

Adam Miller
Professor Thompson
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Improving Relations between the United States and Cuba
Adam Miller

Cuba is a country grounded in its history with political idealism permeating every facet of its government and impacting every area of society. The revolution of the past still determines the social, political, economic, and everyday life of Cubans today. The country seems to be constantly reminded of the sacrifices made to attain independence, and along with this stems the hard-line dedication to the ideal so long sought after: a fair and socialist regime. For the current leaders of Cuba, Fidel, Raul, and other *historicos* of the old revolution, socialism is more than just a political and economic system, it is a mindset. It is a part of what they were fighting for and representative of not only equality and justice, but resistance to foreign influence. Its establishment and firm, continued existence signifies Cuba's independence and achievements. Any deviation from socialist principles can be considered a compromise of values.

Despite this mindset, time and necessity have taken their toll and some interesting developments are beginning to take shape in Cuba. Raul Castro, as the current president of Cuba, has recognized a need for improvements and has set in motion several economic reforms. These include, among others, greater autonomy in the agricultural sector, support of privatized restaurants and bed-and-breakfasts, reduced state enterprises, and increased foreign investment.¹ Additionally, policy reforms are underway in more ways than one. Travel restrictions for Cubans wanting to leave have been eased, Raul instituted term limits for presidents, and within the next several years Cuba is going to have a brand new leader, most likely one without the last name of Castro. Furthermore, the recent passing of Hugo Chavez, Cuba's principal benefactor, increases the uncertainty of Cuba's economic and political future. These developments invite a

¹ Peters, Phillip. *A Viewer's Guide to Cuba's Economic Reform*. Arlington: Lexington Institute, 2012.

reexamination of what United States policy should be towards Cuba. In this paper I will argue that the United States should take efforts to improve relations with Cuba and lift the economic embargo through a series of incremental steps. The lifting of the embargo will be beneficial to both the United States and Cuba and the use of a series of small steps is not only more feasible, but also allows Cuba to retain its independence and identity.

Most of the benefits from lifting the sanctions are mutual; what helps Cuba will help the U.S. To begin this process, first and foremost the United States should reach out to Cuba and offer its knowledge and resources on Cuba's offshore drilling efforts in the Gulf. This is a shared concern among both countries, and the extensive experience and equipment of the United States would be extremely beneficial in ensuring environmental protection.² This would allow the United States to not only help in preventing potential spills, but also to respond appropriately should one occur. The United States has a lot of experience in this area while Cuba is more of a novice in their attempts to develop their own energy resources. The U.S. would be able to protect its waters while Cuba would benefit from U.S. assistance, and furthermore it would give U.S. firms an opportunity for partnering and investment.³ This initial step would be the spark of a dialogue between the two countries and begin the breaking down of communication barriers. The two countries could then discuss policies and joint effort options regarding other common issues, such as drug trafficking and counterterrorism. In the past, U.S. and Cuban cooperation allowed them to decrease drug trafficking and is evidence of the benefits to be gained through the countries' collaboration on shared interests.

As the relationship between these neighboring countries continues to improve, the next step towards lifting the embargo would be increasing marketing and sale of medical goods to

² *21st Century Cuba*. Washington: Center for Democracy in the Americas.

³ *Ibid.*

Cuba. The benefits to be gained from this can be seen in a dialogue with Dr. Alvarez Cambra, a leading Cuban physician who was instrumental in bringing about the success of their health care system. Dr. Cambra discussed the difficulties and roundabout manner in which medical supplies are obtained. He states that Cuba doesn't buy any supplies from the United States; instead they must get them from a more distant country like Europe or China, which increases the price considerably. Some medical supplies cannot be obtained from anywhere but the United States, so Cuba must have Panama purchase these items and in turn buy them from Panama. As a result the price of these important U.S. produced medical goods are almost twice as expensive. These unnecessary obstacles result in lower quality, slower care for Cuban patients. From a humanitarian standpoint, the United States should allow trade of medical supplies to Cuba. It seems unjust to deny them access to readily available, necessary treatments and in doing so impede their ability to treat and help as many patients as they would if operating at full potential. Furthermore, this would benefit the United States economically, as it would open up an eager market for U.S. pharmaceutical companies and manufacturers of medical equipment. While limited medical exports to Cuba do exist already, they are insufficient based on the words of Dr. Cambra. Limited increases in medical exports result in limited gains. Fully embracing this opportunity offers significant advantages to both the U.S. and Cuba, and would vastly strengthen ties between the two.

Along with medical goods, the list of exports licensed for sale to Cuba should be fully expanded to agricultural goods and equipment. The United States is Cuba's largest supplier of agricultural products, providing around 96 percent of Cuba's rice imports and 70 percent of their poultry meat imports since agricultural trade was authorized in 2000.⁴ Cuba's new reforms seek

⁴ *United States Department of Agriculture: Foreign Agriculture Service*. June 2007. <http://www.fas.usda.gov/itp/cuba/cuba-faq.html#representatives> (accessed April 4, 2013).

to give greater autonomy in the agricultural sector and increase farm production to reduce the food import bill and provide employment opportunities.⁵ This opens up additional prospects for the United States. Given their success in selling basic food products and commodities, they could also tap into other farming needs such as fuel, seed, fertilizer, insecticide, and machinery. Cuban farmers are intelligent and eager to expand, but can only be as productive and efficient as their equipment allows them to be. Allowing the trade of agricultural goods and equipment would help the economy of each country.

The next step of eliminating the embargo would be to ease the U.S.-Cuba travel restrictions. The Obama administration enacted measures which allowed increased purposeful travel to Cuba and eased the sending of remittances.⁶ This has been greatly beneficial to Cuba, as money sent in has provided many small entrepreneurs the capital they needed to start their business. It has also allowed Cuban Americans to visit close relatives without intense restrictions. The educational and religious travels to Cuba have increased person to person contact. The next step would be to allow limited tourist visits. A flood of U.S. citizens traveling and engaging in conversations with Cubans would allow the free flow of information and help breakdown the Cuban government's control over the nation.⁷ Some argue that the monetary benefit to Cuba from allowing American tourism is equivalent to supporting Raul Castro's rule. In reality, preventing travel supports the Castro regime by restricting information for Cubans and providing the Cuban government a scapegoat for their economic woes. Increased tourism would increase the demand for private restaurants, vendors, bed-and-breakfasts, and other businesses. It would only spur the trend towards a more capitalist Cuba. The U.S. economy would also benefit

⁵ Peters, Phillip. *A Viewer's Guide to Cuba's Economic Reform*. Arlington: Lexington Institute, 2012.

⁶ Sullivan, Mark P. *Cuba: U.S. Restriction on Travel and Remittance*. Congressional Research Service, 2012.

⁷ Ibid.

as a result of the increased demand for air and cruise travel.⁸ Easing travel restrictions may also make U.S. citizens more aware and sympathetic towards Cuba, stimulating a desire for lifting the embargo further.

One of the final steps in lifting the embargo would be authorizing U.S. investment in support of burgeoning small Cuban businesses. A bed-and-breakfast owner in Cuba took the time to show some visiting Americans his business and discuss his start up. The facilities, decorations, and location he had were beautiful. It was evident the amount of work and money required to get this endeavor off the ground. When asked how he acquired the funds, he explained that it was all from expatriates sending remittances, as there wasn't an opportunity for him to acquire a loan. At present the business is flourishing and was the recipient of a traveler's choice award. This one man's success story points toward the potential benefits of a relationship between U.S. investors and Cuban entrepreneurs. His success was in large part due to the initial help he received from expatriates, which may not be available to other Cubans wishing to start or advance their business. With the reforms allowing increased privatization of restaurants and other small business, the time is ripe for U.S. investors to get involved and support Cuban endeavors. Cuba would be a new, nearby market for U.S. venture capitalists to dive into. The increased growth and prosperity of Cuban businesses would put Cuba on an even more direct path towards capitalism. In time, and in combination with the change of Cuba's leaders, this may help reduce their iron grip on socialist principles. In turn this would decrease any incentive for the U.S. to withhold open relations because of an incompatibility of political views.

Regarding a political standpoint, the United States has much to be gained from lifting the embargo. If the above measures are carried out, Cuba's antipathy towards America will decrease

⁸ Sullivan, Mark P. *Cuba: U.S. Restriction on Travel and Remittance*. Congressional Research Service, 2012.

and even reverse as the two countries become more dependent on one another. Cuba will also no longer be able to use the United States as an excuse for all of its problems. Without the crutch of the embargo, the flaws of the Cuban system will have to be recognized and most likely simultaneously rectified through the improved relationship with the U.S. Furthermore, the recent death of Hugo Chavez has made the Cuban economy more unstable and the need for change all the more urgent. There is a probable void left by Venezuela and the question remains of who will fill it. It would be unwise for the U.S. to ignore the issue and allow a potential threat to rise up so close to its borders. Instead of waiting to see if a country with animosity towards the U.S. gets involved with Cuba, the U.S. should step in themselves, beginning with the means of lifting the embargo stated above. The U.S. could become the major influence in Cuba and naturally pave the way where capitalism would emerge over time. Additionally, by doing so the United States would improve their political standing across the globe, as the United Nations repeatedly urges the lifting of the embargo. Anti-Castro hardliners in Miami would oppose an outright lifting of the embargo, but this removal by small steps is a more appealing, less extreme approach. By the time anything major occurs, all Castros will most likely be out of office, decreasing the feelings of bitterness, and making each step easier.

Overall, the lifting of the embargo is beneficial to both the United States and Cuba. The U.S. especially has major economic, humanitarian, and political incentives. The elimination of the embargo needs to be done in small, digestible steps, allowing each country to reap the benefits of a prosperous relationship without compromising either of their unwavering ideals.

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