



CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

If one compares outcomes to stated objectives, U.S. policy toward Cuba may be the most significant failure in the history of American foreign policy. An almost five-decade embargo and numerous attempts to isolate and undermine the Castro government have not produced democratic change. In February 2008, Fidel Castro successfully orchestrated a succession, handing power to his younger brother, Raúl. Today the United States has little leverage to promote change in Cuba. Indeed, Cuba enjoys normal relations with virtually every country in the world, and American attempts to isolate the Cuban government have served only to elevate its symbolic predicament as an underdog in the international arena. A new policy of engagement toward Cuba is long overdue.

Launched in September 2007, the Brookings project U.S. Policy toward a Cuba in Transition developed a strategic step-by-step program to break this stalemate of failure. This book was completed under the auspices of that project and reflects more than eighteen months of research, analysis, and debate conducted with a group of nineteen leading experts who formed the project's core advisory group. For the first time, opinion leaders in the Cuban American community joined with leading academics and international diplomats from diverse backgrounds and political orientations to seek common ground on the divisive and emotional issue of U.S. policy toward Cuba.

In the spirit of developing policy ideas that would support the emergence of a peaceful, prosperous, and democratic Cuba in which the Cuban people shape their political and economic future, the project featured a

series of simulation exercises to identify critical components, both internal and external, that should be considered in the formulation of future U.S. policies toward Cuba. While the primary objective of the simulations was to facilitate a process of dynamic learning, the process also led the group to reach consensus on its recommendations for U.S. policy.

The fundamental premise of the project was that sustainable democratic change must come from within Cuba and that the American people and their government can serve as a catalyst to foster an environment in which the Cuban people will be able to determine how they wish to be governed. Encouraging broader and deeper knowledge through friendships and family ties will better prepare Cubans to participate in a transition away from the Castro era. In the three decades since 1980, an internal impetus for political change has dominated most power transitions in a number of countries; witness the collapse of the Soviet Union, the emergence of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the consolidation of successful democracies in Central Europe. In China and Vietnam, change from within—though certainly not constituting “political change”—was what drove China’s and Vietnam’s willingness to engage globally, even as other domestic political actors sought to insulate both countries from global uncertainties. The pathways of political change may resemble wandering roots. But only such internal roots can eventually spread, grow, and nurture democratic change.

The timing of the project was based on the conviction that an unprecedented opportunity was presenting itself. The combination of change within Cuba and within the Cuban American community creates the most significant opening for a reassessment of U.S. policy toward Cuba since 1959. Demographic and ideological shifts inside Miami’s Cuban American community underscore frustration with the embargo and a growing sense that a more effective alternative must be sought, one that shifts the focus of policy away from isolating Cuba to supporting the well-being and political rights of the Cuban people. Many in the Cuban American business community, too, seeing international actors who have already positioned themselves to take advantage of market openings, fear that they may be shut out from playing a role in a future Cuba. Polling within the community reflects that, across the political spectrum, Cuban American opinion is now converging in favor of increased engagement with the island at all levels, creating a growing political space to challenge traditional orthodoxy on U.S. policy toward Cuba. A Florida Interna-

tional University poll conducted in November 2008 in the aftermath of the American presidential elections found that, by substantial margins, a majority of Cuban American voters favor ending restrictions on their travel and remittances to Cuba and support a bilateral dialogue and normal diplomatic relations with the Cuban government (see appendix B).

Across the Straits of Florida, Raúl Castro remains committed to the continuation of the Revolution and the preservation of power. Yet Raúl also sees that he cannot succeed by means merely of charisma—he cannot exhort the Cuban people to continue to make sacrifices in the name of the Revolution unless he has an external enemy. Thus, Raúl initiated a process of incremental reforms in order to relieve pressure for political change. The more the United States is committed to engaging Cuba, the less Raúl Castro can use a presumed U.S. threat to justify his authoritarian rule. President Barack Obama is extraordinarily popular among Cubans. His changing tone in U.S. policy shifts the responsibility for how well or badly Cuba is governed from the United States and its policies to Cuba's leaders themselves. If Raúl is to consolidate his rule, he will need a stronger and wider base to govern from, and will need to mobilize the Communist Party and the Revolutionary Armed Forces to disseminate, explain, and enforce the decisions of the Cuban hierarchy. This imperative will be all the more important in an environment where reforms that permit greater economic openness may create new, unpredictable challenges to the status quo.

The international community should not delude itself. Raúl's preference is to be a Cuban Deng Xiao Ping, not Mikhail Gorbachev. His desire is to extend the life of Cuba's authoritarian government, not to preside over the crumbling of one of the world's remaining authoritarian regimes. The central question is whether the Cuban government will be able to control a modest opening of Cuban society, or whether incremental reforms will gather the momentum to unleash a process of irreversible change. The focus of U.S. policy and of international initiatives should be on this new internal dynamic in Cuba. How can U.S. policy be framed so as to give sustenance to actors within Cuba who have the potential to use these small openings to widen the prospects for change? How should the United States engage the international community to challenge Cuba to allow true democratic participation?

Thus, the objective of U.S. policy and broader international engagement with Cuba is not to flirt with Cuban authoritarianism but to challenge it. If the United States and the West hold up their values to be compared to

Cuba's, which values will prevail? Freedom, openness, and the chance to pursue one's aspirations, or state control over political and economic life? These dual tracks of engagement and moral challenge have a solid grounding in history and policy. Ronald Reagan challenged Mikhail Gorbachev to "tear down this Wall," while simultaneously using his direct contacts with the Soviet premier and working with other conservatives like Margaret Thatcher to build pressure to do so.

Through the lessons learned in the project simulations, Brookings advisers came to the unanimous conclusion that the United States should adopt a proactive policy of critical and constructive engagement toward Cuba. Its focus should be on facilitating change from within Cuba. Specific measures, the group concluded, should be phased in unilaterally by the U.S. president on the basis of U.S. judgments, in order to delink U.S. interests from attempts by Cuba to thwart or block U.S. objectives. The more the United States specifies expectations of reciprocal Cuban policy actions, the less the chance that Cuba will take those steps. Instead, the group created a consensus road map of executive actions comprising short-, medium-, and long-term initiatives that would allow the United States to align its policy with that of the rest of the hemisphere and restore normal bilateral relations with Cuba over time. The road map should serve as a clear statement of U.S. intentions to Cuba and the international community. The president of the United States, the group agreed, should decide how and when to move forward along this road map.

Methodology

Over a period of eighteen months, project advisers carried out a series of six simulation exercises and discussions to enhance their understanding of the complex political realities in Cuba and the United States. Each exercise is described in a chapter of this book. Taking a forward-looking approach, the exercises sought to apply the advisers' expertise across a range of subjects to a series of hypothetical scenarios in which participants tested how different U.S. policy responses would affect a Cuban transition, and how the Cuban political hierarchy, independent civil society, and international and Cuban American communities might react to internal and external events that could logically be expected to occur in the near future.

By modeling and generating analyses of various strategic actors' and stakeholders' decisionmaking processes, the simulations identified factors that might influence the success or failure of specific policy options. Those lessons, explained at the end of chapters 3 to 8 in this book, provide policymakers with perhaps the most extensive and systematic set of policy exercises, deliberations, and resultant recommendations for Cuba policy that has ever been created. Whether or not policymakers agree with the specific recommendations, these scenarios reveal not only opportunities that can lead to more effective outcomes but also possible constraints and potential mistakes to be avoided.

The first exercise, in chapter 3 (“U.S. Policy: Constraints of a Historical Legacy”), tested the limits of a policy based on isolating Cuba to respond to major external developments that could open an opportunity for change inside the island. The past fifty years are a strong indicator that a continuation of an isolationist policy will not produce change in Cuba. If, however, change were to arise exogenously, would “isolationist orthodoxy” provide a useful means to help usher in a process of democratic self-determination in Cuba? To assess the possibilities and limitations inherent to this strategy, we simulated how the U.S. government might respond to an exogenous shock, Fidel Castro’s death, if it had to stay strictly within the confines of policies prevailing during the George W. Bush administration. Assuming the role of cabinet secretaries at a meeting of the National Security Council, simulation participants aimed to formulate a diplomatic response and shape a public message while taking precautionary measures to avoid mass migration to the United States. Would instability within Cuba support or hurt the cause of democratic transition? How could the United States bolster the work of civil society leaders seeking political change on the ground? To what extent could the United States mobilize the international community to coordinate pressure to advance political reforms? One of the biggest lessons learned in the exercise was that the historical policy of isolation—characterized by little engagement with Cuba, little policy space to expand such engagement, and little international credibility to influence others—left the United States few levers to act effectively to promote change, even when opportunities arose.

The second exercise, in chapter 4 (“U.S. Policy: A New Strategy toward Cuba”), reviewed options for policy under a new U.S. administration. A

replay of the National Security Council meeting explored policy options without setting predefined constraints; instead, advisers could propose policy options and evaluate their viability on their individual merit. Participants debated whether formulating a long-range strategic policy of engagement would be politically viable without positive Cuban responses. How might the United States formulate a unilateral strategy that balances support for economic liberalization with a commitment to keeping political reform and human rights on the table? Participants considered a new and important strategic reality: Cuba's potential to develop its oil reserves and sugarcane ethanol industry within the next three to five years. With energy revenues, Cuba's vulnerability to outside pressure, from either the United States or Venezuela, will diminish, and state power will be reinforced, bolstering the Cuban government's credibility to maintain political control. This reality suggests that the time for bold U.S. action may be now, before U.S. influence diminishes further.

The third exercise, in chapter 5 ("Understanding the Cuban Leadership"), called on participants to put themselves in the shoes of an inner circle of advisers to Raúl Castro as they meet to discuss how to consolidate their leadership and continue the next phase of the Revolution. Focusing on the internal dynamics, motivations, and decisionmaking processes of the new Castro government, the exercise assessed the possible political and economic strategies Cuba might adopt in the immediate future. Participants probed how the Raúl Castro government might secure its legitimacy and address citizens' rising expectations for improved livelihoods and economic opportunities without undermining the authority of the state. Will the government seek to broaden voices within the Communist Party and rule from a wider institutional base? How far could the government go to address grievances without inviting strong economic dislocations or eroding the social achievements of the Revolution and the socialist nature of Cuban society? How might Cuba reduce its single-source oil dependence on Venezuela, and what might be the costs of closer relations with the United States?

The fourth exercise, in chapter 6 ("Transforming Disparate Voices into a Dynamic Civil Society Coalition"), simulated a meeting of diverse representatives of Cuban civil society convened to analyze the potential of civic movements to advance change in Cuba. By evaluating the interests, strengths, and weaknesses of key sectors of civil society and testing potential motivations and points of division as they endeavor to unite in pur-

suit of a common agenda, U.S. policymakers will be better placed to craft more effective strategies to support a peaceful transition with Cubans defining the island's future. Advisers assessed ways that groups might infuse legitimacy and mass appeal into a broad-based movement, the pros and cons of accepting foreign support, and possibilities for constructively engaging disaffected segments of the population while preserving the interests of those most vulnerable to dislocations.

The fifth exercise, in chapter 7 (“Coordinating U.S. Policy with the International Community”), tested whether a group of key U.S. allies represented by foreign ministers convened by the U.S. secretary of state could come together to forge a coordinated approach toward Cuba. The aim was to assess potential spoilers and constraints to forging new directions, including ways to avoid a high-profile change in policy being perceived as rewarding the Cuban government. Participants debated whether the United States would be more effective in promoting democracy in Cuba if it were willing to work with the international community to place democracy and human rights in a wider context of shared interests that include trade, migration, security, the environment, and civil society. They assessed whether allowing Cuba to participate in international and regional organizations would provide incentives that would change Cuba's behavior by linking it more closely with international standards on democracy, transparency, and human rights. Finally, they examined American potential to forge a multilateral framework to manage an unanticipated breakdown of internal order in Cuba.

In the final exercise, in chapter 8 (“Creating Consensus in the Cuban American Community”), a broad base of leaders from Miami's Cuban American community assessed whether the new dynamics within the community—ideological and demographic shifts demonstrating increased support for engagement with Cuba—would translate to a consensus agenda that would allow the community to play a critical role in shaping a new U.S. policy. Would emerging Cuban American leaders accept possibly being bypassed as Cuba policy is returned to the prerogative of the administration as foreign—not domestic—policy? Could they prioritize recommendations for the administration and come to a consensus on their expectations of Cuban responses on human rights and democracy, and the new administration's resolution of the issues of Guantánamo Bay and expropriated property? Advisers were able to flesh out a broad unilateral and multilateral agenda for engagement rooted firmly within the framework of

the views of the Cuban American community. The recommendations that emerged from this simulation paved the way for the completion of their policy report issued in April 2009.

Crosscutting Challenges

Three crosscutting challenges to crafting a new U.S. policy emerged from the simulations and form the backbone to this book.

The first arises out of the recognition that change in Cuba will have to come from Cuban actors. This fact mandates framing a new objective for U.S. policy, and also raises the question of what policy initiatives might increase the capacity of those working for change within Cuba. How can the United States—lacking insights about grassroots political dynamics and the interests and organizational capacities of civil society actors—structure policy to reach out to actors in civil society so that they have the will and confidence to carry out effective strategies that lead to a more representative government? How might civil society organizations in the United States help build their capacity and get the most appropriate resources into their hands? Facing such constraints, U.S. efforts to assist Cuban civil society should avoid micromanagement by the U.S. government and encourage direct contact and communications between U.S. and Cuban entities to foster relations with a diverse cross section of Cuban society. U.S. policy, therefore, should be based on a three-pronged approach: first, it should aim to foster contacts between the citizens of both countries through travel and the engagement of a broad cross-section of Cuban civil society entities by their U.S. counterparts; second, it should enhance the economic well-being and livelihood of the Cuban people through support for grassroots economic activity and unlimited material assistance; and third, it should increase the access of the Cuban people to the free flow of ideas, information, and communication.

The second challenge stems from the fact that the Cuban state can reduce at will the civic and political space critical for the development of pro-democracy movements struggling to grow within Cuba. What type of a strategy can the United States implement to counter the Cuban leadership's inclination to ensure its own survival by squeezing out dissenting voices? U.S. policy to "isolate Cuba" has cut off the Cuban people's access to resources and information, yet the Cuban state still has access to these very same information channels. Part of the intent of engaging Cuba

is to level the playing field on the side of civil society. Nevertheless, U.S. policymakers must acknowledge that engagement does not guarantee success. Exogenous factors will play a part in whether and how Cuba evolves to democracy. The Cuban government has no desire to open up its political system in ways that will lead to its demise. And the rewards of its present marriage of convenience with Venezuela may soon give way to a bigger bounty: if Cuba's projected energy reserves are proven and its oil and ethanol industries become operational in three to five years, external influence—whether from the United States or Venezuela—over a newly economically viable government will diminish further.

Thus, a policy of engagement may not bring immediate results; success will require a confluence of three factors that over time will drive openings for change in Cuba: the growth of civil society; a change in leaders' attitudes; and changes in the relationship between Cuba and the international community. If Cuban civil society is to gain capacity and form broad-based movements for change, the Cuban government must allow more internal space for this. For this to occur, Cuba's leaders will have to find, or be given, reasons to view improved relations with the Cuban people and the international community as being in their own interest. These factors—the growth of civil society and the Cuban hierarchy's acquiescence to its expansion—will have to converge with a third: the reshaping of international perspectives about Cuba such that it is seen not as an underdog but as a holdout against change. This final critical factor must help compel the Cuban leadership to enact change in order to sustain its positive relations in the international arena.

The test for U.S. policy will be to facilitate the emergence of these three factors concurrently. The United States will need to engage a broad cross-section of Cuban civil society actors and help reduce the dependence of the Cuban people on the state through increased economic opportunity and improved material well-being. Second, it should engage the Cuban leadership on a wide bilateral agenda based on mutual respect to foster contacts at all levels of the government and reduce the Cuban government's resistance to change. And, third, U.S. policy should be shaped within a multilateral framework combining international pressure for the opening of civic spaces and respect for human, civil, and political rights and provide incentives to the Cuban government to enact change.

The third challenge arises out of the widely held view that an engagement policy without preconditions rewards the Cuban government.

More precisely, if the United States changes its approach to encourage greater contact and communication with the Cuban government, how should U.S. policy deal with the perception that in reducing or removing sanctions that contribute to Cuba's isolation the new strategy is "making concessions"?

This book's recommendation of a proactive, unilateral policy is predicated on an assessment that it is in the interest of the United States to seek ways to set both countries on a path that leads them out of the stalemate in bilateral relations. While the United States ultimately hopes to see consistent and irreversible political and economic openings on the island, to prescribe these objectives as preconditions for engagement is folly as it boils down to a reactive stance in which Cuban inaction determines U.S. action—or inaction. Indeed, inaction is in the short-term interest of a Cuban government focused on preserving power. And since the Cuban government will not pursue any reciprocal conditions established on paper, the United States should make clear the direction of policy it wishes to take, and decide when it wishes to take those steps. The United States would assess and judge Cuban actions that are fundamental to the conduct of foreign policy. On the basis of these unilateral judgments, the United States should decide on measures that will advance U.S. policy without making itself hostage to Cuban resistance to U.S. benchmarks.

It is therefore up to the United States to open a new chapter in bilateral relations. The new goal of supporting the emergence of a Cuban state in which the Cuban people determine the political and economic future of their country through democratic means would serve as the key criterion in assessing U.S. measures. In this context, changes in policy that engage Cuba are not "concessions" but strategic tools to advance policy objectives. A strategy that simultaneously engages the Cuban leadership and the Cuban people and strengthens civil society on the island is integral to this approach.

The U.S. president's leadership will be essential to forge a long-range strategy of engagement that may require quiet negotiations with the Cuban government. Contrary to the popular myth that Congress must legislate to change U.S. policy toward Cuba, the president has ample authority to loosen the embargo and put in place a policy of engagement, including the necessary carrot of increased commercial activities. Working closely with Robert Muse and Richard Popkin, two attorneys who specialize in embargo-related law, the project advisers formulated a road map

that relied almost exclusively on unilateral executive actions. This approach is grounded in the understanding that the Helms-Burton Act of 1996 (the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act), which codified the embargo, also preserved and codified the authority of the secretary of the treasury to license all prohibited activities. Therefore, the president can order his secretary to modify, rescind, and change embargo regulations, including permitting broad categories of travel to Cuba and two-way trade in a wide variety of goods and services. (See appendix A for a review of the legal basis for executive action.) Executive action can accomplish a significant amount before the president has to go to Congress for legislation to remove the embargo and lift all restrictions on travel.

The Task of This Book

The second chapter of this book presents the consensus policy recommendations that emerged from the project; it is the only part of this book where the project sought to obtain consensus.

The process whereby all nineteen advisers came together to endorse a set of recommendations broadly acceptable to domestic constituencies in the United States and to the international community represents a strategy that may be replicated. The setting for debate and engagement provided by the simulation exercises led advisers to a common perspective, and the evolving convergence in their views in a sense reflects the deliberations within the Obama administration and in the wider U.S. political environment. A combination of frustration, experience, and new opportunity is leading to incremental change in U.S. policy. The first steps taken by the Obama administration in 2009 were to lift all restrictions on travel and remittances by Cuban Americans to Cuba, and to negotiate a change in OAS policy to rescind Cuba's exclusion and put the onus on the Cuban government to reactivate its membership. Equally significant is that the administration has not engaged in hostile and ultimately counterproductive rhetoric with Cuba. Still, these important measures will not achieve the new policy objective laid out earlier if they are not combined with a longer-term strategy of strategic engagement that further reduces barriers to a normal bilateral relationship.

As noted, chapters 3 to 8 review the main lessons learned from each simulation exercise. Appended to each chapter are documents that help capture the context and dynamics of each simulation: the scenario used

for each simulation, the instructions and setting given for each exercise, and an abridged set of minutes that tracks the development of the discussion. The simulation summaries are analyses that reflect the views of the project team at Brookings and not necessarily the views of the full advisory group, though the chapters themselves were reviewed by the group. The cumulative insights reflected within these chapters were critical to the process of formulating the consensus recommendations presented in chapter 2.

The book includes two important appendixes that influenced the advisers' views on the potential for making constructive changes in U.S. policy toward Cuba. Appendix A, "Understanding the Legal Parameters of the U.S. Embargo on Cuba," presents information on the scope for changing policy toward Cuba within the limits of existing laws. An op-ed piece published by project directors in the *Miami Herald* on February 24, 2009, and a summary of embargo regulations present an underappreciated perspective: current law allows the president of the United States extensive leeway in changing policy toward Cuba without legally dismantling the embargo or seeking legislative action. Such flexibility is a crucial tool in constructing a policy that is nimble and dynamic. Appendix B, "2008 Florida International University Poll of Cuban American Opinion" describes the results of the 2008 Florida International University (FIU) poll of Cuban American opinion on U.S. policy toward Cuba and the U.S. elections. Conducted in the aftermath of the U.S. presidential elections by the Institute for Public Opinion Research of FIU and funded by the Brookings Institution and the Cuba Study Group, the poll shows that for the first time since FIU began polling Cuban American residents in 1991, a substantial majority of Cuban American registered voters favor ending current restrictions on travel and remittances to Cuba and support a bilateral dialogue and normal diplomatic relations with the Cuban government.

We offer this book to a broad range of readers—U.S., Cuban, and international policymakers as well as Cuban American and other general readers—in the belief that the lessons learned over the course of the project can be used as a tool set for future work on Cuba. We believe that our deliberations will be useful for U.S. policymakers as they seek to devise an effective policy toward Cuba. The simulations present plausible outcomes based on various policy approaches and provide insights into the strengths, weaknesses, and interests of a set of key strategic actors in and

outside Cuba, thereby providing useful approximations of how policymakers can expect the Cuban government and the international community to respond to different policies. We also hope our analyses will be of interest to Cuban policymakers themselves as they confront the realities of historic change and new dynamics within Cuban society. In addition, we believe this book will be useful to international policymakers who, attuned to the difficult task facing the United States as it reorients its policy toward Cuba, are called on to play a key role to defuse direct tensions between our two countries and advance the aspirations of the Cuban people on a coordinated front. Finally, we offer this book to the Cuban American community. The community has the potential to play an active role to shape U.S. policy toward Cuba. Cuban Americans can be the best ambassadors for reconciliation on both sides of the Florida Straits. But will the proliferation of voices and interests within the Cuban American community allow it to reach the consensus necessary to help lend coherence to U.S. policy?

Political opportunity is never a guarantee for political action or policy coherence, but for the first time in decades there is a convergence in political self-interests in Cuba and the United States that could break a legacy of stalemate. *Learning to Salsa: New Steps in U.S.-Cuba Relations* is written in that spirit, but it is also rooted in realism. The simulations captured in this book highlight not only positive potential but also resistance to political change. Cuban leaders will not want to relinquish power. Within the United States, adherents to isolating Cuba do so out of conviction, trapped by entrenched views. Still, the potential for building coalitions among younger Cuban Americans, business interests, and centrist Republicans and Democrats creates a new political dynamic. *Learning to Salsa* injects into the policy debates on Cuba perspectives that can take advantage of these political openings to increase the odds that the phrase “Cuba in transition” is grounded in reality.