

**Adolfo Suarez Memorial Debate: Ibero-American Perceptions of the  
Future World Order  
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It is a pleasure to participate in the Adolfo Suarez Memorial Debate. I would like to thank João Espada for his kind invitation to participate in the 2020 Estoril Political Forum. I regret that the current pandemic prevents us from being at the wonderful setting provided by Estoril.

I shall go straight to the point. Talking about Ibero-America implies talking about two very different worlds, each of them with enormous internal differences. On the one hand, Latin America; on the other, the Iberian Peninsula, which means Spain and Portugal plus Andorra, given the latter's recent incorporation to the Ibero-American General Secretariat or SEGIB. It is true that in Spain –essentially in Spain–, many use the word Ibero-America as a synonym for Latin America, since they consider it to be a shameful loan from France, even an imposition. Personally, I prefer to call Latin America by this name and to use Ibero-America to refer to this complex but at the same time enriching set of countries, societies, languages and peoples that make up the universe of those who speak in Portuguese and Spanish.

The first question to ask is if there is something that can be defined as Ibero-American perceptions. Or if there is an Ibero-American vision of the world. It is difficult for something like that to exist. To begin with, due to the differences I have already mentioned between Europe and Latin

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America. Further, because there are so many other differences both within Latin America itself but also between Spain and Portugal. Let's look at two extreme examples to see the differences on this side of the Atlantic. Mexico is not the same as Paraguay or Brazil as Honduras. All of this makes it difficult to share perceptions about the international agenda and, in particular, about the future world order.

Spain and Portugal belong to the European Union, a regional integration process that despite its many difficulties continues to make progress. In Latin America, regional integration is undergoing a deep crisis. Almost all of the integration institutions that emerged in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century under the protection of the Bolivarian umbrella –such as ALBA, Unasur and CELAC– are practically paralysed. The most serious point, and good proof of this deterioration process, is that during the most critical months of the pandemic there has been practically no coordinated intergovernmental action, either to minimise its impact or to improve the level of response. In general terms, the policy has been ‘every man for himself’ (*‘sauve qui peut!’*) and all governments have acted of their own accord and in their own interest.

To this we should add the presence of the so-called COVID-populists, a select group with no political or ideological borders. Among them, in a strange coexistence, we've got characters as ideologically opposed as Brazil's Bolsonaro and Mexico's López Obrador, both with a clear denialist or reductionist attitude towards the pandemic. They also include the Bolivarians Nicolás Maduro and Daniel Ortega, but El Salvador's right-leaning Nayib Bukele as well. On this point, Latin America has the privilege of having set an international trend. Populism, a phenomenon created in the continent –just remember Juan Domingo Perón–, is now a

world-wide trend, from Italy (with Berlusconi) to the Philippines (with Duterte) and from Russia (with Putin) to the United States (with Trump).

Today, Latin America is characterised by a high level of fragmentation, a process that began in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but also by its diversity and its high level of uncertainty. Its diversity is the product of the last great electoral cycle (from 2017 to 2019), which did not give rise to the expected shift to the right. On the contrary, in the elections there has been a relative balance between governments of the left and centre-left and those of the right and centre-right. The result of the Bolivian election may alter this situation. For its part, the uncertainty has been largely generated by the intense and violent mobilisations of the second half of 2019. Chile, Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia, without forgetting Nicaragua and Venezuela, are some worrying examples.

These three factors, especially fragmentation and diversity, and to a lesser extent uncertainty, have made it impossible to reach a minimum consensus on either the regional or the international agendas. As for the regional agenda, we have recently seen how the President of the Inter-American Development Bank was elected. The election of Trump's candidate, breaking one of the Bank's unwritten rules, has shown the inability of Latin American governments to reach a common position and choose a powerful consensus candidate and ensuring a different outcome. But it proved to be impossible, beyond their ability.

What's more, the Venezuelan crisis has become an element of tension that complicates both relations within Latin America and those of Latin America with the rest of the world. The suspension of the EU-CELAC Summit, which should have been held in 2017, is just one example, but it is

not the only one.

Emilio Lamo de Espinosa, Chairman of the Elcano Royal Institute, often says that in international issues Latin America is neither present nor expected. This forceful statement is related to the peculiar way that Latin America has of finding its place in the world. Few countries saw globalisation more as an opportunity than a threat: Chile and Colombia among them. Experiences like that of the Pacific Alliance are rare. And although the period of autarky is over, statism and protectionism are still present in the region.

In other words, Latin America is only interested in those issues on the international agenda that directly affect it. If they do not, it's better to look the other way or show a neutrality that ultimately ends up being misunderstood. Traditionally, for instance, Latin American governments, regardless of their political affiliation, have decided that Islamic terrorism is a marginal problem in their region (something that, with some exceptions, is true) and that, therefore, they should not engage in any activity that implies an active attitude to face up to it and reduce the risk it poses.

Another important example is Latin America's secondary role in the G-20, despite the fact that its activity has currently decreased considerably. To begin with, it should be noted that Latin America is overrepresented, due to the presence of Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. And yet their level of activity has been minimal. Not only that, but coordination between the three countries among themselves and with the rest of Latin American is practically non-existent. There has been minimal coordination. The only instance was under the Argentine presidency of the G-20, when Mauricio

Macri ruled the country. All these factors have led to neither the European Union nor the United States seeing Latin America as a reliable partner in international matters.

The post-pandemic world will be marked by the growing confrontation between the United States and China, a confrontation that goes far beyond the trade war and is increasingly open and widespread. Right now, for example, the People's Republic of China has protested the Trump Administration's rearmament plans for Taiwan and may want to take advantage of the post-election period, especially in the event of Biden winning, to escalate the confrontation. In Latin America, the government of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Trump's main regional ally, is evaluating banning Huawei from participating in the development of 5G in his country.

What we are seeing, in a process that should intensify over the coming years, is a growing pressure from both Washington and Beijing so that their business partners, friends and allies end up choosing in favour of one and against the other. If the European Union, despite its difficulties and the differences between member countries, has managed to develop a doctrine of 'strategic autonomy', which implies following the what Frank Sinatra would refer as 'My way', we might legitimately ask if Latin America will be in a position to do something similar. And here the answer can be no other than 'NO'. At least for now.

As I have already said, it is impossible to reach the necessary consensus on any issue on the international agenda, and this is one of them. At this point it is impossible to find common positions. This weakens Latin American countries and leaves them at the mercy of the two great powers.

It should not be forgotten that, on the one hand, the United States continues to be the international actor with the greatest prominence in the region. Therefore, its capacity for exerting pressure remains high. On the other hand, China has become in a very short time the leading or second-largest trading partner for most Latin American countries. Its investments are growing and it has public funds to build infrastructure that Western governments lack. At the same time, the use of the 'The belt and road initiative' has allowed it to have an ever-greater regional presence.

Here an important question arises: will Latin American countries be able to do without the Chinese market and Chinese investments? Again, the answer is 'No' and this will condition their decisions. Bolsonaro is an example: when he began his mandate he was forced by the Chinese authorities to distance himself from Taiwan if he did not want their presence to disappear. The question, which was not rhetorical, was: do you want to exchange the Chinese market for the United States? However, there is an important issue here, in view of the drift that COVID-19 has imposed on international relations. Will there or will there not be a self-imposed withdrawal by China in the current circumstances? And how will this affect the relationship with the United States and its presence in Latin America?

One final note. In recent months, the President of Argentina, Alberto Fernández, has repeatedly said that the virus has destroyed capitalism. Beyond the mistaken forecast, his statement corroborates how isolated some governments are from international questions, and how little they think about essential issues for post-COVID reconstruction, such as the green pact, the commitment to renewable energy, the fight against climate change and the need to be closely linked to the digital revolution.