

The Next President's Policies Toward Latin America

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October 28, 2008

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Back in 2000, then-candidate George W. Bush pledged to make this a "Century of the Americas." "Our future cannot be separated from the future of Latin America," then-candidate George W. Bush told a Miami audience in 2000. "Should I become the president, I will look south not as an afterthought, but as a fundamental commitment." His campaign promised improved trade relations, solid partnerships, increased development aid, and a more humane and pragmatic immigration policy. President Bush's first international trip was to visit his Mexican counterpart, and his first major international event was the Third Summit of the Americas in Quebec.

Most expected the Bush administration to respond strongly to the ever-growing interconnectedness of the Americas, making the region an important foreign policy priority. But following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, U.S. foreign policy understandably shifted elsewhere and America's traditionally welcoming borders were tightened. With a few exceptions such as free trade agreements and counterdrug initiatives, U.S. policy toward Latin America continued to look like an afterthought.

Eight years later, presidential candidates once again used a Miami stop on their campaign trail to stress the importance of Latin America to the United States, with both Democrats and Republicans pledging to repair relations with the region. "Latin America today is increasingly vital to the fortunes of the United States, and Americans north and south share a common geography and a common destiny. It is time to embrace this destiny for the benefit of all our peoples," said John McCain. Barack Obama broadly agreed, while couching his remarks more explicitly around a criticism of the Bush administration's neglect: "Instead of engaging the people of the region," he declared, "we've acted as if we can still dictate terms unilaterally.... It is time for us to recognize that the future security and prosperity of the United States is fundamentally tied to the future of the Americas."

Fulfilling these lofty promises will not be easy as the region has become increasingly challenging for the United States since 2000. Venezuelan President Chavez's anti-American diatribes are as inflammatory as ever and are now accompanied by those of Bolivian President Evo Morales, Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, and Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega. And it is not only Latin America's leaders that pick on the United States. The Pew Global Attitudes Project shows that Latin Americans in general have among the most negative views in the world of U.S. foreign policy and the country's leadership, disagreeing with the invasion of Iraq and the general response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

For several years, the United States has seen its influence in the region steadily decline, and relations with many former allies are strained. Bolivia and Venezuela's recent expulsion of the U.S. ambassadors to their countries is only the most recent manifestation of this trend. Many other incidents suggest similar symptoms of malaise, including Ecuador's decision to block a renewed lease for the U.S. military base on its territory, and Washington's inability to prevent, or at least ameliorate, Colombia's diplomatic tensions with its neighbors.

In a region that is so paramount to U.S. interests, such events are worrisome: Latin America continues to be the United States' second-fastest growing trade partner, a major source of oil and natural gas, and its greatest source of foreign-born workers. For the sake of U.S. national security, energy security, and continuing economic prosperity, the next President will need to restore the United States' standing in the hemisphere.

Both candidates' campaigns suggest that their administrations would expand engagement with the region, although in disparate manners. John McCain emphasizes trade relations, having voted for the North America

Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) back in 1993, the U.S.-Chile Free Trade Agreement in 2003, the Central America and the Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) in 2005, and recently expressing his staunch support for the Peru, Panama, and Colombia free trade agreements (FTA). (He did not vote for the Peru FTA, which passed in Congress in late 2007, joining Senators Biden, Clinton and Obama in not voting.)

During his campaign, McCain visited Mexico and Colombia, lauding the benefits of free trade in both places. For him, the benefits of free trade agreements go beyond mutual economic prosperity. He sees them as significant tools to support friendly governments while keeping them away from Venezuela's sphere of economic and political influence. This is why in criticizing Obama's opposition to the Colombia FTA, McCain usually mentions the economic benefits of the agreement only in passing, instead focusing on Obama's opposition as turning the United States' back on a long-time ally.

Obama has responded by calling for engagement with the region that goes beyond trade. "If John McCain thinks that we can paper over our failure of leadership in the region by occasionally passing trade deals with friendly governments, then he's out of touch with the people of the Americas," Obama said in Miami this year. Latin America is featured front and center in Obama's energy plans, for example.

While both candidates agree that the United States needs to reduce its dependence on Venezuelan and Middle Eastern oil, McCain's proposal to do this consists of boosting domestic innovation and expanding oil drilling and nuclear power in the United States. Obama's proposal, while striking some similar notes, relies more heavily on regional cooperation. Believing that the United States has a "unique opportunity to lead the region toward a more secure and sustainable energy future," Obama would invest domestically in clean technologies while supporting the production of renewable fuels in Brazil. Supporting alternative fuels throughout the region could "reshape the geopolitics of energy in the hemisphere, reducing the oil-driven influence of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez," Obama argues.

Even if planning to engage with the region in other ways, Obama's stance on trade is somewhat ambiguous. The democratic candidate raises the suspicion of free-traders by opposing both of the pending free trade agreements with countries in the region and by having suggested that he would consider re-negotiating NAFTA's terms. Obama cites concerns about murdered trade unionists in his opposition to the Colombia FTA and has refused to review the one with Panama as long as Panama's President of the Legislature is under indictment for murdering a U.S. Army Sergeant. In both cases, though, Obama's opposition is based on conditions that are expected to change in the near future, and so some expect Obama to approve of both agreements in 2009.

With regards to NAFTA, some Obama supporters seem to have their fingers crossed, hoping that his statement was an impromptu blooper without significant policy implications. The 2008 Democratic platform does call for negotiating FTAs in the future, even if it sets guidelines such as making sure future FTAs include enforceable labor and environmental standards and that they do not stop the government from protecting food safety or the health of citizens.

Obama's running mate, Senator Joe Biden, however, has become increasingly averse to FTAs in the past decade. After voting for NAFTA in 1993, he has opposed the FTAs with Chile and Peru, and DR-CAFTA, as well as those with countries outside the region such as Oman and Singapore, and has also mentioned renegotiating NAFTA. Obama's stance toward free trade is somewhat unclear, but there is no doubt that FTAs, which for the past decade have been central in the United States' engagement with the region, would be featured less prominently under Obama than under McCain.

Diplomatic engagement or the lack thereof, with the region's leaders that challenge U.S. foreign policy, will also define U.S. relations with the region. Obama was criticized early in his campaign for stating that he would like to "pursue direct diplomacy, with friend and foe alike, without preconditions." Since then, he has had to tone down his proposal, saying that he would only meet with the Cuban leadership at "the time and place of my choosing" and "only when we have an opportunity to advance the interests of the United States, but more

importantly to advance the cause of freedom for the Cuban people.” In terms of Venezuela, Obama has said that he would like to talk with President Chavez in order to ameliorate tension between the two countries.

McCain, on the other hand, has taken a more aggressive approach. His chief Latin America adviser, Otto Reich, recently compared Chavez to Mussolini and Hitler and called him dangerous, a fascist, and an enemy of the United States. While the Bush administration has utilized a sticks and carrots approach with the region's leaders, the candidates so far suggest that McCain would offer more sticks while Obama would hand out more carrots.

When President Bush visited Latin America in March 2007, though, many of his regional counterparts brought up immigration, rather than trade, energy, or diplomacy as a point of contention. Immigration has become a pivotal issue for many of the region's governments, some of which depend on remittances their émigrés send back. On this subject, the candidates' views may converge. In the past they have both proposed further securing the border, creating a guest-worker program, and creating a pathway to legalization for the 12 million undocumented immigrants in the country. All of the above provisions were included in a bill McCain proposed in 2005, which Obama voted for in 2007, known as the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Bill or the McCain-Kennedy Bill.

Following its collapse in Congress last year, however, McCain now says he would no longer vote for the bill that carries his name, describing his come-about as “a lesson learned about what the American people's priorities are, and their priority is to secure the borders.” Pressured by conservative forces in the GOP, McCain now proposes to secure the borders first and not move forward with a guest-worker program or "address the undocumented" until every border governor agrees that the border has been secured. Even McCain's updated proposal is liberal compared to the 2008 Republican Party Platform, which calls for securing the border, but does not mention a guest-worker program or legalization at all.

Obama, on the other hand, has the support of his party for his immigration proposal, which reflects the spirit of the McCain-Kennedy Bill. An important addition to his proposal, though, is collaboration with Mexico in order to help that country develop with the end-goal of decreasing incentives for illegal immigration.

Both presidential candidates, in their own way, have promised to expand engagement with Latin America. The next administration's foreign policy priorities, though, will obviously lie elsewhere, and in the face of a U.S. government occupied with other regions, Latin America's perception of the next president, and policies toward his administration, may be as significant to regional relations as the next president's policies.

In this sense, the region's leaders who derive their popularity from disparaging the Bush administration would have to change their tone, at least to some extent, if the United States were to elect a president whose views cannot be lumped together with the United States' historical role in the region. Significantly, a recent Pew Global Attitudes survey found that almost double the number of Mexicans and Brazilians have confidence in Obama than do in McCain. An Obama presidency may therefore have greater breathing room to change the dynamic of U.S.-Latin America relations while a McCain presidency may face an uphill battle if it is to be seen as a new voice in regional affairs.

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