

Obama's Visit to Latin America: A View from the South

Sergio Bitar



Introduction

Prompted by President Obama's planned March 2011 visit to Latin America, we are pleased to offer these reflections prepared by Sergio Bitar. A long-time member and currently visiting senior fellow of the Inter-American Dialogue, Bitar served as senator as well as minister of energy and mines, education, and public works in three separate administrations in Chile. His sophisticated and wide-ranging perspective about the present moment and opportunity for relations between the United States and Latin America merits public dissemination and spirited discussion. We hope that Bitar's views, which do not necessarily represent the opinions of Dialogue members or staff, contribute to a more constructive consideration of inter-American affairs.

Michael Shifter
President

Since the start of the Obama administration, two shifts in Latin Americans' perceptions of the United States have been apparent: There is greater affection for Obama, and there has been more criticism of the United States.

As opinion polls indicate, there is indeed affection for Obama.

Why? Because he represents a kind of pluralist leadership, more open and more disposed to dialogue. Because he is less remote, people like him, and he is seen as the underdog who emerged to defeat the traditional elites. He speaks of matters that are of concern to everybody: poverty and inequality, security, democracy and human rights. The esteem in which he is held offers substantial capital for the United States—capital that could help forge a better policy and a better relationship with Latin America.

At the same time, and dating from the previous administration, there has been greater criticism of the United States, which triggered a financial crisis whose impact is global, a crisis that has spurred unemployment and caused uncertainty in the South—because its enormous debt has weakened the dollar and hurt Latin America's non-traditional exports, and because it has pursued an aggressive policy of military action in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Mexico and Central America, drug trafficking and crime that threaten democratic institutions are seen partly as the outcome of flawed US drug policies that have not been coordinated with the affected countries. In short, the United States is criticized because it has acted unilaterally, without regard for the impact of its actions on others, in an increasingly inter-connected and multi-polar world.

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Obama is still benefiting from the “Teflon effect.” But that effect could dissipate if the president’s commitments are put on hold or fail to materialize. Moreover, it should be kept in mind that—despite the esteem in which Obama is held—in Latin America there will always be a backdrop that filters and reinterprets the words and actions of the United States: a history of interference and invasion, and indulgence of the dictatorships that plagued the region in the 1970s and 1980s.

How can these considerations be taken into account in a visit that anticipates a new approach?

I suggest that President Obama’s approach to Latin America should be the same as his strategic speeches in other parts of the world, such as Cairo and New Delhi. And he should project a long horizon—say, 2011 to 2020—with a view to the issues of the future.

A long-term view could anticipate a new stage in relations, as the president outlined in his speech at the 2009 Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago.

What distinguishes the speeches in Egypt and India from the discourse toward Latin Americans?

In the former addresses, Obama described the US vision of the modern world and stated his priorities. He acknowledged the existing differences and tensions (in Cairo: “many Muslims view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam;” “we meet at a time of great tension between the US and Muslims”). And he declared that each country decides its own national interests (in New Delhi: “only Indians can determine India’s national interests”).

On the basis of this outlook, he invited a search for areas of agreement, grounded in shared values, with the purpose of reaching better understanding. In Cairo and New Delhi he emphasized different issues, but they were expressed in similar ways: “I have come to Cairo to seek a new beginning... based on mutual respect and mutual interests... We share common principles: justice, progress, tolerance and dignity.” “The interests of the United States and the interests we share with India are better advanced in partnership... To build a partnership of the 21st century.”

Towards Latin America, by contrast, the discourse seems somewhat paternalistic. It addresses the region’s problems but makes no mention of the problems of the United States. There is no shared global outlook to serve as the basis for a common agenda. Constant reference is made to steps that should be taken in Latin America. Many of these could be broadly shared (for example, the four pillars of a policy outlined by Secretary of State Clinton in her speech in Ecuador on June 8, 2010). But Latin Americans will pay closer attention to them if they are presented in line with the measures that the United States is taking and the goals it has set in its domestic policy (State of the Union address, 2011). There is a very close match between that message to the US Congress and the goals and policies of many Latin American countries in fields such as education, infrastructure, services, the efficiency of the state apparatus, energy, the environment and research (even though they are admittedly of a different order of magnitude and depth).

A second difference between the speeches in Egypt and India and the discourse towards Latin America is that President Obama acknowledges the shifts in relative power at the global level, and on that basis he calls for efforts to forge a new, more reliable and more transparent relationship. This is not the case for Latin America, where the speeches and conversations are confined to hemispheric issues, despite the global nature of the phenomena in question and Latin America's growing capacity to tackle some of them without the participation of the United States.

It is helpful, therefore, to specify the new global challenges that offer a firm foundation for joint multilateral action.

Latin America is stronger than before

To that end, it is essential to recognize that Latin America has acquired an economic dimension and an institutional solidity that will continue to be consolidated. Economic policies have been effective in the great majority of the region's countries, fiscal deficits are smaller, and banking regulation is better. Markets have diversified, there are more free trade agreements, and expansion in Asia is fostering exports from many countries, with better prices for raw materials and new investments. The region's macroeconomic management is in contrast to the situation in the United States and Europe: inadequate regulation, the near-collapse of the financial system, huge deficits and fiscal debt.

It is also crucial to highlight the progress made on democracy in Latin America and the efforts to tackle the region's vast inequalities through various social policies—fighting poverty and giving priority to education.

Moreover, it is worth recalling that Latin America now has greater autonomy to engage in global affairs. We should not disregard Brazil's initiative with Turkey in relations with Iran; Chile and Mexico's opposition to the invasion of Iraq and their corresponding vote in the UN Security Council in the face of US pressure; several Latin American countries' support for Haiti with troops and resources, both before and after the earthquake; and the recognition recently granted to the Palestinian state by several countries of South America.

To point out the foregoing is not to minimize or overlook Latin America's weaknesses and deficiencies, but these key developments do offer a basis for a more robust shared outlook.

If Obama acknowledges that Latin America questions the United States, his credibility will grow, affection for him will persist, and more solid bases could be established for future relations.

A more balanced partnership to tackle new global challenges

There are two options: either the two sides can deepen a forward-looking vision of an increasingly multi-polar world in order to build a new partnership, as the president mentioned in Trinidad ("an equal partnership... no senior partner and junior partner... to launch a new chapter of engagement") or the relationship can continue to be a collection of minor programs of scant significance. Today, "aid" to the region is much diminished and it is practically irrelevant for some countries, especially in South America.

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A genuine partnership should cover the problems that affect Latin America and also those of concern to the United States, giving rise to a hemisphere-wide way of thinking and an overall outlook of common interest. Outcomes are better when Latin America is consulted or informed about US policies that affect the countries of the region.

Though Obama's most recent speeches on Latin America and the Caribbean (Trinidad and Tobago, 2009) rectify traditional thinking and suggest a new direction, this effort is still only half complete. It is better, therefore, to finish what has already begun. It is more innovative to strengthen a global outlook, not to take as given the strategic agreements between Latin America, the Caribbean and the United States.

A more substantive framing will open the way to bigger thinking and to more ambitious joint endeavors.

Which issues, tackled jointly by the United States and Latin America, could make a difference in the future?

The principles and values that Latin America and the United States share require no elaboration: democracy and human rights, social equality and inclusion, justice and security, prosperity, employment and world peace. In most cases, these things do indeed prevail. And there is a close economic, social, cultural and familial relationship.

The main question concerns the concrete issues on which shared agendas take shape. The first and most urgent for the United States are immigration and drug trafficking. In these two areas Obama should be explicit about his policies. New legislation on immigration is under discussion and, though this is a domestic issue, it has a significant impact on neighboring countries. It is worth making plain how the status of many Latin American immigrants is to be regularized, and it would be useful to keep in mind the disappointment in Latin America caused by the wall on the border with Mexico. Immigration is not solely a problem. It is appropriate to acknowledge the contribution it makes to US growth.

It is also helpful to take the same attitude towards new US anti-drug policies—reducing consumption and controlling the traffic in weapons to criminal organizations operating outside the United States. Obama has reiterated this, though progress has been meager. In this area there is room to strengthen joint activities. The United States should contain and reduce the demand for drugs within its borders, something that thus far has met with little success. All the countries of the region have embarked on the same task, since consumption is growing daily. Drug-producing countries should continue with their plans to eradicate and convert coca plantations, and in that regard there is opportunity for agreements with the United States.

This, however, is not enough. There is a need for a large-scale joint initiative to fight against criminal gangs in all the countries, and to attack the traffic in drugs from south to north. There are transnational organizations in the region that individual countries cannot tackle in isolation. This has to be a joint effort by all countries, with the United States taking the lead coordinating role.

Apart from drug trafficking and immigration to the United States, it is also worth pursuing outcomes in at least three other areas where US and Latin American goals coincide: (a) that Latin America continues to grow at a high rate and opens its markets to flows of trade and investment both to and from the countries of the region; (b) that current democratic processes continue to deepen, that there are no backward steps, and that a transition to democracy begins in Cuba; and (c) that there is better multilateral coordination on matters of global interest.

On Cuba, President Obama has taken useful measures to boost the flow of people and resources to the country, but the embargo is still in place and by now it is beyond question that it has not achieved its aims. On the contrary, it has given the Cuban government a pretext to justify the lack of freedoms on the island and the country's isolation.

Moving toward a new strategic partnership and a common agenda

Latin America's priorities are similar to those of the United States, but the region has different approaches, which should be put on the table with a view to devising a common agenda for 2020.

With regard to boosting growth and reducing poverty and inequality, the main contribution the United States can make to the region's development is to institute a regulatory and oversight system to prevent new financial crises. The damage caused by deregulation and the recklessness of Wall Street and of the previous US administration has been infinitely greater than could possibly be rectified by all the plans and aid programs for Latin America that could be devised by the US government. In this area, the president should mention the legislative reforms that have already been approved by the US Congress.

Latin America also hopes the Obama administration will be more resolute in seeking to obtain approval of free trade agreements (Colombia and Panama).

There should be a new phase of closer collaboration between the United States and Latin America in the areas of technology, energy and the environment. An important field in this regard is scientific and technological research for innovations in processing raw materials and increasing their value added. While China buys raw materials, Latin America needs to enhance its capacity to process these materials. Here the United States can make a difference.

Equally valuable, given rising international demand, are agreements in biotechnology to build up Latin America's capacity to produce high-quality foodstuffs for export. This goes hand-in-hand with training experts and introducing joint research and graduate programs between the United States and Latin America. (One good bet is to see which will be the first to acquire a good command of Spanish and English—the first to become bilingual.)

The medium-sized countries of South America are expanding their markets and looking increasingly to China and Asia. They are revising their infrastructure projects and diversifying their energy mix. Innovation in renewable or non-polluting energy, especially solar and nuclear, is a matter of keen interest for several countries, including Chile, Argentina and Uruguay.

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With Brazil, which has a substantial industrial base and a large domestic market, the United States could propose collaboration in the aeronautical, nuclear and energy (ethanol) fields, or in others that will be significant in the future.

Regarding the environment, Latin America has large tropical and temperate forest reserves, and large water reserves (glaciers in Patagonia). The preservation of those forests, as well as reforestation, could be the subjects of a broad agreement on carbon absorption and care of the planet. The United States could take the initiative and could rely on support from every country of the region.

In the area of social policies, Latin America has been innovating and has been paying ever more attention to education. The most useful thing in this regard is the exchange of experiences among Latin American countries. The United States could help facilitate the transmission of good educational practices. At heart, however, these are national policies.

Democracy and global governance

Latin America's priority is to consolidate democracy, strengthen democratic institutions, and expand participation and local-municipal power. This challenge is particularly important in Central America, where there is an urgent need to fight organized crime and strengthen democratic institutions. This is a very significant undertaking to which everyone can make a contribution—helping to devise policies, to offer advice in criminal investigations, and to support the governmental bodies responsible for public order with procedural matters, or with new technologies. A hemisphere-wide program could be expanded and strengthened with more resources to transfer best practices from those Latin American countries that are currently the most prepared. Progress in Mexico and Colombia is crucial for all.

All countries should reinforce their commitment to act together to avert democratic deterioration, as happened recently in Honduras and Ecuador. They should also warn against abuse of power and institutional weakening, as reflected in the granting of special powers to the president of Venezuela by a lame-duck Congress.

It is also the responsibility of each country in the Americas, north and south, to devise a large-scale plan for Haiti. In recent years, for the first time, we have seen several Latin American countries becoming involved. Conditions are right to demonstrate a capacity for new multilateral action.

Deepening democracy should be the preferred field of action of the Organization of American States. The OAS will only retain its credibility if it concentrates on and shows results in this area, with the determined support of member countries.

Latin America hopes to play an active role on global issues (reform of the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other global organizations, the G20, APEC, the Ibero-American Summits, and the BRIC grouping). Consultations in this area between the United States and Latin America could be better managed and more active.

The G20 will have more responsibilities in the future. Three Latin American countries are members and they have initiated consultations among themselves, but there have been no

initiatives to consult and coordinate with the Latin American non-members. This is a job for the Latin Americans, but the United States could promote such coordination—indicating its intentions to Brazil, Argentina and Mexico, and making them public in Chile—for the Latin American non-members.

The shifts in relative power in the world have stimulated various debates. One concerns the decline of the United States. Whatever the arguments for and against, I think it would be useful during his trip to Latin America to hear Obama's thoughts on "how to win the future," as he expressed it in his State of the Union address.

Global governance, inspired by the values of democracy, development, and peace, can only come about by means of concerted multilateral action. That calls for leadership, but the United States cannot do it alone; it requires multilateral agreements. Joint action with Latin America would then acquire a new dimension.

One discourse—with three different emphases

One general notion should serve to frame specific situations in Latin America. Each joint initiative, with a country or a group of countries, should have a common thread and a broad, encompassing vision. That narrative does not exist today.

In El Salvador, Obama will have a chance to stress economic development, migration, remittances, and joint efforts to tackle organized crime in Central America, where the United States has a greater capacity to influence the course of events.

In Brazil, the president should offer the clearest expression of the new form of global partnership in the areas of energy, the environment, research and innovation.

And Chile is a good example (1990 to 2010) of a successful development process that combines democratic, economic, and social change. Moreover, it has been exemplary in investigating human rights abuses by the judicial system, extending up to the present day.

Santiago is an appropriate institutional stage from which to speak of a shared agenda with all of Latin America and the Caribbean. Several of the challenges facing the United States are the same as those confronting Latin America: education, scientific and technological research, infrastructure, regulation, social inclusion, reform of the public administration and so on. Clearly, the challenges are of a different scale, complexity and scope, but they show that there is a common agenda that can and should be addressed jointly, through partnership.

Fifty years ago the Alliance for Progress was launched to help bring about more harmonious hemispheric development. It was a closed and divided world. Today the world is open and fast-paced, circumstances that favor a new partnership for the twenty-first century, inspired by innovation and grounded in mutual global responsibilities. This should be the new framework for the visit of a president of such standing and vision as Obama.

The current US president's advantages are that he is well liked by Latin Americans and he has a global, forward-looking vision. On his visit, he should emphasize those assets.

“ The framework for Obama's visit should be a new partnership for the 21st century, inspired by innovation and grounded in mutual global responsibility. ”

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