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Action Needed on Chávez, Democracy, and Trade: Secretary of State Clinton Visits Latin America Again

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Next week, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will travel to Lima, Peru, to attend the Organization of American States (OAS) general assembly. She is also planning a brief visit to Ecuador, Colombia, and Barbados in what will be her second swing through the region in 2010. Clinton cannot afford to squander this opportunity to focus attention on Venezuela's increasingly dangerous, anti-democratic course. She should also address the deep challenges to democracy, market economies, and cooperative security in the Americas.

Security and Democracy First. Clinton's trip must be a success; the future of the OAS hangs in the balance. Last year in Honduras, several members attempted to return Communist Cuba to full, unconditional membership in the organization—a disaster narrowly averted by vigorous U.S. lobbying.

Fissures within the OAS have led to calls by Bolivia and other nations for a new regional body that excludes the U.S. Launched in March 2010, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States pointedly excluded the U.S. and Canada from its deliberations.

The U.S. and many Latin American states remain divided over whether to recognize Honduran President Porfirio Lobo. While the U.S. accepts the legitimacy of the November 2009 elections that selected Lobo and is actively promoting national reconciliation and economic recovery, nations like Brazil and Argentina still want to keep Honduras out of the OAS. Secretary Clinton needs to press for the return of Honduras to the OAS and enlist friends to help strengthen democratic institutions not just in Honduras but throughout the region.

Combating Chávez. While Clinton lacks the power to put Venezuela and President Hugo Chávez on the OAS agenda, she should address the “Chávez issue” in private and through the media. In particular, Clinton needs to raise the issue of reports that Chávez is funneling money to a violent leftist group, the Popular Revolutionary Army, in Mexico. Further evidence of Chávez's terror ties may soon be revealed as Spanish and Colombian investigators are continuing to probe links between the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Basque separatist terror group ETA, and Venezuela.

In addition to his international terror ties, Chávez has hijacked democracy at home. Political repression, censorship, and intimidation are curtailing the ability of Venezuelans to speak out freely. In advance of the September 26 legislative elections, Chávez has begun barring opposition candidates on grounds of “corruption.”

The OAS must pay more than lip service to protecting rights in Venezuela guaranteed by the Inter-American Democratic Charter. As Senators Chris Dodd (D-CT) and Richard Lugar (R-IN) noted in March, “Venezuela is a critical testing ground of OAS support for democracy and human rights, where basic civil liberties are under threat.”

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aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Other Agenda Items. Clinton will be asked to give U.S. assent to a mind-numbing flood of OAS declarations. In response, she needs to oppose a draft resolution appealing to OAS members to ratify the Statute of Rome, which created the International Criminal Court (ICC). She should demonstrate that the statute, as well as the ICC itself, has no demonstrable connection to achieving the “lasting peace” called for in the draft resolution. Such evidence should be easy enough to provide: While states such as Venezuela have ratified the statute, they continue to try to subvert their democratic neighbors. Responsible democratic governments operating under the rule of law, not the ICC, will judge and punish criminals, narco-terrorists, and those who seek to establish autocratic, one-party states.

Secretary Clinton should also express absolute disagreement with the draft resolution on the Falkland Islands. There is no “sovereignty dispute” over these islands and their surrounding waters. The inhabitants of the islands are British and have clearly and repeatedly stated their desire to remain so. Britain vindicated its sovereignty—which derives both from historical claims and, even more fundamentally, from the consent of the people—over the islands in the 1982 war.

Finally, Clinton needs to light a fire under OAS Secretary General Miguel Insulza to implement sound management principles in OAS, advance merit hiring, and control an excessive number of unfunded mandates.

Colombia and Ecuador: Polar Opposites. Secretary Clinton’s decision to visit to friendly Colombia is a positive one. It comes little over a week after Colombian voters propelled Juan Manuel Santos, a former defense minister and a close ally of outgoing President Alvaro Uribe, into the frontrunner spot for the June 20 presidential run-off.

Highest on Secretary Clinton’s agenda is the need to win legislative passage from of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement. The Administration and the Democratic Congress are quickly running out of excuses as to why they cannot pass a bill that generate jobs for American workers. The Secretary should also use the opportunity to review U.S. support for Plan Colombia and reinforce the U.S. commitment to standing with Colombia in its fight

against drugs and the narco-terrorism of FARC after ally Uribe steps down on August 7.

In Ecuador, Clinton hopes to draw Ecuador’s leftist President Rafael Correa a little closer to the U.S. Her charm offensive needs to zero-in on key issues that include Colombia–Ecuador cooperation against FARC, anti-narcotics, strengthening the rule of law, and improving Ecuador’s investment climate. Clinton needs to remind Correa that unqualified friendship with Chávez, Cuba, and Iran will have a chilling effect on bilateral relations and will harm Ecuador’s chances of winning a renewal of the Andean trade preference it receives when the measure expires in December.

Diplomatic Objectives. During her travels, Secretary Clinton should:

- Press OAS members to take concrete actions to strengthen hemispheric security and respond to mounting threats to democracy posed by external interventions and anti-democratic practices;
- Restore Honduras to full OAS membership;
- Inform members that the U.S. is gravely concerned by developments in Venezuela and by Chávez’s terror ties; and
- Recognize President Uribe’s achievements, underscore the importance of America’s enduring alliance with Colombia, and commit the Obama Administration to passing the Colombia Free Trade Agreement this year.

By taking the above steps, Secretary Clinton will address some of the most pressing issues in the Americas.

A Forceful Message. Diplomats close to Clinton argue that she has a strong interest in the Americas. She can prove this by delivering a forceful message in support of a more secure and democratic hemisphere free from an updated version of Cuban communism, more united in the fight against drug trafficking and narco-terrorism, and opposed to dangerous inroads by terror-sponsoring nations such as Iran and Syria.

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