

Latin America: A Region We Can Believe In

Introduction

For the past several years our neighbors to the south in Latin America and the Caribbean have been far from the center of United States policy. The countries of Latin America have the potential to be vibrant economic and political partners. Continuing to ignore this potential will be to our own detriment.

Latin America is a region of vast resources and untold possibilities that has the potential to create a paradigm shift in U.S. foreign relations and establish a model of reprioritized, mutual, and constructive relationships that renew confidence and ensure a bright and prosperous future informed by justice, security, and global well-being.

Assumptions

The international political and economic landscape is changing to reflect the effects of globalization. Noting the changing role of the United States within the global system and the associated constraints to U.S. power, there is a need to re-evaluate our policy toward Latin America. This policy should be a multidimensional and multilevel approach to address issues vital to U.S. political, economic, and security interests. A revised policy toward Latin America should address, at minimum, the issues of regional security, international development and trade, good governance, and energy.

Regional security

The large development gap and the inefficient enforcement of the rule of law create large security risks in Latin America. Due to our geographical proximity, this also poses a security threat to the U.S. A weakened legal system fuels corruption and undermines trust in government. The U.S. should help countries to build good legal institutions and train effective and accountable police forces. This can be accomplished through logistical support and professional training. Empowering the legal system will open communication lines between countries and is important for the U.S. as it will help to combat the drug trade and to curb terrorism cell formation. In an effort to protect our borders from the illegal trafficking of drugs, arms, and people, we must support the overall development of the region. The continued support and cooperation by the U.S. will provide other jobs, promote education, reinforce trade, and build an infrastructure. Not only will this development help to secure our borders, it will also reduce illegal immigration within the region and to the U.S. Within the U.S., we must review our policy toward legal and illegal immigration.

In acknowledgement of rising democracies, the U.S. should move into a role of moderator to form alliances amongst the region, establish partnerships, and strengthen states' confidence in their ability to manage their own regional affairs. Cutting our direct involvement lowers our physical costs while improving our image in the region, and therefore allows for more beneficial interchanges of services and products. To support this endeavor we must also aide countries in their battles against terrorist organizations and hold governments accountable for the proliferation of small arms, especially when they are released from official use. In exchange for our efforts, the region will be more secure and will empower Latin American countries to work together in a civilized manner. Vibrant and stable southern neighbors will promote U.S. trade and other beneficial relationships, as well as allowing us to play a more influential role in the region.

Trade and Development

Development and trade in Latin America pose significant challenges to the U.S., but are vital to ensuring stability and progress in the Americas. Due to geographical proximity, free trade presents unique opportunities and pitfalls as the U.S. seeks to protect domestic interests while striving to improve the economic welfare of the Western Hemisphere. The United States must be concerned about developing cooperative relationships that foster indigenous growth of sustainable industries through government and private sector investment, leading to job creation and increased innovation.

One of the primary modes of advancing both United States and Latin American interests will be through free trade agreements. While these agreements must include protections for domestic industries, there are incentives to finding a balance between foreign and domestic concerns. Free trade and the increase in legitimate industries and jobs will help to reduce the drug trade and illegal immigration. Free trade agreements between the US and Latin America will also increase the United States' influence in the region. To promote sustainable growth, free trade agreements should include provisions for the Latin American countries such as intellectual property rights, better regulatory institutions, environmental protection, and investment in human capital through education for all people. In addition to free trade agreements, U.S. policy should be directed towards fostering private sector investment in Latin American countries and encourage and incentivize civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to implement new microfinance programs.

Good Governance

In the international spirit of good governance, defined by the respect for human rights, legitimacy, and the rule of law, we should support development and reform to attain politically stable, transparent and accountable institutions. The lack of true democratization has been an historical and current conduit to the oppression of opposition, corrupt leadership, and ineffective institutions. The challenge of empowering civil society with the rights to freedom of expression has yet to be met.

Through dialogue and assistance we hope to develop symbiotic relationships with federal governments, regional actors, and NGOs in order to address these concerns. This will strengthen education, legal systems, human rights regulations, and transparency, building on the successful model we used with Colombia to promote an institutionalized, impartial judicial system. Without this transparency and efficiency, we cannot hope to openly engage civil society in the political process. It is, after all, the active participation of citizens that enriches and legitimizes government. Though differences of opinion may lead to domestic friction, strong institutions can ensure the integrity of the democratic dialogue. Supporting healthy and free media is a crucial avenue through which information can be spread and opinions voiced. The advents of technological development impart us with new tools and methods, of which we must take advantage for the betterment of society.

Energy Policy

The United States should embrace Latin America as a key player in our pursuit to reduce U.S. dependency on Middle Eastern oil and promote environmentally-friendly policies. In the short term, trading with oil producing states cannot feasibly decline. However, in the long term, policy can work toward reducing our dependency on this trade. With effective research and development (R&D), we will have an energy partner to the south. The effort requires a sustained commitment to R&D in order to

find alternative sources of energy. By partnering with Latin American countries on the subject of energy, we can improve our relationships with certain nations by stimulating industrial growth. Nations we hope to engage in this endeavor include Brazil, Mexico, and all states looking for an economic alternative to oil and gas. Ultimately, the benefits of cooperation will outweigh any potential diplomatic strains with non-cooperative states.

Conclusion

As the U.S. looks to regain its position in the new and ever changing global system, our policies toward Latin America are central to our national interest. Looking overseas, the vast potential of Latin America is ignored. By re-prioritizing our relationships to renew confidence, we can develop as partners in prosperity. Through a multi-level approach we can build a positive U.S. influence in the region by promoting socio-economic development, contributing to the formation of good governance, ensuring regional security, and establishing more sustainable partnerships.

Task Force Members:

Tyler Matthews, United States Military Academy
Daniel Yelin, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Liz Page Stitzel, Sarah Lawrence College
Heather Turner, University of California--Davis
Aiyong Zhang, City University of New York--Staten Island
David Reyes, United States Military Academy
Jon Chachula, United States Military Academy
Camila Navarro, University of Southern California
Rodrigo Baxter, International Maritime University of Panama
Nicole Starkey, University of Nebraska--Lincoln
Jackie Race, Keuka College
Kristin Rice, Claremont McKenna College

Juan Cardenas, LTC (Ret), The Office of the Secretary of Defense
Dr. Cynthia Watson, PhD, The National War College