

Partnership, and its obstacles

Barack Obama's fitful attempts to strike a new tone in relations with Latin America face new obstacles from Republicans in Congress



Shortly after he took office in 2009, Barack Obama attended a 34-country Summit of the Americas in Trinidad where he pledged a “new era of partnership” between the two halves of the region, in place of “stale debates and old ideologies”. Honouring this promise has not been easy: Mr Obama has had other priorities, both abroad and at home, and events in the region, such as a coup in Honduras just two months after the Trinidad summit, revived some of those old debates. Nevertheless, the administration has taken some modest initiatives in Latin America. But now the new partnership risks falling victim to partisan infighting in Washington.

In July the Republican majority on a committee of the House of Representatives deleted funding for the Organisation of American States (OAS) from next year’s budget. Conservatives dislike the OAS’s secretary-general, José Miguel Insulza, a Chilean social democrat, whom they accuse of complicity with threats to democracy and media freedom from leftist autocrats, such as Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez. The Republicans have similarly used their powers to hold up the appointment of administration nominees for diplomatic jobs whom they consider too conciliatory towards Mr Chávez and his friends. At the same time, American ambassadors have been expelled from, or not accepted in, Venezuela, Ecuador and (in 2008) Bolivia.

There are plenty of criticisms that can be made of the OAS and of its secretary-general. Mr Insulza’s grandstanding over Honduras—he pushed for its immediate suspension from the organisation—arguably made a negotiated settlement of the conflict between supporters and opponents of the ousted president, Manuel Zelaya, harder. Weeks earlier Mr Insulza had irritated the Obama administration by pushing to end the half-century suspension of non-democratic Cuba from the OAS (though it has not rejoined).

On these issues, Mr Insulza reflected majority opinion in Latin America. He has spoken out against Mr Chávez on several occasions. Indeed, the OAS is still seen by the left in Latin America as a yanqui poodle. While Latin American clubs have proliferated, the OAS remains the only regional diplomatic body which includes the United States. And some bits of it, especially the Inter-American Human-Rights Commission and Court, do valuable work in defence of freedom and democracy.

For these reasons the Democrats who control the Senate may restore the \$49m in annual funding the United States gives to the OAS, which accounts for around 60% of its total budget. But they may do so reluctantly. “The Republicans sense the administration is in a bind over the OAS,” according to Michael Shifter of the Inter-American Dialogue, a think-tank. The OAS does not inspire confidence in Washington, but cutting it would depart from the administration’s commitment to multilateralism, he says.

More worrying is the fate of free-trade agreements with Colombia and Panama negotiated under George Bush. Many Democrats dislike them, mainly on protectionist grounds but also because of worries about murders of trade-unionists in Colombia. As a result, it was not until April that Mr Obama said he was prepared to ask Congress to approve the deals. But many Republicans, who support the agreements, are opposed to a linked measure to extend a scheme that provides federal help to workers in the United States who lose their jobs because of imports.

The administration still hopes to get the trade agreements passed when Congress reconvenes this month. But with the campaign for the 2012 presidential election gearing up, that cannot be guaranteed. Failure would be another example of the way in which the issues that matter to much of Latin America—drugs and migration as well as trade and Cuba—are nowadays shaped by domestic politics.

Shared responsibility

After gangsters set fire to a casino in Monterrey on August 25th, killing 52 people, Mexico's president, Felipe Calderón, lashed out at the failure of the United States to curb drug consumption and gun sales to the gangs. "You are responsible, too," for this "act of terrorism", he declared. In fact, Mr Obama has been readier than his predecessors to talk of "shared responsibility" for the problems caused in Latin America by his country's drug habit.

The administration has stepped up security co-operation with Mexico, deploying drones and American agents south of the border and allowing Mexican police to use American territory as a launch pad for surprise raids southward. It helped to organise a donor conference in June aimed at improving security in Central America. It is paying Colombia to provide training for helicopter pilots and police from Mexico and Central America.

The United States and Mexico are also working more closely together to speed legal trade across the border. Earlier this year Mr Obama at last allowed Mexican trucks to operate north of the border. And the two countries work together on many world issues at the United Nations, says Arturo Sarukhan, Mexico's ambassador in Washington, who says the relationship is closer than at any time in the past 15 years.

But there are still irritants. The biggest is Mr Obama's decision not to take on the gun lobby by seeking to renew a ban on the sale of certain semi-automatic weapons which lapsed in 2004. The administration had to battle hard to introduce a requirement that gun shops along the border (there are many) notify the government when they sell more than one such weapon to the same buyer. It is also deploying more agents to crack down on money laundering to Mexico, though on this "we've been slower than we should have been," an official admits.

Perhaps the biggest policy change under Mr Obama has been towards Cuba. The administration has abolished all restrictions on travel and remittances by Cuban-Americans, and loosened curbs on educational and church visits. In the House, the Republicans are also trying to reverse this, but are unlikely to succeed.

While the United States is constrained by domestic wrangles, Latin America is changing fast. A decade of economic growth, booming trade with China, stronger democracies and the advent of left-of-centre governments have all helped to make the region more assertive. Nowhere is that truer than in Brazil, whose relations with the United States have long been distant and mistrustful, as a recent report by the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), a think-tank, noted. Last year the two fell out badly over the attempt by Brazil's then president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, to broker a deal with Iran over its nuclear programme. But Mr Obama made a successful visit to Brazil in March, and is said to get on well with Dilma Rousseff, Lula's successor. The CFR reckons there is now a chance for the two countries to build much closer ties, despite their differing interests.

In practice, Brazil now often carries more weight in much of South America—though not further north—than the United States does. But despite occasional appearances to the

contrary, the United States continues to have both vital interests and influence in Latin America. How the relationship between the region's two most important countries develops may matter more than the partisan bickering in Washington over the OAS.

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