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DISAGGREGATE LATIN AMERICA

THE FIRST STEP TOWARD SOUND U.S. POLICIES FOR THE AMERICAS

Ronald Reagan's reported comment on returning from Washington from his first trip to South America as president was "These Latin American countries are all very different from each other."

As President Barack Obama and his team head off for the president's first trip ever to Latin America in mid-April, first to Mexico and then to the Fifth Summit of the Americas in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, they would do well to internalize Reagan's homely insight. It is critically important for the new U.S. government at its senior levels to take seriously the oft-repeated advice of regional experts to disaggregate "Latin America," to understand its complex diversity.

The Context

It is not new to say that the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean vary enormously, and that they have different interests, needs, capabilities and relationships with the United States. Emphasizing this is now more important than ever, however. During the past 20 years, under administrations of both parties, Washington has tended to underline the supposed convergence within the region: toward democratic governance, market-oriented economies, regional economic integration and policies of macroeconomic and fiscal balance.

These convergent trends were real, though never universal, and they have been significant, though never as fully consolidated as Washington liked to claim. But despite these broad regional trends toward democratic governance and market economies, key differences persist among the many countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. And some of these differences are growing, not shrinking.

The Challenge

Some of those advising President Obama will stress the distinct geographic regions: Mexico, Brazil, the Caribbean and Central America, the Andean Ridge, and the Southern Cone. These regional differences, including the degree of proximity to or distance from the United States, remain important in defining some aspects of inter-American relations, but location does not decide everything. Some nearby neighbors of the United States, such as Cuba and Nicaragua, are hostile to Washington; some distant nations, such as Chile or Uruguay, enjoy warm and supportive relations with this country, for example.

Other advisors will divide the countries of the Americas into (friendly) democracies and (hostile) dictatorships, or they will distinguish between leftist and center-right

approaches. Better-informed analysts will further divide the “left” into social democratic regimes and those with a populist authoritarian tendency. Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez heads this latter group, and one of the most important questions facing the region is whether and to what extent his influence will spread. Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua seem inclined, to different degrees and in different ways, in that direction. But Paraguay, Honduras and (soon) El Salvador also have governments that might be tempted by some of Chavez’s rhetoric and policies, and Cuba under Raul Castro remains closely allied with Venezuela.

Hemispheric Opportunity

The best approach is for the Obama Administration to consider how the different countries of the Americas cluster along five separate dimensions and how to impact policies taking these dimensions into account:

- The degree of demographic and economic interdependence with the United States. This is highest and still growing in Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean; lowest and likely to remain low in South America, and especially in the Southern Cone. Countries such as Mexico, El Salvador, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic and others, which have significant fractions of their population living and working in the United States, pose “intermestic” issues—combining international and domestic facets—from immigration to medical insurance, pensions to drivers licenses, remittances to youth gangs.
- The extent to which countries have opened their economies to international competition. This has happened by far most fully in Chile; a great deal in Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Panama and some Central American nations; and less so in other countries. A key challenge in the current world economic crisis will be to shore up the trend toward open economies by resisting domestic pressure for protectionism, in our own case as well as in Latin America.
- The relative advance of democratic governance (checks and balances, accountability, and the rule of law). Historically, this has been strong in Chile, Uruguay, and Costa Rica; increasingly, if quite unevenly, robust in Brazil; gaining ground in Mexico over the past 20 years but with ups and downs, hard struggle and major recent setbacks; arguably declining, or at least at risk, in Argentina; under great strain in Venezuela, most of the Andean nations, much of Central America and Paraguay; and exceptionally weak in Haiti. The Obama Administration can make an important positive difference on these issues by respecting the rule of law at home and internationally, and by nurturing democratic governance abroad with patience, restraint and skill, mainly through nongovernmental organizations.
- The relative effectiveness of civic and political institutions beyond the state (the press, trade unions, religious organizations, and nongovernmental entities). These are strongest in Chile, Uruguay, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic and perhaps Argentina; growing but still severely challenged in Brazil and Mexico; slowly regaining stature but still quite problematic in Colombia; weak in Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Venezuela, most of Central America and Haiti. Washington can help strengthen nongovernmental institutions, but it should do so as much as possible through multi-lateral organizations, and in strict accordance with each country’s laws.
- The extent to which traditionally excluded populations are incorporated. This includes more than 30 million marginalized, disadvantaged, and in-

creasingly politically mobilized indigenous people—especially in Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, the Peruvian highlands, and southern Mexico—and Afro-Latin Americans in countries where they are still the object of racial discrimination. The very fact of President Obama’s rise to the presidency has probably done more to affect this issue than years of more direct policies, but enhanced U.S. support for poverty alleviation, with some of this targeted at excluded populations, would also be helpful.

Hemisphere-wide summit conferences like the meeting in Trinidad and Tobago have their place as a way of building communication and rapport, and they offer mutually convenient photo opportunities. But major progress on substantive issues can only be achieved with clusters of countries with comparable or complementary issues and concerns. Recognizing this reality by establishing multilateral working groups on key questions should be the starting point for reframing U.S. policies in the Americas.

Want to Know More?

Lowenthal, Abraham F., Theodore Piccone, and Laurence Whitehead, eds. (2009), *The Obama Administration and the Americas: Agenda for Change*, Brookings Institution Press.