

The Summit of the Americas: Latin America on the new geopolitical stage

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Theme

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Summary

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Analysis

Introduction: the historical significance of the Summit of the Americas

The Summit of the Americas began life in 1994 in the context of the end of the Cold War and the rise of globalisation. It was a US-led initiative to build a hemisphere-wide coalition of democratic countries to promote processes for political cooperation and coordination. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the summit sought to reset regional relations in light of the consolidation of democratic transitions and the end of the conflicts in Central America and the struggle between the US and the USSR. It also sought to respond to initiatives from outside the region, such as Spain's attempt to gain influence through the Ibero-American Summits, launched three years earlier in 1991. The *raison d'être* of the Summit of the Americas was to consolidate democracy through strategic alliances with democratic countries, with the exception of Cuba. Havana's exclusion from the forum lasted until 2015, when Raúl Castro participated in the Panama Summit, alongside Barack Obama, coinciding with Washington's rapprochement.

One of the main goals across the summits has been to deepen economic ties through the signing of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) agreement for the hemisphere, complemented by a forum of democratic states. The project enjoyed enthusiastic backing from many of the countries in the region, which embraced the various mechanisms and procedures designed to implement a plan on this scale.

Opposition was initially limited but grew with the arrival of Hugo Chávez, his alliance with Fidel Castro and the launch of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA, *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América*), which struck a combative stance against any form of free trade. In 2005 the economic and trade pillar at the heart of the hemisphere-wide initiative promoted by successive US Presidents collapsed. Nonetheless, commitment to the defence and consolidation of democracy survived, resulting in the Inter-American Democratic Charter, approved at the 2001 summit in Quebec. The signatories reaffirmed their commitment to the defence of representative democracy. However, the Summits of the Americas became less relevant in the 21st century, at the same time as talks on the FTAA stalled and other actors from outside the region emerged, most notably China.

In 2015 and 2018 Cuba took part in the summits in Panama and Lima, despite not sharing the principles and values of the Democratic Charter and despite being a single-party regime. [Article 3 of the charter states](#): 'Essential elements of representative democracy include, *inter alia*, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, access to and the exercise of power in accordance with the rule of law, the holding of periodic, free, and fair elections based on secret balloting and universal suffrage as an expression of the sovereignty of the people, the pluralistic system of political parties and organisations, and the separation of powers and independence of the branches of government'.

The 2022 summit: a missed window of opportunity?

The Ninth Summit of the Americas, which will take place on 6-10 June in Los Angeles, will see the event return to US soil for the first time since the first summit in 1994. However, the context is markedly different from previous summits, particularly the last one (hosted by Peru in 2018). The pandemic, which saw the event postponed for a year, and the invasion of Ukraine have been catalysts for international geopolitical transformation. The global stage is changing rapidly, in politico-institutional, geopolitical and economic-social terms. The world that emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War started to disappear after the 2008 Financial Crisis. This has been followed by a series of problems for the US, both internal (political polarisation and economic decline) and external (the withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan).

The arrival of powers from outside the region –particularly China– has consigned Washington's traditional hegemony over Latin America to the past. Many of the countries in the region have let themselves be seduced by Beijing's offerings on the economy and trade (particularly the Belt and Road initiative), which are underpinning an increasingly assertive global strategy. While the last summit in 2018 took place during the presidency of Donald Trump, this time it is the turn of Joe Biden, who is more inclined to strengthen

ties with traditional partners like the EU, Australia and New Zealand, as well as Asian countries like Japan, South Korea and even India.

All the signs are that the US views the ninth summit as a major opportunity to fortify its role in the hemisphere, forge new alliances and contain its loss of international influence in light of its withdrawal from Afghanistan, the rise of China and the invasion of Ukraine. While Trump did not attend Lima, this time Biden is hosting the summit and is more involved.

To date, the US relationship with Latin America has played a relatively minor role for the Biden Administration. This can largely be explained by international events, most notably the pandemic and Ukraine, although there are other longer-term reasons. US interest in the region has been waning ever since the end of the Cold War, although the trend has grown more pronounced after the September 11 attacks in 2001. Since the collapse of the FTAA in 2005, driven by opposition from Argentina (Néstor Kirchner), Venezuela (Hugo Chávez) and Brazil (Lula da Silva), Washington has lacked a comprehensive regional programme. The Biden Administration is aware of this, alongside the need to strengthen ties with the Global South. This means deepening its relationship with Latin America, especially at a time when China's growing presence threatens the stability of relations in the hemisphere, which has been the case for a while now.

The Ninth Summit of the Americas appears to have occupied a secondary position on the US agenda, which is currently focused on the issue of migration and the war in Ukraine. There is also a lack of a hemisphere-wide project on the digital and environmental transformation and no specific ideas on how to win over the region as a strategic ally in the face of Beijing. This could be done by promoting nearshoring policies and energy complementarity, through the development and financing of energy sources based on key commodities for the green economy. Not only would such structural changes allow Latin American countries to boost their presence in the global economy, they would also help curb migration pressure on the US.

However, the mid-term elections mean the White House is firmly focused on migration, a key issue in certain states. This affects both Mexico –a transit point– and Central America and the Caribbean, where the migratory flows originate. Biden has put signing a regional agreement on migration at the centre of the summit, arguing that the climate crisis, the pandemic and corruption have created 'migration and refugee flows unequalled in the modern history of the region'. For the US President, 'our goal is to chart a new regional approach to improve how we jointly manage migration across the region for the coming decade'.

While the Summit's slogan ('Building a Sustainable, Resilient, and Equitable Future') alludes to long-term structural goals, its focus is more on promoting 'coordinated regional efforts' to address migration, tackling its root causes and dismantling people-trafficking networks. Issues such as health and security (which became more important during the pandemic), the climate crisis, the transition to clean energies, access to digital technology, equitable economic growth and the strengthening of democratic institutions have all been eclipsed not only by the issue of migration but also by political disagreements.

Washington's decision to invite Spain to the summit is indicative of the new global leadership proposed by Biden and creates a window of opportunity for the two countries to find coordinated solutions to Latin American problems. It also needs to be seen in the context of the White House's desire to strengthen transcontinental ties (eg, AUKUS) in order to recover global leadership and address the challenge of China and other powers from outside the region. Spain and the US have more commonalities than differences. They are the two countries with the greatest historic, social, economic and cultural ties with Latin America. Moreover, both are finding themselves side-lined by China and its interests. The bilateral relationship points to increased collaboration and cooperation on Latin America, especially in terms of governance, strengthening institutions, fighting organised crime and other key issues. It is not a case of Spain acting as a 'bridge' between the US and Latin America, which would be unnecessary. Rather, Madrid and Washington are looking to jointly further their interests in a region that is vital to the future of their mutual interests.

For Biden, the event is the logical extension of the Summit for Democracy in December 2021. Both are opportunities to strengthen democracy in the face of rising authoritarian populism. Having emphasised that 'support for democracy and respect for human rights is at the heart of all of the United States' engagement with our neighbours throughout the Americas', the White House sees the exclusion of Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela as justified. However, this has resulted in the politicisation of the summit, hindering the drive to promote regional coordination on modernising economic structures and democratic institutions. One of the main obstacles to the Biden Administration's objectives (more ambitious in theory than in practice) is the fragmentation of the region, which finds itself riven by different trends and political polarisation, with Mexico jostling for regional leadership. Indeed, some of López Obrador's proposals are incompatible with those emanating from Washington. The Mexican leader has made his presence at the Summit conditional on the invitation of Cuba, Venezuela (Biden would receive Juan Guaidó, whom he continues to recognise as 'interim President') and Nicaragua, a proposal seconded by Bolivia.

López Obrador has defended the participation of all governments without any exclusions. In line with the Estrada Doctrine, which permeates Mexican foreign policy, he has pushed for the participation 'of all countries, all peoples of America, because nobody should exclude anybody else'. However, the US ruled out inviting these three states, arguing that they fail to respect democracy. Brian Nichols, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, has unequivocally stated that if the goal is to strengthen democratic institutions, it makes no sense to invite a single-party dictatorship and two authoritarian regimes: 'Our foundation in the hemisphere is democracy. We have the Inter-American Democratic Charter, the Charter of the OAS, the Quebec and Lima Declarations. There is a democratic spirit and vision in the Americas and we will respect that. And that's why we don't think it's appropriate to include countries that fail to respect democracy'.

The region's internal fractures have once again come to the fore: while Colombia (recently recognised by the US as a strategic non-NATO ally), Ecuador and Paraguay all back the US, other countries are openly critical. The Argentine leader, Alberto Fernández, who holds the *pro-tempore* presidency of the Economic Commission for

Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), has said that 'it is time to help Venezuela'. Similarly, Luis Arce, President of Bolivia, called for no countries to be excluded, arguing that the objectives of the summit could be undermined 'if pluralism is not recognised, the principle of self-determination is ignored and the participation of brother countries is vetoed'. The President of Honduras, Xiomara Castro, has also rejected the exclusion of other countries: 'if we cannot all be present as nations, it is not a Summit of the Americas'. Similarly, the countries of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) have warned Washington from the outset that they would not attend if the US persisted in its attempts to exclude other countries. Ronald Sanders, Ambassador of Antigua and Barbuda to the US, made it clear that they would not attend because 'the Summit of the Americas is not a US meeting and it is not for the US to decide who is invited and who is not'.

While Argentina, Honduras and Chile have all criticised the exclusions, unlike Mexico they have all pledged to attend. In contrast, the President of Guatemala, Alejandro Giammattei, announced he would not be attending after US criticism of the appointment of the Attorney General, Consuelo Porras, who stands accused of corruption by Washington. The [Department of State](#) condemned her appointment, stating that Porras was involved in 'significant corruption' and had 'repeatedly obstructed and undermined anticorruption investigations in Guatemala to protect her political allies and gain undue political favor'. Given this context, López Obrador has doubled down on his opposition to the exclusion of countries. On a recent visit to Cuba, he promised to renew his insistence to Biden that there should not be any vetoes. He also struck a combative note following a tour of Central America and the Caribbean: 'If some countries, if all countries are not invited, I will not attend the event. It will be attended by a representative of the Government of Mexico, the Chancellor [Marcelo Ebrard] [...] Countries are entitled to decide that they do not want to attend. However, how can a Summit of the Americas take place without inviting all the countries of America? Where are those who are not invited? Are they on another continent, another galaxy, an unknown planet?'

The initial tension created by Mexico's demands has dissipated. First, because the US has reduced pressure on Cuba and Venezuela. It has rolled back sanctions on visas, travel and remittances imposed on the former country by the Trump Administration, although progress towards diplomatic normalisation has been accompanied by calls for democratisation and respect for human rights. In terms of the latter, US officials met with Nicolás Maduro in Caracas in March 2022. This was followed two months later by a US decision to allow Chevron to renegotiate its operating licence in Venezuela. Despite remaining firm in his decision not to attend the Los Angeles summit, López Obrador has wound down the rhetoric, assuring the issue will not damage bilateral ties: 'It is important not to think that a rupture will occur just because we do not agree on the summit. That is not the case. Regardless of the outcome, we will always have a friendly and respectful relationship with the US government and even more so with the people of this country'.

In the end, Washington's diplomatic efforts appear to have paid off. The gestures towards Cuba and Venezuela have led most CARICOM countries to relinquish their initial opposition. Moreover, the tour of the region by Senator Christopher Dodd, Special Advisor for the Summit of the Americas, marked the start of negotiations with Mexico to bring López Obrador to Los Angeles and has successfully persuaded Bolsonaro to drop his reluctance and ambiguity and finally agree to attend. Washington has had no qualms

about courting López Obrador, implicitly recognising Mexico's leadership and the country's importance to the success of this summit. In the words of the Ambassador to Mexico: 'You might ask why we are paying so much attention to Mexico. The answer is that at a Summit of the Americas, Mexico needs to be there with its leadership'.

In addition to confirming their intention to be present in Los Angeles, Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua have used the 21st ALBA summit, which took place in Havana over the last weekend in May, as a platform to question the Summit of the Americas and the position of the US. However, the ALBA summit attracted little attention in the media, reflecting the organisation's low profile in recent years.

While the Ninth Summit of the Americas is an opportunity for the region to play a bigger role, all the evidence suggests Latin American countries will come with their own agendas, sometimes contradictory, lacking coordination and without a unified voice. The politicisation surrounding the exclusion of certain countries only makes this worse. As the former Chilean President Ricardo Lagos noted, 'in these stormy times, it would be logical to see Latin America sharing ideas to resolve its difficulties. This is not an easy task because we have not been speaking for a long time. However, given the difficult times ahead, we should be thinking about how we can address challenges together, both as a continent and at the local level. Perhaps we need to seek a new North-South multilateralism. The only thing for certain is that if we want to be able to overcome this period of major challenges, unity and basic consensuses are the priority'.

This is another example of the lack of regional coordination, which began with the disagreements between Latin America's two pre-eminent powers, Brazil and Mexico. In just a decade, the former has gone from enjoying a dynamic position of leadership on the world stage (particularly under Lula da Silva between 2003 and 2010) to *its lacklustre and marginal position under Jair Bolsonaro*. The Los Angeles summit has been largely absent from Bolsonaro's agenda, with the Brazilian President focused instead on his bid for re-election and his fight against Brazil's electoral institutions. This comes against the backdrop of the exhaustion of his ideologically-charged foreign policy under Ernesto Araujo's tenure as Foreign Minister. Brazil's slim margin for geopolitical action has shrunk under Bolsonaro. Potential international allies like Trump have disappeared, while other relationships, such as the one with Vladimir Putin, have come under strain. Moreover, the country's regional isolation has grown with the shift away from centre-right and centrist governments to left-leaning administrations. In the run-up to the summit, Brazil has courted ambiguity, allowing rumours to circulate that Bolsonaro would not attend. However, this was not because of the exclusion of other countries. Instead, the reason remained unspecified, reflecting the frostiness between Brazil and the US. In the end, Bolsonaro's attendance was finally confirmed just 12 days before the summit.

The baton of leadership has passed instead to López Obrador: following a commitment to reactivate ECLAC, he will attend the summit after a tour of Central America and the Caribbean, combining a wide-ranging agenda. Not only is he calling for Cuba's readmission into the American community and taking a stance against the exclusion of Venezuela and Nicaragua, the Mexican President is also aspiring to regional leadership by brokering a deal on migration with the US and pursuing an alternative form of development. While such a project may be far from the 'anti-imperialism' that marked the

socialism of the 21st century and its associates, it is nonetheless permeated by the classic Latin American nationalism and a desire to combine largely incompatible ideas. These include US backing for building a hemisphere-wide framework for coexistence, inspired by the EU, and seeking to fly the flag of democratic principles while allowing dictatorships and authoritarian regimes to be part of the community of American nations, theoretically in an attempt to lead them to democracy. However, we should recall that decades of isolation since 1961 failed to bring about the transition in Cuba and Obama's rapprochement in 2015 also failed to bring greater openness.

As Rafael Rojas noted: 'President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's recent tour summarised the contradiction inherent to the Fourth Transformation of the Latin American left. [...] While he admires the Cuban Revolution and Fidel Castro, he proposes a democratic and capitalist path for transformation and a relationship with the US that are radically different to Cuban socialism. He justifies the lack of democracy in Cuba and endorses the criminalisation of public protest and peaceful opposition on the island, doing so because he regards the effects of the blockade as perverse. However, at the same time, he aspires to be the main regional ally of Havana's historic adversary'.

Mexico has made progress on migration to promote safe and legal emigration and provide a comprehensive solution to the crisis. After a phone call between López Obrador and Biden, followed up by a meeting of Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas, both administrations appear open to long-term solutions, with a strategy to promote economic development, job creation and business and government investment to discourage migration. However, these efforts have been hamstrung by the rift between Mexico and the US on how to implement support and the level of financing (while US\$4 billion is a respectable sum, it is not nearly enough to address the needs of Central America). While Mexican initiatives to promote the development of Central America and the Caribbean (eg, *Sembrando Vida* and *Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro*) strengthen the country's regional leadership, they are not enough to address the structural challenges in the area.

Leaving Mexico and Brazil to one side, under the presidency of Gabriel Boric, the summit also presents a golden opportunity for Chile and a left that has distanced itself from the extremist rhetoric of the previous generation (the so-called '21st century socialism') to sell its project of renewal to the international community. Compared with the outgoing government of Iván Duque in Colombia, the domestically weakened governments of Alberto Fernández in Argentina and Pedro Castillo in Peru, and Bolsonaro's focus on the Brazilian elections, the new Chilean executive –despite its internal differences– brings a new and reformist (more than disruptive) agenda to the table, keen to build bridges with the rest of the region and pursue integration that transcends ideological divides.

Boric has invited the President the Chilean Chamber of Commerce, Services and Tourism to accompany him to the summit. The young Chilean President embodies a shift away from the left-wing foreign policy agendas of the populist left (eg, Chávez and Correa) and right (eg, Bolsonaro and Bukele). His approach turns its back on the 'them and us' mentality, which has gone hand in hand with the politicisation of foreign relations, and seeks to prioritise diplomacy over personality. While Chile is in favour of Cuba,

Nicaragua and Venezuela attending the summit, it will still take part if they are excluded. Antonia Urrejola, Minister of Foreign Affairs, notes that 'the President [Boric] has insisted that beyond ideological kinship among certain groups, his priority is for Latin America to once again speak with a single voice. And this single voice must be defined by the shared agenda we need to find among the different countries in the region, one that goes beyond ideological differences. Latin America is one of the regions most affected by the climate crisis but is among those that bear the smallest share of responsibility. We need a joint approach on migration, drug trafficking and security. The idea is that beyond ideological kinship with certain governments in the region, the fundamental agenda for Latin America is one of regional integration. Polarisation and fragmentation have caused Latin America to lose its voice. [...] This is a new discourse for the Latin American left. Personally, I believe leadership is extremely important and the president, as shown by his domestic agenda, is open to all spaces for dialogue, putting aside any legitimate differences'.

Conclusions

The Ninth Summit of the Americas looks set to go down as another missed chance, failing to capitalise on the opportunity to find viable long-term solutions to the fundamental issues in Latin America. Its politicisation, through Mexico's desire to position itself as a regional leader against the US by fighting the corner of Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela, has deepened traditional regional divisions. Above all, it has overshadowed structural reform projects aiming to address migration by combining control and security policies with a far-reaching agenda on growth with development.

The run-up to the summit has revealed two persistent weaknesses holding back the region: US leadership –not just globally but also in the hemisphere– and the weakness of Latin America's commitment to democracy. US leadership faces two key issues. The first is Washington's failure to come up with an attractive overarching project for the region after the collapse of the FTAA in 2005. The internal rupture between Republicans and Democrats, aggravated by the tenure of Trump, has left a vacuum when it comes to a 'State policy' on Latin America. The US has gone from between excluding dictatorships (Cuba) from the summits to allowing their presence (2015 and 2018), only to go back on this decision in 2022. What's more, Washington is still struggling to find the right tone to cast its relations in the hemisphere as a relationship among equals.

The second is that the summit has become a focal point for many Latin American governments to express resistance to the US, allowing them to shore up domestic support and legitimacy among electorates traditionally drawn to anti-imperialist messages. Mexico is currently in the midst of elections, with a presidential election to follow in 2024. Later this year, Brazil is also due to elect or re-elect a President. Nationalism and striking a defiant tone against Washington may prove vote-winners for both the left (López Obrador) and the far right (Bolsonaro). López Obrador's position means he will be able to claim victory whatever the outcome. If Washington allows Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela to attend, he will be able to style himself the big winner, standing up to US hegemony. In contrast, if Washington's veto prevents them from attending, he will have cemented his position at the vanguard of anti-US nationalism across the region. All this explains why the Biden Administration has redoubled its efforts

in recent weeks to encourage López Obrador to change his stance. This has involved new talks between Blinken and Ebrard, followed by the visit from Christopher Dodd.

In contrast, there are no good outcomes for Biden. Accepting the presence of three undemocratic governments goes against the spirit of the meeting and undermines his strategy. It would also throw a lifeline to the Cuban government, which has failed to take advantage of the thaw in relations since 2015 to promote democratic openness and respect for human rights, choosing instead to double down on repression. The situation is similar for Nicaragua, which held elections with minimal guarantees, imprisoning the main opposition candidates. There is, however, a worse alternative. A summit without the Presidents of the main regional powers –Mexico and Brazil– will undermine any agreements that are reached at the summit. Even if the hemisphere resents the lack of leadership from its US ‘amigo’, it is also suffering –acutely so– from the absence of leaders in Latin America.

In the current context, the main objectives of the summit (the defence and reform of democratic systems and the transformation of the summits to boost their international profile and ensure a coordinated approach to hemisphere-wide weaknesses) are at risk of being side-lined, squandering this opportunity to increase Latin America’s standing on the world stage. Instead of playing a minor role, the region should be capitalising on a potential alliance with the West. The US and the EU should also recognise the importance of Latin America in defending democracy and ensuring the supply of raw materials, especially in light of Russian aggression. At the same time, Latin America also needs to find regional cohesion, with long-term projects backed by consensus, transmitting security on the rule of law and governance.

Spain’s invitation to attend the summit could mark the beginning of a new era. Latin American problems, such as the crises in Central America, migration, organised crime and the region’s deteriorating economic and social outlook, can only be addressed through regional cooperation and with the backing and involvement of major world powers. As Ricardo Lagos notes, the search for a new North-South multilateralism –or at least between part of the North and part of the South– is crucial both for Latin America and, especially in the current context, for the US and even Spain and the EU.