The Case for a Positive U.S. Agenda with Latin America

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Introduction

With the change of administration in Washington, the agenda that the United States is likely to prioritize in its relationship with Latin America has familiar elements: migration, rule of law, governance, counter-narcotics, and the crisis in Venezuela. Newer to the mix are concerns with populism, the inroads made by China, and the social and economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

These are serious issues, but they reflect a largely reactive response to developments in the region. The opportunity also exists for a positive paradigm shift in hemispheric relations post-pandemic that places U.S.-Latin American ties on a more strategic footing to respond to twenty-first-century challenges.

The Biden administration is well-positioned to seize the moment and present a new vision for engagement at the tri-annual Summit of the Americas, which will be hosted by the United States in the coming year. That vision, which can still address the questions of most immediate concern to the United States, would ideally also include a forward-looking agenda developed with regional leaders focused on restoring economic growth, responding to climate change and other global concerns, and creating opportunities for the people of Latin America. In taking this step, it will be important to dispel the undue pessimism that permeates U.S. perspectives on the region.

Latin America has Changed for the Better

We can start by recognizing that the image so many have of a region facing intractable problems has another side to it. Some of Latin America’s democratic leaders view the current Covid-19-generated crisis as an opportunity to transform their countries, and they are driven by the knowledge that their populations expect nothing less. The political, economic, and social foundations for doing so exist.

Latin America’s political transformation since the 1990s has been profound. It is now the region of the world with the highest proportion of democratically elected governments outside Europe and North America. Peaceful transfer of power between often radically different political points of view usually takes place without serious incident. The emergence of populist governments in the region has not, so far, fundamentally altered this reality.

Additionally, institutions and rule of law are stronger than they were 20 years ago, and independent judiciaries in countries from Mexico to Brazil and Argentina have investigated, indicted, or convicted presidents and senior political figures for human rights abuses and corruption. There is legitimate concern about slippage in governance in recent years, particularly in Central American nations, and the collapse of the Venezuelan state is undeniable but the democratic evolution of the region over time has been impressive.

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