

# **Breaking Up is Hard to Do: U.S.-Latin American Relations Under Trump**

**Greg Weeks**

**University of North Carolina at Charlotte**

**Presented at SECOLAS in my house, April 17, 2021**

U.S.-Latin American relations changed in important ways in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In particular, governments from outside the hemisphere are more prominent than they've been for over a century, with China, Russia, India, and others appearing regularly. This was true both of U.S. allies as well as governments it generally considered adversarial. President Donald Trump railed against this development, to no effect.

During his term in office, Donald Trump was consistently hostile toward Latin America and its people. This paper uses the concept of autonomy to make a twofold argument. First, Trump accelerated an already existing trend whereby Latin American leaders increasingly looked to expand opportunities of all kinds with governments outside the hemisphere. Second, ideological and nationalist obstacles within Latin America slowed or even blocked autonomous action. Trump held open the autonomy door, so to speak, but many were hesitant to walk through it.

## Conceptualizing Autonomy

The predominant Latin American approach to understanding U.S.-Latin American relations centers on autonomy, a literature almost exclusively in Spanish and Portuguese.<sup>1</sup> Professors at Latin American universities have written most of the little you will find in English, while the literature produced in the United States stays centered on U.S. theoretical developments and rarely bothers to examine, much less cite, what else might be out there.

The etymology of *autonomy* is Greek from the words for “self,” “rule”, and “law.” At root it is about not being subservient to another and having the latitude to deal with your own affairs without external coercion. In the history of U.S.-Latin American relations, autonomy became important because of the U.S. proclivity to interfere in the affairs of countries, many times to the point of invasion and occupation, which by definition involves the loss of autonomy.<sup>2</sup> Because of this history, autonomy in Latin America carries with it a normative component. Seeking autonomy is not just possible but desirable.

While the concept of autonomy is difficult to find in non-Latin American works on International Relations (IR), in Latin America it has been a topic of considerable debate for several decades, and is still going strong.<sup>3</sup> Juan Carlos Puig, an Argentine academic, lawyer and eventually Minister of Foreign Relations, was (and long after his death, still remains) the major scholarly voice on the topic.<sup>4</sup> For Puig, autonomy is about the ability to make policy decisions without outside interference. Puig accepted the notion of international anarchy, meaning lack of a world government, which is core to realist theory, and the dominance of certain great powers (most notably the United States) from dependency theory. But he considered autonomy to fall outside those theoretical perspectives, in that there is still space for weaker states to make their own autonomous decisions to defend their interests. For Puig, autonomy was about the rational calculation of what independent policies were possible before the United States threw up obstacles. The concept of autonomy continues to take realist and dependency theories seriously but reshapes the debate.

The essence of dependency theory is that less developed countries are locked in to an economic relationship with the developed world that leaves them in a permanent position of weakness. The hierarchical structure of the global economic system allows countries like the

United States to import raw materials at low prices from Latin America, produce finished goods, and then export those industrial goods back to Latin America at higher prices. Because of this relationship, the region was unable to generate enough capital on its own to promote economic development (and ideally industrialization). There is no single “dependency theory,” as they range from a uniform argument that all Latin American countries have similar relationships to the developed world to more attention to different ways in which countries have become inserted into the global economy, which in some cases can leave room for successful dependent development.<sup>5</sup>

Broadly speaking, the Latin American political responses to the dependent relationship took two forms. Even before dependency theory was fleshed out in academia, the United Nations’ Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC in English, CEPAL in Spanish) had proposed new models of economic development that would shield local economies from the more powerful “developed” economies. States could carve out economic autonomy by raising tariffs and subsidizing domestic industries, thus protecting them from imports and nurturing them to compete with imports (Franko 2003, 63). Raúl Prebisch (1962, 2), an Argentine economist who became Executive Director of ECLAC in 1950, was ambivalent about protectionism, writing that the “solution does not lie in growth at the expense of foreign trade.” Prebisch hoped that growth would make it unnecessary to restrict imports, but growth was essential for the model to function. Marxists, meanwhile, argued that only revolution would break the economic bonds to the United States. Both of these responses were efforts to spark autonomous economic policy, which by definition meant reducing U.S. influence to differing degrees.

Realism is also a structural theory founded on the assertion that global politics are defined by anarchy. There is no world police or military force, so individual states are left to seek their own security.<sup>6</sup> In this situation, states with weaker military and economic capabilities are the most vulnerable. State behavior should therefore be understood in terms of relative capabilities. Those who have more power than others act accordingly with their own self-interest driving them. In the Latin American context, one important takeaway was that states in the region faced retribution if they pursued policies (either domestic or foreign) that the United States deemed as threatening. States that attempted to break entirely from U.S. influence, most notably Cuba, found themselves under unrelenting attacks.<sup>7</sup>

From the perspective of autonomy, realist theory is quite pessimistic as the relatively weaker Latin American countries have little leeway. One of the few ways is to *balance*, whereby countries group together to serve as a counterbalance to the largest power. Latin American leaders had been trying to do this with minimal success since independence. The other main option is *bandwagoning*, which means aligning your own state interests more closely to the United States and drastically decreasing autonomous actions. Puig accepted realist assumptions about international anarchy and power, but also dependency assumptions about economic structures.

For Puig, autonomy focused on resistance to the great power, which for Argentina (and the rest of Latin America) meant the United States. That entailed solidarity among those states. He considered autonomy to be a zero-sum game, where gains by lesser powers came at the expense of the more powerful.

Latin American debates about autonomy also tend to pay close attention to national economic policy and to regional integration. Puig himself saw regional integration as a critical

step toward autonomy.<sup>8</sup> He differentiated between “heterodox autonomy,” which accepted (or at least was resigned to) the position of the great power and sought to work within its limitations, and “secessionist autonomy,” which involves, in his words, “cutting the umbilical cord.”<sup>9</sup> Either way, the objective of becoming more autonomous is to move as far away from a position of dependence as possible.

The concept was challenged and shaped over time. Puig’s conception was essentially realist in nature and resembled balancing, whereby weaker countries form alliances to balance the power of the strongest power. During the Cold War some Latin American leaders believed that autonomy must include a measure of separation from the United States. For example, many Latin American countries were members of the Non-Aligned Movement, which sought to provide an informal alliance of countries that excluded the United States and the Soviet Union. It often criticized U.S. policy toward less-developed countries, beginning with Vietnam.

Once the Cold War ended and Latin American countries opened up economically to the world, that emphasis on separation shifted. For example, Roberto Russell and Juan Gabriel Tokatlian developed the concept of “relational autonomy,” which is distinct because it rejects the notion of self-sufficiency and instead emphasizes that “both the defense and the expansion of autonomy enjoyed by Latin American countries today can no longer depend on national or subregional policies of isolation, self-sufficiency, or opposition.”<sup>10</sup> In general, even though the conceptual development of autonomy took place during the Cold War, the numerous projects in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century ensured that it remained relevant and widely mentioned in the Latin American literature (Zapata 2017).

Carlos Escudé was instrumental in developing the notion of “peripheral realism,” which questioned the goal of autonomy.<sup>11</sup> He argued that autonomy was too often considered an end to

itself in the developing world, as it connoted success in pursuing national goals. Instead, all countries, but especially middle-sized ones, have considerable freedom of choice and do not always need to seek complete autonomy. Further, less powerful countries should avoid openly confronting the greater powers because they know they will lose and this will hurt the general population. He frames this as “total foreign policy autonomy = absolute domestic tyranny” (Schenoni and Escudé 2016, 4). For strategy, Escudé focused in particular on attracting investment and otherwise boosting the economy, which would best serve the citizens of less developed countries.<sup>12</sup> The Brazilian theorist Helio Jaguaribe echoed the relevance of size, pointing out the need to have adequate natural and human resources to exercise international autonomy in the face of imperial (meaning U.S.) influence.<sup>13</sup> From that perspective, smaller countries had little chance to increase their autonomy because they could not withstand the effect of being the target of U.S. antagonism.

According to Escudé, autonomy should consider the costs associated with using that freedom. Escudé argues that the pursuit of autonomy can be damaging because the costs are so high. What peripheral realism argues is a careful balance between autonomy and “playing along” with the great power in order to achieve specific national goals. The caveat is that this holds “as long as this does not entail sacrificing its own material interests, which are paramount.”<sup>14</sup> In this view, states should not embrace autonomy just for the sake of autonomy. They must tie those efforts to specific interests they are trying to achieve. Otherwise, the punishment meted out by the stronger power is simply not worth the gain.

Clearly, an important part of this debate is the question of whether a country is entirely free of U.S. constraints or not. Vigevani and Cepaluni (2009, 3) take the position that autonomy falls along a continuum between the ideal types of total dependence and total autonomy. This

book will consider autonomy in the same way, with total separation from the United States at one end and military occupation on the other. Of course, neither currently exists and in fact the former has never existed while the latter has not existed for many years. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Latin America has become more autonomous than ever before, but constraints still exist. And, although much of the pursuit of autonomy in Latin America has been explicitly aimed at breaking away from U.S. control, increasingly it is intended more broadly to maximize economic and diplomatic gains. The United States therefore becomes one actor—albeit a powerful one—among several, or many.

### Elements of Latin American Autonomy

Latin America is more autonomous from the United States now than perhaps it ever has been. Three almost simultaneous processes facilitated Latin American autonomy as the 20<sup>th</sup> century ended.

**First**, in the 1980s virtually all of Latin America undertook a broad array of structural adjustments, including a shift of their economies away from protectionism and toward exporting as the engine of economic growth. This entailed privatization of state industry, the end of government subsidies, deregulation, and the lowering of trade barriers. The United States certainly pressured Latin American policy makers to enact such policies, though they found plenty of elite interest in the region. Likeminded presidents and economic ministers believed such reforms were necessary to bring their countries out of debt.

In some countries the sometimes disastrous results of these reforms led to simmering discontent that eventually manifested itself in support for leftist candidates and movements. These movements were defined in large part by their efforts to seek autonomy from U.S.

economic hegemony. Fueled by the ideals of dependency theory, many leftist leaders called for solidarity against the imperial designs of the United States and for a more global approach to economic development that marginalized U.S. influence to the extent possible.

But in other cases, such as Chile, Colombia, and Mexico, there was no electoral swing from right to left; instead they stayed somewhere in an ideological middle. At the same time, Latin Americans—both political and economic actors—began actively seeking new global partners. For radicals and moderates alike, this new economic model challenged prevailing assumptions about the traditional role of the United States.

**Second**, this new focus on export-led development also prompted *all* governments—regardless of ideology—to start looking beyond the Western Hemisphere for those trading partners, sources of investment, and possible loans. For those countries that continued to favor market-oriented policies into the 2000s, such as Mexico and Colombia, more partners meant more markets for exports and opportunities for imports. While not the primary aim, this dissatisfaction resulted in more autonomy from the United States.

For countries trying to break away from the free market model, such as Bolivia and Venezuela, more partners meant sources of income that did not entail dependence on the United States. Aid and loans from China, for example, did not have the same strings that came with U.S. funding and decreased Washington's ability to use withholding of aid and loans as punishment. Still other countries, such as Brazil, straddled the two orientations by sticking with the market model while also pushing back on the United States. All of those governments were embracing autonomy, albeit for different reasons.

**Third** was the end of the Cold War, which had its last gasp in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. That was a pivotal moment in U.S.-Latin American relations because the



automatic antagonism toward leftist political movements in Latin America, virulent during the Cold War, gave way to flexibility and pragmatism. During the Cold War, when leftist presidents took power the United States worked quickly to invade or to encourage military coups (Guatemala in 1954, Brazil in 1964, the Dominican Republic in 1965, and Chile in 1973 are prominent examples). Governments that came to power through revolution (Cuba in 1959 and Nicaragua in 1979) soon faced hostility: unremitting violence, covert action, and harassment.

### The Trump Era

At the time of Donald Trump's election as president in 2016, Latin American autonomy was extensive when compared to the 20th century. China had a presence everywhere, which would have been close to unthinkable a few decades prior. U.S. officials were certainly not pleased about the situation, but their options were limited. They could sanction Latin American countries or threaten China, which risked serious backlash. They could court those governments, but that was never a hallmark of Trump policies. But not all opportunities worked out.

When Donald Trump won the U.S. presidential election in 2016, his message about Latin America was not friendly. It was instead liberally laced with nationalism, isolationism, and verbal abuse. His inaugural address was apocalyptic, where "American carnage" required policies based on "America First" principles to "protect our borders from the ravages of other countries" (CNN 2016). The speech was intense enough to prompt George W. Bush to remark, "That was some weird shit."<sup>1</sup> Trump opposed free trade agreements, especially the North American Free Trade Agreement, he wanted to build a wall on the border with Mexico and to

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<sup>1</sup> Such a statement was not typical for a former president to say of a current president, to the point that the fact-checking website Snopes felt compelled to confirm that three different people heard it. <https://www.snopes.com/news/2017/03/31/bush-trumps-inauguration-weird-sht/>

restrict migration of all types from the region. His supporters whooped and cheered in enthusiastic approval. Those messages made Latin American leaders uneasy about what concrete policies would emerge from them.<sup>15</sup> That uncertainty never fully dissipated and U.S.-Latin American relations changed as a consequence.

One aspect of Trump's foreign policy that prompted never-ending consternation was his use of Twitter. He dropped rhetorical bombs without warning, often leaving his own advisors scrambling to explain what he said and meant. His social media habit was further complicated by his proclivity to make things up as he went. He shifted between praising and attacking the Mexican government and his ire occasionally also shifted to Central America, Venezuela, or Cuba. Tweets would sometimes, though not always, be followed by a punitive policy announcement. Even those, however, were not necessarily carried out. President Trump's style of diplomacy tended toward harsh threats aimed at forcing concessions, then backing off. One result was the generalized sense in Latin America that the United States was not a reliable partner, given that agreements could change on a dime without warning.

All of Latin America responded by looking to new economic and diplomatic partners, or simply deepening relationships with existing ones other than the United States, especially with China. Even countries like Australia, which did not have strong historical ties to Latin America, negotiated a free trade agreement with Peru specifically in response to Trump's protectionism (Weeks 2018). The Trump administration's approach opened up new, even unprecedented opportunities for autonomy.

In this regard, Trump's election did not create the Latin American inclination to play the field more, but it certainly accelerated it. What once was an ideological mission or a pragmatic shift became necessity. If the United States became protectionist long-term, which would be

even more likely if Trump were re-elected to a second term, then Latin American governments needed more options. Throughout his term, Trump and his surrogates never let up on the basic “America First” message, so Latin American leaders became more intent on finding new partners.

Meanwhile, some older efforts at autonomy began falling apart. In 2018, Colombian Foreign Minister dismissed UNASUR as something “created by late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez to fracture the inter-American system and to create a sounding board for his regime” (Deutsche Welle 2018). Earlier in the year, half of the entire organization (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Paraguay) suspended their memberships because the organization seemed paralyzed (Paraguassu 2018). The initiatives of the century’s first decade, largely initiated by Venezuela, faded away. Lack of leadership combined with traditional fractured hemispheric unity to put UNASUR in the same category of countless failed attempts at regional institutional cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

Hopes of regional unity did not die with UNASUR, but they changed ideological flavor. In 2019, Iván Duque and Sebastián Piñera, conservative presidents of Colombia and Chile respectively, proposed the creation of the Forum for South American Progress (PROSUR) to replace UNASUR. Shortly thereafter, the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru signed the Santiago Declaration to become founding members. Venezuela was not invited because it was not democratic. The declaration was broad, with a call for integration but also flexibility, respect for human rights, and respect for national territory

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<sup>2</sup> From the time of Latin American independence, when the Liberator Simón Bolívar called for unity and to his great frustration never achieved it.

(Ministero de Relaciones Exteriores 2019).<sup>3</sup> It was less ambitious than most of Hugo Chávez's projects, noting that integration should move forward according to each state's "own national realities."

In 2020, Paraguayan President Adbo Benitez met with Duque and discussed the matter (Ferreira 2020). Meanwhile, Duque and Piñera announced that they wanted to raise PROSUR to a treaty level, to be ratified by national legislatures (Seguimiento 2020). Duque's own words, though, showed even more clearly the ideology embedded in the new institution. It would, he said, be aimed at promoting "liberty" and "free trade" while remaining "non-bureaucratic (Ibid.). This makes it more difficult to serve as a long-term vehicle for generating lasting investment and trade connections that strengthen South America without the presence of the United States. They depend on the continued election of like-minded leaders, which in a democratic context can never be counted on.

### Venezuela's Legitimacy Crisis

In early 2019, Nicolás Maduro was scheduled to be inaugurated after being elected the previous year. The election was marred by calls of fraud, imprisonment of opposition political leaders, intimidation, and media harassment. The opposition chose not to participate and called the election illegitimate. Juan Guaidó, the little-known President of the National Assembly announced that Maduro was an "usurper" and called for an interim government and new elections. This was actually shaky from a legal perspective, since the constitution did not include

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<sup>3</sup> The declaration also calls for PROSUR to have a structure that is "not costly," presumably a stab at the notion that Hugo Chávez used state funds to advance his goals without attention to long-term structures, efficiency, or organization. The Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (n.d.) referred to a "light structure."

provisions for interim governments and had no language for deciding the president was illegitimate (as opposed to, say, incapacitated). The constitution certainly did not anticipate the legislative and executive branches labeling each other illegal and illegitimate. A constitutional crisis blew up.

January 23 was the anniversary marking the uprising that ultimately overthrew the Venezuelan dictator Marcos Pérez Jimenez in 1958. On that day Guaidó went before a crowd and proclaimed himself to be President of Venezuela. Not long after, Donald Trump recognized him as such. Following the U.S. example, Canada recognized Guaidó and a slew of other countries followed suit. The U.S. and Venezuelan traded accusations and threats and from there, the situation settled into stalemate.

President Trump and members of his administration periodically hinted at invasion, claiming that “all options were on the table.” John Bolton, who had been a strong supporter of the Iraq invasion to overthrow Saddam Hussein in 2003, was National Security Advisor and an advocate for doing the same in Venezuela. Sometimes he was even theatrical, as when he went to a press briefing with a yellow pad with “5,000 troops to Colombia” scrawled on it.<sup>4</sup> In his memoirs, he said that talking of invasion “was solely to keep Trump interested in the objective of overthrowing Maduro, without actually wasting a lot of time on a nonstarter” (Bolton 2020, 255). Bolton’s ambivalence seemed to mirror Trump, who wanted credit for ousting Maduro but chose neither force nor dialogue as a means of doing so. Instead, U.S. policy toward Venezuela took on the same hues as Cuba policy, where the U.S. applies sanctions on the assumption that the economic pain will generate armed opposition within the country. Even if it doesn’t work, it is at least punishing an adversarial government.

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<sup>4</sup>The image was all over social media: <https://twitter.com/nedprice/status/1090003781729828864>

The Trump administration brought in Elliott Abrams to coordinate Venezuela policy. Abrams was an infamously old hand at U.S.-Latin American relations, having served in the Reagan administration, where he defended the human rights records of pro-U.S. dictatorships and ultimately was convicted (and later pardoned presidentially) for withholding information from Congress when testifying about the Iran-Contra affair. As with Bolton, the administration was signaling an old-fashioned approach to relations that always carried the threat of force behind it.

The Trump administration rejected multilateral coordination. In 2017, twelve countries from across the western hemisphere, including Venezuela as represented by Juan Guaidó, joined to apply multilateral pressure to the Maduro government. It became known as the Lima Group (for the city where it first convened). The group periodically issued responses to events in Venezuela, such as condemning clearly unfree elections. Its purpose was to find peaceful and negotiated solutions to restore democracy in Venezuela, especially through free and fair elections.

The Lima Group did not represent a Latin American initiative intended to exclude the United States as such. The exclusion was self-imposed. The Trump administration did not agree with the Lima Group's rejection of armed force or of its support for dialogue, though the administration periodically praised the group publicly when its policy preferences converged (generally meaning condemnation). The Lima Group was launched in large part by Peru, and Brazil's role was much smaller. Barros and Gonçalves (2019) argue that this marked a shift toward the fragmentation of regional governance. Whatever cohesion Chávez once achieved had disintegrated, and Brazil showed no interest in filling the gap. Further, Mexico under AMLO did not support any Lima Group action that it considered interventionist, a shift that found echo

under the new Argentine government of Alberto Fernández. AMLO objected to any declaration on Venezuela (Dinatale 2020). Chávez was gone, but ideological differences remained a roadblock for hemispheric unity. In his memoir, John Bolton provides considerable detail about events in Venezuela, but mentions the Lima Group only in passing. The Trump administration did not pay it much attention.

In December 2020, Venezuela held legislative elections that the opposition boycotted and in which only about 30 percent of Venezuelans bothered to participate. Since he did not run, Juan Guaidó's role was ambiguous. Was he still a legislator (and recognized by many as president) by virtue of the last free elections, or was he a former legislator? The Trump administration insisted the former, but the Latin American response, as always, varied. The Lima Group issued a statement saying it did not recognize the "legitimacy or legality" of the new National Assembly, though it did not refer to Guaidó as president (Lima Group 2021). Once again, however, both Argentina and Mexico refused to sign.

Under these conditions, Venezuela became what Escudé (2014) labeled a "rebel state." The Venezuelan government faced high costs for almost any action it took, so it acted however it could to survive. For example, in January 2019, President Trump issued an executive order imposing sanctions on PDVSA, which is the only vehicle for the import and export of oil. U.S. companies could therefore not engage in any transaction with PDVSA without approval. Maduro therefore turned to Russia and also India. Two months later, the administration applied sanctions to a Russian bank, Evrofinance Mosnarbank, that worked with PDVSA to elude the sanctions. Individually-applied sanctions continued thereafter. Later, Maduro worked with Iran, which of course was near the top of adversaries for the Trump administration. Like Cuba, Maduro had total autonomy—the United States was already punishing the country as much as it could, short

of military invasion.<sup>5</sup> Short of using armed force, however, the Trump administration found itself unable to isolate Venezuela fully. Russia and Iran managed to find ways to ship Venezuelan crude.

This level of autonomy entailed considerable suffering for Venezuelans. Venezuelan economist Luis Oliveros (2020) estimated that U.S. sanctions directly caused a decrease of \$17-\$31 billion from 2017 to 2020. Those came on top on long-standing economic mismanagement and corruption, which left over 90 percent of the population in poverty. As in Cuba, the irony was that access to dollars—the currency of the sanctioning country—was a lifeline for many. Chávez originally viewed autonomy as a means to generate greater equality and enhanced sovereignty. For Maduro, autonomy became a difficult and unwanted consequence of U.S. wrath. By necessity, it meant Venezuela’s ties to Russia and Iran in particular became stronger than ever, even as its dependence on the U.S. dollar deepened.

Cuba’s situation was similar, though of course not new. The Trump administration tightened sanctions. His reasoning repeated the rhetoric commonly heard since the early 1960s. Saying that he was “canceling the last administration’s completely one-sided deal with Cuba,” he worked toward ending the “reign of suffering” because “I do believe that end is in the very near future” (The White House 2017). Mere days before Trump left office, the State Department placed Cuba on the State Sponsor of Terrorism list, which it shared with Iran, North Korea, and Syria. From 1982-2015, Cuba had been on that list, with the evidence for sponsoring terrorism becoming increasingly tenuous. By 2015, when Obama removed it, the rationale was centered mostly on relations with the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias Colombianas (FARC) guerrillas.

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<sup>5</sup> Even there, the leader of a failed coup led by U.S. military contractors in 2020 said he had “encouragement” from the administration (in addition to Juan Guaidó himself) and plotted in Trump hotels in Washington, DC and in Floruda (Delgado et al, 2020).



The Trump administration also cited Colombia, though no longer focusing on the now demobilized FARC, and looking instead at the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), who had leaders in Havana engaged in peace talks with the Colombian government. Being on the list entails sanctions not only on the country but on anyone trading with them, thus complicating commercial relations. The designation was aimed primarily, if not entirely, at conservative Cuban-American voters in Florida, who Trump viewed as loyal supporters.<sup>6</sup> Crafting Cuba policy to please that audience dated back to the 1980s.

This was a situation Cuba was deeply familiar with. In 2018, Miguel Díaz-Canel became President of the Council of State and the Council of Ministers, which is Cuba's executive. Fidel was gone and Raúl Castro at age 87 transitioned to Secretary of the Communist Party. Being 29 years younger than Raúl, Díaz-Canel brought the Castros' long-standing message to Twitter. Instead of hours-long speeches a la Fidel, Díaz-Canel tweeted about Donald Trump's message being "arrogant, cynical, immoral, offensive, interventionist, hypocritical, war-like, and dirty" (Díaz-Canel 2019). Cuba and Venezuela, tight for years, became even more close.

Despite its historically close relationship with Cuba and its new one with Venezuela, Russia never became a significant part of Latin American autonomy. Although it marketed its Covid-19 vaccines, trade remained modest and it did not follow China's strategy of engaging (and spending) across the entire hemisphere. Vladimir Putin's interest was aimed primarily at Cuba and Venezuela, with some interest in Nicaragua given not only its historical ideological connection from the Cold War, but also because under Daniel Ortega it had evolved into the type of authoritarian and anti-U.S. government that Putin appreciated. Russia did not have the

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<sup>6</sup> Similarly, those voters were receptive to the assertion that Joe Biden would copy the Venezuelan economic model in the United States, a message Trump repeated many times leading up to the 2020 presidential election.

resources or indeed even sufficient interest to become a serious competitor to the United States in most of the region. It did view Cuba as a traditional ally, but the times of pouring resources into it were old history.

### Brazil and Mexico: Autonomy Rollback

Brazil serves as a vivid reminder that presidential changes can presage major shifts in foreign policy and interest in autonomy as a goal. Traditionally, Brazil jealously guarded its role as a regional leader and as a rising global power. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2011) was a leftist but pragmatic leader who wanted to carve out an autonomous international role but without openly antagonizing the United States. Typically, this kind of goal transcended ideology in Brazil.

The 2018 presidential election was controversial and contentious. Lula, still a popular political icon, was in prison on corruption charges and not allowed to run. The Worker's Party candidate Fernando Haddad lost to Jair Bolsonaro, a member of the Chamber of Deputies who ran a campaign eerily but also self-consciously similar to Donald Trump's. His message was unabashedly nationalist, racist, homophobic, and authoritarian.

Bolsonaro's foreign policy made a drastic turn toward the United States, and Trump in particular. He prioritized aligning Brazil with the United States with regard to Israel and rejected the Paris Agreement on climate change, for example. His style was even similar, as he casually offended other presidents (most notably France). He professed an anti-globalist worldview, replete with conspiracy theories about climate change and other "hoaxes." Two of his first three trips abroad were to Israel and the United States. He showed no interest in continuing the

tradition of exerting leadership in South America, and certainly did not care about projecting beyond there.

At times, even sovereignty gave way to signaling support for the United States. In 2019, Bolsonaro alarmed his own military by announcing he was open to the idea of having U.S. military presence is necessary, especially in the context of the Venezuelan crisis (Brooks and Paraguassu 2019). This is the sort of thing no one would ever expect to hear coming from the mouth of a Brazilian president, but there it was.

An even more head-turning shift came from Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico. In 2017, a year before he was elected, he published a book, *Oye Trump (Listen Up Trump)* and even presented it to audiences in the United States. Speculation ran wild on both sides of the border about what direction U.S.-Mexican relations would take. He had a pugnacious tone, which when combined with traditional Mexican suspicion of the United States, suggested a rough bilateral relationship. But there was something else at play as well. Former Obama official Mark Feierstein said he had heard Trump refer to AMLO as “Juan Trump,” a Mexican version of himself (Tan 2018). AMLO’s critics accused him of authoritarian tendencies like Trump’s.

AMLO’s foreign policy toward Latin America was hesitant. Mexico’s immigration policy toward Central America traditionally had been aggressive even while the government publicly complaining of how Mexicans were treated at the northern border. Yet under AMLO, Mexico accepted U.S. demands without complaint. In early 2019, the Trump administration implemented the Migration Protection Protocols (MPP), which became popularly known as the “Remain in Mexico” policy. The policy stipulated that anyone hoping to cross the U.S.-Mexico border to seek asylum would be required to stay in Mexico while U.S. courts decided their fate. For months or years, they faced harsh conditions in unfamiliar areas. By 2020, only 4 percent

even had access to legal representation, less than 1 percent had been granted asylum, and almost 1,000 reported kidnapping, rape, torture, and/or assault while they waited (Human Rights Watch 2020). Part of AMLO's response was to demand the resignation of the Commissioner of the National Institute of Migration and replace him with someone who had spent the bulk of his career as administrator of prisons, even while framing his acceptance of Trump's policy as seeking a humanitarian solution to the migration crisis. (Gutiérrez 2020).

AMLO remained a firm admirer of his U.S. counterpart, going so far as to say that Trump had been good for Mexico (Domínguez 2021). It seemed rather that Trump had been good for *him* politically, insofar that Trump never criticized AMLO for corruption, for example, or for his opposition to renewable energy. AMLO navigated around Trump's foreign policy, accepting what he couldn't change and appreciating U.S. disinterest in governance. Trump also remained quiet as AMLO courted China for Covid-19 vaccines. Through the pandemic, Mexico's trade with the U.S. dipped while China's rose. Mexico renegotiated NAFTA but never lost sight of China, something that the Trump administration was helpless to stop.

At the end of Trump's presidency, the Mexican and Brazilian presidents would share the dubious distinction of being the only Latin American presidents not to congratulate Joe Biden and recognize his victory, preferring to wait until Trump's string of unsuccessful and conspiracy-laden electoral lawsuits ended. By mid-November, only they, along with the Russian and North Korean dictatorships, still refused to acknowledge Biden's win. That fact highlighted the historically unprecedented obeisance to a U.S. leader, to the point of tacitly accepting an outlandish and clearly fictitious about voter fraud. Such admiration reached absurdist peaks, such as when Jair Bolsonaro's son Eduardo put Trump's face on his Twitter account to protest

“TWITTER’S AUTHORITARY [sic] ACTS,” referring to Twitter banning the U.S. president (Bolsonaro 2021). They are all in for Trump.

In small countries close to the United States, autonomy of any kind was much more difficult. During the Trump administration, Central American governments faced intense, even overwhelming pressure to accept harsh U.S. immigration policies. In 2019 the U.S. government announced the negotiation of “Asylum Cooperative Agreements” with Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Their purpose was to send asylum seekers to those countries rather than allow them to enter the United States. The Department of Homeland Security (2020) claimed the intent was to “allow migrants to seek protection within the region,” even though, of course, their original goal had been to leave the region. Guatemala implemented the agreement and El Salvador announced its intent to do so in 2020, but the Biden administration quickly suspended the program and began a process to terminate it.

U.S. influence in Central America is also notable with regard to corruption. Guatemalan elites felt squeezed by CICIG, which had been an Obama-era creation. Similarly, in 2016 the Organization of American States had sponsored an anti-corruption in Honduras, called The Support Mission Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH). Although its mandate was narrower than CICIG (for example, it relied more on the executive branch and was only an advisory body) it uncovered considerable wrongdoing on the part of Honduran elites (Perelló 2020). Those elites predictably wanted it gone and with Trump in office, they felt no external pressure to renew MACCIH’s mandate when it expired in early 2020. The inclinations of the U.S. president were central to the very existence of independent anti-corruption commissions in Central America. Support served as pressure to political elites, while signals of disinterest prompted

### The Impact of Covid-19

Covid-19 was first identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, and by March 2020 sparked countries to impose lockdowns and close their borders. Like the rest of the world, Latin Americans watched in alarm as the virus spread through their communities and overwhelmed their already badly strained healthcare systems. The impact of Covid-19 on Latin America was quickly devastating. By the latter half of 2020, the region had 28 percent of the world's cases and 34 percent of deaths, while only comprising 8.2 percent of the world's population (IMFBlog 2020). That led to a GDP contraction of 8.1 percent over the year prior. With large informal economies, weak safety nets, and poorly resourced healthcare systems, people defied lockdown orders in order to survive. Tens of millions of jobs were lost, and recovery was slow.

The impact on U.S.-Latin American relations followed a similar pattern as the first three years of the administration. By and large, the Trump administration directly or indirectly sent financial and/or material aid while simultaneously maintaining a highly public skepticism and even hostility toward basic precautions such as wearing masks to prevent spread.<sup>7</sup> Billions were made available to the region, through the Inter-American Development Bank, the Development Bank of Latin America, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund, in addition to more direct aid (Congressional Research Service 2021).

Covid-19 did, however, show that opportunities for greater autonomy do not necessarily yield results. There was no coordination, and neighboring countries squabbled. When Jair Bolsonaro contracted the virus in 2020, Argentine president Alberto Fernández sent a message wishing him well but he also poked Bolsonaro with “the virus does not distinguish rulers from

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<sup>7</sup> AMLO, a committed anti-masker, shared that view.

the ruled” (Berti 2020). Argentina had locked down, whereas Brazil remained more open, with the president contemptuous of safety measures. López Obrador shared much the same attitude, which put both leaders right alongside Donald Trump. The Organization of American States opened an information portal on its website and issued various proclamations, but had no noticeable influence on national policies.

Importantly, the virus also deepened bilateral ties with China. In July 2020, the Chinese and Mexican foreign ministers co-pressed over a virtual meeting, attended by their counterparts from across the region. Foreigner Minister Wang Yi told the group that China would provide access to the vaccine it was developing (Gobierno de México 2020). China sent masks, ventilators, testkits, and other Covid-related medical supplies. The Chinese government also participated in the leftist Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) meetings to discuss the epidemic. Nicolás Maduro talked of help from the Russians, but that assistance was not region-wide like China’s.<sup>8</sup> Covid-19’s economic effects did bring Chinese development loans to a halt in 2020, for the first time in 15 years (Goodman 2021). This seemed clearly to be a pause, not a halt, and the Chinese government showed no slackening of interest.

The U.S. response was to declare that it would not join a global effort to create and distribute a vaccine because President Trump believed the World Health Organization, which was to coordinate it, was too “China-centric“ (Rauhala and Abutaleb 2020). The clear irony was that avoiding a supposedly “China-centric” organization led to enhanced Chinese influence on Latin America. The United States did send aid to individual countries, for example through the U.S. Agency for International Development, but chose not to spearhead any regional response or to assume a leadership position in the hemisphere. The playing field was left open for China and

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<sup>8</sup> The Sputnik vaccine did arrive in 2021, and Maduro received the first dose.

to a lesser extent India and Russia. These countries had vaccines available, and Latin American governments were interested in both. India, for example, sent vaccines to Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico (Seshasayee 2021).<sup>9</sup> U.S. companies producing vaccines, such as Pfizer, were available as well, but no Latin American country looked exclusively at the United States. There was plenty of competition, often with lower costs outside the United States. The U.S. was not a leader in this area.

After Trump left office, the Biden administration did try to reassert itself vis-à-vis China with vaccines. For example, it encouraged Paraguay to obtain vaccines through Taiwan (Reuters 2021). Since Paraguay was one of only 15 countries in the world to maintain diplomatic relations, Taiwan jumped at the opportunity. In 2017, Panama switched its recognition from Taiwan to China, with El Salvador and the Dominican Republic following in 2018. This was a major diplomatic victory for China, which promised large infrastructure projects through its Belt and Road initiative.

China's presence had co-existed with Donald Trump's indifference to the point that in late 2020, an Argentine official said, "I think China has more interest in Argentina than the United States has in Argentina. And that is what makes the difference. Trump did not show any interest." (Garrison 2020). China's interest was comprehensive and even intricate, dividing Latin America into ten categories based on the nature of the relationship (Myers and Barrios 2021). Seven countries are the top with "comprehensive strategic partnerships."<sup>10</sup> The lowest level is reserved for countries that recognize Taiwan. China's strategy is to revoke that recognition as a

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<sup>9</sup> India, in fact, was increasing its exports of pharmaceuticals in general to Latin America, where demand (and therefore profit) was consistently high.

<sup>10</sup> These are the larger countries, namely Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela.



precondition for relations. The gradations are fine enough to include both “friendly” and “friendly cooperative.” Cuba enjoyed the status of “good brother, good comrade, good friend.” The exact nature of these categories is not easy to pin down, but China had far more detailed strategies and plans for Latin America than Trump ever did.

As the non-partisan Congressional Research Service (2020) reported, China had become the top trading partner of Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay, and was second trading partner for most other countries. Chinese banks had become the largest lenders to the region, and the top recipients—Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela—followed no particular ideological proclivity. Politicians from across the political spectrum worked closely with China, sometimes more closely than with the United States. Even Jair Bolsonaro, who openly admired and emulated Donald Trump and his anti-China stance, walked a fine line. For example, he simultaneously criticized Chinese Huawei telecommunications company (claiming it stole data) and worked to help Brazil’s agricultural sector, which needed both China’s large export market and its broadband capabilities (Moak 2020).

When Trump left office in January 2021, his successor Joseph Biden, Jr. faced what Azpuru (2021) called a “different Latin America.”<sup>11</sup> Trust in the United States had dropped in 11 out of 17 Latin American countries compared to when Biden left office as vice president in 2017. To add insult to injury, trust in China had increased as compared to the United States. Again, this trend did not begin with Trump, but he exacerbated it. China’s trade relationship with Latin America was strong and not reversible, while it also gradually gained trust.

Nonetheless, not everything was coming up like roses, as positive Latin American relations with China did face obstacles. The most serious revolved around fishing. Chinese ships

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<sup>11</sup> Her analysis was based on polls conducted by Vanderbilt University in their *AmericasBarometer* surveys.

made their way some 9,000+ miles to the western side of South America, turned off their tracking systems, and fished illegally, mostly for squid (Agence France-Presse 2020). The Ecuadorian government complained, which prompted Beijing to ban ships from going there, but the problem persisted elsewhere. In 2020, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru issued a joint statement condemning the practice, “to prevent, discourage and jointly confront” illegal fishing (MercoPress 2020). At this time, it remains an open question whether that seriously erodes overall relations with China.

Latin Americans also showed concern about increased economic dependence on China. Giraudo (2020) points to China’s expansion of influence over different stages of soybean production, which is an important South American crop. That effort includes buying or leasing of land and using its market share as leverage for other issues. In 2020, the chair of the Brazil Foreign Trade Association lamented that “there was already a dependency on China, which has increased. The market for manufactured products in Brazil, South America, and Argentina is in crisis” (The Brazilian Report 2020).

The situation pricked the cultivated image of the Chinese government as more strings-free than the United States. The basic skeptical view of the United States, such as that found in most variations of dependency theory, was of a rapacious and profit-driven state uninterested in the sovereignty of other states. China’s own actions seemed simply to replicate that model. Laufer (2020) writes that Latin American countries did not experience any change to their socio-economic structures, so using the phrase “heterodox autonomy” a la Puig was inaccurate because the international division of labor remained firmly intact. Nonetheless, Latin America did see more freedom of movement from the United States. The question was whether that autonomy benefited Latin Americans in concrete ways.

Toward the end of the Trump administration, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation partnered with Ecuadorian President Lenín Moreno to help the country repay billions of dollars of Chinese loans in return for excluding Chinese companies from telecom work. (Sevastopulo and Long 2021). This was a drop in the financial bucket but marked a long-delayed realization in the U.S. government that it was no longer the go-to source of resources.

The structure of Ecuador's economy did not change, but greater autonomy meant it could play the field. Since the Ecuadorian government could reach out to China without incurring U.S. wrath, then it could also play one side off the other for economic and/or political gain. From Moreno's perspective, the deal allowed him to send a negative signal to China about its fishing practices and was consistent with his general strategy of shifting away from Rafael Correa's wholehearted embrace of China. Ecuador's stance toward the United States vis-à-vis China was strongly correlated to whether the president leaned left or right.

A notable aspect of the economic patterns in recent years is that Latin American leaders are not looking for regional options. Moving away from the United States meant bilateral agreements with new countries and not moving toward each other. Quirós (2017) points to an impasse in what she calls the post-hegemonic, post-liberal era, where there was an opening for greater regional integration but too many obstacles were in the way. One of these obstacles was Brazil, where political and economic crisis under Dilma Rousseff made regional leadership even less likely, and then later Bolsonaro's lack of interest and proclivity for insults meant Brazil would not serve in any regional leadership capacity.

Further, China did not consciously contribute to Latin American autonomy. Its foreign policy was not ideological, so it forged agreements and formed partnerships as it deemed strategically useful. But the Chinese leadership did not encourage or facilitate any

counterbalance to the United States, and had no interest in creating any broad alliance that the United States might view as a security threat. Instead, Latin American countries needed to take advantage of whatever autonomy China helped generate. Yet despite indifference from the Trump administration, regional unity did not manifest itself, and no government stepped forward to push it.

Ideological divides continued to serve as obstacle as well. Although Cuba continued to tout the value of ALBA and CELAC, they were clearly never going to be vehicles for integration. CELAC did continue meeting, though calls for a “Common Front” for a unified solution to corruption (ironically called by Mexico) and criticisms of neoliberalism did not go much beyond rhetoric (Infobae 2021). Meanwhile, Brazil pulled out of the organization in 2020. Alvarez (2021, 56) points to the declining interest/ability of Brazil and Venezuela as an essential reason: “post-hegemonic proposals lose dynamism and support once the regional leadership responsible for promoting them weaken.”

### Drug Policy

Drug policy under the Trump administration continued with the Obama administration’s gradually increased emphasis on treatment rather than interdiction. Trump himself seemed indifferent to the details of anti-narcotics policy, with the exception of touting his border wall as a deterrent and periodically tweeting insults at individual countries. In a visit to the Mexico-Texas border right before he left office, he bragged that drug smuggling had “plummeted “in every region we’ve built the wall” (The White House website 2021). The fact that drugs typically come through established border crossings rather than open space did not bother him. As the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (2021, 56) pointed out in its 2020 assessment of drug threats,

“The highest seizures occurred in states with major land border crossings or high traffic seaports.”

In 2017, a bipartisan law created the Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission, which was to assess U.S. anti-narcotics policies and make recommendations for the future. The commission, composed of experienced analysts, released a report in late 2020. Its core recommendations entailed eliminating the controversial drug certification process, making greater use of the State Department to coordinate “whole-of-government” policies, and to establish clear metrics to determine whether a given policy was succeeding (Western Hemisphere Drug Policy Commission 2020). The report emphasized working with civil society in Latin American countries to determine what policies might in fact be counterproductive (e.g. aerial spraying in Colombia).

Overall, the report called for a significant policy shift. A Colombian presidential advisor asserted that the government was already working toward the report’s recommendations, especially in terms of focusing on economic development in highly affected rural areas (*El nuevo día* 2020). Reality on the ground called that into question because the government’s peace accord with the FARC was shaky, uncertain, and unpopular with Trump administration officials. State presence in rural Colombia remains minimal and land ownership is highly concentrated, which represents a serious obstacle to providing land for the internally displaced and generating real peace and economic development (Ahumada 2020).

Latin America saw prominent calls for decriminalization of narcotics, especially from former presidents. Juan Manuel Santos (Colombia) and Ernesto Zedillo (Mexico) co-authored an op-ed to argue that the drug war was “futile” and governments needed to take more control over the market (Santos, Zedillo, and Dreifuss 2019). That built on past public statements by Cesar

Gaviria (Colombia) and Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Brazil). Vicente Fox (Mexico) supported legal use of marijuana. Even Otto Pérez Molina, the hardline president of Guatemala from 2012 to 2015, favored legalization. Laws to decriminalize marijuana passed in numerous countries to varying degrees (in some cases only allowing it for medicinal purposes).

With strong U.S. pressure not to decriminalize, public support for such a policy remained largely confined to former presidents rather than current ones. Despite minimal gains in the “war on drugs,” both Republican and Democratic administrations preferred tweaking the status quo, rather than substantial reform. Further, there was no regional consensus about the issue, either at the elite or popular levels. Lastly, outside powers like China had no incentive to become involved.

The United States government remained opposed to such measures. Under Obama, Vice President Joe Biden was a drug war hawk, favoring more militarized solutions—such as Plan Colombia--and vocally opposing decriminalization. The Trump administration was even more opposed, and in 2017 even threatened to decertify Colombia as a partner in fighting drug trafficking, which would have entailed cuts in aid. President Santos pushed back, saying that it was a “shared responsibility” that must also be borne by drug-consuming countries like the United States (Insunza 2017).

The radical, anti-U.S. streak in Latin America had ebbed. Rhetoric in that vein came predictably from Cuba and Venezuela, but was less common elsewhere. Take Luis Arce, who was elected president of Bolivia in 2020 and served as Evo Morales Finance Minister. In that capacity, he was viewed as pragmatic and once he became president, he talked favorably about working with the United States. The result was that the appetite for intentionally excluding the U.S. was mostly gone.

The Trump years were marked by a wider door for Latin American countries to pursue autonomy. They either formed or deepened relationships with countries outside the region in ways that would have been either difficult or impossible before. At the same time, Latin American leaders chose to remain closely tied to the United States in others ways.

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<sup>1</sup> For a broad discussion and a bibliography of major works, see Tickner 2014.

<sup>2</sup> For a political history of the U.S.-Latin American relations, see Weeks 2015.

<sup>3</sup> For a good summary of the concept’s development, see Simonoff 2016.

<sup>4</sup> He held this position under President Héctor Cámpora for three months in 1973. The entire purpose of Cámpora’s brief presidency was to pave the way for the return of Juan Perón by

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removing the barriers to his candidacy the military dictatorship erected before leaving power.

Once that was achieved, Cámpora handed the presidential sash to Perón and Puig resigned.

<sup>5</sup> For the former, see Gunder Frank 1986. For the latter, see the seminal work by Cardoso and Faletto (1979). Fernando Henrique Cardoso would later become President of Brazil.

<sup>6</sup> As Kenneth Waltz, whose *Theory of International Politics* is the most influential example of realism, puts it, the international system is “self-help” (Waltz 1979).

<sup>7</sup> Realism spawned its own variants, often aimed at showing how cooperation between states can indeed take place based on shared norms or interests that go beyond just security. For example, Keohane 1984 argues that states have complementary interests and are interested in cooperating with each other, including through the creation of international organizations, to reduce conflict. It is worth noting, however, that his analysis centers exclusively on advanced market-economy countries.

<sup>8</sup> On this point, see Bernal-Mesa 2013. He also favored going beyond just economic integration.

<sup>9</sup> Puig 1980: 153. To illustrate, he uses the case of the United States disputing British power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which fundamentally changed their relationship to U.S. benefit.

<sup>10</sup> Russell and Tokatlian 2013: 13.

<sup>11</sup> For a concise discussion in English, see Escudé 2014. The more detailed Spanish book is Escudé 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Peripheral Realism developed in Argentina and was reflected in particular in the foreign policies of President Carlos Menem (Sahni 2001).

<sup>13</sup> Jaguaribe 1979. He does not specify exactly how many of these resources are necessary. At a minimum, it is clear that by virtue of its size Brazil qualifies.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

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<sup>15</sup> Chilean political scientist Robert Funk pointed this out in a conversation with the author on the Understanding Latin American Politics podcast, March 13, 2017.

<http://weeksnotice.blogspot.com/2017/03/podcast-episode-27-how-latin-america.html>