



318

APRIL
2014

THE AMERICAS: full backing for an irreversible historical fact

Anna Ayuso, Senior Researcher for Latin America

The historic summit to reunify the American hemisphere was completed. The VIIIth Summit of the Americas on April 10th and 11th, 2015 ended an exclusion that had been in place since December 1994 in Miami, when Bill Clinton was US president. At the Panama summit, the 35 leaders of the continent hailed Cuba's inclusion in the meeting following the historic thawing of relations with the United States, simultaneously announced by Raul Castro and Barack Obama on December 27th, 2014. The octogenarian Cuban debutant was applauded during an unusually emotive speech in which, as well as defending the revolution, he recalled the damage done to the Cuban people by the total opposition of the United States, including the blockade, and the attempted Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. He even suggested that this aggression caused the radicalisation of the revolution and led Cuba to seek sanctuary in the Soviet bloc in order to defend itself. Nevertheless, it was Raul Castro who gave the greatest praise to his counterpart, Barack Obama, calling him an "honest man", a quality that he attributed to his humble origins.

It was one of Obama's few happy moments of a plenary session in which the US leader was obliged to listen to a shipload of reproaches for the historical insurgencies made by the United States in the region. Obama defended himself against them without denying the existence of dark chapters in the history of the United States and without pretending to be perfect, while also speaking with pride of the achievements made in equal rights as illustrated by the march across Edmund Pettus Bridge in Alabama against racial discrimination, the 50th anniversary of which was recently commemorated. Like Castro, Obama called for change in hemispherical relations to confront common problems and seek solutions without getting "caught up in ideologies" and suggested that blaming the United States for everything "is not going to bring progress".

The summit was replete with history and memories of conflictual episodes. Abundant references - both good and bad - were made to US presidents such as Kennedy, Lincoln, Jefferson, Monroe and Bush, turning the session into an unusual course on American history. Nevertheless, the principal reproach that Obama had to face was the repudiation of the executive order made by the United States on March 9th, 2015, applying sanctions to Venezuelan citizens. Although they target

specific individuals and not the general population or the state, the description of Venezuela as a threat to national security that accompanied the presidential sanctions drew the expected denouncement of “interference” from the government of Nicholas Maduro, who requested and received the support of the majority of his counterparts against what he considered an imminent aggression.

While the condemnation of the United States’ unilateral methods was generalised, there were nuances. The leaders are aware of the delicate political and economic situation Venezuela is going through and the risks of coups in the region cannot be excluded, as demonstrated by events in Honduras in 2009 and Paraguay in 2012. Some leaders, like Dilma Rousseff of Brazil, recognised this, but insisted that the place to discuss it was UNASUR, and the way to focus on it was not with counter-productive, ineffective sanctions but by attempting to bring the parties together and seeking moderation. Others went further. The Ecuadorian president, Rafael Correa, urged Luis Almagro, the brand-new secretary-general of the Organisation of American States (OAS) which oversees the summit, to transform the organisation and convert it into a place where the Americas to the north and south of the Rio Bravo, which, in his opinion, are different, can “talk as blocks”. Correa insisted, in his habitual rejection of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), that it was unnecessary, and proposed the establishment of a Latin American system of human rights built around the Inter-American Court whose headquarters is in San Jose, Costa Rica. The Ecuadorian president, who spoke before Obama, also rejected the IACHR’s accusations made against his government of alleged restrictions on the press freedom, distinguishing between good press and bad press that manipulates reality. Obama responded by assuring that the United States has its own very bad press too, but insisted that it was not his place to decide on what was good and bad and everyone should have the opportunity to speak.

Along with Ecuador, various leaders of socialist governments in the 21st century, such as Argentina, Nicaragua and Bolivia, condemned the United States for interfering through non-governmental organisations (NGOs) defending human rights. The Venezuelan president, Nicolas Maduro, went further and accused the US embassy of being the “machinery of psychological war” against its government and conspiring its overthrow. Evo Morales, the president of Bolivia, also made a heated speech against the violations of human rights by the United States in various parts of the world and at home, including the death penalty. These are some of the examples of the differences in perspective that persist in the region, hinder cooperation and impeded the adoption of a final joint declaration.

Obama’s third and final summit was a success but it was no bed of roses. In his speech, a more pragmatic Obama recalled that at his first summit in Trinidad and Tobago in 2009 he promised to begin a new chapter in hemispherical relations and claimed to have done that. Now he asked for common problems to be addressed in order to attempt to find solutions. The chapter of issues remaining to be “resolved” is very large (a very Cuban expression), and among them is the lifting of the embargo itself. Security, narco-trafficking, arms races, migrations, climate change and inequality were among those most mentioned at the summit and all are highly complex issues to tackle. Dilma Rousseff finished her speech by saying that geography has produced a continent separated from the rest of the world by two oceans and it is down to them to make it navigatesail it to a successful conclusion. Little time is left in Obama’s term. Others will have to continue what he has just begun but the important thing is that this step forward is not reversed.