

The Future of the Organization of American States

Written by W. Alejandro Sánchez and Kelly Morrison

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W. ALEJANDRO SÁNCHEZ AND KELLY MORRISON, AUG 28 2014

The Organization of American States (OAS) is set to appoint a new Secretary General in 2015. The new leader will replace José Miguel Insulza, of Chile, who will soon finish his second consecutive term. Since the OAS charter states that a Secretary General cannot serve more than two five-year terms, the position will soon be open to a new candidate. Regardless of which Latin American figure is chosen for the position—Uruguay's Foreign Minister Luis Almagro and former Guatemalan Vice President Eduardo Stein are two recent nominations—the next Secretary General will have the critical responsibility of maintaining the agency's status as a relevant player in the evolving inter-American system.

This will be no easy task. Washington has a reputation for influencing the OAS, and the next Secretary General will be responsible for maintaining the organization's independent identity. Additionally, Insulza's replacement will need to cut down on bureaucratic inefficiencies and build regional consensus on key policy issues such as the hemisphere's approach towards Cuba and environmental issues. Only with these accomplishments will the OAS be able to implement positive changes in the hemisphere and maintain—or reclaim—its status as one of the region's key international organizations.

A Brief History

The OAS traces its origin to the First International Conference of the Americas, which took place in Washington D.C. from 1889 to 1890. At this conference, delegations from throughout the Americas resolved to create the International Union of American Republics—later renamed the Pan American Union—in order to promote regional integration. By the Ninth Conference of the Americas, which was held in Colombia in 1948, the Union took on its current title.

During the Cold War era, the OAS gained its status as another of Washington's pawns. According to one scholar, at this time “many observers came to view the OAS as a facile extension of the Cold War security interests of its most powerful member, the United States.”¹ Certainly, the location of the organization's headquarters in the heart of the United States has not helped the OAS maintain an image of neutrality.

Furthermore, the OAS has frequently carried out actions that unilaterally benefit the United States. Most notably, the OAS tacitly supported U.S. military intervention in the Americas during the 20th century, like the CIA-sponsored overthrow of the Arbenz government in Guatemala in 1954, and the invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965.² In contrast to these incidents, the OAS passed a resolution to express its “regret” when the United States invaded Panama to overthrow Manuel Antonio Noriega. However, the OAS' light criticism had little to no effect on Washington's actions, and the resolution was deemed irrelevant when Washington continued with its military operations. As further evidence of U.S. influence, Cuba was excluded from the OAS in 1962 and was not allowed to rejoin OAS proceedings until 2009 (though Havana ultimately chose not to do so).

Turning Point

By the end of the Cold War era, the United States began to demonstrate less influence in the organization as the hemisphere's concerns shifted from security to human rights issues.³ Yet it was not until 2005 that the key post of Secretary General was filled by someone other than a candidate pre-approved by the United States. The process by

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which Chilean Minister of Interior, José Miguel Insulza, took charge of the organization was somewhat unusual. In June 2004, OAS member states elected former Costa Rican President Miguel Ángel Rodríguez to serve the five-year term as Secretary General. However, Rodríguez's time in office lasted only a month as corruption charges surfaced relating to his actions during his presidency. The Secretary General resigned in disgrace in October 2004. The following year, OAS members chose Insulza to be Rodríguez's successor.

Initially, the U.S. government supported former Salvadoran President Francisco Flores to replace Rodríguez. However, Flores withdrew his candidacy early in the debating period. During the first round of voting, Mexican Foreign Minister Luis Ernesto Derbez, backed by most of Central and North America, tied with Insulza, who had support from most of South America. However, citing his desire to maintain unity within the hemisphere, Derbez withdrew from the race before the second round of voting. Insulza then won the election with support from all but three of the Latin American states. Mexico abstained from voting out of respect for Derbez, while Bolivia and Peru refused to support Insulza due to their historical tensions (including border disputes) with Chile.

Diplomatic Hyperactivity

Insulza's election marked a turning point in OAS history, but the organization has more to accomplish if it is going to remain the hemisphere's preeminent multilateral organization. Indeed, the OAS is only one of many multinational agencies that cater to the economic and political needs of the Americas. According to one scholar, this excess of regional agencies suggests "a sort of diplomatic 'hyperactivity' in Latin America" that is resultant from the OAS' inability to tackle the region's current issues.⁴ Thus, the OAS will have to increase its problem-solving capacity if it is going to maintain its status among so many economic and political regional bodies.

This section will (briefly) outline those organizations that are most important to the region and the ways in which each compares to the OAS.

The Community of Latin America and Caribbean States (Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños--CELAC) is a political organization that was created in Caracas, Venezuela in 2011 to merge the Rio Group and the Latin American and Caribbean Summit on Integration and Development (CALC). Some of the most ambitious of CELAC's 33 member states hope that the organization will prove to be a viable alternative to the OAS, free from the influence of the United States and Canada (which are not members). For now, however, CELAC lacks the funding and organizational structure that it needs to deliver on its bold promises. The organization has no permanent representatives, nor headquarters of its own. For these reasons, although CELAC's latest summit was a successful exercise in diplomacy, it seemed to lack real results.

The Union of South American Nations (Unión de Naciones Suramericanas--UNASUR) was created in 2008 to join the 12 South America states in an integrative body modeled after the European Union. The most well-known of the group's subsidiary bodies is the South American Defense Council, which was created to promote military cooperation and unified regional defense strategies.

The Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América--ALBA) is the brainchild of the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez Frías. The organization was created in 2004 by Cuba and Venezuela, and its membership has since expanded to include Bolivia, Nicaragua, Dominica, Antigua & Barbuda, Ecuador, and St. Vincent & the Grenadines. According to *Americas Quarterly*, ALBA is guided by three general themes: conflict, 21st century socialism, and international revolution. Thus, it unites countries that seek to challenge established norms in the region, and therefore the dominance of the OAS.

The Central American Integration System (Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana--SICA) was originally created in 1991 via the Protocol of Tegucigalpa and came into effect in 1993. Its members include all the Central American states, as well as the Dominican Republic. It has various agencies to promote regional integration and democracy, such as a Central American Parliament, the Central American Court of Justice, and the Central American Council on Tourism.

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In addition to the aforementioned political organizations, Latin American countries have also created economic alliances to achieve their trade-related goals. The main groupings are the Pacific Alliance (Alianza del Pacífico) and the Common Market of the South (Mercado Común del Sur--MERCOSUR). The Pacific Alliance is a trade partnership between Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru. These countries constitute some of the region's fastest growing economies. The organization was created in 2011 to promote economic integration and economic growth for all member states, while building a "platform for political integration," between Latin America and the Asia-Pacific region. In contrast, MERCOSUR was created in 1991 and includes Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela. Though the group was established to promote regional economic integration, MERCOSUR has become more statist and politicized during recent years, especially since Venezuela joined the group in 2012.

Due to space issues, we cannot discuss other regional entities, such as the Andean Community, Caribbean Community and the Association of Caribbean States.

To what extent the OAS has been influenced by the actions of other blocs is debatable; however the Washington-based organization has suffered from decisions made by its members within their own smaller blocs. Case in point was the 2013 decision by several ALBA nations (namely Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela) to leave the Inter-American Defense Board. At the time, Ecuador's foreign minister claimed that the Board was "not useful at all." The OAS has also been at odds with some blocs. Most notably, in 2012 the head of the OAS mission to Paraguay published an open letter in which he critiqued UNASUR and MERCOSUR. The reason for the letter was that both blocs had suspended the landlocked nation in June of that year due to the overthrow of then-President Fernando Lugo.

How Can the OAS Become Relevant Again?

Given the multitude of regional organizations in Latin America, the next Secretary General of the OAS will have a full term trying to implement positive changes in the hemisphere. In this section, we will explore five main recommendations that would help the next Secretary General to be successful.

1) Focus on smaller agencies. As mentioned previously, one challenge for the OAS will be to defy the stereotype that the United States dominates the organization. However, this notion may not be as strong as some assume. Though the Secretariat and the General Assembly of the OAS have traditionally been influenced by Washington, the OAS has a plethora of lesser-known agencies such as the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the Inter-American Commission for Women, the Inter-American Defense Board (IADB), and the Inter-American Defense College which operate somewhat independently. PAHO, for instance, has supported positive initiatives such as the implementation of higher taxes on tobacco. Other bodies, such as the IADB, could be reformed in order to promote increased hemispheric security. To be successful, the next Secretary General should empower the OAS' smaller bodies, giving specialized agencies the chance to implement policy changes.

2) Stress the history of the OAS. Several governments continue to critique the OAS, while other analysts label it "obsolete," the next Secretary General should emphasize the fact that the OAS is the oldest multilateral organization in the region. Analysts are quick to declare new regional alliances "the future of the region," but consistency is just as important as innovation. Though many scholars declare that the Pacific Alliance will have an impressive impact on the region, analysts said the same thing when MERCOSUR was created in the 1990s, and when ALBA grew powerful the following decade.⁵ Many journalists have harbored similarly high hopes for CELAC since its creation, due to the fact that it includes all Latin American and Caribbean nations, even Cuba. However, CELAC has yet to carry out any major initiatives, and it certainly does not have as strong of a structure as the OAS to enable it to achieve its goals. The next Secretary General must emphasize that the OAS has pursued positive initiatives over decades, not just during the past couple of years.

3) Keep OAS headquarters in Washington. Many countries, especially those with tense relations with the United States, have proposed moving the OAS to another country. In 2012 for example, Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa wanted to move the OAS to Panama. Others have suggested that the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, an OAS agency, should be moved from Washington to Haiti. Though these proposals seek to decrease U.S.

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Meddling in the region, moving the OAS headquarters would be an empty victory. The United States would likely lose interest in the organization if it was stationed in another country. This could lead the hegemon to withdraw funding for the organization, which would be problematic given that Washington is the largest donor to the OAS.

4) Reach out to Cuba. Even though Cuba chose not to re-join the OAS when given the opportunity, Insulza tried to make amends with the country during his term by participating in the 2014 CELAC summit in Havana. His visit marked the first time that a Secretary General had travelled to the island in over five decades. It is unlikely that Cuba will rejoin the OAS anytime soon. Still, the next Secretary General should maintain amicable relations with Cuba, if only to appease the country's regional allies (i.e. Venezuela).

5) Minimize red tape. In general, multinational organizations have a problem with bureaucratic redundancy as well as having sub-agencies that are not particularly effective. For example, the OAS has two agencies that deal with security in the Americas: the Commission for Hemispheric Security and the Inter-American Defense Board. The next Secretary General should re-shuffle OAS agencies to increase the organization's efficiency. This move would free up OAS resources that can be utilized for more useful projects.

Hopefully the next Secretary General will implement some of these changes when he or she takes office next year. Given the number of multinational organizations and the complexity of political alliances within Latin America, the success of the OAS may be contingent upon their doing so.

Notes

[1] Dexter S. Boniface, "Is There a Democratic Norm in the Americas? An Analysis of the Organization of American States," *Global Governance* 8 (2002).

[2] Fausto Rosario. "Rosario saca en cara a OEA el apoyo a invasion de EEUU a RD en 1965." *Acento.com.do*. October 30, 2013. (Accessed on August 21, 2014). The role of the OAS in the U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic is also discussed in: General Bruce Palmer Jr. *Intervention in the Caribbean: The Dominican Crisis of 1965*. (Kentucky – The University Press of Kentucky). 1989.

[3] Carolyn M. Shaw, "Limits to Hegemonic Influence in the Organization of American States," *Latin American Politics and Society* 45, no. 3 (2002).

[4] Daniela Segovia, "Latin America and the Caribbean: Between the OAS and CELAC," *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 95 (2013).

[5] Recent praise for the Pacific Alliance includes a discussion whether the U.S. should apply for membership: Carl Meacham. "Why Should the U.S. Join the Pacific Alliance?" Center for Strategic & International Studies. July 10, 2013 (Accessed on August 21, 2014). In 2006, Focus Web on the Global South published a report discussed ALBA's growth, including likely new members. David Harris & Diego Azzi. "ALBA – Venezuela's answer to 'free trade:' The Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas." Focus Web on the Global South. Occasional Paper: 3. 2006 (Accessed on August 21, 2014). MERCOSUR was praised in the 1990s before the Argentina's economic meltdown: Juan Jesus Aznarez. "Menem defiende el futuro del Mercosur pese a las disputas comerciales entre sus socios." *El País*. September 12, 1997. (Accessed August 21, 2014). Also read: Gerardo Caetano (coordinator). *MERCOSUR 20 Años*. Centro de Formación para la Integración Regional / Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. 2011. (Accessed on August 22, 2014).

About the author:

W. Alejandro Sánchez is a Research Fellow at the Council on Hemispheric Affairs where he focuses on geopolitics,

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military and cyber security issues. He regularly appears in different media outlets like Al Jazeera, Russia Today, BBC, El Comercio and Voice of Russia. His analyses have appeared in numerous refereed journals including Small Wars and Insurgencies, Defence Studies, the Journal of Slavic Military Studies, European Security, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism and Cuban Affairs. His Twitter handle is @W_Alex_Sanchez

Kelly Morrison is an undergraduate student at Lee University where she studies Spanish and International Relations.