

Cuba-US detente: The long road ahead

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The reopening of embassies and establishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the US after 54 years marks the start of a new chapter in relations between the once estranged countries. Diplomatic engagement opens another road towards resolving many issues that have bedevilled relations between these two neighbours. But there are many difficult and long-standing differences that will require persistent efforts to resolve in moving from destructive conflict to constructive engagement. The development has been welcomed globally, and is especially welcome in the Americas. It is important to note various historical and political factors at work.

President Obama had indicated his intention to improve relations with Cuba as long back as 2005. But the opposition of hard-line Cuban Americans and their representatives in the Congress, and the imprisonment of USAID worker Alan Gross in 2009 stalled progress. The recent thaw began with the release of Alan Gross from a Cuban prison in exchange for the release of five Cubans imprisoned in the US since 1998 for spying. Gross was suffering from medical problems and there was a strong effort by the Jewish lobby to secure his release. The Vatican and Canada facilitated contacts that led to the agreement for the mutual release of Gross and the “Cuban five”. Gross’s release by the Cubans resulted in the Jewish lobby supporting détente with Cuba. A New Cuba-PAC has been set up to press for normalising relations with Cuba. The success on this front encouraged President Obama and President Raul Castro to move further, and led to the decision to resume full diplomatic relations, broken off in 1961.

US-Cuba rift: A brief history

Cuban-US relations have remained troubled since 1902, when Cuba gained independence after the intervention

of the US which defeated Spain in 1898. Puerto Rico was annexed by the US, the Philippines gained full independence, while Cuba was put under the US administration. The US Congress blocked the outright annexation of Cuba, but passed the Platt amendment under which the US would end its occupation of Cuba in return for Cuba's acceptance of certain conditions in a treaty, including the US right to intervene in Cuba's internal affairs. Since then the US has played a dominant role in Cuba's internal affairs, including military interventions in 1906-09, 1912, and 1917-22. In 1933 a popular rebellion led to a new government that nullified the Platt Amendment and carried out major reforms. The US reacted by denying recognition and threatening military intervention, and supported the Army Chief General Fulgencio Batista to gain de facto power and ultimately win the election in 1944. In 1952, the US engineered a coup by Gen. Batista who became president and led to a complete dominance of Cuba's economy by the US interests. It was the 1952 coup which sparked the rebellion by Fidel Castro and his supporters, who failed in 1953, but successfully in 1956-59. These events indicate the strong intervention by the US in Cuba's governance, including support to anti-democratic forces for strategic and economic reasons.

The revolutionary government that ousted the Batista dictatorship in 1959 was opposed by the US administration. The nationalisation of US companies, the purchase of oil from non-US companies, and other incidents led to a growing rift in the Cuba-US relations. Cuba turned increasingly to the USSR, and in January 1961 diplomatic relations were severed. In April 1961, the CIA sponsored an unsuccessful effort to land armed forces at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba to start a rebellion against Castro's government. In 1962 the Cuban missile crisis further worsened ties, and the US further tightened economic sanctions against Cuba. In 1965 the Cuban Communist party (PCC) was formally established and became Cuba's sole legitimate party in 1975.

Fall of USSR: Regime Change Games

Since 1961, the US-Cuban relations have been trapped in a vicious circle of mutual hostility despite some efforts to improve relations by Presidents Johnson and Carter. Nevertheless, cooperation on maritime boundary and migration issues led to some positive results. The collapse of the USSR, Cuba's main economic and political supporter in 1991, greatly weakened Cuba, heightened US expectations of a regime change, and led to renewed US efforts to change the regime. In response, the regime became increasingly suspicious of political dissidents and cracked down on them. Cuba-US polarisation surfaced in Latin American regional meetings and in the UN. The shadows of the past continue to haunt US-Cuba relations even today, though the generation which lived through these events has dwindled.



New vistas and challenges

The establishment of diplomatic relations is a welcome development for the entire region and the world. The US blockade of Cuba and extraterritorial application of its laws had irritated third countries such as Canada, the EU and even impacted India's business with Cuba. The entire edifice of the blockade built up of layers of legislation over the years will need to be demolished. This requires the approval of the US Congress and overcoming the resistance of diehard opponents, especially a few well-known Cuban-American legislators. On the positive side, many US states and businesses are keen to do normal business with Cuba, in sectors such as agriculture, food, tourism, logistics, pharma and biotech products, and oil and gas. They argue that such business would provide jobs and growth in many US states.

Politically, the Cuban American votes have played a critical role in US Presidential elections in swing states like Florida, but this factor has declined over the years. The new generation of Cuban Americans would prefer to relax travel restrictions. The larger Hispanic American community generally supports normalisation of relations. The Cuban regime has also been careful to give the impression of being reasonable on human rights issues, and has involved the Catholic Church in this effort. Cuba's one-party system is led by the Cuban Communist Party (PCC), and permits some choice of candidates at local level but not for the central parliament, which elects the Council of State headed by the President. The media and judiciary are also controlled by the PCC. A system of internal security based on local Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR) ensures that any tendencies against the regime are nipped in the bud. The PCC controls mass organisations such as labour unions, women's and youth organisations, and enterprise-level bodies. There is no concession to demands for genuine multi-party democracy, and dissidence is crushed with an iron hand, particularly if any sign of the US involvement is found.

Cuba has made remarkable advances in health, education and sports. Its health indicators are among the best

in the world, while it sends out competent medical personnel and medical brigades to other countries such as fighting AIDS in Haiti, Ebola in West Africa, etc. However, the inefficient state-controlled system has been unable to make optimal use of Cuba's agricultural potential and its high quality human resources remain underutilised, while entrepreneurship has been stifled. Inevitably, corruption has crept into state structures. The economy has become dependent on sugar and tobacco production while food security has suffered. The state system of providing subsidised or free rations has proved impossible to maintain. The welfare state system of free education, housing and guaranteed employment, but at very low salary levels, is also under pressure. The government led by Raul Castro has gone in for economic reforms following the model of China and Vietnam and a limited opening for the private sector. There are formidable challenges ahead even if the US economic blockade is lifted.

Cubans look forward to the easing of US economic blockade, which will open the doors for remittances from Cuban Americans to their relatives in Cuba, flow of investments into the economy, revival of tourism and external trade, and small business growth. However, these are also areas where challenges to the economic stranglehold of the regime may appear, and get translated into political currents. The US administration is bent on regime change to a multi-party democracy and will promote this objective by all means, including using the platform of the US Embassy. The normalisation of relations may indeed open up new avenues for change in Cuba.

The Way Ahead

Difficult issues remain to be resolved. Cuba wishes to get Guantanamo back and terminate what it sees as an illegally acquired lease over it. The US has claims for nationalised assets, while Cuba has claims for damages caused by the economic embargo and assets frozen by the US. Cuba wishes the US to end hostile propaganda, radio broadcasts, and social media aimed at changing the regime. The US is pressing for greater human rights, release of political prisoners, and political changes. There is plenty of work ahead for diplomats from both sides.

Opponents of normalisation argue that Cuba is now weakened due to problems in Venezuela, its important economic and political ally and could be pushed to a collapse. However, continued economic pressure may lead Cuba to increase its dependence on China and Russia, which would be against US strategic interests. A dramatic collapse of the Cuban regime would also not be in US interests, leading to a wave of migration across the Florida straits. The Obama administration's policy makes sense therefore, and serves to meet US long-term interests, while helping the Cuban people. Time will tell how this new Chapter in Cuba-US relations plays out.

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