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Western Hemisphere: Issues for the 119th Congress

The Trump Administration’s 2020 Western Hemisphere Strategic Framework asserted that “deep geographic, economic, and cultural ties make the region critical to United States national security, peace, and prosperity” (see **Figure 1**). The Biden Administration’s 2022 National Security Strategy similarly stated, “No region impacts the United States more directly than the Western Hemisphere.” Since the end of the Cold War, and particularly since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, however, consecutive U.S. Administrations and Congresses arguably have not prioritized the Western Hemisphere when formulating foreign policy or allocating resources. This may change in the coming years given that President-elect Donald Trump has placed renewed emphasis on the region since his November 2024 election. Among other policies, Trump has suggested he may impose tariffs on imports from Canada and Mexico in response to cross-border migration and narcotics flows, designate Mexican drug cartels as foreign terrorist organizations, and seek to regain U.S. control of the Panama Canal.

The 119th Congress may assess challenges and opportunities in the Western Hemisphere as it considers proposals to authorize and fund diplomatic, foreign assistance, defense, and trade policy initiatives. Congress also may oversee the incoming Administration’s approach to the region and assess whether and how to shape hemispheric relations using its legislative prerogatives.

Strategic Competition

Limiting the influence of extra-hemispheric powers in the Western Hemisphere has been a tenet of U.S. policy since the articulation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 and was the predominant focus of U.S. policy in the region throughout the Cold War. Strategic competition has reemerged as a key aspect of U.S. policy in the Western Hemisphere over the past decade, as the People’s Republic of China (PRC, or China) has expanded its engagement with the region. Such ties have been primarily economic, with China surpassing the United States as South America’s top trade partner and emerging as an important source of foreign investment and development financing for some Latin American and Caribbean countries. U.S. Southern Command has expressed concerns that PRC investments in and around the region’s critical infrastructure—including deepwater ports, telecommunications networks, space facilities, and the Panama Canal—could support future PRC military objectives. Russia’s ties to Western Hemisphere countries are more limited, though U.S. military leaders have expressed concerns about Russia’s activities in the Arctic and its support for authoritarian regimes.

Consecutive U.S. Administrations have warned Western Hemisphere partners that their ties to the PRC could make

them susceptible to economic coercion and compromise their security. They also have sought to foster alternative sources of investment into the region, using the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) and coordinating with multilateral organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank. While the Canadian government has taken steps to restrict PRC influence inside Canada, Latin American and Caribbean governments generally have downplayed U.S. concerns and sought to avoid direct involvement in U.S.-PRC competition.

The 119th Congress may assess which, if any, aspects of U.S. policy have proven effective in countering PRC influence in the Western Hemisphere. Congress also may take strategic competition in the region into consideration as it evaluates proposed legislation, such as a potential reauthorization of the DFC.

Figure 1. Political Map of the Western Hemisphere



Source: Map Resources, edited by CRS.

Drug Control Policy

Over the past three decades, U.S. security policy in Latin America and the Caribbean has concentrated primarily on

disrupting the production and trafficking of illicit drugs. Successive U.S. Administrations and Congresses have provided foreign assistance and defense and intelligence support to partner governments in the region and have imposed sanctions on foreign drug traffickers.

U.S. initiatives have helped dismantle some criminal organizations and have strengthened the capacities of some countries' security and justice sector institutions, but they have not resulted in sustained declines in illicit drug production. The rate of U.S. drug overdose deaths more than tripled between 2003 and 2023, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, driven by fentanyl sourced primarily from Mexico and, to a lesser extent, cocaine sourced primarily from Colombia. Organized crime also continues to contribute to violence and corruption in the region, and some criminal groups have moved into new markets, such as migrant smuggling. Amid these mixed results, some Latin American and Caribbean governments—including those of Mexico and Colombia—have scaled back their anti-drug efforts and pursued alternative policies aimed at reducing violence.

The 119th Congress may assess U.S. drug control policy and other efforts to improve regional security. Such assessments could inform appropriations for international security assistance programs and Department of Defense drug interdiction efforts. Congress also may assess policies reportedly under consideration by the incoming Administration, such as carrying out U.S. military strikes on drug cartels in Mexico.

Migration Policy

The Western Hemisphere is a top source of U.S. immigrants, both authorized and unauthorized, due to factors such as geographic proximity, familial ties, and living conditions in the region. Migration management has become a primary objective of U.S. foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere since 2014 as increasing numbers of migrants from countries throughout the region have sought entry into the United States. In FY2024, U.S. Customs and Border Protection encountered 2.3 million migrants at U.S. land borders, at least 84% of whom originated in the Western Hemisphere. Other countries in the region also have contended with increased migration, due in part to nearly 7.9 million people leaving Venezuela since 2014.

The past three U.S. Administrations have responded to migration challenges by allocating foreign assistance to address underlying drivers in the region, diplomatically engaging partners—particularly Mexico—to increase burden-sharing, and enacting domestic policy changes to deter unauthorized migrants.

The 119th Congress may monitor the incoming Administration's approach to immigration enforcement and assess the potential implications for hemispheric relations. Congress also may assess options for shaping U.S. migration policy in the region through foreign assistance appropriations and/or other legislation.

Trade Policy

The Western Hemisphere includes 12 of the 20 countries worldwide with which the United States has free-trade agreements. These include the top two U.S. trading partners, Canada and Mexico, with which the United States has grown more economically integrated over the past 30 years under the 1994 North American Free Trade and the 2020 United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA).

Over the past two U.S. Administrations, U.S. trade policy in the region has shifted away from trade liberalization to focus more on addressing national security concerns. Strengthening supply chains in strategic sectors has emerged as a top U.S. policy objective in the hemisphere, due in part to the region's geographic proximity and abundant supply of critical minerals. For example, the Trump Administration forged a Joint Action Plan for Critical Minerals Cooperation with Canada, and the Biden Administration launched partnerships on semiconductor supply chain opportunities with Costa Rica and Panama.

The 119th Congress may assess how, if at all, incentives enacted in legislation such as P.L. 117-169, commonly referred to as the Inflation Reduction Act, and the CHIPS Act of 2022 (P.L. 117-167, Division A) have influenced hemispheric trade relations and supply chain resiliency. Congress also may monitor the incoming Administration's trade policy, including its approach to potential tariffs and to a formal review of USMCA scheduled for July 2026.

Democracy Promotion

U.S. policymakers have treated the consolidation of democracy and adherence to human rights standards in the Western Hemisphere as important to U.S. interests with varying degrees of prioritization at different times. As of 2024, the nongovernmental organization Freedom House rated four Western Hemisphere countries as “not free”—Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, which are governed by authoritarian regimes, and Haiti, which has lacked an elected government since a 2021 presidential assassination.

U.S. approaches to democracy promotion in the region have varied over the past eight years. The Trump Administration primarily sought to promote democratic change in the aforementioned authoritarian governments with sanctions and diplomatic pressure. The Biden Administration offered some sanctions relief to Venezuela and Cuba as an incentive to improve political rights and civil liberties. Arguably, neither approach produced the behavior change within those regimes sought by the U.S. government. The Biden Administration also took steps to counter perceived democratic backsliding in other countries and, according to some accounts, may have contributed to democratic transfers of power in Brazil and Guatemala.

The 119th Congress may assess U.S. democracy promotion efforts in the Western Hemisphere, including the relative effectiveness and any unintended consequences of U.S. sanctions policies. Such findings could inform consideration of potential legislation, including whether to reauthorize targeted sanctions intended to promote democracy, human rights, and anti-corruption efforts in

Venezuela, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras that expired during the 118th Congress.

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