



U.S.-Cuba: Time to Push the Door

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If we took their rhetoric at face value, Presidents Obama and Castro would appear confident that they can manage contact across the Florida Strait in ways that satisfy their political needs. But ties between the American and Cuban people can be a very powerful engine for truly *normal* relations.

Obama has given only passing mention to the concrete benefits that better relations will have for the United States -- deepening cooperation in counternarcotics, counterterrorism, illegal migration and combating scourges like Ebola. The potential value of trade and investment, of sharing medical and environmental research, and other interaction is barely raised. Rather, he's been trying to sell his policy as helping achieve what 50-plus years of embargo and isolation have failed to deliver: "to empower the Cuban people" and drive a "lasting transformation" in Cuba.

President Castro, for his part, is saying that the normalization process won't disrupt his revolution. Three days after the big announcement, he reassured the National Assembly that Cuba is not going to give up "the ideas for which it has fought for more than a century and for which its people have spilled much blood and gone through the greatest risks." Not surprisingly, state security detained rights activists trying to hold a protest in the Plaza de la Revolución last week.

The obstacles to real improvements in relations are significant. Hardliners in both capitals hold sway far beyond their numbers in both legislatures. Political interests and bureaucratic momentum driving U.S. programs, such as the \$265 million-plus we've spent on "democracy promotion" and \$25 million a year on Radio and TV Martí, are powerful. On the Cuban side, an almost obsessive skepticism about the United States makes even "trust but verify" a difficult option.

Nonetheless, the new measures promise to create enormous opportunity for change -- if citizens on both sides push to use it. Obama loosened certain obstacles for Americans to travel and do business -- as long as the travel is "purposeful" and the business contacts have no ties to the government. Castro, in opening to the United States, made it harder for his government to blame U.S. "aggression" for the country's economic mess -- and reduced the stigma for Cubans to meet, cooperate or even trade with the Americans.

People on both sides have shown a genius for using whatever space they have to build relations -- free from ideology, politics and Cold War baggage. When President Clinton first authorized people-to-people contacts in 1998-99, Americans surged to meet their Cuban counterparts and build mutually beneficial ties. Long before Alan Gross put secret satellite transmitters in Jewish community centers, American Jews brought food, medicine, books, computers, phones, and fax machines to their Cuban brothers -- without the taint of a U.S.-funded regime-change program. There are hundreds of other examples.

When President Obama restored people-to-people relations in 2011 the contact was again beneficial to everyone. Cuban-Americans are investing in relatives' businesses. Religious leaders cooperate on how best to carry out their pastoral missions, and medical experts on patient care. Academics and think-tanks are working on topics as varied as the environment, fine arts, economics, and our shared history.

Obama and Castro now have given a green light to push this to a new level. While governments can get tied in knots negotiating quid pro quos that fall prey to political games and provocations, deeper and broader people-to-people ties can help the governments deal with challenges and take advantage of opportunities. In addition, people-to-people contacts can do a lot:

Monitor and analyze provocations coming from elements on both sides. It's natural for people who've benefited from the status quo -- special interests can grow deep roots over 50 years -- to fear change. These groups have queered past efforts at rapprochement, and they need to be watched and exposed more aggressively than ever before.

Narrow the semantic gap. Words mean different things to Cubans and Americans -- and people involved in direct contact are well-equipped to explain them. President Obama has authorized sales to "private-sector Cuban entrepreneurs," so Americans dealing with them can help clarify whether Cuba's new cooperatives -- state enterprises now managed by their employees -- count as private individuals.

Develop solutions to looming problems. U.S. law requires government involvement in resolving certified claims for properties confiscated by the Cuban revolution, now supposedly worth \$7 billion, but billions in non-certified claims can also hinder relations. Non-governmental experts on both sides can study how property disputes were resolved in other countries, such as after German reunification, and see if those models can be adapted to Cuba's situation.

Encourage both sides to explain their policies. Cuba would do well to explain its economic reforms more clearly. U.S. Chamber of Commerce President Tom Donahue called for a reassessment of the embargo months before December 17, but he can't be expected to lobby for more changes in policy and legislation without a clearer explanation of the protections and rights foreign investors will have under Cuban law.

Facilitate agreement -- or agreement to disagree for now -- on human and civil rights. In Americans' eyes, Cuban platitudes about democracy can't explain how choice -- an essential element of democracy -- exists in their one-party system with tight controls over media. And in Cubans' eyes, Washington's speeches about rights don't explain how -- even in Cuban territory on the other side of the fence in Guantánamo Province -- it has violated prisoners and held them for years without trial, or how U.S. intelligence agencies collect phone data and e-mails of American citizens without court approval. Reconciliation on these values will take time, and government-to-government negotiations are probably not the right venue.

Urge that the two countries' policies be as inclusive as possible. President Obama's strategy seems premised on excluding the millions of Cubans who are members of the Communist Party or work in State enterprises, even though they are the more likely architects of Cuba's future. People-to-people ties can demonstrate the value of engagement with all sectors.

The U.S. and Cuban governments have plenty of work to do in fulfilling the magic of December 17, and -- whether they admit it or not -- they need all the help they can get from the people in whose interest they claim to be acting. It's time to step up and push.

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