrontational rhetoric than the previous administration employed.

When considering the global scenario, however, Latin America will likely continue to be less of a priority (with the possible exception of issues related to immigration) in comparison to other parts of the world. President Biden's top foreign policy concerns will likely be the global rise of China in the economic, military, intelligence, and cybersecurity arenas; Russia's maneuverings

in cyberespionage and its active role in Eastern Europe and the Middle East; the threat of global terrorism; the Iran Nuclear Deal negotiations; North Korea, which is likely to reemerge as a top concern; maintaining the momentum of the Israel-Sunni Arab world's rapprochement; and the overarching concerns surrounding future cybersecurity attacks from both foreign nations and rogue elements.

Domestic policy will probably also take precedence over foreign policy. This is often the case, but is especially likely now, when President Biden will need to address significant issues within U.S. borders. These include 1) The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, 2) Economic recovery, and 3) A polarizing political and social divide within the country.

PRIORITIES RELATED TO LATIN AMERICA

Inasmuch as the new president will focus on Latin America, his priorities will likely center on the following key issues:

Fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. The battle against the coronavirus pandemic remains the most pressing problem in Latin America. The United States has a vested interest in ensuring the region successfully overcomes this crisis, not only due to the humanitarian concerns associated with it, but also because it has had a devastating impact on the economies of many countries in the region. This directly influences U.S.-LATAM trade and tourism, both of which are key factors to U.S. economic recovery.

The United States has not taken the lead in sending COVID-related financial support to Latin America (a vacuum being filled by China) given its own economic challenges, but it is likely to help distribute vaccines once the majority of the U.S. population has been inoculated and the pandemic is under greater control.

Controlling immigration. Immigration is certainly one U.S.-LATAM issue where the Biden administration will most clearly break from the Trump White House. Within his first few weeks in office, President Biden issued executive orders focused on reevaluating the previous administration's immigration policies. This includes reimplementing the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which enables "Dreamers," referring to children and young adults who immigrated to the United States illegally with their parents, to legalize their status and avoid deportation. This protects many young Hispanics, who make up the majority of Dreamers.¹

In addition, the president and Democratic party leadership in Congress have signaled that they intend to pass immigration legislation to legalize undocumented immigrants living in the United States and create a pathway for lawful permanent resident status. While the initiative aims to address much-needed immigration reform in the country, it may also present challenges for U.S. relations with some of its southern neighbors. In

January 2021, approximately 78,000 individuals tried to cross the border illegally, more than twice the number in January 2020. That figure increased in February 2021, with U.S. border agents detaining nearly 100,000 migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border.² This surge is continuing, reaching over 4,000 illegal crossings a day.³ These numbers likely include immigrants from all over the world looking to gain entry to benefit from these prospective programs. Critics have already indicated that this can have implications beyond immigration, especially regarding national security and the possibility of exacerbating the COVID-19 health crisis.

Biden's advisers have indicated that no one should believe the border will be suddenly open. They do, however, plan to process asylum cases more quickly and allow more applicants. This issue will certainly test the United States' relationship with Mexico and several Central American countries, not only because many immigrants come from there, but also because those countries will face their own internal challenges. Many of those seeking to reach the U.S. border will pass through these nations' territories, and they will need to manage this movement.

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China’s rising influence. China has been expanding its influence in Latin America on several economic fronts, including investments in infrastructure, IT, and tourism development, as well as military aid and weapons systems.⁴ Furthermore, the Eastern power has taken many regional actions around COVID-19, which included a great deal of donated equipment and a USD\$1 billion loan to Latin American and Caribbean countries to support access to a Chinese vaccine.⁵

These economic ties have grown significantly, leading China to become one of the region’s top export and trading partners. In addition, Chinese companies invested USD\$12.8 billion in Latin America in 2019, up 16.5 percent from the previous year.⁶ Chinese loans often come with disadvantageous terms for recipient countries, which at times must cede acres of land, natural resources, or control over ports and roads. Beijing also leverages this aid to hold greater political sway regarding issues relevant to its own national interests, such as decreasing support for Taiwan, collecting intelligence, and supporting China’s initiatives in international organizations.

This is coupled with its cultural influence efforts via its Confucius Institutes to close the soft-power gap it was seeing in the region.⁷ Officially, they are institutions affiliated with China’s Ministry of Education to promote Chinese language and cultural exchange. However, observers view them as a key instrument for China’s efforts to sway public opinion and disseminate the government’s messages. As of February 2021, there are 44 Institutes spread throughout 21 Latin American and Caribbean countries.⁸

China has also enhanced its influence over Latin American militaries. This has included arms sales, which are bolstered by ongoing maintenance and training. This relationship also enables Chinese military officials to visit local military installations, allowing them to understand how their Latin American counterparts operate, collect intelligence, and directly assess the U.S. presence in the region. In addition, it builds influence among military leaders and enhances goodwill to support Beijing’s broader foreign policy objectives. According to Navy Adm. Craig Faller, head of the U.S. Southern Command, China’s

growing presence has contributed to the “sense of urgency that I feel about the overall security of this hemisphere.”⁹



Trade. One of the Biden administration's key priorities in Latin America will be deepening its economic ties with the region, something that could also help counteract China's influence. The United States remains the leading player with regard to trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) in Latin America. Goods trade with Latin American countries stood at USD\$885.1 billion in 2019,¹⁰ with U.S. FDI levels at USD\$256.1 billion.¹¹ U.S. goods exports to Latin America totaled USD\$418.2 billion in 2019,¹² accounting for 16.7 percent of all U.S. exports that year.¹³

Added to this is the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), which entered into force July 2020 to replace the North American Free Trade Agreement. The USMCA includes specific provisions for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), as well as new chapters on digital trade, anticorruption, and good regulatory practices.

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U.S. trade relations with the region will be particularly marked by its engagement with Mexico and Brazil, which are its two main trading partners in Latin America. The Biden team will have its work cut out for them in this area because, unlike with many other allies, these countries' leaders forged close ties with former President Trump, with whom they share a populist style of leadership. Pragmatic interests will likely prevail on all sides, but one should expect a bumpy ride along the way.

The United States might also further amplify its economic partnership with Latin America through initiatives led by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. These are all institutions in which Washington retains considerable sway, which the Biden administration is likely to leverage more than its predecessor did. For example, U.S. leadership is playing a pivotal role in recent IDB initiatives on renewable energy, technology, and access to COVID-19 vaccines, and there is proposed legislation circling in the U.S. Congress to significantly increase U.S. funds for the bank.¹⁴

The overall U.S. strategy to reduce its reliance on Chinese manufacturing could also benefit the nation's economic relations with Latin America. For example, Chinese companies currently supply most U.S. antibiotics, vitamin C, ibuprofen, hydrocortisone, and acetaminophen, not to mention dominate the global personal protective equipment market.¹⁵ Though Latin America cannot replace all of China's production, it can provide an alternative, allowing the U.S. to outsource some production to closer-to-home countries that are its allies on the international stage.



well-organized gangs facilitate drug trade to the United States. Those governments are working closely with the U.S., and all sides have expressed a shared commitment to continuing to prioritize initiatives addressing these issues.

Combatting drug production will remain a principal area of cooperation with Colombia, and joint efforts have been expanding throughout South America and the Caribbean. This is important given the existence of the narco-corridors that challenge the region. Identifying and neutralizing potential terrorist cells in Latin America and disrupting their relations with drug cartels and organized crime will also continue to be a top security priority. Lastly, the United States will be alert to any cybersecurity threats emerging from the region, which saw 74 million attacks launched in 2020, resulting in attack rates higher than the global average across all channels in the first half of that year.¹⁶

Addressing ongoing security issues. The security pillar has consistently been a top priority for past U.S. administrations when it comes to Latin America, and this should continue to be the case under President Biden. Geographic proximity means that turmoil in the region can translate into potential security threats, making this an important focus of U.S. international policy.

The Biden administration will continue to emphasize U.S.-Mexico cooperation in the fight against narcotrafficking and organized crime. Despite Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's nonconfrontational approach to dealing with drug cartels, ongoing cooperation will continue on this front. The situation is compounded by mounting violence in Central America's Northern Triangle – made up of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala – where

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Foreign aid. Biden will almost certainly change the U.S. approach to foreign assistance, likely centering it on local country engagement. The focus will be on crime prevention and fighting drug trafficking and corruption in the Northern Triangle, Mexico, and Colombia. Administration officials believe that this aid is not only beneficial for recipient countries, but also highly relevant to U.S. national security and immigration concerns.

As such, Biden will likely emphasize programs seeking to rehabilitate disenfranchised youth and former gang members in the Northern Triangle. Bringing them into the system will not only weaken the criminal undertakings in the region, but also improve quality of life in these host countries.

This, in turn, can help reduce immigration – something that will be closely watched in the United States during the economic recovery period, given its potential impact on jobs. During the Obama administration, Biden himself touted some of these programs during his multiple visits to Central America. At that time, he led an initiative to secure USD\$750 million to support reforms in the Northern Triangle. This is also an area he has discussed since his presidential campaign, stating an intention to reduce migration from this area by “comprehensively [addressing] its root causes – the factors pushing people to leave their countries in the first place.”¹⁷

Relations with Venezuela and Cuba. The authoritarian regime in Venezuela, strongly backed by its Cuban advisors, is a key destabilizing force for the United States in the region, and the in-country presence of Russia, Iran, and China¹⁸ only enhances its importance. Furthermore, the government in Caracas has been collaborating with drug cartels operating out of Colombia, which has been a strategic U.S. partner for years.

Former President Trump and his team focused their Venezuela policy on strong economic sanctions and isolating President Nicolas Maduro’s government, as well as supporting pro-democracy opposition leaders. Many hardline critics of the current Caracas government call for maintaining maximum pressure on the regime, as they are wary of possible dialogue and negotiations between the U.S. government and the Maduro administration.

“The new administration’s overall approach is likely to place strong emphasis on diplomacy and dialogue”

President Biden’s aides have stated that there are no plans to lift the sanctions or the indictment against Maduro for drug trafficking. Both the current Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Biden himself have also recognized the authoritarian nature of the Venezuelan government and have pledged to work toward making gains in human rights and democracy. In addition, the Biden administration recently announced that Venezuelans in the United States will be able to apply for temporary legal status in the country because it is not safe to go back to theirs in the current situation. Senior officials added that the United States will provide humanitarian assistance to neighboring nations that have taken in millions of Venezuelans refugees who have fled the country.¹⁹ The new administration will also work with the pro-democracy opposition in Venezuela, which will be a delicate task since it is increasingly fractured and has lost momentum.

However, this administration’s methods may vary from its predecessor’s, emphasizing a multilateral approach that works toward dialogue with the regime in Caracas in partnership with other nations. The rhetoric is also likely to shift away from military threats to one critical of the Venezuelan government, but which still leaves enough room for engagement. In any negotiations with Caracas, it is likely that a key figure will be Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-NY), who has known Maduro personally since 2002 and has visited Venezuela several times. He is the current chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and has stated that he is ready to act as a liaison if President Biden requests it.²⁰

Biden's approach to U.S.-Cuba policy will also be significant, not only to the relationship between those two countries, but also in connection to the situation in Venezuela. From the beginning, the Cuban government has played a fundamental role in sustaining the late Hugo Chavez' government, and now Maduro's as well. These efforts intensified first when Chavez was briefly unseated from power in 2002, then again when Maduro faced massive democratic protests that brought his regime to the brink in 2019. Cuban intelligence, security, and propaganda continue to play a fundamental role, making it hard for U.S. policy toward one country to be disengaged from its approach to the other.

Regarding Cuba, President Biden has stated that he plans to return to the negotiating table to reengage in the dialogue that began when Obama reestablished diplomatic relations in 2015. If he chooses that path, he would be wise to condition those talks on obtaining concessions, such as the release of political prisoners and respect for human rights. He could also push for labor rights in Cuba, since the government in Havana keeps most of the salaries of Cubans who work for foreign companies and requires their political support if they wish to keep their jobs.²¹

Many observers, including some that support dialogue, have noted that the Biden administration should be careful to avoid "empty" engagement, in the sense that the United States should be sure to extract concessions in the area of human rights from Havana during any negotiations. As former Secretary of State John Kerry, who served during the Obama years, recently stated, "It's fair to say that everybody

shares a little bit of disappointment about the direction that the government in Cuba chose to go [in those negotiations] ... Cuba seemed to harden down after the initial steps were taken."²²

During the rapprochement phase, human rights groups denounced stronger persecution as pro-democracy activists continued to be arrested and persecuted by the Cuban state security apparatus.²³ In addition, numerous reports have indicated that the "Havana Syndrome," a medical condition that injured U.S. and Canadian diplomats based in Havana while the U.S.-Cuba diplomatic negotiations were taking place, was intentionally caused by targeted radio frequency energy.²⁴ The exact role played by the Cubans is debated, but experts believe they were involved at some level. As the former U.S. Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs Kimberly Breier recently wrote, "The exact origins of the injuries remain uncertain, but the known and emerging evidence suggests the Cuban regime is guilty, if not by commission then at least by omission, of injuring U.S. personnel."²⁵

CONCLUSION

There are many important issues in Latin America that the new president will have to deal with, including combatting the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, immigration, the rising influence of China, trade, security concerns, foreign aid, and policy toward Venezuela and Cuba. These varied challenges each pose unique concerns and require differing solutions, but the new administration's overall approach is likely to place strong emphasis on diplomacy and dialogue.

President Biden will also be more engaged in the decision-making than his predecessor was, given his familiarity with Latin America. He visited several times and led various initiatives while he was Obama's vice president, giving him a strong background in this region. Each country's reality will require individualized attention and solutions, but it will be the overarching issues described above that will test his foreign policy team and define the U.S.-Latin American relations under the Biden administration.



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