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In the longest trip to Latin America during his presidency, U.S. President George W. Bush addressed socio-economic issues, security, immigration, and alternative energy from March 8-14. Moving beyond the headlines, AS/COA provides an in-depth look at the meetings in each country.

First stop, Brazil

All eyes were on Bush and Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as the five-country, six-day tour began in São Paulo. As expected, their meeting focused primarily on biofuels. The two presidents signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) reflecting the strategic importance of biofuels for the U.S. and Brazil—combined, the two countries account for more than 70 percent of global ethanol production. The MOU recognizes biofuels as a transformative force in the region to diversify energy supplies, bolster economic growth, advance social agendas, and improve the environment. For Brazil and the U.S., greater cooperation should encourage local production and consumption, pave the way for greater energy independence, and facilitate the sharing of biofuels knowledge, especially with Central America and the Caribbean.

On the trade side, President Lula expressed disappointment about U.S. tariffs on imported ethanol and the implications for Brazil. Both presidents agreed to raise the issue in other multilateral, regional, and bilateral fora. With Brazil and the U.S. playing key roles in moving the World Trade Organization Doha Round forward, they discussed how to jump start negotiations and outlined guidelines to be issued to their respective trade ministries. Building on the Brazil meetings, Bush hosted Lula last weekend at Camp David—the first visit by a Latin American president to the U.S. presidential retreat since 1998. Ethanol, trade, and the situation in the Middle East were on the agenda along with how to move forward on the bilateral tax treaty.

Uruguay, closer relations

The next stop served to recognize Uruguay's solid democratic performance and to reciprocate President Tabaré Vázquez's visit to the U.S. in 2006. Despite differing ideological backgrounds, both leaders highlighted the need for "respect for human rights and human dignity, and respect for the rule of law." Even skeptics within the Uruguayan government coalition softened their position on closer relations. "To negotiate is not the same as selling your soul or changing your ideas. If Bush comes for political reasons, let's take advantage of this visit," recognized Jose Mujica, Minister of Agriculture, Livestock and Fishing. Trade discussion took center stage to secondary issues such as U.S. government assistance for education programs. According to an early March Consultora Cifra poll, 88 percent of Uruguayans disapproved of President Bush's visit, while 59 percent approve of an eventual bilateral free-trade agreement (FTA). Bush emphasized that the U.S. will respect Uruguay's pace for the trade talks, as well as its relationship with Mercosur. Vázquez made clear that Uruguay does not wish to weaken its relationship with this regional trade bloc, but reiterated that Mercosur and bilateral trade agreements are not mutually exclusive. A Uruguayan delegation will travel to the U.S. this month to continue Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) discussions.

Colombia, coming back to Bogotá

The last U.S. president to visit Bogotá was Ronald Reagan in 1982. Since then, U.S. presidents have preferred to head to the coastal city of Cartagena. In talks on security and Plan Colombia, Bush congratulated President Álvaro Uribe on the progress in restoring security—the U.S. has proposed \$3.9 billion in additional funding for the next phase of Plan Colombia. Potential resistance in the U.S.

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Congress may be tempered by its deeper emphasis on the judicial system, rural development, and social issues. Emphasized by President Bush and highlighted in an April 3 interview with Colombian Foreign Minister Fernando Araújo and the Americas Society and Council of the Americas, a comprehensive national plan for maintaining peace is critical to Colombia's long-term prosperity. The U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (TPA) is an important component of that goal. Ratification would create jobs and reduce poverty in both countries.

Guatemala, to show U.S. commitment

With an estimated 10 percent of Guatemalans living in the U.S., it is no surprise that the meetings with Guatemalan President Oscar Berger focused on immigration. In reinforcing his support for comprehensive immigration reform, Bush said he would press for passage of a temporary worker program but did not waver on the issue of deportations. Another important topic was security and the border. President Bush suggested that these issues should be addressed as part of a larger regional effort and stressed further cooperation both with Central America and Mexico. More than anything else, though, the visit to Guatemala highlighted U.S. commitment to the region through the Central American - Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). According to Bush, U.S. foreign assistance to Latin America, including development, military, and anti-narcotic assistance, has doubled to about \$1.6 billion per year since he came to office. Traveling outside Guatemala City, the presidents met with indigenous groups in a town devastated by a 1976 earthquake and later rebuilt with the help of U.S. aid. President Bush also visited an American military center that provides medical care and training, accompanied first lady Laura Bush at an elementary school to give out hygiene kits, and loaded lettuce onto a truck. With this last stop, he hoped to demonstrate how small communities are linked to international markets and the potential benefits of open markets.

Final stop, Mexico

At the end of his trip, President Bush and President Felipe Calderón discussed the important issues of immigration and security. Bush reiterated, as in Guatemala, that a comprehensive immigration reform bill will help both countries by securing the joint border and boosting Latin American economies. If a temporary worker program passes in the U.S. Congress, the number of illegal immigrants would not as rapidly increase and border patrol could focus on tackling other issues such as drug trafficking and organized crime. Both leaders resolved to work more closely in law enforcement cooperation and the pursuit of criminal activities. With a safer U.S.-Mexico border, Calderón stressed at a joint news conference that both countries can "close the gates to crime and open its doors to trade." The two leaders also discussed new crossing points and border bridges as part of broader talks on improving border infrastructure and efficiency for both goods and people. Rounding out their meetings was an emphasis on strengthening North American competitiveness through improved security and prosperity—a key initiative of the North American Competitiveness Council where the Council of the Americas jointly serves as the U.S. secretariat.

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