

CHAPTER 3

LATIN AMERICA AND CUBA
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE
OF THE U.S. THINK TANKS

2000–2010

Luis Fernando Ayerbe

This chapter compares different U.S. perceptions of the political evolution in Latin America, especially the Cuban situation, by considering studies that have been produced by think tanks during the administrations of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. The selection of think tanks includes seven institutions that play renowned roles within American political life and which develop lines of research on the Western Hemisphere:

- The American Enterprise Institute (AEI). Founded in 1943, it is one of the main research centers for conservative thinking. The list

of AEI's scholars includes important staff members of the George W. Bush administration, such as Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, and Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton.

- The Brookings Institution. Founded in 1916, it defines itself as independent, although it is traditionally considered to be close to the Democratic Party. Among the government members who are affiliated with this institution are William Cohen, the secretary of defense for Bill Clinton; Ivo Daalder, a U.S. National Security Council (NSC) staffer in the Clinton administration and the current U.S. permanent representative on the Council of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization; and Susan Rice, the assistant secretary of state for African affairs during President Clinton's second term and the current U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.
- The Center for American Progress. Founded in 2003, it does research and publishes on government policies and is close to the Democratic Party. It is run by John Podesta, who served as the White House chief of staff to Clinton and was the cochair of President Obama's transition. Dan Restrepo, the director of the institution's Latin American program, became Obama's senior policy advisor on the Western Hemisphere during the presidential campaign and is the current White House special assistant to the president and the senior director for Western Hemisphere affairs.
- The Center for Strategic and International Studies. Founded in 1962, it emphasizes its independence from ideological and partisan stances. Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's national security advisor and the international affairs advisor of candidate Obama, is currently a member of its board of trustees. Members of the George W. Bush administration, such as Robert Zoellick, the U.S. trade representative and deputy secretary of state, and Otto Reich, the assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs and the main Latin America advisor for Republican presidential candidate John McCain, are former members of the institution.

- The Heritage Foundation. Created in 1973, it adopts a conservative perspective on the topics which it analyzes and proposes public policy solutions. Sara Youseff, the associate director for domestic policy; Elaine L. Chao, the secretary of labor; and Michael J. Gerson, a speechwriter for and advisor to George W. Bush, have come from this institution.
- The Inter-American Dialogue. Founded in 1982, it presents peculiar characteristics when it is compared to the other centers, not only because it is directed exclusively towards hemispheric issues but also because it incorporates leaders of the public and private sectors in Latin America and Canada into its ranks. It is worth mentioning the presence on the current board of directors of Ricardo Lagos, the former president of Chile; Carla Hills, George H. W. Bush's U.S. trade representative; and Thomas F. McLarty III, the White House chief of staff for Bill Clinton. The organization clearly seeks a nonpartisan position but one which leans left of the center.
- The Rand Corporation. Created in 1946 to develop research projects related to the field of defense, especially for the Air Force, it emphasizes its commitment to a nonpartisan stance. Frank C. Carlucci, the secretary of defense during Ronald Reagan's first administration, is an honorary member of the board of trustees. Important members of George W. Bush's staff have also been on the board, such as Condoleezza Rice, the secretary of state, and Donald Rumsfeld, the secretary of defense.

Although I do not intend to establish a consensus about the selection's representation within the great variety of sectors which directly or indirectly exert an influence on the course of America's international positioning, I believe that the selection that has been made provides access to important actors. Other Washington-based think tanks exist to the left of the selected groups, including the Washington Office on Latin America, the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, and the Latin American Working Group. However, I believe that these groups, in spite of the quality of

their research and writing, have been marginalized by the policy-making circles in Washington, DC.

Besides providing staff to important decision-making bodies of the White House and other key institutions, the selected institutions produce studies that reflect the perception of Latin America by relevant interlocutors from recent Republican and Democratic administrations. This allows for the possibility of a close examination of the challenges that the country's foreign policy establishment perceives in the region. Following this perspective, I have selected two think tanks that are identified with the George W. Bush administration, the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation; two that are identified with the Bill Clinton and Barack Obama administrations, the Brookings Institution and the Center for American Progress; and three that seek to maintain a less partisan position, looking to contribute with less short-term ideas, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Inter-American Dialogue, and the Rand Corporation.

My approach highlights three common aspects of the various think tanks, with some differences according to the positions of each institution:

1. The critical evolution of Latin America's economic situation during the 1990s
2. The consequences, in terms of governance, of the election of several governments from the left side of the political spectrum, which keep friendly relations with Cuba and press for the normalization of U.S. relations with that country
3. The implications for the U.S. regional security agenda in the context of the region's loss of relevance after 9/11, a trend that has continued under the Barack Obama administration

THE DOWNTURN OF LATIN AMERICAN CAPITALISM AND THE DEFENSE OF THE WASHINGTON CONSENSUS

In 2000, on the eve of presidential elections, the Rand Corporation published the report *Taking Charge: A Bipartisan Report to the President Elect on Foreign Policy and National Security*. The report was published

under the direction of Frank Carlucci, and it sought to present to the new administration the challenges that were associated with foreign policy and national security. In reference to Latin America, the document expresses concern over some of the impacts of globalization and the liberalization of the region's economies. Notwithstanding the earnings from the flow of foreign investment, productivity, and growth, the social distribution of benefits in the region remains unequal, which can create obstacles to home market development and to the stabilization of the economic system and democracy.

According to Ángel Rabasa, the author of the report's chapter on the Western Hemisphere, the new administration would face two main challenges. One was the building of a positive U.S. policy towards the region. The other was addressing the threats to democracy that existed in the Andean countries, such as the possible regionalization of the Colombian conflict and the spread of new types of populism inspired by the example of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela.

In order to deal with such challenges, Rabasa's recommendation was for the United States to take an active stance, striving to deepen liberalizing reforms within the realm of the political and the economic systems. As for the latter, he suggested that the U.S. government should stimulate dollarization, which "would lower the cost of capital, encourage fiscal discipline, reduce the transaction costs of international trade and finance, increase investor confidence, and deepen hemispheric integration."¹ A good example of this kind of policy was Argentina's Convertibility Plan. In 2000, only one year before the collapse of Fernando de la Rúa's government, in spite of the concern over some negative indicators, Rand's report did not notice the situation of great severity, even though it was clear that Argentina was headed for economic disaster as the result of dollarization. After the crisis in Argentina, in 2001 think tank analyses started to incorporate the growing pessimism that was brought out by the crises that had been triggered in several Latin American countries. The focus on the benefits produced by market reforms gave way to the record of their limitations, the critical implications of which indicate a troubling framework for governance.

For Stephen Johnson from the Heritage Foundation,

Latin America is less stable and prosperous than it was 10 years ago. Half-implemented reforms do not allow full citizen participation in politics or the economy ... According to a 2002 Latinobarómetro report, only 32 percent of citizens in the 17 Latin American countries say that they are satisfied with democracy—down from 37 percent in 2000. As few as 24 percent have positive feelings about market economies.²

The failure of the economic reforms had very critical implications in some countries, resulting in the early resignation of elected presidents de la Rúa in Argentina and Sánchez de Lozada in Bolivia, prompted by the sharpening of conflicts between the governments and their opposition.

Considering the situation the region was experiencing, Johnson wondered if neoliberalism had died in Latin America. His answer was no; the responsibility for the crisis did not come from the implemented economic policies, he argued, but rather from the reforms' insufficiency and misapplication. He recommended their intensification:

Opening internal markets to foreign trade, restraining public spending, and privatizing inefficient state industries are not enough to establish a free market economy or capitalism, although capitalism gets the blame for any failure of partial reforms. These and other measures, known as the Washington Consensus, were widely adopted in Latin America in the early 1990s and for awhile helped reduce deficits and boost foreign investment. Economies grew where tariffs were lowered, but poverty and unemployment increased.³

Carol Graham and Sandip Sukhtankar from the Brookings Institution agreed with Johnson's analysis of not mistaking the Latin American crisis for the failure of the undertaken path. At the same time, they presented a more optimistic evaluation of the future of democracy and of the market economy in the region. The authors acknowledged the situation as a very serious one: "Nor have the region's age-old problems gone away, and its weak public institutions are ill equipped to solve

them. It has the highest inequality in the world, relatively weak social indicators, and high rates of poverty, violence, crime, and corruption."⁴ Making use of the Chilean institution Latinobarómetro's 2002 survey, they saw positive indicators in the respondents' dominant reported perception that the merit of the adopted policies and their application were separate issues. Despite the fact that there was a strong resentment with the results of liberalization, especially when it came to privatizations, most people did not transfer such dissatisfaction to doubts about the policies. The problem, they believed, was in the way the policies were implemented.

An ever-present issue in the analyses of the stalemates experienced by the region is the increase of criminality, a result of the countries' weak economic performance during the past years. A study developed by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) draws attention to the impacts of this phenomenon on the operation of democracy and the economy, a consideration which often appears to be put aside given the priority that is often attributed to citizens' lack of physical safety.

According to the CSIS study, statistically, Latin America became the world's most violent region in the early years of the twenty-first century, with a rate of twenty-three murders per one thousand inhabitants—more than double the world's average, placing the region at the same level of danger as warring African countries. Besides the loss of human lives and the destruction of property, one can identify other direct and indirect costs of the relationship between crime and economic performance:

1. It chases investments away as it starts to be a part of the private sector's risk evaluations.
2. It reduces tourism, mostly affecting poor countries in Central America and the Caribbean, which are more dependent on such activity.
3. It reduces work productivity because of the role it plays in absenteeism.
4. It raises insurance costs relative to higher rates of robberies and kidnappings.

5. It limits commercial transactions to regions and neighborhoods that are considered to be safer.
6. Investment in private security firms increases.

The research cites data from the World Bank estimating that the average per capita growth in Latin America could have been 25% higher if the region's criminality rates were similar to the rest of the world's.⁵

Concerning the effects of crime on the democratization process, CSIS highlighted three aspects:

1. State institutions are delegitimized. This view is expressed in the results of public opinion polls that place the police and the judiciary among the worst qualified sectors when it comes to credibility.
2. Favorable opinions regarding violent and antidemocratic solutions increase. This boosts political leaderships that turn unrestricted fights against crime into their main electoral platform.
3. There are degenerative effects within civil society, especially in Central America, as a consequence of people's disbelief in the state's ability to make effective use of its strength and its justice system when sectors of the population start acting in their own defense, acquiring guns and fostering punishing actions against criminals, especially in the form of lynching.

The CSIS study's conclusion is pessimistic about the possibilities of improvements in the context of crime in the region.

THE BUSH YEARS AND THE REGION'S MOVE TO THE LEFT

In light of the negative diagnoses presented in the aforementioned paragraph, the think tanks' analyses of the supportive role the U.S. government could play in overcoming the region's impasses leave little room for optimism. Latin America's position in the United States' foreign relations has been characterized by growing irrelevance during the past years.

For Mark Falcoff of the American Enterprise Institute, the presidential election of George W. Bush, the former governor of Texas, a state that has strong economic links to Latin America, had raised people's hopes that more attention would be paid by the U.S. government to Latin America. The attacks of September 11, 2001, however, radically changed the U.S. foreign policy agenda; its main focus turned towards security, giving priority to regions in which bigger challenges in the war against terror could be verified, especially the Middle East. Falcoff observed,

As both President Bush and Vice President Cheney have repeatedly stated, the war against terror is likely to last for the rest of our lifetimes; it may never come to a definitive conclusion ... That Latin America might become as much as the second-ranking priority for the White House, the State and Treasury Departments, and the Pentagon, might well be too much to hope for.⁶

The region's loss of significance to the United States has taken place at a bad moment. For Falcoff, the strong aggravation of the difficult economic situation, coupled with the trend of Latin American governments taking different positions from the U.S. foreign policy and the rise of leftist leaders in key countries such as Venezuela and Brazil, requires more attention from Washington:

We are witnessing the beginnings of a split into two Latin Americas—one running on an irregular axis from Mexico City through Central America to Chile, and the other from Havana, passing through Caracas, Brasilia, and possibly Quito and Buenos Aires. The first will be broadly associated with the United States, both in economic and geostrategic terms; the second will define itself by opposition to the Washington Consensus in economics and finance, to hemispheric free trade, and to the broader strategic agendas of the Bush administration. The implications for future policy are far too crucial to ignore.⁷

Contrary to Falcoff's expectations, Brazil has not followed an anti-American path. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's government tends to seek credibility with the U.S. establishment, adopting a pragmatic stance of

continuing the economic liberalization policies that were set forth by da Silva's predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, as well as the commitment to hemispheric governance and security. This new reality made Falcoff put his initial diagnosis under review, stressing what he saw as a real historic conquest of da Silva's rise to the presidency:

The real merit of President da Silva is to have reconciled vast sectors of Brazil's have-nots to Brazil's democratic system with all its warts. He believes—and he acts as if he believes—that constructive economic and social change is possible through negotiation, consensus, and constitutional procedures. All of Brazil's well-wishers cannot but cheer him on in this enterprise.⁸

In the view of analysts at the American Enterprise Institute, Heritage Foundation, and Inter-American Dialogue, the main worries are regarding Venezuela, whose government is considered to be a focus of anti-American militancy in and out of the region. Unlike Fidel Castro, the leader of a country with little economic significance, Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez controls the state of one of the world's biggest oil producers, whose resources could be used to foster an opposition axis against democracy and the free market, the pillars of the United States' international influence. Among the selected examples to justify such a perception, it is worth highlighting the following:

- Chávez has troublesome international connections. The country has formed an alliance with Cuba, sending it oil in exchange for medical services, educators, and intelligence experts. Chávez was the first leader to visit Saddam Hussein after the Gulf War, in 2000. His party, the *Movimiento de la Quinta República* (Fifth Republic Movement) has direct bonds with the São Paulo Forum, which brings together more than thirty-nine political parties and guerrilla organizations from Latin America.⁹ Chávez is suspected of supporting leftist armed organizations in Colombia as well

as the presence of terrorist group cells from the Middle East in Venezuela.¹⁰

- Chávez has used oil as a matter of political influence. In 1999 and 2003, the Chávez administration played a prominent role in OPEC's decision to reduce the production of oil and promote a policy of price increase, paying visits to Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. In 2005, Chávez created the company *Petrocaribe*, which makes it possible for countries in the Caribbean to buy oil from Venezuela with funding and low interest rates.¹¹
- Chávez has expressed opposition to the United States' regional policy. At the presidential Summit of the Americas celebrated in 2004 in Monterrey, Chávez was the only one of thirty-four leaders not to sign the final declaration, using his opposition to free trade as an argument. In December 2004, he signed an agreement with Cuba, starting the *Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America* (*Alianza Bolivariana para las Américas*, or ALBA) as an opposing project to the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Bolivia, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Honduras would eventually join ALBA. Chávez successfully opposed the inclusion of free trade on the discussion schedule of Mar del Plata's presidential summit in November 2005, directed by Mercosur countries, especially Brazil and Argentina, which indefinitely blocked the creation of the FTAA.¹²

As far as Cuba is concerned, the demise of its Eastern European allies at the end of the Cold War and the fast and drastic deterioration of its population's life conditions in the early 1990s stimulated successive U.S. administrations to strengthen the pressures aimed at accelerating Castro's fall, which was seen as inevitable. Such a perspective motivated the broadening of the economic embargo through the Torricelli and Helms-Burton laws, which were supported by George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, respectively. It also supported the ongoing presence of Cuba on the list of terrorist sponsors and the Free Cuba Initiative (FCI) sponsored by the George W. Bush administration.

Among the main measures contained in Bush's initiative are

- the enlargement of government resources for the protection and development of Cuban civil society
- travel restrictions for American university students and researchers
- restrictions to programs which are directly linked to the Cuban government's political objectives
- the limitation of family visits to Cuba to one every three years
- diminishing the amount of money Cuban Americans can spend on food and lodging in Cuba from US\$164 per day to US\$50 per day
- laying the groundwork for the viability of a possible government that might appear after the end of the current political regime
- identifying and training leaders who are capable of dealing with the process of creating a market economy, based on Eastern European experiences

When the measures of the FCI were announced by then-assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, Roger Noriega (who was replaced by Thomas Shannon in 2005 and who joined the American Enterprise Institute), their previously unseen character was emphasized:

It's unprecedented. Because for the first time ever, a U.S. Administration has articulated a definitive, decisive and integrated strategy that represents a national commitment to help the Cuban people bring an end to the Cuban dictatorship and to be prepared to support a democratic transition in meaningful, specific, explicit ways once that transition is underway.¹³

During Bush's second administration, the think tanks' analyses tended to present the Latin American situation as increasingly alarming, as the United States was forced to live with Néstor Kirchner in Argentina, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Michelle Bachelet in Chile, Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Fernando Lugo in Paraguay, and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. However, the different stances taken

by those countries' leaders concerning the United States encouraged the think tanks to adopt more pragmatic analytical perspectives, which prevented them from placing all of countries into the same group.

The Inter-American Dialogue's (IAD) *Agenda for the Americas*, presented in March 2005, stresses the importance of Brazil and Mexico as important actors in the establishment of a successful alliance between the United States and the whole region. The report stated, "Washington needs to remember that it is the economic and political success of Brazil, Mexico, and the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean that best serves U.S. interests in the hemisphere."¹⁴

The call for a stronger U.S. presence in the region was thus reinforced, with Venezuela and Cuba as the main targets. In the former case, there was concern over the amount of polarization between President Chávez and the opposition, because the leader "has shown little respect for democratic procedures."¹⁵ Concerning Cuba, the report recommended,

The United States should continue to prod the Cuban government to end its repressive practices and improve its human rights record. However, the central goal of the U.S. government in Cuba should be a peaceful and successful transition toward democratic politics and market economics. The U.S. government should start by dismantling the web of restrictions that prevents Cuba's integration into hemispheric activities.¹⁶

Noriega adopted a similar perspective on the Brazilian and Mexican roles, following the strong shift away from the initial mistrust within conservative circles regarding the Brazilian president's leftist path. Regardless of the diversity of the political trajectories that separate Lula's Workers Party and Calderon's National Action Party, Noriega presented both leaders as "committed democrats who accept strong institutions and pluralism as essential tenets of sound government and both see their task as promoting their nations' ability to compete in the world economy—not to rant against globalization." This was in direct opposition, he noted, to the "irresponsible populism championed by Hugo Chávez and his acolytes in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua."¹⁷

Despite being located in a political arena opposite to that of Noriega, Dan Restrepo from the Center for American Progress also listed among the challenges of the region encouraging economic development and strengthening different political paths than those offered by neopopulism. However, his diagnosis of the route of reforms that were associated with the Washington Consensus and American policies, especially in relation to the Cuban issue, highlights important differences between the Center for American Progress' ideas and those of the other think tanks that are studied in this chapter. Given the roles assumed by Restrepo during Obama's presidential campaign and in his administration from 2009 onwards, it seems important to restate policy stances assumed by Restrepo when he directed the Latin American program of the Center for the American Progress (CAP).

Referring to the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, Restrepo believed there was a new agreement about the failure of the Washington Consensus. However, he did not deny that there were conservative sectors—which, in his view, were a minority—which attributed the problem to its incomplete and defective implementation, a failure that they believed should be blamed on the Latin American countries rather than on the United States. Questioning this view, Restrepo signaled four dynamics of U.S.–Latin American relations which affected the search for a different consensus, based on the region's poverty and development problems:

(1) A lack of official focus on Latin America; (2) The political paralysis of the United States in the face of the forces of globalization and the politics of fear; (3) The problem and the opportunity created by the neo-populists in the Americas; and (4) The perception that Latin America, and in particular its elites, must do more for itself ... They have helped to create recognition of the fact that poverty in the hemisphere must be fought and must be fought now. They have also created a political reason to pay attention to what happens in the Americas—the perceived possibility that the United States is going to “lose the Americas.”¹⁸

Analyzing the transference of the Cuban presidency from Fidel to Raúl Castro due to the former's health conditions, Restrepo argued that

the moment had arrived for a radical change in the American stance on seeking to determine the island's future. He suggested that rather than implementing measures that were obsessively focused on the goal of overthrowing Cuba's political regime, the United States should instead support a transition that respects all of the interested parties. As a possibility for a direction shift, he suggested that

President Bush and Congress must relegate to the dust bin the so-called Helms-Burton law and the ideologically driven posturing that has passed for planning for a transition in Cuba. We must also open the way for the Cuban people to have increased access to our ideas and citizens, either as a peaceful countermeasure to a desperate attempt by the successor regime to cling to power, or to help the Cuban people, if they so desire, in their journey to a more open and democratic society.¹⁹

PERSPECTIVES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

In 2004, the qualifications of presidential candidates George W. Bush and John Kerry to lead the war against terrorism were at the center of the electoral debate. In 2008, the agenda of challenges was more varied and complex. The severe financial crisis and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan required the new president to be able to allocate limited resources to a variety of urgent issues.

Among the challenges in the regional sphere, the positions of the presidential candidates presented some important idiosyncrasies. In a speech in Miami on May 20, 2008, the celebration of Cuba's Independence Day, the Republican candidate John McCain sought to distance himself from former U.S. administrations, questioning their tendencies to treat Latin America as a junior partner rather than as an equal one during the past decades. Concerning Cuba, he stressed the importance of continuing Bush's restrictive policies, pressing Cuba's government “to release all political prisoners unconditionally, to legalize all political parties, labor unions, and free media, and to schedule internationally monitored elections”—and

to keep the embargo “until these basic elements of democratic society are met.”²⁰ Regarding free trade, he criticized the Democrats’ legislative performance, questioning the negative votes of Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama on the trade treaty with Colombia.

Three days later, in the same city, Obama delivered his speech on renewing U.S. leadership in the Americas, which turned into the main document of his campaign addressed to the region. In it, he questioned the policies of his predecessor, who, he said, after starting

a misguided war in Iraq, its policy in the Americas has been negligent toward our friends, ineffective with our adversaries, disinterested in the challenges that matter in peoples’ lives, and incapable of advancing our interests in the region. No wonder, then, that demagogues like Hugo Chávez have stepped into this vacuum.²¹

As a contrast, Obama proposed a new regional relationship based on freedom, which would have Cuba as its main target, promising to keep the economic embargo and, at the same time, to loosen the restrictions on family visits, as “there are no better ambassadors for freedom than Cuban Americans.”²² He indicated his desire to emphasize security, particularly focused on the fight against drug-traffic-related criminality, and he promised to strengthen both Plan Colombia, which began during the Clinton administration, and the Mérida Initiative, an association with Mexico that was implemented by Bush in order to fight drug trafficking, money laundering, and transnational crime and to promote border control. Obama also vowed to continue the fight against poverty, citing the Millennium Development Goals of halving the poverty rate by 2015.

Considering the positions presented by the Democratic and the Republican candidates, Sidney Weintraub from the Center for Strategic and International Studies stressed “that they know little about the region other than the clichés—that there is much corruption, inequality, and poverty.”²³ Analyzing what the region could expect from a possible McCain or Obama administration, Weintraub did not perceive great differences between the candidates and did not think it was likely that there would be changes in the existing policies.

If McCain is elected, he will most likely keep his promise and seek to obtain approval for the Colombia free trade agreement; but if he has a large Democratic majority in the Congress, he is unlikely to succeed, certainly not early in his administration. If Obama is elected president, I expect him to look for ways to get around his campaign statements, especially on renegotiating NAFTA ... On drug trade, Obama will try to stanch the shipment of guns from the United States to Mexico, whereas McCain will not. Obama will support a comprehensive immigration law in the United States, whereas McCain will not—despite his earlier history on this subject. Neither Obama/Biden nor McCain/Palin will change what critics refer to as U.S. neglect of Latin America because they will have higher priorities.²⁴

For Ray Walsler from the Heritage Foundation, the future president needed to pay closer attention to Venezuela, whose foreign policy deals with delicate issues of the American security agenda. Venezuela has military agreements with Russia for the purchase of weapons and the performance of joint naval exercises in the Caribbean; petrochemical, transportation, and agroindustrial agreements with Iran; and agreements with China to increase its oil exports to the country.

At present, Venezuela represents the single most difficult diplomatic and security challenge facing the U.S. in the immediate future. How the U.S. chooses to deal with this challenge will say much about the direction the next Administration will take as it shapes its policy toward America’s neighbors in the hemisphere.²⁵

In regard to oil, it is worth mentioning that although Latin America is not the world’s main reserve region, the biggest providers for the United States are located in the area. Acknowledging this reality as well as the challenges that are posed by Hugo Chávez, the Rand Corporation’s report *Imported Oil and U.S. National Security* puts Venezuela’s impact on national security into perspective:

He has not won the respect of his neighbors. Although Venezuelan financial assistance is welcome, it has not bought Chávez

influence on political and economic policies; their governments go their own ways. Chavez's dream of creating a Bolivarian state has been ignored. In contrast to Iran, Venezuela does not pose a serious military threat to U.S. allies; its two largest neighbors, Brazil and Colombia, have much more capable militaries. In short, increased oil revenues have given Chavez more freedom to pursue policies antithetical to U.S. interests but have not permitted him to become a serious threat to U.S. national security.²⁶

Another important security issue for the new U.S. president was the weak control of certain Latin American states over their territories. In addition to the Colombian case, which was associated with drug trafficking and guerrillas—the object of Plan Colombia—the porousness of the Mexican borders was noticed because it allows for the flow of migrants as well as for 90 percent of the cocaine that enters the United States and 90 percent of the weapons that enter Mexico, contributing to the power of organized crime. For Noriega, the experience of recent years, especially in the Andes and in Colombia, called for the review and the updating of U.S. strategies, using the Mérida Initiative as a positive example, “placing U.S. aid to Mexico and Central America ... in the context of an integrated strategy in which all countries are asked to contribute to a common goal.”²⁷

The report *Rethinking U.S.–Latin American Relations* from the Brookings Institution, which resulted from the work of a commission of intellectuals and politicians from several countries in the hemisphere, identified the main challenge for the next administration. The effects of American negligence and the mutual mistrust between the United States and Latin America needed to be overcome. This was of particular importance in a scenario of increasing hemispherical interdependence and the transnationalization of threats to common security, which tended to aggravate the consequences of the United States not taking the convergence of interests seriously:

Without a partnership, the risk that criminal networks pose to the region's people and institutions will continue to grow. Peaceful nuclear technology may be adopted more widely, but without proper safeguards, the risks of nuclear proliferation will increase. Adaptation

to climate change will take place through isolated, improvised measures by individual countries, rather than through more effective efforts based on mutual learning and coordination. Illegal immigration to the United States will continue unabated and unregulated, adding to an ever-larger underclass that lives and works at the margins of the law. Finally, the countries around the hemisphere, including the United States, will lose valuable opportunities to tap new markets, make new investments, and access valuable resources.²⁸

The latter aspect of new markets, investments, and resources is emphasized in the specific case of the United States. The document points to the fact that Latin America has been going through a favorable trend of growth of its economy in recent years, marked by increased exports of commodities and followed by the diversification of its international economic relations. This trend will continue notwithstanding great or small U.S. involvement.

The Brookings Institution's report identifies and makes recommendations for four main areas of regional reach: (1) developing sustainable energy and supporting the fight against climate change and its effects, (2) efficiently managing the issue of migration, (3) improving the accessibility of the opportunities that are offered by economic integration, and (4) protecting the hemisphere from drug traffic and organized crime. Bilaterally, it presents a specific section on the United States' relations with Cuba, the justification of which is associated with the disproportionate attention that the policy regarding Cuba has acquired in the regional agenda, affecting both the United States' image and its relations with Latin American countries. The document recommends three categories of measures: ones that can be unilaterally taken by the United States, ones that require talks between Washington and Havana, and ones that involve multilateral cooperation. I highlight the first category, which reflects the position of the report regarding the responsibilities that would be given to the next U.S. administration (the Obama administration):

Lift all restrictions on travel to Cuba by Americans. Repeal all aspects of the “communications embargo” (radio, TV, Internet)

and readjust regulations governing trade in low-technology communications equipment. Remove caps and targeting restrictions on remittances. Take Cuba off the State Department's State Sponsors of Terrorism List.²⁹

TENDENCIES AND PERSPECTIVES OF THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

As seen in the analyses presented, the selected think tanks differ greatly in their assessments of the level of threat that is attributed to the Venezuelan government and its policies of regional alliances. They also differ in their opinions about the reach of the unilateral measures Washington should take to alleviate tensions related to Cuba. In the characterization of the broader challenges of the hemispheric agenda, however, convergences of opinion among the think tanks abound. Such consensus and differences have been reflected in the reality of the administration's experiences during the first year of the Obama administration, starting with the challenges that are presented by the evolution of the regional scenario.

At a debate about the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago in April 2009, Peter Hakim of the Inter-American Dialogue considered Thomas Shannon's continuity as the assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs to be a positive development. Although Shannon would serve on an interim basis until the permanent appointment of the new secretary, Arturo Valenzuela, Hakim recognized Shannon's accomplishments during the last three years of Bush administration, informing Shannon that

if this Summit turns out to be a success, I think it will be in good part due to your excellent work in bringing a consistency to U.S. policy and a sort of coherence to the way the U.S. deals with Latin America.³⁰

Although it did not present strong measures and there was no consensus on the final resolution, the summit, held in April 2009, was a moment of rapprochement, providing an opening for new ideas from all involved without the threat of vetoes or the exclusion of internal relations within the

hemisphere. Acknowledging South America's growing relevance, Obama gathered in Trinidad and Tobago with all of Latin America's leaders.

Before the summit, Obama announced the loosening of the restrictions that had been imposed on Cuba by Bush, allowing for Cuban Americans to take trips to Cuba and make remittances to their family members. This was presented as a first step on the way to a normalization of bilateral relations—making it clear, however, that the new measures would depend on the Cuban government's response, especially concerning any initiatives leading to the country's political democratization. On June 3, OAS' Thirty-Ninth General Assembly, gathered in Honduras, unanimously voted to revoke the 1962 resolution that had expelled Cuba because of its ties with the former Soviet Union, paving the way for its reintegration with the organization.

The Heritage Foundation's Ray Walser noticed a positive effort towards hemispheric conciliation in the Obama administration's first steps. Referring to the Trinidad and Tobago summit, he highlighted the environment of good will—an environment that was markedly different from that of the previous summit:

There were no riots, no counter-summits as in Mar del Plata during the Fourth Summit attended by President Bush. Contentious issues like free trade, serious governance reforms, or free versus unfree markets were relegated to the background. Overall, the latest iteration of the Summit of the Americas was long on idealism and upbeat rhetoric and short on accomplishments.³¹

Concerning the OAS' decision, Walser seemed to be more cautious. He acknowledged the Obama administration's arguments that the end of restrictions put Cuba's need to adapt to the organization's 2001 Democratic Charter into perspective. He also raised questions about the correlation of forces among the countries of the OAS and their influence on the decision-making process:

The Administration argues that lifting the ban on Cuba will strengthen the OAS. This point is subject to debate. The addition

of a contentious, totalitarian Cuba will inevitably weaken the institution. A few will stick to demands for democratic change, while others—perhaps a majority of members—will give Cuba a free pass if it wants it.³²

One month later, paradoxically, Honduras was suspended from the OAS, which applied the Democratic Charter in response to the coup d'état against President Manuel Zelaya. Zelaya was overthrown by the military after the Supreme Court ruled that he had disrespected the law by conducting a poll about a constitutional amendment that would open the way for his possible reelection. Both the legislative and the judiciary houses had denied authorization for such a reelection.

Although Zelaya was elected by the Liberal Party—which, along with the National Party, has been in office since the civilians' return to power in 1981—during his first year in office, he promoted a deep change in Honduras' foreign policy orientation. Strongly dependent on oil imports, in the context of increasing international barrel prices, Zelaya called for Honduras' incorporation into the Petrocaribe alliance at the end of 2007. In August 2008, the country joined ALBA.

In spite of the fact that such actions were sanctioned by the Honduran Congress, when the economic measures were considered, the proposal for Zelaya's reelection through constitutional reform was seen by the elites as promoting a structural change in the balance of power, with implications for the country's foreign relations. Zelaya would be jeopardizing decades of alliance with the United States by approaching its biggest opponents in the region.

The Obama administration approved of the OAS' decision, stating that the United States supported Zelaya's return to power; otherwise, it would not acknowledge the results of the presidential elections scheduled for November. It sponsored the mediation of Costa Rican president Oscar Arias, which was accepted by both conflicting parties. It also applied sanctions against Honduras by making cuts in military and economic aid and cancelling the visas of members of the de facto government, following a progressive scale of pressure

aimed at leading to a negotiated resignation of the coup leaders who overthrew Zelaya.

Obama's position received criticism from sectors that were close to the Bush administration. The criticism was concentrated around two main issues: (1) denying the existence of a coup d'état, as Zelaya's removal from power was a legitimate reaction of a legislative and judiciary power against a president who did not respect the law, and (2) recognizing that there were bigger interests at stake, because beyond the defense of democracy, the result of the political dispute in Honduras would be an indicator of tendencies within the regional influence of the United States and Venezuela.

Newt Gingrich, the former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, summed up this position:

Although Chávez, like Zelaya, was democratically elected, he has subverted democracy in Venezuela to ensure his rule will be uncontested for decades. And one-by-one, each of the members of ALBA have followed Chavez's lead and changed their constitutions to remove limits on the number of terms their presidents can serve. First Bolivia and Ecuador changed their constitutions. Then, this summer, Chavez allies Zelaya in Honduras and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua began agitating to do the same. The Obama administration's reaction to Honduras' attempt to stand athwart this anti-democratic tide in Latin America has been shocking and inexplicable.³³

In spite of international pressure and the isolation of the de facto government, its capacity for maintaining power, with a domestic opposition that was unable to generate alternatives through popular mobilization, led to a well-known conclusion. When Zelaya did not return to the presidency, elections were held on November 29, 2009, and the candidate from the National Party, Porfirio Lobo, won. The election outcome was recognized by the U.S. government. Two important countries in the region outside of ALBA, Argentina and Brazil, did not.

From the perspective of the Heritage Foundation's analysts, the election's result represented a historic landmark, a time when the "myth of populist invincibility began to die"; the analysts believed that in spite of the mistakes Obama made throughout the crisis that was initiated in June 2009, "the Obama Administration now recognizes that free and fair elections are the most effective method of resolving the Honduran crisis."³⁴ Concerning Venezuela, the vanguard of the "populist" threat, Walser recommended its inclusion on the list of terrorist-sponsoring countries, along with Iran, Syria, North Korea, and Cuba. By adding it to the list, he argued, the United States would be sending a "powerful signal that the American people understand that oil, extremism, terror, and anti-Americanism make a dangerous mixture whether in the Middle East or the Americas."³⁵

Noriega saw the outcome in Honduras positively, as a part of a process he associated with the 2009 presidential campaigns in Chile and Uruguay and the 2010 campaign in Brazil, which he believed "demonstrate[d] that, in spite of the left-wing bombast from a couple of troubled states, most people in the region see institutionalized democracy as the best means of ensuring accountable government."³⁶ As it turned out, his hopes were only partly realized by the victory of the conservative Sebastián Piñera in Chile, as the Left retained power in both Uruguay and Brazil.

In the think tanks which are close to the Democratic administration, recognizing the results of the Honduran elections was seen as an inevitable lesser evil. For Stephanie Miller from the Center for American Progress, once the elections have reached a conclusion, the U.S. government should prioritize the challenges that are faced by Honduras, the second poorest country in Central America. She recognized Honduras for its dependence on the United States, for the recession that diminished the money remittances from Hondurans living in the United States, and for the cuts in economic aid applied by the State Department against the de facto government.

And as the Honduran economy gets worse, the higher the incentive for Hondurans to leave their country in search of economic

opportunity elsewhere, usually the United States. Knowing this likely scenario is perhaps the underlying motivation behind the United States' having gone from initially refusing to recognize the elections to last month working to broker an agreement that would allow all parties to accept the elections as legitimate.³⁷

Kevin Casas-Zamora from the Brookings Institution presented a more pessimistic scenario. Labeling the winners and the losers in the wake of the Honduran coup, he highlighted the victory that was achieved by the Honduran elite. In the group of the defeated, he placed Zelaya, Chávez, Brazil, the OAS, and the United States. For him, U.S. diplomacy shifted from indignation with the June 28 coup to indifference, then to confusion, and finally to acquiescence, all in less than five months.

Micheletti's ability to make the United States dance to his own tune will nevertheless be recorded and remembered by other oligarchies in the region, whenever a president starts showing dangerous signs of heterodoxy in the future ... If they couldn't handle Honduras, think about the Middle East. We all know that, while still number one, the United States has seen its capacity to determine what happens in Latin America and the world diminish.³⁸

In a 2009 balance sheet, Hakim opined that it "has not been a good year for U.S.-Latin America relations," concluding that "Obama's Latin American agenda will not be any easier in 2010."³⁹ The evolution of the situation in Honduras, he observed, "demonstrated how difficult it is for the U.S. to pursue multilateral approaches in a politically divided Latin America." In addition to recognizing that, "Washington must also work with the OAS and other governments to find a better formula for collectively defending democracy." Regaining perspective demanded the realignment of the United States' shaken relations with its partners such as Brazil, Hakim added. It also required a willingness to act fairly towards Venezuela, as "confrontation with President Chávez is counterproductive, though the U.S. cannot ignore Chávez's violations of democracy, interventions in other countries, and growing ties to Iran." Further, the United States would need to sustain "progress toward the U.S. re-engagement of Cuba."⁴⁰

The quick and substantial mobilization carried out by the Obama administration in response to the January 2010 Haiti earthquake has been seen by some analysts as an opportunity for the United States to regain the lost prestige of the United States in Latin America and the Caribbean. For the Heritage Foundation's analysts, the catastrophe generated a leadership vacuum in the affected region that urgently needed to be occupied by the deployment of American civil and military assistance units, because "Cuba and Venezuela, already intent on minimizing U.S. influence in the region, are likely to seize this opportunity to raise their profile and influence in a country that is already battling drugs and corruption."⁴¹

Thomas Donnelly from the American Enterprise Institute and William Kristol, the director of the *Weekly Standard* magazine, supported Obama's actions, presenting similar geopolitical arguments: "With a transition looming in Cuba and challenges in Central America from Venezuela among others, there is a political reason to be—and to be seen to be—a good and strong neighbor."⁴² Expressing some sense of irony about the differences between the Obama administration and the Bush administration in respect to the use of power,⁴³ they drew upon these differences in order to value the strategic role of the armed forces: "More than just 'hard power' or 'soft power' or 'smart power,' our military capabilities are the tools of action. It's good to have them. It would be better to have enough of them, now and in the future."⁴⁴

From the perspective of analysts from the Center for American Progress, the military dimension of the Haiti response had to make room for the State Department through USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, which was better suited for responding to humanitarian challenges given its traditional presence in Haiti and its greater knowledge of the needs of the most affected people. Quoting polls that were taken following the 2005 Pakistan earthquake, when USAID played an important role, Andrew Sweet and Rudy de Leon highlighted that

support for Osama bin Laden declined significantly, opposition to terrorist tactics increased, and more Pakistanis were then favorable to the United States than unfavorable for the first time since

September 11, 2001 ... The point is not that the United States should provide humanitarian assistance to win friends. What is crucial to understand is that American values have far-reaching positive effects.⁴⁵

Daniel Kaufman from the Brookings Institution brought to light the multilateral dimension of international aid given the idiosyncrasies of the Haitian case. Although it cannot be considered a failed state like Somalia, he noted, Haiti's capacity to face the consequences of such a catastrophe cannot be compared to Indonesia's disaster where a local government response backed by international mitigated the effect of the tsunami. In such a context, he noted,

while politically correct, suggestions that the international community play only a "supportive role" and funnel relief and recovery funds through the Haitian government that "takes the lead" are likely to be unrealistic and counterproductive ... Therefore, the international community will need to be much more involved than usual, for a longer period ... It may backfire for one country like the U.S. to take over relief and reconstruction efforts.⁴⁶

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The concerns and recommendations expressed by various analysts in the previous section about Honduras and Haiti sum up the various approaches of the United States' relations with Latin America that have been presented throughout the chapter. The selected think tanks—and the reports they create—represent three different perspectives:

1. Conservative. This approach emphasizes the importance of U.S. power as an instrument that is capable of characterizing its rivals and enemies. It is aligned with the ideas of the Republican Party. This applies to the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute.
2. Moderate. This perspective emphasizes using the national values' power of attraction. Its ideas are similar to those of the Democratic

Party. The Brookings Institute and the Center for American Progress are in this category.

3. **Comprehensive.** This school of thought seeks to be non-partisan, not affiliated with either major party. It emphasizes understanding the existing challenges in the region, the national interest, and the correct policies to follow. This includes the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Inter-American Dialogue, and the Rand Corporation.

On the structural plane, there is a common line of coherence among the many think tanks when they present market economy and representative democracy as the great pillars of convergence between Latin America and the United States. However, this is not reflected in their proposals of far-reaching programs, as was the case with the Alliance for Progress, which linked democratization, industrialization, and land reform.⁴⁷

After the initial optimism of think tank analysts about the economic and political liberalization process in the 1980s and 1990s, the crises in Argentina, Bolivia, and Ecuador, alongside the political strengthening of the critics of the Washington Consensus, raised some uncertainty about the victories and deficiencies of neoliberalism. Except for the Center for American Progress, which pointed to the loss of validity of the Washington Consensus, the conservatives and moderates agreed in denying the link between the origin of Latin America's problems and the liberalizing reforms. Failure took place during their period of implementation, whether because mistakes were made or because the policies were incomplete. Therefore, it is not necessary, in the view of the think tanks, to change the route that was chosen, but rather it must be deepened, sensitizing the U.S. government to the need to give more attention to the region, which for the past years has been driven further away from its main international agenda.

The successive wave of Latin American governments that originated from the Left, although they were of different sorts, raised concerns among think tank analysts, but without creating a general agreement on the dimensions and the consequences of the new perceived threats.

Some disagreement among the think tanks has been noted, and its most distinctive characteristics can be attributed to imperatives of an ideological nature.

From the conservative perspective, the United States must fear the upsurge of a leftism that is able to reinvent its traditions of anti-Americanism, statism, and rejection of the market economy. As a result, the United States must make a commitment to its allies, such as Mexico and Colombia, and to the clear labeling of its enemies, such as Venezuela and Cuba.

From the moderate point of view, the systemic threats that originated within the new forces from the Left that are governing important countries in the region are put aside. It is expected that the U.S. government will work along with the region to develop actions to fight poverty and social exclusion without resorting to proposals of programs of development aid. Unlike the conservatives, who supported Bush's policies towards Cuba, within the moderate field the normalization of bilateral relations is a common goal, with differences arising concerning the unilateral initiatives the United States should take. The end of the embargo toward Cuba is not one of the conditions on the Brookings Institution's proposals, for example, although it is the case for the Center for American Progress.

The evolution of the regional scenario will continue to reveal the increasingly accentuated hues that differentiate the stances of the leftist governments towards the United States and the liberal reforms. Concerning these stances toward the U.S. and the reforms, the countries that were aligned with ALBA became the new anti-American axis. Fighting against Chávez-led "neopopulism" has become a common goal among the moderates, although recommendations on how to do so vary substantially, from including Venezuela in the group of terror-sponsoring countries to promoting its estrangement through the building of increasingly broad regional alliances.

Within the comprehensive perspective, the challenges presented by Cuba and Venezuela have to do with their real and potential capacity to jeopardize regional governance. In regard to Cuba, the problem is the deterioration that the continuity of U.S. policy causes to its image

and its isolation in relation to the other countries in the hemisphere. Concerning Venezuela, notwithstanding the criticism by people of this perspective regarding the promotion of the Bolivarian revolution, the threat to national security is put into perspective, highlighting the distance between discourse, actions, and the actual reach of their influence, suggesting the need for a balanced stance.

The differences among the conservative, moderate, and comprehensive perspectives are related to the means and not to the ends of foreign policy; all three schools of thought comprehend many threat perceptions, priority definitions, and policy proposals for solving various problems. However, in all cases, the prescriptions have a circumscribed reach, one that is inversely proportional to the amount and complexity of the detected challenges. Paying attention to Latin America is important but not urgent, except when there are unanticipated situations, such as the Honduran crisis or the earthquake in Haiti. All three perspectives implicitly accept the two-century-long assumption that the United States' dominance of the Latin American region is permanent and unchallengeable—a perception that is no longer held by many people from Latin America.

During such moments like the Honduran coup and the Haitian earthquake, concerns about the breakdown of the United States' relations with the region come up, as well as concerns about the consequences in terms of the loss of influence and the strengthening of “reprehensible” alternatives, triggering a debate over immediate responses and permanent actions. When the crisis finds a solution within the field of what is acceptable for the maintenance of traditional order, such as in Honduras, or a solution that fosters predictability in terms of the continuity of the objectives set by the UN mission, such as in Haiti, the normal scale of establishment priorities will be reestablished.

However, beyond the lamentation from those people who feel orphaned by the loss of the Cold War levels of attention, the invisibility of the Latin American region within U.S. foreign policy priorities also represents an opportunity for the region to broaden its autonomy—a move that is cautioned against in some of the studies that are analyzed in this chapter.

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CHAPTER 4

CUBA AND THE NEW INTER-AMERICAN SYSTEM

Jaime Preciado Coronado and Pablo Uc

Statements against the trade embargo that has been imposed against Cuba by the United States since 1962 are no longer coming only from academics and intellectuals, nor are they a mere expression of institutional condemnation by multilateral bodies. The issue has taken a new turn in the hemispheric agenda and in the agendas of countries in the region, both in Latin America and the United States. The geopolitical rhetoric of the Cold War era that warned of the "Cuban threat" to hemispheric and American stability and that rationalized the international isolation of the country has faded and is now considered to be the most anachronistic aspect of the United States' foreign policy.

The lack of objective reasons for the policy led American national security agencies to strike the "Cuban threat" from their list of strategic priorities ten years ago, a view that was supported by former president