

Gobernabilidad y
Convivencia Democrática
en América Latina



Governance and Stability in the Americas. The Obama Administration, First Year in Latin America.

The Obama Administration cannot be very happy with developments in inter-American relations during his first year in office.

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For four crucial months, as Honduras became a test of US policy in Latin America, a Republican minority in Congress blocked the appointment of Obama's senior policy official for Latin America, and—more generally—threw a monkey wrench into the Administration's efforts to design a coherent response to the Honduran crisis and other challenges in hemispheric affairs. And Republicans continue to bar the naming of American ambassador to Brazil, and have stymied consideration of the crucial issue of immigration reform.

Democrats in Congress and their allies in the US labor movement have made it impossible for the Administration to deal responsibly with critical trade matters. They have prevented the approval of free trade agreements signed with two close allies, Colombia and Panama, and—in violation of the US-Mexican free trade pact—continue to bar Mexican trucks from US highways. The Administration, to its credit, was able to limit the reach of the protectionist "Buy America" clause demanded by the Democrats in the economic stimulus legislation.

It was not long after the April 2009 Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago, where President Obama's was warmly welcome by Latin American leaders from

across the political spectrum, that the region's governments began to make life more difficult than anticipated for the new administration in Washington.

At the OAS's General Assembly meeting in early June, the US reluctantly signed on to a unanimously-approved resolution that set a path for Cuba's return to the hemispheric organization. Although the resolution was a constructive step and fully consistent with US policy, American diplomats felt unduly pressed to sign onto a document they felt could interfere with their cautious, bilateral approach to the politically perilous task of re-engaging Cuba, which had already produced some modest but important changes.

When the initial response of the OAS, supported by every member government (including the US) failed to reverse the Honduran coup and return President Zelaya to power, the consensus fractured and opinion in the US and the rest of the hemisphere quickly polarized on what to do next. The Obama Administration, without its senior Latin American diplomat, came under intense pressure from both sides. Now that it has decided to recognize the results of recent Honduran presidential elections, without the restoration of Zelaya, Washington finds



itself at odds with most other governments of the hemisphere. The Honduran crisis has demonstrated how difficult it will be for the Obama Administration to pursue multilateral approaches in a politically divided Latin America.

In the midst of the Honduras affair, nearly every South American government vehemently condemned a US-Colombian agreement authorizing US troops to use Colombian military bases to help combat drugs and guerrillas. Latin America's deep distrust of the US (despite their warm feelings toward Obama) was on full display as the continent's other governments demanded to review every detail of the agreement and sought formal guarantees that US military activities would be restricted to Colombia. Colombia's South American neighbors may have overreacted, but it is true as well that both Colombia and the US managed the incident poorly. Greater transparency and wider consultation from the outset were called for.

In its early months, the Obama Administration viewed Brazil as a promising partner on both regional and international issues, but the two governments have since ended up disagreeing on most important matters. Both nations have been disappointed and frustrated with the other. Brazil has been a harsh critic of the US-Colombia base accord and of Washington's approach in Honduras. While President Lula has helped to moderate Chavez's belligerence toward the US, he has stopped short of challenging his assaults on democracy at home, or his interventionism in South and Central America. Brazil's close relationship with Iranian president Ahmadinejad has also deeply troubled the US, particularly Lula's defense of Iranian nuclear policies and his seeming indifference to Iran's crackdown on dissent and threats against Israel. US-Brazil cooperation on the Doha round and on biofuel develop appears stalled. One year, after President Obama's historic election, Lula told the Financial Times that the US was "not paying attention to Latin America. Despite the handshakes and smiles in Trinidad, President Chavez has zealously stuck to his anti-US agenda in the Americas. He remains a dangerous and disruptive force

in inter-American affairs and a relentless and malicious opponent of the US. Rather than directly attack Obama (as he did Bush) as responsible for US aggression and 'imperial' policies, Chavez dismisses Obama as well-intentioned, but too weak to curb predatory agencies like the Pentagon and the CIA.

Interestingly, what many feared would be the toughest challenge for Latin America, and potentially most harmful for US relations with the region—the global financial crisis—has turned out to far less destructive than had been feared. The economic and social damage in most places has been kept in check, and growth is returning to the region. Although the crisis was essentially "made in the USA," the recriminations against Washington have been limited. The credit goes mostly to the governments of Latin America for their economic management in the years prior to the downturn, which left nearly every country well prepared to withstand the external shocks.

Still, the Obama Administration, in short, has a tough agenda ahead (although it has been clearly been made more manageable by the recent Senate confirmation of Arturo Valenzuela as the key policy manager for Latin America).

Honduras is the most urgent priority. US post-coup policy demonstrated the Administration's commitment to multilateralism in the Americas, but recent developments threaten to alienate many countries in the hemisphere. The challenge is for the US, working through the OAS, to find a formula that would allow most countries to recognize the legitimacy of the newly elected Honduran government and to identify a better way for governments collectively to respond to coups and other violations of democracy. If this cannot be done, the Administration will then have to manage its Latin America agenda with another serious unresolved issue.

Another critical task is to reassure Colombia of continuing US support as it battles guerrillas and drug traffickers, and faces neighboring Venezuela's aggressive threats of war. The Colombian government is already

disheartened by the Obama Administration's failure to secure congressional approval of its free trade accord. Colombia is not so much worried that Venezuela will start a war—but that Chavez will step up aid to the FARC guerrillas, who already enjoy safe haven in Venezuela, and prolong Colombia's internal conflict. But the Obama Administration's challenge is more complex than merely helping Colombia withstand Venezuela's bullying tactics. It must also work to persuade Colombia's government to do more to curb abuses of human rights, better control its intelligence and security services, and keep its paramilitary forces disarmed. Washington must as well assure other South American countries that the US access to Colombian military bases is no threat to any of them.

Responding to Venezuela and its ALBA allies will require a delicate balancing act. Confrontation with Hugo Chavez is usually counterproductive, most often emboldening rather than containing him. Washington also has to be wary that its treatment of Venezuela not harm its relations with other nations. Still, it will be hard for the US to ignore Chavez's violations of democratic norms, his interference in other countries' affairs, and his deepening relations with Iran. Attentive management and flexibility will be required.

Getting relations with Brazil on track is another critical task, given that US agenda in Latin America often depends on the quality of US-Brazilian ties. It is task made much harder by the delay in the Senate's confirmation of Tom Shannon (Valenzuela's predecessor) as the new US ambassador. The Administration's main challenge may not be to find common ground with Brazil, but to expect, accept, and work around policy disagreements and divergent approaches. It is also to persuade the US congress of the need for new US trade and energy rule that take better account of Brazil's significance for US foreign policy.

Mexico's multiple problems, including the steepest economic downturn in all of Latin America and a relentless wave of crime and violence, are a special challenge for the US. No country in the world is more important to the US than Mexico, and its problems have no ready fix. Long-term, constructive cooperation between the US and Mexico will require painful reforms and policy changes in both countries. For its part, the US will have to repair its broken immigration system, rethink its drug policies, and as NAFTA requires, allow Mexican trucks to operate inside the US. Beyond Mexico, the US also has to be concerned about the deepening and destabilizing security challenges confronting its other near neighbors in Central America and the Caribbean.

Finally, the Obama Administration should do all it can to sustain its step by step strategy toward re-engaging Cuba, which has produced promising results without having generated the feared political resistance. A genuine breakthrough is possible here—and would have an immediately positive effect across Latin America.

By and large, hemispheric relations have taken a disappointing course during the first year of Obama Administration, and the US has suffered several political setbacks in Latin America. Although he remains widely admired across the region, Obama has surely learned by now that building a constructive relationship with the region will not be easy. In order to succeed, the Administration will have to work harder, in Washington and in the region, and invest more of its already thinly stretched political, intellectual, and financial resources in this hemisphere. Latin American governments will need to work harder as well



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