

FRAGILE RESTORATION: THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF U.S.-CUBAN RELATIONS

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On December 17th, 2014, U.S. President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro announced a historic policy change to begin the normalization of diplomatic relations between their two countries. This landmark decision was already paying off, as U.S. engagement with Cuba increased bilateral cooperation in areas such as national security, immigration enforcement, and countering narcotic smuggling (Eaton, 2017). But today, the Cuban-American détente is at risk of collapse in the hands of the Trump Administration's new direction. While studies show that 63% of Americans oppose the continuation of the U.S.-Cuban embargo in favor of better relations with their neighbor to the south, President Trump has taken a clear stance opposing the economic and foreign policy changes put in place by his predecessor (FIU, 2016). However, President Castro intends on returning Cuba to the international community, and if the U.S. refuses to provide support - someone else will. A complete reversal of diplomatic restoration would take the U.S. back to unsuccessful Cold War-inspired policy, allowing current foreign opposition to fill the gap left behind.

Cuba's dependence on oil from Venezuela has become problematic, due to Caracas facing an unprecedented economic crisis, leaving President Castro no choice but to look elsewhere for assistance; this served as a strategic opening for their former Soviet ally, as the first shipment of Russian-refined oil in decades arrived on Cuban soil during May of this year (Gonzalez, 2017). Russian ambition on the island goes beyond oil, however, as seen by investment and military agreements signed over the past few years. In 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin traveled to Havana and agreed to write off \$32 billion of Cuba's debt to Russia. Further, during his trip, new trade deals were signed in the energy, health, and disaster response sectors (Newsweek, 2014). In December of 2016, an agreement was reached to upgrade Cuba's defense industry. While the deal excludes arms sales, it will provide military instruction on how to renovate Cuba's stockpile of weapons from the Soviet-era (Gonzalez, 2017). Multiple reports over the past three years have also mentioned the possible reopening of a Russian intelligence base used during the Cold War –

although Russian officials later denied these rumors (Newsweek, 2014). The Russian threat today is minimal compared to what it was during the peak of the Soviet Union, but if left unchecked, Putin's grasp on Cuba and its government will continue to grow. The attempt at coercive democratization in Cuba has failed for 55 years. If the U.S. refuses to change its direction regarding Cuba, it will inevitably allow strengthening of Cuba-Russia relations.

While history clearly shows the possible dangers posed to the United States by a strong Russia-Cuba partnership, there is a potentially more powerful State influencing Havana. As of 2016, China replaced Venezuela as Cuba's largest trading partner with a total bilateral trade value of \$2.59 billion (Xinhua, 2017). Beijing's investments in public transportation, telecom services and the tourism sector have also become visible across the island (Hodge, 2016). But while the increase in trade may seem beneficial for the Cuban people, financial dependence on Beijing would result in increased influence that Chinese policy makers have over Cuba and the surrounding regions.

China is no stranger to foreign direct investment flows in developing countries in Africa and Latin America, and has often used their advantageous geo-economic position as an instrument to leverage foreign policy abroad. This is most visible through their economic coercion of States like South Africa and Gambia to end diplomatic relations with Taiwan and adopt the one-China policy as a precursor to investment or economic ties (Blackwill, 2017). While China's lending policy doesn't explicitly demand political support, trends at multilateral institutions like the UN General Assembly show overwhelming support for China's votes by countries benefiting from Chinese investment (Blackwill, 2017). Beijing's far-reaching influence, lack of transparency, financial capacity, and aggression in areas like the South China Sea, are threats to U.S. national interests and the sovereignty of developing nations across the world.

Cuba is not a threat to the United States today, but the Trump Administration cannot afford to wait for danger to materialize nor allow Eastern influence to curb U.S. strategy in Havana. Only 103 miles separate the Florida coast from Cuban shores, and its proximity to the U.S. is crucial to the importance of improving diplomatic relations. If future events lead to a global conflict, it is imperative that Cuba is an ally and not an adversary. Immediate measures should be taken to resume the normalization process and prioritize the eradication of the 55-year-old economic embargo separating the two nations.

For decades, foreign policy through the isolation of the Cuban people failed to promote U.S. national interests and provided the Castro Regime with a scapegoat for its own failings. It is time for the U.S. and Cuba to move beyond harsh rhetoric and mistrust, for the sake of not only international security, but also the prosperity of both its citizens. As former President Obama said during his address on restoring relations with Cuba, "[a] future of greater peace, security, and democratic development is possible, if we work together. Not to maintain power, not to secure

vested interests, but instead to advance the dreams of our citizens.” (Obama, 2014). Solidarity, not segregation, must govern the future of relations in the Western Hemisphere if we are to assure the well being of its citizens.

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