INTRODUCTION

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A Hemisphere in Flux

For the United States, the tumult exhibited at this spring's Sixth Summit of the Americas in Cartagena, Colombia was an unfortunate but increasingly common display of the shifting templates of contemporary inter-American relations. From the high point of the Miami Summit in 1994—when a convergence of historic transitions to democracy and more open economies gave birth to an ambitious hemispheric agenda of cooperation across multiple sectors—to the failure in Cartagena to reach agreement on a final declaration, plus an embarrassing scandal involving U.S. Secret Service agents, regional diplomacy has grown ever more fractious and deadlocked. The fragmenting poles of power and influence in the region—a rising Brazil, a combative alliance led by Venezuela, a weakened Central America bogged down by economic stagnation and criminal violence, a struggling Mexico adapting to global forces and a new president, and a distracted and despondent United States, not to mention the pull of new actors like China and the downcast eyes of old actors like Europe—translate into a frustrating competition for leadership and growing doubts about the usefulness of pursuing a hemispheric agenda.

At least that is how it looked from the headlines in Washington, which focused on the contentious debates around U.S.-Cuban relations, the "war on drugs," and even the long-simmering Malvinas/Falklands dispute that marked the Cartagena gathering. These are longstanding and legitimate disagreements that deserve recognition and serious hemispheric diplomacy. But they should not stand in the way of other important business on the regional agenda, issues that range from economic innovation and trade to public security, education reform, and energy and climate change. These are the subjects that will determine whether countries of the region are able to move together into the 21st century as meaningful partners with a common vision for win-win solutions. They merit more attention and discussion in every capital of the hemisphere and at the heads of state level.

To flesh out the best ideas in each of these areas, the Brookings Latin America Initiative commissioned a series of working papers from leading experts in the United States and the region. The group, joined by senior officials from the Obama administration and a host of Brookings and other scholars, then came together for discussion at an all-day workshop in the lead-up to the Cartagena Summit. Based on the rich conversation that ensued, and the results of the summit itself, the authors prepared longer versions of their work, with the aim of providing deeper and up-to-date treatment of each topic as well as a roadmap for hemispheric cooperation.

Looking ahead to the next summit, scheduled for 2015 in Panama, the overarching question is whether states can summon the political will to manage their differences in a way that will not block cooperation in other important areas. The current signals, however, are not encouraging. Cuba, the lost cousin of the inter-American family, will remain a divisive issue because some states want it to be invited even though it does not meet the region's democratic criteria for inclusion. This disagreement should become a catalyst for developing a road map for engagement that would outline the steps Havana could take to demonstrate its commitment to the region's core values. Such an initiative would be a good test of the hemisphere's true commitment to its identity as a club of democracies. It might learn something from the successful experience of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (hardly a chorus of democracies), which denied Myanmar a meaningful role in the organization until it undertook important political reforms. Instead of taking this kind of nuanced approach, friends of Cuba in the ALBA bloc (Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and others), vowed not to attend the 2015 summit if Cuba were not included. They adopted this position after they failed to win support for a boycott of the Cartagena Summit if Cuba were not invited (thanks in part to Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos's deft handling).

Assuming no change in Cuba's political system between now and 2015, a free ticket to the dance would mean a serious rupture in the region's rules that only democratically elected governments can participate fully. To avoid the U.S.-Cuba problem becoming the skunk at the next party, governments need to start spelling out some criteria that would point the way toward Cuba's re-admission to inter-American institutions, while continuing to pressure the United States to reconsider its own failed embargo policies.

The dispute over U.S.-Cuba relations, however, is merely one symptom of the larger phenomenon of changing power dynamics taking place in the region. The slow but encouraging process of democratic consolidation, as uneven as it is, nonetheless has brought to power (through free and fair elections) a series of governments of varying stripes that have played a recurrent chord of anti-Americanism. In its most strident form, this brand of "anti-imperialist," (i.e., anti-Washington) politics has become the central rallying cry of their foreign policies, a view in which publicly contesting the United States, regardless of the merits of the issue, is reason enough to take the opposing side. Brazil, for its own reasons of exercising regional influence, often at the expense of the United States, is encouraging such talk as it seeks to build up UNASUR as a force in hemispheric politics. These attitudes are not only hamstringing cooperation across a number of key issues, they are also generating proposals that steadily chip away at the Organization of American States, the inter-American human rights system and the summitry process, after years of relatively positive progress. The region, despite all its promises and the obvious logic of deeper integration and cooperation, has reached a crossroads that may force a break from the past with no clear direction for the future.

It is against this rather complicated backdrop that we have considered the issues that deserve greater attention from policymakers in the region as they pick up the pieces from Cartagena and look forward to Panama. In the following papers, experts on economic innovation and trade, education reform, energy and climate change, public security, democracy and human rights, and the inter-American system address a myriad of opportunities open to governments interested in deepening cooperation, outline the challenges that confront them, and recommend actionable steps for moving forward. Each one includes commentary from Brookings scholars who have participated in various stages of the project from the start. Together, they offer a set of priority actions for hemispheric cooperation, and measurable steps for U.S. engagement, that could help define which path regional diplomacy takes out of its current state of disarray. For the United States, its own competition for the White House and the Congress this fall may lead to different outcomes on issues—immigration, drug control, Cuba, energy, foreign assistance and dwindling resources—that are central to U.S.-Latin American relations. We hope this collection will contribute in some meaningful ways to repairing the thinning fabric of inter-American cooperation, regardless of what the voters decide in the United States, Venezuela or Mexico this year.