



Executive Summary

Forging New Ties: A Fresh Approach to U.S. Policy in Latin America

For nearly twenty years, the United States has preached the same simple message to the countries of Latin America: governments in the region should pursue free trade, expand free markets, and hold regular elections. Today, while the U.S. continues to invoke the same package of policy recommendations, Latin America's political dynamics have undergone a drastic change.

Respect for human rights has improved and most governments in Latin America are chosen through formal electoral processes. But there continues to be a huge gap in income between the rich and the poor, with over half the region's population still living in poverty. And soaring levels of common and organized crime undermine confidence in the democratic system. U.S. policy recommendations have done little to improve the lives of ordinary Latin Americans. Populist and social-democratic movements, often critical of U.S. policy, have emerged in Latin America, and in some countries have been elected democratically, pledging to address the problems of the region.

These new political dynamics provide opportunities for the United States to forge new ties, and pursue a more fruitful policy. In "**Forging New Ties: A Fresh Approach to U.S. Policy in Latin America**," the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) argues that if the U.S. hopes to have a foreign policy relevant to Latin America, it must recognize that Latin America matters and that everyone will benefit from shared economic growth that allows a strong Latin American middle class to develop. U.S. policy should acknowledge that the populist currents that have emerged are understandable responses to the region's profound problems. We should respond with bold and innovative policy initiatives. These include:

1. **The United States should work with Latin American governments on developing growth strategies that promote greater equity.** U.S. programs should contribute to meeting the Millennium Development Goals, promoting rural development and reducing poverty in marginalized communities including indigenous and Afro-descendants. The U.S. should revise its trade policies to guarantee that they are more equitable and transparent and bring development to Latin American partners. With Mexico and Central America, the U.S. administration should evaluate the impact of NAFTA and CAFTA on economies and communities, and make adjustments accordingly.
2. **The U.S. should support Latin American governments in improving the rule of law and public security** through technical assistance programs that increase police training, strengthen citizen participation and oversight, and reform the judiciary. U.S. drug policy should stress reducing demand for drugs in the United States, preventing the trafficking of arms, investigating drug trafficking networks and supporting alternative development strategies for small, rural producers.



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3. **Finally, the U.S. should actively support the consolidation of democracy and respect for human rights in Latin America.** The U.S. should provide long term support for effective transparent governance, at both the local and national level, in Latin America. The U.S. should put its own house in order by closing the Guantánamo prison, and by making clear that its commitment to human rights and democracy will not be manipulated for political reasons or used as an excuse to harass governments with whom we disagree.

If the U.S. works respectfully and as partners with Latin American governments, civil societies and multi-lateral institutions a new relationship can be forged.

Finally, WOLA outlines concrete actions in the document that a new U.S. administration should take during its first 100 days in office in order to demonstrate its commitment to a new approach:

1. Schedule a presidential trip to Latin America to articulate the new approach, visiting a number of countries in order to recognize the steps that governments in the hemisphere are taking to strengthen democratic governance and address poverty and inequality.
2. Commit the United States explicitly to supporting the U.N. Millennium Development Goals in Latin America and announce that new U.S. foreign aid programs to Latin America will be geared toward meeting those goals, particularly those related to the elimination of extreme poverty.
3. Call for a summit meeting with Mexico and Canada, our partners in North America, to lay the foundation for a new collaboration for North American development.
4. Work actively with Congress to achieve comprehensive immigration reform that will regularize the status of undocumented people of Latin American origin established in the United States.
5. Propose an inter-American summit meeting to reconsider drug strategies, placing emphasis on alternative livelihoods for small farmers, targeted enforcement against the most dangerous and violent criminals, programs to identify and prosecute money laundering, and programs to reduce demand.
6. Close the Guantánamo Bay detention facility and either initiate legal proceedings against those held there or release them.
7. Call on Congress to lift the ban on travel to Cuba, a gesture that would benefit American citizens and businesses and signal a fresh approach to a long-standing issue in U.S.–Latin American relations.

Founded in 1974, WOLA is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that monitors human rights and social justice issues in Latin America, and that advocates for U.S. policies that support human rights, democratization, and social justice in the region. For almost thirty-five years, WOLA has monitored issues of human rights and democracy in Latin America, and has provided information and analysis to Congressional offices, the Administration, and the general public about conditions in the region and the impact of U.S. policy.



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