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Recommendations for a New Administration: Base Hemispheric Relations on Opportunities, Not Threats

By Howard J. Wiarda | November 26, 2012

Before discussing what countries the president should prioritize or what laws to change, it might be useful to look at U.S. policy on the macro level. The new administration should consider adopting four self-explanatory guiding principles:

- Get our own government's own house in order,
- Upgrade priorities in the hemisphere,
- Distinguish between countries, and
- Support institutions that complement U.S. interests.

Whatever one's policy or partisan differences, I think we can agree that for the last decade, since 9/11, U.S. policy toward the Americas has drifted. We have not paid sufficient attention to an area that is right on our own borders and is of rising importance to us. U.S. policy has been episodic and inconsistent, lurching from crisis to opportunity and back again.

The lack of attention to the hemisphere may be understandable. Since the attacks of 9/11, U.S. policy has focused on Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, international terrorism, and now China. With regard to Latin America and the Caribbean, we have accomplished a great deal at lower, individual-country levels—democracy, development, modernization, good relations with most countries—but without articulating at high levels a coherent, mature policy for the region as a whole. As Colin Powell once said when he was secretary of state, “When I get up in the morning, I already have forty-seven problems—Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.—on my plate. The last thing I want to hear from some other area is about number forty-eight.”

Although many have charged the policy is one of “benign neglect,” we would not characterize it that way. We see each new administration—Bush making Mexico a priority, Obama attending the Summit of the Americas—as starting with good intentions but then

being overwhelmed by more immediate problems. There is little follow-through on the initial first initiatives. Policy drifts. Meanwhile, the hemisphere is changing rapidly, and U.S. policy has not kept pace with those changes.

Quite a number of Latin American and Caribbean countries—Argentina, the Bahamas, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, Panama, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay—are breaking through the threshold to “developed country” status. Others, like the Dominican Republic and Peru, are on the way. Those breakthroughs call for a new and different policy from the United States in terms of trade, investment, and our treatment of these countries.

Quite a number of Latin American countries are becoming more assertive in both regional and global affairs and more independent of U.S. policy. Brazil comes to mind in its 2010 pursuit of a solution to Iran’s nuclear fuel desires through a swap arrangement with Turkey.

There are new regional institutions—the Southern Cone Common Market (Mercosur), the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA), and the South American Union (Unasur)—that exclude the United States from participation. Overall, the United States has lost position and influence throughout the region. These and other changes call for a new approach to Latin America and a new, more mature U.S. policy toward countries that merit it.

What to Do

Above all, the United States needs to get its own house in order, not only in terms of a cohesive policy for Latin America but also in resolving the twin issues of immigration and better integrating Hispanics into the mainstream of U.S. life. Without that, we lack credibility. After that, the United States should

- Give a higher priority to both Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa—likely to be economic powers in their own right in the next 20 years.
- Distinguish carefully between countries. Latin America and the Caribbean are diverse sub-

regions that cannot be regarded as monolithic. At one level, we need a coherent regional policy, but we need also to develop good, specific bilateral relations with each individual country.

- Put our ties with certain Latin American countries like Brazil and Mexico on the same regular, normal, and mature basis that we have long maintained with Europe, Japan, and other countries.
- Strengthen those international institutions that can and do serve as complements to U.S. policy. Here I have in mind the Organization of American States, the Caribbean Community, the Central American Integration System, the Defense Ministerial of the Americas, and others.
- Make U.S. policy opportunity-based, not threat-based. During the Cold War and then again after 9/11, U.S. policy was preoccupied with possible threats emanating from Latin America. Now we should recast policies to take advantage of the many opportunities there in terms of trade, investment, tourism, democracy, development, etc., that Latin America offers.

As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton did when she spoke in Quito, Ecuador, June 8, 2010—a speech that received far less attention that it deserved—we hereby call for an opportunity-based foreign policy for Latin America.¹

Howard J. Wiarda is Dean Rusk Professor of International Relations at the University of Georgia in Athens and a senior associate in the CSIS Americas Program.

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Cover photo: A casual group portrait of some of the heads of state in Cartagena, Colombia, attending the 6th Summit of the Americas (April 2012), http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jefes_de_Estado_en_la_Cumbre_de_Cartagena_de_Indias,_2012.jpg.

¹ See Howard J. Wiarda, “An Opportunity-Based Foreign Policy in Latin America,” CSIS Election Watch 2004 (November, 2004); and Secretary Hillary Clinton, “Policy Address on Opportunity in the Americas,” speech presented at the Centro Cultural Metropolitano, Quito, Ecuador (June 8, 2010), <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/06/142848.htm>.