

Bush Administration Must Reassess Relations with Latin America

By Laura Carlsen | January 24, 2005

In her January 18 confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Sec. of State-designate Condoleezza Rice asserted that the Western Hemisphere is “extremely critical” to the United States. “With our close neighbors in Latin America we are working to realize the vision of a fully democratic hemisphere bound by common values and free trade.”

While it’s heartening to see that Latin America has made it onto the map of the Bush administration’s foreign policy, there is little reason to expect policy toward the region to change or deepen in the next four years. More likely, with all eyes on the Middle East, the region will remain an arena for ad hoc crisis intervention, with Cuba and Colombia as opposite focal points.

Does Latin America Matter?

Latin American countries have faded from focus since the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center. While little has been said about the region’s significance in contemporary geopolitics, even less has been said about what short- and long-term policies could feasibly lead to more integrated but less economically and politically polarized hemisphere.

Latin American countries have been forging a new role over the past few years. They have already consolidated surprising leadership on issues of international trade, finance, and regional economic integration. Since the formation of the Group of 21 at the 5th Ministerial of the World Trade Organization in Cancun in 2003, Brazil has adopted the role of trade reformer. Its principal banner is to reduce farm subsidies in the United States and Europe.

Argentina’s insistence on stabilizing its economy before paying off creditors has made the country a maverick in financial communities and an unsung hero for many other nations facing stifling foreign debts.

The Latin American region has also become a global leader in questioning other aspects of the neoliberal model of economic integration. The list of national battles over privatization plans grows daily. Privatization of services, promoted in U.S. free trade agreements and adjustment programs has recently become a lightning rod for discontent in Latin America. Bolivian civil society has two major victories on water under its belt: against

Bechtel in Cochabamba (2004) and with the cancellation of the contract with Suez in El Alto/La Paz (January 2005). Ecuador, Nicaragua, Mexico, Uruguay, and El Salvador have also rejected privatizations.

The Community of South American Nations founded on January 9, 2005 may be mostly symbolic, but it should be viewed as a statement of independence with respect to the Bush administration’s assumption of regional hegemony. The new multilateral forum should also be viewed in the political context of the leftward shift in the Southern Cone.¹

In recent elections, Uruguay elected a president from the leftist Broad Front, the Workers Party (PT) in Brazil made significant gains, Hugo Chávez consolidated power in Venezuela, and other center-left organizations gained on the municipal level.

This, of course, isn’t exactly the kind of leadership the Bush administration wanted to see coming from its Southern flank. But it reflects deeply felt contradictions within Latin American societies and at the same time offers a serious challenge to U.S. policymakers to adopt more flexible and reality-based positions.

Ideological Offensive, Policy Vacuum

The second Bush administration appears unlikely to rise to the challenge. Before the Senate foreign relations committee, Rice reiterated positions put forth during the first administration. She reaffirmed the clampdown on Cuba and severely criticized Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez. Brazil was cited as a critical partner, Mexico viewed as key to strengthening the global competitiveness of the NAFTA bloc, the Andean countries heralded as “a vital region with a lot of potential,” and Colombia’s Uribe government praised as a model of successful cooperation.



IRC Americas

www.americaspolicy.org

A New World of Analysis, Ideas, and Policy Options



But the main message of the incoming Secretary of State was that the criteria for U.S. involvement around the world will be largely the promotion of “freedom and democracy.” In this way, Rice presaged President Bush’s inaugural address, which promised a crusade for freedom across the globe, leaving in the dust predictions of a more isolationist United States.

This reinforced agenda unfortunately fails to define the terms “freedom” or “democracy,” much less the policies to back them up.

In Latin America, phrases like “America’s influence is considerable and we will use it confidently in freedom’s cause” sound ominous. The neighboring superpower has a track record for sponsoring repression and intervention cloaked in similar rhetoric.

Moreover, the kind of engagement envisioned by the second Bush administration espouses lofty principles but shows little commitment to grappling with the pressing problems that exist in the region. Terrorism remains at the top of U.S. security concerns, when the term rarely even figures on lists of priorities for the other nations of the hemisphere. In Colombia, the battle lines have been drawn against “narco-terrorism”—a questionable category that conflates the drug war with counter-insurgency efforts in a general campaign that has raised serious questions of human rights violations. Cuba remains on the list of state terrorists, despite no evidence that the Cuban government has ties to international terrorism.

Latin American governments, meanwhile, face daunting challenges of poverty, economic inequality, urban violence, and massive displacement. All these require U.S. support for domestic policies that have little or nothing to do with the “War on Terrorism” (now “Tyranny”), or free trade.

In addition to these long-term challenges, the United States is already deep into policy conflicts with individual nations that require immediate, negotiated solutions. In Mexico, the issue is immigration. In the United States, the issue is treated by restrictionists, corporate interests, and pro-immigrant groups as a political hot potato. But in Mexico, fair treatment of immigrants is regarded by all sectors as a measure of the government’s ability to protect its people and a weather vane for binational relations.

In Brazil-U.S. relations, the issue of U.S. farm subsidies remains in the center of the table. The Lula government has made it clear that it will not negotiate an FTAA without a commitment to subsidy reductions. No such commitment has been forthcoming from the Bush government.

The Bush government has offered no concrete proposals to these sticky issues. In fact, beyond the counter-terrorist agenda, there still is no evidence of any coherent policy toward the region that takes into account real problems and the need for two-sided dialogue.

The “Freedom” Lens

In this context, Latin American policy is likely to be a series of reactions, punctuated by a few pet projects, especially Plan Colombia. This lack of an overall policy—and particularly the absence of concern over deepening poverty and inequality—could have profoundly negative effects.

Such a disjointed and disoriented policy perspective leaves policymakers without tools for interpreting growing protest in the region. Generally treated as problems of “governance” by the Washington elite on both sides of the aisle, demands to maintain public services and assert more local and national control over natural resources cannot be dismissed as “populism” or mob hysteria, but in most cases represent organized expressions of public will.

The “freedom” lens that defines governments as good and bad along a single, invisible axis, renders these demonstrations of public will incomprehensible. In a refrain well-known from the days of the Central American conflicts, the Bush administration tends to accuse third parties of outside manipulation before acknowledging popular discontent with policies favored by the United States. This political short-sightedness leads to a serious underestimation of the breadth and depth of the indigenous movements in the Andes, for example.

The Second-Round Team

The new team being put together for the second Bush term leaves little reason to foresee the emergence of a more coherent policy agenda for Latin America. Condoleezza Rice brings a marked lack of experience in Western Hemisphere affairs to her post. Her training in Cold War mentality feeds into the president’s messianic vision of foreign policy to create a dangerous tendency to prejudge events. Rice’s refusal to condemn the thwarted coup in Venezuela raises concerns that in certain circumstances she places ideological objectives over rule of law.² At a time when most Latin American countries seek to consolidate democratic institutions, basic governance

depends in large part on the United States respecting internal processes.

The appointment of Robert Zoellick (<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/ind/zoellick/zoellick.php>) as Under-Secretary of State also does not bode well for Latin America.³ Zoellick's crusade for the free trade model and corporate privileges has caused him to dig in when the U.S. should have been negotiating. The WTO ministerial in Cancun broke down due to the combined intransigence of Zoellick's team and the European Union's Pascal Lamy,⁴ and talks over the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas have arrived at a stalemate due to the same intransigence.

Zoellick's style of trade negotiation has been characterized by a hard-line unconditionality combined with personal arrogance. Brazilians still smart over his 2002 remark that if the country didn't like the FTAA offered by the United States it could always head south, to trade with Antarctica.

Much to Zoellick's chagrin, that is exactly what Brazil is doing. Bypassing the penguins, Brazil has sought to form alliances with Southern countries both in the Americas and on other continents. In so doing it seeks to improve its bargaining position—and that of other developing countries—in trade negotiations. The formation of the Community of South American Nations and the association of Andean nations to Mercosur both form steps along the path of alternative regional integration.

At the same time, Zoellick has openly favored breaking down resistance to U.S. agendas by choosing bilateral negotiations over multilateral institutions.⁵ In this way, the U.S. trade negotiator hopes to bulldoze through some issues that are highly sensitive—including farm subsidies—for developing countries in the region. Zoellick has made rhetorical allusions to subsidy reduction while refusing to budge in practice.

Other sensitive trade issues include a reticence on the part of many governments and civil society groups to grant so-called “investor rights” as established in Chapter 11 of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Many of these “protections” border on the absurd, including not only liberal expropriation compensation but compensation for future earnings for cancelled projects. Intellectual property rights that outlaw state programs for treatment with generic drugs have also raised protests, especially in Brazil, where successful control of the HIV-

AIDS pandemic is based on access to generic drugs. Washington's insistence on including all these issues as a package deal in free trade negotiations will undoubtedly continue, leading to more friction with Southern trade partners.

Policies that Divide or Unite

Democracy, freedom, and good governance are undoubtedly shared goals in the hemisphere. The recent, reinvigorated activity of truth commissions and courts to prosecute human rights violations committed under dictatorships is proof of reinvigorated democracy, the end of impunity, and a new era of responsibility.

Ironically, as the Bush administration proposes these principles as the guidelines for foreign policy, the U.S. government appears repeatedly on the wrong side of these cases. Its at-least tacit acceptance of repression under Operation Condor, and its role with Central American death squads and contra forces, have generated long-term resentments in the region. Recommending application of a “Salvadoran solution” in Iraq⁶ or placing indicted criminals like Elliott Abrams⁷ (<http://rightweb.irc-online.org/ind/abrams/abrams.php>) in high-level State Department posts rubs salt in old wounds.

To move toward a united hemisphere capable of guaranteeing mutual security and well-being, the United States needs a policy toward Latin America that learns from—rather than repeats—past mistakes. Despite differences of opinion, the dynamism and innovation in Latin American politics today provides a source of hope. Urgent tasks remain to consolidate democratic institutions, foster grassroots alternatives, and channel movements for change.

Decades of experience have disproved the theorems that democracy and development flow naturally from the center to the periphery. The model is even more unlikely to apply to “freedom.” Imposed freedom is an oxymoron. As in other parts of the world, Latin America's freedom will depend on its people and U.S. policy must be sensitive to the needs and challenges determined through strong democratic processes in those societies.

(Laura Carlsen directs the Americas Program for the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org.)

ENDNOTES

¹ See Laura Carlsen, "Latin America Shifts to the Center-Left," IRC Americas, <http://www.americaspolicy.org/columns/amprog/2004/0411elect.html>

² Senator Christopher Dodd was reported in the press as noting about Rice's response: "To stand silent while the illegal ouster of a government is occurring is deeply troubling and will have profound implications for hemispheric democracy."

³ See Right Web analysis at <http://rightweb.irc-online.org/analysis/2005/0501number2.php>

⁴ See Laura Carlsen "Bringing down the Walls: A Partial Victory in Cancun," IRC Americas, <http://www.americaspolicy.org/columns/amprog/2003/0309walls.html>

⁵ See Tom Barry, "Coalition Forces Advance" IRC Americas, <http://www.americaspolicy.org/briefs/2004/0407econ.html>

⁶ See Michael Hirsh and John Barry, "The Salvadoran Option," *Newsweek*, <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/6802629/site/newsweek/> and Christopher Dickey, "Death Squad Democracy," *Newsweek*, <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/6814001/site/newsweek/>

⁷ See Right Web Profile <http://rightweb.irc-online.org/ind/abrams/abrams.php>. Abrams wrote of El Salvador in *National Review* (February 3, 1992, pp.39-40): "In this small corner of the cold war, American policy was right, and it was successful."

Published by the Americas Program of the International Relations Center (IRC, formerly Interhemispheric Resource Center, online at www.irc-online.org). ©2005. All rights reserved.

The Americas Program

"A New World of Ideas, Analysis, and Policy Options"

Founded in 1979, the IRC is a nonprofit policy studies center whose overarching goal is to help forge a new global affairs agenda for the U.S. government and people—one that makes the United States a more responsible global leader and partner. For more information, visit www.americaspolicy.org or email americas@irc-online.org.

Recommended citation:

Laura Carlsen, "Bush Administration Must Reassess Relations with Latin America," policy report, Americas Program (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, January 24, 2005).

Web location:

<http://www.americaspolicy.org/reports/2005/0501latamrel.html>

Production Information:

Author: Laura Carlsen, IRC

Editor: Tom Barry, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC