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## FEATURED Q&A

# Will Biden's Latin America Team Set the Right Priorities?



Joe Biden, who was sworn in Wednesday as president of the United States, has nominated several officials who will be responsible for U.S. policy toward Latin America. // Photo: U.S. Congress.

**Q U.S. President Joe Biden has nominated, pending congressional confirmation, Antony Blinken as his secretary of state. Meanwhile, Colombia-born Juan González will be the next senior director for the Western Hemisphere in the Biden administration's National Security Council, and Samantha Power was nominated to lead the U.S. Agency for International Development. Who are the primary players in terms of Latin America policy to watch in the Biden administration, and what do choices so far signal about areas that might take center-stage in Western Hemisphere relations? What are the strengths and weaknesses of Biden's Latin America team? How much priority will Latin America-related issues take in the new U.S. administration, particularly in terms of funding?**

**A Arturo Sarukhan, member of the Inter-American Dialogue's Board of Directors and former Mexican ambassador to the United States:** "Joe Biden's deep and extensive role in Latin America and the Caribbean, both during his time in the Senate and as President Obama's wingman for the region, certainly bodes well for the Americas. However, that does not necessarily mean that his administration will be able to dedicate an unvarying bandwidth to inter-American affairs or that the region is the same as when he left office in January 2017. As the world economy gets a shot of optimism from a Biden win and vaccine news, most Latin American economies enter 2021 challenged either by the need to implement unpopular fiscal consolidation and face social tensions or by the risk of populism and the fraying of democratic governance and institutions—or both. Heightened

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## TODAY'S NEWS

### ECONOMIC

## Biden Takes Office in U.S., Orders Reversal of Trump Policies

Joe Biden took office as president of the United States and signed orders to reverse policies of his predecessor, Donald Trump, in areas including immigration.

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### POLITICAL

## Mexico's Homicide Rate Fell Just 0.4% Last Year

Mexico's homicide rate declined 0.4 percent last year, despite the Covid-19 pandemic, which some had expected to lower the murder rate due to lockdowns.

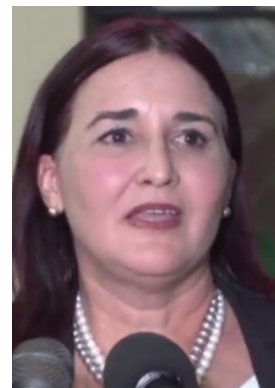
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### ECONOMIC

## Trump's Sanctions Cost Cuba \$20 Bn: Foreign Ministry

Sanctions that the United States imposed on Cuba during the administration of former U.S. President Donald Trump cost the island nation \$20 billion, said Foreign Ministry official Johana Tablada.

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Tablada // File Photo: Cuban Government.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## Biden Takes Office in U.S., Orders Reversal of Trump Policies

Joseph Robinette Biden Jr. was sworn in Wednesday as president of the United States and pledged to help unify a deeply divided country. "This is our historic moment of crisis and challenge," Biden said in his inaugural address at the U.S. Capitol, which just two weeks before was overrun with rioters attempting to overturn the electoral loss of Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump. "Unity is the path forward. And we must meet this moment as the United States of America. If we do that, I guarantee you we will not fail." Trump, who pursued several claims dismissed as baseless in failed efforts to overturn the election result, broke with tradition by not attending Biden's swearing-in. In his inaugural address, Biden, at 78 the oldest person to assume the U.S. presidency, urged Americans to end what he called its "uncivil war" and unify in the face of crises, including the Covid-19 pandemic. The United States has recorded more than 24 million cases of the highly contagious disease and more than 406,000 deaths, far more than any other country in the world, according to Johns Hopkins University. Just before Biden took the oath of office, Kamala Devi Harris was sworn in as the nation's vice president, making her the first woman, the first Black American and the first person with Asian heritage to occupy the office. She was sworn in by Sonia Sotomayor, the United States' first Supreme Court justice with Latin American heritage. Soon after taking office Wednesday, Biden signed 17 executive orders, reversing several Trump-era policies. They included a requirement that people wear masks on federal property to fight the spread of Covid-19 as well as orders to rejoin the World Health Organization and the Paris climate accords. Under orders Biden signed Wednesday, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced that, starting today, it would pause deportations for some noncitizens for 100 days and would also halt new

enrollments in the Migrant Protocols Policy, also known as the "remain in Mexico" program, NPR reported. The policy had required asylum seekers trying to enter the United States from Mexico to stay in Mexico to await their U.S. court hearings. Biden also ordered officials to work to preserve the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, program, which has shielded from deportation hundreds of thousands of people who are undocumented and were brought to the United States as children, The New York Times reported. Biden also ended the emergency declaration that Trump used to begin construction of a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, a signature initiative of Trump's administration. Several world leaders congratulated Biden. Colombian President Iván Duque said his government "is ready to continue strengthening a historic relationship," according to Colombia Reports. Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, the target of numerous sanctions by the Trump administration, said he hopes for better relations with Biden. "We must tell the United States: we want to improve our relations, to make it one of respect, of mutual acknowledgment, a relationship with a future," Agence France-Presse reported. Maduro urged Biden to "turn the page ... after four years of Trumpist brutality." Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador called on Biden to fulfill campaign promises to reform U.S. immigration policies. "I hope that today or in the coming days he presents the migration plan," said López Obrador, Reuters reported. "What it is going to consist of, how they are going to respect [migrants'] right to be recognized, that they get dual nationality."

## Mexico's Homicide Rate Fell Just 0.4% Last Year: Gov't

Mexico's homicide rate declined just 0.4 percent last year despite the Covid-19 pandemic, the government announced Wednesday, the Associated Press reported. The country recorded 34,515 homicides in 2020, just 133 fewer than the country tallied in 2019. The decline equaled just more than the one-day homicide death

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Witness Implicates Mexican Soldiers in Students' Disappearance

New testimony from a witness in the case of 43 college students who went missing in Mexico in 2014 has directly implicated army soldiers in the incident, the Associated Press reported, citing Mexican newspaper Reforma. The witness, presumed to be a gang member, alleges soldiers interrogated some of the students before turning them over to a drug gang. Mexico's Interior Department declined to comment on the newspaper's report.

## Protesters in Haiti Demand Moïse's Resignation

Hundreds of people took to the streets in Haiti's capital on Wednesday in the latest protest demanding that President Jovenel Moïse step down, the Associated Press reported. Protesters clashed with police, and one woman was shot in the arm and was in stable condition. The demonstrations, which opposition leaders are organizing, are calling for the resignation of Moïse, who has been governing by decree for a year following the dissolution of parliament. Moïse claims that his term ends in February 2022.

## Chile Raises \$4.25 Billion in Euro, Dollar Markets

Chile raised approximately \$4.25 billion in euro and U.S. dollar markets on Tuesday, including the largest sustainability bond issued by a Latin American sovereign in foreign debt markets, Bloomberg News reported. The Andean nation borrowed \$2.25 billion in a two-part dollar-denominated sale, including \$1.5 billion in sustainability bonds. The country also raised 1.65 billion euros (\$2 billion) in European markets to finance green and social projects. Chile's finance ministry said on Tuesday that both the dollar and euro offerings were oversubscribed.

toll. Some had expected that partial lockdowns instituted during the pandemic would mean a significant decline in the number of killings in Mexico, but 2020 turned out to be the second consecutive year that the country's homicide rate remained flat. From 2018 to 2019, figures published by Mexico's National Statistics Institute showed a decline that was similar—about half a percentage point, the AP reported. Mexico's homicide rate has remained at levels that have been historically high since President Andrés Manuel López Obrador took office in December 2018. The rate was 29 killings per 100,000 residents in 2019, according to the National Statistics Institute, which relies on data from death certificates. [Editor's note: See [Q&A](#) on military policing in Mexico in the May 22 issue of the Advisor.]

## ECONOMIC NEWS

# Trump's Sanctions Cost Cuba \$20 Bn: Foreign Ministry

The administration of former U.S. President Donald Trump's toughened sanctions against Cuba cost the Caribbean nation some \$20 billion, Johana Tablada, a senior official at Cuba's foreign ministry, told Agence France-Presse on Wednesday. "The damage to the bilateral relationship during this time has been considerable, and the economic harm to Cuba immense," she told the wire service in an email. Tablada also said 250 measures were taken against Cuba during the Trump presidency. Among the stepped-up measures during the Trump administration were limits on Cuban-Americans' travel to the island as well as to remittances services, in addition to a blacklist of several Cuban companies and actors. In its latest action, the Trump administration returned Cuba to a list of state sponsors of terrorism last week, rolling back then-President Barack Obama's 2015 move to remove it. Tablada said she was hopeful that U.S.-Cuba relations would improve under new President Joe Biden.

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domestic political risk, the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic and global trade tension fallout—and other factors such as productivity and competitiveness challenges—are weighing on many nations. Nonetheless, Biden's experience and that of his team—Jake Sullivan, Juan González and Roberta Jacobson at the NSC and Alejandro Mayorkas at DHS—are a breath of fresh air and good news given their collective and holistic experience, and their policy and intellectual chops, in dealing with the region and this set of challenges there. We will still need to await news, though, on who will be appointed as assistant secretary for Western Hemisphere affairs at State—one of the two key 'air-traffic controller' positions for regional policy in any administration, along with González's role as director for Latin America and the Caribbean at the White House. The dynamics between those two positions are key in ensuring a whole-of-government approach to inter-American affairs, surely and sorely needed in resetting relationships and tackling the effects of Donald Trump's diplomatic vandalism."

**A** **Cynthia Arnson, director of the Latin America program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars:** "Thus far, there are only rumors about who will be nominated as the next assistant secretary of Western Hemisphere affairs, a key position on Latin America policy. But what we know so far augurs well for a strong reset in U.S.-Latin American relations.

Juan González is an excellent choice for the National Security Council's top post covering the region. He grew up in Colombia, the United States and Mexico, and spent several years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala, thus bringing deep knowledge and cultural sensitivity to what has become a fraught relationship with the hemisphere. González was mentored by some of the State Department's best and brightest, including career diplomat Tom Shannon and

Clinton political appointee Arturo Valenzuela. During the Obama years, González worked closely with then-Vice President Joe Biden on Central American as well as Caribbean issues. His prior government experience and strong personal relationship with

**“** **What we know so far augurs well for a strong reset in U.S.-Latin American relations.”**

— Cynthia Arnson

Joe Biden suggests that he will have Biden's ear—and trust—on key policy initiatives. The nomination of Samantha Power as director of USAID is similarly heartening, if not inspired. As journalist, scholar and diplomat, Power has demonstrated profound empathy for people suffering deprivation and the consequences of violence and war. Her new seat on the National Security Council positions her well to advocate for U.S. government programs that target the most needy. The Biden administration's commitment to address root causes of migration in Central America and help Venezuela's neighbors hosting millions of refugees will make Power an important player on hemispheric issues."

**A** **Stephen Johnson, former U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense for Western Hemisphere affairs (2007-2009):**

"Personnel is policy—so goes the familiar cliché. If true, Tony Blinken, Juan González and Samantha Power are all solid picks as far as Western Hemisphere ties are concerned. They bring experience, subject matter expertise and competence. Three other key positions will be the U.S. trade representative; State's undersecretary for civilian security, democracy and human rights; and the assistant secretary for Western Hemisphere affairs. All will need to

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work to put relations on a consistent track and re-establish U.S. credibility damaged by Donald Trump's undemocratic behavior. Trump's erratic, transactional approach left regional allies fearing what the next tweet would bring and adversaries comforted that any threat would eventually prove survivable. Trump's understanding of issues such as immigration was shallow, and his rhetoric was often insulting. To be sure, there were some things his administration did right to support long-term U.S. interests in promoting democracy, economic prosperity and the rule of law. Yet, much credit goes to certain appointees, dedicated diplomats and career personnel who worked hard to keep sensible programs going, despite capricious cuts and rescissions. Bipartisan congressional support was crucial. Today, issues are ever-more complex. The region is struggling against the Covid pandemic, and record economic losses have devastated recent gains in social mobility. China's influence has grown. Iran is back in Venezuela. Narcotrafficking has grown worse in Mexico. And Chile is experiencing social upheaval. Biden's team needs to hit the ground running, and with few resources that will, for now, mostly go toward U.S. economic recovery."

**A** **Francisco Sánchez, partner at Holland & Knight and former U.S. undersecretary of trade:** "The Biden administration's nominations for several key posts related to Latin America indicate many of his priorities for the region. His nominations include Tony Blinken as secretary of state, Juan González as senior director for the Western Hemisphere at the NSC, Samantha Power as USAID administrator and John Kerry as climate czar. If confirmed, these individuals will likely focus on migration, economic engagement, human rights and climate

change. Of these, migration will likely be the top priority. Biden has already announced a \$4 billion plan to address the migration crisis in the Northern Triangle—Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. Collectively, this team has many strengths. Each appointee is highly experienced in their respective fields,

“**The Biden administration's nominations for several key posts related to Latin America indicate many of his priorities for the region.**”

— Francisco Sánchez

and many are directly knowledgeable of the region. Stylistically, the team will likely seek agreement through bilateral discussion rather than through the unilateral demands seen during the Trump administration. This would likely improve the chance for diplomatic breakthroughs. However, upcoming elections in Ecuador, Chile and Peru may undercut this team. Several prominent candidates have indicated they will shun close cooperation with the United States, if elected. There are many opportunities for improving the relationship between the United States and Latin America. President Biden will focus on domestic issues and U.S.-China relations early in his term. Nevertheless, the Biden administration will be well served by also empowering his skilled Latin America team to focus on the many important issues in the Western Hemisphere.”

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org).*

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