

**The New Hemispheric Agenda and the Role
of Regional and International Organizations**

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In the run-up to the Summit of the Americas in Port of Spain last June there were extraordinary expectations about a “New Hemispheric Agenda.” It was assumed that with a new American administration under charismatic new leadership there would be a break from the policies of the preceding Iraq-obsessed Bush administration. The perceived neglect of Latin America would now be reversed, and the western hemisphere, America’s own backyard, would regain a central position in American Foreign Policy. It was also assumed that together with this new American engagement the Organization of American States and its subsidiary organs would become the central operational pillars for this new agenda.

However, it was not easy to define what the new agenda would contain and how a hemispheric agenda would relate to Washington’s larger global agenda. Nor was it clear that the Obama Administration would turn more actively to the use of multilateral institutions in preference to more traditional bilateral diplomacy or ad hoc coalitions. If one were to probe more deeply the American agenda in the hemisphere throughout the previous two administrations, one would have to ask whether any change in the agenda was really very likely. The new Administration on the White House website describing

the Obama foreign policy priorities has only one short paragraph on Latin America entitled: “Restoring American Leadership in Latin America”. It explains: “We are committed to a new era of partnership with countries throughout the hemisphere working on key shared challenges of economic growth and equality, our energy and climate futures, and regional and citizen security. We are committed to shaping that future through engagement that is strong, sustained, meaningful and based on mutual respect.” There is no indication that the new partnership would be multilateral, or merely a series of bilateral relationships. For the United States’ partners the key phrase is “mutual respect”, raising the expectation the U.S. would do more listening than hectoring .On the face of it there seemed to be a considerable shift from the priorities of previous administrations. There was no mention of the war on drugs, the struggle against transnational terrorism or the strengthening of democracy and market economies. There was also no mention of any multilateral dimension to this agenda. Nonetheless the contrast with the past was evident if only in the recognition that the future of the United States is inextricably bound to the future of the people of the Americas.

Over the last three administrations beginning in the mid 1990’s there has been remarkable consistency in the United States’ hemispheric policy. Beginning with the George H. W. Bush Administration the United States had a clearly articulated set of priorities: to promote democracy, encourage market-based economic reform and reduce the production and interdict the transport of illegal drugs from the Andes, Central America and the Caribbean into the United States. This agenda enjoyed broad bipartisan support and achieved considerable success. By the beginning of the 21st century

democracy appeared to have been consolidated throughout the region, with the notable exception of Cuba. Market reforms had taken place, if not root, throughout the continent, and the production of cocaine in the Andes had been dramatically reduced. As a result the hemisphere often appeared to have dropped off the radar screen of most American policy makers, particularly in both the second Clinton and the Bush 43 administrations. Journalists facetiously referred to Latin America as Atlantis, the lost continent. Similarly the OAS seemed no longer to be an engaged and active partner in implementing America's hemispheric agenda.

With 9/11 America's eyes turned away from the larger issues facing its southern neighbors and became fixed upon the threat of transnational terrorism. The Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) was launched, often to the dismay of countries in the hemisphere, who saw a further erosion of American interest in the region. Iraq and Afghanistan took central stage. There was little room for Latin America except to the degree that the region might be harboring terrorists or, in the case of Mexico, allowing its border with the United States to be used as an infiltration route for malefactors into the United States. Homeland security became the order of the day, and America turned inward in its own self-defense. All of this gave to American foreign policy the illusion of a monomaniacal focus on only one thing: America's security.

The underlying reality, however, was far different. Even in Latin America the old agenda was reasserting itself. As the 21st century advanced democracy was seen as increasingly under siege. Constitutions were challenged in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia. Populist

rulers were elected and seemed to desire to keep themselves in power indefinitely. Charges of electoral fraud were more frequent in countries as different as Nicaragua and Venezuela. And the traditional, but simplistic, version of democracy based on the alternance of governing between right and left leaning centrist parties seemed under threat. Coincidentally the Washington economic consensus based on liberal market-oriented polices came under attack by the very same governments who seemed to be bent on eroding the democratic process. A change in priorities was called for as was a change of tactics to implement those priorities.

Given the generalities in which the Obama Administration couched its Latin American goals, it was probably something of a surprise for the President in Port of Spain and Secretary of State Clinton at the OAS Council meeting in Honduras, to discover that the subject uppermost on hemispheric minds was not democracy and free market economic policies but rather Cuba and its reintegration into the OAS. It was clear that Latin America had one agenda and the United States another. It fact, to some extent that has always been the case, although policy makers in Washington have continued to postulate a fundamental congruence, if not identity, of interests.

It is perhaps well to remember that a hegemonic power, such as the United States, has an extraordinarily complex and diverse set of foreign policy objectives. No region of the world has absolute priority, and no one set of institutional arrangements can be used to advance its foreign policy agenda. Think for a moment of the subjects which any President, whether Republican or Democrat, must confront in the world today: energy

security, terrorism, narcotics, global warming and the environment, democracy and human rights, non-proliferation, free trade and open markets, migration, and the overall impact of globalization. To some degree all of these issues, with the possible exception of non-proliferation, impact the U.S. relationship with Latin America, although the degree of impact varies enormously from country to country. Many issues must be handled bilaterally; some can be dealt with through the organizational structures of the OAS and its subsidiary agencies; others will require ad hoc coalitions of the willing or the interested. Some will have to be tackled simultaneously on both a bilateral and a multilateral basis.

Let us take the issues one by one to determine the extent to which the items on America's global agenda have a hemispheric dimension and present possibilities for regional and international organizations to contribute to the solution.

Energy Security: While America's eyes have been fixed on the Middle East and our relations with the oil rich countries of the Persian Gulf, in reality America's energy security depends to an extraordinary extent on three countries in the hemisphere, Canada, Mexico and Venezuela. Other countries in the Caribbean basin could also over time become important components of a long-term energy security strategy, including Cuba, whose offshore resources may be of considerable size and importance. However, protection of these energy relationships is largely a bilateral matter. The only multilateral organization with significant involvement in the energy field, OPEC, is not a primary supplier of hydrocarbons to the U.S. market. There is no hemispheric energy policy, nor

is one likely to appear in the near future. That being the case, U.S. energy policies will be advanced in a process of bilateral negotiation.

The two most visible global concerns of the United States: terrorism and narcotics have also been on the hemispheric agenda for some time. Both are structurally integrated into the multilateral agenda through the InterAmerican Drug Abuse Control Commission (CICAD) and the InterAmerican Committee Against Terrorism (CICTE) Both play important roles in coordinating the exchange of information and in implementing other multilateral initiatives. However, from the perspective of Washington neither CICAD nor CICTE are the central elements of the U.S. strategy. With respect to narcotics it is all too evident that the United States sees these issues as predominantly bilateral, as evidenced by Plan Colombia and the Merida initiative, the two principal vehicles for the deployment of counter-narcotics resources to the region. In addition there are small bilateral narcotics control programs with virtually every hemispheric country designed either to impede the transport of drugs from the Andes to the United States or to deal directly with the production of the raw materials (coca and marijuana) and their refinement into finished and consumable narcotics. Interestingly enough, at the most recent CICAD meeting the hemispheric partners of the United States insisted on focusing on the demand side of the narcotics problem. While the United States has historically acknowledged that demand is an important subject, demand reduction in the United States has always taken second place to production reduction efforts, with the result that there has continued to be a certain tension between the United States and its southern neighbors on what should be the priority.

Similarly with the terrorism agenda. While CICTE is a useful coordination vehicle for counter-terrorism policies and information, it is not at the center of action, which is driven by the United States' own policies and resource transfers. At the end of the day the real coordination takes place on a bilateral level, between the security and intelligence services of the United States and its Latin American partners. Counter-terrorism is, of course, a critical dimension of U.S.-Mexican (and U.S.-Canadian) relations since one of the principal foci of American homeland security and domestic counter-terrorism efforts has been at our northern and southern borders.

There is one area where the multilateralization of the hemispheric agenda is more obvious and that is in the case of the promotion of democracy. The United States has consistently turned to the OAS in support of its efforts to promote democracy. During the Cold War the OAS was a vehicle for thwarting the introduction of non-democratic, Marxist influences in the region, notably in the efforts to isolate Cuba and prevent the revolutionary contagion which it was assumed Cuba was propagating. However, in more recent years with the emergence of populist governments the hemispheric democratic strategy of the United States has been bedeviled by definitional issues. Are free multi-party elections sufficient determinants of the legitimacy of a particular set of democratic leaders? This ambiguity has become most apparent in the ineffectual OAS efforts to restore the democratically elected president of Honduras who was overthrown in a bloodless military coup this past summer. Because the democracy agenda touches directly on the extremely sensitive area of domestic sovereignty, the United States has

consistently wanted the support of its hemispheric partners in advancing the agenda, in order to avoid the sense of Big Brother imposing its political vision unilaterally on its smaller and less powerful neighbors to the south.

While democracy promotion, however, defined, will almost certainly remain a regional/multilateral agenda item, other items on the hemispheric agenda, particularly trade and development will have multiple dimensions: bilateral, regional and global.

There already exist global institutions to handle both trade – the World Trade Organization - and development, the United Nations Development Program, the World Bank, etc. On the development front the Inter-American Development Bank has an important role to play in channeling resources to the hemisphere. And, of course the United States will continue to maintain bilateral programs with hemispheric countries either through USAID or the Millennium Challenge Corporation. Some of the bilateral aid programs also overlap with other elements of America's agenda, notably democracy, political reform, narcotics (where alternative development has a key role to play)

Trade will also have multilateral, regional and bilateral dimensions. The Obama Administration has on its agenda pending bilateral free trade agreements with both Colombia and Panama. These agreements, however, face strong opposition from some of Obama's own constituencies in the labor, human rights and environmental communities and it remains to be seen whether there is sufficient political support to push this agenda. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the grandfather of regional free trade agreements, also has important bilateral dimensions as can be seen from the recent

discussions in Guadalajara between the Mexican and American presidents about implementation of the trucking and other provisions of NAFTA.

While the bilateral trade agenda has advanced fairly successfully from an American point of view, it has not been successful multilaterally. The Clinton and Bush administrations had both hoped to move towards a Free Trade Area of the Americas, but negotiations to achieve the FTAA have stalled, as similar negotiations have stalled on the global level in the WTO Doha Round, in part because of differences between the agendas of the developed and developing countries and emerging powers such as India and Brazil. In fact, Brazil has become one of the major obstacles to successful multilateral negotiations both regional and global, because of differences with the developed countries, notably the United States, over agricultural policies. As a result the trade strategy, as viewed from Washington, has been to aggregate as many bilateral or sub-regional agreements as possible, beginning with NAFTA and proceeding to CAFTA and the bilateral agreements with Chile, Peru, Colombia and Panama. Through these agreements the United States has successfully broadened its market access to the hemisphere substantially over the last three administrations. A continuation of this bilateral effort is likely.

While the focus of the hemisphere's attention is often on the Organization of American States, it is important to recognize that from the United States' point of view many of the principal items on its agenda can only be handled in the United Nations, primarily through the Security Council. In this context Latin America will have to stand up and be counted, since there are always two Latin American or Caribbean countries on the

Council (currently Mexico and Costa Rica). Because they are elected by the regional grouping, they are expected to represent not only their own governments policies and priorities but those of the region, there is certain to be interaction between the United States and these hemispheric representatives. There is often congruence between the hemispheric and the North American position, but this can not be taken for granted in Washington as Latin American opposition to the Iraq war made clear a decade ago.

Looking to the future; the question remains as to the extent to which there is a new hemispheric agenda and the extent to which that agenda can be managed through regional or international organizations. It is fair to say that in most respects there is continuity in the hemispheric agenda, at least as seen from the perspective of the United States. If there is a new agenda it revolves around definitional questions relating to democracy and development. Here there are profound and growing differences between Washington's perspective and that of many of its neighbors to the south. Populist governments are here to stay, and their rejection of the traditional elite politics of the region is not likely to change. On the development front the assumptions underlying the Washington Consensus are increasingly challenged particularly in the context of the global economic crisis. It is no longer evident to the countries to the south that free markets, free trade, deregulation and fiscal austerity are the paths to growth or to the solution of the deep-seated social inequalities which characterize virtually every country in the region.

If there is a new a hemispheric agenda it is likely to be one that is generated in the hemisphere itself. Washington's agenda is clear and is largely unchanged. While the style of the administration may, and probably will change, to a more open and collaborative one, the issues about which the United States is concerned remain constant. However, the issues on the agendas of many of our neighbors are rapidly evolving. They seek more inclusive hemispheric organizations (*vide* the issue of Cuba) and a greater focus on the pervasive social and economic distortions and inequalities that have undermined traditional democratic structures, and fueled distortions in individual societies. For the regional multilateral institutions these changes will pose great challenges as they will find themselves caught between America's traditional agenda focused on drugs, democracy, human rights, free trade on one hand and the growing obsession of Latin American governments and societies with social inequalities and economic inequities on the other. But the tension is not just between the United States and the countries of its backyard. Increasingly within regional institutions we are likely to see tensions between and among different countries, pitting the populist regimes against more orthodox and conservative governments, with several of the key players, such as Brazil, Mexico and Chile caught in between. While much of the agenda will have to be addressed in bilateral terms, regional and international organizations will have a role to play. As the hemispheric agenda evolves, multilateral institutions may be required to broker an increasingly diverse set of issues in an effort which will have to be designed both to advance the old agenda and take into account the new. However, if the regional organizations fail to play this intermediary role effectively, the issues on the hemispheric agenda will again be forced into bilateral channels. The resulting fragmentation and

erosion of hemispheric solidarity and cooperation would be a serious loss and one which all the countries of the region have good reason to try to avoid. .