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U.S. Hegemony or Global Good Neighbor Policy?

PART 2

Laura Carlsen and Tom Barry*

Neither Leader nor Partner

In the course of the past five years, this ideologically driven US foreign policy in Latin America has proved counterproductive. Public opinion polls show overwhelming disapproval of US policies. Under the Bush administration, the highly ideological and self-referencing approach to US-Latin American relations has severely undermined the US position as a regional leader and even as a desirable partner.

But although President Bush, Secretary of State Rice, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, and US trade negotiators were alarmed by the vehemence of anti-US sentiment during their latest trips to the region, there are, as yet, few signs that the Bush administration is willing to alter its rigid postures about the policy paths to development and security.

Instead of taking to heart the criticisms of past policies—to a large degree foisted on Latin American nations by the US government, US-trained economists, and the international financial institutions including the IMF and World Bank—Washington has condemned the protests as a surge in “radical populism” that threatens to destabilize the entire region. In a return to Cold War logic, members of the administration have blamed foreign agents for leftward movements, especially Chavez, who was blamed for the rise of Evo Morales in Bolivia. Fears that the rejection of neoliberalism and conservatism will affect US interests and erode its hegemonic control over hemispheric affairs have led Washington into petulant, defensive postures. Unfortunately, Washington has not recognized that this is an opportunity to shift course and aim to build more cooperative and forward-thinking relationships.

The immediate prognosis does not look good. There is reason to believe that without a change of course the current model of economic integration will face more and more frequent crises. Growth rates for '05 are below '04 with predictions for a further slowdown in '06, and even Chile—the poster child for the neoliberal model—has a growing movement against the model and the inequities it has produced.

One of the major factors will be the fragile state of the US economy itself. Confronted with unsustainable trade, a weakening dollar, and budget deficits, the US economy will likely slow down and face some harsh readjustments in the years ahead. Among the probable impacts on Latin America will be shrinking market demand along with increased protectionist sentiment. Higher

energy prices are already severely impacting the region, with the exception of the few energy-rich nations, notably Venezuela.

Today many popular movements and the new left-leaning governments in Latin America espouse social programs closer to FDR's New Deal than to the "Washington Consensus." The Bush administration, however, shows no signs of altering its course. A Global Good Neighbor policy would interpret the growing rumblings in Latin America as a call to re-examine the current economic integration model and adopt greater flexibility.

If the US government insists on imposing stringent terms of market access that displace local production, reduce government supports, strictly protect investments, and impose intellectual property rights that limit public health programs, it risks breaking the back of fragile economies by obstructing national development aimed at improving the quality of life for a long-suffering majority.

Likewise, a Global Good Neighbor approach to security policy reform would stress non-intervention, following the example of President Franklin Roosevelt when he launched his Good Neighbor policy by withdrawing U.S. troops from the Caribbean Basin countries. It includes a call to end military aid that not only responds to a new definition of the parameters of US involvement but also recognizes that expanding military power beyond strictly defensive aims is most often a destabilizing and anti-democratic measure. Involving the military in domestic efforts unrelated to national defense—including anti-narcotics activities and immigrant smuggling—further raises fears of a return to military control and repression.

Like FDR's decision to terminate three decades of Gunboat Diplomacy, the end of a US military presence in the region is a radical step. However, it is the only way to establish the foundation for more cooperative, productive relations.

The US government could also signal a commitment to being a better neighbor by taking concrete steps at home, specifically to refocus the US military on homeland defense and end operations that task US forces to involve themselves in campaigns against immigrant flows; drug production, use, and trafficking; and gang activity. These activities are best addressed by nonmilitary programs and policies. Washington should also use multilateral regional forums to encourage a process of demilitarization throughout the hemisphere and resolve disputes or pending threats.

As US policymakers attempt to improve US-Latin American relations, they must find new ways to constructively address the political trends mentioned above, be willing to abandon or significantly modify the failed policies of the past, as well as seek joint solutions with their regional counterparts to redress the deepening economic and social polarization in Latin American and Caribbean countries.

Global Good Neighbor Principles

Principle One: *The first step toward being a good neighbor is to stop being a bad neighbor.*

Principle Two: *Our nation's foreign policy agenda must be tied to broad US interests. To be effective and win public support, a new foreign policy agenda must work in tandem with new domestic policies to improve security, quality of life, and basic rights in our own country.*

Principle Three: *Given that our national interests, security, and social well-being are interconnected to those of other peoples, US foreign policy must be based on reciprocity rather than domination, mutual well-being rather than cutthroat competition, and cooperation rather than confrontation.*

Principle Four: *As the world's foremost power, the US will be best served by exercising responsible global leadership and partnership rather than seeking global dominance.*

Principle Five: *An effective security policy must be two-pronged. Genuine national safety requires both a well-prepared military capable of repelling attacks on our country and a proactive commitment to improving national and personal security through non-military measures and international cooperation.*

Principle Six: *The US government should support sustainable development, first at home and then abroad, through its macroeconomic trade, investment, and aid policies.*

Principle Seven: *A peaceful and prosperous global neighborhood depends on effective governance at national, regional, and international levels. Effective governance is accountable, transparent, and representative.*

IV. Toward a Global Good Neighbor Ethic in Latin America

There is a precedent for stopping a strongly imperialist and militarist foreign policy. The Good Neighbor Policy of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt turned around a nation fed up with three decades of Gunboat Diplomacy, military occupations, and racism. In his inaugural address in 1934, FDR called for an entirely new approach to international relations—instead of imperialism and arrogance, respect and good neighbor ethics. (See “The Good Neighbor Policy—A History to Make Us Proud” online at <http://ggn.irc-online.org/ggncontent/99>).

The Good Neighbor policy contained cultural, diplomatic, and economic initiatives. It quickly led to dramatically improved US-Latin American relations in the pre-war period.

Today we are again faced with the choice of enforcing hegemony or promoting mutual respect and cooperation. The combination of the hemisphere's greater independence, the exhaustion of current models, and limits to US military capacity all point to the need for a sharp shift in US foreign policy direction.

By using FDR's good neighbor model as an animating policy vision (not a blueprint), it is conceivable to develop a global good neighbor ethic in relations with our hemispheric partners that would reverse the rapidly deteriorating relations between the US and its southern neighbors.

Current US foreign policy seeks to strengthen US hegemony and shape regional economies and governments around US ideological, economic, and political interests. It insists on isolating nations that question hegemony and browbeating others into obedience will neither serve US national interests and security nor improve the prospects for sustainable political and economic development in Latin America and the Caribbean. To the contrary, these policy approaches could lead to dangerous confrontations that do nothing to benefit Latin American or US populations.

The rise to power of center-left political currents and the emergence of new social movements raise many questions and uncertainties that go beyond the scope of this paper. Clearly, though, this trend has placed equity and other social demands back on the hemispheric agenda.

If Latin America and the Caribbean are to have a brighter future, it must be one that is self-determined and responds to the interests of the poor majority. All nations deserve the right and the room to define national policies in the best interests of their people. Exercising these rights—as is happening increasingly in the region—is the sign of political health and can lead to the end of many of the structural obstacles that have impeded the region's political and economic development.

In this context, Washington needs to chart a new approach to hemispheric relations that serves US national interests and national security, and that does not antagonize, destabilize, or debilitate our closest neighbors. To be successful, such a new approach to national interests and national security must not ignore the common-sense notion that the entire community benefits when all neighbors respect one another.

The first principle of the GGN reads: *“The first step toward being a good neighbor is to stop being a bad neighbor.”*

Nowhere has that been as obvious as in Latin America, where the “bad neighbor” reputation of the US is historically proven and is growing in contemporary times. The dirty wars in Central America, the involvement in overthrowing elected leaders, a long history of support for repressive governments—people remember these acts and regaining trust will be a difficult road.

To change course, the US must, as FDR did, acknowledge the need to reject bad neighbor policies of diplomatic and military intervention, and non-negotiable terms of economic integration. To stop being a bad neighbor doesn't mean to discard concerns about US national interests and security but to become convinced that respect, cooperation, and more leadership with an eye to collective well-being are more effective in serving those ends.

Instead of using our political stability and economic power to help the region move forward, more often than not our influence and interventions have retarded economic and political development. Responsible leadership and participation require a basic respect for the self-determination of all nations.

While our government or we as a people will always have differences with the policies and rhetoric of some other governments, we should not resort to our superior power to reprove or change those governments. Neighborhoods work best when rules are enforced not by vigilante action but by collective processes. In other words, US unilateral action, either overt or covert, against neighbors we disapprove of contributes to a breakdown of the community and ultimately does not advance US national interest and security.

The US government should encourage and support reforms in Latin American nations that aim to spur broad development, protect the environment, protect human rights, create a generous social safety net, and reduce the widening gap in income distribution.

It should do the same thing at home. The US could make a good start in this regard by respecting labor rights of U.S. workers, returning to a more progressive tax structure, shutting down torture cells, and clamping down on business-government corruption.

Recommended first steps toward better cooperation and away from US domination in the hemisphere would be to stop treating the Organization of American States as an instrument of US policy, end the embargo of Cuba, and encourage common solutions to common problems—including the illegal drug and immigration crises.

Good neighbor initiatives would include an offer to renegotiate NAFTA, CAFTA, and its bilateral trade agreements, a real commitment to meet millennium development goals through previously agreed levels of economic aid, and a public shift away from its insistence that neoliberal policy reform is a requisite for receiving bilateral and multilateral development aid. US “democratization” aid to such countries as Nicaragua, Haiti, Cuba and Venezuela has proved time and again to distort political transitions rather than helping to consolidate or advance democracy, and should therefore be terminated as an instrument of U.S. foreign policy.

Us and Them

As more governments and political leaders in Latin America and the Caribbean assert their differences with US foreign policy and in doing so assert their determination to follow their own political paths, it's time for the US to reconsider its hegemonic habits. Unfortunately, the Bush administration has reacted to political changes in the hemisphere with the same “us vs. them” policies that have been so disastrous elsewhere on the international stage.

The Bush administration can either accept Latin America's bid for greater policy independence or attempt to divide the continent into simplistic categories of “unconditional allies” that it will favor and “dangerous foes” that it will seek to undermine. And not just the economic costs. The policy of “with us or against us” exacerbates intra-regional tensions as well. Attempts to coerce adoption of US trade and security policies have created a wave of resentment and anti-US sentiment throughout the region.

A new foreign policy would be one that recognizes differences but does not view them as political or cultural divides. In this respect, we would do well to remember FDR's formulation of his administration's new foreign policy. “I would dedicate this nation,” he said, “to the policy of the good neighbor—the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and because he does so, respects the rights of others.”

In our hemispheric foreign policy, we must remember that the United States of America does not include all of the Americas. But as an American nation we have a special responsibility and a special national interest in ensuring that in our regional partnerships and in our leadership we foster a mutual respect that results in mutual benefits.

*Laura Carlsen directs the IRC Americas program of the International Relations Center, online at www.irc-online.org. Tom Barry is the IRC's policy director. <http://americas.irc-online.org/am/3114>
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