



Change for the Better The Chance to Recast U.S.-Bolivian Relations

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The waning days of the Bush administration saw the breakdown of U.S.-Bolivian relations. The Obama administration and Bolivia's President Evo Morales should now seize the moment to repair the bilateral relationship, to the benefit of both countries.

In September 2008, Bolivian President Evo Morales expelled the U.S. ambassador, Philip Goldberg, stating that he had violated national sovereignty by interfering in Bolivian political affairs. The Bush administration denied any improper conduct and immediately expelled the Bolivian ambassador, Gustavo Guzman. Evidently as a reprisal for Ambassador Goldberg's expulsion, the administration then declared (without basis¹) that Morales' government had "failed demonstrably" to honor its international drug control obligations and suspended Bolivia from eligibility for benefits under the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA). Accusing members of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) of engaging in espionage and political interference, President Morales then expelled the DEA from Bolivia.

A Fresh Start for Bilateral Relations?

However, since last November, when U.S. voters made history by electing Barack Obama, President Morales and other high-ranking Bolivian officials have frequently expressed their optimism about the Obama presidency and their interest in improving relations. After addressing the United

¹ For analysis of the Bush administration's decision to decertify Bolivia, see AIN and WOLA's submission to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, "Decertifying Bolivia: Bush Administration 'Fails Demonstrably' to Make its Case," at http://www.wola.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=viewp&id=797&Itemid=2. The memo argues: "The Bush administration evidently chose to use drug decertification and suspension from ATPDEA in an attempt to punish the Morales government for expelling the U.S. ambassador. In order to justify labeling Bolivia a "demonstrable failure" in drug control, the Administration perpetuated serious inaccuracies and distortions of the record. The next U.S. administration and Congress should not be deceived by the Bush administration's decision to decertify Bolivia, but be prepared to consider Bolivia's policies fairly and without prejudice. To be sure, Bolivia faces real drug control challenges, and a respectful bilateral partnership should be in the interests of both countries."

Nations General Assembly in New York in mid-November, Morales remarked: “My interest is how to improve relations with the new president,” adding “I think we could have a lot of things in common.”ⁱ The next day, at a ceremony on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial where he paid homage to the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Morales affirmed that “We have a lot of hope that diplomatic, trade, and investment relations with our country [and the United States] are going to improve. We have a lot of hope and we’re optimistic.”ⁱⁱ This week, Bolivian Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca saluted the historic Obama inauguration, and reiterated his country’s hopes for improved relations with the United States, suggesting that it is time that both governments name new ambassadors.ⁱⁱⁱ Coming on the heels of the turbulent preceding months and Bolivians’ great mistrust of U.S. intentions, especially during the closing days of the Bush presidency, statements of optimism by Morales and others can hardly be interpreted as playing to Morales’ domestic political base, and should be considered genuine.

But as Obama assumed the presidency in Washington, and Bolivians prepare to vote on a new constitution, the bilateral relationship remains in limbo. Will the acrimony that marked relations in the waning days of the Bush administration continue, or will the new Obama administration and the Morales government find ways to renew dialogue and achieve respectful relations, rather than prolonging old stereotypes and inherited resentments?

Mixed Signals

To be sure, the signals from Washington have thus far been mixed. Even as the Bush administration expired, the anger towards Morales in many quarters of Washington remained palpable, especially over the ambassador’s September expulsion. In written responses to questions from her January 14 Senate confirmation hearing, Hillary Clinton, now confirmed as President Obama’s Secretary of State, referred to “fear-mongering propagated by [Venezuelan President Hugo] Chavez and Evo Morales.”^{iv} While Clinton’s intent in characterizing President Morales as engaging in “fear-mongering” is unclear, the statement does not seem to suggest a readiness to improve relations. Although the new Secretary of State’s reply received scant attention in the United States, it was front-page news in Bolivia, and was easily open to interpretation as a deliberate rebuff of the Bolivian government’s repeated expressions of readiness to engage the new U.S. administration. On the other hand, Clinton’s testimony was also hailed by Bolivia’s Vice Foreign Minister, Hugo Fernandez, as signaling that the Obama administration shared Bolivia’s desire for closer relations;^v Clinton remarked, for example, that “bilateral cooperation … on a range of issues would be in the mutual interest” of both countries.^{vi}

Moreover, President Obama’s own words, while not explicitly directed to Bolivia, could imply a willingness to move beyond the embittered state of affairs that his administration has inherited. In his Inaugural Address, Obama told those watching around the world that “America is a friend of each nation, and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity.” Addressing the “people of poor nations,” he pledged to “work alongside you to make your farms flourish and clean waters flow, to nourish starved bodies and feed hungry minds.” And the new president struck

a note of humility regarding the exercise of U.S. power, recalling that earlier U.S. generations “understood that our power cannot protect us, nor does it entitle us to do as we please.”

Just days before he assumed office, Obama told the *Washington Post* how he hopes to make his presidency “an example of how people can bridge differences – racial and otherwise.”^{vii} In his own words, Obama hopes to model “a way of interacting with people who aren’t like you and don’t agree with you that changes the temper of our politics.”^{viii} Obama may have had in mind domestic U.S. politics when he spoke these words, but this outlook could shape his approach to international affairs as well.

President Morales’ November Visit to Washington

Following Obama’s election in November, President Morales paid his first-ever visit to Washington, where he spoke at the Organization of American States (OAS) and made a point of reaching out to key legislators to directly express his views on the ruptured relations with the United States and his interest in mending them. Although Morales evidently did not meet with members of Obama’s transition team, he did sit down with members of Congress with a significant role in shaping U.S. foreign policy, including Senators Harry Reid (D-NV), John Kerry (D-MA), Chris Dodd (D-CT) and Richard Lugar (R-IN), as well as Representatives Howard Berman (D-CA) and Eliot Engel (D-NY). Despite the tensions in relations with the Bush administration, Morales’ visit to Washington gave grounds for hope that the situation could improve with Obama’s entrance.

Especially noteworthy was the pragmatic view expressed by Senator Lugar, the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who hailed Morales’ visit as “a positive step toward improving dialogue and understanding between the two nations.”^{ix} Moreover, Senator Lugar’s statement acknowledged and addressed Morales’ grievance, highlighting that:

“The United States regrets any perception that it has been disrespectful, insensitive, or engaged in any improper activities that would disregard the legitimacy of the current Bolivian government or its sovereignty. We hope to renew our relationship with Bolivia, and to develop a rapport grounded on respect and sovereignty.”^x

The face-to-face meetings that Morales experienced with Senator Lugar and other congressional leaders permitted the sort of frank exchanges that can create rapport, laying the basis for more regular dialogue and better mutual understanding. Indeed, after returning to La Paz, Morales wrote to Senator Lugar that, “Our productive encounter a few days ago in Washington, D.C., amply confirmed for me that a renewed and respectful relationship between our peoples and governments is possible.”^{xi}

Turning Points for Both Countries

Even as the U.S. general election campaign was reaching its historic conclusion last fall, Bolivian politics entered its own crucial phase, with conflict over constitutional reform becoming violent and threatening to plunge the country into turmoil. After the expulsion of U.S. Ambassador Goldberg,

Bolivia's neighbors (through the efforts of UNASUR, Union of South American Nations), as well as the United Nations and the OAS, helped facilitate a compromise between Bolivian government and opposition political forces on the hotly-debated draft constitution. Once compromise was reached, the Bolivian Congress set a date – this Sunday, January 25 – for a national referendum to approve or reject the draft.

This crucial episode of international support for conflict resolution and compromise points to the possibilities for redefining the U.S. role in Bolivia – and the region – as a team player in multinational efforts. The Bush administration's punitive attitude toward Bolivia, so apparent in its closing days, underscored the extent to which the U.S. government had fallen out of step with the priorities of the region's other democracies (such as Brazil and Chile), whose support has helped Bolivia weather tumultuous days. The Obama administration now has the chance to set a new tone.

By negotiating directly with opponents in the Bolivian Congress, the Morales government underscored that political decision-making lies in the hands of the national legislature – not with the opposition leaders, despite their attempts to assume this role. In turn, the Bolivian Congress' reassertion of its role and responsibilities also helped to neutralize the undue influence of civic, regional and social movement leaders (including the opposition departmental prefects), who had repeatedly overstepped their bounds. Should the new constitution be approved on January 25 – which is considered quite likely – fresh elections would be slated for December 2009. President Morales initially won office with an unprecedented 54 percent of the vote, and was reconfirmed in a referendum last August, balloting a landslide 67 percent. He therefore stands a good chance of winning another term in office (until 2014), meaning that U.S.-Bolivian relations will likely feature the administrations of Presidents Obama and Morales for the next four years.

Making the Most of the Opportunity

U.S.-Bolivian relations could use a fresh start, and doing so appears entirely feasible, with a modicum of flexibility from both governments. President Obama's election and President Morales' subsequent November 2008 visit to Washington opened the door to fashioning a new relationship. It is now up to both governments to make the most of this opportunity to begin the sort of respectful, mutually beneficial diplomacy that ought to be possible. Of course, the two governments' interests and agendas will not always coincide, and real differences will persist and new disputes will arise; but the perpetuation of the suspicions and antagonism that led to a breakdown in bilateral relations during the Bush administration and is neither desirable nor inevitable.

For their part, Bolivia and the Morales government face enormous challenges, especially in delivering economic development and reducing poverty – challenges that will only be heightened by the current global economic crisis. It is crucial for Bolivia to be able to count on the new Obama administration's support to tackle these challenges, especially poverty alleviation. At the same time, President Obama and the United States confront tremendous problems at home and abroad. It would make little sense to prolong or let fester inherited problems that can be resolved for the better. Indeed, the new Obama administration and Congress could help repair some of the damage

done to the U.S. reputation in Latin America in recent years by taking a flexible, respectful approach toward Bolivia, in cooperation with Bolivia's neighbor democracies and the international community. The Obama administration would also do well to recognize that Bolivia's political dynamics, demands for profound reform, and jealous defense of national sovereignty and self-determination have emerged from the country's own history, and have not been somehow foisted upon it by outside powers against the democratic wishes of the Bolivian people.

With this in mind, a positive first step for Washington, already endorsed by Senator Lugar, would be to signal the renewal of Bolivia's eligibility for the ATPDEA benefits suspended by President Bush. According to Lugar, "Lifting the suspension on the ATPDEA with Bolivia will strengthen the growing political and economic relationship between our nations and help bring new jobs and good will to the region."^{xii} For its part, the Bolivian government has already expressed its strong interest in improving relations, gestures that can be reinforced by concrete steps to build confidence with the new Obama administration and the Congress. Both the U.S. and Bolivian governments should also prepare to put in place new ambassadors as soon as possible, and to ensure that the new envoys will be attuned and equipped to advance an agenda of mutually respectful and beneficial relations.

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ENDNOTES

- ⁱ Patrick Worsnip, "Bolivia's Morales Seeks Better Ties with Obama," Reuters, 17 November 2008.
- ⁱⁱ EFE, "Morales visits U.S. hoping for better relations with Obama," 18 November 2008.
- ⁱⁱⁱ ABI, "Bolivia aguarda mejorar relaciones con el nuevo Gobierno de Estados Unidos," 20 January 2009.
- ^{iv} Senator John Kerry, "Questions for the Record, Nomination of Hillary Rodham Clinton, Department of State, Secretary of State," January 2009, p. 74, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/KerryClintonQFRs.pdf>.
- ^v ANF, "Vicecanciller: EEUU tiene política de acercamiento," 20 January 2009.
- ^{vi} Senator John Kerry, "Questions for the Record, Nomination of Hillary Rodham Clinton, Department of State, Secretary of State," January 2009, p. 74, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/KerryClintonQFRs.pdf>.
- ^{vii} Michael A. Fletcher, "President-Elect Sees His Race as an Opportunity," *Washington Post*, 19 January 2009.
- ^{viii} Ibid.
- ^{ix} Press Release of Senator Lugar, "Lugar meets with Bolivian President Evo Morales," 18 November 2008, <http://lugar.senate.gov/press/record.cfm?id=305086&&>.
- ^x Ibid.
- ^{xi} Letter from Bolivian President Evo Morales to U.S. Senator Richard Lugar, 28 November 2008.
- ^{xii} Press Release of Senator Lugar, "Lugar meets with Bolivian President Evo Morales," 18 November 2008, <http://lugar.senate.gov/press/record.cfm?id=305086&&>.