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CELAC Offers Promise of Unity, Independence to Region

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Within the context of a multipolar world in full reformulation of its regional institutions, the 33 nations of the Americas recently formed the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC), a forum that includes one country under a US embargo (Cuba), others that have signed free-trade agreements (FTAs) with the US (Chile, Peru, Colombia, and Mexico), and still others with a historical relationship of political and economic dependence (most of the islands in the Caribbean). CELAC also includes countries whose governments have opposing political stances—with Chile, Colombia, and Honduras on one side and Bolivia and Venezuela on the other—but does not include either Canada or the US.

The new organization had its origins in an April 2010 initiative of former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010), which was quickly supported by Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and promoted until it became a reality by Venezuela President Hugo Chávez. CELAC is not intended to replace the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR), which was created in 2004, was relaunched in 2007, and came into its own in 2010 during an attempted coup against the democratically elected government of Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa (NotiSur, Oct. 15, 2010, and Jan. 7, 2011). On the contrary, in promoting the organization, its authors took care to not weaken UNASUR just as UNASUR had not weakened the Southern Cone Common Market (MERCOSUR).

An OAS without the US, Canada

Although none of the thirty presidents, one vice president, and two foreign ministers who signed the Declaración de Caracas on Dec. 3 in the Venezuelan capital said specifically that CELAC was created to replace the Organization of American States (OAS), the idea was floating around, and it was clear that the strategy of many presidents was for that to be its goal.

And that is how other heads of state seemed to understand it, since in the closing session they established a list of priorities that in some respects clashed directly with the interests of the US and its principal allies in the region or that had a different focus. Why this distinction? Because the OAS is criticized with increasing intensity for it ineffectiveness and especially for being an organization that has historically acted in line with US interests in the region.

In mid-2011, President Correa had said, "The time has come to give life to an OAS without the US and Canada, a Latin American OAS." On more than one occasion, Chávez and Bolivian President Evo Morales spoke in the same vein. The day the Declaración de Caracas was signed, Cuban President Raúl Castro called the new organization "the most important initiative in the last 200 years." Although he did not say that CELAC was created to replace the OAS, he did say that such organizations "continue draining the OAS of specific content." On Dec. 9, in Montevideo, the Uruguayan weekly Brecha used a parody of a mathematical equation to describe CELAC: "The OAS plus Cuba minus the US equals CELAC."

The first CELAC summit closed with the signing of several joint communiqués and the Declaración de Caracas. The 33 countries were unified on issues of common interest such as the rights of
migrants and the defense of democracy and institutional order in each member country. On this issue, the heads of state agreed on an "anti-coup clause" to prevent of recurrence of events such as the one in Honduras in 2009, when constitutional President Manuel Zelaya was overthrown (NotiCen, July 2, 2009).

Among other points of agreement was the bloc's unity regarding two serious situations in the region. It backed Argentina's sovereignty claim of the Islas Malvinas/Falkland Islands and called the British occupation an "anachronistic colonial situation on American soil." The bloc also expressed solidarity with Cuba and said that the US blockade against the Caribbean island "violates international law and undermines not only Cuban sovereignty but that of the whole region." It also called on "the government of the United States of America, in compliance with resolutions approved by the UN General Assembly and in response to repeated calls by Latin American and Caribbean countries, to end the economic, trade, and financial blockade that it maintains against Cuba, which is against international law, exacts costly and unjust damages on the Cuban people, and affects peace and coexistence among American nations."

**Unlikely trio to guide CELAC**

CELAC's immediate future was left in the hands of a troika comprising Chávez, Chilean President Sebastián Piñera, and Castro. The Venezuelan president was the host of the organization's first summit, Chile will organize the second this year, and the third will be held in 2013 in Cuba. Cuba's participation ensures ideological diversity.

"With Comandante Chávez and Comandante Castro, we form the troika. 'Vive la différence,' as the French say. We think differently, perhaps we can find common ground," said Piñera. And, to everyone's surprise, he added, "One of every 10 people in the world lives in CELAC territory. In 2010, we had an average growth rate of 5.6%, and we ended 2011 with 5%. CELAC is fundamental; many think they can walk faster alone, but together we can go further and be more secure. Today unity is the path."

A Brecha correspondent in Washington quoted a US analyst who pointed out that, "from any other Latin American leader, that speech would have gone unnoticed, but coming from the president of a country like Chile, that has excelled by not going it alone but negotiating with everyone, but separately, and coming from a liberal like Piñera, it is very notable."

The Brecha correspondent was not alone. The French news agency Agence France-Presse (AFP) quoted other analysts who also commented on the quality of the Chilean president's speech and who framed it within a new reality that speaks of the regional leaders' political maturity.

The US political leadership seemed to neither comprehend nor understand the implicit message in each paragraph of the CELAC communiqué and the Declaración de Caracas. Meanwhile, the Associated Press (AP) quoted Jay Carney, White House press secretary, as saying, in reference to the blocks by legislators of nominees for three diplomatic positions essential for Washington to continue developing a fruitful dialogue with the region, "Today's filibuster is one more example of the type of political posturing and partisanship the American people are tired of seeing in Washington." He said nothing, however, regarding the emergence of an organization created to reduce and limit the powers of the OAS, a structure friendly and functional for US interests.

On Dec. 13, Michael Shifter, president of the Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue, wrote in El Colombiano in Bogotá and at least a dozen other Latin American and Caribbean publications
and Web sites, "Washington knows that its influence in the region continues to decline. The United States is preoccupied and struggling to deal with other profound economic and political problems," while it loses ground in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In highlighting the clumsiness of the establishment and the White House in managing relations with the region, Shifter told AFP that CELAC, "whose creation would have been hard to imagine not long ago, is a political expression of the existing distancing between the Latin American and Caribbean countries and the US." However, he said nothing regarding the threats that surround the OAS.

Another US analyst, Cynthia Arnson, director of the Latin American program at the Woodrow Wilson Center, did not share Shifter's concern, although she did agree that the OAS could be at risk and admitted that it is essential to US regional strategy. The US State Department, she told AFP, "recognizes that Latin America has reached the level of independence and autonomy and a political and economic sophistication that makes the existence of regional groups such as CELAC natural [but] it remains to be seen whether its creation represents the death of the OAS."

CELAC emerges as the State Department is without a person to manage relations in the region following the resignation of Arturo Valenzuela last July as assistant secretary of state for Western Hemispheric affairs. The nomination of his successor, Roberta Jacobson, as well as those of the new ambassadors to El Salvador (Mari Carmen Aponte) and Ecuador (Adam Namm), is blocked in the Senate. Representatives of the most conservative wing of the Republican Party threaten to block approval of President Barack Obama's nominees until the president changes his "weak" policy toward the region.

The reasons for blocking Jacobson are unclear. Aponte was rejected because at one time she had a romantic relationship with someone later alleged to be a Cuban spy and because she once expressed support for gay rights. Namm's nomination is frozen because some legislators accuse the State Department, headed by Hillary Clinton, of allowing purely tourist trips within a program that authorizes US citizens to travel to Cuba "to strengthen democracy."

For the US, the emergence of CELAC should be worrisome. At least that is how it is understood by other economic powers such as Canada and Germany, which see Latin America and the Caribbean as one of the most interesting regions in which to have a presence and, above all, to strike good business deals.