

# Latin America as a Future Strategic Partner

## Building a New US–Latin American Relationship

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### Abstract

Conditions are right for a new US–Latin American relationship. Using the twentieth century Anglo-American rapprochement as a guide, this article shows how developments within the United States and Latin America over the past decade suggest that the region can become to Washington what Europe is today: a vital strategic partner.

### Introduction

One of the defining features of international relations for the past seven decades has been the alliance between the United States and Europe. Despite the ever-changing global threat environment, the transatlantic relationship remains a fundamental component of American and European security; the United States and Europe collaborate on a wide range of issues and play a central role in shaping global rules and norms that reinforce Western interests. The alliance's breadth, depth, and durability are remarkable and make it a worthy topic of study for current foreign policy practitioners. In particular, given its success, it's logical to study how the relationship developed, why it has lasted as long as it has, and whether a similar bond could form between the United States and another region.

The early twentieth century Anglo–American rapprochement, which catalyzed the formation of a new relationship between the United States and Western Europe, is highly constructive in this regard. Using the rapprochement as a framework, this paper argues that a new relationship, modeled off the one between the US and Europe, is possible between the US and Latin America. Developments within the hemisphere over the past decade suggest the United States and Latin America can establish a relationship built upon more than just shared geopolitical interests. Common values, merging cultures, and expanding links between the American and Latin American publics offer to bring the two bodies closer together. Furthermore, rising defense spending among Latin American countries would give such a relationship strategic significance.

An assessment of future possibilities for US–Latin American relations is timely given changing global and regional politics. Washington's pivot to Asia and continued focus on the Middle East threatens to leave its Latin American policy in another generation of benign neglect. Simultaneously, Latin America's impressive development, in combination with its traditional wariness of American policy and the pull from competing rising powers, is giving the region the confidence to chart an independent course. As such, the US and Latin America have actually been moving farther apart over the past decade. However, future relations do not need to continue this trend. Alternatives exist, of which a relationship modeled off the US–European alliance is one example. Such a change in relations not only offers significant rewards for both parties, but also is realistically possible. The changes occurring in the hemisphere provide a solid foundation for Latin America to become to the United States what Europe is today: a vital strategic partner. All that's missing is the political will and leadership to see this vision through.

## The Relevance of the Anglo-American Rapprochement

The Western international order that governs global affairs today was not inevitable. It reflects a series of choices going back more than a century to align the interests of the great liberal democracies. Replacing the hostility that permeated cross-Atlantic affairs with a culture of trust and mutual admiration was a momentous task. But by the end of the nineteenth century, two key developments pushed the rapprochement forward gradually but relentlessly. The first was the changing distribution of power in the international system. Great Britain, long the keystone in maintaining a peaceful balance of power in Europe, was in relative decline.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the traditional rivalry with France, London faced new competition from rising powers such as the United States, Germany, Japan, and Russia. Even the mighty British Empire could not confront all these claimants to great power status, a fact the Admiralty explained to the Foreign Office in a 1901 memo.

*Great Britain unaided can hardly expect to be able to maintain in the West Indies, the Pacific, and in the North American stations, squadrons sufficiently powerful to dominate those of the United States and at the same time to hold command of the sea in home waters, the Mediterranean, and the Eastern seas, where it is essential that she should remain predominant.*<sup>2</sup>

Forced to prioritize its interests, London started looking for ways to improve its strategic position. Among its many conclusions were Whitehall's decisions to initiate a rapprochement with the United States and enter into an alliance with Japan. While chosen as part of the same end goal—to reduce London's overseas commitments—the divergent histories of these two policies showcase what would become the second development that spurred Anglo-American rapprochement: the growing recognition of shared cultural ties between the United States and Great Britain.

At the end of the nineteenth century, many elites on both sides of the ocean believed in the popular Teutonic myth that argued Aryan blood was the only civilizing force in human history. This blood had been diluted in most cultures but remained intact and pure in the Anglo-Saxon lineage.<sup>3</sup> According to this line of reasoning, this common racial inheritance reinforced the idea that Englishmen and Americans were simply estranged members of the same family; it followed then that the two countries should be cooperating rather than competing. British Prime Minister Arthur Balfour spoke for his countrymen in 1896 when he asserted, “The idea of war with the United States carries with it some of the unnatural horror of a civil war. . . . The time will come, the time must come, when someone, some statesman of authority . . . will lay down the doctrine that between English-speaking peoples war is impossible.”<sup>4</sup> President Theodore Roosevelt reciprocated this sentiment in a 1905 letter to Arthur Lee, former British naval attaché and civil lord of the Admiralty. “You need not ever be troubled by the nightmare of a possible contest between the two great English-speaking peoples,” he declared. “I believe that is practically impossible now, and that it will grow entirely so as the years go by. In keeping ready for possible war I never even take into account a war with England. I treat it as out of the question.”<sup>5</sup>

Compare these statements to the fate of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, which lasted 19 years before dissolving due to concerns about its impact on Anglo-American relations. Originally signed to defend against Russian expansion in the Far East, by 1921 the treaty was no longer considered in the best interest of the United Kingdom because it placed London in direct conflict with Washington's policy in Asia. A confidential American memorandum outlined the choice facing London on whether to renew the alliance or not,

*In making her decision for or against renewal of this alliance, Great Britain will choose between Japan, “special interests” and imperialism, on the one hand, and the United States, the*

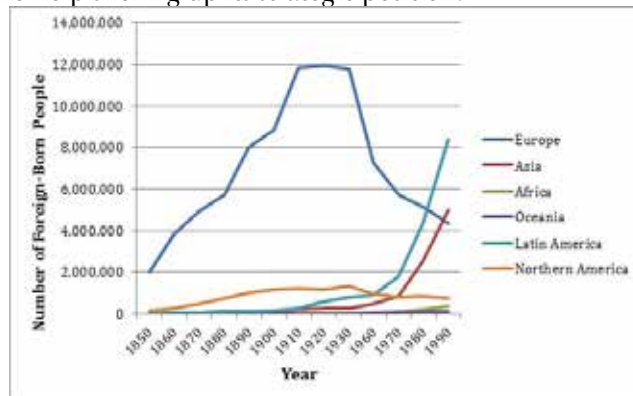
*“open door” policy and Anglo–Saxon consolidation, on the other. She must choose between a temporary partnership with an Oriental autocracy, on the principle “divide and rule,” and friendly cooperation with her nearest of kin (in race, in legal conceptions, and in economic practices), on the principle of equality of commercial opportunity and regard for the rights of both great and small (or weak) nations.*<sup>6</sup>

America would be Great Britain’s strategic ally not just because it needed friends in the face of multiplying challenges, but because culturally it made no sense for them to be enemies. As one scholar of the era points out, “For reasons of geography, race, and ideology, the United States, despite its long tradition of Anglophobia, seemed better suited to this role [rapprochement] than any other power.”<sup>7</sup>

A larger US–European rapprochement grew from this friendship. Over the next half century, one European state after another saw the benefit of aligning with the United States until, by the time of the Cold War, almost all of Western Europe was an American ally. While these allegiances were always initiated by strategic concerns, they were informed and maintained by the recognition that the United States and Europe are essentially two sides of the same cultural and ideological coin. With so many people in the United States being of European origin or descent, it was only natural for the two sides to see each other as simply estranged kin. This is one reason why the alliance between the United States and Europe has survived for so long following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Their shared ancestry has kept the two sides close.

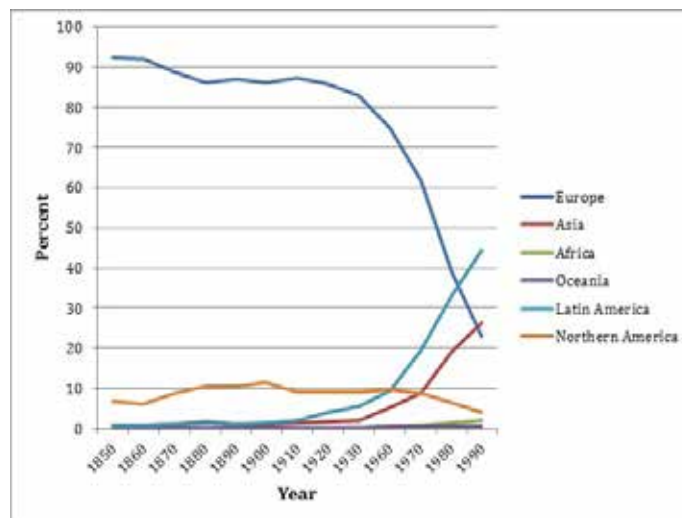
### Latin America as a Future Strategic Partner

While not an exact replica of current geopolitical dispositions, this narrative is comparable to many of the major transformations occurring today in the United States and Latin America. The first transformation is the shift in power from the United States and its allies to other parts of the globe. Whether this shift is permanent and portends the end of the American Century or is simply a temporary moment of Western weakness is up for debate. But what is unavoidable is the conclusion that for now, the United States is in relative decline. At the same time, American commitments are increasing rather than decreasing. Continued conflicts in the Middle East and aggressive, revisionist pushes from Beijing and Moscow are stretching American resources while they’re being cut at home. The result is that Washington is forced to do more with less, an unsustainable proposition. Thus, like Great Britain at the turn of the twentieth century, the United States could use some help shoring up its strategic position.



**Figure 1. Change in number of foreign-born by region. (Data sourced from Campbell Gibson and Emily Lennon, “Region of Birth of the Foreign-Born Population: 1850 to 1930 and 1960 to 1990,” US Census Bureau, 9 March 1999, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/tab02.html>.)**

The second major change is the evolving demographics of the United States. According to the 2010 census, there are more than 50 million Hispanics living in the United States, representing roughly 16 percent of the population and thereby making Hispanics the largest minority in America.<sup>8</sup> Even more astounding is the growth this represents; in 2000 there were only 35 million Hispanics in the United States, signifying a growth rate of 43 percent between 2000 and 2010. Furthermore, in 2011 more nonwhite babies were born than white babies.<sup>9</sup> Given these trends, census data now predict the United States will have the largest number of Spanish-speaking people of any country in the world by 2050.<sup>10</sup> The magnitude of this population shift can be seen in the change in number and percent of foreign-born people in the United States that come from Latin America versus Europe (fig. 1 and 2).

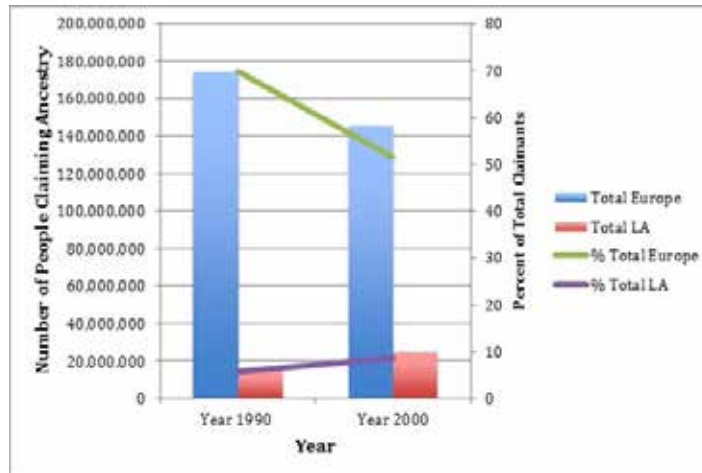


**Figure 2. Change in percent of foreign-born by region.** (Data sourced from Campbell Gibson and Emily Lennon, “Region of Birth of the Foreign-Born Population: 1850 to 1930 and 1960 to 1990,” US Census Bureau, March 9, 1999, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/tab02.html>.)

A similar trend can be seen in the country’s overall population as indicated by the responses of people who claimed a specific ancestry in the 1990 and 2000 censuses (fig. 3).

As these figures show, both the absolute and relative sizes of the foreign and native-born Hispanic populations in the United States are growing. The potential significance of this development is huge. While conventional wisdom holds there is no “Hispanic” polity in the United States, recent research suggests otherwise. In 1989 the Latino National Political Survey (LNPS) found that few Latinos in the US thought of themselves as part of a pan-ethnic group. By 2006 this had changed dramatically; the LNPS that year revealed that 87.6% of respondents thought of themselves as belonging to a pan-ethnic Hispanic identity either “somewhat strongly,” or “very strongly.”<sup>11</sup> The emergence of a shared Hispanic identity, in conjunction with the group’s rapid demographic growth, suggests the increasing relevance of a “Hispanic take” on American domestic and foreign policies in the near future. Such an influence would extend to US-Latin American relations. If shared ancestry and culture made the US–European alliance possible, the same could be true for a US–Latin American alliance. Every year, the American people identify

as and look a little more Latin and a little less European. It's possible that over time, a growing proportion of Americans will see their counterparts in Latin America as simply estranged kin.



**Figure 3. Change in number and percent claiming European and Latin American ancestry. (Data sourced from Angela Brittingham and G. Patricia de la Cruz, “Ancestry: 2000,” US Census Bureau, June 2004. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/c2kbr-35.pdf>.)**

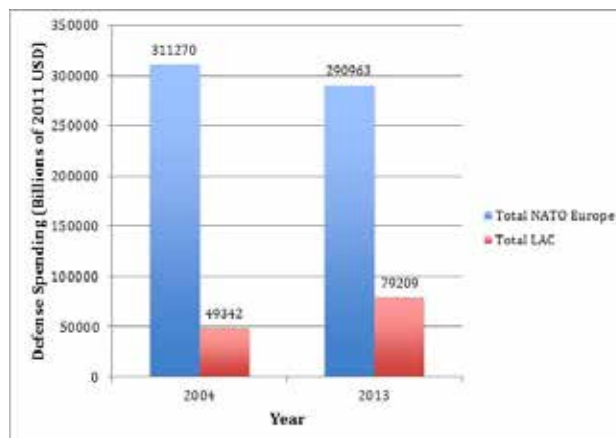
The gradual democratization of Latin America mirrors the changes in US demographics. Today, the region is the third-most democratic area in the world, after North America and Europe.<sup>12</sup> Freedom House’s 2014 Map of Freedom puts this development in striking visual context: Latin America, as a cluster of free and partially-free states, looks a lot like Europe (fig. 4). If you believe that a state’s internal makeup affects its foreign policy preferences, then as this trend continues (in conjunction with the United States’ evolving demographics), it becomes increasingly possible for the cultural and ideological similarities between the United States and Latin America to spill over into the strategic realm.<sup>13</sup>

This potential for strategic spillover makes the recent spike in Latin American defense spending truly significant. The region’s emergence as a democratic and cultural compatriot of the West would be a noteworthy achievement in any context. But it is even more important taken within the context of the region’s arms buildup. Simply put, the spending hike suggests that Latin America can transition from being a security consumer to being a security provider. This makes it an even more attractive partner for a budget-constrained Washington as it seeks to match ends and means abroad.



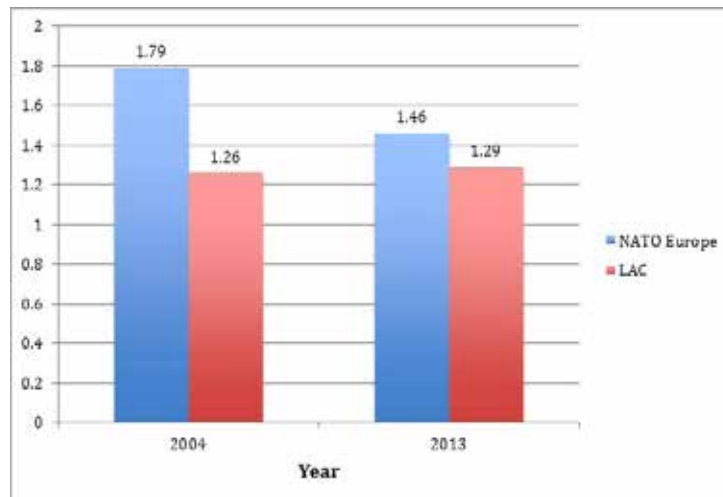
**Figure 4. Map of freedom.** (Courtesy of Freedom House, “Map of Freedom,” 2014, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/MapofFreedom2014.pdf>.)

The numbers paint an impressive picture.<sup>14</sup> In 2013 Latin American countries on average spent 71 percent more on defense than they did in 2004. For the region as a whole, total spending increased from \$49 billion to \$79 billion, an increase of 60 percent. In comparison, during this time period US defense spending increased approximately 12 percent. Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, European North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members spent on average 5 percent *less* in 2013 than in 2014. Total European NATO spending for this period declined 6.5 percent from \$311 billion to \$290 billion. By placing the numbers side by side, it is clear that Latin America is slowly closing the gap with Europe (fig. 5). And, although many Latin American countries are starting from a low level of spending, for some this spree has translated into truly sizeable defense budgets. Brazil, for example, increased its defense spending from \$24.5 billion in 2004 to \$36 billion in 2013, placing it near the 10 largest defense budgets in the world.



**Figure 5. Defense spending, 2004 and 2013.** (Information from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), [http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex\\_database/milex\\_database](http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database/milex_database).)

This growth in spending has been sustainable. Latin American countries spent on average 1.29 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defense in 2013, up from 1.26 percent in 2004 (fig. 6). Only Colombia (3.4 percent) spends more than 2 percent. This gives the region's governments the ability to increase spending in the future without breaking the bank. If, for example, the region were to match Europe's average 2013 GDP expenditure of 1.46 percent, total military spending in Latin America would approach \$100 billion. In other words, the region's growth potential for defense spending is strong.



**Figure 6. Defense spending as %GDP for 2004 and 2013.** (Information from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), [http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex\\_database/milex\\_database](http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database/milex_database).)

Continued growth is expected because Latin America needs robust defense forces. While tensions between countries in the region are low, many governments still face transnational criminal networks that threaten state and citizen security. Additionally, several states, such as Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia, increasingly believe they have a leadership role to play in international affairs and want the means to exercise their policy objectives. For example, Brazil has led the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Haiti since 2004, while Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto announced this year at the UN General Assembly his intention to deploy Mexican forces for peacekeeping missions in the near future.<sup>15</sup> Colombia, for its part, not only requested to join NATO in 2013 (the request was politely declined) but has also sent experienced counternarcotics officers to train units in Afghanistan, thereby exporting the knowledge gleaned from decades of fighting the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC).<sup>16</sup>

These policy moves show that Latin America is not only closing the gap with Europe on spending, but on ambition as well. This is not to imply that Latin American capitals will be unilaterally projecting power globally anytime soon. Material and political conditions in the area simply do not support such policies (although that may change over time). But, the growing military capabilities and self-confidence of many Latin American states suggest an increased willingness and ability to contribute to multilateral security solutions. The result is that the region increasingly looks like an attractive, viable, and strong partner for the United States as it continues its role as the global security provider.

## Conclusion

The noted naval historian Philip Crowl once wrote that using history to predict the future is a fool's errand. "The present is never exactly analogous to the past," he wrote, "and those who would draw simple analogies between past and present are doomed to failure."<sup>17</sup> But as a historian, Crowl wasn't about to completely dismiss the relevance of his profession to modern policy. History, he said, "will help us to ask the right questions so that we can define the problem—whatever it is." In other words, history can help us understand our present situation and acts as an example against which we can compare policy proposals.

The Anglo-American rapprochement functions in this mold. There are many similarities between the circumstances of the late nineteenth century and now, but it's not an exact match. The United States today is far stronger relative to its competitors than the United Kingdom was at the turn of the twentieth century. Therefore, it is far less imperative that Washington finds new strategic allies. Moreover, the United States already has a strong and robust network of alliances and sits at the center of an international system it designed. Turning Latin America into a core strategic partner would mean integrating the region into this existing alliance and governance structure on a much higher level than it is now. Consequently, Washington would not only have to spearhead the engagement with its southern counterparts, but would also have to midwife a similar strengthening in relations between its traditional allies in Europe and its new ones in Latin America. This combination of lower need and higher barrier to success greatly distinguishes the situation from the one facing London in 1900.

Yet, the Anglo-American rapprochement forces us to recognize that the similarities that do exist between then and now have analytical value. In particular, it forces us to place the changes occurring in the United States and Latin America within a context. Too often changes are mentioned simply as important facts unto themselves, but lacking context, they hold much less value. For example, in 2013 Brazil spent \$36 billion on defense. What does this mean? Without a bigger picture it's just another statistic. The Anglo-American rapprochement gives us one way of constructing this picture by making us ask some basic questions. Does Latin America's democratization and increased defense spending have any significance to the United States' relative decline and changing demographics? Does the sum of these changes suggest something more powerful than their individual impacts? And, at its most simplistic but profound: what is the future of US-Latin American relations in this changing world?

A US-Latin American relationship modeled off the one that currently exists between the United States and Europe is one possible answer to this question. It would be misleading to suggest it is the only solution, but it is one derived from an informed and appropriate use of history. Moreover, it offers a clear and comprehensive lens through which to shape US-Latin American relations in the decades to come—something that has been lacking for many years. Last, it prescribes a thorough and sensible role for Latin America within global affairs. As a core strategic partner, Latin America would become a prominent part of the West, gaining increased access to and control over the international system. In exchange, it would be expected to help defend the system from revisionist powers and support the spread of Western values abroad.

Despite its rhetorical simplicity, such a strategy would require significant time and effort to put it in place. But this shouldn't deter Washington or its Latin American counterparts from trying. Effort and reward are often positively correlated, especially in foreign policy. History, therefore, has one final limitation. It helps define the problem, but it's up to us to implement whatever solution it reveals.

### Notes

1. By 1900 Britain was no longer an industrial and military superpower; her greatest days were long gone. In fact, by the late 1870s Britain's economic lead was already evaporating. On most key industrial



measures, Britain was being rapidly eclipsed by the United States and Germany. For example, between 1890 and 1907, Britain's steel production rose from 3.6 to 6.5 million tons. However, during the same period US production went from 4.3 to 23.4 million tons while German production grew from 2.2 to 11.9 million tons. Between 1880 and 1906 both the United States and Germany surpassed Britain in pig iron production. The trend continued with coal production: the US matched British production in 1900 and Germany matched it in 1914. The trend was obvious. While still an economic powerhouse—London was the financial capital of the world, sterling remained the global reserve currency, and even in 1914 Britain invested twice as much capital abroad as any other country—overall, the United Kingdom was experiencing relative economic decline. Aaron Friedberg writes, “By one estimate, average annual growth in England from the 1860s to the 1880s was 2.4 percent. For the period 1885–1905 this figure fell to 1.9 percent.” Meanwhile, from 1870 to 1913, the United States grew at an annual rate of 5 percent while Germany expanded by 4.7 percent. Looking at the goods Britain produced in the early 1900s provides an even starker contrast with its economic rivals. According to Fareed Zakaria, in 1907 Britain manufactured four times as many bicycles as the United States, but the United States produced 12 times as many cars. The conclusion, Zakaria notes, is that “Having spearheaded the first industrial revolution, Britain had been less adept at moving into the second.” Aaron L. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 25; and Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 175.

2. Friedberg, *The Weary Titan*, 171.

3. For a concise breakdown of the myth, refer to James Bradley, *The Imperial Cruise* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 23–27.

4. Stephen R. Rock, *Appeasement in International Politics* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), 32.

5. *Ibid.*, 29–30.

6. “The Anglo-Japanese Alliance and the Future of American-British Relations,” Confidential memorandum, 30 March 1921, in Stanley K. Hornbeck Papers, Box 478, Folder: Writings Anglo-Japanese Alliance 1921, Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford University, California.

7. Rock, *Appeasement in International Politics*, 35.

8. Karen R. Humes, Nicholas A. Jones, and Roberto R. Ramirez, “Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: 2010,” US Census Bureau, March 2011, <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-02.pdf>.

9. Frank Bass, “Nonwhite U.S. Births Become the Majority for First Time,” *Bloomberg*, 17 May 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-05-17/non-white-u-s-births-become-the-majority-for-first-time.html>.

10. Jesus Ruiz Mantilla, “Más ‘Speak Spanish’ que en España,” *El Pais*, 6 October 2008, [http://elpais.com/diario/2008/10/06/cultura/1223244001\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/diario/2008/10/06/cultura/1223244001_850215.html).

11. Matt Barreto and Gary M. Segura, *Latino America* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014), Kindle edition.

12. “Democracy Index 2012,” *The Economist*, 2013, [https://portoncv.gov.cv/dhub/porton.por\\_global.open\\_file?p\\_doc\\_id=1034](https://portoncv.gov.cv/dhub/porton.por_global.open_file?p_doc_id=1034).

13. Proponents of second image theories of international relations argue that the determining factor in state behavior is the state's internal composition. Therefore, democracies act differently from autocracies and are more likely to have strategic interests in common.

14. All data are represented using constant 2011 US dollars as the currency of measure. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), “2014 Data on Global Military Expenditures,” [http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex\\_database/milex\\_database](http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex/milex_database/milex_database). No data is available for Panama, Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, Costa Rica, or Cuba.

15. HIS Jane's Intelligence Review, “Mexico's Plan to Send Military to UN Peacekeeping Missions Likely to Weaken Its Fight against Drug Cartels,” *Jane's*, 24 September 2014, <http://www.janes.com/article/43691/mexico-s-plan-to-send-military-to-un-peacekeeping-missions-likely-to-weaken-its-fight-against-drug-cartels>.

16. Agence France-Presse, “NATO Rules out Colombia Membership,” *Defense News*, 4 June 2013, <http://www.defensenews.com/article/20130604/DEFREG02/306040013/>.

17. Philip A. Crowl, “The Strategists Short Catechism: Six Questions without Answers,” *The Harmon Memorial Lectures in Military History*, no. 20, 6 October 1977.



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