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Fluid Diplomacy: Harnessing Water Security for U.S.-Latin America Engagement

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Binary, zero-sum thinking has curtailed the ability of the United States to sustainably and comprehensively engage with Latin America. When American policymakers devote attention to the region, remnants of Cold War-era rhetoric have pushed Washington to pursue foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere that frames Latin American countries through the undescriptive and harmful prism of East/West. More often than not, historically tainted labels that come attached to this binary fail to recognize Latin American countries' agency. Consequently, the U.S. government lacks a consistent, cohesive, and effective Latin America strategy.

As the multipolar world order continues to crystallize and Latin American countries engage in active non-alignment, it is imperative that the United States reframe its relationship with the region. Despite the frustrations a non-aligned approach may give Washington, Latin American countries' strategies demonstrate the sort of flexibility that the United States should be embracing. Increased Chinese and Russian engagement with the region has raised concerns for U.S. leaders and policymakers. However, as it seeks to counter both powers' growing influence, Washington should actively avoid policies that would try to reproduce a bipolar world order. Bipolar, zero-sum framing, in which the United States and its allies (us) are pitted against China and/or Russia (them) and only one side can win, risks increasing the possibility of escalation and leads to weak partnerships with other nations that do not advance U.S. interests. Dividing the world on the basis of an "us vs. them" dichotomy is overly simplistic and ultimately counterproductive.

State maintenance in the 21st century will come to be defined by access to water. As such, this paper argues that collaboration on water security issues can help the U.S. government reframe its relationship with Latin America and aid in the mitigation of water scarcity. The latter is a complex and intricate "non-traditional security challenge."¹ Pursuing water security-related policies with Latin American partners will aid the United States in moving away from traditional, binary-thinking and increase diplomatic links to the region, while additionally providing new methods to tackle climate change.

Water scarcity's interconnected relationship to other crises will require policymakers to craft fluid and dynamic foreign policy abroad. Due to the impacts of globalization, there is no such thing as a localized water crisis anymore.

Situating Non-Alignment

The term “Non-Aligned Movement” (NAM) has re-emerged in recent years to describe Latin American countries’ navigation of foreign affairs and alliance-making in the 21st century. Although many viewed 1989—the ostensible end of the Cold War—as the logical conclusion of the NAM, the term still serves a descriptive purpose insofar as it points to the fluid nature of Latin American foreign policy-making. Today’s alliances are flexible, while political and economic loyalties are driven more by pragmatism than ideology.² As regional partners such as Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico pursue foreign policy goals that do not explicitly align with U.S. objectives, U.S. policymakers must seek to understand the reasons behind such pliability. Pursuing a strategy that would attempt to force Latin American allies to bend to the U.S. foreign policy agenda without considering the region’s concerns or desires will only further alienate them. Embracing the status quo’s multipolar reality will benefit the United States in the long run and prevent it from splintering an already strained relationship.

The conception and evolution of the NAM can be understood in the context of decolonization after World War II and during the Cold War. Its origins can be traced to the 1955 Bandung Asian-African Conference, wherein 29 countries assembled to challenge the Western colonial model and provide an opportunity for Third World voices to be heard on an international scale. The gathered nations raised issues related to human rights, sovereignty, and territorial integrity while focusing on non-interference in the affairs of sovereign states.³ The tenets expressed at Bandung came to be known as the building blocks of the NAM, even though they were not explicitly related to non-alignment.

The organization officially met again in 1961 at Belgrade, Serbia. Here, a diverse group of Global South states led by Yugoslavia, Egypt, and India agreed on the formation of a Third World response to the Cold War blocs.⁴ The aim of Belgrade was to voice a “third way” approach that moved beyond East/West bipolarity. Despite the fact that Cuba was the only Latin American country that actively participated at the first Belgrade Summit—Bolivia, Brazil, and Ecuador were observers—these ideas of non-interference and non-alignment gained traction in the region over time, though for different reasons.⁵ Latin America’s colonial past and the many U.S.

interventions in the region played a role in solidifying these positions. As of this year, 26 Latin American and Caribbean countries are members of NAM, which now has 120-member states. The three largest countries in the region, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, hold observer status and are not full-fledged members.

Understanding Non-Alignment in Latin America

As positions, non-alignment and non-intervention hold a valuable place in Latin American political calculations. This may be in part a result of the region’s history with U.S. military and economic intervention and the subsequent distrust Washington’s interventionist policy has generated.

Colossus of the North: American Intervention and Anti-Americanism

Since the early 19th century, the United States has considered the Americas its sphere of influence and has sought to pursue its own foreign policy objectives in the region through various avenues, including direct military intervention, economic coercion, and CIA-backed coups.⁶ The nearly parasitic bond between the United States and Latin America, which has manifested both explicitly and implicitly across time and space, has given rise to strong anti-U.S. sentiment in the region. Marcos Aguinis highlights some of the elements fueling anti-Americanism, which he argues include the annexation of territories from Mexico, interventions in Central American and Caribbean conflicts, support for coups and repressive military dictatorships, and economic policies that exploit natural resources, at times with the connivance of corrupt government officials.⁷

American Domination of International Financial Institutions

Another driver of anti-U.S. sentiment is U.S. domination of Bretton Woods institutions such as the World Bank Group (WBG) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The United States continues to have the largest voting share in the WBG and IMF, holding greater than 15% of the voting power, which grants it veto power in most cases.⁸ Japan, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, as well as other European countries and U.S. allies, hold more than 70% of all voting power in both institutions.⁹ Consequently, decision-making is concentrated in the hands of the developed world even though borrowers

are developing countries. This unequal distribution of power does not go unnoticed in Latin America.

WBG and IMF interventions are also known for exceeding the bounds of economic assistance and veering into the territory of policy reform. Although attaching certain conditions to loans is not an inherently negative practice, the ' historical role of the United States within these institutions has been controversial in Latin America. Beyond possessing informal veto power, U.S. interests are heavily favored in World Bank and International Monetary Fund loan conditions, a fact that has garnered the pro-austerity model the nickname of "the Washington Consensus."¹⁰ U.S. favoritism may prove challenging for Latin America as Washington's goals rarely align with the objectives of borrowing countries. From the borrower's perspective, these conditions can be costly intrusions into domestic policy which essentially challenge their internal sovereignty.¹¹

On a regional level, Latin America has suffered through cyclical debt crises that have necessitated heavy borrowing from the IMF and WBG. As of 2020, Latin America and Caribbean public debt totaled \$3370B.¹² As many nations find themselves unable and/or unwilling to engage with the structural change associated with WBG and IMF borrowing schemes, backlash to these institutions and their agendas has inspired the rise of populist leaders. IMF-backed austerity, for example, triggered waves of mass anti-neoliberal mobilization across the region which eventually led to presidents like Bolivia's Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, who had adopted IMF-imposed policies, to flee from office.¹³ A combination of Washington's influence within these institutions and their overall lack of popularity may incentivize Latin American countries to borrow from alternative institutions.

Anti-neoliberal sentiment in the region, however, is not new. Although distinct across the board, from the end of the 20th century to 2005, leftist governments in Latin America rode the anti-neoliberal wave to power. Since President Hugo Chávez's victory in Venezuela in 1998, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala elected left-wing leaders who ran on platforms promising to reverse "the damage of two decades of devastating neoliberal structural adjustment policies."¹⁴ Colloquially known as the "pink tide," Latin America's pivot and challenge to the Washington Consensus model required American foreign policy decision-makers to adapt.

These leftist governments were far more skeptical of the United States than the initial governments that came following democratic transitions in most major South American countries.¹⁵

The Pink Tide Exerts its Influence: The Cuban Thaw

During President Barack Obama's administration, this became apparent in relation to the question of Cuba. The normalization of relations between the United States and Cuba manifested, in part, due to pressure exerted onto the United States from Latin American leaders. By 2012, President Obama faced a solid body of Latin American presidents no longer willing to passively accept Washington's policy of indiscriminately isolating Cuba.¹⁶

Challenges to the American foreign policy strategy grew as Cuba's reintegration in the world stage morphed from a symbolic issue into a serious threat to U.S. relations with Latin America.^{xvii} The Obama Administration recognized the importance of the region's concerns and in 2014, adopted a new policy toward the island nation which prioritized diplomatic engagement. Across five Latin American countries—Chile, Argentina, Venezuela, Brazil, and Mexico—a median of 77% of those surveyed approved of the U.S. reestablishing diplomatic relations with Cuba.^{xviii} Much of the efforts and progress of the Obama years on Cuba were discarded by the Trump Administration.

Outdated Cold War-Era Rhetoric and its Consequences

It is now time to choose active reengagement with Latin America. Latin American leaders are decisively steering clear of attaching themselves to positions contingent upon East/West bipolarity, engaging in what Chilean scholars Jorge Heine and Carlos Ominami have labeled as the "active non-alignment option."¹⁷ This choice exemplifies countries participating in the rawest form of *realpolitik* as they pursue objectives that, first and foremost, align with their own national interests, even if it puts them at odds with the United States. The region's countries' responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 demonstrate efforts to pursue active non-alignment.

The United States, hoping to present a unified front against Russian aggression, wrongly assumed that Latin American countries would adopt the West's stance of absolute condemnation. This assumption, fueled by the type of historical precedent created

through mandates like the Monroe Doctrine and Cold War-era regime change efforts, led to shock and blowback in Washington when Brazil opted to be a neutral mediator in the conflict. Although Brazil has expressed sympathy with the Ukrainian cause on the basis of upholding national sovereignty, Brazilian President Lula da Silva has accused the West of “encouraging” war by arming Ukraine.¹⁸ His rhetoric speaks to Latin America’s general attitude toward the conflict. Lula’s comments around the war, which hold both Russia and Ukraine responsible for the ongoing conflict, sparked condemnation from the U.S. government, which claims that Brazil is “parroting Russian and Chinese propaganda.”¹⁹

Yet, no amount of pushback from Washington has led Brazil to budge on its position of neutrality. The region, in broad terms, has been reluctant to take clear-cut sides and persistently urges Russia and Ukraine to resume diplomatic dialogue to solve the conflict.²⁰ As of today, no Latin American country has adopted sanctions against Russia related to the conflict.²¹

This logic of non-alignment does not merely pertain to issues directly related to great power struggle. Latin American frustration with rigid U.S. foreign policy can additionally be observed with the ongoing conflict in Gaza. Washington’s indiscriminate support for the Israeli government stands in stark opposition to Chile and Colombia’s recalling of their ambassadors to Israel and Bolivia’s decision to sever diplomatic ties with Israel.²²

Active non-alignment showcases an acceptance of multipolarity by Latin America. Globalization has transformed the post-Cold War unipolar system wherein the United States once reigned nearly supreme, into a multipolar system.²³ In other words, international clout has been thoroughly diffused and now lies in the hands of multiple actors including, but not limited to, the United States, Russia, and China.

Despite President Biden’s affinity for reproducing rhetoric reminiscent of the Cold War era (namely his emphasis on a global struggle between democratic and autocratic countries), the status quo is not a bipolar system. The U.S. no longer holds the level of military and economic power it did during the early decades of the Cold War, while simultaneously China does not match the Soviet Union at its peak.²⁴ Embracing multipolarity means recognizing the dynamic nature of power. There is no such thing as a forever hegemon.

Ideologically charged and heavily militarized,

American foreign policy during the Cold War destabilized Latin America. With its goal of Soviet expulsion from the Western Hemisphere, the U.S. pursued interventionist policies that harmed Latin American countries, U.S.-Latin American relations, and U.S. national interests. If the Biden Administration continues to frame foreign policy through rigid binaries, it will fall prey to the type of mistakes made by past U.S. administrations in the region.

China and Russia in Latin America

Latin America’s experiences with European colonialism and U.S. interventionism partially inform the region’s pursuit of active non-alignment, but alone are not enough to explain status quo conditions. Latin America’s embrace of pragmatism and flexibility in foreign policy can additionally be understood as a byproduct of increased Chinese and Russian engagement in the region. While China favors a predominantly economics-based approach to Latin America, Russia has been focusing heavily on creating interregional ties through media and information systems.

No String Attached? Chinese Investment in Latin American Economies

China’s interest in the region is both opportunistic and strategic. Latin America has tended to be on the backburner in U.S. policy calculations outside the prism of the Cold War.²⁵ This created a vacuum that China has been more than happy to fill. Today, China is one of Latin America’s most important partners.

Chinese representatives have described the mutual benefits of Latin America-China relations as a “win-win” situation.²⁶ Through this framing, China has managed to increase its presence in the region. In the last 20 years, trade between China and Latin America has grown by 2600 percent; as a result, China is now South America’s main trading partner and the second-largest to Central America.²⁷ Currently, 22 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) have signed numerous memoranda related to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).²⁸ And in 2022, LAC trade with China rose to record levels with LAC exporting roughly \$184 billion in goods to China and importing an estimated \$265 billion in goods.²⁹ China’s trade is expected to reach \$700 billion by 2035, on par with the current level of U.S. trade with the region.³⁰

This has been accompanied by rapid growth in loan commitments to the region made via Chinese-owned

institutions. Chinese state banks such as the China Development Bank (CDB) and the China Export-Import Bank (CEIB) have become the greatest creditors in the region, surpassing international organizations such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).³¹ Between 2005 and 2022, LAC countries borrowed a cumulative \$136.5 billion, most of which was directed at the energy and infrastructure sectors.³² These high levels of investment and returns signify a deepening of relations between China and Latin American nations, even with those who may have once opposed Chinese influence on the basis of aligning closer to the West.

Chinese investment in the region has been described as coming with “no strings attached.” This has been used to argue for a move away from U.S.-centered engagement, as China often does not include structural reform-related conditionality into loan schemes. Although China steers clear of condemning a particular nation’s human rights record and does not attempt to inject institutional change into trade agreements, this does not mean that Chinese investments do not possess their own brand of diplomatic baggage. Studies have demonstrated that China uses BRI funding as an incentive for states to toe Beijing’s line.³³

One example pertains to China’s efforts to shape the region’s countries’ stance on Taiwan. Seven out of the 12 countries that recognize Taiwanese national sovereignty are in Latin America and the Caribbean. These numbers have slowly dwindled as Beijing carefully coaxes LAC partners with economic incentives. Since 2017, Panama, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador have severed ties with Taiwan and established diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China.³⁴ In March 2023, Honduras broke relations with Taiwan and, in August, as part of the Central American Parliament voted to oust Taiwan as a permanent observer and replaced it with China.³⁵

In contrast to Western countries, which have overtly used sanctions and other forms of economic coercion, China has publicly denied such policies while simultaneously quietly pursuing them.³⁶ Italy, formerly a recipient of BRI funds, has recently withdrawn from the initiative on the basis that it “has not produced the results that were expected.”³⁷ This might be a sign that BRI countries are recognizing that China’s investments come with a price that they may not be willing to pay. It will be key to maintain an eye on

other BRI countries and observe whether further down the line, they retreat from the initiative.

Et Tu, Brute? Russian Media Campaigns in LAC

Russia, on the other hand, has embarked on an influence campaign that largely centers around media systems. Despite its shared history with Latin America, after the Cold War, the Russian government under President Boris Yeltsin did not prioritize the region.³⁸ This began to change in the late 1990s with increased visits of Russian government officials to several Latin American countries.³⁹ This may be a result of the ever-strained U.S.-Russia relationship.

Given the deterioration of relations between Moscow and Washington, Latin America has regained importance in Russian geopolitics.⁴⁰ Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela are Russia’s closest allies in the region, while Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico have, over time, strengthened their relationships with the Kremlin. With the goal of amplifying existing anti-U.S. sentiment, the backbone of Russia’s approach to Latin America has been media systems.

RT en Español, the Spanish-language version of Russian state-owned *RT*, (formerly known as Russia Today) has significant popularity in the region. In 2018, *RT en Español* claimed an audience of 18 million and social media accounts with more than 25 million followers.⁴¹ The Venezuelan-owned *TeleSur* has also played a key role in spreading the Kremlin’s messaging. Started under Hugo Chávez’s administration in 2005, the TV station has become a bridge that connects the Russian disinformation apparatus to Latin America. No medium has been a more important force for the peddling and amplifying of Russian narratives in the region than *TeleSur*.⁴² Efforts to disrupt Western narratives through traditional media channels and social media intensified after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Russia’s Economic Engagement in Latin America

Compared to China, the Kremlin has limited financial resources. As such, its economic targeting has been more incisive. Prior to the start of the war, Russia-Latin America trade accounted for a mere 0.64 percent of Latin America’s total trade.⁴³ However, when it comes to particular products, Russia accounts for an important portion of certain countries’ exports. Brazil and Argentina, for example, import a fifth

and a tenth, respectively, of their fertilizer from Russia.⁴⁴ For Brazil, this is equivalent to 9 million tons of fertilizer.⁴⁵ As both nations rely heavily on their agricultural sector for economic growth, any disruptions to their fertilizer supply chain could lead to a severe economic downturn.

In March of 2022, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay even went so far as to propose the exclusion of fertilizer from Western sanctions on Russia.⁴⁶ Ultimately, this request has held steadily to this day, as EU sanctions exclude food and fertilizer.⁴⁷ The South American countries' petition signals to the West that when it comes to certain issues, they will rally to counter Western pressure, particularly when their economic interests align with Russia's.

Implications of Chinese and Russian Influence for the United States

If foreign affairs were a regional popularity contest, the United States would be losing in Latin America. As a result of Western indifference and ambiguous U.S. foreign policy—combined with growing Chinese and Russian engagement with the region—the U.S. sphere of influence has been severely undermined.⁴⁸

The Biden Administration's attempts to engage with Latin American countries have ultimately fallen short due to a lack of a cohesive or unified regional strategy. In November 2023, President Biden hosted the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity (APEP) Summit in Washington, D.C. with the goal of bolstering regional competitiveness and mobilizing investment.⁴⁹ Albeit a sensible platform for engaging with leaders from Barbados, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Uruguay, the Summit failed to address many of the structural drivers of Latin America's continued involvement with Chinese investment schemes. Even as it includes launching a new investment platform to channel funding into sustainable infrastructure such as clean energy networks, APEP does not mention regulatory reforms aimed at mitigating unfair treatment by both financial institutions and multilateral lenders like the IMF. It additionally does not include one of the largest players in the region: Brazil.⁵⁰ Some have noted that the plans outlined under APEP commitments reveal an outsized role ascribed to the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). This offshoring of responsibility could potentially prevent the U.S. from directly engaging with Latin American leaders.

U.S. approaches to LAC are disjointed, sporadic, and isolated. The lack of an underlying, sustained policy as it relates to Latin America has created a reality wherein the country is not even entirely sure of what it wishes to do beyond curbing Chinese and Russian influence in the region.

Additionally, the economic displacement created by China is linked to a visible decrease in U.S. soft power/influence which could hinder the country's ability to pursue cooperative projects with other nations in the region. At the UN Human Rights Council, countries in Latin America and the Caribbean that experienced economic displacement by China tended to align less frequently with the United States, voting differently than Washington more than 30 percent of the time, compared to just 2 percent for countries more reliant on the United States economically.⁵¹

China's economic investment in Latin America has also been accompanied by public diplomacy campaigns that elevate Latin American countries, at least rhetorically and linguistically, to the level of partner. Partners are, in theory, equal, and through a framing of the relationship as a "win-win" situation for both parties, China is speaking to an element of the U.S.-Latin American relationship that the U.S. government has been neglecting for years: articulating how regional countries concretely benefit from the partnership. The Chinese diplomatic efforts have paid off in a number of countries such as Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela where surveys have concluded that Beijing scores more favorably than Washington in terms of its image.⁵²

Although not ideal for the United States, China and Russia's positioning in Latin America may well be the wake-up call the country necessitates. It is time for the U.S. government to consider Latin America beyond the theoretical bounds of a new Cold War. Discontent over the region's swelling relationship with China and Russia indicates that U.S. officials recognize the importance of Latin America in foreign policy calculations. The Pentagon considers China a "pacing challenge" and Russia an "acute threat" and describes their activities in the region as a challenge to Washington's own "backyard."⁵³

This type of framing is inherently erroneous, if not downright patronizing, and will only serve to trap the United States within a binary of East/West that is no longer reflective of status quo conditions. Through this reaffirmation of the American belief that Latin

America is merely a backyard, which attaches a set of normative standards that ultimately deny the region any agency, U.S. officials run the risk of continuing to alienate Latin American nations. Reframing the relationship is critical to ensure that the United States is in conversation with partners that can help mitigate serious existential challenges such as climate change.

Growing Chinese and Russian influence in the region is concerning for the United States insofar as it might push foreign policy decision-makers to embrace hardline approaches that create a self-fulfilling prophecy of escalation in which neither side feels compelled to back down. A similar logic occurred during the Cuban Missile Crisis. Through a series of avowedly defensive actions, such as American missile deployments in Turkey and assertions of strategic superiority Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and American President John F. Kennedy made their fears of an acute confrontation self-fulfilling by ultimately pushing the other to escalate.⁵⁴ Although conditions clearly differ between the Cold War and the status quo (and it is important to note that historical analogies contingent upon allusions to the Cold War are both lazy and harmful), the self-fulfilling prophecy example is a helpful analytical tool. Based on American, Chinese, and Russian rhetoric, it is clear that escalation might become perceived as inevitable and security spirals may ensue.

The United States needs to accept that if it is not offering sustainable and enticing alternatives, Latin American countries will feel compelled to continue engaging with China and Russia in a way that could diminish the United States' own ability to cooperate with the region. It is time to both renew and reframe the conversation, and water security issues provide a viable method to do just that.

Water Scarcity in the United States and Latin America

Water accessibility is becoming an epochal concern. More than 2 billion people around the world live in countries where the water supply is inadequate and by 2025, half of the global population could be living in areas facing water scarcity.⁵⁵ Water insecurity is defined as inadequate or inequitable access to clean, safe, and affordable water for drinking, cooking, sanitation, and hygiene.⁵⁶

The consequences of diminished access to water are far-reaching and will have lasting impacts spanning multiple generations: life-threatening food

shortages, surges in displaced people, resource wars, debilitating health crises, and destabilizing economic stagnation. Water stress affects all facets of life and has additionally been linked to conflicts in Syria, Sudan, and the La Chad Basin.⁵⁷ Water's connection to conflict is deeply concerning, as mounting temperatures will continue to strain the capacity of states to provide citizens access to clean and safe water sources. Dangerous competition may consequently arise. In July 2023, the Earth reached its highest average temperatures in recorded history, and climate scientists have added that it may have been warmer than at any time in the last 125,000 years.⁵⁸ Unless seriously and comprehensively addressed, water security will come to define state maintenance in the twenty-first century.

Water is at the very heart of human existence and as a result, many assume an innateness that is not guaranteed. Access to water is intrinsically linked to a country's capacity to provide food, energy, and sanitation services to its citizens. Because of its intimate relationship with the latter elements, scholars have introduced the Water-Energy-Food (WEF) Nexus. This tool demonstrates how the production and consumption chain of water, energy, and food resources are intricately connected.⁵⁹ Under the Nexus approach, water, energy, and food are hyper-connected as impacts in one sector affect the performance in others.⁶⁰

This interconnectedness means that a disruption in one sector creates a domino effect with disastrous consequences. Empirical and predictive data showcases the central role water plays in both propagating existing and creating new crises. These crises will become harder to combat as the growing frequency of extreme weather events, alongside increasing global average temperatures, will put further pressure on infrastructure and water resources.⁶¹

In the United States, more than 2.2 million Americans live without access to running water or basic plumbing.⁶² This is disproportionately affecting already vulnerable communities. Research has concluded that levels of water insecurity vary across regions, race, and income level as "people living on American Indian reservations are far more likely to experience plumbing poverty (incomplete connection to hot and cold water, flush toilets, and bathing facilities), a number of Black and Hispanic individuals are not connected to piped water, and those with lower incomes are more likely to be serviced by water systems with greater contamination violations."⁶³

In 2022, the Biden-Harris Administration launched

the White House Action Plan on Global Security, underscoring both the U.S. government's awareness of water insecurity as a national security risk and the country's strategies for mitigating its devastating effects. The Plan posits: "As the world becomes increasingly water insecure, the significance of water security in U.S. foreign policy and national security goals is coming into sharper focus."⁶⁴ The Action Plan establishes a solid foundation upon which subsequent administrations must continue to build. The United States has recognized the dangers and consequences of water scarcity; it is time to take this acknowledgment into the realm of tangible action and multilateral cooperation.

Latin America and the Caribbean

Latin America and the Caribbean have the largest freshwater resources per capita, yet a third of the region's population is cut off from sustained access to drinking water.⁶⁵ A quarter of its population, 150 million people, lives in water-scarce areas.⁶⁶ These levels of water insecurity are not monocausal and have been further accelerated by climate change. The White House highlights that "16 of Latin America's largest cities are 'water-stressed,' and its three largest cities—São Paulo, Mexico City, and Lima—are at risk of running out of water."⁶⁷ Nearly 5.8 million people from Latin America and the Caribbean could fall into extreme poverty by 2030, largely due to a lack of safe drinking water, as well as increased exposure to excessive heat and flooding.⁶⁸

In the Northern Triangle, which includes Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, sudden water level increases and corresponding floods led to the displacement of more than 48,700 people in 2019, and it is predicted that global warming will cause a 30-87 percent decrease in regional crop fields by 2100.⁶⁹ South America, on the other hand, has been facing prolonged and acute drought conditions since 2019. This has led to severe vegetation stress and a sizable reduction in the region's glacier ice cover. It is estimated that the multi-year drought event experienced in Latin America has contributed to the loss of 30-50% of glacier ice cover in the Andes while others have fully disappeared.⁷⁰ These realities intersect to reduce crop yields and hamper hydroelectric power generation. The region is responsible for 14% of global agricultural production and is the world's largest net exporter of food,⁷¹ while about 45% of its electricity comes from hydroelectric plants.⁷²

Extreme weather events in Latin America have ripple effects that stretch far beyond national borders, as production losses in the region impact global food markets and global food security.⁷³ Climate change-based displacement compounds these effects. As a result of global warming, hurricanes, floods, and droughts are becoming more frequent in Latin America and it is estimated that 17 million people could be forced to flee their homes.⁷⁴ When it comes to water access, there is no such thing as a localized water crisis.

The United States must be aware of the type of spillover effect that can take place when water crises happen in Latin America as these will affect global food, health, and immigration systems. An analysis made with the aid of the WEF Nexus framework makes this apparent and further highlights the devastating consequences of possessing a weak link within the Water-Energy-Food structure. As the capacity of states to ensure access to water, energy, and food becomes ever more strained, water will take center stage. The United States cannot keep waiting in the hemispheric wings.

Active Reengagement with Latin America: The Case for Water Security

Political will to pursue water security-related projects exists in the United States; the issue is simply a matter of tapping into it and redirecting it toward Latin America. In Southeast Asia, for example, Washington has been working closely with partner countries in the region to combat water scarcity through Water Smart Engagements (WiSE). Launched in 2018, this joint effort pairs the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries (Brunei Darussalam, Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) and U.S. cities to strengthen water security in Southeast Asia through the exchange of knowledge, industry practices, and private sector engagement with water utilities and/or management districts.⁷⁵ Water security projects have also aided in strengthening U.S.-Japanese relations. Through a collaborative framework that acknowledges water security as a priority in Southeast Asia, some Japanese cities are engaged with municipal cooperation for water supply using sister cities relationships in the United States.⁷⁶ The Mississippi/Mekong "Sister Rivers" cooperation is currently taking place in the Mekong, where U.S. expertise on transboundary water disputes has been transferred.⁷⁷ It is clear that the United States possesses both a will and

an ability to pursue water security projects abroad.

On a regional level, several Latin American countries are engaging with water security initiatives to tackle challenges associated with water access. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean's (ECLAC) launch of the Regional Network and Observatory for Water Sustainability (ROSA) project signals a serious commitment from Colombia, Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, and Panama to strengthening regional and territorial water cooperation.⁷⁸ The Regional Water Dialogues for LAC is another indicator of both concerns related to water access and various strategies regional experts propose to tackle water scarcity. The talks, which happened in February 2023, saw the participation of more than 20 countries in the region including Mexico, Costa Rica, Trinidad and Tobago, Peru, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, Honduras, and Panama. One of the projects highlighted by the speakers demonstrates regional willingness and ability to cooperate with other countries on water security-related schemes. In 2021 and 2022, an exchange and knowledge-based alliance between Argentina, Mexico, Italy, Brazil, and Kenya allowed for the implementation of education and cooperation projects for comprehensive and equitable water management, especially in rural areas.⁷⁹ The type of knowledge and people exchange that has been generated by the aforementioned initiatives has been vital in creating stronger ties between Latin American and partner countries.

Engaging in climate diplomacy across the Western Hemisphere is thus key. This type of diplomacy underscores the importance of strengthening diplomatic networks, building new partnerships, and raising awareness to combat climate change-related threats.⁸⁰ Further cooperation with Latin America as it relates to water security can provide a path to strengthen the hemispheric partnership. It is key that Washington moves away from the militarized interventionist approach that has, for decades, underscored U.S. foreign policy in the region. Water security collaboration provides an avenue and a space where the U.S.-Latin America relationship can be reimagined.

Recommendations

Embrace Multipolarity

Instead of fearing the multipolar world, the United States must embrace it. By trying to organize a

group of as many countries as possible in opposition to China—and by extension, Russia—the Biden Administration risks weak partnerships built on lowest common denominator interests.⁸¹ This practice also runs the risk of alienating potential partners as it frames every issue through a rigid, static, framework that leaves little room for further interpretation. Pursuing policies on the basis of binary, zero-sum-thinking is limiting and creates foreign policy scenarios where escalation with either China or Russia appears to be preordained and inevitable. Bipolarity additionally curtails the type of partnerships that the United States can build with Latin American nations, as Cold War binary thinking presents LAC countries through a lens that is no longer reflective of status quo realities.

Operating under a strategy of bipolarity cages policymaking within a fixed and stagnant prison. Recognizing multipolarity and learning to navigate it highlights the dynamic nature of power and allows nations to work with the type of flexibility that is required for successful foreign policymaking in today's rapid, ever-changing world.

Create a Long-Term Strategy for Latin America

For several decades, the United States neglected Latin America and focused its major foreign policy efforts on other regions.⁸² In the absence of a cohesive U.S. strategy for Latin America, China and Russia have grown their presence in the region. If the United States wishes to counter this influence, U.S. leaders and policymakers should prioritize crafting a sustained strategy aimed at the region, instead of relying on isolated initiatives to generate conversation with Latin American countries (such as the APEP Summit). The strategy should focus on reframing the relationship as a “win-win” situation that opens and generates, as opposed to restricts and curtails, interregional exchange. A strategy for countering China and Russia that is heavily focused on imposing costs on adversaries and denying access to markets or communities will run the risk of alienating Latin American countries.⁸³

Focus on Climate Diplomacy in the Western Hemisphere

As a non-traditional security concern, water security provides an opportunity for the United States to reframe its relationship with Latin American nations. Non-traditional security challenges are “challenges

to the survival and well-being of peoples and states that arise primarily out of nonmilitary sources, such as climate change.”⁸⁴ During the Cold War, U.S. policy toward Latin America was heavily militarized and ideological which had devastating consequences for Latin American countries and the U.S.-LAC relationship.

Water security-related collaboration with the region can aid the United States in moving away from this failed military-heavy framework. Many Latin American countries view water insecurity as a key issue. The U.S. should remind these nations of China and Russia’s record on environmental policy and position itself as a better alternative to aid in the mitigation of water scarcity-related challenges. This can include pursuing joint partner efforts that pair U.S. and Latin American cities or bodies of water (such as lakes or rivers) to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, industry practices, and private sector engagement in the Western hemisphere.

Encourage and Pursue Debt-for-Nature Swaps

Studies show that investing 1.3% of Latin American regional GDP annually until 2030 can close the drinking and sanitation coverage gap that exists in the status quo and generate 3.6 million direct jobs per year.⁸⁵ The United States could aid in financing this growth through debt-for-nature (DFN) swaps. DFN swaps can be used to finance ‘brown’ (pollution abatement, development of environmentally friendly infrastructure, etc.) or ‘green’ (nature conservation, preservation of biological diversity, etc.) environmental programs and projects.⁸⁶

There is historical precedent for these kinds of projects between Washington and Latin America, and they have been found to work. In the 1990s, the U.S. government participated in DFN swaps with Latin America that encouraged development. These previous DFN swaps between the U.S. and Latin America generated nearly \$177 million for environmental and social projects within debtor countries.⁸⁷ DFN swaps foster economic growth and opportunities for both creditor and debtor countries.

Policy Alternatives: Primacy at All Costs

Despite the various benefits attached to an embrace of the multipolar world, many still believe the U.S. should seek to maintain its position as the global hegemon, especially through its foreign policy. These

beliefs are fueled by a conviction that the world benefits from U.S. leadership and intervention abroad. The following section engages with this type of rhetoric and ultimately refutes it.

Even as the U.S. has experienced a gradual decline in economic and soft power, many argue that American primacy creates the best-case scenario for securing and maintaining the international order. Hegemonic stability theory posits that international economic openness and stability is most likely when there is a single dominant state.⁸⁸ Based on this logic, certain American scholars and policymakers have presented U.S. hegemony as beneficial not only for the United States, but for the entire world.

This has led to the creation of rigid coalitions that separate the world into two distinct fields of “us” and “them.” Under the assumptions of the hegemonic stability theory, China’s rise is seen as an existential threat to U.S. hegemony, one that Washington must counter at all costs. Some have characterized the intensifying competition between the U.S. and China as a “new Cold War.”⁸⁹ Similar allusions to the Cold War have been made in relation to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the type of response the Washington should pursue.

However, framing international affairs through such a limited lens is counterproductive. Binaries never tell the full story and it is important to note that much of the destabilization caused abroad, especially in places like Latin America, was a result of American foreign policy-making that relied on the logic of the hegemonic stability theory.

Conclusion

Latin American countries’ non-aligned approach should not be surprising. By engaging with the region’s history and understanding the role the U.S. has played in its destabilization, the reasons behind non-alignment become apparent. Washington must understand that if not providing viable and sustainable alternatives to Chinese and Russian investment (in both soft and hard power capabilities), Latin American governments will choose to embroil themselves with both powers.

Language matters. Especially in the realm of foreign policy. This paper has sought to demonstrate how Cold War-era rhetoric echoes in the status quo and the implications of such remnants. Instead of viewing Chinese and Russian influence in Latin America as an

“incursion” into its sphere of influence (or backyard), the United States must consider this as an opportunity to reframe its relationship with the region. Climate diplomacy, specifically on water security-related initiatives, provides the space for a much-needed recalibration of U.S.-Latin America relations. The time for fluid policy-making is now.

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