
The OAS: Playing an Essential Role in the Western Hemisphere

By

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Foreign Minister Werleigh, distinguished ministers. It is a great pleasure to join you today at this informal dialogue.

Over the coming days, our delegations will address a wide-ranging agenda that shows just how vital the OAS is to attaining the goal of a stable, prosperous, and democratic Western Hemisphere. We should begin by noting that this General Assembly is taking place in a democratic Haiti. Together with President Aristide and the Haitian people, our nations made history by demonstrating that our commitment to democracy goes beyond words. It is fitting that the world's oldest regional organization played a crucial role in defending human rights and restoring democracy in one of the hemisphere's oldest nations.

The support of the OAS will remain essential to Haiti over the coming weeks, months, and years—just as it has been essential to other democracies in our hemisphere. Last year, for example, the OAS helped broker the Pact for Democracy to resolve disputed elections in the Dominican Republic. Two years ago, it stood by democracy when it was threatened in Guatemala. It has strengthened the legislature in Paraguay. And it has helped Central American nations to preserve the environment.

The increasingly vigorous role that the OAS is playing both reflects and reinforces the remarkable political and economic transformation of the Americas over the past decade. Over the coming days—and over the coming years—we must use that foundation to build a lasting architecture for the Western Hemisphere.

We should start by considering the thoughtful proposals for restructuring the OAS that are outlined in [OAS] Secretary General Cesar Gaviria's New Vision working paper. Allow me to mention a few that deserve particular attention.

First, we must consolidate democracy's hold in the region by supporting the Secretary General's efforts to strengthen the OAS's Unit for the Promotion of Democracy. We applaud the Secretary General's proposals to reallocate resources to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court. Our member states can also send a strong signal of our support for democracy by speedily ratifying the Washington and Managua Protocols.

Second, the United States strongly supports the Secretary General's decision to bolster the ability of the OAS to deepen the economic integration of our hemisphere. The resources that the Secretary General plans to allocate to the new trade unit will help the OAS spur economic liberalization and trade expansion. We also look to the unit to increase coordination among members of NAFTA, MERCOSUR, CARICOM, and other regional groups, and to enable the smaller countries of the hemisphere to benefit fully from free trade and open markets.

Third, we must intensify the fight against the corruption that undermines our economic progress, our governments, and our societies. The OAS can play a valuable role in enabling countries to adopt and enforce collective measures against bribery, establish strict ethical standards for public servants, and make the workings of our institutions more transparent.

Finally, the United States also supports Secretary General Gaviria's attempts to make the OAS more efficient. We agree that the OAS must support projects more selectively by focusing on areas where it has a comparative advantage.

The New Vision's proposals to strengthen democracy and expand free trade will greatly assist the OAS to carry out the tasks it was given at the Miami summit. But we must do more, especially in the seven areas of the Action Plan where our leaders called on the OAS to play a special role.

I look forward to working with my colleagues to refine the proposals in this report. When the nations of this hemisphere meet in the OAS, each country's voice is heard—no matter the size of its population, territory, or economy. We respect each other's sovereignty, and we recognize the needs of all our members.

As the Secretary General has often said, more is expected of the OAS today than ever before. But high expectations are themselves the product of high hopes. Never has the future of the Americas seemed brighter. Never has the prospect of a stable, prosperous, and democratic hemisphere seemed so close within reach.