

U.S.-Cuban Relations: Zigzags And Obstacles in Rapprochement

Jesús Gallegos Olvera*



Kevin Lamarque/Reuters

Reformulating relations between the United States and Cuba must consider two variables: the advances and results of the rounds of negotiation, and the debate in the U.S. establishment between those in favor and those opposed to President Barack Obama's decision. Both the U.S. and Cuba have definitely taken actions in recent months to broaden and strengthen their relations, interrupted more than 50 years ago, but "normalization" is still a riddle.

The first variable requires pinpointing the general reasons behind each of the parties' positions in the context of their own development. The contention strategy expressed through the economic blockade and embargo against the Cuban government as well as the diplomatic isolation of the Castro regime had been the main public U.S. foreign policy actions *vis-à-vis* the Caribbean nation in the last five decades.

Until the morning of December 17, 2014, the "Cuba" issue seemed to be a Cold War leftover in the Americas. However, it also went through a series of updates after the end of the Cold War with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the political changes in Latin America. In the case of the United States, it could be said that the "Cuban matter" has had its own weight, not only electorally speaking, but also in the political dynamic between Republicans and Democrats. For its part, the Cuban government had blamed the U.S. embargo for the adverse conditions experienced in recent decades.

So, Cuban-U.S. relations have undergone different phases of confrontation and coordination of interests, exemplified by the arrival of a communist government off the coast of the great promoter of liberal democracy; the "Cuban missile crisis"; the Mariel exodus and the problems of Cuban boatlift; the establishment of detention centers on the military base at Guantánamo, where prisoners of war from Iraq and Afghanistan were taken; and the strengthening of rela-

*Professor at the UNAM School of Political and Social Sciences International Relations Center, jesusgallegos1978@hotmail.com.

tions between the island's government and "leftist" countries in Latin America. This has forced members of the U.S. establishment to think of Cuban beyond the ideological and historic variables, meaning that the geopolitical and economic calculation set certain unavoidable imperatives.

The reasons for the Barack Obama administration's push toward changing the direction of relations with the government headed by Raúl Castro converge with analyses by some of the spokespersons for U.S. interests in recent years. Zbigniew Brzezinski in 2012 and Henry Kissinger in 2014 noted that renewing U.S. leadership with a strategic international vision would require rethinking the blockade of Cuba.

From the liberal and neo-realist points of view, the idea of strengthening the current administration's prestige and credibility requires recognizing the inefficacy of the economic embargo and renewing the good neighbor discourse in the Western Hemisphere in which Secretary of State John Kerry's 2013 corollary to the Monroe Doctrine would seem to come to an end. While this is not divorced from the carrot-and-stick policy made popular by Teddy Roosevelt, the responses establish a relationship to the excesses by the intelligence apparatus operated from the National Security Agency (NSA) and exposed to international public opinion through the leaks to the media about the cases of spying on government officials in Germany, Brazil, and Mexico, among others. Added to this is the qualitative aspect of the current administration's interest in establishing a legacy and the distinctive actions this implies.

For their part, some apologists of the current regime in Cuba say that the U.S. government's position is determined by the strength and legitimacy of the cause and the history of resistance of the Cuban people. To this can be added the explanations of why the Revolution's internationalist policy was designed as part of what was needed to shine a light on the situation and avoid the country's complete isolation in the international community. Nevertheless, we should note that the economic situation of the last 20 years on the island is the biggest consideration for understanding the reasons behind the Cuban government approaching and opening up to its U.S. counterpart.

If emigration from the island in the 1960s was spurred by political criteria, in the last two decades, it has been defined by the economy. In this sense, the simultaneous implosion of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the socialist bloc and the crisis that in the early 1990s reduced Cuba's gross national product by 40 percent have meant that foreign in-

In the case of the United States, it could be said that the "Cuban matter" has had its own weight, not only electorally speaking, but also in the political dynamic between Republicans and Democrats.

vestment is an alternative for accessing capital, technology, and other resources like energy. In addition, Cuba has an exceptional geographical location and an educated population, both assets of great value in this process.

Cuban Minister of Foreign Trade and Investment Rodrigo Malmierca explained his country's conditions and needs in November 2014 when he presented an US\$8.5-billion project to finance different kinds of activities, among them, setting up a car assembly plant in the economic zone around the port of Mariel. As he recognized in a statement prior to the Summit of the Americas in Panama last April, "The continuing blockade, the restrictions on the use of the dollar, the impossibility of exporting Cuban products [to the United States] or using trade credits are obstacles to trade and impede investment in Cuba."¹

This explains why, in addition to the trade partnerships Cuba has established with companies of several countries—out of over 400 in effect, 342 stand out, linked to, among other sectors, mining, oil, tourism, and light industry—, its government passed a new foreign investment law in 2014 that offers tax breaks and new conditions for creating investor security and certainty.

What is clear is that market-oriented reforms set guidelines that reaffirm socialist planning and the continued relevance of state-owned companies and do not clearly outline Cuba's future development model. Nevertheless, as former Clinton administration advisor Richard Feinberg states in an analysis published by the Brookings Institution last November, the Cuban government's document, *Portafolio de oportunidades para la inversion extranjera* (Portfolio of Opportunities for Foreign Investment), shows that it will be cautious in opening up the Cuban economy to international capital because in the front of its mind is what happened in Russia after the end of the Soviet era.²

The point is that, without economic growth, the social advances cannot be maintained. To be sustainable, the so-called progressive Cuban policy definitely requires economic pro-

perity. This is why three key issues must be worked on for the future: economic growth with equality, monetary and exchange-rate reform, and institutional change.

Beyond the agenda and the main political and technical aspects that both countries will have to review, and given that the debate about the process of normalizing relations is in and of itself today one of the main discussions, the interaction between the United States and Cuba is also the object of a series of perceptions and local, regional, and global opinions that point to different issues.

The Latin American Working Group looked at different surveys carried out between 2009 and 2012 that show how opinions favorable to reestablishing relations between the United States and Cuba have grown.³ Most of the polls of U.S. Americans show that between 50 and 60 percent of citizens think moves should be made to reestablish relations, to eliminate the embargo, and to allow travel to Cuba. In addition, according to Cuban Research Institute surveys, while in 1991, 87 percent of Cuban-Americans thought that the embargo should continue, by 2014, only 48 percent thought so.⁴ A University of Florida survey of Cuban-Americans showed that most also supported renewing relations and putting an end to the embargo. For their part, 97 percent of Cubans thought they should be renewed, according to a 2015 survey by the firm Bendixen & Amadi International.⁵

Despite these trends in public opinion, White House presidential spokesperson Josh Earnest has announced a list of issues that must be resolved first. Among them, in no particular order, are the limitations U.S. embassy officials in Havana would face in carrying out their work as they do in other countries, particularly their interaction with civil society; the political reforms linked to progress on human rights issues; the return of expropriated property of U.S. citizens after the Cuban Revolution; and the extradition of any terrorist or fugitive who might be on Cuban soil.

Cuba's recycling of its political argument to explain why its economy is not able to develop as needed and of its demands *vis-à-vis* the U.S. government has opened the way to

its being taken off the list of state sponsors of terrorism; this happened on May 29, 2015, 33 years after it was first included in March 1982. This makes for a change in the perception of the risk of developing links with Cuba; in addition, it has been taken off the package of sanctions imposed by the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) linked to the arms trade, aid programs, and restrictions to trade relations. Other issues presented by the Cubans in the negotiations are putting an end to the embargo on Cuba in place since 1960, and its complement established in the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, which establishes legal restrictions for U.S. companies and investors in Cuba, and finally, the return of the territory on which the Guantanamo naval base is built.

Four rounds of negotiations have been held until now, on January 21 and 22, February 27, March 15, and May 21 and 22, 2015, the first and third in Havana and the second and fourth in Washington, D.C. Advances have been reported on issues of civil aviation, human smuggling, migratory fraud, protected maritime areas, hydrography, nautical charts, and health. In addition, in recent months announcements have been made about the reestablishment of the ferry line between Florida and Havana, suspended decades ago; the licensing of a New York hospital to carry out a clinical protocol of the effective Cuban therapeutic vaccine against lung cancer; the visit to Havana and the much-applauded performances of the Minnesota Symphony Orchestra; the participation of U.S. boats in the Ernest Hemingway Fishing Tournament, for the first time in a very long time; and the friendly soccer match between the New York Cosmos and Cuba's national team.

In addition, the Cuban Interests Section and future Cuban embassy in Washington was able to open a bank account when granted a Treasury Department license; it currently operates through Stonegate, a small bank with 22 offices located in southern and western Florida. In the face of this situation, Cuban Vice-chancellor Marcelino Medina warns that the current negotiations with Washington are merely a first stage of a long, complex process. State Department spokesman Jeff Rathke has emphasized that there is still "work to be done" with Cuba. In the last analysis, from the perspective of the U.S. government, normalization is based on the results of the negotiations and not the wish to conclude the process quickly.

With regard to the second variable, the formal process for normalizing U.S.-Cuban relations depends on the political and administrative reading of the faculties of each head of

If emigration from the island in the 1960s
was spurred by political criteria,
in the last two decades
it has been defined by the economy.

Without economic growth, the social advances cannot be maintained. To be sustainable, the so-called progressive Cuban policy definitely requires economic prosperity.

government in his own country and that of their respective legislatures. Also relevant is the pressure brought to bear on each side by interest groups represented in think tanks, media, political parties, corporations, intellectuals, social sectors, etc.

Specifically, on the U.S. side, among the opponents to the actions taken by the Obama administration to change the government's position about Cuba is Republican Senator Marco Rubio, who continually states that he will oppose any nomination of a U.S. ambassador to Cuba as long as several prerequisites linked to human and property rights that he considers indispensable are not met. Another staunch opponent is Mario Díaz-Balart, Republican representative for Florida and the sponsor of a law that includes the denial of funds "for an embassy or other diplomatic facility in Cuba."⁶ For his part, Democratic Senator Robert Menéndez has been critical of the Cuban government, pointing to the scant possibility that the current Congress would repeal the laws that establish the trade embargo. For these and other detractors, the argument centers on supporting the Cuban people and not those they call their oppressors, as they say Obama does.

In contrast, those who favor a rapprochement with Cuba, like Democratic Congresswoman Barbara Lee from California, a member of the same subcommittee that Díaz-Balart serves on, have insisted on increasing trade in order to improve both countries' economies. Similarly, Democrat José Serrano, together with Republican Senators Jeffrey Lane Flake and Michael Enzi, have indicated the importance of establishing an embassy to strengthen the defense of U.S. interests in Cuba and defend the rights of the citizens of their country to do business on the island. In the opinion of these and other members of Congress, the problem lies in the power of the Cuban-American community in Florida. However, despite the fact that the Cuban community in Miami has played a fundamental role at election time—it represents 5 percent of Florida's population—it is important to recognize that in the most recent elections, the lack of identification of the children of exiles with the old Cuban cause has generated important changes. Specifically, in 2012, President

Obama received the support of 50 percent of the Cuban-American electorate for his reelection.

The U.S. Congress is definitely the political body with the faculty to put an end to the policy that establishes the blockade of Cuba, but Obama does have substantial prerogatives about how it is applied. While the 1996 Helms-Burton Act did transfer certain executive faculties regarding the island to Congress, Obama can take action on matters like travel to Cuba, telecommunications, and remittances. Further down the line, executive actions should be put in place to establish direct commercial flights between the two countries and lengthen the list of goods manufactured in Cuba or with Cuban inputs that can enter the United States.

One important area of work has been health; in this sphere, by allowing U.S. citizens to travel to Cuba, Obama is including the possibility that they receive medical treatment there. In addition, the export of medications and medical equipment must be authorized, as well as the sale of raw materials so that medications like Heberprot-P and Nimotuzumab, monoclonal anti-bodies that have resulted from research in biotechnology for the treatment of advanced head and neck cancers, respectively, can be produced on the island.

However, important areas exist in which the U.S. president definitely has no room to act. One clear example is the ban on U.S. subsidiaries in third countries from trading with Cuba, as stipulated in the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992, as well as the prohibition of doing business with formerly U.S.-owned properties that were nationalized. These are part of the list of the on-going issues being negotiated to achieve "normalization" of relations between the two countries; those negotiations are constantly zigzagging and still have a long way to go. ■■

NOTES

¹ Enrique Andrés Pretel and Ana Isabel Martínez, ed., "Cuba invita a empresas extranjeras a hacer negocios en comunismo," April 9, 2015, <http://mx.reuters.com/article/topNews/idMXL2N0X62SD20150409>.

² Richard Feinberg, *Cuba's Economic Change in Comparative Perspective*, Brookings Institution, November 2014, <http://brook.gs/1JvO55L>.

³ Latin American Working Group, <http://bit.ly/1G40eL9>.

⁴ Cuban Research Institute, <http://bit.ly/T4iqQM>.

⁵ Danielle Renwick and Brianna Lee, *U.S.-Cuba Relations*, Council on Foreign Relations, April 15, 2015 (updated May 29, 2015), <http://www.cfr.org/cuba/us-cuba-relations/p11113>.

⁶ U.S. House Representatives, Committee on Appropriations, 114th Congress, 1st Session, "Appropriations Committee Releases Fiscal Year 2016 State and Foreign," June 2, 2015, <http://appropriations.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=394231>.