



Time for US Leadership in the Americas

By Roger F. Noriega

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KEY POINTS

- *Progress in the Americas—including supporting the new democratic majority in Venezuela, advancing essential freedoms in Cuba, and promoting prosperity throughout the region—demands much more active and ambitious US leadership.*
- *Flagging economic growth and widespread corruption in key Latin American countries have produced popular dissatisfaction with big-government solutions, creating an opportunity for free-market policies to restore prosperity.*
- *Urgent US sanctions targeting criminal kingpins—despots in Venezuela, cronies in El Salvador, narcoguerrillas in Colombia—can make a crucial and timely contribution to democracy and security.*

In 2016, the United States has the opportunity to advance key US interests in the Americas—eclipsing the failed and fading legacy of the late Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez, filling the void that China’s receding demand created, and backing a trend toward accountable policies. Predictably, President Barack Obama’s outreach to the Raúl Castro regime in Cuba has failed to produce the results that he hoped would leave a lasting legacy.¹ However, he has one final year to make a meaningful contribution to democracy, the rule of law, and free-market economics in the Americas as a whole.

For nearly two decades, several countries have succumbed to a mix of authoritarian populism, statist economic policies, and unsustainable social spending—giving government such an overbearing role in national economies that it spurred corruption and undermined democracy. Regrettably, in the last decade, the United States

failed to advance any alternatives to big-government strategies.

Meanwhile, regional antidrug cooperation that willing Andean neighbors forged with the United States 25 years ago has virtually disintegrated today.² At first, leftist regimes in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela defied this US-led agenda. Eventually, several became complicit with narcocorruption—with little or no pushback from US policymakers.³ Now, Colombia’s government is gutting key antidrug policies in its rush to make peace with narcoguerrillas, but US diplomats have failed to counsel against making peace at any price.⁴ Transnational organized crime destabilizes a half-dozen countries, but the Obama administration plans to throw US tax dollars at the symptoms in Central America while neglecting the narcostate in Venezuela.

In a number of countries in recent months, elections and opinion polls suggest that people are seeking alternatives to statist formulas that

have produced political repression, economic recession, or both.⁵ President Obama has the opportunity to salvage the final year of his mandate by empowering his diplomatic and economic team to demonstrate US leadership in key areas:

- **Show that the United States cares about its neighbors.** Energize outreach to like-minded governments, civil society, and the private sector, and speak out on a host of practical and pressing issues—including fighting corruption in Central America, promoting political accountability and practical economic solutions in Haiti, and rallying solidarity with the region’s democrats, beginning in Venezuela and Cuba.
- **Lead with free-market solutions.** The secretary of the treasury should form a regional working group of finance ministers to develop a prosperity agenda for aggregating and channeling private capital and international assistance to private-sector entrepreneurs, liberalizing internal markets, modernizing infrastructure, maximizing energy production, and tapping the benefits of international trade.
- **Help rescue Venezuela and support the new democratic majority.** Call for an urgent meeting of foreign ministers at the Organization of American States under the Inter-American Democratic Charter to respond to the Nicolás Maduro regime’s attempts to deny the democratic opposition the National Assembly supermajority it won on December 6.
- **Put narcotraffickers and other transnational criminals on the defensive.** Use executive authorities to sanction individuals (denying access to the US financial system and freezing assets) who play a disproportionate role in undermining democracy and the rule of law.
- **Promote principled peace in Colombia.** Encourage the Colombian government to negotiate a tough, enforceable agreement with the

guerrillas, such as Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC); fortify the agreement with a constitutional referendum; and restore effective extradition and coca-eradication programs if the FARC fails to cease drug-related crimes.

- **Support the right of the Cuban people to choose their own future.** Reprioritize their human rights, democracy, and economic liberty in compliance with the bipartisan Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (LIBERTAD) Act of 1996. Challenge the Castro regime for meddling in Venezuelan affairs.

Filling the Vacuum of Responsible Leadership

President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry clearly come from a school of thought that sees Latin America and the Caribbean as a bundle of grievances against US interference. When, in November 2013 at the Organization of American States (OAS), Kerry declared, “The era of the Monroe Doctrine is over,” he might have admitted that the Obama administration’s policy is to leave the Americas alone, literally.⁶ Dutiful career US diplomats have fashioned a policy of benign reticence—self-conscious silence as leftist *caudillos* (strongmen) dismantled democratic institutions, muzzled independent media, and jailed political opponents; as unsustainable social programs and corruption smothered burgeoning economies; and as China muscled its way into a natural US market with mercantile tactics and predatory loans.⁷

Minding these matters is the United States’ business.

It is a fallacy that Latin America regards any sort of engagement by Washington as unhealthy intervention. The truth is the United States can work with like-minded democrats to reenergize the Inter-American Democratic Charter—starting with reviewing the conditions of democracy, human rights, and the separation of powers in Venezuela. Luis Almagro, the new OAS secretary general, deserves the strong backing of the United

States and other democratic governments, so the OAS can reassert its role in detecting and responding to threats to democracy and human rights.⁸

There is dramatic evidence that people in many countries need and welcome their neighbors' renewed solidarity. In Guatemala, a political neophyte, Jimmy Morales, was elected president in October with two-thirds of the popular vote. His election came after months of peaceful popular protests, which forced President Otto Pérez Molina (and his vice president) to resign in the face of corruption charges uncovered by a prosecutor backed up by a UN-sanctioned (and US-backed) international investigative team.⁹ Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández has turned to the OAS for similar international assistance to ferret out corruption.¹⁰

In Haiti, the United States and the international community cannot merely provide aid while ignoring the feudal economic system, nor should they pay for periodic elections and then neglect political dysfunction. Once the current electoral impasse is resolved, the United States and other donors must press Haiti's new president and parliament to govern responsibly and eliminate the culture of cronyism and corruption. Haitian leaders, in government and business, should be challenged to take practical steps to modernize the economy from the bottom up, emphasizing private initiatives that create decent jobs and give people a stake in the future. This requires transparent policies that encourage domestic and international investment.¹¹ As Haitians begin to identify responsible government with greater prosperity, their leaders can pursue the long-term goal of reforming the country's political institutions to make them more accountable and relevant.

Poverty and insecurity in some Latin American and Caribbean countries are primarily caused by a lack of strong, accountable institutions that can foster economic development and provide for public security. For these valid reasons, the United States has been active for 80 years in promoting democracy and the rule of law in the Americas. In numerous countries in recent years—including Guatemala, Haiti, Argentina, and Brazil—people demonstrated their faith in these democratic solutions to the toughest

problems. In each case, legislatures, courts, independent media, civil society, the rule of law, or free and fair elections have played indispensable, positive roles.

US foreign policy cannot be timid when these values and institutions are tested. Although some in the region complain about the appearance of US meddling, many have come to expect US solidarity with its neighbors in defense of shared principles.

Jump-Starting Prosperity with Free-Market Solutions

Elections in Argentina and Venezuela reflect the apparent failure of statist, big-government policies. Even in Brazil, Ecuador, and Chile, the political fortunes of socialist leaders appear to be declining.¹² Today, the United States has the opportunity to advocate free-market solutions to pressing economic problems in the Americas.

The Obama administration has shown little interest in touting the advantages of free-market policies—either at home or abroad. That must change in order to empower rising reformers in key nations who recognize that right-sizing government spending and incentivizing private-sector growth are the best way to sustain and share prosperity.

The economic benefits of free-market policies are tangible. Just within Latin America and the Caribbean, free-market policies have helped cut extreme poverty in half, so that the region has more people in the middle class than in poverty.¹³ Clearly national policies must promote free-market growth, as well as extending economic opportunity to people from all walks of life.

In recent years, many Latin American economies have lost momentum. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, in 2015, the South American economy will *contract* by 0.4 percent. Setting aside the impending collapse in Venezuela, economic growth has slowed in the giant economies of Brazil (which will shrink by nearly 3 percent) and Mexico (whose 2.4 percent growth is half what it was just five years ago). All the Andean states, plus Chile, have slowed down appreciably in the

last two years.¹⁴ In Central America, the economies of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are foundering.

In 2015 the region was reminded that national leaders must summon the political courage to adopt internal reforms. Commodity booms, natural-resource wealth, foreign trade, and capital can only sustain growth when coupled with national policies that reward private initiative, investment, and innovation. This is the “sweet spot” for the world’s most dynamic economy, and US foreign policy must play to this advantage.

Nine short years ago, the United States advocated the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) to secure market access and fuel long-term economic growth. Since then, political instability and crime have undermined these plans—corrupting Central America’s institutions and destabilizing their economies. Arguably, Honduras and El Salvador are *less competitive* than they were before CAFTA.¹⁵

Foreign observers have rightly credited Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto for emphasizing his country’s economic modernization—including in the energy sector. However, persistent organized crime and corruption, which continue to complicate doing business in Mexico, have undermined his domestic reforms.¹⁶

Brazil slipped into recession two years ago and is not expected to recover for several years. A multibillion-dollar-kickback scandal involving the state-owned oil company, Petrobras, is widely perceived as the proximate cause of the ongoing impeachment crisis. However, President Dilma Rousseff’s failing economic program is a contributing factor.

She relied on unsustainable public spending—even though it meant milking Petrobras of capital that it needed for exploration, production, and profitability. Even worse, Rousseff failed to adopt badly needed reforms, including improving government efficiency and accountability, taming costly public pensions, simplifying the labyrinthine federal and state tax systems, liberalizing the labor code, removing regulatory obstacles to doing business, and attracting foreign capital and technology into the promising energy sector.¹⁷

A similar situation can be seen in Ecuador, where, until recently, substantial oil revenues and favorable trade and investment with China sustained economic growth, mitigating the impact of Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa’s unsustainable welfare programs and statist policies. Correa began to lose popularity even before his administration proposed \$2.2 billion in cuts to public spending. Ecuador’s annual growth rate—which averaged 5 percent from 2010 to 2014—ground to a halt in 2015.¹⁸

In light of these examples, the region is more receptive than ever toward a constructive agenda stressing *internal reforms* that protect and promote economic freedom, incentivize entrepreneurship, reduce taxes and regulation on the economy’s productive sectors, and empower job creators and workers. These domestic policies will help countries build more mature economies, create better jobs, increase productivity, and cultivate healthier internal markets.

The tide already is turning, and US policy should go with the flow.

The tide already is turning, and US policy should go with the flow. For example, in Argentina, after 15 years, a majority of voters rejected the statist policies of Presidents Néstor and Christina Kirchner. Even within the Peronist movement, many voters preferred a change of course. As a result, the free-market-friendly candidate, Mauricio Macri, was elected to a four-year term that began December 10.

Macri already is making good on campaign pledges to lift currency restrictions and price controls, dismantle counterproductive taxes on agricultural goods, provide an honest accounting of economic data, and settle with bond holdouts as a step toward restoring Argentina’s creditworthiness.¹⁹ Argentina’s new foreign minister has even spoken positively about a regional pro-trade initiative.²⁰ If Macri can deliver on key points in his ambitious agenda, his election is an opportunity to demonstrate free-

market remedies' effectiveness in right-sizing government and jump-starting stagnant economies.

Latin American and Caribbean leaders are not expecting a new "Washington Consensus." However, many may be receptive to a partnership with the United States organized around proven formulas to attract capital, generate growth, and create jobs. President Obama should instruct the secretary of the treasury to form a regional working group of finance ministers to develop a *prosperity agenda* for aggregating and channeling private capital and international lending to private-sector entrepreneurs; setting benchmarks for liberalizing internal markets, accommodating business creation, and modernizing infrastructure; identifying best practices to maximize energy production; and helping people from all walks of life benefit from expanding international trade.

Rescuing Venezuela

Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez set out in 1998 to make his Bolivarian Revolution the most influential force in the Americas. His grandiose vision and lavish spending at home and abroad helped create a significant international following. At the same time, Chávez and his handpicked successor, Nicolás Maduro, have destroyed the Venezuelan economy, bankrupted the government, looted state-run enterprises, decimated oil production, wrecked democratic institutions, muzzled the media, and jailed political opponents. Just two years after Chávez's death, Venezuela's lawless regime and the implications of its inevitable collapse cast a shadow over the region and challenge US policymakers.

In this case, too, the United States has an opportunity to change its policy and support the right side. On December 6, the Venezuelan people overwhelmingly voted to give the democratic opposition a landslide victory and two-thirds control of the National Assembly, starting this month. This would mark the first time in 16 years that the Socialist Party (PSUV), founded by Chávez, has not controlled Venezuela's congress.

The opposition's supermajority would be sufficient to submit draft laws to a referendum; adopt constitutional amendments; name a controller general, attorney general, and public ombudsman; remove Supreme Court justices; and convene a constituent assembly.²¹ The assembly also can interpolate and censure the vice president and ministers, name members to the electoral council, approve a referendum revoking the president's term, authorize charges against the president and public officials, approve or reject states of exception, and censure the vice president and ministers.

President Maduro initially accepted the outcome of the December elections. However, in one of its final acts, the lame duck assembly, controlled by the Socialist Party, elected 13 new justices and 23 alternates to the 32-member Supreme Court. And Maduro's party has formally appealed to this packed court to challenge the election of four deputy seats; by vacating those results, the Socialist Party hopes to deny the opposition bloc its powerful supermajority.²²

Until now, US diplomats have pulled their punches against the narcostate that has evolved in Venezuela, apparently under the delusion that a strategy of accommodation will either placate the regime or forestall a disorderly implosion. US law-enforcement agencies and prosecutors are confronting this dangerous security threat by building cases against key political and military officials and even against Maduro's family members.²³ However, US diplomats apparently are not taking these investigations seriously; the meeting in June 2015 between senior State Department official Thomas Shannon and alleged Venezuelan drug kingpin, National Assembly President Diosdado Cabello, sent mixed signals.²⁴

The international community must recognize that the democratic opposition, for the first time since Chávez's rise to power, represents the majority in Venezuela. US diplomats must work with other democratic states to rally the region to support the new National Assembly's legitimate exercise of power. For example, the Inter-American Democratic Charter explicitly refers to the "separation of powers and independence of the branches of government" and authorizes the OAS secretary general and any member state to request a regional meeting to assess events in a

country that “seriously impair[] the democratic order.”²⁵

US diplomats must rally like-minded governments to invoke, at long last, the Inter-American Democratic Charter in the case of Venezuela to defend the free exercise of the National Assembly and the essential elements of democracy under the Democratic Charter. In addition, Obama should bring sanctions against Maduro regime officials who are responsible for abuses of human rights and democracy. As I explain later, he should also expose and punish senior Venezuelan officials involved in narcotrafficking, seizing their dollar-denominated and US-based assets and pledging to release them to a democratic successor government.

Putting Criminals on the Defensive

US security demands more vigorous efforts to confront transnational organized crime, which is preying on weak states and threatening our neighborhood. The Obama administration would have difficulty restoring the antidrug alliance in the region, particularly because it has failed to enforce federal laws against marijuana trafficking at home.²⁶ Also, sanctioning states for their lack of cooperation will do little more than stir a diplomatic controversy.

However, President Obama has all the authority he needs to deliver a devastating blow to individual criminals by denying them access to the US financial system and seizing their US-based and dollar-denominated assets. In many key cases, targeting prominent criminals will help tip the scales politically in favor of democracy and the rule of law. The kind of sanctions imposed on Honduras’ Rosenthal clan last year should be applied against far more important figures in the hemisphere, such as José Luis Merino in El Salvador and Cabello and Tarek El Aissami in Venezuela.²⁷

Perhaps the potential biggest loser in Venezuela’s recent election was Cabello, the outgoing National Assembly president, whom, according to published reports, US prosecutors are

investigating for involvement in narcotrafficking, money laundering, and other acts of corruption. El Aissami, governor of the state of Aragua and another political henchman of the Maduro regime, also is among several dozen officials whom numerous US federal prosecutors are investigating.²⁸

Merino, a former FMLN guerrilla whose criminal activities were exposed in captured FARC computers, is known as the FARC’s man in El Salvador. He has played a central role in using a Venezuelan aid program known as “Alba Petróleos” to launder money for the FARC and other criminal and terrorist organizations.²⁹

Although the US Congress recently approved \$750 million to support these Central American states, no significant progress can be made until the executive branch deals effectively with the underlying official corruption—beginning with effective law-enforcement measures targeting Merino and his coconspirators. Such action against Merino also will send a signal to the FARC that, regardless of the peace talks with the Colombian government, US authorities will act to dismantle their criminal network. Indeed, if FARC leaders fail to sign or comply with a peace accord, the US government should be prepared to use financial sanctions against recalcitrant narcoguerrillas.

President Obama does not need an international coalition to deliver a decisive blow against criminality. With the stroke of a pen he could instruct the secretary of the treasury and, respecting the separation of powers, ask the attorney general to prioritize investigations against those individuals who menace US interests in neighboring countries.

Promoting a Principled Peace in Colombia

Hoping to end the 50-year armed conflict in Colombia that has claimed more than 220,000 lives, President Juan Manuel Santos in 2012 launched negotiations with the FARC. The two sides have set March 23 as the deadline for signing a final agreement. How that agreement is

implemented may affect significantly US antidrug efforts and Colombian political stability.³⁰

A peace deal's long-term viability depends on whether the FARC leaders cease their narco-trafficking operations—which garner an estimated \$600 million annually—and submit to prosecution and punishment. Enforcing the accords so they produce true dividends for Colombia will require the kind of hard-nosed approach that Santos has not demonstrated in his quest for a deal.

Colombia reclaimed the title as the world's largest producer of cocaine, with more than a 50 percent increase in coca production in recent years.

If the FARC commanders continue to enrich themselves with narcodollars, they will have the means to buy the political influence they could not win on the battlefield. As their influence undermines Colombia's political institutions and the rule of law, the expected peace dividends in the form of economic growth and foreign investment may fail to materialize. Instead, a powerful underground economy that writes its own rules could squeeze out the country's legitimate commerce and industry.

Data collected by the United Nations revealed that Colombia reclaimed the title as the world's largest producer of cocaine, with more than a 50 percent increase in coca production in recent years. For that reason alone, it is very significant that the Santos government effectively ended aerial spraying of illicit coca crops in a concession to the FARC. In another peace gesture, Santos suspended extraditing FARC kingpins who are wanted for drug trafficking in the United States; for the first time ever, in December 2015, Colombia refused a US extradition request of a FARC commander indicted for drug smuggling.³¹

These developments beg the question of whether Colombia is letting down its guard. Few begrudge war-weary Colombians the opportunity to end a long, violent chapter in their history. However, their US allies have apparently failed to warn against trading prosperity and security for an unsustainable truce with criminals.

President Obama has invited Colombian President Santos to an official working visit in Washington, DC, next month. More than cheerleading the peace process, Obama must convince his counterpart that he can count on US political and material support for peace, provided that Santos presses the FARC to accept and comply with a tough, verifiable agreement to definitively end the conflict and the FARC's criminal activities. And if the FARC fails to comply, the United States must impose its own executive sanctions on FARC leaders and insist that Colombia restore the extradition of FARC criminals and aerial spraying of illicit crops.

Standing with the Cuban People

It is important to do a cost-benefit analysis of the Obama administration's concessions to the Castro regime—because what is good for the Cuban people no longer guides US policy. Arguably, conditions for 11 million Cubans have worsened since President Obama announced the normalization of relations in December 2014. According to prominent dissidents, repression has increased.³² One dissident, whom the regime released temporarily as a gesture to Obama, now lies near death from a hunger strike.³³ Cuban purchases of US goods have decreased in the last year.

Despite the foreboding indicators, an administration official stated in November that additional planned concessions will not be linked to progress on human rights.³⁴ Predictably, Castro has made it clear that his political and economic policies will not change, while he continues to demand reparations, the end of US prodemocracy programs and broadcasting, and the end of the US presence at Guantanamo Bay.³⁵ Moreover, the Castro regime pays no political price for destructively micromanaging the

Maduro government and advocating antidemocratic measures in Venezuela.

Obama appears to accept that the US economic sanctions are to blame for Cuba's woes. Others note that, despite being able to trade with every country in the world, the Cuban economy has collapsed because of authoritarian controls on the economy. Despite Soviet Union largesse, European investment, Canadian tourist dollars, and Venezuelan oil riches, the Cuban government is bankrupt. Despite the trend toward democracy over the last three decades, Cuba remains a totalitarian dictatorship. Despite being a tropical island, Cuba has shortages of citrus and seafood.

The Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidary (LIBERTAD) Act of 1996, which a three-fourths majority in each house of Congress approved and President Bill Clinton signed, defined reasonable terms for normalizing economic relations with a post-Castro Cuba. Cuba is the only country in the Western Hemisphere that cannot meet *any* of the human rights, labor rights, or democracy conditions contemplated in this act. That is the responsibility of the Castro regime. If President Obama cares about the Cuban people's well-being, he should focus on supporting their right to elect their own leaders, not scuttling the bipartisan principles behind US law.

Conclusion

Commitments to democracy and human rights—far from being Washington impositions—are the product of regional solidarity and decades of inter-American jurisprudence confronting homegrown dictatorships. For example, the Venezuelan people and their neighbors are not able to fend off a military dictatorship with potent allies, such as China, Russia, Iran, Cuba, Hezbollah, and the FARC. Ignoring that narcostate's evolution has only compounded the threat.

Moreover, the United States is not doing its neighbors any favors by neglecting extraregional threats and transnational criminality, which both overwhelm many small states' institutions. Rather than vigorously promoting trade relations with the world's most dynamic economy, the United States left small nations to fend for

themselves and left larger economies to choose the "sugar high" of commodity revenue, which fostered overdependence on Chinese demand and stunted their own integral growth.

President Obama can salvage his Americas policy as he enters his final year in office. Although the agenda described in this paper is complex and challenging, many free-market democrats in the region are eager to begin restoring prosperity, democracy, and security for their people.

It is never the wrong time to do the right thing. And, in 2016, constructive US leadership is the right thing for the region.

About the Author

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