

Summits and Short-sightedness in the Americas

Author: Daniel Cerqueira*

Since the First Summit of the Americas was held in Miami (1994), the state of the hemisphere has undergone significant changes. At that time, the heads of state and government shared the premise that trade liberalization and economic integration would be the driving forces of the region's development and welfare. Accordingly, the Declaration of the First Summit states:

"Free trade and increased economic integration are key factors for raising standards of living, improving the working conditions of people in the Americas and better protecting the environment. We, therefore, resolve to begin immediately to construct the 'Free Trade Area of the Americas' (FTAA), in which barriers to trade and investment will be progressively eliminated."

Two decades later, China has become the principal importer, exporter, investor, and lender in much of Latin America and the Caribbean. According to data from the Global Economic Governance Initiative at Boston University, China granted over \$102 million in loans to Latin America between 2005 and 2013, which exceeds the amount disbursed by the multilateral banks headquartered in Washington DC, and which makes Shanghai the region's new financial center. Currently, the closest thing to the FTAA in the hemisphere is a political and diplomatic bloc whose acronym—ALBA—embodies a deliberate opposition to the aspirations of free trade in the Americas.

If the economic aspect of the consensus expressed in Miami has come to an end, in the diplomatic sphere the ability of the region's governments to find consensus on the hemispheric agenda is on its last legs. At the Cartagena (2012) and Port of Spain (2009) Summits, the main obstacle to the adoption of a final declaration of the heads of state was the exclusion of the Cuban government. At the most recent Summit, held in Panama (2015), there was no final declaration because of differences surrounding a paragraph proposed by some of the ALBA countries rejecting the White House Executive Order calling the Venezuelan government an "unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security" of the United States.

Aside from the situational reasons that have led to disagreements at the last three summits, regional integration was already suffering—well before the first meeting of presidents and prime ministers held in 1994—from a shortsightedness characterized by two main symptoms: (i) an inter-governmental

perspective that was disconnected from the demands of civil society and the public; and (ii) the ease with which bilateral disputes render issues of hemispheric interest opaque and therefore outside the purview of the inter-governmental perspective.

At the Panama Summit, the first symptom was illustrated by Barack Obama's praise for Mexico's recently enacted energy reforms. In the opinion of the U.S. President, the reforms will create jobs and foster development; for a substantial part of the Mexican people and civil society, it will give rise to social conflict and, ultimately, the violation of the fundamental right of various indigenous communities to be consulted prior to any government decision affecting their traditional lands.

With respect to the second symptom of inter-American shortsightedness, some heads of state placed a surprising priority on the dispute between the United States and Venezuela during the Panama Summit. It is virtually indisputable that the executive order was a clumsy decision that lacked political sensitivity to the polarization of Venezuelan society. If the White House was looking to increase the political cost of the serious human rights violations that are being committed on a daily basis in Venezuela, its strategy was inadequate. What it did manage to do was to further radicalize Nicolás Maduro's position of ignoring political opposition and social protest as a legitimate expression of democratic participation. Notwithstanding, it is unprecedented for the differences between two governments to be capable of precluding a joint statement by the heads of state on their outlook for the region and its people.

Throughout most of the Cold War, the relationship between Washington and its Latin American and Caribbean counterparts seemed to have been designed by the Department of Defense and its Panamanian subsidiary, the School of the Americas. While the United States implemented an entire reconstruction plan—the Marshall Plan—to contain the Soviet influence in Europe after it had been devastated by the two World Wars, in Latin America the closest thing to an integration plan designed to contain international communism was probably Operation Condor. On this path of regional integration, the Miami Summit symbolized a self-critical gesture of U.S. diplomacy, in which the design of its relationship with Latin America and the Caribbean would shift from the Department of Defense to the Department of Commerce. For its part, the Panama Summit will most likely be recalled as a milestone that marked the beginning of diplomacy toward the region directed from the Department of State and the White House.

It would be too much to expect that in Panama, whose national history includes a lengthy repertoire of harsh events in north-south hemispheric relations, the inter-American shortsightedness would be cured

with a handshake between Obama and Castro. For those of us who were at the Summit of the Americas, the myopia was more evident than ever, and not only because of the conduct of the region's leaders. During the civil society forum held in the days prior to the presidential forum, the long-winded speeches of the pro-government Cubans and Venezuelans against the presence of members of the opposition, and the recurring altercations between both groups, were also a reflection of this inter-American shortsightedness that highlights the differences and the stumbling blocks that hinder their potential resolution. In addition, the summit was marked by inconsistencies such as the recitation of anti-imperialist slogans such as "Yankee go home" by Chavistas and supporters of Castro, while Raúl Castro clearly took a conciliatory stance toward his U.S. counterpart that instead conveyed the subliminal message of "Yankee welcome home."

Judging by the course of the debates during the civil society forum and the absence of a final declaration by the region's presidents in Panama, if the official slogan of the 2015 Summit had not been "Prosperity with Equity," one would think that its sole purpose was to record the historic meeting between the presidents of Cuba and the United States. It remains to be seen whether this small diplomatic step will amount to a great leap for the future integration of the governments of the Americas. If so, another important step must still be taken to reconcile the agenda of inter-governmental forums and the demands and expectations of the citizens represented therein.

***Daniel Cerqueira is a Senior Program Officer at the Due Process of Law Foundation.**