

## ARTICLE

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# Inter-American Relations in the Age of Trump: How the U.S. Is Losing Its Grip on Its Volatile “Backyard”

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### Abstract

*Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the U.S. has exerted strong political and economic influence over Latin America. The painful experiences of the Cold War, when the U.S. supported military dictatorships across the region, and assisted anti-communist forces in Central America, left deep scars in Latin America’s collective memory. This article claims that while the Obama administration undertook a series of measures to re-establish some trust, Donald Trump’s aggressive rhetoric against immigrants from Latin America, his Cuba Policy, and his threat of using military force in Venezuela have reinforced a negative image of the U.S. It also argues that threats of budget cuts for foreign aid and a protectionist trade policy are undermining the U.S. capacity to exert influence on its southern neighbours. This will most likely bring the region closer to China and other extra-regional powers, which have been increasing their profile there in recent years.*

### Keywords

U.S. foreign policy, Latin America, Cuba, Venezuela, war on drugs.

### Introduction

Throughout his electoral campaign, the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the U.S., Donald J. Trump, appealed to and reinforced xenophobic stereotypes against immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries by calling them rapists and criminals. This rhetoric went hand in hand with his promise to

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deport immigrants without legal status, and to construct a 'great wall' along the U.S.-Mexican border. During his first two years in office, Trump reinforced a negative image of the U.S. by repeating his anti-immigrant campaign rhetoric, reversing

the recent rapprochement between the U.S. and Cuba, and threatening to use the military to 'solve' the crisis in Venezuela. Furthermore, the CEO-turned-president championed an 'America first' policy with regard to trade deals and developmental aid, arguing that the U.S. had been taken advantage of by its trading partners and multinational businesses that have shifted their production facilities to Mexico and other low-cost countries. His hard-line positions mark a notable reversal of previous administrations' approach towards Latin America. For several decades, U.S. governments had tended to promote a discourse of unity and supported free trade, especially with those states that were willing to support U.S. efforts to combat the illegal drug trade and organised crime.<sup>1</sup>

Some analysts have argued that Trump's hostility toward free trade in general, and Mexico in particular, could lead to a new wave of Latin American unity and integration.<sup>2</sup> This assertion is not entirely unfounded, but within limits. This article agrees that there is an opportunity for greater intra-regional trade and cooperation, especially between the major economies, such as those of Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico. However, as argued below, South American economies in particular are too similar in their reliance on the export of natural resources and agricultural products to be able to push their internal trade and integration to new heights.<sup>3</sup>

This article claims that the more likely scenario is an even deeper engagement with China, which has become the region's second largest trading partner and investor, as well as closer relationships with other extra-regional powers like Europe, Russia, India, and the Arab Gulf States. It also posits that another possible impact of Trump's presidency could be a renewed attempt to re-escalate the largely unsuccessful 'war on drugs,' as well as the combat of criminal networks that operate across the region. Such intent could push the U.S. and parts of Latin America even further apart. In recent years, demands from Latin America to end the 'war on drugs' have become more prominent, while several Latin countries have relaxed their drug laws. Before these points are elaborated in greater detail, the following section provides a brief overview of how inter-American relations have evolved over time.

## The U.S. and Latin America: An Uneasy Relationship

The dominant feature of inter-American relations has always been the enormous asymmetry of military and economic power between the U.S. and its southern neighbours. Throughout history, this asymmetry has enabled the U.S. to promote its economic and military interests with little respect for the sovereignty and well-being of Latin America’s states and societies. This overarching characteristic has cemented the image of the U.S. as an imperial power, and Latin America as its ‘backyard’ or area of influence.<sup>4</sup>

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U.S. aspirations for regional hegemony were first declared in 1823 by President James Monroe. In a State of the Union Address, which later became known as the Monroe Doctrine, the president called upon the European states to suspend their colonial ambitions on the American continent. Moreover, he made it plain that any foreign intervention would be viewed as an act of aggression and would provoke a strong military reaction by the U.S.<sup>5</sup> As the predominant power in the Western Hemisphere, in 1846 the U.S. attacked Mexico and took over approximately half of its territory. Furthermore, it started to expand its economic and political control over several Latin American countries, above all in Central America and the Caribbean, where it carried out numerous military interventions.<sup>6</sup>

The U.S. goal to exert strong levels of control over the Western Hemisphere reached new heights during the Cold War, when the U.S. and the Soviet Union were competing over power, influence, and ideology. As is well known, both sides perceived this confrontation as a zero-sum game.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, the U.S. adopted a strategy of containment, which aimed at freezing the expansion of the Soviet Union and communist forces. The so-called domino theory constituted an ideational framework that dominated U.S. thinking during the Cold War. According to this theory, once a country turned communist, its neighbours would follow sooner or later.<sup>8</sup>

Due to Latin America’s long history of economic inequality and social exclusion, which often erupted in pervasive social conflicts and political

instability, the region was considered particularly susceptible to Marxist ideas. The emergence of revolutionary movements and communist parties across the region exacerbated U.S. fears. Especially after the Cuban missile crisis, Washington acted as if Latin America constituted “a full-blown East-West confrontation,” and determined to prevent communism from taking root.<sup>9</sup> Following the imperative that “democratic openness might allow the Soviet Union to gain foothold on the continent,” the U.S. supported military dictatorships in almost all Latin American countries.<sup>10</sup> The exceptions were Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, and Venezuela. The support for military dictatorships and anti-communist forces came in multiple ways, including economic sanctions (mainly in Cuba, but also in Chile from 1970-73); the deployment of military troops (Dominican Republic 1965); the training and schooling of Latin American militaries to suppress and fight leftist guerrilla forces; the provision of military hardware and technical and financial support in order to carry out military coups (Guatemala 1954 and Chile 1973); and technical and financial support for right-wing guerrilla movements (Cuba 1961 and Central America throughout the 1980s).<sup>11</sup>

Another area of U.S. engagement with the region has been the never-ending fight against the illicit drug industry. This development took off in 1971, after Richard Nixon identified illegal narcotics as a threat to U.S. national security

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and declared a ‘war on drugs.’ As the world’s primary producer and exporter of cocaine, Latin America came under strong pressure to enforce stricter drug laws. During the presidency of Ronald

Reagan (1981-89), the ‘drug war’ became a key element in U.S. foreign policy towards the region, and was put into practice through the application of military force to combat drug cartels, and to eradicate and interdict drug supplies.<sup>12</sup> To ensure the cooperation of Latin American states, the U.S. relied on a controversial, unilateral sanctioning mechanism known as the certification process. This mechanism allowed the U.S. to penalize governments that did not live up to its expectations in terms of deterring the drug trade.<sup>13</sup> While the militarised strategy was at first partially successful in dismantling the largest trafficking organisations of the 1990s, the Medellin and Cali cartels, it failed to reach its goal of erasing, or at least significantly reducing, the size of the illegal drug industry.<sup>14</sup> Instead, it facilitated the outbreak of large-scale drug-related violence.<sup>15</sup> The most prominent cases are Colombia in the 1990s,

where the fight between drug cartels, the government, left-wing guerrillas, and right-wing paramilitaries, generated a record homicide rate of 80 killings per 100,000 habitants, and contemporary Mexico, where the violence surrounding the trafficking of illegal narcotics has been responsible for 80,597 assassinations since 2007.<sup>16</sup>

In Colombia, the fight against illicit drugs often overlapped with the goal to contain leftist guerrilla groups, especially the rural, Marxist, and originally pro-Soviet *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), and the more urban *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN). These insurgencies not only pursued a revolutionary political agenda, but also controlled many of the coca growing and cocaine producing regions. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Colombia’s president Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010) framed the fight against these groups as part of the ‘global war against terror.’ His message was well-received in Washington, and the U.S. government rewarded Uribe with vast amounts of military aid. Under Plan Colombia, a \$6.1 billion aid program, designed to help the Colombian state to retake control over its territory, the Uribe government managed to fight back the guerrilla groups and provide new levels of security in the country’s largest cities, Bogotá, Cali, and Medellín.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, coca cultivation was reduced from an estimated 163,300 hectares in 2000 to 62,000 hectares in 2010.<sup>18</sup> While many analysts consider Plan Colombia as a major success, its critics point to the numerous human rights violations committed by the Colombian army and right wing paramilitaries; the pernicious environmental side effects of the aerial fumigation campaigns against coca crops; the displacement of millions of people fleeing from the violent confrontations between the different fractions; and the upsurge of illegal mining.<sup>19</sup>

Parallel to the fight against illicit drugs, the U.S. continuously promoted free trade and financial deregulation. In 1990, President George H. Bush launched the *Enterprise for the Americas Initiative* to stimulate free trade, support promising development projects, provide debt relief for countries willing to reform and deregulate their economies according to the ‘Washington consensus.’ At the time, pro-market governments were in power across the region, and eager to integrate into the world economy. The negotiation of the 1994 *North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement* (NAFTA), which integrated the economies of Canada, Mexico, and the U.S., was a strong expression of the goal to liberalize trade.

While the policies of financial and economic liberalisation were relatively successful in combating inflation, most countries suffered from slow economic growth, rising inequality, and financial instability. The region's largest economies, Mexico (1994), Brazil (1998), and Argentina (2001) encountered increasing difficulties to repay their growing debts, and suffered from severe financial crises. Moreover, in the early 2000s, the region witnessed numerous social uprisings against privatisations, reductions of public spending and employment, and government corruption. Since then, leftist or left-leaning governments came into power in Venezuela (1999), Brazil (2002), Argentina (2003), Uruguay (2005), Bolivia (2005), Chile (2006), Ecuador (2007), and Nicaragua (2007). While Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay sought to maintain cooperative ties with the U.S., the governments of Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and especially Venezuela advanced an aggressive anti-U.S. discourse. Plans from the early 2000s to create a *Free Trade Area of the Americas*, encompassing all countries in the Western Hemisphere except Cuba, were rejected by most governments either because of the unwillingness of the U.S. to reduce agricultural subsidies, or because it was seen as an imperialist project, seeking to gain cheap access to the region's resources. In its stead, the U.S., Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua established the 2005 *Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement* (CAFTA-DR). Moreover, the U.S. concluded bilateral trade agreements with Chile (2004) and Peru (2007), while negotiating similar agreements with Panama and Colombia.

Toward the end of the decade, states from Latin America maintained very different types of relationships with the U.S. Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Panama, Peru, and Uruguay either aligned completely or accommodated themselves with U.S. power. Argentina's and Brazil's engagement with the U.S. can be described as limited opposition, while Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela defied the U.S. more directly (despite maintaining strong economic ties).<sup>20</sup>

## Inter-American Relations under Obama: From Hope to Pragmatism

When Barack Obama came into office in 2009, there was a sense of hope that he would pay greater attention to the region's concerns and sensibilities, and potentially reconcile some of the conflicts that prevented the Americas from

forming even closer ties. This hope was primarily based on Obama’s conciliatory style and rhetoric. His gestures marked a clear departure from his predecessor, George W. Bush, who was perceived by many as a strong advocate and agent of U.S. imperialism. The Obama administration organised several high-level visits, and announced various initiatives to the region, despite a highly complex domestic and international agenda. Moreover, from early on the new president proclaimed that he would seek a new beginning in the U.S. relationship with Cuba, and loosened some limitations on travel and remittances to the island. Notwithstanding the authoritarian nature of the Castro government and its continuing human rights violations, many Latin Americans see Cuba as a symbol of resistance against U.S. imperialism, and consider the trade embargo as a major injustice. For that reason, Obama’s new stance towards Cuba was welcomed by many states.<sup>21</sup>

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However, the high expectations and initial optimism soon gave way to disenchantment and frustration. During the first year of Obama’s presidency, two developments overshadowed the rest of his time in office. In the first place, the U.S. mishandled communication over a Defence Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with Colombia, which allowed the U.S. to access and use seven military bases in Colombian territory. The DCA became public after the U.S. House of Representatives dedicated \$46 million USD to upgrade a Colombian military base in Palanquero, without any prior announcement. Despite the reassurances of the U.S. and Colombian governments that the bases would only be used for counter-drug and counter-insurgency initiatives within Colombia, the secretive nature of the agreement led to a wave of public outcry across the region. The governments of Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador were quick to denounce Colombia as a traitor and argued that the agreement constituted a violation of South American sovereignty. Even the more moderate governments of Argentina, Brazil, and Chile expressed strong concerns over the DCA.<sup>22</sup> Official U.S. planning documents, which revealed that the base in Palanquero could be used to respond to crises across the entire continent, catalysed fears that it might be utilised to combat targets outside of Colombia.<sup>23</sup> Although the Colombian Supreme Court ultimately declared the defence agreement unconstitutional, the episode reinforced the old pattern of fear and distrust in the U.S..

In the second place, the Obama administration's response to the overthrow and deportation of the democratically elected president of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, added further fuel to the fire. Prior to the upheaval, the left-leaning president had initiated steps to change the country's 1982 constitution so that he could run for a second presidential term. On the day of a non-binding referendum on whether a constitutional assembly should be established, the military seized power, deported Zelaya, and named congressional speaker Roberto Michetti president. While the U.S. government officially opposed the overthrow, it never articulated support for Zelaya's return to power, and was reluctant to join the majority of Latin American countries, which demanded strong sanctions against the new Honduran government. Overall, the U.S. gave the impression of implicitly supporting what most considered a military coup. This wide-spread perception caused a lot of frustration across the region.<sup>24</sup>

In the following years, Latin America was clearly not a priority for the U.S., whose foreign policy agenda was determined largely by developments taking place in the Middle East, Asia, and later on in Eastern Europe. Furthermore, the Obama administration appeared to realize that fostering a common agenda would be difficult and time-consuming in a region with highly diverse interests, volatile electoral dynamics, and multiple views towards the U.S. In its stead, the Obama administration invested in bilateral relations with countries that were interested in closer cooperation, while largely ignoring countries that opposed the U.S.<sup>25</sup> Under this patchwork approach, the U.S. enhanced security cooperation to combat organised crime in Mexico and Central America under the *Merida Initiative*; concluded free trade agreements with Panama (2012) and Colombia (2012); and advanced negotiations to construct the world's largest regional trade area, the *Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement* (TPP), in which Chile, Mexico, and Peru were involved as well.

Opinion leaders on Latin America within the U.S. often criticised the Obama administration for being too passive about the erosion of democracy and growing humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, despite launching a series of sanctions against the top government officials.<sup>26</sup> From a foreign policy standpoint, though, the relatively passive stance certainly helped to restore some trust and good faith in the U.S. However, it was towards the end of his presidency that Obama undertook two actions that paved the way for a more constructive relationship.

First, to the surprise of many, in 2014 Barack Obama and Raúl Castro announced that the governments of the U.S. and Cuba would restore diplomatic ties and initiate further steps to ease 50 years of tensions. This decision was not only welcomed by the majority of Cubans living in the U.S., but also received widespread support from Latin America.<sup>27</sup> In the following months, both countries reopened their embassies, the U.S. eased travel and trade restrictions, and it removed Cuba from its list of terrorism sponsors. Moreover, in 2016 Obama visited the island and gave a keynote address to the Cuban people in which he urged both countries to continue reforms. Ultimately, as one of his last actions in power, Obama repealed the ‘wet foot, dry foot’ policy, which guaranteed Cubans that reached U.S. soil permanent residency. Once again, the move was welcomed across the region, given that citizens of all other countries faced much tougher obstacles in becoming U.S. residents.<sup>28</sup>

Second, during the last year of his presidency, Obama began to declassify and share secret Cold War records with the governments of Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. These documents brought new light to the role that the U.S. had played in supporting military dictatorships in all three countries. The policy was widely welcomed as an important step to advance the cause of human rights, as well as to redress and take responsibility for Washington’s support of political violence and repression during the Cold War.<sup>29</sup>

Simultaneous to Obama’s actions, another development favoured closer inter-American ties. Several countries started to feel the negative consequences of the end of the commodity boom, and many leftist governments started losing popularity. Pro-business governments that sought closer cooperation with the U.S. came into power in several countries, and currently govern Argentina and Brazil, South America’s biggest economies. In summary, the prospect of a closer relationship between Latin America and the U.S. never looked as promising as toward the end of Obama’s presidency. However, these reasonable hopes were soon overshadowed by the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

## The Repercussions of the Trump Presidency: Toward a New Antagonism

While most Latin American countries have not yet felt the anticipated negative repercussions of Trump’s presidency and strive for a pragmatic relationship

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with the U.S. government, more than two years into his first term it is fair to assert that Trump has done significant, and potentially long-lasting damage to the relations between the U.S. and its southern neighbours. As highlighted by a 2018 Gallup report, in the Americas the median approval rating of U.S.

leadership dropped from 49% in 2016 to 24% in 2017, 6 points lower than the global average.<sup>30</sup> Although the approval has risen by 6% in the following year, 53% of the respondents continue to disapprove of U.S. leadership.<sup>31</sup> Three reasons help to explain this sharp drop.

First and foremost, since the beginning of his bid for the presidency, Donald Trump has run an aggressive campaign against immigrants from Latin America, calling them rapists and criminals, and revealed his plans to build a wall along the Mexican border, make Mexico pay for it, and deport undocumented immigrants. During his time in office, he showed no signs of moderation and substantiated his controversial plan of building a wall by declaring a national emergency along the Mexican border. Trump's often blunt xenophobia reached its climax when he referred to African nations, Haiti, and El Salvador as 'shithole countries,' questioning why so many of their citizens had been permitted to enter the U.S.<sup>32</sup>

Second, both as candidate and president, Donald Trump toughly criticised his predecessor for his policy of rapprochement with Cuba, claiming that the U.S. had made too many concessions without getting anything in return. While younger Cuban-Americans and Cuban immigrants that had arrived in the 1990s favour closer ties and ending the controversial trade embargo, Trump's promise to take a tougher stance on the communist government helped him to secure the vote of older and conservative Cubans, which were crucial for his close victory in the state of Florida.<sup>33</sup> Addressing a crowd of Cuban Americans in Miami's Little Havana district on June 16, 2017, President Trump finally declared his administration's policy towards the island. His announcements to impose tighter restrictions on travel for U.S. citizens, and to prohibit business dealings with companies controlled by the Cuban military, which account for a large part of the country's tourism sector, were greeted with thundering applause, even though he kept some of Obama's changes in place.

Most importantly, he upheld the re-establishment of diplomatic relations, the reopening of embassies, and ending the ‘wet foot, dry foot’ policy. However, in August 2017 reports surfaced that several U.S. and Canadian diplomats working in Havana suffered from a mysterious sickness. As the symptoms of headaches, dizziness, hearing losses, and cognitive disorders appeared after the diplomats heard strange noises in their homes and hotel rooms, parts of the U.S. establishment advanced the hypothesis that these attacks were caused by some sort of health attack or sonic weapon. The Trump administration was quick to hold Cuba responsible, even though the Cuban government denied all wrongdoing, invited the F.B.I. to investigate, and most importantly lacks a clear motive. Subsequently, the U.S. reduced the embassy staff in Havana to half, ordered an equivalent reduction of the staff of the Cuban embassy in Washington, and issued a travel warning advising Americans not to travel to Cuba. Several analysts have compared Trump’s strong reaction to the Cuba policy of the Cold War.<sup>34</sup>

Third, although Trump’s aggressive rhetoric against Venezuela’s president, Nicolás Maduro, and his support for the opposition leader, Juan Guaidó, have struck a chord with many South Americans, who experience on a daily basis the misery of the approximately three million Venezuelan immigrants who have fled the country, most of the region also fears a possible U.S. military intervention. While Venezuela’s economic collapse and President Maduro’s declining legitimacy have isolated the country within its own region, Trump’s continued assurance that ‘all options are on the table,’ once again, evoked the Cold War era when the U.S. employed troops to fight communist forces in Central America and supported military dictatorships throughout the region.<sup>35</sup>

A direct and immediate consequence of Trump’s antagonist approach is that it has become much harder for both sides to maintain and extend cooperative ties. Latin American governments risk losing popularity when being perceived as too close, or even worse, subordinate to Trump. This dynamic is most evident in the case of Mexico. In August 2016, the country’s president Enrique Peña Nieto invited Trump to visit Mexico when he was still a candidate. The visit went down as a public relations debacle, with Peña Nieto facing nation-wide anger for giving the political tenderfoot an opportunity to look presidential, while failing to confront him about his incendiary remarks and proposals. Moreover, in January 2016 Peña Nieto cancelled a visit to Washington after it

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became clear that the new president stood by his plans to build a wall and renegotiate NAFTA.<sup>36</sup> In February 2018, Mexico's president called off another visit to the White House after Trump would not agree to back down publicly from his claim that Mexico will pay for the wall.<sup>37</sup> Although other Latin American countries are less constrained than Mexico, his interactions with the centre-right presidents of Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Peru, looked more like damage control than advancing strategic partnerships.

What makes cooperation with the region even more difficult is that Trump appears to be reluctant to offer countries from Latin America favourable market access to the U.S. His 'America first' agenda led to the withdrawal of the ambitious TPP agreement, while pressuring Mexico to renegotiate NAFTA. As outlined above, trade agreements used to be one of the favourite tools of previous administrations to foster bilateral relationships and advance U.S. interests.

While Trump's agenda has set inter-American relations on a difficult path, it is still too early to predict the long-term impact of his proposals. So far, U.S. Congress has blocked several of Trump's proposals, thereby ensuring a certain degree of continuity. First, by denying funding for his controversial plan to build a wall along the Mexican border, it is unclear whether the president will be able to keep his most divisive campaign promise. Second, until now Congress has denied Trump to follow through with his proposition to cut foreign aid for the country's long-term ally Colombia by 35%.<sup>38</sup> Third, Congress still has to approve a new trade agreement between the United States, Mexico, and Canada (USMCA), which is set to replace NAFTA. While USMCA foresees tighter environmental and labour standards and imposes a quota on Mexican and Canadian automobile production, a congressionally mandated analysis shows that its impact on U.S. growth will be negligible. Hence, it is far from certain that Trump will be able ensure congressional support.<sup>39</sup> Until then, NAFTA will continue to regulate commerce between the three countries.

The fact that Mexico was able to accommodate Trump's protectionism and negotiate a new agreement, has so far protected the country from the potential repercussions of an interrupted trade relationship with the U.S. Since NAFTA

came into force in 1994, the Mexican economy has become highly dependent on commerce with its northern neighbour. From 1994 to 2015, Mexico increased its exports to the U.S. from \$51.2bn to \$309.2bn, constituting 81.24% of its entire exports, and about 27% of its GDP.<sup>40</sup> Hence, any serious disruption of trade with the U.S. carries the potential of devastating the Mexican economy. While it is unclear what will happen should the U.S. Congress reject USMCA, at least for now Mexico has managed to avoid the worst-case scenario.

Some analysts and policymakers have expressed optimism that the United States’ increasing protectionism will promote Latin American unity and economic integration.<sup>41</sup> There certainly is a window of opportunity for the region to move closer together and establish new economic links. Mexico in particular will be eager to find new markets for its growing electronics sector. Moreover, other large economies like Argentina and Brazil are sufficiently diverse to gain from intra-regional trade liberalisations. However, most countries in the region are strongly dependent on the export of primary goods, including oil, gas, minerals, and agricultural products. The biggest markets for these products are not within the region, but in the U.S., East Asia, and to some extent Europe. Sharing similar export portfolios implies that even if Latin American countries do lower their barriers, intra-regional trade would not necessarily increase. The case of the *Pacific Alliance* exemplifies this point. In 2012, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru concluded negotiations for the new trade bloc. Even though its members eliminated the tariffs on 92% of all goods, trade between them has actually decreased since 2013.<sup>42</sup> Unless the region develops a coherent plan to move beyond its current centre-periphery model of exporting primary goods, and establishes new ways to diversify its individual economies, the effects of trade liberalisation within the region will continue to be highly constrained. The more likely scenario in the short and medium term is increasing engagement with external actors, ranging from China to the European Union.

Many leading publications and experts have argued that China will be the main beneficiary of the U.S. retreat.<sup>43</sup> Data on trade and investment supports this argument. From 2000 to 2015, Sino-Latin trade has grown from \$12.5bn to \$234.7bn. China currently exports \$131bn to the region, and imports \$104bn worth of products from Latin America.<sup>44</sup> In 2015, the Chinese government signed a series of agreements promising to bring trade up to

\$500bn and increase investments from 85bn to \$250bn.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, since the U.S. withdrew from the TPP, which was widely perceived as a geopolitical instrument to contain the influence of China in the Pacific Rim, Chinese leaders have wasted no time in initiating negotiations for a new agreement. In March 2017, ministers and high-level representatives of the states that formed part of the TPP, as well as China, Colombia, and South Korea, met for the first time in Viña del Mar, Chile, to discuss future trade relations.

However, not everybody in Latin America is excited about China's rising influence. A common criticism is that current trade patterns favour China more than Latin America. Iron, copper, oil, and soybeans constitute about three quarters of Latin American exports to China, while almost all of the imports are cheap manufactures. Many economists believe that these imports undermine domestic industries, and are partly responsible for the region's de-industrialisation. Moreover, when China's economic growth started to slow down in 2015, Latin American exports shrank, while imports from China remained stable. This created a trade deficit of \$27bn.<sup>46</sup> Despite these concerns, U.S. protectionism will make it easier for Chinese leaders to accomplish their strategic objectives in the Western Hemisphere. These objectives are not entirely economic, but also stretch into the realm of security. In March 2017, China opened a new space-monitoring base in Neuquén, Argentina, whose parabolic antennae are suspected to have some military uses.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, 11 of the 20 states that have full diplomatic relations with Taiwan are located in Latin America and the Caribbean. In June 2017, however, Panama became the latest of many Latin American countries to cut formal ties with Taiwan, stating that 'Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory.'<sup>48</sup>

China is hardly the only external actor trying to improve its relationship with the region. In a 2017 visit to Argentina and Mexico, Germany's chancellor Angela Merkel campaigned for both countries to stay within the Paris agreement and commit to free trade, while offering new investments and trade opportunities. Moreover, since the early 2000s several states from the region have increased cooperation, and held regular summits with India, South Africa, and the Arab Gulf States. The most prominent example is the case of the BRICS (acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), which have held yearly summits since 2009 and have created a set of new institutions and cooperation mechanisms in the areas of development and finance. In the same period, Russia increased its profile in the region,

offering political support to regimes that are critical of the U.S., including Cuba and Venezuela, and selling military hardware to several states from Latin America.<sup>49</sup> It can be expected that the Trump administration’s protectionism and antagonism will facilitate and deepen these linkages.

While these developments are likely to weaken U.S. influence, the country still has strong interests in the region. Most importantly, the Western Hemisphere is home to a powerful complex of criminal organisations. This network is dominated by Mexican cartels, whose main revenue is the extremely lucrative drugs market in the U.S. At the same time, Central American street gangs like MS-13 and the 18<sup>th</sup> Street Gang, which cooperate closely with Mexican cartels, have managed to control large territories in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, the so-called Northern Triangle.<sup>50</sup> These territories provide an important transportation route for Andean cocaine. In recent years, the Northern Triangle has become the world’s most violent region after Syria, with 15,000 killings per year. This unprecedented level of homicides is largely responsible for the 200,000 Central Americans that flee into Mexico each year, hoping to enter and stay in the U.S.<sup>51</sup> While the Obama administration attempted to address some of the root causes of this growing humanitarian crisis, by financing justice and security reforms, as well as prevention and development programs, Trump has threatened on numerous occasions to withdraw foreign aid if Central American countries fail to stop the flow of migrants.<sup>52</sup> At the same time, the Trump administration has made it clear that it wants to cut back the influence of organised crime, while promising a tougher stance on illegal drugs, including marijuana, whose use for recreational purposes has become legal in nine U.S. states.<sup>53</sup> Hence, many experts assume that Trump’s government may attempt to re-escalate the ‘war on drugs’ and militarize its foreign policy towards Central America.<sup>54</sup>

A re-escalation of the ‘war on drugs’ has the potential to alienate the U.S. even further from the rest of the region. Much of Latin America has become tired of the futile military campaigns to combat the supply of drugs, which are responsible for far more deaths and damage than drug consumption. Furthermore, over the past decade, several countries from the region have advanced significant changes to their drug policies, including the decriminalisation of marijuana and other mood-enhancing substances (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico), the legalisation of medical marijuana or cannabis oil (Argentina, Chile,

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Colombia, Peru, and Uruguay), the self-cultivation of marijuana plants (Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Uruguay), and in the case of Uruguay, the legalisation of the production, sale, and recreational consumption of marijuana. Ultimately, in

Bolivia the government of Evo Morales (2006-), a former coca grower, implemented a new system of “social control” to regulate cultivations of the coca crop.<sup>55</sup> This change of direction will make it harder for the U.S. to project an aggressive counter-narcotics strategy beyond Central America.

However, Central America is not the only region that could be affected. From 2012 to 2016, Colombian coca cultivation exploded from 78,000 to 188,000 hectares, underlining the country’s role as the world’s principal coca producer and cocaine manufacturer.<sup>56</sup> The upsurge of coca cultivation comes at a crucial time for Colombia. After four years of negotiations, the country has started to implement a peace accord with the FARC insurgency. While several parts of the treaty have been implemented successfully, including the decommission of 7,134 weapons by the United Nations, colossal challenges remain regarding the governance of territories that were previously under FARC control.<sup>57</sup> In many parts of the country, armed groups, including former FARC fractions, have started taking over territories. It is evident that without external help the Colombian state will not be able to enforce its power in some of the remote regions that lack infrastructure, and whose hills and jungles provide generous safe havens for armed non-state actors. While the Obama administration granted Colombia a mild increase in foreign aid to help the country implement the peace accord, Trump’s 2018 and 2019 budget proposals planned to reduce aid to Colombia by about 35%. Although so far U.S. Congress has refused these cuts, it is possible that future aid will depend on a more aggressive counter-narcotics strategy, including the highly controversial aerial fumigation campaigns.<sup>58</sup> While the election of Ivan Duque as Colombia’s new president in June 2018 facilitated closer cooperation, there are significant legal and institutional obstacles, especially against the spraying of the crop desiccant glyphosate and its environmental side effects.<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

While this article has portrayed a pessimistic picture of inter-American relations under Trump, some effects of his presidency may actually facilitate more functional relationships in the future. First and foremost, Trump’s unconventional style of governance, including his disregard for established rules, procedures, and institutions, has inspired numerous comparisons to Latino-style populism.<sup>60</sup> For that reason, future U.S. presidents, state officials, and business leaders will have a harder time lecturing their Latin American counterparts on what democratic governance should look like. This could enable a stronger, and less politicised emphasis on issues of common interest in the areas of trade, migration, organised crime, infrastructure, and the environment. More importantly, as outlined above, the emergence of China as a major player in the region does not only bring benefits and will likely continue to cause frustration. This may draw some countries closer to the U.S., a nation that they know and understand much better than distant China. However, with China and other external actors increasing their profile in the region, the U.S. will have to bring more to the table to foster cooperative ties and advance its interests.

Overall, an increasingly multipolar world offers many new opportunities for Latin America, especially when the demand for commodities starts picking up again. However, if the region wants to move beyond its peripheral position of exporting primary goods, it should develop a clearer and better idea of how it wants to associate itself with the rest of the world, and what type of partnerships are useful.

## Endnotes

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