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How Latin America rebuffs the US

At the Summit of the Americas, the US wants to reaffirm its democratic leadership role in the region. Latin America doesn't show much enthusiasm

Back in 1994, the first Summit of the Americas in Miami had generated euphoria. The phase of bloody dictatorships and proxy wars in Latin America had come to an end, and US President Bill Clinton spread a mood of democratic optimism. The vision of an all-American free trade zone raised hopes for an era of stability and growth. Now, the Summit of the Americas returns to the US for the first time in its ninth edition from 6-10 June 2022, hosted this time by Los Angeles.

But unlike in 1994, this time the preparations were a real fiasco. US diplomacy, which has lost many of its best and most experienced diplomats in Latin America in the Trump era, appeared unusually clumsy and haphazard. Moreover, almost half of the US ambassador posts in the region are vacant. For a long time, neither the summit's title nor the agenda – and certainly not the list of participants – was fixed. 'There is no excuse for this,' said Ryan Berg of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). 'This is our chance to set the regional agenda, and I'm afraid we're missing it.'

Then, in March, Juan González, the presidential adviser in charge of Latin America, indicated that only democratically legitimate heads of state would be invited – a rejection of autocracies like Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba. This in itself is not unusual: since the summits are organised together with the Organisation of American States (OAS), the participation of non-members is a matter of diplomatic discretion.

Cuba was expelled from the OAS after the 1962 revolution and has repeatedly stressed that it has no interest in returning. For the first time, however, two other states are now also affected. Socialist Venezuela withdrew from the OAS in 2019 – and has since been represented there by a diplomat from the bourgeois opposition on the basis of a decision by the General Assembly. Nicaragua announced its withdrawal in 2022 and, contrary to all diplomatic customs and conventions, also confiscated the OAS representation in Managua. In all three countries, there are no

elections that meet democratic standards, no separation of powers and no rule of law, which has been a prerequisite for OAS membership since the introduction of the Democratic Charter in 2001.

The Cuban drama

This situation is an uncomfortable starting point, as Cuba's participation or non-participation has already been a diplomatic tightrope act and a propagandistically exploited showdown between the socialist Caribbean island and the US in the past. In 2015 and 2018, at the last two summits, this dilemma finally seemed to be overcome: At the time, the respective host countries Panama and Peru invited Cuba. Cuba's presence, however, remained relatively colourless except for the handshake photo between US President Barack Obama and Cuban revolutionary leader Raul Castro.

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That the Cuban drama is making a comeback also has to do with US domestic politics. The right-wing exile communities from Cuba and Venezuela are now influential beyond the state of Florida – in Congress in particular – and they vehemently resist any steps towards the dictators of their home countries.

The hardliners on the one side are matched by the reactions of savvy strategists on the Cuban side. This time, the Caribbean island cleverly managed to enlist other countries such as Mexico, Honduras, Argentina, and Bolivia to push its interests. All four presidents place themselves on the left, all are at loggerheads with the US government for different reasons, or see short-term domestic political advantages in doing so.

Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico

Argentina's President Alberto Fernández wants to secure better conditions for his heavily indebted country from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and is under internal pressure from his Vice-President Cristina Kirchner, who is rallying the left-wing hardliners of the ruling party around her. Bolivia's President Luis Arce is under pressure from his predecessor Evo Morales, who blames the US for his fall in 2019. And Mexico's leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador is persistently angered by US criticism of his drug policies, his investment-hostile economic policies, and his authoritarian domestic course.

The Caribbean island states, in turn, threatened to stay away from the

summit if Venezuelan opposition leader Juan Guaidó was invited. Brazil's right-wing populist president Jair Bolsonaro doesn't care about Cuba or Venezuela, but is infuriated by criticism from Washington over rainforest logging and his attempts to discredit the October elections. He, too, initially wanted to stay away from the summit – but then changed his mind and will apparently even have a bilateral meeting with Joe Biden.

'To many Latin Americans this feels like a perfect opportunity to say: No, it's 2022, and we're not going to take this unilateral nonsense from the United States ever again,' analyses Brian Winter in an editorial in Americas Quarterly. It 'also tells a less flattering story about the region's current political reality—namely, a wavering commitment to democracy.' 'This is the usual fuss about the guest list, wasting time talking about the really important, substantive issues,' lamented James Bosworth of the think tank Hxagon,. He predicted that, in the end, it would probably most heads of state would come after all.

The US lost ground in Latin America

However, this does not guarantee that the US will be able to push through its agenda: promoting democracy, limiting migration, and curbing Chinese influence. With a few exceptions such as Ecuador, Uruguay, and Guatemala, Latin America has once again moved significantly to the left in recent years. In Bolivia, Argentina, and Honduras, left-wing parties returned to power after a right-wing interlude. In Mexico, the left-wing nationalist López Obrador has been in power since 2018. This year, Colombia and Brazil could be added to the list. Scepticism towards the US, which has lost ground in the region, is widespread.

The continent is further away than ever from a common vision like in 1994.

Latin America has diversified its international relations since the millennium. The region has a strategic interest in receiving Chinese loans and investments and in continuing to supply its raw materials and food to China and Russia as well. Not a single country in the subcontinent has therefore imposed sanctions against Russia because of the Ukraine war – which is seen as a European problem.

'Latin America's leaders are desperately seeking economic levers to put the pandemic crisis behind them,' says Eric Farnsworth of the Council of the Americas and the Americas Society. 'As partners, they are looking more to China, which is expanding its presence, than to the US, which is reducing theirs.' For Brazil, Chile, and Peru, China is now the most

important trading partner; since 2005, Beijing has lent $141bn to the region, more than the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank combined.

While in Europe the US is seen as a liberator and democratic protector, the picture in Latin America is much more differentiated. Here, they are still perceived by many as an imperialist superpower that does not shy away from the use of force to enforce its own interests. While the last military interventions were a while ago – in 1989 to overthrow the Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega and in 1994 to overthrow the Haitian military junta – the memories of how the US repeatedly overthrew progressive, supposedly pro-communist governments or governments hostile to US capital during the Cold War shape historical consciousness on the continent. Many countries were the scene of proxy wars – from Guatemala to Chile – and paid a high price. They do not want to see this repeated. Accordingly, Latin America has little interest in a new polarisation of the world order between democracies and autocracies.

The continent is further away than ever from a common vision like in 1994. 'It is unclear if and what will be agreed at this summit,' Bosworth writes. He is sure that some initiatives will be presented. But these are likely to be far removed from the economic, security and climate challenges facing the region.



Sandra Weiss
Mexico City

Sandra Weiss is a political scientist and a former diplomat. A freelance journalist, Sandra writes articles about Latin America for several German newspapers, among others *Die Zeit* and *Die Welt*.