

House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

Hearing on the
Overview of U.S. Interests in the Western Hemisphere: Opportunities and Challenges
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Ranking Member
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere

OPENING STATEMENT

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing. And thank you, to the witnesses, for being here today. I want to express my appreciation to you, Mr. Chairman, for reaching out earlier this week and meeting with me to discuss how we can work together. We share many of the same concerns and aspirations for the Western Hemisphere. And I feel encouraged by our similar desire to achieve meaningful results in a constructive, bipartisan manner. Additionally, I commend you, Mr. Chairman, in setting the theme of this, our first hearing for this subcommittee, and recognizing that while there are many challenges facing the hemisphere, there are indeed many opportunities as well that we can capitalize on. And so, I look forward to working with you and the members of this subcommittee to address and overcome our nation's most pressing issues in the hemisphere.

I believe it is fair to acknowledge that since 9-11, our foreign policy has focused on crises emanating from the Middle East, Asia, and back again. While certainly understandable, this focus has come at the detriment of our policy towards the Americas. Unfortunately, we have not paid appropriate attention to an area that is right next door.

Some analysts have likened our foreign policy toward Latin America as adrift and far too narrow in scope. I agree that as problems have risen, our responses have been reactive rather than proactive. And while I commend the strides that have been made in the areas of democracy and development at the country level, we have yet to articulate a strategic, cohesive policy for the region as a whole. A patchwork of initiatives is insufficient and unsustainable for a region that is rapidly evolving and that is today, second to Asia, amongst the most economically vibrant regions in the world.

Today, Latin American and Caribbean immigrants account for over 50 percent of the U.S. foreign-born population. Today all nations in the hemisphere, with the exception of Cuba, are elected democracies. Economically, the U.S. accounts for roughly 40 Percent of the region's imports and exports valued at nearly \$400 Billion and \$450 Billion respectively. Canada is our number one trading partner, Mexico, a close third after China, and the rest of Latin America combined is fourth.

Yet today China has become the largest trading partner for some of Latin America's largest economies. From 2000 to 2009, annual trade between China and Latin America grew more than 1,200 percent from \$10 billion to \$130 billion. There are new regional associations, such as ALBA, the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas, and CELAC, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, that exclude the United States. Russia has increased its arms sales with Venezuela and now Brazil. And Iran continues to expand its influence. I am concerned of Argentina's joint truth commission with Iran to investigate the horrific 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish Community Center and its continued harassment of the Falkland Islands is worrisome.

I remain determined to maintain pressures on Cuba's authoritarian regime, expose its continued human rights and press freedoms violations, and press for the release of U.S. citizen, Alan Gross. While I am hopeful for the day of a post-Castro Cuba, I remain vigilant on a possible post-Chavez Venezuela. Venezuela is our 14th largest trading partner with \$56 billion in total trade during 2011, thus the fate of Venezuela is critically important to us. If Chavez dies, we must be ready to work with allies in the region for a peaceful transition of power and support the citizens of Venezuela's demand for democracy and constitutional accountability.

As you know, Colombia is our strongest regional ally. It is also a country very dear to me. I travel there annually to support an orphanage outside of Bogota and I recently traveled with a Congressional Delegation alongside the President to attend the Summit of the Americas in April. I am closely following the peace talk negotiations of President Santos with the FARC. If successful, Colombia will free itself of a longstanding obstacle to long term economic prosperity. I believe we should continue to lend our support to Colombia now and especially after the fate of the negotiations.

While overall security conditions have improved in Colombia, the levels of insecurity and corruption that has plagued weak Central American nations like Honduras and El Salvador is very troubling. In light of declining foreign aid levels, I am particularly worried to ensure that monies spent are simply not encouraging corrupt practices and acting as a rubber stamp to governments that treat American firms unfairly. I am also concerned with the balloon type effect of drug related gang violence and government corruption that has spread to the Caribbean, especially the Dominican Republic.

In regards to Mexico, I am waiting to see how determined President Peña Nieto will be in combating drug trafficking. In this regard, I am looking forward to discussing the results of the Merida, Central American Regional Security Initiative, and Caribbean Basin Security Initiative programs and the implications that spending cuts may have on their effectiveness.

Our foreign policy with the Western Hemisphere has to be both relevant and practical to the needs of everyday people. Geographic proximity alone cannot dictate the importance of the relationships we have with our southern neighbors. As members of this Subcommittee, I believe these relationships are amongst the most important for the safety and economic security of our nation.

The region has made significant political and economic advances. However, the lack of inclusive participation by all members of society in the growing economic prosperity of the region has made the Americas vulnerable to anti-democratic forces. Additionally, weak state presence and corrupt governance has allowed drug traffickers to act with impunity, while economic and fiscal insecurity has dampened sustainable progress and further encouraged immigration into this country.

I look forward to working with the Chairman to advance these amongst other important U.S. regional interests and discussing with our witnesses how we can better address these concerns. I am hopeful that, together, we can work to ensure that these challenges do not overshadow the opportunities that lie before us.