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The Geostrategic Context

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United States Security Policy in Latin America

Introduction

The Honourable Lester B. Pearson, Prime Minister of Canada during the early 1960's, once described the experience of being a nation on the borders of the United States as like being in bed with an elephant - no matter how friendly or well intentioned the elephant, his slightest twitch or itch is cause for anxiety. In this case Mr. Pearson was chiding the American elephant on the basis of a long term relationship of good will and mutual respect - a relatively happy marriage to a kindly if sometimes careless elephant. To apply the same analogy to Mexico and the latin American nations to our South, the relationship would more appropriately be described as a loveless marriage, with a long history of neglect and elephant abuse. When you have been crushed by the elephant it is hard to trust him or his motives.

There is no doubt that for cultural, ethnic, and other reasons, our relations with Canada have been radically different and consistently better than with our Southern neighbors. The point of this paper is not to critique the difference, but to analyse U.S. relations with Latin America as they have been and are currently evolving, and to isolate what our core national interests are in the region. From this some broad policy priorities will be developed in an effort to

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better define a coherent approach for the future.

The Elephant's Traditional Attitude

According to Dr. David S. Palmer, generalizations about Latin America are universally false.¹ But the fact is that Americans have tended to do just that. The traditional view of the region has been highly negative, indiscriminately judging all of its components as politically corrupt and economically backwards. Throughout most of our history it has been an area to be avoided. Exceptions came when some priority interest was directly threatened and required the exercise of hegemonic muscle flexing to work a quick fix, with attention soon turned away to matters of greater significance elsewhere in the world.

After World War II Latin America became a part of the Cold War confrontation, and even took center stage briefly during the Cuban Missile Crisis. But basically the region remained of secondary interest, attended to only when the Communist threat required it. Not until the 1980's with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and insurgency in El Salvador did policy makers in Washington feel compelled to engage on a continuing basis. In fact in 1986 Jeanne J. Kirkpatrick described Central America as "the most important place in the world for the United States today."² However the severity of these threats was not universally agreed on. A combination of factors, including an ideological battle between the Reagan Administration and Congress, and almost unanimous disapproval by other Latin American governments, made both the wisdom and effectiveness of our engagement a matter of intense debate.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and its withdrawal from the region has now removed the prime motive for recent U.S. interest in the area. This has led some to predict even less interest and involvement in the future. However, there are compelling reasons to reach an opposite conclusion based on emerging realities in our hemisphere.

Simple Answers

The collapse of communism also brought the collapse of the Soviet/Cuban political and economic models. In Latin America as elsewhere democracy and free markets are espoused as never before. The victory of our ideals at this point would seem complete. But is it? Has the pendulum made its final swing and come permanently to rest? As a nation prone to making generalizations, how confident should we be of this conclusion?

Charles Krauthammer in 1985 coined the phrase "plural solipsism" to describe a major weakness in American attitudes about the rest of the world and the formation of our foreign policy.³ Solipsism means mirror imaging. Plural solipsism is the belief that the rest of the world is essentially like us, sharing the same values, goals, likes and dislikes. Logically then they must want the same things we want; democracy, free enterprise, free trade, etc. Recent events might be interpreted as validating this view. However a more critical view of history will show that nothing seems to antagonize other nations, and generate xenophobic reactions^{more} than this simplistic attitude. In fact in this hemisphere maintaining a national identity has always required an emphasis on the differences between that nation and the dominant influence of the United States.

Nicaragua and Cuba are cases in point. Of all the nations in Latin America they were the two that were most North-Americanized. And yet each underwent a profound anti-American revolution. These were bitter pills for us to swallow. Those able to wrest control of these nations consciously decided, with at least the passive acquiescence if not enthusiastic support of the majority of their countrymen, that they didn't like us and didn't want to be like us. This was a mystifying result to those guided by plural solipsism. There had to be something truly perverse at work to explain such an illogical result. The simple answer was found in the Cold War, but it was never the complete answer because it ignored many of the complex realities that were also involved.

What plural solipsism really represents is an overly simple perspective. If any weakness infects our traditional thinking about Latin America it is the recurring urge to rely on simple premises and simple solutions. It's the attitude that says "Don't confuse me with the facts". However, the confusing nature of the facts is insufficient justification for not facing them.

The Complex Realities

Latin America covers a vast area containing close to half a billion people and 33 separate states. A more complete picture would emphasise their diversity and give a separate analysis for each. Here we will look at common trends impacting all the nations to varying degrees.

First, the elimination of virtually all external

security threats since the end of the Cold War has allowed concentration on economic development. After minimum or negative growth during the 1980's, export oriented industrial development is now widely accepted as the key to future prosperity. The free market system and trade have been validated; closed economies and central planning are discredited. Foreign investment is actively sought. The shift from agriculture to industry and rural to urban proceeds steadily, with most nations in transition somewhere between underdevelopment and development.

Despite optimism rising from economic progress, old problems persist and new ones surface. Many countries are burdened with huge national debts owed to foreign banks (predominantly American) which they cannot service, let alone payoff; and which block the influx of new development capital. By most estimates the percentage of the population living in poverty has increased to over 40 percent in the region as a whole, up from 30 percent little more than a decade ago. Unemployment is chronically high, frequently over 20 percent. Healthcare is a luxury available to few. The contrast between rich and poor is glaring.

The second major trend is on the political front. Democracy and free elections are the norm; authoritarianism survives only in Cuba and Haiti. Elsewhere political liberalization has gone hand in hand with economic reform, and future political stability is tied directly to the success the popularly elected governments have in dealing with their economic challenges. What is helping to keep a lid on

discontent is the surprisingly persistent optimism on the part of many have-nots that better times are ahead. Many governments see themselves in a constant race against time to achieve sufficient prosperity and high enough growth rates to ward off the social upheaval that failure to meet expectations may bring.

Third and fourth on the list of trends having a significant impact on virtually all nations in our hemisphere are the related challenges posed by population growth and environmental degradation. Their subordinate ranking here does not imply less importance, for they in fact underlie many problems that should more appropriately be identified as their symptoms. For example, economic problems are often symptoms of population pressures. Assuming a fair distribution of benefits, economic growth must outpace population growth if living standards are to improve. Unfortunately population growth and environmental degradation are factors which have received some lip service, but little effective action. For all their size and resources, our American continents are finite. They have an unknown capacity to sustain a limited population in an environment that provides an acceptable quality of life. We may argue about what the limits are, but we cannot assure we will stay within the critical bounds, or that some areas have not already exceeded them (Mexico City?). Controlling, or even influencing migration will be a particular challenge in the future. Disparities in population density and economic opportunities will create pressure for increasing numbers to seek a better life in neighboring states.

Interdependence

Dr. D. S. Palmer notwithstanding, there is one generalization about the Americas, North and South, that is not only true but of critical relevance. As nations and peoples we have and will continue to become ever more interdependent. Our problems and our opportunities no longer stop at borders. Illegal immigration and the drug trade are obvious examples. Progress in either of these areas will require action on both sides of the U.S./Mexican border, and elsewhere in Latin America.

Trade and investment comprise another area of vital and expanding interdependence. As noted previously, Mexico and nearly all other Latin American countries have consciously tied their economic future to free trade and building export markets, especially the massive U.S. market. Failure in this effort will result in instability, and perhaps both economic and political collapse, with a dramatic impact on the U.S. felt directly and indirectly. Using immigration as an example again, the numbers would likely overwhelm us in ways we have not yet experienced, and beyond our capacity to cope. So the U.S. has a crucial interest in seeing sustained economic recovery in all of Latin America. If the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is approved and extended to Central and South America, it will not only give a significant boost to development but further interlock our economies. Given the emergence of trading blocks elsewhere in the globe (European Common Market, and potentially a Pacific Rim block), such a scheme may be essential for our economies to remain competitive in a global market place.

U.S. Policy Objectives

In 1984 The Report of the President's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, familiarly called the Kissinger Commission, summarized the historical context of U.S. interests in Latin America as follows:

We have tended to view the region superficially, our policy has sometimes swung erratically between the obsessive and the negligent... we require a design.⁴

The report went on to recommend actions designed to encourage economic and social development, promote democracy, and meet regional security threats. In a broad sense this remains a pretty good outline today, and is consistent with the National Security Objectives presented in the National Security Strategy of the United States as published in 1993.⁵

In the area of economic and social development, emphasis must be placed on fully adopting the NAFTA and then working to expand membership. The Enterprise for the Americas Initiative (EAI) should be fully supported and funded. Nations which have been slow to enact privatization and free market reforms should be encouraged to do so. Debt relief through forgiveness, or payment rescheduling, should be tendered when it hampers long term growth. Strong pressure is needed to support measures to control exponential population growth, including family planning programs.

The best way to strengthen democracy and advance human rights is to preclude instability resulting from failures of economic and social initiatives.

In the area of regional security threats, external

threats are minimal today, but some local tensions persist. The Organization of American States (OAS) should be revitalized and strengthened. The war against drugs poses unique challenges, but also opportunities for cooperation. Direct security assistance may be required in the case of Peru to deal with the Sendero Luminoso insurgency.

A Change in Attitude

Albert Einstein once commented that the release of the power of the atom changed everything but our way of thinking. To some extent the same is true of our post Cold War ways of thinking. As much as anything else what is most needed in our policy toward Latin America today is a shift in attitudes. The following juxtaposition of alternative attitudes has been drawn from the recent thoughts of various authors on the subject of U.S./Latin American relations. It is presented here in an effort to indicate where their consensus shows we should place future emphasis.

Past	Future
Neglect	Engagement
Unilateral	Multilateral
Short term	Long term
Threat based	Opportunity based
Reactive	Proactive
Independent	Interdependent
Geopolitics	Transnationalism
Hegemony	Collective security

Our policies won't change unless our philosophy changes. In the past the elephant of our opening analogy had little cause for worry. There was practically nothing his Latin American neighbors could do to cause him more than minor discomfort, and even that could be readily dealt with.

But today the same neighbors can be the source of real and perhaps crippling pain. Neglect, benign or otherwise, can no longer keep separate what interdependence and geographic proximity have joined. We have no rational choice but to be fully engaged in Latin America. Otherwise our domestic priorities may be overtaken by events we have chosen not to influence.

The Clinton Administration should move quickly to demonstrate a new approach to Latin America - one of true engagement. A good way to start and underscore our new commitment would be a conference of all Latin American leaders to discuss shared problems and their solutions. A location outside the U.S. would be best. Periodic meetings thereafter would help maintain the momentum.

Conclusion

Official U.S. policy statements and political rhetoric would seem to indicate that our approach to Latin America may indeed move in a new direction - basically from neglect to engagement. Writers are virtually unanimous in their support for such a change. But there is also widespread pessimism that substantive change is imminent. The fear is that the U.S. will increasingly move towards a more isolationist stance while concentrating on our considerable domestic challenges. In fact some degree of disengagement from the high levels of activity during the Cold War seems inevitable, if not already an established fact.

A case can be made however, that a relatively more isolationist approach vis-à-vis global engagement may in fact

result in greater engagement in our immediate neighborhood, especially Mexico and Central America. The public is easily saturated by complex foreign policy issues, particularly when it involves far away places with no apparent impact on the U.S. But Mexico and at least Central America are another matter. Their connection to issues such as immigration, drugs, and trade are well understood. Without advocating greater isolationism, it is at least reasonable to speculate that a relative move in that direction will not necessarily mirror the old isolationist paradigm of pre-World War II. Instead of drawing the lines of interest at our borders, it is likely a larger sphere of concentration will be defined, and include much of Latin America. The same result could of course be achieved by reordering our priorities for engagement to give more weight to areas of greatest interest and interdependence. This would be the preferred alternative.

Citations and Notes

1. From a lecture by Dr. David S. Palmer at The National War College, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington D.C., on 19 February 1993.
2. Kamen, Al "Reagan Era Zeal for Central America Fades", The Washington Post Newspaper, 16 October 1990, page 18.
3. Will, George F., "Washington's Dr. K.", The Washington Post Newspaper, 1 October 1985, page 25.
4. Kissinger, Henry A. et al, Report of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984), page 12.
5. National Security Strategy of the United States, (U.S. Government Printing Office, January 1993).