

## The Fifth Summit of the Americas: Relations with the US are Played Out in Cuba (ARI)

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**Theme:** The Fifth Summit of the Americas allowed the US to resume dialogue with Latin America. During the meeting, Washington sought to establish a relationship 'among equals', in line with Barack Obama's idea of moving from a policy of acting 'for' Latin America to one of acting 'with' it. The Bolivarian discourse and the Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's antics that are typical at this kind of gathering were overshadowed this time by Obama, who is willing to talk to everyone and re-orient relations with Cuba.

**Summary:** The Fifth Summit of the Americas, held in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, on 17-19 April, had as its central theme 'securing our citizens' future by promoting human prosperity, energy security and environmental sustainability'. It was attended by 34 heads of State or Government from the American continent. The only country not represented was Cuba, which was expelled from the Organisation of American States in 1962. The idea in theory was to discuss issues related to energy, security and sustainable development in the region. However, the issues that drew the most interest were the world financial and economic crisis –although to a lesser extent than one would have expected– and the situation in Haiti and, in particular, Cuba, which was at the top of everyone's agenda. In the months leading up to the summit, Cuba shaped up as a very sensitive topic for practically all of the leaders of Latin America, as seen at the summits in Costa do Saúpe, Brazil in December 2008.

Acting pre-emptively, and knowing that some Latin American Presidents were prepared to make Cuba a confrontational issue, or at least a common cause, the White House took several measures designed to defuse the situation. On 13 April it announced the lifting of all restrictions on Americans travelling to Cuba, which complemented an earlier move, voted by Congress as a rider to a budget bill, to ease limits on visits by Cuban-Americans and the amount of money they could spend in Cuba. In this way some conflicts were averted, making the summit a relaxed and respectful one, full of smiles and handshakes with Barack Obama –even from leaders of the countries of ALBA (the Spanish acronym for Bolivarian Alternative for the Peoples of Our America)–. This highlighted the announcement of a new era, marked by a relationship among equals. The final statement was signed only by the leader who hosted the summit, Prime Minister Peter Manning, acting in name of all of the participants, because the ALBA countries refused to endorse a document that had been agreed beforehand. Despite this, the meeting can be characterised as a success for US diplomacy, and to lesser extent, that of Brazil.

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## Analysis:

### *Precedents*

The run-up to the summit was marked by the great expectations among Latin American leaders over the presence of Barack Obama, so much so that none of them stayed away, even though some had threatened to. For most, it was a chance to meet Obama personally. Presidents Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil, Felipe Calderón of Mexico and Cristina Kirchner of Argentina met Obama at the G-20 summit in London, and the first two of them also had bilateral meetings with him, as did Canada's Prime Minister. Added to this was the equally important fact that for Obama it was the time for him to define the outlines of his policy towards the hemisphere, especially in the wake of other US foreign policy changes he had made. In their first months in office, both the President and the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, made major announcements on US policy in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Middle-Eastern conflict, Iran and Transatlantic relations. The Summit of the Americas provided the perfect opportunity to talk about Latin America, after disagreements with the Bush Administration. José Miguel Insulza, Secretary General of the OAS, said he was convinced the Fifth Summit of the Americas would mark a 'new beginning' in hemispheric relations 'and in particular those of the United States with Latin America and the Caribbean'.

US ties with Latin America were unfinished business left by the Republican Administration. Added to this was the US role in the international financial crisis, which hit Latin American economies hard. For this reason, Obama wanted to prepare for the summit meticulously, relying on two veteran diplomats with strong credibility in Latin America: Thomas Shannon and Jeffrey Davidoff. Shannon, Assistant US Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs under Bush, was retained in his post after the change in government in order to prepare the summit, with the twin goals of fielding a team that knew the issues and avoiding improvisation on delicate topics. Davidoff, a former US Ambassador to Guatemala, Chile, Venezuela and Mexico and US Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American affairs under Bill Clinton, was appointed presidential adviser for the summit. At the same time he is a key member of Obama's team in its policy of rapprochement toward Latin America.

In the months prior to the meeting in Trinidad and Tobago there was feverish activity in Washington, both at the State Department and the local think tanks that focus on Latin America. Many studies were generated, and numerous seminars were held in which US diplomats, academics and Latin American Ambassadors exchanged points of view and advanced in the preparation of the summit. All of this was in contrast to what happened in most Latin American capitals, where preparations for the summit were more or less left to improvisation.

The US also waged a pre-summit diplomatic offensive, which led Vice-President Joe Biden to Viña del Mar (Chile) for the Progressive Governance Summit on 27-28 March and saw Secretary of State Hillary Clinton meet in Washington with her counterparts from Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Peru and Panama, offering to 'deepen and broaden relations' with their countries and discussing points on the summit agenda. In addition to all this, Obama met Lula in Washington and visited Mexico right before the summit. These two meetings give an idea of the importance that Obama will place on Brazil and Mexico.

Latin American leaders were brimming with expectation as they arrived at the summit for Obama's first taste of Latin America. The region has changed a lot since Bush visited it early in his first term. Added to this are six years of strong economic growth, the effects of which persist despite the crisis and have allowed 37 million Latin Americans to break out of poverty and 29 million to escape indigence since 2003, according to ECLAC. The good times also led to the emergence of a middle class in countries with huge gaps between rich and poor, such as Brazil. Still, the continent is divided into two large blocs centred on different political and integration projects. They are essentially led by Lula and Chávez. While Lula supports Unasur (the Union of South American Nations), Chávez wavers between it and ALBA, along with Cuba.

The situation masks a certain degree of conflict over regional leadership, pitting Brazil against Venezuela. But Mexico is also in the picture, although with other problems and issues. It seems that Brazil has decided to exercise leadership in South America, after realising that, in order to be a player on the world stage, it needs to be one at the regional level as well. Thus, the convergence of Brazilian and Mexican diplomacy was auspicious, as seen in Costa do Sauípe. This allowed the meeting between Lula and Obama at the White House, which the Brazilian leader used to go over issues on the regional agenda, rather than the US-Brazilian one. But the new reality in the region also features other outside players, aside from the EU, such as China, Russia and Iran. They have been establishing strategic alliances with some countries, clearly questioning the traditional US hegemony in the region. However, this seems to be something from the past, however reluctant Obama may be to give up talking about American leadership.

With this backdrop, one might have thought that the leaders of Latin America would travel to Trinidad and Tobago with clear ideas on what they wanted from Washington. However, with a few exceptions, they showed up without having done their homework, waiting for responses and solutions to come from Washington, either to accept or challenge them. But the Latin American leaders did not have proposals of their own that were credible and could be negotiated, and instead left nearly everything to improvisation. Evidence of this is the fact that the main argument they had in order to negotiate with the US was Cuba, a recurring theme in their messages to Obama.

Two days before the summit, Hugo Chávez called a meeting of ALBA in Cumaná, which was attended by Evo Morales of Bolivia, Raúl Castro of Cuba, Manuel Zelaya of Honduras, Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua and the Prime Minister of Dominica, Roosevelt Skerrit. Also invited as guests were the Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo, Ralph Gonsalves, the Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines –which announced it was joining ALBA– and Ecuador's Foreign Minister, Fander Falconí. The idea of the meeting was to reach consensus positions on the Trinidad summit and ask that a clause on Cuba be included in the final statement. It should be recalled that all of these countries share an anti-imperialist discourse which is wary of US actions in Latin America. However, with Obama reaching out to Cuban leaders, the Bolivarian rhetoric lost one of its main pillars, leaving the traditional prominence of Chávez somewhat overshadowed.

Countries that are closer to Washington, such as Brazil and Chile, and others whose positions is less clearly defined, like Argentina, also embraced the Cuban cause, although for different reasons. Whereas Lula wants to consolidate his role as regional mediator and his position as a force to be reckoned with on the world stage, President Michelle Bachelet and Argentina's President Mrs Kirchner are motivated more by domestic issues, a rather naive concept of regional solidarity and the absence of an *ad hoc* discourse.

However, all the countries of Latin America will conceal behind the Cuban issue the lack of coordination in the regional bloc and the emergence of a growing number of bilateral conflicts (such as one between Argentina and Uruguay over paper mills on their common border, and between Ecuador and Colombia after the bombing in 2008 of a FARC rebel camp in Ecuadoran territory) that prevent Latin America from going before the US with a clear policy. The firmest allies of the US, and the most neutral on the Cuban question, were Canada, Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Mexico.

*The Summit: Items on the Agenda and the Final Statement*

The summit opened with a speech by the Argentine President Cristina Kirchner, whose country hosted the controversial fourth summit in 2005. She criticised George W. Bush's regional policy and called for a lifting of the embargo against Cuba, describing it as an 'anachronism'. Daniel Ortega addressed the same issue but with tougher talk: 'I am ashamed of being at this summit and calling it *summit of the Americas*, not just because Cuba is absent but also Puerto Rico, which continues to be a colony of the United States in the Caribbean'. Then came the Prime Minister of Belize, Dean Barrow, followed by the most keenly awaited speech, that of Obama, who debuted at the summit by offering reconciliation to Cuba. 'I do believe that we can move US-Cuban relations in a new direction', Obama said. 'Over the past two years I've indicated, and I repeat today, that I'm prepared to have my Administration engage with the Cuban government on a wide range of issues –from drugs, migration, and economic issues, to human rights, free speech, and democratic reform', he said, leaving the ball in Cuba's court. However, no Latin American leader turned to Cuba to ask for a gesture of democratic openness or political dialogue. After the opening session, with constant allusions to Cuba, which had become the protagonist of the meeting even though it was not present, the Presidents met behind closed doors to discuss the issues that were on the summit agenda. These were a series of points that were more relevant for the future of the region, such as the economic crisis and cooperation in the field of energy.

After six years of growth, with yearly rates of expansion of between 4% and 6%, ECLAC announced on 1 April that the economies of Latin America and the Caribbean would contract by 0.3% in 2009. The countries most affected will be Mexico, with a decline of about 2%, the largest in the region due to its dependence on US markets, Brazil (-1%), Costa Rica and Paraguay (-0.5%). Other countries, such as Panama, Peru and Bolivia, will maintain positive growth equal to or greater than 3%, while Ecuador and Chile will post zero growth. The same week that the summit opened, the World Economic Forum on Latin America met in Rio de Janeiro and released forecasts even more pessimistic than those of ECLAC: regional GDP will decrease 0.6% in 2009, while the flow of private investment will drop by US\$47 billion, 89% less than in 2008. The strong performance of the Latin American economies and the reforms undertaken in recent years mean the region will take on the crisis from a position of macroeconomic strength. This will not immunise the region but should at least cushion the drag-in effect of the world recession. The International Monetary Fund's Managing Director, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, said Latin America will recover at a good pace once the wealthy countries, mainly the US, turn the corner. He said this is because Latin America's banking sector has been less damaged than those of other regions.

At the G-20 summit in London, with three Latin American countries present, it was agreed to pump half a trillion dollars into the IMF, taking its reserves from US\$250 billion to US\$750 billion in order to boost its lending capacity. This measure was described as 'very serious' by the Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa. However, Colombia and Mexico

have said they will try to tap the new funds. Also, Obama announced in Trinidad and Tobago that he will push for a re-capitalisation of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), a measure sought by all leaders of the hemisphere and a key issue at the summit because some countries, like Argentina, cannot resort to flexible IMF loans. In late 2008, the IDB's President Luis Alberto Moreno, announced loans for projects in Latin America to the tune of a record US\$12.2 billion in order to tackle the crisis. In the same statement, Moreno said China would join the bank as a donor, contributing US\$350 million and thus strengthen its ties with Latin America. Obama used his announcement on the IDB to gain popularity with respect to other competitors, such as China. Another important announcement was the creation of a new micro-financing fund for loans in the region.

On the economy, little more was agreed at Port of Spain, and this was one of the reasons cited by the countries of the ALBA for not signing the final statement. They called it 'unacceptable' because it does not respond to the global economic crisis. However, the lack of initiatives was offset to some extent by the US proposal for greater cooperation on energy, which was the focus of the second day of the summit. Aware of the emergence of Latin America as an energy power, especially in renewable energies, Obama wants to be able to rely on Latin American partners to engage in joint projects and confront the challenge of climate change. The Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim welcomed Obama's proposal on increased energy cooperation, while keeping in mind the interests of each country. Amorim said that it is impossible to think at the regional level when 'each country has its differences and different approaches'. But the consensus that exists on searching for new energy models, the bio-fuel strategy and energy cooperation were in the summit's final statement.

Another issue of vital importance in hemispheric relations is that of migration. According to a study in *Foreign Affairs en español* (August 2008), nearly 26 million Latin Americans live outside their countries of origin. Of these, 22.3 million (86%) are outside the region, while 3.5 million (14%) are in other Latin American countries. The main destination of Latin American migrants has been and continues to be the US. Another study, by the Pew Research Center, has reported that 75% of the illegal immigrants living in the US are Hispanic. Of these, 59% (nearly 7 million) come from Mexico, 11% from Central America, 7% from South America and 4% from the Caribbean.

After the summit, the President of the Central American Integration Initiative (SICA in Spanish) met with Obama to discuss immigration reform, which Obama had announced during the US presidential election campaign as a gesture to Hispanics. The Central American Presidents expressed concern about their citizens in the US, including those affected by natural disasters, who fall under the category of Temporary Protected Status (TPS). This was granted to 250,000 Salvadorans, 75,000 Hondurans and 4,000 Nicaraguans. Their visas will expire in May 2010 in the case of the Hondurans and Nicaraguans and in September of that year for the Salvadoreans. The outgoing Salvadorean President, Tony Saca, suggested to Obama that they be permanently legalised. The leaders also addressed the touchy issue of immigrants with criminal records who are deported from the US and freed when they arrive back in their home countries. Álvaro Colom, President of Guatemala, said there was discussion of the possibility of the US providing advance notice of the deportations, so these people can serve their sentences in their native countries. Although concrete results were not achieved on many issues, the Central American leaders expressed optimism after their meeting with Obama. They said he was 'totally different in terms of how we are being treated, in the sense that there is more openness, more dialogue, more respect'. To this

effect it is worth nothing that Obama listened closely during the three plenary sessions, showing a quality not seen in his predecessors.

It was to be expected that the summit would address negotiations on free trade accords between the US and some countries in the region. These talks are paralysed in the US Congress. Thanks to intense bilateral contacts, the groundwork was laid for re-launching the negotiations on approving free-trade deals with Colombia and Panama. The 'buy American' campaign proposed by Obama to ease the effects of the economic crisis, which he later toned down, did not sit well with the US's neighbours since the US is Latin America's number-one trading partner. But it is also true that Latin America has also seen a resurgence of protectionism in the countries of Mercosur (Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay). At the Summit of the Americas, several countries wanted a paragraph in the final statement that would call explicitly for 'an open, transparent and rules-based multilateral trading system'. In the end, this was in fact included as Point 14 in the statement. In any case, free trade was not a big topic at the summit, even though it was the issue that got such meetings started 15 years ago.

Latin America's most pressing problems are drug trafficking and violence. In the case of Mexico, during a visit there Clinton and the Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said the US shared responsibility in the war against drug cartels. The US is the main market for drugs from Mexico and President Calderón says 90% of the weapons in Mexico come from across the border in the US. Obama's visit to Mexico prior to the summit firmed up the commitment made by Clinton and Napolitano to cooperate in the fight against criminal organisations that operate in the area. This is a major step with immediate repercussions in the countries of Central and South America: the latest reports from the US Drug Enforcement Administration say that pressure from President Calderón has prompted some cartels to flee to Central America, where their involvement with street gangs called *maras* is particularly worrying. According to a report issued in February 2009 by the International Narcotics Control Board, an independent body that monitors implementation of UN drug conventions, 'there is no country in the region which is free of the drug problem'. Colombia, Bolivia and Peru are the world's top producers of coca and cocaine, which is sold in the US and Europe over land, air and sea routes that pass through Central America. In those three countries, the total land area used to grow coca in 2007 rose 16% from 2006. The same report warned that 'corruption, a judicial system equipped with scant resources, the lack of public trust and weak legal action' continue to be factors that hinder the war on drugs in the region.

The summit's final statement features a generic commitment to 'fight the global drug problem and related crimes' (point 5) as part of the challenges that the Americas region faces. Later, the statement says the countries promise to fight together and in a coordinated way (points 70 to 76) against money laundering, manufacturing of and illegal trafficking in weapons or any other kind of organised, transnational delinquency. As for the problem posed by the *maras*, the leaders agreed to encourage 'OAS efforts to prepare a comprehensive hemispheric strategy to promote inter-American cooperation in dealing with criminal gangs'. One will have to wait and see how this cooperation evolves in the future, since Ecuador and Bolivia are wary of DEA action in the Andes region. Ecuador did not renew the Base de Manta agreement and in Bolivia President Evo Morales suspended DEA activities in his country in November 2008 after accusing some of its agents of conspiring against his government.

It was only the summit's host, Peter Manning, who signed the final statement on behalf of all of the countries that attended. This was a reflection of the discontent of the countries of the ALBA movement. The document had been agreed after months of negotiations among the delegations, producing a document that was long and rhetorical. It was criticised as being a 'ragbag that will not facilitate structuring the region's priorities'.

#### *The Aftermath of the Summit*

Although the summit can be considered a success, one should not overstate the gestures made in Port of Spain. In a speech marking his first 100 days in office, Barack Obama did not refer again to the Cuban issue, although he did address other important areas of US foreign policy, such as Iraq and the new American strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan. US Presidents hold yearly meetings with leaders of the Pacific Rim countries in order to follow up on initiatives undertaken in the region. But these summits of the Americas are only held every four years, and there is no follow-up or evaluation of the measures signed in the final statements.

But the meeting in Trinidad and Tobago did serve to draw a map of the current situation in Latin America, both with regard to its relations with the US and the status of its various countries. As for the first issue, along with Spain, the US was the only country that had an overall policy towards Latin America. However, policy differences and the conflicts that have emerged make it increasingly difficult to pursue this policy, giving way instead to a bilateral approach with an agenda suiting each case. For Washington, Brazil, Mexico and to a lesser extent Chile are shaping up as strategic partners.

Brazil came out of the summit with its role as leader of South America enhanced. Evidence of this was its mediation aimed at getting the US to hold a dialogue with the region's bloc of countries most critical of Washington: Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua and Ecuador. After Brazil's request to Hillary Clinton, the Secretary of State said publicly that she was willing to do so. Once again, Lula stole the limelight from Chávez. The anti-imperialist discourse of these countries was overshadowed not only by Obama's reaching out, but also by Brazil, which is increasingly important on the regional and international stage. Argentina's role is also significant. President Cristina Kirchner did not have a bilateral meeting with Obama, so her only interaction with him was in the session he held with the presidents of Unasur. Although many times Kirchner has said that US strategy toward Latin American countries was to 'divide and rule', this time she turned the argument around and complained about not getting a face-to-face meeting with Obama. This gives the impression that Kirchner was aware that once again Argentina is not among Obama's strategic preferences, yet another setback for the country's international position.

**Conclusions:** Although little concrete emerged from the Fifth Summit of the Americas, it did pave the way for a new relationship between the US and Latin America and the Caribbean. That said, this new US policy of acting 'with' rather than 'for' Latin America requires greater commitment and greater definition from the countries of the region. Otherwise, and much to its detriment, the US will continue to set the agenda. Therefore, it is a good idea to avoid crying victory until the promising steps taken in Trinidad y Tobago –to cite a few highly practical and symbolic examples, they include rapprochement with Cuba, a pledge to look again at the immigration issue, a coordinated fight against drug trafficking and organised crime and the elimination of the North American Free Trade Agreement, the last of which divided the continent deeply– develop into specific actions.

Brazilian and Mexican diplomacy will play key roles in the future because they have been chosen by the US as preferred channels of contact. Brazil's mediating skills are also highly regarded by the countries of South America. The US is aware of this and the fact that Brazil today has vast experience in renewable energies, making it an essential partner for Obama in his ambitious energy programme for the American continent. Meanwhile, the countries of the ALBA initiative, while not expressing the hostility they did towards Obama's predecessor, George Bush, did show their discontent by not signing the summit's final statement. The gesture drew widespread commentary but did not manage to water down the positive feelings that characterised the summit.

The future of Cuba in the OAS was another of the issues taken up by various delegations in many of the meetings held on the sidelines of the plenary sessions. Strong criticism of the OAS's decision to expel Cuba in 1962 is still out there, and this makes for intense debate over reversing it when the organisation holds its next General Assembly. But we will have to wait and see how such a measure would be compatible with the democratic charter of the OAS. Actually, what is at stake is the very future of the OAS. It remains to be seen if the constructive mood with which the summit ended can be transferred to this framework, and if the OAS is capable of taking a unilateral step with regard to Cuba similar to the one that Obama made.

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