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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Donald Trump and Latin America

Alessandro Guida

University of Naples "L'Orientale"

ABSTRACT

Beyond the rhetoric and the very deep contradictions that seem to characterize the Trump administration, events seem to suggest that US continental politics will be characterized by the attempt to abandon or, at least, supersede some of the pillars of US foreign policy in Latin America since the post-Cold War. Security threats remain essentially the same, as is the tendency to establish privileged relationships with key partners in the region. What seems to have changed is trust in multi-lateral institutions and agreements, in the promotion of democracy, and, more generally, in that combination of hard and soft power which, since the end of the 1980s, was considered by US policy makers as the main way to preserve the 'liberal hegemony'. These things have been abandoned in favor not of a withdrawal from the continental scenario, but of a definitively unilateral and aggressive approach. It is difficult to predict what the effects of all this will be on the Latin American countries. The Trump administration's choices could even open paths unthinkable until now.

KEYWORDS: Trump; America First; Latin America; Strategy; Hegemony.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Alessandro Guida (alessandroguida2@gmail.com)

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1. Introduction

After the late nineteenth century, when the Monroe Doctrine,¹ was converted from a negative ‘veto’ towards the interference of the powers of the Old World into a positive claim of US interest in the ‘stability’ of Latin America, the influence of United States in the region grew progressively and relentlessly, starting with the Central American and Caribbean area.² From that point on, the use of a combination of hard and soft power – with a clear predominance of the first – by US administrations, with its use or threat of using military and economic measures to impose certain actions and behaviors, represented the norm; just as constant was the predilection for a one-sided approach in place of looking for shared interests (Weeks, 2017). A partial exception in this sense came with the ‘Good Neighbor’ policy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which, based on the principle of non-intervention in Latin American affairs and on the commitment not to resort to force, tried to revive inter-American relations and re-qualify continental organization after decades of misunderstanding and conflict. A policy which, in the long run, yielded its fruits, considering that between 1939 and 1945 it led to the strengthening of the inter-American system and the definitive sanction within it of US domination.³

However, the various US administrations that have followed over time, quite independently of their political color, have considered the subcontinent as a sort of ‘backyard’ and an area of exclusive influence, and used different tools (diplomatic, economic, military) to exert pressure on the Latin American countries

¹ Beginning with one of the first and most famous works published on the Monroe Doctrine (Perkins, 1927) much has been written on the subject. Among the most recent works we mention: Kason, 1985; Dangerfield, 1986; Murphy, 2005.

² Works related to the beginning of the American penetration in Latin America are numerous. Regarding the first interventions, military and otherwise, in the Caribbean and Central American area between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, among the most recent works of a general nature we mention: Lafeber, 1993; Langley and Schoonover, 1995; Langley, 2002. Regarding US economic penetration in those years and the competition between the United States and Great Britain in the area we mention, among others: Pletcher, 1998; Leonard, 1999; Healy, 2001.

³ On the policy of ‘Good Neighbor’ and, more generally, on the foreign policy of the Roosevelt administration see, among others: Gellman, 1979; Fejes, 1986; Pike, 1995.

in order to affirm and consolidate their hegemony, obstructing, at the same time, the penetration of foreign powers in the hemisphere. And from the perspective of Washington's policy makers, the 'backyard' has often represented essentially an economic opportunity and a potential threat to US national security (Weeks, 2015). This approach has meant that Latin America, from the United States' perspective, has been displayed, in various phases, through the distorting lenses of global struggles such as those against Nazi-fascism, communism, terrorism or drug trafficking, while, at other times, it simply did not form part of the priorities of the White House's political agenda. This approach is emblematic of the United States' perception of the subcontinent, a perception conditioned by the conviction of being a superior nation in economic, political, military, social and cultural terms, and based on its effective centrality in the inter-American system from the years of the Second World War up to the present day (Schoultz, 2009).⁴

If during the Cold War, even in Latin America, the United States subordinated all foreign policy issues to the bipolar conflict, with the collapse of the communist threat at the end of the 1980s, the White House, then occupied by Ronald Reagan, began to shift its attention towards new priorities.⁵ Among these, in particular, as well as the traditional security pillar – which was now under attack from new 'threats', such as drug trafficking and illegal immigration – the US began to include the promotion of free trade at the economic level, and the strengthening of democracy at the political level – considered not as an end in itself, but as a tool to promote long-term stability and order – and governance (soft power). All the ensuing administrations, whether Republican – Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and George W. Bush – or Democratic – Bill Clinton and Barack Obama – although in the context of very different approaches, have adhered to these fundamental programmatic lines.

⁴ There are numerous works that have reconstructed the inter-American relations in the long run and from a historical perspective. Among the best known are: Connell-Smith, 1974; Langley, 1989; Niess, 1990; Smith, 1996; Schoultz, 1998; Gilderhus, 2000; Longley, 2002; Langley, 2003.

⁵ On inter-American relations and, in particular, on US policy in Central America during the years of the Reagan presidency, see, among others: Carothers, 1991; LaFeber, 1993; LeoGrande, 1998.

The overcoming of the bipolar conflict was managed by George Bush (president from 1989 to 1993), who found himself closing the still open fronts inherited from the Cold War period, especially in the Central American area. Here, the Republican president alternated diplomacy (as in the case of Nicaragua and Salvador) and hard power (as in the case of Panama, where the White House authorized the first unilateral US invasion of a Latin American country since the 1920s in order to remove the dictator Noriega). During the Bush administration, efforts were increasingly made to strengthen the spread of democratic regimes in the region, considered an indispensable precondition for the stability of the area. Emblematic, in this sense, was the approval of Resolution 1080 by the Organization of American States (OAS) which established, among other things, ‘the immediate convocation of a meeting of the Permanent Council in the event of any occurrences giving rise to the sudden or irregular interruption of the democratic political institutional process or of the legitimate exercise of power by the democratically elected government in any of the Organization’s member states’.⁶ These efforts continued with even greater intensity during the presidency of Bill Clinton (1993 to 2001), which went as far as sending US troops to Haitian soil (this time under the aegis of the UN) to restore the democratically elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide. In fact, during the Democratic president’s two terms, the region did not seem to pose particular problems to the stability functional to the interests of Washington: the number of ‘democratic’ governments was now increasing, and these seemed to adhere without particular difficulty to the structural adjustment plans sponsored by the US Treasury and advocated by the International Monetary Fund. Macroeconomic stabilization, liberalization, privatization and deregulation, the pillars of the development paradigm imposed by the Bretton Woods institutions under the ‘Washington Consensus’, seemed to have been definitively affirmed almost everywhere and without particular obstacles.

⁶ The text of the resolution can be consulted at the link: <http://www.oas.org/juridico/english/agres1080.htm>

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the agreement between the United States, Canada and Mexico, was emblematic of the new US economic strategy towards the area in the early 1990s. Promoted by the administration of George H. W. Bush, the agreement aimed at promoting an area of free trade among member countries through the elimination of tariffs and other trade barriers, and was approved by the US Congress a year after Bill Clinton entered the White House. In fact, during his mandate the Democratic president tried to go even further than this, trying to lay the foundations for an area of free trade that would embrace the entire continent; the project foundered mainly due to the growing distrust of many Latin American countries, worried that this would only increase economic dependence on their northern neighbor.

It was probably during the Clinton administration that some new menaces to US security in the region took on the shape of ‘serious internal threats’. In reality, elements of strong continuity in US foreign policy towards Latin America between the eighties and nineties can also be traced on this front, starting from the threat posed by drug trafficking. From the time of the Reagan administration, in which the principle was established that the fight against drug trafficking should be among the tasks of the North American army, up to Clinton’s Plan Colombia, the approach to the question on the US side was based essentially on a militarization of the problem, which, among other things, has led to constant increases in military spending, imbalances and degeneration of various kinds at local level (from corruption of public institutions and control agencies to the growth of paramilitary organizations without restraints), and new forms of interference in the affairs of the Latin American countries.⁷ Continuity was the constant trait also in terms of immigration, seen in turn increasingly as a threat rather than a resource. Here, rather than through the adoption of coherent strategies, Washington’s management of the issue was characterized by ‘ad hoc’ solutions strongly influenced by the pressures of internal public opinion and economic powers. This has produced interventions that

⁷ On the theme of the fight against drug trafficking in Latin America, see, among others: Bergman, 2016; Youngers and Rosin, 2005; Walker, 1996; Santana, 2004.

have led to a policy of ever greater firmness towards illegal immigration, which the state has attempted to contain both by acting on North American companies and by enforcing greater control over land and sea borders, as well as by differentiated treatments both among national immigrant groups and within the same groups.⁸

Another constant of the US presidencies that followed in the immediate post-Cold War – with the not inconsiderable change of approach represented by the Obama administration – was the maintenance of the hard line against the ‘historical’ enemy, Cuba. Although, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the military, political and ideological influence of communism in the hemisphere had reached its historical minimum, Castro’s regime did not cease to pose a threat to the security of the area for US policy makers. On the contrary, probably in the belief of being able to give the final blow to the communist government of the Caribbean island, and under the pressure exerted by the powerful anti-Castro lobby of Miami, during the presidency of George H. W. Bush the United States assumed a particularly harsh approach, culminating in Congressional adoption of the Cuban Democracy Act, with which the trade embargo in force for over 30 years was substantially strengthened. This hard line continued during the Clinton years, with the Helms-Burton law approved by Congress in 1996, intensifying the embargo against the island, and confirming, among other things, the prohibition of trade with the island for US companies.

During the presidency of George W. Bush (2001-2009), the pillars of US strategy towards the hemisphere remained virtually the same; what did change was the new administration’s approach. Also as a result of the terrorist attacks of 11 September, the Bush administration was characterized by an intransigent and strongly ideological unilateralism and by the attempt to impose a North American agenda on the whole area. The United States brought back schemes that had seemed obsolete, replacing the fight against communism and subversion, which had characterized the period of the Cold War, with that of international terrorism. The

⁸ On the topic see, among others, Mitchell, 2010.

new administration was characterized, in fact, by a marked lack of interest in the difficulties encountered by the country's southern neighbors (as in the case of Argentina, plunged into a deep economic crisis in December 2001), by the use of typical hard power practices (as in the case of the coup d'état in Venezuela, which led to the temporary overthrow of President Hugo Chávez), by the use of an iron fist against 'threats to national security' such as immigration (for instance, the construction in this period of the barrier along the border with Mexico, the so-called 'wall of shame') and drug trafficking (where military aid to Colombia was accentuated to conduct a struggle that had been reclassified as a 'war on terrorism'), and by a predilection for bilateral agreements with a few countries deemed to be of particular strategic importance such as Mexico, Brazil, Canada, Chile and Colombia, rather than more extensive agreements (it is not a coincidence that it was during these years that the Free Trade Area project of the Americas finally stopped).⁹

During the Bush years, inter-American relations, already at historic lows for some time, seemed to reach a point of no return. The 'neoliberal' programs of the nineties had weighed heavily on most Latin American countries, bringing with them social devastation, misery, and impoverishment of the middle and working classes. The failure of neoliberalism, between the 'Lost Decade' and the 'Washington Consensus' – also symbolized by the worst performance in terms of long-term economic growth for most Latin American countries in more than a century – made sure that the anti-US sentiment resumed its strength and the first signs of intolerance towards North American power began to appear. The so-called progressive cycle of the beginning of the century, with the coming to power of leaders like Lula da Silva in Brazil, Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and, a little later, presidents like Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador, seemed to be

⁹ On inter-American relations during the years of George W. Bush see, for example: Bodemer, 2003; Fuentes, 2004; Prevost and Oliva Campos, 2007.

the response to this widespread discomfort in most of the populations of Latin America.¹⁰

Not surprisingly, the administration of Barack Obama, following its establishment in January 2009, was faced with the difficult task of re-evaluating inter-American relations, which rarely in the past had been so marked by distance and lack of communication, and to recover the ‘lost space’ between Washington and the continent, even in the face of strengthening political and economic ties among Latin American countries and extra-continental preoccupations, starting with the European Union and China. Indeed, the abandonment of the thesis of the ‘Axis of Evil’ and of an aggressive style in favor of a greater use of the typical ‘soft power’ tools, the declarations regarding the need to create continental cooperation and the appeals to a multilateral approach to the problems of common interest – in short, the realistic approach that seemed to characterize the Democratic administration from the beginning – were perceived by many analysts, but also by a few Latin American leaders, as encouraging signs on the road to requalification of inter-American relations. However, beyond the initial good intentions, even the Democratic presidency soon proved not to have either a global vision or an overall strategy for the region that would move in this direction, showing itself also substantially indifferent towards the United States’ southern neighbors, apart from issues considered urgent for US security – starting with immigration and drug trafficking. The objective of normalizing relations with Cuba was an exception, even if the gradual attempt at rapprochement never resolved the central issues, beginning with the embargo on the Caribbean island. Therefore, Obama's presidency did not mean a reversal of the course in US policy towards Latin American countries. The political line of Washington, evidently well drawn before the advent of the Democratic president, was once again characterized by the propensity to manage ‘emergencies’, by the persistence of a substantial hostility towards ‘traditional’

¹⁰ Much has been written in recent years on the progressive cycle in Latin America. See on the topic, among others: Castañeda and Morales, 2009; Ellner, 2014; Webber and Carr, 2013; Weyland, Madrid, Hunter, 2010.

enemies, and by the predilection, with all due respect for multilateralism, for privileged relations with few partners, such as Brazil, Mexico and Colombia. Undoubtedly, Obama, favoring persuasion backed up by the use or the threat of the use of force, helped to improve some relationships and, above all, the image of the United States among its Latin American neighbors. However, even during his administration the US continental agenda, unchanged for decades, remained essentially the same, still based on the pillars of free trade, security and the promotion of democracy, albeit in the context of a re-balancing between strength and diplomacy in the direction of a clearer recourse to the instruments of ‘soft power’ – as well as through the adoption of a new pragmatism on the international scene, considered necessary also in light of the overexposure of the early 2000s.¹¹

Since the arrival of Donald Trump in the White House in January 2017, analysts, scholars and commentators of various kinds have not had an easy time trying to predict and decipher his foreign policy strategy, and not only in Latin America. Trump’s impromptu press releases, his apparently contradictory decision-making, the use of a style that would seem to be the product of improvisation, have been some of the factors behind the difficulty of discerning between concrete projects and mere propaganda, a difficulty that has made the task of deciphering the real intentions of the executive, in the Western hemisphere and elsewhere, challenging, to say the least. According to some scholars, the Republican administration seems to be characterized by an explicitly ‘anti-strategic’ approach, the result of a worldview that would favor a sort of doctrine of ‘tactical transactionalism’, that is, a foreign policy structure not governed by particular guiding principles but based on a strongly improvised leadership style, unprecedented in recent history, ‘that seeks discrete wins (or the initial tweet-able impression of them), treats foreign relations bilaterally rather than multi-dimensionally, and resists the alignment of means and ends that is necessary for effective grand strategy’ (Zenko and Friedman, 2017). In short, the ‘Trump

¹¹ On these aspects see, among others: Lowenthal, Piccone, Whitehead, 2009; Lowenthal, Piccone, Whitehead, 2011; Weisbrot, 2011.

Doctrine', in this perspective, is nothing more than a set of principles, some of them operative, others simply theoretical, held together by a preference for 'tactical victories' rather than a broader vision, based on a zero-sum world view and a transactional understanding of American foreign policy devoid of moral or ethical considerations (*ibid.*). Other analysts have argued that, while it should be considered full of contradictions, rather confusing and not without potentially harmful and worrying effects, the foreign policy of the new administration is driven by a real grand strategy. Starting with a series of US security priorities, including threats posed by radical Islam, disadvantageous trade agreements, and China's increasingly dominant economic position, the new administration is aiming to deliver its 'great strategy' of America First, founded essentially on four key pillars: economic nationalism, 'extreme' homeland security, 'amoral transactionalism' (i.e. an approach based on the need to 'cut deals with any actors that share American interests, regardless of how transactional that relationship is, and regardless of whether they share — or act in accordance with — American values'), and 'a muscular but aloof militarism' (Kahl and Brands, 2017).

Other scholars have meanwhile speculated about the inauguration of a new great strategy by Trump, defining it in terms of 'illiberal hegemony' (Posen, 2018). In short, breaking with his predecessors, the new US president will eliminate much of the 'liberal' from the hegemony that, at least since the end of the Cold War, Democratic and Republican administrations have pursued strategically; a strategy that was hegemonic in that the United States aimed to be the most powerful state in the world, and at the same time liberal as the United States sought to transform the international system into an order based on precise rules, managed through multilateral institutions and aimed at transforming other states into market-oriented democracies that traded freely among themselves. In this perspective, the Trump administration would limit or completely abandoned many of the pillars of that liberal internationalism aimed at guaranteeing US hegemony, without renouncing, however, a coherently hegemonic security policy, as confirmed by the

constant attempts to maintain the economic and military superiority of the United States and maintain the role of ‘security arbiter’ for most regions of the world (*ibid.*). And it is from this standpoint that it seems necessary to start shedding some light on Trump’s policies in Latin America. The aim of this paper is to highlight how Trump’s first year and a half in office is bringing with it a partial, though important, deviation from some of the pillars of US foreign policy in Latin America since the post-Cold War. Security threats remain essentially the same, as does the tendency to establish privileged relationships with key partners in the region. What seems to have changed, even at a rhetorical level, is the level of trust in multilateral institutions and agreements, in the promotion of democracy, and, more generally, in that combination of hard and soft power which, since the end of the 1980s, was considered by US policy makers as the main way to preserve hegemony. This approach, which favors not a withdrawal from the continental scenario, but a definitively unilateral and aggressive approach that looks only to protect US interests, in some ways recalls the years of the George W. Bush presidency.

2. Democracy promotion and multilateralism

Analysts, the media and public opinion in general only had the opportunity to get a clearer idea of what the main lines of Trump's foreign policy may be almost a year after his assumption of office, with the publication, in December 2017, of the National Security Strategy document (NSS). Even after the publication of this document, there remains a great deal of uncertainty about what the main lines of foreign policy of the new US government will be, and this not simply because the NSS can only be considered indicative of US strategy up to a certain point – it is quite rare to come across cases of presidencies which, in their concrete action, have slavishly adhered to the provisions of their various national security strategies – but also and above all because, in the case of Trump, at least until now, the difficulty of discerning between concrete planning and mere propaganda is almost

insurmountable, making the task of deciphering the executive's real intentions difficult, to say the least, both in Latin America and further afield.

As some analysts have stated, the NSS of the current government rests on a vision of the international system that could be defined as 'Hobbesian': 'Trump's international order is anarchic, characterized by scheming and aggressive rival powers and ruthless non-state actors' (Leffler, 2017). In this pessimistic vision of the international system, struggle is considered the fundamental component of the competition between states, a competition in which only the strongest survive (*ibid.*). In such a 'competitive world', characterized by the presence of threats emanating from non-state actors (jihadists and international criminal organizations), revisionist powers (China and Russia), and rogue dictatorships (Iran and North Korea), the United States is therefore called to rethink its policies of the past two decades, 'based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners' (National Security Strategy, 2017). On the contrary, the tasks of what currently remains the principal world power can only be: 'protecting the American people, the homeland, and the American way of life'; strengthening control of borders and reforming the immigration system; 'promoting prosperity'; preserving peace and rebuilding US military so that it remains preeminent, deterring adversaries, and if necessary, fighting and winning. In addition to the traditional goals of protecting the homeland and promoting economic prosperity, the Trump administration's strategy appropriately emphasizes 'preserving peace through strength' and 'advancing American influence in the world'. It is a vision of the world in which actors are in constant struggle with each other and that, therefore, requires an aggressive approach, which may suggest that the new administration intends to definitively put aside the 'soft power' that characterized the Obama presidency – considered weak and inept – to resort to the so-called 'hard power' tools. The starting point for the realization of all this is of

course the economic strengthening of the nation: economic prosperity is the key to power and security (*ibid.*).

This pessimistic view of the international context is, of course, also applied to the regional framework. In fact, within the National Security Strategy of December 2017 it is stated that the Western Hemisphere must defend itself against illegal immigration, violence and drug trafficking perpetuated by transnational criminal organizations – including gangs and cartels – that threaten the common security, and challenge the presence of authoritarian and hostile governments such as those of Venezuela and Cuba, as well as the ever deeper penetration of powers such as China, which is allegedly trying to pull the region into its orbit through state-led investments and loans, and Russia, still dominated by the logic of the Cold War and always ready to financially and militarily support the communist dictatorships of the area. In light of this, the US goal is identified in the construction of ‘a stable and peaceful hemisphere that increases economic opportunities for all, improves governance, reduces the power of criminal organizations, and limits the malign influence of non-hemispheric forces’ (*ibid.*). How to achieve all this? The National Security document does not say much about it, besides the need to consolidate close diplomatic relations with the key countries of the region (without even mentioning the names of these countries), isolate the hostile governments of Cuba and Venezuela, modernize trade agreements and reinforce economic ties with the region (although in the context of bilateral trade agreements, it is pointed out). These are undoubtedly rather vague formulations, confirming that the Republican administration – whether through incapacity or through lack of interest, although for now the question is moot – has few original ideas, and that these are far from clearly defined, and not at all specific about how to deal with the problems and ‘threats’ that arise at the regional level.

However, besides this, if it is true that the security priorities remain substantially the same, as well as the emphasis on the importance of privileged relations ‘with key countries in the region’, what seems to have diminished is the

need to support multilateral regional institutions and promote values of freedom and democracy in the area – even a merely rhetorical defense of these notions is now absent. Looking at the previous presidencies, it is possible to affirm that not even the National Security document produced by the Bush administration, which certainly did not stand out for the centrality of Latin America in the foreign policy agenda, much less the promotion of a multilateral approach to problems of common interest, was as negligent on these points. There, at least on paper, reference was made to the need to ‘work with regional institutions, such as the Summit of the Americas process, the Organization of American States (OAS), and the Defense Ministerial of the Americas for the benefit of the entire hemisphere’, a ‘democratic hemisphere where our integration advances security, prosperity, opportunity, and hope’ (National Security Strategy, 2002).

The situation is even clearer if we examine the actual conduct of the current Republican administration during its time in government so far. In terms of strengthening diplomatic relations, the conduct of the executive has been to all intents disastrous, and not only because of how slowly Trump proceeded to appoint his experts in the key positions of the administration and in the field. The way the administration has managed and is managing the Cuban question, the Venezuelan crisis and the relationship with Mexico – that is, only as internal security problems – and, more generally, the hard line that it is pursuing on the front of immigration, are obviously undermining relations not only with the nations in question or with the Central American countries, but, to an extent, with all the states of Latin America. At the same time, this approach has been accompanied by aggressive rhetoric, such as that of President Trump, made up of continuous expressions that are poorly chosen, offensive, and arguably racist – as, for instance, to name only one of the most recent examples, a statement allegedly made by Trump about Haitians (‘why should the US accept immigrants from shithole countries’) ¹²; language that communicates something verging on contempt for Latin Americans, and which, to

¹² “‘Shithole’ wasn’t the most offensive part of Trump’s Haiti comments’.

a certain extent, recalls the times United States, with Theodore Roosevelt, attributed to themselves the task of watching over the hemisphere and carrying on a civilizing mission justified by their alleged racial superiority. Such rhetoric can only promote the dissemination among the populations of the subcontinent (and among their governments) of those old feelings of hostility towards the bulky ‘neighbor’ that the Obama administration had at least understood it was necessary to overcome.

But what is even more important is that during this period Trump has remained silent on many issues that have affected the region, for example, just to mention one of the most recent, the serious democratic crisis that has affected Honduras, which saw the American government turning a blind eye despite the fact that the country in question represents an important partner of Washington in the fight against drug trafficking and illegal immigration (Shifter, 2017). Secondly, the new administration has been contemptuous of regional multilateral bodies. With respect to this last point, a great stir was caused, for example, by the absence of the ex-Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson – the only foreign minister in the region not to be present – at the meeting of the Organization of American States (OSA), held in Cancun in June of last year, an absence officially justified by the need for the head of US foreign relations to deal with a simultaneous crisis in Qatar. And this, despite the fact that on the agenda of the meeting of the OSA there was, among other things, a resolution presented by Mexico and Argentina against the ‘enemy’ Nicolás Maduro government in Venezuela. This was followed by Trump’s decision to cancel his participation in the Summit of the Americas in Lima, Peru, officially because he was involved in the management of the Syrian crisis. By sending deputy Mike Pence instead, Trump achieved a historical record: he was the first president of the United States to miss the Summit since 1994. It was a particularly emblematic and significant way to demonstrate the orientation of the new administration in terms of hemispheric cooperation. Not only that, but Trump took more than a year to designate his ambassadors in some ‘key’ countries in the region and identify new leaders for the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs. And all this does not seem

to be just the result of the ‘traditional’ lack of interest of US administrations towards a ‘pacified’ area. It must be said, however, that Trump has so far personally met several Latin American leaders. Among these: the Peruvian President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, to discuss the need to strengthen trade relations with Peru and other countries of the Asia-Pacific region; Argentine President Mauricio Macri, to address bilateral and regional issues, including the situation in Venezuela; and Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos, who allegedly asked the US president to renew US aid (the \$450 million approved by Congress at the request of the Obama administration) for the Colombian peace process for next year – a rather difficult goal to achieve, also in light of the drastic cut in the aid budget for developing countries planned for 2018 – and to continue to support his country in the fight against drugs. After his speech at the United Nations in September, Trump also met the president of Brazil, Michel Temer, the president of Panama, Juan Carlos Varela, and again the presidents of Colombia and Peru, to discuss the economic growth of the region and the situation in Venezuela. All this shows not only the predilection of the Republican president for bilateral relations, but also the tendency to select only those issues considered ‘emergencies’ for the security of the United States – an element, it must be said, characteristic in part also of the Obama administration and certainly of the Bush presidency. On this basis, there has been a will to establish few agreements with those countries considered relevant on the strategic level (with the exception, of course, of Mexico). This is largely in continuity with the previous administrations. In fact, since the Bush presidency, and also that of Obama, nations like Brazil – important for its economic weight and its regional power dimension – Colombia – central in the fight against drug trafficking but also in the sphere of the containment of Venezuela – and, secondarily, countries such as Chile, which are particularly dynamic on the economic level and considered strategic in terms of relations with the Asia-Pacific region, have been able to boast privileged relations with the United States. With Trump (although it must be said that the process started under Obama), to the above group of ‘friendly’ countries has been added

Argentina, following the Kirchner period and the rise of the liberal conservative Macri. In other words, the list of ‘friendlies’ consists of all those countries with right-wing or center-right governments. But the point of the matter is that in the case of Trump’s administration, it would not seem that we are dealing only with the ‘traditional’ disinterestedness of the US presidencies in the area (which approached an apex during the years of George W. Bush); nor are we dealing with yet another case of ‘good intentions’ with respect to the possibility of a new course of inter-American relations, only for it to be denied by the policy actually implemented (as in the case of Obama). What the current North American executive appears to be doing is abandoning, even at a rhetorical level, ‘democracy’ promotion and governance (soft power) as foreign policy goals, with relative trust in the use of multilateral institutions to tackle problems of common interest (trust, it is worth clarifying, that, as we saw with Bush Senior and Bill Clinton, never meant the abandonment of an interventionist approach and the typical tools of hard power). In practice, the current administration seems to be abandoning some of the pillars of the US hegemonic strategy in the area following the Cold War.

A clear picture of the priorities of the Trump administration in Latin America emerges, moreover, from the budget requests presented by the White House to the Congress in the last two years, with relatively drastic cuts in aid to the area (cuts that Congress rejected). In the last of these budget proposals, in fact, regarding the fiscal year 2019, if on the one hand, as will be seen later in this paper, the White House asked for an overall 22% increase of the budget of the Department of National Security compared to 2017, on the other hand it requested a reduction of aid to development assistance and health assistance programs to Latin America of about 36%, as well as a cut in funding to the State Department and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Aid that, among other things, has in recent decades been a pillar of US policy aimed at strengthening the institutions and democratic governments of the region (Isacson, 2018). The dissemination of ‘U.S. culture, language, traditions and values to the

world, popularizing the “American Way” and influencing opinions and policies’, was, in fact, the center of the soft power policy aimed at guaranteeing US hegemony through the objective of promoting democracy and governance, and, from the beginning of the nineties, support for economic development and social programs through an agency like USAID played a major role in this sense (de la Fuente, 2017).

3. A halt to free trade?

As Barry Posen has pointed out, the other fundamental aspect of the ‘illiberal hegemony’ to which the Republican administration aspires is abstention from multilateral trade agreements, a product of mistrust towards free trade and, therefore, the treaties and institutions that facilitate it (Posen, 2018). As we have mentioned, since the beginning of the 1990s the United States laid the foundations for the creation of a free trade area with Latin American states. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which gave life to an area of free trade between the United States, Canada and Mexico through the elimination of tariffs and trade barriers, and approved by the US Congress at the beginning of the Bill Clinton administration, should have been only the first step towards a future hemispheric area of free trade stretching from Alaska to Argentina. The goal, of course, was to increase the dependence of the Latin American countries on the United States, or, to put it another way, represented another fundamental element, the economic one, according to US policy makers, of the strategy aimed at guaranteeing US hegemony in the region. Therefore, its importance for the various US administrations that have followed since then, regardless of their political color, has always gone well beyond merely commercial aspects, affecting diplomatic, security and North American leadership issues. Bill Clinton attempted to go even further than NAFTA. The first Summit of the Americas in Miami, in 1994, in which 34 nations of the continent – with the exception of Cuba, which was not invited – met to discuss issues of common interest, as well as issues such as strengthening

democracy, the promotion and protection of human rights, and the fight against drugs and related crimes, focused very much on the realization of a Free Trade Area of Americas (FTAA) (Feinberg, 1997). The project, as is well known, would definitively run aground in the following years due to several factors, including the fear, on the American front, that it could damage the national economy and, on the side of several Latin American partners, including Brazil, that it would increase the dependence of their economies on the United States. However, for ‘the first time in the history of inter-American relations, the ideal of economic cooperation was grounded in a reality that signaled hemispheric convergence toward market economy and electoral democracy’ (Arashiro, 2011, p. 3).

Two decades later, among the decisions of the current US administration during its first year of management, that of reviewing NAFTA stands out.

Since the election campaign, Trump has questioned the agreement, calling it ‘the worst trade agreement ever’, which has done nothing but harm US workers and businesses. Immediately after assuming the presidency, he started negotiations with Mexico and Canada to review the agreement considerably (he also promised to use the ongoing negotiations to force the Mexican government to pay for a wall along the border). In reality, NAFTA has always been the object of divisions and contrapositions. Its supporters have always said that it is an agreement that has fostered millions of jobs. Its detractors have sustained the exact opposite: that the agreement in question is the basis for a decline in employment in the United States and wage stagnation in some sectors, due to the delocalization of production activities and the trade deficit that it led to. Others have pointed out that all the positions that have loomed over the agreement stem from the wrong questions, because the importance of NAFTA is essentially political. They consider it to have codified an existing order, and put the official seal on a trade regime that had been in place for more than a generation and would continue without a formal agreement (Cowie 2017).

And in this, internal issues are undoubtedly a determining factor. It is evident that Trump, since the electoral campaign, has become the spokesman for that part of the population that has been particularly affected by the effects of the international economic crisis and convinced of the fact that ‘many of the evils that afflict the advanced economies are attributable to the integration process with emerging economies and to the pressures coming from these’ (Magri 2017). Without going into too much detail, it may suffice to recall the way in which the American businessman presented himself, right from the Republican primaries, to the US electorate: using simple, direct and aggressive language, Trump portrayed himself as the successful self-made man, anti-systemic, critical of bureaucracy but also of Wall Street, unrelated to the logic of the Parties, who promised to ‘make America great again’ by defending the interests of Americans over everything, creating job opportunities and protecting the nation from external interference and, in particular, from the invasion of migrants. In short, as has been widely argued, he relied on the most basic desires and fears of a part of the white population, poorly educated, culturally conservative and worried about its economic condition. Its growing conservatism may well have been fuelled by economic frustration (Griffin and Teixeira, 2017).

This part of the population, increasingly concerned by social, economic and cultural changes taking place in American society, looked and still looks with hostility at the effects of globalization, at immigrants, at minorities in general, and is particularly sensitive to trumpet calls and slogans, including the fight against illegal immigration, the security of the borders, the protection of the national economy and, more generally, the defense of the nation against external threats (including free trade agreements that are disadvantageous for the ‘North American worker’). All of these formed the pillars of the US tycoon’s election campaign.¹³

¹³ However, it must be said that, according to some surveys (Gallup and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs), if it is true that the percentage of Republican voters critical of international trade grew considerably in the months leading up to the presidential elections, probably also in response to the Trump's stance on international trade agreements, between October 2016 and mid-2017 the percentage of Republicans convinced that international trade favored the US economy increased by

But at the same time, Trump's attacks on NAFTA and the pressures for its revision are undoubtedly the product of the administration's lack of confidence in multilateralism and, on the other hand, a preference for bilateral trade agreements, which in the opinion of the new president are easier to control and enforce. In short, even here a clear desire can be seen emerging to abandon the path of liberal hegemony, which, from the end of the Cold War to the present, has been based on international security, economic institutions, free trade, human rights and the spread of democracy, not as values in themselves, but as tools (of soft power) to attract others 'to the cause' (Posen, 2018).

The decision to pull the United States out of negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), taken soon after Trump's arrival in the White House, is another clear demonstration in this regard. It should be pointed out, however, that the United States has always been rather wary of multilateralism, for various reasons; above all, because of the difficulty in carrying out the necessary transfers of sovereignty, and the high negotiating power they have enjoyed for decades and, therefore, for the temptation to take advantage of bilateral negotiations in specific situations. However, despite the resistance in question, the development of multilateralism and international institutions in the last half century owes much to American support (Magri, 2017). And this, of course, is as true in Latin America as it is elsewhere. Hence the concern of many analysts regarding Trump's decision to abandon the TPP negotiations, the common market project that would have included most of the Latin American countries facing the Pacific, plus Australia, Japan and Vietnam. It began during the presidency of George W. Bush and was carried out by the Obama administration with the purpose, among other things, of countering growing Chinese influence in the region. Trump's decision could definitively challenge decades of US leadership within the liberal international order, as well as, of course, its own hegemonic position in the hemisphere. The

about 20 points (Mutz, 2017). More generally, several public opinion polls conducted by organizations such as Gallup, the Pew Center, and the Chicago Council on Global Affairs have highlighted how the Republican base is quite divided on issues such as free trade, even if Trump supporters remain the majority who believe that NAFTA is negative for the United States (Dueck, 2018).

penetration of China in Latin America in recent years is, indeed, an incontrovertible reality, whose underlying motivations are many and range from exclusively economic interests to broader geopolitical objectives. For the Asian giant, Latin America constitutes a sufficiently large and relatively stable market from which to import raw materials and food products and where it might export its finished products, as well as the ideal area to direct its investments (China has pledged to invest \$250 billion in the region by 2019). On a geopolitical level, moreover, for China, the continent between the Atlantic and the Pacific could be a strategic point for commercial expansion towards the rest of the world. For the Latin American countries, on the other hand, which in turn require capital and technology and who, in the vast majority of cases, are eager to expand their economies in directions that make them less dependent on the United States, relations with China represent an obligatory passage for their approach to Asia. Thus, within a few years, China has become the main trading partner of Brazil, Chile and Peru and, in the immediate future, it could establish itself as the main partner of the entire region, definitively undermining the United States and the European Union.

Nonetheless, in a move indicative of the tendency towards fluctuation and self-contradiction of this Republican administration, as well as of how thoroughly its definition of foreign policy is conditioned by internal politics, it should be noted how, in the course of 2018, Trump reopened again to the possibility of a return of the United States to the negotiations for the TPP, and ordered senior management officials to evaluate this option (Taylor, 2018).

4. Hard line against traditional security threats

In Trump's campaign rhetoric, defined by some analysts as the obvious expression of a 'right-wing populism' (Martinelli, 2016; Oliver and Rahn, 2016), a place of absolute importance was occupied, as is well known, by the relations between the United States and Mexico. The hostile comments about that country, the pressures exercised to involve it in the containment of northbound immigration

and Trump's promise to the American public to charge the neighbor the costs of the necessary construction of the border wall – even if this entailed modifying the US Patriot Act antiterrorism law to use part of the remittances of Mexicans present in the United States – were indeed central components of his campaign. Thus, in the announcement of his candidacy in June 2015, the Republican candidate used harsh expressions against the neighboring nation, accusing Mexico of ‘ripping off the US more than almost any other nation’,¹⁴ of getting rich thanks to bad commercial agreements with the United States and with the billions of dollars in remittances sent from illegal immigrants in the United States. Trump has gone even further, accusing Mexicans in general of being drug traffickers, criminals and rapists (Ye Hee Lee, 2015). The strengthening of control over national borders and a new immigration system were thus defined as fundamental for national security, for the economic prosperity of the country and for the guarantee of the rule of law.

After the electoral victory, Trump continued along this line, signing, a few days after assuming the office of president, an executive order for the construction of the wall and continuing to argue that it should be paid for by Mexicans, even as he asked the US Congress to finance the ambitious project (on Twitter, Trump wrote ‘the Great Wall...will be paid back by Mexico later!’).¹⁵ Congress, however, has not allocated any funding for the continuation of the project during 2018, and its future remains mired in controversy, given both the meager advantages it would provide in the fight against illegal immigration (not to mention drug trafficking, which, according to experts, would not be hampered in the least by the artificial barrier), but also because of the high costs its implementation would entail for American taxpayers (from 12 to 21 billion dollars) – the Mexican government, it might be added, has continued to maintain that it has no intention of contributing to the costs. In 2017, therefore, no significant progress was made on this front, even if the administration identified some companies and commissioned them to

¹⁴ ‘US election 2016: Trump defends wall on Mexico visit’.

¹⁵ Trump's comment on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/i/moments/817339187594752002>.

build prototypes on which the building of the future barrier would be based. Despite this, Trump has continued to reiterate that the wall will be built, and argue that the solution to somehow charging the costs to the Mexican government would continue to be among the fundamental objectives pursued by its administration. In short, both during the election campaign and after his assumption of duties in the White House, through aggressive rhetoric, Trump aimed, firstly, to carry forward some of the promises made before the election, but above all to preserve the consensus of his ultra-conservative electoral base and of Republicans in general, without considering in the least what the consequences of his actions and his statements could be, both in terms of relations with a traditional US ally in the region like Mexico, and on the balance of the Latin American area.

A similar analysis can be made about the hard line adopted against illegal immigrants in the United States, another pillar of Trump's electoral program. The promise of the electoral campaign to deport 11 million illegal immigrants has resulted, among other things, in an expulsion order against 800,000 migrants protected by Barack Obama's 'Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals' (DACA) program – a deportation which mainly affects Latin Americans and which was temporarily blocked by decision of a federal judge – and in the proposal, at the beginning of 2018, to suspend the 'temporary protection status' (TPS) given to nearly 300,000 Salvadoreans about seventeen years ago, following an earthquake in 2001 (and this because the emergency situation in their country of origin, which justified the adoption of the provision, would be terminated). The same fate may soon be in store for over forty thousand Haitians, to whom TPS was awarded following the earthquake of 2010, and about sixty thousand Hondurans and two thousand Nicaraguans, forced to leave their respective countries in 1998 following the devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch.¹⁶

Beyond the 'humanitarian' aspects of the problem, which are far from irrelevant or secondary – starting with the reality of expelling people who have lived

¹⁶ 'Let the Salvadoreans stay. America's decision to strip 200,000 people of their right to remain is a mistake—unless it spurs broader immigration reform'.

in the United States for almost twenty years, and who have built their homes there – what impact could such solutions have on relations with the United States’ southern neighbors? The impact will certainly not be positive. Mexico was therefore the emblem of the use of continental themes as an instrument of internal consensus, but also testifies how immigration, perceived by US policy makers to be one of the main threats to national security from the beginning of the nineties to today, continues to be at the forefront of the concerns of the North American government, which, however, is approaching the issue today with a style of extreme firmness and almost no willingness to dialogue that is very reminiscent of the management of George W. Bush. This is a fairly clear change of direction compared to the soft actions implemented by the Obama government. In fact, at the beginning of his mandate, the Democratic president, by defining the US system on the subject ‘broken’ and notoriously ‘dysfunctional’, had repeatedly supported the need for important reform; and yet, even if he repeatedly stated his commitment on this front publicly, for several years, no proposal ever arrived before the Congress. This was the situation up to the first two years of his second term, 2012-2014, when he presented two programs on the subject (the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals and the Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents), with the aim of granting a ‘temporary truce’ to about 4 million illegal immigrants living and working in the United States, protecting them from so-called deportation, i.e. from the practice of forced repatriation (Masters 2016). Following his arrival in the White House, Trump has repeatedly reiterated the need to change legislation that represses illegal immigration and make it much more difficult to find shelter in the United States, and has gone so far as to cancel DACA and repeatedly threaten to leave NAFTA if Mexico does not make a clear contribution to increase border security. Moreover, as indicated in the national security document, illegal immigration ‘burdens the economy, hurts American workers, presents public safety risks, and enriches smugglers and other criminals’ (National Security Strategy, 2017).

Even here, however, it is sufficient to look at the White House budget proposals for 2019 to make clear the perception of how the administration considers immigration: that is, essentially as a security problem, a serious internal threat on which to intervene, with drastic solutions:

*Building the Wall, Dismantling Transnational Criminal Organizations, and Enforcing Our Immigration Laws. The Budget reflects my Administration's serious and ongoing commitment to fully secure our border, take the fight to criminal gangs like MS-13, and make our immigration system work for Americans. The Budget provides funding for a wall on our Southwest border and additional resources for law enforcement at the Departments of Homeland Security and Justice. The Budget also funds an increase in the number of Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers, Border Patrol agents, and immigration judges to improve enforcement at the border and within the United States.*¹⁷

Specifically, the plan would include: ‘\$1.6 billion for construction of the border wall and \$782 million to hire and support 2,750 additional law enforcement officers and agents at U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)’; and ‘\$2.5 billion for detaining up to 47,000 illegal aliens on a daily basis’.¹⁸

Compared to the other security priority, drug trafficking, although this was indicated in the national security document as a threat – along with terrorists, criminal cartels exploit porous borders and threaten U.S. security and public safety (National Security Strategy, 2017) – and although the administration is putting pressure on countries like Mexico and Colombia to do more about it, the White House budget ‘proposes to cut International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE) assistance to both countries’ (Isacson 2018). Even in the fight against drug trafficking, the administration seems to be more focused on the internal front and, in particular, on the ‘impenetrability’ of the border, rather than

¹⁷ Office of Management and Budget, Budget of U.S. Government, Fiscal Year 2019: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/budget-fy2019.pdf>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

on the countries in which the drugs originate. This is demonstrated by a '\$44 million investment in new Non-Intrusive Inspection technology at Ports of Entry, which is used to examine cargo and conveyances for contraband and weapons of mass effect' and 'an increase of \$42 million, funded by both fees and discretionary appropriations, to enable CBP to screen inbound packages at express consignment carrier facilities such as FedEx, UPS, and DHL'.¹⁹

5. Iron fist against continental enemies

The demonstration of the fact that the Republican administration has no intention of taking refuge in a sort of 'isolationism' but, on the contrary, aims to continue its role as international 'security referee', comes from the positions and initiatives taken at the continental level towards 'traditional' enemies such as Cuba and Venezuela. Indeed, it is probably the field in which the US government has been most demonstrably active in recent months, repeatedly showing its muscles and adopting a hard line.

For President Obama the normalization of relations with Cuba constituted a central objective of foreign policy in Latin America, an undertaking whose value was strongly symbolic. The mission to recover the 'lost space' from Washington in the subcontinent – in the end never accomplished – necessarily passed through a reconquest of the trust of the southern partners, which had collapsed especially during the years of George W. Bush, when relations with the neighbors of the South reached an historic low-point. Cuba should have been the center of this strategy, because over fifty years of uncompromising conduct towards this country had resulted in the partial isolation of the United States on the continent over this issue. Hence the acceleration given to the process of opening up with the Caribbean island during Obama's second term – a process that came to a halt when faced with the decisive stumbling block of the embargo. This attempt at reconciliation probably also responded to Obama's desire to close at least some of the critical

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

fronts on a global level, thus leaving behind a less 'problematic' political agenda, as well as the fact that the overcoming of hostilities with the 'historical enemy' of the area would have probably been the main success achieved by the Democratic administration in eight years – and thus a key part of the president's historical legacy

However, the subsequent Republican administration immediately decided to use the Cuban issue to mark a clear difference between them and the 'passivity' and weakness that, in their view at least, had characterized the Obama administration. Indeed, even before taking office Donald Trump had demonstrated a desire to reverse the process initiated by the Democratic president, who, in his opinion, had done nothing but strengthen the communist regime and the military elite in power on the Caribbean island. The exultation with which Mike Pence greeted, in November 2016, the death of Fidel Castro, 'el líder máximo', at the age of 90, through the usual message via Twitter – 'The tyrant Castro is dead. New hope dawns'²⁰ – was further confirmation of the new orientation of the White House in this regard. It was a political line subsequently reaffirmed by Trump, who repeatedly declared that he wanted to put an end to the attempts made by the previous administration to normalize relations between the two countries, at least until all political freedoms and human rights were restored in Cuba. The new approach to the 'historical enemy' did not stop at the rhetorical sphere, but it translated into a series of concrete measures that, in a few months, practically ended up eliminating most of the progress made on this front starting, in particular, from 2014. Using as justification alleged and unspecified 'acoustic attacks' against the staff of the US embassy in Havana between August and September 2017 – attacks denied by the FBI, which, after investigating, has argued that there was no evidence of action against US diplomats – the Republican administration ordered a massive reduction of its diplomatic personnel stationed in Cuba, expelled Cuban diplomats and stopped the processing of visas for Cubans trying to reach the United States. These measures were followed by the application of restrictions on the possibility of

²⁰ Available at: https://twitter.com/mike_pence/status/802557437786066944.

US citizens to travel to the island and to do business with various Cuban companies and agencies that are supposed to be related in some way to Castro's government, and went hand in hand with the attempt to involve numerous continental partners in the isolation of the Cuban regime. In short, while supporting the need for a recovery of economic freedom in Cuba, Trump demands the adoption of measures that, in practice, affect, among other things, the tourist industry on the island and the nascent private sector, While appealing to the importance of the contribution of the Latin American partners in the 'shared endeavor' to ensure that 'the people of Cuba and Venezuela can enjoy freedom and the benefits of shared prosperity' (National Security Strategy 2017), the White House does everything it can to inflame those old hostilities that had led numerous countries in the area to move away from the northern giant.

The revival of a manifestly aggressive attitude towards the traditional enemies of the United States at the continental level has emerged even more clearly in the management of the Venezuelan crisis. It is not a coincidence that the Venezuela of Nicolás Maduro, like Cuba, occupies a position of absolute importance within the National Security Strategy of the new administration. With their governments that 'cling to anachronistic leftist authoritarian models that continue to fail their people', and supported economically and militarily by nations like Russia – which continues its failed politics of the Cold War by bolstering its radical allies on the continent – and China – which 'seeks to pull the region into its orbit through state-led investments and loans' – Cuba and Venezuela are among the main threats to the common security of the continent, next to violence, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration (National Security Strategy 2017). The goal of isolating these countries in order to favor regime change within them has been a priority of the United States in the Western hemisphere. A priority that Trump has shown to have very clearly in mind since his arrival at the White House.

Regarding Venezuela, even during the Obama presidency, after some initial attempts to 'stabilize' relations between the two countries, the United States

continued along the furrow traced in previous years, if not even worsened during the presence of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State. Soon, in fact, the concern that dominated during the years of George W. Bush prevailed – regarding, in particular, the ever closer links between the Bolivarian government and Cuba, the links of the Latin American country to nations like Russia and China, the difficult relations with one of the main US allies in the region, Colombia – and the Democratic administration continued to support the Venezuelan internal opposition economically and politically. This support culminated, after Chávez’s death, in the failure to recognize the result of the presidential elections of April 2013, which determined the victory of Maduro, and in the definition of Venezuela as a threat to the region.

However, unlike his predecessor, Trump did not waste much time in using a heavy hand against the country in question. Driven by his former rival in the Republican primaries, the ultra-conservative senator Marco Rubio, Trump resorted to various measures with the purpose, practically declared, to hasten the fall of the Bolivarian government. The first measures, adopted no more than a month after the mandate, were aimed at targeting individual Chavist officials, whose visas were blocked and whose bank accounts in the United States were frozen. After the convening of the National Constituent Assembly, in July last year, by the government of Maduro, the first economic sanctions arrived, with the White House Treasury Department adopting an executive order that prohibited US financial institutions from buying and selling bonds issued by the government of Caracas and by the state oil company of the Latin American country. Subsequently, Venezuela (along with North Korea and Chad) was added to the ‘black list’ of countries (majority Muslim) whose citizens were banned from entering the United States. The prohibition from travelling to the US, in the case of Venezuela, was officially justified by the fact that the government of this country would not cooperate in verifying whether its citizens represented a threat to national security or to public

security in the United States, and would be limited to the officials of the Chavist government and their families.

But Trump in the case of Venezuela went even further. Defining the Venezuelan as a ‘corrupt regime [that had] destroyed a prosperous nation by imposing a failed ideology’, the president has come to affirm that the United States has many options for Venezuela, ‘including a possible military option if necessary’ (Oliphant, 2017); a statement that has, however, provoked, as is easy to imagine, the negative reaction of many governments, both Latin American and non-Latin American (even by those manifestly hostile to the Bolivarian government or who had been significantly critical of it, such as those of Brazil or Chile). Hence the idea, increasingly widespread among analysts, that the hard line adopted by the administration against Caracas may represent a sort of unexpected gift made by the US president to Maduro, in deep crisis for some time.

6. Consequences and perspectives

Beyond the rhetoric, often of low level, and the very deep contradictions that seem to characterize the Trump administration, events seem to suggest that US continental politics will be characterized by the attempt to abandon or, at least, supersede some of the pillars of US liberal hegemony, including the promotion and strengthening of democracy in the area, multilateralism in the economic sphere – something that, if we are to be honest, was always spoken about more than it was actually practiced – and a combination of soft and hard power, with clear preference given to the latter. In short, it is possible that a marked unilateralism – with relative abandonment of openings in the direction of hemispheric cooperation on shared challenges such as trade, the environment and immigration, which had characterized the Obama administration – a greater militarization of issues and a more aggressive and ideological approach will be some of the prevailing features of the continental politics of the Trump government.

It is difficult to predict what the effects of all this will be on the Latin American countries. The disinterestedness and contempt shown by the administration will have no other effect than to encourage neighbors to progressively distance themselves from Washington, in similar fashion to what happened at the beginning of the 2000s during the Bush administration. The same hard line adopted by the Republican administration against Cuba and Venezuela, barely masked, this time, by resorting to rhetoric about the defense of human rights (Trump would hardly be credible on this front) could even favor rather than damage the 'historical' enemies of the United States in the area, giving them new vigor. At the same time, the political and economic penetration of rivals like China constitutes a real 'threat', the real challenge, at this stage, to a US leadership already in difficulty on the continent; a threat that actions taken by the US government can only facilitate. Likewise, it is indisputable that Russia is trying to make progress in the area, in particular by intensifying its diplomatic and economic relations with Cuba, with the aim, it has been claimed, of keeping the island in its orbit 'precisely at the time when the United States has returned to Cold War policies, intending to freeze the island out' (Sabatini and Naylor, 2017).

Certainly, however, there is currently no block of forces in Latin America capable of proposing alternative and autonomous routes with respect to the United States. The 'progressive cycle' that began between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the millennium and which has had great weight in the last fifteen years in the subcontinent seems to have come to the end of its journey, paving the way for the return of the neoliberal right. This is what has happened in Argentina, Brazil, and, in part, in Chile, and what could also soon happen in Venezuela, where, apart from the economic warfare of international imperialism and of internal oligarchies, the left and center-left governments, radical and moderate, have paid and are paying the price for not being able to free themselves from dependence on the main national resources and not being able to impose adequate structural measures that would transform the countries in the long run. Despite this, it is not

excluded that things cannot change very soon. The Trump administration's choices could even open to the Latin American countries scenarios unthinkable until now.

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