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POLICY BRIEF

LATIN AMERICA, WORLD POLITICS AND THE GREAT POWERS

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Latin America has had to deal with expansionist agendas of great powers since its independence. To do so, different leaders from the region have adopted different policies. Some have sought to reinforce their relations with the U.S. whereas others mistrusted their big neighbor from the North and tried to multiply their partnerships with other parties in order to keep their autonomy. To this respect, the central role played by U.S.-Latin American relations, epitomized by the 1823 Monroe Doctrine that has shaped the relations between both parties for over two hundred years now, cannot be overestimated. In this policy brief, the global insertion of Latin America is the point in focus, and the policies -and counter-policies- adopted by different governments -from and outside the region- are presented and analyzed. The objective is to reflect the complexity of Latin America's foreign relations and to bring nuances to analyzing its policies.

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1. Introduction

Since gaining their independence, more than two hundred years ago, the countries of Latin America have struggled to retain their autonomy. The hegemonic approaches of their former colonial powers, Spain and Portugal, as well as of Great Britain, which in the early nineteenth century was the world's greatest power, paralleled by the expansionist views of their northern neighbor the United States, have impinged on their sovereignty. That challenge has been present ever since. During the twentieth century—from its start, when Teddy Roosevelt was U.S. president, through the Cold War, and into the post-Cold War period—Latin American countries have sought to diversify their partnerships and multiply their relationships with external powers. The goal has been to avoid exclusive dependency on one partner—the U.S. In this sense, the international dimension has been part of Latin America since independence, having an impact on its political and economic options, and on its policies.

This paper, after a brief and broad historical overview of Latin America's insertion in world politics, presents an analysis of the current challenges, in order to discuss the different available options for Latin America in the world. The objective is to de-center from U.S.-Latin American relations, and to shed light on the different challenges and opportunities for the South American subcontinent. A second objective is to show that Latin America has agency in this debate, and is not only the recipient of foreign pressure and aid, but also an agent that has diverse interests, and defends them through the means at its disposal.

2. Conceptual Considerations

In Latin America, the U.S. was not the only external power to be considered the source of a threat that needed to be neutralized. Dependency theory and the seminal book by Uruguayan intellectual Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*, indicated that clearly¹. The consensus among different approaches to dependency theory (as well as the argument of Galeano) could be summarized as saying that Latin America's development has been held back for structural reasons, which are that Latin America has consistently been dependent on, and at the mercy of, European and U.S. economies, feeding their needs rather than pursuing Latin American plans and priorities. In other words, Latin America has served the core economies rather than itself and its own interests, and has thus remained peripheral. To emancipate itself, Latin America must cut those dependent links—with Europe, with the U.S.—and pursue its own path. Varying strategies could be employed to do this, but their common objective should be to allow Latin America to break away from simply trailing the U.S. or Europe. This is what has informed Latin American history, and the policies pursued by its different types of leaders, since Latin American countries became independent.

There is an internal aspect to these relationships, which dependency theory presents eloquently: the dependency of the periphery on the core (in this case, Latin America is the periphery) hinges on the mutual benefits that the core of the periphery and the core of the core extract from that relationship. In other words, elites in general, and business elites from Latin America in particular, benefit fully from the perpetuation of those relations of

1. For more on dependency theory, refer to Cardoso and Faletto (1978), and Theotonio dos Santos (1970).

dependency, and want to maintain them. Whereas those elites used to be in the agrarian sector—the owners of the large estates—they have become industrial, financial, focused on agri-business in contemporary times. These sectors have benefited and continue to benefit from the relations of dependence with the core, and want to reinforce them. But since that is far from the case for all sectors of Latin American society, large sectors within Latin America aim to limit that dependency and to evolve beyond it.

3. Some History

Latin America's independence from Spanish colonization at the beginning of the nineteenth century, under the leadership of Simon Bolivar in the northern part of the subcontinent, and José de San Martín at its southern tip, symbolized a liberation from Spanish and European colonialism and the establishment of independent states that would reflect the will of the local populations. But as Latin American states fought for their independence and eventually obtained it, Spain resisted the process, while Great Britain aimed to extend its influence in the region and replace Spain. The U.S., in line with the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, signaled to European powers that the Western Hemisphere was its backyard, and that European powers should stay out. It did not matter that the U.S. at the time did not have the means to translate that discourse into acts. What mattered was that Latin America was subjected to the clash between powers, while attempting to affirm its own identity and to pursue its own path as an independent region.

Internal rifts also characterized the struggle for sovereignty and autonomy. Those in Latin America who believed that the subcontinent should treat the hegemonic views of its northern neighbor in the Western Hemisphere as a major threat clashed with those who benefited and believed in the necessity of strengthening links with the U.S. Another, deeper rift existed between those who anchored Latin America in the West and those who did not.

This latter rift was deeper since the large indigenous populations in many former Spanish colonies remained marginalized and were for a long time considered second-class citizens in their countries. In Bolivia, for instance, the indigenous population was banned from the main public squares until 1953, despite representing between 40% and 60% of the population. The first indigenous president of Bolivia, Evo Morales, was only elected in 2006.

In Brazil, the indigenous population at the moment of independence was relatively small. The marginalized population consisted of the Black population, most of whom were slaves. Slavery in Brazil was only abolished in 1888, almost 70 years after independence, and the Black population has been kept on the margins of Brazilian society since then. This did not mean that the contributions of the indigenous populations in many former Spanish colonies, or that of African descendants in Brazil, were negligible. Brazilian activist intellectual Lélia Gonzalez, for example, speaks of "*Amefricanity*" to refer to the substantial African heritage and impact in Brazil and the rest of Latin America. Because of their different understanding of their national identities—coincidentally in a similar fashion to those who considered Latin America to be part of the West—this part of the population mistrusted both Europe and the U.S. simultaneously.

To return to the historical perspective, the rest of the nineteenth century was characterized by a growing but somehow moderate British influence in Latin America, and the relative absence of the U.S. That changed with the First Panamerican Conference in Washington in 1889, when the U.S. invited leaders from all over the Western Hemisphere with the

objective of translating the U.S. ambitions for the region into reality. The conference coincided with the publication by José Martí of his book *Nuestra América* (Our America), in which he called for an America that was Spanish speaking, distinct from Anglo-Saxon America, with its own ambitions and culture. In sum, while some Latin American states adhered to the U.S.-led process, as they saw mutual interests between their states and the U.S. and expected mutual benefits from the strengthening of those links (and who also perceived the main threats as coming from Great Britain rather than the U.S.), Martí represented those who mistrusted U.S. plans and saw in the U.S. approach the potential for future U.S. expansion in the region.

Meanwhile, Spain continued its decline into relative global political irrelevance, especially after the 1898 Spanish-American war and the historic defeat of a European power by a non-European one. The war resulted in the independence of Cuba, but curiously, Cuban independence from Spain did not mean freedom for the Cuban people; rather it meant a new dependence on the U.S. That dependence can be illustrated by the Platt Amendment, an amendment to the Cuban constitution carrying the name of an U.S. Senator, which allowed the U.S. to intervene in Cuba whenever its interests were under threat.

The relative retreat of European powers from the Western Hemisphere took place in parallel with renewed U.S. ambition in the region, while different Latin Americans, to different degrees, tried to follow a path that would grant them autonomy. A good example was Brazil's contribution to international conventions that were the initial attempts to establish multilateral governance at the international level. The roles played by Joaquim Nabuco and Rui Barbosa, Brazilian jurists and eventual diplomats, in the second Hague Convention of 1907, were good illustrations of that. They secured a prominent role for Brazil in the nascent multilateral arena.

At the start of the twentieth century, the rise of the U.S. as a global power became more evident. That translated into a less nuanced ambition in the Western Hemisphere. The clearest articulation of that new posture was what is commonly referred to as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. This was summarized by the famous quote: *"speak softly and carry a big stick"*. President Teddy Roosevelt understood his relations with the other states of the Western Hemisphere as one of U.S. supremacy and entitlement. He wanted Latin American leaders to understand that. The twentieth century became the continuous translation of that tense relationship, with Latin American states, to varying degrees, attempting to balance the overwhelming U.S. influence with other partnerships. For example, during the Second World War, President Vargas of Brazil offered his support to both Germany and the U.S., and opted for the latter after it committed to significantly support Brazil economically. That support was translated, for instance, into the building of a steel factory in Volta Redonda, in the state of Rio de Janeiro (Moura, 2012).

The post-Second World War period brought its own share of disappointments for Latin Americans. The U.S. rose to the rank of superpower and leaders from the Western Hemisphere hoped they would be able to turn their alignment with the U.S. into concrete support, similar to the Marshall Plan that was directed at Europe. Instead, all the Western Hemisphere received was President John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress (1961), in which he committed to encourage the private sector to invest in the region.

In political and security terms, the U.S. cemented its supremacy in the region by establishing the Organization of American States, headquartered in Washington. This enabled the U.S. to institutionalize its leadership in the Western Hemisphere. In parallel, it also launched the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance in 1947, with the objective of framing

security cooperation among the states of the Western Hemisphere in a collective security pact².

It is worth mentioning here that President Kennedy's initiative took place after the U.S. had lost Cuba. The 1959 Cuban revolution brought down the regime of President Batista, a solid U.S. ally, and replaced it with an increasingly socialist-inclined regime under the leadership of Fidel Castro. The alienation of the Castro regime by the U.S.—shown, for instance, by the attempt to invade Cuba, commonly known as the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961—pushed it progressively but quickly into the orbit of the Soviet Union, of which it became a firm ally. The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1963 showed the strength of the Soviet-Cuban alliance and the enhanced threat to the U.S. One of the consequences of the Cuban revolution was to enhance the importance of avoiding the manifestation in the Western Hemisphere of the 'domino theory', according to which the fall of one piece—in this case, of an ally—would result in all pieces—all the region—falling into communism. But instead of trying to conquer hearts and minds in the Western Hemisphere, the U.S. decided to support military coups, as will be discussed next.

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a split between governments and the people in Latin America, similarly to what took place at the turn of the century, when José Martí, an intellectual, represented mistrust of the U.S., while state representatives opted to more-or-less enthusiastically join the U.S. bandwagon instead of balancing it. After a series of military coups in the region, the objective of which was to counter what was considered the threatening rise of communism, the U.S. supported the infamous Operation Condor, through which the military regimes of Latin America violently repressed their political opponents and assassinated opposition leaders. Whereas the military regimes had enjoyed some level of popular support, at least in their initial years, there was subsequently a widespread popular rejection of those regimes, and *ipso facto*, growing popular distrust of the U.S. influence on the regimes. The anti-imperialist narrative took hold of solid chunks of the Western Hemisphere's public opinion, and with that, from a political point of view, popular mistrust of the U.S. grew and solidified.

U.S. interventions in Latin America helped that popular feeling to solidify. After the fall of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua in 1979 as a consequence of the Sandinista revolution, the U.S. supported several unpopular regimes in Central America, and fostered civil wars that immobilized the whole region for most of the 1980s. Subsequently, the U.S. intervention in Panama to remove General Noriega and take him to court in the U.S., as well as the shift towards the so-called 'War on Drugs', which saw increasing U.S. support for the militarization of anti-drug trafficking operations, consolidated the popular anti-U.S. feeling. The 'War on Drugs' had a lasting impact on the negative perception of the U.S. in the region, as evidenced by Plan Colombia in the country that carries that name. The Plan was accompanied by many human right abuses and included the extraditions to the U.S. of South American citizens accused of drug trafficking which amplified the image of a superpower that took the region for granted and treated it as its backyard, while showing no respect for its sovereignty and independence.

It is relevant to note here that there were episodes in which it was attempted to create some distancing from the U.S. in Latin America. For instance, in the mid-1970s, still under military dictatorship, the government of Ernesto Geisel in Brazil attempted to diminish its heavy

2. The Treaty showed its limitations in 1982, during the Malvinas/Falklands War, when Argentina called for the activation of the Treaty to no avail, as the U.S. military supported the United Kingdom, its NATO ally, to the detriment of Argentina, its inter-American treaty ally.

reliance on the U.S. Under President Geisel, Brazil became the first country to recognize the independence of Angola from Portugal, after which it maintained a close relationship with African former Portuguese colonies, despite U.S. pressure to cut those ties because of the alignment of those countries with the Soviet Union. Geisel's government also voted in 1974 in favor of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution that equated Zionism to a form of racism. This shocked the West, but reflected a Brazilian attempt at rapprochement with oil-rich Arab states. The same government launched the Brazilian nuclear program, initially in Angra dos Reis, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, in cooperation with, and with support from, the Federal Republic of Germany. With all those gestures, Brazil tried to reduce its overreliance on the U.S., and to establish diversified partnerships that could help Brazil survive eventual clashes with the U.S.

From a security point of view, it is also important to note that Latin Americans took initiatives or were part of initiatives that attempted to distance the region from the priorities of the two superpowers during the Cold War, and to give it a distinct voice. Two initiatives deserve a mention: the Treaty of Tlatelolco of 1967, and ZOPACAS. The former was a strictly Latin American treaty with the objective of banning nuclear weapons from the region. Although neither Argentina nor Brazil initially ratified the Treaty on Nuclear Proliferation (TNP), both countries ratified the Treaty of Tlatelolco. Later, in 1986, and under a UN initiative, Latin American states became part of what is known as ZOPACAS, a zone of peace and cooperation in the Southern Atlantic that brought together states from both sides of the Southern Atlantic. Those initiatives indicated that the region's leaders of the time aimed to have a distinct voice in the global agenda, taking an attitude of cautious equi-distancing from both superpowers, and that they did not want to commit to one side or the other.

4. The Post-Cold War Period

The post-Cold War period can be characterized as a period during which Latin America has attempted to reinforce multilateralism while diversifying its partnerships. Although the U.S. remained the only superpower, it was distracted by other regions and paid only scant attention to the Western Hemisphere. That opened up an opportunity for the European Union to seek stronger trade links with Latin America. Later, it also represented an opportunity for a rising China to multiply its partnerships and links with Western Hemisphere states.

None of this meant that the U.S. was totally absent from the region, or that all U.S. initiatives were military centered. In December 1994, President Bill Clinton invited all Latin American leaders—with the notable exception of Cuba's Fidel Castro—to an America Summit in Miami, with the objective of consolidating democracy in the region and launching a free trade zone in the hemisphere. Divergent trade and political agendas, as well as mistrust of the U.S., led to the failure of the initiative, but several states from the region, including Colombia and Chile, ended up signing free trade agreements with the U.S.

To balance the overwhelming U.S. supremacy in the region, different states followed different strategies. As noted earlier, Brazil tried to diversify its partnerships. Meanwhile, Cuba, as well as post-Sandinista revolution Nicaragua, became solid Soviet allies. States in the region also tried to solidify their economic integration by intensifying regional trade links. The most successful initiative was the launch in 1991 of Mercosur. The success of Mercosur meant its member states could rely less on external partners and more on each other for trade. It also allowed them to enter into high stake negotiations with other partners, including the EU—the Mercosur-EU deal finally became a reality in February 2026. Other initiatives took place in the region, notably in the security sector with the launch in 2008 of

Union of South American Nations (UNASUR).

The most significant development globally since the fall of the Soviet Union was certainly the rise of China to the rank of major power. That rise has had a significant impact on the Western Hemisphere. China is one of the main foreign investors in the region, with Chinese investments in Latin America in 2024 surpassing \$8.5 billion. China is also the second trade partner for Latin America, with trade in 2024 worth \$ 518 billion. China's Belt and Road initiative, in which more than 20 Caribbean and Latin American states participate, has also been a significant tool via which China exercises its influence in the world in general, and in the region in particular.

Since about 2020, as it has progressively established itself as the second-largest economy in the world, China has also become a significant political player in Latin America. Already at the start of the twenty-first century, China flexed its muscles as it threatened to block a UN peacekeeping operation in Haiti because the Haitian government established political and economic links with Taiwan. China thus indicated not only its red lines but also its readiness to use its economic and political might to influence players throughout the world, including in areas far from its territory, such as the Caribbean. China also strengthened its relationship with Venezuela, which until very recently, was considered a rogue state by the U.S. Despite that, China contented itself with condemning the January 3, 2026, kidnapping of the Venezuelan President, Nicolas Maduro, showing its unwillingness to engage, at least for now, in direct security-centered confrontations with the U.S. in remote territories such as Venezuela³.

From a Latin American point of view, Argentina under President Javier Milei and Brazil under President Lula represent two opposite approaches to dealing with global politics⁴. Argentina under Milei sees strengthening links with the U.S. as being of the utmost interest to Argentina, and Milei does not hesitate to voice harsh criticism of China. Meanwhile, Brazil under Lula has been very cautious in dealing with U.S. President Donald Trump, and has sought to reinforce Brazil's ties with China, India, the EU, and other partners from the Global South.

It should be noted that Brazil has hosted two multilateral summits and a major international conference with global impact. In 2024, Brazil hosted the G20 Summit, which was held a few days after the election of President Trump, and which became an opportunity to defend the importance of multilateralism. In 2025, Brazil hosted the BRICS+ summit, which claimed a place for the Global South in the global agenda, and defended the necessity of respecting its voice, its relevance, and its priorities. Some of the decisions made at that summit angered President Trump and pushed him to direct harsh words towards the BRICS+ in general, and Brazil in particular. Later in 2025, Brazil hosted the COP30 climate summit, which for President Trump represents a nuisance because it focuses on the environmental agenda and on global warming—which President Trump calls a hoax—and which defends multilateralism as the only way to efficiently deal with those global challenges.

Meanwhile, Brazil has been lukewarm toward President Trump's Board of Peace, an initiative the U.S. President initially launched to deal with the future and the reconstruction

3. The restraint China exercises in its foreign policy, as shown by its mild condemnation of the kidnapping of President Maduro, becomes evident when compared to the attempt of the former Soviet Union to install ballistic missiles in Cuba in 1962.

4. It is significant to mention the names of the presidents of both countries, since both countries have followed different policies under different leaders: whereas Alberto Fenandez, predecessor to President Milei in Argentina, welcomed his country's membership of BRICS+, one of Milei's first presidential decisions was to withdraw from the group.

of Gaza, but which has become a venue for the U.S. President to create a new international forum under his exclusive leadership, with the objective of competing with—and eventually sidelining—the UN. In all these initiatives, Brazil has sought to defend its interest by insisting on multilateralism, while avoiding direct confrontation with President Trump.

As a consequence of China's more assertive presence in the Western Hemisphere, and also in parallel to it, one needs to read the U.S. security and defense strategies, respectively published in December 2025 and January 2026. In them, the Western Hemisphere rose to the highest level of priority for the U.S. global security and defense strategies. Why? As mentioned in previous analyses of U.S. relationships with the subcontinent, independently of President Trump, the U.S. has started to see China as a major global competitor.

Consequently, the U.S. seeks to delink its economy from China, and to stop providing that country with materials it deems strategic. It also foresees a strong competition with China over energy supplies and raw materials. The novelty under President Trump is that the U.S., despite some contradictions, seems ready to concede that the new world is made up of spheres of influence—a Chinese sphere in Asia, a Russian one in Europe, and an American one in the Western Hemisphere—although the U.S. is not ready to concede the Indo-Pacific to China⁵. That reading of world politics led President Trump to revisit the Monroe Doctrine and give it new life: the Western Hemisphere is under U.S. influence, and no external power should have influence over its natural resources (both energy and minerals), or its infrastructure.

If economically and from a trade perspective, the challenge for the U.S. might be unsurmountable, such is the Chinese penetration of South American economies, from a political and a security point of view, the Trump administration is maneuvering to prevent all external powers—especially China—from influencing the region. That was the case when President Trump threatened to seize back control of the Panama Canal, but ultimately contented himself with Chinese withdrawal from the operation of the Canal. That has also been the case since the kidnapping of President Maduro and his replacement by his former vice-president, who aims at regime survival and has agreed to all necessary concessions for that to be the case. This has included cutting some ties with China.

In other situations, President Trump has forcefully supported specific candidates in electoral processes and made explicit threats in case his candidates do not obtain popular support (which was explicitly the case in Argentina's legislative elections in October 2025, and more implicitly in Honduras's presidential election later that year). Finally, in some cases, such as in Chile, ultra-right candidates, who share his worldview, were elected without him having to interfere with the local process. These sectors of Latin American societies clearly aim to strengthen relations with the U.S. and to benefit from that strengthening, which is why they defend it.

But Latin American states walk a fine line between avoiding clashes with President Trump and pursuing independent foreign policies. That was illustrated—and in a certain way, reinforced—by the Mercosur-EU agreement, which resulted from a process that took almost three decades, but which contrasts with the threats to global trade from President Trump's tariff policy, by representing a way for two commercial blocs to forge closer ties. For Mexico, the challenges are more acute because of Mexico's intense reliance on trade with the U.S. and the long border the two countries share. But President Sheinbaum's

5. As for the contradictions and paradoxes, one has to mention the U.S. bombing of Islamist radicals in Nigeria, and most significantly, the U.S.-Israeli attack against Iran.

ability to keep her options open has been noticed by many observers. In sum, this second category of states seeks to diversify its options, not to say its dependencies, while also trying to avoid antagonizing the U.S. President openly.

5. Concluding Remarks

After a long period of being relatively marginalized in world politics, Latin America has returned to the spotlight: hosting summits that have defended multilateralism (the G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 2024, the COP30 conference in Belem in November 2025), and that have defended the voice of the Global South and its place in world politics. Latin America was also in the spotlight at the start of President Trump's second term, because of his focus on the Panama Canal. By the end of 2025, Latin America had been significantly present in the agenda of President Trump, whether Argentina or Brazil, or even Honduras. At the start of 2026, the kidnapping of the President of Venezuela represented an even more significant development: the success of the operation emboldened President Trump to pursue similar operations around the world.

The objective of this policy brief was to show the historical roots of Latin America's insertion in world politics, and how it has faced the challenges throughout history. Light was also shed on the internal divergence in Latin America on how to deal with that insertion, i.e. to balance against Western influence in general and U.S. influence in particular, or join with it. There is no end to this debate, since it is based on the intertwined aspects of the domestic, regional, and international.

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