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Disunited

Latin Americans have frequently accused the Bush administration of not having a Latin American policy or of acting unilaterally when it has a policy. To correct this situation, Washington is urged to increase its engagement with the region and seek multilateral solutions to the hemisphere's problems. The underlying assumption of both the criticism and the recommendations is that Latin America is fairly united in terms of what it wants, both for itself and from the United States. Recent developments, however, increasingly call these assumptions into question.

The most obvious lack of consensus concerns free trade, including the degree to which the region wants increased economic integration with the United States. Several countries are clearly committed to free trade and increased economic ties with the United States. The leaders are Mexico and Chile. Both have significantly opened their economies and have signed free trade agreements with Washington. The Central American countries plus the Dominican Republic are seeking a free trade agreement with the United States and have accelerated their efforts to liberalize their economies. Colombia also is committed to free trade and wants a free trade agreement with Washington.

Other countries, however, have rejected the so-called Washington Consensus and instead seem to be seeking some other path to development. Venezuela is opting for a more statist economic model and has laudatory words for the tightly controlled Cuban economy. Bolivia is engaged in an internal battle for its political and economic soul. The Peruvian and Ecuadorian governments would like to further open their economies and sign free trade agreements with the United States, but it is not clear that key sectors of the population will allow that to happen. Finally, Brazil has been liberalizing its economy and has greatly expanded its exports but is more interested in creating a South American common market than a Latin American Free Trade Area. Argentina, which supports the Brazilian position on trade, at times seems to be flirting with statist economic ideas.

Latin America also does not have shared views on oil prices or China. Oil producers such as Venezuela, Mexico, Argentina and Ecuador are clearly helped by high energy prices, whereas Latin American countries that import oil are suffering. Commodity producers such as Brazil and Argentina are profiting from Chinese investment in their countries, while countries whose manufactured exports must compete with those of China are losing ground.

There is much less ambivalence regarding democracy, at least among the region's democratically-elected governments, but the attitudes of their populations are more divided. Recent polls show that significant numbers of Latin Americans are disillusioned with democracy and believe that more authoritarian rule would create more growth and reduce crime and instability. And although the region had little trouble uniting against the United States when Washington welcomed an attempted coup against Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, it has been far less united and active regarding Chavez's continuing use democratic procedures to destroy democratic freedoms.

Nor is there a shared attitude or common policy regarding terrorism, judging from the relative lack of regional support for President Alvaro Uribe's efforts to defeat Colombia's guerrilla movements of the left and the right. Latin America's rampant and growing urban crime problem, including escalating kidnappings and gang violence, has also not generated a regional response.

The new Bush administration has indicated its desire to improve its relationship with Latin America and help the region advance both politically and economically. But in order for greater U.S. engagement to be productive, Latin America needs to decide what it wants from its relationship with Washington and whether it wants to work together as a region to get it.