

Adjustments in U.S. Foreign Policy towards Latin America under President Trump's First Years

Nguyen Vo Huyen Dung

Abstract—In the history of international relations, foreign policy has always been considered as one of the important strategic development directions of a country in a certain period. For the U.S. - the world power - the effects of its foreign policy are regional and global. Latin America - the region that has always been the strategic backyard of the U.S. over the past few years is having significant changes, especially in bilateral and multilateral cooperation. This has raised concerns about the U.S. - Latin American relations as well as changes in US foreign policy toward Latin America. So what has the President Donald Trump's administration changed in its foreign policy for this region during his first years? Will these adjustments affect this bilateral relationship? These will be the main contents in the following article.

Index Terms—Adjustments, foreign policy, Latin America U.S.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the 240 years since its inception, the United States (U.S.) from a young nation is now the world's superpower, with both political and economic influence not only in the region but also in the world. It can be said that, in any historical age, with any country, besides domestic policy, economic power, scientific and technological progress ... foreign policy always has a particularly important role in the development and shaping of a country's development strategy. The U.S. is therefore no reason an exception. In other words, the U.S. will not be able to have the great prosperity and influence based on both hard power and soft power today without proper, sharp and timely foreign policies in most of the key areas in the world including Latin America - an area associated with the U.S.'s interests based on its geostrategic location.

With three basic objectives of security, development and influence, right after gaining independence and momentum, the U.S. did not hide its intention to turn Latin America into a "backyard" which is typical marked with the introduction of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823. The reasons why this region became such an important area for the U.S. were that, apart from the geographical location, this region was also the place providing essential oil and alternative fuels for the U.S. That also means this region has such a huge commercial potential for the U.S. During the late 19th century and early 20th century, with the slogan "The Americas belongs to American" along with a series of U.S. policies and foreign affairs in this region, it has proved its ambition to monopolize Latin America before serving as a stepping stone to this nation's attempt to master the world. Thus it can be seen that, in the history of the

U.S. foreign policy, the Latin America region has always been one of the top concerns and priorities even though there have been many ups and downs and tensions in this relationship, when there were times in history, along with direct interventionism, the U.S. was strongly opposed and condemned in Latin America and this tension was only appeased after the launch of the Good Neighbor policy (1933) [3]. This is seen as a more flexible, softer way to protect "national interests" in U.S. foreign policy while maintaining certain interference in this "backyard" area. [5].

However, since the mid-20th century until now, due to the great fluctuations in international relations with regional changes and order, the U.S. has been forced to make adjustments in its foreign policy in which Latin America, although still has a certain position, seems to be no longer the top concern and priority as before. Revolutions in military technology and in maritime trade have reduced the strategic significance of Latin America to the U.S. In addition, the traditional diplomatic value of Latin America for the U.S. has also fallen sharply as more and more Latin American countries have a closer relationship with the Third World countries than the U.S. and pursue their national interests independently. It can be said that, although separate countries (Mexico, Canada, Brazil ...) are still important for the U.S. economy, but considering the overall importance of the region then clearly the Asia, Middle East or even Europe has surpassed Latin America to some extent. In addition, the problem of production, drug trafficking and migrants has further affected this relationship.

In November 2016, the U.S. witnessed a memorable moment of the country when for the first time in history; a businessman was elected and became the 45th President - President Donald Trump. As soon as the election result was announced, many scholars, experts, and researchers had made a series of analyzes and comments as well as predictions about adjustments in the U.S. foreign policy under President Donald Trump, especially in regional policy when the world is becoming increasingly complex and unpredictable. Will Donald Trump continue to maintain the policy of the previous president Barack Obama or will there be more unique and different policies? Whether Latin America can restore the position inherent in the U.S. foreign policy when during the campaign of Donald Trump, Mexico was the only Latin American country which was mentioned and the slogan "Make America Great Again" has had very clear messages? In fact, after more than a year in power, the administration of Donald Trump has made many decisions that caused many concerns for the international community such as withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), being cold with The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), criticizing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ... which makes it more difficult to make judgments about this government [11]. However, experts on Latin America are not surprised that President

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Donald Trump continues to not place Latin America in an important strategic position, but instead the Indo - Pacific region with a Free and Open Indo-Pacific Policy (FOIP) is considered to be inherited and expanded from former President Barack Obama's Pivot to Asia-Pacific policy.

In summary, the U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America has changed dramatically since the mid-20th century to the present. Although in the first years under President Donald Trump, there has not been a breakthrough change in the U.S. foreign policy towards this "backyard" area but with its economic potential and inherent strategic location, will the Donald Trump administration make other moves? A certain conclusion whether or not right now seems to be too hasty because President Donald Trump has just spent his early years in office and with his special personality, this President is expected to be able to make many new and breakthrough decisions, just like his own election results.

II. THE U.S. FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS LATIN AMERICA REGION

A. Before Donald Trump's administration

It can be said that since the early years of the 20th century up to now, the position of Latin American region in the U.S. foreign policy has undergone significant changes during the term of former President George W. Bush - a president who was considered to have given a lot of favor to this region since the beginning of his term in 2001 and that position was also affected by many objective and subjective factors. The terrorist attacks in September 11 2001, fighting in Afghanistan (October 2001) and Iraq (March 2003), the war with the Al-Qaeda forces later had put the U.S. in a new position - the long-running war on terrorism and forcing former President George W. Bush to adjust the focus of the U.S. foreign policy under which terrorism and destructive weapons become top concerns. The Middle East is now both a vengeance and a concern, meaning that Latin America cannot remain in the same position as before. During those years, the George W. Bush administration was associated with two persistent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, causing heavy economic losses and credibility for the U.S., leaving for the successor Barack Obama a recession economy and a country where people have been overstressed with the word "war" [4].

From the early years of his term in 2009, Barack Obama administration on one hand pulled out troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, intervened to deal with Islamic rebel forces, on the other hand adjusted the U.S. foreign policy with the policy of Pivot to Asia - Pacific. One of the most important factors influencing the former President Barack Obama's adjustments was the China's strong rise. Although the slogan of this resurgence is the "peaceful rise" that Beijing has emphasized since 2002, Washington clearly cannot help but be apprehensive when witnessing series of strong and challenging moves of China in this period. In other words, an undeniable fact is that under the administration of President Barack Obama, the Asia-Pacific region in general and Southeast Asia in particular have been particularly focused and the Latin American region so, although it seems to have returned to the "strategic backyard" position of the U.S. when shortly after taking office, former President Barack Obama

attended the 34th American Summit in Trinidad in April 2009 but after 8 years, ending two terms, what former President Barack Obama can do was just a re-engagement agreement with Cuba and the strategic interests of the U.S. in this area are still left open.

In summary, under the two periods of the governments of George W. Bush and Barack Obama, the influence of the U.S. in Latin America has been lower than in the first years of history, but that does not mean the U.S. will lose its role in this region or "cede" it to China, Russia or Japan ... countries that are seeking to expand their markets in Latin America. In other words, the nature of the U.S. - Latin America relationship remains the same, what different is the U.S.'s adjustment in its foreign policy toward the region in a different direction, recognizing Latin America's diverse interests, focusing on trade relations as the very words of former President Barack Obama in his inaugural address in 2009: "It is time to develop an equal relationship with Latin America. In the past, we sometimes tried to impose our conditions. Maybe we were wrong and we admit it." [6]

1) First years under Donald Trump's administration

If during the election campaign until the inauguration speech on January 20 2017, Donald Trump has always focused on domestic policy to solve the problems of increasing employment for the American people, resolving illegal immigration... then foreign policy was rarely mentioned. This has led many people to doubt about the entrepreneurial ability of this businessman and make the predictions about adjustments in the U.S. foreign policy more difficult under the administration of Donald Trump. In a global survey by the Pew Research Center [10] about how relations between the U. S. and the other regions of the world will change under President Donald Trump, almost all regions, from Africa, Asia - Pacific, Latin America to the Middle East, Europe, all showed that the percentage believed to be better was very low, instead mostly believed it remain the same or worse. In Latin America alone, 15% believed that the relationship between the U.S. and Latin America would be better, 46% thought it would be the same and the remaining 32% were quite pessimistic that this relationship would deteriorate (Fig. 1).

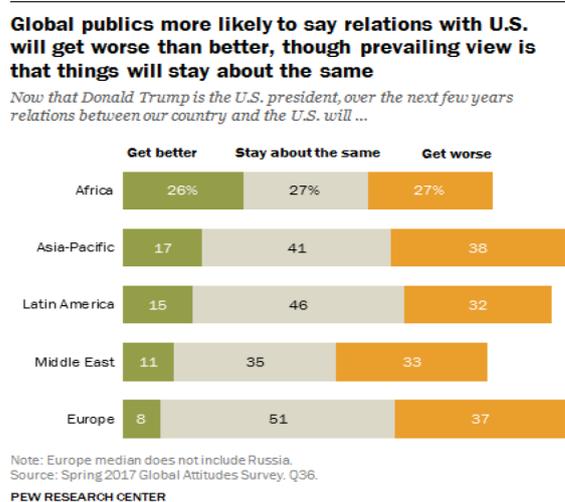
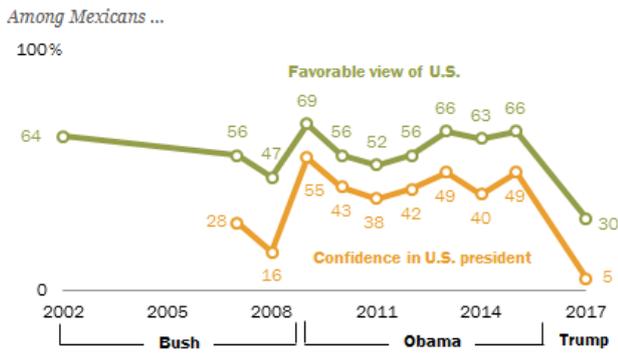


Fig. 1. Survey about the relations among U.S. and regions under Trump's administration

(Source: Global Attitudes Survey 2017, Pew Research Center)

Even in a survey of people in countries that are both neighbors and NAFTA members with the U.S. (Mexico and Canada) on President Donald Trump, the rate of support and confidence in the U.S. President has fallen to the lowest, much lower than the previous two presidents, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Specifically in Mexico, if the lowest rate of trust in President George W. Bush was 16% (2008), President Barack Obama was 38% (2011), then President Donald Trump's was only 5% (2017) (Fig. 2). The results of the survey were believed to indirectly reflect clearly the response of the Mexican people to President Donald Trump's declaration of building a border wall between the two countries.

In Mexico, steep drops in U.S. favorability and confidence in U.S. president

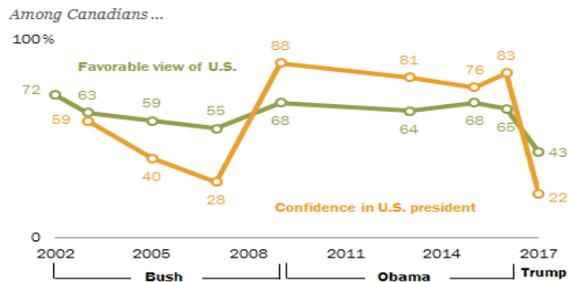


Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, Q12a & Q30a. PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Fig. 2. Survey among Mexicans about Donald Trump. (Source: (Source: Global attitudes survey 2017, pew research center)

Meanwhile, in Canada, for the first time in the Pew Research Center survey history, the U.S. support rate was lower than 50% when it was only 43% under President Donald Trump (2017) compared to the lowest rate 55% of President George W. Bush (2008) and 64% of Barack Obama (2013) (Fig. 3).

Trump, U.S. get lowest ratings from Canada in 15 years



Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey, Q12a & Q30a. PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Fig. 3. Survey among Canadians about Donald Trump. (Source: (Source: Global Attitudes Survey 2017, Pew Research Center)

Thus it can be seen that even in the two countries that are currently important trade partners of the U.S., Mexico and Canada in particular or Latin America in general, there were distrust and pessimism about the Donald Trump administration. Meanwhile, on the U.S. side, it was Donald Trump administration that also expressed "indifference" to Latin America when Donald Trump did not mention this

region during his campaign or giving unfriendly speech like building a border wall with Mexico, threatening to withdraw from NAFTA ... One of the most important reasons which can explain for this is that the White House is currently facing with too many foreign policy issues in other parts of the world, where there are more urgent fluctuations and tensions.

Although there have been adjustments in foreign policy and approaches to Latin America, it is undeniable that the Donald Trump government will continue its maintain foreign policy toward this region based on the three main pillars which are freedom of trade, democracy & dominance and security [8]. These are also the three pillars that Republican presidents such as George W. Bush or Democrats like Barack Obama have used. In these three pillars, free trade will still be promoted in addition to maintaining the remaining two pillars. Bilateral commercial cooperation and ensuring benefits for the U.S. are and will continue to be promoted by the administration of Donald Trump instead of multilateral cooperation as before. Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau in 2017 [2] showed that in the group of six countries that were the most important trading partners of the U.S., there were two countries from Latin America (Canada and Mexico) and Canada was also a leading country with the total trade value of up to 290.2 billion dollars (Fig. 4). This demonstrates the enormous economic potential of Latin American countries to the U.S. and the countries in this region are always important trading partners for the U.S. Therefore, despite adjustments in foreign policy, the Donald Trump's administration will certainly not be able to ignore the economic benefits in this "backyard" area, especially in the context that other great powers like China, Russia are increasingly promoting political influence through economic investment projects, trade cooperation with Latin American countries.



Fig. 4. America's most important trading partners. (Source: U.S. Census Bureau)

For the democratic & dominant pillar, the slogan "America First" shows the views of Donald Trump administration when promoting the national security interests and economic interests of the U.S. rather than promoting democracy or disseminating U.S. values of freedom and democracy. In other words, the administration of Donald Trump will tend to use hard power in both domestic and foreign policies with tough measures. A typical example is that President Donald Trump signed an order to extend sanctions with Cuba (09/2018) despite the previous diplomatic effort to normalize of former President Barack Obama. In addition to security issues, compared to other regions such as the Middle East and Asia, Latin America is stable and has less potential threats but due to the geographical position associated with the U.S.,

which means that any disturbance here could become a security threat to the U.S., though it is not a top priority, but certainly Latin America still occupies an important position in the security strategy of this great power. The progress of the Islamic Republic of Iran in maintaining and promoting relations with Latin American countries in recent years clearly has concerns about ISIS while there have been statistics showing that in recent years, a certain number of people from Latin America and the Caribbean have joined this organization [1].

It can be said that the U.S.-Latin American relationship under the administration of President Donald Trump has not yet changed much different from the period of the previous presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama but tough decisions together with President Donald Trump's policy of "America first" in addition to the intervention of countries from the Middle East, Asia - Pacific into Latin America region will make this relationship increasingly complex and diverse. Although in the first years of rule, it seemed that the Indo - Pacific region, along with the revival of the Diamond Quadrilateral (Quad 2) - a return cooperation of the four: U.S., Japan, India and Australia are said to be aimed at countering the China's "One Belt - One Road" policy [7], which has become one of the major highlights of the U.S. foreign policy under President Donald Trump, but adjustments in foreign policy to ensure U.S. rights and security in Latin America will certainly be a priority in any stage, under any presidential administration of the U.S.

III. CONCLUSION

In the first year of rule, the U.S. foreign policy in general and Latin American region in particular under the Donald Trump's administration, despite certain adjustments have been made, the nature of policies has been still mostly maintained. President Donald Trump is showing that he is ready to do what he has declared in the campaign and in fact until now, what this President has done is still being explained as all for the favor of national interests as the ideal he pursued, though those decisions have faced objections from the countries that are important alliances or trade partners of the U.S.

It may be still too early to make a definitive judgment on U.S. - Latin American relations under President Donald Trump but in terms of geostrategic position, economic potential, and trade relations or in terms of politics - security... Latin America will always be an important factor in the U.S. foreign policy. With special personality as well as the unique view of the Donald Trump administration, a scenario with more pragmatic approaches to Latin America is possible. Bilateral trade agreements with the U.S. trading partners in Latin America as well as military security cooperation will still be promoted to ensure the U.S. strategic interests in this backyard area as well as to counter the increasing influence of nations competing with the U.S. on the international arena like China and Russia. In addition, the fact that Latin American countries themselves also tend to actively expand relations with these countries, showing a more independent attitude towards the U.S. will also be the factors that greatly affect the adjustment in the U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America.

In short, a foreign policy with a tendency to increase hard power, strengthen bilateral relations, strengthen relations with allies, focus on the Indo-Pacific region as well as ensure national interests, the U.S.'s strategic interests in the region and the world... are expected to be outstanding features of the U.S. foreign policy under President Donald Trump [12].

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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