

Toward Rapprochement between the United States and Cuba with a Special Emphasis on Obama's Cuba Thaw

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Abstract:

This paper explores the diplomatic process undertaken by President Barack Obama to achieve rapprochement with Cuba after more than five decades of strained relations. Obama's approach to fostering reconciliation with Cuba was the result of US failed policies. Focusing on the period leading up to the historic announcement on December 17, 2014, and the subsequent policy changes, this study analyzes the motives, strategies, and outcomes of Obama's policy of engagement. Despite the considerable challenges associated with the Cuba thaw, the short-term policy outcomes and the broader implications for regional dynamics cannot be overlooked. The paper concludes that Obama's engagement with Cuba was successful in achieving significant policy changes, fostering a more constructive relationship between the two nations, and drawing the path for continued progress in U.S.-Cuban relations.

Keywords: Cuba Thaw; Trade Embargo; Normalization; President Obama; Latin America.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The United States and Cuba were locked in a Cold War rivalry for decades. A long history of US hostility toward Cuba stemmed from Cuba's revolutionary leaders who sought friendship with enemies of the United States. After the revolution in 1959, Fidel Castro, Cuba's premier, implemented a political and economic system that differed significantly from the U.S. model. Since then, the process of normalization had been challenged by the ideological differences and geopolitical considerations which made it difficult for earlier U.S. presidents to advance bilateral relations.

While previous U.S. administrations' efforts to engage with Cuba did not achieve remarkable breakthroughs, President made a notable success in normalizing relations with Cuba. William M. LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, authors of *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana*, presented in their book a remarkably distinctive view on secret negotiations between both nations. The authors asserted that since the presidency of Kennedy, all US administrations were involved in restoring diplomatic talks with Cuba. In this respect, Obama was not the first president to pursue normalization with Cuba as previous presidents attempted to re-establish diplomatic ties through "secret back-channel diplomacy"¹.

Obama's reversal of Cold War policies was a significant departure from the previous approach of isolation and hostility. The policy shift responded to a set of domestic considerations, political calculations, and external pressures. First, the perceived failure of the embargo was a significant factor that influenced President Obama's decision to change the US policy toward Cuba. The primary goal of the embargo, which was to bring about political and economic change in Cuba, has not been achieved. Second, the Cuban American community which was characterized by a strong stand against lifting the embargo became gradually open to more moderate policies. Third, growing voices among Cuban American Congressmen emerged to

criticize the costs of maintaining the embargo on Cuba and the United States. Fourth, the Cuba thaw was a broader shift in U.S. policy toward Latin America to foster greater hemispheric unity.

Obama's Cuba policy alleviated a major cause of irritation across the hemisphere. The shift was seen as an important development that contributed to broader implications for U.S. standing in Latin America². As Cuba symbolized resistance against U.S. imperialism, the region had often supported the end of the economic embargo on the island. Related to this fact, Washington realized that improving relations with Cuba was a step forward improving U.S.-Latin American relations³.

In an attempt to understand the subject in hand, two broad questions are raised; first, what circumstances led to the Cuba thaw specifically taking place during the Obama presidency? Second, to what extent can the Cuba thaw be considered a success? The present research paper aims at investigating the Cuba thaw, its reasons, and the repercussions engendered by the policy change.

The followed methodology encompasses both the qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative method is applied to identify the main elements of Obama's policy shift toward Cuba. Interpretation and analysis to policy statements examine the motivations, objectives, and the specific actions taken to promote normalization. Equally, the quantitative data is deemed necessary as statistics and numbers are used to measure the Cuban American community views on the embargo and its response to Obama's Cuba policy.

2. Why Does Cuba Matter?

In the past, US global role in spreading democracy and liberal values failed to defend human rights and improve civil liberties ninety miles off the coast of Florida. The embargo that created further unintended hardships for the Cuban people left the island unaltered;

the “undemocratic” regime did not change, media did not become independent, and economy was still controlled by government. US disengagement with the island paved the way for countries like China to exercise their influence in the region. The Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere reported that “the U.S. has drifted instead toward benign neglect toward Latin America and the Caribbean. China has taken notice, and China has stepped up into this vacuum of leadership”⁴. China’s presence in the region did not only influence the island, it impeded the advancement of US interests as Cuban markets were not accessible to American competition.

Travel ban is another pivotal issue in bilateral relations that affects both Cubans and Americans as it thwarts significant educational exchange programs. Today, Cuba’s unchallenged development in medicine, education, and environmental science represents a worldwide experience that all countries seek to learn from. The travel ban prevents Americans from seizing important educational opportunities and shrinks the role of higher education in promoting democracy and human rights⁵. The economic and political implications that resulted from US stringent policies of isolating the island did not only influence Cuba and the United States, they disturbed the already unstable US hemispheric relations.

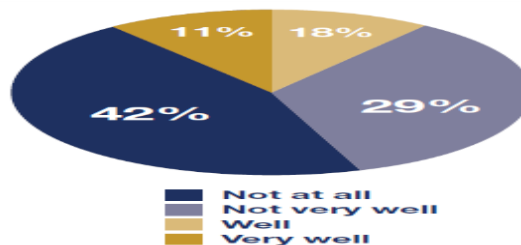
It becomes evident that US relations with Latin America could not be improved without bridging the Cuba gap. As Serbin and Serbin Pont noted, “Cuba became the key to accessing a now diplomatically distant region as the embargo on the island had not only taken its toll on bilateral relations, but had become a key issue of dispute between the US and Latin American countries”⁶. U.S. aggressive policies against Cuba led to major political complications with hemispheric neighbors who, nonetheless, remain skeptical about Obama’s pledge for change in the continent without solving the Cuban issue. The eventual thaw with Cuba would certainly lead to more reconciliation with Latin American neighbors.

How Cuba is seen by Americans is another changing parameter that reflects the US political consideration of this country. In recent years, Cuba was viewed favorably by the majority of American citizens. A Gallup poll conducted with random of 1,021 Americans in 2016 showed that the American view on Cuba significantly improved in the last decade. This noticeable change was illustrated through respondents of earlier Gallup polls who had an unfavorable image on Cuba in 1996 (81%). In 2016, Cuba's favorable image was represented in 54 % of respondents' answers and a continuous decline in the unfavorable option (40%)⁷. This change in US public opinion could not be easily overlooked by decision makers especially in regard to election campaigns.

3. The Trade Embargo: New Prospect

The embargo on Cuba was meant to exercise pressure on the Cuban government to change its “communist”, “undemocratic” and “unjust” policies. For more than fifty years, the embargo failed to achieve any of the intended goals⁸. This belief was widely shared by the majority of Cuban Americans (71 %) who think that the embargo did not reach its objectives. Forty two per cent of respondents saw that the embargo did not work at all, while another 29 % believed that it did not work well (see fig. 1).

Fig.1. Cuban Americans' Views on the Embargo



Source: Guillermo, G. & Gladwin H, 2014, p8.

The Cuban Diaspora in the United States, particularly in Florida has used a considerable political and economic influence to define the city's prominent role in US politics⁹. The FIU Cuba Poll is an outstanding example which tracked the public opinion and attitudes of Cuban Americans and their descendants in Florida. The poll findings have been cited by the US media as the most accurate on Cuban Americans' attitudes as to sensitive issues such as the economic embargo, resuming diplomatic relations, travel restrictions, and the support of human rights in the Island⁹. The Cuba poll investigates the impact of Cuban Americans on U.S. attitudes toward their country of origin. The poll which was conducted months before US-Cuba D-17 was considered pivotal in revealing Cuban Americans' attitudes on lifting the embargo.

In Florida, the Cuban American community deviated from its traditional monolithic pro-embargo position. Reviewing US policy toward Cuba became a major concern to the younger members of the Cuban American community who believe that the embargo policy ought to be replaced by more engagement¹⁰. This new direction in viewing US- Cuban relations was endorsed by young Cuban Americans, politicians, and businessmen. Representative Kathy Castor, a Democrat from Tampa (Florida) stands as an excellent example of a Congresswoman who became the first in the legislative branch to call for lifting the embargo. Castor represents the Tampa Bay area that is largely occupied by Cubans where the anti-Castro sentiment prevailed¹¹.

In 2013, Joe García, a Miami Congressman known for advocating Cuban research institute attempt to test a diabetes treatment in the United States. Garcia's stance on US-Cuban relations was a new perception in the embargo spectrum inside the US Congress as he became the first Cuban American Congressman to uphold measures against the embargo¹². Although support for the Cuban drug license was primarily based on medical and humanitarian reasons, Garcia's voice could engender significant political

implications for alleviating travel and economic restrictions. He represented a more moderate political position in contrast to right-wing Cuban American Congressmen who supported tight embargo measures.

García stood against influential Cuban American Congressmen who made the reviewing of the embargo policy a harder task to accomplish. Senator Robert Menendez, a Democrat from New Jersey, Senator Marco Rubio, a Republican from Florida, Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Representative Mario Diaz-Balart, both Miami Republicans hindered Congress formulation of new laws in favor of normalization¹³. The emerging voices in Congress may hopefully push for more changes in US policies to end the economic blockade on Cuba which requires a congressional approval.

4. Obama and Latin America: US Stance between Continuity and Change

During his bid for the presidency, Obama's course on Latin America seemed more enthusiastic. Rejecting the old backyard position, Obama considered Latin American countries as neighbors which deserved diplomatic respect through pursuing talks especially with those who had deep rooted ideological divergences with the United States¹⁴. Obama made explicit that his policy toward Latin America "[would] be guided by the simple principle that what's good for the people of the Americas is good for the United States"¹⁵. Obama's pledge for more engagement in the continent was tested soon few months after his election in 2009.

In 2009, Joe Biden, the then US Vice President, expressed in a press conference in Chile that the United States did not intend to lift the embargo. He further argued that "Cuban people should determine their own fate and they should be able to live in freedom and have some prospect of economic prosperity"¹⁶. Biden's statement was quite expected as Obama insisted previously during his 2008 bid for the presidency that the trade embargo remained in its present condition.

While President Obama called for more inclination toward diplomacy, negotiations, and mutual understanding with hemispheric neighbors, Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton and her staff showed the opposite. In 2009, James Steinberg, the newly appointed Deputy Secretary of State argued that the US acts as “a counterweight to governments like those currently in power in Venezuela and Bolivia which pursue policies which do not serve the interests of their people or the region”¹⁷. Steinberg’s bold words revealed US traditional foreign policy view to Latin American countries, a trajectory that was better characterized by false accusations, misunderstanding, and mistrust.

Most Latin American leaders welcomed Obama to the White House and felt more reassured by his elections. When they watched the U.S. Presidential campaign, leaders in Latin America expected a president with a new vision to the Western Hemisphere. President Lula da Silva of Brazil expressed his feeling: “just as Brazil elected a metal worker, Bolivia elected an Indian, Venezuela elected Chávez, and Paraguay a bishop, I think that it would be an extraordinary thing if, in the largest economy in the world, a black man were elected president of the United States”¹⁸. Fidel Castro who had equally shared a similar stance, described Obama as “intelligent, even-tempered, sincere”¹⁹. Whereas he thought that McCain was “old, bellicose, uncultured, not very intelligent and not healthy”²⁰. With the election of Obama, Latin American presidents showed optimism about a substantial altering in the direction of U.S. foreign policy in regard to Latin America.

Latin American leaders’ great expectations about the newly elected president were raised once more in the 2009 Summit of Americas in Trinidad. The Port of Spain summit was the first hemispheric forum for President Obama. Latin American leaders’ speeches had overtly addressed sharp criticism to past and current U.S. policies, yet the general atmosphere was favorable compared to previous summits. Obama’s speeches and actions were praised by

leaders who declared that the summit marked a new phase in hemispheric relations²¹. These hopes vanished few months after Obama's elections when he showed more continuity than change to his predecessor's

In his speech, President Obama pointed up a shifting foreign policy trajectory toward Latin America by criticizing old U.S. policies that took the region "for granted"²². However, he did not remove one of Bush's key diplomats, Thomas Shannon. Shannon, who served as Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs in the wake of Bush's administration, gained a reputation as the most influential official regarding U.S. relations with Latin American countries. Obama left him in position during the first years of his administration before he appointed him Ambassador to Brazil and later Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs in 2016²³. These politicians would certainly continue in their support for poisoned U.S. relations with Latin American countries, a legacy that they inherited from Bush.

Still the spirit of change characterized relatively the president's agenda especially that many groups including farmers, the Catholic Church, tourism businessmen, and Cuban Americans who immigrated recently to the United States would continually claim lifting the embargo²⁴. In 2011, Obama partially reversed Bush's policies toward Havana by lifting restrictions on several types of travel including religious, educational, and family. Allowing Americans to send remittances to Cuba was also permitted²⁵. Although the U.S. government attempted occasionally to ease restrictions on Cuba, bilateral relations were poisoned by an overdose of skepticism. Easing sanctions on Cuba was considered as distrustful to Cubans, while to Americans, it was an opportunity for the Cuban government to hopefully reconsider human rights, legal, and civil reforms.

5. On a Journey toward Normalization

The election of a Democratic president to the White House and the leadership change in Cuba raised hope especially to those who had been waiting for a shift in the course of bilateral relations. Despite the fact that Obama's general approach to foreign policy and specific vision to Latin American neighbors signaled an attempt of improvement in U.S.-Cuba relations, his policy toward Cuba was not quite understood during his first years in office. Obama's change slogan adopted in his presidential campaign was interpreted into more continuity to his predecessor's policies especially in regard to the embargo.

During his run for the presidency in 2007, Obama's Cuba rhetoric seemed to appeal to all Cuban Americans. Senator Obama promised to change Cuba policy that proved to be a failure over the last fifty years. He suggested lifting restrictions on remittances and family travel, enhancing people-to-people contact, and engaging with Cuba on issues that interest both countries. Lifting the embargo, however, was not among Obama's Cuba policy objectives²⁶. His approach held the stick from the middle as it gave hope to moderate Cuban Americans who dreamt of normalized relations with Cuba and the more conservative political faction that had historically fought for maintaining the embargo.

Obama's attempt to be inclusive proved successful as he gained 35% of Cuban Americans' votes in Miami- Dade County compared to John Kerry who won only 25% of the votes in 2004. Winning Hispanics' votes marked a significant shift in the 2008 elections; Obama was the first Democratic candidate to win the State of Florida in which the Republicans historically dominated Hispanics' votes. On the national level, Obama gained a wider margin in Hispanics' votes by obtaining 66 % compared to McCain who had only got 42 %²⁷. The unprecedented electoral shift was to great extent related to generational make-up in the Cuban American community in which elderly electors tend to be republicans, while, younger members prefer

the Democratic Party²⁸. This electoral divergence signaled a new direction that both Democratic and Republican politicians must consider in upcoming elections especially in regard to young voters.

Obama's first step in the course of U.S. rapprochement with Cuba was immediately taken after his election when he allowed Cuban Americans to visit their homeland without restrictions and expanded licensed travel²⁹. Obama's tactical maneuvers were certainly well received by the Cuban American community. Optimists expected President Obama to have an updated policy toward Havana as a response to failed past U.S. policies. Aligned with promoting American principles, Obama was waiting for a positive Cuban reaction before moving forward in the process of re-establishing relations. He made it clear in a joint press conference with President Felipe Calderon of Mexico in 2009 stating that:

Relationship that effectively has been frozen for 50 years is not going to thaw overnight. And so having taken the first step, I think it's very much in our interest to see whether Cuba is also ready to change. We don't expect them to change overnight. That would be unrealistic. But we do expect that Cuba will send signals that they're interested in liberalizing in such a way that not only do U.S.-Cuban relations improve³⁰.

For Obama, normalizing relations with Cuba would not take place without Cuba's reconsideration of U.S. model of democracy, a policy that seemed more similar to those of his predecessors. The slow and cautious process toward more normal relationships soon faced another crisis between the two countries. The arrest of the U.S. contractor Alan Gross by the Cuban authorities dashed hope for further diplomatic reconciliations in the course of U.S.-Cuban relations. Gross who was building access to internet in Cuba, was arrested for providing illegal satellite to members of Cuba's Jewish community³¹. During his first years in office, Obama's Cuba approach could not be fully understood as it was difficult to predict whether alleviating more

financial restrictions on the island was on the President's agenda before Gross' incident or not.

Obama's shift in tone was again felt when he delivered his critical statements on U.S. policies at a Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee fundraiser in 2013. The speech of the President had implicitly overshadowed an upcoming change in U.S. policy toward Havana in response to domestic changes in Cuba. In his address to Floridians, Obama was intransigent on this point:

And we've started to see changes on the island. Now, I think we all understand that, ultimately, freedom in Cuba will come because of extraordinary activists and the incredible courage of folks like we see here today. But the United States can help. And we have to be creative. And we have to be thoughtful. And we have to continue to update our policies. Keep in mind that when Castro came to power, I was just born. So the notion that the same policies that we put in place in 1961 would somehow still be as effective³².

On several occasions, Obama made similar declarations. What made this speech specific is that the President advocated pursuing one of the major concerns in the U.S.-Cuban relations, freedom in Cuba through a new approach of engagement that he referred to as updating U.S. policies. For the first time, Obama's engagement policy appeared on the horizon as he matched his words with the green light for starting secret negotiations with Cuba. As a result, the Cuba thaw became a reality that evolved out of a genuine political will in Washington accompanied with changes in both Cuba and the United States.

President Obama's second term witnessed a significant shift in U.S.-Cuban relations, a thaw in more than fifty-years freeze took place. The Cuba thaw is defined as "the period between 2014- 2016 during which U.S.-Cuban relations were normalized"³³. Obama who endorsed initially an inconsistent Cuba policy during his first term, could finally summon courage to take more serious steps in the

process of normalization. The decision to normalize relations with Cuba was partially related to the fact that Obama was re-elected for a final term. He therefore, did not have to worry again about uncalculated political outcomes.

Winning voters' support was not the only reason that encouraged Obama to reconsider bilateral relations. The island witnessed economic reforms that started in 2011 in an attempt to update the Cuban government economic policies. The major economic changes included the removal of state imposed industries, permission of more freedom to small businesses, and the opening of agriculture to small producers and cooperatives. In response to these changes, the Obama foreign policy team with the support of the Senate was permitted to start secret negotiations with Cuban officials. The negotiations resulted in the release of Alan Gross, the remaining members of the Cuban Five, and an American intelligence asset who was imprisoned in Cuba. Unexpectedly, the negotiations also ended with the American and Cuban leaders' historic joint announcement of normalization³⁴.

Since the arrival of Obama to the White House, Latin American leaders did not miss a single Summit of the Americas to reveal their anger with the U.S.-Cuba policy. The Obama administration realized that improving relations with Latin American neighbors could not be attained without solving the Cuban issue. A reason that made pundits in both the United States and Cuba believe that "Obama [...favored normalization] not for Cuba's sake, but the U.S.'s sake, because this had become an embarrassment for the U.S. – a major obstacle in the relationship with Latin America"³⁵. The U.S. hostile Cuba policy tarnished U.S. global image, a major issue that President Obama targeted in his foreign policy agenda.

The Cuba thaw paved the way for important diplomatic reconciliations including prisoners' swap, reopening embassies in Washington and Havana, lifting some of travel restrictions, mutual cooperation on environmental issues, upper-level diplomatic visits, and the first direct mail service. Normalization reached momentum

with Obama's historic visit to the island as he was the first serving president to visit Havana since Calvin Coolidge in 1928. On the other hand, the trade embargo, U.S. occupation of the Guantanamo Bay, human rights, civil liberties in Cuba, and the issue of U.S. properties seized after the revolution in 1959 thwarted noteworthy progress in bilateral relations³⁶.

The first step toward normalization for both Cuba and the United State was positive. The major reward, nonetheless, came from Latin America³⁷. Latin American leaders who supported Obama as a candidate and later as an elect president finally met their expectations. In the wake of U.S. and Cuban Presidents' normalization declaration, Latin American leaders endorsed the decision. The Venezuelan President, Cuba's closest ally, referred to the thaw as "[a] valiant and historically necessary gesture by President Barack Obama."³⁸. Venezuela, one of the fiercest critics to U.S. policies, shared the same view with the more pro-American countries such as Mexico and Colombia. President, Juan Manuel Santos, hoped that the thawing of relations would finally reach "the dream of having a continent where there is total peace"³⁹. Obama's initiative has undoubtedly marked a beginning of the end of inherited tensions across the Western Hemisphere.

6. CONCLUSION

Since the sixties, the U.S. endorsed a policy of isolation to oust the Castro regime. The embargo, an inherited Cold War policy, proved over the years to be counter-productive. This failed policy gave more legitimacy to the Castro government as it gained worldwide sympathy to his battle against U.S. imperialism. Maintaining the embargo fueled the international community's perception of U.S. bold policies especially that the conditions in which the embargo took place disappeared. After the demise of the Soviet Union, Cuba, the closest communist neighbor, posed no threat to U.S. national security. The embargo affected the United States like Cuba, at

least not on equal terms, but missing significant economic, medical, and educational exchange was bidirectional.

The complexity of the Cuba thaw lies in the different, sometimes, juxtaposing parties involved in U.S.-Cuban relations; the Cuban government, the Cuban people, the Cuban American community, Latin American neighbors, and most importantly U.S. interest. What made Obama's mission pretty difficult is the fact that the President Cuba policy could not court all. Although there are indications that positive results of reestablishing relations have taken place, it is difficult to realize the long-term impact of this normalization as far as the aforementioned parties are concerned. Cuba certainly remained a thorn in U.S. relations with Latin America for decades and U.S. engagement with the island would definitely lead to more engagement with the continent.

Obama's approach toward Cuba voiced a new direction in U.S. foreign policy as the administration became aware that fundamental change in the island would not be possible without a significant shift in U.S. Cold War policies. Obama's reelection, the division in the Cuban American community over the embargo policy, the growing political voices in favor of lifting the embargo, and the imposed pressure by Latin American leaders were pivotal factors that pushed Obama to re-establish diplomatic ties with Cuba. Complete normalization, however, has been challenged by the power of lifting the embargo that is solely delegated to U.S. Congress. While the Cuba thaw made progress in U.S.-Cuba relations, its overall success is mixed as challenges and obstacles persist.

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