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George Rodríguez

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US President Barack Obama’s Meeting with Central American Leaders Seen as Possible Relaunching of US Relations With Region

by George Rodriguez
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US President Barack Obama’s meeting last month in Costa Rica with Central American counterparts could have relaunched the relationship between the US and this region. That is the view several local observers shared with NotiCen after Obama met early last month with Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana (SICA) leaders over a work dinner at this capital city’s elegant Teatro Nacional.

As was the case during the bilateral US-Costa Rica encounter hours before (NotiCen, May 9, 2013), topics ranged from introducing new elements in the fight against organized crime—mainly drug trafficking—in the region to development and environmental issues, such as fighting poverty, strengthening US-SICA trade, and producing clean energy.

Regarding the struggle against organized crime, the new components discussed during the talks included prevention—through education, reducing drug use, creating opportunities—as well as building strategic alliances aimed at boosting the regional bloc’s economy.

The 22-hour visit on May 3-4 also included a meeting that Obama and Costa Rican President Laura Chinchilla held with some 100 Central American business and civil-society leaders, the event that marked the closing of the US president’s brief stay in the country.

That the visit included other topics besides security implies a new focus by the US on its ties with Central America, local observers told NotiCen.

Banco Nacional de Costa Rica (BNCR) president Fernando Naranjo said, "There’s not the slightest doubt" the US-Central America tie has been relaunched, after years during which this region was not a high priority for the US. Naranjo was referring to the lack of attention by the administration of President George W. Bush (2001-2009) to Latin America in general.

Observers see change by both Mexico and US

On the visit that Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto made earlier this year to Costa Rica, where he also met with Chinchilla and other SICA counterparts, Naranjo, a former Costa Rican foreign minister, said, "It’s not a coincidence that Peña Nieto and Obama visited Central America within a matter of weeks. I believe Mexico and the US are focusing on this region."

"Mexico has been quite absent from Central America during the past several years, and the US, because of all the international problems we know—world conflicts—hasn’t been quite present," Naranjo went on to say. "But I feel that, yes, now there’s unity and a different vision by the US, by Mexico, and I believe Central America has to profit from this new opportunity."

Naranjo described Obama’s visit as "excellent," and added, "It opens great possibilities to Costa Rica and to Central America."
Regarding trade, the head of the BNCR forecast that "the free trade agreement is going to take a new turn to include a social component" consisting of "training, improving our populations," referring to the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), negotiated in 2003 and in force since 2006.

Minister of Economy, Industry and Trade Mayi Antillón said, "We’re very encouraged that the agenda," both US-Costa Rica and US-SICA, "was inclusive, an agenda in which security issues—drug trafficking—were taken up but within a comprehensive vision."

"For the Ministerio de la Economía, the fact that economic participation, with more economic actors—such as medium and small businesses, entrepreneurs, women, the young—was present in President Obama’s speech gives us much hope," Antillón pointed out.

"With [the US], we’ve been working on … the SBDC, the Small Business Development Centers, which have a comprehensive view for developing small and medium-sized business," added Antillón, a former private-sector leader.

Regarding security, Guatemala’s President Otto Pérez Molina said it is present on the US-Central America agenda, adding that it is "an issue for countries such as Guatemala," which, because of the US drug market, "turn into transit countries … where violence is caused … where weapons are brought in and dollars are brought in, but we also have the dead and the violence."

"So, it’s an issue that’s there, that’s present," said Pérez Molina, a retired Army general.

**Hope for new attention to region**

Referring to the visit as a whole, Ottón Solís, co-founder more than a decade ago of Costa Rica’s opposition center-left Partido Acción Ciudadana (PAC) and the party’s three-time presidential candidate (2002, 2006, 2010), said, "I hope the signal is … that the US is going to take interest in our region."

Solís also mentioned the Bush administration’s lack of attention on Latin America and pointed out that, nevertheless, Central America has kept an interest in the link. "There’s been a unilateral route," Solís said, adding that "democracies exist in this region, and at times our presidents have turned into spokespersons of North American interests, not in counterparts."

In this regard, the opposition leader, who is an economist and a professor at US universities, said he particularly enjoyed Obama’s message on the US partnering with Central America on a basis of equality and mutual respect.

During the meeting with Central American business and civil-society leaders, the US president said that "the main message that I have is that the United States recognizes our fates are tied up with your success."

"We want to be a partner … we don’t think that there’s senior partners or junior partners in that partnership. I think it’s a partnership based on equality and mutual respect and mutual interests," Obama said, adding, "If you are doing well, we will do better, and if we’re doing well, we think your situation improves. So, through all the various forums that we have, let’s continue to build, and let’s recognize that in this global economy that we now live in, that for us to be successful we’re going to have to further integrate."
Solís said that those statements by Obama "must have made many leaders in our region blush" because "they’ve behaved as subjects" and "because a major opportunity opens up to do what has to be done: that we behave as equals before those powers," such as the US.

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