

# Latin America is already Trump's 2020 presidential campaign testing ground

*The US president needs to keep co-operating closely with Mexico and refraining from bullying partners in the region*



MICHAEL SHIFTER

The 2020 United States presidential campaign is already in full swing in Latin America. Four hot-button issues that helped propel President Donald Trump to the White House in 2016 are already coming into play in his approach with the region, and they are being driven by two parallel electoral strategies: appeals to his political base nationwide on immigration, drugs and trade, and a hard sell directed at South Florida on Cuba and Venezuela.

Since he announced his candidacy in 2015, Trump has treated Mexico as a proxy and scapegoat, particularly on immigration and trade, two issues on which he promised a radical policy shift. Calls to build "the wall" on the United States-Mexico border became shorthand for a tough, aggressive stance on these issues that reliably rallies and excites Trump's hard-core supporters.

But closing down the border, as the president threatened to do recently, would hurt both countries and cause irreparable damage to what is arguably the United States' most crucial relationship. On April 4, under pressure from Republicans in Congress, he backed off that threat, only to issue another one: "We're going to give them a one-year warning, and if the drugs don't stop or largely stop, we're going to put tariffs on Mexico and products, particularly cars."

Until now, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico has done a great deal to accommodate Trump, including working out an updated NAFTA agreement and allowing Central American refugees to remain in Mexico while their asylum claims are being adjudicated. The move to close the border will test the limits of López Obrador's forbearance. On March 29, the Mexican foreign minister, Marcelo Ebrard, said on Twitter: "Mexico does not act on the basis of threats. We are a great



Trump at one of his campaign rallies in 2015.

neighbour."

Perhaps just as outrageous, Trump also announced that he would cut aid to the three countries of Central America's so-called "Northern Triangle" — Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras — citing their failure to curb the continuing mass outflow of migrants headed for the United States.

This move has led some to speculate that Trump is seeking to deepen the crises in these countries, which could result in exploding migration flows and that could pose a "real" national security crisis on the United States-Mexico border, thus justifying the president's hard-line policies and providing a powerful campaign issue.

It remains to be seen whether Trump even has the authority to cut off congressionally appropriated funding, or if he'll follow through on these threats. But the announcement understandably left the governments of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador bewildered, having done everything to accommodate the United States.

The Guatemalan and Hondu-

ran governments sought to curry favour with the Trump administration by moving, or considering moving, their embassies in Israel to Jerusalem. Trump's announcement is particularly insulting to El Salvador's incoming president, Nayib Bukele. On a recent visit to Washington, Bukele unveiled a much tougher policy on Venezuela and pledged to review the outgoing government's decision to break with Taiwan and recognise China — both diplomatic wins for the Trump administration. Moreover, there is evidence that United States assistance is helping reduce migration from El Salvador.

On the drug question, too, the president is posturing to shore up his political base for the campaign. The Colombian president, Ivan Duque, recently met with Trump and vowed to pursue a United States-backed strategy to bring down rising levels of coca production. But that wasn't enough. Duque was reportedly taken aback when Trump told reporters, "he (Duque) said how he was going to stop drugs. More drugs are coming out of Colombia right now than before he was

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States-Colombia ties are in danger of becoming "re-narcotised," which would undermine efforts in recent years to broaden the bilateral agenda.

The Trump administration's approach towards Venezuela and Cuba should be distinguished from issues of nationwide concern such as immigration, drugs, and trade. Still, there is little question that domestic politics, largely focused on South Florida, is a key element helping to shape policy. More ideological factors, advanced less by Trump himself and more by his national security adviser, John Bolton, and Marco Rubio, the Florida senator, are also relevant.

The Trump administration's sustained pressure on the Venezuelan dictatorship, carried out in concert with hemispheric and European allies, has rightly provided badly needed support for a democratic transition to a beleaguered Venezuela. But the United States' agenda in Venezuela is tightly linked to the administration's pursuit of regime change in Cuba, as Bolton has repeatedly made clear. Though in Latin America there is no love

lost for the Cuban regime, the region is more cautious about Cuba than Venezuela. Most Latin Americans consider the past several decades of United States policy toward Cuba (aside from the two-year opening under Obama) to be a failure and strongly oppose any new threats and punishments.

To be sure, infelicitous phrases by Trump and other senior administration officials like, "A options are on the table," and "I wish Nicolás Maduro and his top advisers a long, quiet retirement, living on a nice beach somewhere," may draw cheer help deliver votes, and generate money in a critical swing state in 2020. But they also evoke possible military action and, as a result, risk weakening or dividing the broad coalition that has been forged on Venezuela.

To preserve this coalition — a major asset for the United States Venezuela policy — the Trump administration needs to keep it posturing for electoral purpose in check. Invoking the "socialism" boogeyman in Venezuela as a way to attack the Democratic Party for its health care and New Green Deal proposals shows how the hemisphere's worst crisis could be used in the presidential campaign.

It would be naïve to call for a moratorium on theatrics a November 2020 looms. Play on domestic politics with Latin American issues may work for Trump as he pursues a second term. Still, it is crucial not to completely lose sight of the national interest, which means investing wisely in Central America and cooperating closely with Mexico. Trump needs to stick with the broad coalition on Venezuela, eschew any suggestion of military action there and any reference to regime change in Cuba. These issues should command bipartisan support. If not handled well, they could have consequences for the United States policy in the region for decades to come.

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## CIVILIAN'S TRIBUNE

### How can we forget Chernobyl, Fukushima?

With reference to Joshua Goldstein's "Nuclear Power can save the world", while the premise and the factors supporting it are quite convincing, the two disasters, Chernobyl and Fukushima, by themselves provide as strong a reason as ever not to consider expansion of nuclear power until the risks are mitigated.

Fukushima is still contaminating the Pacific ocean at an unbelievable level, and this is impacting not only the environment, but the surrounding community, and thousands around the world consuming products subject to the contamination.

To simplify the disaster and say no one died is overly simplistic and reckless, as the long term im-

pact of the disaster which has yet to be stopped, controlled or mitigated in any fashion, will not be fully known for generations.

At a basic starting point, the Fukushima disaster must be resolved, and the risks associated with it must be mitigated substantially to warrant an expansion of nuclear power.

Omar Haydar



Excavators piling nuclear contamination at a temporary place in Tomioka, Fukushima prefecture.