

OBAMA'S LEGACY IN LATIN AMERICA: HINDRANCES FROM THE PAST, UNCERTAINTIES IN THE FUTURE



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Latin America received Barack Obama's arrival in the White House with expectation. After the two terms of the Republican George W. Bush, who categorised the continent into friends and enemies and contributed to inflaming the anti-American discourse of the left-wing governments led by Venezuela and Cuba, Obama arrived on the scene with an idealistic discourse. He proposed a new more neighbourly association inspired by the four liberties of Roosevelt's 1941 State of the Union address: freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom from want and freedom from fear. But his narrative found no better predisposed audience than the Nobel Prize committee.

Speech meets reality

Some months after his swearing in, at the fifth Summit of the Americas held in Trinidad and Tobago in April 2009, Obama declared that no Latin American country was now considered a threat to the United States. But his conciliatory speech came up against the refusal of the "Bolivarian Axis" (led by Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua) countries to sign the final Declaration of Commitment of Port of Spain out of solidarity with the absent Cuba, subject of the US embargo. To remind him of history the Venezuelan president, Hugo Chávez, gave Obama Eduard Galeano's book *Open Veins of Latin America*, which tells the story of the United States' past complicity with totalitarian regimes in Latin America. Lula da Silva, the Brazilian president, whom Obama had greeted "that's my man!" at the G20 summit weeks earlier, reminded him that Latin America aspired to a new way of overcoming differences.

Obama's first official tour of the region (neighbouring Mexico apart) did not come until March 2011 and was much less historical than the White House intended. Choosing Chile, Brazil and El Salvador provoked displeasure across the Andes in Argentina. He didn't make Brazil happy either, which waited in vain for a statement in favour of its aspirations of a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. The Speech of the Americas, given at the Palacio de la Moneda, where president Salvador Allende fell victim to a military coup, did not dispel the sense of an

attention deficit towards the region as Obama struggled with the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression and military intervention in Libya, and awaited the outcomes of the nuclear disaster in Japan and the negotiations with Iran. Obama praised the region's democratic transitions and economic growth and called for the page to be turned on the "ideological battles" of the past.

It was there that he said the words that would travel around the world years later when he announced the restoration of diplomatic relations with Cuba on December 17th 2014: "We are all Americans". There, he also recognised the United States' responsibility in the region's security issues resulting from the drugs market and arms trafficking, and he committed to seeking solutions to the problems with US migration policy. But he did not make significant progress in any of these areas.

From idealism to pragmatism

The disagreement between the United States and the "Bolivarian Axis" grew with the polarisation around the coup d'état in Honduras on June 28th 2009. The radicalisation of the revolution in Venezuela and the empowerment of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) group in the Organisation of American States (OAS) blocked the room for the US to manoeuvre. Brazil, engaged in consolidating its sphere of influence in South America, promoted organisations like the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) in order to counter the influence of the OAS and become the arbiter of regional tensions. Brazil also aligned itself with the BRICS in international forums like the G20, and in the Security Council on the resolutions on Libya and Syria. China, for its part, has been undermining the economic influence of the United States in percentage terms. Nevertheless, according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the percentage of US global trade that is with Latin America and the Caribbean has grown in the past ten years from 19.3% to more than 22%. Although concentrated in Mexico and just a few other countries, the region remains an important economic partner for the United States, which has attempted to consolidate this with bilateral treaties. Not even the conflicts with Venezuela have led to a break in trade.

The phone tapping crisis that affected President Dilma Rousseff and the Snowden affair contributed to the growing criticisms of the Latin American left and to weakening US influence. The sixth Summit of the Americas in Colombia in 2012 – from which most presidents of the ALBA countries were absent – ended with the threat of break-up if Cuba was not included. This was a turning point that accelerated with the midterm congressional elections in 2014 when, free from electoral pressures, Obama decided to take the step of re-establishing relations with Cuba after 55 years of rupture. The seventh Summit of the Americas in Panama on April 10th and 11th 2015 was an exercise in pragmatism in the strategy with Cuba, but it did not stop the dissent. Obama once again heard voices rejecting US sanctions on Venezuelan officials accused of violating human rights. His response consisted of declaring that pragmatic rapprochement did not mean the United States was giving up on the principles of the liberal order.

The Americas: a new global playing field

Despite the remaining ideological dissent, there has been evolution in US hemispherical policy. The reinitiation of relations with Cuba and the signing of peace in Colombia (sponsored by Havana) are the two main events that illustrate Secretary of State John Kerry's claim in a speech at the OAS in 2013 that "the era of the Monroe Doctrine is over". The backyard has become a playing field for global games. But the end of the Obama presidency coincides with a change in the economic and political cycle in the region that has brought in governments of a more moderate bent. Growing instability in Venezuela after the death of Chávez, the weakening of Brazil after the fall of the Workers' Party and Macri's Argentina seem to present a scenario that is increasingly conducive to more fluid relations. This could be the case if the Democrat, Hillary Clinton, becomes the new occupant of the White House, being more of a realist than idealistic Obama. By contrast, Donald Trump's anti-Latino discourse, built for domestic consumption, is a liability in the relations that could dynamite the bridges built, even with allies as strong and strategic as Mexico.

