



## **TRANSCRIPT:**

# **TRUMP OR BIDEN: WHAT WOULD IT MEAN FOR LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN?**

**SEPTEMBER 21, 2020**

## **WELCOME/INTRODUCTIONS**

**(0:06) Cindy Arnson:** Good morning, and welcome to our speakers Juan Cruz and Juan González, as well as to all of you who are joining us from around the hemisphere. I'm Cindy Arnson, the director of the Latin American Program, and I'm delighted to welcome you to this discussion of the very consequential US election that will take place in November and what that will mean for US relations with Latin America and the Caribbean. If you'd like to ask a question of either of our speakers please send a tweet to our Twitter account @LatAmProg and we'll take as many questions from the audience as we can.

Juan Cruz and Juan González are both top authorities on US relations in the hemisphere and each has a distinguished record of US government service. Juan Cruz is currently a senior advisor and consultant to multilateral organizations as well as to private firms and consultancies working in the region. He retired from the US government in 2019 after almost 35 years of service, most of it in the region, with postings in Brazil, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela. His last assignment was in the Trump White House, where he served as special assistant to the president and senior director for Western Hemisphere Affairs at the National Security Council. Among other things Juan is a native of Puerto Rico.

Juan González has held several positions in the Obama administration. His last appointment was as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, where he had responsibility for policy in Central America and the Caribbean. He also served in the White House for four and a half years, first as National Security Council director for the Western Hemisphere, and then as special advisor to Vice President Joe Biden, during which he played a central role in the Vice President's engagement in the region. Juan was a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala, and is a native of Cartagena, Colombia.

## **COVID-19 CRISIS IN LATAM**

We're going to jump right in because there's a lot of ground to cover. The first question has to do with COVID-19, which has been devastating for Latin American economies. Growth on average







speeches saying either you go to China or you go with us, but you provide an alternative; and what that means is a US that focuses less on what does Trump Administration has done, which is been a return to Cold War era-ism by talking about Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua strategy at the expense of everything else.



think Venezuela has been one where you don't have to doubt where the US lies on the issue of Venezuela. It's come out hard and I think that the administration will be looking for a second administration to bring the football across the line.







So to your point about what's next, I think that for the Trump administration, it'll still be seized on two issues: the issue of immigration, particularly coming from Central America; and secondly, law and order and issues of combating narco-trafficking, and the ravages of the failure of the drug war and what it means for the US population. So, I think in a second term you're going to see a lot more focus on that. I think as they've looked at accomplishments and setting the groundwork and a firm foundation, the administration is going to look for a way to capitalize on that and bring to fore precisely the two issues that they're probably most interested in on Mexico.

**(30:30) Cindy Arnson:** Thanks. For Juan González, what do you think has been ignored by the Trump administration and how might that shape a US approach to Mexico under a Biden administration?

**(30:48) Juan González:** That's a tough question to answer, Cindy. I do have to take issue with Juan's characterization of the bilateral relationship. I think what you have here is a relationship of convenience where Mexico has been cracking down on immigration. There are tens of thousands of people that are in Mexico on the US-Mexico border, on the Mexico side, as part of the "Remain in Mexico" program, in shantytowns, many victims of criminal armed groups. And at the same time the United States, which under this administration cares very little about matters of corruption, human rights, press freedom, really ignores some of the problematic trends that are taking place in Mexico. And I think the calculus, perhaps, on the part of the Mexicans and then my personal opinion, is that they have to avoid pissing off the president of the United States, because he has shown his willingness to just close down the border to trade and the flow of people. And in doing that, recognizing that if Joe Biden is elected that he's going to be the adult in the room and be much more responsible about managing the bilateral relationship. They're not wrong. I don't think you're going to see Joe Biden threatening to close down the border on a whim.

The USMCA, let's remember that President Trump, as many people have called him, has been an arsonist firefighter, where he's created the crisis along the border and then created the USMCA as a way to resolve a crisis that he himself created. You look at the ITC analysis [of the contribution to US GDP of the USMCA], it really is not [a large contribution]. Zero point three five (0.35) percent of US GDP, it's not dramatic. And there weren't major changes in the agreement other than adding a technology chapter, and then what Democrats fought for, which was stronger labor protections to make sure that US workers were protected, and that when it comes to prescription drugs and the environment, there were serious commitments. And the agreement is where it is because of Democrats and Speaker Pelosi.

When you step back at the bilateral relationship under a Biden administration, as many folks know, Vice President Biden led the high-level economic dialogue with Mexico. It's something where he saw that US-Mexico economic cooperation had to be central and a priority for the United States. That's not just a trade issue. It's looking along our communities along the US-

Mexico border to make sure we're planning not just on cross-border infrastructure, but also on security. Making sure that at the same time we're prioritizing US national security, making sure that cross-border commerce is something that's facilitated. Fostering educational exchanges—at this point there's a statistic that there are more Mexican PhDs living in the United States than there are in Mexico. That is because we benefit from having those educational exchanges. But I think we've got to treat Mexico like the strategic partner that it is. Treat them with respect. We're always going to have differences with Mexico, but we address those in an adult manner. And beyond just the trade agenda is looking at what we can do regionally and globally with Mexico, when we treat them as partners and address migration in a responsible way, by focusing on good policies. That is how I think Vice President Biden as president will manage the Mexico relationship.

## BRAZIL

**(34:21) Cindy Arnson:** Let's talk for a moment about Brazil. President Trump and Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro have had a close personal relationship and they share a very similar approach to handling the COVID-19 pandemic. Juan Cruz, aside from the personal affinity that exists between these two presidents, do you think there's been any content in the US-Brazil relationship in the Trump years?

**(34:52) Juan Cruz:** Cindy, I would say there's a general predisposition, and I wouldn't just discard the affinity that exists between these two presidents. As a student of Brazil, it's tough to see the two largest countries in the region, Mexico and Brazil, have often represented a challenge for the US historically in these bilateral relationships. In the case of Brazil, both sides wanted to see eye to eye, but they kept missing each other. There are multiple examples, and it's in the history of two ships passing in the night. And I think that this is for the first time, a real deep and marked difference in the approach. The Brazilians have been exceedingly acquiescent, friendly, flexible, and trying to match policies with this administration. It does matter that the two presidents get along and have a positive viewing of each other; it extends to their teams and the makeup of the Brazilian team and the preparedness of the US team to find avenues of commonality with Brazil.

And I think that a perfect example of that is—Juan talks about the travel of Vice President Biden to the region. Look at the multiple travel to Brazil by this administration, including by Vice President Pence himself, and of course, Mike Pompeo on more than one occasion, and the fact that he just traveled there within this past week with an objective of comparing notes with the Brazilians over the issue of Venezuela, and a lot of the Venezuelan migrants there, and

absolutely compatible to the administrations in terms of everything from issues of defense and military cooperation, and logistics and space, and so on and so forth. So, I think that the conditions are right and it's just for both sides to exploit. And I would venture to say that I hope

Even though November 3<sup>rd</sup> is really the only poll that matters here in the United States, Joe Biden is going to win this election. He is leading the polls by an amazing stretch, he is looking to defeat Donald Trump in the same way that Carter was defeated after his first term, if trends continue the way they are. So the countries of the region have to start thinking about, how do we actually advance our own national security and economic interests with partners like the United States? It's something I think people need to start brainstorming about, because when a Biden administration hits the ground in January, they're going to hit the ground running. And they're going to be really moving aggressively on addressing many of the wrongs, including on climate change, perpetrated by the Trump administration.

**(41:19) Cindy Arnson:** I'm going to take a question, since we're talking about climate change, from the senior correspondent at S&P Global Platts Sheky Espejo. This is for you, Juan González: If climate change and the environment are going to be a central focus in the future, how can that coexist with Mexico's current energy policy that focuses exclusively on hydrocarbons? And after your question we're going to come back to Central America and Colombia, so let's leave time.

**(41:53) Juan González:** Great, so this is a challenge that we faced during the second term of the Obama administration, when we were working on the Caribbean Energy Security Initiative. I'm coming back to the answer, but in a roundabout way. We were debating whether the focus on energy security in the Caribbean should be a renewables-only approach, or whether we should actually think about natural gases as a transition fuel for the Caribbean. And the approach that we ultimately took was an "all of the above" approach. So those that were investing in geothermal, those that were investing in solar, those that were investing in wind, we helped them prepare for those investments and have the governance and the financing tools to do that. There are countries like the Dominican Republic and Jamaica that use natural gas still, and they are going to need to use that as a transition energy. I know that a lot of climate activists may not see

that we're creating that environment for countries like Mexico and Brazil. And I think just as important are Central America and the Caribbean, which are going to be facing adaptation issues, that they have the tools to be able to prepare for the changes that we are already facing. So that's the main answer, creating those tools to allow for those countries to begin investing in renewable technology and preparing to implement ambitious emissions targets that, for many countries, have fallen back since the United States started dropping out of the COP.

I think that you are on mute, Cindy.

## CENTRAL AMERICA

**(44:44) Cindy Arnson:** Thank you, my goodness. Let's move to Central America. The focus of the Trump Administration in the US relationship with Central America has been almost exclusively focused on migration. And it's true that migration from the so-called Northern Triangle—El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala—has been much reduced since the spike in 2019, a lot of that obviously due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The question is really for both of you, the same question, is this enforcement-focused approach sustainable in the long-term? Juan Cruz, why don't you go...

**(45:26) Juan Cruz:** Thank you, Cindy. It all begins with the relationships that we have with all three countries. The administration currently enjoys a rather positive, extremely positive, relationship with all three of these countries and an understanding, and with that all three countries have come to a real energetic and creative way to try to align with the administration's objectives, and I think eliminate all the rough spots that can exist in an issue like this and which existed early on in the administration's pushing back on this on this issue. With each one of these presidents in the region, we have an exceptional relationship, we are aligned, we can have discussions, our embassies have done a phenomenal job, and we can discuss issues that in the past may have been unilaterally dictated. I think that gives us an opportunity to have a more mature conversation, and no longer impose from the North, but rather suggest, maneuver, and work towards the objectives that the US would like from all 3 countries. Yes, I think it is going to be driven primarily on these issues, rather than others, and I think if there's another issue out there that might surface it would be, of course, issues of security, likely issues of China, and, much less so for this administration, issues of corruption.

**(47:03) Juan González:** Can I say something briefly Cindy? Look, I think enforcement is necessary. I think the United States needs to enforce immigration laws, people that don't have a credible claim on asylum or refugee status, they need to be repatriated. But I think what we need to recognize here is that the Trump administration has created a false choice between enforcing US law and upholding our international humanitarian obligations. They've been systematically

attacking our legal migration system by breaking down the asylum system, and, it is a function of that, there is a certain demographic in the United States that fears the increasing diversity as a threat against their way of life. That's called xenophobia. Some people have called it worse but I am not going to say what they've said. The reality is that migration has been one of the reasons the United States has been able to reinvent itself economically and innovate, where countries like Europe that have a negative growth rate are economically on the decline. Immigration has been a tool of our survival, resilience, creativity, and cultural richness. We are a nation of immigrants. Enforcement is necessary but its insufficient. When you look at all the experience we've had, from Plan Colombia forward, high intensity law enforcement operations get you the numbers and the quick wins. But strategically, you need to invest in education, you need to invest economic opportunity. A kid is going to join a gang if he doesn't have an alternative. You have to invest in Boys and Girls Clubs, community policing, the place-based strategies that the Obama/Biden administration advanced that this administration has completely cut. Until then, migration is going to be just a





something that separated the administration from Colombia for quite a while. The issues of drugs and fighting drugs are very close to the president's heart; it's an authentic view of his and so he's not going to drop it, and the fact that the Colombians are back on track and we're in agreement, helps those friends and supporters in both countries relax a little bit. But the fact is that the devil is in the details on this eradication business, when we get back on track and we have a way forward, but it's not going to be back to the future. Also, the long list of challenges that the Colombian government faces, now exacerbated by the response to COVID and trying to help the country recover from the impact, the economic and social impacts of COVID, and of course, Juan discussed earlier the issue about a few countries in the region having seen a resurgence of its population protesting inequality, Colombia was one of those countries. That whole situation caught all of us by surprise, not to mention the leadership of those countries, but we just saw a recent demonstration that might reignite this, with an issue of police treatment of a man and death of a man in police custody. So it's a long list of challenges that Colombia has, it's not the first time Colombia has had to confront these sorts of things. I have great confidence in Colombia, the Colombians, law enforcement, and of course their ability to solve their own problems. But, of course, we've been great partners irrespective of ideology and we need to continue to do that in a way that the Colombians feel that they're supported, and we continue to help them provide the right and left parameters to do things the right way, and abide by

impact on Colombia. It's in our strategic interest to make sure that we're helping Colombia addresses this. But, of course, you know finding peace is something that all Colombians want, as a Colombian-American, it is something that is an exciting prospect for country that has been in conflict over 50 years. But, again, it's the role of the United States to support the Colombian government and the Colombian people advance that debate and get to a point where they are securing a durable peace. We can't tell them what that balance is.

## VENEZUELA

**(59:35) Cindy Arnson:** Thanks. We have a question from Geoff Ramsey of the Washington Office on Latin America, for both of you, with respect to Venezuela. The question is whether a second Trump administration or Biden administration would re-calibrate the existing sanctions policy; for example—consider offering sanctions relief for something other than regime change, in other words, to achieve the right conditions for an electoral process? After this, after both of your answers, I'm afraid we're going to have to end because we're out of time, but let's take your answer to that question. First, Juan Cruz.

**(1:00:18) Juan Cruz:** Cindy I apologize, but I was having a few technical difficulties, so I am going to ask you if you could repeat your question briefly?

**(1:00:27) Cindy Arnson:** Sure, from Geoff Ramsey at WOLA, about whether in a second Trump administration there might be a recalibration of the sanctions policy toward Venezuela so that sanctions theoretically could be partially lifted in exchange for electoral conditions?

**(1:00:46) Juan Cruz:** Interesting. I will start with something that Juan said earlier, which is that I agree with him on the issue of sanctions. We've sanctioned everything except Venezuela's oxygen and the sun, but if we could figure out how to do that, we would sanction that, too. I do agree that what we need to do is, we need to use all the tools that the US government has at its disposal. And I see a lot of good movement there, but we have been sort of heavy-handed on the sanctions regime and I think there's room to reassess that. My own particular view is that whatever you do to reassess, it is an opportunisg2 (i) 0.0 041 (e) 0.2 (xc)02 (o ) on ueuniur 0.92ppportqu

**(102:17) Juan González:** So Cindy, what I would say to that, is that it is a bit premature to speculate on what a Biden administration would do on sanctions, given that we have a National Assembly election that is still scheduled for December. I can say, and people from the campaign have been on record on this, that the way things are headed, the December National Assembly elections will not be free and fair. So a Biden administration would not recognize the results of that election. I would also say that in the Democratic primary, I think that Joe Biden was the first candidate to recognize Juan Guaidó as the leader of the only democratically-elected institution in the country, the National Assembly. And I agree with Juan that the goal here has to be free and fair elections. Again, sanctions, unilateral sanctions, have never in their history worked at regime change. So I think what we need to do is find a way to pressure the regime back to the negotiating table, with the opposition, as equals; and getting there, like what are the minimum conditions required for the opposition to trust that the regime is negotiating in earnest? We have ideas on that, reconstitute the electoral council, release political prisoners, there's a list of things, but we're not the ones that are going to be sitting down with the regime, it is going to be the opposition and so they're the ones that have to make that call; and ultimately, we have to work toward a situation where there are free and fair elections in the country. [Henrique] Capriles has called for an international verification mission that is credible and can administer the elections. Those are things that, I think, the opposition needs to lay out, for us to get back to in the negotiating table, which will be key toward getting out of this crisis. They're going to be the ones that have to set those conditions, and then they need to negotiate in earnest, as partners, to see the way forward. Because the current situation is one that, number one, is only going to aggravate the suffering of the Venezuelan people, and b) is not going to achieve regime change. I'll finish with this; Joe Biden has a saying where he says, "you never back a person into a corner where their only way is over you." And so creating this expectation where the United States under the Trump administration is basically telling the opposition what to do, is not how this works. It's the opposition and the Venezuelan people are the ones that really should be determining their future. And the United States is, then, there to support them in their efforts, the protagonists of their own future through free and fair elections.