

## **The Summit of the Americas has peaked**

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But for the great steak and good wine, this Summit of the Americas has the makings of a lousy beach party. None of our hemispheric neighbours is enthusiastic about spending a couple of days together, starting today, in Mar del Plata, Argentina. Ten of the Latin American countries (including Brazil and Mexico) will be conducting presidential elections within the next year, and their presidents would rather be tending to domestic issues.

Not even the summit's host, Argentina's President Nestor Kirchner, is enthusiastic about the gathering. He has done little to infuse energy or purpose into the summit. He has also excluded civil-society organizations -- which in past summits have been effective in raising issues and stirring the pot -- from participation in all but one of the official proceedings.

It's not as if the last Summit of the Americas, held four years ago in Quebec City, was boring or unproductive. Though remembered by some in Canada for tear-gas clouds, many considered it a success for birthing the Democratic Charter of the Americas, a tool for lifting the hemisphere's democratic standards. So how is it that no one holds out much hope for this summit?

There are a number of reasons.

A leadership void pervades this hemisphere. The traditional hemispheric leaders -- the United States, Mexico, Argentina and Brazil -- are otherwise engaged or distracted. The U.S. is quickly losing ground in its own backyard. And then there is Canada -- more recently counted on to speak loudly, albeit loftily, but carry a small stick.

The only serious attempt to exercise Pan-American leadership comes from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Mr. Chavez is becoming an increasingly effective international operator, purveyor of oil diplomacy, and exploiter of resurgent anti-Americanism. It's easy to understand why many believe that Mr. Chavez's use of petrodollars for health-care delivery in Venezuela and elsewhere in the region is more productive than the use that ChevronTexaco, ConocoPhillips or TotalElfina would make of the same dollars. While many of the current leftist leaders in Latin America reject Mr. Chavez's government militarization and many of his economic policies, they have been more than willing to accept the favourable oil deals offered by Mr. Chavez, and mute their criticism of him.

The summit has been in search of an agenda. The parties settled on an agenda of anodyne, boilerplate issues about jobs, poverty and democracy. These are worthy issues but they were assembled without much hope of presenting new ideas or addressing the increasingly unequal distribution of wealth that has undermined belief in democracy and become a rallying cry for anti-democratic movements.

Absent from the top of the agenda is a discussion of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which was launched at former U.S. president Bill Clinton's first summit in Miami in 1994. It was projected to be implemented by 2005, but after a decade the hemispheric community is no closer to a consensus on what the FTAA should look like.

The agenda also does not include one of the most critical issues facing the hemisphere: the continued viability of the Organization of American States (OAS), which is on the road to insolvency. As the OAS weakens and the summit process loses steam, a competing organization will take on leadership in the hemisphere.

The revitalized Ibero-American Summit is an attractive alternative for some Latin Americans because it includes Spain, Portugal and Cuba, and excludes the U.S. It also excludes Canada and the English-speaking Caribbean countries. The Ibero-American Summit has hired one of Latin America's most distinguished and influential diplomats, Enrique Iglesias, as its new leader.

Canada should be concerned. Canada's engagement with Latin America would be damaged by the collapse or near collapse of the OAS. Its replacement by the Ibero-American Summit would leave a gaping hole in Canadian foreign policy and deprive Canada of its primary tool for addressing and influencing region-wide issues: political, economic, social and security.

Much is at stake for Canada at Mar del Plata. From an economic standpoint alone, Canadian trade and investment have flourished in Latin America. The region contains two of the world's emerging economic powers: Brazil and Mexico.

Though the vogue for Canadians is to think that most of our non-U.S. eggs are and should be placed in the Asia-Pacific basket, comparisons can be salutary. Canadian direct investment in Latin America and the Caribbean is \$61.9 billion, compared to \$22.3 billion for Asia-Pacific. Two-way trade is greater with Asia-Pacific, but the increase last year for Latin America and the Caribbean was 20 per cent, compared to 13 per cent for Asia-Pacific.

Paradoxically, this extensive engagement is not reflected in government foreign policy toward the region.

Because its prospects appear so dismal, the implications of its failure so large, and its direction leaderless, this summit offers an opportunity for Canadian intervention. There is a desire for non-U.S., non-Venezuelan and non-abrasive leadership. There are few candidates currently capable of responding. Canada is one of them.

Prime Minister Paul Martin will be delivering one of the three keynote speeches. A Martin speech that dwells on the FTAA as a panacea for most social and economic ills will be interpreted as a song sung from the U.S. hymnal. A speech that emphasizes the fundamental importance of collective hemispheric response to present and future challenges would resonate. Sustaining the hemispheric community that includes Canada beyond Mar del Plata will require a greater commitment than Canada has demonstrated.

Mr. Martin has an immediate challenge and opportunity in partnership with like-minded colleagues to keep the summit from grounding on the rocks of Mar del Plata.

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