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Cuba to Head CELAC in Coming Year of Change

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Santiago, Chile, was the stage, on Jan. 27-28, of two political events that will surely go down in the history of Latin American and Caribbean countries as noteworthy. First, the presidents and heads of state of the 33 countries of the region—speakers of Spanish, Portuguese, English, and French—participating in the first summit of the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC), stood to pay an emotional tribute to Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. And within hours, they applauded for more than two minutes when rightist Chilean President Sebastián Piñera, a conservative, handed the rotating pro tempore presidency to Cuban President Raúl Castro, a Marxist.

The presidents—white, black, and indigenous—signed a joint declaration in which they affirmed the need for concrete actions to end hunger and poverty as well as to achieve energy integration and assume a commitment to prioritize the education of their people.

However, beyond statements that could be confused with the platitudes coming out of any multinational meeting, the 33 heads of state—Catholic, Protestant, agnostic, atheist—agreed on specific points that also implied a confrontation with the North. Those points included a condemnation of the US embargo against Cuba and support for Argentina’s claim of sovereignty over the Malvinas/Falklands, occupied by Great Britain since 1833.

More important than Cuba's again participating in a hemispheric body together with all Latin American and Caribbean countries a half century after its expulsion from the Organization of American States (OAS)—and even assuming the rotating presidency for a one-year term with the responsibility of organizing and hosting the second summit in 2014—the meeting in Santiago was successful in definitively forming a new regional body in which neither the US nor Canada is a member.

**OAS with Cuba, without US and Canada**

None of the heads of state was willing to say that CELAC is an OAS with Cuba and without the US and Canada, but that is what it is. An analyst with the Brazilian online magazine Carta Maior lauded CELAC's creation, saying that "it has great historic importance, since it gives the countries south of the Río Bravo [Río Grande in the US] an equitable mechanism for cooperation, integration, conflict resolution, and dealing with common problems. Those are tasks that the OAS has not fulfilled for one fundamental reason: its subordination to the designs of the US State Department and the asymmetry inherent in a forum at which the hegemonic power of Washington co-exists with Latin American countries that have been victims of all kinds of aggressions, pressures, blackmail, and political, economic, military, and diplomatic interference from the US."

Uruguayan President José Mujica summed up the new situation saying, "We have come to this historically important reality because we are beginning to be our own bosses."

During the discussions, not even Cuba referred to the OAS directly, clearly alluding, as Carta Maior said, to the role to date of that multinational organization. However, there were frequent indirect...
references, including the reference to the need for Latin American and Caribbean countries to consolidate their own organization from which the two powers from the North were excluded.

As early as 2011, in the days leading up to the creation of CELAC in Venezuela, Chilean essayist Marcos Roitman wrote in the magazine Sin Permiso of the need to coordinate an integration project beyond ideological and political differences, that is, beyond diversities. One of the delegates at the Santiago meeting quoted Roitman.

Borrowing from Ernest Renan, the late 19th century French philosopher and historian and author of What is a Nation?, the Chilean academic said that one could say that neither race, nor religious affinity, nor interests, nor geography, nor military necessities are sufficient to articulate a spirit of unity (a nation) because "the soul of a nation is the sum of past and present, expressed under a historical legacy, a collective memory, and the desire, the political will to maintain said legacy as part of a common life together." Those are the factors that favor the CELAC countries.

In the Sin Permiso article, originally published in the Mexican daily La Jornada, Roitman referred to the still nonexistent CELAC and said that the OAS and its military precursor, the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR), signed in 1947, a year before the OAS was formed, were real barriers to any national liberation effort that sprang up in the region. "Both organizations showed their ugliest face a few years after their creation, first, by backing the 1954 coup in Guatemala organized by the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] against President Jacobo Arbenz..., and second, by endorsing the US's economic and political blockade of Cuba and then orchestrating its expulsion from the OAS in 1964," Roitman said.

The South American diplomat who quoted Roitman in Santiago said that, even with its diversities, CELAC would never be like the OAS, "which has been a permanent destabilizing factor in the region. We need only recall the complicity maintained in the face of the coups and the civilian-military dictatorships established in the 1970s. The OAS's principal role has been to block the creation of any Latin American and Caribbean project that challenges US hegemony."

**President Chávez present even while absent**

President Chávez's physical absence in Santiago was huge, even though he, then Presidents Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2011) of Brazil, and Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) of Argentina were the architects of CELAC. Lula is no longer president, and Kirchner died in 2010. However, Chávez's absence was only physical. Still hospitalized in Cuba where he is being treated for cancer, Chávez was very much present at the meeting. In their principal speeches, each of his colleagues mentioned him and always, even acknowledging differences, praised and recognized him for his Latin American spirit.

A letter from Chávez to the summit, symbolically signed in red ink, was mentioned by everyone. In it, Chávez stressed two points: 1) Unity in diversity—cultural, linguistic, ethnic, religious, ideological—which is seen within CELAC and is a tribute that, two centuries after the liberating actions that would bring them independence from Spain and Portugal, the American nations pay to Simón Bolívar, José Artigas, José de San Martín, Antonio José de Sucre, Bernardo O'Higgins, José Martí, and others; 2) frequent references to Bolívar, his historical point of reference. Chávez said that, when Bolivar talked of his ambitious plan for a political, economic, cultural, and social union of American peoples, he spoke of the "nation of republics."
In the letter, Chávez referred to the US embargo against Cuba and the British occupation of the Malvinas, saying that "justice is unquestionably on the side of Cuba and Argentina." He added, "If we are a nation of republics, our sovereignty belongs to the entire Patria Grande, as the liberators called it, and we must demand that it be respected."

Media accounts of the closing ceremony in Santiago are notably consistent. From the rightist cheerleaders for the OAS and detractors of CELAC, including O Globo (Brazil), El Mercurio (Chile), and Clarín (Argentina), to progressive outlets, including La Jornada (Mexico) and Tiempo (Argentina), each one, from its own perspectives, emphasized the "strangeness" of hearing Cuba's voice at a hemispheric summit. And each saw the importance of reporting what Raúl Castro said.

Beyond the use, or not, of derogatory adjectives accompanying the mere mention of Castro's name, all reporters wrote that: 1) CELAC is a common vision of the great Latin American and Caribbean Patria Grande that belongs only to its peoples; 2) CELAC is a diverse, but common, space that allows the region to move toward its independence and toward control of its resources, which, without that unity, would not be possible; 3) in this year of its leadership of CELAC, Cuba is committed to building a space of sovereignty, consensus-building, solidarity, and cooperation; and 4) "the communist ogre of the Caribbean" has a sense of humor, such that, when it was time for the transfer of leadership, Piñera reminded him that the organization's objectives include "defending democracy and freedoms," and the Cuban brought a laugh from everyone when he answered with a smile and a "Don't worry, I'll only be here for a year." And he followed that with a remark that was also reported by all the media, "Don't despair, Mr. President, Chile will have another turn in 33 years."

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