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The Summitry of Small States: Towards the "Caribbean Summit"

Andrew F. Cooper and Timothy M. Shaw

Each Summit of the Americas forum has been accorded a single imprint. The 1994 Miami summit is remembered as the "Trade Summit," the 1998 Santiago summit as the "Education Summit," the 2001 Quebec City Summit as the "Democratic Summit," and the 2005 Mar del Plata in Argentina—although officially focused on the themes of "Creating Jobs to Fight Poverty and Strengthen Democratic Governance"—is best remembered as the "Summit of Disorder." The Fifth Summit of the Americas, April 17 – 19, 2009, presents an opportunity to identify the event with a regional sub-set of the Americas: the Caribbean. The host country, Trinidad and Tobago, is the first Caribbean country to host the event and, with a population of only 1.3 million, is the smallest state ever to host "such a logistically complicated and politically sensitive gathering" (Erikson, 2009: 179). Relegated to a marginal position in the first four summits, the Caribbean now moves to centre stage in 2009.

This policy brief attempts to locate the summit process in the context of the distinctive brand of diplomatic culture deployed by small states in general, and Caribbean states in particular, with a special focus on what small states can bring to the table of the Fifth Summit of the Americas. In what way can they leverage their own set of capabilities—and to what ends? Just as importantly, what are the limitations of this activity? Although there may be a greater policy space that small states can exploit—often by unconventional means—there are still severe limitations on what small states can hope to achieve. Select avenues of agency hold rising possibilities for small states, but they are mitigated by increasing structural constraints.

Due to their comparative disadvantage in terms of material and personnel resources, small states must find innovative and often unorthodox forms of diplomatic engagement to ensure their interests are well served in a hyper-globalized world (for a deeper examination of these challenges, see Cooper and Shaw, 2009). This shift in orientation is in significant contrast to traditional approaches, which privileged collective solidarity and cooperation as the prime avenue for diplomatic success, such as through involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement. This is not to say that all small states, including those in the Caribbean, have utilized (or benefited) from the new script in equal measure. Indeed, a good number of small states have found themselves overwhelmed by an assortment of ills, the most obvious being crime rates and illegal drug trafficking. Yet, there are good stories as well as bad.

Setting the Agenda: Addressing Regional Priorities

Branding the mid-April meeting of leaders in Trinidad and Tobago as the “Caribbean Summit” plays well to the need to ensure that the priorities of this sub-region—in terms of both its pressing needs and the celebration of its successes—are reflected in the agenda of the fifth summit.

As stated above, the small states of the Caribbean have played only a marginal role in terms of their involvement at the previous Summits of the Americas. Fourteen countries from the Caribbean partake in inter-American summitry—40 percent of the 34 attending states—yet as Daniel P. Erikson (2009: 187) remarks: “During the fifteen years since the first Summit of the Americas, many Caribbean countries have been torn between judging the summit process as a glass half full or a glass half empty.” This has been largely due to the US–Latin America focus of the summit process. This process of marginalization was most evident when the English-speaking states of CARICOM were originally excluded from the 1994 meeting in Miami, only to be included at the last minute. It can also be seen in the prominence of the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) within the agenda of the last four summits, overshadowing the consistent expression among Caribbean small states of the need for special attention/treatment regarding their own needs and interests.

Caribbean member states have made their presence known in a few key areas outside of the FTAA negotiations. The Dominican Republic and Jamaica were central to the coordination of the civil society mandates that came out of the second summit in Santiago, Chile. Caribbean states have also taken active roles in various summit agenda items concerning the flow and abuse of drugs throughout the region (Erikson, 2009: 188). Yet, it must be acknowledged that such progress is subordinated to the pervasive sense of disappointment surrounding failed Caribbean attempts to gain special treatment in matters of trade policy.

Now, with the Fifth Summit of the Americas looming large, and its hosting function placing Trinidad and Tobago in a pivotal role, the Caribbean as an entire entity is poised to push an agenda that reflects the region’s sensibilities. With the death of the FTAA project amid the turbulence at Mar del Plata in 2005, the agenda can now be more diverse and accommodating, paying greater attention to factors across the economic/social spectrum. Jorge Heine (2009), a former ambassador for Chile and now CIGI Chair in International Governance, has recently supported this reasoning, arguing: “Given that nature abhors a vacuum, this puts a premium on initiatives from the region.” Acting upon this potential, Trinidad has focused on an agenda that shies away from the traditional issues of trade and democracy. Instead, the emphasis is on the theme: “Securing Our Citizens’ Future by Promoting Human Prosperity, Energy Security and Environmental Sustainability.”

In declaratory language, this theme has been met with some considerable enthusiasm. José Miguel Insulza, Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), notes that this theme encompasses the region’s principal challenges and concerns, and that it will serve as a strategic guide orienting “the [OAS] and other multilateral organizations for years to come” (Conaway, 2009). This enthusiasm appears to be mirrored by United States Ambassador Hector E. Morales, Jr., permanent representative to the OAS, who in December 2008 named public security as one of the primary challenges facing the region

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as a whole: “Democracy and development will not be sustainable or long-lasting if there’s not going to be a secure environment,” he argued. He further stated: “If people don’t feel they have economic opportunities, they turn to crime, so these security issues [are of] extreme concern” (cited in Green, 2008).

Moving Forward: Ensuring the Caribbean’s Place within the Hemispheric Agenda

Beyond the promotion of a more inclusive agenda, however, the small states of the Caribbean have come under pressure to do more. Most explicitly, the Caribbean region has been called out by OAS Assistant Secretary General, Ambassador Albert Ramdin. He argued that CARICOM should be more vocal on hemispheric issues and use the summit to make a strong claim for playing a greater role in shaping the agenda of the Western Hemisphere, adding that “it is critically important [for CARICOM] to demonstrate a commitment to the Americas” (BBC Monitoring Americas, 2008). Such self-assertion would ensure greater regard for the issues at “the heart of CARICOM’s political and economic well being,” above all attention to environmental disaster relief, crime prevention, energy security, and the reduction of poverty (Ramdin, 2009).

One way forward in promoting a distinctive and assertive regional approach within the hemispheric agenda, without overtaxing small states, is through the greater inclusion of civil society groups in the summit process. Raquel Smith, a program staff member of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL), has argued that Caribbean civil society organizations and NGOs are being offered an opportunity “to ensure the summit’s draft declaration will reflect citizens’ views at the 2009 Trinidad and Tobago gathering.” The goal of such groups, she adds, is to “spread awareness about the work of Caribbean civil society to others, but also to broaden the awareness” among Caribbean groups that the summit offers a “space for regional cooperation on the promotion of democratic norms, prosperity, security,” among other issues (FOCAL, 2008).

Of course, the inclusion of civil society groups within the structure of the Summit of the Americas process has been advocated for some time. By advancing the inclusion of regional NGOs and non-state entities in the summit process, Caribbean states anticipate that this approach will help win greater recognition for the issues that are often sidelined from the summit agenda. Moreover, some of the greatest proponents of the Caribbean and its priorities are in fact non-state entities. Civil society advocates have embraced the need to contribute to the summit process, as is evident from the success of a Caribbean civil society sub-regional forum held in November 2008 and organized by the Trinidad-based Network of NGOs, the OAS, and FOCAL. Still, the need, as recognized by Ambassador Ramdin, is that the inclusion of civil society members cannot be “a one-off activity.” As he stated: “This engagement should be a continuous one, structured and well defined, and even beyond the Fifth Summit of the Americas. Civil society engagement is not a gesture, it is an obligation.” (cited in Richards, 2008)



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Competing Interests: The Risk of Being Overshadowed

At the state level, there remains the larger puzzle surrounding the Fifth Summit of the Americas. That is to say, what will be the attitude and policies of the new US president, Barack Obama? His presence at the summit meshes with his campaign messages of change, as epitomized by an emphasis on enhanced multilateral cooperation. Such a break with the approach of the past eight years leads many commentators to speculate about whether he can turn around a growing anti-Americanism embedded among states in Latin America and the Caribbean. Stephen Fidler (2009) of the Financial Times has argued that “Washington’s clout in Latin America is waning,” exacerbated by both the actions (and inactions) of former President George W. Bush.

Through various lenses, the US appears to have lost considerable ground during the Bush years. The rise of the ideological left in the Americas has been at the centre of this debate. At the same time, though, this ascendancy must be nuanced with an eye to the diversity of the left in the Americas. If Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez was one key player at the 2005 Mar del Plata summit, so was Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the extremely popular president of Brazil—who, it must be added, has focused considerable attention on the Caribbean’s security and economic development (for more on the rise of leftist politics in the Americas, see Cooper and Heine, 2009).

Small states need innovative, even unorthodox diplomacy to advance their interests in a hyper-globalized world.

This trend has also opened the Caribbean to deeper engagement by the major emerging economies. India has a longstanding connection that is being used increasingly in a strategic fashion—not least among segments of the population of Indian origin in states such as Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana. Meanwhile, China’s economic influence in the region continues to grow (Fidler, 2009), primarily through trade in natural resources.

Against this background, Ambassador Ramdin of the OAS has hailed the Obama victory and the possibilities it brings with it, as ushering in the prospect of “a renewed engagement with the Western Hemisphere, a stronger relationship with countries of the Western Hemisphere, and also a renewed and stronger relationship with the Caribbean countries.” He also states that President Obama’s presence “will provide for the hemisphere a new opportunity to re-engage, build solidarity, foster the collectivity and friendly relations between nations, but more importantly to focus on the agenda for change, a platform for the future, for the Americas.” (OAS, 2008a)

Yet, as on so many other issues, both international and domestic, the star presence of President Obama in Trinidad and Tobago could complicate matters for the Caribbean Summit. Between the pressures of addressing the

global financial crisis and securing agreement on the summit's agenda, will the Caribbean brand be crowded out? OAS Secretary General Insulza has encouraged the inclusion of the economic crisis in the summit's "Declaration of Commitment," arguing that the pledges made at the November G20 meeting in Washington are of significant importance to the region as a whole and must be adequately addressed at the April summit (OAS, 2008b). Small states in the Caribbean must therefore do their best to "impress upon President Obama how urgent the situation in the Caribbean has become" in terms of the region's own social and economic difficulties (Heine, 2009).

The second G20 summit will have been convened in London shortly before the Port-of-Spain meetings, raising some important questions: Will a Caribbean-specific agenda find sufficient public attention and policy space? Or will concerns over the global economy overshadow issues on the Summit of the Americas agenda? Balancing the many competing interests will form the primary challenge for both Trinidad and Tobago (as host) and for all Caribbean states (as participants), testing their resolve towards a concerted and durable attention to the core regional concerns.

Resilient Diplomacy and the "Caribbean Summit"

Small states have traditionally been considered – both in practice and in academic literature – vulnerable or weak entities with little economic or political influence. Their successes are often overlooked and their diplomatic status systemically marginalized in a global system that privileges power over potential. But there are signs of a change in this thinking, as small states defy the stereotype and employ innovative methods to accentuate their comparative advantages (Cooper and Shaw, 2009).

Summitry allows small states to capitalize on their one true inalienable asset – their sovereign voice – but it also provides a moment for resilient collective action. While the Summit of the Americas continues to be a diplomatic stage where asymmetric power persists among rich and poor nations, the Caribbean host has so far navigated the competing forces ably. By emphasizing issues of common concern such as energy security and climate change, and downplaying divisive debates over trade and democracy, Trinidad and Tobago hopes to restore the spirit of collegiality to the summit process (Erikson, 2009: 190). The April summit is the small state's first major opportunity to demonstrate effective diplomatic leadership, an undertaking it has not taken lightly.

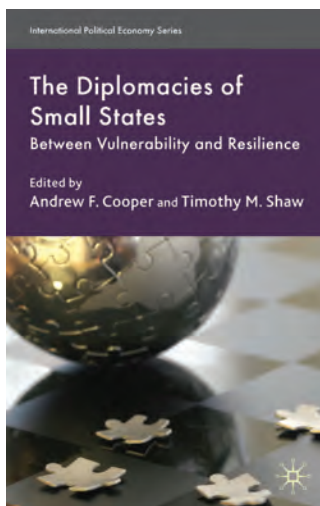
The summit in Port-of-Spain deviates somewhat from tradition, as a small state hosts a large cast of world leaders. However, the summit (and the proficiency of Trinidad and Tobago as host – it is also hosting the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting this November) will be judged on its ability to deliver solutions towards the core regional agenda items; if it can do so, the brand of the "Caribbean Summit" will be permanently affixed. These developments have signalled that the door for Caribbean leadership in the hemisphere is opening, providing momentum for continued attention to the region's social and economic priorities.

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Related Publication

This policy brief connects the diplomatic agenda at the Summit of the Americas with the research and arguments in Andrew F. Cooper and Timothy M. Shaw's *The Diplomacy of Small States: Between Vulnerability and Resilience* (Forthcoming, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). The book is a project of CIGI's Shifting Global Order program, with research support from the Institute of International Relations at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine.

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