

A Key Partner for Latin America

An Interview with Jason Marczak, Director, Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center, Atlantic Council

EDITORS' NOTE Jason Marczak joined the Council in October 2013 to launch the Center and set the strategic direction for its Latin America work. He is a bilingual, results-driven entrepreneur and senior executive, political leader, academic and media commentator with more than 20 years of leadership experience in public policy, communications and business operations management. Since 2016, Marczak has been an adjunct professor at



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The George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs, where he teaches on Central America and U.S. immigration policies. He was previously Director of Policy at Americas Society/Council of the Americas in New York City and co-founder of Americas Quarterly magazine. In 2003, he joined Partners of the Americas to help lead its work on Latin America-wide civil society engagement. He has also held positions at the National Endowment for Democracy and with then-Representative Sam Farr (CA) with a portfolio including trade and foreign affairs. Since its founding, he has served on the communications committee of *Qualitas of Life Foundation*, which provides financial education to Latinos in the New York City area. Marczak earned a BA in international relations from Tufts University and an MA in international affairs and international economics from the John Hopkins University – Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies.

INSTITUTION BRIEF The Atlantic Council (atlanticcouncil.org) promotes constructive leadership and engagement in international affairs based on the Atlantic Community's central role in meeting global challenges. The Council provides an essential forum for navigating the dramatic economic and political changes defining the 21st century by informing and galvanizing its uniquely influential network of global leaders. The Atlantic Council – through the papers it publishes, the ideas it generates, the future leaders it develops, and the communities it builds, shapes policy choices and strategies to create a more free, secure, and prosperous world.

What excited you about the opportunity to lead the Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center (AALAC) and what made you feel it was the right fit?

The vision of Adrienne Arsht in founding the Center along with the prestige and global reach of the Atlantic Council drew me to the Center. I have long shared the same perspective as Adrienne with regard to the region: overlooking Latin America and the Caribbean is a missed opportunity. The region's prosperity is fundamental to U.S.

strategic interests, but that is often not recognized outside the small circles of Latin Americanists. Untapped opportunities exist for even deeper partnerships, especially when you consider the over 60 million Latinos in the United States. With new global challenges, strong U.S. ties with the region will be even more important in the years ahead.

So, for me, the opportunity to lead Latin America and Caribbean work at a center where the founder cares so deeply about the region and at an organization where Fred Kempe, the President and CEO, recognizes the region's importance for our global work, made this position the right fit. I knew that I could get things done for the region with this support and with the opportunity to tap into the expertise of the Atlantic Council's thirteen other global and regional programs and centers.

Will you provide an overview of the mission and key areas of focus for the Center?

The Center broadens understanding of regional transformations and delivers results-oriented solutions to inform how the public and private sectors can advance hemispheric prosperity. We focus on Latin America's strategic role in a global context and place priority on pressing political and economic issues that will define the future trajectory of the region.

To advance issues, we identify where we can address policy gaps and then, often in private settings, we convene stakeholders at the highest levels to reach consensus. Our findings and reports are then delivered to key public and private sector stakeholders and disseminated during engaging, unique public events and through all forms of media.

Our work is regional in scope, but to be effective, we stay focused on moving policy change forward by finding common ground among policymakers, business leaders and civil society in key countries and sub-regions including Mexico, Central America, Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil and the Caribbean. Given China's focus on accelerating loans and ramping up investment in the region, we also prioritize first-in-class work to provide nuanced understanding of China's trajectory and influence in the region.

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What are the key issues that the AALAC is currently addressing throughout the region?

Across our priority areas, we work closely with in-country partners to improve inclusive economic opportunities, to advance democracy and the rule of law, and to strengthen ties with the United States and the broader global community. Importantly, our work is long term and strategic, but we are also quick and nimble in order to rise to the moment. Over one year ago, we jumped into full gear to provide new ideas on how to help the region in its battle against COVID-19, and today, as we continue to look around the corner, it's critical to use the tragedy of the pandemic as a catalyst for confronting long-standing development challenges.

In Venezuela, we are leading an international campaign focused on a restoration of democratic institutions and an easing of the humanitarian emergency. In Central America, a priority for the Biden-Harris Administration, we see the president's focus on the region as a rare and unique opportunity to galvanize local buy-in for change and to hopefully advance sustainable, long-term and bipartisan support for Central America in Washington. Given the close linkage of the U.S. with our southern neighbor, a strong U.S.-Mexico partnership is essential in confronting future challenges and seizing opportunities. In addition, I'm thrilled that in 2021 we are beginning our new Caribbean work.

How has the AALAC adapted the way it works to address the challenges caused by the global pandemic?

My motto for our work during the pandemic has been “let's turn adversity into opportunity.” At a time of upheaval, it is critical to be nimble and creative and to find new ways to inspire others and to engage our stakeholders. We quickly adapted to the virtual world, hosting online public events and private meetings as soon as public gatherings were not safe. These first events led to a programmatic shift in mindset. I worked with the fantastic team of the Center to take our work to our stakeholders and to our speakers, rather than wait for people to come to us.

Being virtual, the Center has additional flexibility to host ministers and Heads of State as their participation is no longer constrained by travel schedules. Likewise, in a virtual world, we can convene a strategy session with participants from multiple countries and with varying perspectives without the time or cost of travel. So, our work and the perspectives that add to it, have been enriched by the forced online presence of the pandemic.

What are the keys to economic recovery for Latin America as the region has been deeply impacted by the pandemic?

Latin America and the Caribbean have been hit harder by the COVID-19 pandemic than any other region in the world, accounting for over one-quarter of all 2.5 million global deaths attributed to the disease as of early March. The world's most unequal region has seen inequality on the rise. Corruption, a long-standing impediment to greater development, has been further unleashed as governments expedite public procurement of medicines and medical supplies.

Economic recovery will require a new focus on rooting out corruption, accelerating massive investments in technology and education, advancing clear rules of the game, and fostering public-private partnerships. For economies to recover to pre-pandemic levels, democratic stability and security must take hold. The end goal is to use the pandemic to address long-standing development challenges so that Latin America and the Caribbean are better positioned to compete and prosper in the decades ahead.

We are also commercially bound to the region. Over half of the United States' 20 free trade partners are Latin American countries. At the same time, Latin American countries account for 11 of the United States' top-45 export partners. A quick economic recovery is in our joint, mutual interests.

How valuable has it been to have assembled such an engaged and committed advisory council at the AALAC?

We formed an Advisory Council a couple years ago with the recognition that we had advanced from a start-up Center focused on the region to one that had quickly become known for its timeliness in addressing major issues and for our ability to create impact. The Advisory Council is composed of top policymakers, business leaders and, importantly, musicians from countries throughout the Americas. Members are deeply committed to the work of the Center and to helping to advance prosperity across the region. We are also lucky to have the participation of Atlantic Council Board members in the work of the Center.

Will you discuss the talent and expertise of the AALAC team?

The AALAC team, including full-time staff, fellows, consultants, and interns, is the most dynamic and committed group of professionals with whom I have worked. Team members

each bring unique expertise on a country, set of countries, or on cross-cutting thematic issues, but it's not just expertise that they bring to the table. Each share a passion for getting things done and for recognizing the importance of innovation in our approach. In particular, since the founding of the Center, I have had the great pleasure to work with our Ambassador-in-Residence, Capricia Marshall, the former Chief of Protocol of the United States and White House Social Secretary.

How critical are metrics to track the impact of the AALAC's work?

Metrics are fundamental. Quantitative results are the most efficient way to indicate impact; for example, the number of views of a report or the audience size of an event or impressions of a tweet. We also track press coverage as well. But the biggest impact, especially in our field, is seen through our qualitative results. For example, when the President of Colombia said that our U.S.-Colombia Task Force report should be the basis of the relationship moving forward or when, last year, our Brazil trade and investment roundtables and report provided key insight and momentum for a “mini” U.S.-Brazil trade deal, or when we helped to give the Venezuelan opposition a spotlight during the UN General Assembly. The list goes on.

What are your key priorities for the AALAC as you look to the future?

I want the AALAC to be a key partner for the region in building back stronger from the socioeconomic challenges magnified by the pandemic. As well, it's absolutely fundamental that a broader set of stakeholders recognizes the many opportunities in the region and that we accelerate stronger and deeper partnerships for the region with the rest of the world, of course with the U.S. at the top of the list.

I also worry about the increasingly ideological divides in the region. Our work must help to bridge those divides and always ensure a neutral, non-partisan space for finding common ground on policy differences. In the United States, with President Biden, who knows the region so well and cares so deeply about it, we must seize on this administration's desire to be a better, more committed regional partner. That means providing ideas and insight alongside local stakeholders as well as working to create bipartisan momentum on Capitol Hill for key issues in our relationship with the region. ●