



9/11, Latin America, and the Impermanence of Strategic Concepts

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On September 11, 2001, then US President George W. Bush had just completed a historic summit with his Mexican counterpart, Vicente Fox, the week prior. The interaction built on the “special friendship” between the two nations and the intertwined commercial, security, and other strategic interests binding the United States and Mexico.¹ This relationship had deepened considerably in the seven years since the two nations, along with Canada, had signed the North American Free Trade Agreement. For those of us emphasizing the importance of the US bond with the people of its hemisphere, there was hope the new post–Cold War order would finally allow Mexico, Latin America, and the Caribbean to receive their due with respect to US attention and partnership.

On 9/11, I was a still relatively young analyst working in Washington, DC. I had recently completed my PhD and was working for a defense contractor on future warfare issues while moving into work on Latin American security. My worldview was shaped by having grown up during the Cold War era of seemingly immutable US-Soviet competition. As I was completing my undergraduate and graduate programs in political science, the world transformed with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Many observers have written about how the 9/11 attacks similarly changed the world and US strategic thinking. We all have personal recollections of our lives pre- and post-9/11 and how we experienced that day. For me, 9/11 profoundly impacted both worlds in which I was professionally engaged: Latin America on the one hand and the US Department of Defense, preparing for the evolving global security environment, on the other.

These experiences lead me to the following reflections about 9/11. First, we in the United States repeatedly overestimate our ability to anticipate the future due to our difficulty imagining a departure from the world we know. In the 1980s, it was difficult to conceive of a world not defined by US-Soviet systemic competition. Then, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, we

rapidly celebrated the perceived rightful, and enduring, triumph of Western-style democracy and free markets.

Similarly, the sudden, widespread recognition of the global terrorist threat after 9/11 and the rapidity with which we transitioned into a global war against the threat highlighted for me the difficulty of imagining how the contemporary strategic environment we know may dramatically change until it does. After such a shift—as also occurred with the Pearl Harbor attack early in World War II, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the unexpectedly rapid disintegration of the US-backed government in Afghanistan—we retrospectively find indications of the change that existed at the time and lament not having recognized them. Then, we wrap ourselves in our new, seemingly immutable reality—until we are surprised again.

To this point, as someone who has focused much of his career on Latin America and the Caribbean, I recognize the longstanding perception of the region as being populated by relatively democratic states that do not go to war with each other or pose a significant strategic threat to the United States.² I now watch with concern as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread in the region, wreaking havoc on lives and the fiscal positions of governments, the structures of economies, and the political stability of states.³ This damage also contributes to the advance of leftist, populist governments across the region, from the repression of democratic alternatives by Maduro in Venezuela and the Ortegas in Nicaragua to the radicalization of leftist governments in Argentina, Bolivia, and Mexico. Related developments of concern also include the election of Pedro Castillo in Peru, uncertainties about the constitutional assembly in Chile, and the upcoming presidential elections in Chile and Honduras in November. I do not know what crisis event will alert us to the reality that Latin America is no longer the strategically inconsequential palm-covered land we have long treated it as. But I fear, as with 9/11, such a crisis is coming, and we will initially be surprised, only to discover after the fact we missed the warning signs.

Second, beyond our difficulty in anticipating change to the world as we know it, the US response to 9/11 also highlighted to me our culturally rooted belief in the ability to solve any problem through the application of science, planning, and resources, and the limits to what it is possible to achieve. The US self-concept as a successfully self-constructed nation, complemented by such major triumphs as its victory in World War II, the Cold War, and putting a man on the moon, strongly shaped our response to 9/11. Our culture and its past successes have allowed us to presume, in our indignation over the 9/11 attacks, that we could fully protect ourselves from an amorphous and evolving terrorist threat. It similarly led us to believe we could restructure Iraq and Afghanistan in our image as friendly, stable, democratic countries if only we applied enough technology and funded and executed programs on the correct scale. The current US withdrawal from Afghanistan after 20 years, over 3,500 coalition deaths, and \$2 trillion in expenses suggest this enormously expensive assumption may have been optimistic.⁴

The United States should recall the lessons of the Afghanistan War and the Iraq War if crises in Latin America draw the US government to focus more attention and resources on the region. Before the November 2020 general election, then-candidate Joe Biden laudably promised \$4 billion in aid for the nations of the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala).⁵ The challenges in the region, supercharged by COVID-19, may ultimately make such levels of assistance look minuscule. The United States should not assume it can address the underlying causes of Latin America's deeply ingrained problems simply by scaling up traditional security sector assistance or expanding the US Agency for International Development or other Department of State programs. Real solutions will require reevaluating the fundamentals of how we support the region. Before spending the money and designing the programs, the United States needs to look hard at the limits of what can realistically be achieved as well as the structure of, legal authorities for, and coordination between the program instruments the country has at its disposal.

Finally, the tragedy of 9/11 highlights both the bureaucratic momentum and the fragility of doctrine, capabilities, and organizations. In the years leading up to 9/11, my work allowed me to observe, through working on, issues of future military operational concepts and force structure. The focus of many programs at the time involved the application and integration of technologies to prevail quickly in a major conflict that roughly resembled the last one in which the United States had fought (the Persian Gulf War). Less sexy, but still very troublesome, issues arguably received less attention from the US defense establishment. These issues included protection against asymmetric threats (such as large-scale terrorism) and extended military deployments in less-than-major conflicts (such as the Afghanistan War and the Iraq War), each of which were challenges that did not conveniently accord with new, cutting-edge concepts and established programs. I recall well the enormous quantities of money spent by program offices and DoD-level entities to show the systems they were buying were reasonably on track with the expected threats.

Following 9/11, I was impressed by the speed with which the same establishment reorganized itself and redirected its efforts. New technologies, systems, and intelligence methodologies began solving the new problem set: securing buildings and transportation infrastructure against terrorism, detecting individual targets, and protecting soldiers from improvised explosive devices in Iraq and Afghanistan. Similarly, defense doctrine and writing on warfare issues was quickly transformed by real-world combat experience in ways that were unthinkable before US forces began operating in the two countries.

Turning to Latin America, as with pre-9/11 defense thinking on major warfare, any new force deployments into Latin America, like those in Afghanistan and Iraq, are likely to bring new thinking and experience to areas important for Latin America's challenges. Many of these areas have, to date, only been evolving at a modest pace at best. Examples include support to counternarcotics operations, civil affairs, security assistance and security sector assistance, and

psychological operations. The United States' performance in these areas is generally adequate for small-scale operations, such as building schools, bringing in medical teams, or intercepting drug boats. Attempts to scale up these operations will likely expose serious deficiencies. Nevertheless, doing so will also create more detailed—and, ideally, improved—thinking in these areas.

As noted, the shift in the United States' strategic focus following 9/11 arguably came at the expense of the Bush administration's incipient turn to Mexico and Latin America. It is unknown if the next grave event or strategic shift will focus badly needed US attention on the region. The ways in which the United States responded to 9/11, for both good and bad, offer us invaluable insights for anticipating such shifts and managing our expectations regarding the United States' ability to address the related challenges.

ENDNOTES

¹ Office of the Press Secretary, "Joint Statement between the United States of America and the United Mexican States," September 6, 2001, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010906-8.html>.

² Sezai Özçelik, "A Zone of Twilight? Peace and Conflict in Latin America and the United Nations," *Austral: Brazilian Journal of Strategy & International Relations* 10, no. 19 (January–June 2021).

³ "COVID-19 Daily Update – Region of the Americas," Pan American Health Organization, updated September 1, 2021, <https://www.paho.org/en/covid-19-global-and-regional-daily-update>; and Julia Symmes Cobb, "Colombia Government Sends \$3.9 Bln Tax Reform to Congress amid Renewed Protests," Reuters, July 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/colombia-government-sends-39-bln-tax-reform-congress-amid-renewed-protests-2021-07-20/>.

⁴ Sarah Almukhtar and Rod Nordland, "What Did the U.S. Get for \$2 Trillion in Afghanistan?," *New York Times*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/12/09/world/middleeast/afghanistan-war-cost.html?mtrref=undefined&gwh=E65449A2BD9CD2F1EC2748FD892EFE2F&gwt=pay&assetType=PAYWALL>.

⁵ J. D. Long-Garcia, "Joe Biden's \$4 Billion Plan to Discourage Central American Migration at Its Source," *America*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2021/01/21/joe-biden-four-billion-dollar-immigration-plan-central-america-239732>.

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