

Hearing Transcript

House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere Hearing on The Western Hemisphere

February 28, 2017

DUNCAN:

Quorum being present subcommittee will come to order. I'd now like to recognize myself for an opening statement. I would like to begin by extending a warm welcome to the returning members on the subcommittee.

Over the years this subcommittee has been fortunate to operate in a bipartisan fashion and look forward to continuing the work that we've done and working hand-in-hand with my good friend, the gentleman from New Jersey our Ranking Member, Albio Sires.

And all the members of the subcommittee as the new Trump Administration begins to lay out their policy priorities for the Western Hemisphere. I look forward to seeing what those priorities are. I would now like to introduce the new members, they are not here, but I am going read their names and hope for their (inaudible) after votes way go sometimes.

We've got Mr. Mo Brooks from Alabama, Mr. Francis Rooney of Florida, Ms. Norma Torres of California and Mr. Adriano Espaillat of New York.

They each have their own unique background and experiences and we look forward to them being strong contributors to our work during this 115th Congress.

Today's hearing should provide subcommittee members with a confidence of look at the lay of the land in the Western Hemisphere. Give us some food for thought as the new Trump Administration begins to reveal their priorities for 2017.

I am particularly interested in what our witnesses think that policy priorities should be in Cuba and Venezuela and in places that continue to receive large amounts of U.S. taxpayer funding by Colombia, Haiti and the Northern triangle in Central America. Clearly, the administration will need to work on bilateral relationship with Mexico but United States is certainly right to seek to enforce our borders and protect our precious sovereignty.

I thank today's distinguished panel witnesses for being here and share their thoughts and insights with us. Many of them have testified before our committee before and I welcome them back. In my opinion the prior administration did little to advance U.S. interest in this hemisphere.

In fact, did harm to traditional U.S. policies of standing up for human rights, the rule of law under repressive regimes across the currently play countries like Cuba and Venezuela. In Cuba, the Obama Administration gave the casters pretty much everything they wanted without asking Congress to remove the embargo as required by U.S. law.

Furthermore, the Obama Administration didn't even insist upon the most basic human rights protections as political distance were rounded up, beaten and jailed in record numbers. And in their Cuba policy shift all-important issue of resolving the thousands of property rights claims were barely even mentioned.

The pain and suffering that the Chavez Maduro regime inflicted upon Venezuela has been well documented in our hearts go out to the Venezuelan people who deserve so much more than hyperinflation, rolling blackouts, widespread shortages of medicine and literally scrounging for food every day just to survive.

Recent reports of canines and flamingos and other animals being slaughtered for food is disheartening and our thoughts and prayers go out to the folks in Venezuela.

I was encouraged by the early signs from the new administration last week, including the decision to slap sanctions on the Venezuelan vice president for his participation in drug trafficking and President Trump taking an impromptu meeting with Lillian Lopez, the wife who wrongfully jailed opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez.

We had also an opportunity to meet with her as well and Leopoldo Lopez remains in our thoughts and prayers. Under my chairmanship, this subcommittee has travelled extensively in the region and I intend in continue to do my part in this session of Congress to advance our interest in the hemisphere.

It's been said that our region does not get the attention that it deserves. In fact, when Secretary Kerry made his famous speech with the OAS in November 2013, that the era of the Monroe Doctrine is over, the administration admitted as much.

But I would maintain that because of our region being largely peaceful, the lack of major wars for several years, a healthy flow of trade and commerce and an abundance of common heritage and religious beliefs, these are things to be celebrated and built upon rather than overlooked. Of course that is not to say that we don't have much work to do.

The important task of finishing plan in Colombia by making peace Colombia at work, going forward will surely present many challenges in the U.S. and Colombian policymakers.

But this work in which both our countries have invested much blood and treasure so as to successfully turn that country around. As a result, they remain our best ally in the hemisphere. In Haiti there's now been more than seven years since the devastating earthquake that resulted in so much damage and loss of life.

Much progress has been made, thanks to the generosity of U.S. taxpayers and many other international donors, but there's still much work to be done there. It certainly didn't help that they were hit by hurricane Matthew last fall and experience another up taking cases of cholera.

Like many regional observers nearly 14 months after the elections, I began - the elections began, I was hopeful when Haiti finally democratically elected new president and a Congress. We at least now have a government partner to work with going forward and I plan to do my part in keeping a healthy dialogue open when I meet with the new President sometime later this year.

Obviously, this is all not to say the hemisphere doesn't still suffer from the seemingly intractable problems of drug trafficking, transnational gangs and criminal organizations, corruption, poverty and lack of opportunity for many.

We've been experiencing the results of these problems first hand for the continual wave of illegal immigration, especially unaccompanied minors from the northern triangle of Central America coming to our southern border every day.

As for the Trump Administration I stand with those who believe we must enforce our borders and protect our sovereignty. As Ronald Reagan said if we do not we are not a country at all. We are a kind and generous nation but we cannot become the orphanage to the world.

When I asked him, the chairmanship of this subcommittee, I pointed out that our first hearing - in our first hearing that I have three simple priorities. I will restate those for this Congress; create jobs for the American people, promote U.S. energy security in that U.S. exports and return to the wisdom of our founding fathers. As an acronym, jobs, energy, founding fathers, is spelled "Jeff" and I think Jeff's a winning message.

It is true through that prism; I now continue to view the issues and priorities that we will focus on going forward. Western Hemisphere presents abundant opportunities for success in all of these areas for the United States as well as our allies here in the hemisphere. With that, I will turn to the Ranking Member, Mr. Sires for his opening statement and I will restate again that I have enjoyed our work together and I look forward to working with you again and (inaudible).

SIRES:

I just want to start by saying that you and I have nothing to do with Mr. Meeks (ph) going down below. Good afternoon and thank you Mr. Chairman for holding this hearing. I'd like to start by welcoming everyone through our first hearing of 115th Congress and give a special welcome to the new members of our subcommittee. I look forward to working with all of you in the new Congress.

I am grateful to be back as Ranking Member of the subcommittee once again and serving alongside our chairman and my friend of South Carolina, Jeff Duncan. Many countries in the Western Hemisphere are a crossroad. Throughout the region, the anticorruption wave has taken hold and we have seen indictments, arrest and resignation as a result.

While these revelations have caused a stir in the region, they have also created the opportunities to bring real and lasting change to these institutions long in need of reform.

In the Northern Triangle, efforts are on the way to strengthen the rule of law and address human rights concerns. Our Brazil officials are facing accusations of bribery. Brazilian people are insisting the government uses democratic institution to hold them accountable. Partners like Argentina are taking steps to reform their economies and play a larger role addressing regional challenges.

That is why I'm brought to sponsor H.Res 54 reaffirming our strong relation with the Argentine people and commending the government of President Macri for his economic reform and commitment to holding the perpetrators of the 1994 AMIA bombing accountable.

Additionally, our friends in Colombia signed a peace agreement with the FARC, taking the first steps in ending a 52 year long war that has claimed the lives of over 200,000 people. We must remember that this agreement is just the beginning of the peace, not the result.

It is now more important than ever to continue our bipartisan doctrinal Colombia as they work to implement the peace deal. Fight back against criminal groups, working to take over the FARC's territory and deter for the cocoa cultivation.

Despite these opportunities for growth, challenges still abound. The repression of the Cuban people is only escalating, with innocent women continuing to regularly beaten in the streets while peacefully watching. The Venezuelan people are unfortunately continued to languish at the hands of a Bartudo who continues to stifle democracy and violently fight back against pro-democracy advocates.

My experience with the Western Hemisphere has taught me that any approach to Latin America needs to be a regional one. Peace-mail approaches will not tackle the region's most pressing challenges such as strengthening the rule of law, respect for human rights, increasing transparency and combating drug trafficking.

That is why I am concerned that the rhetoric that is already coming out of the Trump Administration with regards to our allies at Mexico who has been a strong partner of the U.S. under the both, Republican and Democratic administrations.

I hope the President Trump soon realizes how much these relationships have enhanced the security and prosperity of the United States and the only way to make the region stronger is by working together.

I thank the witnesses for their testimony and I look forward to discussing how we can improve relations in the coming year. Thank you.

DUNCAN:

Okay, this being our first subcommittee, our first subcommittee meeting tomorrow, I'm going to step out of the norm and I recognize the former Chairwoman of the subcommittee of the full committee and the subcommittee chairman of the North Middle East and North Africa Ms. Ros-Lehtinen for a brief opening statement.

ROS-LEHTINEN:

Well thank you so much Mr. Chairman and thank you to the other Ranking Member for this timely hearing.

I'll be travelling to the region with the Ranking Member Sires and we are going to Honduras and Guatemala this weekend and we've seen those countries make significant progress in fighting corruption but the Attorney Generals of these countries need our support. They face tremendous propaganda campaign to undermine the progress that they have been making.

In Nicaragua we see that Ortega regime immersed in corruption denying human rights to its people and undermining our interest in the region by placating to the Russians so much work needs to be done in Venezuela as you pointed out Mr Chairman.

Thank goodness we got new sanctions against these human rights violators. We've seen the dialogue in Venezuela is not working and the U.S. position must be that Josh holds in all the political prisoners, including Leopoldo Lopez and Anthony Ledesma must be released immediately and unconditionally.

And in my native homeland of Cuba, we need to prioritize our focus to the communist island and be on the side of human rights, on the side of return of fugitives like Joanne Chester Mart, on the side of U.S. citizens whose properties were confiscated.

There is so much going on but we have hopeful signals too, we've got a new election cycle in Ecuador, Mr. Chairman in April that's going to hopefully bring back election democratic norms to that country. And in Haiti, lastly, after years of stalling elections finally occurred and that we have a new President; so good things can happen.

Thank you for your leadership, Mr. Chairman and Mr. Ranking Member.

DUNCAN:

I thank the lady and I will go now to Mr. Meeks, who is probably the single member on the subcommittee for a brief opening statement.

MEEKS:

Thank you Mr. Chairman. I want to thank you and the Ranking Member for holding this very important hearing on issues and opportunities in the Western Hemisphere.

Our relationship with our neighbors, partners and friends must be a high priority for the United States. I am hopeful you know, that the cuts that we are seeing for the State Department ensure that the President is proposing does not jeopardize something that we are doing.

I'm very concerned about that and maybe some of the other statements that he has made particularly in regards to Mexico where we spent decades investing in the relationship that works collaboratively on all fronts.

And the question is now whether or not all that is in jeopardy following inflammatory and audacious statements regarding Mexican migrants and orders to increase deportation that would tear families apart and efforts to build a border wall at Mexico's expense. You know, Mexico is a big important people for us and there is no question that NAFTA should be updated to meet the needs and changes of the 21st century.

However, it has enabled a strong trade relationship between our countries and the subject of withdrawal, but any of the three countries should not be used in taking lightly or uses a political tool. It is unfortunate that had hurt both of you, Mr. Chairman and the Ranking Member say that the political situation in Venezuela has become detrimental to the Venezuelan people.

Admittedly people are deserving of safety, security and prosperity and their well-being. But things should've changed, positive change across to Hemisphere are welcome, including in the Caribbean, where we are encouraged by Haiti's commitment to peaceful transfer of power to a new President.

The Haitian people have endured countless natural and man-made disasters and their resilience that will restore and rejuvenate a democratic Haiti. Changes to the Hemisphere are constant but I also want to say I am pleased that we have been active last year, the U.S. Caribbean Strategic Engagement Act which I think helps us strong engagement with the Caribbean's is critical to our national security and also I could not stop without talking about.

And I think I've heard everyone's mentioned this, the ratified peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC which showcased to the world that Columbia's - Pennsylvania looks like and serves as the model to others that getting to the table and talking to legitimate concerns and next that is possible for our support for the peace Colombian and that should be as strong as it was for prior (ph) Columbia.

And you know, I'm a big trade guy, but I got it in, I want to conclude with by highlighting an issue that is near and dear to me, the social inclusion of persons of African descent and indigenous and marginalized communities is crucial to the advancement of our hemisphere.

I would like to spotlight Brazil and Colombia as leaders in their respective efforts to dissolve barriers of race discrimination. Our joint action plans with Brazil and Colombia to eliminate racial and ethnic discrimination and promote equality highlights our mutual commitment to the issues.

I feel that if we failed to acknowledge the necessity of social inclusion across the Hemisphere, it will be to the detriment of all of us in the Hemisphere including the United States as Dr. King would say, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere".

So the political, economic, social, environmental advancement of our hemisphere requires evidence in genuine social inclusion to combat systemic discrimination and injustice. And if any

government in the Hemisphere including the United States, fails to address this, it would do so at its own peril. And I thank you Mr. Chairman again for giving this opportunity.

DUNCAN:

Thank you Mr. Meeks. I'm going to go ahead and recognize the witnesses, the rest of the committee members, if you would like to make a brief opening statement during the question period, I would allow little leniency on our time. We got to adhere to strict 5 minutes but keep those statements brief and we'll get into the question. I am just - try to make it fair with this being our first committee but I would like to go ahead and start hearing from the witnesses in the time allotted. So, we'll now pursue with that each witness will be given five minutes to present testimony.

There is no lighting system in here so I will give a brief indication when your time's getting close, you can wrap it up at that point. Members have been given the bios of all the witnesses and that's how we'll run this committee. We will not introduce each witness by their bio or long list of introduction, I'll just recognize them to go ahead with her testimony.

You can read about them beforehand, we should provide that beforehand. So, Ms. Sally Yearwood, you're recognized for five minutes, welcome back.

YEARWOOD:

Thank you. Good afternoon Chairman Duncan, Ranking Member Sires and members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. The countries of Caribbean and Central America are America's third border and while they do not always take of front and centre in discussions on hemispheric policy, they include 22 of the hemisphere's 35 independent nation and therefore a significant strategic importance.

With limited exceptions, the countries of the region have strong and long-standing relationships with the U.S. and share common values, intertwined histories, and often common challenges. The important thing about challenges however is the solutions and opportunities for all partners, our founding collaboration, clear priorities and shared commitment. At the end of 2016, in the bipartisan bill the United States Caribbean Strategic Engagement types of 2016 was passed until law.

I would like to go on the record thanking Congressman Engel and Congresswoman Ros-Lehtinen for their co-sponsorship of the bill and ongoing support to the region. Its passage has immediately afforded an opportunity for Caribbean stakeholders to dialogue with counterparts in the United States on areas of mutual importance.

Whereas Central America figures in United States foreign policy and what that means to tackling such areas as crime and corruption in a volatile environment, is particularly important and ongoing commitment and partnership is necessary.

There is a lot at stake, particularly for the countries of the Northern Triangle, where uncertainty could have repercussions across the social, political and economic front, including the vibrant trade

relationship. The U.S. has consistently had a surplus with both sub- regions for the trade of goods while the balance of trade with the Hemisphere overall shows the U.S. on a deficit of \$36.9 billion in 2014, the balance of trade with the CBI countries recorded a surplus of \$3.6 billion that year and in 2015, the U.S. had a trade surplus of \$5 billion with (inaudible) countries.

This straight supports hundreds of thousands of jobs here and has a correlated effect of creating and supporting hundreds of thousands of jobs in the region. There are a number of issues that have broad implications on the growth in the region, the weight of each factor varies by country but I will point to some areas that have general resonance under often related.

One, crime is one of the most pervasive issues the government and societies are confronting. The tentacles of drugs, gangs and violence bleed into politics and the economy in ways that many of the countries are unable to address in isolation. Related to the ability to manage crime in many of the countries is the weak nature of the judicial process. The court systems are often bolted down and people who were arrested or held without trial for extended periods of time.

Not to mention those who are in and out of the system off the payoff. Collaboration on security programs in the region can have a positive impact on the cost of managing border security in the United States. As an example, custom and immigration preclearance facilities are instruments of building mutually beneficial partnership for protecting borders.

Two, corruption has different implications depending on the type and scale of the problem but it is important to note that there are significant efforts being undertaken throughout the region to combat it, and to increase transparency and accountability. The ease of yielding important results and ongoing support from international partners including the United States will serve to strengthen political will and will have lasting results.

Three, reforms that can drive more productive policy environment for trade and investment are necessary. Indeed, institutional inertia in both the Caribbean and Central America has been a barrier to more dynamic business communities. A strong business climate with clear rules and with rule of law, has implications at job creation and economic growth. And is an area that will impact competitiveness and productivity for the better.

Four, there are strong legal migrant communities in Central America and the Caribbean throughout the United States and as U.S. policy evolved, there will be concerns about the possible effects on the region. One would be about the general economic impact which could be triggered by a drop in remittances.

Second, is the absorptive capacity if there is a wave of returning migrants and/or deportees. This could put extreme socioeconomic pressure on nations unless national or international resources are directed towards managing this influx.

Five, the correspondence banking crisis in the Caribbean is considered a threat to stability. Small markets and high cost of compliance with global regulations have led to the de-risking phenomenon which is an outflow of foreign banks that manage cross- border transactions.

The U.S. together with other bilateral partners and multilateral institutions is working with the region to address compliance issues and the related unintended consequences. This cooperation must continue as a matter of national and regional security.

Six, the entire region is vulnerable to natural disasters and the cost of the disaster can reach up to 30 percent of GDP. Linked to this vulnerability is the impact of rising sea levels that has threatening the coastline. Resilient infrastructure development is a key to economically a sound and secure region.

Seven, it is difficult to capture the importance of regional energy security in a paragraph. Peninsula's relationship with many in the region, and the influence of Petrocaribe is its own book. Some highlights on progress in the region include the important work on the Central American elect connection system.

They are on being on the brink of becoming a regional and global energy leader and the deployment of technology for transportation and delivery of natural gas, which is making the fuel a more accessible and cost-efficient option for small islands.

The U.S. and other partners have been working with the region with a focus on sustainable energy development. This is had positive results for economies with the high cost of energy can negatively impact economic activity.

And finally a few words on Haiti with the new President was recently inaugurated. Haiti social and economic development will require substantial public and private sector investment. Haiti stability needs to be secured and it will take well-planned domestic strategies, coupled with targeted, thoughtful international involvement to achieve this.

In conclusion, fragile states are unreliable neighbors so it is valuable to underscore the importance of a strong collaborative relationship with the countries of our third border. This subcommittee has been very mindful of this fact and I appreciate the attention that is given to the smaller nations of the Hemisphere and to the issues impacting the systemic challenges that their economic growth. Thank you, Mr. Chairman for the opportunity to be here.

DUNCAN:

I now recognize Joseph Humire for five minutes.

HUMIRE:

Chairman Duncan, Ranking Member Sires, distinguished members of the subcommittee, Good afternoon. Thank you once again for inviting me to testify before you today and thank you for your leadership on a region that's near and dear to my heart and want to spend a lot of time through my work. We're in important period of transition of both in the world, democratically in the Western Hemisphere.

The rise of pro-U.S. governments in Argentina, Peru, Brazil, Guatemala and potentially other nations in the region very soon, combined with peers for the renewed focus from the White House with the appointment of General John Kelly. Along with the leadership of this Congress, I believe there is ample opportunities to increase engagement throughout the Americas.

Capitalizing on these opportunities is however going to require strategic approach that's informed by our partners in the Latin America and Caribbean area. Through my work I can primarily focus on national security issues, but I spent a lot of time on the ground. I travel to the region, probably more than I want but I spent a lot of time dealing with different actors in different partners that express different challenges that they are experiencing in the respective countries.

With that, I consider any regional strategy must take into account the growing transnational threats that are active in both Central South America and the Caribbean. Along with the regional and ex-regional actors that are exacerbating these challenges, many of which are identified in my written testimony. In my written remarks I provide a series of recommendations - five recommendations in particular that I believe are areas where the Congress in the new administration can collaborate on to further interest - U.S. interest in the hemisphere.

I like to highlight three of them. The first is immigration security, border security begins beyond the border. There is a series of networks that are permeating all throughout Latin America from the southern tip of Argentina all the way up North through Mexico, passing through countries like Venezuela and Central America.

The ability to capitalize on our immigration security is encompassed in our ability to strengthen our human intelligence collection. It's no longer suffice to simply rely on law enforcement or immigration officials to wait till they get to the border or to the airport to be able to identify what is a threat.

We must be able to augment our embassies and consulates abroad who are literally our first line of defense when it comes immigration security and I believe with the prioritization of the administration on this issue, this provides tremendous opportunities for the Congress to collaborate on this in Latin America.

The second is counterterrorism. We are, in about less than a month, we are about to embark upon a historic legal precedent in Latin America both in Brazil and in Peru. For the first time in the region there is a strong potential that we will have the first conviction of a member of an Islamic terrorist organization both Sunni (ph) organization and that of ISIS as well as the Shia Extremist Organization (inaudible).

The case in Peru is said to be adjudicated before the end of March, the case in Brazil of 12 sympathizers that ISIS part of the block several sites before the Summer Olympics this past year is said to adjudicate even sooner.

If these cases are convicted in a sentence, this is the first time in Latin America's history that and a member of Islamic terror organization is convicted for being a member of Islamic terrorist

organization. That creates a legal precedent because in Latin America, there is a legal vacuum and that half the countries have any terror legislation.

Even the country that have this legislation, they never took into account foreign terrorist organizations. It was mostly domestic terrors and threats that they were dealing with when they addressed this problem. The influx of foreign terrorist organization into the region creates different challenge for these countries and being able to convict these individuals are de facto designations.

I believe that will create tremendous opportunity for the United States to cooperate with these countries to provide technical assistance, legal assistance and other so that they can create a bigger robust global counterterrorism coalition.

The final recommendation - not the final recommendation, my remarks but the one I'd like to address my opening statement is looking at a particular phenomenon in Latin America that goes beyond corruption. Many countries in Latin America are facing informal markets, illicit markets that override a lot of times the form markets, free enterprise oftentimes being overrun by criminal enterprise.

However, there is a select few countries that have gone beyond that to essentially use criminalization as a way to empower state policy and to project their influence both within the country and abroad. A colleague of mine, a regional security expert, Douglas Farah has called these countries criminalize states.

I believe that's a concept that we need to develop, we need to discuss. Our country is using transnational organized crime, terrorism and proliferation of illicit products as a method to empower their governments, control the people and eventually promote their influence regionally.

I believe if we can assess that and determine that we need to establish a strategy to deter it and neutralize it because that can essentially become a bigger threat if you combine it with the component of extra region actors.

With that, I will just conclude by saying that you know, I agree with your assessment, Mr. Chairman, that Latin America is largely is on a piece if you want to call it that.

My colleague is in the defense committee often tell me that while we have headaches in Latin America, we have migraines in the Middle East and what I would like to couch the committee to think about is that those headaches can turn into migraines if we don't anticipate the problems that are coming our way.

Warfare, war is nothing more than compulsion. There many ways to compel your adversaries and I believe in Latin America, we are in asymmetric war for legitimacy in the region, and we have not yet begun to fight. In my written testimony, I've identified these recommendations, how to advance on these interest but has to be couched among the concept that if we lose in our own hemisphere, we're going to lose everywhere.

DUNCAN:

Thank you Mr. Humire. I now chair recognize Jose Cardenas.

CARDENAS:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Ranking Member Sires, our distinguished members of the subcommittee. It is both an honor and a privilege to appear before you today to discuss U.S. policy in the Western Hemisphere.

As my colleague Joseph mentioned after more than a decade after the rise of Populist governments in the region uninterested in productive relations with the United States, the political pendulum is begun to swing the other way. With the election of a number of pragmatic governments open to re-establishing normal relations this creates significant opportunities to pursue new initiatives for the benefit of our and our neighbor's security and prosperity.

To begin with, I suggest that the new administration in the new Congress focus on four issues out of the gate, Mexico, Venezuela, Cuba and Central America plus two longer-term place if you will. Mr. Chairman, the U.S.-Mexico relationship is one of most important bilateral relationships that the United States has in the world.

It is equally true that President Trump has a mandate to make border security and reviewing NAFTA priorities. These, however, should be carried out in a collaborative way that encourages vital cooperation, it doesn't have to be confrontational.

Smoothing over some of the rough edges from the 2016 campaigns is key to wider progress in the Americas without compromising on U.S. - core U.S. interests. Such an approach will likely deliver the stronger border security and a modern NAFTA that better serves U.S. interests.

Secondly, on Venezuela, President Trump will encounter different hemisphere which creates opportunities for more diplomatic engagement to hold Venezuela accountable for its anti-democratic behavior.

The president has already demonstrated an interest in defending democracy by meeting with the wives of two high-profile political prisoners as you mentioned Mr. Chairman. President Trump is also sanctioned senior Venezuelan officials implicated in narcotics trafficking in the United States.

This two-track approach of working multilaterally specifically to the organization of American states while increasing pressure by continuing to expose the crimes of Venezuelan officials would be a welcome change to U.S. policy.

On Cuba, Mr. Chairman, the Trump Administration should seize the opportunity to bring energy and creativity truly empowering the Cuban people to decide their own destiny, which President Obama articulated as the goal of his policy. First off, however we need to immediately re-establish common cause with Cuba's persecuted dissidents and human rights activists.

Secondly, the administration should review all executive orders and commercial deals signed under the previous administration and judge them by a single standard. Do they help the Cuban people, or do they empower the Castro regime. I suggest that any activity found to be more sustaining of the regime's control rather than directly benefiting the Cuban people should be ended.

On Central America, President Trump can bring new commitment and funding for our beleaguered neighbors attempting to cope with the transnational crime and gang activity.

To that end, Mr. Chairman, we have to be guided by several assumptions; number one, in Central America as we try to placate and stabilize the societies preventing the push factor from sending people to our borders, we have to recognize there are no silver bullets, it's not the question of the hard side or the soft side, it's going to take all sides.

Secondly, Mr. Chairman, we cannot want it more than they do. We can only help if they are truly committed to helping themselves. That means tackling the twin evils of corruption and impunity.

Three, we must be clear on sequencing. Security doesn't follow from resolving social and economic problems. You have to create security first before anything else.

And lastly a strong commitment to human rights is not a hindrance. It is essential. It creates legitimacy and trust among the very people we are trying to help. Beyond those imperatives the longer-term play is realigning U.S. relations with two of the most important countries in the Western Hemisphere, Brazil and Argentina. Both are undergoing profound course corrections and we need to take advantage of the situation. Both of those countries can be essential partners.

After many years of less than cordial relations in support of consolidating democratic and free-market development in the region, enhancing both U.S. security and prosperity. The table was set. All it requires is political will.

Mr. Chairman, despite the myriad challenges, I remain optimistic on U.S. relations with Latin America and the Caribbean in the next four years. It will not be all smooth sailing, it never is. But the key is to move past the 2016 presidential campaign by pursuing serious initiatives with tangible benefits to both the United States and those who want to work with us.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

DUNCAN:

Thank you and the chair recognizes Mr. Quilter.

QUILTER:

Thank you very much Chairman Duncan, Ranking Member Sires for the opportunity to testify today. Good to see you Mr. Meeks.

I will summarize my statement, I asked the full statement be made part of the record. I would like to concentrate on three different issues which I think are intimately connected; Mexico, Venezuela, and the organization of American states.

Mexico, what we have seen in the past week, the take away from what we have seen in the past week is that the dynamic that we are now seeing between Mexico and the U.S. is not business as usual. In 30 years of looking at this relationship, I have never seen it this messy.

The Tillerson Kelly visit which was intended to smooth things over, I think in fact laid bare that one year away from Mexican elections, we have a lot on the table between us, Mexico and the United States. We have a big agenda but the manoeuvring room is constricting, it's getting smaller rather than widening.

That's not good. What can be lost? A lot. I am not going to talk about the trade issue because we know that between Canada and Mexico, the trade relationship is huge. I'm in fact about security, drugs and migration.

What if Mexico were to look the other way on Central American migration going north? What would it look like if Mexico loosened its resolve on the drugs issue with us? What would it look like if Mexico stopped cooperating on terrorism Intel with us? And I'm talking about Middle Eastern countries. Lots of Intel but I am talking specifically about that.

Number two, there is a winner out of the past couple of weeks and that's Lopez Obrador, the perennial leftist presidential candidate in Mexico. His stock is going through the roof, he is a year away from the election, the front runner. This is not the consummation devoutly to be wished for the United States.

Number three, this dynamic we are seeing right now with Mexico is the canary in the coal mine for our relationship with the rest of the hemisphere. We need to fix this because we have serious problems in the region. Case in point, Venezuela. Venezuela remained the ulcer eating sore of the region.

In my statement I talk about two scenarios, a soft landing, where Maduro basically limps his way to elections next year, which may or may not occur.

He's good at buying time that could happen. The second one is a hard landing, hard landing will certainly involve bloodshed, will involve the Venezuelan military, will be a security nightmare for Venezuelans neighbors and will very likely unleash a refugee crisis. What to do? We need both these things; we need Venezuelans to lead the solution and we need the international community to accompany.

Maduro does care about his international reputation, he doesn't care so much about what the U.S. says but he cares very much about what happens in the rest of the international community. We got to go there. Sanctions on individuals such as we just had with the vice president, work. They work we should do more of those. What not to do? Brisley rhetoric. We tried that before, didn't work, we're not doing it now, but we shouldn't do it.

Second and most critically, the U.S. can't do Venezuela alone, and it can't lead on Venezuela. The lesson now from the Mexican dynamic is that U.S. needs partners. Unfortunately trust in our partnerships is eroding. Maduro is exploiting that erosion, we need tools to galvanize those partnerships. The main one we have is the Organization of American states, the OAS. Let me quickly moved to the OAS.

The OAS is very weak. It's actually close to a breaking point. This is not an accident. This is a campaign of Venezuela and its friends have waged since Chavis. Unfortunately, I think the U.S. has let this happen. It is allowed a farm policy asset to weaken that now we need more than ever.

The good news is the OAS is worth saving, the time to fix it is now. Latin American, the past 15 years has been a good news story. It's less poor and more middle-class than it has been.

2017 and 2018, we will have eight different presidential elections. This dynamic with Mexico bodes ill. The regional problem, such as Venezuela requires conservative effort which now looks more difficult than ever and the tools to do it, such as the OAS are in trouble. There are significant U.S. policy equities that hang in the balance without a serious course correction from the Trump Administration. I hope it comes in time. Thank you, sir.

DUNCAN:

I thank the witnesses and I'm pleased that there are several regional ambassadors in attendance today. If you are an ambassador from a Latin American country, you could your hand, could recognize. All right thank you for attending. So I will now recognize myself for five minutes and then we will go through the order between majority minority side and so I will put the same clock on these I did you guys, but may not adhere as strongly to it as I did you.

Ms. Yearwood, since Congress passed the Caribbean strategy legislation late last year, given our continued focus on the best way forward in dealing with the thorny issues of corruption, lawlessness and migration of the Northern Triangle countries, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Would do you see is the best strategies for engagement in the hemisphere, kind of collaborate on some your opening statement as well.

YEARWOOD:

Thank you for the opportunity to talk a little bit more about 49-39. 49-39 is kind of a little bit unique and so far there is no money attached to the bill, but what it does is create a vehicle for regional engagement with the United States and I think according to some of the other statements from the witnesses, the need for having this engagement particularly as I mentioned 22 of the 35 countries independent nations in the region are not in the Caribbean and Central America.

Having the ability to dialogue with them and taking advantage of 49-39 to create stakeholder dialogue with the U.S. is a partner with the region on these critical issues of corruption, economic development, diplomatic engagement, energy, being able to help fill away the influence of Petrocaribe, which I think is going to be important going forward and finding ways to the region

to advance as a self-reliant and self-sustaining nations is going to be important. So, I think having vehicles both within the Caribbean and within Central America where the U.S. is engaging productively will be an excellent way to make that vehicle work with the region.

DUNCAN:

Thank you. Now I'll shift gears a little bit, Mr. Humire, I know you are an expert on security in the region and you've ran an extensively on the Iranian activity in the hemisphere. I have engaged in that sense I came.

A story broke this week in Argentine press that I exposed some of the tape recordings of Argentine prosecutor Alberto Nisman before his death where you seemed sure of the guilt of former Foreign Minister, Timerman than other top government officials and covering up the AMIA bombing and is quoted as saying quote, "although they want to kill me and take me out of the picture, that won't be a setback.

Many/some of the involved already know and are pleading for their lives. But all of them know what they did, what they said and it is their problem". So, that was the words of Alberto Nisman. Can you expand on this revelation and give us a sense of the status of the investigation and into his death and also what he was working on with regard to AMIA.

HUMIRE:

Mr. Chairman, in Argentina, related to the case of Alberto Nisman is actually three separate cases that are connected. There is obviously the case of the AMIA bombing from 1994 that's still active, still around and needs to be pursued in advance.

There is a case that he presented at the - Alberto Nisman presented before the Argentine courts allowed the criminal conspiracy between the former President Christina de Kirchner and her complicitness (ph) with the Iranian government to grant impunity to those accused of the AMIA bombing.

And finally, there is the case on his death. Those three cases are currently active in the Argentine judiciary, and I believe the most important case of the three is the middle one, the case that he presented before the court a week before his death to say that the Argentine government was colluding with Iranian government to grant impunity.

That case was all but shunt don't out of the courtroom in Argentina, a repeatedly went through various appeal processes and we have an opportune moment in that some of the obstacles - the judicial obstacles that were presented in that court in that case have been removed. So that case is now active.

The DIA (ph), the Jewish community, the sister of the AMIA has become a part of that case so they can now present additional evidence. I actually participated in examining a lot of the evidence that was involved in that case, the wiretaps that Nisman had presented as part of the evidence of

making that accusation and there was a lot more that what he was able to present. Obviously, he was never able to present that because he was killed.

Having that case open, suggest that he was killed in the line of duty, that he was actively pursuing a judicial matter and then was found in his apartment shortly after. The case on his death is also an opportune moment (ph) because now it's been graduated to a federal court because of the preceding actions on the other case.

This presents a tremendous opportunity in advancement on the Macri administration to be able to help and lend support as needed and requested, to be able to come to conclusion, and either one of those two cases.

Having a conclusive judicial action on either one of those cases to help us advance the AMIA and at the end of the day that's what Alberto Nisman was trying to do. He was trying to seek closure for the victims of the AMIA attack and to pursue those he believed that were behind the attack.

I think that there is advancements on that, I think there is lot of opportunities for the U.S. to help, but it's still in process.

DUNCAN:

Do you have any sort of timeline idea when they may come to some conclusion on that?

HUMIRE:

I would like to say that it would happen this year. I couldn't say that with any certainty, Mr. Chairman, but I will say is it that if there is a time to advance the case, it is now. Last year, obviously Macri was first year as President, there was a lot of struggles and challenges to get one of those cases open and to get the other case moved to the federal court.

That was a very difficult obstacle, they have overcome those obstacles so now is the time to lend whatever support whatever assistance is needed so that they can adjudicate these properly. There's still a lot of adversarial forces in the country that don't want to see these cases ever see the later date, which is why you are seeing those wiretaps come.

DUNCAN:

But in your opinion is Macri government been very accommodating and with prosecutor?

HUMIRE:

I believe that the Macri administration is supportive to these cases, however, I believe there's more that could be done. I believe that if the U.S. government...

(CROSSTALK)

DUNACN:

Macri, I wouldn't say campaign on it, but it was part of his promise to get to the bottom of it from what I understood.

HUMIRE:

Correct. But I believe on the change of the administrations in the U.S. I think in the past he might have got a clear signal from the U.S. that they were very cooperative on this particular issue, is not an issue that the U.S. would say that we were involved or had any stake in and see the outcome or resolution.

That might change and if that were to change I think you would see a much more rapid advancement and the Macri administration - I think would welcome that change.

DUNCAN:

OK, we went a little further into that than I anticipated. Let me just finish up with Mr. Cardenas. You know, you've role with the Bush administration, you have a lot of experience what are some of the other diplomatic tools other than the sanctions that we just recently saw the Trump Administration, what are the other diplomatic tools, you might recommend Trump Administration use toward Venezuela.

CARDENAS:

Mr. Chairman I believe that we need to take a good look at the energy relationship and that is of course Venezuelan oil shipments to the United States. I think that what I am talking about of course this is really an expansion of targeted sanctions.

Nobody is arguing for the type of wide application of economic sanctions that would only make the lives of individual Venezuelans even worse. But I think that within the realm of authorities that both treasury and State Department have that we can do a lot more in terms of sending signals and creating disarray within the leadership of the Venezuelan government.

I can imagine who wants to be the last Venezuelans sanctioned by the United States on behalf a government that most Venezuelans have long ago lost any faith in. I think that the diplomatic route is key as my colleague Mr. Quilter stated within the Organization of American states.

I think that this the changed environment in the region presents some opportunities that didn't exist before for other countries to get active on the Venezuela issue within the context of the of the OAS.

Of course we have a very spirited secretary general Luis Almagro who is looking for diplomatic support. We of course as United States don't want to be out there bear hugging him with love, but we can through our offices, our good offices around the region and here in Washington work with these other governments to support Mr. Almagro and what he wants to accomplish on Venezuela.

So, I guess the most fruitful avenues I believe that exist out there are continuing on the diplomatic regional approach, multilateral approach and then let's start looking at very, very specifically at pressure points in that the Venezuelan government's economic wherewithal to start upping the pressure. Pressure combined with the multilateral diplomacy I believe this is the way to go and frankly we just did not see that for many years, including both his administrations.

DUNCAN:

I appreciate your frankness and I hope our subcommittee will bear with me because I am going to make Venezuela a focus of this subcommittee on what we can do for the people of Venezuela and in the oppression and so we will have multiple hearings. I am sure in this Congress on this, for that I owe to you gentleman. I reckon Mr. Sires for as much time he wants.

SIRES:

Thank you Mr. Chairman. There is a newspaper report tonight that a new budget looks to cut 37 percent of the state department's budget. This is the, it just came up. I was just wonder what you think the impact is going to do with our relation to the region if this was to become -- to fruition.

YEARWOOD:

Thank you, Mr. Sires. I think Mr. Humire said it very well in terms of a working with the State Department and U.S. agencies and country goes a long way towards helping identify and deal with threats as they occur and I think State Department is the front lines in the region when it comes to dealing with problems, when it comes to nurturing the relationships.

I think taking the State Department out of the equation creates a void, it means that other countries are able to step in and nurture relationships that the U.S. should be leading on and so I would strongly advocate against those.

(UNKNOWN)

Yes, Mr. Sires, I believe obviously you have detrimental facts, any cuts, any budget cuts in a particular part of the world where the U.S. government, particularly U.S. State Department still struggles to have a level of engagement that I think they would wish to have, it will hurt.

But I think I lived also to the cuts in the Defense Department during the sequester, then obviously then General John Kelly, commander self obviously complained a lot about because he didn't feel like he had the adequate resources after the threats. But I think in both of these cuts there is a reality, a physical reality that as legislatures you know very well.

However, it's also consequence of the priorities or lack of priorities and this is a point I just want to emphasize a lot of challenges we're addressing throughout the world are converging in Latin America, be at the aggressions, a resurgence of Russia, the expansions in aggression of China or the policies of Iran. Those challenges are becoming more closer to our shores in Latin America in

places like Venezuela and if our policymakers don't prioritize the region, that's going to become a bigger problem, that's going to become a bigger threat.

Dealing with that requires money, it requires appropriations, it requires us to give our authorities the capabilities that they need to address it.

SIRES:

Jose Cardenas?

CARDENAS:

Thank you Mr. Sires, as Mr. Duncan noted, I just served in the Bush 43 administration and both State Department and U.S.AID, so I have been in the belly of the beast and I have - I recall it was very, very shocking or certainly sobering to compare the resources that we had at our disposal with those that our colleagues in DOD had at their disposal.

So that was an ongoing challenge, but at the same time there is waste, fraud and abuse and in any federal bureaucracy that can be addressed that more efficiency and at a better prioritization of objectives can be achieved.

I think it has to be an effort I think whereby one has to be cognizant of a new environment whereby we have to be leaner and meaner. Maybe it will not wind up where the President's opening bid established and it would be the figure could result in a higher number, but I think that the bureaucracies involved need to be prepared for - to participate in leaner, meaner operations.

SIRES:

Mr. Quilter?

QUILTER:

The American people apparently believe the 25 percent of our budget goes to foreign aid, the number is less than 1 percent as you know. I think this would be penny wise and pound foolish, any cuts to the 150 account would be more expensive in the long run, General Mattis himself said that if you if don't fully fund the State Department, I think he said I have to buy more ammunition and I think that's absolutely right. Buying ammunition is much more expensive than fully funding the State Department.

SIRES:

In my topic that I always raise, you know, partners in the region along the line the United States force treatment of Cuba. And use it as an excuse to stay silent. Now that we have this opening, we have all this counter back-and-forth, one is the principal reason for these countries don't speak up about the human, the abuses in Cuba.

I mean it's well documented, human rights abuses, people getting beat up, why is that they don't speak up. I mean they don't have to now worry about us. Mr. Cardenas.

CARDENAS:

Mr. Sires, I have as a long time student of U.S. Cuba relations, I do have some impressions if I could share with you. I think that in most cases, in many of these countries they are afraid domestically of their own left. The left in Latin America is not like the left in this country.

The left movements, many of them have been widely infiltrated by Cuba, can be violent, they can be disruptive and to push against Cuba, to speak out for the most humane topics that any American wouldn't think twice about, they remain reluctant for fear of the trouble that Cuba can cause in their own countries.

SIRES:

Mr. Humire would you agree that?

HUMIRE:

I do agree. Let me just add to that, it's also not an accident that you see in this particular countries because the Cubans are very good at is working with host governments to be able to influence public opinion and it's that centre of gravity public opinion that we need to tackle to be able to get it more on the side of U.S. influence or U.S. activity.

In my written testimony, I examined public opinion polls, to the Latino parameter of a respected Chilean polling firm and what you see is the negative trend in Peru, U.S. public opinion in 10 countries throughout the hemisphere.

I'm not going to say that the Cubans are behind all of that but they're definitely pushing that narrative, it's the ability to get a narrative, to grab a narrative that helps solidify our ability to sell the U.S. as a legitimate partner in the region, we don't have that narrative.

The U.S. is a lot of good actions, the Defense Department does a lot of good, whenever there is a humanitarian crisis, they are one of the first people to respond, but that action is accompanied by a story and is those stories that need to be told to be able to push back against what the Cubans have done throughout the region.

SIRES:

Thank you Mr. Chairman.

DUNCAN:

I thank the Ranking Member. Now, going back and forth, we going to go to Mr. Rooney from Florida for five minutes.

ROONEY:

This testimony has been a very thorough overview of what's going on in Latin America right now and I appreciate that, it's been a fair bit of time down there myself over the years.

So I'm trying to find a couple of things that haven't been mentioned yet to be productive. So, Mr. Humire, if you could comment - the Chairman commented on the role of Iran in the Nisman case in Argentina. You could comment on the current activities in Iran and Venezuela and (inaudible).

HUMIRE:

Thank you, Mr. Rooney. Iran - let me just start by saying that Iran, along with the proxy Hasbell is present in every country in Latin America. In some cases they are more subterranean, they are working out of an informal network. In other cases, such as Venezuela, they have a full seat at the table with the current government.

The recent appointment of the current Venezuelan Vice President Tareck El Aissami to me was a clear indicator of the level of control and influence that Iran has in that country.

I studied the Iranian presence in Venezuela for several years and it's graduated, it started to escort for presence, moved over to become a diplomatic presence with more economic engagement. It's now fully graduated into a military presence.

The Iranian Revolutionary guards along with the subordinate elements through the Ministry of Defense and all force logistics has complete presence and activities within Venezuela, including territories that are not within control of Venezuelan government.

Tareck El Aissami was one of the individuals that controlled the network or at least was one of the men on the ground partners for Tehran in that activity. My understanding is that as the Executive Vice President, he has been granted executive powers that are essentially presidential powers that can be used by Iran to foment more instability and conflict.

What I worry about with Venezuela and think of it within the context of Syria. What are we dealing with Syria? We are dealing with the proxy conflict with many parties with the Iranians, the Russians and other actors are since implementing instability and violence so that they can engage the United States.

If you take that lens, that optic, and you apply it to Venezuela, you have the same actors obviously not to the level as you see them in Syria, but the potential for that is there, especially with an individual like to Tareck El Aissami at the helm, his connections with Damascus with Russia, with Tehran, could potentially create a conflict with the military gets in to a war with the militias and that only benefits the folks in the Middle East.

ROONEY:

I'm glad you brought up that because you know, we know how often they fight and what kind of aircraft that use. Similar to that, assuming that we don't get into a Cold War Guatemala situation, Venezuela finally win the final innings, there is an opportunity to put 15 years of Chavez misery behind us.

Could you comment on what the impact of the smaller Caribbean countries is going to be with the Petro Caribe. I don't know who would be the best for that. Maybe Ms. Yearwood because she is the Central American expert.

YEARWOOD:

I mean Venezuela because of everything that's going on in Venezuela obviously Petro Caribe, the influence of Petro Caribe is waning and what we are seeing is the push towards greater energy diversity and sustainability in the region.

The U.S. is engaging in various programs throughout the Caribbean and Central America and basically the hope is that Petro Caribe will become a not as influential at the end of the day. I think given everything that's going on in Venezuela we can expect to see the Petro Caribe program come to an end at some point in the not-too-distant future.

From the Caribbean perspective, the countries that are part the Petro Caribe program, the important thing is there ready to deal with the move away from Petro Caribe which I think opens a lot of opportunities for collaboration with United States and I referenced earlier, the discovery of oil in Guyana and the co-operation between Guyana and Trinidad & Tobago in terms of exploiting that opportunity.

ROONEY:

One brief I would like to ask Mr. Quilter and perhaps Mr. Cardenas about the Pacific alliances. That's one thing that hadn't been mentioned here, and we have got four very important countries working together and looking west while we don't know sometimes where we're looking right now.

And you both touched on some of those so maybe you could give some comment on the negative aspects of that for the United States and the positive aspects of that for Chile, Mexico, Colombia and Peru vis- a-vis China and Asia.

QUITLER:

The Pacific Alliances is an amazingly effective integration mechanism. By now trade is a bad word, we're sort of falling over ourselves trying to understand how it fits into our bigger picture but that is precisely the kind of integration mechanism that we would need to work with.

We need to work with it in some manner. The fact that the TPP is now off the table means that we need a new way to engage with that group because there are going to move without us. There is no doubt that they are going to move without us.

And another thing we have think about, our opportunity cost of all these things. So, are we creating a strategic opportunity for China as we step back from these relationships? The same question really applies to Russia although not as urgently I believe.

Another opportunity cost which was mentioned by the Chairman, which I would like to flag is what we really should be talking about right now with Mexico is energy integration in this region, we can do it. That is the next item on the agenda, we are just not getting to that item because we're talking about a bunch of other things that I think we should have left behind.

CARDENAS:

That's a really if I could just add to Peter's comments. The Pacific alliances is something that was an achievement of U.S. foreign policy as an objective of policy that has spanned Democratic and Republican administrations.

That is advocating on behalf of trade integration, open economies, free trade and now that we have this entity that is born of itself, it wasn't like that the United States came and put them together, they unilaterally came together but it was after many years of things that we push for, a bipartisan support in the region.

So I think that we have to quickly figure out what our approach is going to be. President Trump has been very clear on his points about multilateral agreements, but he is for bilateral agreement so we have to figure out how this all fits together.

DUNCAN:

Thank you gentleman. I just hope you know, five weeks into this, I hope energy is a part of the conversation as NAFTA is renegotiated, we do know with natural gas pipelines, with constitutional changes in the Mexico, with regard to nationalization , de-nationalization of energy sector, there is a lot opportunity with Mexico that I think ought to be on the table and I can promise you I will be conversing with the Trump Administration on energy policy with regard to the Western Hemisphere countries because I think there is ice to talk about American energy independence.

I brought that to North American energy independence, now brought that to the hemispheric energy independence. We're in work with our allies here that are hungry for energies, hungry for American technology. They are just a heck of a lot of opportunity here, bilateral opportunity in so many ways so with that I will go to the gentle lady from Illinois, Ms. Kelly and for five minutes.

KELLY:

Thank you Mr. Chair. At the community of Latin American and Caribbean states summary on January 25, President Castro expressed Cuba is willing us to continue negotiating a bilateral agreement with the U.S. President Trump has continually repeated his America first mantra about creating jobs and increasing export. Lifting the embargo would open up a new market for American companies and the potential to add \$366 million annually in U.S. exports.

In Illinois alone, where I represent, the removal of U.S. travel and financial restrictions would increase Illinois agricultural exports to Cuba by \$6.6 million annually. In my opinion, expanding trade opportunities for American farmers is putting America first.

Given the economic benefits and regional support for lifting the outdated Cuban embargo, what are the next steps that Congress and the Trump Administration should consider and also how should we balance trying to bring opportunity to the Cuban people without emboldening the Castro regime and if we could start with Mr. Cardenas then Mr. Quilter.

CARDENAS:

Thank you, congress woman. I would say that opportunities unfortunately, what I have seen over the last two years is the Cuban government taking advantage of the very generous outreach of the Obama Administration to put the past history behind us, and to move forward in a cooperative manner for the benefit of the Cuban people, has resulted in the Castro regime manipulating and using those overtures to solidify its own control over the people.

And specifically I would say that the Cuban military take over all the Cuban tourism industry, the hotels, the restaurants and other institutions means that this has translated into a windfall - a financial windfall for the government at the expense of the people. I have seen very little true market openings whereby Cubans truly have the freedom to open businesses, to conduct them as they see fit, without fear of government deciding that they are making too much money.

So, I would find ways to review the relationship with more stipulations, more conditionality on benefits for the Cuban people rather than simply this open ended new path that was opened up by President Obama that doesn't account or doesn't demand or expect any reciprocal action from the Cuban government.

QUILTER:

I would agree that if a metric here is benefit to the Cuban people. I think that's absolutely correct. I don't think lifting the embargoes on the table, I don't think there are boats for it right now. I do not believe we need to go any farther than what President Obama has done for now.

My take on the changes that President Obama made are a little bit different and I see them as things that are in here to us as Americans, and that's a part of it that sometimes gets lost in the discussion. It's not only a farm policy move to give Americans back their rights to travel, to engage in commerce, to help their families in Cuba if they have them, et cetera.

So, but all through this, we must keep our compass true. This is about democracy, this is about human rights, it's about fugitives from justice as Mr. Sires knows well something very close to his heart, that should still be the north of our relationship with Cuba, that should not change.

DUNCAN:

Gentle lady's time expired. I'm going to go ahead Ms. Torres and I am going to ask if you could just limit your to maybe one good question because they called votes and then I will moved on your colleague, just allow the new members to ask. Go ahead Ms. Torres.

TORRES:

Thank you so much for the opportunity and participate. It's been quite interesting hearing all of the different perspective. I'm new to the Western Hemisphere committee, new to foreign affairs committee but the work in certainly the Northern Triangle is not new to me, I've been very, very involved in addressing the issues specifically the issues of government corruption and ensuring that the U.S. is not just throwing good money after - you know, good money, it's our taxpayers dollars but ensuring that once our work there is done we leave a government you know, with a judicial process that actually works for the people.

You know, my goal is that the next Norma Torres will have an opportunity to be a member of Congress in Guatemala and that has to be sent to live with a relative in the U.S. because it was too dangerous for her to grow up there.

On the issue of Mexico, up from California, Mexico is their number one trading partner. Mr. Quilter I really appreciate your comments on diplomatic engagement, I absolutely agree is the key to solving some of our problems. A lot of the problems have been created with this new administration. I believe in my opinion, some of the very loose comments that have been dated by this administration has certainly hurt us there.

We don't have an ambassador to help clean up some of the mess that we have created there and that poses a problem not just to what more, what policies could be affective to help stand the tide of guns across the border into Mexico. I have to go back to some of the comments that I think it was your comment that stated that Mexico has fortified their borders and even with Central America. They used to have a sort of a brotherhood, there were no borders.

You know, people from the region can travel across, that is no longer you know, what is happening there. People are stopped, 97 percent of the migrants that cross to the Mexico border are sent right back to their home country without refusing them refugee status.

So what more can do to ensure that we don't destabilize Mexico as we have done in some of the areas and other areas that we had no business conducting ourselves the way we have been in past.

(UNKNOWN)

Very quickly. Thank you very much for your letter of February 27th on Mexico. I think it's a wonderful letter and I am - it was great to see it. On guns, lost a little bit in the trip right now, secretary Tillerson was that he brought up the issue of guns and a ball cash which is of course what the Mexicans want out of the other side of the drug equation just that specific item. This has been on the table for a long time, we just never really gone there.

We need a strategy, we have the smarts to do it, we have state, we have ice, we have ATF and we have ONDCP which is really good on the numbers, we need to engage them all on that. To do it, we need better information, we need better reporting, we need better transparency about the guns, we need a very good record of what guns are eventually found down in Mexico, where did they end up where they recovered and what for. Those are the kinds of things -

TORRES:

It's true 70 percent of those weapons found in Mexico are - you know, have a U.S. point of origin.

(UNKNOWN)

Yes and that we need to make sure our numbers are really good because we have these discussions about whether it's really 70 percent or some number that smaller. Honestly, it doesn't matter. These numbers are way too big. So what we need, but we need good numbers.

TORRES:

On the issue of Central America congratulations Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member. I think you have been around for a while and the work being done with Plan Columbia has been wonderful, but what lessons learned from Plan Columbia has we applied to the Northern Triangle. I truly believe that we sort of done such a great job in Columbia that a lot of the drug cartels have moved north to the region in and are the cause - part of the cause of what has happened in the Northern Triangle specifically.

CARDENAS:

I would just very quickly think that the - say that the essential a lesson is political leadership in the region. We have to find frankly three or four present OED (ph) base among the Northern Triangle countries. Somebody who is willing to go against vested interests as you noted, Congresswoman the narco's and the gangs have so permeated these societies that you don't know who is dirty and who is clean.

So, but you can find out and there are ways to find out. We need to help them expose the insidious infiltration of the narco traffickers and they need to be rounded up and we need to as I briefly stated in my testimony, the twin evils of corruption and impunity, we need to do to push and stand behind and help those administrations counter those evils within those societies in order to make real progress against the narco traffickers.

TORRES:

I agree with that, I just disagree that security should be our only point of business there. I also believe that ensuring that we are supportive of (inaudible) continues to be a priority for us and ensuring that educational opportunities for the future leaders of this country that there is an investment outside of military training or police training in the region.

ESPAILLAT:

Mr. Chairman if I can just really quickly address. Congresswoman, just in capitalist Central America you understand to deal with the insecurity situation there and I deal with a lot of department of defense and counter transactional organized crime that has to be an economic solution as well.

The idea of doing security measures without doing any type of economic empowerment or economic trade is not going to work. If you look at the crisis in El Salvador, if you overlay where all the gangs have become greater control over different territories, El Salvador, in the overly that will - where they have lack of property rights is the same territories.

So the essence to what I'm saying is we have to understand what are drivers of economic growth and if you look at the drivers of the economic growth, they are mostly economic freedom and I think that's where we have to go.

DUNCAN:

I hate to do this, there is less than five minutes on the clock for a vote so they've called members of the committee can submit the questions for the record, I would ask that you respond to those so that members can have their question asked. I apologize I will have the vote schedule and I appreciate the participation and Mr. Espailat I will make it up to you in another future committee hearing.

Before we adjourn I would like to give a special thanks to James Randaccio, our current western hemisphere subcommittee intern. James been a real asset to subcommittee. We have been happy to have his significant contributions to our team and we've got a great staff on the minority and majority side.

Look forward to working with you, thank the witnesses and with that I will stand adjourned.