

A new cycle in inter-American relations?

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After the conclusion of World War II, the United States directed its efforts towards advancing two primary objectives in Latin America and the Caribbean. Firstly, Washington endeavored to forestall the repercussions of nuclear-military competition, within an emerging bipolar world, from engulfing the region. Secondly, there existed a widespread commitment among Americans to foster democracy and a regime characterized by freedoms.

In neither instance did virtue and fortune suffice to ensure the full realization of these objectives. In 1962, the Soviets stationed nuclear weapons and facilities in Cuba, bringing humanity to the brink of all-out war. As for the aspiration to advance the cause of democracy, numerous instances exist where the White House effectively provided a “blank check” to those who opposed civilian governments, invoking the authoritarian tradition prevalent in the region. Whether due to a lack of confidence, theoretical pessimism, or simply a preference for familiar references, democratic fatigue became the prevailing norm in the region, with only a few notable and exemplary exceptions.

Today, more than 75 years after the detonation of nuclear bombs on Japanese soil, the status quo —namely, American

understanding of Latin America and the Caribbean— suffers from the same ailments of the 1950s, encapsulated succinctly by Professor Charles Anderson in his astute observation that Latin America was “a living museum.” In other words, various political forms coexist within the same space and time, the majority of which do not facilitate the full promotion of democracy.

The amalgamation of various intentions, decisions, and consequences made by presidents, secretaries of State, senators, representatives in the US Congress, along with opinion leaders, analysts, journalists, and academics, coalesced into a bloc of reflection in Washington. This bloc endeavored to demonstrate that, despite challenges, it was feasible to safeguard nascent democracies from adversaries and sidestep considerations of a nuclear-military nature.

This scrutiny of Latin America and the Caribbean found expression prominently, particularly within university halls, where fervent debates about the region’s future unfolded. One of the most significant contributions came from Philippe Schmitter, who reflected on S.M. Lipset’s optimistic equation and highlighted a crucial error in judgment: that economic development did not inherently translate into political development. Schmitter drew upon Anderson’s insights to illustrate that development in the region could not be depicted as a simple linear progression but rather resembled a rhomboid shape.

Hence, the Cuban Revolution exerted a profound impact on the region, rekindling skepticism about the efficacy of

democracy in our countries and bolstering the rationale for bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes in a more sophisticated manner. It's worth recalling the significant sympathy generated for Fidel Castro and the proletarian revolution, which marginalized democratic experiments. Either there was apprehension regarding a regime characterized by freedoms, or these experiments were dismissed as puppets of imperialism and the bourgeoisie.

The trajectory of the Cuban Revolution was marked by complexity, casting shadows and yielding negative outcomes, much like what we observe today. Democracies made limited progress, with many remaining ensnared in formalities and electoral charades. While military regimes did not proliferate as before, a nefarious formula gained traction: the civil-military alliance.

During that era, the Latin American and Caribbean agenda transcended traditional issues, advocating for mechanisms of economic integration and foreign trade as a panacea and an opportunity to move beyond the criticized model of primary export economics.

Over the years and decades, the Latin American discourse within Washington circles has expanded to encompass social, environmental, gender, and other now politicized issues, paradoxically enriching studies on the region. Additionally, the impact of the war in Ukraine has once again elevated strategic thinking and geopolitical considerations to a place of prominence above the social agenda.

The conflict in Ukraine has brought several revelations, but perhaps the most significant among them are two: the possibility of a nuclear war and the observation that many of the governments involved are replicas of democracy, including the present-day United States. This is an important point to underscore. It appears that we are entering a new phase in inter-American relations, one that is increasingly complex and challenging to comprehend, let alone predict.

It is essential to acknowledge that we are amidst a new cycle, albeit not necessarily a virtuous one. Both traditional and emerging issues are being scrutinized, challenging the previous status quo while also presenting potential risks. One need only observe the developments in environmental policies or migration to appreciate this, not to mention military concerns.

The truth is that the global inter-American agenda is intricately linked to domestic factors, both within the United States and throughout the rest of the Western Hemisphere. However, there's more to consider. Geopolitical dynamics can undermine the advancement of democracy. One need only observe the situation unfolding within the European Union. Its precarious position vis-à-vis NATO has contributed to a partial retreat from democratic commitments and has facilitated the toleration of blatantly authoritarian governments.

Moreover, it is imperative to incorporate into the agenda and recognize the shifts in the narratives surrounding power, which increasingly manifest as what we term "the illegal reality." This encompasses activities such as drug trafficking, paramilitary violence, the presence of armed gangs and

guerrilla movements, as well as the smuggling of goods, services, and people.

In conjunction with these considerations, there is an ongoing debate regarding the development model to pursue. This debate arises from the contradictions between an ideal industrial and services-based model and the persistent temptation to deepen reliance on a primary export model centered on the exploitation of oil, gas, and “new materials and in rare lands”.

Given the theoretical confusion of our times, what can we predict? First, we must recognize that no theory can encompass all the complexity presented irregularly. Second, there are a series of communicating vessels between international and domestic factors during global events.

Thirdly, the monopoly of legitimate violence and state institutions has given way to a multiplication of multilateral and transnational actors challenging State power. In the multilateral case, one sees with astonishment how the European Union organizations, in the context of the war in Ukraine, have, in fact, assumed powers that were within the Member States’ scope. In transnational cases, it is important to highlight the war in Gaza, where a paramilitary and non-institutional organization (Hamas) is challenging the state of Israel, and the case of Haiti, where a diminished State confronts the violence of illegal groups that dominate 90 percent of that nation’s territory.

Returning to this essay's key aim, which is to analyze the current cycle of inter-American relations, we must point out that the transition from an international order established in 1945 (which was maintained until now) towards one that is fastly transformed, calls into question all the approaches that were applied for so many years, to analyze our region and its relationship with the United States.

In this context, we observe an "internationalization" of the regional agenda. This refers to the recent failure of the White House's objective to "protect" the other Latin American and Caribbean governments. Tensions between the United States, China, and Russia, along with the US military presence globally, link inter-American issues with the global agenda, thereby impacting the region. The United States seeks to strengthen its ties with Latin American and Caribbean countries, while Russia aims to expand its presence, and China pursues economic and commercial interests. Additionally, some governments have shifted their strategic interests towards the dense and contradictory anti-Western space, as exemplified by Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.

Simultaneously, diverse interpretations of what constitutes a democratic regime are rapidly scrutinizing the "performance" of each case. New issues, such as those related to gender and the environment, have become critical factors in evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of democracies in the region. Traditional themes, including armed conflicts, political transitions, economic development, and human rights, have also taken on new dimensions. Amidst this spectrum of issues, drug trafficking persists and expands.

Broadly, the inter-American agenda is undergoing a metamorphosis, prompting us to question the extent to which the “toolbox” that once formed the basis for the concept of singular relations remains valid. Particularly, there is a pressing need to acknowledge that this singularity no longer holds true today, and that under “internationalization,” Latin America and the Caribbean are diminishing in interest for Washington, except in matters related to immigration, nuclear power, and anti-Western alliances in the region.

Certainly, this phenomenon is closely linked to the internal dynamics of the Latino vote in the United States and the growing discourse within the country that challenges the “melting pot” thesis. This thesis, criticized by a group of authors who argue that racial, ethnic, and social divisions are deepening in the United States, questions social integration. Consequently, this group supports the idea of cultural heterogeneity as a fundamental characteristic of inter-American relations.

In addition to internationalization and the intermestic nature of relations, along with the emergence of new themes and the reevaluation of the concept of cultural heterogeneity, it is crucial to underscore the significance of the underlying idea shaping Latin American studies in relations between the United States and the region, which has evolved over time. The once prevalent notion of a homogeneous Latin America, associated with the optimistic equation mentioned earlier, has given way to the recognition of cultural heterogeneity, thus opening a spectrum of possibilities albeit laden with ideological influences.

What do we mean by this? Put simply, ideological factors play a significant role in shaping the perceptions that the United States holds regarding the hemisphere. These factors encompass a wide range of ideologies, from liberal thought to Marxism, as well as various centrist, populist, moderate left, or communist ideologies (as exemplified by Cuba). Consequently, it is apparent that the understanding of the region is influenced by this ideological landscape, which increasingly interconnects ideological and methodological orientations.

As we assess the state of affairs in 2024, and consider what can be anticipated in inter-American relations, the landscape is complex and nuanced. Diplomatically, there has been a notable decline in the presence and significance of foreign policies. Neither the region's largest countries, such as Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, nor intermediary nations like Colombia and Venezuela, are actively pursuing robust foreign policies. Even Cuba, with its unique position as a country in direct opposition to the United States, has been unable to overcome its internal challenges. This is exacerbated by financial constraints, economic stagnation, a surge in emigration, and significant deficits in public services, compounded by a lack of democratic spaces on the island.

Across the region, countries have scaled back their international commitments, mirroring a trend of escalating external debt, encompassing both multilateral and bilateral obligations, as well as private debt. Furthermore, the region grapples with mounting inflation and a persistent migration crisis, affecting both countries sending migrants and those receiving them. It's crucial to acknowledge that the United

States remains at the epicenter of the immigration issue, with its repercussions reverberating throughout the region and impacting various facets of American life.

In conclusion, it's vital to acknowledge that these dynamics significantly shape the development of relations between the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean. They unfold within a framework characterized by heightened skepticism towards democracy, political parties, the rule of law, and institutions. Concurrently, ideological polarization, persistent challenges of poverty and inequality, the impact of remittances, as well as issues like corruption, deforestation, and the migrant crisis, compound the pressing needs faced by a disillusioned populace often reliant on clientelism as a means of ensuring political stability. Moreover, there's the challenge of countering narratives fueled by the manipulation of social media and emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, which erode personal freedoms.

Ultimately, it's imperative to recognize that we're navigating a new cycle of inter-American relations, marked by complexity and novelty. This ongoing process oscillates between traditional power dynamics, institutional control, and the rise of non-traditional forms of influence driven by grassroots movements. In this perpetual tension, the heterogeneous nature of the region is forged, reflecting the diverse and multifaceted realities of its inhabitants.