

What is Obama's 'new alliance of the Americas'?

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In 2008, when Barack Obama was hoping to become the first African American President of the United States, he famously championed hope and promised change.

One of the many, many things he was hoping to change was the relationship between the United States and Latin America. The soon-to-be president made a speech at the Cuban American National Foundation in which he set out his goals. "It's time for a new alliance of the [Americas](#)," Mr Obama declared. "It's time to turn the page on the arrogance of Washington and the anti-Americanism across the region that stands in the way of progress."

He pledged to help end the decades-old conflict in Colombia, help develop Haiti, crack down on drug cartels in [Mexico](#) and strengthen trade and aid to Latin America as a whole.

While Obama's two term presidency may have struggled to bring about reform in many other areas, few would have predicted so much change in some of Washington's regional relationships.

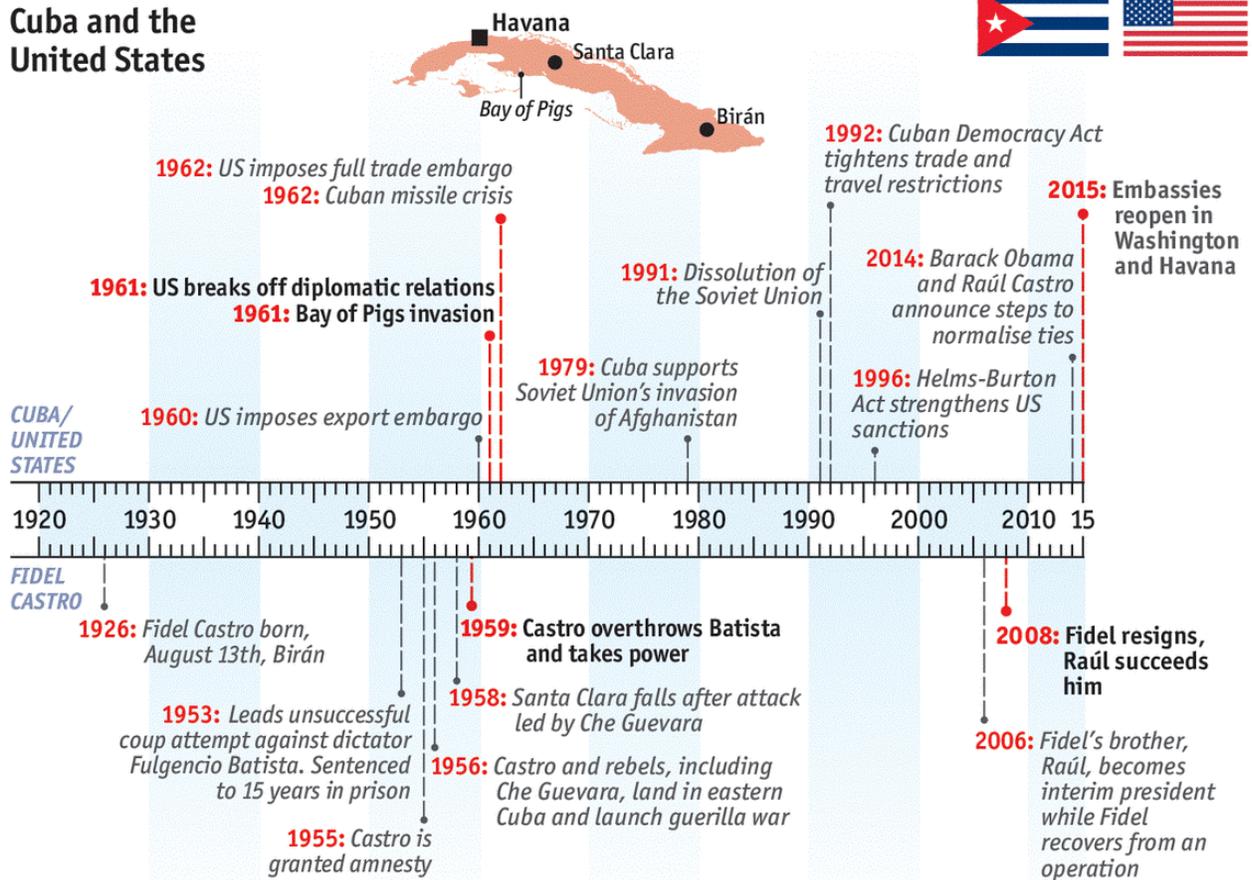
The Cuba question

The most striking difference is, of course, the re-established relationship between Washington and Havana.

Barack Obama has become the first US President to visit Cuba in almost a century. The visit was the latest in a string of extraordinary steps that began when Mr Obama and Raúl Castro, Cuba's leader, announced in December 2014 that the two countries would move towards normalising relations.

Things have come a very long way since the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion and the Cuban Missile Crisis which brought the world to the brink of all-out war the following year.

Cuba and the United States



Source: *The Economist*

Economist.com

Image: *The Economist*

The thawing of relations between the US and Cuba is also helping to improve America's image across the region.

Speaking in [Washington](#) in March Mike Hammer, the US ambassador to Chile, said that normalised relations with Cuba went a long way to "removing what we all know was a tension point in US relations with the hemisphere".

"It's good for folks back here in Washington to grasp that," he added, "as ambassador of Chile I can see, even among regular people that come up and say, 'Well, it was about time,' and 'It was the right thing to do,' really it's quite significant."

President Obama's more humble attitude to his near neighbours has also come with some acknowledgement that the US has made mistakes in the past. In [a recent interview](#) with the Atlantic he said the US had to face up to the darker side of its foreign affairs record.

"We have history. We have history in Iran. We have history in Indonesia and Central America," he told the Atlantic. "So we have to be mindful of our history when we start talking about interfering, and understand the source of other people's suspicions."

Growth in trade

While President Obama has been in office Latin America has undergone plenty of change that has no direct link the United States, of course.

A generation of leftist leaders have been weakened or have gone altogether. Venezuela now seems a long way from the heady defiance of Hugo Chavez as it battles a steady stream of [grim economic news](#).

China's slowdown has punctured commodity prices which has hit many exporters, especially Brazil.

Against this backdrop, Washington's influence within the region has strengthened. US trade with the region has doubled during Obama's time in office and more than tripled since 2004. The value of the dollar has also appreciated enormously against most regional currencies.



Source: FAS GATS

Image: FAS GATS

Argentina's attitude

President Obama appears determined to meet difficult challenges in the region head on. He knew that by going to Argentina he would be facing South America's most anti-American nation.

In a 2012 poll of distrust of the US, Argentina came out top, ahead, even of Hugo Chavez's Venezuela.

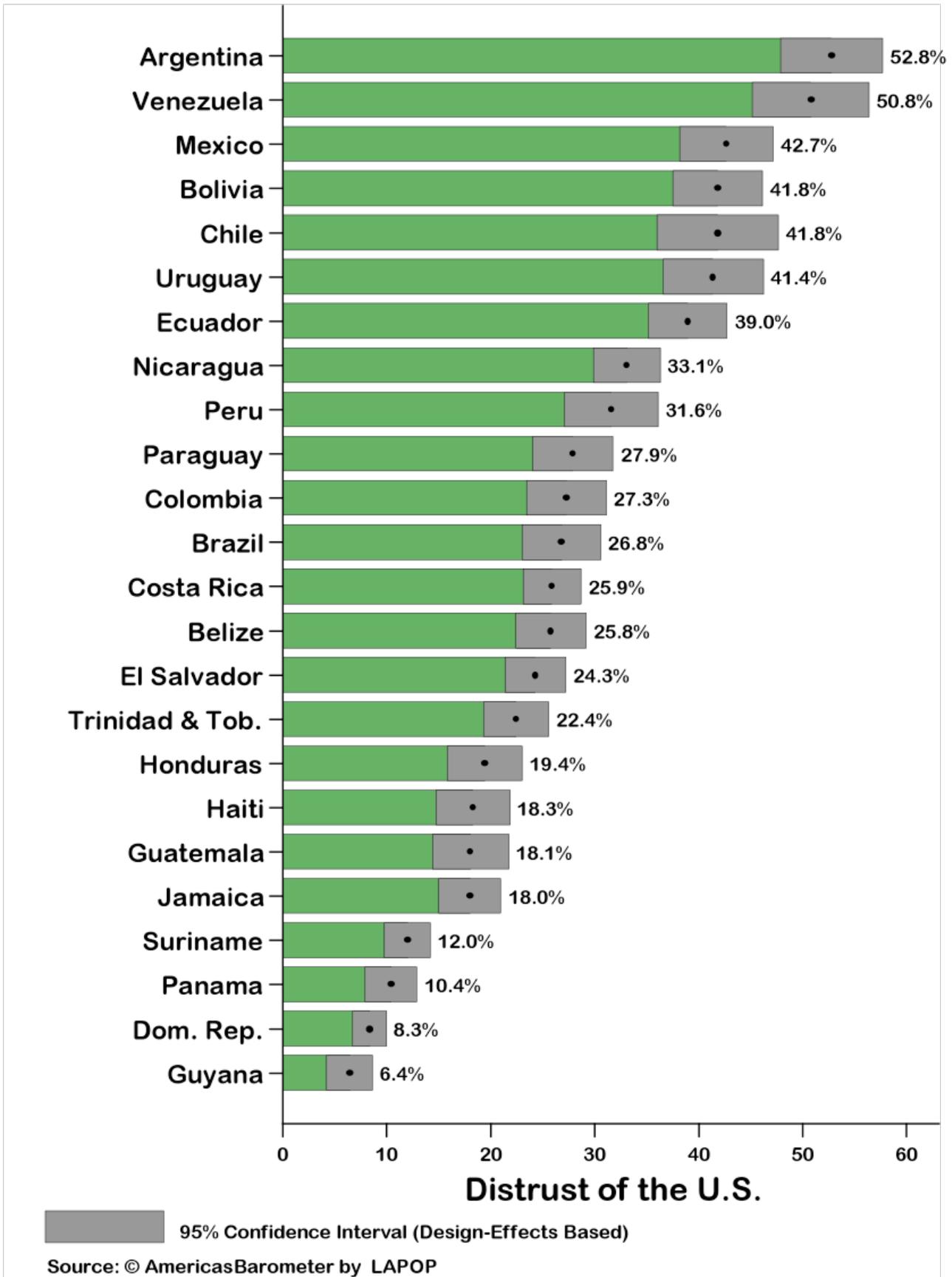


Image: AmericasBarometer by LAPOP

President Barack Obama's visit, originally scheduled to coincide with the 40 year anniversary of Argentina's military coup, was moved to later in the month following protests.

The accompanying 'dirty war', during which military and security forces hunted down political dissidents, was fuelled by the United States in a Cold War bid to prevent the spread of communism.

Historical documents show US officials, including then-secretary of state Henry Kissinger, [encouraged](#) the regime crackdown that killed tens of thousands.

Obama's part in a wreath-laying ceremony at the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Cathedral, marks an attempt to heal those wounds.

It is also an attempt to offer support to new president Mauricio Macri and end a decade-and-a-half of financial isolation and political enmity with Washington.

Macri took office in December with a vow to reverse many policies of his leftist predecessors, who imposed tight controls over the economy. One change was almost immediate: he lifted currency controls to allow a free exchange of the Argentine peso for U.S. dollars.

A long way to go

Of course Latin American suspicions about US intentions still linger. There is already concern about what future US policy might look like once Obama leaves the White House.

This anxiety has not been soothed by comments made on the campaign trail by some of those hoping to be the next president.

Certainly Obama has not managed to tame Mexico's drug cartels or brought much progress in Haiti. But given the history of entrenched and vehement anti-Americanism in the region, the current level of engagement is remarkable and President Obama can claim to have delivered a significant amount of what he promised back in 2008.

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