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OBAMA SEEKING ALLIANCES IN LATIN AMERICA

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Barack Obama's first tour of Latin America kindled great expectations, was preceded by controversy, roiled by a convulsive international context and it ended up with more questions than answers. The expectations were fuelled by the White House, which described the tour as historic and tagged it the starting shot of a revamped US policy in Latin America that would remedy the neglect and misunderstandings of the Bush years.

Obama's first meeting with the leaders of Central and South America took place shortly after his swearing-in at the Fifth Summit of the Americas, which was held in Trinidad and Tobago in April 2009, but the relaunch of relations was slow in coming. The effects of the economic crisis, the fast-multiplying points of extra-regional conflict and the difficulties in appointing the new Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Arturo Valenzuela, because of opposition from House Republicans, all delayed its advent.

The announcement of the three countries to be visited was contentious. The choice of Brazil as the starting point came as no surprise, but the inclusion of Chile instead of Argentina or Colombia (the faithful regional ally) raised hackles. Perhaps Valenzuela's Chilean origins had some influence, but also working in Chile's favour are its being a prosperous, stable country with a centre-right government (while those of Brazil and El Salvador are leftist) that, after the restoration of democracy, has recently surmounted the challenge of peaceful alternation in office. It is also the first Latin American country to sign a Free Trade Agreement with the United States, added to which are the emotional rescue of the miners, the country's capacity for recovery after last year's earthquake and the good prospects for bilateral relations. Obama's speech in La Moneda Palace was loaded with symbolism since this was the scene of the death of President Salvador Allende in a US-backed military coup.

It was taken for granted that voices would be raised against US imperialism. Several of the region's leaders are allergic to any US presence and have grafted constant denouncements of US-hatched conspiracies and interference into the

DNA of their foreign policy, a ploy that also serves to consolidate their political bases and prolong a state of exceptionality that justifies suppression or demonisation of any show of opposition to the leader. There is nothing new in this and neither is it possible to deny the historical record that vindicates wariness about US interventionism in the region. Obama referred to this in his Santiago speech, although his conjugation was past tense.

The ambivalence of some members of the left in the region over the relationship with the United States has a clear exponent in Brazil. The giant of the South shows no compliance with any US presence in what it sees as its sphere of influence. In order to counteract this, it has fostered the creation of such regional forums as UNASUR (Union of South American Nations) with a view to undercutting the influence of the OAS and becoming the arbiter of regional tensions. The initiative has the support of the ALBA (Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas) countries, although it has also given rise to some misgivings and leadership struggles. Opposition to the number one world leader may inflate perceptions as to the scope for autonomous manoeuvring for the global-player ambitions of Brazil, but it also limits its capacity to attain its goals, as its incursions into the Middle East and Honduras have shown.

In the recent UN Security Council vote on the intervention in Libya, Brazil's lining-up with the abstentions of China, Russia (present permanent members), Germany and India (aspirants, along with Brazil, to a permanent seat) did nothing to win Obama's support for its candidature, which he did offer to India during his visit to Delhi. Washington is not exactly keen on the scenario of any future increase in the number of members of the Security Council who might shirk responsibilities of collective intervention, especially with humanitarian crises. During his tour, between one speech and another, in which he called for new alliances with the countries of Latin America, Obama spoke with the United States' allies in the coalition for intervention in Libya. The main stumbling block continues to be Brazil's support for Iran's nuclear programme, a matter on which President Dilma Rousseff has not yet made any statement. Nevertheless, Obama praised Brazil's role in Haiti and alluded to the country's leadership in the region.

Overshadowed by a recalcitrant Lula, who declined to join other former presidents at Dilma Rousseff's lunch in honour of Barack and Michelle Obama, the visit is unlikely to produce any qualitative political advance. Hence, officially, the balance of the bilateral agenda will be tilting towards economic matters and energy or technological cooperation. For the United States, Brazil is a continuously growing emerging market while, for Brazil, it is important to maintain a diversified economy and to have access to cutting-edge US technology. Again, regional security and the struggle against drug trafficking doubtless had their place in the presidential talks, especially in view of the leading role Brazil is acquiring with regard to Bolivia, which has expelled the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA).

Obama's much-awaited speech in Santiago de Chile, in which he addressed the region as a whole, reiterating that the United States was willing to work towards improving cooperation despite differences, could hardly be described as a historic landmark. He called for turning over the pages of history, reinforcing democracy, joining forces against common threats, strengthening already-consequential social and economic ties and little more than that. It is no accident that his specific proposals were mostly made in El Salvador, a country that is striving to overcome economic and social relegation and to struggle against the violence of Mesoamerica, which is one of Barack Obama's main concerns in the region. It was here that he announced the "Central American Citizen's Security Partnership" and the "Crossroads Partnership". He had previously

heralded the Energy and Climate Partnership of the Americas and new programmes to boost scientific and educational exchanges. However, he also recognised shortcomings in such crucial areas as migratory reform, dismantling agricultural protectionism and ratifying trade agreements with Colombia and Panama due to a lack of majority in Congress.

One obvious conclusion arising from the tour is that the United States has no Latin American policy because there is no such thing as a single, uniform Latin America. Each country has its own interests, alliances and aspirations which it pursues by means of different strategies. Some countries want more US involvement and others less, so any answer has to come out of regional talks. Obama did his best to reiterate that global and regional changes require a new and more appropriate way of looking at the twenty-first century and offered partnerships based on equality. The stubborn reality, though, is that Latin America persists in being the most unequal continent.