

Summitry Behind the Scenes

By Luke Sookocheff

The Summit of the Americas happens only every three or four years, and is over in a matter of days. Yet its impact is felt for some time afterwards, through the implementation of mandates by countries, the Organization of American States, inter-American ministerial meetings and other multilateral organizations that collectively make up the inter-American system.

Canada has a stake in helping to make each summit a success. Indeed, we have a special relationship with the event. Since 2001's Summit of the Americas in the city of Québec, which resulted in the adoption of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, countries have sought Canada's expertise in organizing their summits. In preparation for the Mar del Plata Summit in Argentina in 2005 and the Port of Spain Summit in Trinidad and Tobago in 2009, Canada deployed a "SWAT team" of some five experts on logistics, protocol and security who had been instrumental in making the gathering in Québec a success.

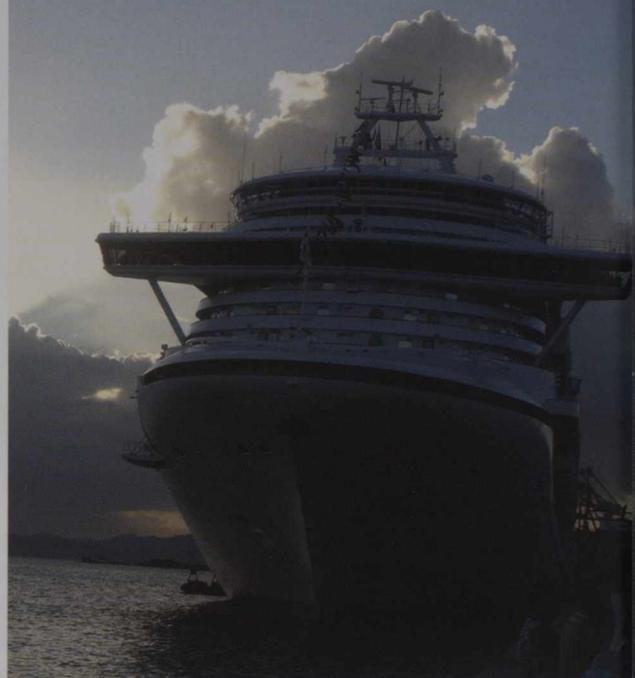
The team especially helps local summit organizers to engage senior people on the importance of logistics, an area that is often underestimated in international diplomacy. Like most countries, Canada focuses primarily on the substantive elements of the agenda—leaders' dialogue, themes to be addressed, negotiation of text, engagement with civil society and the media. However, we also recognize that none of these things will see the light of day if flights are late, equipment is lost or a venue is too small to accommodate everyone.

Before the 2009 Summit, for example, the Canadian team invited key organizers to come to Québec to observe the final stages of preparation for the 2008 Francophonie Summit. Upon their return to Port of Spain, office staff was increased. Responsibilities were delineated for teams responsible for administration, transportation, accommodation, accreditation and operations. Key sites were secured. Budgets were aligned with activities. Canada's team returned from time to time, providing suggestions for dealing with problems that arose. One recommendation was to supplement the hotel rooms by bringing in cruise ships to handle the overflow. (The U.S. delegation alone numbered 1,000 and needed an entire hotel to itself.) In the final month, two Canadian experts on logistics and protocol were deployed to work directly with the national secretariat to address last-minute issues.

When the Summit took place, in April 2009, logistics faded into the background, and the leaders and delegates were able to focus on the substantive issues that had brought them to Port of Spain. The Canadian delegation shared its experience in promoting equitable access to health and helped to forge compromises on contentious topics, such as the appropriate role of the private sector in energy production. Ultimately, the Summit overcame potential divisions and saw leaders renew their commitment to inter-American cooperation.

Just as the dust settled came a diplomatic note asking Canada to send a logistics expert to help the finance ministry of Colombia prepare the budget for its hosting of the 2012 Summit of the Americas. Next stop, Cartagena!

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For the 2009 Port au Prince Summit of the Americas, hotel rooms were supplemented by cruise ship cabins.



Leaders at the 2009 Summit: When things work well, logistics are invisible.