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Latin America Struggles to Deepen Integration

by LADB Staff

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In the third week of December, Costa do Sauipe, a natural paradise on the northeastern coast of Bahia state in Brazil, was the scene of four simultaneous summits in which the presidents of 33 Latin American and Caribbean countries participated. The meetings were part of a diplomatic offensive aimed at consolidating integration mechanisms capable of making the region a strong player in international politics.

In his gambit to set himself up as the continent's top leader, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva was able to bring together the members of the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR), the Grupo de Rio, the Union de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR), and the Cumbre de America Latina y el Caribe (CALC).

For the first time, regional leaders met without the participation of Spain and Portugal, the former colonial powers with which they meet every two years at the Ibero-American summits, and, above all, without the US, the superpower that has dominated the hemisphere's politics for the last two centuries. It was the acid test. Despite areas of agreement, the summits produced few concrete results. Analysts said that, while a strong political will exists, regional-integration structures are still a long way from being a powerful and solid reality. All the bilateral conflicts that impede progress surfaced at the meetings.

Nevertheless, two far-reaching resolutions were passed: a unanimous request to the US to lift the embargo it has imposed against Cuba since 1961 (even strong US allies Colombia, Peru, and Mexico supported the resolution); and the decision to set up a regional organization similar to the Organization of American States (OAS), guided by its own rules but without the US or Canada.

Alongside those two significant actions was an episode that marked the summits and prevented UNASUR from being given the authority needed to move this ambitious South American geopolitical organization forward. This was Uruguay's supposed veto of the designation of former Argentine President Nestor Kirchner as UNASUR's political secretary, an executive position whose task would be to get the project underway.

Uruguay's complaints against Argentine block leadership vote

Two specific Uruguayan complaints against the former Argentine president and Argentina as a nation set off a media blitz based on rumors and reports that have still not been confirmed by either of the two principals: Uruguayan President Tabare Vazquez and Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner.

The first complaint was about former President Kirchner's lack of collaboration in seeing that a group of environmentalists, protesting the construction of a cellulose-pulp mill on the Uruguayan coast, end their 26-month blockage of traffic across a bridge spanning the Rio Uruguay, the border

between the two countries. Before Nov. 20, 2006, when the protest began, the bridge was the major route for the exchange of goods and movement of people between the two countries (see NotiSur, 2007-02-16, 2008-01-04, 2008-10-17).

The second complaint was Argentina's failure to complete the dredging of the principal navigation channel of the Rio de la Plata, essential for deep-draft vessels to travel the route between the ports of Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Armed with these two real issues, the local press and news agencies said, without any evidence, that Uruguay would veto Kirchner's designation, and, also without proof, that Uruguay was ready to withdraw from the UNASUR meeting and by doing so destroy the still-not-formalized organization if the former Argentine president was chosen by a majority and not unanimously, as had been agreed.

The press reports originated in an Oct. 23 article in El Pais, principal voice of the Uruguayan right. The international news agencies and reporters from the major regional media outlets took as fact Uruguay's supposed decision to veto the Kirchner candidacy. Since that date, the El Pais version has been the accepted one in the South American media. The Uruguayan government responded with silence, which allowed the story to grow. Within a few hours, Uruguayan opposition leaders came out in support of the supposed decision, and the matter even set off a debate within the Frente Amplio.

Using Vazquez's limited regional standing, members of his party criticized him for departing from a historical strategic political position of leftist and progressive groups in the tiny country, where a deep integrationist spirit has always dominated. In the days just before the Dec. 16 opening of the four summits, the press came out with another version. The source was, once again, El Pais. This time the paper reported that if Kirchner were chosen as executive secretary of UNASUR, Uruguay would resign from the group. That is, it would break from the most ambitious political integration project in South America.

The news agencies and reporters accepted the newest version and, in Argentina, the story, involving the husband of the president, was the daily headline in the two newspapers that lead the opposition to the government. The atmosphere was tense when the summit opened. President Vazquez did not respond when asked about the supposed veto and the resignation of Uruguay from UNASUR. President Fernandez de Kirchner said repeatedly that the executive-secretary position had not been a topic of the summit, and Brazilian Foreign Relations Minister Celso Amorim announced that UNASUR officers would be elected when the 12 countries meet in Chile in April 2009.

Efforts to deepen integration stalled, not ended

Beyond whatever had been the initial objective with the Uruguayan right, to cause a conflict between the president and his own party, and, for the Argentine opposition, to damage the image of the government what is certain is that the press played a role in the failure of one of the summits in Brazil. In this case, the role was similar to that which it has been accused of playing recently in Bolivia, Venezuela, Paraguay, and Argentina: to fan the flames of discontent and act as political-destabilization agents against those governments. President Fernandez de Kirchner called it, directly, "promoting a dismissive climate," meaning a climate conducive to a coup.

And, with the failure of the summit, the brakes were applied, at least until April, to a project as ambitious as it is necessary. This has various analysts asking whether, behind the campaign of various unsubstantiated stories, there was a greater goal than just causing friction between Vazquez and his party and sullyng the image of the Argentine government during a legislative-election year.

This question arises because there might be those who wanted UNASUR to remain merely a proposal. UNASUR, whose Tratado Constitutivo (founding document) was signed by Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Paraguay, Surinam, Uruguay, and Venezuela on May 23, 2008, has enormous significance.

Among its principal objectives is "to construct a space for cultural, social, economic, and political integration and unity." It gives "priority to dialogue, social policies, education, energy, infrastructure, financing common works, and environment, among others, with a view to eliminating socioeconomic inequalities, achieving social inclusion and citizen participation, strengthening democracy, and reducing asymmetries within the framework of consolidating the sovereignty of the member states."

UNASUR supports creating a Consejo Sudamericano de Defensa, conceived as a consultative forum rather than a classic military alliance with its own armed force. UNASUR and the countries that will be invited to join it in the future have enormous potential. Statistics from the UN Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean (ECLAC), from 2007, indicate that the 33 countries cover 20 million sq km and have 550 million inhabitants, a US\$3.5 trillion GDP, and US \$459.774 billion in reserves. Brazilian analyst Alfredo Prado wrote in the Angola-based magazine *Africa 21* that, beyond the numerous obstacles in the road leading to UNASUR and the expansion of the Grupo de Rio, the summits clearly show regional willingness to assume a greater international role.

"The presence of Cuban head of state Raul Castro, and the formal entry of Cuba into the Grupo de Rio, one of the two most important diplomatic forums in South America, need to be understood as a new era for integration and also as a signal to President-elect Barack Obama that Latin America believes the time has come to end the blockade of Cuba," said Prado. Uruguayan political analyst Gerardo Caetano opted for formulating a query that also serves as a warning to regional leadership. "Could it be," he asked, "that the constant expansion of integration formats (ALADI, Comunidad Andina de Naciones [CAN], MERCOSUR, Alternative Bolivariana para las Americas [ALBA], etc.), rather than deepening what already exists, is a new flight forward."

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