



# THE RETURN OF GEOPOLITICS

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LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN IN AN  
ERA OF STRATEGIC COMPETITION

**AUTHORS**  
RYAN C. BERG  
HAL BRANDS

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## INTRODUCTION

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With the advent of the Biden administration, it has become clear that the idea of focusing U.S. foreign policy on strategic competition enjoys widespread bipartisan support. U.S. statecraft is increasingly directed at the threats posed by powerful state rivals—especially China—as opposed to Salafi-Jihadist extremists and other non-state actors.

Yet geopolitical rivalry is not simply something that happens “over there” in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East. It also happens “over here,” within the Western Hemisphere.

Just as geopolitical competition is more the norm than the exception for the United States, historically, America has faced recurring threats from major-power rivals operating in Latin America. This pattern is repeating itself today, as the countries—China, Russia, and to a lesser extent, Iran—with which the United States is competing in overseas regions are, in turn, competing with the United States in *its* shared neighborhood. These challenges have not yet risen to the level of the Cold War-era threat posed by the Soviet-Cuban alliance or even the Nazi presence in many Latin American countries prior to World War II. But they are gradually calling core U.S. strategic interests in Latin America into question.

For roughly 200 years, the core U.S. interest in the region has been strategic denial—preventing powerful rivals from achieving strategic footholds in Latin America or otherwise significantly impairing U.S. influence and security in the hemisphere. The nature and severity of challenges to that objective have varied over time, as have the urgency and methods of the U.S. response. As the United States enters a new period of geopolitical rivalry, it must update its understanding of strategic denial to fit the facts on the ground.

This paper offers an intellectual starting point for that endeavor. It is intended to help the U.S. national security community think through the imperative of strategic denial and hemispheric defense in the twenty-first century.

First, we discuss the meaning and logic of strategic denial and how that policy has evolved over time. Second, we explain why the United States has sometimes been slow to respond to threats in the Western Hemisphere, and the blind spots that have hindered its ability to spot emerging threats in recent years. Third, we offer a detailed review of the activities that China, Russia, and Iran are undertaking in the Western Hemisphere and the specific challenges they pose to core U.S. interests. Fourth, we identify tipping points at which extra-hemispheric influence could seriously damage U.S. security and influence throughout the region. Finally, we briefly discuss several principles for a U.S. response.

These include:

- (1) **Track extra-hemispheric influence more systematically.** The U.S. government will need to comprehensively catalog great-power activity and presence in its shared neighborhood to avoid ad hoc responses to strategic challenges.
- (2) **Track vulnerabilities as well as strengths.** The expansion of Chinese, Russian, and Iranian influence in Latin American and the Caribbean has not always been a popular phenomenon. Studying which aspects of these countries’ regional presence create diplomatic or soft-power vulnerabilities is a starting point for developing a more competitive response.
- (3) **Engage on security issues of greatest concern to local governments and peoples.** The United States must present itself as the preferred partner to help countries in the Western Hemisphere address their security concerns. To do so, America must prioritize the most pressing security challenges of its partners—and understand that those challenges are quickly shifting.
- (4) **Counter the authoritarian playbook.** Maintaining the largely democratic nature of the region and focusing on improving the quality of governance and political institutions can reduce the number of openings for rival influence. **Do not make it all about China.** There is no

question that U.S. interest in Latin America and the Caribbean rises when perceptions of extra-hemispheric threats become more acute. But it is a mistake to convey the impression that Washington cares about the Western Hemisphere *only* because of the Chinese, Russian, and Iranian threats.

**(5) Emphasize cost-effective means of competition.**

When resources are relatively scarce, the United States will need to find ways to increase the bang it receives for each buck. For example, International Military Education and Training (IMET) initiatives are an inexpensive means of building relationships with the next generation of Latin American military leaders—relationships that the United States is in growing danger of not having in the future.

**(6) Leverage non-governmental advantages.**

The United States has deep cultural, political, and historical ties with its southern neighbors. Facilitating people-to-people diplomacy can be a cost-efficient way for the United States to strengthen its hemispheric relationships and limit the influence of its great-power rivals.

**(7) Understand that you ultimately get what you pay for.**

A resource-poor approach to the region has inherent limitations. If the United States does not ultimately pursue a better-resourced, whole-of-government approach, it may once again have to make larger compensatory investments later when strategic challenges have become impossible to ignore.

In the Western Hemisphere, the United States has an unfortunate tendency to downplay growing threats until they finally elicit a panicked response. The United States must get ahead of the curve by reframing strategic denial for an era in which great-power competition is likely to intensify in the years ahead.

## THE TRADITION OF STRATEGIC DENIAL

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The idea of Latin America as a theater of intense, if quiet, strategic rivalry would not have come as a surprise to most U.S. officials in previous eras, even if the notion sounds jarring today.

The breakup of colonial rule in Latin America and the Caribbean in the early nineteenth century unleashed several subsequent waves of sometimes-violent geopolitical contestation for influence in the region. Participants included a rotating cast of European powers—from the United Kingdom to Nazi Germany to the Soviet Union—and, of course, the United States. It was only with the end of the Cold War that Latin America receded briefly in its relevance to great-power politics—largely because great-power politics itself seemed to recede in an atmosphere of U.S. dominance and liberal democratic supremacy. Before that, Western Hemisphere countries were often the objects of ideological and strategic competition among the major powers; they were also strategic actors, through the choices they made and the alignments they sought or spurned, in those same affairs.

As a result, previous generations of U.S. policymakers would have had little difficulty articulating the strategic importance of the Western Hemisphere. Latin America and the Caribbean matter to the United States not just because of extensive economic ties and the deep human and cultural connections that have developed over time (and impact U.S. domestic politics), nor because it has constituted a regional community of democracies in recent decades. From a geostrategic perspective, Latin America and the Caribbean—particularly the countries of the Caribbean basin—represent the most direct vector for political instability or security threats to reach the United States. In the nineteenth century, the region was the theater that, in unfriendly hands, could present formidable challenges to the physical security and even the survival of a fledgling republic. Since the early twentieth century, it has been the “strategic rear” whose tranquility—or volatility—profoundly affects America’s ability to act effectively on the global stage.

After all, it was not until Washington had established its own regional preeminence, punctuated by victory over Spain in 1898, that it could consistently project power into regions farther afield. Global influence has long required regional preeminence for the United States: Only a country *not* constrained by a balance of power near its borders can decisively affect the balance of power overseas.

The essential thrust of U.S. policy in the Western Hemisphere has thus been *strategic denial* vis-à-vis other great powers. U.S. officials have sought to prevent major rivals from developing regional footholds from which they can menace, distract, or otherwise undercut the strategic interests of the United States. There has also been a persistent, if not always consistent, ideological component to strategic denial—a belief that non-democratic political systems in Latin America and the Caribbean constitute a conduit through which malign actors can exert their influence. “It is impossible that the allied powers should extend their political system to any portion” of the Americas, stated James Monroe in his eponymous doctrine, “without endangering our peace and happiness.”

Yet if the basic objective of strategic denial has endured over time, the manifestations and targets of that policy have repeatedly shifted. The Monroe Doctrine warned against a restoration of formal European colonial empires in Latin America; the “political system” it sought to exclude from the hemisphere was monarchy. Although John Quincy Adams prevailed on Monroe to issue that statement as a unilateral declaration rather than “come in as a cock-boat in the wake of the British man-of-war,” it was London—which had its own policy of strategic denial vis-à-vis its European rivals—whose navy enforced the edict for most of the nineteenth century. The United States, for its part, spent much of this period trying to prevent, not always successfully, the expansion of European influence in Latin America rather than liquidating it where it remained.

This posture changed in response to growing U.S. power and shifting international threats. In 1898, the United States defeated—for the first time since the American Revolution—a European power in a major military conflict and thereby banished Spain from the hemisphere.

During the 1890s and early 1900s, the United States used various forms of coercive diplomacy to reduce a distracted United Kingdom’s influence around the Caribbean basin and gain exclusive control over the routes for an isthmian canal. Meanwhile, concerns that internal instability and financial insolvency might invite European intervention elicited the Roosevelt Corollary, which established a tradition of “protective imperialism” of Washington intervening in troubled Caribbean countries so hostile actors would not have a pretext to do so. This theory of strategic denial paved the way for multiple U.S. interventions—in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Nicaragua, even Mexico—in the subsequent decades.

That heavy-handedness provoked blowback, however, and in the Franklin Delano Roosevelt era, strategic denial took on yet another form—this time under the moniker of a “Good Neighbor Policy.” Roosevelt would end lingering U.S. occupations, hoping that a less invasive presence focused more on economic ties, de-emphasizing the military dimension of strategic denial—combined with the steady hand of friendly dictators—would better consolidate the hemisphere against the growing fascist threat. At the Havana Conference in 1940, the United States announced, in the guise of a multilateral declaration, that it would enforce the Monroe Doctrine against any extra-hemispheric power that violated the territorial or political sovereignty of a Western Hemisphere state. The fear persisted, particularly after the fall of France, that Nazi Germany would use subversion, economic coercion, or even direct aggression to turn South American or Central American countries into platforms to threaten the United States. In response, Washington used various methods, from good intelligence work to blunt diplomatic pressure, to limit German influence in the region and eventually bring Latin American and Caribbean governments into World War II on the side of the Grand Alliance.

During the Cold War, the target of strategic denial was Moscow. The danger was that local communists would take power through peaceful or violent means and turn their countries into beachheads for Soviet military and political influence. As Castro’s revolution in Cuba showed, a Soviet presence in the Caribbean would endanger U.S. sea lines of communication and

expose major gaps in the country's air defenses. It would be a launching point and logistical, financial, and training hub for other burning insurgencies in the region. A United States consumed with fighting communist regimes, and revolutionaries close to home would, in turn, find it far more difficult to concentrate its energies on checking Soviet influence in Europe, the Middle East, or Asia. It might even find its physical security endangered. It was this prospect that led Jeane Kirkpatrick to declare in the 1980s that Central America was "the most important region in the world."

The United States used the full panoply of tools—economic development programs, military coups, covert action, and direct military intervention—to fight the expansion of Soviet and Cuban influence. In some cases, it sought to promote democracy and economic reform as antidotes to revolution; in others, it partnered with conservative or downright reactionary Latin American regimes such as the Brazilian military dictatorship to bludgeon leftist movements. But by the 1980s, Washington was more decisively moving toward a strategy that employed democratization as a tool of strategic denial by establishing legitimate regimes that would be less vulnerable to challenges by Marxist insurgents.

Within another few years, the Cold War had ended, and the threat of alien ideologies and extra-hemispheric power faded more fully than ever before. They did not, however, disappear for good.

## **U.S. BLIND SPOTS AND THE LATIN AMERICA PARADOX**

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The post-Cold War era also revived another less salubrious tradition in U.S. policy—the Latin America paradox. That paradox resides in the fact that Latin America is perhaps the most critical region for the United States, in the sense that pervasive insecurity or danger could pose a more direct threat to America than an equivalent disorder in any other region. The Mexican Revolution, for example, elicited not one but two U.S. military interventions for just this reason. But Latin America has traditionally received considerably less foreign

policy attention than other regions because American influence there—while periodically challenged—has long been so preeminent.

This paradox is not new: It is one reason why, even during the Cold War, Washington went through periods of intermittent engagement with the region (the Eisenhower era) followed by periods of intense concern bordering on panic (the Kennedy years). This spasmodic history is now repeating itself: Over the last three decades, the U.S. tendency to treat Latin America as a tertiary concern has created a blind spot in U.S. strategy, making it harder to spot threats as they emerge.

Since the 1990s, this blind spot has been exacerbated by several other factors. First, although there have been serious security challenges in the region, most have taken the form of drug-related violence and out-of-control criminality, domestic challenges often viewed as law enforcement matters that lack an obvious geopolitical salience. Compare, for instance, the remarkably scant attention that ongoing state failure and rampant violence in Mexico have received over the last 15 years to the attention those phenomena would have received had they been caused by a communist insurgency with links to the Kremlin during the Cold War. "Law enforcement problems" are, by their nature, unsexy in the foreign policy world.

Second, the largely democratic nature—or perhaps the democratic patina—of the region has masked the severity of underlying challenges. Since the early 1990s, the vast majority of Latin American and Caribbean governments have been democracies in the sense that they have regular, contested elections. After Mexico's transition in 2000, Cuba was the only fully authoritarian regime in the hemisphere. Yet the existence of democratic procedures, consolidated in regional diplomatic accords such as the Inter-American Democratic Charter, has obscured concerning levels of political backsliding in countries from Central America to the Southern Cone, in addition to the emergence of violently repressive authoritarianism in Venezuela. It has also dulled the U.S. response to the creeping accumulation of extra-hemispheric influence in hemispheric affairs, in many cases through the same countries experiencing a rapid decline in the quality of democratic governance.

Finally, blind spots in Latin America have been exacerbated by the intensity and number of challenges the United States has confronted elsewhere. Prior to 9/11, the George W. Bush administration had signaled it would make relations with Latin America a top priority. That subsequently changed dramatically. The 9/11 attacks led to a heightened focus on Colombia because its guerrilla insurgency could be viewed through a counterterrorism prism. But in most cases, the “war on terror” diverted focus from the region. More recently, U.S. resources and attention have been consumed by a remarkably full foreign policy agenda—ongoing instability in the Middle East and Africa, a resurgent and revisionist Russia, periodic North Korean nuclear crises, the rise of China as a regional and increasingly global power, along with the pressing problems posed by climate change, pandemics, and other transnational challenges. Even as the situation has deteriorated in Latin America and the Caribbean, the region has had to compete with a remarkably crowded and challenging foreign policy panorama.

For much of the post-Cold War era, the near-term costs of inattention were limited because serious challenges to strategic denial remained far over the horizon. Yet the costs are rising as that horizon approaches, and a great-power rivalry once again intensifies. During the Trump years, U.S. officials such as Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and National Security Advisor John Bolton went so far as to restate the Monroe Doctrine in response to the growth of Chinese influence in the Western Hemisphere. Yet those warnings simply obscured the fact that America’s rivals are once again competing vigorously in its shared neighborhood. Their strategies are far better developed than the U.S. response.

## **CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES: CHINA**

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The primary threat to U.S. interests in Latin America comes from China because Beijing is the most significant global challenge for U.S. statecraft and its presence in the Western Hemisphere is multifaceted and widespread. Whereas Russia and Iran are malign actors whose capabilities remain limited, the People’s

Republic of China (PRC) has the resources, capacity, and—increasingly—the desire to shift the overall climate of hemispheric relations in decidedly adverse ways. As part of a strategy to increase its influence and options in the region while creating potential problems for the United States close to home, China engages governments and supports political models in the region that are hostile to U.S. interests while also courting traditional U.S. allies.

### *Economic Engagement*

The leading edge of China’s involvement in the Western Hemisphere is economic. For roughly a generation, Beijing has been leveraging its massive domestic market and vast financial resources to draw countries in the region closer and pull them away from Washington. China is now the region’s second-largest trade partner behind the United States. While the United States still enjoys a comfortable lead in this metric, its advantage has been eroding since the turn of the century. Between 2000 and 2018, the percentage of Latin American exports going to the United States dropped from 58 to 43 percent while it increased from 1.1 to 12.4 percent with respect to China. In fact, discounting Mexico, China already surpassed the United States as the largest destination country for the region’s exports. Importantly, China has linked itself closely with the largest economic power in the Western Hemisphere outside the United States—Brazil. Beijing has become Brazil’s most important commercial partner, doubling in size compared to the Brazil-U.S. commercial relationship.

Besides trade, finance is another powerful economic tool of the Chinese government. Many countries in the region see the Chinese as an attractive source of financing, as they do not set conditions on their loans, such as environmental impact standards or anti-corruption benchmarks. Between 2005 and 2020, China’s investment and construction contracts in the hemisphere (including the United States) totaled over US\$440 billion.

China also uses its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to project its economic power and improve its geopolitical position. Since its launch in 2013, BRI has become one of the most ambitious global development programs in history. According to Chinese officials, its rapid growth

in Latin America represents a “natural extension of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road.” Thus far, 19 countries in Latin America have signed on to BRI—including some of the most prosperous countries, such as Chile.

While BRI is attractive to recipient nations because it purports to address real infrastructure needs and other development shortfalls, the resulting Chinese economic leverage can become a means of extracting political concessions. For example, when Sri Lanka fell into arrears on the loans it had taken from China (loans other sources had declined due to risk), it was left with no other option than to turn over the Hambantota Port with thousands of acres of land surrounding it to the Chinese for 99 years. While thus far China has preferred to extend loan repayment timelines and offer new lines of credit, it could use the tactic employed in Sri Lanka to obtain strategic footholds in the Western Hemisphere, perhaps taking advantage of high debt burdens owed by small island nations in the Caribbean. Regionwide, the acute debt crisis that could be the legacy of COVID-19 may provide further openings for predatory Chinese finance throughout the region.

China also leverages its economic power in Latin America to erode what modest diplomatic support Taiwan still enjoys. Latin America and the Caribbean remain Taiwan’s largest regional block of recognition, with nine of the 15 countries that formally recognize Taiwan located in the region. However, China has started to reverse this bastion of Taiwanese diplomatic recognition. Countries that recognize Taiwan are denied access to the massive Chinese domestic market and Chinese investment and finance opportunities, including the BRI. Accordingly, through its economic power (and coercion), China has recently persuaded Panama (2017), the Dominican Republic (2018), and El Salvador (2018) to change their diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing.

#### *Technology Sharing*

Technology is another weapon of Chinese influence in Latin America. Huawei, the Chinese telecommunications company, is one of the market leaders of mobile devices in the hemisphere. Huawei is a top contender for the upcoming 5G auctions in Brazil, Chile, and Mexico. Although the company repeatedly

claims its independence from the Chinese state, it possesses an intentionally opaque corporate structure, and Chinese law requires that Chinese entities “support, assist and cooperate with state intelligence work.” Accordingly, the United States is attempting to persuade countries in the hemisphere to reconsider adopting Chinese equipment. U.S. officials have warned countries that adopting Huawei technology would make information sharing and collaboration with the United States difficult, if not impossible. U.S. lawmakers have also introduced legislation to restrict intelligence sharing with countries that use Huawei equipment in their 5G networks. Additionally, Washington has offered economic incentives to tip the scale away from Chinese companies. For example, the United States offered Brazil, an erstwhile member of the “Clean Network,” generous terms of finance to purchase 5G equipment from other (non-American) sources. Unfortunately, Brazil reversed its initial decision on Huawei under threat of losing access to Chinese COVID-19 vaccines, demonstrating the leverage China has built over the region’s largest economic power through its economic engagement.

#### *Military Collaboration*

Although Chinese engagement in Latin America is primarily economic, military collaboration is a growing aspect of Chinese activity in the region. Arms sales, military training, and technical military support allow the Chinese to build key strategic relationships with the armed forces of countries in the United States’ shared neighborhood. The Chinese have sold equipment to military and police forces from countries historically opposed to the United States—such as Venezuela and Cuba—as well as close U.S. partners like Colombia and Chile. The People’s Liberation Army (PLA) maintains a growing presence in the region through training and visits, which allows greater familiarity with countries’ operational frameworks and preparedness, as well as their strategic doctrine. China has also focused on ongoing training of the region’s military officers at PRC institutions of military education, which should familiarize and educate the upper brass in Chinese military doctrine. For instance, Venezuelan troops participated in China’s “Clear Sky” exercises in November 2017.

Analysts debate how seriously Chinese military engagement in Latin America challenges U.S. influence in the region. Yet, it bears noting that the PLA is also rapidly building new dual-use infrastructure and acquiring access to existing dual-use infrastructure that can enhance its future military capabilities in the region. For example, China has several dozen agreements to build or expand deep-water ports, as seen most recently in El Salvador's ratification of infrastructure deals that will see a water purification plant and a port built along the country's Pacific coast. China also constructed a space station operated by the PLA in Neuquén Province, Argentina—without Argentinian oversight. While the Chinese claim this installation is for peaceful space exploration, the base has obvious dual-use potential as a tool for espionage. Ominously, China does not permit the Argentines to come near the facility. Likewise, China's growing partnership with Panama could eventually result in preferential access to the Panama Canal, facilitating the movement of goods and people in and out of the hemisphere and inflicting a symbolic as well as a strategic blow to the United States. Two-thirds of all ships transiting to and from the United States pass through the Panama Canal.

The growing interconnectedness of the Chinese and regional armed forces, combined with the already extensive Chinese economic and political leverage in the region, could increasingly create strategic challenges for the United States. In the case of a military confrontation between the United States and China, hemispheric dependence on Chinese economic, political, and military support could encourage (or force) Latin American countries to assist the Chinese—or at least withhold support to the United States. The PLA could use its increased presence in the hemisphere to gather intelligence on the United States or instigate a crisis that requires a U.S. response. Chinese leverage over countries in Latin America may also result in countries allowing the PLA to use its ports and other installations. Fortunately, China has yet to establish permanent military bases in the hemisphere, reducing its ability to operate without significant assistance or perform important military exercises in the region. And the scenarios raised in this paragraph are projections of what *could* happen in the

future if current trends continue. But they bear exploring because Chinese leadership likely envisions a military presence in the Western Hemisphere as a long-term investment to cash out later, as needed.

#### *Soft Power*

China is doing more than just developing its economic and military presence in the region. The Chinese are also applying soft power capabilities to make their burgeoning influence seem less threatening. Vaccine diplomacy is China's latest soft power play in the hemisphere. Even though the Chinese government's attempt to cover up the outbreak of COVID-19 assisted the virus in its spread worldwide, China is now repairing (and even enhancing) its reputation by providing personal protective equipment and vaccines to Latin American countries. Even Brazil, whose president is rhetorically hostile to China, has been left with no other option than to acquire China's Sinovac vaccine, lest Brazil be without a vaccine. And although Chinese officials claim that Beijing "never seeks geopolitical goals and economic interests" in exchange for vaccines, this does not appear to be the case. Shortly after initial talks on the possibility of Brazil receiving vaccines from China, Brazil announced the rules for its 5G auction, which allowed Huawei to participate—reversing earlier comments by government officials that seemed to favor barring the Chinese company and committing Brazil to the U.S.' "Clean Network" initiative. China also slowed its vaccine delivery schedule after a diplomatic spat between the president's son, Federal Deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro, and Chinese Ambassador to Brazil, Yang Wanming. Both are blatant attempts to use "vaccine diplomacy" to leverage strategic goals, with Huawei leading the way on China's potential espionage against the region.

A longer-standing soft power tool of the Chinese government is state-controlled media outlets. *Xinhua*, *The People's Daily*, and *China Radio International* all provide daily Spanish and Portuguese reporting. Similarly, *China Central Television* has a free, online 24-hour channel in Spanish, *CGTN en Español*. This latter station often attracts top commentators, including many U.S. think tank scholars. The magazine *China Today* also operates multiple websites in Spanish and even sells print copies in certain countries. These outlets have a robust social

media presence in Spanish, including on websites China bans in its own country. Local news agencies often republish or cite these Chinese sources—multiplying the reach of their messages and amplifying their shares through social media algorithms.

#### *Authoritarian Export*

Linking many of these initiatives is a final—and critical—aspect of China's engagement in Latin America: efforts to export its authoritarian model and repressive technology. Authoritarian governments in the hemisphere—most notably Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba—see China's combination of semi-market economy and repressive government control as a model to be emulated. The Chinese Communist Party actively aids these countries in this endeavor, thereby thwarting domestic efforts of political transition and regime change.

For example, Chinese telecommunications company ZTE has helped Nicolás Maduro regime develop a national identification card inspired by China's social credit system. This card, named "*carnet de la patria*" ("fatherland card"), tracks and stores its owner's information, such as family relations, social media presence, membership in a political party, and whether they have voted. This card is increasingly required for people to receive public benefits, including medicine, pensions, food, and subsidized fuel—and most recently, the ability to receive a coronavirus vaccine. (Of course, distributing scarce vaccines in Venezuela according to who possesses a "fatherland card" contravenes all epidemiological advice.) There are concerns that the Maduro regime uses these cards to reward loyalty and punish the opposition.

Chinese surveillance technology, including its "smart city" technology, has also proliferated to a number of illiberal governments or backsliding democracies in the region. For instance, under Rafael Correa in Ecuador, China extended loans to build "smart city" technology, ostensibly aimed at curtailing street crime. However, surveillance footage was sent to the country's feared domestic intelligence agency, including footage that compromised opposition political parties. While such potential is concerning for the region's democratic future, so long as Latin America and the Caribbean continues to

represent an outsized portion of global crime—that is, 8% of the world's population but one-third of global homicides—there are likely to be sizeable markets for Chinese surveillance equipment.

A hemisphere where China is increasingly influential will also be a hemisphere in which autocracy is strengthened as democracy recedes and the tenets of the Inter-American Democratic Charter fade into irrelevance. Likewise, backsliding democracies, such as Nayib Bukele's El Salvador, provide a strategic opening for China to assert itself in countries where U.S. influence usually has been strong. This is evidenced by the recent ratification of an "unconditional" infrastructure deal after the United States criticized the government for using its new parliamentary majority to remove five justices from its high court, as well as the independent attorney general.

## **CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES: RUSSIA**

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Russian power is more limited and less multidimensional than China's: Moscow occasionally undermines U.S. interests in select areas rather than consistently and across-the-board. Nonetheless, since the early 2000s, Russia has publicly expressed interest in expanding its presence in the region. Moscow's 2016 *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* proclaims: "Russia remains committed to the comprehensive strengthening of relations with the Latin American and Caribbean States taking into account the growing role of this region in global affairs."

Most evidence suggests that Russia views its presence in Latin America primarily as a modest rejoinder to U.S. influence in Russia's near abroad—a way of gaining strategic leverage on the United States and diverting its geopolitical energies. Contrary to China's more robust efforts, however, Russia has circumscribed its activity and sought to expand its influence in the Western Hemisphere primarily with countries that have been historically opposed to the United States with regimes of an illiberal nature. (Unlike China, Russia has little to offer healthier, more politically stable and liberal

states.) Russia has been actively involved with the states in the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA)—most notably Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua.

#### *Military Assistance*

Perhaps the primary way Russia supports Latin America's illiberal regimes is with military assistance through arms sales, technical support, and military training and visits. Nicaragua serves as a prominent example. Russia provides practically all of Nicaragua's armaments, many of which became key instruments of terror in Nicaragua's 2018 uprising and President Daniel Ortega's brutal suppression of it. (For example, Dragunov sniper rifles sold to the Nicaraguan Army ended up in the hands of well-trained paramilitary groups that used them to fire indiscriminately at protestors.) In 2014, the Russian military opened a training facility in Nicaragua, where numerous Russian military personnel are stationed—purportedly for joint military exercises and anti-trafficking efforts, but possibly to aid Ortega's efforts to suppress political opposition. A year later, Nicaragua permitted Russian warships access to Nicaraguan ports, and, in 2017, Nicaragua agreed to allow Russia to build a Global Navigation Satellite System station, conveniently stationed a short distance from the U.S. Embassy in Managua, that is likely used for intelligence gathering.

Russian military partnerships in the Western Hemisphere also allow Moscow to retaliate against U.S. involvement in Eastern Europe and perceived U.S. participation in so-called "color revolutions" on Russia's periphery. For example, following the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and increased NATO presence in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea, Russia sent nuclear-capable bombers to Venezuela for training exercises and a warship to visit ports in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba. No doubt, the Russians were mindful of former President Donald J. Trump's various musings about the possibility of a naval blockade against Maduro's Venezuela. After the United States withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, Russia openly discussed the possibility of installing cruise missiles on Venezuela's Caribbean coast. Although Russia's ability to follow through on such statements is limited, Moscow presumably uses these maneuvers (and rhetorical flourishes) to

demonstrate that it, too, can project power in its competitor's traditional sphere of influence.

Besides traditional military channels, Russia employs private military contractors to protect vulnerable Latin American regimes. For example, there are allegations that the Russian government sent the Wagner Group, an elite group of private military contractors with experience in Syria and Ukraine, to protect Maduro during Juan Guaidó's effort to force him from power. Such efforts serve to position Russia as a major player in any resolution of Venezuela's multifaceted crisis and constrain U.S. freedom of action by increasing the likelihood that any effort to remove the Maduro government would lead to a diplomatic confrontation with Moscow.

#### *Disinformation & Propaganda*

Disinformation and propaganda are also powerful and fine-tuned Russian tools. They allow Russia to manipulate public opinion and spread anti-western sentiment throughout the region—especially toward the United States. Russian state-owned news outlets have expanded their reach in Latin America with Spanish television and news networks such as *Russia Today en Español* and *Sputnik Mundo*. According to its website, *Russia Today en Español* reaches 18 million people a week in 10 different Latin American countries and has more than 3 billion total views on its YouTube channel. As with Chinese outlets, regional news organizations often republish many of these stories.

Russia pushes a familiar leitmotiv in the region: The need for a new multipolar world order, independent of the "imperialist" control of the United States. For example, Russian outlets fabricate stories about U.S. intentions to increase its military presence in the region. By playing off fears of U.S. interventions in Latin America, Russia endeavors to reduce the U.S. sale of military equipment to countries throughout the hemisphere.

Official media platforms are not the only channels Russia uses to advance its narrative and preferred policies. During multiple rounds of unrest across South America in late 2019, there was a marked increase in the number of Twitter accounts linked to Russia spreading destabilizing messages, such as encouraging violent protests

in Chile and Colombia. There are also reports that Russia used similar tactics to influence presidential elections in Brazil and Mexico.

#### *Financial Support and Sanctions Relief*

In the economic realm, Russian trade with the hemisphere is not substantial. Nevertheless, Russia plays a significant role providing governments with financial support and helping them circumvent sanctions. Like China, Russia provides loans to friendly regimes with few strings attached and is flexible with repayment, including payment-in-kind (as it does with Venezuelan crude). In 2015, Russia extended a US\$1.5 billion loan to Cuba (the largest since the fall of the Soviet Union) with a generous interest rate to build large power plants on the island. A mere year earlier, Russia excused 90 percent of Cuba's Soviet-era debt totaling over US\$30 billion.

Russian assistance with sanctions evasion is critical for the survival of certain countries in the hemisphere, notably Venezuela. For example, after the United States imposed sanctions on Venezuela's state-owned oil company, *Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA)*, Russia's state-owned oil company, *Rosneft*, continued to do business with PDVSA. (The United States later designated *Rosneft Trading* and *TNK Trading*, the Swiss-based Russian subsidiaries in question in these endeavors, for sanctions.) Russia also appears to have been quietly involved with Venezuela's effort to design a national cryptocurrency, the *petro*, to help the Maduro regime avoid international sanctions. While the *petro* has been unsuccessful due to bureaucratic incompetency and lack of domestic and international enthusiasm, Russia will continue to aid its beleaguered ally in the effort to evade U.S. economic leverage.

#### *Diplomatic Legitimacy*

Russia also provides ALBA with diplomatic legitimacy and cover on the world stage. Putin and other high-level Russian officials frequently visit the Western Hemisphere to maintain contact with friendly regimes in the region. Between 2000 and 2017, 43 high-level Russian visits to Latin America took place—the majority to Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua. Additionally, Russia's permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) gives it the ability to block the international community's efforts to

hold governments in the region accountable for human rights violations or electoral fraud. Russia-led opposition, for example, has consistently blocked efforts by the United States and like-minded partners at the UNSC to restore democracy in Venezuela or criticize Ortega's human rights violations.

Diplomatic support flows both ways. By providing diplomatic cover for authoritarian governments in the hemisphere, Russia can obtain support for its revisionist policies closer to home. In 2014, numerous Latin American countries either voted against or abstained from a UN resolution that condemned Russia for its invasion of Crimea. Venezuela and Nicaragua were two of the few countries to support Russia and recognize Georgian breakaway regions following the Russo-Georgian War in 2008. Likewise, Bolivia, Cuba, and Nicaragua are among the few countries that recognize Russia's claim to Crimea.

#### *Soft Power*

Lastly, Russia is using vaccine distribution to expand its soft power capabilities in the hemisphere. Several Latin American countries have secured Russia's *Sputnik V* vaccine, which has an efficacy rate topping 90 percent. Bolivia, for example, procured Russian vaccines after citing difficulties and delays associated with acquiring Western alternatives, a common complaint from governments in the region. Following vaccine agreements between Bolivia and Russia, leaders of both countries discussed the possibility of increasing economic partnership between them in the natural gas, nuclear energy, and lithium mining sectors. Another country that has received the Russian vaccine is Venezuela. While the actual number of cases and deaths associated with COVID-19 in the country is unknown (with government reports almost certainly undercounting and obfuscating the figures), it is clear that Venezuela's health care system is in a precarious position. Russian vaccine diplomacy has further solidified Russia's place as one of Maduro's most important allies. Argentina is another country that has signed contracts for significant amounts of the *Sputnik V* vaccine.

## CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES: IRAN

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Iran is another serious yet less prominent extra-hemispheric player in Latin America. While it does not have China's and Russia's economic or military capabilities, it wields influence through friendly relations with several governments in the region and connections with myriad non-state actors. Occasionally, these relations have proven capable of frustrating U.S. interests and, leveraging its network of non-state actors, threatening regional allies and U.S. national security with its participation in terrorism and illicit markets.

Like Russia, most of Iran's hemispheric allies are governments with strong anti-U.S. sentiment, especially ALBA members. Venezuela is Iran's closest partner in the region. As founding members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), their partnership stretches back more than fifty years. The relationship drew closer under President Hugo Chávez, who consolidated a block of ideological allies to oppose the United States, allowing the Iranians to build connections with other Latin American governments (with Chávez's blessing). More recently, the two countries have relied on each other to resist international pressure, especially as pressure from the United States has challenged their hold on power. Accordingly, Caracas and Tehran have supplied one another with the resources they desperately need. Venezuela provides hard currency in the form of gold bars to the cash-strapped Iranians in exchange for refined oil and food. Maduro has also shown interest in purchasing Iranian weapons as hostilities with the United States and neighboring Colombia intensify.

Another troubling trend is Iran's connection to non-state actors and proxy groups that operate throughout the region, especially Hizballah, which is deeply embedded with the illicit economy, including drug trafficking and money laundering. The group has been particularly successful in these endeavors in the Western Hemisphere, using Lebanese and Syrian diaspora communities to expand its reach and establish a connection with regional criminal organizations and government officials. Hezbollah has collaborated with drug trafficking

networks in South America and Mexico and made millions of dollars trafficking drugs into the United States. Some of these earnings have been used to fund terrorism and even purchase weapons for Middle Eastern insurgents to employ against U.S. soldiers.

Iran-backed non-state actors have even managed to work with prominent government leaders in Venezuela. There are credible allegations that Tareck El Aissami, Venezuela's former vice president and current minister of industry and national production, was directly involved in providing fraudulent Venezuelan documents for Hezbollah members and sympathizers while in charge of the country's immigration office. Not only did this action permit Hezbollah members access to Venezuela, but it also provided them with passports they could leverage to travel visa-free throughout much of the region. The Venezuelan embassy in Iraq even sold such documents out of its official office. Furthermore, Adel El Zabayar, a former member of the Venezuelan National Assembly who worked closely with Maduro and other high-ranking Venezuelan officials, was charged in the United States for narco-terrorism involving the Cartel de Los Soles, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Hezbollah, and Hamas. El Zabayar was involved with trafficking cocaine into the United States and connecting the Cartel de Los Soles with Hezbollah and Hamas to recruit terrorists to carry out attacks against the United States.

Iran lacks the power to mount a major strategic challenge to U.S. influence in the Western Hemisphere. It can, however, increase instability and strengthen actors that threaten U.S. and broader regional interests.

## TIPPING POINTS

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While concerning, today's extra-hemispheric challenges to U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere have not yet risen to the level of the Cold War or even the pre-World War II era. Yet, it is undeniable that the region is becoming a field of intensifying geopolitical contestation and that certain challenges—particularly the one posed by China—are likely to grow more serious over time, especially if left neglected.

So far, the United States has monitored these developments with concern, occasionally voicing its concerns publicly. But policy responses have been episodic and anemic at best. Part of this problem reflects the same resource limitations that have often hobbled U.S. policy toward Latin America outside times of acute crisis. But it also reflects the fact that the U.S. government has placed a lower premium on thinking strategically about the region since the end of the Cold War, no doubt owing to the favorable balance of power after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Looking ahead, the United States will need to identify developments that would begin seriously challenging its strategic denial policy or other critical U.S. interests in the region. That is the intellectual prerequisite to formulating an effective response—and to have any chance to make a case for the additional resources needed to counter rivals' influence.

In our view, there are at least five scenarios that are: (a) eminently plausible, given the current trajectory of great-power rivals' actions in the Western Hemisphere, and would (b) rise to the level of a more serious geopolitical challenge—and in some cases, a strategic threat.

**First, the balance of security influence in the region tips away from Washington as a growing number of countries in the Western Hemisphere seek military assistance from and security cooperation with great-power rivals instead of the United States.** Extra-hemispheric actors are increasingly the go-to source for military equipment and assistance for several countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as military training in both doctrine and strategy. This dynamic allows rivals to expand relations with countries close (geographically and ideologically) to the United States and shield friendly authoritarian regimes from domestic and U.S. pressure. Military assistance also increases the interoperability of weapons systems between great-power rivals and countries in the region. Over time, this trend could not only hamstring the pursuit of U.S. strategic goals but also provide strategic rivals a readymade excuse for a greater presence in our shared neighborhood. (Russia has justified its boots-on-the-ground presence in Venezuela, for instance, based on the need to service Russian weapons systems, per the contracts established by the original arms sales.)

Closer ties between the Chinese and Russian armed forces and countries in the hemisphere might allow rivals to obtain valuable operational knowledge and training and assess the preparedness of regional armed forces that could be used during a potential conflict with the United States (or less likely, a partner country in the region). Furthermore, it may lead the region's armed forces—which have historically wielded significant political influence in their respective countries—to see Beijing and Moscow in a more favorable light. Lastly, the history of U.S.-led military training in the region could permit rivals to glean valuable information about U.S. military doctrine and command.

**Second, a significant number of countries in the Western Hemisphere aspire to political and economic models that do not align with U.S. interests and values and even contravene the Inter-American Democratic Charter.** Adopting China's economic and political model, i.e., a semi-market economy with near absolute state social control, could become an attractive option for countries facing poverty and social unrest. Both have increased in recent years, most recently owing to a regional economy buffeted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The (spurious) belief that China can put down domestic opposition and is bound to eclipse the United States economically may lend some modicum of credibility to the idea of adopting such a system. In the abstract, some governments may be attracted to the concept of a government able to concentrate and centralize power to "do big things" of a national character, especially in a region that has long suffered from weak institutions shot through with corruption. Here, too, the feeble nature of the region's state institutions, exposed during the current pandemic, may increase the attractiveness of rivals' political models. If a growing number of countries follow this path, it could lead to rapid democratic backsliding and economic policies unfavorable to U.S. interests and the many trade deals the United States maintains with the region. It could also accelerate adverse trends with respect to security relationships and military-to-military ties.

**Third, regional indebtedness to extra-hemispheric rivals restricts freedom of action for countries in the Western Hemisphere and their ability or willingness to**

**partner meaningfully with the United States.**

The growing economic dependency of countries in the hemisphere on great-power rivals for financing, especially China, may encourage (or force) them to side with extra-hemispheric actors during a potential conflict with the United States, or to at least withhold their support for U.S. strategic interests. Debt traps through predatory lending open the possibility that geopolitical rivals can extract concessions from countries in the hemisphere that are not in their (or the United States') best interest. The significant bind in which a country such as Ecuador currently finds itself illustrates what could become a reality on a region-wide scale.

**Fourth, Western Hemisphere countries accept basing agreements, naval ports, joint airstrips, intelligence outposts, and other critical, potential dual-use infrastructure from great-power rivals.**

While the presence of Chinese and Russian military personnel and infrastructure projects in the hemisphere is growing, it is still limited in important ways. A more permanent, widespread, and extensive presence in close proximity to U.S. shores would give these rivals a strategic perch from which to challenge U.S. security and economic interests. The United States must be particularly attentive to dual-use technology or facilities already present in the region under the guise of peaceful objectives, especially some of the infrastructure contracts China has secured in the region. The aforementioned Chinese space station in Neuquén province, in southern Argentina, is a prime example. In the future, however, such dual-use assets might include (seemingly benign) dams, ports, waterways, highways, and bridges. Great-power rivals may seek to leverage these dual-use assets by converting them into military advantages. For now, this is a scenario that applies mainly to China and its terms of engagement in the Western Hemisphere, with Russia and Iran posing lesser challenges.

**Fifth, extra-hemispheric rivals develop direct and operational ties with threatening non-state actors.**

Hostile non-state actors, including transnational criminal organizations or designated terrorist groups such as Colombia's FARC and National Liberation Army, threaten the national security of close regional allies. Extra-hemispheric actors may seek to

establish direct ties to such groups by providing them with material support or fraudulent documentation so they can take actions that weaken or distract U.S. capabilities and resolve. The resources of major state rivals, combined with non-state actors' asymmetric capabilities, could advance their respective objectives in the region. To an extent, this has been visible with Iran's use and support of Hizballah cells in Venezuela and the "Tri-Border Area" of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. However, it would be far more troubling if China or Russia displayed an interest and developed an ability to play a similar role in the region, as there are some scattered indications that Moscow may indeed be seeking to do.

## **PRINCIPLES FOR A U.S. RESPONSE**

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Geopolitics are back in Latin America, with great-power rivals seeking to use the Western Hemisphere for strategic leverage against the United States. The United States will need a long-term, strategic response. It appears the region will receive greater relative priority in U.S. policy: The Biden administration implicitly ranked the Western Hemisphere above the Middle East in its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance. Nonetheless, short of a major crisis, there is little likelihood that the level of resources the region receives will increase dramatically in the near term. With this in mind, we offer a few basic principles for a strategic response to the deterioration of American influence in the region that is mindful of resource constraints and the limits of what Washington can achieve within them.

**First, track extra-hemispheric influence more systematically.**

The U.S. government will need a more complete cataloging of great-power activity and presence in its shared neighborhood, as one recent bill before the U.S. Congress would require. Just as important will be establishing qualitative and quantitative metrics to monitor and evaluate the presence of its geopolitical rivals in the Western Hemisphere. Lacking such metrics, policymaking will continue to be conducted on an ad-hoc basis. Given the multidimensional nature of great power competition illuminated

in this report, developing such measurements is not a straightforward endeavor. However, proximity and threat level (regarding both military and economic challenges to the United States) should be guiding principles in this effort to establish thresholds for greater action. In particular, the United States would be wise to systematically monitor the transfer of dual-use infrastructure and technology to the region and determine at what point such transfers would cross a critical threshold, presenting a point of significant strategic leverage against core U.S. interests.

**Second, track vulnerabilities as well as strengths.** The expansion of Chinese, Russian, and Iranian influence in Latin America and the Caribbean has not always been a popular phenomenon. Industries and enterprises have been hurt by economic competition, and support for corrupt and illiberal regimes has tarnished the reputation of China, Russia, and Iran with some local populations. Heavy-handed vaccine diplomacy (with substandard quality vaccines and defective personal protective equipment to boot) could create further vulnerabilities for China in particular (and Russia, to a lesser extent). Studying which aspects of these countries' regional presence create diplomatic or soft-power vulnerabilities is a starting point for developing a more competitive response.

**Third, engage on security issues of greatest concern to local governments and peoples.** The United States must present itself as the preferred partner to help countries in the Western Hemisphere address their security concerns. In this regard, Washington has had some success in the past, with wide-ranging security assistance programs such as Plan Colombia and the U.S.-Mexico Mérida Initiative. In other cases, however, U.S. policy initiatives have focused on issues—such as curbing migration—of comparatively lower concern to regional partners. To compete effectively, the United States must also prioritize the preferred security challenges of its partners—and understand that those challenges are quickly shifting. The burgeoning threat represented by China's highly subsidized illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing activities in sensitive ecological waters off the Pacific Coast of South America is but one example of the rapidly evolving nature of the region's security

environment. The rise of disinformation and cybersecurity vulnerabilities throughout the region are other examples.

**Fourth, counter the authoritarian playbook.** While the presence of great-power rivals has often exacerbated political instability and furthered democratic backsliding in Latin America and the Caribbean, the truth is that preexisting political tensions, endemic corruption, and a poor record of governance in many countries throughout the region leave them vulnerable to Chinese, Russian, and Iranian influence. In the domestic context, there is a well-worn playbook that leads to authoritarianism, which includes electoral reengineering, suffocation of civil society and corruption of the media's independence, and the weakening of political opposition and political institutions, capped off by the politicization of judiciaries, military, and police forces. Sometimes leaders following the authoritarian playbook even consolidate their gains by amending or rewriting their country's constitution. Fortunately, the tools inherent in the Inter-American Democratic Charter can help sound a powerful warning against democratic backsliding and the authoritarian playbook. Maintaining the largely democratic nature of the region and focusing on improving the quality of governance and political institutions can reduce openings for the authoritarian playbook and limit opportunities for great-power rivals to use backsliding democracies and nascent autocracies as convenient entry points into the hemisphere. Inevitably, however, these decisions will present difficult tradeoffs for U.S. policymakers, as pushing countries too hard on the quality of their democracy and governance could also open the door to Chinese and Russian influence.

**Fifth, do not make it all about China.** There is no question that U.S. interest in Latin America and the Caribbean rises when perceptions of extra-hemispheric threats become more acute. But just as the United States sometimes misfired during the early Cold War by focusing excessively on the dangers of communism as opposed to aspirations for local political and economic progress, it is a mistake to convey the impression that Washington cares about the Western Hemisphere *only* because of Chinese, Russian, and Iranian threats. Similarly, there are

times when public critiques of Chinese, Russian, and Iranian policies by U.S. officials are entirely warranted, and Washington—as part of a larger turn to strategic competition—will need a more robust, focused bureaucratic capability in this area. Another lesson of the Cold War is that those critiques are often more effective when delivered by friendly local actors rather than the United States itself. For example, if the United States points out that Chinese COVID-19 vaccines don't work very well, it comes off as crass geopolitical point-scoring. If local actors in Chile or elsewhere make this argument, it is more likely to find a receptive audience.

**Sixth, emphasize cost-effective means of competition.** When resources are relatively scarce, the United States will need to find ways to increase the bang it receives for each buck. There are a variety of possibilities. International Military Education and Training initiatives are an inexpensive means of building relationships with the next generation of Latin American military leaders—connections that the United States is in growing danger of not having in the future. Visits by high-level U.S. officials to countries that have not historically received much attention from the United States can also play an outsized role in warding off rival influence. Showing up does matter: Taiwan, for example, has used this sort of approach to maintain its diplomatic toehold in the region.

**Seventh, leverage non-governmental advantages.** Great-power competition encompasses more than just state action. This is where the United States can leverage asymmetric advantages. The United States has deep cultural, political, and historical ties with its southern neighbors, exemplified by the many immigrants and diaspora groups in the United States who hail from the region. These immigrants and their descendants have a deep sense of patriotism that rivals (and often surpasses) native-born U.S. citizens. Facilitating people-to-people diplomacy—by relaxing travel restrictions, expanding trade links, encouraging religious and university exchange initiatives, or pursuing professional development programs through public-private partnerships—can be a cost-efficient way for the United States to strengthen its hemispheric relationships and limit the influence of its great-power rivals.

**Eighth, understand that you ultimately**

**get what you pay for.** Most analyses of deteriorating U.S. influence in Latin America and the Caribbean focus on the resource-poor approach Washington has taken in the region over the past 30 years and calls for a more holistic, better-supported strategy. We support this basic recommendation.

Most countries in Latin America and the Caribbean still see the United States as a preferred partner on many issues of concern and regret there are not more opportunities to engage with Washington on these issues. Defending U.S. interests in the region will indeed require a whole-of-government effort to provide countries in Latin America and the Caribbean with alternatives to economic, diplomatic, and military reliance on extra-hemispheric rivals in investment, 5G telecommunications, strengthening governance, pushing for greater transparency (in development and other projects), and highlighting the predatory aspects of China's advance, while not appearing to block countries from taking advantage of the trade and investment resources Beijing can offer. In the coming years, the United States will likely need to pursue competition on a strictly limited budget. But if it does not make greater preventive investments in the region now, it may once again experience the historical pattern of having to make far greater compensatory investments once key tipping points have been reached and emerging strategic challenges have become impossible to ignore.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### HAL BRANDS

Is a Henry A. Kissinger Distinguished Professor of Global Affairs at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). He is the author or editor of several books, including *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (2016), *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (2014), *Latin America's Cold War* (2010), *From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World* (2008), *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft* (co-edited with Jeremi Suri, 2015), and *The Last Card: Inside George W. Bush's Decision to Surge in Iraq* (co-edited with Jeffrey Engel, Timothy Sayle, and William Inboden, 2019). His newest books are *The Lessons of Tragedy: Statecraft and World Order*, co-authored with Charles Edel, and *COVID-19 and World Order*, co-edited with Francis Gavin.

He served as Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense for Strategic Planning from 2015 to 2016. He has also served as lead writer for the Commission on the National Defense Strategy for the United States, and consulted with a range of government offices and agencies in the intelligence and national security communities. He was a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow from 2015 to 2016.

He received his BA from Stanford University (2005) and his PhD from Yale University (2009). He previously worked as an assistant and associate professor at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, and as a researcher at the Institute for Defense Analyses.



### RYAN C. BERG

Is senior fellow in the Americas Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He is also an adjunct professor at the Catholic University of America and visiting research fellow at the University of Oxford's Changing Character of War Programme. His research focuses on U.S.-Latin America relations, authoritarian regimes, armed conflict, strategic competition, and trade and development issues. He also studies Latin America's criminal groups and the region's governance and security challenges. Previously, Dr. Berg was a research fellow at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), where he helped lead its Latin America Studies Program. Dr. Berg has served as a research consultant to the World Bank, a Fulbright scholar in Brazil, and a visiting doctoral fellow at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. He has lived and worked in Peru and Brazil and is an expert member of the Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime and the Urban Violence Research Network.

Dr. Berg has been published in a variety of peer-reviewed academic and policy-oriented journals, including *The Lancet*, *Migration and Development*, the *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, and the *Georgetown Security Studies Review*. In the popular press, his articles have appeared in *CNN.com*, *Foreign Policy*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, *The Hill*, *World Politics Review*, the *National Interest*, and *RealClearWorld*, among other outlets. He has appeared on *Voice of America* and *National Public Radio* and has testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Dr. Berg obtained a Ph.D. and an M.Phil. in political science and an M.Sc. in global governance and diplomacy from the University of Oxford, where he was a Senior Hulme fellow. Earlier, he obtained a B.A. in government and theology from Georgetown University. He is fluent in Spanish and Portuguese and has a working knowledge of French and Slovenian.

