

Is the Cuban problem fading away with the ageing Castro regime?

Written by Benedict Hayes

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BENEDICT HAYES, SEP 18 2011

From the end of the Cold War, when Soviet economic support to Cuba disappeared, numerous political commentators on the Western Hemisphere have debated the longevity of the regime implemented by Fidel Castro since taking power from Fulgencio Batista. From that point on United States (US) – Cuban relations have been constantly strained, with Havana a significant target of Washington criticism and overthrow attempts. This has led to a regard of Cuba as an embarrassing ‘problem’ that appeared to both tarnish and depreciate US honour both domestically and internationally. This essay shall examine Cuba from a predominantly US perspective, understanding the word ‘problem’ in terms of undemocratic regime type, representing the epicentre for all global anti-US sentiment and posing a threat to US national security. This essay argues that both the Cuban problem and Cuba itself shall change in the short to middle-term post-Castro(s) period, but remain an irritant to US foreign policy in both rhetoric and action.

To examine the ‘problem’ that the Castro-led Cuban regime has posed towards the US and its foreign policy, it is important to acknowledge that the ‘problem’ itself has changed overtime. Most notable in this consideration is the context of the Cold War. No longer is the island as significant within the context of armed political struggle and secular nationalism as it was in the period of the Cold War. When in 1966 Cuba hosted the Tri-Continental Congress and brought together left-wing revolutionaries from across the globe, and in 1962 became the focal point of the world’s attention with the Cuban Missile Crisis, the island constituted a significant threat to US national security and the spread of communism. Since then the agendas of human rights and democracy promotion have emerged as the main focus of US-Cuban foreign policy.

US interference: a challenging factor?

Since the Platt Amendment, the US has attempted to shape Cuban politics, thereby limiting the island’s national sovereignty. The US saw it as its prerogative to intervene in the domestic and foreign affairs of Cuba. Since the emergence of the Castro regime, Washington has spent four decades attempting to remove Fidel Castro from his position as head of an anti-US regime. As Under Secretary of State David Newsom once commented “[f]ew issues are as emotionally charged in American Foreign Policy as those relating to Cuba.”[1] However, such US fury and resentment towards the Castro regime has led to a fixation on Fidel Castro. This essay argues that such a fixation has been one of the principal policy mistakes of Washington administrations, with too much focus being placed upon one man instead of looking to empower the Cuban people themselves to take control of their own futures. This crucial error has enabled Fidel to establish an institutionalised state in his place that shall be able to continue without him. As the US has found out after Fidel left power and was replaced by his brother, the Cuban Revolution is not a mere result of personality and communist repression.

The transfer of power to Raúl Castro and a number of loyalists has been conspicuous for its regularised and easy transition, in stark contrast to the predictions of US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon who thought that post-Fidel Cuba would be similar to “a helicopter with a broken rotor”.[2] Instead of immediately crashing, Cuba has continued with its slow and stable transition to non-Castro leadership. As Raúl has started, the lack of checks and balances under Fidel, have become more operational and look like continuing to

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do so. This would help the eventual progression away from the previously centralised and personalised authority scheme. Whilst Raúl's proximity in age to his older brother would see him as a transitional as opposed to permanent figure, it would appear that the Communist Party is groomed to take over,[3] with a *Raúlista* military to fortify and stabilise the first post-Castro(s) government when indeed it happens. This smooth transition of power, but adherence to Communist ideologies would see Cuba remain a serious concern to the US.

The US has continually regarded Cuba through the prism of its own self interests and desired model. This essay argues that this short-sightedness has undermined its demands for democratic stature on the island. The US' prevalent policy promotion, of what Laurence Whitehead has classed as the third type of democracy promotion, namely 'intimidation' has in fact damaged social support for the democratic process.[4] It has enabled Cuba to demonise the US to the world with such policies as the Torricelli Act.[5] In this particular case the US was portrayed as an enemy, as opposed to a benevolent global player, enforcing nationwide hunger on Cuban society. Whilst the US demands unequivocal surrender from Cuba, in exchange it does not even offer any assurances towards a newly democratic Cuba and its sovereignty.[6] Following on from Hilary Clinton's comment that "...just as no nation can meet these challenges [obstacles to cooperation] alone, no challenge can be met without America",[7] US assumptions that Cuban leaders want to improve relations with the US is short-sighted. US isolation policy has provided Cuba with a justification for many of its national policy choices and to excuse a number of policy failures. Such US-demonization has encouraged foreign support for Cuba.

Foreign aid to durability & further security issues:

With such foreign aid as that provided by Venezuela, the People's Republic of China and the European Union, this essay views anti-Cuban US behaviour, such as the trade embargo and isolationism, as actually beneficial to Cuba in a number of ways, and does not show the US as a tenable and positive advocate for democratic reform. Whilst in the Cold War period the Soviet Union provided \$4 billion annual subsidy and much of the regime heavily relied upon soviet aid,[8] Cuba has since opened itself up to economic diversification. According to official government figures 258 foreign financed investment projects were taking place on the island.[9] Additionally, Havana has found a significant benefactor in oil-rich Hugo Chávez's Venezuela. Therefore whilst the US trade embargo has seen Cuba at times struggle, the emergence of 'alternative options' has underlined the durability of the regime. Without needing to prostrate itself before the US, Cuba may continue to embody the anti-Washington Latin American sentiment and receive support from non-capitalist global actors.

Within the context of a post-Cold War 'Cuban problem', it has been suggested that a new security threat has emerged from Cuba, namely that of drug trafficking.[10] Cuba has been described as "un corredor 'favorable' para el narcotráfico";[11] as such, it is possible that certain entrepreneurs and officials may look to exploit their geographical proximity to the US and collaborate with the drug traffickers. The apparent current reluctance of the Cuban regime to sufficiently and adequately finance anti-drug law enforcers could lead to the emergence of a new and significant chain in the drug trafficking process. At only 90 miles off the US coast, this could constitute a considerable US national security threat, and one which could well continue after the Castros have gone.

It is also briefly important to consider the fact that if the US got their desired transition in Cuba, how much of the new 'democratic' regime would be as the US stipulated. Following on from Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe Schmitter's theory of the "high degree of indeterminacy"[12] in transitions from authoritarian regimes, it is important to recognise the rising tide of illiberal democracies, and pose the hypothetical question: what if the Cuban people in a free and fair election, elected a government that was not US-friendly? Would this rid the US of the supposed 'Cuban problem'? If the US continued to intervene in the Cuban political situation, would this not be a violation of the Organisation of American States' respect for national sovereignty? Whilst these points are indeed most hypothetical considerations, their contemplation are still most valid when analysing whether a future non-Castro government would cease to be problematic for Washington.

This essay argues that through US attempts at regime overthrow, they have inadvertently created a martyr for anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist movements. Fidel Castro shall continue to play an important role in US-Latin American relations long after his death, as a focus of solidarity, a mantle that Hugo Chávez purports to continue. Whilst it is

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impossible for the Castro(s) regime to continue forever, witnessing the success of their education and healthcare programs it is difficult to witness a Ceaușescu-esque crumble into chaos. Whilst traditionally the US has focused in efforts predominantly on the downfall of Fidel Castro, it has not sought sufficiently to empower the Cuban people themselves to control their own destinies. In the meantime, the Castros have looked towards a time after they have left power, with recent economic reforms and openings. These efforts to aid a smooth transition shall see the Cuban regime continue after its original leaders have left, standing firm as an anti-US focal point and remaining an issue to an already over-stretched US foreign policy staff.

[1] Newsom quoted by Pérex, L. A., 'Fear and Loathing of Fidel Castro: Sources of US Policy Toward Cuba' from *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 34, 2002, p. 227

[2] Sweig, J. A., 'Fidel's Final Victory' from *Foreign Affairs*, January/ February 2007, p.42

[3] Erikson, D. P., 'Charting Castro's Possible Successors' from *SAIS Review*, Vol. XXV no.1 (Winter-Spring 2005), pp. 94-95

[4] Whitehead, L. 'The Imposition of Democracy' from Lowenthal, A. F (ed.) *Exporting Democracy: The United States and Latin America*, (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 378

[5] Domínguez, J. I., 'Cuba in a New World' from Lowenthal, A. F, & Treverton, G. F., (eds.) *Latin America in a New World*, (San Francisco & Oxford: Westview Press, 1994), p. 209

[6] Whitehead, 'The Imposition of Democracy', p.379

[7] Hilary R. Clinton quoted from 'Foreign Policy Address at the Council on Foreign Relations' Washington, DC. July 15, 2009

[8] Sweig, J. A., 'Fidel's Final Victory', p.44

[9] 'Investors sticking it out in crisis-prone Cuba' from ' from Reuters, 17th December 2009

[10] Domínguez, 'Cuba in a New World' from Lowenthal, & Treverton, (eds.) *Latin America in a New World*, p. 214

[11] 'Denuncian que Cuba es un corredor "favorable" para el narcotráfico' from *El Nuevo Herald*, 2nd March 2004

[12] O'Donnell G. & Schmitter P. C., 'Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies', (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 5

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