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Power Shift Evident At Summit Of The Americas; Central America Gets A Hearing

by LADB Staff

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The day after the 48th anniversary of the US invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, Trinidad and Tobago hosted the presidents of 34 nations of the hemisphere for the Fifth Summit of the Americas. Excluded from the activities, and thus the unrelenting focus of them, was Cuba. Despite some promising signs and high expectations of its fledgling president, the US was largely unsuccessful at turning the attention to the pressing matters brought about by the rupture of the global economic order. Although much of the media trumpeted a new US willingness to listen and to retreat from its traditional by turns dictatorial and neglectful relationship with the nations of the hemisphere, there was no mistaking a shift in the balance of power away from the US and toward the Latin American leaders. The meeting ended with an unmistakable signal that these leaders intend to hold the US's feet to the fire with respect to its economic blockade of Cuba. Several countries declined to sign the concluding declaration, usually a pro forma event. Five of the holdouts were countries of the Alternativa Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra America (ALBA), Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, Dominica, and Honduras. But signals aside, leaders used plain language to herald a bright future for North-South relations. The two most influential spoke positively. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, the most frequent voice of dissent during the Bush years, said the summit "opened all the doors to a new era of good relations on this continent," and, in a gesture to the adjoining continent, agreed to return his ambassador to Washington. He had withdrawn his envoy in September 2008. The gesture owes as much to the going of Bush as to the coming of Obama. "When there's a new government in the United States, we'll send an ambassador. A government that respects Latin America," he said last year with some prescience. The other major player from the region's Deep South, Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, also predicted good things to come from the US change of leadership. "I believe we'll likely see a positive evolution in the relations between the United States and Latin America. It is possible to create a new dynamic of partnership and contribution," said the leader of the hemisphere's second-largest economy. Even Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, who treated Obama and the gathered leaders to an excoriating examination of the US record in the region, acknowledged the potential for change the new US administration represents. "There is a willingness on Obama's part to work in a new direction with Latin America and the Caribbean, and we share that vision," he said. Ortega used 50 of his allotted 10 minutes to recount what he called a century of terroristic US aggression in Central America. The oration left Obama and his Secretary of State Hillary Clinton both speechless, unable to respond to reporters' queries of their impressions. Nor did Obama give an account of his country's performance with respect to its neighbors during his 17-minute turn at the rostrum. In reference to Ortega's denunciation, Obama ventured, "To move forward, we cannot let ourselves be prisoners of past disagreements. I'm grateful that President Ortega did not blame me for things that happened when I was three months old. Too often, an opportunity to build a fresh partnership of the Americas has been undermined by stale debates. We've all heard these arguments before." The Obama response was off target in a number of respects. Ortega was not repeating arguments; he was recounting history, speaking of US "expansionist policies, war policies, that even led us in the 1850s, 1855,

1856, to bring Central American people together. We united with Costa Ricans, with the people of Honduras, the people of Guatemala, El Salvador. We all got together, united so we could defeat the expansionist policy of the United States. And after that, after interventions that extended from 1912 all the way to 1932 and that left as a result the imposition of that tyranny of the Somozas, armed, funded, defended by the American leaders." As for what happened when he was three months old, Obama got that wrong, too. The reference was to the Bay of Pigs invasion, which occurred in April 1961. Obama was born August 4 of that year. Ortega was especially stinging on the exclusion of Cuba, "whose crime has been fighting for independence, fighting for sovereignty of peoples." Despite the harsh criticism, Ortega was at pains to make clear that there was nothing personal in this, nothing that would prevent dialogue among the nations. But, in doing that, he exposed what is for many in Latin America a deeper problem. "We are confronting a model of economic development, a system, and Obama is the president of an empire, an empire that has its rules. He can't change them, he has to grapple with them," said Ortega. Obama showed a willingness to grapple that most of the leaders accepted as genuine, and he even got a little help from his friends. Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias, in many ways Ortega's polar opposite, said he had advised Obama to get used to the complaints of the Latin Americans. He said in a radio interview that he had been sitting beside Obama during the Ortega lecture, "and I told him, 'Well, you're going to have to get used to this kind of thing because very strong recriminations are going to come.'" Arias opined that some nations have valid arguments in their complaints against the US, but at the same time, Latin Americans played into these problems. "We haven't advanced as we ought, and it peeves me when we are looking for scapegoats for our own mistakes." Arias has not always been in synchrony with his fellow Central American presidents, especially now that the isthmus has taken a synchronized left turn in leadership, but he did seem to be in agreement with them in his assessment of the US president as someone who was willing to listen and "to treat us as equals." Sit-down with SICA That opinion emerged out of a meeting the Central Americans had with Obama. It was a two-hour affair, scheduled outside the summit agenda (see NotiCen, 2009-04-16), at which Obama was quoted as saying he was "seeking to hear more ideas on how the United States can be an effective partner." He was seated, said officials present, between Ortega and Arias. In order better to hear those ideas in their plenitude, "Obama left the doors open even to call the White House directly, and [both] regional and bilateral issues could be discussed," Dominican Republic President Leonel Fernandez told the media. Fernandez was present as an associate of the Sistema de Integracion de Centro America (SICA). As such, and additionally because of his country's participation in the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), the Dominican Republic can logically be grouped with Central America. This is Obama's first meeting with this group of trade partners. But before any new ideas, there is no shortage of old ones to occupy the protagonists. The Central Americans talked about the deportations from the US flooding them with returning citizens for whom there are no jobs or resources to reintegrate them into the societies they had been keeping afloat with their remittances. They talked about recapitalizing the banks that no longer extend the lines of credit they need to recover. They talked about the need for more resources to fight the drug-trafficking battles that US consumption has foisted on them. In the end, Arias said, Obama "didn't promise anything, but he listened." Arias is the more accomplished negotiator among his contemporaries. He implied that his best moments at the summit involved securing a visit from Lula and a commitment from Colombia's Alvaro Uribe to send military engineers to build houses for Costa Ricans displaced by the recent earthquake at Cinchona. Honduras' President Manuel Zelaya said that another problem related to the deportations is the breakup of families that occurs when parents of US-born children are ejected or in other instances where families consist of members

entitled to stay and relatives who are not. "The possibility of reunification of migrant families and of agreements to accept agricultural and other workers...was brought up. Obama was very receptive," said Zelaya. Generally speaking, the presidents were near-jubilant at Obama's receptiveness, but all had to end their expressions of happiness with something like, as Guatemala's President Alvaro Colom put it, "There's no promise, but it's being worked on." The similarity of sentiments added up to a SICA-wide set of very high expectations. It also recast Ortega's analysis as a warning; the system over which Obama presides simply may not permit the kind of change Obama might like to see. Uncharacteristically, Ortega was emerging as the single note of moderation in a cacophony of enthusiasm. The Sandinista added that, despite structural impediments, the new US president could still establish new relationships within a framework of respect and cooperation. Where Ortega was enthusiastic was in the new unity and authority with which the hemisphere approached the Cuba issue (see other article in this edition of NotiCen). "There was no country that did not refer to Cuba and to the necessity of suspending the blockade of Cuba," said Ortega. "All America closed ranks pressing the need to suspend the blockade." And indeed they did, punctuating their decision by not signing the concluding document, reducing it to 97 pages few will ever read with a single signature at the bottom, that of the summit host, Trinidad and Tobago Prime Minister Patrick Manning. This had the salutary effect of turning the spotlight back on the internal dynamics, rather than the institutional product, of the meetings. The regional political developments during the Bush years, combined with the galvanizing presence of the new US administration, made for, as Zelaya said, "a very fraternal atmosphere of dialogue" free of past rancor. The agreed-upon tactic of having Manning be the sole signatory was itself done in the spirit of unity, said Norman Girvan, former secretary general of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS). The blockade lay at the heart of disagreement leading to some countries being willing to sign and some not. "This would have put their disagreement on public display, exposing the signers to the charge of being 'sellouts' to the United States and the nonsigners to the charge of being 'spoilers,'" observed Girvan. It was also true, said Manning, that the declaration did not reflect the region's rapidly changing realities. He noted that the document was put together well in advance of the meetings, even before the G-20 summit in London. "Our deliberations took that into account and came to the additional conclusion that we were concerned about the allocation of resources to developmental institutions, particularly the Inter-American Development Bank," he said. As fractious as hemispheric relationships have been in past years, and as central to that as the US has been, the obvious and near-universal mutual good feeling the summit produced seemed to carry value, even if little was nailed down on crucial economic, cultural, and social issues. Only Ecuador's President Rafael Correa was reported to have slammed the proceedings with a complaint about "the lack of a discussion at the summit about the causes, consequences, and alternatives" of the current economic problems. Hugo Chavez summed up what was probably the prevailing sentiment. "The encounter was a complete success that led to a set of tacit commitments and others expressly defined," he said. "Of all the summits that I have attended in this decade, without doubt this was the most successful, one that opened the doors to a new era of reasoning among all countries."

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