



Whither the Monroe Doctrine?

Description

WORLD : As an immigration bill languishes in Congress, President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump's simultaneous appearances at the U.S.-Mexico border heightened the salience of border security.

The border crisis has yielded an unprecedented number of asylum seekers and migrants from across the globe, making it one of American voters' top concerns. However, despite the regional issue absorbing the public's attention, the United States is not fully executing a strategy for building security in the Western Hemisphere.

From a historical vantage point, the lack of a proactive strategy for securing the Western Hemisphere is disorienting. Since the republic's founding, the United States has strived to preserve regional stability and prevent foreign powers from intervening in Western Hemisphere affairs.

This aim, famously codified in the Monroe Doctrine, has resulted in infamous excesses and resounding successes. Nevertheless, the past fifteen years of inattention have nearly undone over two centuries of consensus at a dangerous time.

America's adversaries have noticed the neglect. To varying degrees, the despotic quartet of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea have increased their influence in the region. Most significantly, China has pursued diplomatic, economic, and military ties with Latin American countries at an alarming rate.

It has become the top trading partner for South America by signing up twenty-two countries for the Belt and Road Initiative and constructing dual-use facilities, not to mention exporting fentanyl precursor chemicals to Mexico.

In addition to trading with democratic countries, Russia maintains close security ties with Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, the autocratic trio perennially opposing the United States in the region.

In February, Russia thwarted a security assistance package to Ecuador, using its influence to great consequence for both South America and Europe.

Under the agreement, Ecuador would have received American weapons for President Daniel Noboa's campaign against gangs in exchange for old Soviet-made weapons that the United States would send to Ukraine for its defense against a Russian invasion.

After Russia banned Ecuadorean bananas imports, jeopardizing the \$800 million Russian market, Noboa canceled the deal.

North Korea, for its part, opened a new Nicaraguan Embassy, one of the select few permitted in Pyongyang, in its bid to strengthen relations with anti-American countries.

Iran, too, remains close with its autocratic allies in the hemisphere, especially Venezuela. Hezbollah, the Islamic Republic's proxy, continues to operate in South America, where the terrorist organization engages in arms dealing, narcotics trafficking, murder, and money laundering.

Like hostile foreign powers, transnational criminal organizations (TCO) pose a grave danger to the Western Hemisphere. In December 2021, Biden established the United States Council on Transnational Organized Crime (USCTOC) to replace the Threat Mitigation Working Group. The USCTOC coordinates a whole-of-government response to the threats of TCOs among six departments and agencies.

Among TCOs, drug cartels present the chief regional threat. Cartels contribute to the humanitarian catastrophe at the U.S.-Mexico border, along with violent crime, record-breaking overdoses, corruption, and unstable regional governance.

Worse still, Latin American countries face a daunting prison crisis in their efforts to combat organized crime and restore order. As prison populations increase and state funding dwindles, the inmates are running the prison: high-profile criminals luxuriate in the sanctuary while gangs actively recruit new members.

Other challenges brew across the region. Haiti teeters on the brink of collapse after two years of gang warfare that followed the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse.

The Haitian government desperately anticipates the arrival of a Multinational Security Support mission authorized by the United Nations Security Council.

In the interim, the United States has pledged to underwrite a mission by Kenyan police officers to assist the Haitian National Police and urged interim Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry to resign.

In Mexico, drug cartels intimidate and murder local political candidates to shape the outcome of the country's elections in June. In the oil-rich Essequibo region, the conflict over the area between Venezuela and Guyana has escalated.

The situation looks dire, but positive trends are nevertheless underway. Brazil will host the next G20 summit, a geopolitical reflection of a more optimistic outlook for the region, where democracy mostly prevails, trade and investment grow, and China does not yet dominate.

Foreign direct investment increased in 2022, and commodities prices will continue to rise, a boon to the region's economies. The United States can and should help nurture these encouraging developments.

Biden has acknowledged the problem of hemispheric security. His 2022 National Security Strategy outlined his political aims to "foster democracy and shared prosperity" through economic and security cooperation, emphasizing the Americas' importance to the national interest. Yet, how Biden has implemented his strategy belies the region's significance.

To counter China and promote economic integration, for instance, Biden created the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity (APEP), an eleven-country initiative announced at the 2022 Summit of Americas and further touted at the 2023 APEP leaders' summit in Washington D.C. Ambitious and well-intended, the APEP became more of a forum than a launching pad for binding agreements.

Latin American officials have not only doubted it, but members of the president's party have also criticized it.

Commitments may provide the first steps to solid agreements but do not materially advance policy. Biden previously encountered this dilemma when dealing with migration.

He tasked Vice President Kamala Harris with addressing the "root causes" of the Central American migration crisis, resulting in more commitments than solutions.

More recently, Biden negotiated the aforementioned immigration bill, which included aid to Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan but did not gain the requisite Republican support.

So far, the ways and means have proved insufficient for building regional security, not because the United States lacks the tools and resources but because it lacks the necessary will.

The United States retains the institutional capacity to foster greater regional security. The State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL) handles an active regional portfolio.

Fresh off an independent review, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has been revamping the agency's foreign operations to forcefully target the Sinaloa and Jalisco Cartels, which it categorizes as the top global threats to the United States.

The Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S) routinely conducts major interdiction operations, preventing tons of illicit drugs from entering America.

The JIATF-S, however, could make a more substantial impact if new legislation broadened its jurisdiction to include every sea route benefiting the cartels, not solely those between Latin America and the United States.

On Capitol Hill, Congress has not lost hope or abandoned the region. To astute observers, Latin America presents a "missed opportunity" for friend-shoring close to home.

The region can become an integrated bloc for automobile, critical mineral, pharmaceutical, and

semiconductor supply chains. The prospect for such economic engagement has assembled a bipartisan coalition.

Alongside Representative Maria Salazar (R-FL), Senators Bill Cassidy (R-LA) and Michael Bennet (D-CO) have proposed the Americas Trade and Investment Act, a promising plan for facilitating regional integration and potentially expanding membership of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA).

As the president and Congress recognize, the Western Hemisphere remains vital to the United States. If hemispheric security demands a whole-of-government approach, Congress must reestablish a bipartisan consensus.

Majority-dominated committees and subcommittees tackling disparate regional issues and the Republican-led Task Force on Drug Cartels should give way to a Select Committee on Hemispheric Security.

Here, the House Select Committee on China offers an exemplary model for how Congress can help the president address critical threats to the United States. The House Select Committee on China has raised awareness and provided policy recommendations for confronting the Chinese Communist Party.

By forming a similar select committee in either chamber, Congress could work in bipartisan concert with the president to develop a consensus on hemispheric security and offer recommendations for viable policies to ensure it.

In doing so, the United States can build even stronger cultural, economic, and military ties with the region for the betterment of over a billion people.

Although foreign policy entails trade-offs, failing to secure the Western Hemisphere is strategic malpractice. The United States must summon the will to prioritize the region in an increasingly dangerous world.

A good neighbor with good intentions for the region's security and sovereignty can safeguard its prosperity and peace and work toward stabilizing the world order that the United States guarantees. A little willpower can go a long way.

by Joseph A. Ledford

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