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Latin Americanist Luis Almagro of Uruguay Chosen as New OAS Chief

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The Organization of American States (OAS) has picked a pivotal moment in Latin American and Caribbean affairs to "clean up" its image. On March 18, the international organization, whose task, since its founding in 1948, has been to "manage" regional crises, took advantage of the end of Chilean José Miguel Insulza's term as secretary general to designate a progressive, former Uruguayan foreign minister Luis Almagro, as his replacement. The post is an especially important one given that the OAS groups together all 34 countries in the Americas, from the southern tip of South America to Canada in the extreme north. Almagro will assume his OAS leadership functions on May 26.

The move comes at a time when Venezuela considers itself under threat from the US (NotiSur, March 27, 2015) and when the northern superpower, after maintaining a stiff diplomatic and above all economic embargo against Cuba for more than a half century, has finally admitted that its policy failed and that it must begin normalizing bilateral relations with the island nation (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015). The decision also came just three weeks before the Seventh Summit of the Americas, an OAS-sponsored event that will be held in Panama City, Panama, April 10-11 and, for the first time since the periodic gatherings began in 1994, will involve Cuba. The OAS expelled Cuba from its ranks in 1962, keeping it at arm's length until 2009 (NotiCen, June 4, 2009).

Observers from throughout Latin America agree that Insulza's decade-long run as secretary general marked a period of significant decline for the OAS as evidenced by the various alterative mechanisms for regional integration that arose during that time. Chief among those alternative associations is the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR), which began to take shape in 2004 and was formalized four years later (NotiSur, May 30, 2008).

Those same analysts also agree that only a figure like Almagro—who comes in fresh off a successful run as the foreign-policy executor of the government of ex-President José Mujica (2010-2015), a local leader who rose to international prominence and boosted his small country's global standing to previously unimaginable heights—stands a chance of bringing the organization back from the brink of collapse. Efforts by the powerful and omnipresent US to spare the OAS from agony have proven futile in recent years. And so last month, 33 of the 34 nations in the Americas (one member state abstained) opted to revive the OAS by trusting the task to Almagro.

"A tireless fighter"

Upon being elected to the post, Almagro spoke to the various foreign ministers and ambassadors who had just designated him and offered an outline of where he would like to take the organization. He said he does not want to be "the administrator of the crisis of the OAS but rather the facilitator of its renewal." The Uruguayan diplomat went on to say that he will work with all countries "without exception" and that "it is time to put an end to unnecessary fragmentations."
"Beginning on May 26, as secretary general of the OAS, my efforts will be focused on making the organization a useful tool in the interests of all the peoples of the Americas, wherever they are from," Almagro said.

Almagro once said in an interview that he was often accused during his tenure as foreign minister of being "too driven by ideology." Perhaps for that reason, in his March 18 acceptance speech, he promised to be "a tireless fighter for the unity of the Americas, more concerned with seeking practical solutions to the enduring problems of our region than with rhetoric and stridency in statements guided by one ideology or another."

But he also made a surprising and detailed reference in the speech to Raúl Sendic, the founder and historic leader of the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional–Tupamaros (MLN-T), the largest urban guerrilla organization operating in Latin America in the second half of the 20th century. And because none of the major international news agencies made any mention of his allusion to Sendic, the father of Uruguay’s current vice president, Almagro made a point of repeating his comments in every one of the subsequent media interviews he gave.

"I’m not a believer in the Big Bang theory, that I’ll arrive at the OAS on May 26 and change everything. Instead I think we need to focus on the positive elements already in place and expand them," Almagro said in a March 28 interview with Argentine journalist Manuel Alfieri of the Buenos Aires daily El Tiempo.

"It’s imperative that we generate credibility so that the OAS can really help solve regional problems," Almagro went on to say. "When I was elected, I mentioned something said by Raúl Sendic, the leader and founder of MLN-T, that applies well to the OAS. Paraphrasing him, I said, 'If we argue about the things that we see differently, we are going to spend our whole lives arguing, but if we work on the things we agree on, we will spend our lives working.'"

The quote, in Almagro’s opinion, made a strong impression on the diplomats gathered that day in the OAS headquarters in Washington, DC. It was likely the first and only time in a formal OAS setting that a guerrilla leader was referred to in such a respectful way. In the last century, when the organization was peopled by ambassadors from the various Latin American dictatorships, Sendic and other guerrillas were dismissed as being standard-bearers of "international Marxist subversion."

**Long list of challenges**

Now, as head of the OAS and with the conviction that his role will not be to simply administer the crisis, Almagro has a chance to accentuate the profile he maintained during his years in the Mujica administration as a Latin Americanist dedicated to building a "grand American homeland." He comes to the job with a real wave of support from the region, "an endorsement," according to journalist Rodrigo Abelenda of the Uruguayan weekly Brecha, "that stems in large part from the political backing he received from ex-President Mujica, whose own rise in global stature catapulted [Almagro] to the forefront of regional diplomacy."

Abelenda also analyzed Almagro’s designation within the context of the recent change of government in Uruguay. As of March 1, the tiny country is now led by President Tabaré Vázquez, who is from the same party as Mujica (the Frente Amplio, FA) but is noticeably more moderate (NotiSur, Dec. 12, 2014). "Almagro’s arrival in the OAS should be seen as a victory for the much
malignant ‘Mujiquista’ diplomacy and a defeat for those who accused [the ex–president] of forging ties for ideological reasons and of making his diplomatic representatives less professional in their approach," Abelenda wrote.

Within the FA, which has historically dismissed the OAS as a "ministry of US colonies," Almagro’s election holds special importance given the turn in foreign policy that the Vázquez government, much to the liking of the conservative opposition, is taking in favor of closer relations with the US. The ex-foreign minister’s designation as the new OAS head, in that sense, is viewed by many on the Uruguayan left as a sign that the previous government’s pan-Latin American vision can still hold sway. In his Brecha analysis, Abela suggested that Almagro’s placement in such a regionally influential post—something made possible by the powerful internal movement that developed around the figure of Mujica—can act as a counterbalance to the lukewarm policies of Vázquez.

"Without stridency but with arduous work, Almagro laid out the essential steps needed to update the OAS in line with changes that have taken place in the region," Sergio Jellinek, a former World Bank external affairs manager for Latin America and the Caribbean, wrote in a March 13 Huffington Post essay. Jellinek will be part of a select team of people advising Almagro in his new post. Other members of the advisory group include Uruguayan economist and former deputy minister of foreign affairs Luis Porto and Dan Restrepo, a former government official under US President Barack Obama. "Based on his knowledge of new regional dynamics—involving UNASUR and CELAC [Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños]—and of the US government’s softening stance toward Cuba, Almagro thinks a new kind of hemispheric dialogue is possible," Jellinek added.

The future secretary-general of the OAS will certainly face his share of challenges. The list includes the difficult situation between Venezuela and the US; the thawing of relations between Cuba and the US; ongoing peace talks between the government of Colombia and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) guerrillas (NotiSur, April 3, 2015); reconstruction in Haití, which was devastated by a 2010 earthquake (NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2010); and Great Britain’s colonial presence in the insular Argentine territory of Las Malvinas. Other pending challenges are Latin America’s vast income-distribution problems—it is the most inequitable region in the world—and the irrational exploitation of its resources by external agents who have been allowed to operate without any restrictions.

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