

Trump Tries Old Tricks With Latin America

By Christopher Sabatini

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The president's strategy echoes Reagan's Cold War battle against leftists and ignores, at Washington's peril, the concerns of elected leaders in the region's democracies.

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We finally have a sense of President Trump's strategy for Latin America.

This month, the national security adviser, John Bolton, gave what was billed as a major policy speech on Latin America policy [that focused on tightening the screws](#) on leftist autocrats in Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela. In the weeks that followed, the White House put sanctions on state-owned companies in Cuba and on public officials in Venezuela and Nicaragua.

Mr. Bolton didn't discuss Mexico, where the leftist populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador will be sworn in as president on Saturday. He had very little to say about

most of the region's other main countries and instead harped on punishing Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, whom he called the "troika of tyranny," "the triangle of terror" and "the three stooges" of socialism.

This Manichaeian view — a misguided rehash of the Cold War policies of Ronald Reagan — threatens to polarize the region. While punitive measures against the regimes in these three countries may be overdue, this strategy ignores, at Washington's peril, the domestic concerns of elected leaders in Latin America's democracies. And we already see troubling signs that in pursuing this narrow focus on leftist autocrats, the Trump administration is embracing far-right-wing populist leaders.

Squeezing regional dictators is simply not a priority for Latin America's democratically elected leaders. Nor should it be.

[Public opinion surveys](#) show that Latin Americans care primarily about economic opportunity, corruption, security and immigration — none issues addressed by Mr. Bolton. Ignoring citizens' concerns will mean derailing the chance for long-term partnerships between Washington and countries in the region, and sacrificing potential support for human rights and democracy.

The most troubling part of Mr. Trump's emerging approach to Latin America is his apparent embrace of Brazil's populist president-elect, Jair Bolsonaro. During his campaign, Mr. Bolsonaro, a former army captain, railed against human rights and criticized black and [indigenous](#) Brazilians, women and the L.G.B.T. community, while advocating violence and voicing support for the country's former military dictatorship.

Despite these [antidemocratic](#) warning signs, Mr. Bolton called Mr. Bolsonaro a "like-minded" leader in his speech. And Mr. Bolton is visiting the president-elect this week to discuss how to tighten the vise on the Cuban regime.

It's not the first time Mr. Trump has shown a preference for ideology over reasoned policy. The administration has tacitly supported Guatemala's extreme-right-wing president, Jimmy Morales, who is in a standoff with a United Nations commission that is investigating corruption accusations against him. It's probably not a coincidence that like Mr. Trump, Mr. Morales moved his country's embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Allying with far-right-wing governments with troubling positions on human rights undermines America's moral authority to call out the abuses of other governments. Moreover, the Trump administration is attempting to put in place an us-versus-them dynamic that fails to take into account the interests of the partners it seeks south of the border.

It is also operating in marked contrast to earlier presidents. Even as he denounced the region's leftist regimes, Reagan signed a sweeping immigration bill into law; George W. Bush and Barack Obama tried to get Congress to pass immigration reform. Mr. Trump's predecessors initiated or approved free-trade agreements with Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Chile, Peru, Colombia,

Panama and Central American countries, linking those economies with the United States market and America's broader interests.

The [Group of 20](#) meeting on Thursday in Buenos Aires, which Mr. Trump is scheduled to attend, provides the president an opportunity to change his tone in face-to-face meetings with regional leaders.

Mr. Trump should voice concern for the region's slowing rates of economic growth by promising better access to United States markets. A strong pledge of assistance from American law enforcement to address corruption in countries other than Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua would help, too.

Mr. Trump should show Latin Americans that Washington wants to do more than just ramp up pressure on leftist autocratic governments.

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