How to repair a damaged relationship

By Michael Shifter

Few would dispute that the US relationship with Latin America has deteriorated over the past decade, or that the past half dozen years have been the worst. Even Bush administration officials, and certainly many Republicans in Congress, concede as much. There is manifestly less trust than there had been in inter-American affairs.

To repair the damage it is crucial to identify the fundamental reasons for the decline. The search for an adequate explanation should begin with the larger question of how the United States is exercising its power on the global and regional stages. The specifics of Washington’s Latin American policy, while important, should be a secondary factor.

Indeed, on three key questions—immigration, agricultural subsidies and free trade—President Bush has been more in sync with the region’s democratically elected governments than with Congress, whether controlled by Republicans or Democrats. For that matter, it would be hard to identify a major candidate from either party who can match President Bush’s drive for pushing comprehensive immigration reform, reducing agricultural subsidies and promoting a free-trade agenda.

Nonetheless, polls show that Latin Americans of all political stripes are eagerly anticipating the next US administration. Perhaps more than in any other region in the world, the Iraq invasion struck a real nerve in Latin America. For many in the hemisphere, the prevention doctrine is less a recent policy formulation than a historic reality. The US carries a lot of baggage in Latin America, especially Central America and the Caribbean—the consequence of frequent unilateral military interventions carried out with missionary zeal in the name of spreading democracy.

In the post-Cold War period under George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, many Latin Americans entertained the possibility that the US would begin to pursue its interests in accordance with international law and with key allies. Iraq shattered that notion. If the US could carry out a policy of “regime change” in the Middle East, what is stopping a comparable intervention in this hemisphere? While serving as non-permanent members of the UN Security Council, Chile and Mexico opposed the US decision to invade Iraq. Washington temporarily distanced itself from these countries, disappointed it did not receive unquestioning loyalty and support from its strategic “backyard.”

Of course, it wasn’t just the Iraq invasion that touched a nerve. The shocking abuses committed by the US in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo effectively destroyed any credibility Washington may have had on human rights and the rule of law. The hypocrisy and double standards exhibited by the Bush administration have been more costly for US-Latin American relations than any specific issue on the agenda.

Particularly after 9/11, Latin Americans have been troubled about the yawning gap between Washington’s priorities (chiefly the war on terror) and what matters most to the region (social and governance agendas). In the early part of the 21st century, Latin America has experienced social dislocations and pockets of instability. Largely preoccupied with the Middle East, Washington reflexively assumed the region’s governments would embrace US interests and objectives. Of course, they didn’t. The world has changed, and Latin America with it, but the US remains stuck in its old mindset about the region.

To put US-Latin American relations on a more productive track and begin restoring some measure of trust, Washington needs to take a number of concrete steps. Before the next administration takes over in 2009, the Congress should approve pending trade deals with Peru, Panama and Colombia. Since most of the region falls through the cracks on assistance programs, Congress should also back the proposal for a social investment and development fund for Latin America. It is unrealistic to expect much progress on immigration until early 2009, but comprehensive reform is an urgent priority that would send an important signal to the entire region.

Despite the debate over the renewal of Plan Colombia funding, the drug issue remains on automatic pilot. After so much money spent over so many years, Washington-inspired anti-drug policies have yielded meager results and need to be reviewed. In country after country—Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, and others—drug-fueled violence poses the most serious threat to democratic governance and the rule of law. As the world’s largest drug consumer, the US has shirked its full responsibility. In Mexico, for example, nearly all drug-related killings are committed with arms easily acquired in the United States. Other decisions, or non-decisions, did not go over very well in Latin America. The Bush administration’s tacit support for the 2002 coup against Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez cast further doubt in the region about US motives. Washington’s response to the Argentine financial crisis in late 2001 was notably cavalier, and its failure to back an ally in Bolivia with even modest support when the government was in trouble was not very reassuring. The Bush administration also turned abruptly away from its immigration agenda with Mexico. Just six days before 9/11 at the White House, Bush had called the bond with Mexico “our most important relationship.”

Even on policy questions where, on balance, Bush was generally supportive of Latin America, the upshot often left increased irritation with Washington. On immigration, Bush’s support for a “wall” on the US-Mexico border was seen as a serious affront to the region. On trade agreements with Chile and Central America, US negotiators evinced little flexibility or generosity.

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More than any particular policy or program, what is most needed to repair the relationship is for Washington to adopt a different style and fresh attitude. The new administration in Washington must take Latin America’s profound changes into account and treat the region with the seriousness it deserves—not as the stepchild of US foreign policy. Trust, after all, has to be earned.

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