



Turning the page

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Hernán Cortés, the conquering Spaniard, whose great military expedition and march (1519-1520) with some 500 men from the Gulf of Mexico to the seat of the Aztec empire at Tenochtitlán was not only bold but decisive. A determined Cortés scuttled his ships at Villa Rica and left them on the beach; he did so to secure the commitment of his troops for his expedition after some of the soldiers had wanted to return to Cuba. Both the American and Cuban presidents have been bold but neither have made the commitment that Cortés did. There is much to be done and whilst the restoration of diplomatic ties is on the agenda, the lifting of the 54-year-old embargo remains the grand prize for Cuba.

Perhaps by the time you read this column more material inroads will have been made towards the normalisation of relations between the communist island and the North American world power, but pessimism is more likely to prevail. Cuba reflects an abiding mistrust of the US, shared across the region (admittedly, more virulent in some countries than others), and this manifested itself during Raúl Castro's speech in Panama which resurrected the ideals of a grand American homeland during the time of Simón Bolívar. He referred to the 19th-century US doctrine or belief that its expansion throughout the two American continents (it wasn't so lucky with Canada) was both justified and inevitable and he described the US as "that expansionist and dominating force that stripped Our America of part of its territory and expanded as far as the Rio Grande". Even so, the Cuban president, in recognising the profound differences, made it clear that he was ready to engage in "a respectful dialogue and work for a civilised co-existence between our states".

Talks to reopen respective embassies have been difficult, one problem being the US request that its diplomats be able to travel and operate freely on Cuban soil. The other sticking point (perhaps solved before you read this – although I shan't hold my breath) is Cuba's inclusion on the US State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism (fellow club members being Iran, Sudan and Syria). President Obama's ability to persuade his Congress to remove Cuba is, to some degree, hobbled by a hostile Republican Party; that said, not every Republican member of Congress is opposed to the move and, most certainly, big business in the US is very supportive, seeing a new market less than 100 miles away from its shores. Besides, Cuban interventions abroad all but ended in the 1990s and rather than backing insurgents and leftist movements in the Americas and parts of Africa, it is better known today for the role it has played as mediator of peace talks in Havana between the Colombian Government and the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) rebels.

Even assuming that the two sides get around the table and start drafting a blueprint for future relations, my own experience in government service, and attendance at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, where the wording, phraseology – even punctuation – of resolutions can be laboured over to the point of despair, suggests to me that the road ahead will not only be paved with good intentions but frustration too. Consider, for instance, the US naval base at Guantánamo Bay. Panamá got its canal back

(more later) and Cuba now wants Guantánamo Bay returned, viewing this US enclave as an aberration arising from the military intervention approved by the US Congress in 1898 midst the island's wars of independence from Spain.

Thinking about tortuous text, the late James Thurber, an author and journalist back in the 1960s, had constant conflict with Harold Ross, a former editor of *The New Yorker*. The writer almost went into a coma over commas because the two of them frequently went ten rounds over their use. Thurber was once asked why there was a comma in the sentence "after dinner, the men went into the living room". He replied, "This particular comma was Ross's way of giving the men time to push back their chairs and stand up". A different interpretation, just as the many which lie ahead between the two presidents; different languages will be the least of their concerns and, doubtless too, there will be many difficult moments in the days ahead.

Predictably, Venezuela's attendance at the Summit meant that the atmosphere, rather than sentences, was punctuated with moments of unease. Nicolás Maduro, the Venezuelan president, offered his usual anti-imperialist bluster which had already been boosted by the US president's executive order the month before declaring Venezuela as "an unusual and extraordinary threat to US national security and foreign policy". Sanctions have been placed on seven officials in Caracas accused of human rights abuses; besides being refused travel to the US, any assets they have there have been frozen. Venezuela would appear to have replaced Cuba at the top of Washington's regional blacklist. An unprecedented statement at the end of March by all 33 members of the Community of Latin America and Caribbean States expressed opposition to this action against the seven officials and referred to "the application of unilateral coercive measures contrary to International Law".

The US president had already left the Summit's plenary session ahead of the Venezuelan president's speech in which he referred to the US executive order as "threatening" and "dangerous", claiming that the US embassy in Caracas had been planning a coup as well as an assassination attempt on him. Nonetheless, 22 ex-presidents of the political centre and right have demanded that Nicolás Maduro free opposition prisoners. Although Latin America is prickly over unilateral interventions by the US, it must be conceded that the Unión de Naciones Suramericanas (Union of South American Nations) has made little progress in mediating between Venezuela's autocratic regime and the opposition. Modelled after the European Union, it was created in 2008 and has 12 countries as members (Venezuela being one of them).

Away from the Summit, other significant events were occurring locally. The last of 16 rolling gates was moved into position in the Panama Canal's new third set of locks. The gate, weighing 4,200 tons, was slid into place on the Canal's Pacific side, and with this installation of the final gate, the expansion project is now nearly 90% complete according to the Panama Canal Authority. Once complete (2016 is the target) the Canal's capacity will be effectively doubled.

The Canal's new locks are expected to be flooded in the near future; let's also hope for a positive flow, if not a flood, of communications between the two presidents of the Americas, even if, as James Thurber would have appreciated, there's plenty of pauses and chairs pushed back before the US and Cuba achieve anything that can be described as normal diplomatic relations between two countries. Sitting down again, however, after standing up is what will be the most important thing.

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