

The Continuing Challenge of Democracy in the Americas

U.S. influence is waning in the Americas. Although Washington is currently engaged in a well-intentioned effort to reverse this trend, its agenda will have only limited impact over the longer term unless the United States changes the lens through which it views the region. Strategic thinking has essentially collapsed. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the international relations community in the United States moved on, leaving regional studies to development and social inclusion advocates. At the point in history when the United States should be reaping the reward of years of patient investment and hard work building democratic institutions and open markets in the region, we have either doubled down on, or pivoted to, other parts of the world. Now, instead, the United States must refocus its perspective within the region, or else its traditional leadership role will continue to erode. Countries in Latin America and the Caribbean are neither charity cases nor default partners in international affairs. It is time for a less romantic, more realistic approach to the Americas.

Democracy As the North Star

For a generation, democracy has been the goal, or the North Star, guiding U.S. policy in the Americas. Policymakers on a bipartisan basis have repeatedly and appropriately said that democracy is the only legitimate form of government for the region, and have built the basic framework of hemispheric institutions around the democratic ideal. Democracy as the endgame is so ingrained that, at U.S. urging, the hemisphere unanimously agreed

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to support a regional democracy charter in 2001 as part of the Summit of the Americas process, a U.S.-initiated forum for democratically-elected leaders (excluding only Cuba).

Nonetheless, certain assumptions underlie U.S. policy. For instance, we assume that democracies once established through free and fair elections will remain democratic, and that democratic institutions will naturally deepen and prosper over time. We anticipate that legitimate opposition parties will have equal opportunity to contest elections and that democratically-elected governments will transition power regularly and peacefully, abide by the rule of law, maintain human rights protections, and respect a free press. We also imagine that regional democracies are natural partners of the United States, that they are ultimately intent on pursuing a common agenda (including a common trade agenda) rather than in establishing and promoting their own, which at times directly contradict U.S. interests. Indeed, partnership often does result. And even if we don't always agree on every topic, democratically-elected governments in the Americas that actually govern democratically tend to treat their citizens more justly, while also making better long-term partners for the United States.

Unfortunately, though, these underlying assumptions don't always prove true. While most nations remain strong if imperfect democracies, others such as Ecuador and Venezuela have moved backward as their leaders pursue a populist authoritarian model, with laws and institutions bending to the individual will of the president. Of equal concern, even the strongest democracies in the region rarely stand up these days to support the practice of democracy outside their own borders, unless doing so throws U.S. policy off balance. This occurred in the 2009 political crisis in Honduras when, despite little historical connection to or interest in Central America, Brazil loudly insisted on actions that undermined U.S. efforts to resolve the crisis while empowering the anti-American grandstanding of others.

While the United States continues to give lip-service to the idea of a common agenda based on democratic values, others (including the populist authoritarian nations in the region) have clearly moved on. Still, the United States insists that hemispheric democracies are inevitable partners sharing a common agenda, which has had the unintended impact of binding U.S. foreign policy priorities in the Americas to the lowest common denominator upon which the region can agree. Any remotely controversial or politically-sensitive U.S. proposal in support of democracy, public security, and open markets can be stymied at the hemispheric level, or at least greatly complicated. This is troubling because the so-called Bolivarian Alliance, or ALBA bloc nations, including Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela—all with leaders who have won elections—have now explicitly positioned their policies in opposition to the United States and are seeking to build a hemisphere that intentionally limits the U.S. role.

In practice, this means that the regional agenda represented by the periodic Summits of the Americas has become increasingly irrelevant since the first meeting in Miami in 1994. For instance, rather than focusing on ways to improve regional democracy or economic integration, the 2012 Summit in Cartagena, Colombia, produced an agenda focused on initiatives so noncontroversial that they were self-evident: social inclusion, micro-enterprise, and new requests for the United States to transfer technology and support regional innovation. Democracy and trade relations—the *sine qua non* for the Miami Summit—were too controversial for discussion.

The truth is that the idea of a united hemisphere, as enticing as that may be, does not exist at this juncture. Perhaps it did in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, but that door—a unique moment in time—has long since closed. In the meantime, the unwillingness of the United States to break out of the paradigm of consensus-based decisionmaking that it helped to create has been a powerful factor contributing to its perceived declining regional influence. In fact, the idea that the United States should have a “hemispheric policy” at all, rather than a varied policy more in tune with regional realities, is probably misplaced at this point. Recent events show why.

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Hemispheric Democracy on Trial

To put it bluntly, hemispheric leaders have flunked several important democratic tests. Venezuelan voters went to the polls on October 7, 2012, for example, and re-elected Hugo Chavez for another six-year term, making him *de facto* president for life. Observers viewed the election as free, and a vibrant opposition vigorously campaigned to make the eventual margin of victory much less than before. But the elections were not *fair*. In the months, indeed years, prior, Venezuela’s system was structured to give every advantage to the Chavez regime, discriminating against the opposition in access to the media and other resources, control of the electoral commission, manipulation of electoral lists, and the massive use of state resources for political purposes (including on polling day itself). Yet, the hemispheric community was strangely silent about the process in the run-up to the elections, even though similar actions in other countries would have caused apoplexy in regional political bodies.

Next, Chavez’s death on March 5, 2013, after spending weeks *incommunicado* in Havana, led to malleable and expedient interpretations of Venezuela’s constitution, manipulation of the electoral calendar, and the election of Chavez-designee Nicolas Maduro on April 14. As Havana stage-managed the transition process, hemispheric leaders remained silent about the health of Venezuelan democracy. Despite significant electoral irregularities highlighted by the opposition, these leaders rushed to congratulate Maduro before a full accounting of the process could occur. To date, significant questions about the election remain unanswered, despite pledges to investigate them by the government. These include allegations of fraud and ballot stuffing, which the Venezuelan opposition has sought to have investigated by the Organization of American States (OAS).

The response (or lack thereof) to the Venezuelan election builds on the July 2012 effort to welcome Venezuela as a full member of the Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR), after the governments of Brazil and Argentina suspended Paraguay from membership in June 2012 for the awkward yet constitutional manner in which Paraguay impeached its president. Paraguay had been the only one holding out against Venezuelan membership; with that obstacle removed, Venezuela could join. This is despite the democracy protocol that has formed an important part of MERCOSUR since it was adopted in 1998, requiring the parties to maintain “fully functioning democratic institutions.”

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The cynicism of the move was breathtaking. And despite a free and fair election in April 2013, Paraguay's membership in MERCOSUR was only restored in August.

Additional examples abound. Ecuador's president, Rafael Correa, has restricted press freedoms at home while seeking to undermine the inter-American human rights framework abroad; he was nonetheless comfortably re-elected in February 2013 and is well on his way to his own lifetime appointment as president. He was one of the leaders who remained away from the 2012 Cartagena Summit, arguing he would not attend a regional meeting that did not

include non-democratic Cuba. In fact, several leaders, both present and absent, spent as much time pushing for the inclusion of Cuba at the Summit—a forum that, by consensus and explicit previous agreement, is only open to democratically-elected leaders—as for enhancing economic competitiveness and cooperation in areas that would improve their citizens' lives. Compounding matters, this episode came shortly after a state visit in January 2012 that Brazil's leader Dilma Rousseff made to Havana, where she reviewed a Cuban honor guard but refused to meet with democratic dissidents.

Clearly, democracy remains a work in progress across the region. At the same time,

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democracy itself does not guarantee a common agenda. The Bolivarian Alliance bloc (ALBA) nations—a grouping of Latin American and Caribbean nations based on political, economic, and social integration—are actively working to undermine U.S. interests to a greater or lesser extent. In fact, various ALBA agreements are an explicit reaction against the United States, European governments, free trade agreements, and colonial and neo-colonial rule, among other adversaries. Regional heavyweight Brazil, a strong and vibrant democracy but with a separate strategic vision, has also pursued an agenda seeking to build its own

influence at the expense of the United States, sometimes creating embarrassing contradictions when Brasilia's actions in support of its strategic goals, commercial advantage, or regional solidarity enable others' actions that undermine national and regional institutions of democracy. For example, Brazil's pursuit of commercial advantage in Venezuela and Cuba have taken precedence over a desire to support the institutions of democracy in those nations, while actions to build competing regional institutions at the expense of the U.S.-supported OAS explicitly exclude the United States while building new alliances under Brazilian leadership.

Additionally, China's active presence in the hemisphere since 2003 provides increasing economic options and political legitimacy to those nations whose democratically-elected leaders may not govern democratically. China's economic largesse is also undercutting the effectiveness of tools that the United States and others have traditionally used to leverage democratic actions, particularly international financial institutions such as the IMF, World

Bank, and IDB, institutions that seek independent central banks, open markets, rational energy policies, labor and environmental protections, and regulatory reforms.

Yet, in lamenting a lack of regional interest in partnership with us, the United States must also acknowledge that its attractiveness as a partner ebbs and flows. It particularly recedes during times of sluggish U.S. economic growth and a focus on its own domestic issues. Indeed, former White House Special Envoy for the Americas, Mack McLarty, and other policymakers used to argue that the best thing the United States could do for development in Latin America and the Caribbean is to grow economically. No matter how much regional leaders might dislike its northern neighbor, they still required the U.S. market, the largest in the world. That remains largely the case to this day, although China has quickly become a competing option for a number of nations, and is now the top trade partner of Brazil, Chile, and Peru.

It is also true that a strong U.S. economy supporting regional growth tends to encourage Latin America's willingness to receive and adhere to policy prescriptions coming from Washington. Since the recent economic downturn, which began in the United States and other financial centers of the developed world in 2008, anecdotal evidence suggests that the region has been less interested in listening to lectures—especially when the lecturers fail to take their own medicine in areas such as fiscal discipline, rules-based trade, state intervention in the economy, and market-led growth, to say nothing of refusing to consider default on the national debt.

Without the lure of a strong economy or significant funding for new regional initiatives (both of which China, for one, has brought to the table), the United States is reduced to providing rhetorical support for orthodox policies and inventing programs for the region that are well-intentioned but lack funding. Examples include education exchanges, entrepreneurship development, and diversity programs. Predictably, these have had limited impact. The one area where funding remains robust and that continues to form

a backbone of U.S. policy in the region—counternarcotics and security assistance—has come under fire by domestic critics and is undermined by state-level initiatives to legalize the recreational use of marijuana. These policies also provide a unidimensional and therefore easily caricatured impression of U.S. interests in the Americas, one that feeds the narrative promoted by regional critics of an overreaching United States harassing others to address problems that the United States itself created.

But blaming the United States for a lack of stronger regional partnership is too easy, and not borne by the facts. Washington may or may not choose to address issues such as drug legalization, immigration, or the Cuba embargo, but we should not be deluded into thinking that this or that policy is the key to unlocking the door to pan-regional partnership. No quick fix will work. One need only look as far as the recently lapsed U.S. tariff on Brazilian ethanol imports to see the wishful thinking in such reasoning. For years, Brasilia loudly proclaimed that the tariff was a major obstacle to improved relations. But once it expired at the end of 2011, Brazil let it pass without comment, much less reciprocal actions, and failed to grow a new spirit of bilateral cooperation.

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Realism, not romance, is required. The United States is by far the strongest power in the region, but it is no longer the only power. The tools available have also changed. This calls for understanding and policy nuance as Latin American and Caribbean nations assert their own regional and global interests and now have additional options. The pursuit of U.S. interests, including support for robust democratic institutions, is now more complicated than before.

An Agenda for Progress

The U.S. must now contend for the Americas in a manner that it has not previously had to do.

U.S. policy in the Americas is at a crossroads. Policymakers internalized the “end of history” dynamic whereby the advent of democracy across the north-south axis in Latin America ensured the pursuit of a common agenda based on shared values and common interests. This led to complacency and has ultimately proven ineffective as a hemispheric policy—several nations now openly bid to promote their own interests and influence at the expense of the United States. In short, the United States must now contend for the Americas in a manner that heretofore it has not had to do.

Several near-term actions would help revive U.S. policy. As a first step, it is critical to restore the attractiveness of the U.S. economy, which has traditionally been a primary engine of regional growth, and the top trade partner for many Latin American and Caribbean nations. A healthy U.S. economy would continue to advance the region’s own development, and access to the world’s largest economy will become an even more important factor driving hemispheric cooperation, particularly as China’s economy slows and Europe’s continues to languish. When the United States sneezes, Mexico and the Caribbean Basin still catch cold.

Second, contending for the Americas requires that the United States work with regional allies to concretely and visibly support nations that play by the democratic rules. Unilateralism has never really worked effectively in the Americas, but the alternative must not be inaction. It is heartening to see the recent high-level attention that the Obama administration has given the region. Presidential, vice-presidential, and secretary of state visits in 2013, in addition to meetings with regional leaders in Washington, are welcome and long overdue. The intentional engagement in hemispheric affairs by Vice President Biden is an important signal that the White House is moving toward a more active and collaborative regional agenda, as well as the institutionalization of various bilateral working groups and economic commissions. In recent oversight hearings, Congress, too, has expressed a desire to engage more fully, and has re-invigorated the legislative exchange program with Mexico.

Unfortunately, the revelations by Edward Snowden of NSA eavesdropping on communications in Brazil and across the region have frozen relations with Brazil, leading to the indefinite postponement of the state visit that Brazil’s leaders had scheduled for October, significantly setting back relations. These revelations have also caused concern in Colombia and Mexico, among others. Likewise, the October shutdown of the U.S.

government, sequestration, and the fight over spending levels and the debt limit have imposed real limitations on the ability of the United States to promote its interests in Latin America and the Caribbean. This comes through reduced foreign and security assistance as well as limits on senior travel impacting the region, including negotiations to conclude the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement.

Building an effective policy requires both general attention and specific policy actions. In this regard, North America is key. Working together, a politically and economically united North America can make a profound difference in promoting a sound democratic, open market vision for the region. Canada, a tested and proven partner on global affairs, is a logical partner for democracy promotion and other priorities within the Americas, including the Caribbean. Prime Minister Stephen Harper, in fact, has made engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean a priority in Canadian foreign affairs.

Similarly, new Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto is keen to expand Mexico's role in hemispheric affairs, and the United States should work closely with the new government to promote Mexico's growing regional and international role (much as Washington should have done more actively with the receptive Calderon government before it left office on December 1, 2012). That will mean that Washington needs a smart, ongoing, strategic dialogue, recognizing that Mexico City also has interests that it would do well to consider. The United States could begin by re-imposing the ban on assault weapons and further restrict flows of illicit cash to Mexico, both of which Mexico City has requested numerous times to starve the drug cartels and traffickers. U.S. drug control laws at the state level need clarification. Immigration reform is also a critically important issue in the bilateral relationship, although it should primarily be pursued because it is in the U.S. interest, and border infrastructure and cooperation continues to require significant work.

Third, the United States should develop a Brazil strategy that recognizes the inherent advantages of working with a prosperous, democratic Brazil both in the hemisphere and around the world. Washington should take concrete steps to support Brasilia, particularly in agriculture and energy—two areas where both nations are globally competitive and can learn from each other. At the same time, Washington should understand that Brasilia's worldview is not necessarily the same as its own, and that strategic partnership at this stage is a chimera. As Brazil continues to pursue a position of enhanced global leadership, which implies choices and obligations, the United States and the other nations of the Americas should increasingly have the right to expect that this would include support for democratic institutions at both the national and regional levels within Latin America. To date, Brazilian support has been erratic. This includes the OAS, which must be updated and strengthened if it is to play a proper role in regional democracy promotion. These behaviors would be considered before offering unqualified support for Brazil's broader ambitions such as membership in the UN Security Council or the OECD.

Fourth, a more consequential U.S. policy toward the Western Hemisphere would seek to update security relations and institutions. Washington should tailor security assistance to the needs and capabilities of each country, instead of the current one-size-fits-all programs. With state-to-state violence no longer a primary concern for the region, the need and effectiveness of U.S. military assistance has been reduced. Nonetheless,

transnational criminal activities seeded by the drug trade have increased to the point where personal security routinely ranks at or near the top of concerns expressed in public opinion polling. These criminal activities also have a corrosive impact on the authority and capacity of the state, therefore becoming a threat to democracy itself. In addition to reducing our own demand for illegal drugs, there is ample space to cooperate more effectively with the nations of the region on security issues, both individually and on a regional basis. This covers peacekeeping and disaster relief, training and equipment, intelligence sharing (particularly on threats from external actors), deploying technology more effectively, and developing joint approaches on cyber security, which was a burgeoning issue across the region even before Edward Snowden became a household name. In support of healthy democratic institutions, these issues need addressing.

The reality is that security and development assistance to the region have both decreased. This trend is unlikely to reverse, given the intense budget pressures that the United States faces in the near term. That is why it is doubly important for Washington to reinvigorate the potent tools of trade and investment, which have been underutilized in recent years. Aside from Brazil, who appears uninterested in formal trade agreements with the United States at this point, there are not many nations left in the Americas where the pursuit of bilateral trade agreements would be compelling.

Instead, Washington should turn toward sub-regional blocs of like-minded nations. For example, the United States should look for ways to update and expand the NAFTA relationship—cutting edge when it was implemented in 1994, but now showing its age. North America is a platform for global competitiveness; the region should increasingly be viewed in this manner, with trade policy as a tool supporting this vision. Additionally, the United States should seek to improve and consolidate existing trade agreements in the Western Hemisphere to make trade more effective and efficient, unlocking gains from trade among all sorts of relationships across Latin America, not just interactions between those nations and the United States. Critically, negotiations on the TPP—a primary vehicle in these efforts, which already includes Canada, Chile, Mexico, and Peru—should conclude as rapidly as possible, even as they should expand to include other potential Latin American candidates such as Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama, and Uruguay.

Concurrently, leaders are also taking a look at the idea of a broader Atlantic community including, for the first time, Latin America and Africa in addition to the United States and Europe. A favorable nod from Brazil would be key to the ultimate success of such an initiative. Brazil is by far Latin America's largest economy, the world's sixth-largest, and geographically a nation positioned in the heart of the Atlantic. To this point, Brazil has been focused on developing cross-Atlantic ties with Africa, but has expressed little interest in participating in any full-blown pan-Atlantic arrangement that includes the northern members. That need not be the final word, however. To the extent other nations want to press ahead, initial progress can be made with North America—including Mexico, Europe, Colombia, and Uruguay—in addition to certain African nations. This could hold the door open for others to see the benefits, eventually, of signing on. Negotiations that have just commenced for a trade agreement between the United States and the EU—the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, or TTIP—should also welcome Canada (a NATO member) and Mexico (which already has a free trade agreement with Europe), and form the nexus of a wider emerging Atlantic community.

Working together to create meaningful economic links to the world's largest markets and most dynamic regions would provide a significant economic boost, not just to the Latin American nations involved but also to the United States. It would also restore indispensable U.S. leadership to the economic liberalization effort. Specific sectoral agreements could also be considered. For example, the rapidly expanding production of energy across the hemisphere, particularly cleaner-burning natural gas, provides compelling opportunities to pursue closer ties based on energy cooperation, best practices, and global climate change initiatives. Of course, this will require a greater willingness by U.S. authorities than has generally been exhibited to date to allow the export of natural gas, particularly to Central America and the Caribbean. In addition, other vehicles such as membership in the G-20 and OECD could be explored to support the aspirations of like-minded nations, such as Chile and Colombia, respectively.

Finally, the United States should rethink the umbrella approach of the Summits of the Americas. If some in the hemisphere succeed in including a non-democratic Cuba in the next Summit of democratically-elected leaders, then the United States would be hard-pressed to attend at the presidential level, since the *raison d'être* of the Summit of the Americas—the celebration and support of democratic governance—will have ceased to exist. The truth is that the promise of the first Summits has been squandered over the past nineteen years, and the meetings have degenerated into little more than street theater (in some cases literally such as the 2005 Summit in Argentina, when soccer star Diego Maradona joined Hugo Chavez in a raucous public rally against U.S. “imperialism” and the neo-liberal order). At this stage, they accomplish little beyond giving an opportunity on the international stage to air publicly divisive issues with the U.S. president. It is legitimate to raise these issues in a spirit of cooperation and mutual trust; quite another to raise them in a bid to promote wedge issues overtly targeting the United States and Canada for domestic audiences. Rather, the United States should actively promote sub-regional meetings with like-minded nations, perhaps also including extra-regional nations from both the Atlantic and Pacific, with a return to an economic focus with real benefits to participation.

One way to do this would be to use the next meeting of North American leaders, likely in 2014, in order to highlight the 20th anniversary of NAFTA and to lay the groundwork for a more consequential forward-looking hemispheric trade agenda. By also inviting the leaders of the Alliance of the Pacific—an exciting new economic integration initiative among Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and others—as well as other like-minded regional leaders, such as President Horacio Cartes from Paraguay, the United States could conceivably create the conditions for a more effective hemispheric economic agenda. In so doing, Washington would restore momentum to the regional trade agenda, perhaps also linking it over time with the pan-Pacific, and ultimately the Atlantic agenda. This would meaningfully establish a more strategic and consequential agenda with the Americas than has existed since the breakdown of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) agenda a decade ago.

Contend for the Americas

In short, the United States needs to contend for its interests in the region in a much more serious way than it has over the past several years. Complacency doesn't work.

Recent steps by the Obama administration are welcome and appropriate, yet must now be followed by concrete policy actions. We cannot assume that democracy and common democratic values can be sustained without active support. Nor can we assume that even healthy democracies will automatically support the U.S. agenda. Elections are critically important, but elections alone do not necessarily confer the patina of common interests.

Partnership requires more, and the United States needs a more realistic approach. It should seek progress as far and as fast with as many countries as it can, no longer allowing it to be bound or undermined by rejectionists. Benefits and mutual reward must flow to those who seek a similar course. This is what Washington does everywhere else in the world—pursuit of U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere requires a similar approach.