

Latin America and the US: an agenda adrift

Augusto Varas
Associate Researcher, FRIDE

The outcome of the upcoming presidential elections in America will have an important effect on both the domestic and international fronts, depending on who ends up as the new occupant of the White House. This situation was put vividly in *The New York Times'* final editorial column of 2007, in which - with an eye to the future - it listed some of the Bush administration's enormous follies and blunders: "We can only hope that this time, unlike 2004, American voters will have the wisdom to grant the awesome powers of the presidency to someone who has the integrity, principle and decency to use them honorably. Then when we look in the mirror as a nation, we will see, once again, the reflection of the United States of America."¹

More specific policy criticism can be heard amongst those who analyse the history of the relations, which for geographical reasons have an inevitable importance, between the USA and Latin America. At present, and despite increasing economic ties, these relations are seen by both sides as unstable, or hostile. From the American angle, independent analysts and even some former members of the Bush Administration have described the US' Western Hemisphere policy as insensitive, apathetic, inefficient, arrogant, derivative, backward-looking and lacking in any display of solidarity. An ex-Secretary of State has even gone so far as to suggest a "non-policy", the naming of a special envoy to Latin America capable of understanding the region and ensuring America's interests there.

Whilst the main presidential candidates have not devoted much time to questions of the Western Hemisphere, they have described the current Administration's policies towards Latin America as thoughtless and apathetic.² Nevertheless, when it comes to specifying their own approaches to the region, neither of the Democratic candidates showed that they are in tune with Latin American concerns, whilst both are reluctant free-traders - keen to protect electoral heartlands made up of white workers.³ In the case of McCain, nothing can be discerned which indicates any kind of change from the policies of the Bush administration in the region i.e., promoting free trade in the hemisphere and supporting internal forces who wish to oust the Castro regime in Cuba and Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, the latter being defined as a focus of instability throughout the region of the Andes.⁴ Given that state electorates and cross-party lobbies will play an important role in the outcome of the next US election, the candidates are highly constrained by their strategies for attracting these votes. Such is the case with US policy on Cuba, which is hostage to the exiled Cuban community in Florida - a decisive state in the previous presidential election.

¹ *The New York Times*, Editorial "Looking at America", December 31, 2007.

² Un análisis de estas posibles políticas en: Michael Shifter, "Se va Bush, ¿qué viene?", Inter American Dialogue, February 22, 2008. See also: "Latin America and the U.S. Presidential Campaign: Nikolas Kosloff on John McCain".

³ Robert Matthews, "USA 20089: the Democrats, free trade and Latin America", FRIDE Comment, April 2008.

⁴ <http://www.johnmccain.com/Search/?keyword=latin>

In the case of America, the fact that domestic factors and the need to represent a wide range of interests determine this particular strand of foreign policy explains the absence of consensus between the major political parties, since the constituency for a hemisphere-wide policy is clearly weak. The region's traditionally low position on Washington's agenda should also be noted in this regard, since the latter's attention is focused on other areas of the world or on global issues, such as the current emphases on the Middle East or the war on terror.

Yet in spite of the above, one can perceive some important changes in the array of governmental posts that relate to the region. Thus, for example, certain political adjustments may be observed since the appointment in 2005 of the new Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, in the State Department: a new dialogue with Brazil was initiated, with a research and development agreement on world bio-fuel markets being signed; a more sober attitude has emerged in response to President Chavez's broadsides against President Bush; a free trade agreement has been signed with Peru and an important policy initiative has been designed to advance the DR-CAFTA with Colombia (even though it is largely sterile, due to the critical human rights situation in that country); finally, an attempt has been made to rebuild relations with Argentina after the Mar del Plata conference fiasco, in which President Kirchner attacked US Western Hemisphere policy during his inaugural address and President Chavez headed a march against Bush. Yet all of these changes are not sufficient in themselves to create a new and constructive atmosphere in the region, in which the complex agenda facing the latter might be addressed.

Could the arrival of a new administration in 2009 lead to profound change in US policy on the Western Hemisphere? The Fifth Summit of the Americas, to be held in Trinidad and Tobago in the same year, will provide a useful opportunity to measure the extent to which the White House is willing to embrace change, by tackling the important regional challenges already highlighted in previous Summits. These include democratisation, protectionism, agricultural subsidies and the limits imposed by the rules of origin in the textile industry, global warming and climate change, immigration, drug-trafficking and poverty. Latin American countries are waiting expectantly to see if new and more constructive US policies in the hemisphere will be drafted and implemented. However, sceptical voices can be heard regarding that prospect: "These challenges will be daunting for the next president, as limited resources and political constraints make it unrealistic to expect grandiose schemes or costly new initiatives. But regardless of who wins, the good news is an unpopular administration will have passed and *even modest adjustments in emphasis could significantly improve regional cooperation* (author's emphasis). More important than any single policy, the next president has the opportunity to show that he or she understands the transformations in the hemisphere and can respond constructively, without falling into bullying or apathy."⁵

The question which therefore presents itself is whether the next administration - whichever it may be - will be able to recognise the legacy of its predecessor's mistakes and avoid repeating the same simplistic slogans which have been of little use in implementing a realistic agenda in the Western Hemisphere. Considering the omissions of the Democratic candidates and the continuity of the Republican challenger, important changes in American internal policy-framing will need to take place, if this new understanding of Latin American realities is to make itself felt and so allow for new and constructive relations within the hemisphere to be developed. The changes we feel the USA must make in order to come up with a realistic and effective Western Hemisphere policy can be divided into three key areas: it should leave behind the outdated notions and concepts which it employs (as it begins to face an increasingly dynamic continent) and replace its ideologically-driven diagnosis of regional situations; it should find answers to the hemisphere's problems which go beyond unilateral policies and in agreement with the other parties involved; and finally, it should provide a new vision of security in the hemisphere.

⁵ Shifter, Op.Cit..

Elections and the free market are not enough

A recent report by the State Department's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs sums up its main achievements in the region in 2007 by saying that the year in question "was one of positive and comprehensive US engagement in the Western Hemisphere. Our engagement was built on the four pillars of our Americas policy: consolidating democracy, promoting prosperity, investing in people, and protecting the security of the democratic state".⁶ However, an absence of new conceptual tools with which to analyse and plan action in the region has meant that the measures implemented in line with these "four pillars" have met with little successes.

The Latin American policy of the US has always involved an emphasis on democracy and free markets - these being seen as the two elements that guarantee American interests in the region as well as the stability of the nations of Latin America. However, democracy has been crudely identified with states holding more or less free elections, whilst the quality and stability of the democratic institutions that rest on those electoral processes have traditionally not been taken into account. Only lately have some elements relating to institutional development and citizen participation been incorporated, identifying benchmarks but not properly integrating the main elements of democratic development in the region.

The same is true of development and free markets. The constant insistence that liberalisation and free trade is the correct formula for development fails to recognise that whilst these policies have been introduced in all of the region's countries in a more or less radical way, "in economic growth, poverty reduction, income distribution, and social conditions the results were discouraging".⁷ Similarly, the underestimated but key role of the state in aiding national development by implementing policies which relieve poverty and reduce inequality should be recognised, since "addressing poverty is a legitimate function and responsibility of the state and not simply an expected outcome of market forces".⁸

Yet in spite of these evident realities, the Bush administration's stance has been to reiterate its criticism and to continue trying to isolate the new left-wing governments elected in the region, most notably those which are carrying out the most radical reforms, such as in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. Disapproving of policies inspired by other economic, political and social concepts - such as those attempted in Argentina - also does little to foster regional cooperation. Stability in an environment which is increasingly complex and heterogeneous must be based on recognition of this diversity and by working from a common agenda, through multilateral institutions which can give full expression to it. Moreover, the ambition of Western Hemisphere integration will never be fully realised without the reincorporation of Cuba in the inter-American system. As a necessary part of that, the US embargo must be called off.⁹

As the Independent Task Force of the Council on Foreign Relations recognises, "For over 150 years, the Monroe Doctrine provided the guiding principles for US policy toward Latin America, asserting US primacy in the foreign affairs of the region. Over the past two decades, those principles have become increasingly obsolete. Washington's basic policy framework, however, has not changed sufficiently to reflect the new reality."¹⁰

⁶ 2007: Historic Commitment, Positive Engagement, The U.S. Department of State Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/99475.pdf>

⁷ Nancy Birdsall and Augusto de la Torre: *Washington Contentious. Economic Policies for Social Equity in Latin America*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Inter-American Dialogue, 2001.

⁸ Cynthia J. Arnson "Poverty fueling shift to the Left in Latin America", Wednesday, *The Ripon Forum*, Volume 41, No. 2, April/May 2007.

⁹ Even Brent Scowcroft, United States National Security Advisor under Presidents Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush has affirmed that the "US-Cuba Embargo Makes No Sense". http://www.thewashingtonnote.com/archives/2008/05/brent_scowcroft_1/

¹⁰ "Continuing to build U.S. policy on these pillars alone reflects a mistaken sense of what U.S. policy can realistically achieve and a failure to recognize where Washington can meaningfully bolster Latin Americans' efforts to improve their own quality of life, providing a new foundation for U.S.-Latin America relations in the process... The Task Force highlights "four emerging and urgent priorities that should provide the basis of U.S. policy toward Latin America: 1) poverty and inequality; 2) citizen security; 3) migration; and 4) energy security and integration." Council on Foreign Relations, "U.S.-Latin America Relations: A New Direction for a New Reality" Report of an Independent Task Force, 2008.

In consequence, a new Western Hemisphere policy should be drawn up - one that is based on concepts that reflect the reality of a much more complex and diverse Latin America than the existing rudimentary and stale conceptual framework is capable of comprehending. It should also incorporate the best regional and international practices, which have already proven themselves to be successful in overcoming the barriers to equitable development.¹¹

Alliances for the implementation of policies

In contrast to the 1980s and 1990s, an exceptional period of growth has taken place in Latin American economies during the current decade. In spite of the crisis of 2001, the region has experienced steady rates of growth. In the last four years, Latin America grew at an average rate of 4.3 percent and in 2006 alone 15 million people were lifted out of poverty (albeit unevenly, between the relevant countries). This growth has been possible thanks to the unprecedented rise in the price of Latin American commodities, the macroeconomic stabilisation policies which were introduced and, for some of the poorer countries, the sustained rise in foreign currency transfers from abroad.

All of these advances have been possible without any aid or special help from the USA, which has been incapable of implementing convincing regional economic programmes. Still it is true that economic integration within the hemisphere, which has been a guiding light of American policy since the 1980s, has resulted in various formulas, the most successful of which are the bilateral agreements established through the signing of NAFTA and the DR-CAFTAs signed with each country in the region. Less successful, however, has been the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) - the collective initiative approved in the 1994 Summit of the Americas in Miami, by 34 regional heads of state and government - which was shelved in November 2005 in the Fourth Summit of the Americas in Mar del Plata without having generated any consensus or having brought about any significant advances.¹² This can in fact be explained by the refusal of political decision-makers to use available but ideologically unacceptable means.

Another important limitation of previous approaches has been the by-now familiar tendency to use multilateral mechanisms as instruments of naked self interest, thereby benefiting particular policies yet without committing anyone to cooperative practices. When the USA for example feels that common positions do not suit its interests, it acts outside the parameters of multilateral institutions, remaining on the sidelines of international treaties and agreements which might put constraints on its international activities. This illusory and phony multilateralism has led to the establishment of a pseudo-collective diplomacy, which operates outside any kind of institutional framework by means of ad-hoc meetings of Western Hemisphere ministers and high-ranking civil servants. In practice, however, this policy has limited itself to straightforward bilateralism, which has ended up taking precedence over weakened multilateral mechanisms.¹³

An addiction to unilateralism - seen most dramatically in the Iraq intervention - is also present, one which flies in the face of the long tradition of multilateralism in the region of the Americas. For whilst the latter cannot boast great successes, it does at least persist in a central commitment to generate an asymmetrical dialogue with the USA, in a situation in which the objective and pressing problems surrounding immigration, trade and the various political and social issues demand immediate and joint solutions. This requirement is even more obvious in matters relating to security in the hemisphere - as we shall see presently.

¹¹ A diagnosis and agenda proposed on this matter can be found in: Washington Office on Latin America, *Forjando Nuevos Lazos. Un Nuevo Planteamiento para la Política Estadounidense hacia América Latina*. Washington D.C., September 2007.

¹² Argentina vetoed it and Brazil supported its neighbour. The latter has preferred to resolve its trade disputes within the International Rounds, such as at Doha. Despite an agreement to try to harmonise conflicting positions after the Mar del Plata summit, to date these meetings have not taken place.

¹³ This tendency has even reached important American liberal intellectual figures. Cfr. Albert Fishlow, "U.S. Policy toward the Hemisphere: New Ideas for a New Administration", Center for Hemispheric Policy, University of Miami, February 28, 2008.

Unilateralism is rendered even more inefficient by the fact that at present Latin America is employing a much richer patchwork of international relations, which include differing political, economic and military ties with counterparts as diverse as the European Union, NATO, Japan, Russia, China and Iran. Depending on the case, these partners provide investment, markets, finances, energy, arms, telecommunications and technology, amongst other things. Such new global realities limit the US' capacity to influence its Latin partners' international stance.¹⁴

The poor results of American policy in the region can be contrasted with the initiatives that countries such as Venezuela or Brazil have started to develop. Identifying the main regional problems and the historic limitations of institutions in the hemisphere, Venezuela - buoyed by the high price of oil - has developed new projects without the help of the USA. These initiatives (many of which are based more on rhetoric than substance) include undertakings such as ALBA, that is, the Bolivarian Alternative in the Americas (la Alternativa Bolivariana para América Latina y el Caribe), which is a response to ALCA; the Peoples' Trade Agreement (el Tratado Comercial de los Pueblos) or TCP, between Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua and Bolivia (this is an alternative to the CAFTA, which involves the USA); and the creation of the Bank of the South (Banco del Sur), following ferocious criticism from the Inter-American Development Bank. Other significant developments include Venezuela's exit from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), having settled its debt five years ahead of schedule; the proposal for an ALBA army, as part of a new agreement for regional security; the widening of a diplomacy of the Peoples, via the Bolivarian Movement (Movimiento Bolivariano), which contains echoes of left-wing and other social movements in the region; the creation of Petrocaribe and Petrosur, in order to confront the energy crisis through credits subsidised by Caracas; and finally TeleSUR, conceived as a regional mechanism for cultural integration.

Brazil has eschewed Venezuela's incendiary rhetoric, but its government has also created new regional possibilities by incorporating partners into its Union of the South American Nations project (Unión de Naciones del Sur or UNASUR), which is in harmony with its outreach beyond the continent, through its alliances with India and South Africa (IBSA). Similarly, as a result of the violation of Ecuadorian borders by Colombian armed forces, Brazil proposed a South American Defense Council, which has recently been approved (Colombia being the only country to opt out).¹⁵ In addition to all this, Ecuador's President Correa, during his recent visit to Mexico, proposed the creation of an Organisation of Latin American States, thereby making his own contribution to the panoply of regional proposals.

All of these initiatives show the currently limited role of the USA in the Western Hemisphere and the existence of a political will - present throughout the region - to establish institutions without its presence. However, Washington continues to repeat its tired unilateralist mantra, rejecting the Latin American positions out of hand and leaving the urgent matter of a Western Hemisphere agenda without an effective response. Highlighting this problem, important Washington think-tanks have insisted that the first thing a new American administration must do is to show respect for international norms and institutions,¹⁶ which in the case of Latin America would be expressed by bolstering consultation mechanisms and multilateral organisations, such as the Organisation of American States (OAS), which was recently at the wrong end of criticism from the Bush administration and the press.¹⁷

Giving precedence to diplomacy over direct intervention and fostering a concept of alliance, instead of naked unilateralism, could enable work to be carried out around a pragmatic, common agenda, in a hemisphere which, increasingly, should be seen as ideologically and politically plural.¹⁸

¹⁴ An account of this diversification can be found in Robert Matthews, Op.Cit.

¹⁵ On the subject of Brazil, see: Augusto Varas, "Brasil en Sudamérica: De la indiferencia a la hegemonía", FRIDE, Comentario, mayo de 2008. <http://www.fride.org/publicacion/415/brasil-en-sudamerica-de-la-indiferencia-a-la-hegemonia>

¹⁶ Peter Hakim, Latin America: The Next U.S. President's Agenda. Inter-American Dialogue, January 1, 2008.

¹⁷ Marcela Sanchez, "Insulza's Divided Attention", *The Washington Post*, Friday, December 14, 2007.

¹⁸ Other policy changes in: Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), *Forging New Ties. A Fresh Approach to U.S. Policy in Latin America*. September 2007. <http://www.wola.org/media/Forging%20New%20Ties-FINAL.pdf>

New visions of security in the Western Hemisphere

The aforementioned problems are amplified when it comes to the question of regional security.

Important military leaders have affirmed, in reference to the international situation, that “no nation state will be able to face the current sum of risks and dangers on its own”.¹⁹ Along the same lines, and considering the hemisphere itself, one writer at least has insisted that “the integrated approach in a world of collaborative networks between sovereign states - or collective security - is still the only system which makes sense”.²⁰ In spite of this, United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) displays a highly contradictory approach to security in the hemisphere, calling for cooperation between regional “partners” whilst at the same time identifying crucial security matters from an exclusive and very narrow American point of view. From the American perspective, the main “threats to security in the region” are “crime, gangs, and illegal drug trafficking”, thus highlighting the fact that “the alarming growth of criminal activity in the region, gangs and criminal violence are a security priority”.²¹

Admiral Stavridis, the current head of USSOUTHCOM, is even more explicit, when commenting on the spread of the war on terror to the Western Hemisphere: “I would characterise our region as being a highly-likely base for future terrorist threats. Members, facilitators, and sympathisers of Islamic terrorist organisations are present throughout the region”.²² Based on this identification of likely threats, moreover, he thinks it possible to “achieve the security conditions necessary to create the enduring basis for prosperity and healthy democratic institutions in this important region. This is the promise of a hemisphere free of gangs and drugs; free of human trafficking, money laundering, and terrorism; free of repressive regimes; it is the promise of all of us together finding cooperative solutions to demanding security challenges.” He goes on to add that “besides supporting Colombia, containing the spread of FARC activity in neighbouring countries is also part of our focus....the situation in Cuba and any potential repercussions from the end of Fidel Castro’s rule are another set of our priorities”.²³ However, he does not define either the multilateral institutional mechanisms or the regional alliances which might lead to “cooperative solutions” to the controversial and crucial questions of the region.

The inherent weakness of these unilateral definitions and the fruitless implementation of the policies they give rise to²⁴ have a further negative consequence - the “securitisation” of domestic order in the region, thus effectively snatching it away from civil institutions. The militarisation of relations within the hemisphere will be further encouraged by what is known as “Command Strategy 2016” - a new policy which “proposes a radical solution: that the US Southern Command become the central actor in addressing regional problems. The command would transform itself from the traditional military organisation it is now...into a “Joint Interagency Security Command” involved in matters ranging from long-term economic development to trade to public security...coordinating all relevant US agencies, including non-military agencies, operating in the region... a model which other commands would follow as part of the Unified Command Plan”.²⁵

¹⁹ General (ret.) Dr. Klaus Naumann, KBE Former Chief of the Defence Staff Germany; Former Chairman Military Committee NATO; General (ret.) John Shalikashvili, Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the United States of America, Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander in Europe; Field Marshal The Lord Inge, KG, GCB, PC Former Chief of the Defence Staff United Kingdom; Admiral (ret.) Jacques Lanxade Former Chief of the Defence Staff France Former Ambassador; General (ret.) Henk van den Breemen, Former Chief of the Defence Staff the Netherlands: *Towards a Grand Strategy for an Uncertain World. Renewing Transatlantic Partnership*. Noaber Foundation, 2007.

²⁰ Lee H. Hamilton, “Global Realities: American Power in an Uncertain World”, *The C. Warren Goldring Annual Lecture On Canada-U.S. Relations*, Design Exchange, Toronto, September 12, 2005.

²¹ “Testimony of General James T. Hill, United States Army Commander, United States Southern Command, Before The House Armed Services Committee”, United States House of Representatives, March 24, 2004.

²² “The Posture Statement of Admiral James G. Stavridis, United States Navy Commander, United States Southern Command, Before The 110th Congress, March 21-22, 2007.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Cfr. Below The Radar U.S. Military Programs With Latin America, 1997-2007*. A Joint Publication from The Center for International Policy, The Latin America Working Group Education Fund, and The Washington Office on Latin America. March 2007.

²⁵ WOLA, Just the Facts Project, “Ready, Aim, Foreign Policy. How the Pentagon’s role in foreign policy is growing, and why Congress—and the American public—should be worried.” March 2008.

This concentration and centralisation in military institutions of the responsibility for internal order has the effect of militarising civilian affairs and simultaneously “de-professionalising” the armed forces, which are assigned duties that do not correspond to their expertise and for which they are neither trained nor equipped. This seems even truer when one considers that immigration, drug trafficking and criminal activities are issues of regional importance that ought to be dealt with by specialised civilian institutions - particularly by the police, who need to be given real support and specialised training, if they are to avoid the erosion of their field of operations by the armed forces.

Such ideological and unilateral definitions of regional security issues, then, prevent real questions being given immediate answers, which is vital if instability in the field of regional strategy is to be prevented. Here we are referring to the need to apply a multilateral and regional solution to the internal crisis in Colombia and the fact of it spreading across the frontiers of neighbouring states, as has recently been seen in the Colombian-Ecuadorian border skirmishes; the failure of American counter-narcotics policy; the growing market for arms in the region; the trafficking of light arms and the lack of control of such by the USA; reform of the police force; as well as new developments in nuclear matters and their possible military use.

All of these matters, which pertain in a real sense to questions of regional and inter-state security, require a multilateral and cooperative approach right across the Western Hemisphere. The next US administration will need to deploy new concepts and policies, as well as strengthening those existent institutions propitious to multilateral collaboration, if the challenges are to be successfully overcome. If this does not take place, the agenda in the Western Hemisphere will continue to be adrift.

FRIDE's Comments provide a brief and concise analysis of current topics in international affairs in the fields of peace and security, democratisation, human rights, and humanitarian action and development. Further information about FRIDE, as well as its publications can be found at www.fride.org

The views expressed by the authors of the documents published on this website do not necessarily reflect the opinion of FRIDE.
If you have any comments on the articles or any other suggestions, please email us at comments@fride.org

Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior
C/ Goya, 5-7 pasaje 2ª - 28001 Madrid - Telf: 91 244 47 40 - Fax: 91 244 47 41 - E-mail : fride@fride.org
www.fride.org