

# The Opportunities Ahead: Policy in the Western Hemisphere

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**An Interview with Sumner Becker, Maxwell  
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19

***Brown Journal of World Affairs:*** What are the most important issues on the State Department’s agenda for the Western Hemisphere in the coming years, and have these priorities shifted at all since the replacement of Secretary Hillary Clinton with Secretary John Kerry?

**Roberta S. Jacobson:** In this hemisphere, the priorities are fairly constant. One of the things you have to remember is that this is still the Obama Administration—secretaries set the policies, but the President is ultimately in charge. There are a couple of things that we’re focusing on. One is greater economic opportunity. At the end of the [Obama Administration’s] first term, we got the Colombia and Panama free trade agreements ratified. We now have free trade agreements with 12 countries in the region, and that’s probably all we’re going to have for a while, since these were the countries interested in pursuing free trade agreements. So what do we do next? The answer lies in the Trans-Pacific

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Partnership [TPP]. While most people think of the TPP as just the eight [member] countries in Asia, there are actually five Western Hemisphere countries in it as well—Canada, the United States, Mexico, Chile, and Peru. It's incredibly important to include the Western Hemisphere, especially Mexico and Canada, in the Partnership. If you look at the Alliance of the Pacific—which includes four countries, and soon Costa Rica—they're doing incredible things in terms of economic integration. They're way ahead of their neighbors. Across the Hemisphere over the last 15 years we have seen 56 million people moving out of poverty into the middle class and incredibly good macro numbers—largely fueled by commodity purchases by China. Part of the issue now is how to sustain the growth and expand it further to benefit the still large numbers of people who are living in poverty—there are whole swaths of the population in the Western Hemisphere that have really not yet benefitted from this growth. However, none of this is sustainable unless countries diversify their trade and continue to open their economies.

The second area where we have to put more emphasis—and it's not one in which U.S. foreign policy has put much emphasis until very recently—is education. There have been numerous surveys done recently on the top higher education systems in the world, and Latin American universities almost don't appear on those lists. There are some educational institutions such as UNAM [Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México] and the University of São Paulo on the list, but not many. Clearly there will need to be a qualitative leap in education—especially in the STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] fields—and the United States needs to do more to partner with Latin American universities in these areas. That's one of the reasons President Obama wants the “100,000 Strong in the Americas” initiative to increase the number of student exchanges in our hemisphere; we have to double the current annual numbers to get to our goal of 100,000 exchange students in each direction.

A third area of focus is social inclusion, with a particular focus on women, indigenous people, and the LGBT community. These were issues that were personally very important to Secretary Clinton, and I don't think that focus will change under Secretary Kerry. The President's institutionalization of the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues before Secretary Clinton left, for example, really was the signal that this focus is permanent.

There's no doubt that Secretary Kerry brings to the job some of his own particular passions. And for him, that's the environment and climate change. To me, the Western Hemisphere is the perfect home for these issues because there are some real leaders in our hemisphere. Mexico did a fantastic job at COP16

[The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change] in Cancun, and the country continues to be a leader on both conservation and wind power. Mexico is also focusing on reducing its carbon footprint. So there will be certain areas where Secretary Kerry will put his own imprint on things, but the policy priorities remain largely the same in the second term of the Obama Administration.

**Journal:** Referring back to the economic side of U.S. foreign policy, what do you think will be the future of economic relations between the United States and Central and South America?

**Jacobson:** Some relationships are changing faster than others, and I think the relationship with Central America is changing and certainly did change to some extent because of CAFTA–DR [Dominican Republic–Central America Free Trade Agreement], but not as much as elsewhere. Central America, I will just say, still has very significant challenges. Regarding South America, people talk about how China has really strengthened its economic ties with the region, and it surely has. On the whole, the Chinese appetite for raw materials has been very good for Latin America, but there are still a couple of concerns.

First, trade has to be based on a set of international global trading rules by which China abides. Second, there are labor concerns, namely whether China is bringing in its own labor or working with global labor. As a result, companies became a lot savvier in terms of demanding the relationship on an equal footing.

Look at the different trade relationships between Brazil, China, and the United States. Brazil's trade with China is dominated by Brazilian exports of agricultural and mineral commodities and imports of Chinese manufactured goods. On the other hand, the United States is Brazil's largest, most diversified export market with trade spanning over 1500 products and services. It is particularly exciting to see the upward trend in services and tourism, and the potential for deeper ties is tremendous. Our hemisphere must continue to

diversify and undertake exciting joint projects, whether venturing into biofuels or aerospace with Brazil or creating innovation hubs in Santiago, Chile, for example. The relationship needs to continue to evolve to stimulate innovation and new areas of cooperation, not just follow the trade, commercial, or investment patterns of the past.

What is really interesting is that with Latin America growing faster than

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the United States—which hasn’t happened often in the past—there are huge amounts of FDI [foreign direct investment] flows into the United States from the region. Last year, FDI from the United States into Mexico declined slightly, and that was somewhat surprising. Mexican investment into the United States, however, increased. Another example: the way Brazil’s investment into the United States has grown is just dramatic. These relationships are changing in ways that are really healthy, but there are lots of areas where we can continue to push and make sure that we’re creating an environment that encourages innovation.

**Journal:** From the political side of interregional relations, the Obama Administration has made it a priority to reconsider immigration policy in the second term. Do you think that any change in policy might affect U.S. relations with the rest of the Western Hemisphere?

**Jacobson:** The effect will be huge. I said to some people after the election in November—especially as we entered the second term—there are two domestic issues where movement will be an enormous lift to the foreign policy with this hemisphere. One is immigration policy. It’s hard to overstate the practical impact of actually getting comprehensive immigration reform—11 or 12 million people will come out of the shadows and become legal, and there will be a guest worker program that allows people to come in a legal fashion and to circulate freely.

But the effect is also way beyond the practical—it’s psychological. Immigration reform removes from the table a complex and emotional issue. It’s interesting, because up until now the United States has essentially said to its foreign neighbors, “Please, please, please, stay out of the debate. This is not an international foreign policy debate. It’s really domestic.” But there comes a point in this process when the United States has to work with our partners, because it cannot implement this change without collaborating with them. We will need people to issue new visas. We will need all kinds of new structures and relationships, especially with Central America and Mexico, to make this work. At that point, it becomes very much a foreign policy issue.

The second policy area in which we will get lift unless nothing at all passes is gun control. People in the Hemisphere have been complaining about guns sourced to the United States for years. Even if we can’t get everything that the administration wants, if we can at least get the background check or some other new regulations, doing something on gun control will be enormously helpful to our citizen security programs as well as our efforts to trace guns and work cooperatively with other countries. It’s interesting to me the way in which all

of this domestic policy becomes linked to foreign policy. We say it’s *intermestic*; it’s international policy but also very much a domestic issue.

**Journal:** It seems that the drug issue is also in a sense intermestic in that individual states’ policies directly affect both domestic and international markets. In light of recent actions by the U.S. and other nations to crack down on the drug trade and revamp drug policy—including a trend towards legalization—how do these events affect economic relationships in the region?

**Jacobson:** The last election opened debates in countries throughout the Hemisphere, in a healthy way, about whether the policies that we’re pursuing on narcotics are working. Some of that same debate is happening in the United States, clearly. The referenda in Washington and Colorado were very much about whether policy domestically is working. It’s a good thing that we can point to a debate that is taking place and that the United States is not sitting around saying, “We really don’t want to hear it.” The president made it clear in Cartagena, Colombia, that he was not averse to having a conversation—quite the contrary. What he wanted to be sure of was that we were having a conversation that was fact based and backed by data. What I find is that the conversation sometimes begins with “What we’re doing isn’t working. We have to look at alternatives, including legalization.” But then what? There’s no one who has then come forward and said, “I have a proposal. Here is what I’d like to do. I’ve looked at Amsterdam. I’ve looked at Portugal. I’ve looked at various policies in the Hemisphere, which decriminalize but don’t legalize yet. And I think if we do the following it might work better.” Even the Global Commission on Drug Policy report and other studies like it have not really presented a complete alternative. It’s one of the reasons why I think we can have the conversation, but I want to make sure it’s not solely a conversation of sound bites, but rather one backed by facts.

Now, that’s one of the reasons why the presidents decided at Cartagena that they were going to ask the OAS [Organization of American States] to do a study on the drug problem in the Americas. That study is not done yet, but I think it will be illuminating. I also feel pretty strongly that this administration to some extent—like many administrations before it—gets characterized as doing only one thing, and that’s not fair. We are characterized as doing only the law enforcement stuff, mostly on the supply side, even in the United States. This administration has said from the beginning that it has to be a much more comprehensive approach, including public health, prevention, and significant

demand reduction. This administration increased funding for prevention and treatment—it's now at \$10 billion per year—and we have drug courts where cases don't go to the criminal justice system but toward rehabilitation. A lot of the things that are being talked about as alternatives are things we're actually doing and we'd be perfectly comfortable talking more about. It's a debate that's going to continue, but I just don't think it's been a very informed one so far.

**Journal:** It's interesting that much of public opinion in Latin America, especially now, is informed by what's going on in states in the United States. As Colorado and others reconsider this issue, the Latin American public is very much in tune to what is going on.

**Jacobson:** That's right. Mexico decriminalized small amounts of everything—right up to meth—a couple years ago and said those people would be going to rehabilitation and not to prison. Other countries have decriminalized marijuana but not legalized it, so there are different approaches that can be tried to see if they work. Everybody knows that long-term demand reduction is the only way to get this problem solved. It's interesting to me that it's no longer entirely a North–South debate either. Peruvian and Bolivian cocaine doesn't come to the United States. It goes to Brazil, then Africa and north to Europe. So there are more countries in the Hemisphere that have domestic demand issues than there were 10 years ago, unfortunately. And part of that can be attributed to the drop in drug use in the United States.

**Journal:** Turning back to an issue we touched on briefly—you mentioned there was a focus on including women in the process of engaging with Latin America. Could you expand on their role?

**Jacobson:** Sure. On the whole Latin America does better than a lot of other parts of the world in terms of the participation of women in public life, whether that's in business or the public sector and government. In Colombia, for example, three of the last five foreign ministers have been female. Their foreign ministry is remarkably equal in gender in a lot of ways. When we meet with them, very often there are more women in their delegation than in ours, which is fascinating. It's not true in some other places, but it is true there. And we've obviously seen a number of female presidents in the Hemisphere.

But there is still a long way to go. One of the areas that Secretary Clinton was very committed to was improving women's entrepreneurship. We know the

statistics on small businesses in the United States, how many jobs they generate, and how good they are for economies—the same is true overseas. And yet small businesses in the Hemisphere don't thrive as much and don't grow as much, and there aren't as many women-owned businesses. So at the Summit of the Americas last year we launched a program called WEAmericas [Women's Entrepreneurship in the Americas] to help women who are small-business entrepreneurs—not microenterprises—move up the chain, whether that's in relation to size or openness to export, and connect with global markets in ways that they have not done up until now. In the United States, only between one and two percent of small businesses export goods or services, which is really staggering to me. In Latin America, the percentage is even smaller. So working on women's entrepreneurship is key to ensuring women participate in the region's economic growth.

The other area where we have a lot of work to do, frankly, is domestic violence and violence against women. Looking at severe citizen security problems, whether it was in Colombia in the past two decades or Guatemala right now, women are disproportionately affected: they are both more often the victims of violent crime and victimized by the system because the system is not prepared to deal with them humanely and is sometimes even dysfunctional. The conviction rate is low for crimes against women—I'm thinking of Guatemala, where there is a three-percent conviction rate for violent crime, and Mexico, where it's two percent. The female attorney general of Guatemala, when I was talking with her recently, said she's changed the conviction rate in Guatemala City to 14 percent. That's staggering. I think these are the kinds of things we need to keep working on, because we have not achieved enough progress in this area yet.

**Journal:** Like gender issues, religion plays a role in politics and I'm sure that affects what you do in the Western Hemisphere quite a bit. In what ways do you see religion influencing politics and civil society in the region, and how has that affected your work? Is there any significance in the selection of the first Latin American pope?

**Jacobson:** That's an interesting question. I've done a lot of work with Jewish communities in the region, all of which have shrunk over time, largely for economic reasons and not for religious or political reasons, although there's some of that in certain countries. It's dicey, for example, right now—I don't know how you

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would disaggregate it—the Jewish community in Venezuela, which was fairly robust, is dwindling rapidly. While some of this can be attributed to political factors, considering there had been lots of really ugly things said by Chávez and other people in Venezuela, on the other hand both crime and economic factors are also pushing people in this community to leave.

I don't know if we think very consciously about the role religion plays in our policy design or implementation, except that of course for years—either explicitly in USAID [United States Agency for International Development] programs or implicitly in economic programs—the issues of contraception, abortion, and the fertility rate have been directly linked to economic growth and development. We've gone through various cycles of what is called the Mexico City Policy that bars U.S. aid to any organization that funds abortions. This policy is not in effect under the Obama administration; it began during the Reagan Administration.

Latin America has really changed over the last decades, and it began probably in the 1960s and 1970s. The percentage of those who call themselves or are practicing Catholics has gone down in favor of evangelical Protestantism. This has been something that the Church has been quite concerned with, although the countries are still overwhelmingly Catholic. The selection of a Latin American pope is enormous; even with the diminution in Catholicism as practiced, its impact is just stunning. On that day, every news reporter on the subject and friend I talked to from the Hemisphere was so excited about it, saying, “If there is going to be a pope from the developing world, it should be someone from

Latin America.” And I think this is a very good thing for the Church, and certainly for the Hemisphere because of the pride it engenders. Argentina is having a rough time these days, so I think it was a good boost

for the country. It'll be interesting to see if this is going to make any difference in Latin America, if Pope Francis takes on a special role, and if he uses his role differently than other popes. 

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