

What should US policy be towards Cuba? Formalizing US-Cuba Relations in Drug Trafficking

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Cuba has a long history of being subject to political and economic transitions that has caused it to adapt quickly in order to survive in light of the embargo. Taking into account the political changes from Batista's overthrow to the rise of the Castro brothers, the withdrawal of Soviet support, the enforcement of the US embargo and, most recently, the death of Hugo Chavez, a great political and economic ally to Cuba, this has led to numerous discussions on what would happen to Cuba-Venezuela relations, and, more importantly, what should US policy be towards Cuba?

In this paper, I will argue that the US should establish a formal cooperation with Cuba in their desire to counter drug trafficking for three reasons. Firstly, political tensions are wrought with frustrations from existing preconditions that has led to no resolution. Secondly, the embargo has been discussed recurrently to no avail, as restrictions have relaxed and tightened. Thirdly, since the US and Cuba has worked well together in the past to bust drug traffickers, there is no reason for them not to formalize this cooperation as Cuba has numerous formal agreements with other countries. This would be a plausible option as political and economic solutions seem to be fraught with preconditions that no one is willing to compromise on.

US-Cuba relationship has not always been so strained. Prior to Fidel Castro's ascension to power in 1959, the US has had amiable relations with Cuba. Dating back to the Spanish-American War, the US granted Cuba its independence after gaining its rights from a defeated Spain, with the condition that the US be allowed to intercede in Cuban affairs, as well as be given a lease for a US naval base, now known as Guantanamo Bay. The US has invested numerous dollars into the economy and provided help against revolts. With the help of the US, Castro and his guerrillas overthrew President Batista and assumed power. However, after the US gave their blessing to the new head of state and after Castro's tour of the United States, things

started heading south as Castro's communist ideologies became known. Castro seized private property, including US corporations and nationalized it. US imports were taxed enormously and in retaliation, President Eisenhower enforced trade restrictions, except for food and medical supplies, on Cuba.¹

It seems that US-Cuba relations have been fraught with disaster after another after the relationship disintegrated. In the early 1960s, the military fiascos, known as the Bay of Pigs, where the CIA trained Cuban exiles were defeated within 3 days, and Operation Mongoose, a series of assassination attempts on Castro, further escalated tensions. It reached a boiling point in 1962 when US spy planes exposed the fact that the Soviet Union was developing nuclear missiles in Cuba. The Cuban Missile Crisis, where the US and Cuba were in the brink of nuclear war, ended when Khrushchev accepted President Kennedy's terms of removing the US warheads in Turkey in return for the de-arming of Soviet missiles in Cuba. After this, mostly economic sanctions were sought. In 1992 and 1996, the US tightened their trade restrictions in retaliation for Cuba shooting down American civilian planes. Since then, economic sanctions have tightened and relaxed, as influenced by political tensions. However, with the Obama administrations, restrictions have been more lax. Nevertheless, with the debacle of the arrest of Alan Gross, is there a possibility that US-Cuba relations can improve?²

With regards to ideology, it seems unfair that the USA stipulate that the embargo only be lifted when there is a regime change. It also is unlikely that Cuba would budge in this when the Castros are all about keeping their power. This has been a constant strain on the relationship. Olive branches have been extended to no avail as the head of states from these two countries,

¹ Suddath..

² Ibid.

especially the United States, came in with preconditions and are not open to compromise.³ William Ratliff, a research Fellow at the Independent Institute, argued that the US applauded Turkey and Armenia in their negotiations to normalize relations due to their lack of preconditions but has refrained from following suit in their negotiations with Cuba. He argues that Castro is hardly worse than Robert Mugabe but the US demands more from Cuba.⁴ In addition, bringing preconditions to a negotiate defeats the purpose of trying to negotiate if the terms are already set. So if the US were to negotiate without any preconditions, what would it try to talk about first?

For many, the issue of the embargo is quite controversial and has led to numerous discussions about whether it should be taken away. Opponents of the embargo argue that it hasn't done what it imposed to do, namely to bring down the Castro brothers and put in place a democratic government and set up a free market, as well as to take back the US corporations that were seized during by the Castro regime. In fact, it has hindered the ability for Cuban Americans from travelling freely to visit and send remittance home. Despite their early advocacy for the embargo, the large Cuban American community in Miami wants this embargo lifted because it has done more harm than good, especially for the common people.⁵ In fact, the majority of nations in the UN also voted that the US was violating Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in that they are depriving individuals of the right to health and wellbeing.⁶ In our talk with Dr. Alvarex Cambra, he also mentioned that the embargo was inhumane and relates to us that Cuban people are suffering long waits because there were unable

³ Ratliff.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Radford University.

to find MRI machines from companies that do not trade with the US, as per their ban. As a result, the Cubans currently had to settle for second best instead of the state of the art machines that provide great service to them.

Despite all the opposition, it is unlikely the embargo will go away. With the passing of the Helms Burton Act of 1996, it made it hard to do away with the embargo. However, I personally believe that it is a matter of pride and that compromising on their stance that the government be democratic is against American ideals. In any cases, this act made it impossible to allow for normal relations between the two countries but with Raul Castro's announcement that he will be stepping down after his term ends in 2018, this can allow for a positive move to normalizing relations.⁷

Even with Castro stepping down, I believe the transition to lift the embargo would take place slowly as lifting the embargo is a drastic step since there are so many stipulations surrounding it, like putting ships that enter Cuban harbor into blacklists. In addition, our guide, Alejandro, agrees that bringing down the embargo in one whole step would collapse the Cuban economy as there would be an influx of tourists, goods and companies. With 2018 so far away, it does not mean that the US should wait till the Castro regime is over. It should, however, look for other simply ways to cooperate with the Cubans, one of which can be tackling drug trafficking issues.

Despite the grim realities we face with US-Cuba history, these two countries have found common ground before in its fight to stop drug trafficking. While the relationship has not been rosy during the early 90s during President Carter's term, cooperation has been cultivating

⁷ Allam.

since. In 1999, Fidel Castro imposed Operation Ache against the high use of Cuban waters to smuggle drugs. Helicopters and radar systems were implemented with high success rates. However, according to lieutenant-colonel Fernandez, about 60% of all perpetrators get away. As a result, Cuba now gives real-time information to the US coastguards in order to bust these traffickers.⁸ However, despite the encouraging results of this relationship, there has not been any formal agreement despite the fact that Cuba has over 30 formal drug agreements with other countries. This should be a first step in US-Cuban policy.

First and foremost, with a formal agreement, it could signal the start of diplomatic relations and improvements in other aspect of Cuban-American relations. As stated earlier, change must come in small steps. In addition, with a formal agreement, both sides can benefit by mutual training in tactics so that they are both on the same page. In addition, as the saying goes, 'two heads are better than one', both sides would benefit from talking about strategies. Since this agreement would not bring political or economic discussions (embargo), this would be a great step to take without butting heads. The United States and Cuba have a mutual interest in lowering, if not completely ending, drug trafficking.

With the recent economic changes in Cuba, we expect to see less government power with the new government. This might lead to less control over combating drug trade as in the past, the Castros were adamant to stop the rise of drug trafficking in order to retain power since these drug lords can potentially rise to power. In addition, the new economic changes will open up Cuba's

⁸ Rainsford.

economy to more imports and, potentially, drugs.⁹ This formal agreement could, thus, prevent the proliferation of drug trade once Castro's reign ends.

US-Cuban relation has been strained for way too long and numerous parties have interests in seeing this embargo lifted. However, as neither side are willing to compromise, it seems likely that we will have to wait till 2018 when Raul Castro steps down before any real attempts are made to lift the embargo. In this paper, I have highlighted the reason why, given past history, we should have a policy that is neither economical nor political as neither have worked beforehand. Since US-Cuban relations are better in their efforts to end drug trafficking, it seems highly plausible and congenial, it would be good to capitalize on this good relations and establish a formal partnership, as Cuba has done with other countries in the past. As this furthers diplomatic relations between the two countries, perhaps the US and Cuba can tackle another humanitarian issue like establishing an agreement to stop human trafficking/prostitution or establish a deal with volunteerism and disaster relief. The US would be more inclined to believe that Cuba is making efforts to step up on their humanitarian efforts.

⁹ Lee.

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