

Latin America Policy in the Next Two Years: The Obama Administration and the Next Congress

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President Barack Obama came to office with a real opportunity to repair Washington's tattered relationship with Latin America. He began with the advantage of *not* being George W. Bush, who was the least popular U.S. president in decades among Latin Americans. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, President Bush largely ignored Latin America, except for a handful of issues, including the war on drugs, a shouting match with Hugo Chávez, and renewed efforts to subvert Fidel Castro's government in Cuba. None of these issues were priorities for Latin American leaders. Moreover, the unilateralism of Bush's foreign policy reminded Latin America of the bad old days of Washington's intervention in the Hemisphere. The invasion of Iraq was especially unpopular.

President Obama, in contrast, promised a new partnership with Latin America based on equality and multilateralism. He declared that fifty years of U.S. policy toward Cuba had failed, and that it was time to try a policy of engagement rather than hostility and isolation. He acknowledged that the United States shared responsibility for narcotics trafficking because demand from U.S. consumers was driving supply production in Latin America. Of special concern to Mexico and Central America, he promised immigration reform, providing a path to citizenship for tens of thousands of undocumented Latino immigrants.

President Obama's first encounter with Latin America came early, at the Fifth Summit of the Americas in April 2009. He repeated the themes from his campaign, which were well-received, but he added little in terms of policy details. He engaged in a civil dialogue with Hugo Chávez, and the State Department curtailed the harsh anti-Chávez rhetoric that had characterized the Bush administration. A few months later, at the OAS General Assembly, the United States agreed to the repeal of the 1962 resolution that suspended Cuba's membership. Working multilaterally, Washington won the concession that Cuba would have to accept the principles of the OAS— which implicitly include the Inter-American Democratic Charter— in order to reactivate its membership. Cuba, of course, has denounced the OAS as a tool of U.S. imperialism and shows no interest in rejoining.

Finally, the Obama administration's policy framework for the Hemisphere is a far better reflection of Latin America's concerns than was President's Bush's policy. Obama's "four pillars" are economic development and social inclusion, security (especially citizen security from criminal violence), good governance and the strengthening of democratic institutions, and environmental sustainability.

Unfortunately, after getting off to a very positive start, President Obama's policy went off track. On June 28, 2009, the Honduran armed forces, acting in concert with opposition political groups, overthrew President Manuel Zelaya, forcing him into exile. Condemnation of the coup was unanimous across the Hemisphere, and Honduras was suspended from the OAS for this breach of constitutional order. After a few months, however, the Obama administration backed away from the OAS consensus position that new elections in Honduras would not be recognized unless the legitimate constitutional government was restored. Under pressure from

Congressional Republicans who supported the coup, the administration – which did not particularly like President Zelaya anyway– accepted the election of Porfirio Lobo and urged other Latin American countries to do the same.

By this unilateral shift in policy, Washington split the Latin American consensus and belied its commitment to multilateralism. The result was to damage relations with Brazil, and to encourage the far right elsewhere in Latin America to think they might be able to overthrow democratically elected progressive governments with the acquiescence of the United States.

In August 2009, the United States and Colombia announced a Defense Cooperation Agreement providing the U.S. military with access to Colombian military bases. The agreement was announced without prior consultation with other Latin American countries, and both Venezuela and Brazil had strong negative reactions. Once again, the unilateralism represented by this lack of consultation reminded Latin Americans of Washington's interventionist past rather than heralding a multilateral partnership.

The escalation of drug violence in Mexico presented the Obama administration with a third challenge. In March 2009, President Felipe Calderón ordered 5,000 troops from the Mexican Army into Ciudad Juarez, where bloody fighting among the drug cartels threatened to spill across the U.S. border. In 2009-2010, U.S.-Mexican cooperation in fighting traffickers reached unprecedented highs, but the ongoing violence began to strain relations. Some in Washington began referring to Mexico as a “failed state” and to the traffickers as an “insurgency,” which the Mexican government resented bitterly. U.S. diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks expressed U.S. frustration at inadequate commitment to the drug war among some sectors of the Mexican government and security forces, prompting President Calderone to remind Washington that over 20,000 Mexicans had died in the recent violence. Washington's political timidity and ineffectiveness in controlling the flow of assault weapons into Mexico causes justifiable anger in Mexico City.

Adding to tensions with Mexico, the Obama administration was unable to make any progress in its first two years on its promise of immigration reform. Republican gains in Congress in the 2010 elections make any chance of reform in the next two years even more unlikely.

Finally, President Obama has not made good on his promise to embark on a fundamentally different approach to Cuba. He kept his campaign promise by eliminating restrictions on family travel for Cuban Americans and he loosened restrictions on educational travel imposed by President Bush. He also reopened consultations with Cuba over immigration and counter-narcotics cooperation. But he continued President Bush's “democracy promotion” program aimed at undermining the Cuban government, funding it at the same levels as his predecessor. This is the program that led to the arrest of USAID contractor Alan Gross, whose imprisonment has, in itself, become an obstacle to improving bilateral relations. Moreover, the essence of U.S. policy toward Cuba has remained unchanged: to foster the replacement of the Cuban government with a free market, multi-party electoral democracy, and to withhold normal relations until that transition has been accomplished.

Amidst these challenges, it is important to recognize the administration's successes. In the war on drugs, more attention is being paid to strengthening institutions and government services, rather than a unitary focus on military equipment and responses. In Central America, the administration has committed itself to helping governments address the underlying problems of poverty, inequality, and social exclusion that give rise to criminal violence and youth gangs. In the Andean region, the administration has shown a willingness to work with ALBA countries

that are open to working with it, and has dampened the anti-Chávez rhetoric that the Bush administration seemed to relish. In Haiti, the administration reacted quickly and effectively to the earthquake, coordinating its efforts with other donors, including even Cuba.

Nevertheless, there is a sense of disappointment in much of Latin America at how little of Obama's initial promise of change has been realized. "The truth is that nothing has changed and I view that with sadness," remarked Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as he left office.

So why hasn't the Obama administration been able to accomplish more? Although Secretary of State Hilary Clinton has traveled to Latin America more than any modern secretary of state, the reality is that Latin America is not high on the agenda of senior U.S. officials. Their attention is on wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, nuclear proliferation in North Korea and Iran, the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history due to the Gulf oil spill, and now, revolution sweeping the Middle East. Apart from the drug violence in Mexico, Latin America is not in crisis, and poses no serious threat to U.S. security.

Moreover, Washington simply does not have the influence it once had in the region. Latin American countries' economic ties with one another, with the European Union, and with China have grown significantly in the past few decades, reducing their dependence on the United States. In just the last decade, Latin America's trade with China has increased ten-fold, making China the top export market for Chile, Brazil, and Peru. Brazil today is the eighth largest economy in the world, and views itself as an emerging global power.

Washington's bilateral economic aid to the region has largely evaporated except for aid to the poorest countries of Central America and the Caribbean, and aid concentrated on fighting the war on drugs.

Perhaps most important, Latin America has matured politically. Most countries of the region have developed into democracies with broad popular participation. No longer are they governed by small cliques of U.S.-educated elites. Democratically elected leaders are more responsive to their own voters than to Washington, and have their own conceptions of their national interest, which will not also be consonant with the interests of the United States.

Finally, Latin America has become more heterogeneous, making it difficult to have a single policy like the Alliance for Progress that fits the whole region. Going forward, the United States will have a Mexican policy, reflecting the uniqueness of our shared border. It will have a Central American and Caribbean policy, reflecting the close economic and social ties between those regions and the United States. It will have an Andean policy, reflecting the ongoing problem of narcotics production and also the struggles of those countries to integrate their indigenous populations into full citizenship. It will have a Brazilian policy, reflecting Brazil's new status as a global power, and it will have a Southern Cone policy, reflecting the ongoing commercial relationships of those countries with the United States.

It would be a mistake to expect any dramatic new departures in U.S. policy toward Latin America in the second half of President Obama's first term. The Republican majority in the House of Representatives and the thin Democratic majority in the Senate will prevent any initiative that cannot command bipartisan support.

That makes immigration reform unlikely.

It makes tougher controls on assault weapons impossible.

It makes any significant change in policy toward Cuba unthinkable.

It probably means a reduction in foreign assistance aimed at social and economic

development.

The one area in which President Obama may be able to muster Republican support is in winning ratification of the pending free trade agreements with Panama and Colombia— pacts that have until now faced more opposition from Congressional Democrats than Republicans.

Later this month, President Obama is scheduled to visit Latin America, with stops in Brazil, Chile, and El Salvador. It will be the first time since the Summit of the Americas that the president has turned his full attention to the region, and it offers an opportunity for him to “re-set” relations and perhaps recapture some of the promise of his first six months in office. Most of the major countries in Latin America have no fundamental conflicts of interest with the United States, and even in the cases of Cuba and Venezuela, there are untapped opportunities for cooperation. But President Obama needs to convey to Latin America’s leaders that he recognizes there will be points of disagreement even among friends, and that he respects those differences. He needs to show Latin Americans that he recognizes and accepts a fundamental fact: the era of U.S. economic and political hegemony is finally over. A successful U.S. policy will be one that treats Latin America just as we would treat our European allies— as equal partners, not little brothers.