

The Summit of the Americas

The Summit of the Americas is a unique forum that enables all heads of state from the continent to meet and discuss issues covering their hemisphere. Cuba's first ever attendance, at the forum's Seventh Summit, held in Panama in April 2015, marked a turning point in the process.

Historical background

The first [International Conference of American States](#) was held in Washington DC, from October 1889 to April 1890, and led to the creation of the [Commercial Bureau of the American Republics](#), that would later evolve into the [Panamerican Union](#), and finally in 1948, into the [Organisation of American States](#) (OAS). Successive conferences held up to the end of the Second World War helped to develop inter-American international law, with numerous conventions and agreements concluded, including a [Private International Law Code](#). After 1945, the Cold War led the agenda, and democratic values and principles were subordinated to security interests. The [First Presidential Summit](#) was held in 1956 in [Panama City](#), where committees were set up to study the critical problems of the continent, and the first steps were made in the creation of the [Inter-American Development Bank](#). A second summit was held in Punta del Este (Uruguay) in 1967, to strengthen the [Alliance for Progress](#), US President John F. Kennedy's 1961 initiative to promote peaceful economic cooperation and development in the Americas. The [Punta del Este Declaration](#) affirmed the participants' resolve to create a Latin American Common Market by 1980, and to ensure multilateral cooperation for the development of infrastructure, agriculture, education and arms control. As many of these goals were never achieved, the summit process [lost credibility](#) as an instrument for change and progress in the region.

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The Summit of the Americas as we know it today started as a proposal of the US Government. Re-organising inter-American relations was among the main [aims](#) of this new process, which was to be achieved by adapting its agenda, content, and mechanisms to the world and region's new political, economic and social realities. The heads of state and government decided to meet periodically and define the main positions of an agenda for the Americas, based on action plans. Today, this is the only forum where Latin American and Caribbean countries meet at leader's level with the United States and Canada.

Summits prior to 2015

The [First Summit of the Americas](#) was held in Miami (USA), in December 1994. It was the first hemispheric summit to be attended by heads of state who, without exception, had been democratically elected, and also the first to include Canada and the Caribbean island states. The 34 participants signed a Declaration of Principles (establishing a pact for development and prosperity, based on the preservation and strengthening of American democracies), and a Plan of Action. From then to 2012, the following summits took place: a [Summit on Sustainable Development](#) in Santa Cruz (Bolivia), in December 1996; the [Second Summit of the Americas](#) in Santiago (Chile), in April 1998; the [Third Summit of the Americas](#) in Quebec City (Canada), in April 2001; a [Special Summit of the Americas](#) in Monterrey (Mexico), in January 2004, focused on economic growth with equity, social development, and democratic governance; the [Fourth Summit of the Americas](#) in Mar del Plata (Argentina), in November 2005; the [Fifth Summit of the Americas](#) in Port of Spain (Trinidad and Tobago), in April 2009; and the [Sixth Summit of the Americas](#) in Cartagena de Indias (Colombia), in April 2012. This last summit was marked by sharp disagreements with the US on the status of Cuba and on drug policies. According to some commentators, this summit showed that the [process had been exhausted](#) in its current form and needed re-engineering.

Summit organisation

Several bodies ensure the smooth work of the summits: The [Summits of the Americas Secretariat](#), which is provided by the Organisation of American States from its Washington DC headquarters, keeps the institutional memory of the process; provides technical support to the SIRG; coordinates activities regarding civil society participation in the summit process; and presides over the [JSWG](#). The [Summit Implementation Review Group](#) (SIRG), which is the core management body of the process, is composed of representatives (national coordinators) of the OAS Member States, who meet to negotiate the text of documents which will later be signed by the leaders at the summit. The [Joint Summit Working Group](#) (JSWG), which coordinates the support of 12 inter-American and international [institutions](#) to the summits process, plans and carries out projects and initiatives to implement summit commitments; supports inter-American ministerial meetings and their linkages to the summits process; and participates in policy dialogues. There is also a 'Summits of the Americas Mandate Follow-up System' ([SISCA](#)), an online inter-agency work tool for the entry of information by entities linked to the system and for public consultation. It also serves as an online interactive forum for government entities to enter summit-related goals and progress.

Relevant initiatives and results from past summits

Among the main initiatives and results from past summits are: the launch of negotiations for the creation of a [Free Trade Area of the Americas](#) (FTAA), a result of the First Summit; the [Inter-American Democratic Charter](#) which has its origins in the Quebec Summit; the establishment of a [Multilateral Evaluation Mechanism](#) (MEM), also proposed at the Second Summit with the aim of improving the capacity of states to control drug trafficking and abuse and enhance multilateral cooperation; the [American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#), which also has its origins in the Second Summit; the appointment of a [Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression](#), proposed at the Second Summit and ratified by the Third; the [Follow-up Mechanism](#) of the Inter-American Convention against Corruption (MESICIC), proposed at the Santiago Summit; the [Inter-American Social Protection Network](#) (IASPN), which received its mandate from the 2009 Summit; the [Report on the Drug Problem in the Americas](#), an initiative of the Cartagena Summit; the [Small Business Network of the Americas](#) (SBNA), a mandate of the Sixth Summit; the promotion of the [Agenda for Connectivity in the Americas](#), an initiative of the Sixth Summit; and [civil society participation](#) in the preparation process of the Summit of the Americas, first implemented in the Seventh Summit.

The Seventh Summit of the Americas: a turning point

The [Seventh Summit of the Americas](#) was held in Panama, in April 2015, and its central theme was 'Prosperity with Equity: the Challenge of Cooperation in the Americas'. This summit, at which all 35 independent American nations met at the highest level for the first time, was a turning point in the United States' Latin American policy. Among the themes discussed were education, health, energy, environment, migration, security, citizen participation and democratic governance. Also for the first time, a series of activities were designed to facilitate the participation in and meaningful contribution of [civil society](#) and social actors to the process. Cuba's participation, which had been requested by Latin American countries in the Sixth Summit, and Cuban President Raul Castro's 80-minute meeting with US President Barack Obama on its margins, signalled the start of a new cycle. It was [the first time](#) in more than 50 years that a US and Cuban president had met and talked face to face. Obama explained that this was an expression of a [major shift](#) in his government's policy towards the whole region, stressed his interest in forgetting the past and looking to the future, and called for an alliance with Latin America on equal grounds and with mutual respect. Castro also confirmed that a new era had started and stated that he considered Obama 'an honest man'.

The EU and the Summit of the Americas

In 2015, the [European Union](#) was invited to the Summit of the Americas for the first time and was represented by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, [Federica Mogherini](#). She [exchanged views](#) on the margins of the summit with Presidents Barack Obama and Raul Castro. Mogherini [declared](#) that in this historical moment for the Americas and as a result of the opening of a new chapter of US-Cuba relations, 'it is crucial to reaffirm and strengthen the friendship between the European Union and all the countries of the Region'. She had visited [Cuba](#) in [March](#) to speed up dialogue and work on a bilateral agreement with the country.