

CUBA-UNITED STATES - The Slow Thaw

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May 1, 2009 - After nearly 50 years of unrelenting hostility to Cuba's revolutionary government, the United States has taken its first steps towards a thaw in relations. The Cuban government has responded cautiously and skeptically, but has kept the door open to this possibility.

Some commentators have attributed this new situation to a change in leadership in both countries. The real explanation lies much more in the changed geopolitical situation - in the world-system as a whole and in Latin America in particular.

The Cuban revolutionaries came to power in January 1959. Relations with the United States deteriorated badly within a year. In March of 1960, President Eisenhower ordered the preparation of an invasion by Cuban exiles to overthrow the Cuban government. Shortly after John F. Kennedy became president, he approved a revised version of the Eisenhower plan in March of 1961. One month later, the plan was implemented. It is known as the Bay of Pigs (Playa de Girón) invasion. It lasted a very few days and was a military fiasco for the U.S.-supported invaders.

In January of 1962, the United States proposed at the meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS) that Cuba be suspended from membership. The United States proposal was supported by 14 of 21 members, the bare two-thirds needed to pass it. Cuba voted no and six Latin American countries abstained. The principal ground for the suspension was the fact that Cuba had announced its adherence to Marxism-Leninism, which was deemed incompatible with membership. The United States in addition launched a total embargo on trade relations with Cuba and sought to get acquiescence in this boycott from its NATO allies in western Europe and from Latin American states.

October of 1962 marked the very dramatic Cuban missile crisis. The Soviet Union had placed nuclear missiles in Cuban sites. The United States demanded they be withdrawn. The world feared it was on the brink of a nuclear war. In the end, the Soviet Union withdrew the missiles, presumably against a secret pledge by the United States that they would not support a further invasion of Cuba. The Cuban government indicated its disagreement with the Soviet Union's decision, but maintained its good relations with that government.

As is evident, the main element in U.S. hostility to the Cuban government was Cold War considerations. From that point on, the U.S. government placed constant pressure on its NATO allies and Latin American states to cut all links with Cuba, which one by one most of them did.

At the same time, there were an increasing number of Cuban exiles in the United States. These exiles were determined to overthrow the Cuban government, and organized politically to ensure very strong support for this idea by the U.S. Congress and government. Over the first thirty years, this effort was increasingly successful.

Against this hostility, the Cuban government sought alliances not only with countries in the so-called socialist bloc but with revolutionary governments and movements in the so-called Third World. It "exported" to Third World countries its human capital in the form of well-trained physicians and schoolteachers. It offered crucial military assistance to the government of independent Angola, when it was fighting against invaders from the apartheid government of South Africa. Cuban troops helped defeat the South Africans at the crucial battle of Cuito Carnavale in 1988.

The entire situation changed in the 1990s in three crucial ways. The first new element was the collapse of the Soviet Union. This meant that Cold War considerations had now become irrelevant. It meant also that Cuba suffered great economic hardship in the 1990s because of the ending of Soviet/Russian economic assistance, and had to adjust its internal program.

The second new element, especially evident under the presidency of George W. Bush, was the acute decline of U.S. geopolitical power. This unleashed a serious reversal of Latin American politics, with the coming to power, in one country after another, of left-of-center governments. One by one, these countries all began to restore diplomatic relations with Cuba and to call for both the ending of the U.S. boycott and Cuba's reintegration into the OAS.

The third element was a marked transformation of the U.S. political scene. For the first time, there began to be serious talk about the "failure" of U.S. policy towards Cuba. There was pressure from farm interests to gain the right to sell their products in Cuba. This gained support from many Republican senators, including notably Richard Lugar, the senior Republican on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

Even more important perhaps was the fact that, after fifty years, the Cuban exile community had evolved in its political views. Large numbers of younger Cuban-Americans began to argue for the right to travel to Cuba, to send money there, and to have free and open exchange.

When Barack Obama became president, he was thus under some pressure to launch a "thaw" in Cuban-American relations. He did this by various initial gestures, undoing the restrictions on family remittances and travel imposed by his predecessor. How far Obama is ready to go to improve relations is as yet unknown. But whereas a mere ten years ago, the internal U.S. political pressure was overwhelmingly in favor of the economic boycott, the public and the politicians are now divided. And given the evolution of Latin American opinion and the growing size of the Latino population in the United States, it is likely that U.S. public opinion will evolve further in the coming year or two.

Cuba's reaction has been prudent. Fidel Castro explained it well on April 5. He said that Obama's gestures and statements were destined primarily to a U.S. public and expressed the view of a U.S. president. He then said two things: "Undoubtedly he is much better than Bush and McCain" (something many left critics of Obama are unwilling to admit) but Obama is constrained by the realities: "The empire is much stronger than he and his good intentions are."

So, Cuba is tentatively exploring how far the United States is ready to go. There are "low-level" diplomatic discussions currently going on. The Obama government is under internal pressures towards a "thaw." The Castro government is under Latin American pressures in favor of a "thaw." If geopolitical realities continue to evolve in the direction they have been heading in the last few years, it is not impossible that Cuba and the United States can achieve "normal" diplomatic relations. No doubt, both would continue to have different perspectives on the world, and pursue somewhat different objectives, but that is true of most bilateral relations. A situation in which the relations between Cuba and the United States were ones of dignity and mutual respect would be a great improvement over the relations of the past fifty years.

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