

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2044
September 3, 2008

The Eighth Defense Ministerial of the Americas: End of the Line?

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The Canadian government will host the Eighth Defense Ministerial of the Americas (DMA) September 2–6 at Banff in the scenic Canadian Rockies. The purpose of the meeting is the promotion of regional defense and security cooperation in the Americas and the strengthening of ties among 34 invited nations. It is a ministerial event in search of a diplomatic and strategic meaning—and at present lacking both.

Harbinger of Security Cooperation. The first DMA took place in Williamsburg, Virginia, in 1995. It began as a defense and security counterpart for the 1994 Miami Summit of the Americas. The U.S. launched the DMA in the proximate aftermath of the Cold War at a time when the U.S. and Latin America appeared to be moving with unity of purpose toward strengthening democracy, expanding free trade, guaranteeing basic human rights, and deepening defense reform and security cooperation.

An underlying assumption of this DMA process was that as the world's sole superpower, the U.S. was uniquely positioned to mentor the Hemisphere's armed forces as they set out to discover new roles and relationships in an altered geopolitical environment. The threat posed by the Soviet Union and its proxies had vanished, and Cuba had sunken into nasty but largely isolated dotage.

Among the fundamental “Williamsburg principles” were calls for defending democracy, broadening civilian control over the military, increasing transparency in defense matters, and enhancing confidence-building among nations. These were to

become benchmarks for building a better, more unified, and safer Americas. The DMA was also seen as a forum for encouraging non-traditional roles for militaries and strategies to meet emerging transnational threats.

History Returns to Latin America. While its principles remain sound, the DMA today has lost cohesion and much of its rationale for convening. Latin America, thanks to Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez and his Bolivarian Revolution, is engaged in its own version of “the return to history,” to quote conservative strategic thinker Robert Kagan.¹ Signs of this return include a mixture of ethno- and resource-nationalism coupled with a reappearance of Péronist-style populism in Venezuela and elsewhere. For the fervent U.S.-bashers in Latin America, Chávez is the new Fidel Castro, a David striking out at the imperial U.S. hegemon.

Thus far 2008 has proven divisive for hemispheric security. It has been marked by Colombia's crisis with Ecuador and Venezuela after the March 1 attack on the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) camp in Ecuador, resulting in threats of war and a display of readiness by President Chávez to back the narco-terrorism of the FARC against a democratically elected government.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/LatinAmerica/wm2044.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
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It has also witnessed the emergence of an exclusionary South American security body (UNASUR). Although Brazil and Venezuela are the project's main promoters and all 12 South American nations have signed on, members maintain contradictory views about the new body's goals and implementation mechanisms. It is also worth noting that this regional security architecture is meant to be a Latin American-only club, thereby excluding the U.S., despite its undeniable role as an essential contributor to hemispheric security and stability. Under such conditions, UNASUR is bound to fail.

Most recently Chávez has aligned with Russia and extended an invitation for Russia to again project military power into the Western Hemisphere.

Not all blame accrues to Chávez. Washington also retains the ability to inflict serious wounds to our hemispheric relationships. In a recent *Foreign Affairs* article, former Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda points to legislative diluting of the anti-drug program for Mexico (known as the Merida Initiative), the U.S. refusal to drop a 54-cent-per-gallon tariff on Brazil's sugar cane-based ethanol, and the sidelining of the Colombia free trade agreement as acts of parochialism that trouble our closest hemispheric partners.²

A Minimal Agenda. Canada, the DMA's host, wants to play a constructive defense and security role in the Hemisphere. The Canadians are working hard on an agenda focused on less divisive topics such as responding to natural disasters, security cooperation for international events like the 2007 Cricket World Cup, and developing peacekeeping capacity and expertise. Optimists still see the possibility of institutionalization and follow-up to advance cooperative security that will make countries actually work together. Yet these positive attitudes will not heal deep ideological fissures.

The DMA, like the larger Summit of the Americas process and the vision of a Free Trade Area of the Americas, is floundering.³ It has fallen victim to ideological, social, and geopolitical rifts that are sundering the former hope for democratic unity in the Americas. The Williamsburg principles mean little to the exclusionary brand of Bolivarian nationalism and anti-imperialism.

The need for security cooperation remains manifest in the Americas. Criminal organizations, gangs, trafficking organizations and residual insurgencies require serious, concerted action. Citizen security and fighting domestic and international crime are central concerns for all of the Americas. The threat of global terrorism to the Hemisphere is genuine, as evidenced by the increased presence and activities of Islamic radical groups in areas such as the tri-border region between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay.

In the U.S., professional soldiers and diplomats remain committed to perpetuating process and the pleasing fiction of hemispheric unity and the imaginary workings of multilateral, inter-American security institutions. Some are patient enough to await prodigal Venezuela's return to the democratic fold. Sadly, that wait may be longer than anyone desires.

Back to Basics. For the foreseeable future, the working lines of hemispheric security cooperation will run primarily like the spokes of a wheel from North America to nations ready for serious-minded, professional interaction and genuine cooperation. Under this model, effective partnerships will be possible only if they are based on a set of shared values such as liberal democracy and free markets. In said cases, defense cooperation can take the form of either bilateral or multi-country arrangements, but it requires actual friends and genuine partners, like the U.S. and Colombia, ready to tackle tough challenges such as counter-terrorism, anti-drug actions, or international peacekeeping.

1. Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams* (New York: Knopf, 2008).
2. Jorge G. Castañeda, "Morning in Latin America: The Chance for a New Beginning," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2008, pp. 136–137.
3. Jim Roberts, "Rethinking the Summit of the Americas and Advancing Free Trade in Latin America," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2170, August 8, 2008, at http://www.heritage.org/Research/LatinAmerica/upload/bg_2170.pdf. See also Thomas A. Shannon and Ambassador Hector Morales, "Summit Promotes Security, Democracy, Prosperity," *The Miami Herald*, August 20, 2008, at <http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rls/rm/2008/q3/108657.htm> (August 27, 2008).

Ministerial success at Banff would be a good step in the right direction. However, given the Hemisphere's present strategic situation, that is almost impossible. Therefore, expectations and resources would be better invested in working more closely with friends and real partners than in staging short-lived shotgun weddings at scenic Canadian resorts.

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