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The rise of the in-between

In a polarised world, Europe and Latin America risk being sidelined unless they turn shared interests into concrete cooperation

Trump's foreign policy is not only changing the transatlantic relationship. It is also forcing Europe to strengthen its cooperation with the countries of Latin America. As the Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney so aptly put it in his plea for closer cooperation among middle powers: 'If we're not at the table, we're on the menu.' This applies to European NATO partners as much as to the countries of the continent regarded by Trump as the 'US's backyard'. It is high time that Europe strengthens its alliances with this continent of middle powers (Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Colombia).

Europe and the countries of Latin America need to steer a course through treacherous waters between the two poles of the US and China, and should place their trust in the potential benefits of a strategic partnership between their two regions. Both sides share an interest in strategic autonomy, multilateral cooperation and an international order that is not solely defined by the rivalry between the two major powers. Survey data from the region's AMLAT Radar suggests that such a partnership might strike a chord with the public. We can draw three conclusions from it when shaping our relations with Latin America.

First, there is a growing need there for alternatives to the US as an international partner. No global leader generates more mistrust on the continent than President Trump. Both the impact of his foreign policy and the current state of bilateral cooperation are viewed in an extremely negative light — hardly surprising considering his bullying methods, from election interference to military interventions that breach international law.

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The Spanish website *Canal Red* recently unearthed the 'Hondurasgate' scandal, in which a far-right network is planning disinformation campaigns to destabilise the progressive governments in Colombia and Mexico, with

financial support from, amongst others, the Argentine President Milei. The surprising release of the former Honduran President Hernandez from prison in the US is only one puzzle piece in a strategy threatening the sovereignty of the continent's countries.

Second, there is little interest in Latin America in the formation of a new global bloc. Although just under half of those surveyed recognise that their country is under pressure to decide between the US and China, the preservation of strategic autonomy remains a top priority. Accordingly, China, the US and Europe are seen as playing complementary roles. China's enhanced reputation is of particular interest in this regard. Since the last survey, only Beijing has improved its position — not only when it comes to technology, trade and infrastructure, but also increasingly in the fields of culture and education. China has now even replaced the US as the preferred development model.

Third, China's improved reputation does not need to be a problem for Europe. The data from the AMLAT Radar suggests that Europe plays a highly relevant complementary role. Particularly when it comes to issues that rank highly on Latin America's list of concerns – defence of human rights, humanitarian aid, environment and climate protection, and peacekeeping – Europe continues to be regarded as a leading power. Admittedly, it has come to be perceived as less competent in these areas over the last four years. Its stock as an integration and development model has waned, bilateral cooperation is regarded more critically, and the continent's strategic autonomy from the US is viewed as weaker than four years ago. All of this is a wake-up call to act. Nevertheless, Europe continues to be a preferred partner, particularly when it comes to climate and environmental protection and the fight against poverty and inequality. This is precisely where Europe's strategic opportunity lies.

Cooperation is possible

Against this backdrop, instead of instinctively regarding Latin America's relations to China as a problem, Europe should avoid the old bloc mentality and ask itself how it could restore its appeal as a partner. In Latin America, there is no shortage of willingness or expectation to cooperate — particularly when it comes to a progressive agenda. Four topics stand out:

First, climate and environmental policy. Latin America is of huge importance for the global climate due to its large areas of primary forest and impressive biodiversity. In recent years, coalitions have formed,

composed of countries wishing to cooperate on environmental and climate protection, with European and Latin American states taking the lead: recently, 60 nations assembled in Colombia for the first Transitioning away from Fossil Fuelsconference, to accelerate the move away from this form of energy. Colombia and the Netherlands were the hosts.

Second, trade and investment. In light of its own economic crisis and war-related disruptions to world trade, Europe is currently focusing mainly on securing supply chains and export markets. Latin America, however, does not want Europe to take on any extractivist initiatives that usually leave behind ravaged landscapes and hardly have any developmental effects. What is needed is rather investment and trade relations that are designed to contribute to the material improvement of people's living conditions. The alignment of interests during the current US trade war had already led to the provisional enactment of the EU-Mercosur trade agreement. Here – as in other trade agreements – it is important to take account of the social, economic and environmental effects during implementation.

In the interest of sustainable relations, Europe should promote cooperation not only with governments but also at a societal level.

Third, Latin America shares with us a strong interest in defending and strengthening democracy. One of the main motivations of Latin America's progressive heads of government when they formed the *Democracia Siempre (*Democracy Forever*)* alliance in 2024 was their concerns regarding the erosion of democracy by disinformation campaigns. They are conscious of the risks posed by the dominance of US tech companies. Brazil even dared to shut down Musk's platform X when it did not comply with Brazilian legislation. Real digital sovereignty and independence via the development of their own digital infrastructure – both hardware and software – remain a distant prospect. This might indeed form a key focus for cooperation between Europe and Latin America: developing alternatives that elude the mechanisms of accumulation and the dominance of monopolistic corporations. Drug trafficking and organised crime are regarded as a further threat to democracy in Latin America — here too, they hope that Europe might help.

The fourth area of cooperation is closely linked to the crisis of

democracy. Latin America also looks to Europe when it comes to reducing inequality. The focus here is on the fight against poverty and social inequality, but also on the international dimension. Agreements on the taxation of digital services, strategies against the extreme concentration of wealth and the advancement of a global minimum tax should be part of this common agenda. The fight against tax havens and money laundering, as well as the transformation of international financial systems and debt relief, should also gain fresh impetus.

The two continents' cultural affinity and shared values and attitudes would form a fertile basis for such a programme. The survey reveals continued broad support for democracy, human rights, cooperation and peace in Latin America. At the government level, the interest in a progressive agenda is currently, however, mixed: while the heads of government of Brazil, Mexico and Colombia are seeking to form a global alliance with progressive partners, others – such as Argentina's libertarian President Milei – have pledged their allegiance to Trump. If there is a change in government, however, the foreign policy direction can suddenly change in the Latin American countries, as was the case in Brazil in 2022 and now in Chile at the start of this year. In the interest of sustainable relations, Europe should promote cooperation not only with governments but also at a societal level.

The time is now right for Europe to raise its profile in Latin America. Many countries in the region are consciously looking for alternatives and regard Europe, despite its waning reputation, as an important partner for democracy, social justice and climate and environmental policy. This is precisely where the strategic opportunity for both sides lies: Europe and Latin America are united by a shared interest in maintaining their influence, even in a polarised world. Given its own importance on the global stage, Latin America is self-assured and confident: it recognises that it will be a long way behind the US and China in five years' time, but still roughly on a par with Europe. In other words, they will be middle powers.



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