Summit of the Americas Exposes Continental Rifts

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Disagreements on Cuba and drugs dominated the Sixth Summit of the Americas—held April 14-15 in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia—but Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos stressed that the very willingness to air those differences was a major step forward.

"All subjects were on the table," Santos told reporters following the weekend meeting of the region's presidents and prime ministers. "That has significant political weight."

While nobody expected a thorny issue such as Cuba's participation to be resolved overnight, Santos said, a candid debate has at least begun. "Hopefully within three years we can have Cuba" at the summit, he said, adding that the leaders would meet again in 2015 in Panama.

While both Santos and Mexican President Felipe Calderón praised President Barack Obama for his patient listening and positive engagement in Cartagena, it was clear that on some issues the US continues to be on a different wavelength from Latin America and the Caribbean. That is certainly the case with Cuba.

**US and Canada stand alone on Cuba participation**

At a news conference, Obama noted that his administration had eased restrictions on travel and remittances to Cuba, but he made it clear that the island nation would have to make changes before being welcomed at the summit. "The fact of the matter is that Cuba, unlike the other countries that are participating, has not yet moved to democracy, has not yet observed basic human rights," he said.

"I assure you that I and the American people will welcome the time when the Cuban people have the freedom to live their lives, choose their leaders, and fully participate in this global economy and international institutions," Obama said. "We haven't gotten there yet."

But Canada was the only country to stand with the US in saying that Cuba had to change before it could participate. The Latin American and Caribbean countries, including staunch US allies, all seemed to agree that another summit without Cuba would be "unacceptable," as Santos put it in his opening remarks at the meeting.

The Cuba question had been gaining traction in the days and weeks leading up to Cartagena, with President Rafael Correa of Ecuador boycotting the event because of the issue. Nicaragua's President Daniel Ortega also cited solidarity with Cuba as the reason for his absence. While Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez, who is battling cancer, had indicated his intention to attend—perhaps out of respect for Venezuela's much-improved relations with Colombia under Santos—at the last minute he flew to Havana instead, for further radiation treatments.

While the absence of these three firebrands no doubt lowered the temperature of the closed-door discussions, the countries still had deep disagreements on substance, and the summit ended without a political declaration. "There is no declaration because there is no consensus," Santos said at the closing news conference.
The summit's official agenda was relatively uncontroversial. Under the theme "Connecting the Americas: Partners for Prosperity," it focused on such topics as how to better integrate the region's infrastructure through optimized electrical interconnections, increased renewable-energy generation, and expanded telecommunication networks, among other measures. The summit also produced a series of mandates for the region on such matters as reducing poverty and inequality, improving citizen security, combating transnational organized crime, and strengthening the ability to respond to natural disasters.

During the negotiations leading up to Cartagena, the Colombian government had sought to avoid political polarization and "work on what unites us and not on what divides us," as a Colombian diplomat told NotiSur (NotiSur, Jan. 6, 2012). But as the event drew closer, Santos and some of his counterparts in the hemisphere started venturing into more difficult terrain.

Guatemala leads move to examine drug policy

Other than the deeply symbolic matter of Cuba, few topics in the region are as controversial as drug policy. Many Latin American leaders have been saying that the "war on drugs" is unwinnable and that the region needs to take a fresh look at the problem. In a recent op-ed piece published by The Guardian, Guatemalan President Otto Pérez Molina called for a realistic approach to drugs based on regulation (NotiCen, March 1, 2012). That means legalizing consumption and production, "within certain limits and conditions," he wrote.

In his remarks at the opening of the summit, Santos talked about the heavy toll illegal drugs are taking on the region in public health and safety, despite the immense effort and cost invested in fighting the problem. Noting that the war on drugs (as Richard Nixon dubbed it) in reality dates back 100 years, to the 1912 International Opium Convention, Santos called for a profound discussion of the issue, "without prejudices or dogmas."

Leading up to the summit, US officials had made it clear that legalization or decriminalization were nonstarters for the US, a position Obama reinforced in Cartagena. "I think it is entirely legitimate to have a conversation about whether the laws in place are ones that are doing more harm than good in certain places," he said at a forum for top executives held in conjunction with the presidential summit. But, he added, "I personally, and my administration's position, is that legalization is not the answer."

In his closing press conference, Santos stressed the importance that an honest debate about the drug problem had at last occurred in the context of a Summit of the Americas. The debate was not about legalization specifically, he said, but about the need for a comprehensive look at all alternatives to more effectively address the challenge. He said the region's leaders had given the Organization of American States (OAS) a mandate to conduct a broad study of current anti-drug policies and their effectiveness.

US seen as disengaged in region

Columnist Moisés Naim, writing in Spain's El País newspaper during the summit, said the fact that there is no longer a prohibition on exploring alternatives to US-imposed drug policy is a positive step, but he questioned the focus of talks in Cartagena. "What do these two issues, drugs and Cuba, have in common?" he asked, adding that both allow participants to divert attention from their own shortcomings and put the spotlight on the US. "Why talk about repression in Cuba, freedom of the
press in Ecuador, Argentine populism, or militarization in Venezuela if we can talk about the United States?"

A few days before the summit, the Washington-based Inter-American Dialogue launched the report Remaking the Relationship: The United States and Latin America. The report describes a general drift in the relationship in the last six years, with Latin America undergoing profound change and the US becoming less engaged. "Three long unresolved problems that cause strain and frustration in inter-American affairs—immigration, drugs, and Cuba—demand especially urgent attention," it states.

At an event to launch the report, Dialogue president Michael Shifter stressed the importance of nurturing the relationship and building real partnership, which will be essential in a crisis. "When the crisis does emerge, if you don't have a foundation of trust and real engagement at the highest political level," he said, "then you're not going to see any effective resolution of these problems."

In addition to drugs and Cuba, another issue that failed to gain consensus in Cartagena was Argentina's call for a summit statement supporting its sovereignty over the Islas Malvinas, which the British call the Falkland Islands. Santos admitted to reporters that, after his speech to open the summit, President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner had told him, "You forgot the Malvinas."

Throughout his visit to Colombia, President Obama emphasized the importance of expanding trade with the region, and he and President Santos announced that the US-Colombia free-trade agreement (FTA) would take effect next month.

But it was Cuba, in its absence, that seemed to overshadow the summit. As the hemisphere's presidents and prime ministers met for a private retreat near the end of the two-day meeting, the Associated Press began one story by asking whether Cartagena could be the last Summit of the Americas. It noted that even such moderates as Santos and Brazil's President Dilma Rousseff had said this should be the last such event without Cuba.

President Santos insisted that Cartagena had been about "building bridges" and beginning a process that he hoped would lead to Cuba's invitation to the Seventh Summit of the Americas. The Cartagena summit, he said, advanced the "dialogue among equals."

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