

U.S.-Latin American Relations An Alternative Geopolitical Approach?

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Enrique Marcarian/Reuters

Latin American presidents and foreign ministers at the May 2010 Union of South American Nations summit in Campana, Argentina.

A multiplicity of elements help in analyzing how Latin America fits in with U.S. security strategy: the various analytical focuses about U.S.-Latin American relations; the opposition of security paradigms (national vs. hemispheric); the priority issues on the national security agenda; and the historic situations that have presented themselves in recent decades.

September 11 sparked a rigorous review of U.S. security strategy, giving rise to doctrines like preemptive action and

homeland security, demonstrating how the United States concentrated on implementing unilateral policies by guaranteeing security “*vis-à-vis* everyone and despite everyone.”¹ In the Bush national security plan, Latin America was thus relegated to a back burner, as was multilateralism, the mechanism *par excellence* for solving conflicts on the international plane. In the eight years of the Bush era, the United States returned to vertical unilateralism, with extraordinary implications for international security. The election of Barack Obama represents the second turning point since the fifth debate on security began. In his administration, Latin America has not been totally restored to U.S. national security strategy only because of its traditionally being part of its area of influence; but there is not indifference either. Obama’s pragmatism and

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anti-ideological, issue-per-issue treatment of world affairs set a different tone for approaching the region; as a result, there are clear hints of a most dramatic change in the U.S. stance toward the hemisphere to an almost respectful one. The question here would be whether Latin America is ready for this new conciliatory U.S. approach.

LATIN AMERICA, A PRIORITY?

The relationship between the United States and Latin America plummeted to its lowest point during the administration of George W. Bush. U.S. reaction to the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington was exclusionary, deepening the distance with a region that did not share its anti-terrorist obsession. In this context, the distance between the two Americas was determined by the U.S. setting foreign policy priorities based on immediate considerations and the return to “hard power”: military solutions as the way to reposition the United States at a time when it was going through a crisis of hegemony. That particular moment favored the plans of the neo-conservative elite whose philosophy was most accurately expressed in the Project for the New American Century.²

In effect, in the National Security Strategy designed in 2002 as the official response to the September 11 attacks, Latin America is mentioned in two sections: the chapter dealing with defusing regional conflicts and in the chapter that talks about the new era of global economic growth. The former proposes the formation of “flexible coalitions” with countries like Mexico, Brazil, Chile and Colombia, with which the United States identifies shared risks, particularly the priorities involving the fight against activities related to or derived from drug trafficking and extremist groups in Colombia.³ In the second chapter, the framers attempted to dredge up and make a priority of the dubious proposal—now completely exhausted—to create the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) planned for 2005.⁴

It is evident that Latin America was simply not included as one of the highest priority regions for several reasons:

because it has not been yet perceived as a fertile breeding ground for terrorist cells threatening U.S. national security; because it continues to be thought of as “the United States’ back yard”; because specific issues of interest can be more easily handled piecemeal; or because the supremacy of hard power relegates issues that can be dealt with by non-military means to the back burner.

VISIONS OF HEMISPHERIC RELATIONS

It is understandable that the distancing of the Colossus of the North from the rest of the region was not only the result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, given that it had already insinuated itself into President Bush’s plans when he moved into the White House. By putting such a high priority on terrorism, the United States neglected other geostrategic issues that were also very important to hemispheric security.

Once the Cold War was over, Latin America was no longer a region in dispute ideologically, and the nature of its political systems did not seem to be at high risk. While the abandonment was already evident, the 9/11 terrorist attacks were the catalyst for putting Latin America in second place among White House foreign policy priorities. This was partially brought on by Latin America’s tardy show of support after the attacks and the energetic rejection of the Iraq invasion by some important countries in the region like Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Venezuela, Chile, Mexico and Peru.

A string of missed opportunities is the way the current relationship between the two Americas is best described, in the sense that the United States forgot its promise of making its relationship with Latin America a priority, and issues that are *de facto* related to each other like migration, drug trafficking and security, have been fragmented. In the very design of a monothematic foreign policy agenda—terrorism—a project of regional integration that included common prosperity as its most important boon was postponed, conditioning it to advances in democracy and security. This is the reason why we can consider that the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPP) is already in the process of collapsing, if it ever existed as an institution capable of regulating the exchange on prosperity and security among the three partners.

Different perspectives have been proposed for interpreting relations between the United States and Latin America. First of all is the idea of “the Western Hemi-

sphere,”⁵ “linked to the archetypal geopolitical notion prevalent in the United States whereby the Western tradition had to have conditions for settling itself within a geographical piece of the American map.”⁶ The concepts of “inter-American community” and “pan-Americanism” used during the Kennedy and Nixon administrations flow from this vision. However, their relevance in the twenty-first century is questionable. In addition to the “idea of the Western Hemisphere,” Roberto Russell recognizes three other visions: that of the “growing irrelevance of Latin America,” that of the “imperialist will and practice,” and that of the “decline of U.S. hegemony” in Latin America, particularly in South America.⁷ There are specific cases that could well validate each of these focuses; however, all of them are linked to the imperialistic image of a hegemony that underscores the sovereignty and self-determination of the neighbors. Even the alleged vision of the growing irrelevance of Latin America intrinsically demands attention and specific action from the U.S.

The discussion of how Latin America fits into the national security and hemispheric security paradigm needs to be dealt with. Is the United States really interested in getting involved in a hemisphere-wide security effort? Regardless of the focus used to analyze relations and of the conflict between security paradigms —national or hemispheric— the underlying factor derived from the traditionally paradigmatic U.S. hegemony was Washington’s reticence to accept reciprocity in its foreign relations. The disinterest and lack of thoughtfulness in Bush’s Latin American policy were part of the big puzzle whose central pieces are the absence of understanding, sensitivity and mutual knowledge. That is, it was a proximity unresolved on both sides for many reasons. For the U.S., security agendas are non-negotiable; for that same reason, agendas of common risks can also not be agreed upon mutually. For some in Latin America, the imperialistic past casts a shadow on any attempt at proximity.

In this regard, there has been a trend toward bilateral relations dominating U.S. relations with the hemisphere in all of the sub-topics of integration, in matters of both trade and security. And it is in the area of security that Washington has forged its greatest bilateral commitments, above all with Mexico, Canada and Colombia. However, the approach in the case of Brazil is clearly dominated by a strong commitment toward cooperation on development and other issues, such as alternative energies.

The negative interpretation of the phenomenon arising out of U.S. hegemony is that it would not necessarily need

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to commit itself at all in a multilateral game in which it does not get the benefits it does from the bilateralization of its relations. In policies to fight drug trafficking and to defend energy security, it has clearly expressed the idea of bilateralization because these issues represent a latent threat for U.S. domestic and economic stability. That is why the strategic alliances have been created for the defense against threats, even occasionally producing divisive strategies contrasting with the sometimes naked pragmatism Washington has accustomed us to.

This is not a particular feature of the Bush administration or particular conservative factions. Obama himself has found bilateralization useful for managing some priority issues on his agenda, whether the aforementioned emphasis on energy with Brazil or the war against drugs with Mexico. The difference is situated in the doctrine underlying the pragmatic decisions: while George W. Bush reestablished unilateralism and hard power, Obama has tried to use multilateralism and smart power as the guiding principles of his foreign policy; proof of this are the pledges at the G-20 summits, the messages to the Muslim world, the Afghanistan surge and, in this region, the Honduran crisis.

Regionalism based on bilateral relations with the dominant actor (the U.S.) can be justified by a) the enormous differences dominating relations among the Latin American countries (according to the nature and degree of their economic independence, their commitment to international competition, the patterns of their activity in the world economy or the strength of their democratic institutions); 2) asymmetries with the United States; and c) the importance that the issue of risk has when the U.S. weighs its priorities.

IS A NON-IMPERIALIST LEADERSHIP POSSIBLE?

In the last six months, the Honduran crisis has illustrated some of the most worrying ills and stability threats to the Latin American region; at the same time, it has thrown into the international spotlight the current geopolitical weight

of the regional actors and their particular approach to regional dynamics, which is dramatically different from similar previous crises. The main questions arising from the crisis are: To what extent is the U.S. acting as a regional leader without the imperialistic glitter that some members of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) insist on highlighting? And, is Latin America ready to get over its past with the U.S.?⁸

First, it has been widely commented that a contagious illness is spreading in the Southern Cone regardless of political affiliation: the need to remain in power. Right, left or center, Latin American governments have presented bills to legalize multiple re-election and broadening executive powers, some openly illegitimate and overriding the law. Apart from the illegality of the coup and its leaders, Zelaya's attempt to illegally remain in power should not be dismissed. A second threat is the trend of making the internal affairs of another country a collective issue. The principle of non-intervention has been customized in the sense that, for some, intervention is allowed and demanded if it fits the interests of a particular side in the conflict. That is the case of the Venezuelan and even Brazilian interference in the Honduran affair.

A third threat is not, for a change, U.S. intervention, but the ironic demand for U.S. interference especially made by the so-called anti-imperialist leaders (all of them members of ALBA). The first White House reaction to the coup was described as weak and non-committal, while Hugo Chávez openly questioned U.S. non-action. The following declaration of Obama marked a shift in the hemispheric relation: "the same critics who say the U.S. has not intervened in Honduras are the same people who say we are always intervening and Yankees need to get out of Latin America.... You can't have it both ways." For a country traditionally accused of interventionism and being the sponsor of coups, non-action and caution is not that mistaken and may be a clue to a fifth vision of hemispheric relations, namely a new "non-imperialist U.S. leadership," a rational and more constructive dominant actor in regional affairs. So, is Manifest Destiny evolving?

And yet, the distribution of power in the region exhibits interesting trends: 1) the U.S. continues to be the regional leader with a legitimate voice; 2) Brazil emerging as the southern leader respectable enough to establish a dialogue with the U.S.; 3) the ALBA block trying to be a counterpart to the "imperialist menace"; and 4) former regional leaders being asked to endorse initiatives but do not have enough

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leverage to head them up (Costa Rica, Mexico, Argentina among others). It is interesting to note that Latin American public opinion seems to be reflecting this renewed distribution of power and attitude: in the newly released poll conducted by Latinobarómetro in 18 Latin American countries, Latin Americans gave Chávez the worst rating on a list of 17 regional and world leaders; Barack Obama topped the list, followed by Brazilian President Luiz Inácio *Lula* da Silva.⁹ On the Honduran crisis, even though 58 percent of the Hondurans polled stated they were against the coup, 48 percent were in favor of the president being expelled by the military if he violated the Constitution.¹⁰

There is an outdated tone in every anti-imperialist statement coming from ALBA. However, what was the actual participation of the U.S. in the conflict? And could it be categorized as intervention? Washington's official participation was as mediator. A delegation composed of Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon, Ambassador Craig Kelly, the Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, and Special Assistant to the President for Western Hemisphere Affairs Dan Restrepo was sent to Tegucigalpa by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Obama. They were instructed to provide support for the national dialogue and to underscore the necessity of an agreement in order to win broad support in the international community for the suspect electoral process that Honduras held on November 29. On the other hand, Republican senators flew to Honduras to meet with *de facto* President Roberto Micheletti and some members of the Honduran Congress with the purpose of ensuring that the November elections were free and fair. Contrary to the White House position, they openly supported the *de facto* government.

Even though it is accepted that the U.S. establishment had a relative role in the saga of the Honduran affair, this does not necessarily mean that the White House played an interventionist, big-stick role. In any case, we would argue that the coup was more of a burden than a boon for Obama.

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NEW TIMES FOR
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Political conditions in Latin America change periodically. In line with the hegemonic theory, U.S. supremacy follows an irregular course as long as it continues to maintain its position as dominant power. The “hegemonic presumption,” a term coined by Abraham Lowenthal to describe regional relations with the United States, existed and was effective in the context of bi-polar competition characteristic of the Cold War.¹¹ However, in today’s international order, the idea of a Western Hemisphere as an inclusive, generalizing concept is no longer valid. The image of a “consolidated backyard” no longer fits in with the very diverse nature of twenty-first-century Latin American countries either. That is, this old notion of U.S. hegemony over Latin America seems to have definitively lost its validity in the face of recent political events, and this is perhaps already a very strong perception that follows some of the policies of Foggy Bottom in the region. And yet, some Latin American actors insist on not accepting any kind of U.S. role in the region, let alone an interventionist one. However, we can foresee contradictory views in the way actors will play the anti/pro-interventionist card depending on the specific cases, just as happened in Honduras.

This is perhaps the reason why Washington will have to think seriously about reinforcing its position as a *constructive partner*. Thus, the challenge is to develop a strategy of both joint responsibility and cooperation that consolidates—in the Latin American collective consciousness and public opinion—a distance from the United States’ past inter-

ventionist tradition. Such an approach can find resonance with partners that are in a position to accept this framework of mutual collaboration to resolve the critical issues affecting domestic development in most Latin American countries. It has yet to be confirmed that the Obama leadership is actually non-imperialistic, nonetheless, and if the U.S. decides to go non-interventionist, it remains to be seen if this will be accepted by Latin Americans and consequently, if they can handle the absence of the ugly American. May this virtuous circle occur; then we will witness a valuable opportunity to shift toward a new intellectual tradition in our thinking about the Americas. ■■■

NOTES

- ¹ Leonardo Curzio, *La seguridad nacional en México y la relación con Estados Unidos* (Mexico City: CISAN-UNAM, 2007).
- ² See “The Project for the New American Century,” <http://www.newamericancentury.org/>.
- ³ The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2002).
- ⁴ Part of this proposal was the importance of signing free trade agreements with Chile and Central America and the need to resolve trade disputes with Mexico and the European Union.
- ⁵ This term is a territorial extension—and an ontological representation—of the U.S. conviction that the “American creed” and thereafter, the “American way,” were the philosophical pillars of its conception of civilization. See José Luis Valdés-Ugalde, *Estados Unidos: Intervención y poder mesiánico. La guerra fría en Guatemala, 1954* (Mexico City: CISAN-Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas-UNAM, 2004), p. 200.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Roberto Russell, “América Latina para Estados Unidos: ¿Especial, desdénable, codiciada o perdida?” *Nueva Sociedad*, no. 206 (November-December 2006), pp. 48-62.
- ⁸ For a recent analysis on the Honduran coup d’état, see José Luis Valdés-Ugalde, “Las Honduras abiertas de América Latina,” *Voices of Mexico* 85, May-August, 2009, pp. 7-8.
- ⁹ Corporación Latinobarómetro, *Informe 2009*, <http://www.latinobarometro.org/>.
- ¹⁰ Encuesta Latinobarómetro 2009 “La región desaprueba el golpe en Honduras,” *El País*, December 14, 2009, http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/region/desaprueba/golpe/Honduras/elpepiint/20091212/elpepiint_2/Tes.
- ¹¹ Abraham F. Lowenthal, “Estados Unidos y América Latina a inicios del siglo XXI,” *Foreign Affairs en Español* (January-March 2007).

