It is no surprise that the new administration of Barack Obama has been getting a lot of advice about how it should approach US policy towards Latin America and the Caribbean in the coming years. There is an enormous sense of opportunity right now, a feeling that the time could be ripe for shaping a more productive relationship between Washington and the region.

Most of the ideas have focused on controversial policy questions of great concern to Latin America. In addition to the usual array of issues—trade, immigration, drugs, and Cuba—there is a great deal of interest in whether or not relationships will change with countries like Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, and Colombia. How will the new administration tackle this agenda? How should it tackle the agenda?

Another very important—and much less frequently asked question—is how President Obama will deal with the inter-American system and, specifically, the Organization of American States. Will the new administration continue to give it ample financial assistance (roughly 60 percent of the total budget) and performant political support? Or will it attempt to reenergize an institution that has been limited in its ability to carry out critical functions? The fact is that it is hard to separate the specific policy challenges in Latin America from those facing the hemisphere’s institutional architecture.

Given budgetary pressures and other foreign policy priorities, the Obama administration is unlikely to give more aid money or even attention to Latin America. But what should be reasonably expected of President Obama is a greater emphasis on multilateral diplomacy. Since he announced his candidacy for the presidency two years ago, Obama has been consistent in talking about the need for genuine consultation with partners in this hemisphere and elsewhere. This kind of consultation also seems to be a central trait embodied in his leadership style.

For reasons of pragmatism as well as principle, Obama would be wise to elevate the importance of the OAS. Any efforts by the new US administration to support democratic governance, the rule of law, or human rights would have little credibility or legitimacy unless it was conducted in concert with other regional governments. On those and other issues, the OAS offers a unique forum and much-needed space to air different perspectives and explore cooperation.

In addition, the technical expertise of the organization has given it an impressive track record for addressing transnational problems in a professional manner. Through the work of the independent Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, for example, the OAS has developed a significant body of hemispheric jurisprudence and has put a spotlight on an array of critical human rights concerns. Set up in 1998, the Special Rapporteur for the Freedom of Expression has called attention to violations of press freedom across the region. The efforts of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, based in San José, Costa Rica, have been similarly significant. Election monitoring under OAS auspices in select countries has become a regular, expected practice since the early 1990s.

The Obama team can make progress on questions of democracy and human rights—the core of the OAS mission—by giving the OAS greater political weight and mobilizing support from other governments for its valuable work. Obstacles exist, to be sure. As current OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza has said often, and with good reason, the strain in inter-American affairs today has made political consensus on an array of fundamental issues exceedingly difficult. The problem goes beyond whatever tensions may exist between the United States and other member governments. Clearly, there is also friction between Latin American governments on issues ranging from energy to the economy to long-simmering border disputes. In a context of political disarray and mutual suspicion, multilateral agreement and effectiveness is particularly elusive.

But the Obama administration can build on its goodwill and the previous accomplishments of the inter-American system to pursue elements of its regional agenda through the Organization of American States. Despite difficulties, there is precedent for such an approach. Immediately following the Cold War, the government of George H. W. Bush worked together with other like-minded governments to build a broad consensus around the collective defense of democracy in the Americas. As General Augusto Pinochet’s rule ended in Chile, the OAS General Assembly met in Santiago in June, 1991 and adopted a landmark resolution that, for the first time, called on all member states to respond to any interruption in the constitutional democratic order. In fact, the OAS did respond—albeit with varying degrees of success—in four different cases during the 1990s: Haiti in 1991, Peru in 1992, Guatemala in 1998, and Paraguay in 1996. Subsequent resolutions and declarations reinforcing a collective concern for democracy culminated in passage of the Inter-American Democratic Chart in Lima, Peru, on September 11, 2001.

Since then, OAS responses to increasingly complicated and troubling situations have been less forceful and assured. Of course, that is more a measure of the political problems in the hemisphere than of the available instruments and framework of the institution. Especially on political questions related to democracy and the rule of law in the Americas, it would make sense for the Obama administration to mark the beginning of a new era by consulting with other governments and refashioning a coalition prepared to address violations of democratic norms seriously and collectively.

Though political issues are clearly under the purview of the OAS, other hemispheric concerns—including trade, immigration, drugs, and the
environment—can also be usefully addressed in the organization. Indeed, the OAS is precisely the right forum to air important policy differences on these contentious issues involving the United States, Canada, and the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. It also has developed some technical expertise in each of these issue areas that can help forge consensus positions.

Drugs: Apart from his support for US anti-drug aid programs for Colombia, Mexico, and Central America, President Obama has had little to say regarding how his administration plans to deal with the drug problem, which is perhaps the most serious threat to democratic governance in the region. Multilateral discussions are essential for reshaping a policy that is not yielding satisfactory results, and that has clearly been viewed as Washington’s prerogative. Given the value of the multilateral evaluation work performed by the Inter-American Drug Abuse Commission (CICAD), member governments should coordinate political consultations with the OAS to develop alternative approaches.

Trade: On trade, it makes sense for the OAS to consider and discuss the Obama administration’s proposals for incorporating labor and environmental protections into future trade agreements. Free trade has met with controversy in much of the region, and the OAS can serve as a forum to assess past agreements and identify how best to proceed.

Immigration: Obama also favors a comprehensive immigration reform in the United States. Though there are major domestic political obstacles in moving ahead quickly on this front, immigration is bound to be addressed eventually. It is an issue that is relevant to all OAS member states and has important implications for inter-American affairs. Reviewing regional norms and practices on immigration makes a great deal of sense.

Environment: Obama has also signaled that under his administration the United States will be committed to carrying out a “green revolution.” His concern fits well with positions taken by many Latin American governments regarding the proper balance between protecting the environment and pursuing economic development. The OAS offers a space to review the practices and formulas that work best.

Cuba: Perhaps the highest expectations in Latin America for the Obama administration have to do with a shift in policy towards Cuba. If not an end to the embargo, there should at least be a significant opening and greater attention to diplomacy. Differences over the US embargo have long been a major source of irritation in US-Latin American relations. Though Obama is likely to fulfill his promise to lift restrictions on travel and remittances for Cuban Americans, it is unclear how far and how quickly he will move beyond that.

Finding a way to reincorporate Cuba in multilateral organizations such as the OAS would be cheered in most of Latin America. Indeed, at the Latin American and Caribbean summit meeting in Brazil last December, Cuba was formally brought into the Rio Group. Significantly, neither the United States nor Canada, nor Europe was present at that “mega-summit.” Latin Americans are clearly seeking regional forums to talk about and work out a range of common problems. Some, like the Rio Group, date from the mid-1980s, while others, like the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR), were set up only last year.

The Obama administration is likely to recognize the multiplicity of such forums as an expression of a transformed and increasingly assertive region that is expanding its global ties and interests. In this context, the OAS and the Summit of the Americas—both of which include the United States and Canada—perform valuable and complementary functions to the other, entirely Latin American, forums. Obama, who has emphasized pragmatism in all policy areas, will apply the same philosophy to US-Latin American relations and work through different institutional mechanisms based on the issue under consideration. In that menu of policy options, a more vigorous OAS should figure prominently.

Of course, opportunities to make significant progress in US-Latin American relations will be limited until the current economic and financial crisis is resolved or at least mitigated. That concern is paramount in the minds of most Latin Americans. Brazilian president Luiz Inácio da Silva spoke on behalf of many in the region when he said that the best thing President Obama could do for Latin America was to put the US economic house in order. That is precisely what Obama is trying to do. At the same time, on all of the issues mentioned above, the new administration’s best bet for success is to work through multilateral organizations like the OAS.

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