

Editor's Foreword

AS the old century ends and a new one begins, United States foreign policy seems remarkably consistent in being continuously focused on Europe and, to a lesser degree, on Asia. The foreign policy team that was recently appointed by the Clinton administration is characterized, as have been most important US foreign policy appointments since World War II, by expertise in, and concern for, European affairs. Like Kissinger, Brzezinski, Haig, Baker, and Christopher before her, the new US Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, brings to the post vast experience and interest in both Europe and the West. Perhaps justifiably so, Europe and, to a lesser extent, Asia remain at the center of the United States global view.

Despite concerns over drugs and immigration, the floundering of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the periodically unsettling news from Mexico, and the problem of Cuba, the United States has focused less attention on the Western Hemisphere. Latin America has been during the recent past, and probably will remain so into the future, an area of low priority for a United States that has been primarily preoccupied with a volatile Russia, an expansionist and increasingly aggressive China, an unsettled Central Europe and Balkans, and a deteriorating situation in the Middle East.

Yet Latin America remains important for the United States. The US has significant economic stakes in the area that not only include large loans (both public and private) and investments, but also two-way trade of major proportions. Latin America is a source of many raw materials important to the United States as well.

Depending on global developments and changes in the US access to important resources abroad, especially in the Middle East, Latin America may become even more essential to the United States in the future.

It is in both the security, as well as economic, interest of the United States to conserve not only its own vital resources, but also to develop and maintain access to as wide a range of alternative sources of raw materials in foreign countries as is possible. In this respect, access

to Latin American resources becomes especially important, if only because of their geographic proximity and the greater ability of the United States to protect routes of access in the Western Hemisphere. Note that oil purchases from Mexico and Canada, now delivered overland and therefore not subject to the perils of sea transit in time of conflict, are already subject to special favorable US import quotas.

A scenario of US differences with Latin America — which may include repudiation of debt owed to the US, hostile environment for investments, and redirection of trade — will significantly affect Latin America's economic development as well as impact the United States adversely. Even if US business and the US economy could absorb their losses in Latin America, the political consequences for Latin America would likely be such as to exert a significant effect upon US security interests. The United States is not able to ignore so large a region, which is situated in such close geographic proximity, and particularly one whose total population is expected to reach more than 600 million by the end of the century.

On the other hand, any US retrenchment or retreat from economic involvement in Latin America would generate enormous political and economic instability, intensifying the risk of violence and civil wars. In turn, such developments could easily result in pressures for US political and military intervention and could (and would) increase the cost of US defense requirements. The political influence of the United States is inseparable from its economic relations in Latin America, and any loss of one would undoubtedly result in loss of the other.

At present, the United States appears to be concerned with events in Mexico. Violence, drugs, and migration from that country could easily engender a public attitude of uneasiness, fear, anger, or a combination of these. Major changes in US-Latin America relations might well generate domestic reactions in the United States that could either revive isolationist attitudes on the one hand, or lead to demands for a forceful reassertion of the earlier "big stick" policy (US predominance) in the region, on the other. In either case, such public attitudes would not only have a major impact on domestic politics, but would give rise to important repercussions in US foreign policy as well.

US interests in Latin America have been conditioned by the inter-related benefits which the United States has derived from its relations with the region, by its position of influence there, and by its ability, in the past, to exclude other great powers from challenging that position. With the exception of Cuba (and formerly Nicaragua and Grenada), the

United States has benefited greatly from the fact that Latin America, unlike other less-developed regions of the world, has not been subjected to the same competition for influence and control on the part of the great powers. In turn, this circumstance has largely localized disputes and conflicts in the area. The United States doubtless owes much of its security over the past century and a half to this happy circumstance.

The United States has a clear interest in preserving political stability in Latin America and, to that end, in directing its political institutions toward stable democratic systems. Quite aside from the general American belief in the efficacy of democratic systems as essential to socio-economic progress and peace, the United States clearly has an interest in preventing the rise of those political conditions in Latin America that could (a) generate hostility toward the US and its economic and political interests; (b) divide the region into antagonistic groups; (c) give rise to violence, either in the form of civil war or of interstate armed conflict; (d) invite inimical influence or intervention by powers from outside the Hemisphere; and (e) work to the detriment of the US or the Hemisphere as a whole.

The fact that adverse changes may take place in an area where the United States has predominated for a long time would not only cast doubt on the ability of the US to maintain its position in its own "backyard" but, in consequence, would also damage the image of US power in the world. Doubts about the viability of US power could cause some states to re-examine their relationship with the United States and encourage others to challenge US policies.

While, in a unipolar world, the strategic importance of Latin America is somewhat diminished, it would be a serious error for the United States to view Latin America in isolation from the rest of the world and fail to take into account the fact that developments in the region, and its own corresponding response to those events, have a direct bearing on the image of global power that it is able to project.

The following essays deal with these and other issues of importance to US-Latin America relations. I am grateful to this distinguished group of scholars and practitioners of foreign policy for their contributions. If nothing else, I hope that this special issue of the JOURNAL will contribute to the continuing dialogue on these issues and raise awareness in US policy circles of the importance of Latin America to the US national interest.

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