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United States-Cuba Normalizations:
Strategic Implications for U.S. National Security

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The breakthrough in traditionally hostile relations between the United States and Cuba at the end of 2014 heralds a new opportunity to move past the Cold War era of isolation and antagonism to a new stage of dialogue, negotiation and compromise to the benefit of both countries. Prior to the two presidents' dramatic simultaneous announcements on December 17, 2014, Washington and Havana were stuck in an acrimonious stand-off that did more harm than good to both sides. The joint decision to embark on a new path reflects a growing recognition in both capitals that the old era of embargoes, proxy battles and migration crises no longer served either side's interests. Now, under the supervision of two presidents determined to secure their respective legacies, the two neighbors are moving toward normalization, a goal well-received by majorities of citizens in both countries, including Cuban Americans, but strongly opposed by some factions and fraught with challenges. Such obstacles, however, are surmountable if the political will to resolve differences remains paramount.

What are the strategic implications of this historic shift for the United States? To answer this question, it is important to analyze potential effects at three levels – bilateral, regional and global interests.

Implications for U.S.-Cuba Bilateral Relations

The long history of difficulties between Cuba and the United States is rooted in a fundamental divide between independence and sovereignty on the part of the former, and control and influence on the part of the latter. Sitting astride important maritime lanes on routes through the Panama Canal, Cuba is the largest island in the Caribbean with long ties to the United States. Before the Cuban revolution of 1959, Cuba served as a convenient satellite for U.S. economic and security interests symbolized by the proliferation of U.S. brands and investments and by the Guantanamo Naval base. After Fidel Castro led an armed revolt against the corrupt and

increasingly repressive Fulgencio Batista regime, Cuba became something else entirely – a tool of the Soviet Union, a repository for nuclear missiles pointed at the homeland, and a font of ideological and military support for liberation movements in Latin America and Africa. Now, over two decades after the fall of the USSR, the end of colonialism and the spread of market-based democracy in the region, we return full circle back to the existential question of Cuba's sovereignty and whether its current state-dominated economy and closed political system unduly harm or benefit U.S. interests. Can the United States effectively promote its interests in a peaceful, secure and democratic Cuba with a government that is determined to defend its current system while also gradually opening itself to reform? The new road toward normalization will be long and hard, and as Cuba struggles through its own domestic process of change, strategic patience will be required.

President Obama's strategy for encouraging better relations with Cuba while also supporting longer-term goals of empowering the Cuban people to seek their own democratic destiny was clearly articulated in his White House speech on December 17: "I believe that we can do more to support the Cuban people, and promote our values, through engagement. After all, these fifty years have shown that isolation has not worked. It's time for a new approach." Through a series of unilateral measures designed to foster greater travel, trade and remittances, the Obama Administration has shifted attention away from the highly unpopular "blockade," as it is known in Cuba, and on to the Cuban government's treatment of its own people. The new rules, which fall squarely within the president's existing executive authority and permitted exceptions to the embargo, also allow expanded telecommunications services and direct assistance to Cuba's emerging private sector and cooperatives in the hopes they will eventually become an important voice in Cuba's evolving political economy. Key elements of the embargo,

however, remain in place and Congress appears unlikely to loosen restrictions anytime soon. Both sides, therefore, will have to move relatively quickly to make the most of the current policy initiatives, or risk a reversal in 2017 if a pro-embargo candidate wins the White House.

Washington's comprehensive move toward a policy of constructive but critical engagement went further than most experts predicted and appears to have taken Havana by surprise. The administration of Raúl Castro is principally focused on protecting what it considers the achievements of the revolution, particularly in areas of health, education, security and international profile – the exotic Cuban brand that earns it special attention and patience from its neighbors and friends around the world. The current strategy of “perfecting” the Cuban socialist model, which Raúl Castro launched over six years ago, is loosening the tight economic control the government imposes on its citizens but has fallen behind schedule and below target, particularly in areas of agriculture, energy and foreign investment. In 2015, Cuba may finally tackle its long pending currency unification reform, which is likely to generate both economic turmoil and popular discontent. In addition, the Cubans face increasing pressure from the declining fortunes of the Chavista Bolivarian model in Venezuela, and need the economic boost that will come from a more relaxed U.S. embargo. The current government is also motivated by self-preservation and, as the post-Castro era comes into view in 2018, a smooth hand-off of power to the next generation. The Cuban Armed Forces, which play a critical role in strategic economic sectors along with national defense, and the Ministry of Interior, are expected to continue to play a decisive role in shaping Cuba once the Castro brothers step aside.

In shifting toward engagement and dialogue, the Obama administration is making a bet that, as Cuba faces these challenges and continues a gradual reform process, it will have a better chance of influencing its trajectory toward a more hybrid economy and more inclusive politics.

A sudden regime change or collapse, however, is no longer the goal, a major change from decades of previous U.S. policy. As President Obama has stated, “it does not serve America’s interests, or the Cuban people, to try to push Cuba towards collapse. Even if that worked—and it hasn’t for fifty years—we know from hard-earned experience that countries are more likely to enjoy lasting transformation if their people are not subjected to chaos.” While pro-embargo forces in the United States cling to their goal of regime change, that consensus in Congress, the general American public and the Cuban-American community has fractured if not reversed, suggesting it is only a matter of time before the embargo becomes effectively meaningless or lifted.

In the meantime, the administration has a window of opportunity to advance its strategic interests in a range of areas, from counternarcotics and counterterrorism cooperation to aviation and maritime security, disaster relief, human trafficking and migration. Once diplomatic relations are restored, the regular business of state-to-state cooperation can begin. We know from experience, for example with the Coast Guard’s productive exchanges with Cuba’s border forces, that such cooperation, while limited, is feasible and worthwhile for both sides. Potential talks on the settlement of boundary issues in the Gulf of Mexico with Cuba and Mexico could lay the groundwork for offshore oil drilling that would wean Cuba away from its unhealthy reliance on Venezuela. This period will be marked by distrust and mixed signals but a spirit of pragmatism and confidence-building will likely prevail over the long term.

No subject generates as much distrust and anxiety between Cuba and the United States as the promotion of human rights and democracy, an area which, if mishandled, could slow down or stop the process of normalization. For the United States, direct support for the Cuban people’s political and economic aspirations for greater independence is an essential condition of

normalization and a requirement of U.S. law. For Cuba, it is a direct threat to its mode of control and to be resisted at all costs.

The key question is how far both sides will go to reach an acceptable *modus vivendi*. Already, signals suggest a willingness to establish a human rights dialogue that could help define the parameters of activities. Such a venue may not produce more than a general “agree to disagree” outcome. With some creative thinking and flexibility, however, it could become a constructive forum for concrete progress on both sides. The December 17 announcement, for example, presaged greater cooperation from Cuba on allowing human rights monitors from the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross to visit the island. This commitment could be coupled with greater support and training for Cuban civil society groups interested in using the UN’s human rights mechanisms as a tool for holding the government accountable to its treaty obligations. Cuba might also consider relaxing its harsh treatment of activists, expanding religious rights and revising its laws on “dangerousness,” which are used as a preventive measure to detain would-be protestors. On the U.S. side, Washington should seriously revamp its current democracy programming by broadening its scope to include more diverse sectors of civil society, including groups working within the rules of the game to provoke debate and reform, as well as the small business sector, making its grants more transparent, and cutting back its support to exile groups bent on regime change.

Implications for U.S. Relations in the Region

One of the key factors motivating the Obama administration to take decisive action on the Cuba front was the growing regional unity against the embargo and Cuba’s exclusion from the Summit of the Americas. This point was brought home by the potential spectacle of a weakly-attended heads of state meeting in April 2015 marked by rancor over the issue, if it happened at all. The

positive response to the December 17 announcements throughout the region had the immediate salutary effect of repositioning Washington as a constructive player willing to move past Cold War constructs and on to a more positive posture of genuine partnership, as Obama promised at his first Summit of the Americas in Trinidad in 2009. It also is likely to have some effect in softening the edges of the strident anti-American agenda of the ALBA countries, led by Venezuela.

Beyond the rhetoric, however, it remains to be seen if and how Latin America and the Caribbean will join hands with the United States in encouraging Cuba to modernize its economy and governance. Potential partners on this front could include Mexico, Costa Rica, Peru, Uruguay, Jamaica and Chile. Canada, which played a unique role in hosting the secret talks between Cuba and the United States for 18 months, has a *sui generis* relationship with Havana and could be counted on again to keep the normalization process on track. Brazil, which under Workers Party leadership has become an important investor in Cuba's economy over the last five years, is sympathetic politically to Cuba's situation and will not want to be seen working closely with Washington on such matters. But it could, if it wanted to, use its growing leverage privately to nudge Cuba in a more reform-oriented direction.

More importantly, by opening the possibility of closer economic ties between Cuba and the United States, the new policy may help lessen Cuba's dependence on Venezuela, which continues to provide nearly 100,000 barrels of oil a day to Cuba on highly preferential terms. President Maduro's surprised reaction to the December 17 announcements was a telling reminder that he and Raul Castro do not have the same brotherly bond as Hugo Chávez and Fidel Castro did. Close alignment and mutual co-dependency, nonetheless, are likely to continue. President Maduro's own troubles at home are provoking a backlash against U.S. measures designed to

punish his regime for repression of the opposition and the media. So far, however, the rest of the region, other than its traditional allies, is not rushing to its side; the collapse in oil prices is further weakening the allegiance of ALBA and Petrocaribe states. How Maduro plays his cards at the Panama Summit will tell us if any softening in attitudes, if not realignment, is underway.

The normalization process is unlikely to generate any major changes in the regional security dynamic. A modest strategic opportunity the Summit offers is to continue the process of reintegrating Cuba into the inter-American community. A down payment was made in this direction in 2009 when the Organization of American States (OAS) agreed to lift Cuba's suspension and welcome it back provided it took steps toward fulfilling the criteria for membership, including commitment to the Inter-American Democratic Charter. No one should hold their breath for Cuba to knock on that door anytime soon, but at some point, if it wants to access Inter-American Development Bank financing, it will need to move in this direction. In the meantime, expect Cuba to continue to play a constructive role in hosting the Colombia peace talks, familiarize itself with regional mechanisms for counternarcotics, disaster response and other security matters and engage in medical and disaster relief diplomacy around the region. It is not inconceivable to imagine Cuba's military engaging in trilateral or mini-lateral confidence-building measures with other militaries, including the United States.

Implications for U.S. Relations at the Global Level

The applause generated by President Obama's decision to normalize relations with Cuba echoed beyond the region as well. The Europeans, who initiated their own process of re-engagement with Cuba through a series of talks that began in 2014, are probably the most directly affected. The collective body of 28 states is struggling to forge a common position while it watches other countries – Brazil, China and now the United States – gain greater influence. Britain, Norway,

France and the Netherlands appear more eager than others to cement better ties and could serve as complementary partners to the United States on pushing a reform agenda with Havana.

Russia can be expected to continue to act as a nuisance, as evidenced by the appearance of its spy ship in Havana harbor on the first day of U.S.-Cuba talks, but it has its own problems closer to home and has not earned a particularly warm place in the Cuban people's hearts. Nonetheless, just before arriving in Cuba in July 2014, President Putin signed into law an agreement writing off 90% of Cuba's \$32 billion Soviet-era debt, with some \$3.5 billion to be paid back by Cuba over a 10-year period that would fund Russian investment projects in Cuba. In the aftermath of Putin's trip, there were press reports alleging that Russia would reopen its signals intelligence facility at Lourdes, Cuba, which had closed in 2002, but President Putin denied reports that his government would reopen the facility.

China has emerged as Cuba's second most important partner after Venezuela and will continue to protect and advance its commercial and political interests there. China's investment in Cuba is a small fraction of what it brings to the wider region, but it is the island's largest creditor with debt reaching an estimated \$6 billion and the most recent investment project at the port terminal in Santiago de Cuba rumored to be worth more than \$100 million, interest free. While it has not demonstrated a desire to bail Cuba out from its economic woes, it could provide preferential terms on new credit if it wanted to, particularly when Cuba needs help cushioning the impact of its currency unification. As U.S. interests on the island grow, China may see benefits to securing its foothold in the Mariel port's special development zone with an eye to the potential re-exporting business to the United States once the expanded Panama Canal is opened and the embargo is lifted.

Unlike the confrontational days of old, when Cuba and the United States financed arms and sent soldiers to compete on Africa's battlefields, the two former adversaries now mostly lock horns in the halls of the United Nations. Africa is largely sympathetic to Cuba's plight and could serve as bridge or facilitator of the U.S.-Cuba rapprochement, particularly close and historic friends of Havana, like South Africa. One area of potential cooperation lies in the hospital wards of West Africa, where both nations have medical workers helping to contain Ebola. While cooperation with Cuba's expanding medical diplomacy, in which Cuba pays its workers only a fraction of the income received from donors, is complicated, it does offer some room for common cause with the United States.

Conclusion

As the flow of people, remittances and goods between Cuba and the United States continues to grow under the new rules, the usual problems of criminal activity, American citizen rescues, illicit trafficking and suspicious activities will inevitably arise. One could imagine a sporadic attack on Cuban soil by U.S.-based exiles deeply opposed to rapprochement. But the fact that no such incidents have occurred five years into a policy that allows Cuban Americans to visit family across the island without interference suggests this is highly unlikely. Another remote possibility is the unleashing of another serious migration crisis of Cubans fleeing the island in the wake of economic collapse or panic that preferential immigration status for Cubans may end. Current trends already exhibit an increase in Cubans trying to reach the United States compared to a few years ago. Such a scenario would spell a major rupture in the heart of the normalization process, which is designed, after all, to employ dialogue and negotiation to prevent and manage such problems.

Finally, there is the thorny problem of the U.S. military presence at Guantanamo Bay. It seems clear that, despite President Obama's determined efforts to close the detention center there, the United States will continue to use the facility in the short term. Regardless of when it is no longer used for detaining individuals captured in the fight against terrorism, the United States should begin to consider how important the naval base is to its core strategic interests in the region. Then both sides should sit down and negotiate a resolution to the century-old problem, including the potential for a long-term transition stage that might allow common use of the facility for economic, educational or other joint humanitarian project, as Ambassador Tom Pickering has suggested. In sum, while relations between Cuba and the United States, which share a complex and difficult history, may never be "normal," the door is finally open to a new era that will inevitably bring change to both countries.