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From issue: **Cuba and Colombia** (Fall 2014)

### ■ AQ FEATURE

# Cuba and the Summits of the Americas

by

**Richard E. Feinberg**

Demonstrators march at the 2005 Summit of the Americas in Mar del Plata, Argentina, proclaiming the unity of Latin American leaders. Photo: DANIEL GARCIA/AFP/GETTY

## **The U.S. can save the upcoming Summit of the Americas—and update its anachronistic Cuba policy—in one fell swoop.**

In the coming months, the United States is going to face a tough choice: either alter its policy toward Cuba or face the virtual collapse of its diplomacy in Latin America. The upcoming Summit of the Americas, the seventh meeting of democratically elected heads of state throughout the Americas, due to convene in April 2015 in Panama, will force the Barack Obama administration to choose between its instincts to reset Cuba policy to coincide more closely with hemispheric opinion and its fears of a domestic political backlash.

During her visit to Washington on September 2, Panama's Vice President Isabel Saint Malo indicated her intention to invite Cuba to the Summit—reaffirmed in her meeting with Cuban President Raúl Castro in Havana on September 18—but public U.S. statements have failed to commit President Obama's attendance.

The periodic inter-American summits have become more important than ever for U.S. regional diplomacy, but our Latin American neighbors have said—firmly and unanimously—that unless Cuba is invited, their chairs will be empty. At a meeting in New York on September 22 cosponsored by Americas Society/Council of the Americas, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos said bluntly, “if Cuba doesn't go, then probably no Summit.” At the same time, the specter of photos of Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro conversing around the same table, apparently as equals, will set off a political reaction among Cuban-American hardliners, Democrats and Republicans alike—a thought

that gives the White House politicians heartburn.

Government bureaucracies are particularly ill-equipped to sort out such tough trade-offs regarding Cuba, and officials are reluctant to sacrifice one goal for the other—for each goal commands ardent defenders of roughly equal rank.

So it falls to senior leaders in the White House to make the decision. But when it comes to Cuba, leadership has so far been in short supply in this administration. Rather, it's been the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—the unyielding senior senator from New Jersey, Robert Menendez—who has presided over policy toward his family's native island.

To escape the impending train wreck, the U.S. can stick to its old policy, or it can use the opportunity to reframe both its Cuban and its hemispheric policies.

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