

Reclaiming U.S. Engagement in Latin America: Strategy Beyond Competition

Description

Editor's Note: The following is an adapted version of a speech delivered by Gen. Alberto Mejía (Ret.) at the Irregular Warfare Initiative's [South America in Competition Conference](#), held on July 16-17, 2025.

Introduction

Two and a half centuries ago, thirteen colonies declared independence from an empire, forging a new nation built on liberty, self-determination, and democracy. Not long after, those same ideals ignited hearts across Latin America. Leaders like Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín drew inspiration from the American Revolution to pursue freedom for their own people, even if their struggles took different paths under different conditions.

Throughout history, despite many differences, Latin America and the United States have shared an enduring admiration for democracy and sovereignty. The United States has long stood as a beacon of possibility, illuminating a path toward prosperity, stability, and human dignity. That is why, despite tensions and disagreements, partnership with the United States has always held deep meaning for Latin American nations.

Recognizing Latin America's Intrinsic Value to U.S. Security and Prosperity

For the past two decades, the United States largely took its alignment with Latin America for granted, directing strategic attention elsewhere. Countries aligned with post-9/11 counterterrorism priorities like Colombia benefited from close partnerships and targeted support, while many others were left to navigate their challenges alone. Into this vacuum stepped China, advancing a strategy of deep economic engagement, often without conditions, slowly entrenching itself as a principal partner across the region.

Today, the United States is undergoing a period of strategic reassessment, adopting a more realist, realpolitik approach that prioritizes countering Chinese influence globally, including in Latin America. As this new strategy takes shape, it is important to remember that while great power competition now frames U.S. global strategy, Latin America is not only a theater of competition but also holds intrinsic

importance in its own right.

Beyond Chinese influence, Latin America remains vital to US security and prosperity—-from countering transnational organized crime and narco-trafficking, to securing critical trade routes, to upholding the democratic values that have long bound our nations together. **Effective policy towards Latin America requires more than countering China. It requires recognizing and investing in the region’s intrinsic strategic value, and in the enduring partnerships that will shape its future stability and alignment.**

US and PRC influence

For much of the last century, [US engagement with Latin America was defined by values-based, conditional diplomacy](#). During the Cold War, alliances formed around anti-communism. Later, cooperation focused on fighting narco-trafficking and insurgency. In the post-9/11 era, partnerships prioritized counterterrorism and regional stability. Most recently, migration has dominated bilateral agendas.

This approach produced notable successes. For example, Plan Colombia stands as a testament to what determined partnership can achieve when both sides are committed. With substantial US bipartisan support, [Colombia broke the FARC, reduced violence, stabilized its economy](#), and emerged as one of the United States’s closest security allies in the hemisphere. These achievements culminated in Colombia’s designation as a major non-NATO ally and its recognition as a Global Partner of NATO—-milestones reflecting its transformation into a reliable and capable security partner on the international stage.

However, this model—-prioritizing issue-based engagement often framed in ideological terms—-while effective in moments of crisis, [did not always foster the deep, multidimensional partnerships needed for long-term strategic alignment](#). As US attention shifted to other strategic theatres, Latin America came to be seen as stable, if not static. In many policy circles, an unspoken assumption emerged that the region was securely anchored within the US sphere of influence, reinforced by cultural, ideological, and historical bonds.

Today, we see renewed efforts to reemphasize Latin America as a strategic priority. These efforts are welcome and necessary. Yet US diplomatic bandwidth remains stretched by multiple urgent crises elsewhere—-from Europe to the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific—-creating opportunities for other powers to deepen their presence in the hemisphere.

China saw this opening and acted decisively. Beginning with [infrastructure investments and energy deals in the early 2000s](#), its engagement grew rapidly. By 2020, [China had become the largest trading partner](#) for countries such as Brazil, Chile, and Peru, and a major financier for Argentina, Ecuador, and Venezuela.

Unlike US approaches, China's strategy was not based on ideological alignment or governance standards. Its financing came without requirements on democracy, human rights, or institutional reform, and with promises of rapid delivery. For governments facing fiscal constraints or political instability, this approach was appealing. Over time, Chinese economic statecraft embedded itself deeply in Latin America's infrastructure, trade, telecommunications, and energy sectors.

Even Colombia, long considered Washington's closest ally in the region, has felt these shifts. While Colombia's strategic and military partnership with the United States remains strong, recent years have seen increasing Chinese trade, investment, and bids in infrastructure and energy projects. [These developments](#) are not yet as pronounced as in Argentina or Brazil, but they mark a drift that cannot be ignored.

PRC intent in South America

Chinese intentions are often opaque, unfolding over decades rather than years. In these confusing times, with the global order shifting at unprecedented speed, perhaps only history will reveal the full purpose behind China's growing presence in Latin America. What is clear today, however, is that Chinese economic engagement carries implications far beyond trade balances or infrastructure projects. When a country's principal investor and trading partner [shifts from the United States to China](#), its economic incentives, political alignments, and potentially its security posture change.

We are already seeing these effects. Chinese companies hold significant stakes in strategic sectors such as energy, mining, ports, and telecommunications. [In Argentina](#), despite President Milei's ideological preference for Washington, economic realities have forced continued close financial ties with Beijing. In Brazil, Chinese investment in energy and agribusiness has created a relationship that is increasingly structural rather than merely transactional.

Even in Colombia, [Chinese companies are bidding for major infrastructure projects and expanding in technology and energy](#). While still limited compared to Argentina or Brazil, these moves signal a diversification of economic dependencies. Over time, such shifts could alter government decision-making, not out of ideological affinity, but due to structural economic leverage.

These shifts in alignment are compounded by evolving security threats within Latin America itself. Transnational organized crime is becoming more complex, interconnected, and technologically sophisticated. These networks now engage not only in narcotrafficking, but also cybercrime, illicit financial flows, human trafficking, and environmental crimes on a global scale. They exploit weak institutions, destabilize communities, and corrode democratic governance.

As China embeds itself economically in the region, its interests increasingly intersect with these governance vulnerabilities. Strategic competition thus becomes not only about infrastructure or trade, but also about the integrity of institutions underpinning regional security.

For the United States, this means a region historically considered its strategic backyard may no longer align with its security or diplomatic priorities. This does not mean Latin American nations will become Chinese satellites. But if their democratic institutions weaken under the dual pressures of organized crime and external leverage, their capacity to cooperate with the United States on security, counter-narcotics, and regional stability will be severely undermined, with direct implications for US interests at home and abroad. This challenge only intensifies when national leadership fails to act with strategic clarity or responsibility.

Colombia as a Case Study

Colombia today exemplifies the risks of strategic drift. For decades, Colombia was regarded as a success story of US-Latin American cooperation. [Plan Colombia](#), despite its controversies, achieved what many considered impossible: reducing insurgent violence, weakening powerful narcotrafficking cartels, and stabilizing the economy.

Today, Colombia faces significant challenges in adapting its defense posture to meet emerging threats such as cyber-enabled crime, hybrid threats, and the evolving landscape of transnational organized crime. Most concerning is Colombia's posture toward both internal and external challenges. The Colombian government remains silent on China's growing presence, allowing major infrastructure bids involving Chinese companies to proceed with minimal public scrutiny or strategic assessment. At the same time, [efforts to erode domestic institutions in Colombia](#) have weakened the foundations sustaining security, governance, and Colombia's international credibility. These choices further weaken the foundations sustaining security, governance, and Colombia's international credibility.

This failure of leadership has broader implications. As transnational criminal networks become more sophisticated and interconnected—leveraging global financial systems, encrypted communications, and advanced logistics—weakened institutions leave Colombia vulnerable to internal fragmentation and external influence. These groups thrive in environments of strategic drift, filling governance voids,

undermining institutions, and aligning with external actors when it serves their interests.

For the United States, this is not simply a Colombian problem. Colombia has long been its most reliable partner in Latin America—a partner that cooperated on security matters and advocated for democratic stability and regional integration. Weakness in Colombia undermines regional security and US interests directly, providing fertile ground for organized crime to expand and for strategic competitors to entrench themselves in ways that will be difficult to reverse.

Key strategic considerations

This is not a story of inevitable decline. It is an opportunity for the United States to build a renewed partnership with Latin America that reflects today’s realities while remaining anchored in our shared democratic ideals. The following recommendations offer a way ahead.

First, the US must adopt a posture of continuous, multidimensional engagement throughout Latin America. Presence matters. Latin American nations notice when Washington appears only during crises. Sustained diplomatic, economic, and security cooperation, driven by respect and mutual interest, builds the trust necessary to counter external influence.

Second, the US and its Latin American allies should work to strengthen military-to-military cooperation. Security partnerships are among the most enduring forms of bilateral relations. Joint and combined training, capacity-building, intelligence sharing, and operational coordination enhance mutual readiness, build professional bonds, and reinforce shared standards. This cooperation must also evolve to address emerging threats—cyber-enabled crime, hybrid warfare, and the use of new technologies by transnational criminal networks.

Third, all parties should invest in democratic institutions and justice systems. Organized crime thrives where governance is weak. Supporting judicial reform, anti-corruption initiatives, and institution-building reinforces rule of law and democratic resilience—the ultimate safeguards not only against criminal and external influence, but also against the rise of authoritarian regimes like those in Cuba, Nicaragua or Venezuela.

Fourth, the US and its Latin American allies must promote intra-regional cooperation. While Latin America is not a block, and each country has its nuances, there are domains where regional collaboration is essential. The fight against narco-trafficking and organized crime in the Amazon basin is one example. A potential trilateral agreement between the United States, Colombia, and Ecuador could significantly enhance coordinated efforts against narcotics production and trafficking corridors along their shared borders.

Likewise, a multilateral framework involving Amazonian countries could strengthen joint operations against environmental crime, illegal mining, human trafficking, and arms flows. These complex challenges demand transnational coordination mechanisms, intelligence fusion, and shared operational frameworks to achieve lasting impact.

Fifth, all parties should bolster highly developed capabilities among Latin American partners. Several countries have advanced capacities in intelligence, special operations, aviation, and counterterrorism. Leveraging and supporting these capabilities creates regional leadership anchors, enabling more effective burden-sharing and collective security.

Sixth, the US and its Latin American allies must address threats at their earliest stages. Prevention is always more effective and less costly than crisis response. Early interventions in governance, security sector transformation and modernization, economic resilience, and institutional strengthening reduce the risk of state capture by organized crime and diminish the appeal of external actors offering conditional or opaque support.

Finally, it is imperative that the US and its Latin American allies reaffirm a commitment to principled, realistic partnerships. Latin Americans do not expect the US to solve their problems, nor do they wish to be lectured. They seek a partner who listens, understands, and invests in long-term stability, prosperity, and security—a partner with shared values who recognizes that economic growth, institutional strength, and security are interconnected, each reinforcing the other.

These are strategic options that, if pursued wisely, could revitalize US-Latin American relations, counterbalance external influence, and address the growing threat of organized crime that undermines regional stability and US strategic interests alike.

Conclusion

Latin America and the United States share a bond forged by history and ideals—a bond rooted not in dominance or charity, but in the belief that freedom, dignity, and prosperity are best secured through strong democratic institutions.

Today, as great power competition intensifies, and transnational organized crime becomes more sophisticated and destructive, one truth remains clear: without strong democratic institutions, there can be no enduring equality, true development, or lasting respect for human rights.

These institutions do not strengthen themselves. They require commitment—from within our nations and from partners who value them. They require accountability, standards, and shared responsibility to

uphold them, especially in the face of corruption, criminal infiltration, external influence, and rogue regimes like those in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.

Influence is never guaranteed by history alone. It is secured through presence, commitment, and the wisdom to act in ways that strengthen the institutions keeping our societies free. Latin America does not need economic aid—it needs a strong strategic partnership with the global power whose history, democratic ideals, and respect for sovereignty most align with its own. That power is, and has always been, the United States.

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