



Seizing the Opportunity to Expand People to People Contacts

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Introduction

Last year, President Obama delivered the first step in his promise to reach out to the Cuban people and support their desire for freedom and self-determination. Premised on the belief that Cuban Americans are our best ambassadors for freedom in Cuba, the Obama administration lifted restrictions on travel and remittances by Cuban Americans. The pent-up demand for Cuban American contact with the island revealed itself: within three months of the new policy, 300,000 Cuban Americans traveled to Havana—50,000 more than for all of the previous year. Experts estimate that over \$600 million in annual remittances has flowed from the United States to Cuba in 2008 and 2009 and informal flows of consumer goods is expanding rapidly.¹

The Administration's new policy has the potential to create new conditions for change in Cuba. However, if U.S. policy is to be truly forward looking it must further expand its focus from the Castro government to the well-being of the Cuban people. Recent developments on the island, including the ongoing release of dozens of political prisoners, have helped create the right political moment to take action. The Administration should institute a cultural diplomacy strategy that authorizes a broad cross-section of American private citizens and civil society to travel to the island to engage Cuban society and share their experiences as citizens of a democratic country. Reducing restrictions on people-to-people

contact is not a “concession,” but a strategic tool to advance U.S. policy objectives to support the emergence of a Cuban nation in which the Cuban people determine their political and economic future.

The President has the authority to reinstate a wide range of “purposeful,” non-touristic travel to Cuba in order to implement a cultural diplomacy strategy. Under President Clinton, the Baltimore Orioles played baseball in Havana and in return the Cuban national team was invited to Baltimore. U.S. students studied abroad in Cuba and engaged in lively discussions with their fellow students and host families. U.S. religious groups provided food and medicines to community organizations, helping them assist their membership. However, in 2004, such travel was curtailed, severely limiting U.S. insights about the needs, interests and organizational capacities of community groups and grassroots organizations. Today, visitors traveling under an educational license, for example, number a meager 2,000 annually.

The objectives of cultural diplomacy

Installing a renewed strategy for cultural diplomacy does not mean abandoning U.S. commitment to promoting human rights and political reform in Cuba. It simply reflects recognition that the voices heard and messages projected to Cuba should come from U.S. citizens directly and not be limited to the U.S. government.

¹ “Mules” stretch limits of U.S. trade embargo on Cuba, Reuters, Aug. 11, 2010.

Cultural diplomacy—a strand of public diplomacy—is apolitical by design and has the potential to engage Cuban public opinion in a way that standard diplomacy cannot.² By expanding contacts between U.S. and Cuban citizens, American identity and cultural values will gain exposure in a nation where previous U.S. efforts to engage civil society have often been rendered counterproductive, particularly due to their perceived political content.

Increased contact with citizens in closed societies awakens citizen consciousness and creates a more open, fluid atmosphere for civil society to grow and operate. Greater interaction with the outside world and access to hard currency spurred civil society development in Eastern Europe in the 1980s. In Cuba as well, prior to 2004, repression against dissidents, human rights activists, independent journalists, and librarians was reduced as an influx of U.S. civil society, government and private sector personalities interacted with high-level Cuban officials.

Engaging the Cuban people: Try something that works

Since restrictions on citizen travel went into effect in 2004, U.S. efforts to engage the Cuban people have largely been confined to USAID programs carried out by NGOs and contractors, at a cost of approximately \$40 million annually. It is widely agreed that they have had limited results and touched few on the island.

First, the covert political nature of these programs has put at risk not only U.S. operatives, but also their beneficiaries. Narrowly focused on Cuba's dissidents, they have jeopardized the perceived legitimacy of these brave individuals inside Cuba, thereby limiting their ability to interact with a broader segment of Cuban society, community groups and other grassroots organizations. Second, by scaling back the ability to support and forge contacts with other segments of Cuban society, U.S. policy has not only limited the Cuban people's access to information and resources, it has severely hindered our

ability to gain insights about the evolving needs and priorities of diverse populations and groups.

As Cuba's nascent civil society stretches far beyond the dissident movement—to encompass the blogosphere, religious groups, youth organizations, and agricultural cooperatives, among others—their objectives, too, are more multifaceted and fast evolving. At a time of change in Cuba, increased people-to-people contacts allow a more fluid, nimble response to engage with the needs and interests of the Cuban people.

In this way, a bolstered cultural diplomacy strategy would touch more Cuban citizens than targeted civil society programs funded by USAID. It might also be of greater value to them. As a broad cross section of private American citizens and civil society groups interact with their Cuban counterparts, they share skills and expertise, create economic opportunity and improve well-being, and build capacity to support and widen their membership.

Regaining the momentum in U.S.-Cuba relations

Recent moves by the Cuban government to release political prisoners have rightly been commended by Washington. Nevertheless, U.S. measures that serve to advance our long-term policy objectives should not be tied to such actions. While the United States ultimately hopes to see consistent and ongoing political and economic openings in Cuba, it is folly to prescribe these objectives as preconditions for engagement. It boils down to a reactive stance in which Cuban inaction dictates U.S. action—or inaction. As recently as this past winter, the latter has proved in the short-term interest of a Cuban government focused on preserving power.

Given the nature of the Cuban government and its repressive record, the United States should decide what kind of relationship serves U.S. interests—between governments and societies.

² For a broader discussion of a new comprehensive public diplomacy strategy, see Paul Hare, *U.S. Public Diplomacy for Cuba: Why It's Needed and How to Do It*, Policy Brief No. 1, March 2010, U.S. Cuba Relations at Brookings; available at <http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2010/03_us_cuba_diplomacy_hare.aspx>.

A strategy that engages the Cuban people, while simultaneously engaging the Cuban leadership—as the Obama administration is ably doing—is integral to this approach. Expanding people-to-people travel gives the United States a strategic tool to level the playing field in favor of the Cuban people, by building their capacity and getting the most appropriate resources into their hands.

Making the new policy operational

Since the statutory and political language of the USAID program is still imbued with the old rhetoric of regime change, channeling people-to-people activities under this program would send the wrong message to Cuba and undermine the potential of cultural diplomacy.

In order for the Cuban government to grant the space for people-to-people contacts to flourish, the United States will have to explain to Cuba that this new cultural diplomacy breaks from past programs. It should emphasize that increased contact between the private citizens of both countries is of mutual interest and will be conducted with mutual respect. The United States should raise the new strategy first in private, high-level talks between the two governments, and follow it up with the announcement of a broader public diplomacy strategy between the Cuban and American people.

The United States will have to create incentives for the Cuban government to agree to progress. As such, Washington might begin by increasing contact on issues where Cuban expertise can be brought to prominence, such as medical/health diplomacy, hurricane response systems, and marine conservation. Such engagement will create goodwill in the eyes of the international community as well. And, as the Cuban people and the international community hear a broad public diplomacy strategy from the United States, the Cuban government may be more likely to find that collaboration is in its own interest, lest it be seen as a holdout to positive change.

Recommendations for U.S. policy

As the Obama administration reviews its broad strategy for assistance to Cuban civil society, this policy brief recommends that U.S. policy vastly open opportunities for a broad base of U.S. civil society actors and private citizens to engage their Cuban counterparts. To this end, we recommend that U.S. policy:

Reinstate the regulations that govern private efforts to promote citizen, professional and other exchanges. Specifically, we recommend that general licenses be reinstated for people-to-people travel and the other categories permitted by the Cuban Assets Control Regulations (CACR) immediately.

- Increase the list of items eligible for gift parcels and increase the value of those parcels.
- Remove all other programs that pertain to increasing people-to-people contacts from the USAID Cuba program and make them part of a broader, invigorated federal program managed by the agency.
- Under this program, create a multi-disciplinary scholarship fund for Cuban students to study in the United States at the graduate level. The scholarships would be administered through the U.S. Interests Section in Havana and be offered to all Cubans. It should encourage other countries to do the same.
- Extend Fulbright scholarships and grants to Cuban nationals as well as for U.S. students wishing to study in Cuba.
- Establish a travel fund to facilitate academic exchanges, including those among universities, music academies, and research institutes.
- Encourage U.S. NGOs to offer donations of equipment to wide-impact Cuban civil society organizations.

Executive authority to reinstate a wide range of non-touristic travel

Section 910 of Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act (TSRA), enacted on June 1, 2000, provides that the Treasury Department may not authorize travel-related transactions in Cuba for “touristic activities.” The statute defines “touristic activities” as any activity not “expressly authorized in any of paragraphs (1) through (12) of Section §515.560 of the Cuban Assets Control Regulations (CACR).”

Thus, travel for the following twelve categories is authorized in paragraph 515.560 of the CACR:

1. Visits to immediate family (§515.561)
2. Official business of U.S. and foreign governments and intergovernmental organizations (§515.562)
3. Journalistic activity (§515.563)
4. Professional research and meetings (§515.564)
5. Educational activities (§515.565)
6. Religious activities (§515.566)
7. Public performances, athletic and other competitions, and exhibitions (§515.567)
8. Support for the Cuban people (§515.574)
9. Humanitarian projects (§515.575)
10. Private foundations or research or educational institutes (§515.576)
11. The exportation, importation, or transmission of information or informational materials (§515.545)
12. Certain export transactions that may be considered for authorization under existing Department of Commerce regulations and guidelines with respect to Cuba or engaged in by U.S.-owned or controlled foreign firms (§515.533 and 515.559)

These twelve categories of authorized travel can be resumed by Executive Branch fiat since they were in existence when the regulations were codified in 2000 and are therefore exempt from the prohibitions of that codification.

In this way, a large increase in U.S. citizens travel to Cuba can be achieved by reinstating general licenses for these twelve categories. Today, general licenses are granted for one category only.³ All other categories may travel only via a specific license, requiring a burdensome and lengthy application, which has severely limited the number of visitors to Cuba.

Regarding U.S. citizens’ travel to Cuba for touristic purposes, a formal and comprehensive rescission of the ban will require an act of Congress—it cannot be rescinded through the issuance of an OFAC rule, or permitted through the creation of a general license. Legislation known as the Peterson-Moran bill to lift the travel ban is currently pending in the House of Representatives.

³ “Professional research and meetings,” which permit i) fulltime academic researchers and professionals to attend internationally organized meetings in Cuba, ii) telecom service providers to travel for the purpose of conducting commercial transactions, iii) journalists (non freelance).

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Other publications on U.S.-Cuba policy:

Learning to Salsa: New Steps in U.S.-Cuba Relations

By Carlos Pascual and Vicki Huddleston

Brookings Press, 2010

<http://www.brookings.edu/press/Books/2010/learningtosalsa.aspx>

Coping with the Next Oil Spill: Why U.S.-Cuba Environmental Cooperation is Critical

By Robert Muse and Jorge Pinon

http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2010/0518_oil_spill_cuba_pinon.aspx#.

U.S. Public Diplomacy For Cuba: Why It's Needed and How to Do It

By Paul Hare, former British Ambassador to Cuba, March 2010

http://www.brookings.edu/papers/2010/03_us_cuba_diplomacy_hare.aspx

The Obama Administration and the Americas

By Abraham F. Lowenthal, Ted Piccone, Laurence Whitehead and Foreword by Strobe Talbott

Brookings Press, 2009

<http://www.brookings.edu/press/Books/2009/theobamaadministrationandtheamericas.aspx>

Cuba: A New Policy of Critical and Constructive Engagement

By Carlos Pascual and Vicki Huddleston

Foreign Policy at Brookings, April 2009

http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2009/04_cuba.aspx