

This is the Americas.

The region spans four geographical areas—North America, South America, Central America, and the Caribbean.

Together, this region makes up almost all of the earth's Western Hemisphere reaching from the Arctic tundra all the way down to the Antarctic Peninsula.

To the north is Canada and the United States of America.

In many ways, these two countries are outliers in the region due to their economic, political and military strength. The United States accounts for nearly a third of the region's billion-plus population and three quarters of its economic output.

Canada, like the US, has an advanced service-based economy, which ranks as the third largest in the region.

So significant are these two economies that when the US and Canada entered The North American Free Trade Agreement—NAFTA for short—along with Mexico in 1994, they created one of the largest trade blocs in the world.

Many benefited from NAFTA, but perhaps none more so than Mexico. Today, the country is an emerging leader in advanced manufacturing and increasingly becoming an international trade hub.

But before these changes, Mexico's economy was greatly reliant on commodities, much like its southern neighbors. This area south of Canada and the United States is often referred to as Latin America. Here, Spanish is the predominant language, with English spoken in some Caribbean nations, and Portuguese and French spoken in other countries.

Within this expanse lies large oil reserves, massive copper and gold mines, and abundant crops, especially corn and soybeans. Peru is one of the world's largest producers of gold, copper, tin, zinc and silver. Brazil, one of the world's biggest economies, produces and sells more sugar than anyone in the world by far, and commodities here make up more than 50 percent of the country's total exports.

However, these products are sold largely to buyers outside of Latin America,

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like China, and trade between neighbors here is small by any measure.

This long-standing dependence on raw materials has historically made many Latin American economies unstable, as any global price fluctuation in say, copper, can either save or sink a country's economy.

And in many parts of Latin America, this lack of economic stability is accompanied by political instability.

Though most countries in the Americas are democracies, many have succumbed at times to democratic backsliding -- the erosion or total elimination of the political institutions, like legislatures, independent courts and media, or elected leadership -- that are meant to guarantee democratic principles and freedoms.

And while the United States and Canada were founded hundreds of years ago as liberal democracies, the shift toward democracy in Latin America began just 40 years ago, with the exception of Cuba, which has been a one-party state since 1959.

Ever since, democracy in Latin America has been shaky. Countries including Guatemala, Haiti, and Bolivia have all had periods of both authoritarianism and democracy in recent decades. Democracy in these places remains fragile, and rising populism is a concern across the region.

In recent years, a severe humanitarian crisis has rocked Venezuela. The country's economy collapsed due both to an overreliance on oil and general government mismanagement and corruption. And while Venezuela's leftist government receives support from foreign powers such as China, Cuba, and Russia...the US, Canada and countries in Europe have implemented sanctions as the government cracks down harder than ever on civil liberties.

Issues with corruption and weak government institutions in the region has fed widespread mistrust of the authorities, including police forces and the courts.

In Latin America, there are no ongoing wars between countries, no major terrorist threats, and no nuclear weapons. And yet, violence is a major problem. The region is responsible for a staggering 33 percent of the world's murders, even though it represents just eight percent of its population. Of the 20 countries in the world with the highest murder rates, 17 are Latin American.

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In Mexico, where crime and gang violence is rampant, 90 percent of victims do not file a report with the police when a crime has been committed. And a recent poll found that most Mexicans believe the police are controlled by organized crime. This lack of public trust and confidence has been compounded by actual cases of police collusion with local gangs.

Violence is particularly acute in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador--three Central American countries that make up what is known as the Northern Triangle. Here, corruption, drug trafficking, and gang violence gravely threaten regional security. Millions of people from this region have fled bloodshed, forced gang recruitment, and extortion, as well as poverty, lack of opportunity, and dangers stemming from climate change, like drought. Migrants most often head to the United States, where many have family members.

Strong familial ties between the US and Latin America date back generations. This is largely because migration within the region is an enduring trend that fluctuates with changing economic and political conditions.

For example...Millions of Mexicans were incentivized to come work in the United States in the 1940s under a diplomatic agreement that came to be known as the "Bracero Program." And in the 1980s, in the midst of Cold War proxy fighting, violence in Central America drove thousands of asylum seekers to the US.

This pattern continues. Latin American migrants seeking economic opportunities and refuge from violence have overwhelmed the US immigration system.

But until internal security and political issues like crime, violence, and corruption are addressed, this latest wave of migration is unlikely to slow.

Many countries are taking critical steps to overcome these challenges.

While Mexico is still rife with violence and corruption, its democracy has strengthened from a one-party rule to one with regular, competitive elections and checks on presidential power.

In Colombia, a 2016 peace deal sought to end a civil conflict with FARC rebels that's lasted half a century. Guerilla fighters were required to disarm,

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and in turn were given representation in the country's Congress.

And Chile, a country that experienced brutal political upheavals in the 1970s and 80s, is now one of the strongest democracies in the region. Its economy is robust, life expectancy is up and poverty has been halved since 1990.

Overall, though, democracy in the region is precarious. There are few stable democracies here that have been able to stand the test of time. And despite cultural, historical, linguistic and economic differences across the Americas, failures within weak countries can threaten the strength of all in the region.