

WebMemo



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Iran, Democracy, and Trade Keys to Successful Clinton Visit to Latin America

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Secretary of State Hillary Clinton is embarking on a tour of Latin America with the intention of shoring up flagging ties with U.S. partners in the region. During her five-day, six-nation trip, the Secretary should enlist key players—notably Brazil—in a campaign to convince Iran’s leaders to abandon their nuclear weapons ambitions. Clinton should also deliver a strong message regarding the Obama Administration’s commitment to representative democracy and its readiness to put free trade back on its agenda. Finally, she should make it clear to the region’s leaders know that excluding the U.S. from regional organizations or polarizing the Organization of American States (OAS) will have a negative impact on inter-American cooperation.

The Secretary’s Itinerary. Between March 1 and March 5, Clinton will visit Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Costa Rica, and Guatemala. She will attend the inauguration of President Jose Mujica of Uruguay before heading to Chile, where she will offer U.S. assistance with the damaged caused by the massive earthquake.

International attention will focus on the Secretary’s March 3 meeting with Brazilian President Inácio Lula da Silva because it represents a major opportunity to raise the Iranian issue. In Costa Rica and Guatemala, Clinton will meet with the new president of Costa Rica, several trade and economics ministers, and Honduras’s President Lobo, thereby signaling a U.S. readiness to advance beyond the June 28 removal of former President Manuel Zelaya and solidify bilateral ties.

Iran and Other Regional Challenges. Clinton’s visit to Latin America follows closely upon her recent visit to the Middle East, where she spoke forcefully about the danger a nuclear-armed Iran poses and warned of an expanding Iranian “military dictatorship” bent on regional hegemony.

With a temporary seat on the U.N. Security Council and considerable influence among non-Western states, Brazil is an extremely important international player. President Lula hosted Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in November and defended Iran’s right to a nuclear program—albeit a purportedly peaceful one. The Brazilian president is skeptical of imposing sanctions on Iran, a measure that he claims will only isolate Tehran. Lula is scheduled to make a reciprocal visit to Iran in May. Helping the skeptical Brazilian president recognize that a nuclear-armed Iran is not in Brazil’s interest is extremely important.

In addition to the Iranian threat, Clinton should address the sharpening policy and ideological differences that pit the U.S. against the rest of the inter-American community. For example, in recent years Brazil has taken an active diplomatic and security role in South America and beyond. Yet in this new role, Brazil has supported Cuba’s Castro brothers

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and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez while loudly opposing last year's U.S.–Colombian Defense Agreement—all actions indicative of the substantial gulf between Washington and Brasilia.

Additionally, Brazil has taken the lead in backing the creation of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), a South American–only diplomatic and security association. Brazil, along with Mexico, also launched a new regional “mechanism”—the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States—that includes Cuba but excludes the U.S. and Canada. Meanwhile, the OAS, badly polarized and beset with budgetary woes, is losing its ability to effectively defend democracy and human rights. Despite numerous missteps in Honduras and elsewhere, OAS Secretary General Miguel Insulza is confident he will be reelected for a second five-year term.

Cuba, Venezuela, and Free Trade. The longevity of the Castro brothers, coupled with their ability to keep their communist system economically afloat with outside assistance, frustrates the Administration's objective of promoting a democratic transition in Cuba. The Administration relaxed restrictions on Cuban–American travel to the island, increased remittance flows, proposed more open communications, and participated in migration and postal talks. Yet these steps have failed to pry open even the smallest political space.

The prolonged incarceration of U.S. citizen Alan Gross, recent Cuban outbursts following a senior State Department official meeting with dissidents in Havana, and the death of hunger-striking Cuban political prisoner Orlando Zapata Tamayo again shine a light on the totalitarian mindset of the island's leaders.

In Venezuela, the radicalization of Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution is gathering velocity. Since President Obama took office, Chavez has threatened war with Colombia, launched internal purges, jailed political opponents, closed media outlets, and reinforced ties with Iran and other state sponsors of terrorism.

Secretary Clinton's travels skip Colombia and Panama—the two nations with which free trade agreements were signed but languish in political limbo. In his State of the Union address, President

Obama expressed readiness to press for approval of the trade deals. Yet all Special Trade Representative Ron Kirk could offer with regard to these trade issues was an assurance that the U.S. is “seeking to resolve outstanding issues” and move “forward at the appropriate time.” The Administration's inability to advance a stronger free trade policy is weakening U.S. influence during the current economic downturn.

Recommendations:

- **Iran:** Secretary Clinton should secure greater Brazilian cooperation at the U.N. on Iranian non-proliferation while underscoring that the U.S.–Brazil relationship will suffer if Brazil provides international legitimacy for Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon.
- **Democracy:** Clinton should keep non-democratic states like Cuba and Venezuela in public view. She should invite new democratic leaders in Costa Rica, Chile, and Uruguay to assist in formulating cooperative strategies for the promotion of democracy.
- **The OAS:** The Secretary should press for an OAS that defends representative democracy and fundamental freedoms. The overhaul of the OAS begins with selection of a new Secretary General.
- **Trade:** Clinton should commit the Administration to a serious timeline that advances free trade legislation. She should propose a trade summit in Washington with Colombia, Panama, and existing free trade partners to demonstrate the importance of trade for improving hemispheric job growth.

An Opportunity. Secretary Clinton's trip is an opportunity to talk seriously about the Iranian nuclear threat with Brazil's pivotal president, keep the absence of democracy in Venezuela and communist Cuba on the front burner, and press for genuine U.S.–Latin American cooperation on issues from Haiti and Chile reconstruction to trade and the strengthening of commitments to the Inter-American Democratic Charter within the OAS.

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