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OPINION

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A demonstration in Mar De Plata, Argentina during the Summit of the Americas. The banner reads "Bush out! Workers Party." *Carlos Barria/Reuters*

## Look south, not just east: Re-engaging Latin America

By James Cooper

**F**or U.S. foreign policy, Latin America now appears to be an afterthought. During his first presidential campaign, George W. Bush told the country that developing better relations with Latin America would be a priority for his administration, if elected. But the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, the war on terrorism, and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have pre-empted whatever attention and resources would have been spent on hemispheric cooperation.

Judging by the protests and cool reception President Bush received last month during the Summit of the Americas, it appears that better relations are not what we have. Many in Latin America view the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), the proposed hemispheric-wide free trade area, as a continuation of the so-called Washington Consensus — a process of globalization to which they do not subscribe.

For the past 15 years, "Washington" (an amalgam of the U.S. Department of Treasury, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank) has prescribed a recipe to develop the economies of Latin America: the reduction of trade barriers, the privatization of state enterprises, and the reduction of domestic spending on social services. In exchange, banks lend these governments money. Many Latin American gov-

ernments are being pressured by their populations to resist the Washington Consensus. But the Washington Consensus has not worked for most citizens of the region. Their lives have not been improved, and the gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow. It is no wonder that more than half of the population of the continent would support a military government to the ones they have now.

Maybe that is why leftist, or nominally leftist, regimes continue to strengthen in South America. Neither Nestor Kirchner of Argentina nor Lula da Silva of Brazil are towing the U.S. line concerning the war in Iraq and the war on terror. Uruguay has a new democratically elected leftist government and Chile looks set to elect Socialist Party leader Michelle Bachelet as president in a second round of voting on Jan. 15. Neither Ecuador nor Bolivia has a legitimate, stable government, and leftist indigenous leaders are poised to take control in those Andean countries.

As Bolivians go to the polls later this month, the leading presidential candidate is Evo Morales, who represents indigenous groups, unions and peasant farmers. He was nearly elected in 2002 when he won 22 percent of the popular vote. This time around, he is looking for alternatives to the development models favored by the United States. For Morales, coca production is part of a sacred indigenous right and also a crop in high demand in the global market.

It is no surprise that Morales is supported by Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, who with his oil money, deep alliance with stalwart communist Cuba, and strong relations with communist China, is gaining traction around the region with his anti-Bush rhetoric and his strong opposition to hemispheric-wide free

trade. Chávez has invested in a Latin American satellite television station, funded political campaigns of leftist candidates throughout the region and, in a jab at the Bush administration, provided cheaper oil for low-income families on America's East Coast.

Other than the government of Alejandro Toledo of Peru, whose domestic support hovers around 8 percent, and Alvaro Uribe, president of Colombia, the rest of Latin America remains increasingly out of Washington's sphere of influence, let alone willing partners in the FTAA. Even Paraguay, which recently allowed U.S. Marines to work in-country on a medical mission, resisted Bush's calls to speed up FTAA negotiations. While Paraguay may seem far from the United States, even Mexico's support for U.S. policies is insecure. Polis continue to place Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, a critic of the Washington Consensus and current candidate of the leftist PRD, as winning next year's Mexican presidential elections.

In short, the U.S. faces extensive challenges in developing and marketing better relations with Latin America. But our allies (and adversaries) do not face similar challenges. The European Union and countries throughout Asia continue to court influence with Latin American governments. They are negotiating sweeping free trade agreements, and are purchasing valuable resources that are needed to drive the U.S. economy. In addition, European businesses and governments are making headway in what used to be called the "United States' back yard."

Since 9/11, the focus of U.S. foreign policy has been to the east. It is time for the United States to re-align its compass and pay more attention to the south.

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