
There is a major paradox in current United States-Latin America relations. In the very decade which many saw as the apex of Washington’s latest and univelled “imperial moment”, the Monroe doctrine - the notion, outlined by the US president in 1823, that the US regards any attempt by other powers to exercise influence in the region to its south as “dangerous to our peace and safety” - has collapsed.

It is bad enough that across Latin America governments have come to power which challenge Washington’s interests - and whose leaders in some cases express bitter hostility to the United States and its past and present influence. What is worse is the arrival of new agents from the ranks of the US’s rivals or adversaries. The Chinese are coming to the area with resources, trade, and soft power; the Russians are returning with renewed military muscle; the Iranians are closer, both diplomatically and in terms of energy politics. Politically, India and South Africa are approaching the region. Japan seems interested in improving commercial relations with the area. Don’t forget the Europeans either: in the near future, even the nuclear issue may re-emerge in European-Latin American relations.

It should be evident by now that the Latin American policy of the George W Bush administration - now moving towards an unalmented close - has been unable to change this course of events and initiatives. Washington’s pattern of behaviour for a long time reveals it to be trapped in the role of a frustrated superpower: where exaggerated hopes of a major breakthrough in a peripheral area are followed by fresh disappointments, a process that in turn (and paradoxically) reinforces the original ineffective strategy - and deepens the frustration. At some point, however, reality intervenes - and this complex ends up by inflicting serious damage on the US’s own interests at home and abroad.

A map of failure

The last months of 2008 are a moment when this outcome needs to be registered by the United States - so that after the election of a new president on 4 November (and his inauguration in January 2009), at least some ground is cleared for a renewal of frayed relationships in Latin America.

The degree of damage can be variously estimated. A recent indicator is the expulsion in the second week of September 2008 of the US ambassadors in Bolivia and Venezuela. The polarisation this reveals exceeds that even in other global hotspots where Washington is embroiled (central Asia or the middle east, for example). Meanwhile, Ecuador - like these two other countries, in the middle of a period of intense politicisation and constitutional change - has decided that it will not renew the use of the Manta base, where 450 US military personnel and contractors are stationed, when it becomes due in 2009.

This diplomatic breakdown reflects wider policy failures. The two leading (and hugely expensive) projects of the United States’s much-vaulted “drug war” - Plan Colombia and the Andean Initiative - have failed completely. By now drugs are cheaper, purer, and more available in the United States than in the late 1990s. In face of this reality, the US government has decided to aid Mexico with a similar - that is, supply-oriented and highly-militarised - scheme, Plan Merida.

The White House and the Congress are alike in their inability to develop or agree on a realistic migration policy vis-a-vis Latin America; they have also been unable to devise an integrated energy strategy with respect to the import of the closest and most secure source available to the US.-
(hydrocarbons). Washington's policies in various sub-regions are also ineffective and / or incoherent. In the Caribbean, for example, they seem to be ordered around three principles: preservation of the (futile in domestic terms, and criticised around the world) embargo on Cuba; insistence on the continuation of a four-year United Nations military operation in Haiti that resembles a neo-protectorate; and socio-economic disdain for the rest of the basin.

In strategic terms too, there is a mix of arbitrariness and counterproductive action. The decision by the US military's Miami-based Southern Command to reactivate the navy's IV Fleet (which had been disestablished in 1956) had the effect of accelerating Brazil's proposal to create a "South American Defence Council" without any participation by the United States. The thinking behind this military decision, sanctioned in Washington and implemented in Miami, was never explained to the civilian authorities in Latin America. It's no surprise that this is perceived (rightly or wrongly) as an aggressive, unnecessary move, generating fear among many governments and growing anti-Americanism among large sectors of the population.

A plan for renewal

But the US's repetition of erroneous policies, and the gross misunderstanding of present-day Latin America on which they are so often based, are more than just "bureaucratic" matters. When they consider the region at all, most traditional United States think-tanks (liberal or conservative) - and for that matter the majority of the regional experts around presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama - offer a familiar diet of old formulas and policy guidelines. Their core elements, moreover, are often extremely simplistic, ideological, and outdated.

The implication is clear: that a genuine effort is needed on the part of the US to accommodate the region's - and other - perspectives and practical lenses. If this is not done, Americans (and Latin Americans) will witness another cycle of the same game: the same state and non-governmental actors to seriously rethink Latin America reality with new perspectives and practical lenses. If this is not done, Americans (and Latin Americans) will witness another cycle of the same game: the same state and non-governmental actors to seriously rethink Latin America reality with new perspectives and practical lenses.

The first step to a new hemispheric partnership is the recognition that the Monroe doctrine is, in the 21st century, quite dead - and that it should not be revived - by force or by any other form of pressure. An acceptance of this truth, however reluctant on the "northern" side, would be an enabling step towards a better and more serious inter-American dialogue.

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