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INTERVIEW WITH LATIN AMERICA EXPERT DR. EVAN ELLIS: „CHINESE INFLUENCE IS POSITIONED TO GREATLY EXPAND IN THE POST-COVID ENVIRONMENT“

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Global Review had the pleasure and honor to talk with Latin America expert Dr. Evan Ellis about the situation in Latin America.

Dr. R. Evan Ellis is a research professor of Latin American Studies at the Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, with a research focus on the region's relationships with China and other non-Western Hemisphere actors. He previously served for 1 year at Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's Policy Planning Staff. He has presented his work in a broad range of business and government forums in 27 countries on four continents. He has given testimony on Latin America and Caribbean Security Issues to the U.S. Congress, and has discussed his work regarding China and other external actors in Latin America on a broad range of radio and television programs, including CNN International, CNN En Español, The John Bachelor Show, Voice of America, and Radio Marti. Dr. Ellis is cited regularly in the print media in both the United States and Latin America for his work in this area, including *The Washington Times*, *Bloomberg*, *América Economía*, *DEF*, and *InfoBAE*. Dr. Ellis has published over 270 works, including *China in Latin America: The Whats and Wherefores* (2009), *The Strategic Dimension of Chinese Engagement with Latin America* (2013), *China on the Ground in Latin America* (2014) and *Transnational Organized Crime in Latin America* (2018). Dr. Ellis holds a Ph.D. in political science with a specialization in comparative politics.

Global Review: Dr. Ellis, if you evaluate the 4 years Latin America policy of the Trump administration, which were its priorities and which positive and negative effects did they have for the USA and Latin America?

Dr. Ellis: Within the framework of “America First,” immigration, and securing trade deals more favorable to the US was a prime focus, as was heightened resistance to the activities of extra-hemispheric US rivals in the region, particularly the People’s Republic of China, and to a lesser extent, Russia and Iran. Mexico and Central America received significant attention on the account of immigration and trade. In addition, the struggle to restore democracy in Venezuela and Nicaragua and the containment of the communist regime in Cuba received a great deal of focus, as did the continuing US partnership with Colombia in the face of its serious security challenges. In my personal opinion, the President’s personal style, and policies on specific issues such as immigration were received badly by many in the region, although the administration’s heightened attention to and pushback against anti-US leftist forces was (often quietly) valued by conservative groups across the region. Away from the headlines, a lot of good and thoughtful work was done by the State Department and other US agencies. In addition, the strengthening of friendships with Brazil and Ecuador, and the resolution of Guyana’s electoral dispute were arguably important positive outcomes, among others. Much important work, including the restoration of democracy in Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba was left on the table, and there were arguably important missed opportunities such as the transition back to democracy in Bolivia, among others.

Global Review: What has changed in the last 4 years in Latin America politically, economically and geopolitically. Are there any visible main trends and what would be the conclusion for a new Latin America policy? How does the Covid crisis affect the situation? Will Latin America become poor and Latin Africa?

Dr. Ellis: Latin America has been profoundly transformed by the Covid-19 pandemic, including probable lasting structural damage to its economies, with many small and medium enterprises that will not recover, and displaced workers. Governments will be left with expanded debt and burdens for social safety nets. Pre-pandemic popular frustrations with corruption, impunity, and poor government performance that played a role in the massive protests and unrest in the fall of 2019, have only been exacerbated by the pandemic, with covid-19-related corruption exposed, increased social need and decreased government resources to meet them. We are seeing such discontent play out in a myriad of ways now, even during the pandemic, with protests over new budgets (including the setting afire of Guatemala’s parliament building), public criticism over government management of the pandemic, and other issues. Examples include the demands for a new constitution in Chile, the indigenous “minga” in Bogota and other recent events in Colombia, etc. While some criminal operations such as drug production and smuggling, and gang extortion were temporarily disrupted by the pandemic response, Covid-19 has given criminal groups opportunity to exercise increased social roles in areas they dominate, including the distribution of relief supplies and personal protective equipment and the enforcement of curfews, while security forces were otherwise occupied. Desperate people and marginalized businesses will be more vulnerable to exploitation by criminal groups for money laundering and other activities, and will be more susceptible to fall into human trafficking activities, as well as recruitment into criminal organizations themselves. The region is likely on track for several rough years with mutually reinforcing expansions in criminality and insecurity, social protest, economic malaise, and political change, likely benefitting populists on both the right and left.

Global Review: What is the policy of the new Obrador government in Mexico and the situation in this country? Which effect did Trump’s wall, migration policy, new NAFTA have on Mexico? There were reports that the security situation is eroding and the drug cartels are growing in power while the security apparatus is eroding and a high-ranking Mexican general was arrested by the USA for his connections with drug cartels?

Dr. Ellis: The government of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) and his Morena movement have emphasized a state-centric approach to Mexico's challenges, including favoring the state oil company PEMEX over private investment in the oil sector. Despite tensions with the Trump administration over immigration and the renegotiation of the US-Mexico-Canada trade agreement, AMLO has generally sought to maintain a positive relationship with the US, seeking compromise, ceding significant ground, and cooperating with the Trump administration on issues from immigration to water disputes, among others. AMLO's response to the COVID-19 crisis, coming just after a reorganization of the public health sector that produced medicine shortages and administrative paralysis, was criticized for being slow and not well-managed. It focused on fiscal austerity and delayed imposing strict social distancing measures that would have shut down the economy, and has led the country to one of the highest death rates for the pandemic in the region. In security affairs, AMLO's attempt to restructure key organizations, including eliminating the federal police and the former civil intelligence service CISEN have not turned out well. The National Guard, which he hoped would both replace the police and the direct role of the military in Mexican internal security, was not able to recruit sufficient personnel from the eliminated federal police and new recruits. Consequently it was forced to draw principally on military personnel. The new Center of National Intelligence has the same fundamental problems with analysis and agents and coordination with other government organizations as did CISEN. Meanwhile, violent crime under AMLO has surpassed the historic levels of his predecessors. Worse, the release of Ovidio Guzman Lopez (the son of "El Chapo" Guzman) after a government operation to capture him in Culiacan was met by violent resistance, raised questions about the President's willingness to incur costs to take strong action against powerful criminal interests in the country. Most recently, the agreement in which the US dropped charges against former Army head Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda so that he could be returned to face trial in Mexico, has raised multiple questions about hidden agendas within the AMLO government.

Global Review: Brazil under Bolsonaro was a good ally of Trump and made a similar policy. In foreign policy, it retreated from the Paris climate accord while destroying the Amazon rain forests, the lung of the earth, supported Taiwan and Israel, was not much interested in the BRICS anymore, made a neoliberal policy and was characterized by authoritarian rule. It also ignored the Covid crisis. What do you think will change under a Biden government in the relations with Brazil?

Dr. Ellis: President Bolsonaro had a close personal affinity for Donald Trump, creating unprecedented opportunities for the two countries to expand cooperation on a range of topics from security to social policy. In the US Presidential debates, then candidate Biden signaled that he was oriented to placing more emphasis on Brazil's stewardship of the Amazon, touching a nerve with President Bolsonaro and those in Brazil who see such interest by the US and European left as a challenge to Brazilian sovereignty and an attempt to claim a right to interfere in the management of its national territory. Based on the policy agenda of previous US Democrat administrations including Barack Obama, it is possible that the Biden administration could also give greater attention to other sensitive issues in Brazil, such as allegations of abuses by state-level police forces. The loss of the personal appeal that President Trump had for President Bolsonaro, and possibly greater US attention to environmental issues under a Biden administration will doubtlessly create challenges. Nonetheless, initial indications are that President-elect Biden will be bringing in an experienced team, including Secretary of State designate Anthony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, who both have extensive experience with the State Department and International relations, and thus who should be able to provide continuity and skillful leadership to maintain a positive US-Brazil relationship.

Global Review: While many experts expected the downfall of Maduro, Guaido and the opposition as the USA didn't manage it to get rid of the dictatorship. What is the actual situation in Venezuela and what should be done?

Dr. Ellis: If the Trump Administration, and key figures such as Special Representative Elliott Abrams and his team didn't achieve a restoration of democracy in Venezuela, it wasn't for lack of effort. With Cuban intelligence deeply embedded within the Venezuelan regime, and key actors fearful of giving up power lest they lose not only the fortunes they have robbed, but also their liberty to extradition requests, there has never been a strong hand to play for the US in Venezuela. I admire the creativity and effort of the Trump Administration and Elliott Abrams team for what they worked to achieve. Venezuela has simply evolved into a criminal kleptocracy under the de facto government of Nicholas Maduro and his allies. The likely elimination of the current opposition-led National Assembly with the sham parliamentary election on December 6th will further undermine the position of de jure President Juan Guaido and his position in the opposition. This will reinforce pressures for the international community to seek a "political solution" that would essentially declare victory while leaving the Maduro dictatorship in power and without responsibility for its crimes, human rights abuses, and the tens or hundreds of billions of dollars robbed from the Venezuelan people over the past twenty years. Despite the decreased likelihood of ousting Maduro from power through democratic means, the continuing collapse of the economy, the spread of Covid-19, and the fundamental role of criminal actors such as the National Liberation Army of Colombia (ELN), FARC dissidents, sindicatos, pranes, and others (as the real force in charge in Venezuelan territory beyond Caracas, makes it likely that Venezuela could persist for years as a weakly governed criminal hub and source of instability for the region and sanctuary for groups who would use its territory to enrich themselves and threaten their neighbors. For the US, neither military action nor compromise with the de facto criminal regime, nor peaceful democratic transition are realistic options. This sad reality makes coordination with Europe and other international actors to cordon off its criminality as the best among bad options.

Global Review: How did the situation in Columbia develop since the peace agreement? Has it become more stable?

Dr. Ellis: Colombia is in an increasingly difficult situation, with none of the sides happy with the terms of the peace agreement, including former President Uribe even proposing the elimination of the special peace tribunal (JEP). It is a tribute to the education and resilience of the Colombians that, facing almost every imaginable difficulty all at once, the country remains relatively prosperous and governable. Coca growing and cocaine production has taken off, alongside illegal mining and other activities by an increasingly fragmented array of armed organized groups (GAO). The "dissidents" of the former FARC guerillas, focused on areas offering lucrative opportunities for criminal income, have more than doubled in size, and been joined by important leaders who formerly participated in the demobilization but who now renounce it. These include Ivan Marquez and Jesus Santrich. The National Liberation Army has benefitted from numerous defections from the FARC. Both the FARC and the ELN have benefitted from sanctuary and the ability to raise money through illicit activities, recruit, and hide goods in Venezuela. Meanwhile over two million Venezuelan refugees have created an enormous socioeconomic burden on the Colombian government and economy, and now contribute to risks through their travels in weakened condition and lives in marginalized situations, to the spread of Covid-19. Social protest, which began to explode in the fall of 2019, is taking off once again.

Global Review: We nearly hear no news about Argentine despite an eroding economic situation? What is the actual situation and is facing Argentina a new state bankrupt?

Dr. Ellis: Argentina's fiscal situation remains marginal, its economy and public health badly damaged by the Covid-19 pandemic and response, and the country challenged by deep political divisions, particularly with the return of the Peronists, and their ongoing attempt to realign Argentina to the left and consolidate control over quasi-independent other branches of government such as the judiciary. China, which already has deep business relations and

commercial positions in the country, stands by to both help bail out the country, and dramatically expand its commercial position in sectors from lithium and gold mining, to oil, to telecommunications, to nuclear energy, hydroelectric projects, modernization of the rail system, among others. The increasingly bold voice of Argentina's populist leftist government is likely to reinforce others in the resurgent Latin American left, including Bolivia (with the return of the MAS), Venezuela, Nicaragua, possibly Ecuador after February 2021 elections, and perhaps even Peru, as the left gains an opening for coming to power there in a fragmented political system with a population deeply alienated by corruption and traditional parties. Such developments will cause discomfort to right of center regimes such as those in neighboring Brazil and Uruguay, and fundamentally transform the dynamics of regional politics and multilateral institutions.

Global Review: There were enormous mass protests in Chile and now Chile will get a new constitution? How will this affect the country and Latin America?

Dr. Ellis: Chile is likely to continue with bouts of social protest and instability through the rest of President Pinera's term, which could even be cut short, per some recent proposals. The constituent assembly, which is to be selected in April, will likely not quell protests, but further fuel them with the sense that "anything is possible," animating both the left, and the right who will greatly fear the possible consequences of growing chaos.

Global Review: Venezuela was an obvious showcase for growing Chinese and Russian influence in Latin America. How did Chinese and Russian influence develop in the last 4 years, do they have a strategy and key states and will they benefit from the Covid crisis? What should a new Biden administration do against it?

Dr. Ellis: Chinese influence is positioned to greatly expand in the post-Covid environment, but amidst significant resentment in the region, as well as challenges associated with China's expanding presence in the region. With the Chinese economy poised to grow by almost 2% in 2020, and more than 8% in 2021, while the US and the EU continue to stagnate, Chinese demand for Latin American commodities and foodstuffs will become increasingly important to their governments. As occurred in the post-2008 crisis environment, Chinese companies will be well positioned to buy assets in strategically valued sectors from mining and petroleum to agriculture, telecommunications, logistics and others. We are already seeing this with the acquisition of Naturgy in Chile's energy sector, as well as a Chinese purchase of a 30% interest in the Portuguese company Mota-Engil in construction, with an important presence and experience in Latin America. Chinese companies and banks will be well positioned to offer lucrative deals to invest in Covid-19 paralyzed economies and to bail out distressed Latin American governments on terms they would not previously have agreed to. Yet as PRC-based companies expand their physical presence in the region, their inexperience will lead them to make mistakes in their relations with governments, workers, and communities... provoking conflicts even as they confront a Latin America, as noted before, with higher levels of criminality, social unrest, and political instability.


For the US, it will be important to work to strengthen institutions of governance in the region, and insist on transparency and adherence to a level playing field and rule of law that applies to everyone. This will help Latin American governments secure the best deals for their own development in relating to China, partially protect them from some of the more predatory practices of PRC-based companies, and help ensure that Latin American peoples see the benefits of democratic systems and market principles, helping resist the rise to power of populists who would throw the door open to corruption, authoritarian government, and deeper reliance on economic dependence and political influence from the Chinese.

Global Review: Which policy does the new Cuban leadership make? Are there any changes?

Dr. Ellis: Since the transition from Fidel and Raul Castro, Miguel Diaz-Canel has been hesitant to significantly change Cuban policy, even in the face of greater resistance to Cuba's communist regime from the Trump administration. Diaz-Canel may move cautiously as the Biden administration takes the reins of leadership in Washington, wishing to avoid provoking Washington as it hopes for a return to Obama-era engagement policies, yet tempted to test the Biden Administration's resolve and level of distraction. It is unlikely that a President Biden will rewind the clock to the type opening that President Barack Obama pursued with Cuba.

Global Review: If you compare the Latin America policy of the Trump administration with previous governments what has changed and did Latin America receive enough attention from the governments keeping in mind the central role of Latin America for the USA? What do you think will change under the Biden Latin America policy and what would you advise the Biden administration to change in the Latin America policy?

Dr. Ellis: The region arguably got significant attention from the Trump administration, although the nature and tone of that attention was unlike any prior. While it is difficult to predict the direction a new Biden administration will take in the face of actual challenges in the region, budget realities and other constraints, initial indications are that he will start with a relatively experienced foreign policy and national security team who understand the nuances of Latin America. It is likely that a Biden administration, per its campaign statements, will seek greater development support for Central America, a more accommodating posture on immigration issues, and perhaps a more critical eye toward actions by Latin American security forces, and on environmental, labor and other issues. While leadership time and resources will be in short supply, it is important for the new Administration to recognize, as I believe it already does, that there is no region of the world to which US prosperity and security are more directly tied than Latin America and the Caribbean. A combination of respect, a modest amount of resources, and the channeling of the power of US markets, investors, and private sector charitable giving will go a long way in building goodwill. It is important the Biden administration respects the decisions that the sovereign nations of the region make with respect to issues such as how to employ their own security forces, and otherwise engage in actions so long as they are consistent with their own laws, constitutional frameworks, international commitments, and the standards of human rights and other international law. On the other hand, the US has an opportunity to pursue constructive partnerships, helping to strengthen the region's institutions to show what democracy and free markets can deliver, to collectively build a region that is more prosperous, and more resilient in facing the risks and seizing the opportunities of global interdependence, for the benefit of all who live in the hemisphere that we share.

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Kommentare sind geschlossen.