Let’s begin with the leading Republican candidate. The hallmark of Donald Trump’s foreign policy has been “maximum pressure” campaigns applied to Iran, Venezuela and Cuba. The theory is that if the economy is damaged sufficiently, the people will overthrow their own government. And we have seen large-scale demonstrations in Iran and Venezuela. But the governments also have supporters and the means to respond using security forces. And the more the US helps the opposition, the less legitimacy the opposition is likely to enjoy. So the “maximum pressure” policy has been effective in increasing suffering among the people, but not in causing the regime change Trump says he wants to see. Historically, trying to crack Cuban pride with more pressure has failed for 60 years. But it has worked elsewhere, such as Chile in the 70s and Nicaragua in the 80s, when sanctions coupled with covert operations helped to undermine even popular elected governments. The Cubans know that history, and they are keeping a close eye on anything that smacks of subversion, which means Trump’s crackdown is not only hurting the private sector but also contributing to the closing of political space.

Trump’s foreign policy often seems to be focused like a laser beam on a single country whose name is South Florida. You can see this on Israel; you can see this on his vision of Latin America. He thinks he won the presidency because he won Florida, and that he won Florida thanks to the votes of anti-Communist Cuban-Americans. He won Florida by half a percentage point in 2016. The 2018 races for governor and the Senate were each decided by less than half a percentage point, when 70 percent of Cuban Americans voted Republican.

In reality the story of Florida Latinos is more complex; In Trump’s mind, they are Cuban, but in fact Floridians of Mexican and Puerto Rican origin outnumber
those of Cuban origin. 150,000 climate refugees moved from Puerto Rico to Florida after Hurricane Maria, and as US citizens, they can register and vote immediately. Most Puerto Ricans are Democrats, and a lot are angry at Trump, demonstrating against him holding up rolls of paper towels like the ones he threw into a crowd of hurricane survivors. But it’s complicated because Florida’s Puerto Rican population went for Rick Scott in the governor’s race. He had shown much more compassion and support than Trump after the hurricane and visited Puerto Rico multiple times. And Puerto Rican turnout is usually lower than Cuban turnout.

But complex realities do not determine Trump’s beliefs about the world. Winning in 2020 will depend, Trump believes, on support from Cuban-Americans, Nicaraguan-Americans, Colombian-Americans, and a few Venezuelan-Americans. There’s a problem, because a lot about his administration is hard to sell to Latinos because of its anti-Latino policy and rhetoric. There is not a single Latino member of Trump’s Cabinet. In 2012, Mitt Romney had a Latino advisory board of 200 people, Trump’s campaign can barely get 20 together, and the head of Latinos for Trump in Florida (not endorsed by the campaign), Enrique Tarrio, is also international chairman of the Proud Boys, a white nationalist hate group. So Trump has only one card to play: all he can do is aim for the anti-Communist vote. This explains his harsh tone on Venezuela, his invitation to Guaidó to attend the State of the Union, and the harshest sanctions on Cuba in years. It also explains why Trump and the Republicans have started to attack socialism in general. Online ads purchased by the Trump campaign have invited readers to take a "socialism approval poll" and show pictures of Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio Cortez next to Fidel Castro and Joseph Stalin against a burning American flag. This is not only to discredit the whole Democratic Party by denigrating Sanders and Warren’s economic proposals, which are not really socialist, but also because right-wing Latinos in Florida are now telling new arrivals that Trump’s opponents are
“socialists disguised as Democrats,” by which they mean that the Democrats are the party of Maduro.

So from the leading Republican candidate we can expect rhetoric and policy moves to continue to stoke tensions with Cuba. The country might be put back on State Dept terrorist list using Venezuela or Colombia as excuse. Further restrictions on remittances and Cuban-Am travel are also possible. That would be politically risky, because the Cuban-Am community hasn’t yet responded to defend its connections and that might make it do so, but of course existing measures already hurt Cuban-Americans’ family connections, like the ban on flights outside of Havana, which were used mostly by them, or the cap on quarterly remittances. On Venezuela there are three possible outcomes to the crisis, only one of which would be bad for Trump’s electoral strategy. He would love to take credit for the fall of Maduro, which seems unlikely. A continued stalemate and further deterioration of the quality of life in Venezuela also works for demonization purposes. The only bad outcome for Trump would be a negotiated settlement leading to the reincorporation of opposition groups into a political process, along the lines of what the Norwegians have been trying to facilitate, so the Trump administration can be expected to continue to put obstacles in the path of a negotiated settlement. Linking Cuba to Venezuela has also been a hallmark of Trump administration foreign policy statements over the last year or so, beginning with John Bolton’s “Troika of Tyranny” speech and continuing through Mike Pence’s White House meeting in December discussing how to increase pressure on Cuba to try to reduce Cuban support for Maduro.

The other areas that are likely to get traction this year fall into the category we call “intermestic” issues, that is, issues where foreign policy and domestic policy intersect, such as trade, migration, and drugs. These are the only issues about which substantial numbers of voters outside South Florida say they care. Of all the
questions asked at all the town halls in Iowa, fewer than 5% were about foreign policy. In the televised debates, under 15% of the questions were about foreign policy. But on trade, migration, and drugs, Americans are interested. Here the Trump administration strategy is partly an appeal to the base, and partly an idiosyncratic outcome of the one consistent aspect of Trump’s ideology since the 1970s, which is hostility to America’s trading partners. His idea that trade wars are “easy to win” is not only a play for votes in the Rust Belt but such an ingrained part of his worldview that he will pursue them even at the risk of losing other traditional supporters of the Republican Party, such as farmers, who are facing growing rates of bankruptcy, or business, which currently forgives him because of the tax cuts and deregulation. In Latin America, this has produced an apparent paradox. The Trump administration is unpopular throughout the region because of his racism and brutality against immigrants and his talk of military intervention in Venezuela. His natural allies on the Latin American right, like Bolsonaro of Brazil and Macri of Argentina, staked their own political fortunes on an economic growth strategy that required improved access to the US market. Instead, Trump hit them with tariffs. Macri may have been the first victim of what political scientists are calling not soft power or smart power but stupid power, that is, self-destructive foreign policy that damages US interests and US relations with governments that might be more inclined to be supportive.

On migration, the administration’s actions at the border and with deportations from the interior are well-known. Moreover, rejecting one of Joe Biden’s main achievements, Trump has withheld aid to the Northern Triangle countries in order to extract promises of using security forces to impede their people from going North, rather than providing generous funds to invest in economic development, civil society, youth capacitiation, and rule of law programs to try to diminish the push factors driving so many desperate people to leave their homes.

So what about the Democrats?
Among leading Democratic candidates some basics are widely shared. They agree that military force should be a last resort and that long-term occupations are damaging. They promise to reinvest in diplomacy and rehabilitate the US image abroad, as well as trying to achieve US policy goals, by rebuilding alliances and recommitting to multilateralism on climate change, on nuclear arms control. They want to use foreign aid and international institutions to improve human security, address the root causes of migration, and seek diplomatic solutions to conflicts.

There is a rough division between the mainstream, Obama-style approach represented by Joe Biden and the mayor from South Bend, Indiana, Pete Buttigieg, who both believe that US alliances and international institutions are force multipliers for the United States. Together, the so-called moderate candidates have about 40% of the Democratic voter support in surveys. The progressive wing is represented by Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, who want to reduce US military activity abroad and also reform the global economic order in order to reduce inequality, conflict, and environmental damage. Together, Sanders and Warren have about 40% of the Democratic vote as well.

They all share an opposition to Trump’s immigration policies, from the border wall and family separation to the demonization of undocumented immigrant. Biden and Buttigieg have promised to revive the investments in the Northern Triangle, Biden raising them to a Billion dollars a year; Warren proposes a Billion and a half. Sanders adds that the migrants are fleeing conditions wrought in part by past US military interventions.

They all want to restore the right to asylum that the Trump administration has attenuated through metering and expedited review and the “Migration Protection Program” otherwise known as the “Remain in Mexico Program.” Warren has written about this in some detail. They also say they will use Temporary Protected Status to help immigrants fleeing violence, including in Venezuela.
Most have expressed dislike for Maduro, but then they part company on the details. Biden recognized Guaidó as president and says he would maintain sanctions until there are free elections. Buttigieg says the same, but wants targeted sanctions against top government officials, not broad economic sanctions that hurt the population. He also promises to address the Russian, Chinese and Cuban presence in Venezuela, although he hasn’t said how. His website promises to offer more aid and cooperation to Mexico and Central America, but adds, “And yes, it means isolating dictatorship and encouraging democracy working in concert with our Latin American neighbors.”

Michael Bloomberg, by the way, has also said something about Venezuela. ‘If you want to look at a system that’s noncapitalistic, just take a look at what was perhaps the wealthiest country in the world, and today, people are starving to death. It’s called Venezuela.’”

Warren tries to have it both ways: she calls Maduro “a dictator and a crook” and has said she supports sanctions, but supports negotiations and humanitarian aid at the same time, presumably so the humanitarian aid can soften the damage the sanctions are doing. Co-sponsored a resolution prohibiting unauthorized military action in Venezuela. She has not said a lot more about Latin America, but we can make some educated guesses based on her other remarks. She has blamed war in the Middle East, bad behavior from Russia and China, climate change, and the world’s economic problems on “cutthroat capitalism” and big corporations. So it is unlikely that she would join the John Bolton, who said on television that regime change in Venezuela would present a good opportunity for American oil companies.

Sanders goes the furthest in the direction of nonintervention. He famously sympathized with the Sandinistas and opposed the US role in the Central American wars of the 1980s. He favors lifting the embargo on Cuba (as does Amy Klobuchar, who has visited Cuba and wants to sell Minnesotan wheat there, and introduced a
When Evo Morales fell in Bolivia, Sanders said during a debate, “When the military intervenes…in my view, that’s called a ‘coup.’” For a while he declined to call Maduro a dictator, but then in the September debate he said that “anyone who does what Maduro does is a vicious tyrant.” Today he says he supports negotiations, condemns the use of violence against unarmed protestors and calls for the rule of law and fair elections. However, he says, “We would also listen to the voices of Venezuelan activists themselves who warn against broad sanctions, such as the Trump administration’s oil sanctions, that mainly punish the people, not the government,” and adds this: “my administration would not be in the business of regime change. The United States has a long history of inappropriately intervening in Latin American countries; we must not go down that road again.”

If personnel is policy, it gives us some other insights to see that Biden’s senior foreign policy advisor is Tony Blinken, deputy secretary of state under Obama and a longtime aide to Biden as his national security advisor. We are fortunate to have Dan Erikson on this panel, who was closely involved with the Vice President’s policy toward Latin America and can say much more than I can about him. I’ll just put out a few other names. Biden has tapped Nicholas Burns, a respected career State Department official who worked on the Hillary Clinton campaign. In November Biden was endorsed by 133 former foreign policy officials including some whose names will be familiar to those in this room, such as Jeffrey Delaurentis, Vicki Huddleston, Roberta Jacobsen, and Arturo Valenzuela. He has often received advice from Juan González, who worked with Biden at the NSC and the State Department on projects such as the Caribbean Energy Security Initiative and the Alliance for Prosperity in Central America’s Northern Triangle. González has criticized Trump’s crackdown on Cuba and is on the board of WOLA. On Venezuela, he has on the one hand warned against the dangers a military intervention would bring (creating an
insurgency, bringing in Colombian rebels, etc.) but on the other says that a “humanitarian” military intervention, endorsed by the United Nations, must be on the table. But that’s a unicorn, something that does not exist. At any rate, we can expect that the policies of a Biden administration would be within the range of what these former officials supported.

Pete Buttigieg’s foreign policy team is led by Doug Wilson, a former assistant secretary of defense for public affairs in the Obama administration who worked on South Asia, veterans’ affairs, and LGBT issues. Other advisors include Ned Price, a former National Security Council spokesman for Obama, and Tarek Ghani of the Brookings Institution. His Latin America advisor is Paul Angelo at the Council on Foreign Relations, who has been critical of Trump on Cuba, of corruption in Honduras and Trump’s support for Juan Orlando Hernández.

Elizabeth Warren’s senior foreign policy advisor is Sasha Baker, who had been deputy chief of staff to Obama’s Defense Secretary Ash Carter. She also has an academic team headed by Ganesh Sitaraman, a law professor at Vanderbilt who was her policy director in her 2012 Senate campaign and has written books defending civil liberties in wartime and the importance of international law and diplomacy.

Bernie Sanders’s senior foreign policy advisor is Matt Duss, a Middle East specialist who worked at the liberal think tank Center for American Progress. Duss helped write Sanders’s successful Senate resolution calling for an end to US support for the Saudi war in Yemen.

Biden has promised to hold a global “Summit for Democracy” in his first year. The issue of democracy promotion has been so fraught in the past two decades that this is sure to be controversial. First of all, would the summit feature only democratically elected leaders, and if so, would that include, for example, Jair Bolsonaro and Daniel Ortega? Democratically-elected leaders who thwart democratic practices are having a golden age right now, from Russia and Hungary
to India to the Philippines and Turkey and further afield. And would a summit for democracy be a return to the kind of democracy promotion initiatives and rhetoric that provoked a backlash in Latin America by those who see it as interference with their sovereignty, just as many Americans would probably resent, say, an EU program to promote democracy in the United States by backing certain parties or civil society groups, or lecturing us or withholding aid for an array of anti-democratic traditions from gerrymandering to voter suppression. Here’s what Biden said in a foreign policy address last July. "Leaders who attend must come prepared to cooperate and make concrete commitments to take on corruption and advance human rights in their own nations.” In a contrast to democracy promotion, Sanders wants to “Convene a hemispheric summit with the leaders of Latin American countries who are experiencing migration crises and develop actionable steps to stabilize the region.”

We’ll hear more about some of the differences among the candidates, for example on the USMCA or Son of Nafta, in a moment. I’ll just conclude with this thought.

It seems that there is a lot of unrealized potential in the Democratic Party on Latin America. For example, one could imagine a progressive Democrat not only trying to ignore the Cuba issue in the hope of not getting hurt in Florida, but to contest the Trump narrative with a counternarrative. Refusing to end the Cold War with Cuba was central to the decline of US-Latin American relations in the 21st century, as many governments demanded that the US normalize its approach to Cuba and permit Cuba to be integrated into the international system in the Americas. When Obama did that, it paid dividends all over the region. But there could be more to a Democratic counternarrative. For example, on all the major “intermestic” issues, that is, like migration, drugs, and terrorism, Cuba has been one of the most effective partners the United States has, producing 800 miles of Southern border with no
threat, no instability, no drug flights, no human trafficking, and an orderly migration agreement that is currently being violated by the United States rather than the Cubans. It’s these intermestic issues that US voters care about, and potentially the Democrats could make a case for why a more cooperative approach to Cuba could benefit a whole array of US security interests and economic interests for Carnival Cruise Lines, Delta, Airbnb, and farmers up and down the Mississippi Valley, while reducing the harm to ordinary Cubans. It might even bring a positive change for the disastrous situation in Venezuela. If Cuba and the US resume cooperation on mutual interests, they could work together to nudge their respective Venezuelan partners toward dialogue and a peaceful resolution to this conflict – just as they did in Angola, Central America, and Colombia in recent decades. Cuban-Americans who are not ideologues can recognize that a Democratic policy resuming and extending the Obama approach would make it easier to support and visit their relatives. The sanctions are hurting the nascent private sector, which is the most likely driver of reform in Cuba. So while Trump claims his Cuba policy is to hurt the state and help the people, in fact he is hurting the people and hardening the state, a textbook case of stupid power in action. Whether any Democrat will have the courage to make that point in Florida, where it counts, seems unlikely.

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