

SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR

Petro Expects to Become Latin America's Leader. Expect Bumps Along the Way.

Sergio Guzmán and Karis Williams | September 16, 2022



The President of Chile, Gabriel Boric (left), hands over a gift to his Colombian counterpart, Gustavo Petro (right). Source: The Havana Times.

Latin American presidents often extoll grand visions for regional unity and leadership. However, as their terms progress, they often find out that uniting the region will take not only strong leadership and political will but also require domestic and international conditions to move forward. We find that these conditions are not present in the current environment. Petro starts his term with a grand vision of Latin American unity that will likely face significant political,

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2

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"In most countries of the region there have been efforts to update the anti-

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Nicolás Albertoni

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Juan Nagel

Evan Ellis

On August 7, 2022, Gustavo Petro became the first left-wing president in Colombia's history. His inauguration was met with a wave of congratulations from the region's left-leaning presidents of Chile, Argentina, Mexico, Honduras, and Peru, as well as the region's dictatorships, including Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua.

Petro's victory suggests that Latin America's shift towards the left is only awaiting Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's victory in the upcoming elections in Brazil. If that were to occur, the most influential countries in the region would be once again governed by the left, paving the way to a more progressive region. There is great anticipation and concern about what a left-leaning Latin America will mean. Will it facilitate greater regional integration balancing the powers of the Global North and South, or will it fail like previous attempts leaving the region in **disarray**?

Petro began his presidency calling for regional unity and cooperation and invoking the international community's support, showcasing his regional agenda to be just as ambitious as his domestic agenda. However, although ideologically aligned, the re-emergence of the left in the region is divided by the traditional left, new left, and authoritarian regimes. Despite Petro's roots in the traditional left, he has aligned himself closely with "New Left" leaders, such as Chilean President Gabriel Boric and Honduran President Xiomara Castro, and will likely form a partnership to influence the region towards more progressive proposals focused on social and environmental rights that seem too good to be true and will prove difficult to pass in Colombia's Congress.

The changes in the political climate have erroneously been described as a re-emergence of a pink tide. **However, this is not a new pink tide as it obeys specific circumstances surrounding each country's anti-incumbency, economic duress, and social unrest.** The comparison of the two is an indolent argument, ignorant of the nuances between the current leftist governments and their leaders. The pink tide was characterized by exporting the region's natural resources to strengthen the region's economies, fund public policies, and reduce poverty and inequality. Today's left is focused on the issues of social and environmental justice and a commitment to uphold democracy, which follows suit with Petro's agenda.

This new outlook awakens an opportunity for regional integration, a long-held promise of left-wing and right-wing Latin American leaders. Petro has demonstrated a great interest in greater cooperation in the region and is likely to join efforts with Fernández Boric, Castro, Obrador, and possibly Lula to further encourage the

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Chavez, Evo, Castro, Ortega, and possibly Evo to further encourage the resumption of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and Comunidad Andina (CAN).

CELAC will likely rise in priority across the region as the key organization to discuss regional matters, likely diminishing the influence of the Organization of American States (OAS). However, there are progressive leaders who will try and pressure Petro into reviving other regional cooperation blocs, such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) or the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA). Other regional cooperation groups, such as the Pacific Alliance, are likely to continue but have an uncertain fate under Petro. Furthermore, Petro’s administration will seek to position itself as a leader of the Global South and reinforce South-to-South collaboration, a significant change for Colombia, which is accustomed to aligning more closely with the U.S. and Europe.

Further complicating regional integration is that not all of the region has turned left. Ecuador, Panama, and Uruguay are still governed by right and center-right governments. Petro will need to gain support from all his neighbors—no matter his political standing—and the international community to fulfill his objectives domestically. Does he have the political will and influence to do so?

Latin America faces various challenges, such as poverty, armed conflict, criminality, and growing dissatisfaction with politicians and democracy. Public frustration has built up after years of mediocre growth, rising inequality, and a sluggish recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic. Latin Americans voted for the left because they wanted to see change and to see it happen fast. The expectations are high, and the circumstances make it nearly impossible for the region’s new leaders to accomplish all they have promised.

Petro’s Regional Relations

<i>Friendly</i>	<i>Pragmatic</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Developing</i>	<i>Opposing</i>
<i>Chile – Boric</i>	<i>Peru- Castillo</i>	<i>Paraguay – Mario Abdo</i>	<i>Venezuela – Maduro</i>	<i>Nicaragua – Ortega</i>
<i>Argentina – Fernández</i>	<i>Ecuador– Guillermo Lasso</i>	<i>Costa Rica – Carlos Quesada</i>	<i>Dominican Republic – Luis Abinader</i>	
<i>Honduras- Castro</i>	<i>Cuba – Miguel Diaz Canal</i>	<i>Guatemala – Alejandro Giammattei</i>		
	<i>Brazil– Bolsonaro</i>	<i>El Salvador- Nayib Bukele</i>		

In Colombia, the voters that propelled Petro to power did not do so under the premise of a grand Latin American scheme. They did so because of an anti-incumbent dissatisfaction with the status quo, elites, the private sector, political parties, and institutions. If Petro and other regional leaders' efforts fall short of voter expectations for change, they will likely be met with fierce resistance. Citizens who are unhappy with how democracy works will take to the streets in protest.

Furthermore, internal challenges are complex, driving most of the governmental focus toward domestic issues. The likelihood of the left remaining in power past their predecessors does not fare well. Across the region, leaders are experiencing declining approval ratings starting with Boric and Fernández, in addition to the ongoing investigation of Castillo, which is likely to lead to another impeachment in Peru.

Petro's approval ratings are likely to suffer a similar pattern to most leftist leaders. Although the latest [Invamer poll](#) showed the president's approval rating at 56 percent, problems beyond Petro's control, such as inflation and the risk of a global recession, are likely to affect his ability to push through his ambitious reforms and, consequently, maintain a high approval rating. In turn, this will likely make the president short-tempered and unpredictable.

Currently, Petro is making the most out of the honeymoon stage of his administration; as a career politician, he has hit the ground running by quickly re-establishing diplomatic relations with Venezuela and reengaging in the peace negotiations. Both feats are challenging, complex, and will require a lengthy amount of time, but if successful would accomplish Petro's promise of peace. First, however, Petro must be careful in how he continues to balance his relations, particularly between Venezuela, Cuba, and the United States.

Until now, the Colombian president has portrayed himself as a leader open to dialogue, desiring to expand the country's relations regardless of ideological background. Petros' desire to become a champion of a Pan-Latin American vision reminiscent of Hugo Chávez also is challenged by the pressures that he cannot represent Chavismo nor the failures and errors of authoritarian archetypes. Petro also does not have the support of the military in the same way Chávez did in Venezuela. [Ecopetrol](#) cannot coopt the private sector like PDVSA, and Colombia's political opposition is adamant about not repeating the mistakes made by the opposition in Venezuela. Coopting Colombia's institutions will take more time and effort than Petro has to his avail.

Under Petro, we find it unlikely that Colombia will become the region's next Venezuela.

It is also improbable that Petro will be able to manifest his vision for the region as it takes time and strategy to overcome many of the region's challenges. Petro's presidency is further challenged by a sensitive constituency, his domestic and regionally ambitious agenda working against the clock, and the perilous balancing act

regionally ambitious agenda working against the clock, and his previous curbing act of allies and partnerships. Petro, at the moment, has been able to juggle foreign relations; however, a time will likely come when Petro will have to choose whether he aligns himself with the leftist leaders of the region or the United States.

This piece was adapted from Colombia Risk Analysis' most recent report on regional relations. Read the full report in English:

http://bit.ly/CRASpecialReport_PetroLAC and Spanish:

http://bit.ly/CRAInformeEspecial_PetroLAC.

Sergio Guzmán is the director of Colombia Risk Analysis, a political risk consulting firm based in Bogotá. Follow him on Twitter: [@SergioGuzmanE](#) and [@ColombiaRisk](#).

Karis Williams was a summer associate at Colombia Risk Analysis and is a current doctoral student at The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. Follow her on Twitter: [@karis_dr](#).

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