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The People's Republic of China (PRC) has significantly increased its activities in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and become a significant contender to America's premier place of influence in the hemisphere. This growing Chinese presence in America's neighborhood could potentially undermine the national security of the US and bring long-term instability in the continent. To counter the increasing influence of China in LAC, the US needs to improve its political and economic statecraft in the region.

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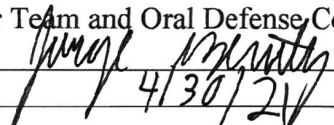
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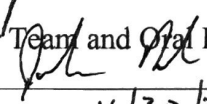
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Executive Summary

Title: A More Robust U.S. Response to China’s Growing Activities in Latin America and the Caribbean

Author: Major Adriana Daroca-Cosulich, United States Marine Corps

Thesis: The People’s Republic of China (PRC) has significantly increased its Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) activities and become a significant contender to America’s historical premier place of influence in the hemisphere. This growing Chinese presence in America’s neighborhood could potentially undermine the United States' national security and bring long-term instability to the continent. To counter the increasing Chinese influence in LAC, the United States needs to improve its political and economic statecraft dynamics in the region.

Discussion: For the past twenty years, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has increased its engagement in the Latin American and the Caribbean (LAC) region, and it has been very successful. Since 2001 the PRC has improved its diplomatic and economic ties with numerous countries within this region. The PRC combines economic statecraft and aggressive diplomatic charm tactics to achieve valuable economic and geopolitical objectives¹. Through its aggressive people-to-people diplomacy and economic statecraft, China has secured its access to the LAC markets and resources and is growing its political influence in the region. If achieved, these strategic objectives position China to strengthen its great power competition against the U.S. and weaken the U.S.’s historical leadership in this region.

Conclusion: Chinese influence in Latin America and the Caribbean has increased significantly. The main avenues China has used to expand its influence in the region are economic statecraft and diplomacy. The United States must refocus its efforts in the LAC region, taking a more robust diplomatic and economic statecraft approach to counter the growth of Chinese influence in the region that jeopardizes U.S. national interests in the region.

¹ LEI YU, “China's Strategic Partnership with Latin America: a Fulcrum in China's Rise,” *International Affairs* 91, no. 5 (2015): pp. 1047-1068, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12397>, 1054.

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Introduction

For the past twenty years, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has increased its engagement in the Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region, and it has been very successful. Since 2001, the PRC has improved its diplomatic and economic ties with numerous countries within this region. The PRC combines economic statecraft and aggressive diplomatic charm tactics to achieve valuable economic and geopolitical objectives². Through its aggressive people-to-people diplomacy and economic statecraft, China has secured access to the LAC markets and resources and is growing its political influence in the region. If achieved, these strategic objectives position China to strengthen its great power competition against the U.S. and weaken the U.S.'s historical leadership in this key region.³

China has capitalized on the United States' focus on wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to gain a foothold on the continent. During these wars, the United States was spread very thin and was unable to have a more aggressive diplomatic approach towards the LAC region. Further, the United States' popularity among LAC countries has decreased even more in the past four years due to President Donald Trump's isolationist rhetoric, harsh immigration policies, and antagonistic message towards some immigration groups. These recent actions by the U.S. have pushed some LAC countries to improve their diplomatic and economic ties with the PRC. Due to its geopolitical proximity, size, natural resources, and population, Latin America's stability is critical to U.S. national security. While the United States still maintains its premier place of power in the Latin American region, there is evidence that China is transforming itself

² LEI YU, "China's Strategic Partnership with Latin America: a Fulcrum in China's Rise," *International Affairs* 91, no. 5 (2015): pp. 1047-1068, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12397>, 1054.

³ Ibid

into a major contender for this role, potentially undermining the United States' interests and bringing long-term instability to the region. To counter the increasing Chinese influence in the region, the United States needs to improve its foreign policy and better leverage its Diplomatic and Economic instruments of power.

Evidence of Increasing Chinese Influence in Latin America and the Caribbean

According to the latest U.S. - China Economic and Security Review commissions report, the United States is still considered the largest economic and security partner for LAC.⁴ Still, when Mexico is out of the equation, China has overtaken the U.S. as the top trading partner for the rest of the region, specifically in the South American area since 2019.⁵

At the top of China's strategic objectives in the LAC region is the desire to secure the developing countries' diplomatic support to enhance its status internationally and correct its negative image. Second China wants to gain access to LAC's consumer market and its vast natural resources to sustain China's economic growth. Finally, China's objective is to gain political influence, to achieve the approval of LAC for China's political policies⁶, Specifically on matters of limiting Taiwan's influence in the continent. It is important to note that LAC still hosts nine of the fifteen countries that recognize Taiwan's sovereignty instead of China (Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Haiti, Nicaragua, Paraguay, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and

⁴ Katherine Koleski and Alec Blivas, "China's Engagement with LAC and the Caribbean," China's Engagement with LAC and the Caribbean | U.S.- China | Economic and Security Review Commission, October 17, 2018, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-engagement-latin-america-and-caribbean>, 1

⁵ Ciara Nugent and Charlie Campell, "China's Effort to Become Latin America's Most Important Ally." Time. Time, February 4, 2021. <https://time.com/5936037/us-china-latin-america-influence/>.

⁶ LEI YU, "China's Strategic Partnership with Latin America: a Fulcrum in China's Rise," *International Affairs* 91, no. 5 (2015): pp. 1047-1068, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12397>, 1054.

Grenadines).⁷ To accomplish the objectives mentioned above, the PRC combines a mix between economic diplomacy and people-to-people diplomacy or “charm offensive.”⁸



Figure 1. LAC countries with formal relations with China and Taiwan⁹

⁷ Ciara Nugent and Charlie Campell, “China’s Effort to Become Latin America’s Most Important Ally,” Time (Time, February 4, 2021), <https://time.com/5936037/us-china-latin-america-influence/>.

⁸ LEI YU, “China’s Strategic Partnership with Latin America: a Fulcrum in China’s Rise,” *International Affairs* 91, no. 5 (2015): pp. 1047-1068, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12397>, 1054.

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China's Economic Campaign

Throughout the 2000s, the rising trade between China and Latin America was due to the commodity boom of minerals such as iron ore, copper, and soybeans.¹⁰ Many governments in South America utilized these profits to improve their exports and national economies. After the fall of these commodities' prices beginning in 2010, China expanded its trade with the region and diversified its economic engagement through infrastructure construction, mining, oil, manufacturing of automobiles, hydropower, and clean energy.¹¹ According to the American Enterprise Institute, the PRC invested \$191 billion in construction contracts in the LAC, with most of these investments located in South America.¹² For example, Claudia Trevisani captures that countries such as Venezuela received \$20.28 billion from Chinese investment, Ecuador Received \$12.94 billion, Argentina \$25.17 billion, and since 2005 Peru \$28.24 received billion, and Brazil \$69 billion.¹³ Due to its long history of investing, the United States still holds most of the stock¹⁴ in Latin America; however, the Chinese cash flow towards the region in the past twenty years provides the region with options that compete with the U.S. economic efforts for the past century.

The sums of money spent by the Chinese on investment throughout the past two decades have excellent results and provide the LAC market with options and raise the competition among enterprises. The LAC region's new market has enabled Chinese companies to boom and competed with the American ones. For example, in Brazil, 35 percent of the mobile communication passes through Huawei equipment, and Chinese electrical companies have built

¹⁰ Trevisan, Claudia. "Trade, Investment, Technology, and Training Are China's Tools to Influence Latin America." Council on Foreign Relations, n.d. 2

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

transmission lines that communicate in large remote cities in the southeast region of the Amazon.¹⁵

Chinese investment, trade, and loan efforts are not only paying off in the economic competition in South America. They are also slowly influencing local communities and gaining their support for these populations to influence political decisions that support Chinese interests. A good example is the case of Brazil. President Jair Bolsonaro, well known for his very conservative and far-right political rhetoric, was critical of China's investments in the region during his electoral campaign in 2018. A year later, after he was elected president, he did a 360-degree turn and since then has been working proactively with Beijing companies for more investment in Brazil.¹⁶ Bolsonaro's change in rhetoric towards China was due to the Brazilian agricultural sector's pressure, which counts on China as its main client¹⁷. The agrarian elite of Brazil is one of the significant contributors to Bolsonaro's electoral campaigns.¹⁸

Furthermore, China has leveraged its economic and political influence in LAC into diplomatic support in international institutions and multilateral forums. For example, the reliance of several South American states on agricultural and livestock exports to China helps explain their support for China becoming the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) chair, the United Nations entity, setting food and animal safety standards.¹⁹ The United States backed China's main contender, but China was able to defeat it due to the support of most of the governments in Latin America.²⁰

¹⁵ Ibid,3.

¹⁶ Ibid,4.

¹⁷ Ibid,5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 6.

²⁰ Ibid

Another critical state within LAC in which Chinese economic diplomacy has gone beyond trade, investment, and loans and has gained political sympathy towards its agenda in Central America is Panama, which has strategic value because it controls a critical chokepoint to the world trade, the Panama Canal. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Panama in 2018; China and Panama have signed multiple bilateral cooperation agreements in different areas, including trade and infrastructure projects.²¹ As a result of the promised investments, Panama cut diplomatic relations with Taiwan in 2017.²² El Salvador and the Dominican Republic followed these actions.²³ Securing these multinational projects was more than a victory for the Chinese economy. It also represented a significant victory for Beijing's political agenda of solidifying its One-China policy in the region. China will continue its influence operations in this region because LAC still hosts nine of the fifteen countries that still recognize Taiwan's sovereignty instead of China.²⁴

Another critical factor that enabled the rise in China's leverage in LAC is its lending capacity. China has become crucial as a lender for the various LAC states. China has given about \$141 billion in loans to LAC states, more than major financial institutions such as the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the Development Bank of South America have given to the region combined.²⁵ According to Ellis, in addition to that funding from the Chinese government, Chinese companies have also invested an estimated \$113.6 billion in LAC. This funding has indirectly helped maintain left-wing governments in power, such as

²¹ Don Giolzetti, "China's Front Door to America's Backyard." *The Diplomat*. The Diplomat, June 28, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/06/chinas-front-door-to-americas-backyard/>.

²² *Ibid*

²³ Trevisan, Claudia. "Trade, Investment, Technology, and Training Are China's Tools to Influence Latin America." Council on Foreign Relations, n.d. 7

²⁴ Ciara Nugent and Charlie Campell, "China's Effort to Become Latin America's Most Important Ally," *Time* (Time, February 4, 2021), <https://time.com/5936037/us-china-latin-america-influence/>.

²⁵ *Ibid*.6

Venezuela, Cuba, and Bolivia.²⁶ According to Kevin Parthenay, “LAC countries are rapidly joining the China-Led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)” as of Jul 2020, and 19 Latin American and Caribbean countries have signed Belt and Road Initiative cooperation agreements²⁷. China’s success in dealings with multiple governments across the region is due to its “Ideological Free” foreign policy, which has enabled it to establish a foothold and adapt to different governments with different LAC ideologies during the past 20 years.²⁸

China’s People-to-People Diplomacy: A New Version of Soft Power

China not only uses its economic tools to gain influence in the region, but it has also opted to utilize a new way to shape viewpoints abroad. This new soft power is used mainly to correct any negative perceptions generated by Western powers' methods and reasonings for Chinese rapid global rise.²⁹ One of the most potent diplomatic efforts executed by China is people-to-people exchange or direct influence. The exchanges include multiple groups such as journalists, diplomats, lawmakers, scholars, students, business owners, politicians, basically including much of the elite in the region.³⁰ The initiatives directed to this elite include scholarships, courses, and seminars sponsored mainly by the Chinese Communist Party.³¹ Civil servants, lawmakers, and entrepreneurs across Latin America have been invited to attend courses. These courses include broad topics such as the Belt and Road initiative, tourism

²⁶ “Chinese Engagement in Latin America in the Context of Strategic Competition with the United States R. Evan Ellis, PHD Latin America Research Professor Strategic Studies Institute US Army War College, Testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission,” 2020.

²⁷ Fermin Koop, “Coronavirus Reshapes China's BRI in Latin America,” Dialogo Chino, July 30, 2020, <https://dialogochino.net/en/infrastructure/36699-coronavirus-reshapes-belt-and-road-in-latin-america/>.

²⁸ Miquel Vila Moreno, “China Adapts to a Changing LAC,” The Diplomat (The Diplomat, March 13, 2020), <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/china-adapts-to-a-changing-latin-america/>.

²⁹ Juan Pablo Cardenal, “Sharp Power Raising Authoritarian Influence.” Nations Endowment for Democracy NED. <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Chapter1-Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence-China-Latin-America.pdf>, n.d. 27

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Trevisan, Claudia. “Trade, Investment, Technology, and Training Are China’s Tools to Influence Latin America.” Council on Foreign Relations, n.d. 10

management, seminars on agricultural production technology, public heritage management, foreign investment, and visits of legislators to major Chinese firms since 2016.³² There have been various parliamentary dialogues established since 2006 between legislators in LAC and the PRC's congress on top of the exchange programs and visits to China offered to the LAC elite. Additionally, cooperation with universities and think tanks has also increased. According to Claudia Trevisan, there has been an intense flow of invitations to LAC scholars to visit Chinese universities and think tanks³³. Also, there is an influx of Chinese delegations to academic institutions in Latin America searching for partnerships and exchange programs.³⁴ This increase of contact has enabled the increase of Chinese centers dedicated to the study of Latin America.³⁵ To conclude, these diplomatic efforts enable the PRC to develop more sympathetic views about China across the region, solidify personal relationships with the most influential LAC elite, insert its pro-China narrative, and reframe its bilateral relationships with a benign façade that goes beyond the economic realm.

³² Ibid 11

³³ Ibid 22

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid



Figure 2. Chinese Partners in the LAC Region³⁶

³⁶ “China’s Science Silk Road: Part 4,” Nature News (Nature Publishing Group), accessed March 28, 2021, <https://www.nature.com/immersive/d41586-019-01127-4/index.html>.

Negative Effects of Past Administrations on the U.S. - LAC Relationship

The U.S. relationship with LAC has considerably worsened since President George W. Bush's Administration. When he took office, Bush declared that LAC would be a top priority in U.S. foreign policy³⁷; however, after the September 11 attack in 2001, the focus of effort shifted to the Middle East, and the United States lost focus on the LAC region.³⁸ When President Obama took office in 2009, he made similar promises as his predecessor during his first Summit. In his remarks at the Summit of the Americas opening ceremony, President Obama stated told LAC leaders, “so I am here to launch a new chapter of engagement that will be sustained throughout my administration.”³⁹ Further, the relationship between the United States and LAC during President Obama's two terms improved but not substantially. The continuing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq and the rise of ISIS also distracted the Obama administration from significantly focusing on the region.

President Donald Trump took a different approach than his last two predecessors. As described by Claudia Trevisan, “In strategically important countries, China is winning the public opinion battle with the United States, partly due to the deterioration of U.S. regional prestige as a result of President Donald Trump’s anti-immigrant and anti-Mexico rhetoric.”⁴⁰ This may have caused the most damage to the U.S. and LAC states' diplomatic ties in the past two decades and pushed the LAC countries to strengthen their relationship with China. During his tenure, President Trump’s immigration policies, such as the Asylum Cooperation Agreements and the

³⁷ Peter Hakim, “Is Washington Losing Latin America?,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 29, 2009, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-america/2006-01-01/washington-losing-latin-america>.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ “Remarks by the President at the Summit of the Americas Opening Ceremony,” National Archives and Records Administration (National Archives and Records Administration), accessed February 28, 2021, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-summit-americas-opening-ceremony>.

⁴⁰ Trevisan, Claudia. “Trade, Investment, Technology, and Training Are China’s Tools to Influence Latin America.” Council on Foreign Relations, n.d. 8

dissolution of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), resulted in the closing of borders, denial of entry for refugees, detention of undocumented, resulting in overcrowding of detention facilities, and backlogs of asylum seeker waiting at the Mexican border, and multiple undocumented families have been separated from their children.⁴¹ He also took an aggressive public stance by establishing significant unilateral sanctions on the governments of Cuba and Venezuela. Even though these sanctions were adopted collectively with other LAC states, they began as unilateral US actions and harsh Trump administration rhetoric towards Cuba, Venezuela, and El Salvador.⁴² These actions backfired and generated a negative perception of unilateral behavior by the United States. These actions also contributed to the movement of some countries to deepen their ties with China. Trump's negative actions also caused concerns among some LAC leaders about a possible intervention of the United States in Venezuela and whether it would be the start of more US interventions in the region.⁴³ Regardless of Trump's sanctions, these autocratic governments are still in power, sustained partly by China's investments in the region. Trump's isolationist and menacing rhetoric made it more difficult for the U.S. to build regional action against the autocratic regimes. Instead, Oliver Stuenkel argues that Trump's policies helped some LAC defect towards China's side.⁴⁴

Additionally, the Trump administration threatened deep cuts on foreign aid assistance programs to El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, arguing that they did not pull their weight and were not dealing responsibly with the migration flow.⁴⁵ Many of the programs cut were

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Oliver Stuenkel, "Trump Drove Latin America Into China's Arms," *Foreign Affairs*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-america/2020-11-13/trump-drove-latin-america-chinas-arms>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Teresa Welsh, "Play the Long Game: US Must Continue Aid in Central America, Analysts Say," *Devex* (Devex, July 11, 2018), <https://www.devex.com/news/play-the-long-game-us-must-continue-aid-in-central-america-analysts-say-93081>.

intended to reduce poverty and violence, which drive migration. Trump’s new policies were contrary to previous traditions; the United States has historically invested in these states through the U.S. Aid and Development Agency (USAID). Earlier, President Obama had established an initiative for the development of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras called “Alliance for Prosperity.”⁴⁶ It was a plan crafted between then-Vice President Biden and leaders of these countries to reduce immigration.⁴⁷ Efforts to defund these programs were seen as counterproductive. Congress rejected the proposed cuts and provided more assistance than President Trump requested in 2019.⁴⁸ However, the message was already transmitted. Trump’s isolationist, “America First” rhetoric and policies have done lasting damage to LAC relations. His action decreased the credibility of the U.S. and created opportunities for China to extend its presence in the LAC region.

A More Robust Response to China’s Growing Influence in the Western Hemisphere

After years of not focusing on LAC issues and the significant damage to LAC public opinion caused by the Trump administration, the Biden administration needs to improve US foreign policy in the region and respond better to China’s growing influence. For that, the United States needs a more robust diplomatic response to regain a more positive image in LAC. This will require emphasizing multilateral diplomacy and cooperation through key credible regional organizations. Second, the United States needs to leverage its powerful economic statecraft through more targeted sanctions towards undemocratic governments and improving U.S. policies on economic development to prevent Chinese influence in the region.

Diplomatic/Political approach

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ “PDF,” January 26, 2021.

To improve its relationship with the LAC and gain public support in the region, the United States has to restore its immigration policies to a more favorable balance with LAC and increase its multilateral diplomacy and cooperation through key credible regional organizations.

Restore U.S. immigration policies to a more favorable balance with LAC

A key element to improving the U.S. relationship with LAC and gaining public support is by changing President Trump's immigration policies, canceling the Asylum Cooperation Agreements (ACAs), and resuming the policy Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). The establishment of the ACAs and the cancelation of DACA policies during the Trump's Administration has been a major limiting factor of engagement in the LAC region. First, the new administration needs to reverse the restrictive Asylum Cooperation Agreements and halt the impediments to the asylum process created by the Trump administration. These policies severely limited the asylum process and denied international protection to people fleeing violence in the Central American region. The agreements caused a backlog of asylum seekers waiting to live in tent camps along the Mexican border.⁴⁹ According to Taladrid and Niarchos, at least 28,455 people are awaiting asylum determination on the Mexican border, ultimately causing a humanitarian crisis.⁵⁰ The new administration needs to reverse the Asylum Cooperation Agreements established by the Trump administration and develop a more comprehensive policy that can better process asylum seekers in a humanitarian way.⁵¹ A more comprehensive approach needs to include multilateral cooperation between the Northern

⁴⁹ Stephania Taladrid and Nicolas Niarchos, "Can Biden Reverse Trump's Damage to Latin America?" The New Yorker. Accessed February 26, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/can-biden-reverse-trumps-lasting-damage-in-latin-america>.

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras), Mexico, and the United States.

Another necessary change to improve international public opinion in the LAC region, the new U.S. administration needs to reinstate DACA. DACA impacts Latin America because more than 90 percent of the 689,800 recipients of DACA belong to LAC countries.⁵² The dissolution of this policy has not only generated a negative impact⁵³ on the international public opinion of the United States⁵⁴ but created devastating consequences to its recipients, their families, and the American economy.⁵⁵ Reinstating DACA will once again provide a haven to individuals that came or stayed in the U.S. illegally as minors and will allow them to register with the government, attend college, and participate in the workforce.⁵⁶ The new administration has already taken some steps and is moving in the right direction. President Joe Biden, days after his inauguration, signed an executive order that will dramatically improve the relationship and restore the image of the U.S. in the LAC region.⁵⁷ According to this executive order, “Consistent with these principles, my Administration will implement a multi-pronged approach toward managing migration throughout North and Central America that reflects the Nation’s highest values. We will work closely with civil society, international organizations, and the governments

⁵² USCIS, “PDF,” September 4, 2017, 1-4.

⁵³ Frida Ghitis, “Trump's Anti-Immigration Policies Are Undermining the U.S. in Latin America,” *World Politics Review*, accessed March 28, 2021, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/24940/trump-s-anti-immigration-policies-are-undermining-the-u-s-in-latin-america>.

⁵⁴ Bill Chappell, “World's Regard For U.S. Leadership Hits Record Low In Gallup Poll,” NPR (NPR, January 19, 2018), <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/01/19/579153589/worlds-regard-for-u-s-leadership-hits-new-record-low-in-gallup-poll>.

⁵⁵ FWD.us, “The Impact of DACA Program Repeal on American Jobs,” FWD.us, May 13, 2019, <https://www.fwd.us/news/daca-impact-report/>, webpage.

⁵⁶ Stephania Taladrid and Nicolas Niarchos,

“Can Biden Reverse Trump's Damage to Latin America?” *The New Yorker*. Accessed February 26, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/can-biden-reverse-trumps-lasting-damage-in-latin-america>, webpage

⁵⁷ (2021), p. 82677-8271 (5 pages), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/02/02/executive-order-creating-a-comprehensive-regional-framework-to-address-the-causes-of-migration-to-manage-migration-throughout-north-and-central-america-and-to-provide-safe-and-orderly-processing/>

in the region to: establish a comprehensive strategy for addressing the causes of migration in the region; build, strengthen, and expand Central and North American countries' asylum systems and resettlement capacity; and increase opportunities for vulnerable populations to apply for protection closer to home.”⁵⁸ These remarks already show a significant improvement and less divisive rhetoric than the previous administration. Instead of antagonizing the immigrant population, the current administration is taking steps to find strategies to address the root causes of immigration,⁵⁹ expand lawful pathways for protection and opportunities, and restore asylum requests' processing.⁶⁰ This executive order sets the stage for future actions to significantly improve the United States' image in the LAC region.

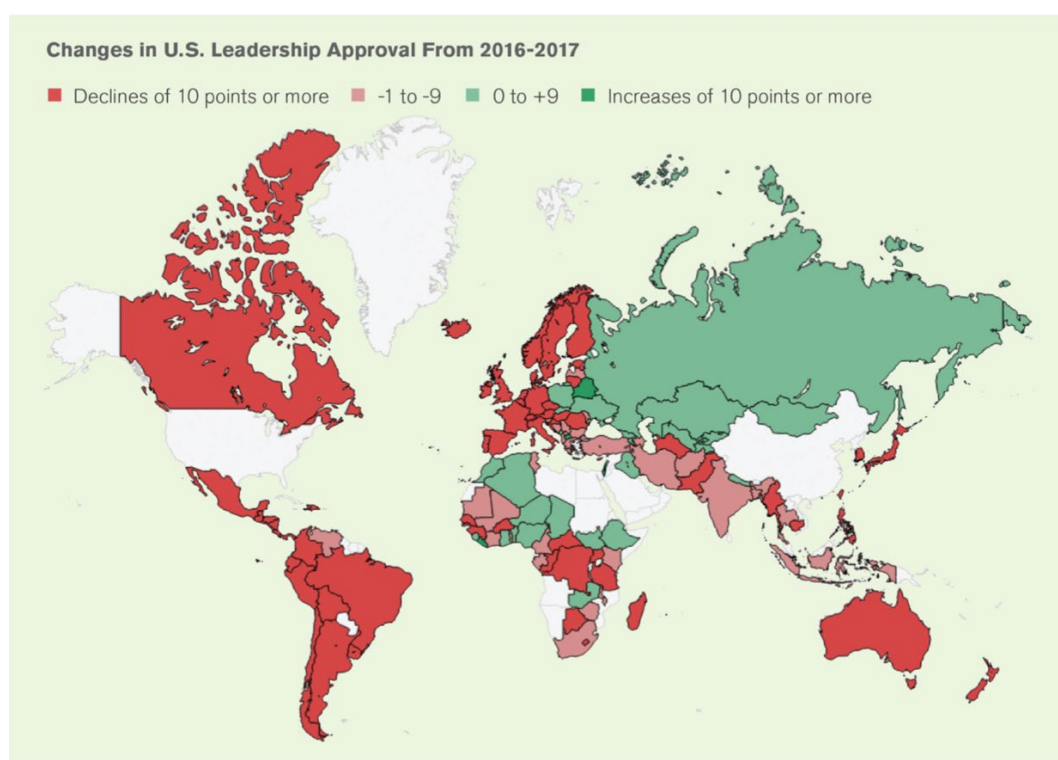


Figure 3. Change in U.S. Leadership Approval from 2016 to 2017⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Ibid

⁶¹ Bill Chappell, “World's Regard For U.S. Leadership Hits Record Low In Gallup Poll,” NPR (NPR, January 19, 2018), <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/01/19/579153589/worlds-regard-for-u-s-leadership-hits-new-record-low-in-gallup-poll>.

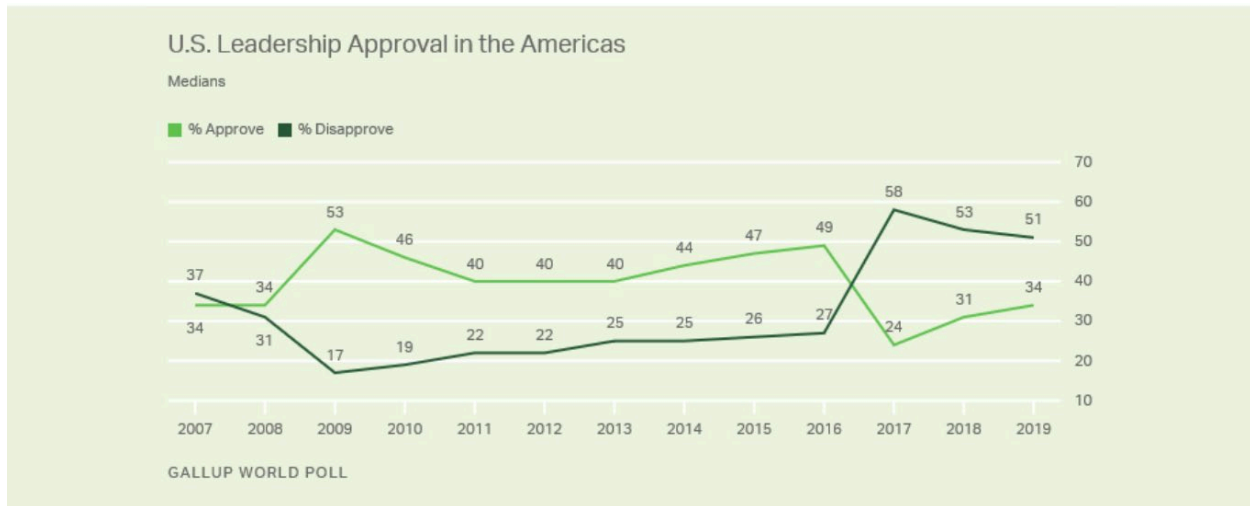


Figure 4 U.S. Leadership Approval in the Americas ⁶²

Emphasis on multilateral diplomacy and cooperation through key credible regional organizations

As a result of the absence of the United States influence in the LAC region for the past twenty years due to the focus on Iraq and Afghanistan, and the harm caused by Donald Trump’s aggressive approach towards the region and withdrawal from some significant trade agreements, LAC countries have resorted to leveraging their regional institutions to collaborate, resulting in the proliferation of regional Institutions such as The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), The Union of South American Nations (Unasur), and The Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA).⁶³ However, some of these institutions lack standards that enable the enforcement of norms, making them ineffective.⁶⁴ These institutions are forums for communication of ideas but inadequate for resolving conflicts and coordinating political and economic policies. Effective organizations set standards for membership. However,

⁶² Julie Ray, “U.S. Leadership Remains Unpopular Worldwide,” Gallup.com (Gallup, March 23, 2021), <https://news.gallup.com/poll/316133/leadership-remains-unpopular-worldwide.aspx>.

⁶³ Christopher Sabatini, “Meaningless Multilateralism,” Foreign Affairs, August 14, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/south-america/2014-08-08/meaningless-multilateralism>, webpage.

⁶⁴ Ibid

due to their willingness to collaborate and include everyone (without setting rules and standards for their members to participate), these organizations do not do much for cooperation and instead help legitimize authoritarian members to their sovereignty claims, undermining long-standing norms of democracy and human rights.⁶⁵ China has capitalized on this lack of accountability in the region and injected itself into these LAC forums. For example, China has a seat as an observer in ALBA, Organization of American States (OAS), The Pacific alliance and maintains a dialogue with the region through CELAC and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). Participation in these organizations provides Beijing with situational awareness of the region's needs, helps China promote its Belt and Road Initiative, and communicate its one-China policy concerns. To counter and slow down the Chinese multilateral attempt to co-opt regional LAC organizations, the United States needs a more robust diplomatic effort to empower credible organizations such as the Central American Integration System (SICA), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), the Organization of American States (OAS), the Pacific Alliance, and MERCOSUR. These organizations have more robust institutional mechanisms to enforce cooperation while protecting the long-standing norms of democracy and human rights among their neighbors.⁶⁶

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a severe crisis across the health, political, and economic spectrum and highlighted the need for more international cooperation. There is no better time for the United States to show its commitment to the continent by cooperating with LAC on the current issues and the future of the continent's post-COVID-19 economy and using these credible institutions as forums to regain its leadership role. After the United States has regained credibility in these organizations, it could start pushing its political agenda and

⁶⁵ Ibid

⁶⁶ Ibid

highlighting China's record of international law violations and human rights abuses.⁶⁷ Further, as stated by R. Evans Ellis, during his testimony before the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission, it is necessary to advocate for programs that will help our partners in the region "to fight corruption, advance transparency, and strengthen mechanisms for government and the rule of law."⁶⁸ Ellis considers such efforts as the most effective tools to protect LAC from China's dangerous business practices. It is time for the United States to invest in regaining its credibility in the LAC. The need for cooperation to answer the pandemic's current issues allows the United States to cooperate through these organizations and show its willingness to fortify its ties with the region. It will also improve its public image and regain credibility in the LAC region.

Economic Statecraft

U.S. Economic Statecraft is still significant and influential in the LAC.⁶⁹ In addition to valuable trade with the region, this statecraft includes sanctions to pressure governments that do not align with U.S. liberal democratic values or economic plans and improve its economic development policies in the LAC region.

Switch to Targeted Sanctions

Policymakers utilize sanctions as instruments to respond to geopolitical challenges and influence states' political decisions. Economic sanctions include the ban of trade or financial relations with the targeted state. There are two types of sanctions. Comprehensive sanctions

⁶⁷ Craig Singleton, "Post-COVID, Let's Leverage International Organizations to Slow down China: Opinion," Newsweek (Newsweek, July 8, 2020), <https://www.newsweek.com/post-covid-lets-leverage-international-organizations-slow-down-china-opinion-1515797>.

⁶⁸ R. Evan Ellis, "Chinese Engagement in Latin America in the Context of Strategic Competition with the United States," U.S.-CHINA ECONOMIC AND SECURITY REVIEW COMMISSION, June 24, 2020, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-06/Ellis_Testimony.pdf, 14.

⁶⁹ Alexander Main, "The Destructive Legacy of US Economic Statecraft in Latin America and the Caribbean," Center for Economic and Policy Research, March 26, 2020, <https://cepr.net/out-of-the-ashes-of-economic-war/>.

target an entire country, and targeted sanctions target particular individuals, businesses, or groups. Comprehensive sanctions bring a political blowback and negative image with humanitarian issues because usually targeted states blame their countries' economic problems on the sanctions. They end up hurting the public much more than the individuals whose negative behavior the sanctions are intended to change.⁷⁰ This is observed in Venezuela, where 68 percent of Venezuelans think their declining economy is due to U.S. sanctions.⁷¹ This perception arose even though their economy was already declining⁷² before the U.S. started sanctioning Venezuela. In the past decade, the United States increased its willingness to utilize unilateral sanctions to combat undemocratic regimes, combat political repression, and human rights abuses. Although unilateral sanctions could be helpful, they are more effective if they are decided multilaterally, when more states join together to enforce sanctions collectively. The U.S. has received some criticism from LAC countries when it issues unilateral sanctions towards Venezuela because the LAC states prefer to rely on multilateral diplomatic negotiations under a non-intervention principle adopted in the Rio Treaty in 1947.⁷³ However, tensions escalated after Maduro's organized rigged elections after disapproval from the OAS and the Lima group; this opened a path to LAC's collective actions by some actors against Venezuela.⁷⁴ Thus, if the U.S. had reached out more to the LAC instead of first acting unilaterally, it could have developed much more regional support against the Maduro regime.

⁷⁰ Daniel W. Drezner, "PDF," September 14, 2015, 2.

⁷¹ Moises Rendon, "Are Sanctions Working in Venezuela?," Are Sanctions Working in Venezuela? | Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 22, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/are-sanctions-working-venezuela>.

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Ignacio Hernandez, "SIPA Center on Global Energy Policy," Columbia, September 2, 2020, <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/research/report/fighting-against-imperialism-latin-american-approach-international-sanctions>.

⁷⁴ Ibid

The U.S. has been imposing sanctions on Venezuela since the Obama administration. These sanctions combine comprehensive and targeted sanctions. According to Moises Rendon, it is the intelligent, targeted sanctions that are working best.⁷⁵ They have substantially impacted Maduro's regime and started to strain his circle, and slowly his control over the state institutions is being reduced.⁷⁶ Therefore, the U.S. should switch to using more targeted sanctions to pressure Venezuela and other authoritarian regimes in the region. While using targeted sanctions is very useful, they are even more effective when executed multilaterally. There are institutions in the LAC region that are a conduit for these conversations. Multilateral, targeted sanctions towards the Venezuelan regime became more successful when the Lima group countries also started pressuring Maduro's government.⁷⁷ Acting multilaterally also provides the U.S. with a shield. It takes away some ownership of damage in the targeted community that could potentially harm our image while providing us with a valuable tool to restrict undemocratic governments' support.

Improving Economic Policies in the Region

The United States has two main initiatives to address economic development in the LAC; America Crece (Growth in the Americas)⁷⁸ and the Alliance for Prosperity (A4P).⁷⁹ The latter

⁷⁵ Moises Rendon, "Are Sanctions Working in Venezuela?," Are Sanctions Working in Venezuela? | Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 22, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/are-sanctions-working-venezuela>.

⁷⁶ Ignacio Hernandez, "SIPA Center on Global Energy Policy," Columbia, September 2, 2020, <https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/research/report/fighting-against-imperialism-latin-american-approach-international-sanctions>.

⁷⁷ Marco Aquino, "Lima Group Extols U.S Plan to Lift Venezuela Sanctions in Exchange for Power-Sharing Deal," Reuters (Thomson Reuters, April 3, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/limagroup-venezuela/lima-group-extols-u-s-plan-to-lift-venezuela-sanctions-in-exchange-for-power-sharing-deal-idUKL1N2BR02D>.

⁷⁸ "Growth in the Americas - United States Department of State," U.S. Department of State (U.S. Department of State, January 8, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/growth-in-the-americas/>.

⁷⁹ "Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle: IADB," IDB.org (Inter-American Development Bank), accessed March 4, 2021, <https://www.iadb.org/en/allianceforprosperity>.

focused explicitly on development in the Northern Triangle of Central America. These initiatives could be instrumental and provide an option to our regional partners to the Chinese efforts like the BRI. To make these initiatives work effectively to counter the growing Chinese influence in the region, the administration needs to invest more in these initiatives or establish new initiatives that focus on economic development in the region.

The A4P was first launched in 2014, and it was a comprehensive approach intended to target security governance and development issues to answer the causes of migration and assist asylum seekers.⁸⁰ This initiative was implemented in collaboration with the Northern Triangle governments of Central America, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. A4P's primary strategic efforts include fostering the productive sector, developing human capital, improving citizen security and access to justice, strengthening institutions, and improving transparency.⁸¹ This program received criticism because it was not sufficient to stop immigration flow from the Northern Triangle.⁸² One of the most notorious problems from the initiative was that a significant part of the budget allocation went to security rather than economic development. New funding should recognize this and be provided in a better balance. Unfortunately, this initiative's actual performance cannot be objectively measured because most of the programs did not get implemented in the region until 2017, and the Trump administration reduced the funding for this initiative in 2019.⁸³

⁸⁰ Daniel F. Rundle et al., "An Alliance for Prosperity 2.0" An Alliance for Prosperity 2.0 | Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 3, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/alliance-prosperity-20>.

⁸¹ "Strategic Pillars and Lines of Action," Banner slider 1, accessed March 5, 2021, <https://www.iadb.org/en/alianza-para-la-prosperidad/strategic-pillars-and-lines-action>.

⁸² Laura Iesue, "The Alliance for Prosperity Plan: A Failed Effort for Stemming Migration," COHA, November 21, 2019, <https://www.coha.org/the-alliance-for-prosperity-plan-a-failed-effort-for-stemming-migration/>.

⁸³ Daniel F. Rundle et al., "An Alliance for Prosperity 2.0" An Alliance for Prosperity 2.0 | Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 3, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/alliance-prosperity-20>.

In contrast, in its new immigration bill, the new Biden administration allocated 4 billion dollars to address immigration causes; this includes increasing the funding for assistance to El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.⁸⁴ There is no current evidence that the Biden administration is channeling this funding through a reinvigorated A4P or will create a similar alternative. However, on his campaign website, A4P is mentioned as a successful initiative.⁸⁵ Perhaps this is a good sign that Biden will improve this initiative by allocating more money.

The second main initiative is America Crece, which was launched in 2009 as a strategic response to counter China's economic development footprint initiative, the BRI in the LAC region. According to the Department of State, America Crece aims to foster a transparent, competitive environment for private investment in energy and infrastructure.⁸⁶ According to Matt Youkee's this initiative has not received any additional funding for vital infrastructure (water, agriculture, transportation).⁸⁷ It is, however, supposed to leverage existing programs.⁸⁸ So far, the lack of financing for critical infrastructure makes this initiative just a rhetorical answer that has no substance. The Biden administration needs to invest more in improving these initiatives through more funding and a multi-year commitment. Congress should agree on making the authorization commitment to these initiatives for at least ten years. There is evidence that programs with a 10–15-year authorization have made tangible improvements, which could

⁸⁴ "Fact Sheet: President Biden Sends Immigration Bill to Congress as Part of His Commitment to Modernize Our Immigration System," The White House (The United States Government, January 25, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/20/fact-sheet-president-biden-sends-immigration-bill-to-congress-as-part-of-his-commitment-to-modernize-our-immigration-system/>.

⁸⁵ "The Biden Plan to Build Security and Prosperity in Partnership with the People of Central America," Joe Biden for President: Official Campaign Website, August 4, 2020, <https://joebiden.com/centralamerica/>.

⁸⁶ "Growth in the Americas - United States Department of State," U.S. Department of State (U.S. Department of State, January 8, 2021), <https://www.state.gov/growth-in-the-americas/>.

⁸⁷ Mat Youkee, "América Crece: Cooperation for Development or Geopolitical Competition?," openDemocracy, September 29, 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/america-crece-cooperacion-para-el-desarrollo-o-competencia-geopolitica-en/>.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

be observed in the multi-year commitment to Colombia.⁸⁹ Plan Colombia has been described as one of the most effective U.S. initiatives in the past thirty years⁹⁰. More investment and longer commitment to the region through programs that foster economic development like Alliance for Prosperity or America Crece are the best options to create an effective change for the regional security. They will help counter China's efforts to grow its influence in the LAC region.

Conclusion

Since 2001, the U.S. role in LAC affairs has diminished. Part of this was due to the Trump administration's divisive rhetoric and policies, which significantly damaged the LAC's public opinion against the U.S. This enabled other actors to take a diplomatic foothold in the region. Today, the most influential non-hemispheric actor in this region is the People's Republic of China. The PRC combines economic statecraft and aggressive diplomatic charm tactics to achieve mainly economic and geopolitical objectives⁹¹. Through its aggressive people-to-people diplomacy and economic statecraft, China has secured its access to the LAC markets and resources and is growing its political influence in the region. If achieved, these strategic objectives strengthen China's ability to challenge the U.S. as a great power competitor.⁹²

To rebuild public support for the U.S. in the region and counter the growing Chinese influence in the LAC, the Biden administration needs to prioritize improving relations with its hemispheric neighbors. For that, the U.S. needs a more robust diplomatic response to improve LAC public opinion and emphasize multilateral diplomacy and cooperation through credible

⁸⁹ Daniel F. Runde, "A New Social Contract for the Northern Triangle," A New Social Contract for the Northern Triangle | Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 3, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/new-social-contract-northern-triangle>.

⁹⁰ "PDF," October 26, 2020. <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43813>

⁹¹ Lei Yu, "(PDF) China's Strategic Partnership with Latin America: A Fulcrum in China's Rise."ResearchGate, September 2015.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/283187707_China's_strategic_partnership_with_Latin_America_A_fulcrum_in_China's_rise. 1054

⁹² Ibid

regional organizations. Second, the United States needs to leverage its powerful economic statecraft and apply more targeted sanctions towards undemocratic governments. Finally, it needs to improve economic development initiatives to restrict Chinese influence and make the LAC countries more resilient to foreign pressure. Together, these measures will help improve US relations with a region essential to our national security and help limit the influence in the region of our great power competitor, China.

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