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For Hemispheric Unity, a Change in U.S. Foreign Policy is Needed

In the face of a new war in Europe, shoring up support in Latin America will not be as easy as the Biden administration thinks.

[Brett J. Kyle and Andrew G. Reiter \(/author/Brett J. Kyle and Andrew G. Reiter\)](#)

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Last month, the U.S. announced it would designate Colombia as a Major Non-NATO Ally. Here, Colombian President Iván Duque in a 2018 press conference with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg (NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Flickr)

On March 10, President Joe Biden [announced](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/10/remarks-by-president-biden-and-president-duque-of-the-republic-of-colombia-before-bilateral-meeting/) (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/10/remarks-by-president-biden-and-president-duque-of-the-republic-of-colombia-before-bilateral-meeting/>) that the United States would designate Colombia as a Major Non-NATO Ally. This [designation](https://www.state.gov/major-non-nato-ally-status/) (<https://www.state.gov/major-non-nato-ally-status/>) extends special military and economic privileges to Colombia, including participation in joint defense research and training, and the [ability](https://www.dsca.mil/programs/excess-defense-articles-eda) (<https://www.dsca.mil/programs/excess-defense-articles-eda>) to purchase weapons, ammunition, vehicles, and other surplus war material from the United States. This came on the heels of a U.S. delegation [traveling to Venezuela](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/05/world/americas/venezuela-russia-usa.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/05/world/americas/venezuela-russia-usa.html>) for the first time since the United States broke off diplomatic relations and closed its embassy there in 2019. Motivating the U.S. overture is the potential to resume purchasing Venezuelan oil to compensate for the [oil no longer being imported from Russia](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/08/fact-sheet-united-states-bans-imports-of-russian-oil-liquefied-natural-gas-and-coal/) (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/03/08/fact-sheet-united-states-bans-imports-of-russian-oil-liquefied-natural-gas-and-coal/>) and to drive a wedge between Russia and its most important Latin American ally. These events illustrate an administration scrambling to repair relations with a region that the United States has long neglected and whose support it has taken for granted.

The United States and its European allies have shown remarkable unity in confronting Russia in the wake of its invasion of Ukraine. The same cannot be said of Latin America. Despite [direct U.S. calls not to go](https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/putins-latin-american-connection-5761/) (<https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/putins-latin-american-connection-5761/>), Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro and Argentina's Alberto Fernández each visited Russia just weeks before the invasion, expressing [“solidarity” with Russia](https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/white-house-rebukes-brazils-bolsonaro-solidarity-visit-moscow-2022-02-18/) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/white-house-rebukes-brazils-bolsonaro-solidarity-visit-moscow-2022-02-18/>) and seeking an alternative [investment partnership](https://theglobalamericans.org/2022/02/alberto-fernandezs-magical-odyssey-to-russia-and-china/) (<https://theglobalamericans.org/2022/02/alberto-fernandezs-magical-odyssey-to-russia-and-china/>) to the United States. Following the invasion, El Salvador and Bolivia joined Russia's long-time Cold War allies Cuba and Nicaragua in abstaining from the March 2 United Nations General Assembly [vote to condemn](https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3959039?ln=en) (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3959039?ln=en>) Russia's actions. Mexico has [flatly rejected](https://www.reuters.com/world/mexicos-president-says-will-not-take-any-economic-sanctions-against-russia-2022-03-01/) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/mexicos-president-says-will-not-take-any-economic-sanctions-against-russia-2022-03-01/>) U.S. calls to impose sanctions and has declared itself neutral. Indeed, it is telling that Biden began his press conference announcing Colombia's new NATO designation by thanking President Iván Duque for condemning the Russian invasion, noting: “not everyone in the hemisphere...has done that.”

As the United States finds itself involved in another major European war, it once again needs and expects Latin America to be on its side. The Biden administration is quickly discovering, however, that creating regional unity will be a challenging task. The shadow of previous wars and recent U.S. neglect of hemispheric relations have pushed Latin American countries away and allowed Russia and China to make significant inroads. If the United States wants support from its neighbors in the confrontation with Russia, it will need to take a new approach to foreign policy, one that recognizes the interests of its partners and provides consistent engagement across domains other than military security.

Hard Lessons from Past Wars

Previous experiences in global conflicts have taught Latin American governments that partnership with the United States is contingent on serving U.S. interests. During World War II, the region closely followed the lead of the United States. On the eve of the war, an isolationist United States pursued cooperation with Latin

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P America in the interest of [creating a trading bloc](https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520328082/latin-america-in-the-1940s) (<https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520328082/latin-america-in-the-1940s>) that could continue to supply raw materials for U.S. industries and a market for the sale of U.S. manufactured goods, insulated from the looming conflicts in Europe and Asia. After the German invasion of Poland in 1939, the United States coordinated a hemisphere-wide policy of neutrality.

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the United States entered the war, and most Latin American states quickly declared war or at least severed ties with the Axis powers. Latin America was firmly behind the Allied cause, contributing to the war effort by cooperating on defense and by providing raw materials for the war industry and foodstuffs to keep the Allies fed. [Brazil and Mexico sent forces to fight](https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781461638629/Latin-America-During-World-War-II) (<https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781461638629/Latin-America-During-World-War-II>) in the European and Pacific theaters, respectively.

When the war was over, however, Latin American countries received little reward for their support. While the United States poured enormous development aid and investment into Europe and Japan, it [rejected Brazilian President Juscelino Kubitschek’s appeals](https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/latin-america-confronts-the-united-states/operacao-panamericana/C9CD1D3C403CD02936E2DBD21537D31C) (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/latin-america-confronts-the-united-states/operacao-panamericana/C9CD1D3C403CD02936E2DBD21537D31C>) to do the same closer to home, insisting that Latin America needed to [attract private investment](https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520328082/latin-america-in-the-1940s) (<https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520328082/latin-america-in-the-1940s>) in pursuit of its development goals.

With the onset of the Cold War, the United States once again realized it needed regional partners in confronting the communist threat, quickly developing a “hemispheric defense” doctrine, codified in the [Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance](http://www.oas.org/juridico/english/treaties/b-29.html) (<http://www.oas.org/juridico/english/treaties/b-29.html>) (the Rio Pact) in 1947. The [overwhelmingly militarized](https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520328082/latin-america-in-the-1940s) (<https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520328082/latin-america-in-the-1940s>) U.S. approach, however, had disastrous consequences for the region. The United States openly accepted—and often facilitated—authoritarian governments, as long as they supported its anti-communist position. It orchestrated a coup to oust Guatemalan president Jacobo Árbenz in 1954, invaded the Dominican Republic to install a friendly regime in 1965, supported the government of El Salvador in its long civil war, and armed the Contras to oppose the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. The U.S.-backed Operation Condor united military regimes across South America into a transnational network of political repression that persecuted activists beyond the borders of their country of origin, ensuring they would not be safe even in exile. Hundreds of thousands of people died in Cold War-driven civil wars and under brutal dictatorships.

The end of the Cold War ushered in a period of democratic change for much of the region, but the United States did not prioritize building strong relationships with these new governments. It continued to view Latin America through a prism of national security, focusing on limited issues of drugs and market reform. The United States provided \$10 billion in aid to Colombia ([Plan Colombia](https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/08/15-years-and-10-billion-later-u-s-efforts-to-curb-colombias-cocaine-trade-have-failed/) (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/08/15-years-and-10-billion-later-u-s-efforts-to-curb-colombias-cocaine-trade-have-failed/>)) as part of the U.S. War on Drugs

and pushed neoliberal economics, ultimately producing a political backlash in the form of the Pink Tide—the election of leftist presidents who promised to undo the economic pain of neoliberalism. By the end of the 20th century, Latin America had come to realize that its support to the United States in its global conflicts brought little in return.

The Forgotten Hemisphere

U.S.-Latin American relations in the 21st century are more defined by the relationships that do not exist than those that do. The United States had already started to reorient its security focus to the Middle East, which then accelerated dramatically following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. U.S. disinterest and rising opposition to neoliberalism produced a fractured security environment in Latin America. Far from being the universal mutual defense treaty that it was in 1947, the Rio Pact has [lost numerous members](http://www.oas.org/juridico/english/signs/b-29.html) (<http://www.oas.org/juridico/english/signs/b-29.html>) in recent years. Just prior to 9/11, President Vicente Fox [made a case](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1531733.stm) (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1531733.stm>) for a new security compact. Mexico withdrew from the Rio Pact in 2002 as relations with the United States grew more strained over the Bush administration's sidelining of the United Nations in [pursuit of war with Iraq](http://www.cisan.unam.mx/virtuales/cuaderno04.php) (<http://www.cisan.unam.mx/virtuales/cuaderno04.php>). In the 2010s, leftist presidents in Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela withdrew their countries from the treaty.

Relations deteriorated further during the Trump administration. Trump's focus on building a border wall with Mexico and renegotiating NAFTA—which he called the [“worst trade deal”](https://www.cato.org/blog/worst-trade-deal-ever-negotiated-goes-effect-today) (<https://www.cato.org/blog/worst-trade-deal-ever-negotiated-goes-effect-today>) ever signed by the United States—signaled a hostile view towards the region even before he took office. Furthermore, he [reversed](https://www.cfr.org/background/US-Cuba-relations) (<https://www.cfr.org/background/US-Cuba-relations>) the Obama administration's work to normalize relations with Cuba and [attempted to end](https://www.cfr.org/background/what-temporary-protected-status) (<https://www.cfr.org/background/what-temporary-protected-status>) temporary protective status for migrants from Haiti, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras. U.S. efforts to isolate Venezuela diplomatically and economically through [sanctions](https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/venezuela-related-sanctions) (<https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/sanctions-programs-and-country-information/venezuela-related-sanctions>) and the [barring of oil imports](https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/faqs/topic/1581) (<https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/faqs/topic/1581>) failed to deliver regime change. Trump's closest relationship in the region was with Brazil's Bolsonaro, a fellow right-wing populist leader. The designation of Brazil as a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2019 harkens back to the Cold War days of the United States supporting authoritarian governments.

While [softening the tone on immigration](https://www.voanews.com/a/biden-s-first-year-brings-modest-changes-to-immigration-policy/6367512.html) (<https://www.voanews.com/a/biden-s-first-year-brings-modest-changes-to-immigration-policy/6367512.html>), the Biden administration's foreign policy toward the region has remained antagonistic. In response to Nayib Bukele's successful negotiations with the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 gangs to reduce violence, the Biden administration imposed sanctions against his inner circle, [widening the rift between the two countries](https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/from-bad-to-worse-nayib-bukeles-split-with-washington/) (<https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/from-bad-to-worse-nayib-bukeles-split-with-washington/>). Bukele [openly mocked](https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1495580731069849610?lang=en) (<https://twitter.com/nayibbukele/status/1495580731069849610?lang=en>) Biden on social media in the lead up to the Russia invasion, and it is not a surprise that El Salvador abstained from the UN vote. Due to the United States' animosity towards Latin America in recent years, renewing regional partnerships will be difficult,

complicated further by actions such as the visit to Venezuela, which are a jarring reminder that the United States will set principle aside when security or material interests are at stake.

Moreover, these failures have enabled Russia to improve its standing in the region. It bolstered its relationship with Cuba by providing it with \$2.3 billion in loans, which it [postponed payment on](https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/russia-postpones-cuba-debt-payments-amid-warming-relations-2022-02-23/) (<https://www.reuters.com/markets/europe/russia-postpones-cuba-debt-payments-amid-warming-relations-2022-02-23/>) until 2027 just two days before the invasion. Fifty T-72 tanks were [gifted to Nicaragua](https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-nicaragua-shows-off-russian-t72-tank-2016aug16-story.html) (<https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-nicaragua-shows-off-russian-t72-tank-2016aug16-story.html>), free of charge. Venezuela has borrowed billions of dollars from Russia to support its military and economy, and members of the Wagner Group—a private military contractor closely tied to the Russian government—[were deployed](https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/enduring-relationship-russia-love) (<https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/enduring-relationship-russia-love>) to provide protection for Maduro during the 2019 protests.

Russia also won favor in the region by supplying countries, [particularly Argentina and Bolivia](https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-03-05/la-fg-ukraine-latin-america-response) (<https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-03-05/la-fg-ukraine-latin-america-response>), with the Sputnik vaccine early on in the pandemic when few other options were available. Its economic ties to the region have also increased. Brazil now imports about half of its [fertilizer from Russia and Belarus](https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/import/bra/show/63104/2019/) (https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/import/bra/show/63104/2019/), leading the South American giant to work with its Mercosur partners to [exempt fertilizer](https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/south-american-nations-push-exclude-fertilizer-russia-sanctions-2022-03-10/) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/south-american-nations-push-exclude-fertilizer-russia-sanctions-2022-03-10/>) from U.S. sanctions. Argentina relies on Russia for about [10 percent of its oil imports](https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/import/arg/show/52710/2019/) (https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/import/arg/show/52710/2019/). In turn, [Brazil](https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/rus/partner/bra) (<https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/rus/partner/bra>) and [Argentina](https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/rus/partner/arg) (<https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/rus/partner/arg>) export foodstuffs to Russia. Yet the overall monetary value of trade between Russia and Latin America is [small enough](https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/export/rus/show/all/2019/) (https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/export/rus/show/all/2019/) that Latin America's lack of participation will not be a deciding factor in the sanctions' effectiveness. Participating would hurt Latin American economies more than it would hurt Russia. The United States wants their participation primarily to demonstrate unity, but being unified with the United States in the past has brought little in return.

Where Does the United States Go From Here?

“The United States must approach security through reciprocal economic and social partnerships.”

To rebuild its relationship with Latin America, the United States must pursue its interests through sustained engagement across multiple domains. The securitized approach to economic and social issues should be inverted. The United States must approach security through reciprocal economic and social partnerships. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend” may have been a sufficient rationale for military alliances in centuries past. Today, alliances such as NATO are more than military connections between countries. They are an affirmation of shared values and a willingness to work and fight together in defense of those values if necessary.

If the United States and Colombia work with each other in this manner, then the new NATO allied status will have value and meaning for both countries. Such alliances transcend individual leaders of countries and instead express a tie between nations. Ivan Duque could soon be replaced by a [leftist ex-guerrilla](#) (<https://www.as-coa.org/articles/explainer-whos-who-colombias-2022-presidential-race#gustavo-petro>) in the May 2022 presidential election. Bolsonaro in Brazil and Bukele in El Salvador were democratically elected. Alliance status should neither be motivation to meddle in leadership decisions nor reason to tolerate authoritarianism, but instead an opportunity to stay committed to the values shared among the people of the country.

In sum, if the United States wants to generate in Latin America the type of unity in the face of international threats that Europe has displayed, it needs to pursue a strategy of sustained, constructive engagement that demonstrates it to be a credible partner in tackling shared challenges.

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