



Obama's Plan at the Summit of the Americas

By Juan Carlos Hidalgo

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President Obama will attend his last Summit of the Americas this weekend in Panama. Long gone are the days when his charisma and rhetoric numbed the anti-American feelings that prevail in these gatherings. Instead, Obama will face a hostile audience that will harangue him on his hardened policies toward Venezuela. But the president seems to have a clever plan to deal with his critics and engage other countries in the region:

Call the bluff of Cuba: The absence of Cuba in the Summit of the Americas was a sore point between the United States and the rest of Latin America. Until now, Cuba was not invited because Washington threatened to boycott a summit where the communist regime would take a seat. As the influence of leftwing governments grew in the region, the “Cuban issue” became a more prominent topic in U.S.-Latin American relations.

The Obama administration has not only agreed to Cuba's participation in this summit, but it has also engaged Havana by calling for opening embassies in each other's countries and lifting economic sanctions. Obama has rightly pointed out that instead of isolating the Castro regime, Washington's policies toward Cuba were isolating the U.S. in the region.

Interestingly, Cuba seems to be at odds with the idea of having a normal relationship with the U.S. Years ago, Elizardo Sánchez Santa Cruz, a leading dissident in Cuba, aptly summed up Havana's strategy: “[Castro] wants to continue exaggerating the image of the external enemy which has been vital for the Cuban Government during decades, an external enemy which can be blamed for the failure of the totalitarian model implanted here.”

No wonder then that Cuba has been dragging its feet in the negotiations with the U.S. In January, Raul Castro gave a speech where he gave a list of unrealistic preconditions to restore ties with Washington: returning Guantanamo to Cuba, compensating the regime for 50 years of sanctions, ending support for dissidents on the island, and abolishing the “wet foot, dry foot” policy

regarding Cuban refugees, among others. It sounded as if the Cuban dictator was looking for excuses to keep the U.S. at arm's length.

By engaging Cuba, Obama is calling the bluff of the Castro regime.

Undermine Venezuelan support in the Caribbean: President Obama is visiting Jamaica on his way to Panama to meet the 15 heads of government of the Caribbean Community (Caricom). In the last decade, most of these countries have benefited handsomely from subsidized oil shipments from Venezuela under the Petrocaribe agreement. In exchange, they have provided the backbone of diplomatic support for Caracas at the Organization of American States and other fora.

However, as Venezuela's economy is imploding, its oil shipments to Caribbean nations have halved since 2012. This represents a serious problem for Caricom nations: Over 90 percent of their energy needs come from oil imports. Only Trinidad & Tobago is energy self-sufficient.

The Obama administration has already launched a Caribbean Energy Security Initiative aimed at helping Caribbean nations transition from their dependence on oil to cleaner forms of energy. The details are still not clear. But Washington should use this scheme to fast-track the export approval process of companies interested in exporting gas from the U.S. to the region. To be sure, Caribbean nations need to upgrade their infrastructure and regulatory environments to adapt their economies to liquefied natural gas (LNG) and compressed natural gas (CNG). But it is in their interest to do so: they already pay some of the highest electricity prices in the world, and the Venezuelan tap is rapidly going dry.

This is of course a long-term strategy. But by playing his cards correctly, Obama can start undermining Venezuela's diplomatic support in the Caribbean.

Challenge other Latin American democracies: President Obama has requested meetings with the presidents of Chile, Costa Rica and Uruguay. According to rule of law and transparency rankings, these are Latin America's best-run countries. They also happen to have left-of-center governments that unfortunately have remained mostly silent regarding human rights violations in Venezuela.

There aren't many details about what Obama will discuss with these leaders, but he should openly ask them for a more forceful stand toward Caracas. By staying mummed about Nicolás Maduro's slow-motion coup in Venezuela, these democracies are tacitly endorsing the consolidation of a dictatorship in that country. Obama should convey the message loud and clear.

Ignore the populists: President Obama will face a circus-like tirade from the likes of Maduro, Bolivia's Evo Morales and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega. They might be joined by Argentina's Cristina Fernández and Ecuador's Rafael Correa. Obama should simply ignore them.

There is little that President Obama can do to help Latin America help itself. Ultimately the fate of the region is in its own hands. But Obama still has some cards under his sleeve that, played skillfully, could do some good for the hemisphere.

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