

Inter-American Cooperation at a Crossroads Conference Report

The Centre for International Governance Innovation



April 14–16, 2009

St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago

Regional cooperation in the Americas has waned in the fifteen years following the optimistic spirit of the first Summit of the Americas in Miami. Issues such as free trade and democracy have become far more contested, and the region has seen an increased presence of external actors that have greatly influenced the ways in which the countries of the hemisphere relate. The Fifth Summit of the Americas, held April 17–19, 2009, in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, was thus convened at a time when hemispheric regionalism in the Americas is seen to be at a crossroads.

The emergence of Brazil as a major player on the world scene has changed the power dynamic of inter-American politics. Traditional powers and ideologies have been challenged despite the energetic leadership emerging from the Obama administration in the United States. Venezuela under President Chávez has asserted itself as a regional power, espousing different conceptions of regional cooperation. New institutions and mechanisms, including the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), have offered contending strategies for integration. Meanwhile, the region's "old" institutions, such as the Mercosur and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), are coming to terms with the new shape of the region and their place(s) in it.

In this context, The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) partnered with the Centre d'Études Interaméricaines (CEI) of Laval University and the Institute of International Relations (IIR) of the University of the West Indies (UWI) to organize a three-day conference in advance of the Port-of-Spain Summit. This colloquium, "Inter-American Cooperation at a Crossroads," was held April 14–16, 2009, at UWI's St. Augustine campus in Trinidad. The conference was co-chaired by CIGI Associate Director and Distinguished Fellow Andrew F. Cooper, CEI Director

Gordon Mace, and IIR Director and CIGI Senior Fellow Timothy M. Shaw. The event received financial support from the Government of Canada through the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). Participation at the colloquium was by invitation, and Chatham House rules of confidentiality were in effect.

The proximity in location and timing for this colloquium served to attract an internationally renowned group of academics, practitioners and experts in the field. The papers presented offered scholarly and policy-relevant analyses, while keynote addresses from Professor Norman Girvan (professorial research fellow, IIR, UWI), Ambassador Albert Ramdin (assistant secretary general, Organization of American States), Alexandra Bugailiskis (Canada's assistant deputy minister, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Sherpa for the Summit process) and David Malone (president of the International Development Research Centre) framed the colloquium's debate with respect to the merits, progress and future of inter-American cooperation. Although the conference did not focus specifically on the worldwide financial crisis of 2008–09, the discussion was invariably affected by the changes and uncertainties stemming from this crisis.

This report summarizes the main findings of the conference and focuses on the key issues affecting regional cooperation. Section 1 of the report discusses the changing landscape in the Americas during the past fifteen years in terms of institutions, practices and mechanisms. Section 2 analyzes the effectiveness of the current and competing institutions in the Americas for facilitating inter-American cooperation. Section 3 concludes the report by offering guidelines for reconstructing the inter-American process in light of the challenges and changes in the region.

This conference report was prepared by Joe Turcotte, research assistant, CIGI. The organizers would like to acknowledge the financial support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT).



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A Changing Landscape

Colloquium participants first discussed the trends that have affected the Americas since the Miami Summit in 1994. Perhaps referring to changing power balances, one participant noted that this is an exciting time to be studying global institutions and affairs. The Port of Spain Summit, then, could act as a launching pad for new institutional arrangements to revitalize the current standing of inter-American cooperation. As another participant commented, various countries in the region have recently demonstrated an unprecedented level of assertiveness.

The “Left” in the Americas: Both Old and New

Leftist parties have begun to win democratic elections and form governments throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, shaping regional debates accordingly. Participants were quick to note that the rise of the Left in Latin America and the Caribbean cannot be seen as homogenous; the multiple faces of the “new” Left take different forms and propose (sometimes) contrasting plans for a variety of concerns (see Cooper and Heine, 2009). The pragmatic yet socially progressive administrations of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil and Michelle Bachelet in Chile have little functional similarity to those of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and the accompanying Bolivarian Alternative. The different forms of the Left propose divergent ways of moving forward in the region.

Cuba’s Place in the Inter-American “Family”

The emergence of new players is also providing an opportunity to reexamine previously frozen relationships. Historically, Cuba has been at the forefront of leftist politics in the Americas, while the hostile relations between Fidel Castro’s government and successive US presidents have helped shape the country’s place in the Western hemisphere. However, as conference participants pointed out, US attempts to marginalize Cuba have failed and a reappraisal of US–Cuban relations is required. The new administrations in Washington and Havana allow for optimism in this regard.

At the 2008 Rio Summit, governments throughout the Americas embraced the new Cuban regime of President Raul Castro¹ and looked to the Obama administration to move forward with the Cuba portfolio. Participants cautioned, though, that bold changes are unlikely in the near future. Although he is no longer president of Cuba and has limited administrative involvement, Fidel Castro’s shadow looms over his brother. At the same

time, interest groups in the US have concerns about the stability of the Cuban regime, particularly with regard to how instability on the island could lead to mass emigration from Cuba, especially to the US.

The improvement of US–Cuban relations is therefore in the interest of the region as a whole; however, as one participant stated, it is easier to change the government and institutions than it is to alter the mindset of the population, which may have prejudices that have accumulated and developed over decades. Participants suggested that the Obama administration could help improve the conditions in Cuba and its standing in the region by engaging Cuba on domestic issues. One participant noted that the Obama administration does not categorically rule out discussions about including Cuba in the Organization of American States (OAS) and that Cuba can be engaged through plurilateral relations and regional institutions.

The Rise of Brazil

Brazil has emerged as a global power in its own right. Brazil’s rise to prominence — evident by its inclusion in Goldman Sachs’s BRICs conception,² in CIGI’s BRICSAM country studies and functionally in the South–South grouping of India–Brazil–South Africa (IBSA) (see Cooper, Antkiewicz and Shaw, 2008) — has seen the country take a new leadership role in the Americas. While Brazil is arguably the second largest player in the Americas, following the US, participants were divided in their opinions about the role that the country can and should be playing in the region.

The participants pointed out that, while Brazil is a credible economic actor and looks like a regional player, it does not provide the goods necessary to transcend from the level of regional power to regional leader. The participants discussed whether Brazil is willing to divest power to regional bodies and lose its own standing.

The Obama Administration

As in most other parts of the world, the election of Barack Obama as the president of the United States was met with enthusiasm throughout the Americas. The “Obama effect,” as it was characterized at the colloquium, could be felt in the days leading up to the Port-of-Spain Summit. The promise of change that carried Obama into the White House translated into a sense of optimism regarding the potential for the Summit. Participants wondered if the Obama “magic” would turn into real action. The first meeting between

1 For more on the Rio Summit and Cuba see Colitt, 2008.

2 For more on the BRICs conception see the Goldman Sachs BRICs website at <http://www2.goldmansachs.com/ideas/brics/index.html>.

Obama and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez was seen as a key moment that could set the tone for the future of inter-American cooperation.³

Conference participants pointed to Obama's emphasis on social democracy as possible common ground with Latin American and the Caribbean countries. However, one participant was quick to point out that the new US administration inherited a full agenda, with many issues to address. Talk about substantial change is helpful and encouraging, but expectations must be cautious as dramatic changes may not occur in the short term.

The Obama administration's interactions in the region prior to the Summit — official meetings in Mexico and Chile as well as communiqués regarding Cuba⁴ — demonstrate that, despite its full plate, the Obama team has made space for the region. There are various regional issues that can be identified as US priorities, including reexamining US–Cuban relations, closing the US prison at Guantanamo Bay, immigration reform, security concerns and the promotion of democracy and common ideals in the Americas.

The participants pointed out that on these and other issues there must be US recognition that the United States is also a contributor to these problems. For example, security concerns related to drug trafficking cannot be addressed without taking the US demand for illicit drugs into the equation. Drug trafficking, as is the case with many other issues affecting the region, is not a one-sided issue (in this case, the supply) and needs to be confronted with a comprehensive approach.

The Old and the New: Competing Institutions and Issues in the Americas

Although the majority of participants expressed optimism for the Port-of-Spain Summit, there were concerns that the inter-American summit process is in decline, and some questioned whether the Summit would be able to keep the process alive. Previous Summits saw the leaders of the Western Hemisphere reach general agreements on abstractions without providing strategies for practical results. The existing institutional architecture in the Americas is outdated

³ In the popular press, the first meeting between the US and Venezuelan leaders was a success. Both Obama and Chávez were photographed smiling as they met. Much was made of the event as pundits scrutinized the gesture, however, the polite encounter between the two leaders pointed the way toward a less antagonistic form of diplomacy between the US and Venezuela and throughout the region.

⁴ For more on US active involvement in the region see Lowenthal, 2009.

and needs to be refined for contemporary circumstances (see Mace, Thérien and Haslam, 2007). The current convergence of events was seen by participants as an opportunity to revitalize the regional project. To do so, they examined the successes and failures of established institutions and analyzed the emergence and impact of new ones.

The Organization of American States (OAS)

Participants viewed the OAS as an important player in the history of inter-American cooperation, especially in terms of democracy promotion — as evident through election monitoring. However, inter-American cooperation is more complicated in today's global political context than it was in the 1990s.

Democracy promotion in the Americas is in decline. Despite the existence of the OAS Charter, hegemonic ideas of representative democracy do not exist in the Americas, as the governments of Hugo Chávez and others demonstrate regional tendencies toward populist measures and participatory democracy. Participants debated the likelihood of democratic norms in the region, with one participant commenting that democracy should not be regarded as being in decline when more participatory elements of democracy are being used.

The issue of Cuba exemplifies the paradoxes created by contemporary situations. Allowing Cuba into the OAS would help to legitimize the association to some members in the region, but it would also add an effective and vocal state opposed to democracy promotion and the mandate of the OAS itself. Participants noted that, in this case, the OAS is prevented from pursuing the interests of some groups due to the opposition of others. "Tit-for-tat" diplomacy, then, blocks OAS success at facilitating inter-American cooperation and pushes the region's countries further toward bilateralism.

The rise of countries such as Brazil and Venezuela, as well as regional groupings, has meant that the OAS has lost some of its standing. Countries now look to different actors and institutions for help. In addition, funding problems have constrained OAS engagement with the myriad issues before it. The challenges facing the OAS can be seen as a microcosm for the challenges found on the larger scale of inter-American cooperation.

CARICOM and the Association of Caribbean States (ACS)

With the Summit of the Americas being held in a Caribbean country for the first time, special attention was given to this sub-region's role in the future of

inter-American cooperation (see Cooper and Shaw, 2009). Both CARICOM and the ACS were viewed as fundamental tools for cooperation in the Americas. Regional groupings such as these are often credited with providing greater weight to small state voices. Both institutions also represent attempts to create single market economies, including the free movement of the factors of production: goods, services and people.

According to one participant, the financial crisis has put Caribbean policy makers on notice that pan-Caribbean regulation is long overdue. In particular, CARICOM should focus on changing surface infrastructure and deepening trade ties. Strengthening the Caribbean region facilitates the possibility of a new set of strategic alliances with inter-American partners, ensuring that Caribbean states are actively engaged in the process of interregional cooperation.

Inter-American Trade: Mercosur and NAFTA

The deepening global financial crisis of 2008–09 has made concerns about equitable trade even more urgent. On the world stage, protectionist trade measures are considered damaging to the global economy, and, regionally, protectionist trade measures can undermine the progress of countries that rely on trade. Mercosur and NAFTA are two well-established institutions in the Americas and serve as indicators of the evolution of inter-American cooperation.

In both cases, competing interests have emerged at the national level to the detriment of the overall agreements. Mercosur suffers from weak institutional structures based on an intergovernmental, as opposed to supra-structural, level. Specifically, national vetoes for full member countries can sometimes make passing agreements difficult.

Under NAFTA, trade between Canada, Mexico and the United States tripled between 1993 and 2007. Positive results have been demonstrated by NAFTA as a normative mechanism, its strengths including established rules that help to facilitate efficiency. At the same time, however, trade disputes and issues such as immigration, smuggling and border control highlight the shortcomings of the trade pact.

The Obama administration has opened a significant window of opportunity to reflect on NAFTA and ways to improve it. Political appointments made by the administration provide optimism for change. The perceived openness of the Obama administration to binding US policies with international bodies should be pursued. In the case of NAFTA this would make trade disputes easier to settle while opening the door for new collaborative relationships in the inter-American context at large.

The current economic climate provides the basis for rethinking and redeveloping existing regional structures. Any new large-scale free trade agreement in the Americas will have to be framed by the existence of several bilateral trade agreements. Chile has been at the forefront of the bilateral movement, and other countries have followed a similar path with numerous FTAs currently taking shape and being signed. This trend toward bilateral agreements underscores the retreat of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), which now appears dormant.

The key challenge to improving trade negotiations in the Americas, however, is not the negotiation of new agreements but optimizing existing structures for maximum benefit. Development problems prevent many countries from fully realizing the benefits of their trade agreements. As one participant put it, market access does not equal market presence. It is important, then, to enhance the trade capacity of countries entering into agreements. Trade needs to be seen as a tool for development and should lead to dialogue for further cooperation between regional partners.

The Bolivarian Response: The ALBA Institutions and Mechanisms

Although there has been a reconsideration of liberal policies for trade and cooperation, at the same time, an alternative conception has emerged. Espoused most famously by Hugo Chávez, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) is the antithesis to the Washington Consensus, specifically opposing free market rules and trade liberalization.

The ALBA centres on a set of regional cooperation projects that seek to create inter-American cooperation outside the confines of US influence, including television (Telesur), energy (PetroCaribe) and other major national projects. PetroCaribe is an important part of the ALBA project because its 18 members are provided with discounted energy (oil) by Venezuela in exchange for goods and services.⁵ Venezuela also provides financial assistance to other countries for national projects and development.

Despite Chávez's positioning of himself as a regional leader in Latin America, there is a lack of accountability with the ALBA project. As one participant noted, no mechanisms exist for verifying the transfer of money from Venezuela or specifying how money is spent and on what these exchanges rely. Another participant acknowledged, however, that although Chávez may not be universally popular, he has developed a plan for regional integration

5 For more on PetroCaribe see Girvan, 2008.

while other regional leaders (in Brazil and Mexico) were preoccupied with national concerns.

Although the ALBA project appeals to those disillusioned by the results of the Washington Consensus, there are reasons to believe that the project is also problematic. Participants noted that the same criticisms leveled against the FTAA by Chávez can be used against ALBA itself. Latin American and Caribbean countries focus heavily on maintaining sovereignty; however, similar to the FTAA, ALBA may lack equal representation of its members. The participants concluded that in order to compete with the demands and forces of globalization, inter-American cooperation needs to move toward regional integration rather than divisive and oppositional groupings.

Reconstructing the Inter-American Process

Despite the general perception that the inter-American system is in decline, participants were optimistic that the current state of events creates an opportunity for reengaging and strengthening regional cooperation in the Americas. The rich history of institutionalism in the Americas, one participant noted, may be richer than in any other region in the world and provides common ground for working together in the future. Various ways of reconstructing Western Hemispheric cooperation were discussed, including:

Functional Institutionalism

One participant presented the idea of a form of modular multilateralism in the Americas, with countries working together to tackle issues as they arise. This functional institutionalism would address topics by looking for and working with partners on an ad hoc basis. Functional institutionalism provides the flexibility necessary to address concerns without a rigid framework. The participants debated whether this framework would be beneficial for the region at large or if more powerful actors would come to dominate the process and advance their own goals.

The countries in the Western Hemisphere need to build on the common interests in the region, and as one participant noted, new ways for hemispheric dialogue are possible. An A10 grouping would allow inter-American issues to be addressed more effectively and present the region as a formidable player in the world.

Interaction with the Private Sphere and Civil Society

The worldwide financial crisis has resulted in a reassertion of the public sphere, with national governments injecting

billions of dollars into the economy to spur economic growth. Participants noted that public sector commitments must also take into account the interests of the private sphere and civil society.

They remarked that inter-American channels available to civil society and non-state actors are far from optimal. These mechanisms are not institutionalized and participants noted that current rules — implicit and explicit — do not allow for input. In effect, these critically important groups have unequal representation and a lack of influence. Integrating non-state actors into inter-American institutions through public diplomacy and other means could facilitate more inclusive forms of regionalism.

The energy sector was presented as a way to improve these ties. Developing energy synergies would help to bridge the gap between market-oriented interests in the private sector and the social and environmental concerns of the state and public sector. Domestic energy policies can undermine the possibility of a regional strategy; therefore, national concerns must be addressed at the regional level. Hemispheric cooperation would help to create consensus about investment and procurement issues while allowing countries to share the information and technology necessary to create inter-American energy technologies and programs. Interaction with the private sphere and civil society would make this implementation easier.

Strengthening Legitimacy

As was discussed throughout the colloquium, many observers in the region feel inter-American institutions lack legitimacy. National governments are therefore reluctant to use the political capital necessary to strengthen these groups. In order for transnational cooperation in the Americas to be effective, these legitimacy concerns must be addressed. Regional cooperation in the Americas needs to become more inclusive and focused on a “with,” not “for,” basis. For the US, this includes taking the ideas of other countries into account and including them in the inter-American process. This must be met by a willingness on the part of Latin American and other countries to engage in regional cooperation rather than furthering domestic agendas. The quality, not quantity, of participation is important, and substantive policy recommendations must be translated into effective decision making. Priorities should be limited to transnational issues and their numbers reduced. Measurable markers for progress would be beneficial to the process. Only once the legitimacy of inter-American institutions is improved can other issues be addressed.

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Who We Are

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CIGI was founded in 2002 by Jim Balsillie, co-CEO of RIM (Research In Motion), and collaborates with and gratefully acknowledges support from a number of strategic partners, in particular the Government of Canada and the Government of Ontario. CIGI gratefully acknowledges the contribution of the Government of Canada to its endowment fund.

Le CIGI a été fondé en 2002 par Jim Balsillie, co-chef de la direction de RIM (Research In Motion). Il collabore avec de nombreux partenaires stratégiques et exprime sa reconnaissance du soutien reçu de ceux-ci, notamment de l'appui reçu du gouvernement du Canada et de celui du gouvernement de l'Ontario. Le CIGI exprime sa reconnaissance envers le gouvernement du Canada pour sa contribution à son Fonds de dotation.

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