

The New York Times

President Biden Should Not Underestimate Challenges in Latin America

Michael Shifter

February 10, 2021



Militiamen in front of an empty electoral center in Venezuela. Credit: Adriana Loureiro Fernandez for The New York Times

The new administration will have trouble finding partners to defend democracy in the region.

As the Biden administration begins to undo Donald Trump's legacy in Latin America, many in the region appear guardedly optimistic about the prospects for more constructive relations with their northern neighbor. President Biden's rapid turn toward [a more humane immigration policy](#) sends a powerful message, and he has promised an approach [driven by national \(not](#)

[personal\) interests](#) and values, with a renewed commitment to democracy, human rights and anti-corruption. He has also assigned urgency to combating climate change.

The harsh realities facing Latin America could thwart the new team's goals and aspirations in a region racked by [pervasive violence and appalling inequalities](#).

Latin America's downward spiral, which began in 2013, has vaporized economic and social gains made over the preceding decade. Both left- and right-leaning governments have failed to deliver: The middle class has shrunk while extreme poverty and joblessness have surged, triggering social discontent and upheaval. Politics has become more polarized and confrontational, and satisfaction with [democracy has reached its lowest level in decades](#). Today the region is fertile ground for authoritarian rule.

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed institutional weakness, entrenched political and corporate corruption, and systemic failures in health, education and other public services. Latin America's economies [will likely not recover their pre-pandemic per capita gross domestic product until 2025](#), according to the International Monetary Fund. Many economists predict [the region could face another lost decade](#), similar to or worse than the debt crises of the 1980s. Most worrying, the region has never been more fragmented and leaderless. Countries are moving in different directions, and cooperation among them is notably weak.

The United States' policies toward Latin America will be constrained by the multiple national crises Mr. Biden has inherited, which will likely consume the government's time, political capital and spending capacity. In U.S. foreign policy, Europe and Asia will take precedence over Latin America.

To his credit, Mr. Biden wasted no time making it clear that his Latin America policies would mark a substantial departure from his predecessor's. The suspension of the wall on the border with Mexico, changes in asylum rules, the reunification of families that had been cruelly separated and other proposed immigration reforms will be cheered across the region.

Early signs of new approaches toward Venezuela and Cuba are also encouraging. On Venezuela, pragmatic diplomacy, [with the United States rejoining European efforts to promote serious negotiations](#), is expected. On Cuba, [moves toward greater U.S. engagement](#), reminiscent of the Obama administration thaw in 2015, appear likely. Threats and harsh sanctions against both countries — for the sake of projecting toughness — have been counterproductive and harmful to ordinary citizens.

The Biden administration's efforts to generate the momentum needed to defend democracy in Latin America will have trouble finding amenable partners. Some Latin American governments were content that Mr. Trump gave them a free pass on democracy and human rights concerns. In the past four years, "cooperation" has meant accommodation to U.S. demands, especially on migration. In the name of noninterference and national sovereignty, these governments are likely to push back if the Biden administration takes firm public stands on, say, military corruption in Mexico, deforestation in Brazil or killings of social leaders in Colombia.

The past four years, culminating in the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, have weakened the United States' moral authority as a keeper of democracy. Mr. Biden has his work cut out for him to demonstrate that Mr. Trump was an aberration and that the United States is a credible and reliable ally on human rights and democracy. Mr. Biden will need to pursue a consistent approach toward governments across the region, whether of the left or of the right, even if they are ready to accommodate the United States on other issues. [Fair treatment of immigrants](#) and serious attention to inequalities and racism in the United States would enhance the Biden administration's standing on these issues.

At the same time, the new administration [should move away from Mr. Trump's attempts to demonize China](#) or portray its growing influence in Latin America in almost Cold War terms. Instead, Mr. Biden should fulfill his promise to strengthen U.S. capacity to compete effectively in the region. Increased trade, aid and corporate investment in Latin America should be emphasized.

Mr. Biden has a special concern for Central America's Northern Triangle countries — Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador — the main source of unauthorized migration to the United States. As vice president, he was the architect of the [Alliance for Prosperity](#) cooperation effort, and as president, he [has proposed a \\$4 billion package](#) to address the economic, security and governance causes of migration.

The idea is commendable, but corruption is rampant in many of these countries, which makes executing such an ambitious plan very difficult.

Given the challenges of United States-Latin America policy, it is wise to focus on a few modest, realistic objectives. For the Biden administration, the devastating situation in the United States is the highest priority. But to signal that the nation's approach is no longer "America First," cooperation on the pandemic — more than anything else — will be critical.

The United States has rejoined the [World Health Organization and Covax](#), a global initiative to ensure access to Covid-19 vaccines. Now the Biden administration should consider mounting a serious effort to help Latin American nations bring an end to the pandemic and support an economic recovery with social justice. A crucial first step would be financial and logistical assistance to secure needed vaccines and help make sure they are widely distributed and reach highly vulnerable populations.

Nothing would do more to help restore trust and renew U.S. partnerships in the Americas.