

Democratization



Year 5, Issue 30

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democratic crisis

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Democracy is continuously receding in Latin America. This is the troubling conclusion drawn from the data presented in the 2023 Latinobarometro report, which reveals that democracy as a political system is supported by only 48% of the region's citizens, 15 percentage points lower than in 2010. Similarly, 28% believe that it "makes no difference" whether regimes are democratic, and a hypothetical non-democratic regime that "solves problems" would receive support from 54% of Latin Americans.¹

It seems obvious that much of this discontent is explained by the devastating effects of economic crises and corruption. As well, of course, as by the erosion that elites have caused in the functioning of institutions. To make matters worse, the democratic regression over the last and a half decade in Latin America coincides with the consolidation of China's presence on the continent. Although it would not be rigorous to exclusively link the aforementioned deterioration to China, the authoritarian influence of such an economically powerful country seems beyond dispute.

1 Informe Latinobarómetro 2023. The report's conclusions are based on a survey of 19,205 people from 17 Latin American countries, except Nicaragua and Cuba. <https://www.latinobarometro.org/lat.jsp>

The Asian giant has emerged as a primary economic actor in the region. Since its accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, bilateral trade has surged from \$14.6 billion to \$450 billion. Within a span of merely two decades, China has ascended to the position of the foremost or second-most significant trading partner for the overwhelming majority of Latin American nations, exerting a particularly notable influence on South America. Concurrently, over the same period, it has injected investments totaling \$172 billion, overseen the construction of approximately 200 major infrastructural projects, and extended loans amounting to \$209 billion, constituting roughly a quarter of its global loan portfolio.

This prowess bestows upon the Asian nation an immense political sway. Numerous South American countries rode the wave of the “Chinese miracle” in the mid-2000s, resulting in regional GDPs experiencing double-digit growth rates propelled by Chinese demand and the commodity price super-cycle. Since then, China has not only emerged as the primary destination for Latin American exports of natural resources, yielding substantial tax revenues for governments, but it has also unveiled a winning card: the financing of infrastructure projects.

Under this framework, a significant portion of China’s presence in the region has been solidified. This was particularly evident in Ecuador, Argentina, and Venezuela during the tenures of Correa, Kirchner, and Chávez, respectively, within three of the so-called Bolivarian *electo-dictatorships* of the era. The benefits for these three countries, as well as for Brazil, Peru,

or Chile, have been undeniable, despite the tendency to downplay the most detrimental effects of the relationship, ranging from the commercial and financial dependencies engendered to the environmental, labor, and social impacts of numerous Chinese projects, including issues of transparency and corruption.

Amidst a glaring asymmetry favoring Beijing and a scant understanding of China, its institutions, and state capitalism, the notion permeates among Latin American political and economic elites that their future development and prosperity are intricately tied to China. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the flagship project of Xi Jinping's diplomacy advocating for China's global integration, reinforces the perception that China offers opportunities that others cannot match. Through land and maritime infrastructure projects spanning Central Asia, Europe, Africa, and Latin America, the majority of which are financed by Beijing, the BRI contributes to this narrative.

Twenty-two Latin American countries have aligned with the so-called "project of the century," despite its waning economic clout due to the unsustainability of Chinese debt and the evolving geopolitical landscape shaped by the pandemic. Nonetheless, the BRI remains valuable for Beijing as it enables the exertion of international influence, consolidation of global leadership, and pursuit of geopolitical objectives. Chinese commercial allurements have enticed the five Central American countries –Panama, Nicaragua, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and El Salvador– that, since 2017, have severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan, a *de facto* independent island whose sovereignty China contests.

Beijing accomplishes a dual objective with its actions. Firstly, it amplifies the diplomatic isolation of Taiwan and exerts pressure on the Taiwanese Democratic Progressive Party, which has been in power since 2016 and opposes integration with China, positioning itself as Beijing's declared adversary. Secondly, it infiltrates and establishes its presence in Central America, a traditional US stronghold. The foreign ministries of these five countries justify their diplomatic realignment with the same rationale that former Costa Rican President Óscar Arias cited when he opted to sever ties with Taiwan in 2007 ("One cannot turn one's back on China").

However, beyond the purported benefits of *realpolitik*, these diplomatic shifts also expose these nations. Not only do they lose an ally whose democracy serves as a model in Asia, but they also risk entanglement —through unforeseen events— in the sphere of influence of an authoritarian regime such as China. Several examples highlight this concern. One recent instance is Honduras, which embraced the giant after cutting ties with the "rebel island" in 2023. Another is Nicaragua, which last year moved to expel Taiwan as an observer country in the Central American Parliament, a status that Beijing now enjoys. Ortega's regime justified expelling Taiwan by labeling it "a Yankee military base".

This isn't the initial instance where the most authoritarian regimes in Latin America have forged alliances with China to undermine democratic institutions. In return for economic prospects and diplomatic shielding, they consistently pledge allegiance to Beijing in the UN General Assembly. Consequently, in resolutions voted upon since 2021, concerning both

values and human rights as well as trade and economic sanctions, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba routinely align themselves against the United States' stance and predominantly in favor of China's².

Especially noteworthy was the alignment of Cuba, Venezuela, and Bolivia with China in 2022, which effectively thwarted the debate in the Human Rights Council regarding Beijing's repression against the Uyghur minority. This regional authoritarian coalition, under China's sponsorship and which also obligatorily includes Russia, can be attributed to a combination of factors: economic exigencies within Latin America, ideological affinities, antipathy toward the United States, and estrangement from the Western world. The repercussions of this closeness are glaringly evident.

Consequently, it comes as no surprise that Venezuela has utilized Chinese weaponry and vehicles to suppress social protests, nor that China aided in the development of Maduro's 'Homeland Card' identification system, a prime example of digital authoritarianism³. Both Venezuela and Bolivia are purchasers of Chinese arms, while Beijing has maintained military and espionage facilities in Cuba for years, alongside

2 Ernesto Salvi, "La geopolítica de América Latina ante la rivalidad EEUU-China: del relato a los datos", Real Instituto Elcano, Madrid, February 6, 2024. https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/la-geopolitica-de-america-latina-ante-la-rivalidad-eeuu-china-del-relato-a-los-datos/#_ftn1

3 Ryan Berg, & Henry Ziemer, "Exporting Autocracy: China's Role in Democratic Backsliding in Latin America and the Caribbean", Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, February, 2024. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/exporting-autocracy>

negotiations for a joint military base. With Nicaragua, there are plans to construct a deep-water port that could potentially serve as a naval outpost⁴.

China now extends its influence beyond providing economic and political backing to autocratic regimes. It also seeks to court Latin American democracies by strengthening economic ties and employing its strategy of hard power, an authoritarian iteration of soft power. This discreet diplomacy aids Beijing in bolstering institutional connections throughout the region, spanning from think tanks and universities to political parties and the media. Complementing this approach is an ambitious offer of scholarships and training for journalists, politicians, or officials, alongside a recruitment program targeting local elites, aimed at cultivating a network of influential allies in each country aligned with their agenda.

The engagement with these esteemed interlocutors typically commences with an invitation to visit China, all expenses covered. Disguised as educational exchanges, these trips primarily serve to expose participants to the regime's propaganda. According to Javier Miranda, president of Uruguay's Broad Front and a longstanding ally of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), these visits "allow comprehending the construction of a nation" and assert that "the CCP is a

4 Kelly Piazza, Cadet Max Lasco, et al, "China-Latin America Alignment and Democratic Backsliding: Gaining Traction for a Chinese-Led World Order", *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Air University, Alabama, October 5, 2023. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3540688/chinalatin-america-alignment-and-democratic-backsliding-gaining-traction-for-a/>

trustworthy party". Another visitor, Argentine Deputy and former president of the Justicialist Party, José Luís Gioja, went as far as affirming that "China is a democracy in its own style".

It goes beyond mere allegiance. Once the relationship is established, China applies pressure. A notable case was that of former Chinese ambassador to Chile, Xu Bu, renowned for his verbal sparring with any politician who criticized China. In the South American country, the resolute manner in which the communist nation acts when situations deviate from its desired trajectory has also been documented. Members of the China friendship group within the Chilean Parliament, who had participated in "parliamentary tourism" to China, faced pressure from the Chinese embassy to abstain or be absent during a resolution concerning China's actions in Hong Kong. "This diplomacy aims to neutralize dissenting voices and has proven effective", Congressman Jaime Naranjo cautioned at the time.⁵

At the inter-party level, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) convened no fewer than 326 meetings with political groups and legislators from Latin American parliaments between 2002 and 2020. Following the pandemic, it also forged connections with the so-called "pink galaxy": leftist actors, institutions, and associations that, led by the Sao Paulo Forum and the Puebla Group, actively work to undermine liberal

5 Juan Pablo Cardenal, "El Arte de Hacer Amigos: Cómo el Partido Comunista chino seduce a los partidos políticos en América Latina," Fundación Konrad Adenauer, Montevideo, 2021, <https://dialogopolitico.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/DP-Enfoque.-Cardenal.-2021.-El-arte-de-hacer-amigos.pdf>

democratic principles⁶. The involvement of Chinese communist leaders in gatherings of Latin American ultra-left leaders, many of whom hold or have held government positions and wield undeniable influence within their political spheres, enables both parties to unite against a common adversary: the United States.

This concerted deployment of financial and human resources, orchestrated in a harmonious effort involving the CCP, state organs, and peripheral organizations and entities within the Party-State structure, serves the purpose of garnering legitimacy, managing influential individuals and institutions, and monopolizing the discourse on contemporary China. This narrative emphasizes the benefits of cooperation with China while silencing its most contentious aspects. Consequently, critical analysis of various aspects of Latin America's relationship with the Asian power is notably absent.

Moreover, the increasing legitimacy of the Chinese regime in Latin America unfolds against the backdrop of Xi Jinping's authoritarian turn and amid overt ideological hostility toward the West and its political system grounded in freedom and universal democratic values. Beijing not only advocates for the moral equivalence of its model compared to democracies but also suggests its superior efficacy, citing the purported eradication of extreme poverty and the successful transition from Maoism to red capitalism, thereby propagating the notion

6 Sebastian Grundberger, "La galaxia rosa. Cómo el Foro de São Paulo, el Grupo de Puebla y sus aliados internacionales socavan la democracia en América Latina," Fundación Konrad Adenauer, Montevideo, 2024.

that its model is not only ideal for China but also superior to the Western alternative.

This idealized portrayal of China finds a receptive audience in Latin America. While it may seem evident that a more efficient model does not necessarily equate to a superior one, voices in the region that regard China as an example to emulate are not uncommon. Perhaps not with the intention of directly importing it, but as an aspiration illustrating that development without democracy is viable. John Garnaut, a former Australian journalist and expert on Chinese foreign influence, cautioned in a recent article in *The Wire China* that a global challenge lies in ensuring that Xi Jinping's project of total ideological control does not extend beyond China's borders⁷.

According to Garnaut, this ideological endeavor travels packaged with Chinese students, tourists, emigrants, and, above all, money. It permeates internet channels in Mandarin, infiltrates major media and cultural spheres worldwide, and consistently aligns with China's increasingly global interests. The decisions of countries like Australia or Canada, with extensive commercial and migratory ties with China, to curtail their relations due to significant Chinese infiltration across various social domains should serve as a point of reflection for Latin America, where – as previously mentioned – knowledge about China's *modus operandi* remains relatively limited.

7 Katrina Northrop, "The China Whisperer", *The Wire China* (7 de abril de 2024). [https:// www.thewirechina.com /2024 /04 /07/ the- china-whisperer-john-garnaut/](https://www.thewirechina.com/2024/04/07/the-china-whisperer-john-garnaut/)

In this milieu, Beijing's enchanting catchphrase to allure the "global south" and expand its sphere of authority and influence in global governance is "multilateralism." Thus, alongside its economic dimension, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been focused on bolstering the perception of China as an alternative power, championing multilateralism, and striving to position itself as the primary ally for the development of the "global south," often as a counterbalance to the interests of the United States and the Western world. Their interest in incorporating Argentina into the BRICS club (during Alberto Fernández's tenure) and potentially extending membership to Venezuela serve the same objective: to shape the rules governing the world.

The "global south," particularly Latin America, holds paramount importance for Beijing: It provides the natural resources essential for the Chinese economy, shields China and sympathetic autocratic regimes from Western sanctions, facilitates exertion of political pressure on a global scale, and aids in forming an anti-American coalition to advance China's vision of an international system. Its primary ally in Latin America, advocating for a "non-aligned and non-interventionist" global stance, is none other than its foremost trading partner in the region: Brazil. Critical voices abound, suggesting that Beijing's burgeoning economic and political influence in Brazil undermines its democratic stability⁸.

However, the notion of China serving as the guarantor of a more equitable and multilateral global order, along with calls

8 "China-Latin America Alignment...". Op. cit.

for the “de-dollarization” of economic relations to challenge the international dominance of the dollar, despite having fervent supporters in Latin America, faces opposition when confronted with reality. Critics argue that the rhetoric of multilateralism harbors a dubious assertion in the case of China: Beijing’s purported aim is not necessarily to construct a more just international order, as official propaganda espouses, but rather to influence it in a manner conducive to its own interests.

This distinction is crucial. This envisioned new international order would revolve around a coalition of nations economically reliant on China and, consequently, subservient to it. In the current climate of deglobalization, amidst ideological animosity between autocracies and democracies, and with over two decades of Chinese presence in Latin America leaving behind a nuanced perspective riddled with uncertainties, China’s power in a culturally Westernized region alone does not guarantee its future hegemony.

Simultaneously, while staunch critics of China like Milei or, in the past, Bolsonaro, and even left-leaning governments such as those led by Boric, Petro, or López Obrador, opt for pragmatic approaches in the ongoing rivalry between the United States and China. In this contest, it is by no means predetermined that the United States will be supplanted.

Russia and Latin America: Opacities, Asymmetries, and Dangers

Elsa Cardozo

The latest Russian foreign policy document regarding Latin America and the Caribbean outlines a commitment to developing relationships “in a pragmatic, non-ideological, and mutually beneficial manner”. Despite this apparent emphasis on pragmatism, the document prioritizes supporting “Latin American states [...] under pressure from the United States and its allies in safeguarding their sovereignty and independence, including cooperation in security, military, and military-technical areas”¹ [Own translation].

As the context for these documents suggests, Russia’s priorities in Latin America and the Caribbean have taken on a more geopolitical dimension as internal and external pressures on Vladimir Putin’s agenda have increased.

In Latin America, there is a notable lack of consensus regarding relations with Russia, as evidenced by differing stances on the war in Ukraine and, more recently, the backlash from ten members of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) against their president pro

1 The Russian Federation’s foreign policy (31.03.2023), available in: https://mid.ru/es/foreign_policy/official_documents/1860586/

tempore's unsolicited congratulations to Vladimir Putin on his fifth re-election. The absence of a unified stance underscores the significant vulnerabilities within the region, particularly given Russia's evolving approach, which employs a range of power tactics to exert social and political influence and encourages the autocratization of the international order².

This backdrop frames the focus of this analysis: the opacity of Russian geopolitics, the asymmetry in its relationships with Latin America, and the associated risks for the region.

Geopolitics and opacity

When comparing the challenges to the world order posed by Vladimir Putin's regime with those of the Soviet era during the Cold War, there are notable similarities, but also key differences.

During the East-West polarization of the Cold War, the Soviet regime viewed Latin America as a fertile ground for promoting communist ideology, challenging U.S. dominance, strengthening the USSR's international influence, and gaining support within the United Nations³. Moscow's toolkit included propaganda, connections between communist parties, diplomacy, trade, espionage, and covert operations conducted by the Committee for State Security (KGB). In Latin America,

2 Elsa Cardozo, "La autocratización del orden internacional: desafío para los demócratas y las democracias", *Democratización* 3, no. 8 (marzo 2021): 22-46, disponible en: <https://red-forma.com/revista-democratizacion/>

3 Cole Blasier, "Soviet Impacts on Latin America," *Russian History* (vol. 29, no. 2/4, summer, fall, winter 2002), pp. 481-97, available in, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24660798>

the Soviet Union's engagement began with moderate support for the Guatemalan Revolution of 1944, which evolved into the Cuban Revolution's affiliation with the Soviet bloc three decades later. With substantial economic and military aid sustained over thirty years, the Caribbean island, situated in the United States' immediate neighborhood, became a platform for supporting armed insurgencies against democratic regimes, interfering in democratic reconstruction processes, and encouraging the radicalization of democratically elected left-wing governments.

After the hiatus caused by the collapse of the USSR, Foreign Minister Evgeny Primakov's visits to Latin America between 1996 and 1997 marked the region's inclusion in Russia's new international strategy. Three years later, under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russia's ambitions to regain geopolitical influence found fertile ground. In this context, the opening provided by Hugo Chávez's government in 2001 became a significant regional development⁴. During Latin America's *marea rosa* (pink tide), the Chávez government facilitated closer ties with Russia, demonstrating political affinity through investments, donations, general trade, arms purchases, and secret military agreements. These activities were

4 Vladimir Rovinski, "Russian-Venezuelan Relations at a Crossroads", Wilson Center (February, 2019), available in: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/russia-venezuela_report_rouvinski_final.pdf

shrouded in significant opacity, often concealing non-compliance and corruption⁵.

Russia's interests extended beyond Venezuela and projected far abroad. Russia's resurgence in Latin America involved both state-owned enterprises and private companies with close ties to the Kremlin, particularly in the arms sector. During the commodities boom years, Russia became the largest military supplier in the region, though these sales declined after 2014 and nearly ceased altogether after 2017. Trade, though generally insignificant, was also affected by this downturn, with further discouragement due to sanctions imposed following the invasion of Crimea in 2014 and intensifying in 2022 due to Russia's military intervention in Ukraine. Despite this overall reduction in trade, Russia's exports —particularly strategic commodities like fertilizers— remained relatively stable, while its main Latin American markets such as Brazil, Ecuador, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Mexico saw a more noticeable decline.

Another sector of Russian interest in Latin America is energy, with Russian companies active in Venezuela, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico, as well as in electricity generation projects in other countries. This interest aligns with Russia's ambition to become a major global player in the energy sector, influencing oil market management and participating in OPEC *Plus* quota decisions. To navigate sanctions, Russia has also developed

5 Transparencia Venezuela, *Acuerdos con Rusia. Alianza Geopolítica* (August 2022), available in: <https://transparenciave.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Acuerdos-con-Rusia-alianza-geopolitica.pdf>

mechanisms to evade restrictions on its own exports and to handle Venezuelan oil, operating in a business environment known for its opacity.

With the start of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, which has significantly limited its international reach, Moscow's Latin American agenda has taken on a more pronounced geopolitical focus. However, this focus has shifted to a more asymmetrical and opaque approach compared to the Cold War era, due to its different objectives and methods.

This trend is reflected in the intensification of what is called "symbolic reciprocity"⁶, which has recently taken on the tone of a sort of Russian payback for NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe and a challenge to the United States in its own backyard. High-level visits, technical cooperation, humanitarian aid, student exchanges, and vaccine diplomacy have all been components of Russia's regional soft power strategy. However, after two years of war, Russia finds itself with fewer material resources and diminished legitimacy due to its increasingly aggressive domestic and international policies. Despite these constraints, Russia continues to exploit dissatisfaction and mistrust toward the United States while cultivating a deliberately skewed view of its own regime among certain Latin American governments and political parties. This strategy

6 Vladimir Rouvinski, "El 'retorno' ruso: cinco claves para entender las relaciones de la Rusia postsoviética con América Latina y el Caribe", Fundación Carolina, *Documentos de Trabajo* 36 (2020), available in: <https://www.fundacioncarolina.es/catalogo/catalogo-el-retorno-ruso-cinco-claves-para-entender-las-relaciones-de-la-rusia-postsovietica-con-america-latina-y-el-caribe/>

unfolds amidst significant opacity, employing diplomatic visits, speeches, joint statements, and, most notably, the strategic use of communication⁷. Russia's sharp power approach involves disinformation and influence campaigns targeting local actors and political decisions, aiming to erode democratic consensus and prop up sympathetic regimes⁸.

Fragmentation and asymmetry

Following Vladimir Putin's ostensibly fraudulent re-election, a limited number of Latin American governments quickly extended their congratulations, including Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba, along with Bolivia and Honduras. Other regional governments may have opted for a more discreet approach, while some remained silent. Tensions rose when ten Latin American leaders protested Xiomara Castro's congratulatory message to Putin⁹, objecting to the fact that the President of Honduras not only spoke on behalf of her country but also, expressly, in her capacity as the Pro Tempore

7 Johanna Cilano Pelaez & María Isabel Puerta, "Así nos habla el Kremlin. Narrativa política y medios de comunicación rusos en América Latina", *DP Enfoque* (no. 10, 2022), Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, available in: <https://dialogopolitico.org/documentos/dp-enfoque/dp-enfoque-10-kremlin/>

8 Claudia González Marrero & Armando Chaguaceda, "El poder de Rusia en Latinoamérica Autocracia global, influencia regional", *DP Enfoque* 7 (2022), Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, available in: <https://dialogopolitico.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/El-poder-de-Rusia-en-Latinoamerica.pdf>

9 Joint Communiqué of the National Coordinators on demonstrations representing CELAC (19.03.2024), available in: <https://www.rree.go.cr/?sec=servicios&cat=prensa&cont=593&id=7668>

President of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

The backlash from these ten governments was swift. They pointed out that, like other positions taken by Castro on behalf of CELAC, this congratulatory gesture was not agreed upon among the forum's member states. Meanwhile, other governments, such as Mexico, Colombia, Brazil, and El Salvador, refrained from joining the protest. This varied response not only illustrates the diverse attitudes toward the Russian regime but also highlights the regional divergences in balancing convictions with strategic interests, a dynamic that has been particularly evident in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Russia has exploited this landscape of divergence in Latin America to further the international ambitions of Vladimir Putin's government, a direction foreshadowed by his speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference¹⁰. This speech was followed by significant military actions: the intervention in Georgia in 2008, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the so-called "special military operation" against Ukraine in 2022.

Within this context, Latin America's role on Russia's geopolitical board became increasingly defined. One notable example was the 2008 deployment of a nuclear cruiser and an anti-submarine ship for joint exercises with Venezuela, which included stops in Cuba and Nicaragua. From this point

10 Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy (10.02.2007), available in <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>

forward, Russia's military presence in the Caribbean took on a more provocative tone, with recurring statements about establishing military bases in the region and agreements allowing military ships to use port facilities in Nicaragua. This was accompanied by bomber visits and the open deployment of Russian military personnel to Venezuela between 2018 and 2019. The latter development occurred amid widespread international refusal to recognize the legitimacy of Nicolás Maduro's presidency, escalating US and European sanctions, and rhetoric from both the White House and Miraflores that hinted at the potential for U.S. military intervention. These moves underscored Russia's readiness to leverage regional divergences in Latin America to project its power and challenge Western influence.

The frequency of visits leading up to the military attack on Ukraine, along with those that have occurred since, has brought the relationships and asymmetries into sharper focus, revealing the risks for a Latin America that is interdependent in the face of threats but insufficiently integrated to address them. A range of national political, foreign policy, geopolitical, and economic factors contribute to this situation, as do the varying principles and conveniences guiding each country's response¹¹. Amidst this fragmentation, three distinct groups of countries can be identified.

11 David J. Kramer, "Russia and Latin America After February 24", in David J. Kramer, Vladimir Rouvinski & Andrei Serbin Pons, *The Impact of War in Ukraine on Latin America and the Caribbean*, FIU Digital Commons (no. 7, 2022), available in: https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1050&context=jgi_research

The first group, the most easily identifiable, comprises regimes with increasing internal and external fragility, which cultivate deeply asymmetrical relationships where security and economic interests, political affinities, and openness to Russia's international influence and initiatives prevail in varying degrees. This group includes the regimes of Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, along with the Bolivian government—though more discreetly under the presidency of Luis Arce—and is often joined by Honduras in statements. Despite the demands of the war in Ukraine, meetings and agreements with Russia have become less frequent but more significant due to their timing and rhetoric, often focusing on sovereignty and non-interference, interpreted through the authoritarian lens of a “rules-based world order.” This perspective aligns with the broader autocratic segment of the Group of Friends in Defense of the Charter of the United Nations, convened by Venezuela in 2023 and prominently sponsored by Russia.

The second group consists of current governments in Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic, and Uruguay, which have distanced themselves from or avoided overt political affinity with Russia. Notably, some of these countries are among the largest regional trading partners, including Argentina, Paraguay, Chile, and Ecuador, and have benefited from vaccine diplomacy that spread across much of Latin America. This group—except for Argentina's initial, later moderated, position—has condemned Russia's invasion within the OAS, the UN General Assembly, and the UN Human Rights Council.

Since Gustavo Petro became president, Colombia has found itself among a third group of governments that adopt a neutral stance, along with the administrations of Lula da Silva in Brazil and Andrés Manuel López Obrador in Mexico. For these countries, the relationship with Russia plays a key role in their geopolitical strategies. In Mexico, as demonstrated by the presence of Russian soldiers in a recent national military parade, the relationship with Russia is interpreted as a symbol of autonomy and a nod to revolutionary ideals, suggesting independence from the northern neighbor and the rest of the region. Brazil's socialist government, a BRICS member, has focused on reclaiming its international leadership role and advocating for mediation diplomacy, while also safeguarding trade with Russia, particularly in fertilizer imports. Both Mexico and Brazil have voted in favor of UN resolutions condemning the invasion of Ukraine but have avoided joining similar hemispheric and subregional statements, often through abstentions and diplomatic proposals, thereby encouraging a more detached regional response to the war.

In his own way, with distinct challenges and international ambitions, Colombian President Gustavo Petro rebalances his political and geopolitical positions with rhetoric that generally condemns violence but downplays Russia's culpability, even though he refrains from making overt political gestures toward Putin's government.

Vulnerability and dangers

Russia's engagement with Latin America has mirrored the totalitarian and expansionist trajectory of the regime under

Vladimir Putin's control. This far-reaching policy has served as a demonstration of domestic stability, international assertiveness, and resistance to US influence. In Latin America, Moscow's approach and strategies have dictated the pace and nature of these relationships: emphasizing opacity and geopolitical maneuvering that disregard human rights, democratic commitments, and, crucially, national sovereignty.

The key challenge for Latin American democracies is to address a significant regional vulnerability: the lack of a unified stance on these three critical issues. To do so, the deceptive and ultimately harmful calls for unified positions without clear consideration of the respective governments' stances on these core principles must end. This shift would enable a more principled and security-focused response to Russia, ensuring that varied national interests do not undermine shared values and regional security.

The LA-EU Alliance in the Context of the Transformation of the World Order

Ramón Cardozo

Introduction

As technological advancement accelerates and globalization propels humanity toward an increasingly interconnected global community, challenges, and complex global issues emerge for which the current international governance model appears unprepared to provide adequate responses. Simultaneously, new influential actors in the global arena question the legitimacy of the liberal international order and seek to transform it.

There are clear indications that a new international order is taking shape, and Latin America cannot remain on the sidelines of this process. To take part in the shaping of the new global rules, the region must make much greater progress towards the consolidation of partnerships based on shared worldviews and common interests. These alliances will allow it to successfully advocate for the inclusion of the region's values, principles, and legitimate interests in the architecture of this emerging world order. The peoples of Europe share deep historical, human, political, and economic ties with those of Latin America. Hence,

the European Union (EU) emerges as a natural partner for the Latin American region to face this challenge.

The Need for a World Order

Henry Kissinger, a renowned scholar and one of the most experienced former Secretaries of State of the United States of America, highlighted in his latest book 'World Order' the urgent need of the modern civilization, increasingly interdependent, to establish a model of global order that rescues it from the chaos or disorder into which it has been increasingly submerged in recent decades.

Our age is insistently, at times almost desperately, in pursuit of a concept of world order. Chaos threatens side by side with unprecedented interdependence: in the spread of weapons of mass destruction, the disintegration of states, the impact of environmental depredations, the persistence of genocidal practices, and the spread of new technologies threatening to drive conflict beyond human control or comprehension¹.

Kissinger defines World Order as "the concept held by a region or civilization about the nature of just arrangements and the distribution of power thought to be applicable to the entire world"². According to this author, historically, due to material and technological limitations, humanity had neither the need

1 Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and Course of History* (7th ed.; Penguin Politics; Penguin Books, 2015), p. 9.

2 Henry Kissinger, *World...* p. 9.

nor the possibility to establish a truly global order. Hence, each civilization or region tended to view its own order as the ideal to impose within its accessible geopolitical environment without there being a truly global and interconnected vision.

With no means of interacting with each other on a sustained basis and no framework for measuring the power of one region against another, each region viewed its own order as unique and defined the others as “barbarians” — governed in a manner incomprehensible to the established system and irrelevant to its designs except as a threat. Each defined itself as a template for the legitimate organization of all humanity, imagining that in governing what lay before it, it was ordering the world³.

In relatively recent times, the acceleration of technological developments, especially in transportation and communications, has enabled sustained interconnection among the world’s various regions, thus driving globalization and making humanity much more interdependent and integrated. This profound transformation of the world has made the emergence of concepts and governance arrangements with a truly global scope feasible and even indispensable, which must materialize in an international order.

3 Henry Kissinger, *World...* p. 9.

Transformations in the international order

Kissinger understands "international order" as the practical application of a certain concept of "world order" to a substantial part of the planet, large enough to affect the global balance of power during a historical period. This materialization is achieved through a system of principles, norms, institutions, and balances of power that regulate the relations between the actors capable of influencing the international arena in a given era.

Although there are divergences in academic doctrine regarding the number of international orders that have existed throughout history, Novak and Namihas point out that most authors agree on distinguishing four international orders established successively from 1815 onwards.

- **The first one (1815-1914)**, known as the Concert of Europe, begins with the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and extends until the beginning of World War I in 1914.
- **The second one (1919-1939)** emerges in 1919 with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles and the establishment of the League of Nations, and lasts until 1939, with the beginning of World War II.
- **The third one (1945-1992)** arises after the end of World War II in 1945 and was marked by the Yalta Agreements, the founding of the United Nations Organization (UN), the creation of the Bretton Woods institutions (IMF, World Bank), but mainly by the beginning of the Cold War in 1947 between the two major global superpowers, the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

- **The fourth order (1991-2008)** emerges from 1991 with the dissolution of the USSR and the end of the Cold War. This period was characterized by the international hegemony of the United States as the sole global superpower.⁴

Turning point of the current international order

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, signs of the progressive decline of the predominance of the United States began to emerge, and with it, the current liberal international order, which ‘has been linked to American power: its economy, its currency, its system of alliances, and its leadership’⁵.

Among the main events that marked the turning point of the current international order are: The global financial crisis of 2008-2009, which exposed vulnerabilities of the liberal economic model promoted by the West; internal tensions within the European Union and NATO, which eroded the cohesion and ability to act of these important allies of the United States; the rise of China as an economic and geopolitical power of global scope; the repositioning of Russia within the regional and global power structure; the emergence of regional powers such as India, Brazil, Turkey, and Iran, which gained greater influence in their respective areas; the challenge to the

4 Fabián Novak y Sandra Namihas, *Tiempos de Transición: La conformación de un nuevo orden internacional* (Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2019), p. 17.

5 John Ikenberry, “The End of Liberal International Order?” *International Affairs* 94, 1 (2018): <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>

preeminence of the dollar as the main global reserve currency by China, Russia, India, and other countries

Increased geopolitical tensions in the world

These changes in international power distribution often bring considerable uncertainties and significant risks of instability and conflict. This situation is aggravated in the current global context, characterized by a growing and sustained interrelation among world regions that are very different from one another. In this regard, Kissinger warns that the interaction between “entities not related to each other by history or values (except under conditions of full competition) and defined mainly by their capabilities, leads to conflict rather than order”⁶.

This perception is confirmed by recent events such as the growing tension between NATO and Russia, stemming from the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Another example is the increase in tensions in the Middle East, as a result of the attack carried out by the terrorist group Hamas against Israel in May 2021, which triggered an escalation of violence in the region.

The Global Risks Report 2024, published by the World Economic Forum, confirms a gradual increase in geopolitical tensions worldwide over the last decade. One indicator of this phenomenon is the growing number of interstate conflicts with a high potential for internalization. The report estimates that this increase in conflict worldwide is due, among other reasons,

6 Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and Course of History* (7th ed.; Penguin Politics; Penguin Books, 2015).

to changes in geopolitical power and the inefficacy of the international system.

The world has become significantly less peaceful over the past decade, with conflict erupting in multiple regions last year. Active conflicts are at the highest levels in decades... While difficult to attribute to a single cause, longer-term shifts in geopolitical power, economic fragility and limits to the efficacy and capacity of international security mechanisms have all contributed to this surge.⁷

Diffusion, degradation, and fragmentation of power

The challenges currently faced worldwide go beyond simply redistributing international power shares among traditional and emerging state actors. Moisés Naím, in his book *The End of Power* (2013), warns that in terms of global governance, ‘much more important than knowing who rises or falls [in the hierarchical order] is understanding how much can be done with the power acquired by the nations that are already ‘on top’ or those that are ‘on the rise’.⁸

On the other hand, Richard N. Haass, in his article ‘The Age of Nonpolarity: What Will Follow U.S. Dominance’ (2008), warns that the advancement of globalization has been diluting the power and influence of large states, while strengthening the

7 World Economic Forum, *Global Risk Report 2024* (2024), World Economic Forum, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2024/>, p. 22.

8 Moisés Naím, *El fin del poder: empresas que se hunden, militares derrotados, Papas que renuncian y gobiernos impotentes: cómo el poder ya no es lo que era*, 5ª ed. (Barcelona: *Debate*, 2016), p. 159.

capabilities of non-state actors, some legitimate like large multinational corporations, and others illegitimate like “terrorists (who use the Internet to recruit and train, the international banking system to move resources, and the global transportation system to transport people), [and] rogue states (which can exploit black and gray markets)”.⁹

In the same line of discourse, Moisés Naím points out that new technologies and global connectivity are degrading, fragmenting, and limiting the power of large traditional actors (governments, armies, companies, unions, etc.), allowing smaller actors, both in size and resources, not only to challenge them but even to undermine their power. These variations in the boundaries and possibilities of traditional centers of power have significant consequences for global governance:

Nowadays, it is much more difficult for a small number of dominant countries (let alone a single hegemonic country) to unilaterally shape international relations, alliances, or conflicts as was done in the past. The crises of the moment, and those to come, involve many new actors who use technologies, tactics, and strategies very different from those common in the past.¹⁰

9 Richard Haass, “The Age of Nonpolarity: What Will Follow U.S. Dominance,” *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 3 (2008): 44-56.

10 Moisés Naím, *El fin del poder: empresas que se hunden, militares derrotados, Papas que renuncian y gobiernos impotentes: cómo el poder ya no es lo que era*, 5ª ed. (Barcelona: *Debate*, 2016), p. 158.

Likewise, the erosion of power weakens the concerted and cooperative action of states at the international level to address challenges that transcend national borders, such as large migratory flows, pandemics, drug trafficking, transnational terrorism, and climate change. According to the Global Risks Report 2024, in the next two years, the five greatest risks the world will face are misinformation, extreme weather events, social polarization, cybersecurity, and armed conflicts.¹¹

Faced with the complex global challenges, authors like Kissinger, Haass, and Naím argue for the need to adapt the global governance system to the new realities. Only in this way, these authors believe, can the chaos¹² or disorder¹³ prevailing in the current world be effectively addressed.

Transition to a new international order

Multiple analysts and renowned academics agree in affirming that the world is currently in the midst of a transition toward the reconfiguration of the international order. This new order is anticipated to be more decentralized, regionalized, and multipolar¹⁴ The Global Risks Perception Survey (GRPS) 2023-

11 World Economic Forum, *Global Risk Report 2024* (2024), World Economic Forum, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2024/>

12 Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and Course of History* (7th ed.; Penguin Politics; Penguin Books, 2015), p. 9.

13 Richard Haass, *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order* (Penguin Press, 2017).

14 Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), en New York Times Best Sellers. Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power*, 1st ed. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).

2024, which collected the opinions of 1,490 experts from the academic, business, governmental, international community, and civil society sectors, revealed that two-thirds of the respondents believe that in the next ten years, humanity will face a multipolar or fragmented order, where medium and large powers will compete to establish and enforce regional rules and norms.¹⁵

However, despite these agreements among experts, there are no certainties about the definitive form that the new international architecture will take¹⁶. As is well known, politics belongs to the world of the contingent, and its outcomes are never assured in advance. What is clear is that this transitional period is extremely complex and challenging.

Amidst questioning the effectiveness and legitimacy of the current international system¹⁷, powers like Russia and China, and even influential groups within the Middle East,

15 World Economic Forum, *Global Risk Report 2024* (2024), World Economic Forum, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2024/>, p. 10.

16 John Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?" *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>

Bikram Acharya, "Modeling Local Government's Perception towards Implementation of ICT Infrastructure and Services through Public Private Partnership Mechanism: Case of Nepal" (2018).

Ana Covarrubias Serbin, "El nuevo orden mundial y América Latina y el Caribe: modelo por armar," *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior* 114 (2022), p. 147, <https://revistadigital.sre.gob.mx/index.php/rmpe/article/view/223>.

17 Ana Covarrubias Serbin, "El nuevo orden mundial y América Latina y el Caribe: modelo por armar," *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior* 114 (2022), p. 147, <https://revistadigital.sre.gob.mx/index.php/rmpe/article/view/223>.

promote alternative models.¹⁸ Everything indicates that, beyond criticisms of the current international system itself, what is being called into question is the Western liberal world order model that shaped it.¹⁹ Faced with this situation, Kissinger wonders: Can regions with cultures, histories, and traditional theories of order so divergent claim the legitimacy of any common system?²⁰

Reconfiguration of the new international order: challenge for LA

Kissinger's response to this dilemma breaks from Samuel P. Huntington's pessimistic view in his well-known book 'The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order'.²¹ While Kissinger acknowledges the difficulty of finding common

18 Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and Course of History* (7th ed.; Penguin Politics; Penguin Books, 2015), p. 1.

Carlos Melero E., "La perspectiva china del orden liberal internacional: ¿nuevo orden mundial?," *Relaciones Internacionales* 55 (2024): <https://doi.org/10.15366/relacionesinternacionales2024.55.005>

19 "Instituciones y normas internacionales acordes con el derecho internacional, promoción de los derechos humanos y de la democracia, y liberalización económica, en el marco de una concepción predominantemente westfaliana de un sistema internacional basado en la interrelación entre Estados, pero con la posterior participación de otros actores". Ana Covarrubias Serbin, "El nuevo orden mundial y América Latina y el Caribe: modelo por armar," *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior* 114 (2022), p. 136, <https://revistadigital.sre.gob.mx/index.php/rmpe/article/view/223>.

20 Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and Course of History* (7th ed.; Penguin Politics; Penguin Books, 2015), p. 9.

21 David Wilkinson, "Samuel P. Huntington: The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order," *Journal of World-Systems Research* 7, no. 2 (2001): 341-361, DOI: 10.5195/jwsr.1998.152.

ground between such disparate worldviews as those existing among different regions or civilizations of the current world, he believes it is possible to establish a new global international order consensually through diplomacy, cooperation, and commitment.

Kissinger applies old principles of political philosophy to the modern international sphere, which indicate that mere force is not enough to maintain the stability of a social order;²² power must be accompanied by legitimacy derived from justice: ‘Any system of world order, to be sustainable, must be accepted as just—not only by leaders, but also by citizens’²³. Therefore, if the new global international order is to be effective and stable over time, it cannot simply be imposed by the power of a few dominant nations, but must arise and ‘cultivate’ through a more organic, inclusive, and consensual process.

Within this process of reconfiguring the international order, Latin America, as a region, cannot remain a mere spectator. As Serbin points out, ‘the tectonic movements through which the international system is going can be a magnificent opportunity [for Latin America] to build - both bilaterally and multilaterally - potential consensuses for a new Atlantic framework and for a more active collective insertion at the global level’.²⁴

22 Rafael Tomás Caldera, *El poder y la justicia para jóvenes políticos*, Colección Letraviva (abediciones, 2023).

23 Henry Kissinger, *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and Course of History* (7th ed.; Penguin Politics; Penguin Books, 2015), p. 9.

24 Ana Covarrubias Serbin, “El nuevo orden mundial y América Latina y el Caribe: modelo por armar,” *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior* 114

Latin America and European Union Alliance

To influence this juncture, Latin America needs to elevate its profile as a global actor further. In this direction, it must continue to strengthen alliances that, based on shared worldviews and interests, generate the necessary support to ensure that its values, principles, and legitimate aspirations as a region are represented in the design of the new global architecture. Within this challenge, the European Union (EU) emerges as an ideal natural partner, given the historical, cultural, political, and economic relationship that links European and Latin American peoples.²⁵

Although Latin America and the European Union are differentiated regions with their own characteristics and priorities, they have significant convergences. Highlights include the close historical, cultural, and economic ties, as well as the shared values and principles of Western civilization, as well as reciprocal migratory flows, sustained political links, and a clear commitment, albeit with varying levels of success, to democracy, free trade, and human rights in both regions. Likewise, they share similar perspectives on the desired inter-

(2022): p. 155, <https://revistadigital.sre.gob.mx/index.php/rmpe/article/view/223>

25 Comisión Europea, “Una nueva agenda para las relaciones entre la UE y América Latina y el Caribe,” Comunicación Conjunta al Parlamento Europeo y al Consejo, JOIN (2023) 17 final, 2023, p.1 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ES/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52023JC0017>. Ana Covarrubias Serbin y Arantxa Serbin Pont, “¿Por qué la Unión Europea debería ser de relevancia para América Latina y el Caribe?” (2019), Fundación EU-LAC, p.1 <https://eulacfoundation.org/es/por-que-la-union-europea-deberia-ser-relevancia-para-america-latina-y-el-caribe>

national order and the importance of strong multilateral global governance based on norms.²⁶

Based on these convergences, the links between Latin America (LA) and the European Union (EU) have experienced, with ups and downs, continuous evolution over the past six decades. The relations between both regions, which initially focused on trade agreements and development cooperation during the 1960s and 1980s, evolved into a broader and more comprehensive bi-regional strategic partnership from the late 20th century. This partnership encompasses aspects such as political dialogue and coordination on global issues, economic partnership, and development cooperation.²⁷

The relationship between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) operates at three levels: bi-regional, sub-regional, and bilateral. The Union has a wide network of agreements with twenty-seven out of the thirty-three countries in LAC. Currently, the EU is the largest investor in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), its third-largest

26 European Commission, *The Strategic Partnership Between the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean: A Joint Commitment* (European Commission, 2008).

UE-CELAC, “Declaración de la Cumbre UE-CELAC, Bruselas, 17 y 18 de julio de 2023,” 12000/1/23 REV 1 (es), 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/press/press-releases/2023/07/18/declaration-of-the-eu-celac-summit-2023-17-18-july-2023/>

27 Iván González Sarro, “Veinte años de relaciones estratégicas de la Unión Europea con América Latina y el Caribe (1999-2019): análisis de la evolución de sus ‘tres pilares’ fundamentales” *Foro Internacional* 60, no. 3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.24201/fi.v60i3.2646>.

trading partner, after the USA and China; and the main contributor to development cooperation.²⁸

Progressive institutionalization of the EU-LAC political dialogue

Since its inception in 1999, the “strategic partnership” between the European Union and Latin America (EU-LA) has gradually progressed towards a more solid institutionalization, providing a formal and structured framework for political dialogue and cooperation between both regions.

Between 1999 and 2010, six bi-regional summits between the EU and Latin America were held. In 2011, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) was created. Since then, three summits between the EU and CELAC have been held. In 2006, the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly (EuroLat), a forum dedicated to the debate, monitoring, and review of all issues related to the bi-regional partnership, was established. Since its creation, EuroLat has held fifteen plenary sessions. In 2019, the EU-LAC Foundation was established, conceived as a tool to strengthen the bi-regional partnership and promote debate on common strategies and actions, as well as to enhance its visibility.²⁹

28 European Commission, “A New Agenda for Relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean,” Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, JOIN (2023) 17 final, 2023, p. 1 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ES/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52023JC0017>.

29 UE - ALC, 2010, p. 9.

In addition to these political forums, within the framework of the strategic relationship between the EU and LAC, an extensive multi-level institutional structure has been established to facilitate the participation of numerous state and non-state actors in building an agenda of mutual benefit. Subregional forums stand out within this structure: EU-CAN, EU-MERCOSUR, EU-CARICOM, and EU-SICA.³⁰

Asymmetries in the EU-LAC relationship

Despite the progress made, the development of the alliance between the European Union and Latin America has experienced ups and downs.³¹ At times, moments of distance in the relationship have been related to the global context, such as in 2007 when the international financial crisis occurred.³² On other occasions, it has resulted from political differences within the regions, as happened following the enlargement of the EU³³. Other structural factors are added to these causes, related to the

30 Andrés Serbin y Andrés Serbin Pont, “¿Por qué la Unión Europea debería ser de relevancia para América Latina y el Caribe?” Fundación EU-LAC, 2019, p.11 <https://eulacfoundation.org/es/por-que-la-union-europea-deberia-ser-relevancia-para-america-latina-y-el-caribe>

31 Iván González Sarro, “Veinte años de relaciones estratégicas de la Unión Europea con América Latina y el Caribe (1999-2019): análisis de la evolución de sus ‘tres pilares’ fundamentales” *Foro Internacional* 60, no. 3 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.24201/fi.v60i3.2646>.

32 Bacaria Colom, Jaume, y Stephan Sberro. “El eje económico y financiero de la relevancia de la Unión Europea para América Latina y el Caribe”, in *¿Por qué la Unión Europea debería ser de relevancia para América Latina y el Caribe?*, 14-20. Fundación EU-LAC, CRIES, 2018. p. 14.

33 Lorena Ruano, “La Unión Europea y América Latina y el Caribe: breve historia de la relación birregional,” *Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior* 112 (abril-junio 2018), p. 81.

asymmetries in size, power, resources, and capacities between the EU and Latin America.

One of the asymmetries that stands out from a political point of view is the disparity in the development of regional institutions. The regional institutions of the European Union are considerably more developed and consolidated than those of Latin America. This disparity is manifested, for example, in the homogeneity of the positions of each region: “While European countries show greater coordination in foreign policy matters, Latin American governments attend the meeting with virtually no prior agreement. Furthermore, in some areas, they arrive extremely divided”.³⁴

Peter Birle, a researcher at the Ibero-American Institute (IAI) in Berlin, argues that while regionalism in Latin America shows considerable organizational diversity, as a whole, these structures “are characterized by organizational weakness, limited competences and narrow margins of action. Lacking the political will to change this situation, regional organizations cannot play a proactive role in deepening regional cooperation and integration”.³⁵ The IAI researcher observes that presidential diplomacy predominates in Latin America, leaving little room for supranational developments.

34 Carlos Malamud, “Las relaciones entre la Unión Europea y América Latina en el siglo XXI: entre el voluntarismo y la realidad,” *Plataforma Democrática*, 2010, p. 5. <https://eulacfoundation.org/es/las-relaciones-entre-la-union-europea-y-america-latina-el-siglo-xxi-entre-el-voluntarismo-y-la>

35 Birle, 2018, p. 258.

Both the European Union and Latin America are very aware of these asymmetries, and they have been implementing instruments to reduce imbalances and promote more equitable long-term integration.

Relaunching the LA-EU relationship

Just as the international context has sometimes hindered the advancement of the bi-regional partnership, this dynamic has reversed in recent years. As the global geopolitical context has become increasingly complex and challenging, governments in the EU and Latin America are increasingly recognizing the benefits of revitalizing and strengthening the bi-regional relationship.

Detlef Nolte, a researcher at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), highlights how “the experience of unilateralism and protectionism from the United States under the Donald Trump administration, the growing dependence on China as an economic partner and competitor, problems with the supply of medical equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic, and more recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine have strengthened the pursuit of strategic autonomy³⁶ in the EU”.³⁷ In this context, Nolte points out that

36 “Such autonomy implies having the capacity to act and cooperate with international and regional partners whenever possible, while being able to operate autonomously when necessary” (Nolte, 2023, p. 4).

37 Detlef Nolte, “The European Union and Latin America: Renewing the Partnership after Drifting Apart,” *GIGA Focus Lateinamerika* 2 (2023), German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), p.4 - Leibniz-Institut für Globale und Regionale Studien, Institut für Lateinamerika-Studien, <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/85384>

there has been a renewed interest from Europe in Latin America: “There is no doubt that the strategic value of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has increased for the European Union since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022”.³⁸

The renewed attention that the European Union is paying to Latin America and the Caribbean is based on several aspects, according to the GIGA researcher. Firstly, the EU considers countries in this region as potential allies in multilateral international forums, especially on Russia-related issues. Additionally, Latin America and the Caribbean are crucial sources of strategic raw materials such as natural gas, oil, lithium, niobium, and fluorspar, essential for European industries. Lastly, this region is emerging as an important producer and exporter of green hydrogen, a key resource in the European agenda for renewable energies.³⁹

In the past two years, both regions’ interest in revitalizing the strategic partnership has been evident in the resurgence of high-level political dialogue. In October 2022, the CELAC-EU 3rd Foreign Ministers Meeting was held. During this meeting, the importance of defending the shared values on which the bi-regional partnership is based was reiterated, and the commitment to jointly address current global challenges was emphasized. Likewise, a roadmap of high-level events was established to “pave the way for a qualitative leap in our bi-

38 Detlef Nolte, “The European...”, p. 2).

39 Detlef Nolte, “The European...”, p. 2).

regional commitment.” These events included a Summit of Heads of State and Government to be held in 2023.⁴⁰

In June 2023, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joseph Borrell, along with the European Commission, presented a “Joint Communication” titled “New Agenda for Relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean”. The objective of this initiative is to establish a “new era of cooperation between equal and compatible partners,” in order to work together to leverage collective strength, defend common interests, and jointly address global challenges.⁴¹

In July 2023, eight years after their last meeting, the heads of government and the state of the EU and CELAC gathered in Brussels for the third EU-CELAC Summit. Among the outcomes of this Summit are a set of bi-regional commitments aimed at reforming the international governance system to address global challenges more effectively, inclusively, and equitably.

In this regard, the III EU-CELAC Summit 2023 agreed on the need to strengthen the multilateral system and promote a

40 UE-CELAC, “Comunicado de prensa, III Reunión de Ministros de Relaciones Exteriores CELAC-UE, Buenos Aires, 27 de octubre de 2022,” UE-CELAC, 2022, https://eulacfoundation.org/sites/default/files/attachments/2023-04/comunicado_de_prensa_-_reunion_celac-ue-esp.pdf

41 European Commission, “A New Agenda for Relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean,” Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, JOIN (2023) 17 final, 2023, p. 1 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ES/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52023JC0017>

more effective and inclusive global governance, respectful of international law; revitalize multilateralism; improve bi-regional cooperation and coordination in relevant multilateral forums on issues of common interest (the EU and CELAC together represent more than one third of the UN membership); contribute to the efforts to reform the United Nations system, including its Security Council; and strengthen bi-regional collaboration in international financial institutions and multilateral organizations, recognizing the importance of having a fair, inclusive, and effective multilateral system.⁴²

The final declaration of the III EU-CELAC Summit reiterated that “by working together as sovereign partners, we are stronger and better placed to face the multiple crises and challenges of our times”⁴³. Although it is clear that there is still a long way to go, it is crucial to adequately value these types of meetings and the high-level political statements that emerge from them. These events reinforce the legitimacy of the partnership, adjust its strategic objectives to new realities, and set the political direction for the various institutional levels to continue advancing in the development of the relationship.

42 UE-CELAC, “Declaración de la Cumbre UE-CELAC, Bruselas, 17 y 18 de julio de 2023,” 12000/1/23 REV 1 (es), 2023, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/press/press-releases/2023/07/18/declaration-of-the-eu-celac-summit-2023-17-18-july-2023/>

43 UE-CELAC, “Declaración...” <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/press/press-releases/2023/07/18/declaration-of-the-eu-celac-summit-2023-17-18-july-2023>

Latin America and the Caribbean: Perspectives on its relationships with China, Russia, the United States and the European Union

Adriana Boersner Herrera

In just the past week, Argentina under Javier Milei has faced massive protests against budget cuts that the government has decided to impose on higher education. In Colombia, Gustavo Petro has faced national demonstrations due to the rejection generated by the reforms his government wants to promote. Ecuador held a referendum that gave support to President Daniel Noboa to keep the military in the streets to control organized crime. Police in Haiti remain on the streets firing tear gas to protect the surroundings of the National Palace and to halt attacks by armed gangs that have taken over the capital. The US Treasury Department reinstated sanctions on the Venezuelan oil and gas sector after Nicolás Maduro's regime failed to uphold its commitment to hold free and fair elections in 2024. Migration, insecurity, unrest, organized crime, illegal economies, and corruption continue to unfold in other parts of the region.

While every corner of Latin America and the Caribbean continues to resonate, concurrently, the region presents itself as an opportunity for other countries around the world, including China, the United States, and countries of the European Union. Agreements and the celebration of a variety of official visits and international forums in which countries of the Latin American and Caribbean region have strengthened cooperation ties are ongoing.

This essay seeks to explore the current status of Latin America and the Caribbean in their relationship with China, the United States, and countries of the European Union in this tumultuous context. Reflecting on each of these relationships should be a separate essay. These pages are not aimed at finding a deep understanding or conducting an exhaustive historical review of the relationship between Latin America and the Caribbean with the aforementioned countries, but rather to offer a general reflection on how each of these relationships interacts in connection with the others and not in isolation in the current Latin American and Caribbean context. In the essay's final section, some reflections will be offered on the challenges Latin America and the Caribbean face in the current global context.

China: Winds in Favor and Against

Since the mid-2000s, China progressively became one of the region's main trading partners, playing a significant role in financing infrastructure, energy, and natural resources projects. China's approach to Latin America and the Caribbean has been multifaceted.

Regarding trade, China has been an important destination for exports of raw materials from many Latin American countries, including agricultural products, minerals, and energy. In turn, China exports a wide range of manufactured goods to the region. Regarding cooperation, China has established a series of initiatives with countries in Latin America and the Caribbean in areas such as education, health, agriculture, and technology. These initiatives have been received variably by countries in the region, with some seeing development opportunities and others concerned about issues such as political influence and human rights. China has used strategic diplomacy and public messaging, amplifying its regional influence in the process, as it has done for decades in other parts of the world.

Alongside trade, investment, and cooperation, China has paid notable, high-level diplomatic attention to education, health, and technology. From 2012 until early 2024, Chinese leader Xi Jinping has visited Latin America and the Caribbean on eleven occasions. China is an observer in the Organization of American States and a member of both the Inter-American Development Bank and the Caribbean Development Bank. Twenty-one Latin American countries have joined China's Belt and Road Initiative, Xi's flagship global infrastructure program linked to China's geostrategic objectives¹.

1 Eduardo Tzili-Apango, "Iniciativa de la Franja y la Ruta: La integración de América Latina y el Caribe." *Red China y América Latina*, October 15th, 2023, <https://chinayamericalatina.com/iniciativa-de-la-franja-y-la-ruta-la-integracion-de-america-latina-y-el-caribe/>

The future projections of this relationship largely depend on the interests of both China and countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. On the one hand, China seeks to secure access to natural resources, raw materials, and markets to sustain its economic growth and expand its global influence. China's relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean is pragmatic. On the other hand, countries in Latin America and the Caribbean are more heterogeneous in their approach to China. While Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela have approached China to counterbalance the United States' influence in the region and also to receive financial assistance from China, other leaders in the region reject cooperation with China, such as Javier Milei in Argentina², or place more emphasis on balancing their cooperation with both China and the United States simultaneously.

China will remain a significant economic, commercial, and financial actor in Latin America and the Caribbean. However, some challenges in both the internal dynamics of China and Latin America and the Caribbean could influence the evolution of this relationship. These include market volatility (raw materials), inflation, a stagnant real estate sector, declining private investments, global geopolitical tensions, and regional leadership. Finally, there are unmet expectations among certain public opinion groups in Latin America and the Caribbean, where China's rapid investments across the region are per-

2 Román Lejtman. "Giro geopolítico del gobierno: Javier Milei comunicó por carta que Argentina renuncia a los BRICS." *Infobae*, December 28th, 2023, <https://www.infobae.com/politica/2023/12/29/giro-geopolitico-del-gobierno-javier-milei-comunico-por-carta-que-argentina-renuncia-a-los-brics/>

ceived with great skepticism towards the Chinese model. However, some also perceive trade with China as better and greater³ not only in terms of various areas of cooperation but also compared to other major economies such as the United States. This is not new, as in Africa, a continent that has had engagement with China for many more years than Latin America and the Caribbean, the promise of Chinese investment has resulted in negative perceptions among the African population towards their leaders and China⁴.

United States: Between cooperation and permanent tensions

The relationship between the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean is one of love and hate. It has not been any different in 2024. While the United States maintains its interest and intervention in various global events, such as the war in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza, its relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean is not only increasingly connected to these events but also in the midst of contention

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- 3 Lorenzo Maggiorelli, Juan Federico Pino Uribe y Carlos Felipe Cifuentes. "Cuatro formas de percibir a China desde América Latina: Análisis de clústeres de la composición de la opinión pública de la región." *Colombia Internacional*, 113 (2023): 113-144. <https://journals.openedition.org/colombiaint/3449>
 - 4 John McCauley, Margaret Pearson, and Xiaonan Wang, "Africa's Leaders Often Welcome Chinese Private Investment. How Do African Citizens Feel?," *Monkey Cage*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/12/09/africas-leaders-often-welcome-chinese-private-investment-how-do-african-citizens-feel/> ; Edem Selormey, "African's perceptions about China: A sneak peek from 18 countries." *Afrobarometer*, September 3rd, 2020, https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/migrated/files/africa-china_relations-3sept20.pdf

through political, diplomatic, and commercial ties with various global actors, including China and Russia. Some see the “withdrawal” or “vacuum” left by the United States in the region as an opportunity for China to insert itself as a trading partner in Latin America and the Caribbean.

However, despite the widespread perception that Latin America and the Caribbean have been relegated from the United States’ foreign agenda, the United States remains an important trading partner for many countries in the region. Agreements such as the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) or cooperation between the Inter-American Development Bank group and the United States have facilitated trade exchanges between the United States and several Latin American and Caribbean countries, as well as agreements in areas such as migration, biodiversity, and investment. There are also various agreements on regional security issues, including the fight against drug trafficking, terrorism, and other transnational crimes. This includes information exchange and training initiatives between the security forces of the United States and the region’s countries, such as Colombia and Mexico.

Similarly, the situation in Haiti and irregular migration from Latin America remain two relevant areas for the United States government. In its budget projection for 2025, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has estimated around \$224.9 million in specific funds to manage the migration situation, plus an additional \$35 million to improve programs in South America that address migration issues. Regarding Haiti, \$10.3 billion in humanitarian assistance has

been planned, which would be divided among other countries experiencing crises such as Sudan, Afghanistan, and some countries in the Middle East⁵.

On the official visit agenda, the United States has tried to by present in the region. In 2022, Secretary of State Antony Blinken traveled to Chile, Colombia, and Peru to discuss issues related to migration, development, economic growth, the environment, and democracy. The trip coincided with the celebration of the General Assembly of the Organization of American States held in Lima. In 2022, a delegation, including Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III and Commander of the Southern Command General Laura Richardson, visited Brazil during the XV Conference of Defense Ministers of the Americas. Similarly, General Laura Richardson has visited other countries in the region, including Guatemala and Argentina.

The current relationship between the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean continues to be complex and varied, influenced by a series of political, diplomatic, and economic factors that are relevant both to the security of the United States and Latin Americas and Caribbean countries. However, these issues are not perceived similarly by both parties. While the United States perceives, for example, the presence of China, Iran, or Russia in Latin America and the Caribbean as “aggressive pressure,”⁶ for some countries in the

5 USAID. “The President’s fiscal year (FY) 2025 budget request.” <https://www.usaid.gov/cj>

6 Gabriela Esquivada, “La jafa del Comando Sur advirtió sobre la presión agresiva de las inversiones en América Latina.” *Infobae*, November 2nd,

region, these cooperations represent a benefit either politically, diplomatically, or commercially.

In 2024, four relevant axes will shape the relationship between the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean in the coming years. One of them is the leadership changes due to the various elections taking place this year, including the presidential election in the United States in November. Depending on the governments and their visions regarding US-Latin America and Caribbean cooperation, the region will be more or less visible in US foreign policy matters and in the electoral campaign.

The second axis is economic relations. Already in strategic documents such as the 2022 National Security Strategy or the White House's annual budget, boosting the presence of US private capital in the region is stipulated as a primary focus. The possibility of increasing industry relocation to Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as focusing on strengthening infrastructure and technology, appear to be priorities that will be maintained in the short and medium term.

2023, <https://www.infobae.com/estados-unidos/2023/11/02/la-jefa-del-comando-sur-advirtio-sobre-la-presion-agresiva-de-las-inversiones-de-china-en-america-latina/>

Laura Richardson, "Statement of General Laura J Richardson Commander, United States Southern Command Before the 118th Congress House Armed Services Committee." March 12th, 2024, <https://www.southcom.mil/Portals/7/Documents/Posture%20Statements/2024%20SOUTHCOM%20Posture%20Statement%20FINAL.pdf?ver=Iwci9nu-nOJkQjxIWpo9Rg%3D%3D>

The third axis is organized crime, human trafficking, and drug trafficking. There are governments in Latin America and the Caribbean that have learned to coexist with the problems caused by drug trafficking and the emergence of criminal organizations. Others have contributed to their creation. This has generated problems in the ability of states to address fundamental societal issues and in failing to ensure high levels of institutionalization, democracy, and transparency. However, the problem of crime and drug trafficking is not only a problem for Latin America and the Caribbean. The United States has also been impacted by issues associated with drug trafficking and the proliferation of criminal organizations, which are not only located in Latin America and the Caribbean but also outside the Western Hemisphere.⁷ Illegal drug trafficking remains a threat to public welfare and represents a challenge for all countries in the Americas. Although it is uncertain whether attention is being paid to the primary and structural causes of these problems, the United States and some Latin American and Caribbean countries are undoubtedly cooperating more to address the issue.⁸

Finally, the fourth axis is the presence of China. Although Russia and Iran are present in the region, China has a much

7 Infobae. "Los alcances de la mafia China en América Latina." December 29th, 2023, <https://www.infobae.com/americas/mundo/2023/12/29/los-alcances-de-la-mafia-china-en-america-latina/>

8 Atlantic Council U.S-Colombia Advisory Group. "Advancing US-Colombia cooperation on drug policy and law enforcement." November 30th, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/advancing-us-colombia-cooperation-on-drug-policy-and-law-enforcement/>

more comprehensive and expansive presence. Similarly, while Russia and Iran are highly dependent on political contingencies, such as anti-American leaders assuming or remaining in power, and spaces ungoverned or outside the control of regimes, China emphasizes building relationships and cooperation with both anti-American and non-anti-American leaders.

Europe: Renewed interest in Latin America and the Caribbean

Contrary to the relationships with the United States, China, or Russia, the relationship between countries of the European Union, Latin America, and the Caribbean does not pose a major challenge at the global level. Rather, it is perceived as a relationship based more on complementarity. Even though the relationship between the European Union, Latin America, and the Caribbean is built on the pillars of a historical-cultural connection dating back to colonial times, and a political and commercial cooperation of mutual interest, for years, the Latin American and Caribbean region has not been of particular relevance to the foreign relations of most European Union countries.

Today, due to the war in Ukraine, the decreased importance of China for European exports, and the need for raw materials, there is a renewed short- and medium-term interest in Europe to open up more cooperation opportunities with Latin America and the Caribbean. For example, since 2022, Europeans have been scheduling meetings with Latin American leaders or joint summit meetings more diligently. This may be

due to the announcement in 2021 by Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in which he mentioned Latin America and the Caribbean as a part of the world with which Europe has a strong affinity and a union of economic and institutional ties. On that occasion, Borrell traveled to Brazil and Peru, and other trips followed, including to Colombia and Cuba. In 2022, Borrell declared 2023 the Year of Latin America. Since then, there have been more trips and intentional cooperations from Europe towards Latin America and the Caribbean, reflecting a renewed interest in the region.

On the one hand, other European leaders have visited Latin America and the Caribbean since Borrell's announcements in 2021 and 2022. In early 2023, accompanied by a delegation of businessmen, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz embarked on a tour of South America, visiting Argentina, Chile, and Brazil.⁹ Berlin highlighted cooperation in the fields of renewable energy, green hydrogen, raw materials trade, as well as the promotion of trade and investment treaties. A central focus was also Germany's clear stance in calling on democracies around the world, including those in Latin America, to condemn the war in Ukraine. Similarly, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, traveled to Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Mexico, where it was announced that by 2027, the European Union would invest 45 billion euros in Latin

9 *The Federal Government*. (January 2023). Further development of excellent relations with Latin America. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/search/scholz-in-latin-america-2161914>

America as part of the Global Gateway program.¹⁰ Finally, French President Emmanuel Macron, who has opposed the trade agreement between the European Union and Mercosur, visited Brazil in March 2024 to establish new cooperation in areas such as defense, energy, environment, and technology.

On the other hand, some Latin American leaders have traveled and met with European Union leaders, sometimes meeting at international forums. Such was the case in 2023 with Colombian President Gustavo Petro, who visited Germany, Spain, France, Italy, and Portugal. Luiz Ignácio Lula da Silva of Brazil traveled to Spain in April 2023 to adopt a joint declaration renewing the strategic partnership between the two countries. Gabriel Boric, President of Chile, met with several European leaders in 2023, coinciding with his participation in the EU-CELAC conference.

In recent years, one of the most prominent forums between Latin America and the Caribbean with representatives of the European Union is the EU-CELAC Summit, which held its third edition in Brussels in 2023. The European Commission continues discussions on the EU-Mercosur trade agreement, which was announced in 2019. Despite not all EU leaders favoring the agreement, discussions are ongoing to achieve its signing and entry into force. Likewise, EuroLat meetings have continued, and in late March 2024, a meeting between high representatives of the European Union and Latin America and

10 *European Commission*. (Junio 2023). Commission presents Global Gateway Investment Agenda with Latin America and Caribbean. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_3863

the Caribbean (EU-LAC) was held to discuss cooperation in the field of human development and health.

There are many reasons to understand this renewed interest in reinvigorating dialogue and cooperation between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean. Here are four detailed reasons. First, in today's globalized world, where the COVID-19 pandemic and wars remind us of the economic and political dependence to which we are subjected, not cooperating or halting cooperation is not the most prudent option. Although the impact of a war like the one in Ukraine is different in Europe than in Latin America and the Caribbean, the truth is that the war shows the vulnerability of countries to disruptions in energy supply or fluctuations in prices of raw materials and non-renewable energies in the international market.

Second, both regions are facing similar problems on different scales, such as migration, insecurity, unemployment, citizen distrust, polarization, and the rise of authoritarian forces and leaders. The relationships between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean can serve to expand cooperation that allows the regions to jointly seek alternatives, solutions, and mediations to some of these problems.

Third, there are leaderships, such as the Spanish presidency of the European Union, that are keen on renewing relations with Latin America and the Caribbean. Similarly, there are leaderships in Latin America and the Caribbean that are interested in keeping Europe as the main investor in the region. However, in both cases, the leaderships suffer from

instability, and that could cast a shadow in the medium term on the renewed intention that the European Union currently has towards Latin America and the Caribbean.

Finally, there is a widespread perception that Europe has substantially disengaged from Latin America and the Caribbean. In this regard, it is important to understand that Europe's relationship with different countries within Latin America and the Caribbean varies. While Central American countries and Mexico are closely linked to the United States, countries in South America have been an important market for European exports for years. In fact, the European Union is the second largest direct investor in the region, surpassing even China. While South America is an important region for its energy resources and raw materials, the European Union remains a primary source of technology and capital for countries in the South American region.

Final thoughts

Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean offer a myriad of opportunities, both to those who are part of these societies and to countries outside the region. It is no coincidence that today we talk not only about the influence of the United States, but also that of China, Russia, and Iran, and the potential benefits that an expansion of the relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean could bring to the European Union.

The perspective of Latin America and the Caribbean in their relationship with China, the United States, and the European Union is complex and varied. There are three

essential points to consider in this perspective. First, cooperation and agreements may occur, but they will always be limited by the will of the current leaders and government. This is relevant in a year with important elections within Latin America and the Caribbean, the United States, and the European Union. Similarly, in intra-regional relations, due to leadership changes, as well as the contrasting left, right, and center leaderships, regional multilateralism will be clouded by the increasing political differences.

Second, the relationships between Latin America and the Caribbean, China, the United States, and the European Union are intrinsically interconnected. Each of them exists and is projected the way it is due to the interdependence of the globalized world. The China-US rivalry has had its impact on the Latin American and Caribbean region, which has served to increase cooperation based, in some cases, on that China-US polarity. Similarly, we have seen that, due to international events such as wars and fluctuations in prices in the international market of raw materials and non-renewable resources, approaches and cooperation become less or more paramount due to the dependence on markets that offer raw materials and non-renewable energy. In the coming years, Latin America and the Caribbean will continue to be affected directly and indirectly by the expansion of conflicts outside the region.

Finally, Latin America and the Caribbean will always be vital regions. For the United States, not only due to its complicated political and economic history, but also because of its geographic proximity. In the case of the European Union, it's due to the historical, cultural, and political ties, and now even

more so because of the commercial and investment importance. China, even though it lacks shared cultural and historical factors and geographic proximity, sees Latin America and the Caribbean as a vital region for access to raw materials, non-renewable resources, and a market of over 669 million people to sell goods and services.

Mariano de Alba: “The international community is not capable, and will not be, of halting authoritarianism in Venezuela”

Pedro Pablo Peñaloza

The lawyer, an expert in International Law and advisor to the Crisis Group, warns that the weakness of institutions, freedom of expression, political parties, and the rise of corruption threaten democracy in the region.

–How would you describe the current state of democracy in Latin America?

It is evident that we are in a period of democratic recession. Recent assessments show that most countries in the region are experiencing a significant decline in respect for civil and political rights and in upholding democratic principles. In Latin America, we face a dual challenge: in authoritarian regimes, this trend is solidifying, while in democracies, the quality of democratic governance is declining.

The problems are diverse and go far beyond the lack of electoral conditions or the disregard for results. The rise of social media is not contributing to generating constructive debate to solve the issues affecting the majority but rather fuels populism and more emotional rather than rational positions.

To this, we must add a very concerning issue: the growing role of international actors meddling in the internal affairs of other countries to take sides with a particular political faction. Finally, I would also highlight corruption as a problem affecting democracy, especially because citizens are increasingly skeptical of the democratic model as they perceive that it fails to improve their quality of life. Rather, the perception is that certain elites come to power democratically only to gain personal and political benefits for themselves.

–Democracy in Latin America has at least three open wounds: Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. However, Nayib Bukele's actions in El Salvador also raise alarms, and what will happen with Javier Milei in Argentina is a mystery. Is it confirmed that authoritarianism is not an issue of ideologies?

If we review the history of the 20th century, it is evident that authoritarianism is not a matter of ideologies. Authoritarianism in Latin America, especially in Venezuela, was not an overnight event. Instead, the country experienced a progressive and pronounced deterioration of its democratic guarantees, starting with the system of checks and balances due to the increasing political control over the Judicial and Electoral

branches and other institutions, but also the weakening of the press and the right to freedom of expression.

The alarms ringing in El Salvador and Argentina are justified. Bukele's security policy has indeed been successful so far, but at this point, it is unknown how sustainable it will be in the long run and whether the gangs will eventually regain their strength. Meanwhile, the country has experienced a significant weakening of its democratic guarantees, as evidenced by the lack of transparency and clarity about the results of the recent legislative elections. Here, we come back to a growing phenomenon in the region, especially among the younger population: as long as there are concrete results in improving quality of life, a significant portion of the population shows indifference about whether this is achieved through authoritarian methods. In the case of Argentina, it is still too early to draw definitive conclusions, largely because it is a country with a much more robust institutional framework than El Salvador.

A key element of democratic systems is the possibility for society to be represented by different political parties. In Latin America, however, political parties have experienced a significant decline as they are now perceived less as representatives of societal sentiments and needs and more as organizations serving the interests of elites.

A growing and concerning phenomenon in our region is that political parties, meant to be the seeds of the democratic system, are internally operating with less transparency and democracy. Leadership cannot be imposed. A democratic

system is meant to convince the citizens; and democracy is strong to the extent that different political parties can act democratically and build consensus with other parties.

There is an urgent and profound task in the region where, in recent years, and perhaps Hugo Chávez was the paradigmatic case, we've witnessed a surge of leaders in the region who, claiming to embody popular representation, impose their will without convincing others.

—The recent case in Ecuador has shown to what extent organized crime can jeopardize democracy in the region. In your opinion, what are the main threats democracy is currently facing in Latin America?

If I were to highlight three, they would be the following: Firstly, the weakness of our institutions and the lack of a State vision. Respect for a system of checks and balances is fundamental for democracy to exist and be in good health. We still have a long way to go in building independent and capable institutions to address the issues of citizenship and avoid being the instrument of a party or a specific group that holds power.

Secondly, I am very concerned about the weakening of freedom of expression and the spaces for constructive and respectful debate. For democracy to function, it is crucial to be able to build consensus with those who think differently. Populism, although not exclusively a Latin American phenomenon, I believe is causing a lot of harm. The objective of many politicians is no longer to build solutions but to seize

power to enrich themselves when they achieve it, and for this, they are capable of promising mirages.

Lastly, I would highlight corruption and the weakening of political parties. Part of the reason for the rise of organized crime in Latin America is how easily these organizations can corrupt public officials, authorities who were supposed to combat crime. And, in the case of political parties, they are weakening institutions: citizens are more focused on what a specific leader says than on an organization that reaches conclusions and defines a course of action after deliberation. This makes it much more difficult for society to progress together.

—It seems that Latin America abounds with strong leaders and weak institutions. What should be done to control the former and strengthen the latter?

To control strong leaders, what is needed is precisely strong institutions. However, as long as the population perceives that these strong leaders achieve tangible results in improving people's quality of life, controlling them becomes much more difficult. Another element I have already mentioned, but that is worth developing further, is the State vision. In most of the region, we are used to seeing that when a new government comes to power, it starts from scratch. They believe they have a blank canvas to advance their project. That is a serious mistake. Perhaps Chile is the only country in the region that has achieved this through sustained success.

The development of a nation and achieving results is impossible if there is a change every four, five, or six years and we start from scratch. Latin American societies must be able to set medium and long-term goals and not derail due to a political change. To strengthen institutions, it is key to build greater civic participation, achieve results in educating the population, and ensure public officials' specialization and fair remuneration.

Citizens must be able to trust the institutions, and that is only achieved through transparency, when citizens perceive that institutions are at the service of the people, always striving to act within the rule of law and with the intention of protecting the public interest.

—Although democratic charters are signed, the region lacks institutional mechanisms to intervene efficiently in safeguarding freedoms in Latin America. How can we progress in this direction with governments that are so protective of their independence and autonomy?

Indeed, it looks very challenging at the moment. It will require governments in the region to understand the usefulness of such institutional mechanisms, which could result from greater pressure from Latin American societies.

The recent trend is that the interest in an institutional framework aimed at safeguarding freedoms is frankly minimal. Therefore, it might make sense to start with issues that have a greater impact on the lives of citizens in the region. For example, establishing institutions to enable the region to

respond collectively to diseases or a new pandemic and presenting a united front on how to address climate change.

On the other hand, I believe that, given the collapse of regional institutionalism, it would be worthwhile to rethink which international commitments the countries in the region are truly willing to undertake and go forward with them. It is evident that there was no actual willingness to respect and fulfill most of the commitments made in the 20th and early 21st centuries. They were signed with little sense of responsibility, more as a mere formality. That never works and requires maturity and State vision from governments.

–Focusing on the Venezuelan case: Presidents Petro and Lula, as well as former president Mujica of Uruguay, have questioned the Maduro regime's decision to prevent the opposition candidate from running. How do you interpret these statements? Could the intensification of authoritarianism break these political alliances?

Naturally, these are positive statements in response to very evident violations, including of specific commitments that the Venezuelan government itself signed just a few months ago in Barbados. However, it's clear that statements alone won't achieve anything.

The governments of Brazil and Colombia should leverage their access and dialogue with the Venezuelan government to try to persuade it to allow competitive elections that can be recognized by the region. At the same time, they could serve as a bridge to listen to and convey the interests of Chavismo to the

Mariano de Alba: "The international community is not capable, and will not be, of halting authoritarianism in Venezuela"

rest of the international community, helping to build a negotiated solution to the Venezuelan conflict.

I'm skeptical whether the escalation of authoritarianism could break those political alliances because, given the recent experience in Venezuela, even if the Maduro government manages to prevail in the presidential election, there will be significant inertia to recognize him as president and continue working with him due to the control he exercises over power. At the end of the day, Colombia and Brazil, as well as other Western countries, have their particular interests and will seek to defend them, even above what may be in the interests of Venezuelans.

–When confronted with Maduro's abuses, there's often discussion about the response of the international community. However, it's evident that this international community has been unable to halt Chavista authoritarianism. What can be expected from the governments of the region, and to what extent can they contribute to the transition in Venezuela?

From 2016, approximately, the Venezuelan opposition mistakenly began to build a narrative that hoped for the international community to resolve the serious issues Venezuela has been facing. Even today, there is still an excessive tendency to expect too much from the international community, which is certainly not capable, and will not be, of halting authoritarianism in the country. It's a task that fundamentally falls upon Venezuelans themselves.

The international community indeed has influence, but much less than some may think. Given the tools and limited infrastructure they have, what can be expected from the region's governments is not only to adopt a position in defense of democracy and respect for human rights, but also to seek mechanisms to make that a reality again in Venezuela. These mechanisms are limited, and basically consist of diplomatic efforts where it's crucial to establish a relationship, listen, and study how to convince the government, which is one of the actors in the conflict.

—All studies agree on highlighting that Latin America is one of the most unequal regions in the world. Can democracy survive amidst the poverty of its citizens?

It will become increasingly difficult for democracy to survive if it cannot address the main problems faced by citizens, and among these problems, economic situation always ranks high. However, the citizens of this region must also be aware that authoritarianism does not guarantee positive economic outcomes. Rather, recent cases like that of El Salvador should be considered. Now that it has managed to control the security situation, that country's economy poses a major challenge for the government of Bukele.

The region and its citizens must accept that the stronger a country's democracy with a clear rule of law, the more likely it is to attract domestic and international investment, which ultimately creates jobs and can contribute to reducing inequality. While another raw materials cycle cannot be ruled out, where state revenues are significant, it is not foreseen for

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the short to medium term. Therefore, private investment is crucial, and even authoritarian regimes like Venezuela, albeit with their limitations, have come to understand this.

A new cycle in inter-American relations?

Carlos Antonio Romero

After the conclusion of World War II, the United States directed its efforts towards advancing two primary objectives in Latin America and the Caribbean. Firstly, Washington endeavored to forestall the repercussions of nuclear-military competition, within an emerging bipolar world, from engulfing the region. Secondly, there existed a widespread commitment among Americans to foster democracy and a regime characterized by freedoms.

In neither instance did virtue and fortune suffice to ensure the full realization of these objectives. In 1962, the Soviets stationed nuclear weapons and facilities in Cuba, bringing humanity to the brink of all-out war. As for the aspiration to advance the cause of democracy, numerous instances exist where the White House effectively provided a “blank check” to those who opposed civilian governments, invoking the authoritarian tradition prevalent in the region. Whether due to a lack of confidence, theoretical pessimism, or simply a preference for familiar references, democratic fatigue became the prevailing norm in the region, with only a few notable and exemplary exceptions.

Today, more than 75 years after the detonation of nuclear bombs on Japanese soil, the status quo —namely, American

understanding of Latin America and the Caribbean— suffers from the same ailments of the 1950s, encapsulated succinctly by Professor Charles Anderson in his astute observation that Latin America was “a living museum.” In other words, various political forms coexist within the same space and time, the majority of which do not facilitate the full promotion of democracy.

The amalgamation of various intentions, decisions, and consequences made by presidents, secretaries of State, senators, representatives in the US Congress, along with opinion leaders, analysts, journalists, and academics, coalesced into a bloc of reflection in Washington. This bloc endeavored to demonstrate that, despite challenges, it was feasible to safeguard nascent democracies from adversaries and sidestep considerations of a nuclear-military nature.

This scrutiny of Latin America and the Caribbean found expression prominently, particularly within university halls, where fervent debates about the region’s future unfolded. One of the most significant contributions came from Philippe Schmitter, who reflected on S.M. Lipset’s optimistic equation and highlighted a crucial error in judgment: that economic development did not inherently translate into political development. Schmitter drew upon Anderson’s insights to illustrate that development in the region could not be depicted as a simple linear progression but rather resembled a rhomboid shape.

Hence, the Cuban Revolution exerted a profound impact on the region, rekindling skepticism about the efficacy of

democracy in our countries and bolstering the rationale for bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes in a more sophisticated manner. It's worth recalling the significant sympathy generated for Fidel Castro and the proletarian revolution, which marginalized democratic experiments. Either there was apprehension regarding a regime characterized by freedoms, or these experiments were dismissed as puppets of imperialism and the bourgeoisie.

The trajectory of the Cuban Revolution was marked by complexity, casting shadows and yielding negative outcomes, much like what we observe today. Democracies made limited progress, with many remaining ensnared in formalities and electoral charades. While military regimes did not proliferate as before, a nefarious formula gained traction: the civil-military alliance.

During that era, the Latin American and Caribbean agenda transcended traditional issues, advocating for mechanisms of economic integration and foreign trade as a panacea and an opportunity to move beyond the criticized model of primary export economics.

Over the years and decades, the Latin American discourse within Washington circles has expanded to encompass social, environmental, gender, and other now politicized issues, paradoxically enriching studies on the region. Additionally, the impact of the war in Ukraine has once again elevated strategic thinking and geopolitical considerations to a place of prominence above the social agenda.

The conflict in Ukraine has brought several revelations, but perhaps the most significant among them are two: the possibility of a nuclear war and the observation that many of the governments involved are replicas of democracy, including the present-day United States. This is an important point to underscore. It appears that we are entering a new phase in inter-American relations, one that is increasingly complex and challenging to comprehend, let alone predict.

It is essential to acknowledge that we are amidst a new cycle, albeit not necessarily a virtuous one. Both traditional and emerging issues are being scrutinized, challenging the previous status quo while also presenting potential risks. One need only observe the developments in environmental policies or migration to appreciate this, not to mention military concerns.

The truth is that the global inter-American agenda is intricately linked to domestic factors, both within the United States and throughout the rest of the Western Hemisphere. However, there's more to consider. Geopolitical dynamics can undermine the advancement of democracy. One need only observe the situation unfolding within the European Union. Its precarious position vis-à-vis NATO has contributed to a partial retreat from democratic commitments and has facilitated the toleration of blatantly authoritarian governments.

Moreover, it is imperative to incorporate into the agenda and recognize the shifts in the narratives surrounding power, which increasingly manifest as what we term "the illegal reality." This encompasses activities such as drug trafficking, paramilitary violence, the presence of armed gangs and

guerrilla movements, as well as the smuggling of goods, services, and people.

In conjunction with these considerations, there is an ongoing debate regarding the development model to pursue. This debate arises from the contradictions between an ideal industrial and services-based model and the persistent temptation to deepen reliance on a primary export model centered on the exploitation of oil, gas, and “new materials and in rare lands”.

Given the theoretical confusion of our times, what can we predict? First, we must recognize that no theory can encompass all the complexity presented irregularly. Second, there are a series of communicating vessels between international and domestic factors during global events.

Thirdly, the monopoly of legitimate violence and state institutions has given way to a multiplication of multilateral and transnational actors challenging State power. In the multilateral case, one sees with astonishment how the European Union organizations, in the context of the war in Ukraine, have, in fact, assumed powers that were within the Member States’ scope. In transnational cases, it is important to highlight the war in Gaza, where a paramilitary and non-institutional organization (Hamas) is challenging the state of Israel, and the case of Haiti, where a diminished State confronts the violence of illegal groups that dominate 90 percent of that nation’s territory.

Returning to this essay's key aim, which is to analyze the current cycle of inter-American relations, we must point out that the transition from an international order established in 1945 (which was maintained until now) towards one that is fastly transformed, calls into question all the approaches that were applied for so many years, to analyze our region and its relationship with the United States.

In this context, we observe an "internationalization" of the regional agenda. This refers to the recent failure of the White House's objective to "protect" the other Latin American and Caribbean governments. Tensions between the United States, China, and Russia, along with the US military presence globally, link inter-American issues with the global agenda, thereby impacting the region. The United States seeks to strengthen its ties with Latin American and Caribbean countries, while Russia aims to expand its presence, and China pursues economic and commercial interests. Additionally, some governments have shifted their strategic interests towards the dense and contradictory anti-Western space, as exemplified by Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.

Simultaneously, diverse interpretations of what constitutes a democratic regime are rapidly scrutinizing the "performance" of each case. New issues, such as those related to gender and the environment, have become critical factors in evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of democracies in the region. Traditional themes, including armed conflicts, political transitions, economic development, and human rights, have also taken on new dimensions. Amidst this spectrum of issues, drug trafficking persists and expands.

Broadly, the inter-American agenda is undergoing a metamorphosis, prompting us to question the extent to which the “toolbox” that once formed the basis for the concept of singular relations remains valid. Particularly, there is a pressing need to acknowledge that this singularity no longer holds true today, and that under “internationalization,” Latin America and the Caribbean are diminishing in interest for Washington, except in matters related to immigration, nuclear power, and anti-Western alliances in the region.

Certainly, this phenomenon is closely linked to the internal dynamics of the Latino vote in the United States and the growing discourse within the country that challenges the “melting pot” thesis. This thesis, criticized by a group of authors who argue that racial, ethnic, and social divisions are deepening in the United States, questions social integration. Consequently, this group supports the idea of cultural heterogeneity as a fundamental characteristic of inter-American relations.

In addition to internationalization and the intermestic nature of relations, along with the emergence of new themes and the reevaluation of the concept of cultural heterogeneity, it is crucial to underscore the significance of the underlying idea shaping Latin American studies in relations between the United States and the region, which has evolved over time. The once prevalent notion of a homogeneous Latin America, associated with the optimistic equation mentioned earlier, has given way to the recognition of cultural heterogeneity, thus opening a spectrum of possibilities albeit laden with ideological influences.

What do we mean by this? Put simply, ideological factors play a significant role in shaping the perceptions that the United States holds regarding the hemisphere. These factors encompass a wide range of ideologies, from liberal thought to Marxism, as well as various centrist, populist, moderate left, or communist ideologies (as exemplified by Cuba). Consequently, it is apparent that the understanding of the region is influenced by this ideological landscape, which increasingly interconnects ideological and methodological orientations.

As we assess the state of affairs in 2024, and consider what can be anticipated in inter-American relations, the landscape is complex and nuanced. Diplomatically, there has been a notable decline in the presence and significance of foreign policies. Neither the region's largest countries, such as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, nor intermediary nations like Colombia and Venezuela, are actively pursuing robust foreign policies. Even Cuba, with its unique position as a country in direct opposition to the United States, has been unable to overcome its internal challenges. This is exacerbated by financial constraints, economic stagnation, a surge in emigration, and significant deficits in public services, compounded by a lack of democratic spaces on the island.

Across the region, countries have scaled back their international commitments, mirroring a trend of escalating external debt, encompassing both multilateral and bilateral obligations, as well as private debt. Furthermore, the region grapples with mounting inflation and a persistent migration crisis, affecting both countries sending migrants and those receiving them. It's crucial to acknowledge that the United

States remains at the epicenter of the immigration issue, with its repercussions reverberating throughout the region and impacting various facets of American life.

In conclusion, it's vital to acknowledge that these dynamics significantly shape the development of relations between the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean. They unfold within a framework characterized by heightened skepticism towards democracy, political parties, the rule of law, and institutions. Concurrently, ideological polarization, persistent challenges of poverty and inequality, the impact of remittances, as well as issues like corruption, deforestation, and the migrant crisis, compound the pressing needs faced by a disillusioned populace often reliant on clientelism as a means of ensuring political stability. Moreover, there's the challenge of countering narratives fueled by the manipulation of social media and emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, which erode personal freedoms.

Ultimately, it's imperative to recognize that we're navigating a new cycle of inter-American relations, marked by complexity and novelty. This ongoing process oscillates between traditional power dynamics, institutional control, and the rise of non-traditional forms of influence driven by grassroots movements. In this perpetual tension, the heterogeneous nature of the region is forged, reflecting the diverse and multifaceted realities of its inhabitants.

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