

Future U.S. Foreign Policy Towards Cuba

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Pol Sci 28000

April 10, 2013

WHAT SHOULD U.S. POLICY BE TOWARDS CUBA?

U.S-Cuba relations have been in a deteriorating state since the revolution and even furthered in the aftermath of the missile crisis, when the Soviet Union placed missiles on the island in the height of the cold war. Further heightening the case was the United States' involvement in the Bay of Pigs invasion by sponsoring Cuban dissidents to overthrow the Cuban government of Fidel Castro. Since then, relations between the two countries has never been a warm kind with the United States placing a trade embargo that prohibited trade between U.S. companies and Cuban companies, person-to-person contact between the two companies and remittances between the two. These restrictions have experienced increments for the past 50 years. These restrictions have hurt the Cuban economy and its people and raise the point of whether there need to be a change in U.S. foreign policy towards Cuba.

In this piece, I argue that U.S. policy towards Cuba should be one of engagement and collaboration rather than of hostility and isolation. The sour relation between these two countries has impeded potential cooperation and growth opportunities that could benefit both. The United States and Cuba could cooperation in the area of marine biology in terms of research, taking into consideration Cuba's location. Past U.S. governments have frowned upon such scientific collaborations, as one marine biologist at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration stated that such cooperation would never be possible during the Bush administration.¹ Such baby steps in minor areas such as these could prepare a ground for much larger discussion between the two countries. Why should the United States be concerned about marine life in Cuba? Cuba is just about 145 kilometers off the coast of Florida.¹ Moreover, it is the largest island in the region and also rich in biodiversity. The geography itself and climate supports different species of plants both from the Americas and other parts of the world. The close

proximity of the two countries also means that they share wildlife and so should both show interest in protecting the species. For the sake of protecting the natural habitat for these animal species and the improvement of science, it is important that both countries come together in some way in their quest to improve their skills and expertise.

On the issue of trade, the United States can benefit immensely from doing business with the Cuban government. Especially looking at the state of the U.S. economy now, it will be wise to find more markets for the sale of U.S. goods, which could create more jobs for people as the companies that provide goods and services to Cuba will be expected to hire more people. From our take in Dr. Alvarez Cambra's address on our trip to Cuba, it seem like the United States could enjoy a great comparative advantage over countries like China and other European countries that Cuba import logistics from. The proximity of both countries will cut down Cuba's transportation cost, which could in turn be used to purchase more goods and services from the United States. What this does to the U.S. economy is the attainment of a trade surplus, which in the long run will cause the U.S. dollar to appreciate. However, this isn't happening due to the trade restrictions put in place by the U.S. Department of Treasury.²

With the worldwide perception of Cuban doctors, the U.S. and Cuba could cooperate in the area of research and development for the good of the human race as a whole. By so doing, the expertise of the Cubans could be mixed up with the technological wherewithal of the United States in medicine. Just like Dr. Cambra pointed out, the United States' aid initiatives in Latin America could partner with Cuba in the treatment of less privileged people suffering from diseases. Instead of the U.S. spending huge sums of money sending these ill people to the United States for treatment in the worst cases, they could just transfer them to Cuba for medical attention, which in the first place is cheaper relative to the United States and other countries and

also effective. Not only just the cost factor, but also the fact that both countries could collaborate in the area of medicine is the right thing to do for humanity.

Does the U.S. 50-year old embargo have a place in today geopolitical environment? Cuba's somewhat "successful" resistance to United States' dominance since 1959 leaves us with nothing except to accept the reality and live it with. U.S governments have long made easing their hostility towards Cuba dependent, from the Cuban perspective, on Cuba surrendering its Revolution, and its widely approved constitution, and becoming a liberal democracy with a free-market economy.³ This stance by the U.S. government is self-contradictory because the U.S. in the past has strongly supported dictatorships and tyrannical rulers in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America without ever making a change of government a condition for the continuous friendship and support. Furthermore, the United States still trades with countries like China who have a poor human rights record and also fall short of democratic reforms. China actually holds most of U.S. treasury bonds and export more to the United States without any known embargo between the two countries. How is Cuba different from China, and what makes Cuba worse than China?

The United States in its approach to Cuba is falling back on the same natural principles that make life worthy of living: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The embargo's main aim is to paralyze the Cuban government by starving and cutting them off from basic necessities. By so doing, the people might become discontent with the government and seek to overthrow it. "As the UN reported in 2008: 'The negative impact of the embargo is pervasive in the social, economic and environmental dimensions of human development in Cuba, severely affecting the most vulnerable socio-economic groups of the Cuban population' (United Nations, 2008: 83)."³

As witnessed in the cities we visited on our trip to Cuba, the people experiencing the impact of the embargo are not the head honchos within the Cuban government but rather the average Cuban trying to make ends meet. Like in many so-called “undemocratic states” in second and third world countries, the big guns live comfortably while the mass of the population starve. Indirectly, the United States’ policy is a cause of human rights violation here as it is starving the mass and denying them of basic necessities which would have been more affordable in cost than it is now being imported from 1,000 miles away somewhere in Asia.

The embargo further keeps the island from the technological enlightenment in the west. Socially, Cubans are deprived from some basic knowledge and impeded their opportunities for development. Morally, denying Cubans access to medicines available in the United States for the cure of the illness is cruel and unjust.

With all this said, what is the future of U.S-Cuba relations? It is apparent that contrary to the notion that the Castro regime was going to crash few years after the imposition of the embargo, it has long overstayed its welcome from the United States’ point of view. At least from my point of view, the resentment the U.S. was trying to generate against the regime is also countered by a mass that sympathizes with the regime. Or even that the most critical of the regime are people living outside the country, mostly in Miami, making the generation of such unrest less likely. Speaking in August 2007 at a political rally in Miami’s Little Havana, then Senator Barack Obama labeled U.S. policy towards Cuba as a failed policy that needed to be changed.⁴ However, taking such a strong stance wasn’t going to be free of opposition from Cuban dissidents in Miami. “Campaigning for the votes of moderate Cuban Americans, Obama promised to end restrictions on remittances and family travel, resume "people-to-people"

contacts, and engage Cuba on issues of mutual interest.”⁴ However, travels to Cuba were still restricted to certain functions of nature such as education and cultural exchange. Upon taking office in 2009, conditions for reassessing relations between Cuba and the United States appeared to be more propitious than at almost any time in a half-century.⁴ President Obama has ended restrictions on Cuban American remittances and family travel to Cuba, as promised during his campaign. In retaliation, Cuban president Raul Castro declared Cuba's willingness to talk with the United States about "everything they would like to talk about, but on an equal footing, with absolute respect for Cuba's sovereignty and for the right of the Cuban people to their self-determination."⁴

This exhibition of optimism was however short-lived after the arrest of Alan Gross in Cuba. To most, the arrest of Alan Gross halted any forward momentum in U.S.-Cuban relations.⁴ Gross who was identified as U.S. “spy” is currently serving a 15-year jail term in Cuba for subversion. In an attempt to diffuse the tension between the two countries, the Cuban regime has offered exchange Gross for the “Cuban Five” which the U.S. rejects. This issue has stained the hopes most Cubans had during President Obama's first term in office.

Cuba under Raul Castro is going through waves of economic changes, allowing private entrepreneurship. Raul has opened a candid dialogue with Cubans about the problems they face. “Raul's frank discussion of the regime's short-comings and declarations of the need for change have raised popular expectations enormously. From the Cuban leadership to the man and woman in the street, Cubans agree that the old system needs a drastic overhaul.”⁵ The pace of both the political and economic changes are however uncertain, listening to talks by high profile people within Cuban academia.

How should the United States approach these changes and how should it realign its foreign policy towards Cuba. As seen in the past 54 years, the U.S. policy of hostility, isolation and economic depression in an attempt to paralyze Castro's government has failed and now comes the time to rethink our approach. As earlier discussed, the United States and Cuba could collaborate in different areas that could be of benefit to both. Also, the continuous punishment of Cuba through the embargo and other restrictions ties the United States' hands in Cuba's shortcomings and humanity as a whole. The way forward for both countries is to engage each other through Cuban-American family contacts and also the chopping off of the restrictions placed on the country of Cuba. Since Raul himself recognizes that the system isn't working and so sees the need to allow some form of free market, the United States should see this as a signal to restore diplomatic relations with Cuba and if possible, assist them in that regard. This might not be an easy task since history has cultivated a sense of distrust between the two countries, but an effort still has to be made to make amends. After all, Cuba isn't and will never be the ONLY undemocratic country the United States has even wined and dined with.

On the issue of Cuban-Americans opposition to the Castro regime, it should be realized that any further isolation of Cuba is only hurting the population most, not just the regime because the embargo and other restrictions only shows the Cuban government what direction it should point its finger as the cause of their woes. These dissidents should reconcile with their past engagement with the regime and look forward to a better Cuba...after all, the Castros and their comrades are running out of steam and the responsibility of running the country will soon fall on the laps of the next generation.

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