

Americas Summit ends in fiasco for Obama

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The Americas Summit held in Cartagena, Colombia over the weekend limped to a close Sunday with the 30-some participating heads of state unable to reach agreement on a joint statement. Preventing any consensus were sharp disagreements between Washington and virtually all the countries to its south over Cuba, the Malvinas and the “war on drugs.”

For Obama, the two-day summit was an unmitigated fiasco, with the positions of his government opposed by every other participating nation outside of Canada, and news reports of the gathering in the United States overshadowed by a prostitution scandal at a Cartagena hotel involving 11 members of the US president’s Secret Service detail and five American military personnel.

This was the second Americas Summit to end with no closing statement for the participants to sign. Obama attended the last one, held in Trinidad in 2009, after barely three months in office, and Washington made a concerted attempt to present the young African-American president as a sea change from the policies of the Bush administration, which were wildly unpopular in the hemisphere.

For all Obama’s rhetoric about having come to Trinidad to inaugurate a new era of “mutual respect and equality,” three years later it has become abundantly clear that his Democratic administration has pursued a Latin American policy that is essentially unchanged from that of its predecessor. This has centered on a continuation of the half-century economic blockade against Cuba, the promotion of Free Trade Agreements crafted to further the interests of US-based banks and transnational corporations and the prosecution of a militarized “war on drugs” designed to further US military hegemony in the region.

Aspects of this policy came under direct attack at the Cartagena summit. Unlike the gathering three years ago, Washington was unable this time to prevent Cuba

being placed on the agenda.

At the 2009 summit, Obama deflected criticism by announcing minimal changes to the US ban on travel and restrictions on remittances to Cuba, vowing a “new beginning” in US-Cuban relations. Since then, Washington has taken no steps to ease, much less end, the trade embargo against Cuba.

In Cartagena, Obama insisted that Cuba could not be allowed to attend the summits because it “has not yet moved to democracy.” Latin American critics of Washington’s policy have pointed to a wide range of dictatorships, from the Middle East to Central Asia, with which the US maintains the closest ties.

A meeting of foreign ministers held to draft a statement for the heads of state to sign voted 32 to two (the US and Canada) to end the exclusion of Cuba from the summits, a policy that dates back some 50 years, to when Washington dictated to the Organization of American States a quarantine policy against the Caribbean island nation in the wake of the 1959 revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power. As the summit statements are based on consensus, this veto precluded the issuing of a closing document.

In response, a number of countries indicated that they would adopt the policy pursued by Ecuador’s President Rafael Correa, who this year refused to participate in a summit that excluded Cuba. The ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) countries, which include Bolivia, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Venezuela, as well as Cuba and four Caribbean nations, issued a statement vowing that they would not attend another summit without Cuba’s participation and demanding an end to the US economic and financial embargo against the island nation.

Brazil’s President Dilma Rousseff expressed a similar view, declaring that the Cartagena summit “must be the last one without Cuba.”

On the issue of the Malvinas (Falklands), the

countries of Latin America similarly took a unanimous position of support for Argentina's claims to sovereignty over the islands and opposition to British rule as a remnant of colonialism. The US, however, opposed any statement of support, insisting that it was neutral in the conflict.

Argentine President Cristina Fernandez Kirchner took a car to the airport as soon as the group photograph was snapped, skipping the second day of the conference. This early departure spared her listening to Obama's remarks spelling out US neutrality in which he referred to the South Atlantic islands as the "the Maldives [sic] or the Falklands, whatever your preferred term."

On the issue of drugs, Obama also found himself largely isolated in his defense of the US-led strategy of a militarized war on drugs. Washington backed this strategy over the course of two decades through Plan Colombia, which saw billions of dollars in military aid, equipment and advisors sent to the South American country. It is now prosecuting a similar bloody struggle in Mexico through Plan Merida and is spreading it to Central America through the Central American Regional Initiative.

Guatemala's recently inaugurated President Otto Perez Molina, a former army general implicated in the genocidal war crimes of that country's protracted civil war, initiated the call for a regional discussion on legalizing drugs, prompting a flurry of US visits to Central America aimed a quashing such a debate.

In Cartagena, Obama insisted that "legalization is not the answer" and that the drug trade "allowed to operate legally without any constraint could be just as corrupting if not more corrupting than the status quo."

Even President Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia, Washington's closest ally in the hemisphere and the former defense minister, distanced himself from Obama, declaring that it was necessary to see if "this policy is working and if there are more efficient and less costly alternatives to confront this problem of drugs."

Economic tensions also dominated the summit. At the center of the increasing challenge to US policy is American capitalism's loss of economic hegemony in the hemisphere. China's drive for new markets and sources of raw materials has turned it into the leading trading partner with Brazil, Chile, Peru and a number of other countries. It is also the chief source of foreign

direct investment in Brazil, Peru and elsewhere on the continent. The European Union, meanwhile, outstrips the US as Latin America's number two trading partner.

In a speech to a parallel "CEOs summit" convened in Cartagena, Brazil's President Rousseff denounced US and European monetary policies, holding them responsible for "provoking a real monetary tsunami," with near-zero interest rates leading to foreign money flooding into Brazil and driving up the value of its currency, the real, thereby making Brazilian exports more expensive on the world market. Rousseff vowed that her government would not "leave our manufacturing sector be cannibalized."

Such concerns have led to a rise in protectionism in the region that has increased tensions not only between Latin America and the US and Europe, but also within the continent itself. Thus, in response to an unfavorable trade balance due to the strong real, Brazil recently threatened to abrogate a bilateral agreement with Mexico providing duty-free export of cars between the two countries. In the end, a deal was patched together imposing voluntary caps on exports.

Presented by Washington as the one "bright spot" of the summit was Obama's announcement that a Free Trade Agreement with Colombia will go into effect by the middle of next month. Such an agreement was initially negotiated by the Bush administration in 2006, but then blocked in Congress.

Candidate Obama opposed the Colombian FTA claiming human rights concerns. Once in office, he renewed the push for its enactment, attaching to it a phony "Labor Action Plan" that required Colombia to create new agencies and programs ostensibly to protect workers in a country where over 3,000 union members have been killed by security forces and right-wing death squads since 1986. Obama has certified Colombia's compliance with the plan, despite these cosmetic changes having done nothing to halt this bloodbath. Over 30 trade unionists were killed in Colombia last year and at least six lost their lives in the first three months of 2012.



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