

Trends in Latin American International Relations

Shifting Alliances in the New World (Dis)Order

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Introduction

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Introduction

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Latin America's socio-economic situation and party politics

The world seems to be becoming more hostile, international relations less stable and predictable, and global problems more challenging. In addition to these external factors, Latin America faces a number of internal difficulties. The subcontinent, rich in natural resources, home to the largest number of democracies in the Global South and free of nuclear weapons and interstate wars, has failed to establish social peace and prosperity. Latin America is a very diverse region, but most countries share a common set of socio-economic problems. Among them, three development traps operate in a vicious circle and are crucial to what the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC 2025, 7) has called a development crisis: First, low growth capacity: between 2015 and 2024, the region's annual growth averaged less than 1%, less than half the 2% recorded during the "lost decade" of the 1980s. Second, high inequality and low social mobility and cohesion: these are the result of a heterogeneous and slowly-changing production matrix, weak education and training systems with high drop-out rates and poor learning outcomes, as well as regressive tax systems and weak social protection. Third, low institutional capacity and ineffective governance: this situation hinders the successful implementation of transformative public policies to address development challenges.

In this context, ECLAC (2025, 7) stresses the need to move towards a major productive transformation through the expansion and improvement of productive development policies. This would require a major reorientation of the dominant development model in favour of long-term and sustainable strategies, including greater attraction of foreign direct investment (FDI). Instead, heavy reliance on natural resource extraction and dependence on exports to China have dominated the economic growth model, particularly in South America. During the commodity boom of the 2000s, which peaked in 2011, rising international prices and export volumes, mainly from South American countries, led to strong growth in the region's economies and a diversification of markets away from the traditional United States (US) and European Union (EU), previously the two main trading partners. However,

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this has contributed to the de-industrialisation of the countries, with the proportion of manufactured goods in their exports declining and the initial stages of production, originally carried out locally, being outsourced to trading partners. Nowadays, the search for diversification of production and exports is a force for re-industrialisation and reducing dependence on China.

The second decade of 2000 began with the Covid-19 pandemic, which had a major negative impact on development in Latin America. The region was disproportionately affected by the virus in terms of infections and deaths, reflecting the high vulnerability of the subcontinent. Latin American governments imposed the most severe and prolonged lockdowns and curfews. These pandemic measures restricted rights and freedoms and had serious socio-economic consequences for many. In several social dimensions, the pandemic reversed more than a decade of gains. In addition, Latin American countries implemented unprecedented support packages, often financed by debt issuance and emergency funding from international financial institutions. This exacerbated the pre-pandemic trend of rising public debt. Weak growth, higher interest rates, and the risk of currency depreciation increase external vulnerability.

In Chapter 1, Andrés Musacchio analyses the challenges that global economic changes pose for economic and social development in Latin America, and the options for a coherent foreign and development policy for the countries of the region. He identifies a multiple global crisis that combines economic, environmental, social, cultural, and political dimensions. For Latin America, Musacchio sees a risk of further economic and social dislocation, but also opportunities for the revitalisation of productive and social forces, provided that the countries succeed in formulating strategies for diversified, ecologically sustainable, and socially inclusive productive development.

Where elections are free and fair, disillusionment with the performance—mainly socio-economic—of democratic governments has led to changes in power more often than the re-election of incumbents over the past decade, regardless of whether the ruling party is left-wing or conservative. As a result, there is no ideological trend in the region, as was the case with the previous Pink Tide. Mexico, where Claudia Scheinbaum succeeded Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) as president, both from the left-wing Morena (Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional) party, and El Salvador, where Nayib Bukele, a populist who rules with an iron fist and partly authoritarian measures, was re-elected, are two contrasting cases on either side of the ideological spectrum in 2024. The continuity of president and ruling party in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua is the result of autocratic government that denies the opposition any chance of fair competition.

At the same time, the causal link between the ideology of the party in power and the approach to foreign policy is weak in Latin America. In general, parties to the right of centre tend to favour closer relations with traditional Western partners such as the US and the EU and do not attach foreign policy to an explicitly normative agenda, while parties to the left of

centre tend to give greater priority to their own region in foreign policy and are—at least rhetorically—more open to a feminist approach, as Claudia Zilla explains in her contribution on Feminist Foreign Policy (Chapter 11). The relationship between electoral cycles and foreign policy is the focus of Chapter 3 by Susanne Gratius. Looking at regionalism in the period 2002–2023, she analyses the impact of presidentialism (polity) and ideology of the ruling party (politics) on national strategies towards the region (policy). She also discusses regionalism as a tool to achieve autonomy and bandwagoning.

Democratic erosion and autocratisation

The global trend towards the erosion of democracy and the consolidation of autocratic regimes has not spared Latin America, although in 2024 the region was still considered relatively democratic by global standards. The Bertelsmann Transformation Index classifies Chile, Costa Rica, and Uruguay as consolidating democracies, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, and Paraguay as defective democracies, Honduras, Mexico, and Peru as highly defective democracies, El Salvador as a moderate autocracy, and Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Venezuela as hard autocracies.¹

Today, processes of autocratisation do not begin with a clear break with democracy, but develop slowly and in stages. It is not military coups that pose the greatest threat, but the gradual erosion of democratic institutions towards autocracy. This includes the harassment of the opposition, the concentration of power in the executive, and the undermining of horizontal accountability (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). Today's autocracies have perfected the art of undermining electoral norms without completely abandoning the democratic facade, which is why many dictatorships today are electoral autocracies, as the cases of Venezuela and Nicaragua show.

Foreign policy and international relations play an important role for modern autocratic governments. In the name of national sovereignty, they use the principles of national self-determination and non-interference as an alibi to prevent external actors from challenging their legitimacy. However, they do not hesitate to interfere in the internal affairs of neighbouring countries when it serves their interests. Mechanisms to protect democracy, such as the democracy clauses of regional organisations, are barely able to prevent the tendency towards autocratisation, as Britta Weiffen shows in Chapter 4 with case studies of Honduras, Paraguay, and Venezuela. At the same time, autocratic governments often rely on cooperation with other autocracies, both at the interstate and transnational level. Transnational arrangements between autocracies create systems of mutual support that are used to legitimise themselves in the eyes of their own populations. Formal and informal networks with other autocracies are aimed at securing their own power (Naim 2022, 206ff.).

Domestic autocratic tendencies often lead to drastic changes in foreign policy, as Andrea Ribeiro Hoffmann shows in Chapter 14 with the example

of Brazilian foreign policy under President Jair Bolsonaro between 2019 and 2022. While Brazil has traditionally been a proponent of a rules-based world order and is involved in numerous multilateral institutions, Bolsonaro radically changed Brazil's international orientation. His government withdrew from several Latin American regional organisations, bilateral relations with neighbouring countries governed by progressives suffered significant setbacks, and "international cultural Marxism" was identified as a threat to the country's national sovereignty. The administration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva returned to active and constructive cooperation at the regional and global level from 2023, but the damage left by the ultra-right populist Bolsonaro government cannot be repaired overnight.

The geopolitisation of international relations

The current international system is characterised by a fundamental crisis of global governance and a return of geopolitics. Armed conflicts and the fear that they will spread are fuelling the global trend towards rearmament and higher military spending. The world has reverted to an order that is increasingly characterised by spheres of influence and great power politics. The intensification of the rivalry between the US and China, as well as the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, are central elements of a development in which a multilateral, rules-based order is increasingly being challenged. Numerous international organisations in a range of policy areas, from trade and health to culture and human rights, are facing an existential crisis, including the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Criminal Court (ICC), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and other UN agencies. While the international order was initially critically questioned mainly by some rising powers after the end of the Cold War—not because they fundamentally rejected this order, but because they saw themselves as underrepresented in it (Stuenkel 2024)—the disruptive questioning of global governance is now coming from within, particularly from the US. This has become increasingly apparent since Donald Trump's second administration took office, but it was already evident during his first term and has continued, at least to some extent, under President Joe Biden. The geopolitisation of international relations has led to an increasing proportion of global economic relations being based on security policy priorities and containment of rival powers (Hurrell 2024). This limits the room for manoeuvre for most states, reducing the range of factors to be taken into account, as adaptation and security considerations dominate worldviews and behaviour.

Several contributions in this volume analyse what this geopolitisation of international relations means for Latin America. In Chapter 10, Federico Merke examines the links between geopolitical fragmentation, economic restructuring, and the need for new energy policies. He highlights the challenges that Latin American countries face as the competition between their

two main global economic partners, the US and China, has become a geopolitical rivalry in which countries are being asked to choose sides, particularly by the US. This, however, runs counter to the traditional desire of Latin American countries for autonomy. They aspire to a multipolar world because they believe that multipolarity increases their room for manoeuvre in foreign policy. Merke also looks at the promises and dangers of “active non-alignment”, a concept that has been propagated for several years by Chilean scholars Carlos Fortin, Jorge Heine, and Carlos Ominami (2023).

In Chapter 12, Gian Luca Gardini analyses the international positioning of Latin American countries between South–South cooperation and active non-alignment. He is particularly concerned with the role of structural contextual factors that limit the freedom of action of national governments. Jochen Kleinschmidt (Chapter 6) also considers the concept of active non-alignment. In his contribution on US–Latin American relations, he concludes that simple choices of non-alignment are hardly tenable from a Latin American perspective. He attributes this primarily to the fact that different foreign policy positions imply different national strategies for social development.

External powers

The geopolitisation of international politics and armed conflicts with international repercussions, such as Russia’s war against Ukraine, limit the room for manoeuvre of Latin American states in their bilateral relations. Although these developments have increasingly challenged the ability of countries to resist alignment and seek autonomy, it would be misleading to see the region as a passive battleground for foreign powers. On the one hand, governments in the region pursue different strategies of international and regional positioning and have heterogeneous preferences for partners; on the other hand, competition between external powers may still allow countries in the region to reassess their resources and demands in bilateral relations.

In this volume, several chapters focus on the relations of external actors with the region and some of its countries. Jochen Kleinschmidt (Chapter 6) analyses current US–Latin American relations against the backdrop of the Cold War era, highlighting significant differences between then and now. Conceptually, he characterises Latin America’s current position towards the US as a heterarchy, taking into account intersocietal multiplicities. In his contribution, Peter Birle (Chapter 9) elaborates on the geometry and main features of the EU–Latin America relationship, taking into account bi-regional and subregional formats and distinguishing three pillars: trade and investment, political dialogue, and development cooperation.

In addition to traditional Western partners, other external actors have become increasingly important in Latin American foreign policy. Benjamin Creutzfeldt (Chapter 7) examines the involvement of China in the region, which has become an important trading partner, investor, and lender for

many Latin American states. He also assesses the role of this Asian power in the countries' efforts to promote sustainable development. Another non-traditional partner for Latin America is Russia. Alexandra Sitenko (Chapter 8) analyses the evolution of Russia's relations with the region and its bilateral partners in the 21st century, focusing on the impact of the invasion of Ukraine.

Foreign policies with adjectives

Many Latin American foreign policies have recently been marked by value-based programmatic innovations, some of which refer to conceptual developments at the international level. The values being promoted are far from homogeneous, which is not surprising given that the region's domestic agendas are also characterised by major differences between progressive and conservative or even ultra-right governments. On the progressive spectrum, feminist or gender-oriented foreign policies, green and turquoise foreign policies, and anti-hegemonic orientations can be noted. On the ultra-right spectrum, these are anti-liberal orientations that warn against an international "cultural Marxism" and are extremely critical of any kind of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism.

As Claudia Zilla points out in Chapter 11, feminist foreign policies assume that the usual patterns of foreign policy action contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality and other forms of injustice. They seek to transform the content and forms of foreign policy in order to change the status quo for the better. In Latin America, such foreign policy orientations have recently been adopted in Mexico, Chile, and Colombia. Zilla analyses the approaches of these three countries in a comparative perspective against the background of the regional gender agenda. Chapter 15 by Raúl Bernal-Meza and Sergio González Pizarro on the foreign policy of the Chilean government under President Gabriel Boric and Chapter 13 by María Cecilia Míguez on Argentina's foreign policy under President Alberto Fernández also address the gendered elements of these policies. However, the recent anti-feminist domestic and foreign policies of President Javier Milei in Argentina have shown how quickly such foreign policy orientations can be reversed after a change of government.

Foreign policies based on ecological criteria have recently been adopted in Chile and Colombia, among other countries. Bernal-Meza and González Pizarro (Chapter 15) analyse the "turquoise" foreign policy of the Boric government. The term is derived from the combination of a green component, i.e. agendas to combat and mitigate the global climate and environmental crisis, with a blue component, i.e. the protection and management of the oceans. This policy is basically aimed at protecting biodiversity and ecosystems through multilateralism, international cooperation, and sustainable development. In Colombia, as analysed in Chapter 16 by Eduardo Pastrana Buelvas and Diego Vera, environmental aspects play a role in foreign policy

in the sense of a complete decarbonisation of capitalism and the provision of clean energy for export.

The focus of Pastrana and Vera's analysis, however, is the anti-elitist foreign policy of President Gustavo Petro's government, which they characterise as a combination of populist leadership and progressive ideology. They draw parallels with the anti-hegemonic and anti-imperialist foreign policies of Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia in the first decade of the 21st century, analysing in particular the confrontational discourse of the Petro government. In the opposite ideological camp, President Jair Bolsonaro has established a far-right foreign policy in Brazil. In Chapter 14, Andrea Ribeiro-Hoffmann analyses this policy in the context of a transnational trend towards the consolidation of authoritarian-conservative movements. She stresses that both global hegemonic shifts and the crisis of globalisation, as well as domestic factors, have contributed to this development.

Under President AMLO, Mexican foreign policy has taken a very specific turn, as Günther Maihold (Chapter 17) demonstrates. It has been characterised by the president's lack of interest in foreign policy and his strong prioritisation of domestic politics. In stark contrast to Mexico's traditionally active, multilaterally oriented foreign policy, AMLO's foreign policy has become increasingly detached from international affairs. Its main function was to stabilise the government's domestic transformation project and defend it against external risks and threats. This came at the expense of previous progressive positions in international politics, for example on renewable energy and climate change.

Regionalism

Latin America is one of the regions in the world with the highest number of regional organisations. This is partly due to the fact that there are very different motives for regional cooperation. One of the main motives, which has played a role since independence from the colonial powers of Spain and Portugal in the first third of the 19th century, is the desire for autonomy and common defence against external threats. In this respect, there is a line of continuity from the Congress of Panama, convened in 1826 by the liberator Simón Bolívar, to the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), founded in 2011. Economic cooperation has always been a second motive for regionalism. In this context, the ECLAC has played an important role as a source of ideas and impetus since the 1950s. However, the weak economic interdependence within Latin America is a major obstacle to any kind of economic integration. A third motive that has always played a role in Latin American regionalism is the pooling of interests in order to speak with one voice to third parties and in world fora, thus increasing Latin America's influence in global institutions. A fourth motive is to strengthen cooperation in various thematic areas. These range from health, education, and social issues to energy, the environment, finance, defence, and the fight against

transnational crime. Over time, regional and sub-regional organisations have emerged in many of these areas, some of which are intergovernmental and some of which include non-state actors. This has led to the emergence of a broad network of institutions that, despite all the justified complaints about the crisis of Latin American regionalism, make an important contribution to regional governance in Latin America.

In Chapter 5, José Antonio Sanahuja analyses the development of Latin American regionalism and the weakening of regional actors and their agency from the perspective of contestation theory and the concept of politicisation. He emphasises the role of actors and agency as causal elements in institutional and normative politicisation and contestation. Sanahuja discusses the contestation of Unasur (Union of South American Nations) and CELAC by right-wing governments, but also the attempts to renew regional cooperation. Recent developments in regional cooperation are also the focus of Detlef Nolte's analysis (Chapter 2). He shows how, since the beginning of his third term in 2023, Brazilian President Lula has been working to reactivate the regional networks and regimes that have been in an existential crisis since the middle of the second decade of the 21st century. Nolte addressees the obstacles to the implementation of regional projects and points to possible favourable factors.

The EU has long promoted regional cooperation in Latin America and has often recommended its own integration process as a model for this region. Not least for this reason, the difficult negotiations for an association agreement between the EU and the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), which began in 1999, have been going on for more than 20 years and have caused a great deal of frustration on all sides. In his contribution on EU-Latin American relations, Peter Birle (Chapter 9) looks at the prospects for ratification of the agreement that was finally signed in December 2024. He argues that at a time of rising global protectionism and geopolitical rivalries, such a step could send an important signal for intensifying European–Latin American cooperation.

About this book

Some of the contributions to this book were originally presented at a symposium of the International Relations Working Group of the German Association for Latin American Studies (ADLAF) held at the Ibero-American Institute in Berlin in late 2023. In the course of 2024, the chapters were revised and updated. In addition, some new contributions were included to complete the analysis of Latin America's position in the international system from national, regional, and global perspectives. The book is divided into three parts. The first section contains the contributions of Musacchio, Nolte, Gratius, Weiffen, and Sanahuja, who look at regional dynamics in Latin America from different angles. In the second section, Kleinschmidt, Creutzfeldt, Sitenko, and Birle analyse the role of external actors. The third section

deals with foreign policy developments, with cross-national contributions by Zilla, Merke, and Gardini, and analyses of individual states' foreign policies by Miguez, Ribeiro-Hoffmann, Bernal-Meza and Pizarro, Pastrana and Vera, and Maihold.

The editors would like to thank the authors for their patience during the editorial process. The fact that we live in troubled times is reflected in the title of this book. But until the beginning of 2025, few could have imagined that the world order as we have known it since the end of the Second World War, and which has been relatively stable despite all the transformations since the end of the Cold War, would be turned upside down by the second presidency of Trump in the US. The disruptive global developments that we are currently witnessing and that take our breath away on an almost daily basis, could not be taken into account in any of the chapters of this book. Nevertheless, we believe that the analyses presented here can help to better understand Latin America's situation in the global (dis)order and to assess the opportunities available to the countries of the region. Instead of the originally planned conclusions at the end of the volume, the editors have decided to insert a chapter that outlines the most important consequences of the new US policy under Trump for Latin America and attempts to identify some prospects.

Note

1 <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/latin-america-and-the-caribbean>.

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