

The Obama Administration's New Partnership with the Americas

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Over the past several years, the United States has entered a period of sustained progress in our relations with the Americas. The new assertiveness of regional players like Brazil and Mexico, the deepening pace of integration in the Caribbean and Central and South America, and the increasing ties between Latin America and the Asia-Pacific region are all contributing to a dynamic environment that is filled with opportunities for our country. Notwithstanding the institutional and governance challenges that persist in some parts of the region, today many Latin American and Caribbean countries are more confident, capable, and open to partnership with the United States than at any other point in recent memory. This is a positive development for our broader national interests and for the Western Hemisphere as a whole. Our task is to engage our neighbors as equal partners, meeting the common challenge of creating a future in which our societies can thrive together, against the backdrop of the Americas' expanding strategic importance for the United States.

Events in Latin America rarely make the headlines in the United States, and when they do, there is a marked tendency to sensationalize, and even caricature, events in the hemisphere, whether violence in Mexico and Central America, the impact of authoritarian populism, or the conclusion that China's role in the region represents a threat to or a failure by us. However, the real story of the hemisphere today is overwhelmingly positive. It is a story of broad commitment to economic and social advancement by inspiring and pragmatic leaders, who are building deeper democracies and a growing middle class. Real challenges remain, including, in a more measured way, those noted above. But in a relatively short period of time, this once troubled region has seen its largest nations emerge as respected players on the global stage.

Our partnership with the Americas matters a great deal for the United States. It is vital for our economic interests, as we rebuild our economy and reinvigorate our competitiveness for a new era, as well as for our security and global strategic interests, as we design a 21st century architecture of hemispheric cooperation with the help of partners like Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru, and the countries of Central America and the Caribbean. Our partners in the Americas are also key allies in the effort to promote democracy, rule of law, social inclusion, and human rights around the world. And we also recognize how important this region is to our society and our culture, as the growing connections between our peoples make us all more vital and innovative.

Secretary Clinton has recognized that harnessing the "power of proximity" between the United States and Latin America, the Caribbean, and Canada is among the most strategically significant tasks facing our foreign policy in the years ahead. The same is true for our neighbors, because the power of proximity runs in both directions. Working together, we

are transforming the Americas into a shared platform for global success.

The United States as a whole is benefiting from the economic and political rise of the Western Hemisphere. In the past 15 years, 56 million Latin American and Caribbean households have joined the ranks of the middle class, which now stands at more than 275 million people—almost half the region’s population and growing. Grouped together, the hemisphere’s market of nearly a billion people has made it an energetic vital hub of trade and investment. Approximately 42 percent of US exports go to this hemisphere, more than any other region across the globe.

During the past three years, our exports of goods to the Americas have increased by over \$200 billion to nearly \$650 billion. This trade supports nearly four million US jobs. With the addition of Colombia and Panama last fall, the United States now has trade agreements with twelve countries in the hemisphere that run uninterrupted from the Arctic to Patagonia. We also have engaged with our FTA partners in the Western Hemisphere to develop a shared understanding of the opportunities and challenges posed by the economic developments in Asia and the broader Pacific. The inclusion of Mexico and Canada, in addition to Chile and Peru, in discussions on the Trans-Pacific Partnership is a positive development as we increase our economic integration with the Asia-Pacific region.

The region’s emergence advances US interests in ways that go far beyond the economic dimension, to encompass the political and strategic realms. Brazil has joined the United States to create the Open Government Partnership, a global initiative to improve government transparency and accountability. Mexico’s smart diplomacy played a vital role in advancing climate change talks in Cancun, and it was again on display when world leaders gathered there in June for the G-20 summit to advance the global economic recovery. Uruguay is a leading contributor to UN peacekeeping missions, and Colombia is using its tenure on the UN Security Council to assert greater leadership on key international security issues.

The Summit of the Americas that took place in Cartagena in April 2012 offered more evidence that the hemisphere is moving in the right direction. There were many headlines written about the Summit, but few focused on what I viewed as the real narrative of that event: the spirit of partnership and equality among the most dynamic, globally-oriented leaders in the region. This joint approach was on full display during the panel at the CEO Forum where President Obama joined Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff and Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos for an insightful conversation about what it takes to compete in today’s global economy. As President Obama stated, the challenge for this hemisphere is to make sure that economic growth is sustainable and robust, and creating opportunity for a wider, growing circle of people. But the CEO Forum merely provided a snapshot of the high level discussions that took place among an incredibly diverse group of democratic leaders, from every corner of the hemisphere, sitting down together in a spirit of pragmatism and trust to speak openly about the hemisphere’s most difficult issues.

The Cartagena summit was a critical juncture for the role it played in advancing initiatives that will make our hemisphere more interconnected and economically competitive.

For example, President Obama announced the creation of the Small Business Network of the Americas, which will support small and medium-sized enterprises as the engines of inclusive economic growth and job creation throughout the region. Women-owned firms will play a big part in this through the Women's Entrepreneurship in the Americas (WEAmericas) initiative, which will reduce barriers to market access, financing, and training that persist for too many women in the region. President Obama announced a Broadband Partnership of the Americas to promote universal access to technologies that will improve our region's competitiveness and foster social inclusion. And, through USAID, we are pioneering the Innovation Fund for the Americas, which will support cost-effective breakthrough solutions to development challenges in Latin America and the Caribbean.

At the 2012 Summit, we joined Colombia in launching "Connecting the Americas 2022," which commits the leaders of the Western Hemisphere to achieve universal access to electricity over the next decade by enhancing electrical interconnection. This ambitious effort builds on the Energy and Climate Partnership of the Americas, which President Obama launched at the 2009 Summit, backed by more than \$150 million in US government investment to support more than 40 initiatives. Canada, whose electrical grid is already closely interconnected with ours and which is an important partner for ensuring US energy security, is active in these efforts, encouraging the exchange of information on best practices and technological innovation for energy development. The theme running through all these initiatives is that of inclusion—and although the region has had much economic and political success over the past two decades, even more citizens must be brought into that progress.

Nothing symbolizes the rise of Latin America as powerfully as Brazil's impressive transformation into a dynamic emerging market that is now the world's sixth-largest economy. With the help of greater economic stability and innovative social programs, tens of millions of Brazilians have entered the middle class. The Rousseff administration understands the importance of science, technology, and innovation to sustaining that growth into the future. President Rousseff's "Science Without Borders" educational exchange program is highly complementary to President Obama's own initiative—"100,000 Strong for the Americas," a goal to expand to 100,000 the number of US students studying in Latin America and the Caribbean, and encourage an equal number of students from the region to come to the United States for study. In the United States as in the rest of the Western Hemisphere, access to higher quality education, at both the primary and university level, is the key to upward mobility and demands special attention through public-private partnerships.

Our partnerships for the Americas also include a focus on enhancing citizen security. While much of the region is enjoying greater peace and prosperity, violent crime remains a serious problem. In response, the United States has built strong partnerships through the Merida Initiative, the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI), and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) to improve security throughout Mexico, Central America, and parts of the Caribbean. And increasingly, we are seeing countries within the hemisphere sharing their experience and know-how to fight organized

crime, such as the new and positive roles played by Colombia, Chile and Mexico to assist their partners in Central America. Colombia has provided indispensable advice at the strategic and tactical levels, and has trained literally thousands of technicians and investigators who are at the front lines in the effort to ensure citizen security. Colombia is sharing its hard-won lessons, which give it unique credibility and effectiveness. We partner closely with Canada, which is providing crucial assistance to law enforcement agencies through its Canadian Initiative for Security in Central America, in order to help the region to combat transnational crime and support efforts to strengthen human rights institutions. When we talk about security challenges in the Western Hemisphere we cannot forget marginalized populations who are more vulnerable to the violence that affects the region—whether that means women and children, gays and lesbians, or members of indigenous communities and Afro-descendant groups. There is strong evidence that some of the violence in the region is gender-based and beyond the criminal activities of organized crime networks.

Under President Obama's leadership, this administration has forthrightly addressed the fact that the demand for drugs, including demand in the United States, contributes to the phenomenon of drug-related violence. The United States has a new drug control strategy that focuses on reducing the domestic demand for drugs through education and prevention and treatment. This administration has made a significant commitment of \$30 billion over three years for early intervention and treatment services for individuals who have drug problems, and the administration included an additional \$9.2 billion request in the FY 2013 budget.

The recent history of the Americas has demonstrated how important democracy is to reinforcing economic progress. Protecting democracy in the hemisphere is the responsibility of governments and citizens alike, and we must speak out forcefully and in unison whenever our democratic values are challenged. This responsibility has been enshrined in the Inter-American Democratic Charter, signed in 2001, by the 34 member nations of the Organization of American States. Given this commitment, we are concerned when others in the region appear complacent in the face of disturbing signs of erosion in the full respect for freedom of expression in some countries. During the remarkable transitions from dictatorship to democracy that have taken place in our hemisphere, our region's free press has played an essential role. Given this distinguished record, any steps backward by either governmental or nongovernmental actors are worrisome—whether it occurs in the form of constant verbal attacks on or disqualification of the media by leaders, hugely disproportionate lawsuits by members of the executive against the media, overuse and overt politicization of national broadcast media, judicial harassment of media owners, or continuing violence against journalists by non-state actors. All these developments must be met by hemispheric solidarity in support of our fundamental defense of freedom of expression.

The nations of the hemisphere must collectively guard against serious and significant efforts by a number of nations to undermine or weaken the Inter-American Human Rights System that has proved so essential to maintaining and strengthening democracy. Dissent must be respected, not penalized, and peaceful opposition to the government

should not be characterized as criminal behavior. Criticism is the price one pays for assuming office in the representative elective democracy which our hemisphere has formally embraced. Nor is free speech criminal behavior—to the contrary, free speech is one of the pillars of our democracies and must be defended.

This hemisphere has been a trailblazer in enshrining democratic principles in its national and regional institutions—to our peoples' enormous shared benefit. Those principles remain critically relevant to the hemisphere, its challenges, and its future. Losing sight of that, or allowing retreat in this area, will have implications for the hemisphere's continued advancement.

The Obama administration's pursuit of stronger partnerships in the Americas is well-rooted in the clear continuity of purpose with US engagement with the region over last two decades, spanning the administrations of four presidents, of both parties, and generally supported by a strong centrist consensus in Congress. Our policies in the region reflect the burgeoning importance of the Americas as a platform for our shared competitiveness, growth, and security. Across the hemisphere, people are demanding better jobs, improved social services, responsible economic management, and the freedom to live as they choose. The United States is committed to working with our partners throughout the Americas to achieve a successful, prosperous, and secure hemisphere for all of our citizens. This will not only advance our national interests, but it also honors our nation's international standing as a beacon of hope and opportunity.