

The United States and the Western Hemisphere: A Relationship on the Rise

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The Western Hemisphere is a top priority for the United States because important national interests are at stake. Available metrics—including public opinion polls, levels of trade and investment, cultural and family ties, security cooperation, and shared democratic values—support the view that the United States remains an influential actor and vital partner in the region. The Obama administration’s policy for the hemisphere seeks to forge equal partnerships with the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. These partnerships build upon the promising destiny of this hemisphere, based first and foremost on shared values, as well as on geographic proximity, demographic connections, and common interests. These shared values and common interests, along with the region’s increasing capabilities, also mean we can work collectively to address global challenges that require more than just national or regional action.

As befits a region that includes our biggest economic partners and longstanding friendships, our top priorities are jobs and prosperity, education and innovation, energy cooperation, and promoting democratic values. We are also focused on deepening the successful North America relationship, supporting Colombia’s peace process, and improving citizen security by addressing prosperity and innovation deficits.

Our economic strategy is centered on our diplomatic efforts to conclude the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations that include our North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) partners, plus Chile and Peru. We are seeking opportunities to deepen our ties with the Pacific Alliance, which includes the rising economies of Mexico, Chile, Colombia, and Peru.

The 2015 Summit of the Americas will provide an important opportunity to showcase a hemisphere with a strong civil society, robust private sector, and renewed commitment to the values of democracy and human rights.

Many commentators have noted that the Americas are at the center of the world’s new energy map. This is a strategic shift that has created huge openings for greater cooperation on energy matters in the hemisphere, including working regionally to promote energy security with responsible environmental stewardship, especially in Central America and the Caribbean. We are collaborating with our North American partners—at a moment when our own energy production is increasing—to offer an environmentally sound energy lifeline to those regions. Beginning with Mexico-Guatemala cooperation, we will encourage public-private cooperation to increase access to, and adoption of, natural gas as a means of reducing carbon emissions from oil-fueled electricity generation. More broadly, the promotion of cleaner energy will be a key means of reducing emissions and advancing our

climate agenda. Even as traditional energy prices may change calculations, it is important to ensure that policies and regulations are in place to improve diversification and resilience for all economies.

Some countries in the hemisphere are still experiencing a “youth bulge” entering the workforce while others are “graying.” All countries, however, recognize that to sustain and broaden the macroeconomic growth that the region has seen in recent years will take much more than an intrinsically ephemeral commodities boom. Creating connections among the region’s youth entrepreneurs and new entrants into the private sector (ages 21 to 35) is an important part of both our youth engagement and economic outreach policy. Our efforts in this area are aimed at helping to expand US business ties beyond traditional hubs. We are supporting innovative ways for our interagency partners, governments, universities, and the private sector to increase two-way delegations, private exchanges, and start-up events to tap into investment opportunities in the United States and across the region. We are working to place youth at the center of our current entrepreneurship initiatives, including the Small Business Network of the Americas, the Women’s Entrepreneurship in the Americas Initiative, the Latin America International Diaspora Engagement Alliance, and 100,000 Strong in the Americas.

The President’s recent \$1 billion budget request to Congress for Central America reflects our strong commitment to investing in a balanced approach, recognizing that effective security cooperation includes deeper engagement to promote greater prosperity and improved governance. In Mexico and Colombia, we are building on our existing relationships to increase the capacity of host governments to provide security for all citizens. Our support to Colombia—both security and development—will remain critical. Mexico’s recent success in bringing drug kingpins to justice demonstrates Mexico’s new ability to tackle cartels. Furthermore, the tragic events of Iguala and Tlatlaya have renewed our commitment to combat impunity and injustice.

The President’s commitment to regular meetings of the North American Leaders Summit highlights a shared continental vision that, 20 years after NAFTA, provides new opportunities for good jobs and investment, and deepened global cooperation with our Mexican and Canadian partners. Our energy, commerce, and foreign ministers have met in recent months to continue the initiatives of our leaders, along with the business community. In Mexico, we applaud the ambitious reforms of President Peña Nieto and his announcement that Mexico will begin peacekeeping engagement in the coming years. The implementation of these reforms will equip Mexico to remain competitive in an increasingly globalized world.

While hailing our region’s promise, there is no shortage of challenges. We continue to see threats to democratic governance and freedom of expression throughout the hemisphere—a hemisphere that proudly proclaimed its commitment to “never again” after authoritarian and military governments were replaced by democracies over two decades ago. We will continue to support human rights activists and fundamental freedoms, including in challenging environments such as Nicaragua, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Cuba.

A New Approach to Cuba

When President Obama announced a new US policy towards Cuba on December 17, 2014, it marked a turning point in what had long been the United States' most contentious relationship in the Americas. While many issues continue to separate our two countries, some of which will take years to resolve, the United States and Cuba are now on a path to building a fundamentally different relationship that will better serve the interests of both of our peoples.

Today, we believe that a policy of engagement will better enable us to effectively advance our values and help the Cuban people move into the 21st century. Our previous approach to relations with Cuba, though rooted in the best of intentions for more than half a century, increasingly hindered our ability to empower the Cuban people and isolated us from our democratic partners in the hemisphere and around the world. It had little effect beyond providing the Cuban government with a rationale for restrictions on its people. Those most deprived were the Cuban people.

Our new approach is designed to promote every Cuban's universal human rights as well as our national interests. We are already seeing signs that our updated approach gives us a greater ability to engage other nations to join us in promoting respect for fundamental freedoms in Cuba. Certainly, our new Cuba policy has galvanized attention throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. It has also drawn greater attention to the actions and policies of the Cuban government.

Ultimately, it will be the Cuban people who drive economic and political reform. That is why, earlier in the Obama administration, we lifted restrictions that made it difficult for Cuban Americans to travel and send remittances to their families in Cuba and opened new pathways for academic, religious, and people-to-people exchanges. These changes created powerful new connections between our two countries. The steps we are implementing now build on this foundation by increasing purposeful travel, licensed commerce, and the flow of information to, from, and within Cuba.

When I traveled to Havana for the first round of the historic talks to re-establish diplomatic relations, I was struck by how the prospect of a better relationship with the United States had raised the hopes of the Cuban people. In addition to my official counterparts, I met with members of Cuba's religious communities, civil society activists and independent journalists, and emerging entrepreneurs, known as *cuentalpropistas*. I was particularly impressed by the entrepreneurial spirit in evidence during a lively lunch with representatives of Cuba's small but vibrant private sector. Their "can-do" attitude reflects the hopes we have that the regulatory changes we announced will increase the financial resources to support the Cuban people and new and emerging entrepreneurs. The revised regulations will also enable US companies to expand telecommunications and internet access within Cuba. US policy will no longer be a barrier to connectivity in Cuba.

Of course, this administration is under no illusions about the nature of the Cuban government. When we sat down with our counterparts in Havana, we were clear that our

governments have both shared interests and sharp differences. From mail service to counternarcotics to oil spill mitigation, we owe our people a diplomatic relationship that allows us to pursue their interests effectively. At the same time, I raised with the Cuban government our concerns about its harassment, use of violence, and arbitrary detention of Cuban citizens peacefully expressing their views. We will use our diplomatic efforts to encourage our allies to take every opportunity, both publicly and privately, to support increased respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms in Cuba.

Our near-term goal of establishing a US embassy in Cuba will help to move forward the tireless work of US diplomats to advance our interests on the island. This includes promoting US trade and commercial interests, conducting education and cultural diplomacy, monitoring significant political and economic developments, and promoting respect for democracy and human rights, including engagement with Cuba's independent civil society. Our diplomats unite families through our immigration processing, provide American citizen services, and issue visas for qualified visitors to the United States. Our consular officers issue tens of thousands of travel documents annually to Cubans traveling to the United States for the purposes of emigrating or visiting friends and family. Our Refugee Processing Center provides assistance to victims of political repression. Our public diplomacy officers work in partnership with a range of journalists, including those from civil society, and provide hundreds of Cubans each week with uncensored internet access through our Information Resource Centers.

Indeed, US diplomats across the Americas are working every day to ensure that the United States enjoys constructive relations with countries across the hemisphere. As Vice President Biden has said, the question today is not what we can do *for* Latin America, but what can we do *with* Latin America. And today the Western Hemisphere matters more to the United States than at any previous point in history, because our relationship has more potential than at any other time in history. The Obama administration is working hard to capitalize on that fact and leave a legacy that will stand the test of time.