Summit of the Americas 2009: Champion Needed

Editorial

The Mar de Plata Summit—gathering in Argentina the 34 democratically elected heads of government of the Americas on November 4 and 5—is, in many ways, a reluctant summit.

The attention of the host government of Néstor Kirchner is consumed by Peronist Party in-fighting and legislative elections. Scheduled to take place just eleven days before the start of the summit, these elections are seen as a test of his power within the party. In addition the United States is focused on a real war in Iraq. But underlying the lack of enthusiasm and commitment from both the host and the most powerful actor in the hemisphere is another factor that is even more significant for the long-term prospects of inter-American relations.

The consensus of the nineties is dead. There is no longer that widely shared vision for the hemisphere that the end of the East-West conflict helped to shape. Indeed, some very deep fault lines exist within the region, and anti-US sentiment is percolating strongly, undermining the inter-American project. The Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) initiative has hit a major impasse, and many in the hemisphere would rather avoid mentioning the subject if at all possible.

This picture begs the question: can the Summits of the Americas be rescued?

The one measure of success of the upcoming Summit in Mar del Plata will be to produce a collective agreement to hold another summit in four years or so. This will, of course, require a champion willing to take on the political manoeuvring, planning and hosting of the V Summit of the Americas.

The next host country will enjoy a marked advantage. Latin American leaders can be expected to flock to the summit, if nothing else, to meet and assess from up close the new US president (a woman perhaps, since both Senator Hillary Clinton and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice are mentioned frequently as possible candidates for their respective parties).

It will be up to those countries with a vested interest in the Summits process to ensure its survival. Who needs the summits? Countries that carry out much of their policy towards the region through multilateral institutions—including the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Summits—such as Canada and Chile; those countries that have already invested in the process such as Mexico; and of course, the main beneficiaries of inter-American multilateralism—the smaller countries of Central America and the Caribbean). The Americas need summity, especially at a time when it is seriously divided. Photo-ops are necessary when other dialogue is lacking. Indeed, bringing to a common table people who would not normally meet is a hemispheric requirement. Summits force officials to engage in dialogue in the lead-up to the meeting itself whether or not the leaders actually like each other or agree on anything.

Which leads to point of this piece.
FOCAL believes the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) should seriously consider collectively hosting the next Summit of the Americas.

A benefit of having the CARICOM as host is that it would endow the process with much needed continuity. A perennial problem with Summits is that there is always the danger that the government that agreed to host it is not the same one that has to execute it. (The same goes for other long-term events such as the Olympics; the people who agreed to do it are not the same ones that have to actually live with it). The case of Argentina underscores this point. President Kirchner inherited the summit from a predecessor who seems to have attached more importance to hemispheric affairs. This is not so much the case in the Caribbean where Parliamentary democracies tend to have stable and permanent bureaucracies that almost ensure foreign policy is a policy of state and not just of a particular party or individual leader.

At the end of this year the CARICOM countries will formally constitute themselves in a Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME). The 2009 Summit could be an opportunity to introduce this new entity to hemispheric society. Of course a single country and foreign ministry would probably have to be appointed in order to coordinate and physically house the event.

Barbados stands out in this regard.

Barbados has democratic, well-functioning and stable institutions, backed by a moderate government and a modern society. It maintains good relations with every country in the Americas, it is not immersed in conflicts, and it is respected by its neighbours. And it successfully hosted the 2002 General Assembly of the OAS.

A Caribbean Summit makes sense at this time. Increasing polarization in South America will continue to fuel divergent visions of the hemisphere, in view of the problems of inequality and inequity that continue to plague most of that region, leaving their appetite to host another Summit perhaps somewhat diminished. The United States will be focused on Iraq for the foreseeable future, and Canada hosted a Summit in 2001. The choice of a venue for the V Summit of the Americas remains an important decision at this critical juncture, and Barbados is well suited for this task. Indeed, CARICOM's time may have come to play a more central role in hemispheric affairs. Stay tuned!