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The Summit of the Americas: A Chance to Make the Americas More Secure

Ray Walser, Ph.D.

On April 17, President Obama arrives in Trinidad and Tobago to participate in the Fifth Summit of the Americas. The summit process, begun in 1994 by President Bill Clinton, brings together 34 leaders of the Western Hemisphere to develop a shared agenda aimed at improving citizen's lives, promoting prosperity, and strengthening good governance in the Americas. The architects of the summit promise to focus on human prosperity, energy security, and environmental sustainability.

Expectations for the Summit. Expectations regarding the summit are relatively low. The Administration has been in office for less than 90 days and is focused primarily on the domestic and international consequences of the present economic crisis, as well as Iraq, Afghanistan, North Korea, and other crisis areas. Predictions for economic growth in the Western Hemisphere over the next five years have moved from optimistic to somber. The Obama Administration has spoken of new funding for the international financial institutes and “bottom-up” development, while the greatest hope for the region lies in a swift and strong U.S. economic recovery.

Given an absence of new policy, the media is inclined to focus primarily on the following issues:

- The dynamics of President Obama's first encounter with Latin and Caribbean leaders;
- The recent modifications in U.S. policy toward Cuba along with the island nation's (not invited) place on the agenda; and

- The potential for a showdown between Obama and Venezuela's populist, anti-American President Hugo Chavez.

However, the gravest challenge facing the summit—fortifying basic citizen security and strengthening the crumbling underpinnings of regional security in the Americas—stands a good chance of being largely overlooked.

Global Crime Pandemic. Today millions of citizens in the hemisphere live in varying states of fear: What Moises Naim of *Foreign Policy* recently referred to as a “global crime pandemic” grips the region.¹ Homicide rates in the Western Hemisphere remain alarmingly high, making the Caribbean and Latin America among the most violence-prone societies in the world. The poor are frequently victimized or terrorized while the prosperous live in a state of continuous fear, relying on private security, armored vehicles, and fortified residences as their first and sometimes only line of defense. The costs of insecurity shave points off economic growth.

The challenge for the Obama Administration will be to deliver more than statements of concern over public safety in Latin America. The Administration needs to develop a comprehensive anti-crime, anti-

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drug strategy that retains the participation of the source countries and rebuilds consensus regarding an appropriate domestic anti-drug strategy. In the U.S. and Latin America, it has become commonplace to speak of the failures of the “war on drugs” without offering a satisfactory alternative.

Yet the core of the problem is the ongoing battle against powerful, transnational criminal organizations that continue to amass sufficient power and wealth to engage in direct assaults on democracy. In Mexico, the drug cartels have created a climate of widespread insecurity and led some to speak of Mexico as a “failed state.” Seven thousand drug-related deaths in 2008 in Mexico demonstrate the magnitude of the problem.

Central America is increasingly insecure as a result of the drug trade and the activities of criminal gangs or *maras*. In Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) continues to wage war against the Bogota government as the U.S. ramps down assistance to Plan Colombia. In Peru, there are troubling signs of the linkages between the persistence of coca cultivation and the reemergence of the Sendero Luminosa. Other coca producers seek expanding opportunities in anti-American Bolivia and fresh transit routes across President Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela.

In short, on the eve of the Summit of the Americas, the coca and cocaine trade continues to flourish. Connections between terrorism and cocaine production are exploited by both homegrown terrorists and by international terrorist organizations like Hezbollah.

Part of a Global Security Architecture. The other aspect of security President Obama needs to address with his fellow leaders is the overall international security picture. An enduring feature that tended to distinguish the Western Hemisphere from other parts of the world was the absence—after 1823 (with some exceptions)—of European colonies and a commitment to sheltering the area from the titanic struggles of the Great Powers and the clash of Eurasian totalitarian regimes. What was

known as the Monroe Doctrine acted as a firewall for the Americas.

Today, experts of every stripe have pronounced the Monroe Doctrine dead: China, Russia, India, the European Union, and even Iran are allowed—even welcomed—to operate commercially, diplomatically, and even militarily in the Western Hemisphere. Pessimists say the decline in U.S. power and military resources will open the door for foreign strategic interlopers ready to provide weapons systems, technologies, and even imported ideologies.

The interconnection between Latin America and the volatile Middle East—especially via the diplomatic mechanisms being established between Venezuela and Iran—will open further fissures and conduits for potential dangerous and destabilizing movements in the region. As noted above, responsible leaders in the hemisphere need to step forward to end insurgencies and defend the Americas against the threats of international terrorism. The U.S. can ill afford to lose sight of the importance of preserving the region, speaking in general terms, as a geo-strategic zone of peace.

Speaking Clearly about Security. If the U.S. and its Latin American and Caribbean neighbors are to live in a more stable, secure, and prosperous environment, there needs to be enhanced attention to public safety, renewed counter-drug cooperation, and a serious discussion about the place of the Americas in global security architecture.

President Obama should take the following steps before, during, and after the Fifth Summit of the Americas:

- Emphasize the critical importance of dealing with criminality and illicit activities throughout the hemisphere;
- Commit to crafting a strong personal message as part of a revitalized demand reduction effort for the Americas;
- Order a comprehensive, high-level review of all aspects of U.S. international drug policy, from problems in source countries to consumption in the U.S.;

1. Moises Naim, “The Crime Pandemic,” *Foreign Policy*, July/August 2007.

- Offer to convene within a year's time a hemispheric drug summit to improve law enforcement and anti-crime cooperation and supply as well as demand reduction programs;
- Remind friends and warn Latin Americas populists that U.S. regional security interests require mutual security, preserving a nuclear weapons-free hemisphere, ending arms buildups, and keeping international terrorism and nations that sponsor it out of the hemisphere.

By following these steps, President Obama will ensure that the Fifth Summit of the Americas makes considerable progress toward securing a more secure, stable, and prosperous Western Hemisphere.

—Ray Walser, Ph.D., is Senior Policy Analyst for Latin America in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.