

Brazil Should Support Mini-Summit of the Americas

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In the March 6, 2003 edition of the Miami Herald, Andres Oppenheimer reported that Brazil is opposed to Canada's idea of a mini Summit of the Americas, to take place later this year. According to Oppenheimer, Brazil's main objection is that the US would use a Summit to pressure Brazil on the Free Trade Area of the Americas negotiations.

Canada's suggestion for a Mini-Summit of the Americas is strong on a number of points. First, the time between the Quebec City (2001) and Buenos Aires (2005) meetings is too long. Valuable momentum on a range of issues is at risk without the injection of political leadership that only heads of government can bring to bear. Second, a number of new leaders have emerged on the political stage of the Americas, most notably Brazil's new President Luis Inacio Lula da Silva. They should have an early opportunity to collectively consider the range of issues that confront the Americas and to map out appropriate strategies. Third, new issues and pressures have arisen since Quebec City which cannot wait until the leaders meet next in Buenos Aires two years from now.

Canada's initiative, has already overcome the initial objections of Argentina (site of the next scheduled full Summit of the Americas) and Mexico (the proposed host of the Mini-Summit). Canada needs to make a slight adjustment to accommodate Brazil's concerns. This should be easy to do.

Brazil is worried that a Summit meeting will give the United States another opportunity to pressure it on the Free Trade Area of the Americas negotiations. The Canadian initiative should specifically exclude the trade topic from the Summit agenda. Canada can point to the consistent political attention given to the negotiations by the 34 Trade Ministers as justification to drop it from the Summit agenda. The Trade Ministers will, in any event, be meeting for the eighth time in Miami on November 20-21, 2003. The FTAA negotiations are also progressing at a steady pace at the level of officials with negotiating groups meeting regularly. The FTAA Administrative Secretariat, according to plan, is currently being moved Panama to Puebla, Mexico. Lastly, while progress in the FTAA negotiations is slow, there are no real logjams, at the moment, that heads of government need to resolve. On this issue, the political leaders should be simply kept in reserve.

Without trade, a Summit would still have a fully charged agenda. First, there are deepening political crises in countries such as Venezuela, Haiti and most recently in Bolivia that could benefit from concentrated political attention. Some attention should be directed to strengthening the ability of the Organization of American States to play an effective and useful role. With a budget frozen at 1970s levels, the OAS is woefully under staffed and resourced. Second, the deep-seated economic crisis in Argentina and recessionary pressures elsewhere in the region need to be addressed. Many people in Latin America are losing faith in the economic model of the last decade, which has brought growth but failed to bring equality. Economic inequity needs the urgent attention of political leaders. Third, despite increased attention at past summits, the region's social

structures are failing fast. Education, the key issue at the Santiago Summit in 1998, is in crisis in most of the Hemisphere with school graduates unprepared to meet the needs of global commerce. Health care, which has received unprecedented attention in Canada lately, is in a far more serious state of crisis elsewhere in the Americas.

Canada's idea for a Mini-Summit of the Americas is a good one but Brazil's blocking attempts are shortsighted. Dropping trade from the agenda would address their stated concern and focus the attention of leaders on the issues most deserving of attention, but only if Brazil remembers that real leadership demands more than a Portuguese "nyet".

March 2003.