



United States Policy and Security Interests in Latin America

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Executive Summary

- This policy paper describes the security interests of the United States in Latin America and explores the range of possible responses to these U.S. interests by the nations of Latin America.
- The desire of the Obama administration to move away from the unilateralism of the Bush administration and to adopt a more collegial approach to the hemisphere presents an opportunity for the nations in the region to take a more protagonistic approach to hemispheric affairs.
- This is an opportunity for the nations of Latin America to achieve a greater degree of autonomy in their international affairs than at any time in the past.
- However, this also presents a challenge to the nations in the region because they are unaccustomed to operating in an autonomous fashion in the international community.
- A series of proposals as to how the nations in the region might act either individually or as a group to maximize their new autonomy concludes the policy paper.

I. The general context

It must be extremely difficult to evaluate the new administration in Washington from afar. The expectations were so high, unrealistically high, that if you read the European or Latin American press in the months following Obama's election, it must have appeared as if the world's problems were about to be solved. It reminds me a little of how I felt when John F. Kennedy was elected in 1960 – he was so charming, so well spoken, his wife and children were delightful, and he had beaten a man who was as Antipático as it was possible for a politician to be. Obama was the same. He said all the right things and seemed so in tune with the interests of democratic countries in every region of the world.

In the case of Obama, part of the euphoria felt around the world had to do with the deep resentment toward the previous administration, especially its bellicose rhetoric and its unilateralism. To this must be added the bemused wonderment at the opposition ticket, especially the candidate for vice-president, who struck outside observers as something very strange indeed. Instead of the Ugly American, Obama seemed like the Good-looking American.

But, in foreign policy, things began badly for the new administration. The economic crisis that had exploded in the last year of the Bush administration was only getting worse as Obama took office, and it was spreading around the world. As if this were not distraction enough, it was

made clear almost immediately, that the local partners in both theaters of war, Iraq and Afghanistan, were not going to behave the way Candidate Obama had hoped they would, and President Obama, because of his campaign platform, was locked into a long, conflicted debate among his advisers as to how to conduct what soon would be called “his war” in Afghanistan. In other crisis spots to which the candidate had offered a new approach, much the same thing happened. The Iranians were not interested in dialogue; the Israelis dug in their heels in opposition to a two state settlement, and the Russians were not ready to settle all of the differences between them and the U.S. In the case of the Russians, Obama was able to secure a significant, if modest, reduction in nuclear arms in the early months of 2010.

With regard to Latin America, there was not much material to go on during the campaign. There were hints about a change in policy toward Cuba, hints about immigration reform, and a bold statement about a new approach to the problem of drugs in the United States and drug trafficking. Beyond that, all analysts had to go on was a stated preference for multilateralism and working closely with other nations in the solution of common problems, which struck most observers in Latin America as a very promising start.

Before any serious policy planning could occur, there was intense preparation for the Summit of the Americas, which became a glorious photo-op for everyone. Nothing of substance was accomplished. Meanwhile, the administration's choice for Assistant Secretary of State, Arturo

Valenzuela, was held up in the confirmation process and was rendered virtually useless for nearly a year. The president and his new secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, had to rely on career officers and on political appointments from the previous administration to carry out the nation's policy in the region.

Then, came Honduras in the middle of 2009. Here, Obama tried to introduce his new collegial and multilateral approach. He left leadership in the hemisphere's response to the crisis to the OAS and its secretary general, José Miguel Insulza. To the dismay of the Department of State and the White House, Insulza was undercut by a double attack from several of the leaders of the ALBA countries and by a very public campaign by a small cohort of conservative Republicans in the Congress who refused to support the administration and the OAS in their effort to turn back the golpe against the government of Zelaya. The U.S. supported efforts by Oscar Arias to negotiate a settlement; but that failed. Finally, the U.S. was forced to reverse field and inject itself in a very active way in the negotiations for a solution. Even that proved to be messy, as the same Republicans insisted on blocking a solution that would allow the ousted president to return to office, even in a symbolic manner.

Everyone lost face in this episode: the Obama administration; the OAS, the Latin American community of nations, and, especially the Brazilians, who were pushed into the limelight by the sudden appearance in the embassy in Tegucigalpa of former president Zelaya, despite severe disagreement within the Lula government over the

correct policy to follow. If this was to be Brazilian leadership in the hemisphere, the future did not look bright. How can we understand the Latin American policy of the Obama administration? What are the principal interests and concerns of the United States, and, what should be the most constructive response by the nations of Latin America?

II. Security Concerns of the United States in Latin America

The lack of focus on Latin America in the Obama administration does not mean that there is no activity at the ministerial level with regard to the region. The Department of State, now with its Latin American team in place has been active in several countries, especially in trying to get Brazil to play a leadership role in the region that will support U.S. objectives, and in dealing with the growing violence at the border with Mexico. In addition, the Department of Homeland Security and the Pentagon have been very active and it is useful to see how their activities may represent U.S. interests and to inquire how these activities may constitute a security policy, a policy to which Latin American nations might respond.

To begin, there is the military - Southern Command and the Fourth Fleet. The efforts by the U.S. to increase cooperation in the region never cease. There is constant negotiation between armed forces to increase inter-service cooperation, even with countries such as Nicaragua which employ harsh anti-US rhetoric.

Central America has been the principal focus of U.S. military cooperation efforts, with considerable success at the bilateral level, including Nicaragua, and frustrating failure at the sub-regional level. Multilateral Central America security agreements remain essentially paper declarations, with little real cooperation to show for the Pentagon's efforts.

The major difficulty confronting the Pentagon as the advance arm of U.S. policy in Central America is the structural asymmetry between U.S. armed forces and the civilian governments, with their civilian institutions of police and judiciary. The security issues confronting the sub-region are mainly crime and violence, often but not always associated with international drug trafficking, and the need to organize effective preparations for the certain but unpredictable natural disasters that recur so frequently. Here, the resources belong to the Pentagon and they are trained to share those resources with their counterpart armed forces. However, the problems are social and civil and require building effective state responses by countries whose civilian institutions are still relatively weak and unprofessional. The U.S. government is sensitive to this asymmetry; but in the absence of multilateral cooperation in dealing with gangs, drug trafficking and natural disasters, the default option leaves the initiative in the hands of the Pentagon. When the leadership of Southern Command is confronted with this dilemma, its response tends to be that they have no other effective interlocutors. Until or unless the Obama administration is able to muster sufficient resources and political will to deal effectively with the problems

confronting Central America, efforts by the Pentagon will continue to have the unwanted consequence of stunting the development of civilian, democratic institutional responses to crime and violence. For their part, none of the governments in Central America has come up with a coherent or effective policy to deal with the asymmetry between military action and civic capacity. For example, after hurricane Mitch, the United States attempted to have the nations of Central America create a regional version of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), a civilian agency that responds to natural disasters in the U.S. Several of the countries (Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Honduras) created national agencies with similar characteristics; but there is no regional civilian unit. Therefore, SouthCom, which has the resources available for such tasks, works with its military counterparts in the absence of civilian interlocutors. By the same token, the security arm of the Central American Integration System, CFAC, is inert. The Pentagon cannot understand why the nations of the subregion cannot work together, with SouthCom, on matters of mutual interest. By default, SouthCom continues to collaborate as best it can with each nation on a bilateral basis.

Dealing with Latin America in strategic terms, the Pentagon is faced with a region at peace and with no clearly articulated collective regional posture on international security issues. Collective policy would strengthen the hand of civilian governments and make it easier for the U.S. to formulate policies that strengthened civilian institutions in the battle against organized crime and illegal traffic in drugs.

As a consequence, most of the analytical effort in Washington has been devoted to thinking about potential threats or challenges. The first of these was the Chavez regime in Venezuela. The review of how to deal with Venezuela began in the Bush administration, which had a powerful prejudice against Chavez. It took three years of internal debate, continuing into the first year of the Obama administration to recognize that Chavez was not a threat; at worst his government represented a challenge which required a diplomatic response. Such a response was not the job of the Pentagon. We are still waiting for a clear statement from the Department of State. Meanwhile, it is clear that Chavez has no intention of using the sale of petroleum to the U.S. as a political weapon. He has used trade as a weapon against Colombia, not the U.S.

Aside from Chavez, now downgraded from a threat to a challenge, the U.S. does not recognize any threat from within the region. The threat of drug trafficking and organized crime, intermestic issues that are not considered traditional security threats, is considered the most significant by the State Department. Therefore, the focus of the State Department's attention has been on the relationship with Mexico and how to secure the border between the two countries, and the new version of Plan Colombia, through which the U.S. helps the government of Colombia regain control over its national territory. Trade, once considered a vital strategic concern, has been pushed to the back burner by the recession to such a degree that the U.S. has broken its agreement with Mexico on easier the barriers to Mexican truckers in the U.S.,

and failed to exert any pressure on the congress to reduce the tariff on Brazilian ethanol, despite the growing concern for alternate forms of energy.

Other strategic studies have focused on the potential threat represented by China, Russia, and Iran. Again, after nearly two years of discussion, the conclusion for the moment is that none of these nations represent a threat to the security of the United States nor to the security of the region. The only long-term challenge is the possible influence of China through its rapidly expanding investments in raw materials and burgeoning trade. The irony here is that the Latin American nations themselves do not seem to feel that Chinese investments, even enclave investments with imported Chinese labor and Chinese security forces, represent a threat to their sovereignty or to their security. The question that must be posed for the Latin American nations is why Chinese behavior so similar to British and U.S. investors in the 20th century should be considered without blame whereas the historic pattern of foreign investment by Britain and the U.S. is still considered imperialistic and a denigration of national sovereignty.

At the same time, various departments of the U. S. government have achieved remarkable progress in sharing intelligence with governments of Latin America. Mutual confidence in dealing with drug trafficking, terrorism, and international crime has reached historic levels. The success is most notable in the cases of Mexico and Brazil. In the former, the boundary between the two countries is treated with greater bilateral cooperation

than at any time in the past. In the case of Brazil, there is greater give and take between the militaries of the two countries and between the drug enforcement agencies of the two countries than at any time in the past. Even the Brazilian navy has signed an agreement with the U.S. for cooperation. In this last case, the consequences of cooperation have regional and global consequences.

Because of the recession and the role that organized labor plays in Obama's administration, the trade agenda has lost the salience it had during the Bush administration. Obama, himself, appears to be sympathetic to the free trade treaties under discussion and his principal economic advisers certainly favor trade opening; but the administration is unwilling to take on this challenge at a time when it is overwhelmed by international affairs and internal crises, such as the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, that occupies so much of the president's time and energy.

More generally, the Department of Homeland Security has succeeded in winning the collaboration of many countries on such programs as the Smart Ports, review of passenger lists on incoming flights, and allowing what amounts to ship-rider agreements that allow U.S. personnel to conduct search and seizure operations in foreign lands. To take the most notable example, again a policy begun during the Bush administration, the port of Buenos Aires, once the "dirtiest" in the Americas, is now fully secured by a bilateral force under the direction of U.S. personnel. And, this in a country whose leaders enjoy denouncing the U.S.

And, there is ongoing cooperation on counter-terrorism even though the U.S. has not been able to convince any country that terrorism is a problem for them. This suggests that the U.S. enjoys a reserve of good will in the region that might be turned to more effect if the Obama administration can come up with a policy that addresses the interests and the needs of the Latin American nations. It is crucial in the months and years ahead that the unilateralism of the Bush administration that so alienated nations throughout the world be converted into a multilateral, collegial approach to dealing with common problems. To succeed, however, such a transition requires a clear, constructive response from the nations of Latin America, as I shall explain in the following section of this paper.

Finally, the Department of State and the Pentagon agree that Brazil is the only strategic option for the U.S. in the region and that it is in the interests of the U.S. to have such an ally. At this writing, government officials in Washington are still trying to figure out what this means. Even the recent Brazilian gambit in Iran has not deterred the Obama administration. In part, this is due to the fact that the officials see no other option. And, they are convinced that the basic strategic needs of the administration are better served by multilateralism than by unilateralism. We may expect that the ramifications of this decision will be worked out in greater detail over the coming year. What makes this process interesting to analysts of international affairs and puzzling to U.S. government officials is precisely the fact that it

does not depend on unilateral decisions in Washington. It depends on some form of dialogue with an informal partner, Brazil, at a time when that partner is not certain exactly what its own international role is supposed to be and how it is to deal with the United States. As the Chinese might say, these are interesting times.

III. The Latin American response

The shift by the Obama administration from a unilateral to a multilateral approach to dealing with international issues or problems represents a major opportunity for the nations of Latin America. The willingness on the part of the U.S. government to dialogue with colleagues in the hemisphere and not merely impose its will on weaker states offers to Latin America the possibilities of autonomous action in many areas of global interaction; of participation in setting policies for dealing with hemispheric issues (rule making); and, of making sure that their own concerns form part of the hemispheric agenda. There has not been such an opportunity for collective action since the euphoric days in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, when many believed that international organizations, especially the United Nations, would become the stage for peaceful settlement of international disputes. That moment passed quickly and twenty years later we are witness to another moment for Latin American protagonism.

It was not surprising that, after nearly two centuries of subordination to

outside powers, the nations of Latin America – with some important exceptions – were unprepared to assume the burdens of autonomous action in the international community when the Cold War ended. Twenty years later, the expectations are much higher; but, there does not appear to be a “Latin American” response or a “Latin American” position on the major issues of the day. In fact, there are as many serious disagreements among the nations of the region as at any time since the beginning of the Cold War, more than half a century ago. We appear to be as far away from hemispheric consensus on major issues as ever, despite the fact that the architecture of hemispheric cooperation is much more fully articulated than at any time in the past and despite the fact that the level of mutual confidence among nations in several sub-regions (Central America, the Anglophone Caribbean, Mercosur) has never been higher. And, as I have said earlier in this paper, this higher level of mutual confidence has not been sufficient to get the nations of Central America to agree on how to deal with the institutional crisis in Honduras in 2009, nor to cooperate collectively with SouthCom within CFAC.

The fact of the matter is that the community of nations in the hemisphere is sharply divided along the lines of basic ideology and commitment to democratic governance. President Hugo Chavez, of Venezuela, has declared his commitment for a Bolivarian Revolution which combines his version of socialism with an anti-imperialism that echoes sentiments of the 1960s, without the context of the Cold War. Chavez is a strong supporter of the Castro regime in Cuba and has reached out

to other nations in the region, especially Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua, to form a Bolivarian Alliance (ALBA). Chavez has attempted to bring other nations into the alliance and has attempted to create regional institutions that would explicitly exclude the U.S., but with little success. He has supported the leaders in other ALBA countries in their efforts to consolidate their control over the state and has made it clear that he has a view of democratic governance that does not coincide with the majority view in the hemisphere. Although the program of the Bolivarian revolution is far from clear, Chavez and his ALBA associates have succeeded in blocking all matters of substance in the OAS and have shifted their support to the newer, untested South American Union (UNASUR).

Chavez also represents the only exception to the progress made in mutual confidence among neighbors in smaller, sub-regional groups. His hostility to Colombia and his willingness to stir trouble with the FARC on the Colombian side of the border, stands as the only exception to an ever deeper commitment to the peaceful settlement of disputes in the region. The willingness of Peru and Chile to submit their maritime dispute to international arbitration is the most noteworthy step in this direction. Bolivia's unwillingness even to discuss its dispute with Chile remains a peaceful deadlock. Elsewhere, cooperation among neighbors with a history of conflict continues to grow and the institutional architecture of collaboration at the sub-regional level continues to develop. The inexorable logic of intermestic problems – those problems that are at once

local and international and cannot be solved by any single nation – is the driving force in building mutual confidence in dealing with common problems.

The most significant example of historical confidence building is between Mexico and the United States over how to deal with the illegal traffic in drugs. Given the violence along the border between the two nations it is difficult to say that progress is being made. Nevertheless, cooperation between the two countries never has been more effective. And, now that the Obama administration has appointed a drug czar who is committed to dealing with the demand side in the use of drugs, it is possible that in the years ahead we may see some progress in dealing with the scourge of drugs at the sub-regional and the hemispheric levels.

However, it is necessary to point out that Mexico, one of the major countries in Latin America, is so thoroughly distracted by the war on drugs that it is unlikely to play a major role in hemispheric affairs in the next year or two. The weakness of the Calderon government in the international community was manifest in its curious reluctance to play an active role in dealing with the crisis in Honduras in 2009. On the other hand, the Central American nations displayed unexpected collegiality in dealing with the Honduras crisis. Their chosen representative, Oscar Arias of Costa Rica, had a solution to the crisis negotiated which was blocked by a combination of opposition by a few conservatives in the U.S. Senate and by the Chavez government. Although they were not successful

in imposing their collective solution on the crisis, the fact that they could discuss such a crisis in their sub-region is a mark of progress.

The most significant obstacle to the formulation of a Latin American response to its collective opportunity for autonomy and rule making in the international community is Brazil's sense of uncertainty in its role in hemispheric and world affairs. A debate has been playing itself out in Brasilia for nearly a decade – ever since Fernando Henrique Cardoso declared that Brazil should have a seat on the UN Security Council – over what role Brazil should play in world affairs. To simplify, since the topic should be the subject of another paper, the debate sets traditional nationalists against modernizing globalists. The former, led by the foreign ministry, Itamaraty, and some of Lula's closest advisers, prefer to have Brazil exert its influence in South America and distance itself from the United States without inserting itself aggressively into global affairs. There is a significant element of anti-Americanism in their thinking. The latter believe that Brazil's long-awaited moment of greatness has arrived and that the nation is fully prepared to play a major role in world affairs. The nationalists see no reason to pay a price for being a rule maker; the globalists understand that rule makers are rule makers who assume responsibilities along with their privileges. Brazil has a credibility problem even in South America. Why will it become involved as a peacemaker in Honduras, but not in Venezuela and Colombia? Why did Argentina and Uruguay not turn to Brazil for help in resolving their differences?

In several of the countries of the region, most notably Argentina, foreign policy has become an instrument of domestic political contestation, so that the ability of the nation to become an effective player in international affairs is severely inhibited. In all countries, domestic politics plays a role in foreign policy. Beyond a certain limit, however, the nation loses credibility as a reliable partner and its relevance in international affairs declines. The concept of autonomous action at the international level has little appeal since it is the way in which local benefits are won that counts.

For all of these reasons, there is among the nations of Latin America a lack of an autonomous foreign policy that seeks to maximize the national interest in world affairs and that asserts a coherent vision of the nation's role in world affairs. The exception to this generalization, of course, is Chile. Brazil may be said to be an exception-in-waiting, as it certainly is headed in that direction. Mexico could become such a nation when it feels that it is freed from the suffocating danger of drug violence. Otherwise, in the near future, we must look to small groups of nations, mainly sub-regional neighbors, for collective action in the response to common problems. On occasion there will be ad hoc groupings of nations that feel they share a common sense of how to deal with common problems. Curiously, this failure is most obvious in the realm of trade and economic development, subjects on which, historically, Latin American nations have found it easy to agree. Today, there is no common trade agenda in dealing with the U.S. or with the Europe Union. However, the

biggest loss for the nations of the region will be as potential actors in world affairs. They may act individually, of course. To be more effective, they should act as a group. To act as a group, they must learn how to build consensus among themselves. At the hemispheric level, that same consensus is necessary in order to deal in a constructive manner with the U.S., now willing to deal with them as partners and colleagues and not merely as subordinates.

IV. What lies ahead: Policy Recommendations

The Obama administration, with its rejection of unilateralism and its genuine preference for collegial action in all regions of the world, represents an opportunity of historic dimensions for the nations of Latin America. It is as if they have been invited to the table to participate in the formation of a community of nations. They have been invited before – to summits, to meetings of the OAS, to ministerial meetings – but never without an agenda fixed in advance by the United States. As I have argued before, to be a rule maker, it is necessary to offer something for the common agenda other than querulous complaints about the hegemonic power¹. That was then; this is now. And, as has been suggested elsewhere, making agendas can be done with reference to different forums or on different levels – sub-regional, regional, hemispheric or global². Policy recommendations, therefore, can be aimed at maximizing autonomy in different forums and propose action in different contexts.

Given that the U.S. believes it will maximize its own interests in the hemisphere through the good offices of a strategic partner and that Brazil is the best option available, it would be useful for all of the nations in the region to consider how such a strategic partnership affects their interests and whether they are prepared to operate through Brazilian leadership or if they prefer to act on their own. In my opinion, Brazil would maximize the leverage of its leadership at the hemispheric and regional levels if it were to avoid anachronistic anti-American gestures. We may anticipate that the new government that will replace the Lula administration will not be bound by some of the old fashioned ideas that have driven the Brazilian debate. However, the new government must rely to some degree on Itamaraty for advice, so we can expect efforts by Brazil to exert leadership on the agenda outside of South America to create difficulties for many members of the hemispheric community, including the U.S. Let us not forget that the U.S. never has relied on a strategic partner. It is by no means guaranteed that the relationship will be a congenial one for the U.S.

Given the fact that the U.S. is focused on its domestic agenda as well as the two wars in which it is involved, proposals for collective action will be more likely to win U.S. support if they are consistent with that domestic agenda. For example, can Mexico and the nations of Central America put together a plan for collective action against organized crime that does not rely on excessive use of the military? Can a regional approach to counter-narcotics work without the presence of U.S.

personnel? Is it possible for some ad hoc group of nations, including Brazil, to serve as a fact finding instrument in the dispute between Colombia and Venezuela? This would be a prelude to an effort to mediate the conflict and take as its model the ad hoc group that stopped the fighting between Peru and Ecuador in the 1990s.

Is there a Latin American trade agenda? Research on how this works at the sub-regional level, in Mercosur, suggests that agreement is more likely if the focus is kept small. For example, agreements confined to one industry are more likely to win approval than broader efforts to open (or close) markets. It is easier to reach agreement on procedures than on tariffs. One obvious initiative that would win U.S. support would be to make public sector contracting transparent.

Policies to reduce the traffic in small arms are an excellent example of how nations in Latin America can seize leadership in a manner that maximizes their interests while not threatening the interests of the U.S. It is notorious and lamentable that the gun lobby in the U.S. has blocked all efforts to control the export of small arms from the U.S. As a consequence, the U.S. cannot participate in hemispheric efforts to bring the flow of weapons under control. But, why can't the nations of Latin America create a common policy to restrict the importation of such weapons? There is evidence that the U.S. would be more than willing to abide by the laws of friendly nations in an effort to bring the illegal traffic under control.

Ultimately, the best policies to maximize the autonomy of the nations in Latin America must rely on their capacity to influence others. Except for Brazil and except for the narrow, market influence provided by the production and export of specific commodities, all of the countries in the region influence other nations through their Soft Power. The more consistent, the more predictable a nation, the more relevant its opinion becomes and the greater its potential influence on policy debates at the regional and global levels. Consistency and fixed purpose have given Chile more than its share of influence. On the other hand, Brazil's effort to intervene in the Iranian nuclear dispute suffered more from Lula's response to the brutal suppression of the protests by the Iranian government, than it did from its unfortunate timing. Power, in the old fashioned sense, is still important; but it only goes so far. No single country has the power to bend others to its will whenever it chooses. Agreements are necessary; persuasion is necessary. In such a world, the nations of Latin America have an opportunity. They must learn how to use their influence.

¹"América Latina en el Nuevo sistema internacional: la necesidad del pensamiento estratégico," in Tulchin and Espach, *América Latina en el Nuevo sistema internacional*, Ediciones Bellaterra (2004).

²Tulchin, Benitez and Diamint. (eds.) *El Rompecabezas. Conformando la seguridad hemisférica en el siglo XXI*. Prometeo (2006).

Publicaciones



Briefing 2

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Bogotá, Julio 2010



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