

Latin America: Summit reveals a changing continent

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The fifth Summit of the Americas was held over April 17-19 in Trinidad and Tobago, bringing together representatives from all countries of the Americas except Cuba.

A far cry from the first of its kind, convened by the US in 1994, it revealed how much has changed in the hemisphere.

The region is now marked by the dispute between a push for greater independence from US economic and political power (which includes a revolutionary, anti-capitalist bloc) and US imperialism.

The latter is trying to undergo a facelift, led by President Barack Obama, to repair the damage done to US regional relations by the actions of the previous Bush administration.

The first Summit of the Americas held was held in Miami and comprised the 34 member countries of the Organisation of American States (which excludes only Cuba).

The purpose was to begin discussions on the US-proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which aimed to cement US domination over the hemisphere after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rolling back of the Central American revolutions.

While the third summit, held in Quebec in 2001, was confronted by tens of thousands of anti-corporate protestors, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez was the sole voice of dissent inside the forum to the FTAA.

At the fourth summit, in Mar de Plata, Argentina in 2005, protesters were in the streets again. This time, an alliance of newly elected governments of different political stripes (Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay) buried the FTAA with their stringent opposition.

Then-US president George Bush left with his tail between his legs.

The backdrop to the latest summit was the global economic crisis, the recent inauguration of Obama and the consolidation of an anti-imperialist bloc centred on the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA).

ALBA prepares its artillery

Between April 16-17, the member countries of ALBA (Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Honduras and Dominica), along with the presidents of Paraguay and St Vincent and the Grenadines and the foreign minister of Ecuador (an observer nation), met in Venezuela, to

“prepare their artillery” for the summit. (St Vincent and the Grenadines has since joined ALBA)

Along with the revolutionary governments of Venezuela, Bolivia and Cuba (President Raul Castro personally attended an ALBA summit for the first time), the other governments, who have joined ALBA for different reasons, signed a public document rejecting the draft declaration proposed for the summit.

The statement declared it insufficient and unacceptable”, as it “offers no answers to the issue of the global economic crisis” and “unjustifiably excludes Cuba”.

The meeting built on the decisions of the ALBA summit last November. It resolved to create a new currency, the Single Regional Compensation Payment System (Sucre) by the beginning of 2010.

The sucre will be a common accounting unit used for trading purposes among the ALBA countries. It will be backed by the funds in the Bank of ALBA, comprised of federal reserves of ALBA countries.

The sucre not only represents a step towards the “de-dollarisation” of the region’s economic relations, but a step towards a common currency.

It will also act as a stimulus to move away from trade dependency with the US and towards building relations based on solidarity among ALBA nations.

The summit also agreed upon 10 new projects, totalling US\$13 million in value, as part of the ALBA food program. A special plan was developed for Haiti (an ALBA observer nation) that included \$9.3 million for agricultural development.

Haiti will also benefit from a literacy campaign headed by Cuban teachers and funded by Venezuela.

Cuba was banned from the Trinidad and Tobago summit, Chavez said Venezuela’s representatives would also be representing Cuba.

The original decision to exclude Cuba from the OAS was justified by its 1962 declaration of the “Marxism-Leninism” nature of its revolution. This prompted Bolivian President Evo Morales to state at the ALBA meeting: “I want to declare myself Marxist, Leninist, communist, socialist and now let’s see them expel me.”

Chavez, Castro and Morales re-raised the idea of replacing the OAS with an Organisation of Latin American States — minus the US and Canada

Battle for the Americas

Before Trinidad and Tobago, the US government worked to co-opt key governments that have been part of the process of regional integration. One way this occurred was through the G20 Summit in London in early April, attended by Brazil, Argentina and Mexico.

Another example was a March summit in Chile of “progressive” presidents (including such “progressives” as British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and US Vice-President Joe Biden).

While Brazil and Argentina were crucial to defeating the FTAA, they did so not from a firm anti-imperialist, let alone anti-capitalist, perspective. Rather their position was one of defence for their economies against US attempts to use “free trade” to weaken them to the advantage of US corporate interests.

Given their economic weight in the region (along with Mexico), the US is trying to use the economic crisis to pull these governments firmly back into its orbit.

Obama made sure to present himself as much as possible as just one more among friends — in stark contrast to Bush’s imperial swagger.

Obama said he aimed to initiate a new era in US relations with the region: “I didn’t come to debate the past, I came to speak about the future.”

In response, Chavez presented Obama with a copy of Eduardo Galeano’s 1971 anti-imperialist classic *The Open Veins of Latin America*, “to learn about our history, [because] it is on the basis of this history that we have to rebuild”.

Morales noted: “Obama said three things: there are neither senior or junior partners. He said relations should be of mutual respect, and he spoke of change.”

Yet in Bolivia, “one doesn’t feel any change”, Morales said.. “The policy of conspiracy continues.”

Morales called on Obama to denounce the assassination plot against him, foiled only days before.

After the highly publicised handshakes between Obama and presidents such as Chavez and Morales, who agreed to resend ambassadors to the US after withdrawing them last September, the customary group photo did not occur.

It was left to the host president to be the sole signatory to the final declaration, approved with some dissent and open rejection of by ALBA bloc and Ecuador.

Argentina and Brazil approved the final declaration “with reservations”.

Brazil, for its part, not only talked up the moves made by Obama, but claimed a large portion of credit for it.

Former US vice-president Dick Cheney weighed into the events by saying that Obama “sets a bad precedent” by shaking hands with the likes of Chavez.

Obama responded: “Venezuela is a country whose defense budget is six hundred times smaller than that of the United States, which is why it is very unlikely that a handshake and a short conversation with President Chavez puts at risk the strategy interests of the United States.”

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