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## Update on the Americas

# Engaging Cuba: Policy Options for the United States, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere

Edited by José Raúl Perales,\* Senior Program Associate

Revolutionary Cuba's intense foreign policy has reached a critical juncture, involving a rare combination of challenges, opportunities, and seeming contradictions. Despite recent efforts to formally reintegrate Cuba into the Organization of American States (of which it was suspended in 1962), the current regime has shown little interest in rejoining a body it has viewed historically as a tool of the United States. At the same time Cuba maintains extensive political and economic relations with many governments of the region, particularly but not limited to those of the bloc of nations forming the Venezuelan-led Alternativa Bolivariana de las Américas (ALBA). Recent re-establishment of diplomatic relations with El Salvador and Costa Rica has left the United States as the only country in the Western Hemisphere without formal ties to Cuba. Yet Cuba's agricultural imports from the United States have reached unprecedented levels, even in the presence of a U.S. economic embargo imposed in 1962 that was subsequently tightened through legislation.

From Washington to Brasília to Madrid, prevalent views on commercial and political relations with Cuba are being challenged and rethought. Some of that process has been driven by changes in leadership not only in Cuba but also in such key countries as the United States and Spain. Throughout Latin America, numerous countries have long maintained correct if not cordial relations with Cuba, out of a sense of self-interest as well as to demonstrate independence from the harsh and, in the view

of many, antiquated and ideologically-driven U.S. stance. Indeed, Latin American leaders figured prominently among the many heads of state visiting Havana after the inauguration of Raúl Castro as president. They invariably called for a change in U.S. policy toward Cuba.

To explore changing attitudes and discuss the divergent perspectives in the international community over how to engage Cuba and over what ends, the Latin American Program joined with the Heinrich Böll Stiftung Foundation North America and the Caribbean Studies Association to convene the conference "Engaging Cuba: Policy Options for the United States, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere." The November 16, 2009, seminar examined the past, present, and future of E.U., U.S., and Western Hemispheric political and economic policy toward Cuba. Panelists included Cuba experts from Canada, Europe, and the United States drawn from the worlds of diplomacy, academia, and civil society.

Participants largely agreed that the current strategy of uncoordinated, disparate approaches by different actors has, unsurprisingly, led to suboptimal results. International divergences over goals and strategies, whatever their source, have largely diluted the impact of any particular policy approach. Participants agreed on the desirability of a single, unified policy within the international community with which to engage Cuba. This shift toward greater convergence may not be as unlikely as it would appear, given statements by the current U.S. administration,

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Canada's impatience that change occur, Spain's efforts to revise the E.U.'s Common Position as it assumes the presidency of that body in 2010, and the emergence in several Latin American countries of stable and confident leadership intent on playing a larger role on the world stage.

**Cynthia Arnson**, Director of the Latin American Program, outlined a series of basic questions informing the debate over how, and whether, to engage Cuba. First, she asked to what extent the transfer of power from Fidel to Raúl Castro marks not only a personnel change at the helm of the regime, but also a substantive change in the goals and policies of the Cuban Revolution. If reform is currently underway does it include political liberalization, and if so, what is the role of the international community in deepening such a transformation? Arnson then asked about the terms of engagement in the political, economic, and cultural spheres. For example, does diplomatic and/or commercial engagement contribute to change over time? Or should engagement be withheld, pending improvements in human rights and political freedoms on the island?

Finally, Arnson addressed whether the international community could find convergences for engagement with Cuba in the policy realms of trade, migration, energy, and human rights. She asked whether Spain, upon assuming the rotating

presidency of the European Union in early 2010, would seek to reorient EU policy toward Cuba and how the Obama administration would navigate among domestic constituencies pressing for change in the U.S.-Cuban relationship versus those insisting on continued isolation. Within the Western Hemisphere as a whole, Arnson wondered whether the Organization of American States was upholding a double standard with respect to the applicability of its Democratic Charter in debating Cuba's readmission.

Programme Coordinator of the Latin America Work Team at the Barcelona Center for International Studies (CIDOB) **Anna Ayuso** detailed Spain's seemingly disjointed foreign policy toward Cuba and offered clues as to how, if at all, E.U. policy toward Cuba would change once Spain took over the E.U. rotating presidency for the first half of 2010. She described Spain's engagement as fraught with conflicting dualities in a number of different realms. First, relations between the two countries cannot be seen strictly in terms of international affairs, she argued, since domestic factors play a crucial role as well. As such, she characterized Spanish-Cuban relations as an "inter-mestic" affair, since the two major Spanish parties embrace divergent positions on how best to engage Cuba and official policy thus changes pursuant upon national

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election results. While the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) supports a policy of constructive engagement, the conservative People's Party (PP) supports a more coercive policy.

Besides this partisan-based duality, Spain's policy toward Cuba is also plagued by the contrasts between pragmatism and voluntarism and between public and private links. Ayuso argued that Spain's approach toward Cuba is at once economically pragmatic and politically voluntaristic. While official links oscillate based on domestic power relations, non-official links are quite fixed. Cooperation between universities, civil society organizations, and businesses is characterized by longstanding stability.

Yet the presence of all these inconsistencies has, surprisingly, not deteriorated relations between the two countries. Admittedly, the absence of political rights, security, rule of law, and incentives for private initiative, coupled with Spain's uncoordinated policies, remain sticking points in the relationship. Nonetheless, Ayuso argued that bilateral relations stay strong, thanks in large part to trade and investment stability (particularly in the tourism sector), cultural and scientific collaboration, and the gradual institutionalization in both countries of policy instruments and links.

Acknowledging that E.U. policy toward Cuba is just as inconsistent as that of Spain, Ayuso proposed a series of policy recommendations to improve coherence and effectiveness. First and foremost, internal consensus within the European Union over Cuba must be built to better coordinate foreign policy positions and limit the amount of personal discretion allowed in decision-making. This involves more than just embracing preconditions; it involves delineating concrete and credible objectives. Second, human rights violations should be monitored through multilateral institutions and, perhaps, regional actors such as Brazil, Mexico, or Costa Rica. Third, the European Union should focus its efforts on supporting economic reforms and building social capital on the island. Finally, key actors for the transition process should be identified, and a reconciliation dialogue should be facilitated.

**Karl Buck**, a recent E.U. official speaking as an individual but who from the early 90s has very closely followed E.U.-Cuban relations, underlined that any approach on Cuba should take into account that, like it or not, Cuba is engaged in world politics and has considerable international support from the developing world as well as Latin American countries which, with few exceptions, were rather unwilling to engage in concrete discussions on improving the internal situation in Cuba.

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Positions like those contained in U.S. legislation or exclusive focus on rapid solutions to the human rights situation in Cuba risk making us hostage to Havana, Buck contended. In clear contrast to the U.S. position, the E.U.'s Common Position excludes coercive means to bring about change, acknowledges the right of Cubans to decide on their future, and offers political dialogue with Cuban authorities and peaceful opposition as well as cooperation. Between 1993 and 2003 and at Cuba's request, the E.U. granted projects up to 130 million, mainly for humanitarian reasons but also to support reforms such as management, labor law, fiscal policy, and others. Cooperation was resumed in 2008, envisaging some 40 million euros in 2009-10 for projects on environment, food security, agricultural reform, humanitarian aims, as well as science and technology.

Cuban conditions to resume dialogue and cooperation (unilaterally suspended by Fidel Castro on account of the 2003 measures imposed against the island) were largely abandoned through patient, informal talks. Clearing the way from unnecessary propagandistic weeds helped prepare a less loaded



terrain for resuming links in 2008; yet a policy of “respeto” (respect) must apply to both sides.

Meanwhile, Cuba requests the elimination of the Common Position to enter into negotiations on possible contractual relations. Buck explained that for this to happen, “unanimity” would be necessary but can be reached in the E.U. only with “constructive abstention.” Buck argued that in itself this might not be harmful, but raised doubts about whether it would solve any of the consecutive problems. For instance, in an elaborate contractual agreement, usual E.U. clauses such as democracy and human rights would have to be entered as Article no.1. Cuba is unlikely to accept these terms or fulfil them; by the same token, some member states are unlikely to renounce the clause for Cuba. Yet as demonstrated in unexpected E.U. flexibility on the 2003 measures, no possibility can be excluded. Despite very opposite principal positions and ideas on how to promote change in Cuba, so far the E.U. has always reached consensus on Cuba positions, while admitting flexible behaviour on the ground. Yet the E.U.’s credibility has suffered from the visibly inconsistent behaviour of some member states at the bilateral and E.U.-Cuba levels. Most observers in the E.U. trust that economic development, as well as the influx of money, goods, and ideas, has a long-term impact that favours a more democratic evolution in Cuba.

Buck stated that “mutual irrelevance” between Cuba and the E.U., or “de-dramatization by bilateralization,” is still a possible evolution in case of intransigence by Cuba or some E.U. member states.

In past years, the E.U. and the United States succeeded in reducing conflicts between their respective policies. In a longer perspective, Buck pointed out to an issue which Cubans, the United States and the E.U. would have to settle in any transition: the thorny property issue.

The E.U. and U.S. approaches to engaging Cuba have different means and different ends, explained **Stephen Wilkinson**, assistant director of the International Institute for the Study of Cuba at London Metropolitan University. The European Union and the United States share a common goal of regime change in Cuba in the direction of Western, liberal, multi-party democracy with a free-market economy; however, this is where the similarities end. U.S. goals, as represented by the Helms-Burton Law of 1996, involve a complete removal of the current government and its replacement by one that includes neither Fidel

nor Raúl Castro. E.U. goals on the other hand, as represented by the E.U. Common Position of 1996, involve encouraging the current government to reform and initiate a peaceful transition. Likewise, these fundamentally different ends are to be accomplished through essentially different means: the United States advocates international sanctions and isolation while the European Union advocates active engagement void of coercive measures.

According to Wilkinson, reasons for these differences fall into two groups: historical differences and specific E.U. interests. Historically, the European Union has had misgivings about embargoes, been committed to maintaining free commerce, and never seen Cuba as a threat to its security. It originally did not see Fidel as a Communist and thus thought he could be steered away from Soviet influence through engagement. Along this line of reasoning an embargo would only serve to drive Castro into the arms of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the existence in Europe of a powerful left, coupled with a legacy of social democracy and mixed economies, meant that Cuba was met with more ideological allies in the European Union than in the United States. In terms of specific E.U. interests, Europe’s Caribbean dependencies has made it particularly wary of the inevitable maelstrom that would result in Cuba’s collapse: a mass exodus of Caribbean citizens fleeing to the European continent is undesirable.

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Discrepancies between E.U. and U.S. goals and means have rendered both Cuba strategies ineffective. U.S. pressure on Cuba, beginning with the 1962 embargo, has been relieved to some extent by the E.U. (and, for that matter, Canadian) strategy of dialogue and cooperation. However, these competing strategies have converged since 2008, given the easing of pressure by the Obama Administration and the push for greater engagement by Spain’s unilateral actions.

Combined with the fact that Venezuela, China, Iran, and Brazil have extended support to Cuba, and that the Rio Group admitted Cuba into its ranks in 2008, the U.S. embargo is becoming less and less effective, Wilkinson explained. The Helms-Burton policy goal of regime change is less and less achievable, as is the Common Policy approach. The best possible solution, he argued, is a convergence of policies. The United States should continue to ease up on pressure—it can always use the threat of a reapplication of pressure to gain leverage—and, with the European Union, push for reforming the regime, not regime overthrow.

Director of the U.S. Education Finance Group **Ambassador John Maisto** argued that one must disaggregate E.U. policy and U.S. policy toward Cuba to understand fully the nature of engaging Cuba. For instance, Spanish unilateral policy differs from that of E.U. Common Policy because of the particular significance of the Spain-Cuba relationship. Spain is one of Cuba's top five trading partners and over 25 percent of foreign investment on the island is Spanish. Less quantifiable but no less relevant is Spanish sentimentality: every Spaniard has some sort of personal link to Cuba and the country as a whole feels intimately tied to its former colony. On the U.S. side, the large Cuban diaspora exerts important political influence. The way the United States has engaged Cuba has varied significantly in style, but little in substance (the embargo goes on), from administration to administration; the Obama Administration, however, has demonstrated a keen willingness to begin anew with Cuba and has taken concrete steps.

The world community remains skeptical as to whether either approach has worked, claimed Maisto. Going forward, however, he cited consensus on the fact that the time for creativity is now. To effect change on the island a greater role is needed for multilateralism, particularly in the use of the Pan American Health Organization in more and better health cooperation, and the Inter-American Democratic Charter of the Organization of American States to address human rights and democracy. First and foremost, however, the European Union and the United States need to set aside their

differences and work together on engaging Cuba.

The predicament held by the U.S. government is not whether or not to engage Cuba, argued **Bisa Williams**, then acting deputy assistant secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. Rather, it is how to engage Cuba in a way that effects change and has a positive impact on both U.S. national security and the everyday living conditions of Cubans. In fact, the United States has been pushing successfully for greater access to Cubans, particularly outside of Havana Province. Likewise, it does support the reentry of Cuba into the O.A.S. community so long its inclusion adheres to that body's Inter-American Democratic Charter, a view recently re-endorsed by every member state. Furthermore, she questioned the conventional wisdom that domestic concerns and constituents largely hamper U.S. policy options toward Cuba. Instead, she characterized this as a robust and healthy debate among NGO's, academics, Americans of Cuban descent, and other members of the exile community, that is constantly evolving in response to changes in the island.

The United States is currently working to support Cuba's homegrown civil society organizations, grassroots organization initiatives, and humanitarian missions, she explained. The Obama Administration is actively engaged with Cuban society writ large—i.e., not just dissident groups, but women's rights activists, academics, and youth groups as well. To this end the United States has eased restrictions on remittances and travel by Cuban-Americans, supported efforts by U.S. businesses to seek contracts in Cuba related to communications technology and licensing, and expanded the caliber and quantity of gift items allowed to be shipped through to Cuba. Tangible evidence of this new engagement is the marked increase in the number of U.S. business associations, trade representatives, and congressional delegations travelling to Cuba within the past few years.

But the picture is not completely rosy; Williams noted U.S. concerns over certain disconcerting developments in Cuba. For instance, the reported forced detention and beating of Yoani Sánchez, a Cuban blogger who does not self-identify as a political activist yet is an active proponent of free speech in Cuba, is a harrowing step in the wrong





direction. She acknowledged that there have been fewer new political prisoners on the island, but nonetheless pointed out that there has been a noticeable increase in harassment and intimidation, no doubt the result of the recent increase in citizen interaction with authorities over issues of political accountability. Alongside this has been a steady expansion of independent voices, particularly through online media channels and among Cuban youths. Williams expressed regret that one recent endeavor to introduce Cuban students to U.S. educational programs was postponed indefinitely by the Cuban regime. To be fair, however, there are numerous private educational exchange programs successfully sending American students to Cuba to study for short periods at Cuban universities. Admissions committees for these programs have registered high levels of interest in increasing the opportunities for Cuban students to study in the U.S. There is high interest among Cuba's youth in such programs.

Canada's policy toward Cuba, on the other hand, has been determined in large part as a counter-approach to the U.S. policy of direct pressure. **Carlo Dade**, executive director at the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) in Ottawa, argued that the reason why Canada never broke diplomatic relations with Cuba—unlike every other country in the hemisphere, with the exception of Mexico—and why Canada has followed the E.U. approach of cooperation and engagement is partially explained because of issues of national identity. Canada's Cuba policy, he argued, has been a way for Canada to distinguish itself from its southern neighbor and, as such, has become important to the Canadian national identity at home and abroad.

Another factor affecting Canada's rapprochement with Cuba has been the strong influence of the Cuban government upon Canadian NGO's and universities, Dade added. Solidarity groups, particularly in the province of Quebec but also at most universities throughout the country, have been particularly active in limiting and defining critical discussion of Canada's Cuba policy. They have impacted popular discourse and to some degree have made the possibility of official policy change more difficult.

Relations shifted drastically with Prime Minister Jean Chrétien during a state visit to Cuba

where he and Fidel argued strenuously over human rights. However, current talk of a dramatic shift in Canada's Cuba policy—as well as the conventional wisdom of Canada's role within Cuba—is based more on perception than reality, argued Dade. Canada is not as important to the Cuban economy as many think. Canada's foreign direct investment is confined largely to the extraction of nickel, oil, and gas, and, though important, is limited in reach. Should there be an opening, these sectors would be open to U.S. competition. Nevertheless, the Canadian private sector will be competitive in mining and retail banking.

Likewise, Canadian spending on development has not focused on human rights. In reality, what Canada has accomplished is assist with economic reform and the modernization of the Cuban state. This will be hugely important should there be any opening in the island, as the skills being taught will be in critical demand and crucial for any transition to a modern, open economy. If and when U.S. policy changes, Dade predicted that Canada would be forced to reappraise its own foreign policy, lest it be sidelined and lose what little special opportunities remains from its fifty plus years of presence on Cuba. The importance of Cuba in defining Canadian identity as being different from the United States, though, has run its course after fifty years; it is becoming less important at home and less convincing in the Hemisphere.

This shift has been particularly prominent within Latin America, explained **Jorge Heine**, chair in Global Governance at the Balsillie School of International Affairs in Waterloo, Ontario. From Mexico City to Santiago, Chile, and from Colombia's center-right president, Álvaro Uribe, to Brazil's center-left president, Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva, Latin America has rallied behind a push to normalize relations with Cuba and bring it back into the region's fold. The pinnacle of this effort to date has been Cuba's invitation in 2008 to join the Rio Group, an international organization of Latin American and Caribbean states. Since then, almost half of Latin America's heads of state and government have visited Havana.

Latin America regards negatively the hostility behind U.S. relations with Cuba; it sees Cuban exceptionality as an outdated relic of the Cold War. However, this should not be a point of contention between the United States and its

southern neighbors, despite the fiery rhetoric on the subject often heard in the media by certain outspoken Latin American politicians. In reality, Heine contended that most Latin American presidents, particularly those holding the most clout in the region—Brazil’s Lula, Chile’s Michelle Bachelet, and Mexico’s Felipe Calderón—are quite sympathetic to an official change in U.S. policy. Heine argued that, more so than anytime in the recent past, Latin America is extending a tremendous opportunity to the United States in helping improve U.S.-Cuban relations. It is up to the United States to engage.

More important than engaging the Cuban regime is engaging the Cuban people, argued Coordinator for Governance at the International Republic Institute **Dan Fisk**. Any change in U.S. policy toward the island must take into account the concerns and priorities of the Cuban people.

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Citing the Survey of Cuban Public Opinion, an IRI poll conducted in 12 Cuban provinces over July and August of 2009, Fisk noted that a mere 17 percent of Cubans are satisfied with the direction their country is taking. Furthermore, 75 percent of Cubans favor fundamental political change and 86 percent fundamental economic change. One in five Cubans cited food scarcity as their biggest concern, and more than 91 percent of Cubans support the ability to freely purchase and sell their homes, a right that is currently not afforded to them.

These survey results show that Cubans remain trapped in a system that does not represent them, suppresses their individual rights, and limits their ability to improve their lives. Given this situation, Fisk argued that U.S. policy should continue to encourage civil society actors to support independent counterparts on the island. These “citizen engagement initiatives” should seek to provide the skills, training, material, and information that empower average Cuban

citizens. Despite the obstacles placed on private activities by the Cuban government, citizen engagement has an impact: witness the increasing internal organization and development of Cuban civil society groups and, most promising, the increased use of cell phones and email in the country. An informed citizenry is an empowered citizenry, he noted.

Cuba’s foreign policy and astute ability to play actors off against one another is the real success story of the regime, observed **Susanne Gratus**, Senior Researcher at Madrid’s Foundation for International Relations and External Dialogue (FRIDE). For more than five decades, the Cuban Revolution has been sustained (in economic terms) by strong external allies and, in political terms, by U.S. hostility. The Western Hemisphere accepted with resignation Cuba’s international integration without any concession to liberal democracy: the OAS revoked the special Cuba clause, the United States returned to the Clinton years and Latin America accepted Cuba into the Rio Group. Pushed by Spain, the EU is about to abandon the Common Position and might change its policy from conditioned to unconditional engagement. Brazil could take the lead on Cuba’s full integration into the Hemisphere.

In short, Gratus argued that all previous efforts to open the Cuban regime have failed. However, she noted that for the first time the international community now has a common denominator regarding Cuba: engagement. Less external pressure might increase internal pressure for a political opening. But without lifting the embargo, we will probably never know if engagement works as a strategy to open up closed authoritarian regimes. Finally, she suggested opening a debate on the incentives for democracy in Cuba beyond the stereotypical “sanctions vs. engagement” dichotomy.



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