

CUBA BRIEF



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When Should the U.S. Change Policy Toward Cuba

By Jason Poblete and Jaime Suchlicki

Ever since Fidel Castro transferred leadership powers to his brother General Raul Castro, there has been a great deal of speculation in academia, the media, and the U.S. Government (“USG”) about what could happen politically in Cuba if one brother predeceases the other. One school holds that a “*transition*” is already underway in the island, while another holds that the political conditions, at least at this juncture, show that it is a “*succession*” and not a transition. It is a subtle, yet not unimportant distinction and goes to the heart of a greater issue, continuity of U.S. policy toward the Western Hemisphere.

U.S. Policy Toward Cuba

Since the late 1990's, U.S. law has clearly outlined a policy roadmap for Cuban officials to use if they were genuinely seeking a change in relations with, and recognition by the U.S. Some of these conditions frequently find their way into speeches and statements of U.S. officials including: the release of political prisoners, legalization of all political activity, free and fair elections, and the respect of fundamental freedoms. Yet one condition never mentioned, arguably the most important from the U.S. standpoint, is that a transition government cannot include either Fidel Castro or Raul Castro.

A former senior Bush Administration said a few years before the transfer of power that the Cuban regime was “whistling past the graveyard” and that a transition was already underway in Cuba. This sentiment has been a recurrent theme during the past few years. Senior State Department officials have been repeatedly quoted in recent media interviews, before Congress, or at regional conferences advancing that a “transition is underway” in Cuba. The notable one exception was Defense Intelligence Agency (“DIA”) Director Lt. Gen. Michael Maples who earlier this year before a Congressional Committee correctly maintained that Raul Castro will “likely maintain power and stability” after Castro’s death and that he has “widespread respect and support among Cuban military leaders who will be crucial in a permanent government succession.”

The “succession” distinction can serve a form of “political insurance” for the Cuban people, including the future generation of political and business leaders on the island. In other

words, by reminding Cubans that we will not replace one dictator for another as part of a transition government, we reward short-term political risk taking by prospective leaders and the general population. By calling it what it is today in Cuba, a succession, we strengthen our policy of supporting pro-democracy movements on the island by clearly signaling a constant variable in this process and providing some certainty of our actions. Nothing could be more powerful than the notion of “certainty” for people struggling to change a government. Unlike other variables of U.S. law that the current government could mimic in the public arena in speeches, in the media or even diplomatic channels, the Cuban regime cannot tinker or fake the requirement that a transition government cannot include either of the Castro brothers.

Finally, at various levels of our government a constancy of rhetoric on this point of succession has a useful and powerful application for U.S. planners that manage the Western Hemisphere and Cuba. Our policy is only as good as the ultimate outcome which, in this case, is a peaceful reintegration and transition back to democracy in Cuba. A key component of this process is accuracy and consistency that not only has repercussions for Cuba policy planning, but for other pressing issues in the Western Hemisphere that will undoubtedly be affected by leadership changes on the island.

Cuba and U.S. Policy Toward Latin America

On this latter subject looms the larger issue involving U.S. policy toward the Western Hemisphere, at least dating back to the Ford Administration, of striving toward continuity of civilian-controlled governments and regional security. The U.S. so ardently believes in this model that, when absolutely necessary, we have even used our military might to advance that agenda in places such as Haiti, Panama and Grenada, or in more protracted engagements such as the war on drugs in Colombia and the Andean region.

Since the Ford/Carter era, U.S. policy toward Latin America has emphasized democracy, human rights and constitutional government. Under President Ronald Reagan the U.S. intervened in Grenada, under President Bush, Sr. the U.S. intervened in Panama and under President Clinton the U.S. landed marines in Haiti, all to restore elected governments to those countries. In addition, the U.S. has prevented military coups in the region and supported the will of the people in free elections. While U.S. policy emphasizing democracy, human rights and constitutional government has not been uniformly applied throughout the world, it is U.S. policy in the region. Lost in the U.S./Cuba policy debate is the rather obvious point that Cuba is part of Latin America. Success or failure in Cuba is success or failure of our Western Hemisphere policy.

A normalization of relations with a military dictatorship in Cuba with General Raul Castro or any successor, will send the wrong message to the rest of the Hemisphere: that militarism is welcomed again in the region and that populist regimes that rig elections and perpetuate themselves in power will also be welcomed. Supporting regimes and dictators that violate human rights and abuse their population is an ill-advised policy that rewards and encourages further abuses, whether in Cuba, Latin America or any other region of the world.

Whatever little prestige the U.S. has left in Latin America and the Caribbean is based on the fact that U.S. policy historically stands for democracy, civilian-controlled governments. If we abandon this principle in the region by allowing a military succession in Cuba, we will lose whatever good will we have built since the Ford/Carter era. This principle is enshrined in U.S./Cuba policies. Principles play an important role in American foreign policy and we should not callously abandon them in Cuba in the pursuit of mollifying a domestic constituency for minor economic gains or in the hope, some would argue quixotically, that trade, tourism and investments will soften a hardened dictatorship and produce a regime change toward democracy.

Stay the Course on Cuba

In addition to concrete steps to advance U.S. policy articulated by U.S. laws on the books since 1992, as well as the more recent White House Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, changing our rhetoric to correctly convey this key pivot – that there can be no transition government with either Fidel Castro or Raul Castro – is absolutely vital. From this clear message, we must follow with no further weakening of U.S. sanctions such as easing travel restrictions or allowing increased sales of U.S. products to Cuba that only go to support the fragile tourism trade in the island.

If anything, the easing of economic sanctions on Cuba without major concessions from the Cuban government would send the wrong message “to the enemies of the United States” in the Hemisphere and elsewhere: that a foreign leader can seize U.S. properties without compensation; allow the use of his territory for the introduction of nuclear missiles aimed at the United States; espouse terrorism and anti-U.S. causes throughout the world; and eventually the United States will “forget and forgive,” and reward him with tourism, investments and economic aid. Moreover, one could argue that Cuba has an even higher burden to meet in a post September 11, 2001 world since it has clearly chosen to side with the likes of Iran and other terror states, individuals, and groups.

As occurred in the mid-1990's, an infusion of American tourist dollars at this juncture will provide the Cuban government with a further disincentive to adopt deeper economic reforms. Cuba's limited economic reforms were enacted in the early 1990's, when the island's economic contraction was at its worst. Once the economy began to stabilize by 1996 as a result of foreign tourism and investments, and exile remittances, the earlier reforms were halted or rescinded by the Cuban Communist Party (“CCP”). Hence, the assumption that the Cuban leadership would allow U.S. tourists or businesses to subvert the revolution and influence internal developments is, at best, naïve.

An argument used by the supporters of easing travel restrictions to Cuba is that through people-to-people contact, change can happen on the island. Yet American tourists in Cuba will have limited contact with Cubans. Most Cuban resorts are built in isolated areas, are off limits to the average Cuban, and are controlled by Cuba's efficient security apparatus. Most Americans don't speak Spanish, have but limited contact with ordinary Cubans, and are not interested in visiting the island to subvert its regime or spread democracy. In fact, the Cuban Communist Party in addition to barring Cubans from public beaches to limit exposure to foreigners, enacted Cuban Law 88 in 1999 to prohibit Cubans from receiving publications from tourists.

There is no persuasive, much less credible evidence to support the notion that engagement with a totalitarian state will bring about its demise. Only academic ideologues and some members of Congress interested in catering to the economic needs of their state's constituencies cling to this notion. Their calls for ending the embargo have little to do with democracy in Cuba or the welfare of the Cuban people.

In the end, if travel restrictions were eased by the Congress money from American tourists would flow into businesses owned by the Castro government thus strengthening state enterprises and, literally, contravening U.S. law and undermining larger policy goals of a peaceful transition to democracy. The tourist industry is controlled by the military and the Castro brothers and it is the one area of the economy on which the government, besides oil exploration, on which the future economic survival of the island depends. Our goal in Cuba is not to support the Cuban regime, and hurt the Cuban people. It is the other way around. And, in a post-09/11/01 world, why would Americans want to perpetuate a State Department-listed state sponsor of terror just 90 miles from our shores by spending money at its government-owned hotels and beach front properties?

The travel ban and the embargo should be lifted as a result of negotiations between the U.S. and a Cuban government willing to provide meaningful political and economic concessions or when there is a democratic government in place in the island. U.S. law provides the Cuban government and its sole political party, the Cuban Communist Party, a clear roadmap on what it needs to do to change the status of relations between our two countries.

The U.S. should start by reminding the Cubans that one key, non-negotiable point, at least according to U.S. law since the 1990s, is that a transition government cannot include either of the Castro brothers. Unless Congress amends the law, our policy should be clear and unequivocal. It will ensure that we view U.S. policy toward Cuba as we do toward the rest of the Western Hemisphere as well as inject a much needed post-09/11 dose of reality in dealing with a state sponsor of terrorism.

Jason Poblete is a Washington, DC Attorney at the international law firm Reed Smith and practices in the Federal Government Contracts/Export Controls & Trade Group. He is the editor of the Washington report, part of the Cuba Business Roundtable newsletter, a publication of the Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies.

Jaime Suchlicki is professor and Director of ICCAS at the University of Miami. He is the author of Cuba from Columbus to Castro, now in its fifth edition.