The United States-Cuba Relationship
A Time for Change?

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In the field of world policy I would dedicate this nation to the policy of the good neighbor.¹

Introduction

In recent decades, FDR’s call for "neigborliness" has been all but forgotten by United States foreign policy makers. Although the world has undergone dramatic change in many aspects, there has been at least one United States foreign policy constant -- the U. S. trade embargo of Cuba. Only ninety miles off the U. S. shore, and with a shared history dating to colonial times, it would appear that the United States and its neighbor to the south should have a natural affinity for one another. Instead, it is clear that we are fundamentally at odds. Much of the rest of the world², on the other hand, seems very willing to carry on a dialogue with Cuba.³ The U. S. seems to be the "odd man out", locked into a Cold War mentality regarding Cuba. What should US military officers know of the US-Cuba relationship? Should the U. S. change its Cuba policy? If we do not do so, are we likely to be left out of a post-Castro Cuba? Should we choose a policy of "engagement", as opposed to continuation of our present policy of "estrangement"⁴? What sorts of risks, if any, would this pose for U. S. strategic interests in the region?

This paper will examine something of the past and present relationship between the United States and Cuba, with a view towards our future relationship. The influence of the United States trade embargo against Cuba, and its utility as a means of speeding Cuba’s transition to a democracy and market-based economy, will be discussed.

There is no issue more important than this facing the U. S.-Cuba relationship today.

Cuba -- The Past

The modern history of the island of Cuba has its origins in the 15th century European voyages of discovery. Christopher Columbus landed there on October 29, 1492, believing he had arrived at "Cipango" (Japan).⁵ Once having been "discovered" by the European powers, Cuba became an important seaport in Spain’s growing New World colonial empire. The indigenous population of the island eventually suffered the fate of many other New World native peoples⁶ during this period of European expansionism -- aggressive proselytization, economic exploitation leading to
enslavement, and staggering death rates stemming from epidemic disease against which their immune systems were ineffectual. As the European colonists’ interests turned to agriculture, in order to work the land, they imported slaves from Africa to work large plantations growing sugar cane and tobacco. What followed next for Cuba was a long and turbulent period of colonial occupation.

Independence from the yoke of colonialism first began in the 1850’s with a fledgling military movement against Spanish forces garrisoned on the island. This came somewhat later than other independence movements in the Western hemisphere because the "Monroe Doctrine" in addition to opposing foreign intervention in the New World, also had the curious effect of preserving what had become established as the "status quo", thus favoring continuing Spanish occupation of Cuba. The Cuban independence movement continued off and on for some forty years without much success, including failed efforts at United States annexation, until Jose Marti, at the head of the "Cuban Revolutionary Party", led the effort for a national uprising in 1892. In 1898, the USS Maine, moored in Havana Harbor, sunk as the result of an on board explosion of unknown origins. Urged on by the press, in the person of William Randolph Herst and Joseph Pulitzer, even though the cause of the event could not definitively be traced to Spain, the United States entered the conflict against Spain on the side of the revolutionaries, rallying to the battle cry, "Remember the Maine, and to hell with Spain!" Thus began that "splendid little war" -- the Spanish-American War -- fueled, in large measure, by U. S. empathy with the Cuban peoples’ desires for independence. When it was over, Spain, among other things, lost its Cuban colony to the United States, which administered it as a protectorate for a period of three years. Thereafter, in 1902, Cuba became an independent nation.

For nearly the next half century, Cuba, although ostensibly a democracy, was dominated by one regime after another underpinned by the military, culminating in 1940 in the notorious dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. At this point in its history, corruption, unequal distribution of wealth and opportunity, and some measure of police/military oppression characterized Cuba. Fidel Castro made his first appearance in opposition to this unsatisfactory state of affairs in July, 1953, in a failed military strike against one of Batista’s military barracks. After a relatively short period of imprisonment, Castro was released and then exiled. While in exile, he formed the 26th of July Movement and planned his return to the island. In 1956, he and a small group of nine original followers landed on the island and launched what became a well executed guerrilla war that skillfully took advantage of the sanctuaries afforded by Cuba’s isolated Sierra Maestra mountains and dense jungles. Building upon increasing domestic support, and with revolutionary fervor, his forces eventually were able to overcome the poorly motivated government forces. Without U. S. support, Batista could not maintain power and he was forced to ignominiously flee the island on January 1, 1959.

Castro’s rise to power in Cuba was initially widely proclaimed, both domestically and internationally. It appeared that his government would restore democracy after the corruption that had dominated the nation previously. Instead, he began to systematically consolidate power by eliminating opposition. He confiscated lands and the means of production. "Moderates" were forced to either join him or flee, and, eventually, many thousands of Cubans left their homeland, as they continue to do so today. In 1961, Castro publicly declared himself to be a Marxist-Leninist, and launched his "revolutionary offensive", a campaign intended to
transform Cuba into an "egalitarian" society. He targeted this effort against "bourgeois institutions, ideas, relationships, and privileges" and, eventually, this led to the nationalization of privately owned businesses.\textsuperscript{27} In trying to understand "Cuban communism", one must consider the personal role played by Castro. As in other authoritarian regimes, Castro’s strong personality has almost completely dominated and shaped the political scene in Cuba. That is, the "...role of symbolic leader (has been) thoroughly integrated with the role of policymaker".\textsuperscript{28} Thus began the long period of conflict and discontent that has characterized the recent United States-Cuba relationship.

One of Castro’s chief revolutionary lieutenants, Ernesto Che Guevara,\textsuperscript{29} helped Castro organize, train and equip his small band of guerrilla fighters. As the revolution matured, Guevara became one of Castro’s most important political advisors, Castro appointing him president of the Cuban National Bank and then Minister of Industry. Later, he became popularized as the virtual symbol and spirit of the revolution itself. Just how strongly Castro and Guevara felt about the United States, and Cuba’s need to confront the U. S., is well illustrated in the following prophetic statement by Guevara\textsuperscript{30}

\begin{quote}
To win something you have to take it away from somebody....This something is the sovereignty of the country: it has to be taken away from that somebody who is called the monopoly, although monopolies in general have no country, they have at least a common definition: all the monopolies which have been in Cuba which have made profits on Cuban land, have very close ties with the U.S.A. In other words, our economic war will be with the great power of the North (emphasis added).
\end{quote}

We have been locked in the continuation of that "economic war" since that time to the present.

The United States has long offered safe haven in South Florida to what has become a large and vocal expatriate Cuban community.\textsuperscript{31} The members of this group, even to this day, with more or less continuous U. S. support over the years, have long harbored hopes of someday overthrowing Castro, restoring democracy in Cuba, and returning home to their "restored" property.\textsuperscript{32} This group of Cuban expatriates has made itself known in important ways,\textsuperscript{33} most dramatically, of course, in the now-infamous 1961 "Bay of Pigs" invasion.\textsuperscript{34} Moreover, as the Cuban Revolution became more and more "radicalized", its relationship with the United States continued to deteriorate, leading in 1961\textsuperscript{35} to the severing of diplomatic relations, a condition that exists to the present day.\textsuperscript{36}

Eventually, almost entirely,\textsuperscript{37} Cuba turned to the Soviet Union for both ideological and economic support. The USSR accounted for 80% of Cuba’s international trade, becoming its principal supplier of oil, food, machinery, spare parts, chemicals, and other vital materials. It subsidized the Cuban economy through its supply of low-cost oil and its purchase of Cuban sugar at inflated prices.\textsuperscript{38} The ever-worsening relationship between Cuba and the United States culminated in the near-catastrophic 1962 "Cuban Missile Crisis", regarded by many as the closest the world has yet come to nuclear war.\textsuperscript{39} Cuba, and Castro, more and more, became players on a world stage dominated by the bipolar superpower rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{40}
From the United States’ perspective of the time, Cuba’s contribution to the Cold War was as a "surrogate" for Soviet expansionism.\(^{41}\)

From 1960 on, Cuba’s efforts to spread revolution in Latin America, its dispatch of troops to Africa, its activities in the Non-Aligned Movement -- indeed, virtually all Cuban initiatives in the international arena -- were analyzed by the United States in terms of the advantages that might accrue to the Soviet Union.

That is, rightly or wrongly, the United States saw Castro as the instrument by which Soviet-style communism could, and would, be exported, especially to neighboring countries in Latin America, in this world-wide contest between ideologies. Locked into this framework, then, the United States "engaged" Castro in several ways -- including instituting, in 1963, a trade embargo which has continued unabated to this day, despite the fact that the Soviet Union has collapsed, the Cuba-Russia relationship has altered significantly, and communism is in retreat around the world.

**Cuba -- The Present**

The former USSR made it economically possible for Cuba to sustain its form of government and its economic system for thirty years.\(^{42}\) In the immediate aftermath of the USSR’s collapse, Cuba also underwent a period of dramatic economic change approaching crisis proportions. Government of Cuba data shows a decline in gross domestic product (GDP) of 35% during the period from 1989 to 1993.\(^{43}\) This was perceived to be such a fundamental change, that one writer saw it "... only as a matter of time before Cuban communism collapses", leaving "... the most interesting question ... whether Cuba will be able to avoid violence and experience a peaceful transition from a communist dictatorship to representative democracy".\(^{44}\) In keeping with this prospect, this writer opined that "(t)he best U.S. policy ... remains the current policy, centered around continuing the embargo ...".\(^{45}\) And, another writer\(^{46}\) made the same point in this way

Fidel Castro’s Cuba is a nation that lives daily under the cloud of economic disintegration and growing political repression. After years in which Cuba was propped up artificially by Soviet economic and military assistance ..., preferential trade subsidies ..., and especially petroleum imports ..., the collapse of Communism and the inability of the Russians to continue that ... support have brought Cuba to its knees. *** (T)he Castro regime is facing its most serious challenge, and many observers wonder when -- not if -- the revolutionary hero will fall from power.

But, from the present vantage point of 1998, it would seem -- just as Mark Twain noted that the "report of (his) death was an exaggeration"\(^{47}\) -- the death of Castro’s communist Cuba, however much expected or even fervently wished for by some, was also exaggerated. It appears that "... the Cuban regime remains, with Fidel Castro firmly at its helm"\(^{48}\). There are several fundamental reasons for this,\(^{49}\) summarized briefly below (with emphasis added)

**Cubans support their regime**....They understand its many failings but they ... also identify its successes.
The Cuban government has permitted, and even stimulated, forms of citizen complaint to expose corruption and mismanagement. This has remained Havana’s safety valve, and U.S. observers often err in their assessments of Cuba because they do not understand its full significance.

...Cubans do not accord much weight to the Communist Party as an institution, but think highly of individuals who are ... members.

Criticism of or noncompliance with certain government policies has existed alongside significant tolerance by the regime. The regime has earned vital public support for many of its programs and has honored important promises to its citizens.

Cuban leaders learned several lessons from the attempted reforms that eventually undermined other communist regimes. The message to ordinary Cubans is clear: the transition to capitalism is long and painful. Mid-level cadres ... fear ... that reform ... would ... lead to their own personal demise. Harsh penalties are meted out to those ... who do not toe the ... line. Cuba’s would-be Boris Yeltsins have .. been cowed.

... Cuba has already begun a transition toward freer markets, (and) black markets ... are ... tolerated.

The Castro Regime endures in part because its enemies unwittingly help it to survive. U.S. policies provide ample fodder for Cuban hardliners...and prevent ordinary Cubans from learning about the outside world.

Most helpful to Cuba’s hardliners has been the so-called Cuban Democracy Act, which Congress enacted in ... 1992 in the midst of partisan competition for Florida’s electoral votes. Prior to the ...Act, Castro’s regime had become internationally isolated. It has since been able to construct a large and heterogeneous coalition to defend itself. U.S. penalties on firms in third countries have provoked protests from nearly all the major U.S. allies and trading partners.

In light of this, perhaps it would be prudent to readdress the present U. S. policy toward Cuba. If so, the questions now become:

Does it still make sense for the United States to pursue a Cold War Cuba policy in a post-Cold War world? If President Bill Clinton continues the Reagan-Bush strategy of tightening the U.S. embargo, will it succeed in forcing the fall of the Castro government? And when the Castro regime at last does come to an end, will the U.S. embargo have been the best prelude for promoting democracy, political stability, economic growth, human rights, and popular welfare in Cuba?

The answer proffered by the author of these particular provocative questions is a “resounding no” (emphasis added). He goes on to say that the U.S.
...chose a policy of engagement with the former Soviet bloc, and it paid off.***
The United States has also preferred engagement with China. If anything, the U.S. government can be more effective in Cuba. *** The impact of economic normalization, with the ensuing billions of dollars of U.S. trade and investment, would further bolster the supporters of progressive reform and *** would offer a forum for political dialogue and gradual, peaceful change.

Some would suggest that this present U.S. policy is "...anachronistic, inconsistent, and counterproductive".53 In the aftermath of the Cold War, and in light of Castro’s renunciation of his troublesome earlier habit of assisting revolutionaries around the world,54 Cuba appears to be now only "...a small and unusually isolated country struggling for survival *** (with) a foreign policy not markedly different from that of other Caribbean islands".55 It is clear that a policy of "estrangement"56 over more than three decades has not worked.

Indeed, the value of economic sanctions in general has been significantly criticized recently, as indicated here57:

Sanctions are a huge slice of the U.S. foreign policy pie -- even cities employ them. Officials like them because they see them as cheaper and cleaner than war. But in the real world, they are expensive, both diplomatically and fiscally, and seldom work. At most they starve large populations while leaving hostile leaders unscathed. If foreign corporations feel they need the ayatollah’s business, slapping them with third-party sanctions only alienates their governments further. Policymakers need to think harder before they rush to push the sanctions button.

Sanctions against Cuba seems to have had the same results, or lack thereof, as sanctions58 imposed against Iran59:

Economic bans and political invective against Iran have not worked. America, not the Islamic Republic, has become isolated. Meanwhile, both because sanctions are leaky and because they have pushed it to become more self-sufficient, Iran is actually doing better than many countries the United States has assisted. The sanctions also give the Islamic regime a scapegoat for its serious problems at home, merely prolonging its hold on power. The United States should abandon containment for a strategy of critical dialogue.

And, finally, other commentators have made these points60 describing the ineffective use of sanctions:

Criticism comes from those who believe that sanctions, except for arms embargoes, are a poor tool for influencing policy in other countries, especially when the United States is alone in applying them. *** A study of U.S. sanctions since World War I indicates that they have failed two-thirds of the time and have been increasingly ineffective as U.S. economic preeminence has faded....
This would suggest, it seems, that it is time to try an altogether different approach. However, the only movement seen recently has been in the direction of bolstering the status quo. The U.S. tightened its already tight embargo of Cuba, further alienating Cuba and simultaneously running the very real risk of worsening our relationships with our allies and trading partners, by passage of the "Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996", the so-called "Helms-Burton" legislation. In passing this Act, Congress listed these "findings" which, presumably, are the fundamental reasons why the US continues to be opposed to the present Cuban regime: there continues to be a repression of fundamental human rights in Cuba, including a ban on democratic elections; the Castro regime continues to be totalitarian in nature, refuses to engage in substantive political reforms that would lead to democracy and a market economy; the Cuban government engages in torture, refuses to permit its citizens to freely leave the country, traffics in narcotics, and harbors fugitives from justice in the United States; and, for almost four decades now, the Cuban government has posed and continues to pose a national security threat to the United States. In signing the bill into law, the President indicated that this Act is a justified response to the Cuban government’s then-recent attack on unarmed civilian aircraft in international waters. This new law imposes additional sanctions on the Cuban regime, and creates a new "cause of action" in U.S. courts against those who would "traffic" in expropriated properties in Cuba, and would deny those individuals entry into the U.S. Both the passage of this legislation and its implementation have generated a significant amount of controversy.

The United Nations General Assembly continues to oppose the unilateral imposition of economic sanctions by the United States against Cuba. Although General Assembly resolutions are generally non-binding on member nations under the UN Charter, they do, nonetheless, represent important statements "as evidence of international custom or as expressing a general principle of law". This resolution, standing, as it does, for the "... the sovereign equality of States, non-intervention and non-interference in their internal affairs and freedom of international trade", is, thus, a powerful statement in opposition to the US embargo. These concepts of "non-intervention" are among the most significant duties of nation States, long established and recognized by both customary and conventional international law.

The European Union has also voiced its strong opposition to Helms-Burton. While the Europeans certainly do not have any allusions about the totalitarian nature of Castro’s regime, they do "... take umbrage with the notion that the United States can foist its foreign policy objectives on other nations through the threat and actual imposition of trade sanctions". They regard this new US law as an intrusion into their sovereign rights and prerogatives and referred their concerns to the Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) of the World Trade Organization (WTO) for inquiry and resolution. The United States challenged this effort of its trading partners by stating that it would not participate in the proceeding, nor would it be bound by any decision rendered by this body. This now creates a significant additional dilemma for the US. If its European trading partners refer the US’s unilateral imposition of sanctions as an issue to the WTO for dispute resolution, and the US refuses to participate in the proceedings or refuses to abide by any resulting "adverse" WTO decision, this could, in effect, "...wreck the trade body
In order to avoid this very serious confrontation with its trading partners in general, and a dispute in the WTO in particular, President Clinton again signed a waiver of the Helms-Burton law into effect, thus extending suspension of the right to sue under its provisions for an additional 6 more months.

In the meantime, other countries seem to be willing to accept and deal with Cuba. Among other things, there seems to be developing a strong effort to include Cuba into the "normal" trading pattern and life of the Caribbean. Looking, perhaps, for what may amount to "first mover advantages" as a means of creating "barriers to entry" into Cuba as an emerging market, especially post-Castro, political and business leaders alike more and more are considering what business opportunities, such as tourism, might be developed in Cuba.

As further proof that countries in the Americas are making their own trade deals whether the United States likes it or not, Caribbean leaders are taking steps to bring long-isolated Cuba into their fold and positioning themselves for an eventual transition on the communist island. Caricom’s (the Caribbean Community’s) embrace of Cuba is particularly strategic. The island of 11 million people is the fastest-growing tourism center in the region and could be harsh competition for other Caribbean nations whose economies depend on that industry.

One might, understandably, expect this to affect both the economic and political relationships that the United States has with its neighbors in this hemisphere. This would be especially important if we were to one day "wake up" to find ourselves "squeezed out" of a post-Castro Cuba that has become an integral part of the Caribbean Community, which, in turn, is part of a more successful trading bloc of Latin American nations. The US trade embargo of Cuba, thus, has, significant potential, it seems, to impact both the short-term and long-term geopolitical interests of the United States.

Conclusion

It is quite clear that what we know of today as global economic interdependence has dramatically affected the ways in which countries and businesses around the world relate to one another. The challenge of global competition today has caused numerous and profound changes in the environment in which businesses must find their way, and, consequently, the ways in which nation states act and react to each other. As a result, no single country can be immune from the impact of such fundamental change.

On a political map, the boundaries between countries are as clear as ever. But on a competitive map, a map showing the real flows of financial and industrial activity, those boundaries have largely disappeared. Through this flow ..., we have become global citizens, and so must the companies that want to sell us things.

Both the risks and benefits associated with global business are very real. This vastly increased importance of transnational business opportunities not only permits, but actually invites, nation states’ efforts to exert influence over them as an extension of foreign policy.
The United States, certainly, has not been hesitant to apply sanctions in order to further its interests. In fact, it has rather liberally used sanctions in this regard. Between 1993 and the present, the US applied sanctions 61 times against 35 countries. This has been a popular option "of choice" for US decision makers. We have often seen them applied as an alternative to military action, as for example, against Iran and Libya for their perceived efforts at supporting terrorism, or against Iraq in an effort to dissuade it from invading Kuwait. As indicated above, however, there is considerable debate as to the effectiveness of sanctions. One study showed that of the 150 examples of sanctions imposed during this century, "... only one in three made even a modest contribution toward the intended goal". Moreover, sanctions are not without economic effect on the country imposing them. They can, in fact, be an "expensive" option. For example, it is estimated that the application of sanctions cost the US in 1995 alone $15 to $19 billion in lost exports.

The U.S. trade embargo of Cuba, as an economic extension of U.S. foreign policy, seems not to have been successful. It has not caused Castro to leave office, nor has it forced an abandonment of the communist form of government in Cuba. Moreover, continuation of the embargo does not appear to offer high prospects for success. In fact, by doing so, it seems that the U.S. will likely continue merely to impoverish the Cuban people, alienate its allies and trading partners, and cause its own businesses to be in a poor competitive position when Castro eventually does leave office.

In our opinion, it is time for the U.S. to reconsider its Cold War attitude toward Cuba and to seek to engage it instead.

Bibliography

1. *First Inaugural Address*, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.


27. The Charter of the United Nations, Chapter IV.


Notes

1. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933.
2. Cuba’s trading partners include, inter alia, Russia, Canada, Mexico, Spain, China, Japan, Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Venezuela, and its Caribbean neighbors. Background Notes - Cuba, by the US Department of State, December, 1995, at pg 1.
4. "Dateline Cuba: Hanging on in Havana", by Andrew Zimbalist, Foreign Policy, No. 92, Fall 1993, at pg 150.
6. To be sure, there were voices raised in concern about this state of affairs. One of the most effective of these was Bartolome de las Casas, who exposed the oppression of the indians. The New American Desk Encyclopedia, 3ed., Signet, 1993, at pg 701.
7. Declared in a speech by President James Monroe, December 2, 1823. Ibid, pg 829.
10. Ibid, at pg 293, and supra, Note 6, at pg 775.
13. So-called by then Ambassador, later Secretary of State, John Hay, ibid, at pg 435.
15. Supra, Note 9, at pg 402.
16. Supra, Note 6, pg 332.
17. Supra, Note 5, pg 24-34.
18. Supra, Note 12, at pg 192.
19. From the Spanish meaning "little war". Ibid, at pg 192.
20. This was graphically depicted in the popular film The Godfather Part II, Francis Ford Coppola, Director, Paramount Pictures Corp., 1974.
21. Supra, Note 12, at pg 194.
22. Supra, Note 9, at pg 1037.
23. Supra, Note 5, pg 52.
24. Supra, Note 9, at pg 1034.
26. Supra, Note 5, pg 52
27. Ibid, pg 71.
29. Supra, Note 6, at pg 536.
30. Made in 1960, supra, Note 9, at pg 1272.
32. This may prove to be very difficult to do, even when Castro, eventually, is no longer in power. By now, property has been distributed in certain ways. It is likely that there will be considerable opposition to returning expatriates trying to reclaim confiscated property and trying to reestablish themselves as a privileged upper class.
33. To include significant power and influence in US domestic political affairs. Supra, Note 31.
34. Supra, Note 9, at pg 1355.
35. Supra, Note 2, at pg 7.
36. Supra, Note 9, at pg 1373.
37. Supra, Note 6, at pg 332.
38. Supra, Note 9, at pg 1372.
39. Supra, Note 6, at pg 332.
40. "The Cold War is one of the strangest chapters in the long, bloody history of international conflict. For forty-five years it drove the politics and devoured the resources of the United States and the USSR. It twisted the fates of smaller nations sucked into the orbits of the superpowers and multiplied the violence of civil wars". Supra, Note 12, at pg 93.
42. Supra, Note 2, at pg 8.
43. The World Factbook 1996, by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Washington, DC, at pg 122.
45. Ibid, at pg 145.
50. *Supra*, Note 4, at pg 151.
51. *Ibid*, at pg 151.
52. *Ibid*, at pg 166.
54. *Supra*, Note 41, at pg 50.
56. *Supra*, Note 4, at pg 167.
63. *Ibid*, at Section 2.
70. *Ibid*.
73. *Supra*, Note 2.
80. Ibid.
81. Supra, Note 60.
82. Supra, Note 79.
83. Ibid

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