

Current Situation & Future of the Relationship Between Cuba & the United States

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The current conditions are ideal to begin to revert more than five decades of disagreements and confrontation between Cuba and the United States. These conditions contributed to extend for 46 years the regime of Fidel Castro, with negative consequences for the Cuban people on both sides of the Florida Strait. The current general crisis has created a national consensus about the need for change, while the government has lost credibility and cannot return society to the era of unchallenged power, before 2006.

The U.S. government's policy of isolation has been counterproductive since the totalitarian regime has used them to curtail personal freedom, to justify its economic mistakes, and to repress, while the United States has been absent. Nevertheless, the Cuban people continue to appreciate the support granted to their families by the US, when opportunities were denied to them in their own country. They are especially grateful for the relaxing of remittances and visits from Cuban-Americans, as well as by visits from artists, academics, religious representatives and U.S. expositions supported by the Obama Administration.

Since July 31, 2006, when the illness of the leader was announced, and before power was transferred to Raúl Castro, a new period began. The most important characteristics of this new period are: the deterioration of credibility due the many unfulfilled promises, miserable salaries that are insufficient to pay for the most basic needs, and unemployment affecting hundreds of thousands of individuals, while private businesses owners are not allowed to support the finances of their families and that of the country. At the same time, these conditions affect individual self-confidence, entrepreneurship and free exercise of the rights of the people. The population grows older, but the current economic conditions mandate restrictions in the numbers of births, and at the same time, the youth can only foresee a successful future abroad. Cuban authorities, who are dealing with their

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own contradictions (old bureaucrats attached to their privileges, and hesitant reformers), are afraid to make changes and have proclaimed the “updating” of the economic model. The slow pace of these steps suggest a material and spiritual de-capitalization and an accelerated process of destruction that could lead to instability and social violence if all Cubans, wherever we are, fail to abandon personal interests, hatred and revenge.

The multifaceted connection between Cuba and the United States is a reality that cannot be challenged. Even when Cuba was a Spanish colony, its commerce was mainly with the United States. After 1898 and during the new republic in 1902, relations were rebuilt, not always positively, but our paths continued to be intertwined. The abrupt break with traditional political, economic, cultural and other relations even caused indirect armed encounters. The economic embargo is still in place and large numbers of business owners, thousands of political prisoners and several waves of regular citizens continue to engross the list of 1.8 million of Cuban immigrants to the United States.

The retaliatory policies of the US were cleverly used by Fidel Castro to increase the level of internal nationalism, as a David against Goliath, to defend the stronghold surrounded by “yankee” imperialism, while promoting international solidarity, and hiding his interference in Latin America, and carrying out wars in the Middle East and Africa under the cover of the liberation of oppressed people. This is how he consolidated the totalitarian regime and dilapidated the immense economic resources and materials delivered by the Soviet Union and the countries of the “real socialism” in Eastern Europe.

Cuba hoped that the source would never run dry. Even if the Cuban government did not fall at the time that the Berlin Wall did, the debacle of the regime that was subject to the personal whim of the leader began with the disappearance of the socialist systems. The Special Period, a time of hardship and regression that started then, forced a slight economic opening at the start of the 90’s, which was forgotten as soon as Fidel Castro’s masterpiece, Hugo Chavez assumed power in Venezuela. The wave of internal dissidence was repressed in March 2003, when 75 pacific dissidents were sent to prison and 3 young black men were executed for attempting to hijack a boat searching for better life conditions without spilling blood.

Again, the regime felt that it had found paradise, to the extreme that it lead Castro to challenge the international community, in particular the European Union, and any other governments that condemned its extreme repressive actions. But at the end of July 2006 the Commander in Chief became deathly ill and the whole power structure was turned upside down. A road without return began, without a clear destination. This is a phase in which bureaucrats fight in order to retain their prerogatives, and the efforts of their heirs to consolidate and change the rules while attempting to overcome more than just the economic and social crisis. There have been many changes while Raul Castro tried to consolidate power, and while Hugo Chávez worked to show that Fidel Castro was alive and “in control”. But again, Fidel Castro imposed his authority during the VI Congress of the Communist Party held last April. The promises and delays have definitely affected the prestige of the higher authorities among people that feel disappointed, suffer serious deprivation and feel frustrated waiting for a better future.

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The new president has shown interest in diversifying economic and commercial relationships, in reducing dependence on the Chavez regime and in obtaining new investors, mainly from China, Brazil, Russia, Algeria and Angola. He has also tried to expand beyond the *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de América* (ALBA) group controlled by Chavez, by incorporating Cuba into Latin American and Caribbean organizations.

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But ideological solidarity is outdated and friends operate following economic and commercial interests that Habana cannot honor due to its financial crisis and the lack of products for export.

Therefore, the umbilical cord continues to be attached to Chávez. But the situation in Venezuela is very complicated and the outcome of the presidential election in 2012 is unpredictable. Meanwhile, Chavez announced that he underwent surgery, allegedly urgent, and remained in Habana for a month, while undergoing treatment for cancer. These events have increased political and social effervescence in Venezuela. There are sufficient causes of concern for Cuban authorities who are very aware of the condition of the benefactor.

In addition, the statements and attitudes towards the US have been contradictory since the unexpected worsening of the conditions of the Commander in Chief. The first time that Raúl Castro spoke about the evolution of his brother's health was on August 18, 2006, and at that time he expressed his willingness to reestablish relationships. On December 2, on the 50th anniversary of the landing of the Gamma, he offered to open negotiations. On December 4, 2008 he stated that he could meet President Obama "wherever he chose". But during 2009 Fidel Castro interfered by attacking President Obama in his *Reflexiones* and he made his first public appearance on television in a long time on July 7, 2010 when Raul Castro had promised to release 52 prisoners of the 75 prisoners of conscience who still remained in prison, as he had agreed with representatives of the Catholic Church. His appearances were limited until just before the VI Congress of the Communist Party on April 2011, when he announced his final retirement from any official position. This is evidence that Raul Castro finally succeeded in relegating Fidel to a symbolic position. In the course of five years he lost his mystic aureole and the Cuban people blame him and his unconditional supporters for preventing changes that could counteract the crisis that he generated.

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Against any logic, American contractor Alan Gross was jailed on December 3, 2009, accused of delivering sophisticated communication equipment to Cuban dissidents, following orders from the US Agency for International Development. He had previously visited Cuba and USAID admitted that he had helped the Jewish community by providing it with cell phones and computers. The trial lasted until March 11, 2011 when he was sentenced to 15 year of prison and the audience for the constitutional appeal filed by Gross was set for July 22 at the Court for Crimes Against State Security of the Supreme People's Court. By comparing the dates of the resurgence and retirement of Fidel Castro we may conclude that they coincide with the apparent fight to maintain power and interfere with the improvement of the relationships with the United States.

Additionally, the Obama administration has developed an intelligent, proactive policy more in accordance with the current situation in Cuba. Since the electoral campaign, Obama has had extensive support and has raised the expectations of the Cuban people on this side of the Strait of Florida. These feelings were deepened with the loosening of restrictions on travel and remittances, which have contributed to improve the living conditions of most Cubans. Also visits from academics and religious leaders, as well as the travel of Cubans with similar objectives, including to Miami, have had a positive impact on the relationship between our two countries.

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PERSPECTIVES

The building of bridges and the increase of diplomacy by visits to Cuba from US citizens will contribute to the advance of the changes that most Cubans expect from this exceptional process that started on July 31, 2006, with many difficulties, but still irreversible. It is important to replace the feelings of revenge by reconciliation, especially among all Cubans, including Cuban-Americans.

Unfortunately, the United States is immerse in serious internal and external economic problems and faced with terrorism and international conflicts while preparing for the 2012 presidential elections. It is clear that the Cuban issue is not a priority, but the confrontational and isolationist measures are used, as has always been done, by Cuban American representatives and senators and their supporters in domestic politics, to threaten other relevant issues with their votes in Congress and in the elections of the important State of Florida. They have managed to postpone yet again, the debate about lifting restrictions on travel of Americans, and more recently, representatives Mario Díaz-Balart and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen have challenged the executive privileges of President Obama to authorize remittances, the visits of Cuban-Americans and more airports for direct flights to Cuba, and other actions. They also demand economic support for Cuban dissidents from the US budget, while they attempt to prevent the support from Cuban to Cuban, with negative impacts on the needy, and at the same time they continue to qualify the peaceful members of the opposition as mercenaries, when they have suffered so many years of unfair prison sentences.

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Additionally, the alleged intention to help the Cuban people to be free from the totalitarian regime and seek democracy seems to hide the intention to protect economic interests. Maybe businessmen in Florida are afraid of Cuban competition if the economy and tourism were to take off. But in reality there will be a long time before this happens and in the meantime, Cuban-Americans will be excluded from investing in the reconstruction and development of Cuba. For several years now businessmen from other countries have worked to position themselves in the most promissory economic sectors without having to compete in international bidding processes with US companies, which could offer better opportunities of modern technology and quality products.

But, if the intention is to benefit the Cuban people, they should recognize that it would be possible to expand independent work in the island with remittances and delivery of products. This could be the seed that the totalitarian regime has always tried to prevent for fear that it could lead to political independence. Fortunately, a wider perspective prevails among our compatriots in the US based on the intention of making a real contribution to rebuild Cuba. There are, among others, proposals from the Cuba Study Group to offer micro loans and other actions. The exchange of knowledge and training is very important; taking into account that Cuba does not have advanced technology, current publications or free access to Internet. This could be the start of direct investment in Cuba, including US investments. The possibilities are significant, due to the technological delays and the destruction of the industry, agriculture, and most of the infrastructure. Undoubtedly, clear laws should be in place to provide guarantees to all parties. Maintaining or strengthening current U.S. policy would eliminate the possibility that the Cuban government could accept the beginning of these efforts.

On the other hand, the sale of food products from the US will remain in place, and if visits were to be increased, sales could grow given that there is no national production to provide supplies. This would be a source of income for US agricultural producers and businessmen, whose exchange already ranks in fifth place in Cuban economic trade. The increase of tourism offers promises to the construction industry and the hotel

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companies from the US, or from Cuban-Americans, and promotes the participation of private investment, since there is no considerable local capacity. Also, the exploration and exploitation of oil in Cuban waters could be attractive. Evidently this is the reason that the port of Mariel is being reconditioned by Brazilian companies to be used in the oil exploitation to the Gulf, to offer services to the increased maritime traffic as a result of the expansion of the Panama Canal.

Nevertheless, a wave of desperate Cubans could invade the coasts of the US if the conditions of misery and lack of opportunity continue. This could be even more serious if it became the result of a social instability forcefully repressed. Thousands of Cubans may die at sea and the US Coast Guard would not be sufficient to stop the massive exodus.

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Undoubtedly, the release of US contractor Alan Gross, possibly by decision of the State Council, with justifications related to his health and that of his relatives, would open the road to normal relationships. The future of relations between Cuba and the US depends on the intelligence and the goodwill of leaders and that of their people. President Obama should continue to lift all restrictions using his presidential powers and according to current legislation. Cuban-American legislators could have a very important role in the current Cuban situation using the abilities and qualities that have made them deserving of such important positions in a country with opportunities for all. These would be effective contributions for the progress of democracy in Cuba.



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