

The United States in Latin America: Lasting Asymmetries, Waning Influence?

Tom Long

Associate Professor, Politics and International Studies

University of Warwick

and

Affiliated Professor, División de Estudios Internacionales

Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas, México

Abstract

It is frequently, though incorrectly, stated that the United States has been hegemonic in the Western Hemisphere since enunciation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823. Overstated notions of US dominance often form the background for today's assessments of the roles of rising powers and other extra-hemispheric actors in Latin America. This exaggerated historical memory of US power is shared by the United States' harshest critics and by those in the United States who suffer nostalgia for bygone days of US pre-eminence. Recurring hegemonic presumptions and fears of declining US influence have long colored US policymakers' own perceptions of international relations in the Americas, while obscuring Latin American agency. This chapter argues that the role of the United States in Latin America would be better understood as chronologically, geographically, and thematically variegated. Tremendous asymmetries of material capabilities do exist and have important consequences; however, these have been tempered by other factors including the limits of converting capabilities to influence, poor and inconsistent US policymaking, and Latin Americans' own agency and determination to pursue their interests. An appreciation of the variation of US power and influence in Latin America creates a sounder base for understanding the role of cooperation and competition with extra-hemispheric powers in Latin America, in the past and today.

Introduction

There is no question that relations between the United States and the various countries of Latin America and the Caribbean are, and long have been, marked by disparities in material capabilities. Nor is there much doubt that the United States was, for most of the twentieth century, the non-Latin America country with the greatest influence on the region.

However, the degree of US influence is very often overstated and homogenized. First, geographical variation in US influence is often overlooked, which can lead observers to neglect the independent influence of secondary powers and other extra-regional powers, especially in South America. US power has always been greatest in a much narrower area than that captured by the term “Latin America.” Second, US influence is often chronologically exaggerated. The most egregious clichés refer to unbroken US hegemony since the 1823 Monroe Doctrine—an anachronistic reading that would have come as quite a surprise to President James Monroe himself. Third, the depth and consistency of US political influence is overstated in a way that fails to recognize the importance of Latin American domestic politics and Latin American states’ agency in relations with the United States and one another. Paradoxically, this third form of exaggeration leads to an overestimation of direct US influence even at its zenith. There is, however, one way in which US influence is often understated—and this is important for the present day. Despite great attention to political fluctuations and the high-profiled presence of other extra-regional powers, US influence in Latin America benefits from substantial historical weight. While the novelties of the growing—and indeed important—Chinese presence in Latin America demand attention, inertia exercises great influence but is rarely as visible. This weight of the past continues to shape institutions, patterns of relationships, and actors’ worldviews and understanding of

their interests, in addition to the more material legacies of stocks of investment and infrastructure.

This chapter will briefly examine asymmetries and influences in US-Latin America relations. First, it will summarize perspectives in the literature on the subject, highlighting some of their commonalities. Second, it will develop the argument about overlooked variation in US influence in Latin America, giving an historical sketch along the way. Finally, it will assess the current moment, in which US power is seemingly more diminished and challenged.

Accounts, asymmetry, and overlooked variation

As noted above, the relationships among the United States and its Latin American neighbors are structured by fundamental asymmetries. But what does that mean, and what does it mean for our understanding of the United States' role in Latin America?

Until relatively recently, it meant that scholars focused their attention overwhelmingly on US interests, decisions, and actions. The study of US-Latin American relations has long provoked sharp divisions, but scholars across the divide granted ontological primacy to the United States, whether they saw the United States as a beneficial presence for Latin America or criticized US avarice and aggression (Pastor and Long 2010). The study of inter-American relations, until recently, has been dominated by the study of US foreign policy (Bertucci 2013). Crandall (2008), echoing an early treatment by Lowenthal (1973), described an “establishment” school, in part due to frequent links between authors and the US foreign policy establishment. On the other hand, most historical scholarship from the 1980s to the 2000s formed part of a “revisionist synthesis” (Gilderhus 1992) that strongly criticized US policy for its economic imperialism, recurring misguided interventions, and entrenched racial prejudice (Schoultz 1998, 2018, Grandin 2006). However, scholarship on the Americas has

increasingly taken Latin American agency into account, “decentering” old narratives (Darnton 2013), and producing a more “internationalist approach” (Long 2015, pp. 10–12).

Asymmetry matters for the practice of US-Latin American relations as well, but its effects are multidimensional. Most obviously, it means the United States possesses capabilities, including military coercion, to act in ways that its neighbors cannot reciprocate. It also means that the United States generates a gravitational pull that affects the calculations of other states, particularly those nearest its borders. Thus, US influence may be overt—even abrasive—or it may work like gravity—unseen, powerful, and constant. Where does this power asymmetry leave Latin American agency? Here, the dynamics of asymmetry are not quite so obvious. As Womack (2016) points out, asymmetry shapes perceptions and patterns of attention. The smaller actor is more consistently focused on the larger actor than vice-versa, and each side wants something different from the relationship. “Differences in material capabilities certainly matter, but they are not the only thing that matters” (Long 2015, p. 15). When the United States turns its full attention to a particular country or crisis, its power can be overwhelming. However, this is a relatively infrequent occurrence, and during other moments, asymmetries in attention can partially counteract asymmetries of power (Darnton 2012).

Geographical variation

The first source of overlooked heterogeneity in Latin America’s relations with the United States is geographical. It is a salutary reminder that Washington, DC, is farther from Buenos Aires (5,187 miles) than from Moscow (4,909 miles).¹ Though globalization and technology have diminished the impact of distance, such expanses continue to matter in trade and

¹ Distances from Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, “Distance between capital cities,” n.d., <http://ksgleditsch.com/data-5.html>.

politics. And if distance matters today, it counted even more in historical patterns of influence.

The spectrum of US influence has always had a strong geographical dimension; the same is true of US perceptions of its interests in Latin America. Observers often fret that the United States spends more time obsessing over small countries in the Caribbean and Central America than it does trying to establish strong and mutually beneficial relations with Brazil (Hakim 2014). However, it is not unusual. Setting aside sweeping US rhetoric, whether about the republican solidarity in the 19th century, Pan American collaboration in the 1930s, or a Free Trade Agreement of the Americas from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego in the 1990s, US interests, interventions influence, and indignities have been heavily concentrated around the Caribbean.

Historically and today, one can observe four geographical tiers of US-Latin American relations. First, Mexico stands in a category by itself, with a unique bilateral relationship shaped by nearly 2,000 miles of shared border and frequent exchanges of populations. The US-Mexico relationship is filled with risks and opportunities, friendships and frustrations, that are unlike those elsewhere (González 2001, Smith and Selee 2013). The very geography of the two countries was created by their relationship, in particular the US-Mexican War of 1846-48, in which the United States largely achieved its continental form while Mexico lost nearly half its territory. Even many US soldiers, including later US President Ulysses S. Grant, derided the conflict as an unjust war of aggression. Since then, the bilateral relationship has alternated hot and cool, though tropes of “distant neighbors” often understated the continued ties even during cool periods. Beyond Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean find themselves in a second tier. Here, there is an exaggerated asymmetrical dependence, both because the United States weighs so heavily, but also because the small countries of the Caribbean Basin appear only infrequently in the imaginaries of

high-level US policymakers. When they do, they often find themselves the recipients of intense scrutiny and pressure. Pastor (2001) aptly described this cyclical pattern of attention as a “whirlpool”—slow, gradual, and harmless at its outer reaches but intense and potentially deadly at the center. It is in this tier that the United States has most often intervened to shape states’ trajectories. While the natures of these relationships have at times undergone significant swings—none greater than the 1959 Cuban Revolution—the patterns of asymmetries that emerged late in the 19th century continue to shape their contours (Santa-Cruz 2019, chap. 7). The northernmost countries of South America constitute the third tier. Colombia and Venezuela form the heart of this tier, though Ecuador and Guyana are also included. Here, US attention has been more moderate in level and nature, allowing for long periods of friendly relations. After healing the wound caused by Panama’s US-backed independence from Colombia, Colombian policymakers adopted a consistently friendly stance (Drekonja Kornat 1982, Bernal and Tickner 2017). Though the governments of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro make it hard to recall, US-Venezuelan relations were also long characterized by comity (Corrales and Romero 2012, Miller 2016), as were US relations with Ecuador before President Rafael Correa (Hey 1995). Guyana historically hoped to have US support against territorial encroachments from its larger neighbors—though it suffered covert US and British intervention as it gained independence. The fourth tier includes the Southern Cone of South America, broadly speaking. Though earlier in its history Brazil was ambivalent about its inclusion in “Latin America” and about its neighbors (Bethell 2010), in recent years one cannot understand the US role in the region without immediately bringing Brazil into the picture. Though the United States has had periods of intense involvement, particularly at the height of the Cold War, the pattern of relations differs. The Southern-most tier has often functioned as a subsystem, in which the United States was one extra-regional player amongst several (Teixeira 2012). Relations between Argentina and Brazil (and

sometimes Chile) were often more important to shaping regional dynamics (Bandeira 2010, Saraiva 2012), including for the smaller states in the tier. Intra-regional dynamics shaped the creation of institutions at the regional and domestic level more than did the United States (Gardini 2010).

Temporal variation

US influence has also been marked by chronological change. At the time of the oft-invoked Monroe Doctrine—initially a message to Congress and not a foreign policy “doctrine”—the United States was a weak international player, lacking military capabilities to enforce its proclaimed opposition to European recolonization or create a separate sphere of international relations in the Americas. Initially, US concerns with the newly independent states to its south were driven by continental expansion and deeply mired in the politics of slavery (Sexton 2011). Slavery and racism so conditioned US policy that the first independent state in the Americas (the United States) refused to diplomatically recognize the second (Haiti) because its independence had been achieved by former slaves. Slavery and expansion also marked the US-Mexican War and early forays into Central America, which emerged from the need for faster connections to California. US involvement produced risk and opportunity for local actors, economically and politically. Some sought US engagement to promote their own agendas or strengthen their hands against domestic opponents or, occasionally, external powers (Gobat 2018). For example, Mexican Liberals called for the United States to put muscle behind the Monroe Doctrine and halt the French and Austrian invasion of 1861-67, which put a Hapsburg emperor on a Mexican throne. Mired in its own Civil War, the United States declined.

US-Latin American relations beyond Panama were fairly limited until the late 19th century; South America looked first to its own consolidation and development and, internationally, to Europe (Burr 1965). In the 1890s, inter-American commercial and political interests began to

take root—though not dominate—in South America. Ideas of a particularly American sphere blossomed; while some in the United States saw this as tutelage, a proto-multilateral hemisphere was advanced by others in incipient institutions and international law (Scarfi 2017). Inter-American relations gained a harder edge at the close of the century as the United States sharpened the Monroe Doctrine’s hegemonic presumption into an instrument of exclusion and intervention under the Olney and Roosevelt corollaries (Gilderhus 2006). The rapid defeat of Spain in 1898 pushed the former colonial power out of Cuba and Puerto Rico. The United States reinterpreted its geopolitical interests expansively and followed its victory against Spain with a series of interventions and occupations throughout Central America and the Caribbean with the aim of instilling democratic political culture and stability in supposedly inferior nations (Schoultz 1998, 2018). The four decades from 1890 to 1930 were hardly the only period of US imperialism or interventionism, but they were the most open and blatant. None was longer than Nicaragua, where growing resistance inspired many in Latin America. None was more brutal than Haiti, where the racism of US interveners justified repression and the racism of Spanish American elites dampened sympathies (Renda 2001, McPherson 2014). The period produced a strong Latin American response, both in terms of resistance against occupations and diplomatically to curtail US unilateral militarism. This created a seeming contradiction of opposition to overt US invasions of Latin America but also increasing institutionalization and cooperation under Pan American institutions (Vargas Garcia 2006, Petersen and Schulz 2018). Often, though, these were sides of the same coin—growing US power created dangers and opportunities, which Latin Americans met with cooperation and resistance. US influence increased, but its limits were clear for those who cared to see them. The great power poured money into ineffective occupations, which helped spur a more coordinated response from geographically distant states in South America (Friedman and Long 2015).

Cooperation, at least temporarily, won the day. The 1930s were marked by the termination of several long US occupations, the renunciation of a right to intervene in Caribbean domestic politics (the Cuban Platt Amendment and copies elsewhere), and the consolidations of multifaceted international institutions. The Great Depression and the more ideologically convergent administration of Franklin Roosevelt encouraged early efforts at economic cooperation, including a stillborn plan for a regional development bank (Tussie 1995, Helleiner 2014). This took place amidst growing concern about the coming of war in Europe. The era of Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy saw Latin Americans achieve a long-sought-after acceptance of non-intervention and (de jure) sovereign equality (Wood 1967). It also saw deep cooperation in the Second World War, including Brazilian and Mexican deployments, and economic contributions from Latin America to the war effort (Torres 1979, Leonard and Bratzel 2007), with important implications from domestic politics in the region (Bethell and Roxborough 1997). The immediate postwar period was reshaped by the United States' new global role and the frustrated expectations of Latin Americans of greater postwar cooperation. However, it also saw the creation of important inter-American institutions, which initially were born more of the vestiges of Good Neighborism and wartime cooperation than the emerging Cold War (Long 2020). Perhaps the longest-lasting effect of the war was the separation it caused between the Americas and Europe; old trading relationships declined markedly even for the Southern Cone and European political and military influence retrenched under the strain of war and reconstruction. The United States encouraged the European exodus, quickly stepped into the void, and then sought to preserve the position. As the immediate postwar period faded, European powers reasserted traditional ties, though at lower levels (Ruano 2013). This was often cultivated by South American leaders who sought to maintain alternative options to the United States.

The Cold War deeply marked US-Latin American relations, though even then, it was hardly an era of homogenous US domination. US influence was substantial throughout the period, though probably broadest and most geographically expansive early in the Cold War when it had clear global material superiority and its ideology was more widely accepted throughout the region. However, the global contest was just one element of overlapping spheres of politics; these included old local conflicts of class, race and party, regional rivalries, and finally the global Cold War (Brands 2010, Harmer 2014, Moulton 2015). These overlaps could create a particularly venomous mix when longstanding local conflicts fused with anti-communism, and conservative elites gained access to material and ideological resources to prosecute violent campaigns. The Cuban Revolution and ensuing Cuban alliance with the Soviet Union confirmed the fears of US policymakers and Latin American conservative elites. For a decade, especially, Cuba actively sought to foment revolution and remained an ideological inspiration (Harmer 2013). The spectre of Cuba often provoked outsized and brutal responses from the US and Latin American conservative elites.

US influence could be decisive through covert or overt means (Loeza 2013), though even in some classic cases, the focus on the United States overshadowed more important national and local actors. For example, though the United States helped create adverse economic conditions and welcomed the outcome, the Chilean military (with encouragement from Brazil's military regime) was the decisive force in the 1973 coup against leftist President Salvador Allende (Harmer 2014). Allende's repressive successor, Augusto Pinochet, had rockier relations with the United States than many—assuming the dictator was a US puppet—supposed (Morley and McGillion 2015). Even in this period of peak US influence, Latin American leaders could achieve substantial successes vis-à-vis the United States on matters of central importance (Long 2015). Mexico walked a fine line, of symbolic resistance and sub-rosa cooperation, turning US aid to its own purposes (Keller 2015). Brazilian Cold

War relations with the United States oscillated; even strong anti-communism did not always translate into close alignment (Hirst and Hurrell 2005). Even smaller states could carve out space and influence US policy. Panama achieved a national ambition with the return of its canal (Long 2014); Costa Rica retained enviable stability and development alongside the conflicts of its neighbors (Longley 1997). During the Cold War's bloodiest chapter in the Central American conflicts of the late 1970s and 1980s, the US found willing anti-communist partners and became complicit in astonishing bloodshed and violence (Rabe 2011).

The immediate aftermath of the Cold War created a moment of seeming convergence between US and Latin American priorities, with support for US leadership on economic policies and promotion of democracy. Following the Latin American debt crisis, US-backed neoliberal economic policies gained traction. The first Summit of the Americas in 1994 gave the appearance of a region ready to follow Washington (Feinberg 1997); however, within a few years, resistance to US demands eroded support for hemispheric free trade (Riggirozzi and Tussie 2012), while renewed contestations over democratic norms emerged (Ribeiro Hoffmann 2019). The reinvigoration of hemispheric institutions, especially the OAS, as well as global institutions like the World Trade Organization, bound Latin America more tightly to liberal order, but also gave the region new tools (Saltalamacchia Ziccardi 2014). To a great extent, transnational issues replaced the old Red Scare (LeoGrande 2005), but these problems were of a very different sort. They often pushed Washington toward policies of strengthening incumbent regimes instead of overthrowing them. That has not stopped Washington from embracing the right-wing—willingly overlooking its transgressions—but this policy and its frequent companion of militarization have been counter-effective in addressing transnational challenges (Durán-Martínez 2017).

The degree and nature of US influence have varied tremendously over the last two centuries. For most of South America, the United States was a secondary actor during the 19th century,

growing in importance only during the First and especially Second World Wars. The high point of US influence, from the late 1930s until the mid-1970s, was both shorter and more contested than is sometimes presumed. There is no doubt that the United States was the weightiest non-Latin American actor in the region; it exercised substantial influence through its actions and mass. However, in other moments—particularly outside the first two geographical tiers—local, regional, and other extra-regional concerns mattered, too. Very often, Latin American leaders turned US attention to their advantage (though not necessarily to the advantage of their populations) and pursued their goals during periods of US inattention.

Depth and domestic politics

The final way in which variation in US influence is often overstated and misunderstood regards its “depth.” Often, the presumed homogeneity of US influence led to depictions that overstated US control of economic, social, and political processes in Latin America while understating Latin American agency. Max Paul Friedman (2003) put this best in his call for “retiring the puppets”—the treatment of Latin American leaders as marionettes on strings held by great powers. The United States did care about domestic developments, as Friedman (2019) argues elsewhere, when these had a hint of communism or evinced an economic nationalism that threatened to exclude US corporations.

But most of what happened in Latin America, even during the early Cold War, was off Washington’s radar or out of its control—even as it could take extreme steps when it perceived a security or economic line was being crossed. In terms of international security, some of Latin America’s bloodiest conflicts had little to do with the United States. The was true for the worst interstate war of the 19th century—the Triple Alliance—and of the early 20th century, the Chaco War (Burr 1965, Brezzo 2004). During the early Cold War, low-level international conflicts raged in the Caribbean between ideological opponents (Moulton 2015)

to US perturbation. If much happened at the international level outside the United States' control, even more did so at the domestic level. During the 19th century, the United States sought to reshape domestic politics during the Mexican Revolution, and then most notably in Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua. Those efforts involved prolonged occupations and certainly grave and often pernicious US influence, but US forces left without achieving their political objectives. Farther afield, the depth of US influence was extremely limited until much later. During the Cold War, leftist revolutions in the region usually failed and the United States often had a hand in helping, especially through military assistance. However, often these failures were overdetermined. The Cuban-style "foco" approach of sending a small group to ignite a struggle was out of touch with the realities in many countries where it failed—especially Venezuela and Bolivia, where Che Guevara was killed (Harmer 2013, Field Jr 2014, Miller 2016). The US was involved in both countries, but revolutionaries never had a serious chance of taking power against their domestic opponents. US culpability for factional and genocidal violence in Central America during the 1970s and 1980s (LeoGrande 1998), contrasted with its marginality for patterns of Colombian violence until the internationalization of those conflicts in the 1980s (Tickner 2007, Karl 2017).

In the economic sphere, the US used direct means to shape Latin American policies and to support its companies abroad (Santa-Cruz 2019). It also exerted influence through the gravity of asymmetrical economic relations, which slowly but surely bent the interests of the Latin American elite in Washington's direction. The success of more direct attempts were mixed when these diverged too greatly from the economic plans of Latin American leaders. Even during the years of highest influence, Latin Americans developed earlier inklings of import substitution industrialization (ISI) into a full-fledged approach to national industrialization, especially in Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina. US policies were inconsistent; the United States sometimes supported national and regional ISI-inspired schemes, sometimes opposed them,

and sometimes ignored them. The United National Economic Commission on Latin America, the seedbed for much ISI thinking, was created at the zenith of US influence, over US grumbling but without a US veto (Santa Cruz 1995). Often the greatest economic influence occurred when US economic power gradually moulded Latin American interests instead of openly countering them and demanding change.

The more things change?

Many aspects of US behavior in Latin America are typical of large powers in their regions—seeking a sphere from which extra-hemispheric rivals are militarily excluded or expecting a degree of deference. However, the way in which the United States exercises its power in Latin America also has particular characteristics that have been shaped by its view of its own role in world politics and by the configuration of the economic and political elite. Starting with its nineteenth century expansion, the United States assumed it was destined to lead a region that it saw as distinct and in need of its leadership. This assumption has been strongest in Central America and the Caribbean. The content of that assumed leadership has variously emphasized US views of racial and cultural hierarchies, ideals of liberalism, and the provision of protection (requested or not) against extra-hemispheric “threats,” whether states, non-state actors, or dangerous ideas. US economic interests first turned to Latin America for land and markets, then for commodities and investment opportunities, and more recently for support for a model of capital expansion and protection of investor prerogatives. At least since World War I, the US has sought Latin American support at a global level for its political positions and economic doctrine; the actual support offered by or commanded from Latin Americans has varied tremendously.

Where does this emphasis on variation leave us when considering the US role and influence in Latin America today? Geographical variation is, perhaps, more salient than it has been since the early 20th century. Mexico and Central America and the Caribbean remain tightly

bound to the United States, socially through migration and economically through remittances and markets, licit and illicit. The most distant tier, however, has reduced interdependence with the United States, particularly by accessing Chinese markets and capital (Paz 2012, Urdinez *et al.* 2016). The middle tier is divided; Colombia has been hesitant in its embrace of China, in part due to domestic political opposition (Long *et al.* 2019), while Venezuela became a money pit for Chinese loans (Rosales 2018). The effects for the region's development and politics are not yet clear, but the divergence between parts of the region is.

Another important difference relates to the depth of US influence; in some regards, it has never been shallower. In other, less obvious ways, the US role remains substantial. US influence is diminished in that its ability to coerce and cajole compliance is reduced, especially in South America. Domestic politics have been increasingly important in shaping Latin American foreign policies (Gardini and Lambert 2011). Two decades ago, one could argue that the international systemic level and presidents determined foreign policy, but that argument, often implicit, has never been less convincing.

In a deeper sense, US influence remains substantial. This sort of influence by inertia resembles what Susan Strange (1987) called—in an article entitled “The persistent myth of lost hegemony”—structural power. China's economic presence has grown tremendously and changed international economic relations in the Southern Cone in many respects. However, US influence in the region benefits from the weight of history, which has accumulated both deeply embedded material bases, socially rooted networks of relationships, webs of formal and informal institutions, and entrenched norms. For example, while the opening of Confucius Institutes and the creation of new fellowships draws attention to China's expanding soft power, these innovative educational efforts are dwarfed by the US Fulbright program and its decades-deep alumni base (including this author). Similar legacy connections are deep in Latin American military, political, and economic elites, shaping how actors

understand the world and define their own interests. Such is the deep influence of asymmetry, and this sort of influence remains profound, regardless of who occupies the presidency in Washington or across Latin American capitals.

The combination of US presumptions, lasting asymmetries, and great variation in influence will shape the engagement of extra-hemispheric powers in the region. As critical reactions from the Trump administration to China's surging economic influence suggest, US hegemonic presumptions mean that visible manifestations of extra-hemispheric engagement are likely to provoke consternation from Washington. However, that hardly means the Western Hemisphere is closed for business. The United States is not uniformly hostile: the Obama administration was more relaxed about Latin America's growing ties with China, and many US economic elites perceive potential benefits. More importantly, the variation in US influence in Latin America provides opportunities for extra-hemispheric powers to gain a foothold without clashing with Washington in the way extra-hemispheric powers have around the Venezuelan crisis. China seems to have largely acted in this way already (Urdinez *et al.* 2016). The United States will be more accepting of other powers' engagement where this is not seen as a direct challenge; over time, Europe's major trade and investment role in South America evolved from a perceived threat to a largely welcome presence. For Latin American states, a more multipolar world offers greater benefits and policy space, but only as long as minimal degree of cooperative order encompasses emerging and status quo powers. If that order frays and zero-sum competition reigns, Latin America room for manoeuvre within an unevenly asymmetric hemisphere will be accompanied by greater risk.

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