Americas Summit Doomed From Outset by Washington’s Venezuela Rhetoric

Andrés Gaudán

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.
Americas Summit Doomed From Outset by Washington’s Venezuela Rhetoric

by Andrés Gaudín
Category/Department: Region
Published: 2015-05-01

US President Barack Obama’s March 9 decision to sign an executive order declaring Venezuela an "unusual and extraordinary threat" to US national security proved, one month later, to have fateful consequences for the Seventh Summit of the Americas in Panama, where everything had been prepared to welcome first-time participant Cuba.

The White House and the region’s analysts had expected the Summit to be a moment of triumph for Obama, who took the historic step late last year of thawing frozen relations with Cuba. But because of his stance on Venezuela (NotiSur, March 27, 2015), the event turned out to be a veritable nightmare for the US president. Even his closest regional allies, according to US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roberta Jacobson, silently but energetically criticized the executive order, which Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa described as "incredible ridiculousness."

As a result, the participating nations failed—just as they had in the two preceding Summit of the Americas gatherings—to agree on a standard "final declaration."

Correa’s reaction came after a White House security advisor, Ben Rhodes, tried to make a last-minute about-face, saying the US does not, in reality, see Venezuela as a threat. "The wording [of the executive order], which got a lot of attention, is completely pro forma," he said in an April 7 press briefing in Washington, DC. "This is a language that we use in executive orders around the world. … We, frankly, just have a framework for how we formalize these executive orders."

Rhodes’ mea culpa came as a surprise in Latin America, where observers had trouble imagining that the most powerful country in the world uses "the same standard forms for Venezuela as it does to refer to and punish the Islamic State," as Bolivian Foreign Minister David Choquehuanca said. Choquehuanca’s statement was one of numerous outside criticisms the Obama administration received in the weeks leading up to the April 10-11 Summit. The diplomatic disaster also prompted attacks at home by the opposition Republican Party. Groups such as the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (UNASUR), the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (CELAC), the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA), and the UN Group of 77 + China also called on the US president to annul the controversial executive order.

By the time Obama arrived in Panama, therefore, he was bruised and battered by a diplomatic fiasco that not only caused him troubles at home and abroad but also had the effect of clouding his accomplishment from Dec. 17, 2014, when he and Cuban President Raúl Castro simultaneously announced that the two countries would begin normalizing relations (NotiCen, Jan. 29, 2015). Panamanian President Juan Carlos Varela lamented that, at the closure of the Summit, the "big photo," as he described it, of Obama and Castro smiling at each other ended up being more incidental than historic.
An earful from an old ally

Obama cannot have been particularly surprised by the attacks from Republicans. What maybe did catch him off guard were the criticisms that came from various think tanks, academics, and international relations experts. Even more surprising, perhaps, was the reaction of former Colombian President Ernesto Samper (1994-1998), an old US ally who now serves as UNASUR’s secretary-general.

Samper openly rebuffed the Obama administration and proposed that the agenda of the Summit be changed to focus on two issues that are particularly sensitive for the US: the dismantling of Pentagon military bases in Latin America and the Caribbean (especially the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base) and an immediate lifting of the economic embargo that the US has imposed on Cuba for more than half a century. "The US, with an outdated attitude left over from the Cold War years, still has 36 bases [throughout the region] that are a threat to the peace, sovereignty, and independence of our countries," said Samper.

In statements reported March 27 by international news agencies, the former Colombian president—in clear allusion to the embargo on Cuba, the executive order against Venezuela, and US criticisms of both countries regarding human rights—called on the US to stop taking "unilateral actions and judging the sovereign decisions of other states, especially considering that [Washington] never formally joined the inter-American human rights system." Samper was referring in this case to the Pact of San José, Costa Rica, a human rights instrument adopted in 1969 under the auspices of the Organization of American States (OAS).

Speaking on behalf of the 12 UNASUR member states, Samper also accused the US of having a "double standard" regarding international relations. "In a globalized world, you can’t demand that countries play by global economic rules but at the same time maintain a policy of unilateralism," he said. "No country has the right to judge the conduct of another, let alone impose sanctions or punishments on its own."

On April 3, one week before the start of the Summit and at a moment when the situation was already taxing the US State Department, Jacobson said she was "disappointed" by the Latin American reaction to the executive order against Venezuela. "The tone that Latin American leaders are using demonizes the United States as if it were the source of Venezuela’s problems," she said. The assistant secretary of state acknowledged that even ally governments, which she chose not to name, had privately expressed their disagreement with the policy of unilateral sanctions.

That same day—as if to underscore the different wavelengths on which the Pentagon and the State Department operate—information surfaced about US plans to expand its Palmerola military base in Honduras. The news came shortly after UNASUR demanded that US military bases in the region be dismantled.

The Tegucigalpa daily La Tribuna cited Pentagon sources to explain that the expansion plans "have to do with a new special force for Latin America called the Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force-South ... which will be made up of 250 Marines equipped with a Joint High Speed Vessel catamaran and four CH-53E Super Stallion heavy-duty helicopters." The Honduran paper explained that the unit will be land-based but "is expected to use the catamaran intensively for intratheater amphibious transport."
"Champion of peace in the region"

On April 6, Cynthia Arnson, director of the Latin American Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, joined the chorus of critics, arguing that the Obama administration erred in how it communicated its actions against Venezuela. Arnson defended the sanctions themselves but slammed the government for "the manner and the language in which they were imposed, using this outmoded … outdated rhetoric, [saying that] Venezuela constituted a national security threat."

Four days earlier, some 130 professionals and academics, including Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) professor Noam Chomsky and Ramsey Clark, an attorney general under US President Lyndon Johnson (1963-1969), sent Obama an open letter recommending that he rescind the March 9 executive order. The signers noted that allied countries such as Colombia and even members of the Venezuelan right reject the threats made against the government of Caracas.

"We see nothing that could conceivably be described as an ‘extraordinary threat’ to the US or even to Venezuela’s closest neighbors," the signers wrote. "Venezuela is not at war with any nation, does not have military bases outside its borders, and is helping to mediate an end to the war in Colombia; it is a champion of peace in the region. To call it a national security threat to the US diminishes the credibility of your administration in the eyes of the world."

By the time Ben Rhodes stepped in, shortly afterward, with his mea culpa, it was already painfully obvious that Obama was not going to be received at the Summit in Panama in the way he had imagined in December, when he announced the thawing of relations with Cuba. The State Department made its own last-minute effort to ameliorate the situation: Just before the start of the gathering, it dispatched Thomas Shannon, one of its most experienced diplomats, to Caracas. By then, though, it was too little, too late for the US government to fix the diplomatic fiasco.

All of that left President Obama in an extremely vulnerable position when he finally arrived in Panama. On April 10, the first full day of the Summit, he had no choice but to listen to the harsh criticisms being issued by Latin American governments. Obama abstained in this case from making any reference to Venezuela.

Complicating matters even more for the US president was a recent appearance in the US Congress by Elizabeth Hogan, the acting assistant administrator for the Latin America and Caribbean Bureau (LAC) of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), who defended the US$5 million her organization receives to finance certain Venezuelan groups that presumably oppose the government in Caracas. With those kinds of dealings going on in the background, it is little wonder that the Summit concluded with a vague, unremarkable speech by the president of Panama rather than with a final declaration signed by the 33 participating nations.

-- End --