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How to Judge the 2009 Summit of the Americas

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About the Hemispheric Think Tank Working Group in Support of the 2009 Summit of the Americas

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The Working Group brought together researchers and policy analysts from the Western Hemisphere's leading think tanks to engage in intensive debate and dialogue and develop a strong intellectual and policy foundation for preparing and conducting the Summit.

In meetings in Ottawa and Washington, D.C., attended by leading national and multilateral officials, the group explored the critical problems the Summit could address, identified key areas of agreement and disagreement among countries, deeply probed the disagreements, and, where possible, sought to develop pragmatic approaches. These discussions and research have resulted in a series of policy papers that hope to mobilize and raise awareness of the Summit amongst regional governments and civil society.

Summit meetings rarely lead to political or diplomatic breakthroughs. It is unusual—and a wrong measure of their success—for summits to produce substantive results of lasting significance. When they do, it is almost always because a strong prior consensus exists among the assembled leaders. Their role is then to endorse and validate the consensus, raise its visibility, and mobilize public support in its favor. Summits mostly reflect the harmony (or disharmony) of underlying political relations. They can intensify and focus that harmony, but they hardly ever generate it out of conflict and division.

It is unlikely that the fifth Summit of the Americas, which will gather the Western Hemisphere's 34 democratically elected leaders in Port of Spain on April 17, will be an exception. Its four predecessor meetings, starting in Miami in 1994, had two memorable achievements—(1) the launching in Santiago, Chile in 1997 of negotiations for the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), an ambitious effort toward integrating the hemisphere's economies, and (2) the agreement in Quebec City, Canada in 2001 to draft the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which was signed later that year in Lima.

The FTAA talks, however, are now stalled, and it is now hard to imagine they will ever be revived. Indeed, they had become more a source of conflict than cooperation. For its part, the Charter has gone largely unused. Both it and the FTAA were victims of the deep strains in U.S.-Latin American relations and the distrust and division among the region's governments—which also led to the tense proceedings and unhappy outcome of the most recent Summit in Mar del Plata, Argentina in 2005 and persist today.

This brief history is not meant to belittle the value of the past summits or to suggest the April 2009 meeting will not be productive. Instead, it is a call to set appropriate goals and realistic expectations for Port of Spain. The presidents and prime ministers in Trinidad and Tobago cannot be expected to repair the fractures or end the discord in hemispheric affairs. Nor will they be able to disregard or circumvent them. Under the circumstances, they are unlikely to find sufficient common ground to embark upon significant new initiatives that involve any substantial measure of cooperation. Nor is this likely to be the right moment to attempt to redesign the Summit process or restructure other inter-American institutions.

What can be accomplished is an serious exchange of views among the politically diverse group of assembled leaders about the important issues and challenges the hemisphere confronts —starting with the economic crisis— and what can and should be done to address them. If that exchange can take place in an orderly and civil fashion, without accusations or recriminations, the Trinidad Summit will be a success. Even without agreement on proposals and action plans, a great deal will have been achieved. The leaders will have set a better tone for hemispheric discourse in the coming period, and perhaps have begun to moderate the acrimony in regional relationships.

There are good reasons to believe that this can be achieved.

First and perhaps most important, the United States today has a president that is almost universally liked and admired in Latin America and the Caribbean. Across the region Obama's election was enthusiastically welcomed, and viewed as a hopeful sign of the vitality of U.S. democracy and the prospect of a more constructive U.S.-Latin American relationship.

Second, the most troublesome issue for the earlier Summit—whether to resume FTAA talks— is no longer on the inter-American agenda. For every country of the hemisphere, the central challenge is how to cope with the global financial crisis. Every Latin American and Caribbean country faces sluggish growth, rising unemployment, and deepening poverty. Although this “made in the USA” crisis has bred new resentment toward Washington, it also makes cooperation with the United States, as well as among the countries of the region, far more important.

Third, the government of Trinidad and Tobago has invested heavily in making the Summit work. The official draft Summit declaration, which has been discussed and debated for months among the participating governments, has been skillfully crafted. To be sure, the declaration is often bland in order to avoid confrontation, but it ably addresses several critical issues, related to environmental sustainability, energy security, and human prosperity (all of which will be affected by the slumping economies).

The spotlight in Port of Spain will clearly be on President Obama, although there will be other leaders participating in their first hemispheric summit, including Mexico's Felipe Calderón, Canada's Stephen Harper, Argentina's Christina Fernandez, Chile's Michelle Bachelet, and Ecuador's Raphael Correa. This will be an opportunity for them and other participants to tell the new U.S. president (and each other) how they see political and economic developments in the region and globally, what they like and dislike about U.S. policies, and what they now want from the United States—and from each other.

Particular attention, however, will be given to what President Obama has to say. No one anticipates that the U.S. president, after only three months in office, will be ready to announce dramatic new directions or offer detailed policy proposals for U.S.-Latin American relations. He will, however, be expected to talk about his priorities and discuss his ideas about major inter-American challenges—and he can contribute importantly to the Summit's success by his willingness to do so. The regional leaders will be concerned about style as well as substance. They will want to see a different tone and texture in the diplomacy of the new U.S. Administration—and will be looking for signals of a multilateral and respectful approach to regional affairs. More than anything else, however, they will want to hear his thinking about concrete problems and opportunities.

The topic of greatest concern will be the global economic crisis—and whether and how U.S. policy responses will take Latin America's needs into account. Latin

America's recovery depends on the U.S. regaining its economic health. But how the Washington proceeds to repair its broken economy is also critical. As Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has made clear to President Obama, Latin America is counting on Washington to resist protectionist measures that would curb U.S. imports or overseas investment; to use its influence to encourage expanded resources and flexibility for the multilateral financial institutions; and to coordinate policy approaches with the region's governments. Latin American leaders will want to be reassured about the 'buy American' provisions of the stimulus package and about the Obama Administration's support for expanded multilateral funding for the region's economies. That might encourage agreement among all the hemisphere's governments to avoid protectionist temptations.

The Latin American and Caribbean heads of state will expect Obama to be particularly well prepared to discuss financial and economic matters. After all, he has spent much of his time on it from a U.S. domestic perspective and will have participated in the G-20 meeting two weeks earlier with the presidents of Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina and the prime minister of Canada. But they will also be eager to hear about other issues.

- Every government in the hemisphere wants to know whether the Obama Administration will find a way to end the United States' policy of isolating and sanctioning Cuba.
- With the pandemic of criminal violence spreading across Latin America and the Caribbean, governments will be interested in whether the United States plans to expand its support for countries battling organized crime and drug trafficking. They will also want to know whether the new U.S. Administration is prepared to review and re-think its decades-old anti-drug strategy that has irritated so many countries of Latin America and yielded such scant results.
- Latin American leaders are aware of the bitter U.S. debates over immigration and know that reform may take time, but they are hoping to hear that the Obama Administration will, at some point, actively pursue changes in immigration law. And they are hopeful that he will suspend construction of the wall or fence on the U.S.-Mexican border, and stop the raids and arrests targeting illegal immigrants.
- Trade initiatives are not a priority for either the United States or Latin America. But most of the region's governments want to hear that the new U.S. Administration will start soon to work toward congressional ratification of the trade agreements that the United States negotiated with Colombia and Panama. Most Latin American countries, and many in the U.S. Congress, would also applaud Washington reinstating Bolivia's trade preferences.

- The leaders of the dozen English-speaking Caribbean nations, who have long felt their interests ignored by the United States, will expect some special consideration given that this is the first hemispheric Summit ever held in their territory. They will want, at a minimum, an indication that President Obama understands the depth of the economic and security problems that are confronting most Caribbean countries.
- How the Obama Administration thinks about the challenges posed by Venezuela and its several regional allies is of deep concern to the assembled leaders.
- The Latin American and Caribbean leaders have a keen interest in Washington's global policies, including its current thinking about the Israeli-Palestine conflict, withdrawal from Iraq, the closing of Guantánamo, the war in Afghanistan, and U.S. relations with such countries as Iran, China, and Russia. They are hoping to learn that the United States no longer divides the world into friends and adversaries—and is now prepared to pursue more multilateral and conciliatory approaches in the hemisphere and beyond.

For most of the assembled governments, the results and impressions that emerge from informal exchanges among the U.S., Latin American, Caribbean, and Canadian leaders will be more important than the formal proceedings or the meeting's final declaration in determining the value of the Summit. Most attention will be on President Obama. The other governments will use the occasion, first, to judge whether the new U.S. president will take Latin American and Caribbean interests into account as he struggles to repair the U.S. economy. Second, they will want to assess whether the Obama Administration is likely to adjust its regional policies and goals so they:

- (1) reflect the profound political and economic changes that have taken place in Latin America and the Caribbean,
- (2) recognize the diminished ability of the United States to exert authority and determine outcomes in the region, and
- (3) build toward a more cooperative and inclusive relationship with the rest of the hemisphere.

The signals from President Obama and how they are interpreted in Latin America will critically shape everyone's judgment of the Summit.

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The Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) is an independent, non-partisan think tank dedicated to strengthening Canadian relations with Latin America and the Caribbean through policy dialogue and analysis. By providing key stakeholders with solutions-oriented research on social, political and economic issues, we strive to create new partnerships and policy options throughout the Western Hemisphere. FOCAL promotes good governance, economic prosperity and social justice, basing our work on principles of intellectual integrity, racial diversity and gender equality.

La Fundación Canadiense para las Américas (FOCAL) es un instituto independiente que se dedica al fortalecimiento de las relaciones entre Canadá y los países de América Latina y el Caribe mediante el análisis y el diálogo sobre políticas. Buscamos la creación de nuevos vínculos y opciones de política para el Hemisferio Occidental a través de la investigación que aborda soluciones sobre temas sociales, políticos y económicos. FOCAL promueve buena gobernabilidad, prosperidad económica y justicia social, basando nuestro trabajo en principios de integridad intelectual, diversidad racial y equidad de género.

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