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Biden and Latin America



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Late in the morning of November 8, 2020 cheering and honking erupted throughout Washington, DC as news outlets announced that Joe Biden was the projected winner of the US presidential election. Thousands of mostly young Washingtonians gathered in Black Lives Matter Plaza, across from the White House, to celebrate the defeat of a blatantly racist, sexist, and xenophobic president.

Relief and joy were also palpable in the city's well-heeled neighborhoods, where senior civil servants and government contractors could at last envision a return to the more normal and predictable politics of the pre-Trump era. Washington's foreign policy elites were jubilant: the US would soon cease to be an international embarrassment; its leaders

would reengage with traditional allies and work to restore US leadership in multilateral institutions.

Within Washington's foreign policy community, expectations are particularly high for US relations with Latin America. During his stint as vice president, Biden focused on this region far more than any other and forged personal bonds with many heads of state. As a headline in *The Atlantic* put it, "Joe Biden's Reset [with the world] Would Start in Latin America."

For those who dream of greater independence for Latin America, it's not clear that Biden's election is such good news. To be sure, Trump played a disastrous role in the region: imposing deadly economic sanctions on Venezuela, hardening the US embargo against Cuba, and throwing his support behind Brazil's racist, anti-Indigenous far-right president, among other horrors. But many will remember all too well that the Obama-Biden era coincided with major reversals for left-leaning movements all over the hemisphere.

The Obama administration may have sought to normalize relations with Cuba's socialist government, but it also helped to enable coups against left-leaning governments. It supported a neoliberal trade and investment agenda, promoted militarized drug and security programs, and provided unconditional support to right-wing governments with horrifying human rights records.

What will Biden do? Will he simply dust off and reapply the Obama administration's playbook for Latin America, as many of his remarks and personnel choices seem to indicate? Will he hang on to some of Trump's approaches toward the region, particularly those that have received bipartisan support? Or will he seek to draw lessons from the unfortunate outcome of many of the policies of both the Obama and the Trump administrations?

Joe Biden's first significant foray into Latin America policy began in the early 2000s when he was a US senator. As the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he helped President Bill Clinton secure funding for Plan Colombia, an initiative that equipped and trained Colombian military and police forces engaged, in theory, in counternarcotics activities. In a joint press conference with Colombian president Andrés Pastrana in August 2000, Biden declared that US support for Plan Colombia would continue so long as human rights were respected and no US aid was used in Colombia's internal conflict. Within a short time, however, US assistance was being used to support a "war on terror" against Colombia's leftist FARC insurgency, and reports began to emerge

of the Colombian military's involvement in human rights atrocities that would result in thousands of civilian deaths.

Despite Biden's extensive involvement in Plan Colombia — which he's referred to as “one of the most successful (...) foreign policy undertakings of the last half century” — he doesn't appear to have been involved much in Latin American matters during Obama's first term in office (2009–2012). There is no indication, for instance, that he played a role in the administration's response to the 2009 military coup in Honduras (which proved instrumental in helping the coup succeed). That job was diligently performed by then secretary of state Hillary Clinton who, by her own admission, actively opposed the return of ousted, left-leaning president Manuel Zelaya to Honduras and then supported elections organized by the country's coup authorities in late 2009.

Most of the rest of the region strongly rejected the US position. Regional bodies like UNASUR and Mercosur issued statements denouncing Honduras's elections as illegitimate and even the Washington-based Organization of American States (OAS) refused to send electoral monitors to Honduras. It was the beginning of Latin America's disenchantment with the Obama administration, which only grew as it became increasingly clear that the new president was largely sticking to the policy agenda of his predecessor George W. Bush. This disenchantment led, among other things, to the creation of a new regional grouping – the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC in Spanish), comprised of every independent nation in the hemisphere with the exception of the US and Canada.

Biden may not have had much to do with how the Obama administration handled the Honduras coup, but later on he did play an active part in propping up the country's repressive and corrupt post-coup governments. One of his first Latin America trips as vice president was to the Honduran capital, to attend a 2012 multilateral summit on “citizen security.” He reserved his warmest words for his host, President Porfirio Lobo. After “winning” the coup regime's 2009 elections, Lobo had further militarized the country while selling off mining and dam concessions located on Indigenous lands. Dozens of anti-coup activists, human rights and land rights defenders, journalists, and lawyers were murdered during Lobo's time in office.

But Honduras's appalling human rights situation wasn't of much concern to the Obama administration. Days prior to Biden's 2012 trip, Obama's National Security Advisor Antony Blinken — the current next secretary of state — stated that the vice president's visit would serve to “reaffirm the United States' strong support for the tremendous

leadership President Lobo has displayed in advancing national reconciliation and democratic and constitutional order.”

During Obama’s second term in office (2013–2016), Biden became much more focused on Latin America, traveling 14 times to the region, as opposed to just twice during the previous four-year period.

In mid 2014, an influx of unaccompanied child migrants from the so-called “Northern Triangle” (Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador) created a major political headache for Obama. Though the administration had deported a record number of immigrants, Republicans accused the president of being a lax enforcer of the nation’s immigration laws. In response to the so-called “child migrant crisis,” Biden was dispatched to Central America to convince its leaders to help stem the migration at its source, in exchange for US assistance.

Out of his conversations with the Northern Triangle leaders, Biden developed an aid plan dubbed the “US Strategy for Engagement in Central America.” In a New York Times op-ed, Biden wrote that it would “help Central America’s leaders make the difficult reforms and investments required to address the region’s interlocking security, governance and economic challenges.”

Biden compared the Strategy to Plan Colombia. Indeed, nearly half of the \$750 million allocated to the Strategy the first year was channeled to the opaque “Central America Regional Security Initiative,” which, among other things, channeled support to state security forces implicated in human rights abuses such as the violent repression of protests and the killing of activists. Following the 2016 killing of renowned Indigenous rights and environmental activist Berta Cáceres by Honduran military officials, among others, dozens of US members of Congress called on the administration to suspend US security assistance to the Honduran government. The Obama administration ignored these appeals and even certified that the Honduran government was meeting human rights benchmarks set by Congress, thereby allowing it to receive the full allocation of US aid.

The Strategy also expanded assistance programs designed, in theory, to help the Northern Triangle countries improve “good governance” and increase “social welfare.” Additional support came from the US-backed “Alliance for Prosperity” program sponsored by the Inter-American Development Bank, an initiative developed in partnership with Central American business elites and focused largely on attracting foreign investment.

Six years have passed, and over \$3 billion has been allocated to the Strategy. Yet there is little sign of improvement in these countries. A 2019 report from the US General

Accounting Office noted: “limited information is available about how U.S. assistance [has] improved prosperity, governance, and security in the Northern Triangle.” Poverty and crime levels remain among the highest in the region, and corruption is rife at the highest levels of government. Each year hundreds of thousands of courageous Central Americans brave extraordinary challenges — including inhumane anti-immigration measures put in place by the US — to flee violence and economic deprivation and to seek out a better life in the United States.

Biden’s Central America strategy is sometimes described as the biggest foreign policy achievement of his vice presidency. But Biden was also deeply involved in US relations with other countries in the region. He traveled to Brazil four times and reportedly had a warm relationship with left-leaning president Dilma Rousseff, even after revelations of US spying on Rousseff and on Brazilian state energy company Petrobras sparked a major diplomatic crisis between the two governments.

In August 2016, Rousseff was removed from power following a controversial congressional impeachment trial based on spurious charges from some of Brazil’s most corrupt politicians. For many Brazilians, an unconstitutional “parliamentary coup” had taken place, engineered in part by conservative vice president Michel Temer who took over as president once Rousseff was forced out. Yet Biden met with Temer only days after Rousseff’s ouster. In a speech he made soon afterward, Biden said that the people of Brazil had followed “their constitution to navigate an economically and politically difficult time, abiding by established procedures to manage the transition in power.”

A number of US members of Congress saw things differently. Shortly before Rousseff’s removal, a group of over 50 House Representatives signed a letter stating, “our government should express strong concern regarding the circumstances surrounding the impeachment process and call for the protection of constitutional democracy and the rule of law in Brazil.” Senator Bernie Sanders asserted: “the United States cannot sit silently while the democratic institutions of one of our most important allies are undermined.”

The Obama administration’s relations with the governments of Brazil and Honduras fit into a larger pattern, one consistent with the approach taken by previous US administrations: The US would seek to undermine the region’s left governments at every opportunity while warmly embracing right-wing pro-US governments, even those of dubious legitimacy and with horrific human rights records.

During the years prior to Obama’s election, the region had shifted significantly to the left and US political and economic influence there had diminished accordingly. Despite the

George W. Bush administration's determined efforts to reverse the progressive tide — including through support for coups in Venezuela and Haiti and through well-funded “democracy promotion” programs backing conservative political movements — the majority of Latin American voters elected left-leaning governments committed, to varying degrees, to revoking neoliberal strategies and to fighting poverty.

However, soon after Obama took office, the geopolitical tide began to shift rightward due to a combination of significant economic shocks (in large part linked to the global financial crisis) and a right-wing counteroffensive employing aggressive and often undemocratic tactics. The Obama administration did its part to help the right return to power, whenever it had the opportunity to do so.

In Paraguay in 2012, the country's first ever left-leaning president was accused of spurious crimes and was removed from office by right-wing legislators in a speedy impeachment process considered “unacceptable” by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, and widely criticized by both left and right-wing Latin American governments (many of which withdrew their ambassadors from Asunción). While regional groups Mercosur and UNASUR suspended Paraguay's membership, the Obama administration maneuvered to avoid a similar move at the Organization of American States and, much as they did following Rouseff's removal, were quick to throw their support behind the right-wing, unelected government that replaced the Lugo administration.

In Argentina, as the left-wing government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner struggled to obtain international financing to help resolve balance of payments difficulties, the Obama Treasury Department opposed credit lines for the Argentine government at the Inter-American Bank and the World Bank. Argentina's economic difficulties were a major factor that contributed to the defeat of Kirchner's party in 2015 presidential elections. Having avoided Argentina during prior trips to South America, Obama made his first presidential visit to Buenos Aires in early 2016 and heaped praise on the country's newly elected right-wing president: “Under President Macri,” he said, “Argentina is reassuming its traditional leadership role in the region and around the world.” A short time before, US Treasury Secretary Jack Lew had lifted US opposition to multilateral development bank lending to Argentina.

In reality, under the governments of Cristina Kirchner and her late husband, Néstor Kirchner, Argentina had assumed a bold leadership role in Latin America, one that the Obama administration seems to have resented. Together with Brazil and Venezuela, Argentina's left government had worked with leaders throughout South America to

establish, in 2008, the Union of Latin American Nations, or UNASUR, as an alternative to the Washington-based Organization of American States (OAS) and to US-backed neoliberal regional integration schemes like the Free Trade Area of the Americas. UNASUR quickly made major strides in defense and infrastructure cooperation, as well as in mediating conflicts among member countries.

Both Macri and Temer abandoned their predecessors' plans to strengthen UNASUR. Macri's government began participating as an "observer" at summits held by the Pacific Alliance, a bloc of four of the US's closest allies in the region — Colombia, Chile, Peru, and Mexico. Dedicated to liberalizing trade relations (all four members have bilateral "free trade" agreements with the US), promoting foreign investment, and expanding trade with Asia-Pacific Countries, it was heavily promoted by the Obama administration. In a 2013 Wall Street Journal opinion piece, Biden referred to the Alliance as "one of the most promising developments" in the region. What Biden and other Obama officials failed to say out loud, but of which observers of the region were well aware, was that the US-backed Pacific Alliance served to drive a wedge between Latin American nations and weaken progressive and independent regional integration projects like UNASUR.

Venezuela was a third pillar of Latin American integration and, as had been the case under George W. Bush, was targeted for regime change by the Obama administration. A warm, public exchange between Obama and then president Hugo Chávez at a 2009 summit in Trinidad had generated hope that relations between the US and Venezuela might finally improve. But the Obama administration refused to engage in productive dialogue with the Venezuelan government and was consistently hostile in its public statements. Following Chávez's death in 2013, the US government was isolated in its refusal to recognize the electoral victory of Chávez's successor, Nicolás Maduro, despite no evidence of electoral fraud. The US position emboldened opposition activists who engaged in violent protests following the election in an effort to force Maduro to step down. This pattern was repeated in 2014, when the Obama administration condemned the repression of anti-government protests while failing to denounce beheadings, burnings, shootings, and other protester violence that led to numerous casualties.

Hope for a new start to US-Venezuela relations resurfaced when Biden and President Maduro interacted in a friendly manner at Dilma Rousseff's second inauguration in January 2015. Only a month earlier, Obama had announced the normalization of diplomatic relations with Cuba and said that the move was part of an effort to "begin a

new chapter among the nations of the Americas.” But the overtures toward Cuba, which progressed steadily in the months ahead, were not extended toward Venezuela.

In March 2015, Obama signed an executive order declaring the Maduro government an “extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States” in order to justify imposing targeted sanctions against senior government officials. The move, triggered by legislation that Obama had signed into law, appeared designed to appease hawkish Cuban-American legislators who — like much of the foreign policy establishment — saw Venezuela as a much greater regional threat to US interests. This “threat,” which first grew into a US obsession under George W. Bush, appeared to stem primarily from Venezuela’s oil-backed support for integration initiatives and progressive movements in neighboring countries.

During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump at times expressed opposition to US interventions abroad, raising hopes that — as president — he might be less interested in interfering in Latin American internal affairs than had some of his predecessors. These hopes were quickly dashed. In late 2016 and early 2017, Trump met several times with former presidential rival Marco Rubio at the “winter White House,” the Mar-a-Lago resort. Soon afterward, it became clear that the right-wing Cuban-American senator was now Trump’s unofficial advisor on Latin America. Rubio was also busy placing allies, such as Mauricio Claver-Carone and Carlos Trujillo, in key foreign policy positions. Trump’s calculation was quite simple: with Rubio’s guidance, he would step up attacks on the Latin American left — particularly in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua — thereby expanding his base of support among the right-wing Cuban-American electorate in South Florida. This strategy, many suggested, would help ensure Trump’s victory in this key swing state in the 2020 presidential elections.

By the early summer of 2017, Trump began rolling back Obama’s Cuba policies, issuing executive orders placing new restrictions on travel and money transfers to the island. He then turned his sights on Venezuela. First he threatened a military intervention. Then, using the same sanctions powers that Obama had activated against Venezuela in 2015, Trump began to asphyxiate the country economically, preventing the Venezuelan government, already struggling to cope with an economic crisis, from borrowing money on most of the international market. Oil production — Venezuela’s main source of revenue — began to drop precipitously as public investment in maintenance of the oil sector dwindled.

Then, in early 2019, the Trump administration shifted its regime change campaign into high gear. Apparently convinced that the Venezuelan military was prepared to back a coup, Rubio, a few Trump officials, and a small group of Venezuelan opposition hardliners hatched a plan to topple Maduro.

On January 23, Juan Guaidó — a far-right legislator who, through a system of annual rotation, had just become president of the opposition-controlled National Assembly — announced that he was now the president of the country. To justify this move, he advanced a creative interpretation of a few constitutional articles according to which he could temporarily assume the presidency because Maduro had become “permanently unavailable to serve.”

Though much of the Venezuelan opposition was taken by surprise by this move, the US government — which alleged that Maduro’s 2018 reelection was illegitimate — quickly recognized Guaidó as president, as did many right-wing governments in the region. European governments later followed suit, led by the embattled socialist government of Spain, which appeared desperate to ward off accusations of being “soft” on Venezuela.

What didn’t happen, despite explicit appeals from US officials and a new round of sanctions that further suffocated Venezuela’s oil sector, was the anticipated military coup. Hard-line opposition leaders, and their credulous interlocutors in the Trump administration, had vastly overestimated the opposition to Maduro within the country’s armed forces. Again and again. US officials and far-right US allies in the region, like President Iván Duque of Colombia and OAS Secretary General Luís Almagro, called for a military uprising against Maduro. If anything, all of this outside pressure merely bolstered nationalistic sentiment within Venezuela’s armed forces. On April 30, Guaidó — with a handful of dissident military officials and political allies — made a final, desperate coup attempt. It went nowhere. and Guaidó’s star began to fall, turning into a tailspin when a scandal surfaced regarding the apparent misappropriation of funds by the Guaidó “administration.”

But not in Washington. In February 2020, Guaidó was invited to Trump’s State of the Union speech and received a standing ovation from Republican and Democratic legislators alike. Later, he held a joint press conference with Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Only a handful of progressive Democratic legislators, like Ro Khanna and Ilhan Omar, made the bold suggestion that Trump’s Venezuela policies had greatly exacerbated the country’s economic and political crisis and were causing widespread human suffering.

Mainstream Democrats have gone along with other harmful Trump policies in Latin America. They have complained about Trump's barbaric treatment of migrants and about cuts to economic assistance to Central America, but most have yet to question the increase in security assistance to repressive, corrupt Central American governments. They have also voiced support for the Trump-backed "Lima Group" of right-wing governments, whose sole mission has been to support regime change in Venezuela while ignoring appalling human rights abuses and attacks on democracy in places like Colombia, Honduras, Guatemala, and — most recently — Bolivia. Most Democrats, including Biden, failed to denounce the military coup in Bolivia in November 2019. Some even heaped praise on the OAS electoral observation mission in Bolivia, whose patently false claims of election fraud provided the coup mongers with a pretext to force President Evo Morales out of power.

Only Senator Bernie Sanders and a few progressive legislators in the House of Representatives denounced the coup as well as the OAS and Trump administration's role in helping it succeed.

Democrats have also largely gone along with Trump's heavy handed efforts to counter China's growing economic influence in Latin America. The Trump administration's América Crece program provides financial support — through the newly created International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) — to private sector energy and infrastructure projects with the goal of driving Chinese investors out. Under Trump, América Crece appears to be focused on preventing Chinese companies like Huawei from penetrating Latin American telecommunications networks. For instance, a recent bilateral agreement signed with outgoing Ecuadorian president Lenín Moreno commits the government in Quito to exclude China from its telecoms networks in exchange for DFC help in repaying its debt to China. Thus far, Democrats seem to have no issue with this latest iteration of the Monroe Doctrine or with the fact that it further promotes a neoliberal model that places the onus on private sector-led development and virtually ignores the possibility of public sector-led investment in infrastructure and services.

With Trump out of the White House (albeit not without significant resistance) what can we expect Biden's Latin America policy to look like?

As soon as he took office, Biden moved quickly to undo some of Trump's most infamous measures: he rejoined the Paris Agreement on climate, rejoined the World Health Organization and abolished the ban on immigrants from predominately Muslim countries,

among other measures that earned Biden international accolades. But on Latin America there is, as yet, no indication that Biden plans to carry out any sweeping policy reversals.

Biden's Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, has said that the US will continue to recognize Guaidó as president of Venezuela, even as the European Union has announced it will no longer do so. Another Biden official has confirmed that Trump's sanctions on Venezuela will remain in place for the foreseeable future.

On March 9, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki announced that "a Cuba policy shift is not currently among President Biden's top priorities," thereby killing any hope that Biden might revisit Obama's normalization policy towards the island nation or take measures to ease the economic war against Cuba anytime soon.

In other areas, Biden plans on bringing back Obama-era policies that appear to have had more negative, than positive effects. During the presidential campaign, Biden announced a \$4 billion "Plan to Build Security and Prosperity in Partnership with the People of Central America," which appears to closely replicate the Central America strategy that he launched in 2015. A letter to Biden from dozens of civil society organizations expresses "concern that the Plan doubles down on policies that have contributed to poverty, inequality and violence in Central America" and recommends a series of significant policy reforms.

Nearly all of Biden's foreign policy appointees hearken back to the Obama era. But one can hope that Biden and his team will evolve, if they open themselves up to new ideas and care to listen to those, outside of Washington, DC, who know the region well and are not bound by the paradigms that have shaped policy for decades.

For starters, the new administration should desist from the temptation of doubling down on policies that bear no evidence of positive results, as is the case with existing security policy and economic development programs in Central America.

Second, they should at all costs avoid falling into the trap of trying to compete with Republicans for votes in South Florida by adopting interventionist policies targeting the Latin American left. They can never win at that game. Instead of pursuing aggressive measures like sanctions, which generate more hardship for ordinary people in targeted countries, they should focus on winning over South Florida's Cuban-Americans with domestic policies that will improve their lives.

The new administration should break with the long US tradition of systematically supporting right-wing, pro-US governments, no matter their record on human rights and democracy.

Finally, Biden and his team should genuinely bury the Monroe Doctrine and do away with the policy of intervening to “protect” Latin American nations from foreign powers. It’s time to accept that the decline of US hegemony in the region might actually be a good thing for Latin Americans. History has shown that the unhampered self-determination of peoples produces far better political, social, and economic outcomes than foreign intervention does. Allowing Latin American countries to adopt independent political and economic agendas might just lead to the “prosperity and security” that President Biden, as well as all of his predecessors in the White House, have said they want to see in the region.

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