

Beyond the Wall: What ‘America First’ Would Mean for Latin America

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“When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you...They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”

Far from traditional political convention, when Donald Trump utilized this rhetoric at the launch of his presidential campaign in 2015, shockwaves were felt throughout Latin America. Although the possibility of a Trump presidency seemed stunningly remote, many at the time wondered if his message—an extremist version of the then-Republican Party platform—would be gradually absorbed into the political mainstream. Now the official nominee of the Republican Party, only a brief sprint away from Election Day, Donald Trump has double downed on this rhetoric, indicating how a Trump Administration might handle relations with Latin America. Needless to say, despite tapping into some of the same populist concerns of the region, Donald Trump’s foreign policy would not only be disastrous to Latin America, but fundamentally at odds with the values and strategic priorities of the United States.

Immigration: The Wall and Other ‘Bigly’ Reforms

The topic of immigration has been at the center of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, finding home in an undercurrent of ethno-nationalism espoused by a large faction of his voting base. Given the number of outlets that have already written on Trump’s immigration policy, it seems prudent to not delve too much into the topic, but there are several points that need to be addressed to understand the intersection between “America First” and Latin America. Outside of calling for a reduction of refugees from majority Muslim nations and other areas of conflict, Trump has become best known for calling for the construction of an “impenetrable physical” wall along the border between Mexico and the United States (that Mexico will pay for, no less).ⁱ Additionally, he is suggesting the full deportation of the millions of undocumented immigrants currently residing in the United States. It is clear that this has already soured any potential relationship that a President Trump would have with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto. Shortly after Trump made a visit to Mexico to meet with him, Nieto not only reiterated his refusal to pay for such a wall, but also communicated that a Trump Administration would pose a threat to Mexico.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Nieto has since expressed his regret for staging a meeting with Donald Trump in the first place.^{iv} Former President of Mexico Vicente Fox has been even more vocal in his critique of

Trump's policy stance on Mexico, infamously saying, "'I'm not going to pay for that [***] wall!'"^v Should anyone still doubt the hostility between Trump and Mexico, they only need to be reminded, that less than two weeks after launching his campaign, Trump tweeted: "I love the Mexican people, but Mexico is not our friend."^{vi}

Fallout from the proposed wall project has far reaching consequences beyond just the relationship between Mexico and the United States, influencing the way other countries in the region perceive the United States. Case in point is Mauricio Macri, president of Argentina. Given his administration has reprioritized the country's relationship with the United States after years of criticism by the Kirchner Administrations, he has a vested interest in ensuring that a relationship is grounded in mutual respect and not open hostilities. In an interview with Buzzfeed, Macri said of the Clinton-Trump race, "I believe in relationships, in networks — we are, in fact, speaking with the world through a network — not in building walls."^{vii} More than just rhetoric, this shift towards a dialogue of hostilities is antithetical to engaging in productive discourse. Although Trump may believe he is putting "America First", what Trump fails to understand is that the strength of America, as reflected in our relationship with Latin America, comes not from the sticks we wield but from our ability to raise the standing of those around us.

It is for this same reason that his insistence on deporting millions of undocumented immigrants is so dangerous, especially as it concerns the stability of many Latin American economies. In addition to immigrants coming to the United States in order to make better lives for themselves, many of these immigrants also send remittances back to their home country in order to sustain their families at home that either cannot find work or that are unsupported by a social safety net. Often times, the same nations blamed for surges in undocumented migrants are also those most dependent on remittances from abroad. In 2015, remittance totals for Central American nations ranged from \$551 million USD in Costa Rica to \$3.666 billion USD in Honduras to \$6.587 billion USD in Guatemala.^{viii} Those represent roughly 1 percent, 18 percent, and 10 percent of GDP respectively, demonstrating that remittances often represent a significant part of the economy.^{ix} Despite criticisms that this money would have gone to American workers instead, the introduction of a workforce of immigrants has boosted wages for U.S. workers.^x Furthermore, there is plenty of evidence that remittances directly help the U.S. economy: "If families in Mexico use those dollars to buy things made in Mexico or elsewhere, then America has essentially gotten immigrants' services without paying anything tangible in return. If, on the other hand, families in Mexico use their remittances to buy things made in the United States, then American exports increase. Either way, the American economy wins."^{xi} To then say that these undocumented immigrants will be immediately deported, or that visas will be suspended for countries who refuse to accept deported individuals, would not only impact the economy of the United States, but it would also have a serious ripple effect throughout the region. Moreover, newfound instability in the economic situation for people in these countries will do nothing but drive immigration rates to increase even further. The impact that such a movement would have would far exceed that of the 2014 migration wave of children from Central America and bring about a regional clash as countries try to balance their prerogatives.

The Art of Destroying the Deal

As a part of Donald Trump's populist policy platform, he has openly embraced opposition not only to trade deals that the United States is currently a part of, but also to those currently being negotiated by President Barack Obama. The two most relevant to Latin America at the present time are the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) signed by President Bill Clinton, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiated by President Obama and still awaiting Congressional approval within the United States.

On the one hand, many of Trump's criticisms of free trade are representative of very valid concerns regarding the treatment of workers abroad and the impact that these trade deals have had on the welfare and employment of American workers. In the campaign for the democratic nomination for this year's presidential election, Senator Bernie Sanders (D-VT) said, "Instead of creating jobs, NAFTA cost us 850,000 jobs."^{xii} This critique of free trade is something shared by both the conservative and progressive factions within the American political scene, and common conversation surrounding NAFTA underscores a belief that the agreement has "[launched] a race-to-the-bottom in wages...[undermined] democratic control of domestic policy-making and [threatened] health, environmental and food safety standards."^{xiii} Moreover, Trump points to NAFTA as the source of the current trade imbalance between the United States and Mexico, suggesting that Mexico is taking advantage of the United States.^{xiv} He has repeated similar criticisms against the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which emphasizing that TPP will undermine our economy through increasing imported goods manufactured in Asia.^{xv}

The issue is not Donald Trump's opposition to trade deals, as there are many legitimate concerns regarding the secrecy of their negotiation or their anticipated impact on domestic economies. Nor is it a great concern that Trump would escalate trade policy into something tantamount to a trade war between nations. The principal issue with Trump's trade policy is his flagrant disregard for cooperation between nations and his perspective that everything is a zero-sum game; either the United States is winning or the other country is, and the latter—as he sees it—needs to be prevented at all costs. In suggesting that his administration would demand renegotiations of NAFTA at penalty of withdrawal, Trump has fundamentally threatened the good will that the United States maintains with these nations, playing into criticisms from abroad that NAFTA is a "neoliberal tool of imperialist gringos."^{xvi} Furthermore, it needs to be recognized that the president, under NAFTA's structure, has the authority to make this decision unilaterally without the hindrance of a system of checks and balances.^{xvii} NAFTA has written into itself a very simple withdrawal clause requiring nothing more than a written notice of an intent to withdraw for a country then to initiate that proceeding.^{xviii} Should Trump withdraw the United States from NAFTA, pulling out of a trade agreement for the first time in over a century, it is inevitably going to impact the way in which Washington can leverage its soft power in the region.

The same holds true as it concerns Trump's declaration of his intention to immediately withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership upon assuming the presidency. A recent analysis published by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) on the status of the TPP in the Americas found that the TPP is currently experiencing wide support across the ideological spectrum in Canada, Mexico, Peru and Chile.^{xix} However, the most imposing barrier to implementation remains the provision requiring ratification by enough nations to represent 85 percent of the GDP of all the signatories.^{xx} Given that the United States represents 57 percent of this figure, the future of the TPP rests largely on whether or not the United States commits to approving the accord. Should a Trump Administration proceed with the immediate withdrawal from this agreement without a conversation by the U.S. Congress, this decision would be perceived as a rebuke to the tedious negotiation process that is five years in the making and involves over forty percent of the world economy.^{xxi} In essence, there is a fundamental difference between withdrawing on the grounds of policy and withdrawing for the sake of withdrawing, as Trump is essentially doing. Regardless of the gains and losses of the TPP and its impact on nations, it is hard to imagine that immediately scraping a trade deal this expansive would be received cheerfully by allies of Washington. Moreover, it promotes a narrative that the United States is returning to a dark place in the history of Pan-American relations where Washington not only failed to recognize Latin American nations as equal actors, but constantly dismissed or bullied nations to implement pro-United States policies at their own expense.

From Good Neighbor to Bad Hombre

When Franklin D. Roosevelt began his tenure as president of the United States (1933-1945), his first inaugural address on Capitol Hill announced a pivot in the U.S. approach to foreign policy with Latin America. Known as the "Good Neighbor" policy, the United States was renouncing its history of intervention in the region from the Banana Wars (1898-1934) to Big Stick policy (1900) to Dollar Diplomacy (1909). In framing this shift, Roosevelt described the future of the United States as "the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others—the neighbor who respects his obligations and respects the sanctity of his agreements in and with a world of neighbors."^{xxii} In effect, the Good Neighbor policy of the United States was a turn towards isolationism on the premise that each nation should be treated as a sovereign entity and regional concerns could be arbitrated and discussed through diplomatic channels. From the contemporary perspective, this change in policy "[was] thus shown to be a new world policy based soundly upon mutual benefits and equal rights."^{xxiii} At the heart of this policy, therefore, was a profound respect for the governments of Latin America and a refusal to dismiss their agency.

Since then, the United States has never truly had an overtly isolationist foreign policy, in fact, frequently preferring to intervene in the name of protecting democratic ideals and the interests of the United States. The Cold War years are abundant in examples of how the United States has taken this approach, ranging from the Cuban Revolution to the Iran-Contra affair to the Washington Consensus. The Obama Administration, while not as interventionist as other administrations in recent past, has undeniably made significant strides to remain actively present in the region,

culminating in President Obama's visit to Cuba and Argentina earlier this year. Those sympathetic to the president suggest that "Obama is paving the way for the U.S. to be an influence in a region its history and ideological stubbornness kept it out of."^{xxiv} Those on the Left critical of him believe "the overriding objective of U.S. government regional policy is not mere destabilization but ultimately to guarantee access for U.S. corporate elites."^{xxv} Either way, Obama's foreign policy still maintains the residual spirit of the Good Neighbor policy, as seen through the signing of bilateral and multilateral agreements with the region, and not overtly interfering in the domestic affairs of other nations such as the Colombia-FARC peace negotiations. Like Roosevelt, the philosophical core of Obama's approach was grounded in respect and voluntary cooperation.

Under "America First," however, Donald Trump has made it clear that a rising tide does not measurably lift all boats and he is operating within an absolutist framework. In his major foreign policy address, he summed up his approach, saying, "We will no longer surrender this country, or its people, to the false song of globalism. The nation-state remains the true foundation for happiness and harmony. I am skeptical of international unions that tie us up and bring America down, and will never enter America into any agreement that reduces our ability to control our own affairs."^{xxvi} Tangibly speaking, this means a reversion to hostilities and the loss of forums to communicate about pressing issues. As it concerns Latin America, this includes a withdrawal from the rapprochement with Cuba unless his "demands" regarding their model of governance are met.^{xxvii} Moreover, it means "a new global deal that demands a kind of tribute paid to Washington for its defense umbrella—he wants them to 'prove' they are our friends, he says—[or else] he'd walk away from the world's trade table, so to speak."^{xxviii}

Extrapolated, Trump's rhetoric suggests a complete lack of commitment to any of our alliances in the region and more notably the international institutions through which the United States promotes its democratic values, such as the Organization of American States (OAS). A hardened realist, Trump fails to recognize the way in which soft power influences perceptions of the United States throughout the region, which inevitably impacts the willingness of these nations to cooperate with the United States on a wide range of projects from petroleum production to climate change to securing the Tri-Border Area. Encapsulating his inability to understand this was his remark during the third presidential debate that "we have some bad hombres here, and we're going to get them out."^{xxix} Beyond simply answering the question on his immigration proposal, Trump took the opportunity to infuse policy points with racist rhetoric, a move that will not get him far with Latin American leaders or their countrymen, as is indicative of what is to come.

America First to America Last

As the world waits with bated breath to see the results of the presidential election on November 8, the electorate of the United States needs to be cognizant of the impact that their decision will have on the fragile relationships that President Obama has been able to achieve after the damage done by the administration of President George W.

Bush. Should the American people decide to put “America First”, they should be mindful of the fact that a large contingency of Latin American populists would be comfortable with eliminating the active involvement of the United States within the region and therefore putting America last on their list of priorities. The election of Donald Trump may be the final piece that leaders of these coalitions need in order to rally people in favor of their cause and initiate a reconstruction of the power dynamics within the region. In this scenario, not only would the United States be unable to promote its values and strategic priorities, but nations such as China and Russia will quickly fill in the power vacuum that the absence of the United States would create. Should this come to pass, “Making America Great Again” will always remain at least an arm’s reach away from being realized.

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