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The Eclipse of the Americas

How the Trinidad Summit Marked the Fragmentation of the Inter-American System

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The first Summit of the Americas, in 1994, was a moment of great promise. Thirty-four countries of the Western Hemisphere -- including the United States, plus many newly democratic states busily opening their economies -- signed a declaration affirming their mutual commitment to representative democracy and social justice and to negotiating a single Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).

But by the second summit, four years later, that promise had already begun to dim. Brazil showed less interest in hemispheric free trade than in consolidating a subregional trading bloc, and the ambitious goal of free trade for all was sidelined and eventually abandoned. The fourth summit, in Argentina in 2005, was dominated by noisy counterdemonstrations (headlined by Venezuela's Hugo Chavez) that overshadowed any official business.

The fifth Summit of the Americas, held in Trinidad and Tobago last month, marked the further eclipse of the original inter-American dream -- an open, U.S.-led network of stable democracies with free markets, effective governments, and strong social policies. In the presence of a rock-star U.S. president, Chavez behaved himself, famously approaching Barack Obama to say, "I want to be your friend." But at the conclusion of the weekend conclave, Chavez and his political allies (members of his Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America, or ALBA) refused to sign the summit communiqué -- a rare break in the protocol of such normally heavily choreographed meetings. For the last year, diplomats had been working closely to negotiate word changes with Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, with the understanding that the edits would result in consensus. Not signing the final communiqué -- intended to serve as a plan of action for future inter-American collaboration -- was a public act of betrayal and an open rebellion against any revival of a true inter-American system.

The Trinidad Summit was a personal triumph for Barack Obama. But ALBA's clever tactics, along with some U.S. missteps and Brazil's continued preference for subregionalism, diminished the

prospects for any rebirth of a full-fledged inter-American system. When Chavez circled the table to present the president of the United States with a Spanish-language copy of Eduardo Galeano's *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillages of a Continent* -- a polemic that blames Latin American poverty on U.S. imperialism -- the wily former military officer unveiled the two-track strategy he would deploy throughout the weekend: befriend the radiant man, defame his damned country.

Rather than lead the anti-imperialist charge himself, Chavez slyly assigned the harshest public polemics to two of his deeply indebted vassals, the presidents of Argentina and Nicaragua. Speaking first, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner -- a loyal member of the recidivist Peronist Party, called on the United States to make up for lost decades and not repeat the mistakes of the past. Next, and just before Obama spoke, Daniel Ortega raised the stakes by declaring that "capitalism is putting an end to mankind . . . destroying all of us and leading to the end of the world, digging our graves."

Obama dealt with these various ideological attacks much the way he responds to criticism at home: dispassionately, without apparent malice, and elevating reason over emotion. To Kirchner and Ortega, Obama quipped: "I didn't come here to debate the past -- I came here to deal with the future. I believe, as some of our previous speakers have stated, that we must learn from history, but we can't be trapped by it." And in response to Ortega's claims that U.S. policies had only further impoverished his nation -- despite billions in foreign assistance -- the president admonished, "We will be partners in helping to alleviate poverty. But the American people have to get some positive reinforcement if they are to be engaged in the efforts to lift other countries out of the poverty that they're experiencing."

Obama's capacity to deftly deliver gentle jabs with a cool demeanor and to combine leadership with listening served him well in Latin America. In his final press conference, he suggested that he had been consciously working to regain the confidence of the more moderate Latin states. "As a consequence of a summit like this, it becomes much easier for our friends -- countries like Mexico or Colombia, that are stalwart partners with us on issues like drug trafficking -- it becomes much easier for them to work with us because their neighbors and their populations see us as a force for good or at least not a force for ill." But, on its own, Obama's personal triumph in Trinidad will not recast regional attitudes toward U.S. policy -- or rebuild the increasingly fractured inter-American system.

Cuba proved a particularly difficult problem -- a sign of troubles to come in inter-American relations. Just a few days prior to the summit, the Obama administration announced that it would liberalize travel and remittances for Cuban-Americans but not yet advance to the openness of the final Clinton years, when it was rather easy for Americans in general to visit the island. The hasty, minor tinkering with Cuba policy did not satisfy Latin American leaders. Instead, U.S. timidity allowed Chavez, in championing Cuba, to position himself as the spokesperson for regional opinion. By the summit's close, the secretary general of the Organization of American States, the Chilean José Miguel Insulza, drifted away from an earlier, cautious position on Cuba to seeming to favor Cuban re-entry into the OAS. Going forward, the Cuba issue could immobilize the organization -- and should communist Cuba gain entry, diminish it from within.

With the spirit of an all-inclusive hemispherism in eclipse, the United States will have to shop around or create forums where it can pursue its interests with willing partners -- what in the Western Hemisphere becomes a hub-and-spoke system. The country composition of the spokes will vary

depending on the issue at hand -- on energy, the spokes will likely include Canada, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and maybe Bolivia and Ecuador; for immigration, the Caribbean, Central America, Mexico, and possibly some Andean nations; for economic relief for the poor, countries that share some similar approaches include Brazil, Mexico, and perhaps Nicaragua, among others; on counternarcotics, Guatemala, Mexico, and Andean nations. Extrahemispheric powers such as China, Europe, and Japan might be included in some working coalitions when appropriate.

For such U.S.-led "flexible functionalism" to appeal to Latin Americans, the U.S. political system will have to do a better job at considering Latin American interests -- whether the issue is bilateral free-trade agreements, comprehensive immigration reform, border politics and arms trafficking, or more rational narcotics policies. In light of the many other pressing issues facing the administration and the deep divisions on many inter-American matters within the Democratic Party and U.S. Congress, forward-looking decision-making cannot be taken for granted.

As a fallback methodology, flexible functionalism ("modular multilateralism," as I phrased it in an earlier era) is not necessarily bad. It is easier to work effectively with a smaller number of genuinely interested governments than with an unwieldy crowd laced with disruptive elements. But such an approach runs the risk of further alienating those excluded and raises questions of legitimacy. A hybrid form of flexible functionalism may evolve in which regional institutions -- such as the OAS and the Inter-American Development Bank -- issue broad statements on specific issues, granting some umbrella legitimacy to smaller-group coalitions of the constructively engaged governments.

At the fifth Summit of the Americas, Obama presented the new body language of the U.S. presidency. But he has yet to fully refurbish the American brand, such that the rejectionist countries still felt it was in their interests -- that the benefits outweighed the costs -- to buck a U.S.-led inter-Americanism. The question still remains whether a results-oriented, hub-and-spoke flexible functionalism will pull friendly states back into the U.S. orbit and gradually persuade the rejectionist states that, on balance, they would do better to diminish their anti-Americanism, if not abandon it altogether.

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