

Canada, Latin America and the Death of the Monroe Doctrine

By Carlo Dade, Executive Director

The Monroe doctrine finally, officially, may be dead. If so, this presents an unparalleled moment for Canada to step into the new spaces that are opening and play a more active role in the hemisphere that is our home.

Since first articulated by President Monroe in 1823, the United States has defined the Western Hemisphere as an area of exclusive US dominance or, from the American perspective, an area of unique US responsibility. Interference in the hemisphere by outside powers or US-perceived threats to the *status quo* by countries within the hemisphere were all subject to a strong response. The Monroe doctrine was actually mentioned explicitly in the charter of the League of Nations and from the Cold War through the Reagan and first Bush presidencies, it was unabashedly used to justify micromanagement of economic and political developments in the hemisphere. And micromanage the US did, from Mexico to Grenada to Panama to the Southern Cone with the rare setback such as Cuba under Fidel Castro. While no one in the hemisphere endorsed this doctrine, it was generally accepted as one of those things that, like the weather, you really can't do much about.

But, the weather is changing.

Perhaps the strongest case for the death of the Monroe doctrine has been made in the opening paragraph of a new task force report, "U.S.-Latin America Relations: A New Direction for a New Reality" by the universally-respected and venerated US Council on Foreign Relations. It is important to note that no one is saying that the US will disappear from Latin America or that the US will face a significant rival. Rather, the argument is that there has been a subtle shift as the US has become marginally less capable of micromanaging the region at the same time that countries within the hemisphere have grown marginally more capable of filling the small, defined spaces that the US is vacating.

For the US, the costs—financial, material and psychological—of engagement in Iraq, the fall of the neo-conservatives in Washington and rising expectations of a more open US international engagement under an Obama or McCain presidency are making the Monroe doctrine seem irrelevant.

More to the point though is the rise of emerging powers led by Brazil, Chile and Mexico who, despite problems at home, now feel confident and competent to shoulder more real hemispheric responsibilities.

This though would not be the first time that the Monroe doctrine has been declared dead. Before we get ahead of ourselves we need to make sure the corpse is cold. What makes this time different is the conflux of factors. First, are the global changes. Yes, the US is still the world superpower and will not be abdicating all responsibility globally and certainly not in this hemisphere. Yet, the threats to US security and power have changed radically. In place of a global struggle against communism, the US is now consumed by a global fight against non-

state disorder: terrorism and criminal syndicates. Among these two, terrorism has most captured US attention.

Rather than chasing down communists in the jungles of Central America and cities of South America, the US is focused on combating Islamic extremism, primarily in the Middle East and Asia. This coupled with a tab on the war in Iraq running at over US\$500,000 a minute and a recession looming at home, means the US simply lacks the resources, will or interest to micromanage this hemisphere. To put it crudely, as long as there is no proliferation of jihadists or al Qaeda cells in the Americas, the US can afford to stop micromanaging the region the way it did during the Cold War.

At this juncture the US is still the sole world hegemon and faces no external challenges to its role in the region. Recent increases in trade by China have been just that—increases in trade, full stop. Though China is, and going back almost a generation, has been seeking to persuade countries in the hemisphere to grant it diplomatic recognition, its agenda in the Americas does not go beyond a narrow mercantilist pursuit of raw materials. China has no interest in regime change or political instability in the region. As opposed to the Cold War era, China's intervention today is limited to lobbying whoever is in power to vote against Taiwan and to sell it raw materials. This is not the type of "challenge" that the Monroe doctrine in any of its manifestations was designed to confront. The entry of other countries into the region such as Iran via Venezuela is insubstantial sound and fury, more a side show designed to annoy the US. But no one except the most zealous of the neo-cons and desperate late night Fox News anchors, have taken this seriously.

This relaxation by the US on the one hand and the constraints it faces on the other has created new openings in the hemisphere that the Latin Americans have begun to fill. The best example of this is the leadership and sustenance of the current United Nation's mission in Haiti, which has been led on the military front since its inception not by the US or by Canada but by Brazil. Second-in-command of the mission rotates between Argentina, Chile and Uruguay, each of whom has more troops on the ground than Canada and the US combined. The era of US hegemony in peacekeeping operations in this hemisphere is clearly over. Despite the occasional setback, the Latin Americans have made more of a success of Haiti than have we or the Americans. And this success is engendering greater confidence.

As opposed to the past, the Americans see the Brazilian rise in Haiti as a godsend, not as a threat or a challenge. Somebody had to do something about Haiti. With the US bogged down in two wars with a third (Iran) and a fourth (North Korea) hovering as possibilities and Canada completely spent in Afghanistan, the Brazilians saw an opportunity to put their money where their mouth had been in demanding greater respect and a larger role in hemispheric and global affairs. The gamble has paid off admirably and the Brazilians and their Latin American partners, having paid their dues, will not go quietly back to the farm team should the US decide to bring the Monroe doctrine off the bench.

The other major change has occurred within the US. Under the Carter administration, the US had tried a policy of openness with Latin America. This was swept aside with the fervent anti-communism of the Reagan revolution. Reagan foreign policy was a popular reaction to what was perceived to have been a too tolerant, too open, too soft Carter foreign policy. The US electorate in the Eighties was ready for a more assertive, more aggressive and more confrontational foreign policy. Reviving the Monroe doctrine fit the bill.

After eight years of a Bush foreign policy filled with the detritus of “dead or alive” and “bring it on”, the pendulum has swung the other way. Now the popular view is that restoring US prominence means consensus-building, dialogue, and openness.

This time around, there will be no resurrection of the corpse of the Monroe doctrine by the right in the US. The neo-cons are in retreat, saddled, along with the US military, with putting everything they have left into Iraq. Rather than neo-cons, the new US administration will be composed of neo-realists who, upon quickly calculating the cost-benefit of various foreign policy options for the hemisphere, will have to conclude that ceding control and space is not just smart but also unavoidable.

So where does this leave Canada? In a remarkably envious position. We have had success in the Americas from quiet involvement to help end the wars in Central America and Peru. But we have always felt a sense of frustration, a sense that we could do more if only the space and partners were there. That moment appears to be at hand.

Though we have a strong and close relationship with the US on our continent, in the larger hemisphere we have often been at odds over our different world views, concepts over the role of government, justice, and human security. From Cuba to Central America to our current championing of free trade with Colombia, the Americas has been one place where we’ve demonstrated to the world how we are different from the Americans. We do not do this deliberately or to provoke the US; we simply are different and this, from time to time, comes out in our engagement in this hemisphere.

Differences between Canada and the US have been noticed in the hemisphere. As countries like Brazil and Chile seek to take on more responsibility and grow from emerging powers into middle powers there should be a natural role for Canada as a friend, ally and companion. Someone who can treat these countries as equals, who will actually listen to what they have to say and engage. The Canadian International Development Agency has already begun to reach out their counterparts in Chile, Brazil and Mexico as these countries seek to do more in the hemisphere and this overture has been warmly received. We can do much more along these lines. Forging an alliance with these countries to develop alternatives for future engagement and development in Cuba and developing alternative paradigms for migration and labour mobility are other ideas with potential.

In many ways, we share more in common with Brazil and certainly with Chile than we do with the Americans. As opposed to recent American presidents, the concept of “social justice” is not something a Canadian Prime Minister needs explained to him before he heads off to tour the region. Canadians read about the danger of the rise of a “new left” in the hemisphere led by socialists like Bachelet in Chile, Lula in Brazil and Tabarez Vasquez in Uruguay and we scratch our heads and wonder what the fuss is all about. We look at the US bogeyman *du jour*, President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and are reminded more a certain provincial premier from the Maritimes than of the next great threat to humanity.

If the Monroe doctrine is indeed dead, there may be more space for Canada. We may find that we share more in common with those stepping in to fill the new spaces. And on that common ground, Canada may finally find a true home in the hemisphere.

Abridged versions of this article have appeared in the Globe & Mail (Canada) and Miami Herald (United States).