

## **The Scouting Report: Previewing the Summit of the Americas**

**Director of the Latin America Initiative Mauricio Cárdenas and *Político* Senior Editor Fred Barbash**

**April 8, 2009**

### **12:30 Fred Barbash-Moderator:**

Mauricio Cárdenas is a senior fellow and director of the Latin American Initiative. Formerly minister of Economic Development and Transportation, and director of National Planning of Colombia, his research focuses on international and development economics. He is also the president of the Latin American and Caribbean Economic Association (LACEA).

Today he's here to answer discuss the upcoming Summit of the Americas, April 17-19 in Trinidad and Tobago.

Welcome Mr. Cárdenas. Let me begin by asking you a basic question about what the expectations are for the summit. What's the agenda? What might be accomplished?

### **12:31 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Hi Fred! It is a pleasure to be in this chat. I really hope we have a useful conversation.

### **12:32 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

So, this is the fifth Summit of the Americas. The last one was in Mar del Plata in Argentina in 2005. And, most observers consider that it was a failure. Not much was accomplished. The overarching goal of these summits is to develop a framework for greater integration in the hemisphere.

### **12:35 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

This year, the summit will gather for the first time many presidents that have never been to a Summit of the Americas, including President Obama. But also others, like President Bachelet from Chile, Calderon from Mexico, Garcia from Peru, and Prime Minister Harper from Canada, as well.

### **12:36 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

The formal agenda covers many topics, but most of them deal with the issue of security. In practice, I expect the global recession to be the central theme.

### **12:37 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Especially the way in which countries in the region are going to be effected and the coordinated actions that can offset the negative effects.

**12:37 [Comment From Arlene Graham]**

Hello Mauricio! Thank you for holding this chat today. Do you believe that President Obama will continue his 'listening mode' stance during the Summit of the Americas? And, if so, what do you think might be accomplished during the summit?

**12:38 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Good question! I think he'll come to Trinidad and Tobago in a listening mode, but he will also bring a new attitude - kind of like what he showed in Turkey earlier this week.

**12:39 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

This means the U.S. is not going to divide the hemisphere in to friends and enemies and, at the same time, President Obama will bring news on various fronts, including Cuba, and hopefully new initiatives on energy from which all countries in the region can benefit.

**12:40 [Comment From Carol]**

Was the timing of Obama's decision to lift travel restrictions to Cuba meant as a signal to the summit? How do you interpret that move?

**12:41 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Ideally, decisions regarding Cuba should be made before President Obama travels to the summit, so that Cuba does not become a central topic for deliberations.

**12:43 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Cuba is important. Sends a signal. Helps build credibility in the region. But it's not the most important topic in the hemisphere. I think President Obama should say that according to his campaign promises he has lifted the ban on family travel and remittances to the island. I hope he also takes Cuba out of the State Dept's list of states that support terrorism, because there is not evidence that the Cuban government actually supports terrorism.

**12:44 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

All other issues pertaining to Cuba, like the lifting of the trade embargo and the reincorporation of Cuba in to the Organization of American states will take more time and definitely changes on the part of the Cuban government.

**12:45 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

President Obama could ask other countries in the region how they plan to help Cuba in establishing a democracy. This should be a joint effort.

**12:45 [Comment From Isabel Fleck (Brasilia)]**

In the 8 years of Bush government, Latin America was not a priority of US foreign policy. During this time, President Lula's importance in South America "grew" considerably. He was seen by US as a leader in S. America and an important interlocutor in the region. In G-20 Summit, president Obama called Lula "my man" and "the most popular politician on

Earth”, showing that he also sees the Brazilian as an important leader. Could we say that President Lula will still be seen as an interlocutor? What do you think Obama expect from Brazilian government?

**12:46 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Thanks for the question Isabel! There is no doubt that the international prestige of President Lula has been growing and it's probably now at the highest level since he became president of Brazil in 2003.

**12:48 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

That enabled him to play a very significant role as a regional leader that can speak with a stronger voice relative to other presidents that will gather there. My impression is that President Obama listens to everyone, but will listen more to whatever President Lula says.

**12:49 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

That's why it is so important that President Lula speaks about the problems of other countries and their relationship with the U.S.

**12:50 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Examples of this would be the need to ratify the Panamanian and Colombian free trade agreements with the U.S. But also, the need to reestablish full diplomatic relationships between the U.S. and Bolivia and Venezuela.

**12:50 [Comment From Patricia Campos-Mello]**

Mr. Cardenas, what can we expect in terms of Obama reaching out to Chávez? Also, there is an expectation among Latin American countries that the US will engage in some sort of mea culpa for the financial crisis, and offer some hemispheric solution...but that's not what Ambassador Davidow pointed to in recent interviews...

**12:51 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Let's talk about the issue of Venezuela and the possible encounter between Obama and Chavez. They will meet. I don't expect that to be a bilateral meeting, but they will have the opportunity to spend time together.

**12:53 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

President Chavez will try to capture the attention of the media. He will say a few things that will make headlines. And it's expected that a lot of the reporters will amplify that.

**12:54 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

But other than that, the only concrete thing we can expect to come out as a result of that meeting is that President Chavez will send an ambassador to Washington. And President Obama will agree to reciprocate.

**12:56 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Given the economic situation in Venezuela, President Chavez will not be able to afford a bad relationship with the U.S. and with other countries in the developed world. So, I expect

that he will say a few things in public that will create the impression that he's antagonizing the U.S., but in private he will be friendly and engaging with President Obama.

**12:57 [Comment From Peter Wütherich]**

Over the last years we've seen an ideological polarization in the hemisphere, with leaders like Chavez in Venezuela and Morales in Bolivia gaining popularity by vividly criticizing President Bush and the US and their allies. Do you think that Obama and his more moderate style will weaken those new leftist leaders in Latin America?

**12:59 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Thanks for the question Peter! They will not be able to criticize President Obama with the same arguments they used to criticize President Bush. Obama's background and style makes it difficult for Chavez and Morales to portray him as oppressive or imperialistic which are two of their favorite words.

**1:00 [Comment From Carmen (Detroit)]**

What do you make of the recent meeting with Fidel Castro by the Congressional Black Caucus? Do you think it was counter productive or achieved anything? There seems to be much outrage in the U.S.

**1:01 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

That meeting shows that Cuba also wants a change. What Fidel Castro did was to send a signal and suggest that the island will welcome a new relationship with Washington.

**1:01 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Raul Castro said that he wants to meet with President Obama - that's a good start.

**1:02 [Comment From Jake Blumgart]**

Good afternoon Mr. Cardenas, Do you anticipate tension between Obama and Chavez? Will Obama attempt to reach out to other leftist leaders like the recently elected president of El Salvador?

**1:04 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Before we move in to other topics, I would just add that most likely President Obama will say that the U.S. will be friends with governments that are at the left of the ideological spectrum provided that they are elected democratically and respect the rule of law.

**1:06 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

This will remove tension in the room.

**1:06 [Comment From Sally]**

How important will US-Mexico security be as a topic of conversation at the summit? And how grave is the situation there?

**1:07 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

President Obama will spend one night in Mexico on his way to the summit. My reading of this is that he will try to take Mexican issues out of the summit.

**1:08 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

The reason is that Mexico is particularly important for the U.S. and therefore has a special relationship. So, topics like the Merida Plan, immigration, border control, and flows of illegal arms are going to be discussed before President Obama arrives to the summit.

**1:09 [Comment From Abraham M. Smith]**

Hello Mauricio and thank you as well for the chat. Do you think regional leaders will address Mexico's 'narco-war' and take measures to support counternarcotics efforts throughout the Americas?

**1:10 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Thanks for the question! The issue of drugs is going to appear in the summit. Many countries in the region are worried that while security conditions in Colombia have improved, they have deteriorated elsewhere - especially in Central America and Mexico.

**1:11 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

And, leaders will ask for more resolution on the part of the U.S. to deal with the consumption problem. Less emphasis on eradication. And more emphasis on controlling demand in the U.S. that's what leaders in the hemisphere want.

**1:13 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Central American and Caribbean leaders worry that strategies that focus on Colombia and Mexico will just export the problem to their countries - where weaker states have less capacity to confront narco-terrorism.

**1:13 [Comment From Rich Basas - FPA.org]**

Due to recent narcotics violence in Mexico, how do you believe migration from Mexico and Latin America as a whole will be affected with so many valid legal refugees now being added to the masses of economic migrants often leaving Mexico and other parts of Latin America towards the US and abroad? Do you believe that traditional US migration policy is going to be able to handle such a change?

**1:14 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Thanks for the question Rich. The economic recession in the U.S. is slowing down the flow of migrants from Latin America into this nation.

**1:15 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

But as economic conditions deteriorate south of the Rio Grande there will be more pressure on the flow of illegal migrants. The Mexican drug cartels are now controlling the illegal border crossing.

**1:16 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

This creates an even more problematic situation than a few years back.

**1:18 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

There are no easy answers to this challenge, Rich. There will be more controls at the border which will delay crossing times for individuals and cargo and will probably affect crime rates in the border states. Precisely because of this the sentiment against immigration reform will grow, making it less likely to be a priority for the Obama administration.

**1:19 [Comment From Rita Siza]**

Recently, a couple of Latin American leaders argued for a change from the US paradigm of the war on drugs and even called for a serious debate regarding the liberalization of marijuana. Do you think this subject will be mentioned during the summit?

**1:20 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

The topic will be discussed, but I don't think that the presidents meeting during the summit will ask for decriminalization.

**1:21 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Mostly because if they ask the U.S. for a change in policy, they will also have to change policies in their own countries.

**1:22 [Comment From Chico]**

There are several critical issues such as energy security and environmental sustainability that are facing the summit. Do you think they may get moved off the table or overtaken by talk on the economic crisis? Of perhaps the economic crisis should be the driver.

**1:24 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Energy will play a central part during the summit. Countries in the hemisphere want to supply renewable energy to the U.S. - like ethanol from Brazil and Colombia. But tariffs in the U.S. prevent that from happening. They want to see President Obama committing to a change in policy.

**1:25 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Also, countries in the region need more resources for research and development that will allow them to improve technologies in solar, wind, and biomass energy.

**1:26 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

The U.S. government should sponsor the creation of an energy laboratory in the Americas. This will be welcomed by most countries.

**1:26 [Comment From Peggy]**

I am the Congressional Correspondent for the Hispanic Outlook magazine focusing on higher education and also immigration. I understand Education is one of the focal discussion topics of the Summit. What do you expect may be some issues in education that will actually receive support (money and specific actions) at the meeting, or will it just be yet again vague comments that education is a goal?

**1:26 Fred Barbash-Moderator:**

We have time for only one or two more questions.

**1:26 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

I don't think education will play a major role during the deliberations.

**1:27 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

There is not much disagreement on the critical importance of investments in human capital. It is already a top priority for most countries.

**1:28 [Comment From Peggy]**

Need to remind Mr. Basas that we're talking about how national IMMIGRATION policies might change as a result of economic and security issues in the migrant source countries. Mr. Cardenas, Do you foresee the U.S. and other countries creating a refugee category for the families of law enforcement and judiciary officials involved in trying to end the illegal smuggling of drugs and guns?

**1:30 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

I think the U.S. already has in place various mechanisms to deal with situations like the one you are referring to. The war on drugs requires a lot of information and there is no other way to get that than from people in the business. So, you have to reward and protect those individuals.

**1:31 Fred Barbash-Moderator:**

Mr. Cardenas: Thanks so much for taking all these questions. This was extremely useful and informative.

And thanks to all those who participated. The questions were smart and on point. Please join us here next Wednesday for another chat on tax reform.

**1:32 Mauricio Cárdenas:**

Thanks very much! It was my pleasure to participate in this lively discussion and I want to apologize for the many questions that were left unanswered because of a lack of time.