



With Barack Obama completing a hundred days in the White House, the evidence that there has been a change in political style in Washington seems to be pretty clear. Obama has insisted repeatedly that he will not tread the path most unfortunately beaten by his predecessor George W. Bush. Obama has said that he wants to hear voices other than those in Washington because he recognises that Washington does not have a monopoly on truth and wisdom.

Obama reiterated this belief in Trinidad at the mid-April Summit of the Americas, while extending a hand of reconciliation to some who have represented the most inveterate opposition to the hegemony of the US— in that region, and throughout the world. Thus there was before the summit and during it the very real sense that relations between an old enemy in Havana and the US were bound for a radical reconstruction as Raul Castro, not an invitee to the summit, and Obama exchanged what amounted almost to pleasantries offstage. And, too, there was a handshake onstage, as it were, with the new enemy, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, the man who has done more than any other to wean countries in Central and South America away from Washington's sphere of influence and build a hostile alliance against the hegemon.

What these will translate into at a later date obviously remains to be seen— Obama repeated on the occasion of the summit that the test would lie in action and not statements of intent, however pious— but clearly there is a sense that geopolitical equations are teetering on the brink of a fundamental reconstruction that could see Cuba coming out of decades of isolation and the coalition of the unwilling in South America engaging with the new dispensation in Washington in unexpectedly creative ways. The measure of the shift in the US's perception of its role in the region can be had from the swift and virulent condemnation that Obama's overtures have drawn in the US from unreconstructed Republican dinosaurs. And from Obama's gentle reminder that Venezuela's defence outlay is one-six hundredth that of the US's.

The importance of the American summit and the changes in direction prefigured, one hopes, can hardly be exaggerated. As the backyard of the world's only superpower, South America has historically been the region that has suffered most immediately from Washington's adventurism during and after the Cold War— the US has stoked insurgencies, toppled and destabilised elected regimes, and provided aid and succour to the most brutal and corrupt of dictators with impunity. No less has it imposed through the agency of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank policies that have ravaged the economies of the region, while underwriting the depredations of US multinationals through grossly unequal arrangements.



Not until Chavez forged the alliance against the most iniquitous of regimes in Washington presided over by Bush Junior, had South American countries ever shown the capacity or even willingness to resist. The US's designs in this continent have always represented in a microcosm the country's hegemonistic designs throughout the world. If the Summit of the Americas paves the way for a new format of engagement, leaders and peoples in the rest of the world will be forgiven for harbouring serious optimism about their engagement with the US.

It would obviously be much too premature to try and settle the style-substance debate at this point in time, but other indications of change are available as well— not least in changes in directions being forged in Washington in relation to crucial multilateral negotiations in the areas of trade and climate change.

The emerging powers will be particularly mindful to map the new directions being forged—

whether in Beijing or in New Delhi. The special, if often fraught, relationship between the US and China, with its permanent seat in the Security Council and greater heft in Washington, obviously has its own dynamic. In the middle of a global economic meltdown that potentially outstrips that of 1929 and the next decade, US policymakers are no doubt keenly aware of the role that the emerging economies, especially China with its huge balance of payments surplus, will be called upon to play in climbing out of it. Washington will also be aware that China's expansionary agenda is very real— not just in Asia, but increasingly in both Africa and Latin America. And that it has especially receptive voices in the South American continent. That may be one of the reasons for Obama's shift in style, but the shift probably has something at least to do with the forging of a new kind of politics.

Whatever the motivations, it is now becoming clear that this is a moment of opportunity for South American countries— a moment at which they must try its best to renegotiate a fraught relationship with the world's only superpower to its advantage. It is also an opportunity for the global South to forge new bonds and solidarities as the international community hunkers down to hammer out a crucial, still-stalled deal on a post-Kyoto regime on climate change and unlock the never-ending Doha round of talks on international trade.

Image Sources:

- [George Bush](#)
- [Obama-chavez](#)