

# PERRY CENTER OCCASIONAL PAPER

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## Pan-Americanism and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Era of Strategic Competition

By Andrew Griffin



**WILLIAM J. PERRY CENTER  
FOR HEMISPHERIC DEFENSE STUDIES**

*National Defense University*



**Cover concept:** Inauguration of the 53rd Regular Session of the OAS General Assembly, June 21, 2023, Washington, D.C. The Organization of American States (OAS) has served as the predominant decision-making body for countries in the Western Hemisphere since it was created on April 30, 1948.

**Credit:** Juan Manuel Herrera/OAS

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*The Organization [of American States] is neither good nor bad; it is what the member governments want it to be and nothing else.<sup>1</sup>*

--Alberto Lleras Camargo, First OAS Secretary General

## ***About the Author:***

Andrew Griffin is a career member of the U.S. foreign service. He is currently the Chief of Staff to the Assistant Secretary of Western Hemisphere Affairs. Most recently he served as Deputy Director in the Office of Global Change. His prior overseas assignments include Havana, Guangzhou, Lima, and Santiago. He also served as an alternate representative at the U.S. Mission to the Organization of American States. Andrew received undergraduate and graduate degrees from Georgetown University, concentrating his studies principally on economic and social development in Latin America. Born and raised in Evanston, IL, he is married to a Chilean and has two children.

## ***Introduction***

In the early 1820s, a fervent debate broke out in the so-called New World regarding the proper relationship among American nations. Two hundred years later the debate is still going strong. The dynamic interplay of ideas that brought into being the world's first regional governance system continues to shape an Organization of American States (OAS) that finds strength in its universality and equality, even as it struggles with democratic backsliding and unfunded mandates, among other challenges. At the dawn of a new era of strategic competition, the United States must decide if it will recommit to Pan-Americanism and to building up the “strategic democracy reserve” in this hemisphere as a platform from which to project strength.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> G. Pope-Atkins, *Encyclopedia of the Inter-American System* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 75. See also Gordon Connell-Smith, *The Inter-American System*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), XX.

<sup>2</sup> Ambassador Thomas Shannon, in discussion with author, March 2023.

This paper traces the evolution of Pan-Americanism and the inter-American system over five distinct periods. These include periods marked by initial attempts at Pan-Americanism inspired by the competing visions of James Monroe and Simón Bolívar (1823-1889); U.S. efforts to place Pan-Americanism into service to advance its political aim of preeminence in a peaceful and prosperous hemisphere (1889-1923); peak cooperation engendered by a shift in U.S. tone and tactics (1923-1945); the establishment of the OAS, fallout from U.S. actions during the Cold War, and the U.S. attempt to reset its relationship to the region (1945-1990); and optimism regarding the potential for regional integration giving way to disillusionment and disagreement over the best way to address democratic backsliding (1990-2023).

The paper concludes with recommendations for elevating Pan-Americanism as a U.S. foreign policy strategy. These include the need to acknowledge the limits of the OAS in addressing deep-seated social, economic, and political challenges; the importance of engaging member states in a long-term dialogue on areas of common interest, including options for joint efforts to counter threats posed by disinformation, election interference, and the unethical use of Artificial Intelligence (AI); and the need for sustained public messaging on the value of engagement with the world's oldest and most inclusive regional governance system.

The use of the term “Pan-Americanism” is based on the following definition: the “amalgam of diplomatic, political, economic, and cultural projects under the umbrella of hemispheric cooperation.”<sup>3</sup> References to the inter-American system are a proxy for the Organization of American States as the “organizational form taken by the Pan-American cooperative effort,” and in some cases to its predecessor institutions.<sup>4</sup> The evolution of other regional entities, including the Inter-American Development Bank, the Pan-American Health Organization, the Inter-American Defense Board, and others, are largely outside the scope of this paper.

Lastly, while the paper concludes with an assessment of the strategic value of Pan-Americanism from the U.S. perspective, it also seeks to highlight examples throughout Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) nations, and in particular how these nations shaped the inter-American system in line with national interests. In this way, the paper aligns with the view that the past 100 years of inter-American relations is not marked by a consistent pattern but instead by a “history of symbiotic, cooperative, competitive, and conflictual relations.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Strategic Competition and the Value of Regional Institutions**

The objective of this paper is to assess the value of the OAS from a U.S. perspective in the context of competition. While accepting the premise espoused by John J. Mearsheimer and other realist

<sup>3</sup> Juan Pablo Scarfi and David Sheinin, *The New Pan-Americanism and the Structuring of Inter-American Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> O. Carlos Stoetzer, *The Organization of American States* (Washington: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1965), 3.

<sup>5</sup> David W. Dent and Larman C. Wilson, *Historical Dictionary of Inter-American Organizations* (Toronto: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2014), 14.

thinkers that nations fundamentally act in line with their interests, the paper distances itself from realist conceptualizations of strategic competition that posit the inevitability of conflict and discount the role of institutions.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the paper aligns itself with interpretations of strategic competition as a contest between democracy and authoritarianism, or between “liberal democracies” and “authoritarian capitalist” regimes to demonstrate the superiority of each system of government.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, by focusing on a regional institution as the unit of analysis, this paper grounds itself in G. John Ikenberry’s liberalist view of a U.S.-led international liberal order “built around rules and institutions.”<sup>8</sup> The paper also builds on the extensive body of research on the potential of institutions in fostering cooperation and interdependence that can contribute to stability in the international system.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, through its focus on continuity and change within the inter-American system, the paper endorses constructivist notions of regions as “social constructions” held together by “historically contingent interactions, shared beliefs and identities, norms and practice.”<sup>10</sup>

The paper contributes to prior studies on the evolution of Pan-Americanism and the inter-American system.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, the paper is informed by Arthur P. Whitaker’s notion of the “Western Hemisphere Idea” as a special relationship among nations in the Americas that “sets them apart from the rest of the world.”<sup>12</sup> It also benefits from the body of literature on the strengths and weaknesses of the OAS, including as they relate to its grounding in the principles of universal participation, equality, and non-intervention as well as studies on the concept of preventive diplomacy and the potential for regional organizations to address collective problems.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “The Inevitable Rivalry: America, China, and the Tragedy of Great Power Politics,” *Foreign Affairs*, 19 October 2021, accessed April 4, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-10-19/inevitable-rivalry-cold-war>.

<sup>7</sup> Azar Gat, “The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1, 2007, accessed 4 April 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2007-07-01/return-authoritarian-great-powers>.

<sup>8</sup> G. John Ikenberry, “Why American Power Endures: The U.S.-Led Order Isn’t In Decline,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 1, 2022, accessed 5 April 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/why-american-power-endures-us-led-order-isnt-in-decline-g-john-ikenberry>.

<sup>9</sup> Roberto O. Keohane, Lisa Martin, “The Promise of Institutional Theory,” *International Security*, Summer 1995, accessed 6 April 2023, <https://www-jstor-org.nduezproxy.idm.oclc.org/stable/2539214>.

<sup>10</sup> Frederik Söderbaum, *Rethinking Regionalism* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ann Van Wynen Thomas and A.J. Thomas Jr., *The Organization of American States* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963); John E. Fagg, *Pan-Americanism* (Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, 1982); Pope-Atkins, *Encyclopedia of the Inter-American System* (1997); Dent and Wilson, *Historical Dictionary of Inter-American Organizations* (2014).

<sup>12</sup> Scarfi and Sheinen, *The New Pan-Americanism*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> Carl Kaysen, Robert A. Pastor, and Laura W. Reed, *Collective Responses to Regional Problems: The Case of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Washington, DC: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1994); Monica Herz, “Does the Organization of American States Matter?,” London School of Economics, April 2008, accessed February 1, 2023, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/csre-working-papers-phase-two/wp34.2-does-the-oas-matter.pdf>; Martha Finnemore and Michelle Jurkovich, “Getting a Seat at the Table: The Origins of Universal Participation and Modern Multilateral Conferences,” *Global Governance*, July – September 2014.

## Evolution of Pan-Americanism and the Inter-American System

### *Seeds of Pan-Americanism – 1823 to 1889*

James Monroe and Simón Bolívar dreamt different dreams in 1823 as they surveyed the geopolitical landscape of the New World from their vantage points in Washington and Caracas. The divergence in political aims underlying each statesman's vision of hemispheric unity could have relegated Pan-Americanism to the realm of the aspirational. Instead, the tension between these visions set in motion a dynamic interplay of ideas that brought the inter-American system into being and continues to shape the evolution of the system to this day.



**Photo concept:** In the 18th century, Simon Bolivar shared many of the same ideas of a free South America as American colonists did of a liberated North America.

**Credit:** Pixabay stock photo

Fresh off a second victory against the British, the United States was motivated in the early 1820s by the twin goals of closing off the hemisphere to further colonialization and denying the United Kingdom a commercial and strategic advantage in the Americas. Thus, while Monroe vigorously opposed attempts by the Holy Alliance (Russia, Austria, and Prussia) to establish a foothold in the hemisphere, he was equally suspicious of UK Prime Minister George Canning's proposal in early 1823 for a U.S.-UK joint statement forswearing territorial annexation in the Americas. Monroe went on later that year to announce that "the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by European powers," a declaration that would come to be known as the Monroe Doctrine.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Carlos Gustavo Poggio-Teixeira, *Brazil, the United States, and the South American Subsystem: Regional Politics and the Absent Empire* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 49.

While Monroe was the first to define as official U.S. policy the safeguarding of the hemisphere against European intervention, the seeds of Pan-American consciousness can be traced to the Founding Fathers. Jefferson spoke of an “American system independent and disconnected from Europe,” Madison advocated U.S. action to “break up the crusade which European powers are seeking to carry out in America,” and Hamilton presaged that the United States would become the “arbiter of Europe and America” able to tilt the scale “in accordance with [U.S.] interests.”<sup>15</sup> Another leading voice was Henry Clay, arguably the most ardent advocate for hemispheric unity, who declared in 1818 his hope that “those [Spanish American] governments will be animated by an American feeling and guided by an American policy.”<sup>16</sup>

The view from the south, no less ambitious, was of a more limited geographic scope. Bolívar, known as the “liberator of America,” articulated a bold vision for unity but one that only extended to the former Spanish republics. In 1814, he proposed a “union of all southern America in a corps of nations.”<sup>17</sup> Bolívar went on in his Letter from Jamaica (1815) to consider the merits of a single Spanish American nation, calling it a noble idea but ultimately dismissing it as impossible despite the fact that the new countries shared the same origin, language, customs, and religion, and therefore “ought to have a single government.”<sup>18</sup> In 1818, he began to push for an “American Pact” that would “present an America to the world of a majesty and grandeur unparalleled among the nations of old.”<sup>19</sup>

Bolívar translated these aspirations into a plan in 1826 to convene the Congress of Panama, to which all nations of the New World were invited.<sup>20</sup> The Congress did not live up to the publicity, which included calls for “unification of the free world against absolutism”; only four nations attended and it failed to achieve tangible outcomes.<sup>21</sup> Clay, now Secretary of State, convinced President Adams to send two delegates but the U.S. Congress delayed approval for five months; one of the delegates died en route; and the other arrived after the Congress concluded.<sup>22</sup> Bolívar, frustrated by failed efforts to unite the Spanish American republics, uttered the following lament in 1830: “...independence is the only benefit we have acquired to the detriment of all the rest. All who have served the revolution have plowed the sea.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Aguilar, *Pan-Americanism: From Monroe to the Present*, 25-26.

<sup>16</sup> Pope-Atkins, *Encyclopedia of the Inter-American System*, 75. See also Connell-Smith, *The Inter-American System*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Aguilar, *Pan-Americanism: From Monroe to the Present*, 26.

<sup>18</sup> Aguilar, 26-27.

<sup>19</sup> Aguilar, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Aida Rodríguez, “Imperial Pan-Americanism” in *The New Pan-Americanism and the Structuring of Inter-American Relations*, Juan Pablo Scarfi and David Sheinin (New York: Routledge, 2022), 11.

<sup>21</sup> Fagg, *Pan-Americanism*, 14.

<sup>22</sup> Fagg, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Joel D. Hirst, “A Guide to ALBA,” *Americas Quarterly*, n.d., accessed April 14, 2023, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/a-guide-to-alba/>.



**Graph concept:** Before the period of independence in Latin America, Spain controlled most of South America and a sizable portion of North America, divided into jurisdictions called Viceroyalties. **Credit:** Encyclopædia Britannica, *Spanish viceroyalties and Portuguese territories in the Americas, 1780.*

Despite Bolívar’s frustration, the Congress of Panama was in some ways his “highest political achievement” as it ultimately gave birth to the Pan-American movement.<sup>24</sup> Progress was not linear, however, and the Congress of Panama was followed by 50 years of failed attempts to promote Spanish American solidarity. These include five conferences called by Mexico between 1831 and 1842, all of which were postponed due to lack of interest; the first Congress of Lima (1847), which resulted in a “treaty on non-aggression and non-interference” that was never ratified; an 1856 conference in Santiago, which produced a “continental treaty” that was only ratified by three countries; and a second Congress of Lima in 1864-1865, which resulted in a “treaty of union and defensive alliance” that quickly fizzled.<sup>25</sup>

In sum, the interplay between the political aims of the Monroe Doctrine and Bolívar’s political project created the dynamic tension that drove the development of Pan-Americanism. On the one hand, the unwillingness of the United States to provide material support to the cause of Spanish American independence, as well as its territorial expansion following the Mexican-American War, sowed distrust

<sup>24</sup> Stoetzer, *The Organization of American States*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas and Thomas, *The Organization of American States*. See also Fagg, *Pan-Americanism*, 18-20. See also Connell-Smith, *The Inter-American System*, 36.

of U.S. intentions. At the same time, the impulse to counter growing U.S. power was insufficient to overcome the barriers to greater unity within Spanish America. The common denominator on both sides was the pursuit of national interests, which were sometimes but not always aligned with the Pan-American goals of hemispheric cooperation and integration.

### ***Pan-Americanism with U.S. Characteristics – 1889 to 1923***

It was in the context of this push-pull dynamic that the United States grabbed hold of Pan-Americanism and put it into the service of Washington's political aims. The decision in 1889 to convene in Washington the First International Conference of American States was fundamentally driven by U.S. national interests. The conference had two objectives: to "bring about peace and prevent future wars in North and South America" and to "cultivate friendly commercial relations with all American countries."<sup>26</sup> Importantly, Secretary of State James Blaine added to the invitation that the "seventeen independent powers of America" would be meeting on "terms of absolute equality" and that in accordance with this equality norm, each state would have one vote.<sup>27</sup> The establishment of universality and equality as foundational principles would imbue the inter-American system with one of its most enduring strengths.

In contrast to its ambitious aims, the four-month conference was a bust in terms of its substantive agenda. Delegates agreed to create an inter-American library and a data bank on trade and transportation, but made negligible progress on proposals related to arbitration and a customs union.<sup>28</sup> From the perspective of engendering a Pan-American spirit, however, the conference was a success. Delegates from 18 countries spent seven months together, including a six-week, 6000-mile "deluxe railroad excursion" designed to impress delegates with the "industrial might of the United States."<sup>29</sup> Cuban poet Jose Martí, an unabashed critic of the United States, praised the conference, noting that delegates left Washington more aware of their American identity after working together to "deal, at Washington's invitation, with American issues."<sup>30</sup>

One "ominous feature" of this first conference came in the form of a statement by Argentine Foreign Minister Roque Sáenz-Peña challenging the notion of Pan-Americanism.<sup>31</sup> Commenting on the proposed customs union, he emphasized the importance of economic ties between Latin America and Europe, and added the following plea: "Let America be for mankind."<sup>32</sup> This episode, along with U.S. opposition to the Calvo Doctrine, which posited that a government should not demand more protection for its nationals in a foreign country than that offered its own citizens, provided early evidence of the fault lines based on competing national interests that would define the inter-American system.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Connell-Smith, *The Inter-American System*, 40.

<sup>27</sup> Martha Finnemore and Michelle Jurkovich, "Getting a Seat at the Table: The Origins of Universal Participation and Modern Multilateral Conferences," *Global Governance*, July – September 2014, 264.

<sup>28</sup> Connell-Smith, *The Inter-American System*, 44-45.

<sup>29</sup> Connell-Smith, 41.

<sup>30</sup> José Martí, *Argentina y la Primera Conferencia Panamericana* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Transición, 1955), 139-140.

<sup>31</sup> Connell-Smith, *The Inter-American System*, 43.

<sup>32</sup> Connell-Smith, 43.

<sup>33</sup> Pope-Atkins, *Encyclopedia of the Inter-American System*, 360.

Pan-Americanism received a boost under President Theodore Roosevelt as it aligned with his grand strategy for U.S. preeminence in a peaceful and prosperous Western Hemisphere. In addition to taking a hands-on approach to ensuring concrete outcomes at the second and third conferences (1901-1902 in Mexico City and 1906 in Rio de Janeiro), Roosevelt lobbied Congress during his 1906 State of the Union address for financial resources to build a permanent home for the secretariat, now the headquarters of the Organization of American States, in a prominent location close to the White House.<sup>34</sup>

Roosevelt's commitment to Pan-Americanism as a foreign policy did not defuse growing suspicion of U.S. intentions. Interventions justified under the Roosevelt Corollary – including seizure of the Dominican Republic's custom house to force debt repayment, occupation of Cuba, and support for Panama's revolt against Colombia – fed concerns that the United States was using “hegemonic Pan-Americanism” as a “weapon of realpolitik to reaffirm its positions as a local, regional, hemispheric, and global power.”<sup>35</sup> Latin American nations exercised agency in countering these moves, including through a 1902 proposal advanced by another Argentine foreign minister, known as the Drago Doctrine, that American nations “multilaterally forbid the use of force” in collecting public debts.<sup>36</sup>

Even in the context of concerns regarding the potential for U.S. hegemony, multiple areas of alignment across national interests permitted rapid growth of the architecture of the inter-American system during the first half of the twentieth century. In Mexico City (1902), delegates adopted a resolution to create what would become the world's first regional health organization, now known as the Pan-American Health Organization. Subsequent inter-American conferences gave birth to specialized organizations on women, children, geography and history, and agriculture.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Rebalancing and “Good Neighbors” – 1923 to 1945***

In response to growing criticism and diplomatic pressure, the United States undertook in the 1920s and '30s the first of several attempts to reinvent its relationship to the inter-American system. Specific U.S. actions to rebalance power and reassure Latin American nations included changes to the system's leadership structure, the shift to the “Good Neighbor Policy,” acceptance of the principle of non-intervention in domestic affairs, and active engagement in three Meetings of Consultations of Ministers of Foreign Affairs during World War II that collectively represent a high-water mark in inter-American cooperation and solidarity.

The first tangible effort to rebalance was the U.S. decision to relinquish, at the fifth Pan-American conference (Santiago, 1923), its privileged position within the leadership structure of the Pan-American Union. Starting in 1923, the U.S. Secretary of State ceased to be ex-officio president of the Governing Board of the Pan American Union, and it became an elected position.<sup>38</sup> In addition, responding to concern

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<sup>34</sup> Fagg, *Pan-Americanism*, 31.

<sup>35</sup> Rodriguez, “*Imperial Pan-Americanism*,” 11.

<sup>36</sup> Fagg, *Pan-Americanism*, 30-31.

<sup>37</sup> Pope-Atkins, *Encyclopedia of the Inter-American System*. See also Dent and Wilson, *Historical Dictionary of Inter-American Organizations*.

<sup>38</sup> M. Margaret Ball, *The Problem of Inter-American Organization* (California: Stanford University Press, 1944), 20-21.

that a “disproportionately low number of Latin-American nationals were employed by the Union,” the United States agreed at the sixth Pan-American conference (Havana, 1928) to a resolution directing the Director General to distribute positions among nationals of all Union countries.<sup>39</sup>

Building on these power-sharing measures, FDR’s articulation in 1933 of the “Good Neighbor Policy” represented a second effort to reset the U.S. relationship to the region.<sup>40</sup> The shift from coercion to cooperation and mutual defense was precipitated by growing opposition to U.S. intervention, which boiled over in a “veritable flood of tirades” at the sixth Pan-American conference (Havana, 1928).<sup>41</sup> The change in U.S. tone was embodied by Secretary of State Cordell Hull, an “unpretentious Tennessean” who during the seventh conference (Montevideo, 1933) persuaded Latin American delegates that the United States wanted to “listen and help” and not “lead or dictate.” Hull also disarmed an attempt by the Argentine Foreign Minister to derail the conference by offering support for his “innocuous” nonaggression pact in exchange for Argentina’s agreement to stop blocking Pan-American accords.<sup>42</sup>

The shift in tone was backed by a shift in substance. In what represented a “historic turning point” for Pan-Americanism and the inter-American system, Secretary Hull announced in Montevideo that the United States would drop its opposition to the principle of non-intervention in internal or external affairs. The United States went on to accept in treaty form the “unqualified principle of non-intervention” at the eighth Pan-American conference (Buenos Aires, 1936).<sup>43</sup> By constraining some of the powers implicit in the Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary, Washington was conveying to the region that Pan-Americanism was not just a diplomatic ritual but would be an organizing principle of its foreign policy.

In 1940, a new U.S. government office, the Coordinator for Inter-American Affairs (CIAA), sought to capitalize on the popularity of the non-intervention principle to “actively reframe U.S. power as anti-imperialist” and U.S. leadership as a “benign and positive influence in the hemisphere.”<sup>44</sup> The CIAA encouraged Americans to host their own Pan-Americanist meetings and sponsored radio programs and Hollywood films, including a Disney film featuring Donald Duck (*Los Tres Caballeros*, 1944), that “propelled the language of Pan-Americanism...into the public discourse at unforeseen levels.”<sup>45</sup>

It was in the context of growing trust in the Pan-American project that World War II brought the twenty-one American republics into a “more intimate relationship.”<sup>46</sup> The highlight of the WWII period were three Meetings of Consultations of Foreign Ministers (Panama, 1939; Cuba, 1940; and Brazil, 1942) during which landmark agreements were reached on collective security, including the

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<sup>39</sup> Ball, *The Problem of Inter-American Organization*, 21.

<sup>40</sup> Fagg, *Pan-Americanism*, 48-49.

<sup>41</sup> Fagg, 44.

<sup>42</sup> Fagg, 50.

<sup>43</sup> In addition to broadening the scope of Pan-Americanism beyond commercial and juridical matters, acceptance of the non-intervention principle unlocked progress on mutual security in what some analysts at the time described as the “Pan-Americanization of the Monroe Doctrine.” See Pope-Atkins, *Encyclopedia of the Inter-American System*, 387-388. See also T.H. Reynolds, *The Progress of Pan-Americanism* (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1942), 161

<sup>44</sup> Scarfi and Sheinin, *The New Pan-Americanism*, 93.

<sup>45</sup> Lisa Ubelaker, “Popular Pan-Americanism, North and South” in *The New Pan-Americanism and the Structuring of Inter-American Relations*, Juan Pablo Scarfi and David Sheinin (New York: Routledge, 2022), 94.

<sup>46</sup> Connell-Smith, *The Inter-American System*, 21.

Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (Río Treaty).<sup>47</sup> The three foreign minister meetings also resulted in the creation of the U.S.-led Inter-American Military System, a significant expansion of the “regional machinery.”<sup>48</sup>

### ***The Promise and Problems of the Organization of American States – 1945 to 1990***

Even though it demonstrated its utility during WWII, Pan-Americanism faced an existential threat in the post-war period as plans moved forward for the formation of a new U.S.-led world organization. The creation of the United Nations “struck a severe blow at the isolationist core of the Western Hemisphere idea” and cast doubt on the value of the inter-American system.<sup>49</sup> Yet far from serving as its death knell, the creation of the UN forced Latin American nations that were excluded from UN planning conferences to bind together in a “united front for protecting the autonomy” of the inter-American system.<sup>50</sup>

This renewed commitment to Pan-Americanism in the face of potential obsolescence paved the way in May 1948 for approval by 21 nations of the Charter of the Organization of American States (OAS) at the ninth Pan-American conference (Bogotá). The Charter provided the inter-American system for the first time with a formal legal foundation, ending a sixty-year period in which the system functioned solely in accordance with conference resolutions.<sup>51</sup> Drawing on the notion of hemispheric exceptionalism implicit in the visions of Monroe and Bolívar, the Charter declares in Article I that American States have come together “to achieve an order of peace and justice, to promote their territorial integrity, and to defend their independence.”<sup>52</sup>

The promise of a new era of Pan-American unity quickly ran into the reality of Cold War geopolitics. From the U.S. perspective, building up the Western Hemisphere as a bastion against the spread of global communism became the guiding principle for the inter-American system.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, the imperative to counter Soviet influence in Europe and Asia led to a reduced emphasis on cooperation with Latin American nations.<sup>54</sup> The U.S. view on Latin America during the first part of the Cold War is encapsulated in a 1950 memo from George Kennan, then Counselor to the Secretary of State: “it is important to keep before ourselves and the Latin American peoples at all times the reality of the thesis that we are a great power; that we are by and large much less in need of them than they are in need of us.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Dent and Wilson, *Historical Dictionary of Inter-American Organizations*, 18.

<sup>48</sup> Dent and Wilson, 18.

<sup>49</sup> Connell-Smith, *The Inter-American System*, 21.

<sup>50</sup> Connell-Smith, 21.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas and Thomas, *The Organization of American States*, 35.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas and Thomas, 39.

<sup>53</sup> Dent and Wilson, *Historical Dictionary of Inter-American Organizations*.

<sup>54</sup> Connell-Smith, *The Inter-American System*, 148.

<sup>55</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Memorandum by the Counselor of the Department to the Secretary of State,” March 29, 1950, accessed March 1, 2023, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1950v02/d330>

Latin American nations largely did not share the U.S. assessment of the communist threat, and many “feared [U.S.] intervention more than the communist challenge.”<sup>56</sup> These fears were substantiated to a degree by U.S. support for the overthrow of presidents in Guatemala (1954), the Dominican Republic (1965), and Chile (1973), widely seen as violations of the non-intervention principle.<sup>57</sup> The Cold War did not further solidarity but instead reciprocity: “economic assistance for Latin America as a reward for supporting [U.S.] policies to meet the threat.”<sup>58</sup> One example was the U.S. decision to commit through President Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress (1961) as much as \$20 billion in loans and grants to OAS member states.<sup>59</sup>



**Photo concept:** President John F. Kennedy sought to stimulate growth and fortify democracy in the Americas with the Alliance for Progress initiative he announced in August 1961.

**Credit:** Cecil Stoughton. White House Photographs. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston

The Alliance for Progress was not the only U.S. effort during the Cold War to reinvent its approach to the region. President Nixon authorized in 1969 the first-ever review of U.S. policy toward Latin America; the Rockefeller Commission was charged with recommendations on the “totality of U.S. policy toward Latin America.”<sup>60</sup> In 1984, Henry Kissinger was tapped to lead a bipartisan commission on Central America that recommended a five-year, \$8 billion economic plan.<sup>61</sup> Together, these efforts fit into the historical pattern of Latin American pushback inducing the United States to recommit to regional engagement in order to avoid undermining its political aims in the hemisphere.

<sup>56</sup> Connell-Smith, *The Inter-American System*, 148.

<sup>57</sup> Dr. Mauricio Paredes, in conversation with author, January 2023.

<sup>58</sup> Connell-Smith, *The Inter-American System*, 148.

<sup>59</sup> Pope-Atkins, *Encyclopedia of the Inter-American System*, 16-17.

<sup>60</sup> Jorge I. Domínguez, “The Future of Inter-American Relations: States, Challenges, and Likely Responses,” in *The Future of Inter-American Relations*, edited by Jorge I. Domínguez (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4.

<sup>61</sup> Francis Clines, “President Asks 8 Billion in Aid for Latin Area,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1984, accessed April 1, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/04/world/president-asks-8-billion-in-aid-for-latin-area.html>.

## *Striving for a More Perfect Pan-Americanism – 1990 to 2023*

The end of the Cold War ushered in important trends – diminished U.S. national security concerns, trade liberalization, and democratization – that created unprecedented opportunities for Pan-American cooperation.<sup>62</sup> An expanded OAS, which now included Canada and 13 Caribbean states, coalesced around the overarching goal of “cooperation for hemispheric security,” which involved promoting democracy, human rights, and integral development.<sup>63</sup> In line with new UN treaties and initiatives, OAS member states also sought to enhance cooperation on environmental protection, climate change, and indigenous issues, among others.<sup>64</sup>

The emergence of the United States as the sole global superpower reinforced asymmetrical power as a structural challenge of the inter-American system. As U.S. power reached its peak, Peter Hakim argues that LAC countries became more effective at collective organization to “cope with this asymmetry.”<sup>65</sup> The scope of this collective action was limited, however, by “disagreement and distrust” among LAC nations, the lack of common interests “except in relation to the United States,” and the reality that countries experience “distinct degrees of interdependence” on the United States.<sup>66</sup>



**Photo concept:** The 1982 Malvinas War between Argentina and the United Kingdom risked disrupting the cohesion of the U.S.-Latin American relations when the U.S. decided to back the UK’s right to liberate the islands following Argentina’s invasion in early April 1982. In this photo, the crew of the badly damaged HMS Sheffield conducts damage control efforts after being struck by Argentine military aircraft. **Credit:** Government of Argentina (Creative Commons)

Despite this underlying asymmetry, OAS member states embarked on several efforts to deepen cooperation on shared priorities. The first of these was a U.S. initiative to host in Miami in 1994 the first

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<sup>62</sup> Carl Kaysen, Robert A. Pastor, and Laura W. Reed, *Collective Responses to Regional Problems: The Case of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Washington, DC: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1994), 7.

<sup>63</sup> Dent and Wilson, *Historical Dictionary of Inter-American Organizations*, 22-23.

<sup>64</sup> Dent and Wilson, 22.

<sup>65</sup> Peter Hakim, “Comment” in *Collective Responses to Regional Problems: The Case of Latin America and the Caribbean*, edited by Carl Kaysen, Robert A. Pastor, and Laura W. Reed (Washington, DC: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1994), 142.

<sup>66</sup> Hakim, “Comment,” 142.

Summit of the Americas (SoA), a head-of-state-level meeting open to all “freely elected governments” of the Americas.<sup>67</sup> Importantly, the first SoA approved a plan for action that declared the “strengthening, effective exercise, and consolidation of democracy” to be the central priority of the Americas.<sup>68</sup> Since Miami, eight additional Summits have elevated political dialogue to the highest level, while also triggering a proliferation of mandates to the OAS for inter-American cooperation, even though these Summits take place outside the institutional mechanism of the OAS. These mandates, mostly unfunded, challenge the OAS by creating expectations beyond its capacity to deliver.

The second joint effort that signaled the potential of the OAS was the enhancement of its role as a platform for preventive diplomacy. Through crisis prevention, preemptive engagement, and pre-conflict peace building, the OAS has used preventive diplomacy to achieve greater stability in the region.<sup>69</sup> In this way, the inter-American system helped bring about a form of “perpetual peace” in a region that has not had an inter-state conflict since 1995. The OAS also demonstrated its capacity for preventive diplomacy through its leadership over 12 years of the Mission to Support the Peace Process in Colombia, which helped usher in the 2016 Colombian peace accord with the FARC.<sup>70</sup>

A third key initiative carried out by OAS member states was to build out the architecture of regional institutions dedicated to the defense of democracy. Following decades of military rule, and reflecting the “never again” sentiment, OAS member states signed on to the 1991 Santiago Decision, also known as the anti-coup mechanism.<sup>71</sup> In addition, OAS electoral observation missions were dispatched to fourteen nations in the decade after they were revived in 1989.<sup>72</sup> Cooperation on democratic strengthening culminated in the adoption on September 11, 2001, of the Inter-American Democratic Charter.<sup>73</sup> The Charter, adopted in Lima, established a right to democracy and its essential elements, including “free and fair elections, as well as respect for human rights, pluralism of political parties, and rule of law.”<sup>74</sup>

While the Charter represented a crowning achievement, it also created a tension point between defense of democracy and the non-intervention principle. In line with the historic pattern of competing visions, the OAS continues to be plagued by intense disagreement over the proper role of the OAS in cases where democratic institutions are eroded from within. Specifically, applications of Article 18 and 19 of the Charter – which authorize the OAS Secretary General to analyze “situations...that affect the development of the democratic political institutional process” or to suspend member states in response

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<sup>67</sup> Pope-Atkins, *Encyclopedia of the Inter-American System*, 130-131.

<sup>68</sup> Pope-Atkins, 130-131.

<sup>69</sup> Monica Herz, “Does the Organization of American States Matter?” London School of Economics, April 2008, accessed February 1, 2023, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/international-development/Assets/Documents/PDFs/csdc-working-papers-phase-two/wp34.2-does-the-oas-matter.pdf>.

<sup>70</sup> Ambassador Thomas Shannon, in discussion with author, March 2023.

<sup>71</sup> Richard J. Bloomfield, “Making the Western Hemisphere Safe for Democracy? The OAS Defense-of-Democracy Regime” in *Collective Responses to Regional Problems: The Case of Latin America and the Caribbean*, edited by Carl Kaysen, Robert A. Pastor, and Laura W. Reed (Washington, DC: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1994), 19-20.

<sup>72</sup> Pope-Atkins, *Encyclopedia of the Inter-American System*, 130.

<sup>73</sup> Dent and Wilson, *Historical Dictionary of Inter-American Organizations*, 184.

<sup>74</sup> Dent and Wilson, 184.

to an “unconstitutional interruption of the democratic order...” – have created situations in which actions some states believe are endorsed by the Charter are perceived as violations of sovereignty by others.<sup>75</sup>



**Photo concept:** U.S. President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro shake hands during Obama’s visit to Cuba in March 2016.

**Credit:** The White House

It is worthwhile to note that in response to the terrorist attack suffered by the United States on the same day the Charter was adopted, LAC signatories to the Río Treaty invoked the treaty’s collective defense mechanism.<sup>76</sup> At the same time, the 9/11 attack and the launch of the Global War on Terrorism diverted U.S. attention away from the region. In this way, 9/11 marked the end of what one analyst referred to as a ten-year period of post-Cold War optimism regarding prospects for inter-American cooperation.<sup>77</sup>

### ***Weighing the Cost of a Renewed Commitment to Pan-Americanism***

The nations of the Americas are the rightful owners of the world’s oldest and most robust regional governance system. This system evolved over five distinct periods dating back 200 years to the emergence of Pan-American consciousness. The evolution of the inter-American system has been spurred on by a continuous interplay of ideas and creative tension stemming from competing national interests. As a result of this dynamic process, the system now provides Western Hemisphere nations with a universally accessible forum for preventive diplomacy and democracy promotion. The inter-American system is also beset by challenges, including distrust linked to asymmetrical power, disagreement over the role of the OAS in countering democratic backsliding, and the proliferation of unfunded mandates, among others.

In spite of these challenges, the United States should remind itself at the dawn of this new geopolitical era that the inter-American system can serve as a bulwark against authoritarianism. The

<sup>75</sup> “Inter-American Democratic Charter,” *Organization of American States*, September 11, 2001, accessed 2 April 2023, [https://www.oas.org/charter/docs/resolution1\\_en\\_p4.htm](https://www.oas.org/charter/docs/resolution1_en_p4.htm).

<sup>76</sup> Dent and Wilson, *Historical Dictionary of Inter-American Organizations*, 24. Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, Signed in 1947 in Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>77</sup> Dr. Cynthia Watson, in discussion with author, January 2023.

argument for a renewed commitment to Pan-Americanism is rooted in the nature of strategic competition. It is in its purest form a contest between two systems of government. The democratic nations of the Americas, including the United States, are under pressure to demonstrate the superiority of democracy as a vehicle for delivering a better quality of life. This shared pressure creates an incentive for the United States to work with other nations, and through existing OAS mechanisms, to enhance democratic resilience and counter threats posed by authoritarian regimes.

How can the United States tap into its “strategic democracy reserve” and project strength through leadership of a more united hemisphere?<sup>78</sup> The first step is to rebuild trust by setting realistic expectations regarding what the inter-American system can achieve. This means acknowledging that Pan-Americanism is not the solution to all social, economic, and political problems in the hemisphere, and that deep-seated challenges in the United States and elsewhere can only be fully addressed through the political process. While the United States should continue to work with the OAS to exert diplomatic pressure on democratically elected leaders that erode institutions from within, it should make clear that it is the citizens of these nations who have the primary responsibility to counter democratic backsliding through constitutional means. The integrity of the OAS can be restored, in other words, by ensuring it is not used as a “battering ram” to shape political outcomes in a given nation.<sup>79</sup>



**Photo concept:** Caption: U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken speaks at the Organization of American States (OAS) on June 23, 2023.

**Credit:** The U.S. Mission to the OAS

The second step the United States should take is to engage OAS member states in a long-term dialogue regarding areas of shared interest as they relate to democratic resilience. As part of this dialogue,

<sup>78</sup> Ambassador Thomas Shannon, in discussion with author, March 2023.

<sup>79</sup> Shannon, March 2023.

the United States should resist the temptation to launch new initiatives but instead “listen with humility” and seek out opportunities to “support initiatives proposed by other nations.”<sup>80</sup> Two areas of cooperation that can serve as a starting point include sharing tools for combatting disinformation and election interference, and working together to develop standards for the ethical use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). These discussions should be focused on democratic resilience and not framed as countering the influence of a specific country, thereby side-stepping an unhelpful “us vs. them” dynamic.

Third, elevating Pan-Americanism as a foreign policy priority requires a shift in messaging. The United States should seek to generate renewed enthusiasm for regional cooperation by instilling pride in the OAS as the oldest, most inclusive regional institution in the world. It should remind itself and other nations that the principles of universality and equality originated in the Western Hemisphere, and resurrect its commitment to a “partnership of equals” as the guiding principle for relationships among nations. Since public diplomacy must be a “sustained, repetitive argument,” the United States should pursue options for conveying tailored messages at all levels regarding the value of a resilient, democratic hemisphere.<sup>81</sup>

It is with all these considerations in mind that the United States must decide, in the words of current OAS Secretary General Luis Almagro, “what kind of party it wants to host in the Americas.”<sup>82</sup> In weighing its response, the United States should recall historical periods in which it derived strategic benefits from recommitting to Pan-Americanism and deepening its engagement with the inter-American system. Maintaining the OAS as a mechanism to build up the Western Hemisphere as a “strategic democracy reserve” has a cost. But the long-term cost to the United States in losing the OAS could end up being much higher.

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<sup>80</sup> Ambassador Liliana Ayalde, in discussion with author, February 2023.

<sup>81</sup> Dr. Cynthia Watson, in discussion with author, January 2023.

<sup>82</sup> OAS Secretary-General Luis Almagro, in discussion with author, March 2023.



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