

The riots, street fighting, and widespread looting and destruction that broke out in Santiago, Chile, in early October and quickly spread to other major cities in the aftermath of a price hike in transportation fees caught many by surprise. The decision by the government of President Sebastian Pinera to suspend the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum and the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP-25) underscored just how seriously the government viewed this security crisis.

Chile, long seen as a model of political comity and economic good sense, had become a flashpoint in several months of political turmoil that roiled Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia. These countries, while all sitting along the Andes and sharing much history, had fundamentally different triggers for their political upheavals. However, the sudden and unexpected nature of their turmoil raised anew questions about the strength of democratic institutions and practices, the role of the security services in maintaining public order, and the long-term attractiveness of the economies for investors.

It would be a mistake to underestimate the impact of these events on the political trajectory of the Pacific coast of South America. However, it would equally be mistaken to understand these events as a harbinger of chaos and decline.

Polling done by Latinobarometer has depicted over several years the growing frustration of many citizens in these countries with the functioning of their democracies and governments. Increasingly, political legitimacy in South America has been linked not only to the democratic and constitutional processes that govern the peaceful transfer of power, but also to the ability of governments to get things done, or "to deliver the goods." The ideological and rhetorical politics of the past have given way to the politics of accomplishment.

This is the result of the remarkable economic and social change that South America has experienced over the last two decades. The countries of the region have significantly reduced poverty and increased the size of their middle classes. Democracy, initially seen as a response to military and authoritarian governments intended to protect the rights and well-being of individuals and return decision making to elected leaders, is now seen as capable of fashioning broad social transformation within a peaceful and constitutional context.

The countries of South America have entered a new and challenging phase of their democratization: the use of democratic governance to create democratic societies. To address the historic inequality and social exclusion that have characterized these countries, citizenship can no longer be defined only in terms of the political rights that allow individuals to participate in determining national destinies. Today, citizenship is also defined by the right of individuals to determine their own destinies. This has created an obligation for governments to provide the security, education, health care, and opportunities necessary for citizens to succeed.

As economic growth has slowed throughout the region, it has become increasingly difficult for governments to meet the economic and social aspirations of their populations. This has generated a sense of vulnerability that has vibrated through the politics of the region. In South America, political and institutional change always lags behind economic and social change. Political parties have adapted slowly and haphazardly to these changes, creating a crisis of representation. This has pushed politics out into the streets, and has led to the marches, demonstrations, and street conflict that has surged through parts of South America.

# Dragoman

Chile's response to this turmoil has been emblematic, and heartening. While President Pinera initially understood the street violence as a security problem, declaring martial law and requiring the Chilean military to join with police to impose order, he quickly realized his actions only inflamed the situation. He rescinded his orders, stepped away from sustained conflict with demonstrators, brought in the United Nations and the Organization of American States to investigate charges of human rights violations, undertook Cabinet changes, promised increased social spending to address the stated concerns of many demonstrators, and laid the groundwork for a Constituent Assembly that will re-write Chile's constitution. Throughout this process, the Chilean military made clear that it understood the turmoil as political, avoided confrontation with demonstrators, and urged President Pinera to end martial law.

This response highlights how South America has changed over the last several decades, especially the rootedness of its commitment to democracy, civilian government, and respect for human rights. While encouraging, Chile and its Andean neighbors still face significant political challenges, especially in regard to refashioning its political parties and representative institutions to reflect the social changes that have re-defined these countries.

We can expect a period of political effervescence in South America, and we cannot be complacent about the outcome. Successfully navigating this period will require good political leadership. It will also require meaningful participation, and not only from citizens and voters, but also from all who have a stake in the success of the region. This includes foreign investors, especially those with long term investments that have committed themselves to the success of these countries. Highlighting the positive nature of these investments, and the manner in which they link to the goals and purposes of emerging social and political forces, will be an important part of any engagement in the region.



## **Ambassador Thomas A. Shannon**

Ambassador Thomas A. Shannon served as Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, the third-highest ranking position at the US State Department. During his tenure as Under Secretary, Ambassador Shannon was in charge of bilateral and multilateral foreign policy making and implementation and oversaw diplomatic activity globally and in our missions to international organisations. He managed the State Department during the 2017 presidential transition, led bilateral and strategic stability talks with the Russian Federation, worked with our allies overseeing Iranian compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and expanded US engagement in Central Asia, among other things.