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This study analyzes the relationship between the U.S. and Latin America and examines the impact of these dynamics on the Western Hemisphere and regional instability. Although not exhaustive, this research will consider the effectiveness of U.S. diplomatic, security, and economic actions since the Cold War and look for links between those actions and Latin American instability. Additionally, this study addresses internal drivers of instability in Latin America. This study also attempts to provide some concepts for strategic positioning of the U.S. as the partner of choice in the Western Hemisphere.

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## Executive Summary

**Title:** Latin America Stability and United States Strategic Leadership

**Author:** Major Curtis Shreve, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** United States leadership in Latin America is a critical source of strategic strength and must be reconceptualized to meet the changing threats to stability in the region.

**Discussion:** The United States (U.S.) fulfilled its intention of gaining and maintaining primacy in the Western Hemisphere in 1823 with the Monroe Doctrine. Until the Cold War and the Cuban Missile Crisis this role went largely unchallenged. During the Cold War, with the world superpowers in a nuclear arms race and economic struggle, the U.S. less concerned with Latin America and focused on building the partnerships it needed to become the unprecedented superpower that it is today. However, this neglect of Latin America, coupled with the rise of competitors with opposing ideologies, generated for instability that could require an increase in future resources. U.S. policy in Latin America has, in many aspects, failed to adapt to the regional challenges presented by Latin American politics and interstate relationships. This failure in leadership, especially since the end of the Cold War, is understood by many in the Western Hemisphere as neglect. Ineffective partnership with Latin America contributes to instability in the region and weakens the U.S. in the region. This instability, in the increasingly multipolar world following the Cold War, creates strategic risk for the U.S. This neglect is exploited by competitors in China and Russia, transnational criminal organizations, and regional influencers that are not aligned with American strategic goals.

**Conclusion:** Effective U.S. engagement and leadership in Latin America could create a source of strategic strength and a firewall against instability in the Western Hemisphere.

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## **Introduction**

This study analyzes the relationship between the U.S. and Latin America and the impact of these dynamics on the Western Hemisphere and regional instability. For the purpose of this research paper Latin America includes Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Although not exhaustive, this research will consider the effectiveness of U.S. diplomatic, security, and economic actions since the Cold War and look for links between those actions and Latin American instability. Additionally, this study addresses drivers of instability in Latin America. In the first chapter, U.S. policies and actions are examined for their effectiveness, relevance, and consistency. There are historical case studies that show how U.S. policies interacted with regional development and partnership.

This study does not purport to provide a comprehensive solution to U.S. strategic leadership in Latin America, but rather to study examples of how U.S. leadership may have become stagnant as the inevitable effect of globalization exerts influence in Latin America. The final assessment will attempt to provide some options for strategic positioning of the U.S. as the partner of choice in the Western Hemisphere. This will ensure regional partnerships that would be mutually beneficial and provide a deterrent for state and non-state actors, from China to transnational criminal organizations, that would seek to benefit from instability in the region. In order to avoid the likely failure of the status quo, the U.S. may need to seek a more effective engagement strategy in Latin America. This strategy should seek alliances with regional governments that value human rights and economic freedom, which will deter actions-short-of-war by competitors such as China and Russia. In return this will encourage mutually beneficial relationships that improve U.S. and Latin American leadership, both regionally and around the globe.

## **United States Leadership in Latin America**

Both the U.S. and Latin America share common history regarding colonization and subsequent liberation from colonialism. They also share many cultural similarities due to proximity and a high level of migration. Geographic proximity, contributes to the interconnectedness between the U.S. and Latin America despite the differences in global influence from one country to the next.

As early as 1823, the U.S. asserted itself as the leader of the Western Hemisphere and demonstrated its authority by involvement in regional affairs.<sup>1</sup> The American government's self-declared role in Latin American affairs was codified by the language used in the Monroe Doctrine, specifically that European colonialization of Latin America would not be tolerated and that the U.S. must be consulted in all regional affairs in the Western Hemisphere. The great European powers would compete at the global level, but the U.S. believed it should be the protector of the Western Hemisphere. The Monroe Doctrine states, "the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers."<sup>2</sup> This statement of leadership in the Western Hemisphere was not only a warning to European powers but effectively an assumption of responsibility for political stability of the region.

### **Inconsistent U.S. Policy**

At the start of the twentieth century, President Theodore Roosevelt introduced his "big stick" approach in his Corollary that demonstrated the U.S.' willingness for police actions in Latin America.<sup>3</sup> This was a prelude to future U.S. hegemony when it was more limited in the Western Hemisphere. In application U.S. attempts at regional hegemony were less than effective and did not produce sustained partnerships. Many in Washington, according to Peter Hakim,

have pointed out “inconsistent American engagement in Latin America and its impact on democracy in the region.”<sup>4</sup> From the promulgation of the Monroe Doctrine, through the Cold War, and until today, the effect of U.S.’ foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere was more self-interested and less about alliance-building. This is because the purpose of the U.S. was to build a deterrent against first Europe and then the Soviet Union.

The majority of U.S. interventions in Latin America did not yield optimal results for myriad reasons, and this was due to hollow commitments with asymmetric benefits. From 1909 – 1980, the U.S. was unsuccessful in its role as the self-proclaimed peacekeeper in the hemisphere, including more than two decades of Nicaraguan occupation, massacres in Haiti, invasion of Ecuador by Peru, the Bay of Pigs debacle during the Cold War and the subsequent blockade. Perhaps one of the most notable failures was the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua following a botched proxy war.<sup>5</sup> U.S. foreign policy in Latin America has been largely self-serving and, in military terms, an economy-of-force mission.

Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has failed to update and remodel its foreign policy in Latin America to reflect the changes influences in the region and around the globe. Some of this neglect has been punctuated and affected by world events, such as the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. While President George W. Bush described his policy as an initiative to create a century of the Americas, both the time and resources of his administration were diverted to the Middle East in a still-ongoing response to those crises.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the trade agreements and relationships, security cooperation policies, and interoperability of security organizations fail to modernize to meet the unstoppable march of globalization or the resurgence of global competitors such as China and Russia. The United States political and diplomatic engagement in Latin America encompasses a wide array of

actions over the last century. On several occasions this engagement has been intertwined with some form of action, or threat of action, by the military. One example of military intervention involves the deposing of narco-state leader Manuel Noriega in 1989, ten years after the Torrijos-Carter Treaties were signed as a plan to transfer control of the Panama Canal to Panama by December 31, 1999.<sup>7</sup> With a questionable success rate at best, the U.S. goal of introducing and sustaining democracy in Latin American countries fell well short of its Wilsonian ideals.

In 1994, the first Summit of the Americas promised to a mechanism to bring Latin America together on a mutually beneficial path toward trade, investment, and integrated markets led by the private sector. At that summit pro-democratic reforms were championed to include accountable and transparent government, stronger rule of law, a spotlight on improved human rights, and free elections. According to Laurence Whitehead, these political and diplomatic goals were “based on the assumption that the [U.S.] already fulfilled these requisites and that, by projecting its *soft power* through multiple channels of influence, could extend [the American model of] democracy throughout the Americas.”<sup>8</sup> Unlike the economic-based model of the European Union, the Summit of the Americas encouraged U.S.-defined democracy as the key theme. Because of this, only countries whose governments the U.S. defined as democratic regimes were invited or permitted to attend.<sup>9</sup> This type of political conditionality has permeated the agreements of the Western Hemisphere and, unlike the European Union and its test-bed relationship with Turkey, served to prevent a comprehensive political system of partnerships.

The largest influential collaboration between regional leaders in the Western Hemisphere exists in the Organization of American States (OAS). The OAS was founded in 1948 with twenty-one original members for the purpose of “overseeing elections, coordinating security and law enforcement operations, providing technical and financial assistance for disaster

management and development projects, and monitoring human rights through the inter-American legal system”.<sup>10</sup> Its membership currently includes thirty-five members and over seventy permanent observers.<sup>11</sup> The OAS is an organization that is limited in influence, partly because of Latin American desire for self-determination free of the appearance of influence by the United States. According to David Mares, agreements such as American Treaty on Pacific Settlement of 1948, while an ambitious pledge to settle conflict and disagreements peacefully, was signed by less than half of the members of OAS.<sup>12</sup>

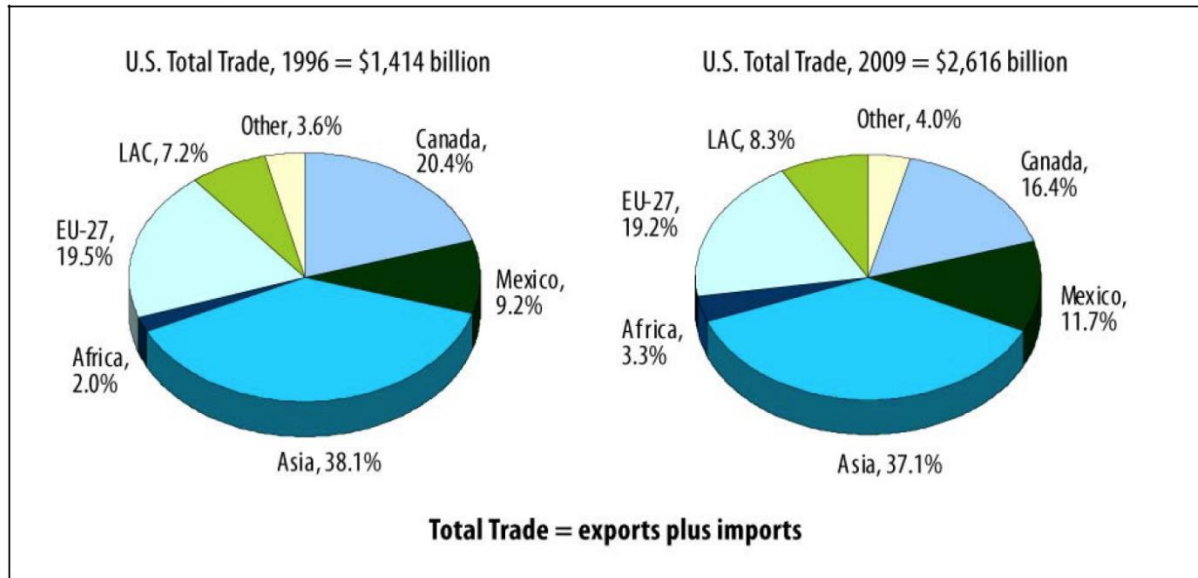
Over the last century American engagement directly affected politics and democracy in Latin America. When American soft power is strong and applied correctly it is usually followed by a move toward unity and cooperation and a move away from socialist and authoritarian rule in Latin America and the Caribbean. On the other hand, when American soft power is weak, or when the U.S. has intervened with force there are quite a few examples of failure expressed in backlash to what is often perceived as the meddling of the U.S. The most recent signal of a positive step toward diplomatic inclusion on the global stage is the acceptance of Colombian as a global partner of NATO. At the same time, the inconsistency in U.S. leadership is felt by many diplomats in the region. A former Mexican ambassador to the U.S. was quoted as saying, “Save a few countries in Latin America, the region as a whole has a historical preference for the U.S. as the main ally. This changed when [President] Trump assumed the presidency. It was his call, his choice, to turn away from the region.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Economic Engagement**

Economic connections throughout the Americas contribute to U.S. prosperity second only to Asia.<sup>14</sup> Due to the structure of major trade relationships, North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) Mexico trades more, by a large margin, with the U.S. than any other

country in Latin America (Figure 1).<sup>15</sup> In conducting this research, it was evident that Mexico, as a member of NAFTA, is an anomaly to the overall regional patterns of trade due to the contiguous northern border it shares with the U.S. The higher level of trade skews the quantifiable economic interaction between the U.S. and Latin America, showing it to be much

**Figure 1. U.S. Direction of Total World Trade, 1996 and 2009**



**Source:** U.S. Department of Commerce data as presented in World Trade Atlas.

**Note:** LAC = Latin America and the Caribbean, except Mexico.

higher. This paper recognized the surprisingly low levels of trade between the U.S. and the rest of Latin America when Mexico is excluded. Due to the existence of NAFTA, Mexico is still included in this study because of its relevance to U.S. policy in the Western Hemisphere. As recently as 2016 over 24 percent of U.S. exports went to Latin America and the Caribbean and nearly 19 percent of imports entered the U.S. from those same neighboring partners.<sup>16</sup> In large countries such as Brazil, with more than two hundred million people and nearly 3% of global consumers, there is trade flow to and from the U.S., albeit with a large margin left available for growth and improvement.

According to the British accounting firm TMF Group, Brazil is seen as a key market for US multinational firms with the U.S. as the origin of nearly 20 percent of Brazilian imports.<sup>17</sup>

These exchanges, as the current state or status quo, may be vulnerable in a future multipolar global order. The U.S. cannot assume that the status quo is desirable or sustainable and must continue to reevaluate the potential future impact of trade relationships with Latin America and the Caribbean. These impacts extend beyond the economic and into the security arena, to include finding economic development solutions that offer superior and long-term influences on international issues such as migration, transnational crime, and poverty. According to a report by Hornbeck in 2011, “Latin American countries have made noted progress in trade liberalization, reducing tariffs significantly and entering into their own regional agreements.”<sup>18</sup> The U.S., however, has not taken advantage of this opportunity, and has entered into mostly bilateral and trilateral agreements with regional trading partners. Examples of these agreements are the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Dominican Republic-Central America-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), and bilateral FTAs with Chile and Peru. Agreements with other regional partners have been signed but await congressional action. The U.S.’ tendency to confine itself to trade exchanges in areas where it is strongest may also present obstacles to expanded trade.

Latin America has long-standing trade ties to the U.S., although they may be considered strategically weak because of the lack of a comprehensive economic partnership. Over half of the previously discussed economic interaction between the U.S. and Latin America flows through Mexico. China is currently rewriting the trade playbook in Latin America, and the U.S. soon could lose the status as the most attractive trade partner in the region. The U.S.’ model in Latin America has been economic self-interest bolstered by the projection of military force to ensure security of those interests.<sup>19</sup> A world in which rising competitors offer attractive alternatives and seek to displace the U.S. requires the willingness to adapt. This creates the

demand to evaluate and restructure trade policy to attract and keep long-term economic partners in the region.

The labor sector in the U.S. is dependent on Latin America. Recent studies show that the vast majority of agricultural labor in the U.S. is not filled by native-born American citizens, but by workers who are foreign born and often of Latin American and Caribbean origin. Michael Clemens of the Center for Global Development studied a network of approximately 700 farms across the state of North Carolina which demonstrated the value of labor exchange between the U.S and Latin America. He reported, “In recent years the NCGA has hired about 6,500–7,000 foreign seasonal farmworkers per year on H-2 visas (Table 1), making it the largest single user of the H-2A visa program.<sup>20</sup> Its members grow cucumbers, sweet potatoes, tobacco, and Christmas trees, as well as smaller quantities of other crops including peppers, hay straw, beans, corn, and horticulture plants.”<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the H-2A visa laborers there are an estimated 10-11 million irregular, illegal, or undocumented immigrants that reside in the U.S.<sup>22</sup> These immigrants participate in myriad jobs across the entire range of labor and services. This creates a link between domestic economics in the U.S. and the economies of Latin America. According to the Pew Research Center study, the estimated total of remittances from Latin American immigrants working in the U.S. back to their home countries totaled more than 74 billion dollars.<sup>23</sup> Because remittances can only be reliably tracked when reliable digital transfer systems such as Western Union are used, the actual economic impact on Latin America is likely much greater.

Many American transnational corporations rely on labor in Latin America for the production of many goods. U.S. automakers all have some form of original engine manufacturer (OEM) production in Latin America, although most of them are in Mexico due to current trade

agreements and geographic proximity. American economic engagement in Latin America in the form of exports has outpaced growth compared to other global regions, yet it is still failing to maximize its full potential. Shannon O’Neil, in her 2016 testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, noted that the U.S. fails to “reduce non-tariff barriers, revise rules of origin, mutually recognize or harmonize differing regulations, expand pre-clearance and other proven programs for trusted travelers, and invest in the border infrastructure necessary to speed trade and travel.”<sup>24</sup> Legacy labor and trade policies should be updated to ensure mutual benefit and assure long-term attractiveness of the U.S. as the regional partner of choice.

### **Security Engagement**

Security cooperation in Latin America has long reflects the status quo of assumed U.S. primacy in the region and revolves around U.S. interests. Most partnership efforts are responsive to U.S. sponsorship and focus on fighting transnational crime, counternarcotic efforts, and humanitarian assistance. The primacy of the U.S. military and security relationships do not seem, on the surface, overly threatened or brittle although they reflect the U.S. lack of a whole of government approach in the region. According to International Relations Professor Juan Tokatlian, “the U.S. military preponderance in the region persists and it is rock-solid. No extra-regional country, individually or jointly, can challenge U.S. military clout and control in the region.”<sup>25</sup> This may project as dissonance from the political statements that are commonly heard, but there is empirical evidence to support this claim.

Thousands of Latin American sailors, soldiers, and airmen are trained every year in the U.S. and Latin America is the recipient of over seventy global military assistance programs. In terms of sheer quantity of military exercises the U.S. has no peer in the military-to-military engagements and U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) and U.S. Special Operations

Command (SOCOM), on any given day, usually have more personnel partnered in the region than any other branch of government. The U.S. relies on the National Guard State Partnership Program and National Guard units from seventeen different states to maintain continuity in partnered exchanges and cooperation in Latin America. The U.S. has much greater access through partnerships in the region than any of its competitors.

U.S. Southern Command is the geographic combatant command (GCC) that is responsible for U.S. military and security engagement. The focus of military effort in security engagement is defined by three lines of effort: counter threat networks, build relationships, and enable rapid response.<sup>26</sup> The activities included in building partnerships acknowledge the necessity of participation by partner nations in the region and are closely aligned with the policymakers' objectives they support. Not only does the U.S. military work to build partner security capacity but they also work toward improving public-private cooperation and focusing on raising the awareness of human rights with each partner force.

Additionally, SOUTHCOM works to defeat threat networks through a variety of means. In some cases, such as Cuba and Honduras, the U.S. maintains military bases while in other countries there is a physical presence maintained in security cooperation locations by deployments and other rotational forces. Additionally, although the U.S. committed to the reactivation of the U.S. Fourth Fleet (C4F) in SOUTHCOM as part of the more recent recognition of the need for increased military and security cooperation in the region, it has been unable to provide funding or resources adequate to the required mission.

While this study cannot comprehensively cover and analyze every U.S. security and law enforcement agency with influence<sup>27</sup> in Latin America and the Caribbean, it is worth noting that both the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)

provide partnership, advice, training, and assistance to counter various threats in the region. For example, the DEA has twenty-one country offices in Latin America and the Caribbean with dozens of additional outposts. These offices and posts are strategically located to place top-level investigators and analysts to combat the threat of narco-trafficking. The agents located in each of those partner countries are subject to the laws and regulations of their respective host nations as well as the level of corruption at each level of government and law enforcement. Most of the U.S.' federal law enforcement agencies have some level of cooperation and liaison in Latin America and the Caribbean, although the majority of their work remains within U.S. borders.

While the DEA and FBI, by charter, have largely domestic roles, their capacity and capability as premier law enforcement agencies create a necessary relationship with law enforcement agencies in the region. Many of their law enforcement counterparts in Latin America and the Caribbean are under-trained, under-manned, and faced myriad internal issues such as corruption or over-militarization of the police force. According to Frühling, Tulchin, and Golding, many of the Latin American police forces are militarized, train for repressive control of insurgencies, and lack the appropriate training in basic police functions that instill trust in the local communities and the population as a whole.<sup>28</sup>

In contrast to this activity at the field office and tactical level the U.S. is failing to remain consistent in the real partnership efforts of developing Latin American capacity. Renee Novakoff reports that U.S. “resources focused on transnational crime and the area of the world where most of the criminal activity that directly affects the U.S. takes place, Latin America and the Caribbean, continue to be cut.”<sup>29</sup> Much of this contradiction is likely driven by the lack of economic exchange with the region as well as diametrically opposed partisanship that is displayed in the current political environment in the U.S. Regardless of the politics, the lack of

engagement due to decisionmakers' unwillingness or apathy to confront the increasing threat of instability is expressed in political apathy and acceptance of the status quo. In 2014 SOUTHCOM Commander General Kelly, addressed the Senate Armed Services Committee in and stated:

Insufficient maritime surface vessels and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms impair our primary mission to detect threats and defend the southern approaches to the U.S. homeland. Similarly, reduction in force allocation severely limit our security cooperation activities, the primary way we engage with and influence the region. Sequestration only exacerbated these challenges, and while its near-term effects may have been mitigated, this reprieve is temporary. As the lowest priority Geographic Combatant Command, U.S. Southern Command will likely receive little, if any, "trickle down" of restored funding. Ultimately, the cumulative impact of our reduced engagement will be measured in terms of U.S. influence, leadership, and relationships in the Western Hemisphere. Severe budget constraints have serious implications for all three, at a time in which regional security issues warrant greater attention.<sup>30</sup>

This posture statement highlights the delta between the rapidly changing security requirements in the region and the resources allocated by the U.S. to meet those sources of instability.

### **Latin American Instability**

In addition to the inter-state tensions, many areas of Latin America and the Caribbean suffer the existence of high levels of crime and violence. According to the Program Director for International Crisis Group in Latin America and the Caribbean, as recently as 2016, "17 of the 20 countries and 43 of the 50 cities with the world's highest rates of homicide—excluding those affected by armed conflict—were to be found in Latin America."<sup>31</sup> Much of this is propagated by organized criminal organizations and individuals who seek to control territory or swaths of the population for the purpose of their own enrichment. An increasing portion of this crime and violence is being attributed to the entrance and participation of international crime organizations

seeking to exploit the gaps in security and stability that exist in the region.<sup>32</sup> From narcotrafficking to preying on vulnerable groups of the population these organizations stain the ability of government to uphold the rule of law, gain the trust of the population, and maintain stability required for sustained progress.

### **Latin American Domestic Policy**

Regimes such as those in Venezuela and Bolivia create long-term economic instability. On an increasing scale they exacerbate the effects of migration in the Western Hemisphere due to economic hardships. This creates a demographic of displaced individuals and communities that are vulnerable to criminal organizations, at risk for predatory business dealings, and many times unable to compete in the labor force.

In order to examine Latin American policies as they affect regional instability this study will focus on two countries in the region. Bolivia and Venezuela are case studies in domestic policies that have either caused instability or thwarted steady progress since the turn of the century. Both of these countries experienced some form of leftist or socialist executive leadership over the last two decades.

With his rise to power in Venezuela in 1998 Hugo Chavez was the first in a wave of socialist leaders in Latin America. Bolstered by vast oil resources, charismatic leadership, and willing partners in Cuba, China, and Russia, Chavez quickly consolidated power across the branches of the Bolivarian government. His policies of redistributing wealth were initially popular as they closed the wealth gap, but the incentives for wealth disappeared. His successor, Nicholas Maduro, leading the country through the historically inevitable downward arc of socialist policies, continued the policies of strengthened government control at the suffering of his own people. In 2017, Ian Bremmer, president of Eurasia Group, stated, “Venezuela’s central

bank stopped publishing inflation data in December 2015. The government then stopped publishing GDP figures in February 2016...the worst performing economy in the world.”<sup>33</sup>

Bolivian President Evo Morales, while pursuing market-friendly policies after nationalizing Bolivia’s natural resources, successfully consolidated power and used the judiciary to overturn term limits as written in their constitution. His iron grip on power in Bolivia ensured this change despite losing a 51-49 vote in the legislative branch. Allegations of corruption, including hundreds of millions of dollars allegedly moved offshore by his paramour via a Chinese corporation, pressurized Bolivia and created the potential for instability due to unrest among his most loyal voting bloc.<sup>34</sup> His anti-U.S. sentiments are an additional challenge for American leadership and solidarity in the region. Not only do they promote regional political dissonance, they also create gaps in international stabilizing efforts, such as law enforcement. This leads to increased instability due to criminal and international exploitation of regional barriers due to conflicts created by ill-aligned domestic policy.

### **Crime and Violence**

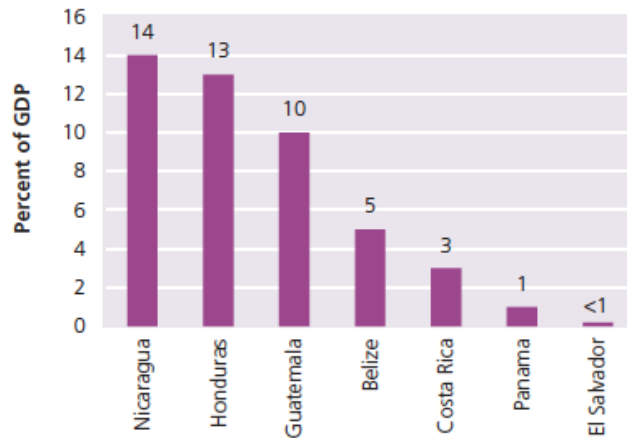
Crime in Latin America is a major source of instability to many of the governments across Latin America.<sup>35</sup> Criminal groups are organized at some level, such as street gangs that have origins traceable to a specific local area and increase their area of influence as they grow in power or numbers. Numerous Latin American street gangs such as MS-13 contribute to regional instability. These organizations engage in trafficking of drugs, weapons, and humans, and corruption in both businesses and government. Transnational criminal organizations are those that have a power base outside of their area of operation and export their members to operate in a specific area or region for the purpose of profit. In addition to the native regional

gangs there are also transnational organized crime organizations that have organized and operate in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Evan Ellis writes about Chinese gangs in Latin America and states that gangs with ties to China extort Chinese populations. In Latin America, they are involved with human trafficking, narcotics or narcotics precursor chemicals, illegal contraband.<sup>36</sup> Two of the emerging markets include illegal weapons and the laundering of money.<sup>37</sup> Multiple government agencies and international organizations are highlighting the vast scale of transnational crime with some estimating that it may account for the value of up to 5 percent of the GDP globally. In 2010, Central America was no exception according to a United Nations study (see Figure 2).<sup>38</sup> Not all of this money goes directly to the traffickers or crime organizations in each country during transit. The funding also impacts regional economies as an additional means of income to local populations. This raises the tolerance of the population to narcotraffickers, thereby ensuring more freedom of action for the organization.

Narco-trafficking has been a major contributor to inter-state violence in Latin America, and the Western Hemisphere for more than a half century.<sup>39</sup> While the life of drug traffickers has been too often glamorized in Hollywood the reality is that it is an obstacle to development and security in emerging countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Drug use, displaced persons, and high levels of unemployment create instability and opportunities for both transnational crime and government-sponsored crime. A study by the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 2012 stated that “although several contraband flows affect the region, the paramount crime issue is cocaine trafficking, the groups empowered by it, and the violence associated with this flow.”<sup>40</sup> Due to corruption, weak governments,<sup>40</sup> and powerful actors that create shadow governance the transnational criminal groups in Latin America and the

Caribbean are increasingly decentralized and exhibiting the capability of cross-border mobility in the region.



Source: Elaborated from ONDCP and UNODC data

**Figure 2. Share of GDP represented by value of cocaine transiting each country (2010)**

Many of the groups that originate from Mexico and Central America are increasingly diversified in their crimes, including drug and human trafficking, migrant smuggling, arms sales and smuggling of weapons and goods across borders. The commonality of these criminal endeavors lies in their destination, the U.S. The economic disparity between Latin America and the U.S. enables a demand that is a catalyst for crime and violence in Latin America and the Caribbean. Violence, as a major source of instability in Latin America and the Caribbean, is exacerbated by ready access to millions of illegal firearms. Many of these firearms are durable goods that remain functional leftover artifacts of war in the region. The regional illicit firearms trade also includes military grade weapons that were sold to countries such as Honduras and Guatemala and made their way into the hands of criminals by way of corrupt military officials and former military officials that seek to control territory.

## **Militarized Interstate Disputes**

Latin America and the Caribbean have recently been largely free of wars that engage large swaths of their population, costly mobilization, and militarization of industry. Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, there have been more than twenty militarized inter-state disputes that have impacted security and stability in the region. According to David Mares, the “sources [of Militarized Inter-State Dispute] are varied. Even if countries no longer go to war to seize neighbors’ territory, national boundaries remain contentious issues between [Latin American] countries.”<sup>41</sup>

The impact of these disputes is a driver of instability in the region that reaches farther than the cost of war or the threat of war. These militarized disputes have increased the demand for military grade weapons purchase that eventually trickle down to illegal weapons dealers following the peak of mobilization. This instability in the region also lends itself to opportunity for smugglers, insurgents, and other forms of cross-border crime as the government over-focuses on the dispute and away from building stability through more capable police networks. Additionally, the tension and uncertainty that lingers due to these disputes leaves cross-border industry and investors with shaken faith in the reliability of their neighbors, further degrading stability in the economy.

The oscillation between the increased centralized state power that is required to deal with these interstate disputes often clashes, in a resource-limited environment, with the internal needs of each country in the region. Throughout Latin America governments are increasing their power that is created by the desire of the population for increased personal security. This has led to the growth of government intervention in the economy and restrictive policies that include wealth and land distribution, property nationalization, and price controls on goods and services.<sup>42</sup>

## Assessment

The diplomatic engagement of the U.S. with Latin America has not adequately evolved to meet the post-Cold War requirements. Due to a variety of reasons there is a perception of U.S. neglect by Latin Americans. This perception creates a strategic environment in which the U.S. is less attractive as the partner of choice in Latin America.

This vacuum presents opportunities for competitors, such as Russia and China, and risk for the U.S. The U.S.' post-Cold War primacy is predictably waning. This brings into focus the need for the U.S. to consider proactive changes in international relationships that can assure regional and global strength as the world changes. Competitors such as China are exploiting gaps in ineffective U.S. policy in the region by suppressing U.S. influence in Latin America for the purpose of economic gain and strategic influence. U.S. influence, despite these efforts, can be a future source of regional strength. Stronger regional partnerships and cooperation may become a critical part of future strategic initiatives in order to limit competitors such as Russia and China from penetrating the region to a point that undermines U.S. policy objectives.

Latin America and the Caribbean are, both positively and negatively affected by globalization. While much of this increased information-sharing and connectivity is positive, the actions of more powerful nations that have superpower aspirations can be predatory and destabilizing. Countries such as China and Russia, with strategic goals contrary to those of the U.S., are seeking to increase their influence and access to resources. Some of these actions undermine peace and stability in the region and bolster regional sources of tension in Latin America and the Caribbean. Chinese actions at present tend to avoid the artifacts of militarization and pursue aggressive economic deals in communications, logistics, and natural

resources. Russia continues to seek to bolster socialist and heavy-handed regional governments that generally oppose U.S. policies and democratic values in general.

China is a world power whose search for additional access to natural resources is well documented which motivates it to test U.S.' leadership in Latin America. Over the last forty years China's economy has flourished while most Latin American economies achieved a regional net growth of mediocre proportions. China is viewed by some as a counterbalance to U.S.' hegemony in the region and makes the case that it is on a peaceful rise to power. The rising influence of China in Latin America may be benign on the geopolitical stage but China may be setting the conditions for economic instability in the region as it pursues its own interests. Indicators of rising Chinese influence in the region, such as the recognition of Taiwan, shows how Latin American countries are seeking to garner a more tenable relationship with China. Edward Wong notes that the top U.S. diplomats to Panama, the Dominican Republic, and Ecuador were recalled in the last year over those nations' decisions to no longer recognize Taiwan.<sup>43</sup> These decisions in favor of China add to the perception of the decline of the U.S. comparative advantage in the region. China is actively challenging the U.S. in Latin America through full spectrum competition for influence in the region. From agriculture to arms sales to trade China represents the changes that globalization has brought to Latin America and is challenging U.S. policy and prominence in the region.

Russia, with respect to U.S. policy objectives, has been a disruptive force in Latin America since before the Cold War.<sup>44</sup> Over the last decade Russia has increased its efforts in Latin America in an apparent attempt to undermine U.S. leadership in the Western Hemisphere. These actions are also likely part of a Russian attempt to create leverage against the U.S. and U.S. partners and prevent unfettered interference with Russian activities in neighboring states

such as Georgia and Ukraine.<sup>45</sup> Russia's history in Latin America is consistent in that Russia exploits the existence of destabilizing factors such as anti-democratic domestic policies and regimes and their inevitable need for a militarized security apparatus. Some examples of this are the deploying of strategic bombers and warships to Venezuela and the bolstering of the regimes of Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, Evo Morales of Bolivia, and other Latin American leaders that attempt to grab power from the existing democratic system and transition to more authoritarian and socialist regimes. With strategic policy objectives that are irreconcilable with those of the U.S., Russia is a historical destabilizing opportunist in Latin America.

### **Recommendations**

U.S. policy since the Cold War lacks effectiveness as measured by regional stability. Organizations such as the OAS have been overshadowed by U.S. self-serving decisions as well as the domestic policies of Latin American leaders that fail to build sustained stability. This combination of ineffective regional leadership has been exacerbated by criminal organizations and despotic leaders seeking self-enrichment. As a result, there are opportunities for strategic competitors to benefit by decreasing U.S. influence in the region as a means to increased global influence. Latin America may continue to provide the U.S. with preferential treatment in the short term, but the U.S. cannot afford to create unnecessary strategic risk. Inconsistent leadership in Latin America from one U.S. administration to the next will nearly guarantee an erosion of U.S. primacy in the region. It is possible, even likely, that the relationship between positive economic trends and increased security and stability provides an opportunity for U.S. policymakers to plot a course toward a long-term increase in regional leadership. This requires adaptive policy and engagement of both soft and hard power. Hardline stances by the U.S. have not promoted mutual trust and have undermined participation in multilateral agreements and

partnerships. There currently exist legacy barriers to trade, dialogue, and educational and cultural exchanges that could be updated to strengthen the U.S.-Latin American relations and focus on shared interests as opposed to unilateral demands. Approaching the region from a hard power stance creates resentment and continues to provide opportunities for strategic competitors to exploit.

An effective and revised approach to economic cooperation in the Western Hemisphere will be the lynchpin for stability across all of the other sources of power. The U.S., in order to be a stabilizing force in the region, has a responsibility to encourage economic investment, exchange, and inclusion in the Americas and the Caribbean. The status quo of economic exclusion due to lack of engagement cannot be the future solution and will likely require a parallel diplomatic solution to set economic zones and policies attractive to industry expansion in the region.

The U.S. must revitalize its efforts at security cooperation in the region in a way that encourages sustainable capacity and interdependence rather than the symptom-focused efforts and effects created by the status quo. Interdependency is a much stronger source of long-term security cooperation and stability than the status quo. Rather than treat symptoms of failing economies with more investments in the security apparatus, cooperation could generate economic strength that employs citizens and decreases the pressure to migrate to the U.S. Security cooperation in the region could be more effectively achieved with a counterintuitive focus on economic cooperation as the main effort.

## **Conclusion**

U.S. leadership in Latin America is a critical aspect of strategic strength in an increasingly globalizing world. The lack of effectiveness of U.S. policy in the region since the

height of the Cold War can be attributed to a range of factors such as inconsistency, lack of engagement, apathy, and competing global events. This has created political, economic, and security gaps that are being exploited by governments, malign transnational organizations, and regional actors attempting to grab power under the banner of populism.

While this study addressed the relationship between U.S. leadership and instability in Latin America, further critical discussion can focus on the destabilizing geopolitical trends resulting from Chinese and Russian exploitation of gaps in U.S. leadership. Strengthened inclusive relationships in Latin America are currently not a U.S.' foreign relations priority relative to other regions of the globe despite but the region is a development opportunity of labor and resources that could provide attractive alternatives and offer a strategic firewall against disruptive competitors such as China and Russia.

These partnerships are likely to become more important in a future situation where greater parity exists among the global powers. The U.S. should invest in sustainable and shared regional partnerships in Latin America that enhance regional stability through cooperation and offer itself as the long-term partner of choice in the Western Hemisphere.

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