

End the Embargo of Cuba

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Cuba once stood as a bastion of communism and a surrogate of the Soviet Union just 90 miles from U.S. shores—a clear threat to national security. Today, the Soviet Union is gone and Cuba, though still ruled by communists, poses no major security threat to the U.S. Yet, despite these fundamental changes, the U.S. embargo of Cuba continues. Originally designed to isolate Cuba and force a shift to a free and open democratic government, the embargo has failed on both fronts. **Nearly 50 years after President Eisenhower severed official diplomatic ties with Cuba, it is time to reassess U.S. policy toward Cuba and lift the embargo.**

Bringing Cuba out of isolation and back into the international fold is a smart move on many fronts; but, most importantly, it would allow the U.S. to concentrate on real security threats. The major security challenges of the 21st century—transnational terrorists, cyber warfare, and nuclear proliferation—require that U.S. security policy shift away from antiquated Cold War thinking so that policymakers can properly allocate resources to confront these challenges. Lifting the embargo and engaging Cuba would be a significant step in shifting security policy to meet 21st century threats.

Background: 50 Years of Status Quo

On January 3, 1961, President Eisenhower officially terminated U.S. diplomatic relations with Cuba. The following year, the U.S. officially imposed its economic embargo against Cuba, hoping it would help end communist rule and foster democracy on the island nation. Nearly fifty years later, not much has changed.

The Cuban embargo in effect today was established pursuant to several laws: the 1917 Trading with the Enemy Act, the

1961 Foreign Assistance Act, the 1963 Cuban Assets Controls Regulations, the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act (Torricelli Act), and the 1996 Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Libertad) Act (Helms–Burton Act). Collectively, these statutes serve to restrict trade and travel between the U.S. and Cuba and place numerous economic sanctions on Cuba as well as countries that do business with Cuba. The 2000 Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act relaxed pieces of the embargo pertaining to agricultural goods and medicine, but all trade between the U.S. and Cuba remains strictly regulated.

Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle have voiced opposition to the embargo in recent years. Senator John Kerry, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has expressed opposition to the embargo on numerous occasions, including a December 2009 op-ed outlining his plan to move Cuba forward.¹ Senator Lugar, the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, released a 2009 staff report arguing for a new direction in U.S. policy toward Cuba, one that chips away at the embargo and moves toward engagement.² The House Agriculture Committee voted the Travel Restriction Reform and Export Enhancement Act (HR 4645) out of committee with a bipartisan 25–20 vote in June.³ Now awaiting further action by the House, HR 4645 would significantly expand trade and travel between the US and Cuba by preventing the President from restricting or regulating travel between the US and Cuba for all U.S. citizens and permanent residents, and by amending the 2000 Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act to simplify the trading of agricultural goods.

Reasons for Lifting the Embargo

Fighting 21st Century Threats

Keeping the embargo in place requires that the U.S. government devote time and resources to fighting a Cold War-era threat. Senator Chris Dodd argued in a 2005 op-ed

that the U.S. spends “extraordinary resources” each year to enforce the sanctions instead of devoting such resources to the fight against terrorism.⁴ While the financial resources dedicated to enforcing the embargo may be limited compared to resources dedicated to other causes, lifting the Cuban embargo could put the U.S. in a better position to fight terrorist organizations by freeing up resources currently enforcing the embargo.

For example, the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), which governs travel and trade between the U.S. and Cuba, is also responsible for maintaining sanctions against truly problematic countries, including Iran and North Korea. OFAC also is responsible for responding to economic threats posed by terrorist organizations and narcotics traffickers. By ending OFAC’s need to regulate the Cuban embargo, OFAC could instead devote those resources to respond to the current threats posed by rogue states and terrorist networks.

Cuba also remains on the State Department’s state sponsor of terrorism list along with Iran, Syria, and Sudan,⁵ despite claims by experts such as former National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism Richard Clarke that Cuba is only on the list for domestic political reasons.⁶ A 1998 report by the U.S. Intelligence Community determined that Cuba does not pose a threat to U.S. national security,⁷ yet the State Department continues to keep Cuba on the list. By normalizing relations with Cuba and removing Cuba from the list, the State Department could better focus on actual state sponsors of terror and instead use resources in the Western Hemisphere bureau to initiate a new path for engaging Cuba.

Advancing Economic Security

The U.S. has had normal trade relations with many countries just as problematic, if not more so, than Cuba, including China, Vietnam (President Clinton lifted the 1975 trade embargo in 1994), and even the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War.⁸ In an era of global economic integration, maintaining strong economic relations with other countries

is vital to growing the economy. The rest of the world has recognized that Cuba does not pose a threat and has normalized trade relations, leaving the U.S. alone in its imposition of the embargo. As long as other countries are willing to supply Cuba with all of its needs, the U.S. embargo will never be effective and will only hurt the U.S. economy. Furthermore, by blaming the U.S. for Cuba's lack of economic prosperity and using the embargo as a scapegoat, Cuba's leadership has eluded responsibility for the poor standard of living on the island and routinely portrays the U.S. as an oppressor of the Cuban people.

Cuba has the potential to be a sizeable market for U.S. goods should the embargo come to an end. Despite all of the trade restrictions, the U.S. exported \$710 million worth of food to Cuba in 2008, making the U.S. Cuba's largest food supplier.⁹ A March 2010 Texas A&M University study found that expanding agricultural trade and travel between the U.S. and Cuba could result in \$365 million in increased sales of U.S. goods in Cuba and create 6,000 new jobs in the U.S.¹⁰

Moving Cuba Forward

Peter Hakim, President of the Inter-American Dialogue, has rightly argued that a "democratic society in Cuba should be the objective of U.S. engagement, not a precondition."¹¹ Vietnam and China both fall under the rule of communist leadership, yet the U.S. has taken steps to establish formal diplomatic relations and open trade with both countries. Cuba should not continue to be the exception. Others have argued that U.S.-Cuba cooperation on issues such as counter-narcotics efforts could benefit both countries and initiate trust-building among the two countries.

Policymakers on both sides of the aisle can agree that the embargo has failed to meet its stated purpose of bringing change to Cuba's communist government, making a change in course a necessary next step. Lifting the antiquated embargo would help to move Cuba into the 21st century, removing the barriers currently preventing the U.S. from engaging Cuba and presenting the U.S. with an opportunity to

bring about change in Cuba through economic and diplomatic channels. By opening Cuba, the U.S. could finally achieve the change it has been seeking for nearly fifty years.

Steps to Lifting the Embargo

Although the Obama administration took the largely symbolic step of extending the embargo for another year under the Trading with the Enemy Act last year, the President did relax some longstanding restrictions by taking action to make it easier for Cuban-Americans to visit and send remittances to family members in Cuba. The administration also recently hinted at plans to reduce travel restrictions for academic, cultural, and religious groups later this year.¹² While the executive branch can continue to chip away at these longstanding restrictions, the law requires that Congress will ultimately need to pass legislation to repeal the embargo.

Under existing law, established by the Helms-Burton Act, the embargo cannot be lifted until the Cuban people democratically elect a new government and the transition government is in place. While President Obama could take an initial step by refusing to issue the annual extension of Cuba's "national emergency" status under the Trading with the Enemy Act,¹³ **lifting the embargo will ultimately require that Congress pass and the President sign into law legislation to repeal both the Torricelli Act and the Helms-Burton Act.** Passing HR 4645 would be a positive first step, but Congress will need to take further action to see that the embargo is lifted in its entirety.

Responding to the Opposition

Opponents to lifting the embargo have raised a number of objections. None of them withstand scrutiny.

Peter Brookes, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense under George W. Bush, said that lifting the embargo could lead to Cuba becoming a regional power, arguing that the U.S. "[doesn't] need a pumped-up Cuba that could become a

serious menace to U.S. interests in Latin America, the Caribbean—or beyond.”¹⁴ While Venezuela, for example, has challenged the U.S. on some interests, its anti-American leadership has not been able to present a serious counterweight to the U.S. or have a significant impact on U.S. security. Given that Venezuela is a much bigger economic player than Cuba due to its oil revenues, it is highly unlikely that Cuba would pose a significant geopolitical challenge to the U.S., even if significant sums of money enter Cuba’s economy.

Former Senator Mel Martinez has argued against lifting the embargo, claiming that the U.S. needs “to support pro-democracy activists in Cuba, not provide the Castro regime with a resource windfall.”¹⁵ Florida Rep. Tom Rooney has argued that lifting the embargo would serve to reward Cuba’s leadership for its decades-long record of human rights abuses and allow the abuse to continue due to the absence of pressure from the U.S.¹⁶ The U.S. has used the embargo as an effort to pressure the communist leadership for nearly fifty years, yet the status quo remains unchanged. If a possible downside of lifting the embargo is that the situation will not change, then the U.S. has nothing to lose by making an effort to normalize relations with Cuba. By refusing to engage Cuba and make efforts to move Cuba forward, the U.S. is in a weak position to criticize the Cuban leadership. Lifting the embargo and normalizing relations would put the U.S. in a stronger position to bring about change through economic advancements that could in turn result in domestic demands within Cuba for greater social and political freedoms.

After five decades of failure, the arguments for lifting the embargo are far more compelling than those in support of leaving the status quo unchanged. The U.S. should leave the Cold War-era policy in the past and look to engage Cuba through open trade and formal diplomatic relations, which could initiate the transition to a more open, cooperative, and potentially democratic Cuba that policymakers have sought for half a century.

END NOTES

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