

Fulton T. Armstrong
Center for Latin American and Latino Studies
American University

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“Tendencias y perspectivas de las relaciones Cuba-EE.UU.
después de las elecciones de noviembre de 2016”

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My topic – Implications for U.S. Policy of the Retirement of President Raúl Castro – required some significant reworking, as did many of my colleagues’, after November 8. My assumptions about the outcome of the election were based on plenty of information but, alas, proved wrong.

I have long felt that one of the potentially strongest drivers of U.S. policy toward Cuba could be – but usually is not – Cuba’s own strategic plan for its future. Critics of U.S. policy, at least until December 2014, have correctly pointed out that Washington has been excessively focused on what *should* happen in Cuba, rather than what *is* happening here. As analysts, most of us in this room have argued for the latter – that is, that our approach to relations should be based on reality and concrete interests.

Under President Obama, we won this debate. It was possible for many reasons – including political shifts in the United States – but in particular because of a growing awareness that the grudge match between U.S. and Cuban presidents was counterproductive to both countries’ interests – and, more powerfully, because of President Obama’s awareness that Cuba’s own vision for its future – if successfully implemented – had many elements that benefited both countries, both countries’ interests, and both peoples.

That paradigm entailed two powerful sub-judgments: one, that Cuba – and the Cuban people – had a plan for the future, and two, that it would indirectly validate normalization and deepen it. In other words, President Obama realized that evolutionary change in Cuba determined by Cubans, instead of explosive regime change, was in the interest of both countries. It was a politically brave analysis. It acknowledged the legitimacy of the Cuban revolution and government, and it acknowledged the Cuban government’s commitment to build a better future for the Cuban people.

President Obama’s approach wasn’t perfect, of course, and we can second-guess some of the Administration’s decisions, including continuation of certain counterproductive initiatives. But it was perfect in several supremely important aspects:

- It moved U.S. policy away from a model based on quid-pro-quo that neither government could reliably promise and were too easy for opponents to shoot down.

- It moved policy into the future. While not ignoring the past, it understood that a new, mutually beneficial relationship could be built on dealing with current and future challenges we have in common – security interests, trade interests, environmental and hemispheric interests. It also acknowledges Cuba’s focus on the future through reforms and other actions.
- It moved relations away from just the two presidents – both of whom were leaving office soon (in January 2017 and February 2018) – and opened opportunities for business and people-to-people interests far beyond senior government in mutual, respectful, non-interventionist ways. In an important sense, it moved the relationship away from the 60-year grudge match I referred to – a struggle between leaders – and to the innocent people who have been victims of U.S. policies.

There’s no denying that the two countries have different histories, different philosophical and cultural roots, different economies, different internal systems, and some different values and priorities. But President Obama – the first U.S. president ever to reach out to Cuba with a commitment to *mutual* interests – did what the United States does with many other countries with which it has differences, and sought common ground in whatever areas possible. Finally, American ideology and politics took a back seat to America’s pragmatic interests.

The corollary to President Obama and President Castro’s historic decision is that both countries – the United States and Cuba – are in the driver’s seat. Both countries can mold the future relationship. So it’s fair to ask: where are the drivers taking the relationship? Or, where are the processes they’ve launched taking it into the future?

President Obama signaled his intention – changing embargo regulations to the fullest extent allowed by the law – and then pledging repeatedly to work to change the law. The U.S. abstention in the United Nations vote was a massive signal.

Alas ... neither Obama nor Hillary Clinton will be in the White House in four weeks, and the incoming Trump Administration could very well try to reverse some of their policies. President-elect Trump’s tweeter messages suggest a shift backwards, and his repeated use of the word “deal” suggest a desire for “quid-pro-quoism.” His senior aides’ references to credible lies being more powerful than facts are also troubling. Much more than U.S. policy toward Cuba is at stake.

But, as I fervently believe, this relationship has two drivers – the Presidents and peoples of both countries. As President Trump begins his first year as president on January 20 and President Raúl Castro begins his last year as president several weeks later, we analysts will surely be debating the significance of what they do internally as well as in the bilateral relationship. And we’ll debate the impact of their actions and people’s reactions to them.

In Washington, I think it’s fair to say, many of those committed to normalization and the mutual interests it serves hope President Obama’s vision of respect and confidence that Cuba has a plan – a plan consistent with its history and own stated commitments – endures, and that Cuba’s actions, taken on its own accord, will help normalization weather efforts by the new U.S. administration to slow or stop the process. If Washington tries to turn the clock back to the Cold War, Cuba can nonetheless demonstrate that it will continue to march into the future. If

Washington tires to make “deals,” Cuba can march ahead with its own reforms without quid pro quos – because change is in its own interest. Just as Cuba’s reform process was not launched in support of normalization – although the reforms would clearly increase Cuba’s benefit from normalization – so a slowing of normalization should have no effect on it.

It may take two to fight, as we say, but it doesn’t necessarily take two to move into the future. Indeed, the future comes whether we want or not, and our choice is whether to accept it or deny it.

I think that some of us “Cuba watchers” in the United States – or maybe even most or all of us – do not know enough to really grasp Cuba’s national strategy. With sincerity, we read *lineamientos* and party reports and documents promoting *conceptualización*. But we don’t really understand. We read speeches and press reports and attend conferences and roundtables, but in the end – when we are confronted with angry critics of normalization – when we are confronted by those more comfortable with Cold War models than with President Obama and President Castro’s models – when strident advocates (and beneficiaries) of pressure tactics and sanctions and regime-change programs argue that only pressure will drive change in Cuba – it’s frankly not easy for us to counter with a clear, forceful analysis of Cuba’s change strategy – a strategy in which U.S. pressure is generally counterproductive if not provocative.

With an incoming administration staffed by people who proclaim that they “make reality” – not respond to it – such persuasion may seem impossible. But history is more powerful than political operatives’ wishful thinking., and insofar as Cuba articulates and implements its national vision – insofar as *lineamientos* and laws and regulations already on the books are implemented with energy – insofar as Cuba projects its future with confidence – the people in Washington who want to write the script are shown to be the interventionists they are, and the people who support full blossoming of normalization – including proponents of lifting the embargo – are strengthened. If you don’t write the script, there are people in Washington who would be happy to.

Fate has thrown normalization a curve ball by creating the coincidence of President Trump’s first year with President Castro’s last as president. But just as Cuba’s future is Cuba’s, President Castro’s plan for handing over the reins of government in 2018 is *his* to present on *his* own terms. The Trump Administration can speak as much as it wants about Cuba’s future, but it’s President Castro’s to present – in the form of policies and the persons and systems developed to formulate and implement policies after he retires.

Cuba doesn’t owe any foreign government an explanation of itself, but the fact is that many pro-normalization Americans believe our policy should be based on facts, not politicians’ platitudes about Cuba, and they believe that the Cuban government can project its vision for its future more effectively than U.S. politicians and their bureaucracies can.

Each action President Castro takes toward the future is one less action Washington can speculate about and send twitters about and try to roll into “deals.” What Cuba does internally is independent of any normalization process, of course, but there’s no doubt in my mind that what Cuba does to fulfill its vision for its future complements efforts to bring our two countries closer in the pursuit of our mutual benefit – even if Washington, for whatever reasons, tries to slow

things down. As a proponent and early architect of normalization, I believe that it benefits both of our countries, and I would not want the U.S. inability to continue the process to affect Cubans' construction of their future. Much more than the current leadership's legacy is at stake. Our shared future depends on it.

My topic, as I said, is the Implications for U.S. Policy of the Retirement of President Raúl Castro. And as I've also said, it would be inaccurate and inappropriate to assert that President Castro's reform agenda was conceived and launched within the framework of normalization. It seems more likely to be within the framework of his retirement strategy. But I think it is accurate and appropriate to say that implementation of his vision will propel normalization forward even if the United States under President Donald Trump loses its way in the relationship. The future has a knack for coming whether we're ready or not, and normal relations between our two countries are inevitable – hopefully sooner rather than later.

Thank you.