

Re-energising Transatlantic Relations: Towards a Different EU Approach to Latin America

by Raffaele Piras

The fast-evolving international environment and the ongoing global pandemic have introduced new challenges and opportunities for Europe's transatlantic partnerships. While relations with the Trump administration suffer from unprecedented tensions and strategic drift, Europe should not overlook the "other" transatlantic relationship, exploring opportunities to both deepen and widen EU-Latin American relations in line with the new European Commission's call for a "stronger Europe in the world".

Europe-Latin America relations have a long history, but momentum has gradually dissipated, leading to a situation today in which bi-regional communications are largely confined to sterile trade talks. It is time for the EU to reconsider its approach to Latin America, applying greater strategic thinking to this relationship, elevating it to a higher political plane that better

reflects the relationships potential and importance for both sides.

A number of factors have traditionally hampered talks between the two regions. While divisions between European member states certainly play a role, geography represents another constraint, as Brussels tends to prioritise its immediate neighbourhood, particularly to the east and south.

While the 2016 EU Global Strategy did reference a "wider Atlantic space"¹ as enveloping the European and American continents, progress on the road towards deeper cooperation has been slow. A number of more recent political developments have added further obstacles, but several aspects indicate that there is still much the EU

¹ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, June 2016, para. 3.4, <https://europa.eu/!Tr66qx>.

Raffaele Piras holds a two-year Master's in Political Science at Università di Roma La Sapienza and a Master of Science in International Relations at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Mainly dealing with global governance, his areas of interest are Latin America and China.

can do to strengthen cooperation.

The new European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has promised to boost the EU's role on the world stage, highlighting her objective to pursue an agenda heavily geared toward external relations during her first press conference since taking office.

Latin America should feature as an integral part of this plan. While traditional and emerging actors are intensifying their power ambitions in the subcontinent, Europe requires a more strategic framework of engagement with Latin America. Building on its strong historical and cultural ties, the EU should labour to develop new objectives for action, seeking to de-escalate tensions and position itself as a reliable actor on the subcontinent.

An encouraging signal was given by the nomination of Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Borrell as the new EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy (HR/VP). A fierce advocate for closer EU-Latin American ties, Borrell has been a major European player on Latin American issues since early 2000s, when he drove the creation of the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly (EUROLAT).² Aimed at being the political arm of the bi-regional relationship, the latter has in fact constituted the parliamentary dimension of the

broader EU-Latin American strategic partnership (EU-CELAC) by providing it with comprehensive – although often unimplemented – recommendations.

The evolution of EU-CELAC summits, the initially bi-annual meeting between heads of state or government of both regions on strategic topics, may best represent the current state of affairs. The strategic partnership between the EU and Latin American Countries (LAC) was established in Rio de Janeiro in 1999, and six summits have since taken place. Yet, since the creation of CELAC in 2011 – when Caribbean States were integrated into the community of Latin American countries – only two summits have been held, the last one being in Brussels back in 2015.

In the context of a sharp regional turn towards the political right, the election of conservative governments in Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Brazil had negative consequences on inter-regional dialogue, resulting in an indefinite postponement of the EU-CELAC summit, originally planned for October 2017 in El Salvador. While the summit had to be postponed due to disagreements inside CELAC about developments in Venezuela, the fact that little has been done to re-convene this meeting speaks volumes about the state of affairs.

Frustration over the stagnation of EU-CELAC summitry was expressed by Borrell following the Foreign Affairs Council on 9 December 2019, just days after coming to office. In noting that “over the last five years, there has not been any high level summit”, Borrell promised that re-energising relations

² European Parliament, *Inaugural Meeting of Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly*, 9 November 2006, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=IM-PRESS&reference=20061106IPR12367&language=EN>.

“will be one of [the] priorities” of his mandate.³ This objective seems to be shared by the current German Presidency of Council as well. It is worth recalling that Germany announced a new policy towards Latin America in May 2019, recognising LAC as strategic allies globally despite geographical distance.⁴

In parallel with a commitment to return to regular summits, and in the face of Trump’s erratic approach towards the region and disregard for European sensitivities and interests, the EU should focus on re-energising the “other” transatlantic relationship.

Trump’s failure to attend the Summit of the Americas in April 2018 in Peru, and most notably his backing of the coup and semi-coup attempts in Venezuela and Bolivia, indicate the erratic and unilateralist nature of his policy. Such policies have deepened internal fragmentation and ideological tensions among LAC, creating room for the penetration of other actors, from Russia to China and even Iran. EU should not be left on the side-lines and explore opportunities to strengthen its presence on the sub-continent, both as a potential mediator between LAC and the US Trump administration and among LAC themselves.

³ EEAS, *Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Press Conference following the Foreign Affairs Council*, Brussels, 9 December 2019, <https://europa.eu/!Tf73RF>.

⁴ German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Opening Speech by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas at the Latin America-Caribbean Conference*, Berlin, 28 May 2019, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/maas-latin-america-caribbean-conference/2222232>.

De-escalating tensions through multilateral dialogue and compromise would not only be beneficial to the bi-regional relationship, Latin America and the Americas in general, but also help re-energise the international rules based order. Under attack from various quarters, this order represents the best insurance for European security and prosperity and provides Europe with important avenues to strengthen relations with other like-minded states in the world, including in Latin America.

While trade is certainly crucial – as displayed by the latest agreement reached in June 2019 between the European Union and Mercosur⁵ –, it is time for the EU to enhance the genuinely political nature of the relationship. Such objective is shared by the Commission and EEAS’ Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council in April 2019, which proposed to boost the bi-regional partnership through the four pillars of prosperity, democracy, resilience and effective global governance.⁶ Yet, it is important for European political leaders to also consider other aspects of the relationship.

Consider the political instability impacting the southern half of the Atlantic space. The unexpected wave of street protests that is shaking the

⁵ European Commission, *EU and Mercosur Reach Agreement on Trade*, 28 June 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_3396.

⁶ European Commission and EEAS, *European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean: Joining Forces for a Common Future* (JOIN/2019/6), April 2019, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52019JC0006>.

region since October 2019 should spur Europe to put in practice the too-often abstract rhetoric about shared values between Europe and Latin America. From Ecuador to Chile passing through Colombia, these countries are experiencing formidable mass demonstrations calling for major – if not constitutional – reforms in terms of equality, the environment, corruption and representation.

The EU is particularly well placed to leverage these demands and strengthen bi-regional relations with practical action. In the case of Chile, this means not only offering support to a possible re-drafting of the constitution but also condemning the Piñera government's aggressive handling of the uprising. While demanding investigations into the excessive use of force by the security services – and cooperating with the international mission of the UN Human Rights Office to this end – the EU could provide technical support in counselling a variety of legal and judicial reforms on issues such as pensions, health and education and towards a broader and improved welfare state, building on the diverse legal traditions of its member states.

Second, Venezuela. The EU has recently, albeit timidly, sought to assert its own policy on the crisis, most notably through the Oslo Dialogue and the International Contact Group (ICG).⁷ While both forums aimed at providing Venezuela with a neutral negotiating table to exit the crisis,

⁷ EEAS, *International Contact Group – Meeting*, Montevideo, 7 February 2019, <https://europa.eu/!bP68QH>.

such mediation endeavours lacked diplomatic creativity, whereas EU efforts to differentiate its policy from that of the US still suffer from internal divisions and a lack of assertiveness vis-à-vis Washington.

Instead of supporting the creation of a mediation group to de-escalate tensions before a more serious crisis broke out, the EU hastily decided to establish one only once Juan Guaidó – the then opposition leader of the National Assembly – declared himself president in early 2019 and the crisis erupted. In doing so, the EU did not act as a mediator but rather as a supporter of Guaidó, in fact preventing itself from being a reliable political mediator in the crisis.

More recently, on 30 March 2020, in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the Democratic Transition Framework, tying humanitarian assistance to tackle the pandemic to a political transition in Venezuela.⁸ The EU should object to such a policy. Going further, it should call for a suspension of US economic sanctions – as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet did – recognising that they are hurting Venezuelan people and destabilizing the region by fuelling migrant flows.⁹

⁸ US Department of State, *Democratic Transition Framework for Venezuela*, 31 March 2020, <https://www.state.gov/democratic-transition-framework-for-venezuela>.

⁹ OHCHR, *Bachelet Calls for Easing of Sanctions to Enable Medical System to Fight COVID-19 and Limit Global Contagion*, 24 March 2020, <https://shar.es/abcW9T>.

Such efforts could provide the EU with new political momentum and visibility, helping to relaunch and re-energise its relations with Latin American countries. Moving beyond its focus on trade agreements and adding genuine political objectives by re-framing the bi-regional relationship as an integral component of the EU's wider global ambitions to support the rules based order are indispensable starting points for this endeavour.

The ongoing global pandemic could certainly have a braking effect on EU action, but may also provide new opportunities to engage, not least given the significant uptake in recent contagion figures in Latin America. While the EU alone will be hard pressed to make a significant difference in LAC, adopting and operationalising Europe's concept of "principled pragmatism" can strengthen the EU's reliability as an actor capable of solving complex dilemmas spanning the social, political and economic domains. Ultimately, this could offer Latin American countries a cooperative framework which does not recall the imperial attitude of the US or the self-serving and the neo-colonial traits of the Chinese or Russians.

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Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

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