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U.S.-Latin American Relations: The Prospect

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This series began more than a dozen years ago with an essay titled "U.S.-Latin American Relations: Where Are We Now?" Since this is the last issue of *Latin American Outlook*, it seems worthwhile to pose the question again.

The answer is bound to be less optimistic than when it was first asked. For one thing, in the intervening years many Latin Americans have become disillusioned with economic reform, privatization, and "neo-liberalism"—as they call it—and are looking once again to the state to solve all their problems. For another, corruption and jobbery have discredited much of the political class at all levels. The most recent, lurid example has been a spate of lynchings of small-town officials in Guatemala, Peru, and Bolivia. For yet another, the "Washington consensus"—the commitment to more open, freer economies—is now regarded as an unfortunate episode forced upon the region by a selfish, grasping, and unfeeling United States. The project for a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) sponsored by the first Bush and Clinton administrations is often depicted as a conspiracy to exploit and subjugate Latin economies. In its place many now look to the creation of regional trade blocs as a better alternative. At the same time, there is a deep resentment against the Bush administration for allegedly ignoring the region and its problems.

To be sure, not all of notions above are accurate, or even coherent. What is true is that Latin America is not the most important region for U.S. policymakers and is not likely to be at any time in the foreseeable future. It would be quite amazing if it were. Partly due to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, partly as the result of the emergence of a rogue nuclear state in North Korea, U.S. security concerns have decisively shifted to the Middle East and North Asia. Even our relations with Western Europe have lost some of their salience.

Even so, this does not mean that Latin America will disappear entirely from the U.S. national agenda, or even that it has done so during the course of the present administration. It is worth recalling that last year a free trade agreement with Chile was concluded after nearly a decade of postponements by the previous administration, and there is significant movement toward a similar agreement with the Central American republics. Immigration issues will remain important, particularly in the U.S. relationship with Mexico. Given the weak economic performance in most of the region—as well as a fractious political environment in Venezuela and Cuba's problematic future—we can expect the U.S.-based diasporas of all the republics to grow in size.

Views from Abroad

The whole notion of "Latin America" is something of a geographical abstraction. What we have south of the United States are a series of societies, many of them—in spite of superficial similarities—surprisingly different from one another. Likewise, attitudes toward the United States vary, according to historical experience and cultural predisposition. The classic case of a "love-hate" relationship is Mexico, which admires, envies, and attempts to replicate the

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United States. But it also resents it—deeply. Mexicans have never forgotten the loss of nearly half of their territory to the United States in 1848 or the intervention of U.S. military forces during the Revolution of 1910. At the same time, the very proximity of the United States—a far more successful society—acts as a permanent wound to Mexican self-esteem.

Quite apart from their history and because their consumer culture has been so heavily influenced by the United States, particularly since the NAFTA agreements, Mexicans feel the periodic need to reassert their independence. This explains, for example, Mexico's reluctance to support efforts to invoke the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (the so-called Rio Treaty) after the attack on the World Trade Center, as well as its refusal last year to support the United States at the UN Security Council on Iraq.[1] Mexican ambivalence toward the United States is buttressed by the inconvenient fact that some 8 million or more of its nationals live and work here, and their remittances to their families back home constitute a safety net crucial to the nation's stability. Indeed, President Vicente Fox has publicly stated more than once that the prosperity of Mexico is dependent upon continued U.S. economic expansion.

Even Mexican attitudes toward the United States *as a society* are complicated. The U.S. media made much of a soccer game last year at which Mexican crowds cheered for Osama bin Laden, but a recent survey reveals ordinary citizens of that country divided right down the middle in their attitudes toward their northern neighbor—as many with positive as negative views. This is all the more remarkable because the major Mexican media does all it can to depict this country in the darkest tones, particularly with regard to the treatment of racial and national minorities. Apparently its representations are not wholly persuasive, to judge by the number of Mexicans who wish to come to this country and are turned away at the border every day.

At the other end of the continent are Argentina and Uruguay, both strongly influenced by Western Europe. Most of their citizens are descendants of Spaniards and Italians who emigrated in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth (with an additional burst after the Second World War). Elite culture in these countries has been strongly influenced by France, so that their educated and political classes have tended to view the United States somewhat condescendingly. Also, for many decades the social democratic model of European statecraft held considerably more appeal than the putatively rough-and-ready style of American free-wheeling capitalism. The years of Argentine president Carlos Menem (1989–1999) were a radical exception to this rule—a decade marked by extensive privatization of state corporations and diplomatic alignment with the United States in world affairs—and their termination in economic collapse has only underscored the decision of President Néstor Kirchner to distance himself from Washington. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that anti-Americanism these days has become an important element of Argentine self-definition. The country's rapidly declining geopolitical weight has somewhat neutralized the effect as far as the United States is concerned.

Brazil is perhaps the only country in Latin America that can be compared to the United States. It is a large continent-island, turned inward culturally but radiating enormous influence in its region and to some extent beyond it. Like the United States, it has a global foreign policy. It sees Washington as its rival for influence in South America, and its willingness to put regional issues first has given it important leverage over its neighbors. Its own project of regional integration, MERCOSUR (or MERCOSUL in Portuguese), is obviously intended to act as a counterweight to Washington's FTAA and, for all one can know, may succeed in doing so. Other countries, notably Mexico and Venezuela, recently announced their readiness to join MERCOSUR, though how this would affect the former's membership in NAFTA remains unclear.

Brazilians do not particularly like the United States but—unlike Mexicans—they are far from obsessed with it. They have too much going on in their own society, which they see as an emerging world power. Theirs is the only Latin American country with important cultural exports—software, technology, and entertainment. Paradoxically, although its president, Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva, has a long history of antiglobalization and anticapitalist militance, his relationship with President George W. Bush—in many ways his ideological polar opposite—is surprisingly good.[2] There have already been two Brazilian-U.S. summits (one including all the members of their respective cabinets), and Brazilian diplomacy has skillfully promoted the country to cochairmanship of the hemispheric integration process (a process for which, for reasons of its own, Brazil has not evinced much enthusiasm).

Chile is a somewhat unusual case. Formerly one of the more statist-populist political cultures of the region, since the mid-1970s it has been the most successful proponent of the Washington consensus. It has experienced virtually

uninterrupted economic growth under a succession of governments, starting with the military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet (1973–1989) and continuing with elected Christian-Democratic and Socialist coalitions. Chile's very success has somewhat isolated it diplomatically in the region; a combination of envy and irredentism on the part of two of its neighbors has added to the subregional tension. Meanwhile, its conclusion of a free trade agreement with the United States has caused some of its adversaries to refer to it, rather unflatteringly, as "the Israel of South America."

As if to counteract unfavorable regional winds, Chile has been careful not to tack too closely to the more controversial international proposals of the United States, such as war with Iraq. On the other hand, it has been a reasonably faithful ally in other matters relating to inter-American relations, most notably in providing troops for the UN peace force in Haiti. Although both far left and far right in Chile have reasons to resent the United States (the former for its opposition to Socialist president Salvador Allende, the latter for its refusal to support continued military rule), most Chileans like and admire this country, and relations between the two governments have been generally excellent.

The most troubled region politically is the Andes—Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Colombia. Recent issues of this *Outlook* have discussed four of the five of these countries in some detail. Colombia has an unusually close relationship with the United States, thanks to a plan inaugurated by the Clinton administration to provide it with economic and military aid to confront the combined menace of a guerrilla insurgency and a movement of narco-gangsters both left and right. So far the U.S. role in that country has enjoyed considerable popular support, despite continual complaints from various human rights organizations. And under President Alvaro Uribe, Colombia has become one of the sturdier allies of the United States within inter-American councils, partly because both countries share an adversary in Venezuela's president Hugo Chávez.

Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador are societies slowly being strangled in the roots of their own history—the exploitation and neglect of indigenous populations is coming home to roost. Identity politics, driven by urbanization of rural folk and often funded by European NGOs, bids fair to replace the traditional class-based electoral left. The U.S. drug eradication program is unwelcome to the Indian peasantry, particularly in Bolivia, all the more so because ordinary folk have not benefited significantly from the larger export industries—minerals, oil, and natural gas. In the case of Bolivia, the political class has cleverly turned popular resentment against the foreign companies who make possible extractive activities, as opposed to the politicians who squander (and steal) the royalties they generate. The fact that many are based in the United States adds a *soupçon* of "anti-imperialist" flavoring to the ideological stew.

In the midst of the Andean whirlpool stands Venezuela, or rather, Venezuela's president, Hugo Chávez, who has set himself up as the principal enemy of American influence in the region. Armed with as much as $20 billion in discretionary funds each year, he has set out to buy support in South America through transfers of oil and gas or outright grants of money to political organizations. His vision is to create a South American alternative to the FTAA, starting with a regional state energy company (*Petroamérica*). Chávez's ambitions undoubtedly run well beyond his capacities. Even if he wins a referendum scheduled later this month, he is bound to face continued opposition at home. And many countries in South America, while willing to accept concessionary arrangements to buy Venezuelan energy, will doubtless reserve themselves the right to decide how to manage their relationships with the United States.

Growing Apart

In a recent television interview broadcast in all eighteen Spanish-speaking Latin American countries with *Miami Herald* journalist Andrés Oppenheimer, Senator John Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate, sharply criticized the Bush administration's Latin American policies and—if elected—promised to devote more attention to the region. His proposals, however, with one exception (an annual $500 million development fund) were in no way different from those of the administration he seeks to replace. Even his views on Venezuela and Cuba were not perceptibly different. He kept reiterating that he would approach the region with more respect and in a more cooperative spirit, which—he insisted—would produce greater alignment with U.S. goals, even on such prickly issues as Cuba. When asked about his impressions of various Latin American leaders, however, the senator did not seem to be more knowledgeable than President Bush was at the same point in his campaign four years ago.

At the end of the interview, Oppenheimer told his viewers that he found Kerry's interest in the region

gratifying and even hopeful. He might have added that since the senator is not President Bush—by now hugely unpopular in Latin America, largely though not exclusively because of the Iraq war—he would come into office with an initial advantage. But Latins, like other foreigners, tend to give Senator Kerry credit that he has yet to earn (and may indeed never earn). In the case of their own region, the outcome of the U.S. elections is probably irrelevant. The longer-term trends are pushing many countries backwards—and at the same time, away from the United States. They cannot easily be reversed, and many of the same people in Latin America who call for leadership from the White House and the State Department are also prepared to reject it when offered, taking refuge under a tent labeled "multilateralism."

There is a limit to U.S. hegemony even when Washington is actively trying to exercise it; to the extent that Latin America becomes—in the near future, at least—a secondary or tertiary field of strategic interest, the writ of our hemispheric policy is likely to be extremely limited. Whether this is good or bad for Latin America, or for that matter, the United States, remains to be seen. If history is any guide, the effects will be both positive and negative, often in ways difficult to foresee.

Notes

1. It is certainly true that the weapons of mass destruction that were the centerpiece of the U.S. case have not been found, thus justifying the Mexican position *ex post facto*. Nonetheless, even if they had existed—and in abundance—Mexico would have surely voted exactly the same way.

2. After his first meeting at the White House, Lula told the Brazilian media that President Bush was "quite different from the way he appears on television"—presumably meant as a compliment, but it also amounts to an oblique critique of media coverage of the president.