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Reintegrating the Western Hemisphere

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It has been almost fifty years since the United States pursued realistic goals towards Cuba, good or bad. After the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion failed to overthrow Fidel Castro, Washington set out to accomplish by stealth and economic strangulation what it had failed to do by frontal attack. Primitive in concept and inept in execution, this clumsy mix of covert action and porous boycott succeeded primarily in bringing shame on the United States and turning Fidel Castro into a folk hero throughout Latin America.

In 1962, the United States tried to expel Cuba from the Organization of American States. This initiative met with fierce resistance from most of the major states of Latin America. It was only after intense diplomatic pressures and the bribe of a new airport for Haiti that Washington eked out the fourteen votes necessary to suspend Cuba's membership in the OAS.

On his first trip abroad as president of Cuba in 2008, Raul Castro traveled to Brazil to confer with twenty two other Latin American presidents: The occasion was the annual meeting of the Rio Group, an organization founded in 1986 with the express purpose of weakening Washington's influence in the region. In his remarks welcoming Cuba as a full member, the president of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez, said, " the



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most positive thing for the independence of our continent is that we meet by ourselves without the intrusion of empire.”

Past administrations’ failure to abolish the economic and diplomatic embargo against Cuba provides a rallying cry made to order for the forces of hemispheric disunity. At the same time, the continued exclusion of Cuba from the OAS sets up an insuperable obstacle for democratic leaders who want to work with the United States in reuniting the inter-American community of nations.

Brazilian president Lula de Silva is Latin America’s leading statesman. In his message of congratulations, Lula urged President Obama to end the “blockade of Cuba” and, to build a “stronger and bolder relationship with Latin America.”

In diplomatic language, Lula is suggesting that a shift on Cuba is obligatory if Obama wishes to rekindle Latin America’s faith in Washington’s capacity to lead.

Another prominent regional statesman, Jose Miguel Insulza, secretary-general of the OAS, said that as thirty-three OAS member states enjoy normal diplomatic relations with Cuba, and only one does not, it is “absurd” that no dialogue is taking place on how to reinstate Cuba’s membership in the OAS.

Progress on the issue of Cuba would enable the United States to recapture the initiative in this hemisphere for the first time since President Carter’s human rights policy provided a shield for democratic forces to confront dictatorship and eventually come to power through elections.



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Inevitably, the emergence of democracy released pent-up demands for social and economic justice that cracked the foundations of politics throughout Latin America. These upheavals have thrown up populist presidents who identify the injustices of the past with the preponderant power of the United States. Yet most leaders of the hemisphere instinctively grasp that with the election of Barack Obama, partnership and not dominance will become the new coin of United States policy towards Latin America.

At this point, Cuba is a more pressing issue regionally than bilaterally. Secretary General Insulza was right when he said that the United States should understand that it is not in its interest to “bilateralize” the issue of Cuba. “The OAS could work with the United States and other countries of the hemisphere to forge common policies on Cuba. We at the OAS are willing to do that,” he said.

Insulza is worried, as the United States should be, that Cuba’s enforced absence from the councils of the organization prevents the OAS from providing the framework inside which each state can pursue its national interest and make common cause with others. The OAS cannot impose a new arrangement on Cuba. That must be negotiated. As representative democracy is now a condition of OAS membership, these diplomatic parleys might may prove long and complicated. As a practical matter, the presence of an OAS diplomatic team in Cuba would require an OAS headquarters.

An easy way for the Obama administration to signal its openness to change on Cuba would be to give its public stamp of approval to the establishment of an OAS office in Havana. This would immediately shift



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the focus away from Washington and put Cuba and the OAS in the spotlight.

In diplomacy few things unfold as planned, but one thing is certain; it would prove far easier for President Castro to say yes, and far more difficult for him to say no to an OAS commission made up of representatives from Latin America than to cede to direct pressures from Washington.

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