

How to judge the 2009 Summit

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Summit meetings rarely lead to political or diplomatic breakthroughs. That is the wrong measure of their success. When they do, it almost always reflects a strong prior consensus. The role is then to endorse and validate the consensus, raise its visibility, and mobilise public support in its favour. Summits mostly reveal the harmony (or disharmony) of underlying political relations. They can intensify and focus that harmony, but they cannot manufacture it out of conflict and division.

The Fifth Summit of the Americas, which will gather the Western Hemisphere's 34 democratically elected leaders in Port of Spain on 17th April, is unlikely to be an exception. Its four predecessor meetings, starting in Miami in 1994, had two memorable achievements. One was the launching in Santiago, Chile in 1997 of negotiations for the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), an ambitious effort to integrate the hemisphere's economies. The second was the agreement in Quebec City, Canada in 2001 to draft the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which was signed later that year in Lima.

The FTAA talks, however, are stalled, and it is now hard to imagine they will ever be revived. For its part, the Democratic Charter has gone largely unused. Both it and the FTAA were victims of the deep strains in US-Latin American relations and the distrust and division among the region's governments – which also led to the tense proceedings and unhappy outcome of the most recent Summit in Mar del Plata, Argentina in 2005.

This history is not meant to belittle the value of the past summits or to suggest the April 2009 meeting will not be productive. Instead, it is a call to set appropriate goals and realistic expectations for Port of Spain. The presidents and prime ministers cannot be expected to repair the fractures or end the discord in hemispheric affairs. Nor will they be able to disregard or circumvent them. Under the circumstances, they are unlikely to find sufficient common ground to embark upon new initiatives that involve any substantial measure of cooperation. Nor is this likely to be the right moment to attempt to redesign the Summit process or restructure inter-American institutions.

What can be accomplished is a serious exchange of views among the politically diverse group of assembled leaders about the important challenges the hemisphere confronts – starting with the economic crisis – and what

can and should be done to address them. If that exchange takes place in an orderly and civil fashion, without accusations or recriminations, the Trinidad Summit will be a success. Even without agreement on proposals and action plans, a great deal will have been achieved. The leaders will have set a better tone for hemispheric discourse in the coming period, and begun to moderate the acrimony in regional relationships.

And this can be achieved. First and most important, the United States today has a president that is liked and admired across Latin America and the Caribbean. Obama's election was enthusiastically welcomed in the region, and viewed as a hopeful sign of the vitality of US democracy and the prospect of more constructive US-Latin American ties.

Second, the most troublesome issue for the earlier Summit – whether to resume FTAA talks – is no longer on the inter-American agenda. For every country the central question is how to cope with the global financial crisis. Every Latin American and Caribbean country faces sluggish growth, rising unemployment, and deepening poverty. Although this 'made in the USA' crisis has bred new resentment toward Washington, it also makes cooperation with the United States, as well as among the countries of the region, far more important.

Third, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has invested heavily in making the Summit work. The official Summit declaration, which has been discussed for months among the participating governments, is skilfully crafted. To be sure, to avoid provoking confrontation, the declaration is often bland or vague, but it ably addresses several critical issues – related to environmental sustainability, energy security, and human prosperity.

The spotlight in Port of Spain will be on President Obama – even though many other leaders will be participating in their first hemispheric summit, including Mexico's Felipe Calderón, Canada's Stephen Harper, Argentina's Christina Fernández, Chile's Michelle Bachelet, and Ecuador's Raphael Correa. This will be an opportunity for them and other participants to tell the new US president (and each other) how they see political and economic developments in the region and globally, what they like and dislike about US policies, and what they now want from the United States – and from each other.

The topic of greatest concern will be the global economic crisis – and whether and how US policy responses will take Latin America's needs into account

What President Obama has to say, and what he decides not to say will get special attention, however. No one anticipates that the US President, after three months in office, will announce dramatic new directions or offer detailed policy proposals for US-Latin American relations. He will, however, be expected to talk about his priorities and discuss his ideas about major inter-American challenges – and he can contribute importantly to the Summit's success by his willingness to do so. The regional leaders will be concerned about style as well as substance. They will want to see a different tone and texture in the diplomacy of the new US administration – and will be looking for signals of a multilateral and respectful approach to regional affairs. But more than anything else, they will want to hear his thinking about concrete problems and opportunities.

Greatest concern will focus on the global economic crisis – and whether and how US policy responses take Latin America's needs into account. Latin America's recovery depends on the US regaining economic health. But how Washington proceeds to repair its broken economy is also critical. Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has made clear to President Obama that Washington must resist protectionist measures that would curb US imports or overseas investments; use its influence to encourage expanded resources and new flexibility for the multilateral financial institutions; and to coordinate policy approaches with the region's governments. Latin American leaders will want to be reassured about the 'buy American' provisions of the stimulus package and hear that the Obama administration plans to support substantially increases in multilateral funding for the region's economies.

The Latin American and Caribbean heads of state will expect Obama to be prepared to discuss other issues as well.

- Every government wants to know whether the Obama administration will find a way to end the United States' policy of isolating and sanctioning Cuba.
- With the pandemic of criminal violence spreading across Latin America, governments will be interested in whether the United States proposes to extend support beyond Colombia and Mexico, to the many other countries battling organised crime and drug trafficking. They will also want to know whether the new US administration is prepared to rethink its decades-old anti-drug strategy that has irritated so many countries of Latin America and yielded such scant results.
- Latin American leaders are aware of the bitter US debates over immigration and know that reform may take time – but they are hoping to hear that the Obama administration will, at some point, actively pursue changes in immigration law. And they are hopeful that he will suspend construction of the 'wall' on the

US-Mexican border, and stop the raids and arrests targeting illegal immigrants.

- Trade initiatives are not a high priority for either the United States or Latin America. But most of the region's governments want to hear that the new administration will start soon to work toward congressional ratification of the trade agreements that the United States has already negotiated with Colombia and Panama. Most Latin American countries, and many in the US Congress, would also applaud Washington's reinstating Bolivia's trade preferences.

- The leaders of the dozen English-speaking Caribbean nations, who have long felt their interests ignored by the United States, will expect some special consideration given that this is the first hemispheric summit held in their territory. They will want, at a minimum, an indication that President Obama understands the depth of the economic and security problems that are confronting most Caribbean countries.

- How the Obama administration thinks about the challenges posed by Venezuela and its several regional allies is of deep concern to the assembled leaders.

- The Latin American and Caribbean leaders will also have a keen interest in Washington's approach to global policies, including its current thinking about the Israeli-Palestine conflict, withdrawal from Iraq, the closing of Guantanamo, the war in Afghanistan, and US relations with such countries as Iran, China, and Russia. They hope to learn that the United States no longer divides the world into friends and adversaries – and is now prepared to pursue more multilateral and conciliatory approaches in the hemisphere and beyond.

For the assembled governments, the most important product of the Summit will be the results and impressions that emerge from informal exchanges among the US, Latin American, Caribbean, and Canadian leaders. These will be far more critical than the formal proceedings or the meeting's final declaration in determining the Summit's value.

Most attention will be on President Obama. The other governments will use the occasion, first, to judge whether the new US president will take Latin American and Caribbean interests into account as he struggles to repair the US economy. Second, they will want to assess whether the Obama administration is likely to adjust its regional policies and goals so they (1) reflect the profound political and economic changes that have taken place in Latin America and the Caribbean, (2) recognise the diminished ability of the United States to exert authority and determine outcomes in the region, and (3) build toward a more cooperative and inclusive relationship with the rest of the hemisphere.

The signals from President Obama and how they are interpreted in Latin America will critically shape everyone's judgment of the Summit. **F**