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OBAMA'S REMOTE PROXIMITY IN LATIN AMERICA

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When Barack Obama assumed the presidency in 2009, in the midst of the economic crisis, he embodied an icon of hope for change that knew no borders. Latin America was no exception. Nevertheless, he inherited a fragmented and damaged knapsack of grievances following the decades of unilateral interventionism, militarism and the imposition of conditions of economic severity that condemned Latin America to recession during the decade-long purging of foreign debt in the 80's. The outgoing Bush administration, having failed in its attempt to create the Free Trade Zone of the Americas, adopted a Manichaeian policy of friends (Mexico, Colombia, Chile, Peru and most of Central America) and enemies (Cuba, Nicaragua and Bolivarian South America), which contributed to a growing distance, almost an antagonism, on the part of the new Latin American left.

The United States has lost the soft power of attraction, at the same time that the now-emerging regional powers question the exercise of hard power and the military presence that comes with it. The North American insistence on waging the battle against drug traffic by military means, combined with the globalization of the war on terrorism, added to this distrust, which included a deficit of attention toward Latin America that fostered the region's autonomy. The appearance of new extra-regional partners (particularly in the Asian Pacific but also in Africa) and the rise of a new type of regionalism considered post-hegemonic, that stretched from South America (UNASUR, ALBA) to the Caribbean and Mesoamerica (CELAC) has displaced the leadership of the United States in the hemisphere and eroded the role of the OEA in matters of Security and Cooperation.

Throughout his four-year term Obama has not managed to improve substantially the influence of the United States in the region. Nor has he devoted much attention to it. In his first presidential campaign Obama created the "New Partnership for the Americas" platform to renew relations, but as President it took two years before he made his first and only Latin American tour, visiting three countries; first, Brazil, whose current role as a global actor and a regional leader means that these two countries are condemned to reach an understanding. The other host countries were Chile, a partner country and a success story, and El

Salvador, a country in transition and a story of hope. Obama avoided countries in conflict, but the discourses of conciliation to turn a new page and of an outstretched hand for new alliances did not gel and confirmed that the United States has not managed to articulate a fruitful relationship with the region as a whole. The 2012 Summit of the Americas in Cartagena ended without a final declaration and with opposing views regarding Cuba, the drug war and regional security.

The U.S.-Mexico relationship has its own singularity owing to the growing economic and social symbiosis of the two, but at the same time it is a barometer for U.S. commitment to the region. With over 50 million inhabitants of Latin origin in the United States, 32 million of whom are Mexican and half of these in an irregular situation, immigration reform is an issue of internal politics that has taken on relevance after the elections because of the influence of the Latino vote. Despite the unkept promises of Obama's first term, the Latino population embraced the Obama candidacy and their countries of origin are demanding solutions. The intransigence of the Republican Party blocked prior initiatives, but their electoral setback has awakened critical voices that are opening a window of opportunity to solve the human drama that traverses Mesoamerica.

Just as crucial is the lack of security, and in particular the consequences of the battle against drug trafficking that has raised the rates of criminality to historic heights. Most of the countries of Latin America question the inefficacy of the repressive policies sponsored by the United States and point to the grand market for drug consumption in the North and the deregulation of the arms trade as the main causes of regional destabilization. The United States repeats the mantra of shared responsibility but they refuse to modify policies with damaging effects in the regions owing to pressure from internal lobbies (including paradoxes such as the legalization of marijuana in Colorado while maintaining prohibition in the region). If Obama continues offering alliances of more of the same but with fewer resources, he will not get very far.

On the level of commerce, the lack of progress is unquestionable. New negotiations have not been initiated, while agreements such as those of Colombia and Panama, signed in 2006, have been blocked until 2011. The crisis in the United States and its global effects have revitalized protectionist measures in the entire continent and have discouraged direct investment. Everyone looks to the Pacific hoping to embrace the Asian dynamism and the life raft it is offering. Still on the agenda remain topics such as monetary policy, the exploitation of energy resources, climate change and vulnerability in the face of natural disasters (evidenced once again with Hurricane Sandy) and Human Rights. These are global issues that require a regional focus, but there exists no consensus.

The lack of advancement gives strength to the arguments of those who maintain that, in foreign policy, a change in occupant of the White House doesn't have any effect, and the regional agenda of the United States is pure national interest as determined by the parliamentary majorities. The form and the words change, but the basis is the same. The timid gestures in the relationship with Cuba while maintaining the embargo are an example, also read in the national key. Obama tiptoes over situations of conflict and seeks bilateral accords to defend his national interests. This avoids confrontations, but it comes at a price, the loss of regional leadership and the decadence of the inter-American system of cooperation of the OAS, displaced by other regional forums. Regional policies have become globalized; the region has opened up to the world and it has new allies.

The balance of Obama's policy toward Latin America must not be complacent; the stagnant map of commercial agreements, his contested leadership, the weakened and marginalized hemispheric institutions, a growing rejection of U.S. military presence and questioning of its commitment to peace and security are some of the symptoms of the disaffection of his Latin American neighbors. But the United States and Latin America are too close to ignore each other, their futures are still intertwined, though no longer on the basis of hegemonic tutelage. The spaces of both the Atlantic and the Pacific, now shared, can give rise to new alliances in the near future.