

## **Obama and Latin America**

**By Rebecca Bartel, Latin America Policy Analyst**

*November 12, 2008*

The feeling among many partners in Latin America is generally very positive in response to the historical victory of President Elect Barack Obama in last week's elections.

In his first official effort at stating a position on Latin America last May, Sen. Obama's speech, "Renewing US leadership in the Americas" framed his positions on policy and relationship towards Latin America referring to Franklin D. Roosevelt's "four freedoms" speech of 1941. This was the vision FDR articulated for a new world order – prior to US engagement in the Second World War – based on 4 basic freedoms: political freedom, religious freedom, freedom from want, and freedom from fear<sup>1</sup>.

That same day, after meeting with the conservative Cuban-American National Foundation, the Obama campaign released "A New Partnership for the Americas" plan, which outlines three major regional policy issues that his administration would tackle if elected to office: (1) political freedom/democracy, (2) freedom from fear/security, and (3) freedom from want/opportunity.<sup>2</sup> As Larry Birns, director of the Council on Hemispheric Affairs states, "According to Obama, the strengthening of democracy will at its core address the protection of human rights, as well as support the rejection of de facto coups and autocratic practices. The U.S. will foster democratic institutions by strengthening democracy at home – habeas corpus will be restored, Guantanamo Bay will be closed, and torture and indefinite detention will end".<sup>3</sup>

Analysts note the particular speech and policy Sen. Obama referred to, which preceded FDR's "Good Neighbour" policy, paved the way for the most harmonious era in Latin America–U.S. relations during the 1930's. The Good Neighbour Policy is a framework that should be re-visited and there is hope in the region, from academics and think tanks, that this would be the model of relationship and diplomacy that the Obama administration will adopt.

However, there is some concern that the Obama presidency will maintain a "business as usual" style of policy towards the region.

For example, although Obama has made reference to the possibility of lifting restrictions on travel for Cuban-Americans and freeing up the process of Cubans in the US sending remittances to families in Cuba, he has maintained the position of holding the embargo as it stands in order to encourage democratic transition and institutionalization. In reference to Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez, Sen. Obama has used strong language, partly in order to separate his campaign from Chávez's populist government, and has again referred to encouraging democracy through "aggressive diplomacy".

---

<sup>1</sup> Tom Barry, "Obama, Latin America and FDR", *Americas Policy Program, Centre for International Policy*, August 25, 2008. <http://americas.irc-online.org/am/5493>

<sup>2</sup> "A New Partnership for the Americas", Obama for America, May 2008. [http://obama.3cdn.net/ef480f743f9286aea9\\_k0tmvyt7h.pdf](http://obama.3cdn.net/ef480f743f9286aea9_k0tmvyt7h.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Larry Birns, "Obama on Latin America", *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*, October 16, 2008. <http://www.coha.org/2008/10/obama-on-latin-america/>

Obama has stated that the foci for security policy should be transnational gangs, drugs, violence and organized crime. He has proposed strengthening security efforts of the United States in Central America, and approves the extension and continuation of the newly implemented “Mérida Initiative” – a multi million dollar military aid package largely to be Mexico and small sum to Central America. Obama supports regional efforts to combat violence and transnational drug trafficking and organized crime, and has also stated his support of continuing military aid to Colombia to combat narco-trafficking. In addition, Obama stated his concurrence with the Colombian military’s decision to attack FARC insurgents on Ecuadorian soil stating that, “Colombia has a right to strike terrorists who seek safe-haven across its borders.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Looking towards the future**

Nonetheless, Obama’s victory is clearly a positive sign for Latin America, and certainly is a hopeful move from the Bush administration’s strategies of increased military aid to respond to social and political conflict, failed drug eradication programs and interventionist counter-terrorism tactics. These tactics and failed policies have served to create more hostility towards the United States in the region and have not responded to the great social and economic strife that millions of people in Latin America face.

Obama’s conviction that a new US-Latin America relationship must be forged and new US policy towards Latin America must be built, is welcome. Time will test the new President elect’s positions in practice towards the region, but the opportunity is ripe for creative and new relationship building..

Obama’s fresh ideas around economic development, increasing U.S. foreign aid, vocational training, micro-finance, and community development may prove to be effective strategies for poverty reduction, job creation and stimulating local economies. As analyst Birns says, “*He will attempt to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, will work to decrease the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, and increase global education. He will cancel the debts of Paraguay, Guyana, St. Lucia, Bolivia, Haiti, and Honduras, as well as those of other countries around the world which have been designated as “heavily-indebted poor countries.” Obama will seek to reform the IMF and World Bank, and establish fair trade that promotes labor and environmental standards. In addition, the WTO will be encouraged to enforce mutually advantageous trade agreements. Obama opposed CAFTA and a U.S.-Colombia FTA, and will seek to amend the provisions of NAFTA to increase its benefits for American workers.*”<sup>5</sup> These are interesting proposals, and will be challenged from all sides by special-interest lobbies in congress, corporate America and Latin America, and potentially Obama’s own party. Lest it be forgotten that NAFTA was negotiated and implemented by a democrat government, as was Plan Colombia.

Although Obama and running mate Joe Biden, have made such overtures to Latin America as a region, in addition to large promises for re-charged relationships and leadership in the region, they have specifically cited countries already closely allied with the United States, such as Colombia, Mexico and Brazil – committing to continuing military aid packages to the first two, and opening up markets for bio-fuel sales for the latter.

### **Country by country: What leaders are saying.**

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

In Bolivia, the Evo Morales administration voiced their hope that “Obama will reverse the Bush administration's anticipated suspension of trade preferences that allowed more than \$150 million in Bolivian goods into the U.S. without being charged import taxes last year”.<sup>6</sup> Morales affirmed hope that relations would improve with the United States expressing his confidence that relations will be healthier with Obama in the White House.<sup>7</sup>

Obama has stated that he intends to cancel Bolivia's foreign debt, however it is not clear whether or not Obama will be willing to renegotiate the inclusion of Bolivia in the ATPDEA (Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act).

The Venezuelan government suggested that Obama's win was the culmination of a wave of leftist electoral victories that started in South America nearly three years ago, saying “the historical election of an afro-descendent to the head of the most powerful nation in the world is the symptom of an era of change which has been brewing in South America and could be knocking on the doors of the United States”.<sup>8</sup>

In a televised speech on Sunday, November 9, Chávez announced that he would be open to meeting with Obama in “conditions of equality and respect” and that he hoped with Obama a “new phase of relations”.<sup>9</sup>

Obama has been widely critical of Hugo Chavez's government and manner of governing, stating that “*Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez has increased his anti-U.S. rhetoric and tried to counter American influence throughout Latin America. Some commentators fear that Chavez threatens oil markets and regional stability. Barack Obama believes the U.S. must restore its traditional leadership in the region – on democracy, trade and development, energy and immigration. This will tamp down the anti- Americanism that has sprung up in opposition to the Bush administration's global policies and lack of engagement in Latin America*”.<sup>10</sup>

The Mexican government expressed its support of the new president elect, stating that the “government will maintain close relations with Obama's transitional team to engage in dialogue at all levels of government around issues of migration and the Mérida Initiative”, affirmed Foreign Minister, Patricia Espinosa. Espinosa also stated that Mexican president, Felipe Calderón, seeks a meeting with Obama as soon as possible given that “what unites (the two countries) is much greater and more important than a long border”.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Jack Chang, “In Obama, Latin America hopes to mend fences with U.S.”, *McClatchy Newspaper, McClatchy Washington*, November 5, 2008. <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/world/story/55377.html>

<sup>7</sup> AP, “Evo Morales Viajará a Washington a la OEA”, *El Mundo*, Tuesday, November 11, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Noticias 24, “Reunión Obama-Chávez será ‘mucho más rápido de lo que la gente cree’”, Tuesday, November 11, 2008, <http://www.noticias24.com>

<sup>9</sup> AP, “Chávez extiende rama de oliva a Obama: Espera nueva ‘etapa’ en relación con EEUU”, November 3, 2008, [www.univision.com](http://www.univision.com)

<sup>10</sup> “A New Partnership for the Americas”, Obama for America, May 2008. [http://obama.3cdn.net/ef480f743f9286aea9\\_k0tmvyt7h.pdf](http://obama.3cdn.net/ef480f743f9286aea9_k0tmvyt7h.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> El Universal, “Buscará Reunión Calderón-Obama”, *El Universal*, November 11, 2008. <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/notas/553081.html>

She also stated that “what unites us, above all, is the need to make North America a region in which we are strengthened economically and our two countries must work together to build societies that are not only more prosperous but also more just”.<sup>12</sup>

While Obama has stated his intention of reforming immigration policy in the United States, through creating legal avenues for undocumented immigrants to seek citizenship and legalization, he has indicated his administration plans to continue and expand the military aid package known as the “Mérida Initiative” to Mexico and Central America, in addition to the building of the wall and increased border security. In his “A new Partnership for the Americas”, it is stated,

*“Border violence and the trafficking of guns and stolen vehicles along the U.S. - Mexico border remains a critical crime and homeland security challenge for the U.S. To combat this increasing problem, the United States forged a new security cooperation initiative with Mexico and nations in Central America. The Merida Initiative is designed to combat the threats of drug trafficking, transnational crime and terrorism in the Western Hemisphere. Barack Obama believes that a new security initiative is needed with Latin American neighbors – an initiative that extends beyond Central America. This initiative will foster cooperation within the region to combat gangs, trafficking and violent criminal activity. And it will marshal the resources of the United States to support the development of independent and competent police and judicial institutions in the Americas.”*<sup>13</sup>

Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua expressed his congratulations to Obama, classifying the presidential elections as historical. Ortega stated that “it is truly a miracle that the United States has an African American president for the first time in its history” and that the new president elect is “the symbol of the immigrant that has arrived to the United States and had children there” after recognizing Obama’s African roots<sup>14</sup>.

Álvaro Colom of Guatemala congratulated the new president elect saying that he, the government and the Guatemalan people, “hoped that the new government would create more humane and respectful conditions for the treatment of the thousands of Guatemalan immigrants that, without a doubt, play and important role in the economy and the progress of the United States”<sup>15</sup>.

Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim compared Obama's victory to that of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, a former leftist union activist known as Brazil's first leader to come from working-class roots.

---

<sup>12</sup> AP, “Buscará México Reunión Calderón-Obama: Espinosa”, *El Periódico de México*, November 11, 2008.  
<http://www.elperiodicodemexico.com/nota.php?id=204189>

<sup>13</sup> A New Partnership for the Americas”, Obama for America, May 2008.  
[http://obama.3cdn.net/ef480f743f9286aea9\\_k0tmvvt7h.pdf](http://obama.3cdn.net/ef480f743f9286aea9_k0tmvvt7h.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Matilde Córdoba, “Ortega Felicite a Obama”, *El Nuevo Diario*, November 5, 2008.  
<http://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/politica/31628>

<sup>15</sup> EFE, “El Presidente Colom llamará a Obama para felicitarlo por su triunfo”, *Prensa Libre*, November 5, 2008.

"In the case of Lula, hope overcame fear," Amorim said. "In the case of Obama, hope overcame prejudice."<sup>16</sup>

Obama has been clear in his intention to relax import quotas on Brazilian ethanol exports to the United States, saying that his administration is interested in creating a bigger market for Brazilian ethanol and will eliminate the 7% limit that is currently in place through the Caribbean Basin Initiative. At the same time, Obama has voiced concern around environmental degradation, particularly in the Amazon region and the risks of deforestation which accompany greater agricultural production. Obama has stated that his administration would support alternative energy and offer incentives to maintain forests and natural reserves.

Colombian President, Álvaro Uribe also congratulated the new leader, stating that Colombia's hopes for the ratification of a Free Trade Agreement which has been stalled by the democratic Congress earlier in the year would be realized. Obama has been very firm on the free Trade Agreement, stating that consistent and systematic violations of human rights by the military, and the worsening situation with union leader assassination for which the government has not responded adequately, in addition to the para-politics scandal, are factors which his administration will not overlook and the chance of the FTA being signed without significant modifications is increasingly unlikely.

Despite his strong position on the FTA, together with Vice-President elect Joe Biden's rejection of the deal and Biden's consistent record of questioning this sort of bilateral trade agreement, Obama has voiced his support for continued military aid to Colombia – although there is hope that an Obama administration will be open to hearing from Colombian human rights organizations and Washington-based NGOs, and heed their call to decrease military aid and increase humanitarian aid. According to Birns, "In 2007, he (Obama) also had sent a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stating that the U.S. must balance its military aid to Colombia with social and economic reforms. Nevertheless, four recent letters (two to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, one to then-Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns, and one to President Uribe himself) regarding human rights abuses in Colombia lacked his endorsement".<sup>17</sup>

Obama has also stated his understanding and justification of the Colombian military's attack on Ecuadorian soil during the raid in March of FARC Secretariat members Raúl Reyes' camp.

*"The U.S. and Colombia have many important shared interests. For more than 8 years, the U.S. has provided roughly \$700 million a year to fight drug trafficking. We need to continue efforts to support Colombia in a way that also advances our interests and is true to our values. We must support the creation and reinforcement of robust civilian institutions in Colombia that contribute to lasting peace and to ending the decades-long reign of terror perpetrated against the Colombian people by illegal armed groups of every stripe. Given the devastating impact the drug trade has on the U.S. and Columbia (sic), we must continue to do more to work to reduce the drug trade. Barack Obama supports continuing the Andean Counterdrug Program to the U.S. strategy to*

---

<sup>16</sup> Jack Chang, "In Obama, Latin America hopes to mend fences with U.S.", *McClatchy Newspaper*, *McClatchy Washington*, November 5, 2008. <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/world/story/55377.html>

<sup>17</sup> Larry Birns, "Obama on Latin America", *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*, October 16, 2008. <http://www.coha.org/2008/10/obama-on-latin-america/>

*combat narco-trafficking in Colombia. He will enhance the program and broaden the involvement of Colombians, while reducing its reliance on American contractors...In an Obama administration, we will support Colombia's right to strike terrorists who seek safe-haven across its borders, to defend itself against FARC and we will address any support for the FARC that comes from members of neighboring governments because this behavior must be exposed to international condemnation and regional isolation".<sup>18</sup>*

### **Some conclusions**

It is safe to say that President Elect Obama's victory presents a symbolic triumph that is encouraging and hopeful for the world. It is also safe to say that the majority of Latin America's "vote" was for an Obama-Biden win.

Concern remains, however, that the new "leadership" model is not what Latin America needs. Rather, as Eduardo Galeano says, what the region needs is a new "mutual respect" model that guarantees autonomy and sovereignty in domestic decisions. Partners have expressed interest in a new model of respect that would re-negotiate un-just trade agreements, such as NAFTA and CAFTA, and close the School of the Americas military training facility and Guantanamo Bay detention center unconditionally. A new model would also cut military aid to the region and increase humanitarian aid, seeking to resolve root problems of social and political conflict through democratic institutions, instead of suppressing civil resistance through violence. This new model would re-think unjust immigration policies and instead create policies of respect and dignity for the 12 million Latin America immigrants living in the United States currently.

There is also concern that the renewed leadership and relationships would be only extended to countries already allied with US interests, such as Colombia, Brazil and Mexico and exclude, or maintain current relations, with countries whose current governments do not reflect US interests in the region.

While Obama is learning about Latin America, and preparing to countermand executive decisions of the Bush administration and bring significant changes to Washington, the moment for re-thinking US-Latin American relations has arrived, and none too soon.

Analysts have made mention of the significant symbolic importance that the results of the election have had, and there is widespread hope in the region that the significance will go beyond symbolism, and translate into real change for US-Latin America relationships in the region.

Obama's policy towards the region will be different from the prior 8 years of the Bush administration, this is clear. The definitive official position and policies towards Latin America have yet to be seen. With the policy outline "A New Partnership for the Americas" and the speeches given during the campaign, it is possible that Obama will reflect a Clinton era style of Latin America relations.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> "A New Partnership for the Americas", Obama for America, May 2008.

[http://obama.3cdn.net/ef480f743f9286aea9\\_k0tmvyt7h.pdf](http://obama.3cdn.net/ef480f743f9286aea9_k0tmvyt7h.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> Larry Birns, "Obama on Latin America", *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*, October 16, 2008.

<http://www.coha.org/2008/10/obama-on-latin-america/>

Obama is in the position and in the historical moment to drastically change U.S.–Latin America relations for the better, and bring a much needed break from past, failed policies. Hopefully he will respect the call of numerous Latin American leaders, and peoples, to enter into a new era of politics, based on mutual respect, autonomy and sovereignty, fair trade policies and increased equality in decision making and distribution of the wealth of resources in Latin America.

To send Barack Obama your personalized request that US policy towards Latin America changes dramatically, click here for a sample letter from Witness for Peace. [[http://org2.democracyinaction.org/o/5436/t/2467/petition.jsp?petition\\_KEY=163](http://org2.democracyinaction.org/o/5436/t/2467/petition.jsp?petition_KEY=163)]