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Hemispheric Security: A New Approach

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Many experts in the United States and Latin America believe that Washington has not paid sufficient attention to the Americas in recent years. They warn that this indifference may prove costly at a time when the region is undergoing political, social, and economic transformations. They believe the United States is projecting a detached, unsympathetic attitude just as democratic legitimacy is weakening across Latin America and populism and anti-Americanism are gaining momentum. To underscore the potential costs of neglect, some observers point to inroads that China, Russia, and Iran have made in regional affairs.

This characterization of US policy is exaggerated. Nevertheless, Washington does habitually avoid one aspect of relations with Latin America and the Caribbean except when domestic politics makes avoidance impossible: security and defense.

The hemisphere, fortunately, remains a “zone of peace.” The region contains no conventional threats to the United States. Notwithstanding recent isolated incidents between Andean countries involving military forces, as well as many longstanding border disputes, no conflicts are foreseen between neighboring countries. Much is often made of weapons purchases by Venezuela, Colombia, Chile, and Brazil, leading some critics to speculate that arms races are developing, but in fact the share of regional GDP that is devoted to defense budgets continues to be one of the lowest in the world: an average of just under 1.5 percent.

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This is not to suggest that Latin American and Caribbean nations are free of violence. On the contrary, recent studies by the United Nations and the University of Maryland indicate that violent incidents, and victims of violence, have increased in Latin America over the past 15 years, while violence has declined globally.

But the security challenges in the Americas today are nontraditional and sophisticated. And the violence is caused by factors different from the mainly geopolitical tensions of the past. In a 2008 monograph titled *From the New Middle Ages to a New Dark Age: The Decline of the State and US Strategy*, Phil Williams of the University of Pittsburgh made the case that security and stability today (not just in Latin America but around the world) have little to do with traditional, zero-sum power politics and interstate military rivalry. For Williams, “they revolve around governance, public safety, inequality, urbanization, violent non-state actors, and the disruptive consequences of globalization.”

At the core of the turbulence is the decline of the state, symbolized by deteriorating sovereignty and exacerbated by poverty, inequality, and ineffective governance at all levels of society. Grown in these conditions, unconventional and asymmetrical public security threats—including international criminal networks, youth gangs, and drug trafficking organizations—have emerged to undermine the security, prosperity, and stability of many democracies in the region.

Indeed, ongoing developments in Latin America and the Caribbean have produced a sense that Washington's policies are no longer adequate for the security environment that the region faces. The United States generally has sought to promote a democratic and prosperous hemisphere as a safe and secure environment for itself and its neighbors. Past administrations have engaged states that affect US strategic interests, such as those with large

economies, critical locations, the capacity to develop nuclear weapons, or the potential to generate refugee flows to the United States. But growing instability within many countries suggests that the US approach has not succeeded in overcoming Latin America's security challenges.

It is important that the multidimensional nature of the security threats facing the hemisphere, and their implications for US policy, be clearly understood. The combination of globalization, social inequality, ineffective democratic governance, transnational criminal networks, and other trends has transformed the security environment. Many Latin American and Caribbean nations today are less dependent on the United States than they once were. Government leaders are tired of Washington's habitual paternalistic approach, and they distrust traditional statements of commitment to the region. Given all this, the contemporary context for US engagement with its neighbors demands a new strategic approach to security relations based on greater trust and effective partnerships.

WEAK STATES

Policy makers need to take particular note of four trends that shape today's security environment in Latin America and the Caribbean. The first is the incomplete development of democratic governance. To be sure, democratic transformation since the late 1970s has been truly remarkable. At no time since the hemisphere's nations won their independence have so many people enjoyed such high levels of political freedom and civil liberty. Despite this accomplishment, however, many fledgling democracies face challenges that either prevent political consolidation or threaten the survival of representative democracy.

Many Latin Americans are frustrated with central governments' inability to deliver basic services. This frustration is exacerbated by inadequate social welfare programs, criminal violence, corruption, and widely perceived inattention to economic disparities. Persistent poverty levels—38 percent of the region's population is poor—and the most unequal distribution of wealth in the world engender a number of social and political pathologies that undermine democratic governance and security.

The crisis in democratic governance is apparent in several ways. Polling data by the Chilean firm *Latinobarómetro* and the UN show that just above 50 percent of Latin Americans strongly support democratic rule—a slight decline from the mid-1990s. A loss of confidence

in the performance of democratic institutions is also confirmed. Over half the people surveyed say democracy in their country has major problems. Those expressing trust and confidence in political parties, parliaments, and the judiciary amount to less than 30 percent.

Another sign of the crisis is the high level of crime and violence in the region. Current social conditions create fertile ground for the spread of drug trafficking and an almost uncontrollable rise in criminal violence, particularly homicides. A number of regional trends, such as the rise of populism and increased migration, indicate that citizens in many Latin American and Caribbean nations are losing faith in the ability of democratic governments to meet expectations.

The long-standing cycle of instability, poverty, social inequality, and marginalization—exacerbated by corruption and dysfunctional state institutions and, more recently, by the pressures of globalization—“spawns political polarization and social turmoil,” according to Williams. These forces in turn fuel violence and hinder economic growth and public support for democracy. Williams observes that the cumulative impact of these factors, which are both mutually reinforcing and self-perpetuating, is the weakening and delegitimation of the state. In this way, the capacity of governments to provide individual, public, and regional security is compromised.

CROSS-BORDER THREATS

A second notable trend in Latin America and the Caribbean today is the growth of transnational security challenges. The ineffectiveness of central governments and a resultant fragmentation of control have created opportunities for criminal organizations to traffic in illegal drugs, weapons, people, money, and intellectual property. This in turn has opened the door wider to venality, internal violence, international terrorism, environmental degradation, and, possibly, the spread of contagious diseases.

The region's vexing, multidimensional security landscape, which includes networked non-state groups, presents US policy makers with a daunting problem. If Washington minimizes the challenge, seeking to avoid getting deeply involved, and fails to develop a comprehensive strategy in response, the momentum of the threat will overwhelm ill-prepared neighboring states and pose a direct challenge to US strategic interests in the region.

Latin America and the Caribbean rank as the world's most violent region, with an average homicide rate of nearly 28 murders per 100,000. Africa, by contrast, has 8 murders per 100,000 and South Asia has 4. The Pan American Health Organization considers anything above 10 murders per 100,000 to be an epidemic. According to a joint study by the World Bank and UN, the homicide rate in the Caribbean, parts of the Andes, and Central America approaches 40 per 100,000 per year. In Caracas, the most violent capital in the world, private organizations place the murder rate at 130 per 100,000. The 2008 Latinobarómetro survey noted that, for the first time since 1995, Latin Americans view violent crime as the most pressing problem facing their societies, surpassing unemployment. A study by the Inter-American Development Bank estimates that violence costs the region's economy as much as 15 percent of GDP.

In Mexico and Central America, the corruption and violence engendered by transnational non-state actors undermine public security and weaken the legitimacy of democratic governance. Drug trafficking organizations in Mexico ruthlessly and with impunity murder local and federal law enforcement officials. Homicides associated with drug violence in Mexico surged from 2,700 in 2007 to more than 5,300 in 2008. In Central America, international gangs, with membership totaling between 75,000 and 100,000, have set up networks that stretch north into Mexico and the United States. The gangs engage in drug trafficking, money laundering, and criminal violence.

In Brazil, the transnational criminal organization First Capital Command in 2006 answered government attempts to control the group's activities by killing police and prison guards, and nearly paralyzed São Paulo. Across the region, non-state actors are better equipped, resourced, and manned than most security forces, and often possess superior intelligence assets. Their organizational structures are sophisticated, flexible, and resilient. As Admiral James Stavridis, head of the US Southern Command, recently asserted, "the adaptive nature of these transnational threats poses an insidious challenge to hemisphere-wide stability and governance."

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INDEPENDENCE DAYS

A third factor shaping the security environment today is ineffective cooperation among the nations of the region. Simply put, the habit of cooperation in Latin America is not well established despite rhetoric from government leaders and the recent creation of subregional institutions.

Cooperation on issues of common interest, and especially regarding security, tends to fail for two reasons. First, societies in the region distrust each other. Most governments, in their relations with neighbors, have been preoccupied with protecting sovereignty, defining national interests defensively, and following zero-sum competitive strategies. At a time when globalization and technology are redefining sovereignty everywhere, and when political, economic, and security challenges require wide-ranging cooperation, Latin American nations hold on jealously to old notions of dominion.

The second reason that cooperation fails is diversity. Countries may agree on a list of problems, but they differ on how to prioritize them.

A sophisticated Chile, for example, places energy at the top of its list of national security priorities, while Central American nations with less developed economies and weaker institutions emphasize the challenge of gangs and organized crime.

A Special Conference on Security, convened in 2003 by the Organization of American States, encouraged governments with shared values such as representative democracy and human rights to work together according to commonly accepted principles like strengthening stability, peace, and development. And efforts to cooperate have not been without accomplishments. Central America has a functioning Central American Integration System and a military Conference of Central American Armed Forces. The Eastern Caribbean has a Regional Security System. The Organization of American States, using its new Secretariat for Multidimensional Security, is trying to enhance regional coordination through confidence building measures. So far, however, most cooperation has occurred in the area of economic integration and trade liberalization, not security. Agreements on multilateral approaches to thorny security challenges have tended to yield beautiful statements instead of practical action.

The fourth trend affecting the region's security environment is an emerging independence from Washington. Growing evidence suggests the asymmetry that has characterized US relations with the Americas is narrowing. While political and economic disparities persist—the GDP of the United States is more than double that of Latin America and the Caribbean—opportunities to reduce dependence on the United States have increased in the past 15 years. In an environment of increased intra-regional economic integration, an expanding array of economic and political partners from outside the hemisphere, and regional resentment of Washington's perceived self-serving exercises of power, North America is no longer the immediate partner of choice for many governments.

The US Council of Foreign Relations, in a 2008 task force report titled *US-Latin America Relations: A New Direction for a New Reality*, stated unequivocally that “the era of the United States as the dominant influence in Latin America is over.” Some observers may disagree with this assertion, but American states are undeniably broadening and deepening their intra- and inter-hemispheric ties. A multitude of formal intra-hemispheric ties does not necessarily translate into closer cooperation, of course, and in most cases it has not. However, as the task force report notes, many of the larger Latin American countries simply “do not consider their interests to be primarily determined by diplomatic, trade, or security ties with the United States.”

Scholars note a recent diffusion of US power and a proliferation of diplomatic and security ties away from the United States. For example, in a 2008 essay titled “Goodbye Washington,” the Argentine columnist Juan Gabriel Tokatlian pointed to an unusually large number of initiatives that not only exclude the United States but may counter US interests in the region. Brazil and Venezuela have been particularly active in this regard. In the former case, President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva has asserted that his country “has to definitively assume responsibility for the integration of South American states.” One example is the creation, announced in May 2008, of a South American Defense Council aimed at institutionalizing and coordinating “defense and security policies in the region while preventing and mediating conflicts within South America.” Venezuela, through multiple agreements, has greatly contributed to the number and types of formal pacts in the hemisphere that do not include the United States.

Meanwhile, US strategic dependence on the region is on the rise. The Western Hemisphere accounts for nearly 50 percent of US energy imports, with nearly a third coming from Latin America and the Caribbean—the largest share accounted for by any region. At the same time, almost 40 percent of US merchandise trade heads south. In terms of investments, the region accounts for 32 percent of all US foreign direct investment, and the dollar amount of US investment has grown nearly 20 percent since 1999. Beyond energy, issues such as the environment, illegal narcotics, and immigration have intensified interdependence between the United States and its neighbors.

From a security perspective, there is unease on both sides of this changing relationship. While Latin American states worry about subordination to the “gringos,” the United States fears loss of the ability to control its geopolitical destiny. Both perceptions work against the need to strengthen trust and institutionalize mechanisms that are critical in addressing today's complex security threats.

REFRAMING SECURITY POLICY

In light of these trends, how should the United States recalibrate its approach to security in the hemisphere? Washington's national security concerns in the region have long governed how US administrations view the place of Latin America and the Caribbean in global policy. From the articulation of the Monroe Doctrine through the cold war period, concerns about instability caused the United States to pursue a policy of “strategic denial”—that is, keeping at bay nations from outside the region that were interested in projecting their influence—while also strengthening the ability of neighboring states to govern. Washington's approach for some time has promoted economic and democratic development supported by US military presence, assistance, and, on occasion, unilateral intervention.

This policy required limited resources to protect US interests, thereby avoiding both entanglements and distractions from commitments elsewhere in the world. But the spread of democracy and free market economic policies as well as changes in military affairs, beginning in the 1980s, ushered in circumstances that strategic denial did not anticipate and that it was ill-suited to address. With Washington's attention turned to Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and the Middle East, Latin American and Caribbean nations found themselves with more maneuvering space. The playing

field shifted, helped in part by uncertainty about US relations, which tended to focus narrowly on issues such as drug trafficking and arms control. Countries in the region gained confidence first on the economic front, although at an unequal pace, and began to explore more trade relationships within and outside the hemisphere.

Now for the first time in decades, global competition for trade and influence imposes practical limits on Washington's ability to dominate events. Even among friends, the nature of relations has changed. Governments are inclined to address problems themselves or with immediate neighbors and rely less on the United States. Latin American presidents, for example, recently joined together to defuse tension between Colombia and its neighbors, Ecuador and Venezuela, after Colombia's March 2008 raid inside Ecuador. No one challenges US primacy, but governments are becoming more distant, independent, and willing to cultivate US competitors and adversaries.

Yet, as national independence strengthens, criminal threats to security and stability are becoming more sophisticated, interconnected, and dangerous. And countries are unable to meet these challenges alone. Effective solutions require greater degrees of multilateral cooperation, despite misunderstandings and irritants. The emergence of subregional communities, independent of the United States, is a step in this direction.

Does Washington have the will to adapt its strategic thinking in light of these changes in the region's security context? If it does, the United States will have to curb its inclination to focus narrowly on one or two issues or countries. Washington must also invest significant political capital to rebuild confidence in US leadership and to answer doubts about the sincerity of its commitments.

Making constructive steps will be difficult, with the global financial crisis slowing economic growth. Regionally, unemployment probably will increase, bolstering the appeal of black markets and smuggling. Funding for security is certain to decrease. On the other hand, if Washington resists adjusting its approach, US credibility is sure to diminish further, and neighbors will look increasingly to nations from outside the region for strategic partnerships.

Washington should resist the temptation to act simply to secure US goals worldwide while providing assistance to its neighbors on its own terms. Instead, the United States should pursue a strategy in which neighboring nations are engaged as equal partners working in concert toward shared goals. Many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have made considerable headway in reducing poverty and inequality, regaining control from criminal elements, and playing responsible roles on the international stage. Washington has an unprecedented opportunity to lead an effort to reduce mutual distrust and promote reciprocal support in order to improve security in today's uncertain international system.

AN UNEVEN LEGACY

The Bush administration's Latin America policy concentrated on four priorities: strengthening democratic institutions, promoting prosperity, investing in people, and bolstering security. Overall, the policy emphasized US oversight or involvement rather than encouraging the hemisphere's countries to work together. The administration's approach to the last priority, bolstering security, was ambiguous in that Washington recognized a need for partnerships but was not committed to building them.

The Bush approach essentially restated standard principles, continued issue-based country plans with pledges of assistance (not all of which gained congressional approval), and preserved Washington's proclivity for independent action. In designing programs to implement the four priorities, the United States often treated the region as if it were a monolithic entity united by more than just geography and history, as if a cookie-cutter approach to policies could equally fit a collection of bilateral relationships. With its attention diverted since the mid-1990s by a deepening global security agenda and challenging geo-economic trends, the United States responded only in shallow and noncommittal ways to the hemisphere's political, economic, and security transformations. As anti-Americanism spread, US influence diminished and policy makers found themselves without a suitable, sustainable strategic framework.

With a new administration in place in Washington, it is time to reconsider the habitual US approach. The core strategy should not change,

The security challenges in the Americas today are nontraditional and sophisticated.

but Washington's two fundamental security objectives—protecting the homeland from attack and fostering conditions in countries around the United States that help secure US wellbeing and prosperity—must get in step with current conditions in the region and today's asymmetrical threats. Washington has to place these security objectives in appropriate contexts and design the right strategies for realizing them.

Historically, a naval shield and an integrated air and missile defense system (developed with Canada during the cold war) achieved the first objective—that of protecting the United States against conventional threats. With no adversaries close by, Washington also sought to exclude extra-hemispheric influences hostile to its interests, particularly in the close, vulnerable, and insecure Caribbean Basin. But the events of September 11, 2001, laid bare weaknesses in this strategy. The United States now needs to defend against state and non-state threats in the geographical approaches to its territory as well as in more distant regions of the world. Washington must coordinate not only with Canada, as before, but also with Mexico and the Caribbean states, which are more reluctant to engage as conventional partners.

Adapting the second security objective—fostering conditions in countries around the United States that help secure its wellbeing and economic interests—presents a different challenge. In today's geopolitical setting, other nations share an interest in stability and prosperity, but they desire to solve regional problems within the region, independent of the United States. A more relevant concept of this objective would recognize the importance of engaging neighbors as equal partners to help foster conditions such that all nations involved secure a shared wellbeing and livelihood.

ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES

The complicated tasks of protecting the United States and bolstering regional involvement in hemispheric security call for three organizing principles. First, Washington should in its strategic thinking disaggregate the Americas into three geographical regions: North America, the Caribbean Basin, and South America. The countries in each region share many security concerns. (The Caribbean Basin overlaps with both North and South America. Mexico, Cuba, and the Bahamas are in the northern region as well as the Caribbean, while Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana, and Suriname are in the Caribbean and the south.)

Second, the essentiality of rebuilding confidence in the United States should be an underlying consideration in all decisions related to the Americas. Third, US strategic thinking should emphasize three values: respect for the views of other governments; working with other states, either individually or as communities, in reciprocal ways; and nurturing the trust of neighboring states. Thus, a fresh approach would see the United States pursue its strategic objectives separately in each of the three regions, with approaches influenced by local as well as US considerations.

The threat-based first objective—that of protecting the US homeland from attack—is of immediate interest in North America and the Caribbean Basin and of significantly lower concern in South America. Looking today at the regions of immediate concern, threat awareness and the coordinated defense of land, sea, and air domains are highly developed with Canada, but the remainder of North America and the Caribbean Basin pose formidable hurdles to US interests. Violent crime, the inability of public forces to police their sovereign territory fully, and serious transnational problems (such as smuggling, weather, and environmental issues) define challenges to these countries as well as to the United States. The absence of defense collaboration with Cuba, precluded by US law as well as by 50 years of mutual antagonism, is a serious weakness. Mexico is pivotal, but the weight of history, concerns about subordination to the United States, and a violent internal war against organized crime limit cooperation similar to that which the United States enjoys with Canada.

Despite these impediments, a multidimensional solution for enhancing mutual security in the Caribbean Basin is possible, and would involve emphasizing contributions by neighboring states. Such an approach would treat the region as a geostrategic whole and proceed from the recognition that a direct correlation exists between disrupting entrenched trafficking and smuggling networks and reducing US vulnerability to terrorists eager to take advantage of such networks.

This approach, rather than trying to integrate Mexico and the Caribbean Basin nations into a North American defense system, would seek to encourage development of a partnership among these countries to address their shared security concerns. Mexico could play a leadership role vis-à-vis its Central American and Caribbean neighbors. A Caribbean Basin Security Partnership

could develop an air, maritime, and land surveillance and response system covering key corridors of concern. The heart of the partnership could be a “Mexico–Caribbean Basin Surveillance System,” based in and led by Mexico and staffed by military, police, and intelligence officers from participating countries. The system would provide information to all participating governments for use by their militaries or police within their own territory. The system could also entail exchanges of information with the United States and Canada.

The values-based second security objective recognizes that peaceful, stable, and prosperous countries foster conditions that help secure the wellbeing and livelihood of democratic societies. Past progress in this arena has been gradual, uneven, and problematic; however, progress now concerns governments in the hemisphere besides just Washington and Ottawa. Many countries now have a broader willingness and capability to assist other nations. In regard to this second objective, Washington should target South America in particular—the Caribbean Basin, less so.

It was not until the late 1980s that Latin American nations began to resolve their traditional border disputes and start collaborating with their neighbors. Since then, summit meetings, trade negotiations, participation in a heavily Latin American UN Stabilization Mission for Haiti, and other collaborations have increased the confidence and readiness of American states to solve thorny mutual problems and to help other countries. Nations’ motivations range from a desire for a stable subregion that can attract outside investment and acquire economic bargaining power to a Wilsonian urge to be a responsible nation in the international system and to do good works.

Regional strategies to realize the second, values-based objective would benefit from a galvanizing idea that addresses the core problem facing weaker states. Such a concept is Colombia President Alvaro Uribe’s assertion that security is a democratic value. This idea could shape policies and become the criterion for measuring their effectiveness. Uribe’s concept emphasizes personal security and involves citizens, not just police and military forces, in strengthening safety. “Democratic security” recognizes that the root of violence and crime is

the government’s inability to exercise authority. It pushes the state out into areas where its writ has been ignored, mobilizes and prioritizes resources to impose law and order throughout the country, and revives socio-economic development as public safety improves. Washington’s strategy would involve collaborating with governments that share its ideas in this arena and that are ready to help other countries in distress.

TOWARD COLLABORATION

The Obama administration will encounter in Latin America and the Caribbean Basin a new strategic environment, one in which security issues will require innovative attention. A sea change is taking place, triggered by past US disengagement, growing anti-American sentiment, and recent economic advances in the region. Nations are coalescing in loose subregional groupings around emerging leaders, such as Brazil and Venezuela. Countries are accepting responsibility for their problems. They want to gain bargaining power for trade and investment, and they desire to work with North Americans on their own terms.

Changes affecting the region’s security environment are shaped by both long-standing and relatively recent trends, which include

ineffective democratic governance and growing transnational threats, as well as emerging independence from the United States and challenges to cooperation. A fundamental question is whether Washington will adapt to circumstances in the region to advance its security agenda. Doing so will require partnerships based on mutual respect.

Collaboration is not easy for a country with a tradition of power such as the United States has enjoyed. America’s path to partnership necessitates reforming its strategic thinking and creating conditions conducive to mutual endeavors. A first hurdle will be to overcome American society’s isolationist tendency, a tendency apparent in ongoing debates about immigration, foreign trade, and the construction of a fence along the border with Mexico. In general, a more nuanced approach to security policy—including a more collaborative and comprehensive diplomatic framework—would serve US interests not just in Latin America but around the world. ■

At the core of the turbulence is the decline of the state, symbolized by deteriorating sovereignty and exacerbated by poverty.
