Latin America

Between U.S. Disengagement and Authoritarian Multilateralism

I. Introduction: A Region Between Poles?

Latin America stands at a historical crossroads. For two centuries, its international posture has been largely shaped in reaction to external hegemonies—from British commercial penetration and U.S. hemispheric domination to Cold War alignments and neoliberal mandates. Yet today, the region confronts a new strategic landscape: one not defined by allegiance to a single center of power, but by the challenge of navigating a fragmented international order marked by declining U.S. influence and the assertive rise of authoritarian actors. This evolving context, as we shall see, presents critically both peril and possibility for the region.

What distinguishes the present moment is not merely the erosion of U.S. hegemony, but the absence of any singular normative or institutional replacement. Washington's retreat—driven by domestic polarization and a strategic reorientation toward Asia—has created a vacuum. Into this space step China and Russia, offering what appear to be pragmatic overtures: infrastructure without reform, technology without oversight, and sovereignty without scrutiny. These, while materially attractive, carry latent risks—dependency, democratic erosion, and even epistemic closure—that mirror earlier forms of external subordination.

Crucially, however, Latin America is not condemned to simply recalibrate its orbit. The region harbors a wealth of democratic innovations, vibrant social movements, and intellectual traditions that—if reimagined strategically—could underpin a foreign policy grounded not in reactive alignment, but in normative vision. One that affirms pluralism, justice, and regional agency.

This brief argues that the region's central challenge is not choosing between geopolitical poles, but dismantling the deeper logic of dependency embedded in both. Strategic autonomy in the twenty-first century must therefore be more than a diplomatic stance; it must entail reclaiming the power to define development, democracy, and sovereignty on Latin America's own ontological and epistemic terms.

II. The Legacy and Limits of U.S. Hegemony

Latin America's position in global affairs has long been structured by the projection of U.S. power. From the Monroe Doctrine onward, Washington institutionalized hemispheric dominance through military intervention, economic penetration, and discursive authority. This influence extended beyond coercion: it was epistemic, constructing a vision of order, development, and democracy that marginalized regional knowledges and ultimately undermined autonomous agency (Tickner and Blaney 2012; Coatsworth 2005).

During the Cold War, U.S. containment strategies legitimized authoritarianism across the continent. From the CIA-backed coups to Operation Condor's transnational repression, Washington's anti-communist posture often undermined democratic legitimacy in favor of geopolitical utility. In the post-Cold War era, this influence took on a more normative and economic guise. The Washington Consensus embedded neoliberal reforms that hollowed state capacity, deepened inequality, and fueled disillusionment from the late 1980s on—laying much of the groundwork for the rise of anti-system politics in the 21st century (Monteagudo 2021).

Yet U.S. hegemony has never gone uncontested. Forms of resistance—from Cold War non-alignment to the Pink Tide's defiant rhetoric—have punctuated the region's history. What is novel today is not critique, but **absence**. Washington's strategic retrenchment, shaped by its pivot to Asia, domestic dysfunction, and fiscal constraints, has diminished both material engagement and the country's normative credibility (Long and Schulz 2023; Ellner 2025).

This retreat is visible in weakened aid commitments, erratic diplomatic signaling, and a loss of institutional anchoring—evident in the erosion of the OAS's legitimacy and the fragility of inter-American instruments. Yet the power vacuum left behind has not led to emancipation. Rather, it has enabled a reconfiguration of dependency under new actors, discourses, and mechanisms. U.S. dominance, for all its contradictions, provided a structural framework. Its fragmentation has created space—but not necessarily agency.

Thus, the legacy is paradoxical. U.S. power constrained Latin America's foreign policy autonomy, yet its decline threatens to fragment regional order without providing a coherent alternative. Without a reinvigorated framework grounded in regional priorities, Latin America risks replacing one logic of subordination with another.

III. Authoritarian Multilateralism: Risks and Attractions

As U.S. influence recedes, authoritarian powers—chiefly China and Russia—have advanced their own forms of multilateral engagement with Latin America. This model, which we define here as **authoritarian multilateralism**, is neither openly ideological nor coercively prescriptive. Instead, it projects power through what can chiefly been seen as strategic pragmatism: offering development partnerships devoid of liberal conditionalities, sovereignty without oversight, and capital flows detached from any form of democratic reform. These appeals are attractive—but fraught.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), now encompassing over 20 Latin American countries, epitomizes this approach. Its infrastructure loans, port developments, and energy deals address pressing material needs regardless of a country's political system or human rights record. Furthermore, Russia's strategy, while more symbolic and selective, targets ideological allies—deepening ties with Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, while leveraging media and security platforms to expand its footprint throughout the region (Berg 2024; Piazza et al. 2023). Together, they offer alternative forums that appear to respect national sovereignty—yet often deepen asymmetry and elite capture.

Beneath this non-interventionist rhetoric, however, lies a familiar logic. Chinese financing mechanisms—such as oil-backed loans in Ecuador or lithium agreements in Bolivia—frequently lack transparency, disproportionately benefit political elites, and entrench extractive dependencies (Berg 2024; Piazza et al. 2023). Russian media and security exports reinforce sovereigntist discourses that obscure democratic backsliding (Kneuer 2020). These dynamics replicate older structures of dependency under a new guise.

More subtly, authoritarian multilateralism can facilitate the export of **governance templates**. Through surveillance technologies, cyber partnerships, and authoritarian-friendly development models, China and Russia offer tools that bolster domestic control and reduce accountability (Piazza et al. 2023). This is not ideological exportation in the Cold War sense, but **discursive and infrastructural diffusion**: a soft entrenchment of both illiberal norms and tools for mass control.

For Latin America's democracies—often hybrid, often fragile—these alignments are attractive. But the cost can also critically be epistemic. This occurs by indirectly constraining democratic imaginaries and reinforcing the consolidation of elites. As Tickner and Blaney (2012) and Sen (2023) argue, rejecting Western liberalism does not automatically yield emancipation. Multipolarity without ontological pluralism ultimately risks reproducing subordination through alternative power centers.

Hence, the question is not whether to engage with authoritarian powers, but **how**. Regional forums like BRICS or the China-CELAC mechanism may offer room for maneuver—but only if grounded in participatory, accountable frameworks. Strategic diversification must not come at the price of neither strategic autonomy nor new forms of epistemic subordination.

IV. Implications for Democratic Governance and Strategic Autonomy

The dual forces of U.S. retrenchment and authoritarian assertiveness are not confined to foreign policy—they reverberate through Latin America's internal political orders. As global actors reconfigure norms and incentives, they catalyze shifts toward governance models that emphasize control, opacity, and elite insulation—often under the banner of sovereignty.

China and Russia's influence strategies—ranging from surveillance technologies and digital infrastructure to media ecosystems and military training—reinforce governments that seek insulation from liberal scrutiny.

These tools strengthen domestic executive power, while eroding institutional constraints (Kneuer 2020; Piazza et al. 2023). Examples such as Bolivia's adoption of Chinese facial recognition systems or Venezuela's reliance on Russian cyber and electoral tools reveal how foreign alignment shapes internal democratic architecture.

Yet external influence alone does not explain this shift. Latin American elites often welcome these instruments as mechanisms of **power consolidation**. The dynamic is not merely one of imposition, but of complicity. Foreign engagement therefore can becomes a **means of domestic illiberal entrenchment**, challenging simplistic narratives of external domination and requiring closer scrutiny of internal political alliances.

Meanwhile, U.S. influence offers little democratic counterbalance. As Long and Schulz (2023) observe, Washington's approach oscillates between liberal messaging and strategic inconsistency—militarized migration policies, selective engagement with authoritarian allies, and rhetorical democracy promotion devoid of meaningful investment. Regional actors, like Brazil, increasingly hedge—negotiating between Huawei contracts and U.S. security alliances—less as a strategy of independence, and more as a function of constrained agency.

This narrowing of options reveals a deeper epistemic vulnerability. As Tickner and Blaney (2012) and Sen (2023) emphasize, strategic autonomy cannot be reduced to geopolitical balancing—it requires the **capacity to define the terms of governance and development**. In this regard, Latin America remains epistemically dependent when its models of order are borrowed, not built.

Nonetheless, the region offers alternative trajectories. Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, plurinational constitutionalism in Bolivia, and Indigenous environmental movements reflect **living democratic experiments**. These are not premodern holdovers or romanticized exceptions—they are forward-looking innovations that challenge the liberal-authoritarian binary. The key question is whether such models can inform a **reimagined diplomacy** rather than remain confined to the margins.

Autonomy, in this light, demands more than flexibility. It requires a politics of **pluralism, accountability, and epistemic sovereignty**. The threat is not just foreign interference, but the internal normalization of hierarchical, exclusionary logics that foreclose democratic futures.

V. Beyond Dependence: Strategic Autonomy Through Democratic Pluralism

Latin America stands before a pivotal decision. One path leads to entrenched dependencies—obscured by multipolar rhetoric, transactional pragmatism, and superficial claims to sovereignty. The other, more difficult path demands the construction of a truly autonomous regional project grounded in plural democratic values. This is not a geopolitical decision alone—it is an ontological one: what kind of region does Latin America aspire to be, and on whose terms?

To move beyond substitution—Western tutelage replaced by Eastern patronage—Latin America must reimagine diplomacy not as alignment, but as **self-definition**. Its marginalization is not only material, but epistemic. Reversing this requires confronting the foundational question of **who gets to define development, power, order, and democracy**.

1. First, foreign partnerships must be subjected to much needed democratic scrutiny. Engagement with China, Russia, or the United States must be transparent, accountable, and open to civil society participation. Sovereignty cannot be invoked to shield opaque infrastructure deals or unregulated surveillance networks. Autonomy begins with **institutional oversight**.
2. Second, regional bodies must be restructured around **inclusive legitimacy**, not elite convergence. CELAC, MERCOSUR, and other forums must integrate subnational actors: Indigenous leaders, feminist networks, Afro-descendant organizations, academic institutions and municipal governments. This is not merely symbolic—it is strategically necessary. Durable diplomacy must absolutely reflect the plural composition of Latin American societies if it is to truly seek strategic autonomy.
3. Third, the region must reclaim **epistemic sovereignty**. As Tickner, Blaney, Tucker, and Sen insist, strategic autonomy is empty without the ability to articulate one's own norms. Innovations like Porto Alegre's budgeting and Bolivia's plurinationalism emerged from within. These should no longer be treated as exceptions; they should shape the region's diplomatic vision and future foreign policy planing.
4. Fourth, Latin America must refuse the false binary between liberal conditionality and authoritarian pragmatism. Multipolarity is not freedom if it multiplies unaccountable dependencies. The goal is not to play the powers against each other, but to **become a subject** of world politics. Strategic

hedging, without normative clarity, will always leave the region reactive. Autonomy requires **a project**.

So now we might ask: what would a diplomacy rooted in **ontological pluralism** look like?

It would treat regional diversity as an asset, not an obstacle. It would center democratic experimentation, rather than replicate dominant models. It would measure influence not by alignment, but by the ability to truly shape global norms from the South.

The risks of inaction are clear. As U.S. credibility erodes and authoritarian powers gain ground, the danger of renewed dependency intensifies. Yet so does the opportunity—to construct a Latin American diplomacy grounded in justice, pluralism, and dignity. The foundations exist. The task is to elevate them from practice to strategy, from margins to center.

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