



Cooperative Diplomacy: It is Time for the United States to Re-engage with Latin America

By: Carter Keating

Carter Keating is a Master of International Affairs student at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University. His primary interests include grand strategy and diplomacy.

The United States must continue to exercise its leadership of the international world order. This leadership is especially necessary in the western hemisphere, where the United States has an opportunity to work cooperatively with Central and South American leaders to confront the transnational security issues that face them. The United States should leverage its resources, capabilities, and [geopolitical slack](#) to re-engage with Latin America and strengthen multilateral cooperation for shared benefit, security, and prosperity.

The primary foreign policy issues facing Central and South America are also some of the most consequential for citizens of the United States. Geographic proximity ensures that regional drug trafficking, gun violence, climate change, and economic inequality have a significant impact on the American public. Where the United States is concerned, Latin American foreign policy issues might as well be domestic ones. The United States cannot presume to effectively combat these issues with domestic policy alone; multinational issues require a multinational response. By stepping in to lead a committed coalition of states, the United States can use foreign policy and diplomacy as tools for confronting these important regional concerns.

The newly-minted Biden administration appears prepared to do so. The [Biden Plan for Central America](#), a proposed four-year, \$4 billion regional strategy, aims to address the underlying causes of emigration and insecurity in the Northern Triangle: corruption, economic inequality, and weak rule of law. The proposed strategy improves upon its predecessors by acknowledging underlying causes of insecurity, emphasizing the need for verifiable progress and program accountability, and requiring countries to invest significant amounts of their own resources towards reform. The ultimate success of the strategy, however, will be determined by continued oversight, adjustment, and commitment to a true partnership between the United States and its Central American neighbors. For long-lasting success, the Biden Plan for Central America must address the conditions of insecurity, not just the symptoms.

The United States and Latin America have a shared interest in building economic growth and development within the region. Where the United States is concerned, investment designed to strengthen and grow Latin American economies could offer an opportunity to increase regional trade and reduce the United States' economic dependence on China, a growing geopolitical adversary. Moreover, China's [recent investment initiative](#) in South America has strengthened its economic and political ties to the region. Providing a competing engagement program focused on building infrastructure that will boost Latin American prosperity will allow the United States to compete with China's influence in a meaningful way. Renewed investment



will allow Latin American nations to better pursue their economic growth, and post-COVID recovery, while taking advantage of the purchasing power of the United States consumer.

Latin American nations, however, have demonstrated [mixed interest](#) in increased United States involvement in the region. While some recognize that the United States presents a potential partner in combatting climate change, emigration, and drug trafficking issues, among others, many Central and South American leaders are reluctant to forgive the Trump administration's [derision and neglect](#) towards the region over the previous four years. The Biden administration will have to grapple with the consequences of the previous administration's unilateral and often unpredictable policies by building trust, transparency, and diplomatic reliability. Fortunately, the Biden administration is uniquely suited for doing so. President Biden's [experience](#) in Latin America, penchant for diplomacy, and avid support for multilateral cooperation should make it easier to pursue collaborative re-engagement.

The Biden administration's largest obstacle to re-engagement with Latin America may be the lack of domestic willpower for doing so. For the average American voter in the 2020 presidential election, domestic issues like the economy, healthcare, COVID-19, and the prevalence of violent crime [took precedence](#) over foreign policy concerns. The need for American policymakers to prioritize and address the economic, social, and health consequences of COVID-19 in the United States has made it difficult to justify increased spending on diplomatic programs and foreign policy objectives. If the Biden administration is to make foreign policy and re-engagement with Latin America a priority, it will need to clearly demonstrate the domestic value of such action.

Re-engaging with Latin America will serve to strengthen the United States' security, prosperity, and diplomatic relationships with its closest neighbors. Though the United States has a host of domestic issues that require attention, a renewed diplomatic relationship with Latin American nations provides an important opportunity for shared benefit by strengthening a relationship that has been underappreciated and underutilized for far too long.