



S P O T L I G H T

# Summit of the Americas

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**T**he Summit of the Americas on April 10-11 is generating an unprecedented amount of attention, thanks in large part to the dramatic changes in the US-Cuba relationship. Though historic, the novelty of seeing Cuban President Raúl Castro and US President Barack Obama at the same table is sure to wear off after the first photo, and the region's attention will quickly turn to other pressing matters.

This year's theme, "Prosperity with Equity: the Challenge of Cooperation in the Americas," aims at uniting the Americas at a time when ideological divides fracture the ability to strive toward common goals. After the 2012 Cartagena Summit—the last time the summit was held—failed to produce a final declaration, presidents of three key countries didn't attend, and two left early, the future of the summit process was in doubt.

In Panama City, the discussions will struggle to overcome a history of inaction, massive ideological polarization, and tired anti-US rhetoric. The shift in the US-Cuba relationship will stand in stark contrast to this trend.

**In this month's Spotlight, we ask: What will be the top headlines at the VII Summit of the Americas?**

- 1 Crisis in Venezuela**
- 2 Influence of GONGOS**
- 3 A Newly Empowered OAS**

**What will be the top headlines at the VII Summit of the Americas?****1 Venezuela is the new elephant in the room. But, unlike the US-Cuba tension of the past, Venezuela is actually in the room.**

bama's ill-timed sanctions against Venezuelan individuals a few weeks ago have done little to help the humanitarian crisis, but plenty to fuel Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's anti-American rhetoric. Just a few weeks ago, members of the leftist Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) coalition (including Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Cuba) came together in Caracas as a united front to condemn the sanctions, decrying American imperialism and infringement of sovereignty. Expect the heads of state of Ecuador, Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Argentina to rally around Maduro to reiterate this message.

The United States will not find a captive audience for its condemnations of the situation in Venezuela. Though countries like Chile, Colombia, and Mexico surely do not condone Venezuela's oppression of the opposition, violent limitations on freedom of speech, or catastrophic economic mismanagement of the oil-rich country, their leaders are notably silent on the deteriorating situation. Watch carefully what these three presidents do and say about Maduro—it will communicate a lot about the region-wide political resonance of the US sanctions and whether any appetite exists for a stronger response to the unfolding crisis.

Unlike with Cuba, an opportunity exists for regional cooperation to find a solution for the long-simmering crisis in Venezuela. Brazil and Colombia have much-sought leverage with Venezuela's government and are both interested in preventing the country from plunging into a political and economic abyss.

For smaller countries in the Caribbean, added urgency exists for multilateral cooperation: islands tied to the Venezuela-led oil alliance, Petrocaribe, face immediate threats to their energy security if Venezuela were to turn off the spigot. Obama will stop in Jamaica to meet with Caribbean leaders on his way to Panama, signaling that the United States is serious about engaging with the Caribbean, especially in finding a solution for the region's energy uncertainty. Following Vice President Joseph Biden's January 2015 Caribbean Energy Security Summit, which was cohosted by the Atlantic Council, the time is ripe for Obama to use the trip to make a significant policy announcement for greater

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**What will be the top headlines at the VII Summit of the Americas?**  
(Venezuela continued)

US assistance in guaranteeing Caribbean energy security. This would also be the most effective time to declare all liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports to Caribbean nations reliant on Petrocaribe to be declared in the national interest. Obama could then use the goodwill from Jamaica for coalition-building upon his arrival in Panama.

**2****The civil society forum may be the summit's best opportunity to fulfill its original mission, but watch out for the GONGOS.**

**G**ONGOS—Government organized nongovernmental organizations—are the wolf in sheep's clothing of civil society. These organizations profess to represent the citizenry in less-than-democratic countries like Venezuela and Cuba, but instead support the government's agenda and live on government resources.

These sorts of organizations could derail discussions at the summit, which many hope to be the largest ever civil society forum to engage an increasingly broader public in Latin America. With Cuba attending the summit for the first time and Venezuela in the throes of political turmoil, the Organization of the American States (OAS), the forum's organizer, is taking pains to weed out the GONGOs through an exhaustive application process to ensure they do not hijack the forum.

At the same time, the OAS is making a concerted effort to include those organizations that previously have not had a serious role at a Summit of the Americas. Though cautious of GONGOs, there is much enthusiasm around the inclusion of Cuban civil society in this forum. An often-isolated contingent of Cuban life, this forum is a unique opportunity for the larger civil society community to show support for this historically oppressed sector in Cuba. This forum may be the best opportunity to fulfill the summit's mission of highlighting democratic governance and citizen participation.

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**What will be the top headlines at the VII Summit of the Americas?**

- 3 Although slow economic growth and rattled governments are casting a dark cloud over much of the region, the summit will shy away from tackling both. That may be for the better, but it points to the OAS's limited capacity to deal with today's crises.**

**W**ith the end of the commodities boom and the dramatic decline of oil prices, Latin America has taken a hit. Many countries are struggling with lackluster economic growth and are trying to recover the momentum of the last decade. Corruption and impunity, along with systems that are ill-equipped to deal with either, have sparked outrage in countries like Brazil, Mexico, and Chile. Massive protests and questions about the ability of the current leadership to provide legitimate solutions are often the result. A more robust middle class, a signal of positive growth, has also created a population that demands better access to justice and more government transparency.

Yet these challenges are not at the forefront of the agenda for the summit. Instead, top billing is given to other longstanding challenges like education, human rights, and the environment. These issues fall under the skillset of the OAS, an organization that has floundered in recent years.

With a newly elected Secretary General, the OAS is looking to revive its relevance in the region. Successful follow-up to this summit's agenda may embody a realistic opportunity to calibrate the organization's influence. One of the most prominent complaints about the summit is this lack of follow-up or enforcement mechanisms. By omitting headline issues and focusing instead on the priorities that the OAS is better equipped to serve, the summit process should have a better chance of meeting its founding objectives. However, the region still lacks a coordinating mechanism for current crises, and it will behoove the summit's participants to recognize the long-term implications of this void.

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