

The realist prism: to reset Latin America policy, U.S. must think big

Nikolas Gvosdev

U.S. policy toward the Western Hemisphere has suffered a series of setbacks over the past month. The first, the Washington summit earlier this month between Presidents Barack Obama and Dilma Rousseff of Brazil, was simply lackluster. The second, last weekend's Summit of the Americas in Cartagena, Colombia, was an outright fiasco. Instead of laying out a common agenda for the hemisphere and rebuilding America's leadership role in the region, the U.S. found itself isolated in a diplomatic corner over Cuba, to say nothing of the Secret Service prostitution scandal that soon overshadowed the proceedings.

More generally, Obama's Latin America policy is suffering from a lack of what George H.W. Bush famously called "the vision thing," compounded by how the administration organizes the U.S. foreign policy apparatus. The president had an initial opening at his first Summit of the Americas in Trinidad, in 2009, to reset what had become a very problematic relationship between the United States and most of the rest of the hemisphere during the George W. Bush administration. Most regional leaders also made it clear they understood that, given the global financial crisis and the challenges of winding down America's involvement in two Middle Eastern wars, Obama could not immediately pivot U.S. foreign policy to the region.

But as I noted two years ago, "There was insufficient follow-up to take advantage of the momentum generated by the Trinidad meeting." Just as candidate George W. Bush's rhetoric about the importance of Latin America understandably evaporated after Sept. 11, the Obama administration, in continuing to react to a series of crises elsewhere in the world, has also put the Western Hemisphere on the back burner.

As a result, according to Sean Goforth, America's relations with the region appear to be adrift. "Many countries want and deserve a serious partnership with Washington. But President Obama is an unconvincing partner. . . . He has stalled on trade treaties with Latin American countries that still want preferred access to the U.S. market, and he's made it clear that his strategic priority is a 'pivot' toward Asia."

Worse still, no senior official within the administration, starting with the president himself, has articulated a clear, compelling and convincing vision for what a Western Hemispheric partnership would look like, beyond the expected bromides about peace, democracy and prosperity. What is the desired end state? There is no lack of compelling possibilities to choose from: free circulation for people, goods and capital from the Yukon to Tierra del Fuego; a greater push for regional independence, in terms of manufactured goods, services and energy; an arrangement that mimics the pre-Maastricht European Community.

Part of the problem is that important U.S. domestic lobbies are opposed to key pieces of what would be needed to promote greater regional integration -- from environmentalists concerned both about Canada's oil sands and new pipeline projects that would transport more of Alberta's hydrocarbons to U.S. refineries and markets to a formidable anti-immigration lobby that would be very hesitant to support a freer flow of labor between the countries of the Western Hemisphere. Add post-Sept. 11 security concerns and a prevailing view among many U.S. voters that free trade agreements usually come at the expense of the American worker, and it becomes more apparent why no U.S. politician has emerged as a strong advocate for a Community of the Americas.

And while domestic politics are always going to be intertwined with foreign policy, U.S. messaging, particularly in Cartagena, seemed to convey just how much a domestic U.S. agenda is driving interaction with the rest of the region. Whether intended or not, Washington's continued emphasis on framing foreign engagement as a way to boost U.S. job numbers does not provide much incentive for other states to embrace the U.S. agenda, as Obama similarly discovered during visits to India and other states in Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, the unwillingness to alter the U.S. position on Cuba set the tone in Cartagena,

reinforcing the perception that U.S. strategy toward the region is seen through the prism of domestic politics -- in this case Florida's electoral votes.

Nor has the administration been willing to empower a senior official to act as an overall coordinator or special envoy for the region, with clear authority to begin the slow and tedious process of laying the foundation for closer ties. As a result, the careful nurturing that it will take to solidify and expand partnerships -- starting with Brazil, which is still skittish about U.S. regional influence -- is not taking place. And while some progress occurred in the Obama-Rousseff summit, notably in the area of trade and in creating a system for regular consultation between the two countries' defense establishments, there is no game-changing initiative -- the equivalent of the U.S.-India nuclear deal -- on the horizon for U.S.-Brazilian relations.

Goforth argues that the president, despite his disappointing summit in Cartagena, should complement his recently unveiled domestic energy plan with a call for a regional energy partnership. "The geoeconomics are straightforward: Latin America is just beginning to tap into a fresh oil and natural-gas bonanza. . . . The technology of U.S. energy companies is absolutely necessary if Brazil is to recover its vast offshore oil reserves; U.S. industry will also be needed if Argentina and Mexico are to tap their shale-gas reserves, estimated to be the third- and fourth-largest in the world, respectively." According to Goforth, such a regional energy partnership could allow the U.S. to eliminate Middle Eastern oil imports over the next 10 years.

It is an ambitious plan, one that would require empowering a senior official to oversee and coordinate the interagency process so as to navigate the inevitable roadblocks. Energy Secretary Steven Chu does not seem interested, nor does he have the traction within the U.S. national security bureaucracy required for moving forward. However, if Obama is elected to a second term, and if Secretary of State Hillary Clinton steps down, the president could insist that a new appointee at State make this a top priority for U.S. foreign policy. Alternatively, as I have advocated on several occasions, this could be a project run through the vice president's office.

Washington, however, does not have the luxury of time. Canada, Brazil, Mexico and Argentina are being actively courted by China, which has already made significant inroads into Venezuela's energy industry. Firms exploiting the oil sands in Alberta, for instance, are not going to keep the energy in the ground while waiting for the U.S. to decide what it wants to do; if pipelines heading south to the U.S won't be built, pipelines heading west to Pacific ports will send that energy to growing Asian markets.

Ever since James Monroe proclaimed his doctrine in 1823, the U.S. focus has been on keeping other powers out of the Western Hemisphere. That approach is no longer effective in the 21st century. Instead, Washington needs to make the case for why countries in the region ought to opt in with the United States. There is still much interest in the rest of the hemisphere, but the ball is in America's court -- and the clock is running.

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