

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Prospects for the Summit of the Americas

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President Barack Obama will take part in the Summit of the Americas meeting held in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, on April 17–19.

Q1: What is the Summit of the Americas? Is it important? Why?

A1: The Summit of the Americas (SOA) process brings together the heads of state/government of the 34 Organization of American States (OAS) member countries for consultation on issues of common concern and to develop strategies for meeting goals developed from these meetings. The first summit was held in Miami in 1994. The Port of Spain meeting will be the fifth full summit, with two interim meetings also held. The last summit took place in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in 2005. The summit process is important on several accounts. It is the premier vehicle of consultation for all OAS heads of state/government, including the United States and Canada. No other regional or subregional mechanism accomplishes this. The OAS serves as the general secretariat of the SOA process and for coordinating follow-ups to the mandates of the summit. The summit process has resulted in a wide variety of accomplishments, such as the negotiation of important inter-American conventions (against corruption, for example) and the development in 2001 of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Although the 1994 mandate from the SOA to consolidate a free-trade area of the Americas (FTAA) by 2005 was not met, the summit process did help stimulate a series of other bilateral and multilateral trade agreements in the region.

Q2: What will be the key agenda items at the Port of Spain summit?

A2: The SOA will highlight a wide range of issues: “human prosperity,” environmental sustainability, energy security, democratic governance, and public security. The current international economic and financial downturn that is strongly affecting all countries in the Americas will be a central topic. In addition, the issue of Cuba’s exclusion from the summit process and from active membership in the OAS will almost certainly be raised, although it is not on the agenda.

Q3: Will the summit reach any decisions on Cuba? What is the U.S. position?

A3: Some OAS members have voiced support for returning Cuba to active OAS membership (it was suspended in 1962) and for Cuban participation in the SOA process. There will also be calls for the United States to lift the economic embargo on Cuba. The United States does not support moving forward on these measures, and it is highly improbable that decisions will be taken on them at Port of Spain. The fact that Cuba will be discussed at all is significant, however, and public opinion will pay close attention to U.S. statements about Cuba made at the summit.

Q4: What can President Obama hope to achieve at the summit?

A4: President Obama will use the summit as an opportunity to demonstrate U.S. engagement with the Americas and highlight a desire to cooperate with other OAS members in strengthening the inter-American system as a means of advancing common objectives in areas such as security, governance, energy, the environment, and poverty reduction. He will reassure other heads of government/state that his administration is taking vigorous steps to resolve the economic crisis in the United States and that—consonant with the G-20 declaration—it will work with other countries to stabilize the world economy. Although it is unlikely that the president will announce any major new U.S. initiatives in the region, especially anything requiring large amounts of new spending, he will probably mention specific areas for heightened cooperation on the part of the United States.

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