

POLICY PAPER

November / 2018

ISBN: 978-9972-671-52-4



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2018



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ISBN: 978-9972-671-52-4

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1ª ed., november 2018

ISBN: N° 978-9972-671-52-4

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Fabián NOVAK and Sandra NAMIHAS*



1 Evolution of the United States Foreign Policy Vis-à-Vis Latin America

Since the eighteenth century, both the US foreign and security policies have advocated and promoted certain values and ideals that constitute the "American creed" and that have been the basis of their national identity (Huntington, 1996, p.251).

Indeed, values such as freedom (political and economic), equality, human rights, representative government and private property have been a constant in the superpower's political discourse.

However, if we briefly review US foreign policy in Latin America and the Caribbean it is possible to conclude that, although these values and ideals have been permanent in discourse, they have not always had a correlation in reality. In fact, we can see how at some times the United States opted for isolationism (Washington, Jefferson, Monroe, etc.), at others it deployed a continental and global leadership (F. Roosevelt, GHW Bush), and even it went so far as to establish intervention as part of its foreign policy (T. Roosevelt, Kennedy, Johnson, etc.).

Also, some US administrations opted to act unilaterally (Reagan, G. W. Bush), while others were clearly inclined towards multilateralism (G.H.W. Bush, Clinton, Obama). There have also been administrations that have promoted free trade, deregulation, privatization, elimination of trade barriers and promotion of policies to attract foreign investment (GHW Bush, Clinton, GW Bush) and others that have rather applied protectionist policies, as was the case of President Hoover before the 1929 crisis. As for the promotion of democracy, another pillar of US foreign

* This document has been prepared based on three of the four chapters of the book by Novak, F. & Namihas, S. (2018). *Donald Trump's Foreign Policy and its Impact on Latin America*. Lima: Institute of International Studies (IDEI) of the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. The digital version of the book can be found at: <http://repositorio.pucp.edu.pe/index/handle/123456789/133506>

policy, there are also swings, because although several presidents (Ford, GHW Bush, Clinton, Obama) sought to support democratic regimes in the region by rejecting dictatorships of any origin, there were others that did not follow the same line (Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, Nixon, Reagan). Lastly, human rights were no exception either, given that in some presidential periods their strengthening and respect was sought (Carter) and in others they suffered a clear deterioration (Reagan, G. W. Bush).

In other words, in our opinion, US foreign policy towards Latin America and the Caribbean has not followed permanent guidelines, values and principles but -given the needs or interests that the situation demanded or because of each president's particular assessment of the region- these have been rather fluctuating, regardless of whether the American president came from the Democratic Party or from the Republican Party.

The same has happened with US interest towards Latin America and the Caribbean, that is, although presidents such as F. Roosevelt, Kennedy or G.H.W. Bush were particularly concerned to prioritize relations with the countries in the region, others -the vast majority- were not.

In this sense, Coronado (2005, p.159) argues that when reviewing the US foreign policy towards Latin America and the Caribbean there is often a feeling of frustration and disappointment as well as a feeling that the region is located in a place at the bottom of the superpower's priority list.

Indeed, although the United States presence and leadership in the region as regards trade, investment and cooperation has been fundamental, as have the values and principles that we share, it can be pointed out that -except for specific moments- our relationships have not had the intensity or diversity that the region expected.

This finds its explanation in several factors:

- a) The USA became a global superpower in 1945. As a consequence, it rethinks its interests and priorities in terms of foreign policy. In short, Europe becomes its priority, followed by Asia, while the Latin American and Caribbean region were relegated.
- b) Linked to the above, the little political, economic and military weight of the Latin American and Caribbean region have contributed to maintaining the superpower's order of priorities; we should add to this the absence in the region of large crises that would draw US attention.
- c) Likewise, the good intentions regarding the region that many US governments had at the beginning of their mandate were frustrated by successive global (World War II, Cold War) or internal crises (crises of 1929 or 9/11) that attracted the superpower's attention.

- d) The complex structure in the management of US foreign policy -in which not only the President of the Republic and the State Department participate, but also Congress and other private actors- tend to overlap powerful groups' interests.
- e) The absence of a comprehensive strategy on the part of the United States, which would understand and attend to the priorities of the region. Except the case of Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and -to a lesser extent- George H.W. Bush, no other US president designed a comprehensive plan for the region.

What is presented in this point is particularly useful when analyzing President Donald Trump's foreign policy towards the region, since it allows us to really establish which of its aspects are novel and which are not.

2 President Donald Trump's foreign policy vis-a-vis Latin America

When analyzing President Trump's foreign policy, it is usually agreed that, in some way, its impact on Latin America and the Caribbean has been less direct and relevant or, simply, of a lesser degree than that in Europe and Asia. While this statement may have some truth, the Latin American and Caribbean region is not excluded from the effects of such policy on relevant issues. Let's see the main characteristics of this policy below:

a) *Selective defense of democracy*

In the field of democracy, we should highlight a more forceful position of the current US administration compared to that of Barak Obama, with respect to certain clearly authoritarian or dictatorial regimes, such as the Venezuela and Nicaragua cases. However, at the same time, the absence of a similar stance towards Honduras should be noted.

In fact, despite the severe and justified measures adopted against Venezuela and Nicaragua, it is striking that a similar reaction has not occurred with the Honduran regime of President Juan Orlando Hernández, despite irregularities in the elections process on November 26, 2017 and the maneuvers of said president to achieve his re-election against the Honduran constitution, which he managed to amend accordingly.

The explanation -but not the justification- would be in the fact that the Honduran regime is akin to the Trump government, unlike Nicaragua and Venezuela; but it would also be due to the existing proximity between President Hernández and General John Kelly, Trump's chief of staff (Oppenheimer, January 1, 2018).

This ambivalent stance -which is not new in US foreign policy, as it is evident in the cases of Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, Nixon and Reagan- brings about a regrettable consequence, the loss of authority on the part of the superpower to signal and fight authoritarian or dictatorial regimes in the region, because their position is not consistent, given that it would be guided by the fulfillment of their own interests rather than by the defense of democratic principles.

b) *Hostility towards some and political cordiality towards others*

President Trump's foreign policy towards Latin America is not uniform, but rather differences can be glimpsed in it depending on the aimed country. In this sense, countries such as Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua have been the subject of special concern and even hostility (justified in some cases) by the US administration, and have merited decision making that has caused tensions in the bilateral relationship.

The situation of the other Latin American countries is very different. Although they may be indirectly affected by some decisions adopted by the current US administration, the truth is that the diplomatic relationship with them is kept at a good level, even maintaining with some of them political agreement on specific issues, as is the case with Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Panama and Peru.

In other words, the relationship between the US and most Latin American countries does not present confrontational features; on the contrary, through the exercise of a predominantly presidential diplomacy, they have been seeking points of encounter and collaboration with the superpower. This is facilitated by the fact that these are States where democracy and respect for human rights prevail and with which there are no commercial problems.

c) *Hardening towards immigration*

In the domestic sphere, beyond the three migratory vetoes decreed by President Trump, measures to tighten immigration have been mainly targeted against nationals from Mexico and Central America.

The hardening of President Trump's immigration policy does not only contradict US history itself as a country formed by migrants (Morgenfeld, 2016), but it starts from a reductionism of the migratory problem and from erroneous data and information, all of which has generated a resistance that has not been limited to affected countries but has spread to political leaders, authorities, judges, civil organizations and to part of the United States citizens themselves, who understand that this policy will not solve the underlying problem.

d) *Impact on free trade*

Although the most drastic trade measures adopted by President Donald Trump have been directed to countries or extra-regional blocs, the truth is that several actions executed by the new US administration have implications for Latin America and the Caribbean, while others have a direct impact on a particular country, such as Mexico. Among these actions we have: the erosion that President Trump would be causing by crippling World Trade Organization practice, the withdrawal of the Trans-Pacific Agreement (TPP), the unilateral actions of a commercial nature adopted against various countries or blocs of the world, which clearly violate the rules of free trade and impact on the world economy, and which call into question some free trade agreements such as NAFTA, forcing Mexico to a new agreement.

e) *Cooperation decrease*

When Donald Trump took office, he pointed out from the beginning his intention to reduce American cooperation to the world, which obviously included Latin America. Fulfilling what he promised, Trump proposed a drastic 36% cut in foreign aid to Latin America for the 2018 budget administered by the State Department and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This indistinctly affected different countries in the region; it cut funds from almost all types of assistance and proposed the elimination of the Inter-American Foundation, a small independent US assistance agency that promotes grassroots development in the region (Meyer, May 09 2018). However, the US Congress did not carry out the cuts proposed by Trump in the end.

However, Donald Trump has made cuts in US contributions to funds of various international organizations that will also have an impact in the region, in areas as diverse as human rights, environment, gender, health, etc. This shows that the international cooperation carried out by the United States has no significant meaning for Trump, and that it only brings economic losses. This reveals a lack of understanding of the role that corresponds to a superpower in this field. As Meyer points out (May 9, 2018), if "foreign assistance cuts proposed by the administration [Trump], combined with other policy changes, materialize, they could contribute to a relative decrease in U.S influence."

f) *Climate change denial and disavowing of environmental commitments*

Trump's measures are not limited to departing from international commitments assumed in the environmental field such as the Paris Agreement, but include a set of internal decisions that imply abandoning environmental and energy policies set by Barak Obama's administration, which will have a direct negative impact on the environment of Latin American countries and the entire world, with social and economic repercussions.

This is particularly complicated for some countries in Latin America and the Caribbean such as Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua or the Dominican Re-

public, but also for Bolivia, Chile and Peru, since these are among the countries most affected by the global warming crisis.

3 General and Distinctive Characteristics in President Trump's Foreign Policy

Beyond specific traits that can be attributed to President Trump's foreign policy in connection to a certain region, we believe that it has some general and distinctive characteristics:

- a) *Nationalist and partially isolationist*: The trend towards an isolationist foreign policy has been recurrent in US history. Thus we have from the most extreme isolationism raised by Washington, Jefferson and Monroe to the more moderate one proposed by Richard Nixon, who at the time supported the need for his allies to defend themselves on their own, without resorting to American help. For his part, Jimmy Carter, George W. Bush and Barak Obama himself initially proposed to reduce the United States prominence in the world to deal with internal affairs (García, January 18, 2018). No matter if these presidents finally end up fulfilling their promises or not, the above reveals that "looking inward" has been a temptation of several US administrations.

In this regard, the promises of Trump -the candidate- such as *America first*, or *Make America great again* and *Americanism, not globalism*, seemed to go in this same line (Aronskind, 2017, p.69).

Nonetheless, President Trump has not ignored what is happening in the world, insofar as this affects the interests of the superpower. There we have his intervention in Asia, Eurasia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and in Latin America itself on issues related to democracy.

However, it is also true that Trump has disregarded global commitments, multilateral treaties and international organizations concerning which he considers that he does not obtain benefits but only burdens. Therefore, we dare to affirm that its foreign policy is partially isolationist, since it depends on the interests at stake.

It also follows from the foregoing that President Trump's foreign policy is ultra nationalist in that he is willing to abandon forums and sacrifice principles, commitments, promises and global interests, if he believes that it favors the US.

- b) *Security prone*: Likewise, Trump's administration has been characterized by focusing on the different areas of its foreign policy from the angle of security, as did his predecessor George W. Bush after the attacks of September 11, 2001; proof of this is that its National Security Strategy conceives environment, migration, free trade agreements as a part of its affairs, among others.

A sign of the importance that President Trump assigns to security issues over any other issue is the increase in the defense budget for 2018 and 2019. Thus, for 2018, he requested an increase of 10%, that is, 54 thousand million dollars more than the previous year, setting the largest budget since the Reagan administration (La Jornada, March 17, 2017); while for 2019 he proposed an increase of 13% as compared to the previous year, that is, a total budget of 686 billion dollars (La Vanguardia Redacción, February 12, 2018).

Linked to this is the fact that military action decisions are adopted more quickly and with less controls by the White House or the State Department. This has been evidenced, for example, with the launch of the so-called "mother of all bombs" in Afghanistan and with the increase of air strikes in Yemen and Somalia; and even more so in military actions against terrorism (García, January 18, 2018).

- c) *Not institutionalist*: US foreign policy, as it happens with all the other countries, is directed by the President of the Republic, as well as by the Department of State.

However, since the beginning of his term in office, President Trump has practically set aside this fundamental element of the State, in many cases directing foreign policy with the support of White House officials.

This presidential attitude of lack of interest vis-a-vis the State Department is evidenced when it is observed that more than half of the positions in this body that required confirmation from the Senate had no candidate until the beginning of 2018, 21% of the Candidates had been confirmed and 24% expected confirmation. In addition, the absence of an ambassador in South Korea or an assistant secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs (to date, Susan Thornton is Interim Assistant Secretary of State), as well as of new ambassadors in Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey should be noted. The same situation is presented with the Secretary of State for the Control of Arms and International Security and with representatives to the OAS, ASEAN, EU, OECD, OSCE, among others. As if this were not enough, more than a hundred

senior officials have left the State Department and career positions have decreased by 60%. All this, despite the difficulties that the United States faces in foreign policy matters throughout the world (Garcia, January 18, 2018).

Another sign that indicates the low importance that Trump attributes to the State Department was his proposal to cut its budget by 28.7% by 2018, and by 2019 the president proposes an even larger cut than in the previous year, reaching 32%, which has hit the morale of the officials that make up this body.

- d) *Low commitment to multilateralism and cooperation:* In connection with the previous point we have the low commitment the current US foreign policy has shown with international organizations and multilateral agreements of which the US is a part. Somehow, Trump considers this system as decadent, complex and not aligned with the superpower's interests, due to which he prefers to act alone, that is, to directly negotiate with each counterpart since he knows that he will obtain better results in this way (Zaldívar, October 2017).

The recourse to unilateral measures or the threat of applying them to resolve disputes are signs that the US does not agree with institutional dispute settlement schemes.

Another indicator of the aforementioned is the reduction of its contributions to multilateral organizations. And the Trump administration even plans measures against international entities to which it does not belong, as is the case of the International Criminal Court.

- e) *Selectively protectionist:* One of the pillars in the One of the pillars of US foreign policy towards the world has been the defense and promotion of a free trade based on a multilateral trade order, where openness and competitiveness were its central characteristics.

However, President Trump has shown a turnaround in this policy, attacking free trade, promoting pro-mercantilist and mercantilist measures, not only towards the interior of the United States, but also and mainly towards the outside. It is not a case of widespread protectionism but rather a selective one, in that it only projects to those countries in which Trump considers that they have taken advantage of the United States through commercial agreements that would have been badly negotiated and where US interests would not have been protected. support these views is the existence of a trade deficit in some trade agreements signed by the US,

such as the one it has with China, where there is a deficit of 375 billion dollars, or with the European Union, with which the deficit reaches 153 billion dollars. Trump's policy then involves a questioning of the economic theory that the US itself undertook to build since 1945.

- f) *Frontal and informal:* Another change that can also be highlighted in US foreign policy is that it is expressed by the president through frontal and informal communication.

About the former, indeed, Donald Trump not only uses a frontal, direct and unconventional language, but in many cases he uses adjectives, disqualification and even insults, as if he required that to support his ideas or positions. For example, he has called Kim Jong-un -the president of North Korea- "fat", "dwarf", "rocket man". Latin American migrants, particularly Mexicans, have been described as "criminals".

But perhaps the most salient aspect is the use of threats to achieve his purposes. Thus, he **threatened** to disappear North Korea in order to achieve a negotiation aimed at denuclearizing peninsula; **threatened** the European Union with abandoning NATO if its members do not increase their contributions for its maintenance; he **threatened** Mexico with leaving the NAFTA if they do not renegotiate, among many other cases. Although he is not the first US president to use this type of language, the levels reached by Trump have never been witnessed before (Pastor, 1986, p.35).

But that is not all. Trump adds informal communication mechanisms to confrontational language. Indeed, the US president resorts to what has been called "diplomacy via Twitter", something unprecedented in the handling of American public affairs (García, January 18, 2018, Meneses, Martín del Campo and Rueda-Zarate, 2018).

- g) *Contradictory and unpredictable:* Finally, Trump's open contradictions in management and conduct are other distinctive elements in his foreign policy. Thus, he seeks to contain China but leaves the TPP aside; he seeks to improve his country's international position, but weakens the State Department; he proposes to rescue American values, but at the same time abandons them and attacks them at international level, among others. This behavior breaks the predictability of his foreign policy and general trust in the entire world, causing instability and bewilderment.

Meanwhile, what do we think should be the response to what has been described? Well, the above shows that it is not possible to assume a sin-

gle strategy, given the diversity of policies established by the Trump administration according to each country; that is, differentiated strategies to different realities.

However, we consider, like Lowenthal, that it is generally very important to avoid exaggerated or overly dimensioned reactions. We should not fall into the game of confrontational rhetoric, but rather seek channels of understanding and dialogue (Lowenthal, 2017).

In this regard, maintaining open channels of permanent dialogue with US institutions, like the Department of State, the White House or Congress seems to be the most advisable, because they have shown some room of maneuver to control and eventually correct presidential excesses. Also, it is important to emphasize coincidences with the superpower and matters that are beneficial for both parties. If this is complemented by a diversified foreign policy, not only effective damage control, but even a constructive link, can be achieved.

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