

China Is to Stay in Latin America and US Has No Choice but to Accept

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Region: [Asia](#), [Latin America & Caribbean](#),
[USA](#)

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China has been increasing its soft power in Latin America since it began heavily investing in the region since the mid-2000s. The administration of U.S. President Donald Trump has taken an ineffective and aggressive approach to try and counter Beijing in Latin America, a region that Washington calls its “own backyard.” Relations between China and Latin American countries are flourishing, but at the same time they face new challenges as the region deals with several crises. Meanwhile, the influential Brookings Institute think tank has concluded that the U.S. is losing its influence in the region.

The U.S. began to pay attention to China’s growing influence in Latin America and came to understand that its historic role as the main power in the region was at risk. The Washington D.C.-based think tank highlighted that the Trump administration has failed to change this trend, with the author of the article, Ted Piccone, emphasizing that Washington needs a more generous and sophisticated approach. With Trump coming into power, Latin American countries began to perceive China as an even more viable partner since the U.S. president repeatedly resorted to nationalist and anti-immigration rhetoric.

Beijing seeks to secure energy, metal and food flows to feed its robust economy and its growing middle class. In 2000, the volume of trade between China and Latin America was \$12 billion. In 2019 it had reached almost \$315 billion. Today, Beijing is the main trading partner of Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Peru and Argentina. China lends money in large quantities to Latin American governments and is reimbursed by some countries with raw materials such as oil.

However, the elites of Latin America continue to be divided between those who have benefited from closer economic relations with Beijing and those who have suffered from cheap imports that affects local manufacturing. Despite all adversities, China’s economic activity appears to have a positive effect on the region.

There is no denying that China’s actions in Latin America have led to the enrichment of the upper class and, therefore, have increased inequality. Beijing’s presence however is a counterweight to U.S. domination of the region. Most Latin American governments, according to the Brookings study, recognize that they cannot get out of the severe recession caused by the coronavirus outbreak without Chinese investments and trade.

The author argues that “after decades of interventionist and hegemonic behavior in the region, the United States after the Cold War shifted to playing a more benign, pro-reform role.” However, “after three years of the Trump administration, the United States is practically displaced, largely absent, or has reverted to type as the threatening hegemon”

that forced a decline in “favorable opinions toward Washington and a renewal of ‘Yanqui go home’ antagonism.”

This was in major contrast to the administration of President Bill Clinton, according to the study, that advocated an ambitious agenda that would involve the entire Western Hemisphere – a policy of uniting the region on the basis of representative liberal democracy, free trade and the market economy as a way to achieve sustainable development. The George W. Bush administration, especially after September 11 attacks, took a more costly approach to national security and the fight against terrorism in the region. At the same time, it remained faithful to the financing of development aid for Latin American countries. The Obama administration, focused on the immigrant crisis in Central America, made significant progress in ties with governments in the region. Piccone points out that the Obama administration improved relations with Cuba and facilitated the signing of a peace agreement in Colombia between the government and communist rebels.

In general, U.S. influence in Latin America and the Caribbean significantly improved in the years preceding Trump, but this has begun to wane. The study argued that Trump has “revived the interventionist rhetoric of the Monroe Doctrine of two centuries ago.”

Joe Biden, the Democrat presidential candidate for the upcoming November presidential elections, blames his own country more than Beijing for the deplorable state of relations between Washington and Latin America, but says that the U.S. has a great advantage in the region. According to Biden, China and Russia do not have the same ties and common history with the Latin American peoples, something that is objectively true, and in which Piccone highlights by stating that “natural geographic, cultural, familial, security, educational, and historic ties to its neighbors” gives the U.S. “a distinct advantage over China.”

Piccone concludes that Washington must provide alternatives to Latin American countries that do not resort to an “us or them” ultimatum in their relations with China.

“The bipolar world has arrived at the U.S. doorstep — it can build walls and threaten sanctions, or it can find ways to help [Latin American] governments address their countries’ deep problems, with or without China,” he said.

As China engages in a no-strings attached diplomacy and trade with Latin America, it will continue gaining influence in the U.S.’ “backyard.” Therefore, Piccone’s suggestion that the U.S. is no longer a hegemon of Latin America, as he terms it, is an honest assessment and one that Washington must acknowledge if it does not want to lose more influence in the region. China is in Latin America to stay, and Washington must acknowledge this.

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