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Editorial

About Latin America

The Bush administration is leaving behind so much turmoil and resentment around the world that President-elect Barack Obama might be tempted to put off dealing with the nation's extremely sour relations with Latin America.

That would be shortsighted. There is a unique opportunity to improve ties with a region that shares key interests and values with the United States. And given how bad relations are right now, it will not take much more than good sense and sensitivity to make progress.

For starters, the Obama administration could gain a lot of good will by supporting more aid, mostly from the International Monetary Fund, for Latin American countries sideswiped by the financial meltdown.

More than anything, Latin American leaders want to know that Washington is ready to talk seriously — rather than just lecture — on important topics, including drug trafficking, energy policy, economic integration and immigration.

With Fidel Castro nearly gone, Washington should be testing the intentions of the new Cuban leadership. We believe lifting the economic embargo is the best way to do that. It has given Mr. Castro and his cronies a never-ending excuse for their failures and misdeeds.

During the campaign, Mr. Obama unfortunately agreed with the incorrect (but politically convenient) proposition that the embargo gives the United States leverage. Fortunately, he also said he would start the process of re-engaging Havana — and opening Cuba to the winds of change — by lifting restrictions on travel and remittances to the island. He should do so quickly.

Declining oil prices, and the declining stature of President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, will also make Mr. Obama's task easier.

We have no patience for Mr. Chávez's corrupt and autocratic ways. But the Bush administration did enormous damage to American credibility throughout much of the region when it blessed what turned out to be a failed coup against Mr. Chávez.

The Venezuelan leader has played anti-American sentiments for all they are worth. And he has spent a chunk of his country's abundant oil riches to prop up the Castro brothers and finance a wider anti-American bloc. He no longer has as much cash to spread around. And his own citizens have lost patience with his failed revolution.

Mr. Chávez's decline also poses some new challenges. The finances of Cuba as well as Argentina, Nicaragua or Honduras could deteriorate rapidly if Venezuela decides to cut back its deliveries of cheap oil and billions in aid. Washington must be prepared to help, either with its own aid or by rallying support from international lenders.

There will be difficult pills to swallow. For the sake of American business and American credibility, Congress must pass the trade agreement with Colombia.

Other steps should come easier. Washington should open a regional dialogue about the illegal drug trade and prove that it can do its share by clamping down on the southward flow of weapons and reducing demand for drugs at home. On energy, eliminating the tariff on ethanol imports would help reduce dependence on fossil fuels and greatly improve relations with Brazil.

This country must move forward with immigration reform. It must also begin regular discussions on migration issues with the countries sending those migrants. That would do much to improve relations and find solutions to key problems like human rights abuses against immigrants.

If there is still a question about the need for a new policy for the region, consider these facts: Latin America provides a third of the nation's oil imports, most of its immigrants and virtually all of its cocaine. And, oh yes, it's right next door.