

Biden's Latin America policy will be constrained more by weak regional leadership than by Florida's electoral politics



Biden's experience and appointments signal an interest in Latin America, but there are few leaders in the region with whom he can advance his policy goals or multilateral approach, writes [Tom Long](#) (University of Warwick).

It is something of a cliché that there can be no “US policy toward Latin America” because there is no single “Latin America”. The region is too large and too diverse to be addressed by a single policy. Normally, this refrain is a helpful reminder that US policy should be attentive to variation in the region. But when the foreign policy team of the newly inaugurated President Joseph R. Biden looks to Latin America and sees that there is no “[Latin America there](#)”, this will reflect the central problem they face: a tremendous deficit of regional leadership.



Any new Biden initiative in Latin America will come up against a massive deficit of leadership in the region (public domain)

Outgoing president Donald Trump's [prejudices](#) and [obsessions about Latin America](#) – the wall, tariff threats, sanctions, and allusions to invading Venezuela – have generated high [expectations for a volte-face](#) from Biden's Latin America policy. Washington establishment optimists cite Biden's [decades of experience](#) and deep relationships in Latin America as a boon to cooperation. Conversely, political pessimists suggest that Democrats' poor showing in South Florida will [frustrate agendas](#) to reshape relations with Cuba and Venezuela. Both factors will matter, but it is the [yawning deficit of regional leadership](#) that will play the greater role in shaping Biden's relations with Latin America, especially during the administration's first year.

Joe Biden in Latin America

Biden has indeed amassed an impressive range of experience in US-Latin American relations since his arrival in Washington in 1972. The salutary refrain that there can be no US policy toward Latin America seems to have gained traction in US policy circles with the Linowitz Commission, whose [1976 report](#) shaped the policy priorities of the [incoming Jimmy Carter](#) administration regarding the Panama Canal and human rights violations in South American military dictatorships. These issues were some of Biden's first policy battles over Latin America in the Senate, where he supported Carter's efforts.



Joe Biden, pictured here in 2016 with the then President of Colombia Juan Manuel Santos, has a long history of engagement with Colombia, Mexico, and Central America in particular (public domain)

In more recent decades, Colombian policymakers saw [Biden as a sympathetic Democratic interlocutor](#), key to advancing Plan Colombia in the Senate – and Biden called for the Senate to “[act quickly](#)” to advance aid. As vice president, [Biden led US engagement with Central America](#) after the first wave of unaccompanied, undocumented minors reached the US-Mexican border. He played a significant role in [relations with Mexico](#), trying to emphasise economic cooperation to balance out the securitisation of the bilateral relationship. Biden's general approach also suggests a return to calmer rhetoric and [more multilateral practices](#) that typically find favour in [Latin American diplomatic circles](#).

Biden's Latin America policy and Florida's electoral politics

On the other side of the ledger, [Biden's loss in Florida](#) – and the election of some hardline South Florida Republicans to Congress – might suggest that painting Democrats as weak on Cuba and Venezuela worked as an [electoral ploy](#) in 2020 (even if [the evidence is perhaps more mixed](#)).

The fear of looking “soft on Cuba” has often led Democratic presidents to adopt tougher and often counterproductive approaches to their relations with Cuba (and now Venezuela). That was the case under the [Clinton administration](#), particularly with its toughening of the embargo under the Helms-Burton Act of 1996.

Those expecting a quick return to Obama's rapprochement with Havana, or a more moderate approach to Venezuela, are likely to be disappointed, the argument goes, because the electoral cost is too steep. Now, just after the waning Trump administration absurdly [returned Cuba to state sponsors of terrorism list](#), new hurdles have appeared. For one, hardliner Robert Menendez (D-NJ) presides over the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, raising the stakes for loosening Cuba sanctions.

But the regional leadership gap will shape Biden's Latin American policy more than his party's weak electoral performance in South Florida. Worse, a lack of Latin American leadership leaves more space for US domestic politics, including hardline voices in Miami, to shape US policy. Biden's experience and some of his foreign policy appointments signal an interest in Latin America, but there are few conducive interlocutors with whom Biden can advance his preferred policy goals or renewed multilateral approach.

The history of regional leadership in Latin America

Regional leadership – the capacity and willingness of Latin American states to work together to address Latin American problems – is sometimes perceived as a threat to US hemispheric hegemony. Certainly, the George W. Bush administration understood Venezuelan president [Hugo Chávez's regional ambitions](#) as a challenge. But it makes more sense to see Latin American leadership as a prerequisite for the policy approach that the Biden administration should advance. After four years of [Trump's transactionalism](#), Biden's Latin America approach must be more cooperative, more multilateral, more focused on jointly managing transnational problems: [climate change](#), migration crises, and the [pandemic and recovery](#).



Some regional leaderships, not least that of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez (above left, with Argentina's Nestor Kirchner and Brazil's Lula da Silva), have been taken as a challenge to US hegemony ([Ricardo Stuckert/Agencia Brasil, CC BY 3.0 BR](#))

Looking to history, better US policy has usually emerged from a combination of favourable domestic conditions in the United States and pressure from effective Latin American leadership. Latin American leaders [steered the United States](#) away from gunboat diplomacy in the early twentieth century and towards the Good Neighbor Policy. Creative Brazilian and Colombian leadership [redeployed Cold War rhetoric](#) to encourage attention to development in the late 1950s, leading to the creation of the Inter-American Development Bank under Dwight Eisenhower and the Alliance for Progress under John Kennedy. In an example that shaped Biden's early views, pressure from Panama and a host of Latin American governments put the [Canal treaties on the US agenda](#). More recently, Latin Americans' [united front](#) and astute use of hemispheric summits made relations with Cuba a problem that Barack Obama had to solve.

In each of these cases, there were political openings in the United States, just as the radical shift from Trump to Biden creates an opening for policy change. Sometimes these emerged from clear policy failures, such as the expensive, recurring interventions of the early 20th century or the counterproductive embargo on Cuba in the early 21st century. At other points, they emerged from moments of crisis, such as when US fears of the Cuban revolution created opportunities for a reevaluation of staid policy. Within these moments of possibility, Latin American leadership advocated real policy change.

Regional leadership in Latin America today

Who in Latin America will lead the advocacy for such changes today? As a result of this [leadership deficit](#), regional institutions like UNASUR and CELAC have collapsed or been [consumed by division](#). In September 2020, the region could not unite to defend what former Colombian president [Juan Manuel Santos](#) recently called, “the only important position we hold in Washington”, the presidency of the Inter-American Development Bank. The post went to a US citizen and former Trump official, Mauricio Claver-Carone, rupturing a sixty-year tradition of Latin American leadership.



“Mexico’s López Obrador and Brazil’s Bolsonaro are sceptical of multilateral commitments and prioritise a traditional idea of sovereignty” (combination of [Eneas de Troya](#) and [Fábio Rodrigues Pozzebom](#)/Agência Brasil, both [CC BY 2.0](#), by Asa Cusack, [CC BY 2.0](#))

The two largest Latin American countries, [Brazil](#) and [Mexico](#), evince little interest in regional projects. Both President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico are sceptical of multilateral commitments and prioritise traditional conceptualisations of sovereignty. The two were among the last world leaders to recognise Biden’s victory, tolerated Trump’s claims of fraud, and criticised Facebook’s and Twitter’s decisions to [block Trump](#) after the capitol riots.

Elsewhere, [Chile](#) is consumed by its constitutional process, [Peru](#) by recurring impeachments, and [Venezuela](#) by its collapse. Colombia – once a friendly bridge to Washington – has prioritised bilateral relations with Washington, with the exception of regional efforts aimed at further isolating the government of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela. [Colombia’s actions](#) on Cuba and Venezuela suggest it may find common cause with hardline legislators including Menendez and Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL), instead of looking for friends in the State Department and White House. Left-leaning governments in Argentina and Bolivia may be relieved by Trump’s exit – and indeed provide Biden with an opportunity for progressive partnerships – but they have only scattered sympathy in the region and few friends in Washington.

The early days of Biden's engagement with Latin America

Biden is taking office with the fullest of proverbial full plates. Attention to relations with Latin America will largely be a function of immediate [domestic politics](#). Better US policies on migration, public health, and economic recovery are all meaningful for Latin America, and particularly for Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean. But the [lack of regional leadership](#) is going to limit what the Biden administration can do even if it dedicates attention to the region. More importantly, however, the absence of a coherent push from Latin America may limit what the administration tries to do. Without external pressure, the region's issues will not climb the US agenda. Inside the White House and State Department, aides who want to change policy will not be able to point to Latin American pressure to strengthen their hands.

The next Summit of the Americas is [expected to take place](#) in the United States during the second half of 2021. This is a decision-focusing moment for a new administration. It should be a window of opportunity for Latin America to push items on to the new administration's radar, as happened with Cuba under the Obama administration. But taking advance of this window requires coordination and leadership that are notably absent from Latin America today.

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