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Think Again: Engaging Cuba

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Why dealing with the Castro regime is a fool's errand.

“It’s Time for the U.S. to Reach out and Engage the Castro Regime.”

Watch out! Before embarking on any attempt at rapprochement with the Castro regime, U.S. President Barack Obama would be wise to review his predecessors' experiences.

Gerald Ford's negotiations with Fidel Castro's representatives had to be called off when 15,000 Cuban troops landed in Angola. Jimmy Carter's efforts led to the opening of interest sections in Havana and Washington, but hopes for normalization were quashed when the Castro regime deployed troops to Ethiopia and subsequently unleashed the Mariel boatlift, which brought 125,000 refugees to Florida, including more than 2,700 convicted criminals and misfits. Several foreign-policy experts called the boatlift an act of migratory aggression.

With the Cold War over, President Bill Clinton tried anew to improve U.S. relations with Cuba, fostering people-to-people contacts. These efforts were foiled by a crisis of refugee rafters in 1994 and again in 1996 when Cuban jet fighters shot down two unarmed planes flying over international waters on a humanitarian mission.

The circumstances have changed since then, but the Cuban regime (now under the dual leadership of the Castro brothers) essentially remains the same. So, at the very least, caution and a step-by-step approach are called for in any new attempt to engage with this wily regime, which has managed to exploit naïveté and signs of weakness to its advantage.

“The Embargo Is a Failure.”

Depends. Some would say the embargo hasn't worked because Cuba's totalitarian regime remains in power. But it's also exhausted and weaker. The regime today faces disgruntled apparatchiks, cracks within its system, a critical economic and financial situation, and growing restlessness and dissent among the population.

The embargo is the only leverage the United States has to ensure a democratic transition, if not under the Castro brothers, then with their successors. Why give up something for nothing? The European Union did that by unilaterally lifting its diplomatic sanctions against the Cuban regime, but Europe's hopes for human rights improvements have so far been in vain. Despite striking out yet again during his trip to Havana last month, European commissioner for development and humanitarian aid, Louis Michel, said that "Cuba-EU relations may go very far." He also hailed the importance of boosting collaboration between both sides. All this while more than 300 Cuban political prisoners remain behind bars under brutal conditions.

Cuba today is virtually bankrupt, with a huge external debt it is unable to serve or repay. According to the Paris Club group of creditors, Cuba owes close to \$30 billion to its trading partners -- the second-highest level of indebtedness reported by the group. Given the sharp decline in oil prices, it is unlikely that Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez will be able to maintain the current level of subsidies and other financial assistance granted to Cuba (to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars annually).

Under these circumstances, the Castro regime has embarked on a charm offensive with a single objective in mind: a U.S. bailout. The regime is looking to Uncle Sam for additional dollars via American tourists, plus commercial lines of credit and access to international banks and monetary funds for the renegotiation or cancellation of its external debt. That is leverage the United States could guardedly use -- not to provide life support to a battered tyranny, but to secure meaningful changes that will hasten the democratization of Cuba.

“Raúl Castro Is More Pragmatic Than His Brother.”

Wishful thinking. Remember that Raúl Castro was largely responsible for building the totalitarian-military apparatus in Cuba. He has promised reforms, but those reforms have been more cosmetic than real. Cubans can now legally go to hotels they cannot afford and buy computers without access to the Internet. Farmers have been leased state-owned land, but without the necessary capital, fertilizers, technology, and tools to make it productive.

Raúl Castro said he would encourage open debate, yet dissidents are constantly harassed and detained. Even several high-level government officials, accused by Raúl as deviationists, were recently purged and forced to repent, Stalin-style. The current Politburo has been largely militarized, with key members of the old guard loyal to Raúl. Lacking the grip and charisma of his brother, he fears the "reformists" who are starting to emerge, hence Raúl's interest in shoring up his prestige and authority with high-level negotiations with Washington and the readmission of Cuba to the Organization of American States and other international forums. He is only looking for concessions that will prop up his internal standing, not real change.

“The Embargo Allows the Regime to Blame the U.S. for Cuba’s Problems.”

Who cares? The Castros have never needed help in coming up with reasons to blame Yankee imperialism or the CIA for any criticism or discontent on the island. Dissidents are constantly being accused of serving the enemy (the United States). Even Spain -- a staunch Castro supporter -- was recently lashed by the ailing ruler for helping the "genocide empire" with its anti-Cuba policy.

But it is safe to say that most Cubans long ago realized that the main cause of their calamity is not the external U.S. embargo, but the internal government blockade. Except among the government *nomenklatura*, there is very little animosity toward Americans in Cuba. The dream of most Cubans today, absent a change that will unshackle them, is to reach Miami, one way or another, to renew their lives with freedom and opportunities to prosper.

“Cultural Exchanges and Tourism Can Hasten Political Change.”

If only. Cultural exchanges would be great if U.S. students, professors, intellectuals, scientists, and artists enjoyed in Cuba the same rights of mobility and expression that their Cuban counterparts are granted in the United States. As for tourism, more than 15 million tourists have gone to Cuba in the last 10 years, primarily from Canada and Europe. They have had no discernable impact on the regime, other than providing hard currency, and have had very limited interaction with the local population. Under the existing system, a kind of apartheid on the Caribbean, Cubans are barred from entering tourist enclaves (most of them are outside Havana) and penalized for engaging in discussions or accepting publications deemed counterrevolutionary. In any forthcoming negotiations, attempts should be made to remove these barriers.

“Cuba Is No Longer a Threat to the United States.”

Don't be so sure. The fact that Cuba, without Soviet backing, is no longer a direct military threat does not make the regime that rules the island a benign dictatorship. Its biotechnology capability, developed in conjunction with Iran, and its close relationship with North Korea pose serious concerns. Cuba continues to harbor terrorists from ETA, FARC, and ELN, as well as U.S.-convicted criminals and fugitives.

Cuban officials have been indicted in the past for trafficking drugs from the island to the United States, and today, according to the *Miami Herald's* summary of a report by the U.S. Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "Cuba is doing little to stop drug smuggling, and ... its cooperation with U.S. efforts is sporadic and limited." Most ominous is the Castro regime's continued support of Chávez's authoritarian and expansionist government with some 40,000 Cubans in Venezuela, including intelligence and military officers and educational "indoctrinators." For many populists in Latin America, Castro's Cuba remains an attractive and contagious symbol of anti-U.S. defiance.

“U.S. Engagement with the Castro Regime Is the Best Hope for a Democratic Cuba.”

Not at all. The hope lies primarily with the silent majority on the island, which is no longer so silent. It includes the brave members of the dissident and human rights movements who remain at the vanguard; the political prisoners who from their cells remain undaunted; the wives of those prisoners parading and demanding the release of their loved ones; intellectuals challenging the Communist Party's rewrite of Cuban history; the priest who sent an open letter to Raúl Castro demanding drastic reforms; tourism workers objecting to stifling taxes; comedians making fun of the government; bloggers debunking the lies spread by the regime; and the Cubans who, during a recent art fair in Havana, went up to the podium, shouted "Freedom!", and were warmly applauded by the audience.

This surging dissident movement, conscious of its rights and determined to be the protagonist of Cuba's future, needs to be encouraged and supported by the United States and others as Solidarity was in Poland: with sufficient funds and tools for civic, peaceful resistance, and with enlightening radio and TV transmissions that can overcome the regime's jamming and provide the same impetus for change that Radio Free Europe did in the 1980s.

This dissident movement, part of the larger civil society, will eventually coalesce with reformists from within the government's ranks and pave the way for a democratic transition in Cuba. Forget the Castro brothers; these are the Cubans the United States must engage with.

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