**Crisis of leadership**

Ariela Ruiz Caro

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The Summits of the Americas initially played an important role for the region. They launched initiatives that set the path of hemispheric development. In the first, held in Miami in 1994, the US proposed the formation of a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and a Hemispheric Energy Initiative, key to US national security at a time when the country was extremely dependent on oil imports. The US government sought to assure its supply of oil, based on the principles of the neoliberal FTAA (privatization of public companies, deregulation, trade liberalization, elimination of investment requirements, and liberalization of services linked to the energy sector).

Behind the slogan of free trade, the proposal would allow agricultural products subsidized by the US government to enter the region free of tariffs. The FTAA sought to impose economic policy via the liberalization of goods and services, the elimination of conditions, regulations or restrictions on direct investment and a minimal role for the state, sealed by an International Treaty that in most Latin American nations supersedes even the Constitution

At the Mar del Plata Summit in 2005, Venezuela and the four Mercosur countries put an end to the US and international capital’s dream of the FTAA. After that very public debacle, the US opted for the subregional or bilateral negotiation of the Free Trade Agreements (FTA), with disastrous results since the majority of Latin American countries that signed them saw their historic trade surpluses with the US rapidly become deficits, destroying the little industry they had. The promise of development and an increase in direct investment did not materialize.

The US-led Hemispheric Energy Initiative was weakened by regional energy integration projects presented by Hugo Chavez with Petroamerica, Petrocaribe and Petrosur, and the strengthening of the San José Agreement to supply oil under preferential conditions to Central American and Caribbean countries, in which Mexico also participated.

Since then the Summit of the Americas has become increasingly irrelevant. The Seventh Summit, held in Panama in 2015, failed to reach a final declaration due to lack of consensus, but it did showcase an important shift in US policy toward Cuba. The island nation participated for the first time and then-president Barack Obama delivered a historic speech that heralded the loosening of the embargo and anticipated the reestablishment of diplomatic relations. “The United States will not be a prisoner of the past. More than anything, we look to the future in policies that will improve the lives of the Cuban people,” he said on that occasion.

When Donald Trump took office in 2017, he reinstated and tightened the embargo against Cuba, a policy shift away from the Obama era that President Biden largely maintains today. The Summit failure in part reflects the political price in Latin America of Biden’s hard line against Cuba. Lopez Obrador said during his visit to Havanain June 2022 that “the government of the United States looks bad using the embargo to prevent the well-being of the people of Cuba with the purpose that, forced by necessity, they will rebel against their own government. If this perverse strategy were to succeed – something that does not seem likely due to the dignity of the Cuban people I have referred to – in any case, it would become a pyrrhic, vile and rogue victory, a stain that could not be erased, not even with all the water in the oceans”.

The last Summit, held in Lima in 2018, was the first in which a US president did not participate. Trump, and the presidents of Cuba, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Paraguay, and several Caribbean countries, sent their vice presidents or foreign ministers. It was also the first time that Venezuela was not invited. This task was entrusted to former Peruvian president Pedro Pablo Kuczynski, in his capacity as host. An angry Maduro threatened to show up at the Summit “by air, land or sea”, which generated tensions in the Peruvian capital. In the end, Maduro chose not to attend after Trump announced that he would not go. Not even Kuczynski attended, following revelations that he was involved in a corruption scandal that forced him to resign shortly before the Summit. The 2018 Summit theme was, precisely, the fight against corruption.

Trump was occupied at the time with allied bombing of chemical weapons manufacturing facilities in Syria, in retaliation for alleged chemical weapons attacks on civilians by the government of that country. Only Bolivia and Cuba openly condemned the bombing of Syria. The latter pointed out that it was “a unilateral, illegal action, without evidence verified by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), so that said actions constituted a flagrant violation of the principles of international law and the Charter of the United Nations that would exacerbate the conflict”.

The other governments with the exceptions of Canada and Colombia, ignored the request of the US Vice President, Mike Pence, to voice public support for the military actions by the United States and its allies against Syria. Instead, they condemned the use of chemical weapons, but implicitly rejected military actions by calling for “through international law and multilateral instruments, to end the use of this type of weapon with such cruel consequences and make efforts to avoid an escalation of violence, resorting to the paths of dialogue”.

The US government got countries at the IX Summit to sign a declaration that endorses economic sanctions against Russia for the invasion of Ukraine and condemns the war. However, the world’s leading power should know that Latin America is not the European Union and that, except for Colombia, no country has announced the application of economic sanctions.

At the Los Angeles Summit the US government promoted and Biden announced the precarious proposal “Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity“. The proposal promises to revitalize regional economic institutions and mobilize investment to counteract the growing Chinese presence in our region.

In reality, it is not a new proposal, but rather an imitation of the ‘America Crece Initiative’, launched in 2019, which offered loans for infrastructure to the region. The Initiative tried to attract greater investment from the private sector in infrastructure by connecting the private sector of the United States with existing opportunities in Latin America and the Caribbean with the condition of not allowing Chinese investments in certain areas of infrastructure, and putting pressure on the Latin American countries to cooperate with Biden’s global political agenda.

The other major initiative, the “Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection”, was signed by 21 countries (Argentina, Barbados, Belize, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, United States, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay). It contains general statements with some laudable objectives. As in any declaration on this subject, the signatory countries committed themselves to expand efforts to address the root causes of irregular migration throughout our hemisphere, improving conditions and opportunities in countries of origin and promoting respect for human rights”. However, without the participation of the presidents who have a leading role in the issue (Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Venezuela and Cuba) the issue lost prominence.

The rightwing ideological tilt to the Summit indicates that Biden seems to have thought that Latin America is Florida, where a group of Cuban-Americans has disproportionate influence in political parties and imposes their policies. Already nothing in Washington is done without an eye on the mid-term elections in November to renew governorships and the House of Representatives.

Excerpted: ‘Irrelevance and clashes at the Summit of the Americas’. Courtesy: Counterpunch.org