



Cuba: Policy Agenda for the Future

By Shawn Malone, Georgetown University Caribbean Project

In recent years, U.S. policy toward Cuba has been guided by two primary objectives or "tracks": to isolate the Cuban government and to provide support to the Cuban population. The former has generally taken priority, precluding various measures that would help the Cuban people but might indirectly benefit the government as well.

Elements of the first track have been in place since 1960, when the U.S. imposed an economic embargo on trade between the two countries. Although many expected an emphasis on isolation to decline with the end of the cold war, recent years have instead brought an intensification of U.S. pressure tactics, initiated primarily by the legislative branch.

The Cuban Democracy Act, passed in 1992, prohibited foreign subsidiaries of U.S. companies from trading with Cuba, urged other countries to restrict trade and finance arrangements with the island, approved economic sanctions for any country providing Cuba assistance, and prohibited ships docking in Cuba from entering U.S. ports for six months.

Key Points

- U.S. policy toward Cuba has changed little since the end of the cold war, maintaining and even intensifying efforts to isolate Fidel Castro.
- International reaction to Washington's isolation of Cuba has been overwhelmingly negative.
- Simultaneous with its isolation efforts, the U.S. has announced several measures designed to encourage interaction with Cuba's population. However, U.S. rhetoric presenting this interaction as inherently subversive has seriously hindered the effort.

At the same time, "track two" of the Cuban Democracy Act created possibilities for providing "support to the Cuban people." These included the authorization of regulated donations of food and medicine to Cuba, payments to Cuba for telecommunications services, and travel to Cuba for journalistic, religious, or educational purposes.

Though humanitarian in intent, many of these initiatives were later justified by U.S. officials as yet another means of subverting the Cuban government. Already apprehensive about increased

people-to-people contact, Cuban leaders found in such rhetoric both genuine cause and political justification for greater restrictions in this sphere, resulting in less space for interaction than before the U.S. "opening."

The second major piece of recent U.S. legislation on Cuba is the Helms-Burton Act. Passed in 1996, its most important component is the codification of U.S. sanctions against Cuba, which had previously been implemented by executive order. Since its passage, the administration has had less flexibility to adjust U.S.

policy to changing circumstances and must now obtain congressional approval for any major policy shift.

In addition, Helms-Burton introduced new penalties for foreign companies doing business in Cuba, permitting U.S. nationals to sue foreign investors who profit from property confiscated by the Cuban government and denying such investors entry into the United States. The President, however, retains—and has exercised—the ability to waive full implementation of the first measure, and enforcement of the second has thus far been limited.

Despite its stated commitment to "the self-determination of the Cuban people," Helms-Burton also sets out a series of internal conditions that Cuba must meet before Washington will consider normalizing relations with Havana. These include holding elections specifically excluding Fidel and Raul Castro and establishing American-style systems of representative democracy and freemarket economics.

International reaction to these acts, particularly Helms-Burton, has been overwhelmingly negative. Key U.S. allies have denounced the laws as an extraterritorial attempt to bully sovereign nations into adopting a particular foreign policy. The conflict has been especially sharp with close U.S. trading partners such as Canada and Mexico, who argue that the U.S. is in violation of NAFTA, and the European Union, which had threatened to bring the case before the World Trade Organization before reaching a tenuous last-minute understanding.

In contrast to these isolation measures, the U.S. has taken small steps in recent years to cooperate with Cuba on regional security interests. In 1994, for example, responding to a rafter crisis involving tens of thousands of Cubans, Washington and Havana negotiated a comprehensive migration agreement and have continued to meet every six months for ongoing talks. There is also modest interaction in the counternarcotics realm between the U.S. Coast Guard and the Cuban Border Patrol, which share limited tactical information on a case-by-case basis for interdiction of suspicious vessels.

In sum, the U.S. government continues to maintain pressure on the Cuban government in the form of long-standing economic sanctions, which have intensified in recent years. At the same time, the U.S. has initiated circumscribed attempts to provide humanitarian and moral support to the Cuban population. There has also been modest government-to-government collaboration in areas where other concerns override the two countries' political conflict, particularly migration and drug trafficking.

U.S. policy toward Cuba suffers from two fundamental problems. First, it has proven an ineffective and even counterproductive instrument for achieving the U.S. goal, namely the isolation and removal of Fidel Castro in order to bring about a political and economic transition. After nearly forty years of U.S. sanctions, Fidel Castro remains firmly in power and intent on blocking any transition during his lifetime. Despite continued economic austerity, Cuba has weathered the worst of the storm and has recently experienced modest growth. In the political sphere, there are no known viable opponents to Castro's leadership, inside or outside the system.

In fact, rather than promoting change, U.S. pressure has strengthened Castro's position, creating the impression that the U.S. aims to destabilize Cuba's present system and dictate the structure of a new one. As a result, some inside Cuba who would otherwise advocate for a more open system fear that such a move would be manipulated by outsiders. Meanwhile, those in power use this state-of-siege mentality as justification for insistence on internal unity and intolerance of dissent. The U.S. embargo has also been used to stir up Cuban nationalism in a classic "David versus Goliath" scenario and has served as a convenient scapegoat for economic hardships whose true roots are the Cuban system's internal inefficiencies.

Reinforcing Cuba's perception of external meddling, the Helms-Burton Act specifies internal decisions—such as individuals the Cuban people are not permitted to elect—among the conditions for normalization of relations. Helms-Burton's heavy emphasis on confiscated property further implies that the U.S. is more concerned with a handful of wealthy elites than with 11 million Cubans. Negative perceptions are also reinforced by U.S. broadcasts to Cuba via Radio Marti, which often contains more propaganda than objective journalism.

Internationally, U.S. isolation measures have also backfired, frequently leading other countries to embrace Cuba all the more openly. Here, too, Havana has been adept at using the U.S. as a scapegoat to distract attention from Cuba's internal problems.

The second fundamental problem with U.S. policy is its pursuit of a minor goal to the detriment of major goals. By focusing on punishing Castro, the U.S. hinders its pursuit of key objectives, such as laying the groundwork for better relations with future Cuban leaders, defending U.S. security interests in the region, maintaining good relations with U.S. trading partners, and providing meaningful support to the Cuban population.

Most problematic is Washington's failure to fully recognize that Cuba's current second-tier leaders—including ministers, vice ministers, military officers, and businesspeople—are highly likely to take the reins in a post-Castro era. The U.S. nonetheless limits engagement with these individuals, diminishing the possibility of establishing confidence-building ties that might positively influence a process of change.

From a regional standpoint, U.S. policy hinders strategic security interests whose neglect could result in problems far greater than any posed by Castro, principally in the area of drug trafficking. Few policymakers appear to realize the grave potential consequences for U.S. security interests should organized crime gain a foothold on the island.

Although transshipment of narcotics through Cuba does not appear to be a significant problem at present, the island does manifest several conditions favorable to the growth of this phenomenon. Geographically, Cuba finds itself directly between the primary producing countries of South America and the primary consuming countries to the north. Interdiction efforts are complicated by the island's 2,300 miles of shoreline, countless keys, and numerous natural harbors. Cuba's economic troubles constrict funding and equipment for anti-narcotics efforts, which focus primarily on the major airports, leaving the coastline largely unmonitored. The country's economic crisis also renders low-level officials more prone to corruption.

In the future, Cuba may also be vulnerable to money laundering schemes. Though this is not currently a problem, due in part to Cuba's underdeveloped financial system, the country shows characteristics of susceptibility, including a booming tourism industry, high receptivity to foreign investment, and surreptitious commercial channels established to circumvent the U.S. embargo.

In addition to security concerns, U.S. policy has jeopardized U.S. diplomatic and trade interests by harassing or threatening key allies—including Canada, Russia, and most of the countries of Europe and Latin America—regarding their friendly relations with Cuba. A minor conflict with a small island nation has thus been allowed to generate serious tensions with important political and economic partners.

From a humanitarian perspective, U.S. policy has also aggravated the economic situation of the Cuban population by limiting the ability of U.S. groups and individuals to provide assistance and the ability of U.S. firms to freely sell basic necessities such as food and medicine. While the Cuban system suffers from serious internal flaws as well, the U.S. embargo imposes an added economic burden that is ultimately borne by average Cubans.

Current U.S. policy also inhibits progress on various other issues of mutual concern, including environmental protection, weather monitoring, natural disaster response and intellectual property rights.

Key Problems

- U.S. efforts to isolate Havana are counterproductive, generating sympathy for Castro both domestically and internationally and providing him with a scapegoat for Cuba's internal flaws.
 - Some elements of U.S. policy imply that Washington aims to destabilize Cuba's present and dictate its future, contributing to an environment of defensiveness.
 - A narrow focus on isolating Castro has hindered other U.S. interests, such as engagement with future Cuban leaders, regional security initiatives, relations with U.S. allies, and humanitarian support to the Cuban people.
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Before specific proposals can be contemplated, fundamental changes must be made in Washington's policy framework. Without such changes, new measures are likely to be incoherent and ineffective. First, U.S. policy toward Cuba should focus on the long run, abandoning its focus on the current regime to evaluate and prepare for challenges and opportunities that are likely

to arise in the future. In the same vein, Washington should reorganize its policy priorities to reflect the comparative importance of various interests and objectives. In particular, engagement of future Cuban leaders, support for the Cuban population, and protection of strategic U.S. interests should take precedence over isolating Castro.

One of Washington's highest priorities should be to engage Cuba's current second-tier officials. As the country's likely future leaders, they must be brought into dialogue eventually, and the outcome is likely to be better if this happens sooner rather than later. Specifically, the U.S.

should eliminate remaining restrictions on granting U.S. visas to high-level Cuban government officials and should permit regular communication between them and their U.S. counterparts. This would also serve Washington's presumed interest in exposing these individuals to the virtues of multi-party democracy and free markets.

The U.S. should increase its outreach to the general Cuban population as well, focusing on two objectives: providing meaningful support and dispelling perceptions of hostility. Most compelling in both respects would be the elimination of all restrictions on the sale of food and medicine. Additional gestures of support could include ending existing limits on monetary remittances to individual Cubans, on family reunification visits, and on all forms of travel. Measures should

continue to be explored for establishing regular commercial flights and direct mail service between the two countries.

Ideally, Washington should also rescind the portions of Helms-Burton that directly reinforce Cubans' fear of U.S. domination. At a minimum, the aggressive rhetoric often present in the Clinton administration's Cuba policy statements, which is already decreasing in intensity, should be replaced by a clear statement of commitment to respect the Cuban people's right to self-determination, even if their choices clash with U.S. preferences. The administration should also establish effective control over Radio Marti, in part by returning its operations from Miami to Washington, and should ensure that its broadcasts communicate a message of support and goodwill to the Cuban population.

In addition, the U.S. should work more closely with Cuba to protect its strategic security interests in the region, particularly to combat the growth of drug trafficking, corruption, and organized crime. Modest progress has been made in this area, and several small initiatives are currently under consideration that would result in a more effective regional counternarcotics strategy, including authorization of telephone communication between Cuban and U.S. authorities in time-sensitive vessel-interdiction situations (versus the current fax system, which slows the exchange of information.) Washington may also post a U.S. "interdiction specialist" in Havana to interact directly with Cuban counterparts on antinarcotics cases. For the future, the U.S. should begin at least contemplating more comprehensive counternarcotics cooperation with Cuba, including the provision of badly needed equipment and technical assistance.

Due to domestic factors in both Cuba and the U.S., neither side is likely to initiate a bold change in its stance toward the other. Any constructive measures are therefore almost certain to be incremental. Even so, a steady series of gradual measures has significant confidence-building potential and could ultimately create the conditions for negotiation of more fundamental issues at some point in the future.

Shawn Malone is the coordinator of the Cuba Program at the Georgetown University Caribbean Project.

Key Recommendations

- The U.S. should focus on creating goodwill among Cuba's future leadership and the population in general by ending restrictions on the sale of food and medicine, family reunification visits, and individual remittances.
- Washington should work to change Cuba's fear of hostile U.S. intentions by emphasizing respect for principles of sovereignty and self-determination and by removing aggressive rhetoric from U.S. policy statements.
- The U.S. should increase collaboration with Cuba to protect its regional security interests, particularly in the counternarcotics sphere.

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World Wide Web

Cuban Democracy (Torricelli) Act of 1992
[http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d102:h.r.05323:](http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/z?d102:h.r.05323)

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U.S. Department of State
http://www.state.gov/www/regions/wha/us_cuba_index.html

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