

**Hearing on the Ninth Summit of the Americas**  
**Senate Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security,**  
**Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues**  
**May 26, 2022**

**Testimony of Rebecca Bill Chavez**  
**President and CEO, Inter-American Dialogue**

Chairman Kaine, Ranking Member Rubio, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the upcoming Ninth Summit of the Americas to be held in Los Angeles.

My name is Rebecca Bill Chavez. I am President and CEO of the Inter-American Dialogue, a think tank dedicated to fostering democratic governance, prosperity, and social equity in Latin America and the Caribbean. We work to shape policy debate, devise solutions, and enhance cooperation within the Western Hemisphere.

From 2013 until 2016, I served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Western Hemisphere Affairs. Before that, I was a tenured professor at the United States Naval Academy, focusing on democracy and security in Latin America and the Caribbean. I have dedicated my policy, academic, and government career to working on and understanding U.S.-Latin American relations as well as democracy and the rule of law in Latin America.

**The Summit is an Opportunity to Deploy a Vision**

In my testimony today, I want to underscore two core points.

First, we should not view the Summit as a single, discrete event. Instead, the Biden administration should use the gathering to articulate a vision for Latin America and the Caribbean that it will carry forward over the coming years.

Second, the United States must release as soon as possible a robust Summit agenda that reflects and aligns with the concerns and priorities of the region as well as with U.S. interests.

As was the case when the first Summit of the Americas was held in Miami in 1994, hosting the Summit in the United States and especially in Los Angeles has tremendous symbolic value. With a population that is almost 50 percent Latino and with deep ties to Mexico and the other countries of the hemisphere, Los Angeles is a microcosm of the deepening connection between U.S. domestic policy and foreign policy. Beyond the strong resonance of its location, the Summit presents the Biden administration with the opportunity to announce and begin implementing a holistic strategy for Latin America and the Caribbean – a pivot to the Americas that is more needed today than ever.

Despite concerns about Summit participation by other nations, the Biden administration can and should take strong steps to make the Summit a success by underscoring that the Summit is part of a broader U.S. effort to reengage with the Americas, reassert the U.S. position as a hemispheric partner and leader, and reassure the region that the United States cares deeply about

the Americas' collective future and well-being. Of course, this will require that the U.S. government make and follow through on concrete commitments.

In addition to presenting a vision and a renewed commitment to the Americas, the United States must present a Summit agenda that reflects the concerns and priorities of the region. There are many specific and critical issues on which the United States can and should work together with the nations of Latin America and the Caribbean.

In sharp contrast to the first Summit in Miami when democracy and economic development were on the rise, the United States will be hosting this year's gathering at a time when the region is polarized, COVID-19 has laid bare public health and economic challenges, democracy is in its second decade of retreat, climate change is threatening the health and safety of people throughout the hemisphere, and global rivals are making their financial and political presence strongly felt. A U.S. commitment to a Summit that reflects the region's priorities and to greater engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean is fundamental to competing effectively with authoritarian countries like China, which are increasingly influential in the region.

President Biden's commitment to multilateralism on a global scale should constitute the backbone of the Summit itself and of a Latin America and Caribbean strategy. After all, the greatest threats to our hemisphere are complex and transcend national borders. An Americas strategy without strong partnership and alignment or that is seen as simply a unilateral U.S. project is destined to fail. The president has the opportunity to build common cause with the hemisphere's nations through the reinvigoration of regional organizations like the Organization of American States, which should play a key role in bolstering democracy in the hemisphere.

### *The Hemispheric Migration Crisis*

First on the Summit agenda should be the hemisphere-wide migration crisis. Irregular migration is a tragic humanitarian issue that impacts countries across the Americas – a truly hemispheric challenge that is best addressed in collaboration with regional partners. As such, the Biden administration has the opportunity to demonstrate that it cares about more than crossings along the U.S. southern border.

Migrants from a diverse set of countries, including Venezuela, Haiti, Nicaragua, and the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are fleeing a mix of acute humanitarian crises, political repression, violence, and state fragility. Over six million Venezuelan refugees are overwhelming Colombia, Ecuador, Chile, and many other Latin American and Caribbean countries. This number rivals Syria's demographic collapse, and yet the amount of international funding for each Venezuelan refugee is only ten percent of the per capita funding for Syrian refugees. The Biden administration took an important first step by granting Temporary Protected Status to Venezuelans in the United States. Now it's time to do more. Just as the U.S. government on a bipartisan basis has generously stepped up to assist Ukrainian refugees, so should the United States work with hemispheric and global partners to help refugees in our hemisphere.

President Biden started to build the scaffolding of a holistic approach to migration with its Northern Triangle Strategy, an essential step with a focus on the root causes, including crippling poverty, widespread violence, government corruption, and climate change. Although its long-term focus on rootedness represents a positive shift away from the ad-hoc, reactive stance that has characterized U.S. policy for decades, it only covers a portion of Central America, leaving out Nicaragua where thousands are fleeing the brutal Ortega regime, not to mention Mexico, South America, and the Caribbean. The localized strategy should be a building block of a broader approach that goes well beyond concerns about migration to the United States, and President Biden should use the Summit to propose a set of practical policy solutions.

### ***COVID and Public Health Emergencies***

The agenda should also include a sustainable, region-wide plan for the still-evolving COVID-19 pandemic and for public health emergencies that the region will undoubtedly face in the future. COVID-19 hit Latin America and the Caribbean hard, killing over 1.7 million people – more than 27% of the total number of global COVID deaths in a region with only 8% of the world’s population. Many countries came to see China and Russia as stronger pandemic partners than the United States, given how slow the U.S. was to provide personal protective equipment and vaccines.

At the Summit, the United States should work to organize a more cooperative approach to managing the pandemic and strengthening public health systems more generally. The countries of Latin America and the Caribbean have for too long invested far too little in health infrastructure. In addition to increasing vaccine provisions, the Biden administration should initiate a robust vaccine technology program to ramp up regional manufacturing capacity to achieve global equitable vaccine access. More broadly, the United States needs to work with other countries to establish robust and reliable systems to coordinate better our response to future pandemic threats and, more broadly, region-wide public health emergencies.

The pandemic and the resulting school closures had significant negative effects on education opportunities across the hemisphere, particularly for students from vulnerable households. The region had the longest average school closures of anywhere in the world, and some countries are only now reopening for in-person learning, over two years after school doors were first closed. The Summit is an opportunity for the United States to reaffirm the importance of education recovery efforts and commit to partnering with countries in Latin America and the Caribbean to promote quality education for all, including through cooperative programs such as the 100,000 Strong in the Americas initiative.

### ***Inclusive Economic Recovery and Growth***

The COVID crisis has also tragically brought into focus the economic weaknesses of the region. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean reports that the spread of COVID contributed to a devastating economic contraction of seven percent in 2020, which led to a ten percent increase in poverty in 2020 and exacerbated income inequality. According to the World Bank, students impacted by extended school closures could face a ten percent loss in their lifetime incomes.

Given the devastating economic impact of the pandemic coupled with rising inflation, inclusive economic recovery should be a central piece of the Summit agenda, and there are several initiatives and commitments the Biden administration could announce in Los Angeles, including the expansion of efforts to attract private investment to the region. The administration's Partnership for Central America could serve as the model and starting point.

The U.S. should also announce climate-friendly infrastructure investment initiatives to follow through on the launch of Build Back World and the promises it made to Latin America and the Caribbean with the other G7 countries a year ago. Expectations are high in the region, especially since the September Build Back Better World listening tour that included stops in Colombia, Ecuador, and Panama. As a start, the administration should harness its various development finance tools, including the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, and provide specifics on areas that it will invest in, which is becoming even more important as China's competing Belt and Road Initiative gains traction in the region.

The administration should also announce specific initiatives that follow up on its talk about nearshoring as a way to boost economic performance in the hemisphere. There are many opportunities to re-route and reinforce more secure and reliable supply chains through the region as an alternative to manufacturing and services hubs in China and other parts of the world. Manufacturing and production were both significantly impacted by the covid pandemic, which has prompted companies to explore options in Latin America and the Caribbean. It's time for the Biden administration to create incentives for companies to move their operations to parts of the Americas that are closer and have easier access to the United States.

Finally, as of part of President Biden's effort to tackle the climate crisis, the administration should announce bold new clean energy investments and demonstrate its support for the region's renewable energy goals. The climate conversation should also include an actionable plan to increase climate adaptation assistance to the region, particularly to the Caribbean and Central America, which experience the most catastrophic impacts of climate change in large part due to their geographic exposure to extreme weather events. Aid should also target the most vulnerable populations, including women, indigenous communities, people of African descent, and youth. Potential commitments include greater funding for resilient agricultural practices where a single drought can utterly destroy the livelihood of subsistence farmers. The administration should also expand its work with the countries that share the Amazon rainforest using a variety of tools from technical assistance to funding to expand protected areas and indigenous reserves. By providing financial and technical resources for the region to meet its climate commitments and build its resilience, the United States can take the lead on a shared sustainable development agenda.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you again for shining a light on the upcoming Summit of the Americas. I also want to thank the Subcommittee for its bipartisan and much-needed attention to Latin America and the Caribbean, a region that is so deeply important to the interests of the United States.