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### TILLERSON'S TRIP TO LATIN AMERICA: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

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Photo: Mr. Tillerson during his visit to Peru. Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Perú/Flickr  
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With a handful of notable exceptions, the tone and substance of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's recent swing through five Latin American and Caribbean countries made it almost hard to remember that he works for the Trump administration. Over the past year, the President's public and private discourse, from the border wall to "shithole" countries, has poisoned U.S.-Latin American relations and caused U.S. standing in the region to plummet. So anything resembling normal and even informed diplomacy was a welcome departure.

Critics have been quick to seize on some of the trip's more troubling moments. These include Tillerson's

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affirmation about the continued relevance of the Monroe Doctrine, a pointed reference to China's "imperial" ambitions in Latin America, and a suggestion that the United States would welcome a move by the Venezuelan armed forces to oust President Nicolás Maduro. The statements—two in response to questions and one in his prepared remarks—showed a woeful ignorance of U.S. history in the region or of Latin American repudiation of military coups. Similarly, the trade, investment, and financial relationship with China is one that South American countries have benefited from—and actively seek.

Yet judging from the public statements in all five countries, the bilateral encounters were remarkably nuanced and multi-faceted. It will be some time before we know what was discussed behind closed doors (U.S. oil sanctions against Venezuela? Stronger measures to oust the Maduro regime?). Venezuela was a constant, reflecting the alarm not only in the United States but also throughout the hemisphere about the country's authoritarianism and roiling economic and humanitarian crisis. On multiple stops, Tillerson voiced concern about actions that would hurt the Venezuelan people or deepen the impact on Venezuela's neighbors. He suggested increasing U.S. assistance to Colombia to deal with the crisis of Venezuelan refugees; and in Jamaica made reference to energy assistance for the Caribbean, ostensibly to offset the decline in subsidized Venezuelan oil through Petrocaribe.

Given the spike of coca cultivation in Colombia to now-record levels, Tillerson could easily have adopted a hectoring tone. Instead, and in virtually every reference to the problem of narcotics trafficking, he underscored the U.S. role as the world's top consumer of illicit drugs, arguing for shared approaches. He went out of his way to underscore the benefits to U.S. exporters of bilateral free trade agreements, voiced support for OECD membership for Argentina, Peru, and Colombia, and praised Peru's leadership of the Lima Group and the next Summit of the Americas. He spoke of modernizing, not ripping up NAFTA.

Nodding to a revised Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement that will be signed by eleven nations next month in Chile, Tillerson expressed an openness to rejoining the TPP. In marked contrast to the efforts of the Trump administration to denigrate the evidence of climate change, Tillerson pointed out the "rich ecology" of South America and "the effect of climate change that we're seeing."

Time will tell if the tone and substance of these exchanges serve to mollify Latin American leaders (probably) or publics (unlikely). And it is worth remembering that, whatever Tillerson's success in damage control, the State Department in any U.S. administration is but one actor in a complex policy making process that rarely yields consistency of thought or action. How to square, for example, the warm embrace of Argentine President Mauricio Macri with ongoing tariffs against Argentine biodiesel, or that—just as Tillerson was in Mexico calling cooperation in the fight against transnational organized crime—President Trump threatened to defund countries that were "laughing at us" by doing nothing in the fight against drugs.

In the United States, Tillerson must also convince skeptics that he is not quietly at war with his own department, by supporting budget cuts, failing to fill key vacancies, or looking the other way as senior diplomats resign in waves. Overall, however, his first swing through the region provided assuring reminders that the internationalist wing of the Trump administration is alive, even if it is not exactly well. Given all that has transpired in the last 12 months, that alone is a step in the right direction.

