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Opinion — US Policies towards Latin America: What to Expect from the November Elections

<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/10/13/opinion-us-policies-towards-latin-america-what-to-expect-from-the-november-elections/>

RAFAEL R. IORIS, OCT 13 2020

Under Trump, Latin America was seen from the top of his imagined – allegedly Mexican-paid – beautiful and huge border wall. In this logic, Latin America only mattered in terms of the meanings the North-American populist leader attributed to the region for the purposes of domestic political use. Now, less than a month to an election that shall decide the course of the world's most powerful military force, with consequential outcomes both domestically and internationally, what are the prospects for US-Latin American relations should Trump win or, alternatively, his opponent, former Vice-President Joe Biden, manage to prevent the often found pattern of presidential reelections in the United States?

Before potential differences in the likely future administrations in the US can be assessed, it should be remembered that, with few exceptions, foreign policies from the United States towards Latin America have been historically defined, by paternalism, at its best, and interventionism, at its worst, regardless of which party is in power. Surely, Trump elevated the symbolism of aggression towards Latin America by separating migrant families at the border and placing their young children in cages while also vilifying immigrants in general by calling them rapists.

On the their part, however, the last Democratic administration enhanced deportations and mostly pursued regional policies inspired on security concerns, wherein even foreign aid was tied to the militarization of domestic policing especially in Mexico and Central American nations, like Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Moreover, starting in 2009, when a military coup in Honduras revived a tragic chapter in the region's history, the Obama administration missed several opportunities (2012 and 2016, when questionable parliamentary maneuvers removed elected leaders from power in Paraguay and Brazil, respectively) to stand for democratic values in Latin America.

Moving beyond the neglect of the Trump administration, Biden could certainly approach the region with a more constructive tone (not a difficult task, in fact) and possibly revive the overture towards Cuba, initiated in the Obama administration, when he served as Vice-President. It is also to be expected that he would pressure regional countries, especially Brazil, to do better in terms of environmental protection (also not a difficult task).

In any event, security-based concerns about immigrants, a tough stance towards Venezuela, economic policies inspired on neoliberal goals, and a growing concern about China's growing influence in the region are all likely to continue to define US approaches to Latin America regardless of who wins the national elections in November.

Should Trump win in November, the turn of the US from the main proponent of the liberal order born in postwar era to becoming the world's strongest unilateralist actor should be expanded. The current president would feel emboldened and validated on his current course of actions, both domestic and internationally, and thus would likely double down on his aggressive go-it-alone rhetoric, as demonstrated on his speech at the United Nations last month.

Trump's attacks on China are likely to get louder and his demands for Latin America to pick a side in the growing regional dispute between the US and China would likely get much tougher. The unilateralist logic guiding Trump's foreign policies worldwide would likely be further expended in Latin America by means of strengthened *ad hoc* ties between Trump and regional right-wing populist counterparts, like Brazil's Bolsonaro and El Salvador's Bukele.

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Trump's denigration of undocumented migrants (most of which come from Latin America), his administration's legal attacks on the deferred action on the deportation of undocumented students (DACA), and his utter lack of interest in reforming the broken immigration system should clearly continue, along with the likely expansion of a white supremacist vision for the country. This logic would also be reflected on the continuation of the current administration's lack of concern for the on-going human rights violations taking place across the region, particularly in Central America, and environmental devastation expanding into ever larger areas in the Amazon.

Moreover, as demonstrated by the Trump administration's Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's recent visit to Brazil to urge regional countries to engage in a tougher stance against Maduro's Venezuela, it is probable that military concerns, potentially even military direct or proxy actions, may eventually (and tragically) elevate the region to the front of the United States' list of global security priorities.

The actual frontrunner of the on-going presidential contest, Joe Biden has the opportunity to improve significantly on Trump's record domestically and internationally. This would include, one hopes, doing better on the disappointing record regarding Latin America of the administration he served as Vice President between 2009 and 2017.

In a general sense, it is expected that Biden would act assertively to reverse the unilateral turn the Trump administration imposed on the US course of foreign policy in general. It is expected a Biden administration would act quickly to rejoin key multilateral agencies and accords, such as the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Accord, as well as work to revive close ties with traditional allies, such as the European Union. And though China still would be seen as the US main adversary in the world today, a likely more diplomatic course of engagement is expected.

In regards to Latin America, the concern for China's growing influence would likely be carried over to a Biden administration, along with a tough stance on Venezuela. It should be remembered that Biden was never a dove in terms of US foreign policy. He supported Plan Colombia, under Clinton, and the creation of an extra-territorial border in the south of Mexico (*Frontera Sur*) to stop Central American migrants to journey northward to the US, in the Obama administration. What is more, he implicitly condoned Hilary Clinton's support for the Honduran coup in 2009, though now, as a candidate, he has given signs of higher levels of concerns for human right violations in the region.

In fact, while it is certain that Latin America would not be a priority for any upcoming administration in the US, for domestic reasons tied to the Hispanic vote, Biden has indicated his interest in providing more foreign aid to Central American countries, engaging more fully with the region as whole, especially in the topic of environmental protection, and possibly reviving the agenda of economic assistance through a new round of free-trade agreements.

It is undeniable that the Trump and Biden candidacies represent remarkably different paths for the course the United States is to pursue in the next four years. In regards to Latin America, though, the traditional disregard and condescension so often manifested towards the region seems to be present in both campaigns, even if in different degrees and through different styles.

Trump clearly has a more aggressive tone in his portrayal of, and little engagement with, the region; whereas Biden signals, mostly for domestic consumption however, with a new concern for topics pertaining to nations on the south of the border.

It certainly matters whether the US approached the region through a unilateral or a multilateral fashion. And it also matters whether there is genuine interest in engaging with hemispheric countries.

Yet, though more interested in engaging more fully and in a multilateral fashion with Latin America, Biden's approach seems to be still guided largely by a neoliberal economic agenda. And what is more, US involvements with the hemisphere are certain to remain tied to an agenda of national security concerns, regardless of the victor of the November presidential election.

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About the author:

Rafael R. Ioris is Associate Professor of Latin American History and an Affiliated Faculty to the Latin American Center at JKSI, University of Denver.