

Opening Statement

by

Ambassador Rajiv K Bhatia

Director General, ICWA

at the Seminar on

**“Recent Developments in Latin American and
Caribbean Region”**

at

Sapru House, New Delhi

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Your Excellency Mr. Alfredo Moreno Charme, Foreign Minister of Chile and the pro-tempore President of CELAC, Your Excellency Mr. Ernesto Serrano, Coordinator for Political and Bilateral Affairs, MFA of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Your Excellency Mr. Abelardo Cueto Sosa, Ambassador of the Republic of Cuba, Shri M. Ganapathi, Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, Distinguished Ambassadors and representatives of various countries in Delhi, Former Indian ambassadors, Honoured guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all at the Indian Council of World Affairs. This unique institution was established before the advent of India's independence. The result of a vision of many great minds, it has played a pioneering role in promoting India's relations with Asia and Africa. We would be delighted to contribute to a sustained dialogue with Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) region too, which leads to greater mutual understanding and cooperation.

LAC region was once considered a distant horizon, but we in India have been increasingly aware of the multi-dimensional transformation unfolding there. Your visit here, Excellencies, provides us an invaluable opportunity to obtain a first-hand perspective about LAC. This visit has a special, nay historic, dimension, namely the formal launch of dialogue between India and the Troika of the recently established Community of Latin American and Caribbean States or CELAC. We are gratified to note that yesterday the First India-CELAC Foreign Ministers Meeting took place where both sides undertook 'a comprehensive review' with a view to strengthening 'the multi-faceted cooperation' between India and CELAC. At this dialogue, it was decided to enhance interaction that leads towards realization of a 'Strategic Partnership.'

Our foreign affairs and strategic community have been deeply conscious of the growing importance of your region due to the political cohesion it has

demonstrated and the impressive economic progress it has achieved in recent years. Despite disparities in terms of size, economic and social development, and diversity in terms of language and geography, the LAC region has shown a strong will to overcome resultant barriers and achieve greater unity, harmony and integration at sub-regional as well as pan-regional levels. Besides, several LAC countries have evolved model projects of socio-economic development. Learning from your experiences India, which shares many common challenges with your region, can benefit considerably.

Fortunately, the history of India–LAC interaction has been entirely positive, with no conflicts, disputes or major disagreements. This is a record that enables both sides to look to the future with enormous confidence. Interaction between the Caribbean and India was largely driven by the presence of substantial communities of Indian origin there. With Latin America, the first decade of 21st century has witnessed acceleration in the momentum of political, economic and cultural cooperation. Many global issues – reform of UN institutions, international financial crisis, climate change, international terrorism – find us all on the same page.

Steady expansion of our economic relationship is evident from the growth of bilateral trade. It has climbed from US\$ 500 million in 1990 to US\$ 25 billion in 2011, a fifty-fold increase in twenty years! But surely we are capable of achieving more. There is also significant investment mainly by India in Latin America, but also in the reverse direction. We have a preferential trade agreement with Chile and there is interest in upgrading this to a more ambitious framework. We have similar arrangements with the Southern Common Market, better known as Mercosur. With several countries in the region, India has also signed agreements on investment, avoidance of double taxation and civil aviation links in order to enhance economic cooperation. Capacity building offers enticing opportunities.

Further, cultural relations, academic exchanges and people-to-people contacts represent a vital facet. This area shows a considerable potential for expansion. At yesterday's meeting, foreign ministers of India and CELAC agreed to strengthen cultural and academic linkages, including between the Diplomatic Institutes. ICWA has recently launched a modest programme on LAC, aimed at enhancing India's relations with your region. We would be happy to work, in a measured manner, with some of your select think tanks to establish a network of institutional contacts. Such links will enable scholars on both sides to exchange knowledge, studies and visits. This could lay the foundation for sustained enhancement of academic and intellectual ties between us.

You would no doubt be aware, Excellencies, that ICWA hosted the 'National Consultations on India-LAC Relations' last month. On that occasion, we also launched the portal on Latin America and the Caribbean on our website. This will be maintained and enhanced as a rich source of reference materials on your region.

The presence amidst us today of the high-level representation of CELAC's Troika is much appreciated. CELAC, as we know, has a long journey ahead. On behalf of our Track-II community gathered here, we wish a fulfilling future for CELAC. We will listen to you with utmost attention and will be happy to cooperate with you all in a mutually beneficial manner.
