



A Latin American shift to the political left

To cite this article: (2006) A Latin American shift to the political left, Strategic Comments, 12:2, 1-2, DOI: [10.1080/1356788061225](https://doi.org/10.1080/1356788061225)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1356788061225>



Published online: 22 Oct 2007.



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4 November 2005 From left, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, President Bush and National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley listen to Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez at the fourth Summit of the Americas at Mar del Plata, Argentina. Photo © AP



A Latin American shift to the political left

US responses

LATIN AMERICA'S APPARENT tilt towards the political left has caught the attention of US policymakers. The election of leftist presidents such as Nestor Kirchner in Argentina, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in Brazil, Michele Bachelet in Chile and Evo Morales in Bolivia all seem to indicate a definite political sea-change in the region. The potential for a leftist victory in Mexico is seen as further evidence of a leftist consolidation. Meanwhile, Hugo Chavez, the vehemently anti-American Venezuelan president, and his 'Bolivarian Revolution' appears, for all his eccentricities, to be gaining standing and influence in the region at the expense of the United States.

There is no doubt that Latin America's political complexion is in flux, and that the election of leftist leaders is an indication that majorities in certain Latin American countries are looking for an alternative to what had almost been a conservative monopoly on national politics in the region's democratic era over the past two decades. Yet the trend is hardly uniform: countries such as Colombia and El Salvador are politically positioned firmly on the right, while others, such as Costa Rica, seem to be attempting to find a comfortable middle ground. Too much should thus not be read into recent political developments in Latin America. For the most part, the new leftist leaders (or, more properly, leaders of the democratic left) are working within the framework of constitutional democracy. Their arrival is a long-overdue balancing out of the electoral playing field.

A new approach from Washington

One reason that events in Latin America have elicited such interest lately in Washington is the clear sense that things in the Western hemisphere are not developing in directions of which the US approves. In response, the Bush administration has quietly but substantially modified its policies toward the region – primarily at the rhetorical level – in order to shore up alliances and to conserve influence. The most visible alteration in policy is the higher-level attention that the Bush administration has recently been prepared to devote to the region. US Deputy Secretary of State Robert

Zoellick's goodwill visit to Brazil in October 2005 initiated this trend. While it was initially feared that Lula would pursue a platform based on anti-American populism, the Bush administration now believes that he can serve as an important counterweight to Chavez's radical agenda. President George W. Bush's visit to Brazil in November 2005 further indicated that Washington hopes for warmer and deeper relations with Brasilia.

Zoellick's trip coincided with a more important development in the evolution of the Bush administration's policy towards Latin America. The highly respected career diplomat Thomas Shannon moved from the National Security Council to assume the State Department's highest post for the Western hemisphere. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's ability to bring Shannon over to the State Department signified an important policymaking power shift in favour of the State Department on Latin American matters. Rice had been irritated by a number of

blunders, including the failed effort to support the Salvadoran candidate for the post of Secretary General of the Organization of American States, and she felt that Shannon's deft touch would help to minimise future diplomatic gaffes.

Mar del Plata

The United States has long looked upon the Summit of the Americas as an excellent forum in which to promote democracy and free trade. Yet the setting of the 2005 Summit in Mar del Plata, Argentina, was seen by American diplomats as uncondusive. Many Bush administration officials privately regard Argentina's president as an erratic and unpredictable figure, and there was much quiet trepidation about how the Summit would ultimately turn out. The answer was that it could scarcely have turned out worse.

In addition to demonstrating his apparent unease during some of the social events, Bush sent conflicting

Selected forthcoming elections and possible outcomes

Peru Presidential election – 9 April

Ollanta Humala is the front-runner in a tightly contested presidential election. He has campaigned on a nationalist-populist platform and has voiced support for the anti-American stance of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez.

Colombia Presidential election – 28 May

Right-wing President Alvaro Uribe is expected to secure re-election.

Mexico Presidential election – 2 July

The leftist Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD) is expected narrowly to win the presidential election over Felipe Calderón, centre-right candidate for the National Action Party (PAN).

Brazil Presidential election – 1 October first round; 29 October second round

President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva is expected to be re-elected, albeit narrowly.

Ecuador Presidential election – 15 October first round; 26 November second round

The presidential race remains completely open. In recent months, President Alfredo Palacio has been confronted with anti-globalisation demonstrations by indigenous Indians opposed to a trade agreement with the United States. The Indian population will play an important role in determining the outcome, either by mobilising in support of a candidate (who would then likely win) or by staying on the sidelines.

Nicaragua Presidential election – 5 November

Former Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega could be elected in the presidential poll.

Venezuela Presidential election – 3 December

Hugo Chavez could consolidate his 'Bolivarian revolution' by securing re-election; if so, some observers fear that this would mark the last semi-legitimate election in Venezuela for some time and signal the transition to full autocracy.



21 January 2006 Then President-elect Evo Morales of Bolivia meets US Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Shannon at the former's house. Photo ©AP

signals about his preference for a hemispheric free trade agreement (Free Trade Area of the Americas) as opposed to seeking to achieve progress in trade liberalisation through the Doha round of the World Trade Organization. At the very moment that American diplomacy was faltering in the formal and public arenas, Chavez – aided by Diego Maradona, a soccer player – held forth at an ‘alternative summit’ amid indications of broad approval for an alternative to the US-driven hemispheric political and trade process. The embarrassment of Mar del Plata reinforced the notion among senior Bush administration officials that significantly more attention needed to be paid to the region.

Policy adjustments

In what is a long overdue adjustment to political, economic and even social trends that have been evolving for many years, the Bush administration now understands that it must more concertedly engage not only its allies but other counterparts in the region. In addition to its growing courtship of Brazil, the Bush administration hopes to deal pragmatically with Morales's election in Bolivia on 18 December. As with the elections of Kirchner and Lula, Washington was severely disappointed by this result. A one-time leader of a coca farmers' movement, Morales campaigned on a platform of coca legalisation and hydrocarbon nationalisation. His campaign resonated with Bolivians who have been disenchanted with US-funded coca eradication schemes and perceived foreign domination of natural resources, particularly in the burgeoning natural gas sector. Many took Morales's victory

to be a clear rejection on the part of Bolivians of both the neo-liberal economic model encouraged by the US, as well as inflexible US-mandated counter-narcotics policies.

Given the shifting political climate in the region, and Chavez's eagerness to capitalise on any perceived US meddling in the Bolivian election, Washington pragmatically chose to smile through clenched teeth upon Morales's victory. Both Shannon and Rice met with Morales in a public effort to show that Washington was eager to find an accommodation. (Shannon met with Morales for over an hour in his private residence; the meeting was unexpectedly positive, and concluded with a joint press conference in the street outside the apartment.)

The courtesies lavished on Morales demonstrated the new willingness of the Bush administration to work with democratically elected leaders, even if their ideological persuasion does not sit well with Washington. The Bush administration now better understands that Chavez's Venezuela, buoyed by oil revenue and demonstrating a confident willingness to use this money to support governments and movements throughout the region, is more than ready to offer alternative alliances if Washington were to attempt a forceful diplomatic approach to dealing with leftist governments such as Bolivia's.

Rice's attendance at Bachelet's inauguration on 11 March was another demonstration of this approach. From the Bush administration's perspective, Chile is a model of constitutional democracy and pro-American foreign policies. Remarkably, given that it has been governed by the centre-left and left since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship, Chile continues to develop a ‘special relationship’ with the United States. Progress in trade and a general meeting of minds on the importance of democracy and market economies in Latin America have driven this relationship (Chavez has taken to accusing Washington of trying to turn Chile into the ‘Israel’ of Latin America).

The China factor

Chavez's ability to provide a rhetorical and operational counter to US-led policies and influence is not the only development in Latin America that has disconcerted Washington. The recent and seemingly insatiable Chinese demand for Latin American natural resources – including Chilean copper, Argentine soy and Venezuelan oil – has

caused Washington to embark on a vigorous internal debate about what to do about the growing Chinese presence in Latin America.

Until recently, the United States had been able to exert wide influence in Latin America for geographic reasons, since the United States represents the most accessible and proximate large market for Latin American goods, especially its natural resources. This might be changing, however. China has expressed interest in importing more Venezuelan oil, and is in the process of building refineries that will be able to handle Venezuelan crude. Similarly, China has expressed interest in helping to develop Bolivia's gas fields, with an eye to expanding future imports to help meet its growing energy needs. Beijing is also eager to broaden and deepen its military ties with various Latin American militaries, a development that has raised the suspicions of both the US Southern Command and many members of the US Congress. Washington ultimately fears the potential for Chinese influence far more than that of Chavez, whom it regards more as an irritant than a long-term challenge to American interests.

‘We're here to listen’

China's increasing intrusions into the region will probably compel the Bush administration to give Latin America the attention it deserved before China's involvement became a concern. The US can no longer claim unchallenged primacy in Latin America. In Chavez and China, Latin American governments have more options than before. Already, America's tendency of only supporting those Latin American countries that cooperated over the Iraq war has now passed. The Bush administration recognises that while this narrow and unyielding approach might have provided short-term gains, including the deployment of Salvadoran and Honduran troops in Iraq, the medium- and long-term consequences have been overwhelmingly negative in terms of the image and influence of the US in the region.

Although the Bush administration missed a rare opportunity over the past several years to cement positive relations with Latin American countries, it still carries a very powerful message of democracy and economic liberalisation. Compared to the paths of Chavez and China, this is a vision that is shared by a broad majority of Latin American governments and citizens. ©IISS