

WebMemo



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Time for U.S. Leadership at the Organization of American States

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The 41st General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) will take place in San Salvador June 5–7. The OAS will convene all members with the exception of Cuba and tackle a 103-item agenda over the course of three meeting-filled days. Since taking office, the Obama Administration has expressed strong support for multilateralism as a corrective for past sins of U.S. “unilateralism.” It designated the OAS as “the foremost multilateral organization of the hemisphere.” Yet, without real U.S. leadership and collective actions to defend democracy, rule of law, human rights, and in-depth security, the OAS may continue its current decline into irrelevance.

The OAS: From Cooperation to Decline. An offshoot of the Pan-American Union, the OAS dates back to the 19th century, which makes it the world’s oldest regional organization. Its stately and aging headquarters near the White House is a historic Washington fixture. Refashioned in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the OAS was once believed to embody “the Western Hemispheric Ideal” and was useful in promoting solidarity among neighbors.

The end of the Cold War opened a door for renewed inter-American solidarity as Washington’s viewpoints appeared to converge with its Latin American neighbors’. The 1990s witnessed the first Summit of the Americas, serious discussion of a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), and broad cooperation on drugs, security, democracy, and development. In the same period, OAS members

undertook to enshrine liberal, democratic governance at the core of the region’s identity. Adoption of the Inter-American Democratic Charter in September 2001 seemed to make the democracy project in the Americas nearly irreversible.

Unfortunately, the amity of the 1990s has given way to the fractiousness of the 21st century. In the past decade, the OAS became an arena for diplomatic jousting on issues ranging from democracy and human rights to Cuba’s readmission and terrorism. U.S. influence and leverage in the region has continued to decline.

Does the OAS Really Stand for Democracy?

In the 2009 Honduras governance crisis, the OAS swiftly condemned the removal of President Manuel Zelaya as a “coup” and expelled Honduras from its ranks. The OAS did so without a careful evaluation of President Zelaya’s constitutional violations, a serious effort at diplomacy, or mediation with the interim government. The U.S. supported this action.

Yet critics of the OAS were quick to note that Honduras was not the only nation in the Americas where the democratic constitutional order was under siege. Members like Venezuela and Nicaragua are routinely in violation of fundamental

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commitments to preserve meaningful checks and balances and political freedom also covered by the Democratic Charter. On June 1, following Manuel Zelaya's return to Honduras free of criminal charges and with the right to participate again in politics, the OAS restored Honduras to full membership.

Other vital freedoms remain under assault. In Venezuela, Hugo Chávez continues to attempt to asphyxiate the opposition through the use of decree powers, curtailments of rights and freedoms, and a net of regulations and prohibitions. The preponderance of the state makes Venezuela a candidate for regular OAS censure. Press and political freedoms are under siege in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. Corruption and routine violations of the rule of law persist.

The Obama Administration has acknowledged several flaws in the OAS. These include an excess of mandates, deviation from core missions, and failure to support representative democracy. The Administration has proposed modest fixes that range from budget reform to reducing the number of OAS mandates. It would like to refocus the OAS on its core responsibilities and bolster democratic monitoring, perhaps creating the position of special democracy *rappporteur*. Yet given current divisions, rescuing the OAS will remain a challenge.

The U.S. has been unable to develop the political will necessary to make the OAS an effective defender of democratic institutions and practices. Sadly, as veteran Latin American watcher Abraham Lowenthal noted, "[T]he OAS has often been ineffectual and the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which is intended to strengthen democratic institutions in OAS member countries, has produced few meaningful results." It is possible that Chávez, who once declared the OAS to be "a corpse that must be buried," may be proven right in the long run.

Hold Tough on Basic Freedoms and Hemispheric Security. The June 5–7 General Assembly has as its central theme "Citizen Security in the Americas," and the U.S. and others will need to concentrate on the range of threats the Americas face, from transnational criminal organizations and drug trafficking to international terrorism. The U.S. must prevent insertion of statements that focus on alleged

"imperialism" or "foreign bases" as the causes of security vulnerabilities. The U.S. will also need to resist efforts by anti-democrats to justify cracking down on legitimate opposition and dissent. The U.S. should reaffirm the central principles of democratic governance and rule of law. To achieve these ends, the U.S. must assume a leadership role at the OAS to:

- **Support Freedom of Expression.** With the backing of Panama and Mexico, the U.S. will sponsor the first-ever resolution on Freedom of Assembly and of Association. That text will undoubtedly encounter opposition from Venezuela and others who will introduce qualifiers and justifications aimed at abridging freedom of assembly and association, so as to make the resolution meaningless. The U.S. must press the OAS to deliver a clear message of support for individual rights and freedom against government encroachments.
- **Support Representative Democracy.** The U.S. and its key allies will need vigilance to thwart Venezuelan and other efforts to undermine basic human rights and democracy language and attempts to equate "popular democracy" with "representative democracy." The U.S. must be prepared to recognize that it is time to abandon the tired assertion that all members of the OAS are democracies.
- **Stronger Hemispheric Security.** In the face of complex criminal, drug, and terrorism threats, the U.S. must keep the focus on building stronger security cooperation via civilian and military means, reminding all members that security against criminal violence and acts of terrorism is not an ideological issue or a tool for U.S. intervention. It must address directly threats arising from the complicity and criminal actions of anti-U.S. members such as Venezuela.
- **Continued Institutional Reform.** The U.S. must press for ways to limit costs, reduce mandates and non-essential functions, and ensure competitive, merit-based hiring at the OAS.

The Obama Administration's investment of increased diplomatic capital in strengthening the OAS has borne scant fruit. Short of withdrawing from the regional body—an option that merits

serious debate—the Obama Administration must continue focusing on democratic development, institutional reforms, cooperation against transnational threats, and strategies to foster accelerated channels of commerce and enhanced economic freedom. The Obama Administration should cease overselling the benefits of hemispheric multilateralism and seek opportunities to work with our

remaining hemispheric friends to advance mutual interests and values.

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