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REMARKS BY THE OAS SECRETARY GENERAL, JOSÉ MIGUEL INSULZA

COUNCIL OF THE AMERICAS, THE 39TH WASHINGTON CONFERENCE ON THE  
AMERICAS "RENEWING THE PROMISE OF PROSPERITY"

(May 13, 2009 - Washington D.C.)

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Thank you for this opportunity to address your very important annual conference. The Americas are faced today with a host of challenges and opportunities and I am certain that, as usual, the deliberations of this prestigious group will help us make the right choices. I believe that the beginning of the new Administration of President Barack Obama is also a defining moment for Inter American relations and that, if we are able to move together on a new path of understanding and cooperation, the community of the Americas will be greatly strengthened.

The V Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago was certainly a great start. Much has been said of this meeting and I will not repeat it now. To sum it up, the climate of the meeting was friendly, the issues were all treated frankly and in depth, all the agenda was covered, there were important resolutions and very clear mandates on where to move forward in the future.

Of course much of this is due to President Obama, who came to Port of Spain with a truly multilateral attitude, participatory, knowledgeable and sincere. He brought a message of cooperation, and the leaders believed him.

But he was not alone in this. The host, Prime Minister Patrick Manning provided leadership in discussions that were not always simple and found avenues to move forward on every issue. And every leader of the Americas (this was the first Summit of only elected leaders) played his or her role and gave her or his contribution.

What are we to make from this success? That after years of more distant relations, everything is back to normal? That recriminations and mistrust have easily and suddenly given way to an atmosphere of cooperation and understanding? Are we really looking forward to a new era in Inter American Relations?

If it is true that Port of Spain signals a new beginning, an assertion I agree with, then it is important that we clearly understand the present situation of Inter American relations.

It is too easy to attribute all the problems that existed before Obama to “neglect”. Easy but erroneous: first because there was no neglect, and to use the word is unfair to people who were in charge of policy making, especially in the past three or four years, and did a great job in approaching Latin America and the Caribbean.

The real problem, from my point of view, is that the US and Latin America and the Caribbean walked in different directions in the past years, without an effective dialogue and mutual understanding of where they were going. The US returned to an exaggerated unilateralism, even before Iraq, in which the key word was US leadership and not cooperation. The notion of

“coalition of the willing” formulated during the months that preceded the Iraq invasion is very telling in this sense: the US would lead the way and those who wanted would follow. For a time, many seemed willing to follow, but as conflicts became more difficult to manage allies began to move away, not because they did not share some of the goals, but because they did not share the policies and did not feel included in the decisions.

In Latin America and the Caribbean the policies of unilateralism were never popular. Most countries rejected the Iraq invasion (only two countries of Central America joined the “coalition of the willing”), opposing them even at the UN Security Council, and maintained that attitude even in the initial period of progress. This did not have many practical effects; regional relations developed normally; but I think it is safe to say that the Bush administration was not popular in Latin America: it was seen as separated from our problems and our interests. Some may say this is unfair, since the President traveled to Latin America often, Free Trade Agreements were signed, and two Summits took place during the Bush years. But there was no real dialogue. There were US policies, some of them more acceptable than others, but there were few instances of cooperation or agreements made on common policies.

As a result the US seemed more apart from Latin America; but they did not really complain; new things were also happening in the region.

Latin America was ready for a period of change, after the problems it had faced in the 80s and 90s. It is not easy to describe those times without referring to its tremendous contradictions. On the one hand, democracy flourished: the Southern dictators and the Central American wars disappeared and democracy began to take hold. But on the other hand, economic growth seemed to slow down, not only in the “lost decade” of the 80s, but in the next one as well. Latin America and the Caribbean was the continent that grew less in the whole world in those decades, and that was felt also in the condition of the poor. By 2002, the percentage of Latin Americans living in poverty was still higher than it had been in 1980. Inequality also rose, not only in income figures but in an uneasy coexistence inside countries between modernizing and backwards societies. Many positive things happened in those years, in terms of economic reform: more open societies, free trade, foreign investment, etc. But those achievements, much heralded in the North did not bring prosperity to many in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In that context, Latin America and the Caribbean were ripe for taking a different, if not a divergent, course from that of the United States. Emerging from the bad decades, in which, in spite of everything democracy prevailed, though governments lasted on average less than expected, it is understandable that most Latin and Caribbean governments, and not only those that are branded as leftist, went their own way. At the start of the new century, a surprising majority of the region’s countries opted for more or less radical policies for change and tended to adopt critical views of liberal economic policies that the US continued to sponsor, to blame neoliberalism for the ills of the previous decades, to proclaim the notion that this continent may not be as poor as others but it is by far the most unfair in the world and to adopt new policies whose common theme was, while in no case abandoning the market, a quest for more state and more regulation.

In this new context, it is also understandable that the region’s governments could not relate to approaches demanding subordination as a result of global conflicts or global confrontations against “axes,” to which were ascribed perverse attributes they simply could not perceive or that bore no relationship whatsoever to their own problems.

The deterioration of hemispheric relations was not just a matter of policies; it was also the consequences of a loss of common visions, common views of the world. In fact policies continued, because there was little dialogue across parts of the continent. One example which I have given several times these days may clarify the point. The first OAS General Assembly I attended as Secretary General was in Fort Lauderdale in June 2005. In the inauguration, as would be expected in the heart of Southern Florida, both President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice spoke strongly about the situation in Cuba and the need to strengthen sanctions against that country. Almost all the rest of the countries represented already had normal relations with Cuba and did not agree with the embargo. But nobody else even mentioned Cuba during the rest of the Assembly. In fact the situation of the only American Republic that is not active at the OAS since 1962, has never been discussed, not even referred to, in the last ten or twelve Assemblies of the Organization of American States.

This distance in our views of the world may also be a reason that some of what Fernando Henrique Cardoso has called “regressive utopias” have again become fashionable in Latin America and that, with them, feelings of anti-Americanism have tended to rise across the region. But as Port of Spain has shown, none of this is insurmountable or difficult to address, and it is a matter of a change of attitude. The Summit of the Americas showed that if we adopt a posture of engagement and partnership and leave aside unilateral temptations, even the hardest positions may be mellowed. Latin American and Caribbean leaders want to get along with the US. But they have also changed a lot, and they expect to see their views included in the picture. This is not a more hostile continent now; but it has distanced from the US and might distance itself even more if the promise of a new beginning is not fulfilled.

When we look at the results of Port of Spain, we can see them in two ways. First, we have finally come to agree on a common agenda, which encompasses seven or eight issues that are hemispheric by nature: they include, economic cooperation and trade, energy cooperation, climate change, poverty and the Millennium goals, migration, crime and drug traffic; all in the context of a common commitment to democracy and human rights. And we even agreed on some very concrete tasks we should be able to perform in the next months.

But the question that remains is broader in scope and content, and comes from a phrase by the US President: “I don’t want to make policy for you, but with you”. Some phrases tend to be catchy, and many Latin Americans tend to learn them. When President Reagan said that “government is part of the problem and not part of the solution” many Latin American economists and leaders felt that they had found the magic key to development, and practiced with devotion worthy of a better cause. Many are waiting now to see what this “with you and not for you” really means.

I believe that Latin American leaders came out of Port of Spain with hope and optimism. The President was certainly sincere when he said that the US was going to listen, engage and look for agreements on common policies. They are ready to practice, probably some in better faith than others. It is essential that we start working and delivering soon.

In conclusion, it cannot be said that hemispheric relations have already undergone a radical change of direction. However, the sum of the gestures of the first days of President Obama’s term, culminating in the Summit of Trinidad and Tobago, are sufficient to suggest that change in that direction is occurring and that, therefore, it may be stated with optimism that we are on the threshold of a new era in inter-American relations. An era in which, as indicated above, domestic and multilateral consensus are essential if some of the current, and very critical issues, are to be addressed.