LATIN AMERICA IN US FOREIGN POLICY: CHANGING INTERESTS, PRIORITIES AND POLICIES

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Summary

The significance of Latin American and Caribbean countries for the foreign policy of the United States has changed in recent years, more than the concepts many analysts use and the language that policymakers often employ.

From the late 19th century into the final decades of the twentieth, US government authorities (both in public statements and in secret documents) as well as outside experts usually asserted that Latin American and Caribbean countries were important for US foreign policy because of military security, political solidarity, and economic advantage, defined then primarily in terms of US imports of raw materials and agricultural products from Latin America and US investments in the region.

All three reasons for Latin America's supposed importance to the United States declined steadily from the mid-20th century to the 1990s. Revolutions in military technology and in maritime trade reduced the strategic significance of Latin America to the United States, even of the Panama Canal. The traditional diplomatic value of Latin America to the United States also declined sharply, beginning in the 1970s and the 1980s, as many Latin American countries increasingly expressed their solidarity with the Third World rather than with the United States and pursued their interests independently and Latin America's relative economic significance to the United States declined over many years, though it has made something of a comeback since the mid-1990s. A few Latin American countries, especially Mexico, are still important to the US economy, especially as markets, but Latin America's overall significance is less than that of Asia, the Middle East or Europe for the contemporary US economy.

But Latin American countries—especially the closest neighbors of the United States in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean and the region's largest and most influential country, Brazil—are increasingly important to the United States and its future in significant day-to-day terms.

First, there is a very high and still growing degree of demographic and economic interdependence between the United States and its closest neighbors. The salient issues in US relations with its closest neighbors are no longer classic questions of foreign policy and international relations as traditionally conceived but rather are "intermestic" issues—combining international and domestic features and facets.

Second, several Latin American and Caribbean countries are important to the United States because of the roles they do or might play in helping to solve (or worsen) significant global problems that the United States cannot successfully handle by itself, and on which close and sustained cooperation from regional partners is desirable or essential. These problems include climate change and other environmental issues, public health, narcotics, organized crime and youth gangs, food security, the protection of cyberspace, the reform of international trade and financial regimes, curbing nuclear proliferation and countering international terrorist movements.

Third, a few Latin American and Caribbean nations are still important for the economy of the United States, some increasingly so. This is particularly true of those countries that comprise large markets for the export of goods and services from the United States; those that offer significant investment opportunities for US firms; and those which are or may become substantial sources of energy, renewable or nonrenewable, to fuel the US economy.

Fourth, Latin America has some recurrent priority in the foreign relations of the United States because of values shared in the Americas, particularly regarding fundamental human rights.

This framework shows why the relationships with Mexico—and (to a lesser but important extent) the Caribbean and Central American countries in its immediate border region—are bound to be a high priority for the United States, for these countries are strongly relevant with regard to all four criteria.

Second, the framework suggests why managing its relationship with Brazil is an increasing priority for US foreign policy. Brazil is important as an arena for US investment; as a substantially and potentially even more important market for US goods and services; as a potentially important source of energy; and especially because of Brazil's current and prospectively greater significance as a global actor in dealing with major challenges ranging from climate change to nuclear proliferation, trade to energy, international peacekeeping to global governance.

Many Latin American countries matter to US foreign policymakers mainly to the extent that they present and/or help resolve troublesome concrete issues, such as narcotics and crime, infectious diseases, or the potential exploitation of failed governance by international criminal or potentially terrorist networks.

US attitudes toward the presence and influence in the Americas of extra-hemispheric powers are (or at least ought to be) very different from what they have been historically. China's commercial and investment presence in the Americas today far exceeds that of the Soviet Union or Germany in earlier periods, but the Chinese presence does not raise serious concerns for US policy. Russia's presence in the Americas, partly commercial but also political and military, has more to do with Russian attempts to establish that they want to be taken into account in international arenas (mainly with respect to other issues) than with presenting any consequential direct challenge to the United States or its interests in

the Western Hemisphere. Iran's efforts to build relationships with Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia, Argentina and potentially other countries is the one significant current extra-hemispheric concern for US policy, mainly because Iran and the United States appear to be on a broad collision course.

The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean have been moving in very different directions, and therefore pose very distinct challenges for US policy. Distinct patterns of US-Latin American relations stand out today: that with the closest neighbors of the United States in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean; with Brazil, the region's largest and most powerful country, rapidly emerging as a world power; with the countries of the Southern Cone; and with the "Bolivarian Alternative" nations, mainly in the Andean region, which differ among themselves but are all marked by gross inequities, dire poverty, and social and ethnic polarization.

Some within the US policy community and some in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean are beginning to understand the need to develop new concepts, attitudes, policies, modes of governance, norms and institutions to channel these complex and unique relations.

Brazil is perceived in US foreign policymaking circles an increasingly successful and influential country. The fundamental challenge for US-Brazil relations at this stage, despite differences and history, is to build greater synergy on major global issues: strengthening regimes for trade, finance and investment; developing and implementing measures to cope with climate change; preventing and responding to pandemics; curbing nuclear proliferation; and reforming international governance arrangements.

All the Andean countries, to differing but high degrees are plagued by severe problems of governance, deeply challenged political institutions, and the need to integrate large numbers of historically excluded citizens, living in poverty or extreme poverty, in many cases from indigenous backgrounds. US relations with all five Andean countries have been problematic, although they have become mostly positive with Colombia and Peru in recent years. The challenge for US policy has been to deal with each of the Andean nations on its own terms, in order to avoid confrontations that would facilitate their becoming an antagonistic bloc. Watchful waiting, more than close engagement, is the pattern of US policy toward and relations with Venezuela and its ALBA associates, in the Andean region and elsewhere.

U.S.-Latin American relations are complex and multi-faceted, not easily captured in broad phrases or simple paradigms. Neither an overarching partnership nor deep and general hostility characterizes inter-American relations today, nor is either extreme likely to prevail in the foreseeable future.