

Not Critical, but Contested: Assessing the State of U.S. Influence in Latin America

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What is influence, and how do we measure it?

Influence consists of the ability to shape outcomes. U.S. influence in Latin America therefore consists of the U.S. ability to shape the regional climate, and specific countries' policies and practices, in ways that benefit American security and prosperity. I prefer to think of *influence* as being different than *power*, which resides mainly in the *capabilities* that a country can bring to bear on a given situation. Influence, rather, reflects the degree to which power (or capabilities) can be translated into specific, desired outcomes. Influence and power are closely related, but they are not synonymous.

When it comes to U.S.-Latin American relations, the level of influence that the United States exerts is a function of both structural and subjective factors. The structural factors include the relative levels of economic, military, or diplomatic power possessed by Washington vis-à-vis other countries, the level of economic or cultural integration between the United States and its regional neighbors, the salient ideological, economic, or geopolitical trends in the global environment, and so on—in essence, these are the factors that *cannot* easily be influenced by policymakers. The subjective factors include those factors that can more easily be influenced by policymakers, here or elsewhere: the degree to which the United States is *willing* to use its power in the service of specific outcomes, the degree to which Latin American leaders are willing to cooperate or resist, and others.ⁱ

Historically, the United States has sought to use its power vis-à-vis Latin America to achieve influence in both positive and negative terms. In a negative sense, the fundamental goal of U.S. policy in Latin America has always been *strategic denial*—preventing hostile powers, particularly great powers, from achieving a position in the hemisphere that would allow them to threaten U.S. security. In a positive sense, U.S. policymakers have sought to expand and sustain U.S. economic opportunities in the region, to promote specific political outcomes in Latin American countries (anti-communism during the Cold War, democracy since the late 1970s), to achieve closer diplomatic and security ties with regional actors, and to win regional support for broader U.S. foreign policy initiatives. Put broadly, the United States has sought to use its power to achieve a Latin America that is stable, politically and economically congenial to American aims, and consistent with U.S. security needs.

How, then, do we measure U.S. influence in Latin America? The roughest and easiest way would be to assess whether the outcomes that American policymakers seek have been achieved. One could, for instance, look at the level of U.S. investment in Latin American countries, the level of trade between Washington and its neighbors, or the overall level of economic integration. One could ask how broadly the sort of political arrangements that the United States seeks are represented in the region. One could assess the extent to which hostile or extra-regional powers are present in the Latin American political, economic, and security arenas. One could try to determine the degree to which Latin American countries see the United States as a security and diplomatic partner of first resort, or the degree to which they cooperate on votes in the OAS or the UN. One could also measure levels of anti-Americanism or admiration for the United States, as reflected in the *Latinobarómetro* survey or similar reports. Many of these tasks would yield answers that are subjective or imprecise, and those answers would certainly not be

purely a reflection of U.S. influence. But absent a better metric, they might provide a first-cut analysis of the level of U.S. influence in the region.

This is not to suggest, though, that measuring influence is an easy or well-defined process. Taken in its totality, influence remains a very broad and even nebulous concept, as demonstrated by the likelihood that three intelligent observers might well come to three very different conclusions about the state of U.S. influence in Latin America. What perhaps can be said about U.S. influence in Latin America is what Joseph Nye observed about security in East Asia. It is “like oxygen: you tend not to notice it until you begin to lose it, but once that occurs there is nothing else that you will think about.” Indeed, we tend to think most about U.S. influence in Latin America when challenges to that influence arise, or when it appears that our traditional level of influence in the region is contested or in decline.

What is the state of U.S. influence in Latin America?

The answer to this second question hinges significantly on one’s historical reference point, because the level of U.S. influence has waxed and waned over time. If the reference point is the immediate post-World War II period, when the bilateral power disparity was at its peak, when American policymakers were often willing to use that power energetically, and when the United States took the leading role in forging the modern inter-American system, then current U.S. influence appears to have declined markedly. If the reference point is 1979, when the United States had failed miserably to avert a Sandinista-led revolution in Nicaragua, when the Soviet-Cuban alliance was being revitalized, when Guatemala and El Salvador were veering toward the abyss, and when longstanding military-to-military relationships had been severely disrupted, then the current situation looks somewhat better by comparison.

For our present purposes, a useful reference point might be the end of the Cold War, around the early 1990s. I would say that this represents a high point in relatively recent U.S. influence in Latin America, and it is probably the comparison many of us have in mind when we ask if that influence is in decline. In the early 1990s, the situation in Latin America appeared quite favorable for the United States. There was no longer a meaningful extra-hemispheric challenge to U.S. security in the region. The region was undergoing, with substantial U.S. encouragement and sometimes pressure, a remarkable shift toward free-market (or freer-market, at least) policies reflecting the Washington Consensus. Democratic governance had also spread widely, often with substantial American support and encouragement. To be sure, Latin American countries were not uniformly following Washington’s lead diplomatically, there was often resistance to economic policies prescribed by the United States and the IFIs, the Central American wars had been a point of contention with many Latin American countries, and security cooperation was not nearly as robust across the region as it had been in the 1960s. But in general, Latin America seemed very much to be going Washington’s way, and the prospects for continued influence and cooperation seemed comparatively bright.

Since the early 1990s, however, there have emerged a number of trends that point to an increasingly contested environment for U.S. influence in the region. We have seen the rise of two very different types of challenges to U.S. leadership from within the region, in the foreign policies of Venezuela and Brazil. We have also seen a growing Chinese economic, diplomatic,

and (to a lesser extent) military presence in the region, which has raised questions about the long-run trajectory of American influence in Latin America. Another potential extra-regional challenge has come from Iran, although here the scope and danger of this phenomenon is hotly debated. (These internal and external challenges to U.S. influence are discussed at greater length in the next section.)

The political and economic climate in Latin America has also changed, often in ways that suggest declining U.S. influence. While democracy has proven more robust than some observers initially predicted, it has receded from its post-Cold War high point. This is particularly true in countries like Nicaragua, Bolivia, Venezuela, and Ecuador, where a strongly anti-U.S. strain of radical and quasi-authoritarian populism has taken hold. Similarly, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw an often-angry rejection of economic policies identified with the Washington consensus, and the reemergence in several countries of more statist, populist models explicitly aimed at reversing neoliberal reforms. More broadly, U.S. economic initiatives like the Free Trade Area of the Americas have run into strong resistance, while non-U.S. groupings like Mercosur or ALBA have often been touted as alternative centers of economic (and political) gravity for Latin American countries (even if the reality has sometimes proved disappointing compared to the promise). The trading and investment patterns of many leading South American countries have also become more diverse. Analysts who emphasize these various trends disagree on whether they are rooted in post-Cold War changes or simply represent a stage in a longer-term process by which Latin America is becoming more assertive and less dependent on the United States. They generally agree, however, that U.S. influence has fallen from early post-Cold War levels.

This is probably true in a regional diplomatic sense, as well. There have long been efforts to create Latin American institutions in which the United States would be less powerful (or simply not represented). In the past 10 years, however, these initiatives seem to have gained greater traction and visibility. Countries such as Brazil and Venezuela have spearheaded the creation of institutions like UNASUR, the South American Defense Council, and CELAC, from which the United States is excluded. These institutions are often portrayed as forums for shaping the regional agenda without large-scale U.S. participation, although the effectiveness of these institutions has sometimes fallen short of what has been promised. And moving beyond the institutional question, American policymakers have generally found Latin American support for major diplomatic or military initiatives (interventions in Iraq or Libya, for instance) harder to come by than it was in previous eras, such as the early Cold War. In this respect, too, U.S. influence seems to be on a downward trajectory.

And this is at least partially because U.S. *interest* in Latin America has also been on a generally downward trajectory since the Cold War.ⁱⁱ Because of the sizable power disparity between Washington and its Latin American neighbors, influence is often closely related to interest: the amount of attention Latin America receives from U.S. policymakers, and the degree to which they are really willing to mobilize American power, and commit American prestige and resources, to achieve specific outcomes. As Latin America has fallen down the ladder of U.S. geopolitical priorities since the Cold War (for some understandable reasons), the level of sustained and sufficiently-resourced U.S. engagement in the region has suffered, as well. There have been very important exceptions to this trend, of course, but the trend itself seems

evident enough. And while it may be a cliché to observe that the United States often “neglects” Latin America in the absence of crisis, it is true that declining or sporadic interest rarely correlates with great influence. More often, it opens voids or vacuums that challengers can exploit.

So it is safe to say that U.S. influence in Latin America has grown considerably more contested than it was at the beginning of the post-Cold War era. Does this mean that there is now a crisis of U.S. influence in the region, or that American influence is in critical or inexorable decline? There are reasons for real concern, some of which I will discuss in the following section. But it is also important to keep several mitigating factors in mind when thinking about the trajectory of American influence.

First, it is easy to exaggerate the level of influence that the United States had in the past, which makes the current situation look worse by comparison. Consider what expert observers were likely saying about U.S. influence in Latin America in 1933 (when FDR swore off military intervention in the region), in 1958 (when Richard Nixon was nearly lynched in Caracas), or in 1979. Most likely, they were lamenting the apparently marked decline of U.S. influence in the region. This is not to say that there are no challenges to U.S. influence today, or that we should simply assume that the situation will correct itself. But it is to say that U.S. influence in Latin America has never been as impressive as we sometimes remember it being, and so the present decline is probably not as sharp as it is sometimes portrayed. In other words, we should not view history through rose-tinted glasses.

Second, the United States is hardly powerless to affect the level of American influence in Latin America. Just as declining engagement can undercut U.S. influence or help foster challenges to that influence, increasing engagement can have the opposite effect. Indeed, while it is clearly an exaggeration to say that the United States has ever controlled the course of Latin American affairs, when Washington has engaged energetically and proactively, it has often been able to achieve positive effects in shaping the regional environment. What the United States elects to do (or not do) can have a real impact on the trajectory of American influence in the region. This has been true historically, and it remains true today.

Third, and related to the second point, if U.S. interest in Latin America has often been crisis-driven, so has Latin American interest in the United States. What I mean by this is that Latin American countries have historically been more solicitous of close relations with the United States when they perceive a significant threat or crisis. The reason that so many Latin American countries aligned with Washington against Havana during the 1960s, for instance, was that they perceived an existential threat from Cuban meddling and their own internal left. When that threat appeared to fade in the 1970s, the OAS consensus on Cuba broke down, provoking much consternation about declining American influence. In this sense, the current state of U.S.-Latin American relations may simply be a reflection of what appears to many countries to be a relatively benign security environment (by comparison to the Cold War or World War II eras, at least). In fact, it is almost certainly not a coincidence that those countries that *do* face major security threats—Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, for example—are the ones that have eagerly sought out expanded partnerships with the United States. The point of all this is that if

and when the going truly gets tough for Latin American countries, we may see a significantly greater desire for the sort of partnerships that conduce to greater U.S. influence.

Fourth, some of the challenges to U.S. influence are occasionally overstated. Yes, Brazil would like to displace U.S. influence in South America and much of the region, but its ability to do so is subject to constraints. Yes, Venezuela has strongly contested U.S. leadership since the late 1990s, but the peak of its effectiveness in doing so is probably past. Yes, Mercosur has often been treated as an alternative to U.S. economic hegemony in Latin America, but it is riven with internal disputes, one of its members (Uruguay) sent shock waves through the organization by considering an FTA with Washington, and the future of the grouping remains quite unclear. There are real challenges to U.S. influence in Latin America, but they should not be exaggerated—and overreacting to them can be just as dangerous as “underreacting.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Fifth, even with all the aforementioned in mind, the trends in Latin America are not wholly negative, and there are cases—not coincidentally, many of those where the United States has engaged most actively—where U.S. influence and engagement have increased in recent years. U.S. economic integration with Mexico and Central America has advanced enormously, due to NAFTA and DR-CAFTA. FTAs with Peru, Colombia, and Chile have also had positive effects, though here the impact has been less significant (owing largely to geography and newness), and the long-term effects remain fully to be seen.^{iv} But if one measure of U.S. influence is the ability to conclude agreements that link regional economies to the United States while also promoting the free-trade practices that Washington has long advocated, then this would appear to be an area of comparative success.

There are also instances in which U.S. influence on security issues has risen considerably. Plan Colombia not only facilitated a dramatic reduction of violence in that country; it also markedly increased U.S. interaction with the Colombian security forces (as well as other parts of the government), and created a much stronger strategic partnership. Likewise, while no one would celebrate the catastrophic narco-violence in Mexico and Central America over the past decade, one by-product has been to make possible a level of U.S. involvement and influence in the security affairs of those countries (particularly Mexico) that would have been difficult to imagine otherwise. There are obviously barriers that remain to greater U.S. involvement and influence, and the intensity of bilateral cooperation certainly decreased following the 2012 transition in Mexico. But if one measure of influence is increased security cooperation, then the medium-term trend has been fairly positive in Mexico and Central America (and the Caribbean basin more broadly).

This is only a rough and partial attempt at a net assessment of trends in U.S. influence. On the whole, though, it is probably fair to say that different trends cut different ways. The decline in U.S. influence in Latin America has not been as precipitous as some assessments would indicate, nor is it likely as inexorable as is sometimes made out. Moreover, there are areas in which U.S. influence has increased in recent years. Yet this should not lead to a Pollyannish view of the overall situation, because there are also important challenges to U.S. influence in the region, which at the very least require sustained attention from American policymakers.

What is U.S. influence in relation to key regional and extra-regional powers?

As noted above, one of the key challenges to U.S. influence in Latin America has come from a diverse collection of actors from both within and outside the region. The sharpest internal challenge has come from Venezuela, under Chávez and now Maduro. Chávez certainly aimed to undermine U.S. influence through ALBA, Petrocaribe, and numerous other initiatives, and his quest did real damage along the way. Chávez effectively polarized the region diplomatically and ideologically, and he provided a drumbeat of anti-U.S. rhetoric that appealed to latent Latin American resentment of the United States. He provided a model of confrontational, “anti-imperialist” leadership that was emulated by Evo Morales and others, and often succeeded in putting pro-U.S. leaders on the defensive. At the height of his influence, Chávez played a key role in blocking U.S.-led initiatives like the FTAA and creating alternative institutions like ALBA and UNASUR. He also provided a bridge for Cuban and Iranian involvement in South America, and his economic largesse allowed leaders in other countries to persist in unproductive economic policies and avoid dealing with IFIs where U.S. influence loomed large. In sum, Chávez’s policies had negative impacts for U.S. influence and interests in the region, and in a number of key areas the damage has outlasted Chávez himself.

The good news is that even before Chávez’s death, the worst of this challenge had passed. Despite fears that Chavismo might sweep the region, it remains confined (outside Venezuela) to a handful of mostly poor countries that are not exemplars for anything save bad governance. The Venezuelan model has had broadly pernicious impacts within Venezuela, and proved far less attractive to most Latin Americans than more democratic, centrist models in places like Chile, Brazil, Uruguay, and Mexico. On the diplomatic front, Chávez’s divisiveness ended up undermining many of his own diplomatic initiatives (such as his meddling in the Peruvian elections in 2006), making as many enemies as friends, and reinforcing the partnership between Colombia and the United States. To be sure, the region—and the United States—will be dealing with Chávez’s legacy for some time. But it seems as though the damage he caused has at least been somewhat contained, and the Venezuelan challenge no longer looks as dangerous as it once did.^v

The Brazilian challenge to U.S. influence, first under Lula and now Dilma Rouseff, is of a somewhat different nature. Brazilian diplomacy has been far more moderate than that pursued by Chávez, and in many ways it is less threatening, as well. For one thing, a U.S.-Brazil competition for influence is less of a zero-sum game than a competition for influence with Chávez, because Brazil and the United States do share a set of broad, common interests: the promotion and consolidation of democracy in Latin America, a stable regional climate, and others. (In fact, as I have discussed elsewhere, Lula’s diplomacy actually served as a check on Chávez’s regional influence in numerous key respects.) Second, the tensions in U.S.-Brazil relations over the past decade have been blended with cooperation on issues like biofuels, and American officials have often referred to Brazil as a model for the sort of political and economic system that they would like to see spread more widely in Latin America. Third, while Brazil retains immense geopolitical potential over the long-term, it nonetheless faces major obstacles to significantly increasing its regional influence. These include persistent economic weakness and social instability at home, mistrust and wariness on the part of many of its neighbors, divisions and fractiousness within Mercosur, unresolved dilemmas in Brazilian foreign policy, and the fact

that many of the regional initiatives that Lula and Dilma have supported—UNASUR, for instance—have had great difficulty effectively addressing the challenges put before them.

For all of these reasons, it is important to take a measured view of the challenge that more assertive Brazilian diplomacy represents. But taking a measured view also requires recognizing problematic issues as well as less threatening ones. The fact is that while there is a world of difference between Brazilian and Venezuelan foreign policy, Brazilian diplomacy over the past 10-15 years has very much been premised on the idea of increasing Brasilia's regional influence, and decreasing Washington's in the process. This is not a secret—it is a goal that is openly and proudly proclaimed. And while there are limits to Brazil's ability to do so, Brazilian officials have succeed in making life more difficult for the United States on a range of regional issues in recent years: counter-narcotics cooperation, military basing, the Honduran crisis, the controversy arising over the reactivation of the Fourth Fleet, and others.

More broadly, while there are areas of cooperation between Brazil and the United States, the reality remains that Brazilian officials have often defined that country's geopolitical identity explicitly in terms of contesting what is seen as the overweening role of the United States in regional affairs. (And certain aspects of the Brazilian foreign policy establishment, particularly the military, view the United States as a key threat to Brazilian national security.) This does not mean that the United States and Brazil are destined for some sort of regional cold war, or that elements of rivalry will inevitably overwhelm elements of collaboration in the relationship. But it does mean that the largest country in Latin America can be expected to continue seeking ways of reducing U.S. influence in the region, and that handling this complex and often-ambivalent relationship will be a real challenge in years ahead.

What about the problems posed by extra-regional actors, particularly Iran and China? While the Iranian presence in Latin America is often described in hyperbolic terms, that presence is genuinely concerning. Iranian-sponsored groups have demonstrated a capability to attack targets in South America before, and revelations of Venezuelan support for Hezbollah, and an apparently-Iranian sponsored plot to use Mexican drug traffickers to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States in 2011, are also troubling. Iran has also provided a source of political support, counterintelligence training, and in some cases economic backing for anti-U.S. leaders in Latin America, although the extent of these activities—particularly on the economic front—remains murky and subject to conflicting interpretation. Given Iran's limited resource base, and the fact that many of its Latin American relationships were highly personalized (such as the Ahmadinejad-Chávez tie, or the Ahmadinejad-Morales tie), Tehran seems unlikely to be a major, long-term rival for influence in the region. But Iran does certainly present a problem for American policymakers, as its presence in Latin America has marginally strengthened quasi-authoritarian, anti-U.S. regimes, and it could be used as a source or leverage or retribution in the event of a U.S.-Iran war or even a sharpened diplomatic crisis.

Finally, there is the growing Chinese presence in Latin America. In economic terms, China has become Brazil's largest trading partner, and its share of Latin American trade grew from less than 2 percent in 2000 to 11 percent a decade later, as the U.S. share fell from 53 percent to 39 percent. Chinese companies have invested in strategic sectors like ports, airports, and telecommunications, and the Chinese government has made "no-strings-attached" loans to

countries like Ecuador and Venezuela. High-level diplomatic and military meetings have increased. Chinese firms have sold aircraft, APCs, and other equipment to Latin American countries, military exchange programs have blossomed, and in addition to the PLA role in Haitian peacekeeping, minor joint exercises with Latin American militaries have been conducted. China's presence in the region is thus expanding across the board. The obvious question is how problematic this expanding presence is from a U.S. perspective.

In the near term, there is not yet cause for great alarm. Although the growth of Chinese military, diplomatic, and economic engagement over the past 10-15 years has been impressive, it has to be kept in mind that it started from a very low baseline. On the military front, there is little prospect of Latin American countries making a wholesale conversion to Chinese arms anytime soon, and Beijing will not have the global power projection capabilities needed to exercise true military influence in the region for many years if not decades. On the economic front, it is only natural that Latin American countries will seek greater commerce with what will likely soon be the world's largest economy. In certain ways, in fact, that commerce could actually redound to U.S. interests in the medium-term: if Latin American countries become more prosperous through trade with China, then that would further Washington's longstanding desire to foster the bases of lasting stability in the region. A similar argument could actually be made about PRC military engagement: if military sales and other forms of cooperation make it easier for Latin American countries to exert effective control of their national territory, that could help address security issues (drug trafficking, ungoverned spaces, etc.) of longstanding concern to the United States. And finally, while the China-Latin America relationship has progressed considerably in recent years, there remain key points of friction on issues like currency valuation. All of these issues argue in favor of taking a nuanced view of the growing relationship.

Over the long term, however, there are reasons for greater concern. An expanding Chinese economic presence in the region may, by creating more options for Latin American countries, correspondingly reduce U.S. leverage in trade negotiations, and undermine Washington's ability to push for free-market and free-trade policies. It may also help fortify illiberal regimes against pressures for political or economic reform by providing them with a conditionality-free source of loans, credit, and investment, and an alternative to engagement with the World Bank, the IMF, or traditional Western capital markets. (Indeed, Chinese lending and investment in countries like Ecuador and Venezuela since 2007 has helped shield those countries from pressures they would otherwise have faced, and thereby made it easier to sustain flawed economic policies and repressive internal practices.) Similarly, Chinese arms sales may complicate U.S. and allied efforts to limit military acquisitions by unfriendly Latin American regimes. And more broadly, if China eventually becomes more of a viable alternative security partner for Latin American countries—if arms exports, technology transfer agreements, military-to-military exchanges, and other such activities continue to increase significantly—then it stands to reason that U.S. influence on a range of security-related issues may weaken, too. These developments would not represent the same sort of dramatic challenge as the Cuban-Soviet relationship during the Cold War. But they could, more subtly, accentuate downward trends in Washington's ability to shape outcomes and influence the political and economic climate in the region.

To be clear, there is probably not a great deal that the United States can do (at reasonable cost, anyway) to directly arrest the spread of Chinese involvement in Latin America. What it can do, rather, is look for ways of protecting and strengthening its own engagement in the region. As discussed in the section that follows, the U.S. military will have a key role in any such effort to fortify American influence.

How does the U.S. military enhance U.S. regional influence, and what types of activities should be pursued to enhance that influence?

No one disputes that the U.S. military has long played a central role in preserving and enhancing American regional influence, but the full nature of that role is often misunderstood. Direct military intervention is, of course, the ultimate guarantor of U.S. interests and influence in Latin America, and has been for many years. Yet while these direct interventions have understandably attracted widespread attention—and left lingering resentment in many Latin American countries—arguably just as important have been other U.S. military activities in the region. Professional exchanges and professional military education, training and advisory missions, combined exercises and operations with regional partners: these and other components of a more “indirect” approach have long been relatively low-cost and high-impact ways of securing U.S. influence. They have allowed the United States to build partner-nation capacity with comparatively minimal levels of investment, to increase interoperability and enhance prospects for cooperation, to establish the personal and military-to-military ties that conduce to effective influence over long periods of time, and generally to help shape the regional security and political climate in subtle but important ways. Indeed, where U.S. influence has increased in recent years—in Colombia or Honduras, for instance, or in terms of fostering counter-narcotics cooperation more broadly—this sort of engagement has frequently been a central reason why.

These kinds of activities will be especially important to enhancing or preserving U.S. influence in the years to come. Budget constraints are a reality, on both the civilian and military sides. In these circumstances, low-cost and high-leverage approaches such as those mentioned above will necessarily be a key aspect of U.S. military engagement and U.S. engagement more broadly. Indeed, the fact that the U.S. military is well-resourced compared to civilian counterpart agencies will likely place even greater importance on military engagement, and further incentivize the ongoing tendency to take military engagement into what have traditionally been considered non-military domains.

My sense is that SOUTHCOM is already quite active in pushing this sort of approach, and that it is certainly not necessary to reinvent the wheel in this respect. In the spirit of constructive engagement, however, I will make a few suggestions—which are not meant to be definitive, detailed, or exhaustive—about what I see as areas or activities of particular salience.

- **Emphasizing personal relationships.** One of the major sources of U.S. military influence in Latin America has long been the personal, military-to-military ties that are formed through professional exchanges and education, training and advisory programs, and other such activities. During the Cold War, these activities helped foster a cohort of Latin American officers who had strong positive associations with the United States and their American counterparts, who had meaningful relationships

with U.S. civilian and military officials, and who thus represented key points of potential influence for U.S. policy. Forging these relationships is comparatively cheap in monetary terms, but it can provide an immense payoff for years thereafter. It can create windows into military institutions that are not already significantly engaging with the United States, and help lock in the gains made in relationships that have seen intensive engagement in recent years. To the extent that these activities can be emphasized within existing budgetary and other constraints, they offer a very useful vehicle for advancing U.S. interests in the short and long-term. To the extent that these activities erode, by contrast, they make it more difficult to replenish the extraordinarily valuable relationship capital that we have successfully formed in earlier eras.

- **Finding new areas of engagement and cooperation.** The regional security environment is constantly changing. That presents challenges for U.S. officials, but also opportunities to find new avenues of cooperation and influence. (Look, for instance, at the way that efforts to address drug-trafficking and narco-violence have led to significantly expanded security cooperation with a number of Latin American countries in recent years and decades, or the way that military engagement on issues like development has broadened relationships within the region.) To the extent that the U.S. military can identify emerging areas of overlapping interest—on climate and environmental issues, for instance, or in the realm of cyber defense—it can capitalize on evolving regional conditions to broaden and deepen American engagement. Cyber defense itself is a particularly contested subject right now, but there would seem to be complementarities of interest (with some countries, at least) that could be exploited in the medium or long-term.
- **Attacking the perception problem.** SOUTHCOM’s humanitarian engagement in Latin America has sometimes been criticized for treating short-term symptoms of problems rather than the deeper problems themselves. Yet this criticism misses the point. The U.S. military has a persistent perception problem in Latin America, stemming from the history of American interventions in the region. To the extent that the U.S. military can engage more directly with the Latin American population—and humanitarian missions, along with development projects, are perhaps the most direct way of doing this—they can help overcome ingrained biases and undercut lingering, negative perceptions of American involvement in the region. Indeed, I would wager that the people that have directly benefitted from U.S. military projects that build clinics or dig wells are probably not those criticizing the “militarization” of American policy in the region.
- **Strengthening strategic communication.** A corollary to the foregoing has to do with avoiding the misperceptions and misinformation that have occasionally clouded U.S. military activities in Latin America. The Colombian basing controversy in 2009-10, the dispute with Brazil surrounding the reactivation of the Fourth Fleet, and other instances have demonstrated that in a region where historical sensitivities about U.S. military activities are very real (and can easily be played up by politicians), a clear and proactive approach to strategic communications is essential. This is not to imply that faulty U.S. efforts have been solely responsible for previous controversies or misunderstandings; it is simply to underscore the reality that if military engagement is to be a key aspect of U.S. relations with Latin America—as it must—

then American military officials can never do too much to explain the nature and goals of that engagement, and dispel the misinformation or misperceptions that can easily occur.

- **Enhancing and emphasizing the positive spillovers from military engagement.** The old stereotype that U.S. military engagement abets—even causes—anti-democratic practices and human rights violations is both outdated and inaccurate, but it still persists in key quarters in both Latin America and the United States. Accordingly, it is useful to stress—both in practical and PR terms—that military engagement actually offers an excellent opportunity to strengthen the norms and values that American foreign policy should promote. As U.S. military officials have long understood, military engagement—whether in a training, advisory, or operational capacity—provides a vehicle for reinforcing respect for human rights and the rule of law with partner militaries, and fostering or reinforcing anti-corruption norms and practices. If these activities can be enhanced, they can potentially have even greater positive spillovers. If they can be publicly emphasized, they can help break down outdated misconceptions about the U.S. role in the region. Even better, if they can be emphasized by Latin American actors or individuals with significant credibility within the human rights community, the message will carry all the more impact.
- **Updating contingency planning.** There are relatively few realistic scenarios in which large numbers of U.S. troops would be inserted into Latin America in either a peacekeeping or a combat role today. But as the current crisis in Venezuela reminds us, there are some instances in which conditions in the region could deteriorate drastically, and on relatively short notice. What would the United States do in the event of civil war or dramatic instability in Venezuela? Even if a direct U.S. military role would be inappropriate, how would SOUTHCOM work with regional partners, or with other U.S. government agencies, to mitigate the consequences of such a scenario? These are questions that are best considered before the fact, even if the precise outlines of any such challenge cannot be fully foreseen.
- **Facilitate and connect the security exporters.** One of the most positive developments in Latin America of late has been the emergence of countries like Colombia and (to a lesser extent) Mexico as security exporters, able to provide other countries with the insights and lessons they have gained from battling internal security challenges. When the United States is able to facilitate these relationships—by making connections, playing matchmaker, providing introductions or forums for dialogue and cooperation—it enables the sort of activities that strengthen regional security at a very minimal cost. In times of budgetary austerity, such activities are all the more valuable.
- **Making the case for prioritizing Latin America.** There is a persistent paradox in U.S. relations with Latin America: it is the region that is arguably most important to American security and prosperity, yet one that generally receives sustained attention from policymakers only in times of crisis. (SOUTHCOM officials are presumably, quite familiar with the dilemmas that this paradox entails.) U.S. influence in Latin America has not yet reached a crisis point, but it is increasingly contested in ways that could have significant long-run consequences, and that could eventually cause the sort of crises that would require much heavier resource commitments. In these

conditions, engagement is best thought of as preventive medicine: a little more attention and investment now can help avoid a lot of grief down the road.

ⁱ A useful example is to compare the U.S. *inability* to prevent the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in 1979, with its success in preventing the FMLN from taking power in El Salvador in the 1980s. The structural determinants of influence did not change dramatically from, say, 1979, to 1981-82. But the *willingness* of U.S. policymakers to intervene strongly to achieve a certain outcome did change, quite significantly.

ⁱⁱ This is not to slight the “structural” factors that also account for declining U.S. influence—things like growing Latin American prosperity and (in some cases) stability, the diversification of trade patterns, and so on. But given that this is a policy paper, it seems relevant to emphasize the factors over which American policymakers have greater control. that this is a policy paper, it seems relevant to emphasize the factors over which American policymakers have greater control.

ⁱⁱⁱ It seems likely, for instance, that the Bush administration did Chávez a favor between 2002 and 2006 by talking up the Venezuelan threat to U.S. interests and by labeling him (as Donald Rumsfeld did) as part of a Latin American “axis of evil”—statements that simply played into Chávez’s characterizations of American “imperialism” and improved his ability to play the foil to U.S. policy in the region.

^{iv} U.S. difficulties in ratifying certain of the FTAs, particularly that with Colombia, also undercut some of the political and diplomatic effect that the agreements might have had.

^v To be clear, there is an equally important—but separate—question regarding Chávez’s legacy: the extent to which it may have primed Venezuela itself for a descent into instability or outright authoritarianism that could have significant ramifications for U.S. interests. This is obviously a key point of interest for U.S. policymakers, and one that poses real problems. There are relatively few levers that the United States can realistically pull to influence the internal situation in Venezuela. Possibilities include revoking visas or freezing assets of Venezuelan officials, but there are significant liabilities attached to even this relatively mild form of leverage.