

200 Years After the Monroe Doctrine, US Influence in Latin America Is in Peril

Description

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In 1823, the United States published its first dictum regarding Latin America: The [Monroe Doctrine](#) declared the entire region off limits for future colonization by any European Powers. Augmented by the [Roosevelt Corollary](#), this assertive foreign policy set up two centuries worth of US dominance over the Western Hemisphere. America deterred European intervention in the [Venezuela debt crisis](#), contained the Soviet Union in the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#) through Kennedy's Flexible Response, and began a [war on drugs](#) focused on curbing the threat of narcotics and illegal substances in the 1980s. However, as the Monroe Doctrine marks its bicentennial, US preeminence in Latin America is rapidly waning. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has [accelerated trade](#) in the region, with more than \$700 billion expected by 2035, creating a gateway for greater political and military influence; Russia has increasingly sought to [break American partnerships](#) and increase its role as a [significant provider of military equipment](#); and [Iran is aggressively seeking to reduce the US's military footprint](#) in the region, as displayed by the damaging April 2023 classified document leaks. For these reasons, the US must now make a new overture of goodwill toward Latin America through security and diplomatic measures.

Though the CCP unquestionably constitutes the greatest threat to American interests and values in the aggregate, renewed emphasis on the US presence in Latin America is necessary because of the region's proximate location to the homeland. Developing a strategy to deter the intrusion of great powers into Latin America should be considered a near-term priority in the interest of maintaining strong defenses against China and Russia. In Latin America, revisionist powers are deliberately building their own dangerous spheres of influence, threatening the stability of the US-led international rules-based order, and sowing the seeds for [even more dangerous drug and narcotic traffic through the US-Mexico border](#). In 2022 alone, a record [110,000 Americans](#) died from opioid overdoses. The dangerous flow of these drugs is aided by transnational criminal organizations that target [regional politicians and law enforcement officials with bribes](#), ultimately undermining the rule of law in the region. [Historically democratic states are also wading into authoritarian waters](#), heightening fears that democratic backsliding and political instability may extend further into the United States, through what one social scientist calls the [neighborhood effect](#). Above all, waning US influence in the region risks strengthening a seeming [axis of great powers](#) — China, Iran, Russia — in a

location where the US does not enjoy the benefits of geographic standoff. To address these troubling trends, the United States must cultivate a more assertive policy that strengthens its Latin American partners, instead of isolating them, through new security and diplomatic measures.

With regard to security posture in Latin America, the US should continue to increase funding for security cooperation efforts [already underway](#), and increase cultural exchanges with regional partners. The United States must invest in “Building Partner Capacity” initiatives, efforts that have proved successful in Europe and other regions. This can be done through rigorous investment in programs such as the Army’s [military personnel exchange program](#) or the Navy’s [equivalent](#), which now conducts 208 total exchanges with 20 foreign nations.^[SR1] ^[SJR2] This process should expand to include more Latin American partners and incorporate not just junior and mid-level officers but flag officers as well.

For example, Colombia would be an excellent strategic choice for expanded officer exchanges, given its [increased military professionalization and modernization in recent years](#). Such reciprocal exchanges increase shared understanding and interoperability between US and partner militaries, and they deepen cultural understanding – a fundamental piece of security cooperation. The US military could also engage in more bilateral training exercises with partners in Latin America, such as the combined US-Mexico initiative, [“Fuerzas Amigas”](#). Likewise the US should conduct trainings that focus on support elements, such as logistics and air mobility, that are typically weaker in Latin American militaries. Such multinational training enhances regional security and helps develop contingency operations within Latin America. While countries in Latin America are not eligible for NATO membership^[SJR3], the US military could encourage allies such as Spain to participate in exercises with militaries in the region. With a shared language and cultural proximity, these nations could find combined training advantageous for increased understanding. Enlisted soldiers and officers alike could also use the opportunity of training with NATO allies to familiarize themselves with the alliance’s concepts and doctrine – ultimately strengthening their own formations and increasing collaboration with NATO even as non-members.

Additionally, a stronger US security pivot to Latin America would include professionalizing the [Conference of American Armies](#) (CAAs) by creating biannual GDP contribution pledges and participating in joint exercises alongside NATO, its peer organization. The recent [spy balloon saga](#) also underscores the need to create an organization like NORAD with countries in Latin America. NORAD proved critical to detecting and downing balloons that crossed into US and Canadian airspace. It is reasonable to assume that a comparable organization for Latin America would result in similar collective security benefits. And, for Latin American states that might not have the capabilities to sustain their membership in an organization like this, the US could accelerate the exchange of

information between partner militaries to increase awareness of malign Russian and Chinese space and satellite activities. Lastly, as then-commander of U.S. Southern Command [Admiral Craig Faller suggested](#) in 2021, stronger efforts must be made to increase the number of US port calls and joint exercises in the region. The expanded US presence would help counter China's growing influence in critical locations such as the Panama Canal. Just as the United States has stepped up military activity in the South China Sea, so too must the US military reassert itself in Latin America.

In addition to changes in security posture in Latin America, the US should also invest heavily in diplomacy with partners in the region. One meaningful first step would be to encourage states to increase diplomatic relations with Taiwan, a major sticking point for the CCP. For example, the US can place diplomatic pressure on [Honduras](#) and [Panama](#) to reconsider their policies breaking off diplomatic relations with Taiwan in favor of Beijing. Deterrence is optimized when military messaging and diplomatic signaling are consistent. The mere fact that the US has a strategically important air base housing many service members in Honduras while the Honduran government is concurrently ending diplomatic contact with Taiwan is troubling and warrants immediate attention from US policymakers.

The US could also soften diplomatic messaging that privileges democratic capitalism over other forms of national economic policies. Though virtuous in its intent, this approach often alienates Latin American partners that may prefer aligning with a benefactor offering economic support without moralistic strings attached. Latin America's largest democracy, Brazil, offers a good example of this trend. [Newly elected President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has increasingly inclined towards Chinese interests](#) and attacked the dominance of the US dollar and interdependent trade and technology transfer in the West. This trend is not limited to Brazil or other coastal states in the region. In fact, a recent report from the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) predicts, "In the event of a prolonged fight in Asia, the [People's Republic of China] could persuade or intimate one or more actors in Latin America to permit the PLA to use its ports, airfields, or other facilities in support of operations against the United States." This is not to say that the Brazilian government would agree to do this, but it does underscore the possibility that regional appeasement to China presents a clear threat to US national security in the event of a large-scale conflict with the PRC.

The challenges that will face the United States in the 21st century are rapidly coming into view. Taking proactive action now to reform the United States' security and diplomatic approach in Latin America would ensure that immediate national security objectives are addressed, while concurrently supporting preparations for potential conflict with China. As the [2022 National Security Strategy](#) affirms that "no region impacts the United States more directly than the Western Hemisphere," US defense and diplomatic policy must pivot in Latin America to reflect just that.

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The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the United States Military Academy, Department of the Army, or Department of Defense.

Lead Image: Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro talks with then-U.S. Southern Command's Commander, Navy Adm. Craig Faller, during a 2020 visit to SOUTHCOM headquarters. (Photo by Juan Chiari, U.S. Army Garrison-Miami)

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