

Organization of American States: Background and Issues for Congress



The Organization of American States (OAS) is the oldest multilateral regional organization in the world. It was founded in 1948 by the United States and 20 Latin American nations to serve as a forum for addressing issues of mutual concern. Over time, the organization expanded to include all 35 independent countries of the Western Hemisphere (though Cuba currently is excluded from participation). The organizations areas of focus have also shifted over time, evolving in accordance with the priorities of its member states. Today, the OAS concentrates on four broad objectives: democracy promotion, human rights protection, economic and social development, and regional security cooperation. It carries out a wide variety of activities to advance these goals, often providing policy guidance and technical assistance to member states. Since the organizations foundation, the United States has sought to utilize the OAS to advance critical economic, political, and security objectives in the Western Hemisphere. Although OAS actions frequently reflected U.S. policy during the 20th Century, this has changed to a certain extent over the past decade as Latin American and Caribbean governments have adopted more independent foreign policies. While the organizations goals and day-to-day activities are still generally consistent with U.S. policy toward the region, the United States ability to advance its policy initiatives within the OAS has declined. Nevertheless, the United States has remained the organizations largest donor, contributing \$61.4 million in FY2011 equivalent to 36% of the total 2011 OAS budget. As OAS decisions have begun to reflect the increasing independence of its member states, U.S. policymakers occasionally have expressed concerns about the direction of the organization. Some Members of Congress assert that the OAS, as it currently operates, advances

policies that run counter to U.S. interests, and that the United States should withhold funding until the organization changes. Others maintain that the OAS remains an important forum for advancing U.S. relations with the other nations of the hemisphere and that U.S. policy should seek to strengthen the organization and make it more effective. Issues receiving congressional attention in recent years have included Cuba's potential inclusion in the OAS, the organization's activities to protect democracy and human rights, the creation of regional organizations that could serve as alternatives to the OAS, and constraints on the organization's budget. The debate over the OAS and its utility for advancing U.S. interests has continued to unfold in the 112th Congress. In addition to raising issues of concern in congressional hearings and other forums, Members have introduced several legislative initiatives that include provisions related to the OAS. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2012, P.L. 112-74, provides funding for the organization during the current fiscal year, while S. 3241 and H.R. 5857 would provide funding for the OAS in FY2013. H.R. 2583 would have prohibited the United States from providing its assessed contribution (membership dues) to the OAS in FY2012, and H.R. 6067 includes provisions that would transfer 50% of the United States assessed contribution to specific OAS programs designed to advance democracy and security objectives starting in FY2013. H.R. 6067 also includes provisions that would forbid U.S. contributions to the OAS if Cuba is allowed to participate in the organization prior to transitioning to democracy. Another bill, H.R. 2542, would withhold 20% of all U.S. contributions to the OAS unless the organization takes action to assess the state of democracy in Venezuela and Nicaragua. H.Res. 312, introduced in June 2011, would call for U.S. ratification of several of the inter-American human rights treaties.

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