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## **Migration, Drugs, and Tariffs: Whether Biden or Trump, US's Latin American Policy Will Still Be Contemptible**



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With Donald Trump as the new US president, pundits are speculating about how US policy towards Latin America might change.

In this article, we look at some of the speculation, then address three specific instances of how the US's policy priorities may be viewed from a progressive, Latin American perspective. This leads us to a wider argument: that the way these issues are dealt with is symptomatic of Washington's paramount objective of sustaining the US's hegemonic position. In this overriding preoccupation, its policy towards Latin America is only one element, of course, but always of significance because the US hegemon still treats the region as its "backyard."

First, some examples of what the pundits are saying. In *Foreign Affairs*, Brian Winter argues that Trump's return signals a shift away from Biden's neglect of the region. "The reason is straightforward," he says. "Trump's top domestic priorities of cracking down on unauthorized immigration, stopping the smuggling of fentanyl and other illicit drugs, and reducing the influx of Chinese goods into the United States all depend heavily on policy toward Latin America."

Ryan Berg, who is with the thinktank, Center for Strategic and International Studies, funded by the US defense industry, is also hopeful. Trump will "focus U.S. policy more intently on the Western Hemisphere," he argues, "and in so doing, also shore up its own security and prosperity at home."

According to blogger James Bosworth, Biden's "benign neglect" could be replaced by an "aggressive Monroe Doctrine – deportations, tariff wars, militaristic security policies, demands of fealty towards the US, and a rejection of China." However, notwithstanding the attention of Trump's Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, Bosworth thinks there is still a good chance of policy lapsing into benign neglect as the new administration focuses elsewhere.

### **The wrong end of the telescope**

What these and similar analyses share is a concern with problems of importance to the US, including domestic ones, and how they might be tackled by shifts in policy towards Latin America. They view the region from the end of a US-mounted telescope.

Trump's approach may be the more brazen "America first!," but the basic stance is much the same as these pundits. The different scenarios will be worked out in Washington, with Latin America's future seen as shaped by how it handles US policy changes over which it has little influence. Analyses by these supposed experts are constrained by their adopting the same one-dimensional perspective as Washington's, instead of questioning it.

Here's one example. The word "neglect" is superficial because it hides the immense involvement of the US in Latin America even when it is "neglecting" it: from deep commercial ties to a massive military presence. It is also superficial because, in a real sense, the US *constantly* neglects the problems that concern most Latin Americans: low wages, inequality, being safe in the streets, the damaging effects of climate change, and many more. "Neglect" would be seen very differently on the streets of a Latin American city than it is inside the Washington beltway.

### **Who has the "drug problem"?**

The vacuum in US thinking is nowhere more apparent than in responses to the drug problem. Trump threatens to declare Mexican drug cartels to be terrorist organizations and to invade Mexico to attack them.

But, as academic Carlos Pérez-Ricart told *El País*: “This is a problem that does not originate in Mexico. The source, the demand, and the vectors are not Mexican. It is them.” Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum also points out that it is consumption in the US that drives drug production and trafficking in Mexico.

Trump could easily make the same mistake as his predecessor Clinton did two decades ago. Back then, billions were poured into “Plan Colombia” but still failed to solve the “drug problem,” while vastly augmenting violence and human rights violations in the target country.

A foretaste of what might happen, if Trump carries out his threat, occurred last July, when Biden’s administration captured Ismael “El Mayo” Zambada. That caused an all-out war between cartels in the Mexican state of Sinaloa.

Sheinbaum rightly turns questions about drug production and consumption back onto the US. Rhetorically, she asks: “Do you believe that fentanyl is not manufactured in the United States?... Where are the drug cartels in the United States that distribute fentanyl in US cities? Where does the money from the sale of that fentanyl go in the United States?”

If Trump launches a war on cartels, he will not be the first US president to treat drug consumption as a foreign issue rather than a concomitantly domestic one.

### **Where does the “migration problem” originate?**

Trump is also not the first president to be obsessed by migration. Like drugs, it is seen as a problem to be solved by the countries where the migrants originate, while both the “push” and “pull” factors under US control receive less attention.

Exploitation of migrant labor, complex asylum procedures, and schemes such as “humanitarian parole” to encourage migration are downplayed as reasons. Biden intensified US sanctions on various Latin American countries, which have been shown conclusively to provoke massive emigration. Meanwhile Trump threatens to do the same.

Many Latin American countries have been made unsafe by crime linked to drugs or other problems in which the US is implicated. About 392,000 Mexicans were displaced as a result of conflict in 2023 alone, their problem aggravated by the massive, often illegal, export of firearms from the US to Mexico.

Costa Rica, historically a safe country, had a record 880 homicides in 2023, many of which were related to drug trafficking. In Brazil and other countries, US-trained security forces contribute directly to the violence, rather than reducing it.

Mass deportations from the US, promised by Trump, could worsen these problems, as happened in El Salvador in the late 1990s. They would also affect remittances sent home by migrant workers, exacerbating regional poverty. The threatened use of tariffs on exports to the US could also have serious consequences if Latin America does not stand up to Trump's threats. Economist Michael Hudson argues that countries will have to jointly retaliate by refusing to pay dollar-based debts to bond holders if export earnings from the US are summarily cut.

### **China in the US “backyard”**

Trump also joins the Washington consensus in its preoccupation with China's influence in Latin America. Monica de Bolle is with the Peterson Institute for International Economics, a thinktank partly funded by Pentagon contractors. She told the *BBC*: “You have got the backyard of America engaging directly with China. That's going to be problematic.”

Recently retired US Southern Command general, Laura Richardson, was probably the most senior frequent visitor on Washington's behalf to Latin American capitals, during the Biden administration. She accused China of “playing the ‘long game’ with its development of dual-use sites and facilities throughout the region, “adding that those sites could serve as “points of future multi-domain access for the PLA [People's Liberation Army] and strategic naval chokepoints.”

As *Foreign Affairs* points out, Latin America's trade with China has “exploded” from \$18 billion in 2002 to \$480 billion in 2023. China is also investing in huge infrastructure projects, and seemingly its only political condition is a preference for a country to recognize China diplomatically (not Taiwan). Even here, China is not absolute as with Guatemala, Haiti, and Paraguay, which still recognize Taiwan. China still has direct investments in those holdouts, though relatively more modest than with regional countries that fully embrace its one-China policy.

Peru, currently a close US ally, has a new, Chinese-funded megaport at Chancay, opened in November by President Xi Jinping himself. Even right-wing Argentinian president Milei said of China, “They do not demand anything [in return].”

What does the US offer instead? While Antony Blinken proudly displayed old railcars that were gifted to Peru, the reality is that most US “aid” to Latin America is either aimed at

“promoting democracy” (i.e. Washington’s political agenda) or is conditional or exploitative in other ways.

The BBC cites “seasoned observers” who believe that Washington is paying the price for “years of indifference” towards the region’s needs. Where the US sees a loss of strategic influence to China and to a lesser extent to Russia, Iran, and others, Latin American countries see opportunities for development and economic progress.

### **Remember the Monroe Doctrine**

Those calling for a more “benign” policy are forgetting that, in the two centuries since President James Monroe announced the “doctrine,” later given his name, US policy towards Latin America has been aggressively self-interested.

Its troops have intervened thousands of times in the region and have occupied its countries on numerous occasions. Just since World War II, there have been around 50 significant interventions or coup attempts, beginning with Guatemala in 1954. The US has 76 military bases across the region, while other major powers like China and Russia have none.

The doctrine is very much alive. In *Foreign Affairs*, Brian Winter warns: “Many Republicans perceive these linkages [with China], and the growing Chinese presence in Latin America more broadly, as unacceptable violations of the Monroe Doctrine, the 201-year-old edict that the Western Hemisphere should be free of interference from outside powers.”

Bosworth adds that Trump wants Latin America to decisively choose a side in the US vs China scrimmage, not merely underplay the role of China in the hemisphere. Any country courting Trump, he suggests, “needs to show some anti-China vibes.”

Will Freeman is with the Council on Foreign Relations, whose major sponsors are also Pentagon contractors. He thinks that a new Monroe Doctrine and what he calls Trump’s “hardball” diplomacy may partially work, but only with northern Latin America countries, which are more dependent on US trade and other links.

Trump has two imperatives: while one is stifling China’s influence (e.g. by taking possession of the Panama Canal), another is gaining control of mineral resources (a reason for his wanting to acquire Greenland). The desire for mineral resources is not new, either. General Richardson gave an interview in 2023 to another defense-industry-funded thinktank in which she strongly insinuated that Latin American minerals rightly belong to the US.

### **Maintaining hegemonic power against the threat of multipolarity**

Neoconservative Charles Krauthammer, writing 20 years ago for yet another thinktank funded by the defense industry, openly endorsed the US’s status as the dominant hegemonic power and decried multilateralism, at least when not in US interests. “Multipolarity, yes,

when there is no alternative,” he said. “But not when there is. Not when we have the unique imbalance of power that we enjoy today.”

Norwegian commentator Glen Diesen, writing in 2024, contends that the US is still fighting a battle – although perhaps now a losing one – against multipolarity and to retain its predominant status. Trump’s “America first!” is merely a more blatant expression of sentiments held by his other presidential predecessors for clinging on to Washington’s contested hegemony.

The irony of Biden’s presidency was that his pursuit of the Ukraine war has led to warmer relations between his two rivals, Russia and China. In this context, the growth of BRICS has been fostered – an explicitly multipolar, non-hegemonic partnership. As Glen Diesen says, “The war intensified the global decoupling from the West.”

Other steps to maintain US hegemony – its support for Israel’s genocide in Gaza, the regime-change operation in Syria and the breakdown of order in Haiti – suggest that, in Washington’s view, according to Diesen, “chaos is the only alternative to US global dominance.” Time and again, Yankee “beneficence” has meant ruination, not development.

These have further strengthened desires in the global south for alternatives to US dominance, not least in Latin America. Many of its countries (especially those vulnerable to tightening US sanctions) now want to follow the alternative of BRICS.

Unsurprisingly, Trump has been highly critical of this perceived erosion of hegemonic power on Biden’s watch. Thomas Fazi argues in *UnHerd* that this is realism on Trump’s part; he knows the Ukraine war cannot be conclusively won, and that China’s power is difficult to contain. Accordingly, this is leading to a “recalibrating of US priorities toward a more manageable ‘continental’ strategy — a new Monroe Doctrine — aimed at reasserting full hegemony over what it deems to be its natural sphere of influence, the Americas and the northern Atlantic,” stretching from Greenland and the Arctic to Tierra del Fuego and Antarctica.

The pundits may not agree on quite what Trump’s approach towards Latin America will be, but they concur with Winter’s judgment that the region “is about to become a priority for US foreign policy.” His appointment of Marco Rubio is a signal of this. The new secretary of state is a hawk, just like Blinken, but one with a dangerous focus on Latin America.

However, the mere fact that such pundits hark back to the Monroe Doctrine indicates that this is only, so to speak, old wine in new bottles. Even in the recent past, an aggressive application of the 201-year-old Monroe Doctrine has never seen a hiatus.

Recall US-backed coups that deposed Honduran President Manuel Zelaya (2009) and Bolivian Evo Morales (2019), plus the failed coup against Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua (2018), along with the parliamentary coup that ousted Paraguayan Fernando Lugo (2012). To these, US-backed regime change by “lawfare” included Dilma Rousseff in Brazil (2016) and Pedro Castillo in Peru (2023). Currently presidential elections have simply been suspended in Haiti and Peru with US backing.

Even if Trump is more blatant than his predecessors in making clear that his policymaking is based entirely on what he perceives to be US interests, rather than those of Latin Americans, this is not new.

As commentator Caitlin Johnstone points out, the main difference between Trump and his predecessors is that he “makes the US empire much more transparent and unhidden.” From the other end of the political spectrum, a former John McCain adviser echoes the same assessment: “there will likely be far more continuity between the two administrations than meets the eye.”

Regardless, Latin America will continue to struggle to set its own destiny, patchily and with setbacks, and this will likely draw it away from the hegemon, whatever the US does.

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