

WebMemo



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The Fifth Summit of the Americas: Return of the Good Neighbor Policy?

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President Obama has completed a grip-and-grin opportunity with hemispheric counterparts at the recently concluded Fifth Summit of the Americas. At the summit, billed as a listen-and-learn event, President Obama modestly offered U.S. assistance to Latin American nations hardest hit by the economic crisis via lending from the International Monetary Fund and Inter-American Development Bank, as well as promising a \$100 million Microfinance Growth Fund. Obama made no public mention of trade, foreign investments, or global trade negotiations as potential solutions.

The President reiterated the need to confront transnational drug and security challenges, but offered little more than a promise of \$30 million in aid for Caribbean nations. He will press for Senate ratification of an inter-American arms treaty that promises symbolic relief. Finally, a voluntary energy-climate partnership agreement will serve as a conceptual framework for future green actions in the Americas.

When it came time to sign the summit's declaration, however, Venezuela and other nations balked because it failed to demand an end to U.S. trade sanctions against Cuba or Cuba's inclusion in hemispheric institutions.

The New Good Neighbor Policy. Often fascinated with things Rooseveltian, President Obama appeared to be rekindling FDR's Good Neighbor Policy:

I pledge to you that we seek an equal partnership. There is no senior partner and junior

partner in our relations; there is simply engagement based on mutual respect and common interests and shared values. So I'm here to launch a new chapter of engagement that will be sustained throughout my administration.

In the post-summit press event, President Obama promised to break free "from the stale debates and old ideologies." He noted that while the U.S. is governed by universal values, the U.S. sometimes falters." Yet, when the President had a chance to deliver a strong message on democracy and human rights, he gave lukewarm one.

For the moment the U.S. seeks friendship with all, regardless of political coloration or economic persuasion. And, as it did during FDR's Good Neighbor Policy, the U.S. may enter a new period of non-interventionism in the Americas—learning to live in relative harmony with the contemporary equivalents of nationalists, corporatists, and tyrants of the 1930s.

Mesmerized by Cuba. The Administration largely kept Cuba off the immediate agenda, despite a reported offer by Cuba's Raul Castro to open talks. On April 16, speaking before the Latin American left clique of Chávez and company, Raul said, "We

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are willing to discuss everything,” but then he inserted all sorts of caveats. President Obama tried to lower expectations of rapid change, noting, “I am not interested in talking for the sake of talking. But I do believe that we can move U.S.–Cuban relations in a new direction.” The President will face renewed domestic pressure to start direct talks with the Cubans, end the ban on general U.S. travel, and throttle back business and commercial restrictions.

Bolivarian Arm Twisting. Venezuela’s populist strongman Hugo Chávez pursued the paparazzi approach to the event but generally controlled his oversized enthusiasm. He gained a photo-op: all handshakes and smiles. During a general meeting, he thrust a popular pro-left history of exploitation and repression in the Americas into the President’s open hands.

Later, President Obama claimed the encounters were no big deal, that U.S. security interests had not been compromised, and that better relations with Venezuela might be advantageous. In his press conference, he registered concerns about Venezuela’s foreign policy and economic policy but failed to mention a mounting assault on Chávez’s political opposition.

Breaking the diplomatic norm of privately requesting host country acceptance of an ambassador-designate before making a public announcement, Chávez announced he will name Roy Chaderton, current Venezuelan ambassador to the OAS, as ambassador to the U.S. Chávez’s proposal short-circuits the normal diplomatic process and limits Washington’s ability to respond privately on the fitness of a potential ambassador. Chávez also created the expectation that Washington will follow suit with a new ambassador to Caracas. Overall, President Obama has clearly opened the door to renewed relations with Venezuela—without a great deal of preconditions.

The Next Hundred Days and Beyond. The initial impression of the summit is that all nations came away feeling they were winners. There were no riots, no counter-summits as in Mar del Plata during the Fourth Summit attended by President Bush. Contentious issues like free trade, serious governance reforms, or free versus unfree markets were relegated to the background. Overall, the latest iteration of the

Summit of the Americas was long on idealism and upbeat rhetoric and short on accomplishments.

The summit marks the end of the Administration’s first 100 days in regional diplomacy. Two things have been accomplished:

1. Critical importance, but limited resources, are being attached to Mexico’s difficult battle against powerful drug cartels; and
2. A path to increased and uncertain interaction with Cuba’s Communist regime and its aging leadership is being opened.

As it continues to put a Latin American team in place and comes down from the rare air of the summit, the Administration needs to concentrate on four basic challenges:

1. *Exercise Caution on Cuba.* President Obama must now give his new policy time to work and discourage Congress from seeking to unilaterally lift restrictions on U.S. tourism and end the embargo. He should continue to press for reform, drawing high-level attention to Cuba’s human rights situation and emphasizing the need for a democratic transition on the island.
2. *Keep Mexico on the Front Burner.* Mexico is by far the most pressing regional challenge, one that requires the steady application of the Oval Office’s influence. The Administration needs to focus on the delivery of promised anti-drug assistance. It can help by using the President to deliver a powerful message against drug abuse in the U.S. as a first step toward demand reduction.
3. *Complete Free Trade Deals.* The Administration should avoid shadowy rhetoric about “partnerships” and “a new era in the hemisphere” and seal the deal by working with Congress to deliver approval of free trade agreements with Colombia and Panama.
4. *Tough Love for Chávez, Morales, and Ortega.* Latin America’s populist-authoritarian left says it wants good relations and its own “restart button.” The Obama Administration must develop a results-oriented, “show-me” policy in response. Security concerns, economic policy issues, and the loss of democratic freedoms are challenges that must be addressed if there is hope for genuinely constructive relationships to develop between the

U.S. and nations governed by the Latin American left. Photo-ops and populist dramatics make good media story, but they accomplish little.

True Reform or Mere Rhetoric? The Fifth Summit of the Americas was characterized by feel-good rhetoric and the resurrection of FDR's Good Neighbor Policy. However, the real impact of the summit—if

there is to be one—will not be clear until the Administration addresses these four basic challenges.

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