



EUROPEAN UNION – LATIN AMERICA RELATIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY: BETWEEN VOLUNTEERISM AND REALITY

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Summary

This essay examines the factors at play in biregional relations between the European Union (EU) and Latin America from the standpoint of the various parties involved. It begins with an evaluation of the premises that have informed those relations since the First ALCUE Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1999. The summit highlighted the existence of a community whose values and interests could serve as the underpinnings for the construction of a biregional “strategic alliance.” These values are associated with being part of western society and with shared perspectives on democracy, human rights, the rule of law and other principles that distinguish us from other cultures.

The above notwithstanding, very little progress has been made in the construction of such an alliance. This essay explores the impediments to significant, concrete progress and identifies the existing fracture on the Latin American side as one of the main obstacles to clear progress in the consolidation of biregional relations.

Changes in Europe since the EU’s expanded from 15 to 27 Member States, changes in Latin America with the advent of certain populist governments and others of a more social democratic bent, and even changes in the international sphere, have influenced the course of these relations. At the same time, both parties seem to lack clarity in their objectives and rhetoric frequently overshadows reality.

This essay offers an assessment of bilateral relations in the first decade of the 21st century, which have been marked by enormous asymmetries that ultimately have allowed Europe to impose its own agenda and viewpoints. As evident in the outcomes of the Madrid Summit, however, the circumstances are different this time. This is due the difficult straits facing the EU, where the 2008 international financial crisis has had a much more powerful impact, coupled with the economic successes that certain Latin American countries seem to be experiencing.

As an EU member with unique ties to Latin America, Spain is a linchpin in biregional relations. For this reason, its policy towards the region is compared to that of other countries, particularly those with more specific interests. The vision that emerges is one of

a cohort of European nations that are much less concerned about Latin America than some of their peers.

After exploring Europe's view of Latin America, the discussion changes direction to highlight the latter region's differing postures towards Europe. While some countries are very interested in strengthening their relations with the EU, others disregard the matter entirely.

EU-Latin American relations are then scrutinized through the lens of two specific sectors or areas: economics (trade and financial matters) and cooperation. This approach allows us to identify specific interests that could contribute to progress in certain aspects of biregional relations.

Finally we offer a very positive evaluation of the last Summit, with special mention of the outcomes concerning the negotiation of Association Agreements. We discuss the agreement with Central America (and Panama) and the multiparty agreements with Peru and Colombia, as well as the announced resumption of negotiations with MERCOSUR scheduled to begin in July 2010. The agreements with Peru and Colombia are significant in that they represent a major shift in what has been the EU's traditional doctrine as far as Latin American relations, in which the latter was downscaled to subregional, rather than bilateral, negotiations in the interest of regional integration in Latin America.

The main conclusions include the fact that up to now, EU-Latin American relations have been dominated by the weight of the topics and an abundance of volunteerism and good intentions. The two regions should therefore undertake to profoundly redefine the nature of their relations and the objectives that might feasibly be achieved. It is not a matter of engaging the debate in general terms to produce well-intentioned declarations, but rather one of trying to move ahead in areas that are germane to both parties leading to the consolidation of a relationship that is relevant for both sides.

At the present political juncture, it is clearly difficult, if not impossible, to move ahead in building a strategic alliance across the Atlantic. It is no longer just a matter of contradictions between the two blocs of countries, although they are significant, but rather one of profound divisions within the Latin American bloc. This is compounded by the confrontational approach of the ALBA countries, some of which outright reject being considered part of western civilization, while others denounce the EU for its imperialist, capitalist, and environmentally harmful positions, even going so far as to accuse it of being capable of fomenting an invasion of Latin America territory.

While the guiding principles of dialogue and the general objectives are relatively clear on the European side, this is not the case from the standpoint of Latin America. It is therefore not uncommon to hear European policy-makers contend that it falls to Latin America to clearly signal its will to pursue biregional relations. That being the case, it would be helpful if the most prominent social entities would clarify their position on the matter.

To the extent that there is a constructive attitude on both sides, however, important steps could be taken on certain global issues such as drug trafficking and climate change.

Progress on these fronts, however, will require a frank dialogue that is free of any propagandistic agenda and steers clear of purely media-driven or unrealistic postures.

Despite the asymmetries that have characterized biregional relations to date, it is possible to move forward through a dialogue between equals that is conducive to reestablishing a frame of reference sensitive to each party's particular circumstances and expectations. In other words, and at the risk of sounding redundant, it is a matter of placing biregional content on the biregional agenda by including issues of interest to both parties. An apt point of departure in this sense could be the need to promote planetary governance focused on shared problems such as the environment, the fight against global warming, water and the use of alternative energy sources; the war on drug trafficking and other forms of organized crime and urban violence (youth gangs); and the regulation of migration flows.

Several other points could be added to the agenda, except that they continue to reflect past asymmetries. This is the case with development and social issues, or problems stemming from regional integration, including the way in which Europe relates to Latin America. Here Europe should be more flexible in the interest of achieving a more harmonious blend of support for integrationist trends and initiatives and efforts to galvanize biregional relations.