

Reviving Multilateral Diplomacy: Perspectives from the US Ambassador to the OAS



Francisco O. Mora

**US Ambassador to the
Organization of American States**

Tuesday, October 24, 2023, 9:00 AM EST

www.thedialogue.org

Remarks by US Ambassador to the Organization of American States Frank O. Mora at the Inter-American Dialogue, "Reviving Multilateral Diplomacy: Perspectives from the US Ambassador to the OAS," 24 October 2023.

Thank you so much, Rebecca, for that very generous introduction. Good morning to all of you. It's good to see friends and colleagues here from the OAS. Rebecca, I want to thank you, as always, for giving me the opportunity to speak—this is my first big speech outside of the Permanent Council to the public. So, thank you for the opportunity and for hosting this conversation on the challenges and opportunities in our hemisphere. And I want to thank all of you here and in the virtual world for your interest and for all that you do to support the inter-American System and community. I have always valued the work that all of you do, and the input and the advice that you all give to me and to others as we work through some of these challenges.

Today, I want to take a few minutes to talk about what Secretary Blinken often refers to as “the power and purpose of American diplomacy”—that is, revitalizing our partnerships and alliances in pursuit of a more stable, more secure, and more prosperous world. President Biden, you have, I'm sure, heard talk about America being “back” and so much of that means that our emphasis is on diplomacy—we are “back” in terms of diplomacy.

As Rebecca mentioned, I began my service as U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States at the beginning of this year and so I want to talk to you about all that we have been doing over the past eight or nine months and what our vision is for the next year-and-a-half or so—and how this fits into a broader vision of U.S. foreign policy recommitting itself to addressing the big challenges of our time alongside our partners and allies, and so many of you here today.

Citation: Mora, Frank O. “Reviving Multilateral Diplomacy: Perspectives from the US Ambassador to the OAS,” 24 October 2023, Inter-American Dialogue, Washington, DC.

A few weeks ago, Secretary Blinken gave a speech at Johns Hopkins University, where he outlined our vision for the road ahead. And I want to emphasize an important piece that he mentioned. He said, and I quote, “we’re building new coalitions to tackle the toughest shared challenges of our time.” This means we are investing in a broader set of partners that includes not just national governments, but also local governments and civil society organizations, academia, the private sector, and citizens, especially young and emerging leaders in the hemisphere. And as we have often said—and certainly I have said—at the heart of our strategy is an understanding that if we are going to commit ourselves to truly addressing the challenges of our day in a lasting, sustainable way, we cannot go it alone. I repeat that message today and I will keep repeating it even long after I am Ambassador to the Organization of American States. This thinking applies to global challenges, but also to hemispheric ones. The multitude of challenges we, as a hemisphere, face today are often interconnected, so for the U.S. government to solve them, it is critical that we think of these challenges in very interconnected ways. As we always have, the United States will lead with purpose, with confidence, and with a collaborative spirit. Indeed, there is arguably no greater show of strength and no better use of our influence and resources than the decision to invest in strengthening international cooperation around a rules-based world order, particularly at this moment when we see a number of countries bent on undermining that order. In a world as complex as the one we lead today, our security and stability depends on our ability to bring countries along with us in pursuit of shared goals and responsibilities.

That is why, under this administration, we have doubled down on diplomacy and that is why we have doubled down on the importance of the Organization of American States. The record is clear and it is one of impact. Impact. That is the word we often use in the Mission. Impact. What is the impact? Over the past many months, we have demonstrated again and again that the OAS is uniquely positioned to mobilize countries, to establish consensus, to set agendas, and to bring about positive change in our hemisphere. We have seen it, as an example, with recent developments with respect to Guatemala, which I will come back to later on. At every turn, we have invested in identifying and building an ever-expanding tent of countries that are able to find common ground on core issues.

In that effort, historically, the evidence is clear: fellow democracies have long been our best partners. That’s why President Biden convened two Summits for Democracy—to bring together leaders from democracies big and small to galvanize global engagement on challenges that today transcend borders and continents. The role of the region and the OAS in collective global initiatives, such as the Community of Democracies, the Open Government Partnership, and the Freedom Online Coalition, further exemplifies the strength and resilience of democratic values when supported by the concerted efforts of like-minded countries. We are seeing these engagements bear fruit every day. And at the OAS, we are as active as ever working with a diverse coalition of countries to address the biggest challenges and opportunities in our hemisphere. And at the Organization of American States itself, we saw how a few months ago, the Permanent

Citation: Mora, Frank O. “Reviving Multilateral Diplomacy: Perspectives from the US Ambassador to the OAS,” 24 October 2023, Inter-American Dialogue, Washington, DC.

Council came together to support the first ever increase in the Organization's budget in over a decade. That was an important accomplishment and I think an important signal of all the member states' commitment to the institution.

Democratic Erosion

I want to talk today about some of those challenges. In our hemisphere, as you all know, one issue that we cannot ignore is democratic erosion, which today threatens the hard-fought progress that made Latin America and the Caribbean the second-most democratic region in the world. As you all know, this erosion is global. All around the world autocracy is making gains against democracy. Revisionist powers are challenging the norms and values that anchor the international system.

According to Freedom House, countries that suffered democratic declines in 2021 outnumbered those that improved by more than two to one.¹ In our region in particular, a report from the Economist Intelligence Unit shows that though Latin America and the Caribbean remains the region with the highest average democratic score outside of North America and Western Europe, in Latin America, just over 39 percent of the public reports satisfaction with how the democratic system is working in its country, the lowest average recorded since polling began in 2004.² Overall, we are seeing increased skepticism about whether democracy can deliver and this skepticism is of great concern to us and our national security.

We should be clear about this: people in the Americas are disaffected, frustrated, and disenchanted with the performance of democracy and that has repercussions not just in terms of the rise of anti-democratic forces, but also what those anti-democratic forces might mean for security and human rights in our hemisphere. People today are looking for alternatives to democracy. And as they search, authoritarian, rule-bending powers are not sitting idly by; they're increasingly collaborating with one another to spread new forms of autocratic governance. This is not some hypothetical; this is happening right now, posing great challenges to key principles of the international order, enshrined in the UN Charter, the OAS Charter, and of course, the Inter-American Democratic Charter.

So, we must be honest with ourselves in terms of the performance of democracy—it is not what it should be. And as a result, support for democracy has declined. Many of you here are familiar with the data from LAPOP's Americas Barometer. In 2021, 61% of respondents in Latin America and the Caribbean said they thought democracy was preferable to any other system of government, representing a seven (7) point decline from ten years prior.³ That's a problem. Democracies are fragile and when they're not delivering, that affects us all, including our national security. Even in the United States, confidence in government institutions has fallen steadily in recent decades,

1 "New Report: Authoritarian Rule Challenging Democracy as Dominant Global Model," Freedom House. February 24, 2022. <https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-authoritarian-rule-challenging-democracy-dominant-global-model>.

2 "Democracy Index 2022," Economist Intelligence Unit. <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2022/>.

3 Lupu, Noam, Mariana Rodriguez, and Elizabeth J. Zechmeister (Eds.) 2021. Pulse of Democracy. Nashville, TN: LAPOP.

Citation: Mora, Frank O. "Reviving Multilateral Diplomacy: Perspectives from the US Ambassador to the OAS," 24 October 2023, Inter-American Dialogue, Washington, DC.

from well over 70% in the 1970s to 20% today.

Today, our democracies are facing unprecedented challenges. Throughout the world and in our own hemisphere, we see elected leaders attacking independent judiciaries, marshaling forces of the state to undermine electoral results and the rule of law, and cracking down on human rights defenders and civil society. We see the engines of mis- and dis-information distracting, destroying, and dividing. We see deep political polarization and we see states that for one reason or another simply cannot deliver. And yet, democracies—and in particular, people’s belief in democracy—have shown themselves to be remarkably resilient. I don’t want to give a fatalistic picture because we are seeing throughout the hemisphere that because people still believe in democracy, despite their frustrations, democracies and democratic institutions are still holding—to one degree or another.

So today, clear-eyed to all these obstacles, we contend that the way to address the challenges that democracies face is not with less democracy but with more democracy. Democracies are not perfect. Of course, they are not; they are not supposed to be. Do they frustrate us? Yes; sure. But they are, as Winston Churchill said, “the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried.” Democracy has proven time and again that it is the best system we have in the world to give voice to our people, to deal with our global challenges, and to contribute to a world that is free, open, and prosperous. It is in our self-interest to preserve and protect democracy. And as we do so, it is incumbent upon us to encourage and invite and inspire new ideas, new voices, and new visions of how our democracies can best deliver.

Defending Democracy through Coalitions

At the OAS, as I said earlier, we are doubling down on our commitment to democracy. Some 22 years ago, member states committed to the Inter-American Democratic Charter, an instrument with the central aim of strengthening and upholding democratic institutions in the Americas. It is our view that the Democratic Charter must continue to be the central, indispensable tool for strengthening inclusive democracy in the Americas. Last month, the OAS announced the creation of a voluntary group of OAS member states, supported by 26 countries, that will focus on making good on the promise of the Inter-American Democratic Charter—namely, that “the peoples of the Americas have a right to democracy and their governments an obligation to promote and defend it.” This diverse grouping of countries represents a collective commitment at the OAS to not only addressing democratic erosion in our hemisphere, but to enhancing the standards of all our democracies. This is coalition building at its finest.

These efforts are more than just words. We, at the State Department and at the OAS, have put word to deed again and again. We have, for instance, stood up for election integrity in Guatemala, when there were efforts to subvert the will of the Guatemalan people over two rounds of voting

Citation: Mora, Frank O. “Reviving Multilateral Diplomacy: Perspectives from the US Ambassador to the OAS,” 24 October 2023, Inter-American Dialogue, Washington, DC.

in that country. We have been ever vigilant and ever active, working tirelessly with civil society and our partners at the OAS to make sure that the Guatemalan people know that the international community is watching. We have also spoken with a powerful, clear, and united voice—not just across our inter-agency but also alongside member states at the OAS. And we will continue to do so. When the OAS comes together and speaks with a unified voice to defend a rules-based order, we send a signal not just to individual countries that are confronting democratic declines, but to others who might consider charting a similar course. I want to be clear about this: in the case of Guatemala, the OAS and the international community have played a crucial role in supporting democracy and the democratic process so far.

And Guatemala is just one of many examples where we have shown we are up for the challenge of the moment; where we have built coalitions and gained strength from adding a diverse group of voices to the calls for upholding democratic values. Working with the OAS and other entities in the inter-American system, we played a key role in denouncing an attempt to subvert a constitutional transfer of power in Brazil, stared down a coup attempt in Peru, and have now mobilized partners around the world to support the long-suffering people of Haiti. In fact, I am proud to say that tomorrow, the OAS will be adopting a resolution urging member states to redouble their efforts to prioritize assistance to Haiti, consistent with the recent U.N. Security Council Resolution on Haiti.

At the OAS, we have worked tirelessly to stand up working groups and establish consensus on the issues that affect us all, from Haiti to Nicaragua to independent journalism and LGBTI rights, convinced that if we both lead with our values and create space for more voices, ideas, and perspectives, the result will be a more effective one.

The process of multilateral diplomacy is fundamentally one of consensus building. This is what defines the OAS: consensus building. Whether it's a resolution, a declaration, or an observation mission, the mere act of establishing this sort of baseline for partnership has reverberating effects throughout our hemisphere. We can set new agendas and we can bring coalitions of nations along with us in pursuit of a shared policy vision. Part of that policy vision requires that we raise our voices to identify those countries that have fallen short of our shared commitments and values, and to make it clear that we are not abandoning those people who still face brutal repression in the hemisphere.

In countries like Nicaragua and Cuba, for instance, where the cries of those people continue to ring loudly for democracy and freedom, our work at the State Department and the U.S. Mission to the OAS centers on supporting civil society and democracy. On Cuba, we have pushed tirelessly to make sure that the OAS never stops calling attention to brazen attacks on human rights defenders and violations of freedom of expression in that country. Just a few months ago, for instance, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) issued an important report about the Cuban government's involvement in the murders of Oswaldo Payá and Harold Cepero. It is

Citation: Mora, Frank O. "Reviving Multilateral Diplomacy: Perspectives from the US Ambassador to the OAS," 24 October 2023, Inter-American Dialogue, Washington, DC.

important for the international community to know of these appalling acts and it is important that human rights defenders know that we are all watching.

On Nicaragua, as many of you know, though its denouncement of the OAS Charter will become effective next month, we will make sure that the OAS does not abandon the Nicaraguan people. In fact, the Government of Nicaragua has a variety of other continuing obligations to the OAS, including those contained in the American Convention on Human Rights. Whether it's condemning attacks against the Catholic Church or other assaults against reputable, established academic institutions, the U.S. has worked closely with our counterparts in Canada, Chile, and many other countries at the OAS to stand firm against repression in Nicaragua. Indeed, the State Department has been a global leader in championing human rights in Nicaragua, demanding not only accountability for ongoing repression but also pushing for the release of political prisoners, perhaps best exemplified by our historic effort brokering one of the biggest prisoner releases ever involving the United States in February of this year.

And as we look at threats within the region, we must also be mindful of the way actors from outside the region foment instability and spread new forms of repression and autocracy. All throughout the region, we see case after case of Russian and Chinese influence contributing to the deepening of fissures in countries, worsening democratic decline. We see the use of very sophisticated technological tools to spread disinformation and meddle in elections. We, at the State Department and in the U.S. Government, are hypersensitive to this—not just because of what we have seen throughout the region, but also because of what we saw here in the United States. We cannot and will not take this lightly.

We have seen this movie before: illiberal movements openly welcoming outside forces to corrupt and shatter the very institutions that brought them to power in the first place. So, when we talk about democracy—which is, of course, one of the core pillars of the OAS's mission—we are not simply doing it from an altruistic perspective. We are also doing it because people in the United States find themselves disaffected as well. And we must be alert to the forces that would try to exploit those sentiments. We are not alone in taking on these challenges head on.

For this reason, every day, we, as members of the OAS and signatories to the Inter-American Democratic Charter, reaffirm our commitment to hold ourselves and each other to the highest possible democratic standards. So, when we stand up for democracies around the world, we are not only standing up for those institutions, but we are in turn strengthening our own commitments to our own values and to our own institutions.

Inclusive and Equitable Economic Growth

Now, we cannot have that conversation without discussing the socioeconomic foundations on which any strong democracy rests. We have seen, between 1980 and 2020, that the richest 0.1

Citation: Mora, Frank O. "Reviving Multilateral Diplomacy: Perspectives from the US Ambassador to the OAS," 24 October 2023, Inter-American Dialogue, Washington, DC.

percent around the world have accumulated the same wealth as the poorest 50 percent. As these disparities grow, they also exacerbate citizens' distrust and disillusionment with the systems that govern their lives. This distrust and disillusionment in turn chips away at people's faith in democratic institutions and structures. Death by one thousand cuts. And on top of all this is the reality that all across the hemisphere, our systems have been under severe stress, strained by the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed the vulnerability—and in some cases, outright collapse—of our social safety nets. The region is still reeling from the economic fallout of the pandemic. And that is why my government continues to promote and insist on inclusive and equitable economic growth across multiple fronts.

We are investing in building the world's most resilient and competitive supply chains, which benefits the U.S. economy and U.S. workers as well as workers all throughout our region. We have found common cause in our hemisphere on shared values, including the need to respect and elevate workers' rights, strengthen social safety nets, spur investment and opportunity, and combat corruption. Just last month, for instance, President Biden and President Luiz Inacio 'Lula' da Silva of Brazil announced the Partnership for Worker's Rights, the first joint U.S.-Brazil global initiative to advance the rights of working people around the world. The initiative builds on our efforts across the region on racial equality and advancing workers' protections through bilateral labor dialogues. Last year, as many of you know, we also launched the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity (APEP), a shared vision for driving regional cooperation on an integrated and sustainable economic agenda for our hemisphere. At every step, we are building coalitions of partners, each committing to promoting responsible investment that will fund high-standard infrastructure and the jobs of tomorrow. The twelve countries that have signed on for APEP, for instance, today represent 90 percent of the hemisphere's GDP and nearly two-thirds of its population. Together, we will shape a shared vision for the economy of today and tomorrow.

At the same time, we have supported the development of subregional groupings like the Alliance for Development in Democracy (ADD), an initiative to promote democracy and economic growth through commitments to strengthen commercial, demographic, and cultural ties between the countries of Costa Rica, Panama, Ecuador, and the Dominican Republic. We have worked closely with this coalition of countries on issues big and small, including on support for the Inter-American Democratic Charter. I am happy that my colleague from Ecuador, Ambassador Mauricio Montalvo, has joined us here today. Alliances like these offer a model of cooperative innovation, built around shared values and opportunities, that will improve the lives of citizens across the region.

Sustainable Development

Now in terms of climate change and sustainable development. I want to spend a few minutes here because this is, as you know, an important priority. Sustainable growth and development

Citation: Mora, Frank O. "Reviving Multilateral Diplomacy: Perspectives from the US Ambassador to the OAS," 24 October 2023, Inter-American Dialogue, Washington, DC.

also requires shared commitments to addressing the escalating climate crisis, which represents one of the greatest challenges of our time. All across the hemisphere, we are seeing climate change wreak havoc on communities, upending economies, disrupting patterns of agricultural productivity, and exacerbating conditions for vulnerable and historically disadvantaged populations. My government recognizes that we cannot address climate change without mobilizing partner nations and investing in significant climate action. And our efforts to mobilize these coalitions have yielded historic progress.

Two years ago, we co-hosted with Argentina the first-ever High-Level Dialogue on Climate Action in the Americas, and we have accelerated our commitments to the clean energy transition through the Renewable Energy for Latin America and Caribbean initiative. We have worked closely with Caribbean nations to launch the U.S.-Caribbean Partnership to Address the Climate Crisis 2030 or PACC 2030, which supports climate adaptation, energy security, and investments in critical climate resilience infrastructure. Recognizing the Caribbean's unique vulnerability to the climate crisis, Vice President Harris has traveled to the region multiple times, as has Secretary Blinken, Special Presidential Envoy for Climate (SPEC) Kerry, and many other high-level officials. Earlier this month, I joined representatives of OAS member states in The Bahamas, where we approved the Declaration of Bahamas to enhance access to climate finance in the region and support green growth.

Indeed, the U.S. Mission to the OAS has been extremely active on questions of climate and sustainable development. This is because we recognize the convening power—the impact—of the OAS to spur innovation, collaboration, dialogue, and ultimately, action. My government funds the hemisphere's flagship energy and climate initiative, the Energy and Climate Partnership of the Americas (ECPA). ECPA is the only multilateral mechanism in the Western Hemisphere focused on advancing sustainable energy development and cooperation in the region. ECPA stands on six pillars of activity: energy efficiency, energy resilience, cleaner energy resources to promote decarbonization, energy access, regional energy integration, and energy innovation.

Closing

So, I want to close by re-emphasizing a couple points. There is no silver bullet solution to the myriad of global problems in the world today, whether we are talking about the climate crisis, food insecurity, social exclusion, or democratic erosion. And the scale of these problems often breeds a sort of cynicism. But that cynicism cannot be met with an “America alone” strategy. Identifying solutions to these global challenges begins with a recognition that many of them are indeed global and that we must forge international cooperation to address them effectively and comprehensively. Partnership and coalition building is at the center of our work because it allows us—both at the State Department and the OAS—to mobilize countries, cities, companies, communities, and civil society actors behind shared visions and opportunities in a way that benefits not only the American people, but the people of our entire hemisphere.

Citation: Mora, Frank O. “Reviving Multilateral Diplomacy: Perspectives from the US Ambassador to the OAS,” 24 October 2023, Inter-American Dialogue, Washington, DC.

Multilateral diplomacy provides an opportunity to bring countries together—to shape the dialogue of today and the solutions of tomorrow. Investing in coalition building has borne fruit on issues big and small. From addressing democratic declines to sustainable development to investments in vulnerable communities, we have found common ground again and again at the OAS, and shown, through these results, that democracy and democracies can deliver. That is our answer to those revisionist powers who are offering that fundamentally different vision. Our success, the success of the OAS and other multilateral bodies, and the success of this project of coalition building will allow us to tackle these 21st century challenges and opportunities head on and build new rules of the road that will allow us to lead with our values and ideals.

Coalition building is not just a government-to-government effort. Whether you are an academic, a student activist, a think tank leader or a concerned citizen, I invite you to join us in this collective project and to share your views with us as we continue this ongoing process of dialogue and engagement. And with that, I just want to thank Rebecca once more for this opportunity and for this space to have a dialogue at this very important moment for our hemisphere. I am grateful for this opportunity and look forward to continuing this conversation with you not just here today, but in the months and years ahead. Thank you so much.

Citation: Mora, Frank O. “Reviving Multilateral Diplomacy: Perspectives from the US Ambassador to the OAS,” 24 October 2023, Inter-American Dialogue, Washington, DC.