

“Trump and Latin America: Asymmetry and the Problem of Influence”¹

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Despite its proximity and importance, Latin America usually does not receive a lot of attention in U.S. elections. After Donald Trump’s shocking and ultimately successful campaign for the presidency, the region may miss being out of the limelight. Somewhat atypically, many of Trump’s campaign promises related to Latin America. Mexico was, and remains, Trump’s villain of choice from the first day of his unlikely campaign. Mexico supposedly sent criminals as immigrants and bested the United States in the countries’ deep trade relationship; Trump granted the Mexican government a level of astuteness and competence that must have surprised many Mexican citizens. Central American migrants, whose remittances are more important to their home states in relative terms, also came under fire. In recent days, Trump has aimed his Twitter feed at transnational, and U.S.-born, street gangs, casting all the blame on neighbors to the south. Trump’s initially pacific tone toward Cuba soured as the campaign progressed. His anti-trade proposals go beyond renegotiating or threatening to withdraw from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and abandonment of the Transpacific Partnership (TPP), and would cut to the core many Latin American countries’ economic strategies, in which access to the U.S. market is the lynchpin.

Though divining Trump’s ‘real’ intentions is a fool’s errand, all of this adds up to a seeming shift in U.S. policy. In recent years, the policy discourse had been dominated by the rhetoric of partnership and the declaration that the Monroe Doctrine was dead (again).² Though the United States never entirely left behind its “hegemonic presumption,”³ openly condescending phrases like “America’s backyard” faded. So, too, did the sort of unilateral military interventions that marked much of the history of inter-American relations. Since

¹ This essay was submitted on 26 April 2017.

² Keith Johnson, “Kerry Makes it Official: ‘Era of Monroe Doctrine Is Over,’” 18 November 2013, *Wall Street Journal*, <https://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2013/11/18/kerry-makes-it-official-era-of-monroe-doctrine-is-over/>.

³ Abraham F. Lowenthal, “The United States and Latin America: Ending the Hegemonic Presumption,” *Foreign Affairs* 55:1 (1976): 199-213.

the end of the Cold War, trade deals, seen by some critics as U.S. impositions, have often been enthusiastically sought by Latin American leaders (in some cases over domestic opposition, but in others with considerable support).⁴ Protecting them is a priority for most of the political spectrum in the Latin American countries that have them. Even discounting some of the Trump administration's most extreme rhetoric, the pattern seems to indicate greater unilateralism, less consultation and institutionalization, more militarization, harder borders, and an overall decline in hemispheric cooperation on shared challenges like trade, environment, and migration. While some countries in the Western Hemisphere, notably Canada and Uruguay, explore alternative approaches to the still-central issue of drug trafficking, Trump and his Attorney General Jeff Sessions intimate a renewed emphasis on militarized interdiction. On one issue after another, it seems like Latin America may face a stark choice between accommodating the diktats of the northern colossus or facing a Trumpian wrath.

The United States still holds the dominant position in the hemisphere. Its power advantage is overwhelming. The military gap is huge, and is relevant far beyond the less likely threat of military incursions to training, provision, and staff relationships. Trade asymmetries vary widely across the region, but U.S. capital markets and the dollar remain central in almost all countries. All of these seem like effective sticks that Trump could use to get his way. If we were to take candidate and President Trump's approach at face value, what should we expect from U.S. policy? Less effective sticks and less enticing carrots, despite the advantages noted above.

Our work on the history of U.S.-Latin American relations and on the dynamics of asymmetrical relationships in IR suggests a much more complex picture. First, Latin America is unlikely to offer outright compliance – in fact, its leaders' independence from the whims of Washington was long greater than many observers supposed.⁵ That may even be the case when Latin American leaders go to great lengths to avoid outright confrontation. Second, U.S. unilateralism holds the seeds of its own undoing. Latin American states are likely to respond with subtle soft balancing, a non-military strategy by lesser powers to restrain a global or regional unipole that may include closer partnerships, recourse to international institutions, foot-dragging, and other strategies.⁶ There is an important caveat: a Latin American united front against Trump is no given, despite the U.S. President's intense unpopularity across the region. Latin America is riven by international divisions, ideological and material in nature, which have slowed the projects of regional integration and coordination that only recently were increasing Latin American autonomy in the framework of new hemispheric institutions excluding the United States such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the

⁴ Richard E. Feinberg, "Regionalism and Domestic Politics: U.S.-Latin American Trade Policy in the Bush Era," *Latin American Politics and Society* 44:4 (2002): 127-51; Tom Long, "Echoes of 1992: The NAFTA Negotiation and North America Now" (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, 2014).

⁵ Tom Long, *Latin America Confronts the United States: Asymmetry and Influence* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Max Paul Friedman, "Retiring the Puppets, Bringing Latin America Back In: Recent Scholarship on United States-Latin American Relations," *Diplomatic History* 27:5 (2003): 621-636.

⁶ Max Paul Friedman and Tom Long, "Soft Balancing in the Americas: Latin American Opposition to U.S. Intervention, 1898-1936," *International Security* 40:1 (Summer 2015): 120-156.

Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).⁷ Finally, outside of Mexico and Central America, Latin American states depend considerably less on the United States than in the past, at least in some respects. In the commercial sphere, China and Europe offer alternatives. This is not a stark geopolitical game or a new cold war in which Latin America functions as a prize in a superpower battle. Instead, the rise of new centers of power is important above all because it amplifies Latin American leaders' choices. In the diplomatic realm, Washington is not making an attractive – or even coherent – offer. In the economic realm, the Trump administration's unpredictability and anti-trade rhetoric (recently Canada became a target) has increased the interest in diversification, even among close allies like Colombia. On the other hand, Mexico, with an economy and society interwoven with the United States, is seemingly susceptible to great damage. However, Mexico holds more cards than a focus on pure power disparities would lead one to believe.

Much of the United States' non-coercive influence comes from the gravitational pull of its huge and relatively open market. If Washington dumps NAFTA, undermines other free-trade agreements (FTAs), or unilaterally curtails market access through a border tax or protective tariffs, it will weaken the domestic political positions of its strongest supporters in the region.⁸ Many countries in Latin America trade with the United States, at least in some sectors, under preferential agreements. These have the effect of aligning certain economic sectors' interests with the United States. Sometimes, Washington has tied this access to specific goals, most notably under the 1991 Andean Trade Preferences Act, which incentivizes anti-drug cooperation.

The principal alternative to Latin American dependence on the United States is Trump's other international obsession, China.⁹ Chinese public finance capital now surpasses what the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank combined invest in Latin America, and Chinese commercial banks are increasing their investments as well, notably in energy and transportation.¹⁰ Chinese lending is concentrated in Brazil, Venezuela, and Ecuador, but other countries are also deepening their economic ties with China. After Trump's election sealed the fate of the TPP in November 2016, President Xi Jinping immediately signed dozens of new trade deals at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit held in Lima. Mexico, Chile, and Peru signaled interest in accession to China's free trade initiative, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which could unite all the largest economies in Asia, including India and Japan, behind the Chinese project. Latin American critics who have long pointed out that Chinese investment is extractive and has not contributed much to development are being heard in Beijing. In December 2016, a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs paper called for aligning investment with local needs to promote independent development capacity, showing that China at least recognizes the political problem of

⁷ Andrés Malamud, "Interdependence, Leadership and Institutionalization: The Triple Deficit and Fading Prospects of Mercosur," in Søren Døsenrode, ed., *Limits to Regional Integration* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2015), 163-178.

⁸ Rawi Abdelal and Jonathan Kirshner, "Strategy, Economic Relations, and the Definition of National Interests," *Security Studies* 9:1-2 (1999): 119-56.

⁹ Kevin P. Gallagher, *The China Triangle: Latin America's China Boom and the Fate of the Washington Consensus* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Margaret Myers and Kevin Gallagher, "Chinese Finance to LAC in 2016," *China-Latin America Report*, Global Economic Governance Initiative, Boston University, February 2017, <http://www.bu.edu/pardeeschool/files/2014/12/Chinese-Finance-to-LAC-in-2016-Web-and-email-res.pdf>.

overreliance on exploiting primary commodities.¹¹ On February 2, shortly after Trump claimed credit for killing a planned Ford assembly plant in Mexico, Mexico announced that Chinese automaker JAC motors will build a \$212 million dollar factory in Hidalgo.¹²

Faced with the growing Chinese challenge as well as orchestrated and effective Latin American criticism, President Barack Obama tried using free trade deals and diplomatic concessions to stanch the bleeding in inter-American relations. But Trump, who disdains both diplomacy and free trade, has given up the principal instruments for evoking cooperation. That makes confrontation more likely—especially since key members of his security team worry that growing Chinese economic influence will lead to growing Chinese political influence and ultimately pose a challenge to U.S. security. Having built a cabinet without a single Latino member for the first time in three decades, Trump has turned to a number of advisors who see Chinese activity in Latin America as a threat to the Monroe Doctrine, in which they still have faith.¹³ Secretary of Homeland Security John F. Kelly has perhaps the most Latin American experience of any of Trump’s cabinet members, having spent the last four years as head of U.S. Southern Command responsible for military operations in the Western Hemisphere south of Mexico. This may make him amenable to cooperative regional security projects. But he has also warned that growing Chinese economic ties can swiftly become Chinese military ties. Trump’s short-lived Senior Director for the Western Hemisphere at the National Security Council, former military intelligence officer Craig Deare, denounced the Obama administration’s burial of the Monroe Doctrine “as a clear invitation to those extra-regional actors looking for opportunities to increase their influence.”¹⁴ With the position of the Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs still unfilled, Deare might have been expected to play a key role in formulating regional policy—if he had not been fired after Trump learned that he had criticized him at a closed-door meeting.¹⁵ Others such as Trump’s sometime Svengali, White House political strategist Steve Bannon; Bannon’s deputy, Sebastian Gorka; transition team member Yleem Sarmiento de Poblete; Special Assistant at the Department of the Treasury Jon Perdue; and rumored future administration member John Bolton have all pointed to the danger of a nexus of Latin American nationalism and Middle Eastern terrorism. If that notion takes hold and comes to the fore, perhaps because of an unforeseen incident, we are likely to see a Trump administration committed

¹¹ Ting Shi and John Quigley, “China Seizes Opening in U.S. Backyard as Trump Upends Policy,” *Bloomberg*, 2 December 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-12-02/china-seizes-opening-in-u-s-backyard-after-trump-upends-policy>.

¹² “Chinese automaker JAC to produce cars in Mexico,” *Xinhua News Service*, 2 February 2017.

¹³ Max Paul Friedman, “Return of the Monroe Doctrine: Making Latin America Irate Again.” AULA Blog, Center for Latin American and Latino Studies, 2 February 2017. Reprinted as “Is Trump Resurrecting the Monroe Doctrine?” *Christian Science Monitor*, 5 February 2017.

¹⁴ Craig A. Deare, “Latin America,” in *Charting a Course: Strategic Choices for a New Administration*, edited by R.D. Hooker, Jr. (Washington: National Defense University Press, 2016), quoted in Matthew Taylor, “Open Questions about Latin American Relations During the Trump Administration,” 25 January 2017, <http://blogs.cfr.org/oneil/2017/01/25/the-big-questions-and-challenges-the-trump-administration-will-face-in-latin-america/>.

¹⁵ Eliana Johnson, “White House Dismisses NSC Aide after Harsh Criticism of Trump,” *politico.com*, 18 February 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/white-house-nsc-aide-craig-deare-dismissed-235175>.

to vigorous unilateralism in Latin America in the name of national security. Across the past century, unilateral interventions were justified by U.S. officials as necessary to defend U.S. interests in the region from bandits, then Germans, then Communists, then drug kingpins. If interventionism resumes, Iranians or the Islamic State may appear next on that list, perhaps before China does.

What should Latin American leaders do now? Trump's impact will vary from country to country. For Brazil, internal economic and political challenges outweigh the possible influence of a Trump presidency. Venezuela is mired in a crisis where any U.S. action may be counterproductive – and where the U.S. capacity to lead even a humanitarian response is depressingly low. The weight of U.S. policy is much heavier in the Caribbean, Central America, and Mexico.

First, relations will progress in a climate of distrust; from the Latin American perspective, this makes sense. When an international relationship is marked by power disparities, the smaller country is at greater risk and has more to lose. It is rational for Latin American states to be skeptical toward the United States even under normal circumstances. Trump exacerbates that. To overcome this distrust, as Brantly Womack argues, the stronger power needs to commit to restraint and employ diplomatic assurance to assuage the concerns of the small.¹⁶ Trump's campaign, and many of his words since then, have done the opposite. If the Trump administration wishes to avoid worsening relations, it will fall upon the United States to swiftly and repeatedly commit to restraint. Demonstrations of unilateralism (say, building a wall without Mexico's assent) will be perceived as threatening; the response to that threat is likely to be a form of soft balancing.

Second, U.S. domestic policies are also foreign policies from the perspective of its neighbors.¹⁷ This has two sides. It means that actions against immigrants or to advance "Buy American" provisions will be watched closely in Latin America and interpreted as unilateral affronts. The effects are too large to ignore for Mexico and others. That said, governments in the region should try to separate foreign and domestic. Mexico and Central America will need a *foreign* policy and a *consular* policy.¹⁸ These may sometimes be at odds as the consular policy fights U.S. immigration actions while the foreign policy tries to salvage diplomatic and trade ties.

Third, on trade, Latin America needs to work with powerful U.S. allies. Mexico has the greatest experience in the region of using transnational business ties to lobby the United States.¹⁹ Now, even Cuba will need to follow that model. Quietly turning to hotel companies, airlines, and construction players like Caterpillar may slow hostile executive actions. Trump understands tourism and construction, of course, and his transition team is showing openness to lobbyists. That indicates that some roads of influence will remain open despite

¹⁶ Brantly Womack, *Asymmetry and International Relationships* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁷ Abraham F. Lowenthal, *United States-Latin American Relations at the Century's Turn Managing the "Intermestic" Agenda* (Los Angeles: Pacific Council on International Policy, 1998).

¹⁸ Jorge A. Schiavon and Nuty Cárdenas Alaminos, "La protección consular de la diáspora mexicana", *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior*, núm. 101 (Mayo-Agosto 2014), 50.

¹⁹ Tom Long, "Coloso fragmentado: la agenda 'intermística' y la política exterior latinoamericana." *Foro Internacional* 57:227 (January 2017): 5-54.

his outsider rhetoric. At the same time, Latin Americans should actively develop alternative trade and investment partners – and should not be shy in letting Washington know. But even if Trump is not as ideologically averse to Cuba as some of the Republican politicians he defeated in the primaries, his political approach to international affairs may bode ill for Cuba if he decides that executing the hard line he promised late in the election campaign would be a low-cost, high-impact way to shore up his conservative credentials in the party he took over. If Cuba wants to avoid being used as a punching-bag, it may need to build up political capital in Washington by, for example, going around the administration to accelerate the signing of contracts with U.S. companies that visibly produce jobs in the districts of key members of Congress.

Fourth, Latin America has friends in the U.S. bureaucracy and military who can delay and lessen the blow of prejudicial policies. Latin American governments cannot let distrust at the top keep them from cultivating contacts at lower levels, where much policy design and implementation will occur. Trump might appoint hardliners to top positions, but his bench does not run deep. Rumors suggest he might name someone like Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio to a high-ranking Department of Homeland Security (DHS) post. Arpaio is an anti-immigration champion who is popular on the right, but is he competent to run a massive bureaucracy like DHS, with its broad mission, mishmash of agencies, and quarter million employees? Not likely. These figureheads may satisfy the base, but many career civil servants understand that long-term U.S., agency, and career interests are better served by workable cooperation with neighboring countries.

Fifth, the national government is not the only place for cooperation. Connections with state and local governments will be more important than ever to address issues that affect migrant communities, the environment, and even manufacturing chains.²⁰ Integration is deep, and second-best solutions will have to be found if the national government is not cooperative.

Surviving the Trump presidency may be for Latin America a matter of waiting and minimizing the damage. Cuba's President Raul Castro was notably silent in response to Trump's gleeful tweeting over the death of his brother Fidel shortly after Trump's election, whereas Fidel might well have responded with at least a rhetorical escalation. At times, it may be tempting to minimize confrontation and even make symbolic sacrifices. Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto tried this humble approach, though his management of Trump's campaign visit raised questions about whether he can successfully execute this strategy, and his ill-fated visit to Washington also fell victim to Trump's ceaseless anti-Mexican rhetoric. In the end, it seems that he has been badly burned. Likewise, Argentine President Mauricio Macri's visit to Washington seems aimed to make sure Buenos Aires does not suffer from Trump's ire – bandwagoning efforts that confront a long Argentine diplomatic tradition and draw considerable domestic skepticism, especially since Macri's plan for achieving economic growth and the resulting political legitimacy hinged on greater access to the U.S. market that is now unlikely to materialize.²¹ Latin American governments need to draw and maintain their lines where it matters most. Trump lacks concrete proposals in most areas, so he will not be bound by them. Nonetheless, his publicity-obsessed id seems driven by a need to deliver visible 'achievements,' particularly on

²⁰ Marcela López-Vallejo, *Reconfiguring Global Climate Governance in North America: A Transregional Approach*. Routledge, 2016; Christopher E. Wilson, *Working Together: Economic Ties between the United States and Mexico*, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011.

²¹ Mario Rapoport and Leandro Morgenfeld, "Proteccionista forever. Argentina y Estados Unidos en la era Trump," *Página 12*, 5 February 2017. <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/18188-proteccionismo>.

immigration and trade. What can be offered that looks important but hurts the least? That's the painful question that Latin American leaders may have to answer over the next four years if they try to accommodate Trump. However, the more blatant U.S. unilateralism is, the more the United States' leadership role will be undermined. The exercise of blunt power is likely to weaken the prospects for accommodation and increase the chances of confrontation.

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