

Latin America, Caught Between Strategic Rebalancing and Hegemonic Transition

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Abstract

This article examines Latin America's position within the contemporary transformation of the international order, questioning whether the current global scenario should be interpreted as a strategic rebalancing of United States primacy or as a broader hegemonic transition driven by China's rise. Building on historical and geopolitical analysis, the article argues that Latin America's renewed relevance derives less from its autonomous capabilities than from its strategic utility within great-power competition. The authors distinguish between structural relevance and relevance as threat, showing how migration, organized crime, extra-hemispheric penetration, and strategic resources have repositioned the region within Washington's security agenda. The study further explores the implications of this altered international context for Latin American foreign policy, contrasting strategies of active alignment with the United States and active non-alignment. Through comparative historical examples and theoretical reflection, the article highlights the constraints imposed by geography, domestic politics, and hemispheric hierarchy. It concludes that, regardless of whether the international system is undergoing hegemonic transition or strategic rebalancing, Latin America's capacity to shape its own position ultimately depends on the accumulation of state capacity, strategic agency, and diplomatic coherence.

Abstract (Italiano)

Questo articolo analizza il posizionamento dell'America Latina nelle trasformazioni dell'ordine internazionale contemporaneo, interrogandosi se l'attuale scenario globale debba essere interpretato come un riequilibrio strategico della primazia statunitense oppure come una più ampia transizione egemonica legata all'ascesa della Cina. Attraverso un approccio storico e geopolitico, il contributo sostiene che la rinnovata rilevanza dell'America Latina derivi meno dalle sue capacità autonome che dalla sua utilità strategica all'interno della competizione tra grandi potenze. Gli autori distinguono tra rilevanza strutturale e rilevanza come minaccia, mostrando

come migrazioni, criminalità organizzata, presenza di attori extra-emisferici e risorse strategiche abbiano riportato la regione al centro dell'agenda di sicurezza di Washington. Il saggio esamina inoltre le implicazioni di questo contesto internazionale alterato per la politica estera latino-americana, mettendo a confronto strategie di allineamento attivo con gli Stati Uniti e strategie di non-allineamento attivo. Attraverso esempi storici comparati e riflessioni teoriche, il contributo evidenzia i vincoli imposti dalla geografia, dalla politica domestica e dalla struttura gerarchica dell'emisfero. La conclusione sottolinea che la capacità dell'America Latina di incidere sul proprio posizionamento internazionale dipenderà dall'accumulazione di capacità statale, agency strategica e coerenza diplomatica.

Keywords: *Latin America, hegemonic transition, United States foreign policy, strategic alignment, international order*

The current international landscape lends itself to two competing interpretations. One understands it as a process of strategic rebalancing: a temporary hardening of U.S. leadership aimed at managing the decoupling from China in a bipolar world. The other conceives it as a hegemonic transition, in which U.S. primacy is being structurally eroded by China's rise. Distinguishing between these dynamics is not merely a theoretical exercise: Latin America's room for maneuver within the emerging equilibrium will depend upon it (Herrera Santana, 2017; León-Manríquez and Alvarez, 2014; Merino and Morgenfeld, 2022; Schenoni, 2019).

The first interpretation, strategic rebalancing, challenges the notion that we are witnessing a full-fledged transition. Rather than an irreversible decline of U.S. primacy, it envisages a gradual shift toward a bipolar system—although the gap with China remains considerable. In this scenario, Washington would be leading a strategic realignment in which it selectively suspends the rules of the international order that it originally created in order to redesign a new order in its favor.

This pattern is recognizable in previous moments of tension with another great power: the Soviet Union. Similar situations occurred at least twice since the Second World War: under Harry Truman,

when Soviet expansion in Europe and the Chinese Revolution appeared to threaten U.S. supremacy; and under Richard Nixon, when nuclear parity and the strain of Vietnam cast doubt on the sustainability of the postwar order (Schenoni, 2025: 153–169). In both episodes, the United States responded not by withdrawing from the system, but by temporarily hardening its leadership through coercion, before returning to a more cooperative form of hegemony.

The similarities with those moments are numerous. First, geopolitical encirclement: just as Truman consolidated an alliance architecture to contain the Soviet Union and Nixon exploited the Sino-Soviet split to redesign the global balance, Trump appears to be pursuing moves aimed at isolating China, including a “reverse Kissinger” strategy involving Russia. Second, a spectacular military deterrence, reminiscent of the threats and use of U.S. military power (including nuclear capabilities) under Truman and Nixon. Third, economic unilateralism, similar to that deployed in the context of the Marshall Plan and during the Nixon Shock, which seeks to redistribute costs within the Western bloc. Finally, in the strategic utility of appearing irrational, there are echoes of Truman—“the mule from Missouri”—and Nixon’s Madman Theory, both intended to reinforce the credibility of threats (Schenoni, 2025b: 149–162).

Seen in these terms, Donald Trump’s foreign policy does not signal the end of the liberal international order, but rather its temporary suspension. Unilateralism, explicit threats, direct interventions, and the rupture with multilateral institutions—what some have termed predatory hegemony (Walt, 2026a)—function as instruments for realigning allies, encircling adversaries, and redefining priorities. The objective is not to manage a transition, but to prevent it or, at the very least, postpone it on favorable terms.

Within this framework, the Western Hemisphere reemerges as a priority not because it is decisive in global competition, but because it allows the United States to demonstrate authority within its hegemonic sphere by expelling extra-regional rivals, as it has historically done (Tickner, 2021; Santa-Cruz, 2020). For Latin America, the corollary of this interpretation is the acceptance of its strategic subordination and, as we shall see, a policy of alignment.

Yet there is another interpretation—and a more widespread one—that understands the current moment not as a rebalancing

within an existing order, but as a hegemonic transition (Serbin, 2019; Stuenkel, 2016). From this perspective, U.S. primacy is not undergoing a tactical pause or cyclical adjustment, but rather a structural decline driven by China's rise and by the inability of the United States to continue providing, on its own, the public goods that sustained the postwar order. This interpretation is rooted in hegemonic transition theory (Allison, 2017) and emphasizes long-term transformations: the shift of the demographic and economic center of gravity toward Asia, the erosion of Western technological supremacy, the fragmentation of global trade, and the growing difficulty of sustaining normative consensus. Under this logic, U.S. behavior is interpreted not as a temporary suspension of the order, but as a form of defensive revisionism, while the world would increasingly drift away from Washington in a process intensified by that very revisionism. As Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney stated in the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting, nostalgia is pointless: we are approaching the unknown and must plan accordingly.

From this standpoint, the emphasis on the Western Hemisphere responds to a logic of retrenchment: faced with the impossibility of sustaining global primacy, Washington prioritizes areas of direct control and lower relative cost. Latin America thus reemerges not only as a stage for demonstrating power, but also as a zone of strategic fallback where the United States retains superiority and can offset losses in more contested theaters. At the same time, it denies that space to its geopolitical rivals. The division of the world into spheres of influence becomes, simultaneously, “an inevitable result of international anarchy and an imperfect solution to the competitive incentives that anarchy creates” (Walt, 2026b).

A Region in Waiting: Relevant or Irrelevant?

The question of Latin America's renewed centrality requires a prior definition: what does “relevance” mean in the international system, and under what conditions can a peripheral region acquire it?

In our previous work, we distinguished between relevance as a resource and relevance as a threat (Schenoni and Malamud, 2021:4–18; cf. Malamud, Schenoni and Paes, 2022:29–37). The former is

associated with positive capabilities: demographic, economic, military, or diplomatic weight. The latter refers to the capacity to generate problems for great powers, whether through internal instability, interstate conflict, or openness to extra-regional actors. Our diagnosis was that Latin America had lost relevance in both dimensions. From a secular perspective, the region became less relevant due to the rise of the rest of the world: Asia, the Middle East, and even Africa increased their demographic, strategic, and commercial weight, displacing Latin America across nearly all structural indicators. From a conjunctural perspective, the end of the Cold War eliminated the principal source of negative relevance, as the disappearance of systemic competition ended the hemisphere's role as an ideological and geopolitical battleground. The result was a more peaceful region, but also a more dispensable one (Russell, 2006: 48–62).

Against this backdrop, the new U.S. National Security Strategy and the discourse surrounding a hemispheric revitalization invite us to think in terms of a recovery of relevance as a problem. The arguments are familiar. First, a reinterpretation of the Monroe Doctrine that revalues the region as a zone of exclusion for rival powers. Second, the growing importance of critical minerals and strategic resources located in Latin America, which are essential for the energy and technological transition and which the United States does not want to leave in Chinese hands. Third, the geopolitical projection associated with passages, maritime corridors, and choke points—from the Arctic Ocean to Cape Horn, passing through the Panama Canal—in a context of global competition. Finally, the region's classic function as a space of territorial denial: preventing hostile powers from establishing military, technological, or logistical presence within the U.S. security perimeter (Milani and Pinheiro, 2013: 11–41).

History suggests that U.S. attention toward Latin America has been spasmodic and reactive. Whenever an extra-hemispheric power attempted to advance into the region—Germany during the World Wars, the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and China today—Washington responded forcefully. But once the threat was contained, the region returned to the background. Prioritization never translated into a lasting reorientation of capabilities or into sustained strategic commitment (Actis and Creus, 2020; Desch, 1993; Schoultz, 1998; Smith, 2005). From this perspective, the so-called

“Trump Corollary” would not be a symptom of recovered structural relevance, but rather a strategic hyperbole aimed at multiple audiences: domestic voters, Latin American governments, extra-hemispheric allies, and global adversaries. The region reappears more as a problem—migration, organized crime, external penetration—than as a resource. Once those problems are controlled and outside intrusions blocked, historical dynamics suggest that attention will once again dissipate. The question is not whether the region matters again, but for how long and under what terms. Experience suggests that, without a substantive increase in its own agency, relevance will once more prove temporary and subordinate, while structural irrelevance—quieter, but more persistent—will ultimately prevail. What does this mean for Latin America’s foreign policy?

Latin America: To Align or Not to Align, That Is the Question

Is the world undergoing a hegemonic transition or a recomposition of US primacy? The answer has implications for the relevance of Latin America and the foreign policy of its countries. Those who emphasize military power tend to see the thesis of strategic rebalancing as more likely, given the overwhelming superiority of the United States. But an economic perspective, which minimizes hierarchy and violence to focus on the last thirty years, points in another direction. In this context, the reappearance of the Western Hemisphere on Washington’s strategic agenda revives a classic dilemma of Latin American foreign policy: how to position itself vis-à-vis the hemispheric hegemon.

The available answers are not new; what changes is the context and, with it, the relative costs and benefits of each option. The traditional typology offers three courses of action. Alignment involves accepting the hegemon’s primacy and coordinating policies with it in its most sophisticated form, while maintaining the greatest possible degree of autonomy (Escudé, 1992; Escudé and Schenoni, 2016). Non-alignment, on the other hand, proposes starting with autonomy and not automatically subordinating oneself to any power (Jaguaribe, 1979: 91–130; Russell and Tokatlian, 2013: 157–180). Finally, balancing consists of confronting the hegemon by allying

with its rival, as Cuba did during the Cold War and Venezuela until recently: the results are not encouraging.

Both proponents of alignment and non-alignment tend to acknowledge some merit in the counterargument and advocate a sophisticated or “active” version of their own. Those who advocate active non-alignment emphasize that it is not a policy of confrontation with Washington but rather of maximizing room for maneuver by avoiding rigid commitments, and they accept that it requires sophisticated diplomacy (Fortín, Heine and Ominami, 2021). But this position does not differ much from active alignment, which suggests starting from a position of alignment and then maximizing room for maneuver by avoiding rigid commitments, which also requires sophisticated diplomacy.

The historical experience of powers outside the region is illustrative. The United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Japan opted, after 1945, for explicit alignment with the United States, albeit with varying degrees of autonomy, as a way to rebuild capabilities and defend themselves against the Soviet threat. In Latin America, the situation is more diverse. XXI-century Venezuela took the path of balancing, with the expected consequences. Brazil attempted early alignment, which, during World War II, yielded industrial and military benefits; subsequently, it sought non-alignment, with mixed results and increasing costs. Argentina favored non-alignment with episodes of late alignment, paying the price of exclusion at critical moments (Simonoff, 2023: 15–29; Paikin, 2022: 151–168; Domínguez and Covarrubias, 2014). Mexico maintained a prudent autonomy, limited by geographical proximity, which combined functional cooperation with symbolic safeguards (González González, 2001: 619–671; Covarrubias, 2011: 213–233). The smaller countries, for their part, alternated between alignment and external interventions, demonstrating the fragility of maximalist strategies.

For those who foresee a rebalancing of US primacy in a bipolar system, the current scenario, with the US as hemispheric hegemon and China as a competitor, pushes toward alignment (Schenoni and Leiva, 2021: 233–255). Considering the cost of the sanctions the US can impose for non-alignment (the case of Venezuela is an extreme example), the real dilemma is not “to align or not,” but how. This view is based on empirical evidence that the choice between

the US and China was mutually exclusive even before the current decoupling (Urdinez et al., 2016: 3–30). From this perspective, the most sensible option is active alignment, where the region does not cross the red lines established by Washington—for example, China’s access to sensitive areas—and is content to maintain autonomy within the limits of the hegemonic umbrella. Non-alignment without material support would translate into vulnerability.

The strategy of active non-alignment, in contrast to the previous one, considers that there is a transition toward a “post-Western” world and emphasizes the economic dimension over the military one (Urdinez, 2025; Wigell, Scholvin and Aaltola, 2018). Its proponents conceive of it, unlike the non-alignment of the Cold War, as less defensive and more oriented toward diversification and the pursuit of global opportunities. In this view, alignment with one of the hegemonic rivals would narrow the range of options and obstruct economic development instead of fostering it. Implicit is the idea that economic hegemony can be separated from military hegemony. Active non-alignment, they claim, has no ideological affiliation, thus allowing for international cooperation between governments of different leanings.

Latin American history is rich in examples of every conceivable foreign policy strategy. Analyzing relations with Washington since 1945, studies suggest three explanatory variables: the geopolitical context, the distance from the US, and a set of domestic factors that affect foreign policy stability and its propensity for alignment.

First, benign geopolitical contexts have allowed Latin American countries to diversify their relationships and maximize their autonomy, while restrictive geopolitical contexts, such as the advance of extra-regional powers in the hemisphere, have tended to reduce options (Malamud, 2025: 51–55; Rodriguez, 2012: 70–89). Second, regarding distance, direct US interventions have taken place within its security perimeter, which extends to Colombia and Venezuela, but have been indirect beyond it. This implies differentiated costs for resistance or autonomy: the farther away, the more tolerable (Russell and Calle, 2022: 167–189). As Octavio Amorim Neto points out, Brazil has conditions that Mexico lacks (Amorim Neto, 2026). Former Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda acknowledges this when he states that, “unlike the rest of the continent,

Brazil can afford to act alone” (Amorim Neto and Malamud, 2015: 1–27). Third, countries like Brazil and Mexico have responded more to the balance of power with the hegemon than to domestic political processes (Castañeda, 2026). This consideration relates to the concept of volatility in Latin American foreign policy (Merke, Reynoso and Schenoni, 2020: 413–429; Schenoni, 2020: 1–26).

Whatever foreign policy is adopted in response to the external context, the ability to maintain domestic support will be equally important. So far, alignment with the US has proven electorally advantageous, as suggested by the victories of Javier Milei in Argentina and Nasry Asfura in Honduras. But if the results of this alignment are slow to materialize, a nationalist backlash has precedents in any Latin American history textbook. Neutrality, in turn, may be popular in the short term, but burdensome in the event of sanctions or market exclusion. As one Latin American foreign minister confided to us, “active non-alignment or strategic autonomy sound very appealing and entertain academics, but the truth is that these concepts are beyond our grasp. We are vulnerable, and all we can do is try to play the game of political maneuvering”.

Conclusions

The choice between strategic rebalancing and hegemonic transition matters less for its analytical precision than for the strategies it enables or discourages. In Latin America, misdiagnosing the issue can lead to two opposing traps. On the one hand, a foreign policy based on maximalist assumptions of autonomy that do not correspond to its material capabilities or the hierarchical structure of the hemisphere can result in hegemonic sanctions, whether economic or military. On the other hand, uncritical alignment can stifle economic opportunities arising from diversification and, in extreme cases, provoke the animosity of extra-hemispheric powers. In both cases, moreover, choosing the wrong strategy implies relative losses compared to neighbors who get it right.

If the current scenario is one of strategic rebalancing, a more or less active alignment with the US appears as a rational adaptation to a hardening order. If, on the other hand, we are facing a hegemonic

transition, diversifying ties is prudent and advisable. Whatever the case, history suggests that structural irrelevance is not reversed by rhetoric or ambiguity, but by the sustained accumulation of capabilities and agency. Without this, Latin America will remain relevant only as an occasional problem or secondary theater, oscillating between imposed alignments and illusory autonomies in a world that does not wait.

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