

[Back Obama's friendly handshake with Latin America](#)

Mr Barack Obama believes that reaching out to Latin America would only benefit the US, and that dialogue is not a sign of weakness. This is a welcome departure from the extremes of "axis of evil" and "pre-emptive strikes" espoused by the Bush administration, says BHASKAR BALAKRISHNAN.

The US President, Mr Barack Obama's foreign policy has broken with the past and seeks to open dialogue even with countries opposed to the US such as Iran, Cuba and now Venezuela. This has won him widespread praise abroad, but brickbats from some political opponents back home, especially the rightwing Republicans.

Mr Obama acted on his policy of recognising that while the US is the strongest nation on earth, it needs to work with other countries, that cooperation will ultimately benefit it, and that it needs to confess to its sins and its failure to meet ideals. He has said that reaching out to critics in Latin America would only benefit the US, and that dialogue is not a sign of weakness. This is indeed a welcome departure from the extremes of "axis of evil" and "pre-emptive strikes" espoused by the Bush administration.

Mr Obama's first trip to Trinidad and Tobago for the 5th Summit of the Americas was a remarkable exercise in diplomacy, reaching out and mending relations with strong US allies such as Colombian President Mr Alvaro Uribe and Brazilian President Mr Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

But most remarkable was his handshake with Venezuelan President Mr Hugo Chavez, who has openly denounced US foreign policies, fostered regional opposition to the US and even called former US President Mr George Bush "the devil". Mr Chavez has now decided to send an Ambassador to Washington, significantly signalling his desire to improve relations.

Reaching out to Cuba

Earlier, recognising Latin America's unhappiness over the US embargo against Cuba, Mr Obama had announced a reversal of the Bush administration's 2004 decision tightening sanctions against Cuba. This was welcomed by most Cuban Americans, who can now send remittances to relatives in Cuba and visit them more frequently.

At the Trinidad summit, Mr Obama indirectly praised Cuba, saying its good image in the region results from the legions of doctors it sends to other Latin countries to tend the poor. "It's a reminder for us in the US that if our only interaction with many of these countries is drug interdiction, if our only interaction is military, then we may not be developing the connections that can, over time, increase our influence," he said.

Cuba's President, Mr Raul Castro, responded by stating that his government was willing to discuss everything with the US, including issues such as human rights. These moves have created a positive climate for constructive Cuba-US relations, which were hitherto frozen into an unproductive hostility between the two neighbours separated by a mere 150 km across the Florida Straits.

Ironically, Cuba's evolution into a more open, social-democratic country in the last half-century has been affected by the economic embargo and isolation imposed by the US which has been portrayed by the Cuban regime as an attempt at domination and an affront to its national identity.

Latin American resentment

The Bush administration's handling of Latin America was marked by a hegemonistic attitude, and harsh pressure on these countries to fall in line with US-fashioned Free Trade Agreement of the Americas, seen as unequal by Latin Americans. Insensitivity to Latin American concerns and the preoccupation with Iraq and Afghanistan led to US-Latin American relations losing priority in Washington, and country after country in Latin America witnessing the emergence of stronger Left parties in elections.

In this situation, countries such as China, Russia and Iran have made considerable inroads into what was once Washington's strategic neighbourhood, developing partnerships with countries opposed to the US such as Cuba, Venezuela, and Bolivia.

Mexico, a party to NAFTA and regarded as closely aligned with the US, has had its share of problems with the US over issues of immigration, narcotics trafficking, illegal inflow of weapons and, lately, the fallout of the US economic recession. Mr Obama indicated he would resist calls to reopen NAFTA, despite pressure from US labour unions. Mexico has benefited considerably from NAFTA.

Obama approach welcomed

Heads of State gathered in Trinidad and Tobago while acknowledging the seriousness of the economic downturn, responded warmly to Mr Obama's more humble approach to the region and his effort to convince leaders of his new approach towards a region still suspicious of US intentions. He acknowledged past US heavy-handedness, saying that too often Americans "sought to dictate our terms", and that "there are no senior or junior partners in the Americas".

Mr Obama even listened patiently to Nicaraguan President Mr Daniel Ortega's 50-minute verbal tirade against the US. The leaders reacted warmly to Mr Obama's pledge for a new partnership of mutual respect to rebuild Latin America's relationship with Washington and reconcile differences within the region.

Latin America, with its population of 570 million, badly needs greater unity of purpose and cohesiveness to combat the savage effects of the economic downturn in the US, to which its economies are closely coupled. This has reduced expected growth in 2009 to minus 0.3 per cent, the first decline in six years.

Summit shortcomings

In this background, the failure of the summit to adopt a consensus declaration is not a positive sign. Leaders delegated the President of Trinidad to issue the unapproved declaration on their behalf. Notable was the absence of specific clauses dealing with the economic crisis.

The declaration refers to promoting human prosperity, energy security, environmental sustainability, public security and democratic governance. The summit, unfortunately, was unable to agree on a clear, focused action plan to deal with the economic crisis. Another disappointment was the poor business response to the parallel II Hemispheric Private Sector Forum of the Fifth Summit of the Americas, held in advance of the summit.

Member countries of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Peoples of Our Americas (ALBA) — Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Dominica, Honduras and Cuba — had earlier voiced their objection to the draft document, as it did not address the global financial crisis and Cuba's exclusion from multilateral organisations in the western hemisphere.

Obama's realignment

Mr Obama's realignment of US foreign policy has already brought dividends in Latin America. It marks an end to attempts to force market fundamentalism, a new commitment to multilateral cooperation and respect for other countries, greater use of US non-military assets, a recognition that world opinion actually matters, and overlooking rigid ideological divisions in favour of dialogue.

The scope for constructive engagement with the rest of the world on this basis is indeed great, as Mr Obama stoops to conquer with soft diplomacy.

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