



Latin American Rises: Whither the Monroe Doctrine?

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Latin America is Washington's neighborhood. With vast oceans east and west and pacific neighbors north and south, the US has been almost uniquely protected from foreign military threats. That has left America free to roam the globe, visiting death and destruction upon other states for all manner of offenses, real or imagined.

However, the neighborhood is turning ugly politically. For years Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua have posed a troublesome trifecta and shown no likelihood of changing. Recently Mexico made a sharp left turn, undermining Washington's policy in the region.

A portside wave also is swamping South America. The Left now rules Argentina, Peru, and Bolivia. More unsettling for Washington was Chile's recent move leftward, despite what had been a generally market-oriented success story. Although Ecuador and Uruguay retain center-right governments, Brazil is expected to shift back to the Left come October's presidential elections.

Of latest concern in Washington is Colombia, traditionally a right-leaning state, which just dramatically tilted left. Bogota long has been a US security client, bedeviled by a virulent communist insurgency, right-wing paramilitary groups, and violent drug cartels. A neighbor of Venezuela, Colombia also has been drawn into the Washington-Caracas confrontation. With the ascension of former communist guerrilla Gustavo Petro to Colombia's presidency, the US no longer can count on Bogota to back American intervention.

Washington suffered a foretaste of what the Left's growing influence portends. The Biden administration hosted a Summit of the Americas but refused to invite the troublesome trifecta. No dictators allowed, explained President Joe Biden, as he prepared to make a pilgrimage to Riyadh and kowtow to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed "Slice 'n Dice" bin Salman. Washington's latest example of insufferable arrogance and the resulting boycott by Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) and other regional leaders overshadowed the meeting's substance.

Some analysts see a much darker future. Warned Frank Gaffney of the Center for Security Policy: "The election of an erstwhile narco-terrorist leader to be Colombia's next president moves Latin America to the brink of being entirely run by this country's enemies." Worse, he

continued, "The Chinese Communists and their Russian and Iranian allies are aggressively expanding influence operations, infrastructure build-outs and basing arrangements that will strengthen their footholds in the Western Hemisphere."

What does this mean? "No good can come of all this for U.S. commercial or strategic interests – or the flow of still more illegal aliens fleeing leftist predations," said Gaffney. Indeed, a few months before his warning was even more ominous: "the Chinese Communist Party, Russia and Iran are working with impunity to transform all of Latin America into a no-go zone for the United States and for freedom."

A "no-go zone for America" in "all of Latin America"? Really?

Gaffney's solution? "Paging President Monroe."

No doubt, from the perspective of the American imperium, the future looks dark. The days of the banana republics, US garrisons, and Washington dependencies are long over. US ambassadors no longer function as foreign viceroys. For many Latin American countries, when the question is, who you gonna' call, it isn't "America," a name many believe the North American colossus has misappropriated.

Yet James Monroe might not have any answers if his ghost answered Gaffney's page.

The policy, which instructed the Europeans to stay out of Latin America, was coldly and unashamedly self-interested. Stated Monroe: "We owe it, therefore, to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and those powers to declare that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety." Monroe wasted no words on sustaining "peace and safety" for *other people in the region*.

When issued, the so-called Monroe Doctrine was just rhetorical flourish. Washington didn't have a navy capable of excluding anyone or an army capable of defeating anyone. US security was mostly guaranteed by the British navy, which controlled the seas. Although London hadn't grown much fonder of its errant colonies, it didn't want to see any of its rivals create a South American empire.

By the 1900s the US had the power to invade and occupy its neighbors at will, and sometimes did so. Alas, that did not bring democracy and stability to the victims, but at least European outsiders generally kept their militaries at home. Throughout the Cold War American presidents worried more about resisting communism than promoting human rights, leading them to support brutal military regimes and other dictatorships. Most autocrats eventually fell, along with Washington's reputation.

With the end of the Cold War, promoting subversion, insurgency, and/or repression, and especially undertaking direct military intervention, fell out of fashion in Washington. Officials were forced to at least pretend that they respected Latin American elections.

Still, the old standbys remained. US presidential politics ensured that the endless, and endlessly fruitless, attempt to overthrow the Castros would continue. Playing the sanctions card might have elected a Republican president or two but did nothing to free the Cuban people. A similar story developed for Venezuela, as various US stratagems succeeded only in intensifying the hardship suffered by the Venezuelan people. Nicaragua elected the old dictator, but more with the help of supposed opponents than outside subversives.

During the Trump administration Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and National Security Adviser John Bolton talked about the Monroe Doctrine. Alas, it offered no greater help to them than to their predecessors. James Monroe's ghost failed to show. Or if it did, it had no advice to offer. Sanctions were tightened on Cuba, again. Promises of liberation were made to Venezuela, again. And frustration was stated regarding Nicaragua, again. All with no positive result. US policy toward the Americas was a mess even before Colombia's election.

So what would Gaffney do?

The Left is advancing across Latin America through the ballot box. True, in the troublesome trifecta the bad guys have maintained power the old-fashioned way, by cheating. However, AMLO and Petro triumphed not only against more conservative opponents, but also in more conservative systems. The other leftist leaders also won elections widely judged to be fair.

Attempting to overthrow these leaders is a dead end. During the Cold War Washington insisted that interference with other nations' politics was vital, to prevent the deadly advance of communism. That claim won't work today. No one would believe it. And future presidents would be laughed out of international forums if they talked about democracy promotion after defenestrating several duly elected leaders. Especially given the recent cascade of rhetoric denouncing Russia's desire for a sphere of influence – precisely what the US has enforced in the Western Hemisphere for decades.

The answer to today's challenge is calm, diplomacy, freedom, and patience.

First, panic is the wrong reaction. Despite US worries over the current crop of leftist governments, the "threat" has changed dramatically from the Cold War. Observed Samantha Schmidt of the *Washington Post*: "today's leftist leaders look and sound very different from those of the past, at least in the case of Petro and [Chile's Gabriel] Boric."

The new Left exhibits little obvious animus toward the US. Boric attended the Summit of the Americas despite criticizing the exclusion of the troublesome trifecta. AMLO established a surprisingly good relationship with President Donald Trump. Petro said that he wanted to work with the US, especially on climate change, and even declared that "We will develop capitalism in Colombia," hoping to use it to address poverty and inequality. His populist opponent joined him in promising to normalize relations with Venezuela and criticizing Colombia's US-backed drug war.

Even ill-intentioned Latin American countries can do little to harm the US. Their peoples tend to be poor, their governments tend to be weak, and their politics tend to be fractious. Leaders often

have limited mandates. For instance, Petro won a narrow victory and his party constitutes only 15 percent of the legislature. Many countries oscillate between left and right.

Despite the region's move left, it doesn't look like Cold War 2.0. There appears to be little interest in establishing military bases for either China or Russia, which would pose the most direct challenge to Washington. Doing so would offer few benefits while turning host nations into Pentagon targets. And any such military installations would be difficult to maintain in any conflict given Washington's local superiority. (The fact that Americans worry about such possibilities suggest that they should give greater credence to complaints by China and Russia about being encircled by US bases.)

As for Chinese economic investment, it flows everywhere. The People's Republic of China is the world's greatest trading nation with extraordinary global reach. That reality cannot be wished away. Washington's best policy would be to implement better policies at home and emphasize its strengths abroad. Chasing after Beijing with subsidies would be detrimental to all concerned, especially American taxpayers. What most countries in the region want are trade access agreements, which grow commerce. Unfortunately, Biden has abandoned free trade, leaving him with little economically to offer the region.

Second, diplomacy remains Washington's most important regional tool. Playing the sanctimonious thug wins the US no points. This approach left mostly bitter fruit during the Cold War, when the US openly backed uniformed rule. Even less extreme military threats, economic sanctions, and political confrontations yielded little long-term gain for Washington.

Indeed, it is time to resurrect George W. Bush's quickly discarded idea of a "humble" foreign policy. For instance, by tying attendance at the Summit of the Americas to Washington's unpopular political priorities, the Biden administration squandered an opportunity to earn goodwill. To advance its objectives, the US must at least respect priorities of Latin American states, cooperating when possible and resisting – peacefully – when not.

Third, the best sales personnel for the US are Americans. Washington should encourage official and private contacts throughout the Americas. This is no panacea, obviously. However, America's power of example remains one of its most powerful international tools. The US arose from similarly difficult circumstances as the Central and South American colonies. The enormous economic and political success of the US reflects its policies and culture, which continue to appeal to others. Today the good is tainted by a history of misguided foreign meddling. Washington needs to limit the bad and highlight the good.

Finally, patience is necessary. A much weaker US survived and thrived as new nations arose in the region. When able, Washington unhesitatingly imposed its will on many nations. Supposed liberal Woodrow Wilson was no more accommodating than his more conservative counterparts. Franklin Delano Roosevelt ostentatiously inaugurated the so-called Good Neighbor policy, which emphasized noninterference. However, Washington busily intervened during the Cold War. As did the Trump administration, which ostentatiously cited the Monroe Doctrine. None of these policies delivered to Washington the stable domination that it craved.

Better for the US to moderate its expectations and realize that improvements will take time. There are no quick fixes. Washington should encourage steady, modest gains, while seeking to create local and regional institutions capable of implementing projects of mutual interest. Most important would be seeking to lower political temperatures and leave countries free to take the lead in dealing with their problems. The US repeatedly demonstrated that it has no answer for Cuba and Venezuela, development and debt, or migration and drugs. Rethinking premises rather than reinforcing failure would be a better approach.

American hawks are worried. Foreign governments are pushing their way into the Western Hemisphere. Someone should do something! Where is James Monroe when we need him?

However, other nations discovered over the years that there is little they can do to stop the US from inserting itself in their affairs. Ironically, Washington is learning a similar lesson, facing increasing difficulty in keeping others out of the Americas. In which case the US is going to need to learn a new approach to better manage its neighborhood.

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