

El Bloqueo

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Today, there are 195 sovereign states in the world.¹ Of these, the US has sanctions against only 10 of them.² While each of these relationships and histories are unique, perhaps the most sensitive of these topics is the embargo against Cuba. This small island, only about the size of Ohio³, has been under U.S. sanctions for over 50 years. Its geographic significance cannot be overlooked, considering it is less than an hour flight away from the Florida coastline. While these facts allude to the past, U.S.-Cuban policy is far from an outdated topic. Considering Cuba's shift in economic policies, death of Hugo Chavez, and aging Castro family, modern Cuba is in a time of tremendous change. For this reason, the US should not hesitate to act on the opportunity to change its policy with Cuba. In order to do so, I argue that the US should make changes to the embargo in a ways that support private entrepreneurs with technology and finances, particularly those in agriculture. Additionally, I suggest taking the opportunity to collaborate in the field of healthcare. By making these changes, the US will maintain the essence of the embargo, and therefore a stance against the Castro regime, while promoting change. To defend this argument, I will begin by presenting opinions for and against the embargo. Afterward, I will continue by addressing the opportunity for collaboration within agriculture and healthcare. Concluding remarks will address the issue of communication between the two countries.

¹ "Countries and Regions of the World from A-Z," One World Nations Online, accessed April 9, 2013, http://www.nationsonline.org/oneWorld/countries_of_the_world.htm

² "OFAC Sanctions Programs," US Department of the Treasury, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Pages/Programs.aspx>

³ "Central America and Caribbean: Cuba," Central Intelligence Agency, accessed April 9, 2013, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cu.html>

An Issue Divided

The absence of American culture and industry is strikingly obvious in Cuba. While seated comfortably in a Yutong bus, driving through Havana for the first time, I immediately noticed the lack of seemingly trivial places like Wal-Mart and McDonalds. As the week continued, I took note of hotels and restaurants filled with appliances stating “made in China, France...” and everywhere except the United States.

These absences served as subtle reminders of the U.S.-Cuba embargo, the legislation that has sustained U.S.-Cuba relations for so long. Created in 1960, the legislation was intended to “...isolate Cuba economically in an effort to undermine the regime and deprive it of resources.”⁴ The embargo, titled The Cuban Democracy Act, was preceded by the Bay of Pigs and Cuban Missile Crisis. Today, “the current incarnation of the embargo...aims at producing free markets and representative democracy in Cuba through economic sanctions, travel restrictions, and international legal penalties.”⁵ Analyzing the purpose of the legislation leads to one obvious question: is it really working?

Some believe so. For example, consider Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, congresswoman of Florida. She argues that “As human rights abuses in Cuba are rising, some lawmakers wrongly seek to reward the Castro Regime by advocating lifting restrictions.”⁶ This argument raises the concern of supporters of the embargo: exactly who would benefit from lifting these sanctions, the

⁴ “Four Decades of Failure: The US Embargo against Cuba,” CATO Institute, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.cato.org/publications/speeches/four-decades-failure-us-embargo-against-cuba>

⁵ “It’s Time for the US to End its Senseless Embargo of Cuba,” Forbes, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2013/01/16/its-time-for-the-u-s-to-end-its-senseless-embargo-of-cuba/>

⁶ “Castro Agents Using Stoning to Intimidate Ladies in White,” Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://ros-lehtinen.house.gov/press-release/human-rights-abuses-cuba-are-rising-some-lawmakers-wrongly-seek-reward-castro-regime>).

government or the people? If money and resources from trade are invested into state-owned businesses, would Democracy ever come to Cuba?

While this argument raises economic aspects, arguments against the embargo are historical; 50 years after its implementation, the Castro family still remains in power. To be especially counterproductive, an article on Cuban blogger and activist Yoani Sanchez, states that “The Castro government... blames all of its problems on the embargo and uses it to divide Cubans and the exile community.”⁷

Aside from the historical argument, economic opinions against the embargo exist. Consider that, “At least 10 different agencies are responsible for enforcing different provisions of the embargo, and according to the Government Accountability Office, the U.S. government devotes hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of man hours to administering the embargo each year.”⁸ While the countries may not be communicating, that does not prevent the country from becoming a financial burden.

Additionally, perhaps CNN gives the most challenging argument against the embargo by stating “You can be sure Fidel Castro isn't going to bed hungry and or suffering through a headache because there's no Tylenol to be had.”⁹ Personally, during my week in the country I came across a “farmacia” only once. Arguments related to human suffering exist on both sides of the embargo.

Ultimately, both sides of the argument have merit. This conflict fuels the difficulty of developing a policy that makes a stance against the Cuban regime, while promoting change. For

⁷“Cuban Dissident Blogger Seeks To Unite Castro's Cuba with Miami's Cuba,” National Public Radio, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/2013/04/02/175997121/cuban-blogger-wants-fidels-cuba-miamis-cuba-to-unite>

⁸ “It's Time for the US to End its Senseless Embargo of Cuba,” Forbes

⁹ “Do we Really Need an Embargo Against Cuba,” CNN, accessed April 9, 2013, http://www.edition.cnn.com/2000/US/06/29/embargo6_29a.tm/index.html

this reason, is it possible to come to a resolution that meets the concerns of all involved? That is, can the embargo be preserved in a way to develop new relations, while continuing to encourage political transformation? Due to recent economic developments, perhaps there are a few.

Mongo: Farmer and Entrepreneur

As of 2008, Raul Castro enacted major economic policy updates.¹⁰ The most dramatic of these may be in the agricultural sector. This new policy states that, “Goals include “to adopt a new business model in keeping with the greater presence of non-state producers,’ providing ‘greater autonomy for producers,’ and achieving a ‘gradual decentralization to local governments’”¹¹. Ultimately, Cuban farmers are finding themselves having control over their products and wages in a way they may never have had before.

These agricultural entrepreneurs are operating in a new private sector, one that could benefit largely from U.S. support. Consider Mongo, owner of a large, organic farm. As I admired the acres of crops surrounding me, Mongo explained that he had less than 10 employees and a complete absence of any farming machinery whatsoever.

Investing in agricultural entrepreneurs would be empowering from the U.S. and entrepreneur’s perspective. By backing individuals working in the private sector, the U.S. would be supporting an economic shift away from socialism. Individuals with opinions on either side of the embargo would be pleased considering exchange would benefit the private business owner. Cuba would benefit from this exchange through a new economic and agricultural support system.¹²

¹⁰ Peters, Philip, “A Viewer’s Guide to Cuba’s Economic Reform,” *Lexington Institute* (2012): 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 9

¹² *Ibid.* p. 7-13

In addition to business materials, agricultural entrepreneurs are in need of insurance programs and loans. While in the city of Trinidad, I listened to a hotel owner explain the process of acquiring his building. “It was through a combination of favors and persistence,” our guide translated “that we could make this purchase.” He continued to disclose the details of his business operations by explaining their banking system: the tiles of the floor. This business owner distrusted Cuban banks and decided to manage his money independently. The opportunity for Americans to provide seed money to entrepreneurs is another avenue of supporting an economic shift outside of state-owned businesses.

There is room to address these exchanges in the embargo. Consider the Cuban Democracy Act, Sec. Section 6004 letter b. This section contains regulations for providing donations of food to nongovernmental organizations.¹³ While this was first developed in a way to provide humanitarian aid, perhaps it could be further shaped to include business aid to private farmers.

Additionally, “An overview to the Cuban Assets Control Regulations”, a resource provided by the Department of the Treasury, expands on this topic. It states that: “Pursuant to provisions of the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992 (the “CDA”) and the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act of 2000, the Department of Commerce maintains a favorable licensing policy with respect to the sale and export or re-export of medicine and medical devices, food, and agricultural commodities to Cuba. Those interested in engaging in such exports or re-exports must first obtain authorization from the Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Industry

¹³ “Cuban Democracy Act,” United States Treasury, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Documents/cda.pdf>

and Security.”¹⁴ This supports that there already exists some framework within the embargo to establish exports to Cuba, especially in the field of agriculture.

The Unifying Nature of Healthcare

In addition to entrepreneurship, medicine offers another opportunity for cooperation. Personally, the most striking of my experiences in Cuba was a lecture from Dr. Alvarez Cambra, physician and hospital administrator. Through narrative, he shared with us that his hospital had bought 30 magnetic resonance imaging machines from Europe. Shortly after the purchase, the company changed ownership to a group of Americans. While Cuba received the machines, they had no way of servicing them, and ultimately, most were never used.

To some extent, this story raises a question of reliability. Is it possible the doctor had a particular agenda for his American audience? This may be true. However, the reality is that while Cuba could receive pharmaceuticals a short distance away from Miami, they are faced with the consequences of having supplies shipped all over the world. Considering diseases like cancer or other pharmaceutical-heavy conditions affect all populations, medical sanctions of the embargo affect individuals from every background.

If the U.S. were to allow more medical collaboration with Cuba, they would be providing a humanitarian service. Traditionally, Cuba is criticized for its harsh human rights policies. By the U.S. expanding this exchange, they would model humanitarian behavior to the regime.

Additionally, Cuba is known for its expertise in primary healthcare.¹⁵ Dr. Cumbra expanded on this through an explanation of Cuba’s network of primary care doctors. This system operates with one primary care doctor per town, resulting in ample doctor-patient interaction.

¹⁴ “Cuba: What you Need to Know about US Sanctions against Cuba,” Department of the Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/cuba.pdf>

¹⁵ “The Truths and Cares of Cuban Healthcare,” Aljazeera, accessed on April 9, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/06/201265115527622647.html>

The effectiveness of this system has led to the phenomenon of Cuba using doctors as exports. For example, Cuban doctors have served in countries such as Venezuela in exchange for oil.¹⁶

It is significant Cuba has developed a specialty in primary care, because this is the area in which the U.S. is lacking. Specifically, “the country is short about 16,000 primary care doctors – and that shortage is only expected to grow.”¹⁷ With this need, perhaps in exchange for biotechnology and pharmaceuticals, the U.S. could benefit from hosting Cuban doctors.

This aspect also fits into the Cuban Democracy Act, which states “Exports of medicines or medical supplies, instruments, or equipment to Cuba shall not be restricted.”¹⁸ Similar to the field of entrepreneurship, perhaps this aspect of the embargo could be the foundation for addressing the reciprocal need of healthcare.

Communication

Before any changes can be made, the question is raised, how do two countries start communicating after such a hostile relationship?

Another striking experience during my time in Cuba occurred in an elementary school library. As I held a book entitled “Terrorism of the United States against Cuba”, I immediately felt like an outsider. Cuban citizens form an opinion of the United States at a very young age. As adults, they are exposed to constant political advertising, particularly signs that address the “bloqueo,” Spanish for embargo.

To initiate communication, I recommend analyzing similarities from the Iran-Israel nuclear power talks. Israel wants an end to all nuclear development in Iran, and the United States wants to impede the Castro regime. Both countries act on these concerns through enacting

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “Primary Care Doctor Shortage Creates Critical Void, Leaving Field’s Future Uncertain,” Southern California Public Radio, accessed April 9, 2013, <http://www.scpr.org/blogs/southla/2013/02/22/12658/primary-care-doctor-shortage-creates-critical-void/>

¹⁸ CDA

sanctions.¹⁹ One difference between these situations is that the Israel- Iran negotiations take place in a neutral location with the presence of other parties. If U.S.-Cuba relations are truly changing, perhaps meeting in a neutral location, such as the current moderator, Switzerland²⁰, would provide an equal setting for the negotiation.

In close, at the 2010 Revolution Day celebration, Cuban vice president Ramón Machado Ventura said “We will go forward, step by step, with a sense of responsibility at our own rhythm, without improvising and without haste.”²¹ Whether intentionally or by circumstance, Cuba is going forward, and now is the time for the U.S. to act.

¹⁹ “Iran heeds Israel’s warning of uranium ‘red line’,” Washington Post, accessed April 9, 2013, (http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/as-nuclear-talks-stall-iran-still-limits-its-uranium-stockpile/2013/04/08/a7c3aa18-a06b-11e2-82bc-511538ae90a4_story.html)

²⁰ “U.S.-Cuba Relations,” Time Magazine, accessed April 9 2013, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1891359,00.html>

²¹ “In Cuba, Revolution Day without Castro at Podium,” New York Times, accessed April 9 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/27/world/americas/27cuba.html?ref=raulcastro>