

foreign policy *in focus*



Interhemispheric Resource Center
and
Institute for Policy Studies



Cuba

The U.S. trade embargo and various other sanctions against Cuba have been in place for some 36 years—and U.S. policy toward the island has changed little in that time. U.S. objectives and the conditions set for rapprochement, however, have shifted over the years. Surprisingly, though somewhat illogically, they have become harsher and more demanding with the end of the cold war. Indeed, the U.S. has now returned to the pre-missile-crisis objective of getting rid of Fidel Castro's government.

In early 1960 CIA preparations to get rid of Castro led to the Bay of Pigs invasion. Although that failed, efforts continued with Operation Mongoose, a CIA campaign of sabotage, subversion and assassination attempts, to bring about Castro's ouster or demise. However, after the Kennedy-Khrushchev understanding that ended the October 1962 Missile Crisis (an understanding that included Kennedy's pledge not to invade Cuba) the overthrow of the Cuban government was gradually removed as a goal.

U.S. objectives then reverted to the achievement of what Washington had said were its conditions for rapprochement: 1) that Cuba give up its efforts to spread revolution, and 2) that it sever its military ties with the Soviet Union.

There were no demands for changes in Cuba's internal system. On the contrary, speaking at the 1962 Punta del Este Conference (at which Cuban membership in the Organization of American States was suspended), Secretary of State Dean Rusk stressed that the U.S. objected to Cuba's activities and policies in the international arena—not to its internal system of governance.

In 1977 the Carter administration re-opened direct communications with the Cuban government, which

had been cut off since the rupture in diplomatic relations in January 1961. The two governments opened Interests Sections in Washington and Havana. Carter also added two new conditions for normalization of relations: 1) that Cuba show greater respect for human rights, and 2) that Cuban troops be removed from Africa, where they had been since 1975.

The Reagan and Bush administrations (1981-1993) put forward essentially those same conditions. By 1992, however, the Soviet Union had collapsed and the cold war was over. One would have expected some improvement in relations, but, with the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992, the U.S. tightened the embargo. As all foreign policy goals had now been attained (Cuban troops were out of Africa, it was not fueling revolutions anywhere in the world, and its ties to the Soviet Union ended as the Soviet Union itself collapsed), Washington added yet another new condition to keep Cuba at arms length.

Cuba was now told that it had to hold fully free and democratic elections before relations could be normalized. Then, in March 1996, with the Helms-Burton Act, the U.S. went far beyond that. The U.S. government reverted to its original objective, that is, getting rid of Castro. Helms-Burton, which now serves as the basis for U.S. policy, calls not only for fully democratic elections in Cuba but also stipulates that no resulting government that included Fidel Castro or his brother Raúl would be acceptable to the U.S.. In other words, even if Cuba were to hold elections deemed acceptable by Washington, these would be rejected if Fidel Castro were elected by his own people.

Until Castro is removed, the U.S. intends not only continue its embargo and all other sanctions against Cuba but also to redouble its efforts to force other governments to adhere to them. Meanwhile, travel to Cuba, academic exchanges and other contacts that had been ongoing for some years, have been restricted. The cold war is over everywhere else—but not with Cuba.

Key Points

- From 1960 until after the 1962 Missile Crisis, the U.S. objective was to get rid of Castro.
- Subsequently, and during most of the years of the cold war, U.S. objectives were to get Cuba to stop aiding revolutionaries, to remove its troops from Africa, to reduce its military ties to the Soviet Union, and to show greater respect for human rights.
- With the cold war over and the first three objectives accomplished, however, the U.S. has reverted to its original objective of getting rid of Castro.

There are five essential fallacies to the U.S. policy toward Cuba. First, the embargo and other sanctions will almost certainly not get rid of Castro. Unilateral embargoes rarely work. This one accomplished little in more than thirty years; so in 1992, with the Cuban Democracy Act, it was tightened. Representative Robert Torricelli, the author of the act, assured other policy makers and the U.S. public in December 1992 that his legislation would lead to Castro's ouster within weeks. Almost four years later, Castro is still in Havana—and the Cuban economy has begun to recover.

The Helms-Burton Act is not likely to have any better success. On the contrary, it may actually help Castro by giving him a more credible nationalist card to play. Diverting people's attention from their internal difficulties by calling on them to rally against an external threat is always a useful tactic. The Helms-Burton Act, with its calls for the ouster of the Cuban government, provides just such a threat.

Second, the policy is irrational in that it risks established and extensive trade ties with close ally—placing as a priority that which is unimportant over that which is. With the end of the cold war, Cuba is of virtually no importance to U.S. interests. It no longer poses even a potential threat to U.S. security or to U.S. economic interests. All U.S. foreign policy objectives toward Cuba have already been achieved. Of course, many would like to see the island move toward a more open political and economic system. But a strong argument can be made that the U.S. government could do more to achieve that objective through a relaxation of tensions and some degree of engagement than through increased pressures.

The economic relations that the U.S. enjoys with Canada, the European Union, and Mexico, are of vital importance. Yet, in Washington's efforts under Helms-Burton to force these and other countries to cooperate with our economic sanctions against Cuba, it is placing these critical economic relations at risk. Indeed, the international community as a whole has rejected Helms-Burton. All countries have said they will not cooperate with it. Canada, Mexico, and the European Union are drafting retaliatory legislation that could have a negative impact on U.S. trade.

Even without Helms-Burton, the vote in the UN General Assembly in 1995 was 117 to 3 to condemn the U.S. embargo against Cuba. The only countries to vote with the U.S. were Israel and Uzbekistan—and they both trade with Cuba. In other words, no other

government cooperates with U.S. policy. On this topic, Washington is isolated.

Third, present policy ignores legitimate U.S. interests such as trade and securing compensation for those who were U.S. citizens or incorporated companies at the time they lost properties in Cuba back in the 1960s. Estimates are that the U.S. and Cuba could enjoy \$7 billion annually in trade were the embargo to be lifted. That is not a great sum, but it would represent a significant plus—one that the U.S. now denies itself.

A compensation agreement would require negotiations with Cuba. For its part, Cuba is prepared to negotiate such an agreement with the U.S. Indeed, it has successfully concluded similar agreements with every other country that had claims against Cuba. Yet the U.S. is not willing to enter negotiations with Havana.

Fourth, the U.S. policy on Cuba ignores one of the basic precepts of diplomacy: There must be a causal relationship between an adversary's actions and one's own responses. In other words, there must be quids for their quos. In Washington's approach to Cuba, however, there are none. All U.S. foreign policy goals were either addressed by Cuba or were overtaken by events. Cuba removed its troops from Africa, stopped giving assistance to revolutionaries in Central America or anywhere else in the world, and its ties to the Soviet Union ended with the disintegration of the communist empire. Washington had told Cuba that once those three conditions were met, there could be a significant improvement in relations. There was none. This is bad diplomacy: If an adversary does not believe there will be a positive response once contentious issues are addressed, there is little incentive to address them.

Fifth, U.S. policy is punitive to the Cuban people and in violation of international law. The U.S. embargo, particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union, has caused severe shortages of food, medicines, and other basic goods and resulted in widespread suffering by ordinary Cubans. This inhumane approach contradicts everything this country is supposed to stand for.

Key Problems

- The embargo is obsolete, illegal, and does not work; it will not get rid of Castro.
- Efforts to force other governments to cooperate with this Cuba policy risk disruptions in relations with close allies and trading partners.
- Holding rigidly to the embargo and refusing to negotiate ignores other U.S. interests such as compensation for lost properties and profits from opening U.S.-Cuban trade.
- The U.S. embargo adds to the hardships of the Cuban people themselves and is in violation of international law.

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Reformulating U.S. policy toward Cuba is more difficult in the wake of the enactment of Helms-Burton, for one of its provisions codifies the embargo and most other sanctions in place against Cuba. These are no longer based on executive orders and thus open to modification or lifting at the discretion of the president.

Key Recommendations

- The U.S. should rescind the Helms-Burton Act and then move to lift the embargo and normalize relations, either all at once, or, alternatively, through a gradual process of engagement, starting possibly with a lifting of the embargo on the sale of foods and medicines.
- U.S. policy toward Cuba should not disrupt or even threaten to disrupt our relations with other countries, and most especially not with our principal trading partners, such as Canada, Europe and Mexico.

Now, that will require an act of Congress. Clearly, then, the first step toward a more positive policy would be rescinding the Helms-Burton Act.

The problems Helms-Burton has caused with closest U.S. allies and trading partners should teach Washington a lesson. At a bare minimum, the U.S. government should make certain that in the future no policy initiative toward Cuba risks disrupting relations with other countries.

Rescinding Helms-Burton would of course be only the first step. The U.S. should then move to lift the

embargo and normalize relations. Ideally, this could be done all at once. Realistically, however, it would be politically difficult for any president simply to lift the

embargo without being accused of giving away a principal bargaining chip with no return.

There is a way around this problem, however. A sensible approach, for example, would be for the U.S. to say to Cuba that now with the cold war over it is time to lay aside the hostilities of the past and forge a more constructive relationship that befits neighboring nations.

As a gesture of good faith, the U.S. would lift the embargo on the sale of foods and medicines (whose inclusion in the embargo in any event violates common international law), lift travel controls (which violate the constitutional rights of U.S. citizens), and close the U.S.-government funded TV Marti (which is never seen nor heard and is a waste of taxpayer money). Having taken those steps, Washington would then offer to open an issue-by-issue negotiating process with a view to solving as many bilateral problems, such as compensation for nationalized properties, as possible.

Cuba's internal arrangements are not and would not be open to negotiation, but the U.S. could make it clear to the Cuba that the pace at which it moved forward toward a more normal relationship would depend in part on how quickly and effectively Cuba moved ahead, in its own interest, with an internal reform program leading to a more open society.

Written by Wayne Smith, Center for International Policy.

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Cuba Info (Johns Hopkins University in English/Spanish) 1755 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, D.C. 20036.

Cuban Affairs (Cuban Committee for Democracy, see above).

Cuba Update (Center for Cuban Studies, see above).

World Wide Web

CDI's Cuba Issue Area

<http://www.cdi.org/~sap/cuba>

Cuba Internet Resources

<http://ix.urz.uni-heidelberg.de/%7Epklee/Cuba/>

Peacenet's Cuba Gopher

[gopher://gopher.igc.apc.org/11/peace/cuba](http://gopher.igc.apc.org/11/peace/cuba)

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