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Reinvigorating Alliances in the Western Hemisphere

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In a world where the United States seems perpetually challenged by incessant wars, intractable conflicts and pandemic state failure, there is a new opportunity for strategic success in our own hemisphere. After almost two decades of ascendant authoritarian, anti-American governments recent electoral losses by the radical populist movements in Venezuela and Argentina offer a new window to reengage with Latin America and create a powerful democratic security coalition.

It is an unexpected opportunity and will require a much deeper level of engagement with the region, at a much higher level of strategic purpose than we have seen in more than a decade. The newly empowered Venezuelan opposition and the new Argentine administration desperately need all the economic and political support they can get from regional democracies to consolidate their gains.

The ruination of the once functional economies of Venezuela and Argentina under the corrupt and incompetent radical populist model peddled by the late Hugo Chávez – coupled with an unprecedented surge in violence and criminality in both countries – has clearly demonstrated that Chávez's much-heralded Bolivarian Socialism for the 21st Century is morally and politically bankrupt.

From the perspective of regional security, the weakened Bolivarian alliance means the weakening of states that directly aid and abet networks that traffic in drugs, weapons and human beings; protect terrorist organizations; directly carry out massive money laundering activities; seek to harm the United States; and undermine good governance at every level. But if the alternative to the Bolivarian project does not bring tangible economic and social results quickly, the window of opportunity could close.

The elections in Venezuela and Argentina took place in a new environment created by the Obama administration's decision to normalize diplomatic relations with Cuba. This initiative simultaneously deprived the anti-democratic left of one of its perennial calls to battle while showing the radical right in the hemisphere had lost strength. This has allowed the Cuban regime to inch away from Venezuela in pursuit of its own self-interest, and the Marxist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), to enter into serious peace talks with the

Colombian government to end the last real armed insurrection in the hemisphere.

With U.S. relations with Cuba moving toward normalization, Venezuela's economy in tatters and the FARC no longer a viable battlefield force, the core of the Bolivarian project is a shambles. This leaves other Bolivarian leaders such as Rafael Correa in Ecuador, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and Salvador Sánchez Cerén in El Salvador scrambling to avoid economic free fall in the absence of Venezuelan largesse and declining commodity prices.

This new alignment has helped move the debate over the direction of Latin America from a conflict between the traditional right and left to a deeper divide: between corrupt authoritarian populism that criminalizes political opposition, the media and independent institutions; and functional liberal democracy characterized by the rule of law, robust political debate, functioning institutions, freedom of expression and electoral transparency.

The price can be high for those who play by the rules of democratic accountability. In Brazil and Chile leaders have seen their popularity plummet as investigative journalist and independent prosecutors and judges root out corruption and institutions begin to function as they are meant to. But for the first time in a decade the price can also be high for those who dismantled and disdained democratic accountability.

The flagrantly illegal efforts by Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro to deprive the opposition of its two-thirds majority in the National Assembly will likely no longer be silently accepted by his neighbors, as they would have been in the recent past. And the regime loses legitimacy with every new dirty trick Maduro and his allies pull to cling to power.

In Argentina, Mauricio Macri ran against the corrupt political machine and virulent anti-Americanism of the erratic Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and won by a much larger margin than most polls predicted. Macri, now leader of a hemispheric power, has been one of the few Latin American leaders willing to publicly challenge the embarrassing Bolivarian human rights records and democratic credentials.

The United States now has the historic opportunity to help the hemispheric realignment coalesce into a secure, stable, and democratic Western Hemisphere that would be a beacon of democratic values. Such a coalition would have a collective GDP of \$1.5 trillion, with a population – and market – of over one billion people. The common agenda can be built on the precepts of respect for democratic norms, economic integration, human rights, and ending endemic corruption. Colombia, a long-time U.S. friend, would remain the linchpin, with Argentina playing a key role, along with Brazil, Peru, Chile, Uruguay and Paraguay.

Such a powerful strategic alliance is possible but to achieve it would require a significant shift from America's post-9/11 mindset of seeking enemies large and small, toward a strategy vision of building alliances. Strategically, with the important exception of Colombia the United States effectively wrote off Latin America in the mid-1990s when the Central American wars ended. Afghanistan and Iraq in the post-9/11 world took enormous resources, while what was left of policy attention shifted toward Asia and other priorities.

Meanwhile our competitors - in some cases our adversaries - have noticed our diverted attention, and made substantial inroads in the Western Hemisphere. The region hasn't had such an influx of Russian diplomatic, military, intelligence, business and criminal activities in since the Cold War. Iran and Hezbollah have extensive networks in Latin America. China has invested heavily in commodity extraction, infrastructure building, military training and market

expansion.

But now that the people of Venezuela and Argentina have spoken unequivocally rejecting the militant populism and anti-U.S. stance of Chávez and Fernández de Kirchner and the U.S. has reached out to Cuba, the U.S. has an historic opportunity to build a powerful democratic security coalition built on mutual respect and shared values.

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