

## "Cuba is Back!"

Amidst a world economic/financial crisis that seems to worsen day by day, continuing political and military meltdown throughout the Middle East, and the global anticipation of Obama's presidency, little world attention has been given to a major geopolitical event in mid-December, 2008. Cuba is back! Four Latin American meetings were held successively in Salvador de Bahía, Brazil. In order of the number of countries involved, they were meetings of Mercosur, Unasur, the Grupo de Río, and the First Summit of Latin America and the Caribbean (CALC in its Spanish initials). The impresario was Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, and the "hero" of the meetings was Cuba. Lula called it an "ideological hurricane."

Let us review what happened. Mercosur is a common market arrangement of Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay, which Venezuela is joining. The presidents of these five countries announced that they would absorb all the exports of Bolivia, which had its preferential tariffs cancelled by the United States in September on the specious grounds that Bolivia was not doing enough to combat drug traffic.

This action was endorsed by Unasur, the union of all 12 South American countries (plus Mexico and Panama as observers). Even more important, Unasur agreed to Brazil's proposal that it create a South American Defense Council. Given that just last May Unasur had tabled this proposal (about which the United States had been unhappy) the Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Celso Amorim, hailed the decision as a "good surprise." He said that it incarnated the idea of Latin America for the Latin Americans, a pointed rejection of the classical Monroe Doctrine slogan of "America for the Americans."

The truly major event however occurred on December 16 in the meeting of the Grupo de Río. The Grupo de Río, a Latin American political forum created in 1986, which in 2008 included 22 countries, "unanimously" admitted Cuba to membership. Mexico's President Felipe Calderón, who was presiding at the session, welcomed the "brother people" of Cuba, represented by President Raúl Castro, to a standing ovation. The forum promptly condemned the U.S. embargo against Cuba, and demanded that it end forthwith.

Calderón and Castro held a private meeting designed to overcome the "rough edges" of the relationship of the two countries that had been brought about by the actions of Calderón's predecessor, Vicente Fox. After the meeting, Castro said the relations were now "magnificent." The two announced that they would exchange official visits to each other in 2009.

The culminating meeting was the summit of all 33 Latin American and Caribbean presidents, the first ever held. The only three presidents not to come themselves but to find excuses to send substitutes were Colombia's Alvaro Uribe, Peru's Alan García, and El Salvador's Elias Antonio Saca - the last firm friends of the United States in Latin America. Brazil was so intent on getting maximum participation that it sent military planes to transport the presidents of poorer countries in Central America and the Caribbean to the meeting.

The significance of this meeting was in the exclusions. Neither the United States nor the former colonial powers, Spain and Portugal, were invited. Ecuador's president, Rafael Correa, said that the meeting marked the end of "puppet governments" in Latin America. The

Brazilian journalist, Pepe Escobar, called it "a torpedo launched towards the Obama submarine."

The timing of this meeting was no accident. The Fifth Summit of the Americas is scheduled for next April in Trinidad. This is a structure launched by President Clinton in 1994. The same heads of state and government will be invited, except that there will be two more - the United States and Canada - and one less, Cuba.

Presumably, Obama will be faced there with the arguments and proposals put forward at the meeting in Brazil. The first is to include Cuba by revoking its suspension from the Organization of American States. Lula stated that, in order to improve the relations of Cuba and the United States, it is the United States that must take the first step by lifting the embargo. A second is to review outstanding national debts. Ecuador has already announced a moratorium on further debt payments, saying that, after paying the debt for 28 years, it still owes the same amount - a "dismal story" said President Correa.

Castro said he is ready for direct talks with Obama. "If he wants to have a discussion, we will. It's increasingly difficult to isolate Cuba." Lula actually went further in his challenge to Obama. He said that his presidency would become truly historic only when he lifts the Cuban blockade. In the meantime, what used to be the backyard of the United States - Latin America - is increasingly open to other world powers. Russia, China, and Iran have all increased their role in Latin America in significant ways.

The latest entrant is France. President Nicolas Sarkozy paid an official visit to Brazil on December 22-23. The two countries not only agreed to increased commercial links but to very important military ones. France will now assist the Brazilian navy to build five "new generation" submarines, including one that is nuclear-powered, the first such submarine in Latin America. Furthermore, France agreed to turn over to Brazil the necessary technology so that, in the future, Brazil can build more submarines on its own. France will also aid Brazil to build so-called heavy helicopters, of which Brazil intends to become an exporter.

The Cuban ball, the Ecuadorian ball, and the Brazilian ball are now all in Obama's court. He has till April to let us know how he will respond.

by Immanuel Wallerstein