



Biden is losing Latin America

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When it comes to foreign policy and national security in the Americas, the crisis on our southern border has rightly dominated the headlines.

But there's another, less-recognized setback happening for the United States far south of the Rio Grande or the Sonora Desert: crumbling relationships with Latin American countries.

Given President Joe Biden's campaign boasts that multilateralism was coming back, one might have expected him to jump on a great opportunity. Namely, that which the supposedly isolationist Trump administration secured with our neighbors: the right of the U.S. to host the next Summit of the Americas conference. It's an important gathering that only happens once every three years. Sadly, there is currently no date set on the calendar, no venue, no agenda, and virtually no multilateral negotiations toward any of it.

According to my sources, the State Department's summit coordinator resigned in frustration in August. On the bilateral front, Colombia has been the U.S.'s closest ally in the region for a generation. Yet, Biden refused to speak with Colombian President Iván Duque for nearly six months. The call finally happened in June, but only when Duque and his team nearly died after rebels fired on his presidential helicopter near the Venezuelan border. Why the delay?

The White House is reportedly unhappy with the actions of Colombian police in dealing with protests this year, despite Duque pledging to hold accountable any security forces who have engaged in excesses. Nor has Biden called the democratically elected leader of the largest democracy in Latin America: Brazil.

Instead, Brazil had to settle for a lecture on climate from national security adviser Jake Sullivan during his visit in August. Special Presidential Envoy John Kerry, who has achieved nothing binding in his mission of getting the Chinese to get serious about climate action, no doubt lectured the Brazilians during his meeting in July. Never mind that Brazil has never been a top emitter of greenhouse gases and already gets 45% of its energy from renewable sources — making its energy sector one of the least-carbon heavy on Earth.

White House officials didn't meet with El Salvadorian president Nayib Bukele on his February trip to Washington, D.C. Bukele has still not received a call from the president or the vice president, even though Kamala Harris's portfolio includes addressing root causes of migration from El Salvador. Instead, the Biden administration has sanctioned officials around Bukele, criticized his government, and tried to dictate the composition of the country's judiciary branch.

It's true that Bukele has undermined democracy in some key ways. But if Biden snubbed him on the basis of not respecting democracy, then why did the president meet with President Erdogan of Turkey or Vladimir Putin?

Then there's Cuba. When Cubans recently rallied for freedom in the streets, the Biden team's toughest response was to sanction Cuban officials who were already sanctioned. It was a signal to the regime of where Biden's Cuba policy is likely to go.

On Venezuela, by failing to appoint a special envoy, Biden has signaled to the State Department bureaucracy and Nicolas Maduro's regime that it's back to business as usual. The administration has legitimized another round of fake negotiations, which include Russia at the table, that are only designed to buy Maduro more time. At least Biden still recognizes President Guaido.

The U.S. also has an obligation to confront China's attempts to create economic dependencies in the hemisphere. But the Development Finance Corporation's efforts to support projects in Latin America seem to have cooled. Rather than directly challenging Chinese global expansion, the DFC appears more focused on advancing green initiatives in the developing world, which will no doubt aid China in selling U.S.-subsidized solar panels to Latin America.

The Biden team has also withdrawn support for a DFC-sponsored hydroelectric project in Honduras (so much for addressing root economic causes of migration). Pulling funding for Honduras, one of the few countries granting diplomatic recognition to Taiwan, pushes it closer to flipping to Beijing. Eight months in, sanctimony and green ideology have already damaged America's relationships in the Western Hemisphere when China is making major diplomatic and economic inroads. Continued failure to engage with greater seriousness of purpose and respect for democratically elected governments will mean a generational erosion of the distinction between what the U.S. and China stand for.

A drastic erosion of U.S. interests in Latin America won't be far behind.

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