The Myth of 9/11 in Latin America

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It is often argued that the first and most visible impact of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 has been the reordering of Washington's priorities in its relations with Latin America. The United States (U.S.) has focused its attention outside the hemisphere and placed Latin America at the "bottom of U.S. terrorist agenda" (Youngers 2003). Various scholars argue that the U.S. has returned to its Cold-War stance, in which it only notices those developments in Latin America that directly challenge U.S. interests (Hakim 2006). Accordingly, after 9/11 U.S. security demands have overshadowed other issues that Latin American countries consider priorities (Youngers 2003, 2). Susan Kauffman (2002), for instance, posits that: "once again the United States is looking at Latin America through a security lens, while Latin America wants the emphasis to remain on economic development."

The effects of U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America after 9/11 have not repeated the pattern of the Cold War. Although Latin America no longer is the overriding priority of American foreign policy, the U.S. has not neglected the region, nor, as many analysts have argued (Shifter 2004; Youngers 2003; Hakim 2006; Roett 2006), has it become disengaged from the hemisphere. The terrorist attacks did not introduce a different agenda for U.S.-Latin American relations from that of the post-Cold-War period. Free trade, illegal migration and the fight against drugs have continued to be the main issues of U.S.-Latin American relations. Even the trend towards militarization of U.S. foreign policy began in Latin America long before the terrorist attacks. U.S.-Latin America relations have been affected significantly not by the consequences of 9/11, but rather by the negative effects of the U.S.-promoted economic model in the region. The failures of the so-called Washington Consensus are not linked to the terrorist attacks.

Trade and Economic Aid

It can be argued that the U.S. has rewarded countries that supported its War on Terror with foreign aid and trade concessions. By contrast, it has punished and neglected the interests of those countries that have opposed this anti-terrorist campaign. Peter Hakim points out that seven out of 34 Latin American countries supported the war in Iraq, of which six (five in Central America, plus the Dominican Republic) were engaged in trade negotiations with the U.S., while the seventh, Colombia, was receiving the greatest amount of U.S.-military aid.¹ Moreover, the U.S. Congress delayed the approval of a free-trade pact with Chile and terminated a migration agreement with Mexico because these nations voted against U.S. intervention in Iraq in the United Nations

Security Council. Hakim notes that the U.S. cut off foreign aid to Latin American countries that refused to exclude U.S. soldiers from prosecution before the International Criminal Court (ICC). This view, however, is not entirely accurate.

The terrorist attacks have not affected U.S. trade and economic policy towards Latin America. On the one hand, although U.S. economic assistance to Latin America has decreased in the past years, this trend dates back to before the events of 9/11. U.S. economic aid to the region has declined since the early 1990s and most of it is now concentrated in Central America and the Caribbean.² Since 1995, the European Union (EU) has displaced the U.S. as the principal donor of foreign-development assistance for Latin America (Smith 2001).³ On

the other hand, trade agreements have not been subordinated to U.S. security concerns in the wake of 9/11 (Hakim 2006; Tokatlian 2003). Although Colombia has been one of Washington's most loyal allies in the War on Terror and has made important progress in containing organised crime, the U.S. Congress has not yet approved the free-trade agreement with Colombia. The free-trade pact with Colombia has faced vehement opposition from the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), and has raised broader concerns about human rights in the country (Hakim 2008). It thus seems that cooperation with the U.S. in the post-9/11 period necessarily entails the grant of privileges or advantages.⁴

Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. has viewed free trade, not economic aid, as the most effective cure for Latin American underdevelopment. Accordingly, free trade agreements do not merely expand trade, but also open the Latin American countries to foreign direct investment, promote structural reforms, accelerate growth, and, consequently, create new jobs. In practice, however, the market has proved unable to reduce levels of poverty on its own.

Negotiations for a Free-Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which was projected to be completed by 2005, have stalled. Despite this, the Bush administration has pursued a more active bilateral trade policy towards Latin America. President Bush has twice obtained the fast-track negotiating trade authority that President Clinton failed on several occasions to secure. The Bush administration has signed free-trade agreements with Chile, Peru, Panama, other Central American republics, and the Dominican Republic. It has expanded trade preferences for Andean countries, and has signed an investment agreement with Uruguay. Prior to 9/11 (using this phrasing might lead the reader to believe that 9/11 did have an effect on U.S.-Latin America relations), the U.S. had no trade agreements in Latin America, save for the North American Free

Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

If trade agreements are considered part of U.S. assistance to Latin American development, it could be argued that the U.S. has not completely neglected Latin American development concerns in the wake of 9/11. The U.S. might be responding to Latin America's interest in placing its commodities in the American market. Many Latin American countries want to negotiate free-trade agreements with the U.S. (Hakim 2006).⁵ However, Latin American nations not only want free trade but also want aid for social development. This request for aid has been largely disappointed under the Bush administration, as under previous post-Cold War administrations. Clearly, U.S. economic assistance and trade policy towards Latin America has been unaffected by the terrorist attacks.

Security and Military Assistance

Militarization is a word frequently used by scholars to describe U.S.-Latin American relations in the post-9/11 period (Youngers 2003). While U.S. economic assistance has stagnated, military aid and training for the region has increased since 2000.⁶ Latin America currently is the second greatest recipient of U.S. military aid and training, behind Iraq.⁷ Undoubtedly, the balance between economic and military aid is a strong indicator of how the U.S. is projecting its power in the region and the world (WOLA 2008). Nevertheless, the increase in the scope of military aid owes little to 9/11.

After the terrorist attacks, the U.S. reinforced security on its southern border and increased the amount of military aid to Mexico for homeland security purposes.⁸ The U.S. and Mexico have also signed several agreements to increase security along their border. In 2005, for instance, both countries signed a trilateral security agreement with Canada, known as the Alliance for Security and Prosperity in North America (ASPNA). The U.S. has also claimed that the Triple Border, shared by Paraguay,

Brazil and Argentina, is the location of a variety of drug-trafficking, human-trafficking, and terrorist activity. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) were active in the area, and the Lebanese Hezbollah and Palestinian Hamas also had a presence in the region (Youngers 2003; Prevost 2007). Despite this, counter-terrorist activities do not account for the trend towards militarization of U.S. policy towards the region.

Unlike the Soviet Union, terrorism is a trans-national and non-state adversary. For the State Department, the term “terrorism” encompasses a broad range of illegal activities, such as drug-trafficking, illegal migration, intellectual property violations, money-laundering, and arms-trafficking (Olson 2004; Tokatlian 2003; Youngers 2003). For the U.S., drug-trafficking revenues are a key source for financing terrorism, which affects both the U.S. and Latin American countries. In fact, Colombia’s three guerrilla groups – the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and the United Self-Defence Groups of Colombia (AUC) – have been listed by the U.S. State Department as terrorist organisations (Youngers 2003). Although the rest of Latin America suffers from high levels of violence, there have been few U.S.-sponsored measures or programs geared towards tackling organised crime under the banner of anti-terrorism. Furthermore, they represent only a small portion of overall U.S. military aid to Latin America (WOLA 2004).

The militarization of U.S. foreign policy does not stem from the irrelevance of the region in the State Department after 9/11. The Pentagon has increased its role in U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America. Its leadership in foreign military and training has increased over the past years. Currently, military-aid funding to the region is not only financed from the U.S. government foreign-aid budget. The US Defence Department pays for roughly 25% of all military aid to Latin America (WOLA 2008). Scholars often cite the War on

Terror as a reason for this trend in U.S. foreign policy (Youngers 2003, 5). However, the U.S. military, especially its Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), began assuming responsibility over U.S. foreign policy tasks in Latin America during the 1980s (WOLA 2008). Currently, SOUTHCOM has more staff dedicated to Latin American issues than the Departments of State, Commerce, Treasury and Agriculture combined (Youngers 2003). SOUTHCOM has defined drug-traffickers as the greatest threat to U.S. interests in the region. In fact, 80% of U.S. military aid is allocated to anti-narcotics activities. Nevertheless, U.S. collaboration in

anti-narcotics activities in Latin America long predates 9/11 (WOLA 2004).

Over the past two decades, the U.S. has provided increasing amounts of military aid and training to counter drug-trafficking in the region.⁹ Plan Colombia, a US\$1.7 billion anti-drug program enacted by the U.S. Congress in 2000, constitutes most of the U.S. military assistance to the region.¹⁰ It is increasingly being marked as an anti-terrorist initiative, but it had been launched as an anti-drug initiative prior to 9/11. In 2001 Plan Colombia was expanded as the “Andean Counter-Drug Initiative” extending its reach to other countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru and Venezuela. More recently, Plan Colombia has been renewed, and similar plans are to be applied in Central America as “Operation Enduring Friendship” and in Mexico as the “Merida Initiative”.¹¹ Mexico and Colombia have welcomed U.S. help to contain

the wave of criminal violence – what Tokatlian (2003) calls “intervention by invitation.” It could be argued that the traumatic events of 9/11 have simply reasserted non-state and trans-border threats, especially drug-trafficking, as a fundamental part of the U.S. regional-security agenda.

The Costs of U.S. Neglect?

Several surveys show that regard for the U.S. across the region has fallen sharply over the past years. According to a Zogby poll, 87% of international opinion-leaders disapprove of Washington’s foreign policy (Hakim 2008). Moreover, most opinion-leaders no longer see the U.S. as a reliable partner. A BBC poll shows that 53% of South Americans had a negative view of U.S. influence. Across the region, around 39% of Latin Americans hold an unfavourable opinion of the U.S., up from 14% in 2000 (Haugaard 2006). U.S. disregard for international precepts in its invasion of Iraq to some extent account for this fall. Latin American countries have condemned U.S. unilateral action, its campaigns to limit the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, as well as human right abuses in Guantánamo Bay. In 2005, for instance, Washington’s candidate for General Secretary of the Organization of American States, former Salvadorian president Francisco Flores, was defeated for the first time in history. At the fourth Summit of the Americas in Argentina in 2005, hostile crowds condemning both the FTAA and U.S. foreign policy greeted President Bush.

Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez has become the leader of the anti-American movement across Latin America. President Chávez has defied Washington on a number of issues. He has not allowed U.S. planes engaged in anti-drug activities to fly over Venezuelan territory. He has also forged closed alliances with governments hostile to the U.S. (like Fidel Castro’s regime in Cuba and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s in Iran) and drawn other Latin American countries (such as Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua) into these alliances. It is also

said that his government is threatening U.S. security interests by supporting the FARC in Colombia and other guerrilla groups in Latin America.

Declining support for the U.S. is not the result of American disengagement from the region in the aftermath of 9/11, as some authors have argued (Shifter 2004; Hakim 2006; Hakim 2008). Neither is the turn to the left and to populist politics in Latin America an unintended consequence of the Iraq invasion and the subsequent escalation of the violence (Hakim 2008).¹² Defensive attitudes towards the U.S. in the region result more from the failure of the Washington Consensus to generate benefits for the region’s citizens. The performance of neo-liberalism has been dismal. Around 40% of Latin Americans live in poverty, 20% in extreme poverty. The inability of the neo-liberal model to provide economic growth over the past two decades has helped to undermine U.S. support across the region. In this regard, as Lisa Hauggard (2006) points out, a negative image of the U.S. in Latin America is nothing new.

Diminished support for the U.S. in the region also stems from increased economic interdependence (Muñoz 2000) and not from the Bush Doctrine (Roett 2006; Erikson 2008). As Latin American nations have opened their economies, they have become less dependent on the U.S. Since the 1990s, South American countries have expanded their diplomatic and commercial relations with extra-hemispheric powers, such as the EU and China.¹³ In 2006, Chile signed a free trade agreement with China, and Peru is discussing a similar accord. Even one of the most loyal allies of the U.S. in the region, Colombia, has opened negotiations with China in search of trade agreements and investment. Thus, economic interconnectedness, and not the 9/11 attacks, is the main reason why Latin American countries are enjoying a greater autonomy vis-à-vis the U.S. than at any time during the Cold War (Castañeda 1994). As Daniel Erikson (2008) argues, “the era when the U.S. could treat Latin

America and the Caribbean as its backyard... is receding faster into history.”

Conclusion

After the terrorist attacks, security concerns were once again at the top of Washington’s agenda for the hemisphere. Most scholars have stressed U.S. indifference towards the region in the aftermath of 9/11. With the exception of Mexico and Colombia, scholars argue that the rest of Latin America has become irrelevant for U.S. security. Yet, the region is neither a source of nor a target for international terrorism. Nevertheless, U.S.-Latin American relations have not changed significantly after the terrorist attacks of 2001. The hemisphere has never been and will not be a priority of U.S. foreign policy, an effect some Latin American leaders ignored. They believed the Bush administration would define a new relationship with the region based not only on free markets but also on social aid. These expectations have remained unfulfilled.

The region has not disappeared from the U.S. agenda. However, the new global threat of terrorism has not set any new agenda

for U.S.-Latin American relations. Trade, drug-trafficking and migration still dominate the agenda, and will probably continue to do so into the foreseeable future. Additionally, the militarization of the U.S. approach to the region precedes the terrorist attacks. The terrorist attacks have simply reasserted the military and security element in U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America in the post-Cold War period. In this sense, there is considerable continuity in U.S.-Latin American relations before and after 9/11.

How has Latin America been affected by the consequences of 9/11? As argued above, Latin America has not suffered from U.S. distraction with the War on Terror, but instead from “unrealistic expectations” of a special relation with the U.S. under the Bush administration (Shifter 2004). If Washington is losing Latin America (Hakim 2006), it is not because of its new foreign policy, but because of the long-term failure of the Washington Consensus to deliver benefits to millions of Latin Americans. This failure has generated defensive reactions against the U.S. across the hemisphere.

Endnotes

- ¹ Since the inception of Plan Colombia, Colombia has received over US\$4.4 billion in military and police aid from the U.S. In 2006, the U.S. provided close to US\$800 million to the Colombian government, mostly in the form of military aid.
- ² U.S. economic aid to the region, for example, dropped from US\$1.8 billion in 1985 to US\$687 million in 1996 (Muñoz, 2001).
- ³ The EU gives around US\$2.2 billion per year in foreign aid to Latin America (Muñoz, 2001).
- ⁴ Similarly, an immigration reform involving Mexico was already unlikely before 9/11, thanks to U.S. domestic constraints unrelated to terrorism (Montaño, 2005).
- ⁵ The U.S. is the largest or second-largest trading partner of almost every Latin American nation. So far ten countries in Latin America have signed free-trade pacts with the U.S. (Hakim 2008).
- ⁶ During the late 1990s, U.S. military assistance to the region doubled. Since 2000, military aid has nearly equalled economic assistance (US\$907.8 million in military aid, US\$1.026 billion in economic assistance in 2006). The U.S. budget for 2007 includes a 17% reduction from the 2005 level of Latin American in economic-support funds (Haugaard 2006).
- ⁷ Between 1997 and 2007, the U.S. gave Latin America a total of US\$7.3 billion in military and police assistance. Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador and Mexico are among the top twelve recipients of U.S. military and police aid recipients in the world for 2005 and 2007. Colombia has been the region’s number-one recipient of U.S. military assistance since the inception of Plan Colombia. It receives around 62% of U.S. total military assistance to Latin America (WOLA 2008).
- ⁸ U.S. military aid to Mexico has more than tripled over the last five years. Military assistance to Mexico has consisted mainly of provision of equipment to the Mexican military and police.
- ⁹ The level of resources spent by the US government to combat drug-trafficking in Latin America has increased nearly tenfold over the past 25 years (amounting to more than \$6.5 billion since 2000) (Shifter 2007, 59).
- ¹⁰ Colombia produces 80% of the world’s cocaine, 70% of which goes to the U.S. market. (Bouvier 2003).
- ¹¹ The Merida Initiative, also known as “Plan Mexico”, is a U.S.\$1.4 billion aid package to combat drug-trafficking and organised crime in Mexico and Central America. During the first year, the U.S. will provide US\$550 million, 500 million of which will be given to Mexico, and the rest within Central America. Currently, Mexico provides 90% of cocaine entering the U.S. market (Benítez Manaut 2007).
- ¹² When President Bush took office, most of the region was governed by rightist pro-market rulers. During his two terms, Latin Americans have elected and/or reelected leftist governments in eight countries: Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in Brazil in 2002 and 2007; Néstor and Cristina Kirchner in Argentina in 2003 and 2007; Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay in 2004; Evo Morales in Bolivia in 2005; Michelle Bachelet in Chile in 2006; Rafael Correa in Ecuador in 2006; Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua in 2006; and Chávez in Venezuela in 2006.
- ¹³ China has increased its economic involvement in Latin America as it has looked abroad for raw materials to fuel its economic growth. The volume of trade between China and Latin America has grown from US\$8 billion in 1999 to more than US\$80 billion in 2007 (Erikson 2008; Haugaard 2006). Much of Chinese trade and investment is concentrated in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, and Chile. It is expected that China will invest US\$100 billion

in Latin America over the next decade.

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