



# Cuban-Latin American and Caribbean relations: challenges beyond normalisation

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## ■ Executive summary

Cuba's relations with Latin America and the Caribbean have expanded in scope and level during the last decade as a consequence of two combined developments: the changing political landscape in the region and the gradual process of reform carried out by the Cuban regime. This report offers an assessment of where this link now lies, focusing on the challenges and opportunities faced by the region and Havana to consolidate the ongoing rapprochement. Additionally, the unprecedented presence in Latin American multilateral initiatives and newborn institutions of specific bilateral connections is discussed, particularly those of Venezuela and Brazil. The way in which regionalism in Cuba interacts currently with changing tides in the world order is also explored.

The findings in this report are based on interviews with local governmental officials and academics, diplomats, NGOs, and business sectors based in Havana, in addition to specialised literature on Cuban affairs.

## Background

The reconfiguration of Cuban-Latin American relations has involved essential elements indicating the dismantlement of the subordination of this region to the U.S. as a sphere of influence. This process only took place a decade after the ending of the cold war, sped up by the widespread rejection of the neoliberal prescriptions of the 1990s, which favoured a growing political convergence between the Havana regime and many countries in the region. From a Cuban perspective the different formulas of anti-Americanism, varying from radical positions such as that of the ALBA<sup>2</sup> countries to more pragmatic approaches geared to Washington such as that of Brazil, have been seen as valid alternatives according to the historical context within the recent political trajectory of each case. When viewing the region as a whole, Cubans share the notion that an unfair debt has been forgiven or that justice has been done, allowing the isolation and discrimination practised by many governments in the past to be replaced by a fluid relationship.

Links among partisan organisations, social movements and/or intellectual personalities have been and still remain a crucial dimension of Cuban-Latin American relations. Connections between left-oriented governments and Havana have been stimulated even further by political actors currently holding official posts, but originating from previous militancy in communist parties and/or Marxist groups.

As the Cuban regime celebrated its 50th anniversary a wave of progressive governments unleashed a non-violent process of change in Latin America.<sup>3</sup> Holding stronger ties with Latin American countries while aiming to leave behind years of isolation and selective bilateral bonds is referred to in Cuba as a process of "normalisation". In fact, Cuban-Latin American relations are not nostalgic and do not at all follow a Proustian logic of the "search for a lost time". Revolutionary processes that involve the use of violence and insurgency are no longer perceived in the region as a

1 I wish to thank Natalia Herbst for her work as my research assistant.

2 Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América/Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, comprising Antigua and Barbuda, Bolivia, Cuba, Dominica, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Venezuela.

3 Presidential victories of leftist leaders took place in Venezuela with Hugo Chávez (1998), in Chile with Ricardo Lagos (2000) and Michele Bachelet (2006), in Brazil with Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2002) and Dilma Rousseff (2011), in Argentina with Nestor and Cristina Kirchner (2003 and 2007, respectively), in Bolivia with Evo Morales (2006), in Ecuador with Rafael Correa (2007), in Paraguay with Fernando Lugo (2008), in Nicaragua with Daniel Ortega (2007) and in El Salvador (2009).

necessary pathway to social change and international autonomy. Widespread social inclusion policies accompanied by economic measures aiming to protect national sovereignty have been pursued with no major damage to the rule of law in various parts of the region, in certain cases maintaining and deepening the democratic foundations, and preserving the rules of the market economy game.

Latin American democracy processes have contributed to restoring and deepening ties with Havana – so much so that during the last twenty years Fidel and Raul Castro have been invited to all Latin American presidential inaugurations of elected candidates regardless of political affiliation. “Normalisation” is also used to underline the acceptance of political differences within the region and that ideology should no longer be considered as the dominant criterion for intra-regional relations.

## The question of change: between reform and transition

Cubans applaud the internal process of reform,<sup>4</sup> although change is not associated with a political transition, as is often speculated about by Western governments, the media and academia. The changes made essentially aim at the liberalisation of the economy through structural transformations of the Cuban statist centralised model. Among Cuban intellectuals the main dilemma challenging current reforms is that of establishing the most appropriate economic model and what its social impact should be. Political changes, albeit viewed as inevitable, are seen as challenges to be addressed down the road. Subsequently, Latin American experiences appear less attractive than certain Asian state-centred trajectories, especially those in Vietnam and China.

From a comparative perspective the reforms in Cuba can be juxtaposed with three experiences: those in Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the ongoing sequence of regime changes known as the Arab Spring that started in Tunisia in 2010 and the Latin American democratic transitions initiated in the late 1980s. Notwithstanding, a quick review of each indicates exceptionality rather parallelism with the Cuban case.

Despite once being part of the Soviet sphere of influence, the Cuban reform process has little in common with the East European Velvet Revolution. When the former Soviet-bloc countries moved rapidly to embrace European Union (EU)/NATO memberships, oscillating between a northern-liberal worldview and/or *deja vu* autocratic leaderships, Cuba reinvigorated the socialist option to increase

resistance to U.S. imperialism. It must be acknowledged, however, that support for an East European style of transition is very powerful among the Cuban-American community in the U.S.

Furthermore, in the Arab world the strategic, cultural and historical factors that influence political developments in each case obey yet another logic, on occasion leading to a type of international intervention that does not apply to Cuba. On the one hand, the frustration of previous interventionist attempts, e.g. the Bay of Pigs episode, affects the Cuban-Americans sector that might support such a solution. On the other hand, the political unrest produced by dramatically unequal social structures, as has been the case in Egypt and Tunisia, is mostly unlikely in Cuba, thanks to its successful public policies that remain in place despite local economic difficulties.<sup>5</sup>

Referring to the regional precedent, Cuba is unlikely to replicate the South American and especially the Southern Cone’s experience of transition in which local/regional pro-democratic forces worked together based on an anti-authoritarian consensus and resulting from hardly any external pressure. This is and will not in future be the case in Cuba. In fact, Cuba is a special – if not unique – case in which anti-democratic anachronism still endures, resisting the pressure of neocolonial interventionism. The most problematic aspect of Cuba’s uniqueness is its dimension that involves the U.S. and the U.S.-based Cuban exile community.

The principle of non-intervention is a strong feature of Latin America foreign policies and within the region the acceptance of political diversity has been perceived as a sign of political maturity. The region’s foreign policies and domestic regional campaigns in areas of human rights or political pluralism that could influence the Cuban regime are expected to be feeble. Nonetheless, the expanded access to information on current Latin American politics within democratic contexts, thanks to the presence of global instruments of communication such as the Internet and the recent presence of TELESUR in open TV broadcasting, unavoidably nurtures political questioning, particularly among younger generations. Also, the expansion of Latin American tourism in the island, together with an increase of cultural and educational programmes, has renewed and extended areas of exchange and mutual knowledge between Cubans and Latin Americans.

## Regional partnerships

Latin American investment, commerce and co-operation for development are considered more as doors of opportu-

4 The Cuban reform process took place after the transfer of power from Fidel to Raul Castro in 2007. The main measures adopted have been the lifting of bans on private ownership of mobile phones and computers, the relaxation of requirements for access to private land exploitation (2008), national approval of legislation that favours private enterprise, and massive job cuts to reduce the state bureaucracy (2010/11). Human rights advances have led to the freeing of 52 dissidents under a deal brokered by the Catholic Church and Spain (2010), as well as to the gradual relaxation of the restrictions on Cuban citizens travelling abroad as tourists (2011-13).

5 Cuba’s social indicators presented in the *2013 Report on Human Development* are illustrative. Cuba lies in position 59, only behind Argentina, Uruguay and Chile in Latin America and far ahead of the Arab countries in which major political changes have taken place recently (UNDP, 2013: 143).

nity for the Cuban economy than a source of inspiration, allowing the country to pursue sustainable growth, social equity and political change. Cuban-Latin American trade has expanded steadily in recent years, yet when current Cuban-Latin American relations are closely observed, Venezuela and Brazil are the partners that seem to count most.

**The Cuban-Venezuelan nexus** was established as a natural outcome of the installation of the Hugo Chávez government in 1999. Perceived by Cuban officials and intellectuals as vital to saving the revolution after the island had struggled through the difficult period after the fall of the Soviet Union, this relationship launched the ground ideologically for reviving Latin American leftist ideals. From the outset, Cuban-Venezuelan bilateralism has been sustained by three pillars: (1) high-level political dialogue, (2) military intelligence collaboration, and (3) compensatory trade.

Primarily based on personal friendship and deep ideological affinities, the Castro-Chávez connection was central to legitimising the Bolivarian socialist project, promoting the ALBA group (2004), and unblocking communications between leftist guerrilla groups and the government in Colombia. Cuban military advisers in Venezuela became crucial for local intelligence activities and involved direct participation in presidential logistics, weapons training and shared anti-U.S. strategic planning.<sup>6</sup> In 2011 trade with Venezuela represented 38% of total Cuban exchanges, while in Latin America the partnership with Venezuela represented 81% of Cuba's trade with the region. The bilateral accord introduced in 2003 set preferential pricing for the export of Cuban professional services (mainly medical) in exchange for the provision of oil and joint investments in strategic areas, plus the provision of generous credit lines.<sup>7</sup>

Venezuela is the only Latin American country that could strongly affect the island, particularly if the Chavista regime were to be destabilised. The uncertainties of post-Chávez Venezuela have created uneasiness in the Cuban government in that a reconfiguration of the bond with Caracas could replicate the gap experienced in the past when the Soviet Union collapsed.<sup>8</sup> Also, recent tension between the governments of Venezuela and Colombia may also become a source of concern for Havana as they could affect the ongoing Colombian peace talks.

An unprecedented dialogue taking place between Cuba and **Brazil** has brought concrete results for investment, credit, and co-operation in biofuels, health, education, culture, agriculture and infrastructure. The Brazilian strategy has been to maximise the opportunities created by Cuba's economic reforms as an important partner of the Cuban state. For Brazil this relationship allows access to myriad Cuban technological areas of accomplishments and human capabilities, such as those in biotechnology, the pharmaceutical industry and public health organisations, and even in Olympic sports (Garcia, 2013).

Food supply and co-operation for agriculture development are important parts of the ongoing collaboration between the Foreign Trade and International Investment Ministry in Cuba and the ABC agency in Brazil, with special attention extended to co-operative and family production. Brazilian investment has also connected with the Cuban sugar industry, an area until recently inaccessible to foreign investment since the first phase of the Cuban revolution. Ironically, the Cuban government still holds strong ties with social movements in Brazil engaged in land struggles (such as MST), particularly in the preparation of organisational capacities and in health and education co-operation.

Brazilian-Cuban private-state joint ventures have expanded in various areas, in spite of the different economic model in these countries.<sup>9</sup> Instead of being perceived as an obstacle, the Cuban state is viewed by Brazilian entrepreneurs as a reliable and efficient partner that is fully responsible for sensitive issues such as local labour contracts, environmental regulation and foreign currency regulations. While it is true that Brazil's economic presence in Cuba benefits from the absence of the U.S., Canadian and European private sectors, which are restrained by the U.S. embargo, it also suffers in areas of Brazilian commerce and investment that are dependent on U.S. technology and/or industrial parts.

Brazilian investment is perceived as having promising effects for the local economy. The construction of the Mariel port by the Odebrecht group, registered locally as COI, is considered the most important infrastructure project in progress in Cuba.<sup>10</sup> Beyond participation in the industrial zone planned to function next to the port, COI wishes to become a central investor in the modernisation and expansion of Cuba's airports. The Brazilian presence in

6 Cuban-Venezuela co-operation in defence involves the presence of 500 Cuban military advisers, exchange programmes between defence academies and naval collaboration (the repair and maintenance of warships, ports and transportation logistics) (Romero, 2010).

7 Bilateral exchanges registered a large leap since 2004, jumping from \$346 million to \$1.487 million in 2007 and \$1.6 billion in 2012. In 2005 it was agreed that Cuba would supply Venezuela with 30,000 medical professionals, 600 clinics, 600 centres for physical therapy and rehabilitation, 35 centres for high-technology diagnosis, and 100,000 eye operations, besides the training of 40,000 doctors and 5,000 health workers and the provision of 10,000 scholarships. In exchange Venezuela was to provide 53,000 barrels of oil daily at preferential rates (\$27 per barrel) (Feinsilver, 2008; Benzi & Lo Brutto, 2012; Serbin, 2006).

8 After President Hugo Chávez's death in March 2013 new presidential elections were held in Venezuela in which Nicolas Maduro won by a small margin of 1.7% over the opposition leader Henrique Capriles. Immediately afterwards, President Maduro met with Fidel and Raul Castro in Havana, when 51 co-operation projects were signed for \$2 billion in the areas of food supply, culture, sports, education, energy, health and transportation.

9 A successful example has been the BRASCUBA venture, which has been in Havana since 1995, focusing on tobacco products in domestic and international markets.

10 The Mariel port is expected to be completed by 2014 with a pier of 700 metres, giving access to ships with more than 45 feet draft, and a terminal with an annual capacity of approximately 1 million containers. This port will also include the logistics necessary for offshore oil drilling. Its construction involves 3,500 workers, of which only 100 are Brazilian, and an investment of \$900 million, of which 85% has been financed by BNDES and 15% by the Cuban government. This project allowed for the participation of more than 400 Brazilian exporters.

Cuba infrastructure fulfils ambitions extending much further than partnering in local economic reforms: worthy of special mention are investments in port facilities in the Caribbean area and in the widening of the Panama Canal. Prospects are also good if and when the U.S. trade embargo is suspended, which would give the Mariel port a privileged position in the Caribbean for trading connections with Florida and other southern U.S. states.

At first there were expectations that the Lula da Silva government would play an overall role in the Cuban process of change, but Brasilia has occupied more of an economic than political place in Cuban transformations. Furthermore, there are commonalities between the current Cuban reform process and the gradualism experienced in Brazil during democratisation.<sup>11</sup> The refrain “without pausing but in no hurry” used by President Raul Castro resembles the slogan “slowly and gradually” used by the Brazilian military authorities during the 1970s. Even more important is the Cuban military’s control of the main economic posts and commitment to a statist production structure intertwined with local and foreign private investment.

Brazil and Cuba have co-ordinated their efforts and are working well in multilateral arenas. Besides shared views on global and regional matters, Cuba’s closeness to other developing countries, particularly the left-wing grouping, has helped Brazil to win support in Africa, Latin America and Asia for the carrying forward of diplomatic initiatives in global governance.

## Cuba’s renewed presence in regional organisations

Cuba’s attendance at Latin American meetings started at Ibero-American summits in 1991 and was followed by participation in the Rio Group in 2009 once diplomatic ties had been re-established with all the countries in the region.<sup>12</sup> Immediate membership of the Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, or CELAC) when it was created in 2011 came as a natural outcome, as did the current presidency of this organisation according to its system of rotating presidencies. During the second CELAC Summit in Chile (2013), the rules were changed to allow for the appointment of a widened troika, which meant that the Cuban presidency will be assisted by its predecessor, Chile, and its successor, Costa Rica, and by a Caribbean Community (CARICOM) member state (represented by its pro tempore president).

Cuba sealed the presidency of CELAC with the slogan “unity within diversity”, suggesting that the political face of any individual country should not be a matter of division within the region. Havana aspires to use this post to promote the deepening of co-operation in the region according to its comparative advantages, particularly its well-known education and health capabilities.

The fact that the country presiding over CELAC should represent the Latin American and Caribbean Group in all multilateral stances has been extremely important to push for a Cuban regional-global diplomacy. This opportunity may contribute to opening new areas of interest and involvement in topics such as climate change, human rights, migration, drug-trafficking control and nuclear technology, among others. This may also be advantageous to the facilitation of international negotiations, particularly with the EU.

Cuba’s presence in CELAC has also allowed it to underline in a regional scenario its historic support for specific claims of individual countries’ territorial and economic sovereignty, e.g. Argentina’s demand to be given sovereignty over the Malvinas Islands and Bolivia’s demand for access to the sea. Reciprocity has been assured by the systematic condemnation in CELAC of the U.S.’s blockade of Cuba.<sup>13</sup>

The Cuban presence in CELAC has been central to the deepening of Latin American-Caribbean relations. Havana has cultivated close links with the CARICOM countries based on a broad agenda of co-operation and solidarity, and similar perceptions in terms of decolonisation and non-intervention.<sup>14</sup> Beyond this, and as part of its commitment to continuously assist Haiti with robust social programmes, Cuba has moved significantly to keep the former under the region’s spotlight.<sup>15</sup>

Although CELAC’s Latin-Americanism has not been conceived to replace inter-Americanism, Cuba’s presence in CELAC has escalated the debate on its reincorporation into inter-American multilateral schemes, particularly the Organisation of American States (OAS). The fact that the Cuban regime has shown no interest in recovering its seat in this organisation has not kept its intellectuals from discussing if the time is ripe to do so. Between CELAC and the OAS lies the question of Cuba’s participation at the Summit of the Americas, which was raised at the 2012 Cartagena Summit. After lack of consensus on this matter prevented the approval of a final declaration, the ALBA

11 In Brazil, the first steps towards democratic transition – known as a period of *political distension* – took place in the mid-1970s, but direct elections for president were allowed only in 1990.

12 Costa Rica was the last country in the region to normalise relations with Cuba.

13 The first CELAC summit Venezuela issued a special communiqué urging the U.S. to end the economic blockade, characterising it as “coercive and unilateral economic measures imposed on sovereign countries for political reasons” and defining the Helms-Burton Act as being contrary to international law (CELAC, 2011). A similar communiqué was issued at the second summit in Chile (CELAC, 2013).

14 Closer ties were created with Grenada during the governments of Maurice Bishop (1979-83) and with Jamaica when the late Michael Manley was in power (1972-80, 1989-92).

15 Since 1996 Cuban medical aid to Haiti has involved over 3,500 doctors in various parts of the country, besides offering scholarships to train doctors in the Facultad de Ciencias Médicas and the Escuela Latinoamericana de Ciencias Médicas. Since the 2010 earthquake in Haiti triangular initiatives have been undertaken with Brazil, Venezuela, Norway, Spain and the U.S., as well as with multilateral agencies like the Pan-American Health Organisation/World Health Organisation.

group and countries like Argentina and Brazil conditioned their attendance at the 2014 summit, scheduled to be held in Panamá, on U.S. acceptance of Cuba's official presence.

## Latin American/Cuban-U.S. and Cuban-EU bilateralism

For many decades connections with Havana had inevitable implications for U.S.-Latin American relations, because closeness to Washington was defined by whether governments were friends or foes of Cuba. While it is true that such rigidity no longer exists, narrow mind-sets have not been completely discarded. From a Cuban perspective closer relations with Latin America are perceived as part of a more distant and critical stance towards the U.S. For the U.S. government this is essentially a bilateral matter with long-standing ideological contents to be addressed in the context of bilaterally unsettled negotiations. For Latin American countries the U.S. blockade represents an anachronism and any step on Washington's part to eliminate it would be read as a positive sign towards the region.<sup>16</sup>

For their part, Europeans have observed the recent Cuban-Latin American rapprochement positively and are themselves about to take a first step toward opening negotiations with Cuba. Relations between European countries and Cuba have followed a dual pattern: while the EU has resisted proceeding with the negotiation of collective accords with the island, bilateral ties have been pursued by many EU members.<sup>17</sup> Conditions imposed by the EU are focused on expected changes on the part of the Cuban regime regarding the protection of human rights, the rule of law and adherence to the International Court of Justice. The 17 bilateral accords in place cover investment, trade and co-operation initiatives. Prospects have recently emerged for the drafting of a framework to start a negotiation process with Brussels.

Europe is Cuba's second-largest trading partner (after Venezuela), and relations therefore benefit from bilateral understandings and commercial preferences. The EU does not support the U.S. blockade in any way. In terms of business, European expectations are based on the "day after" the suspension of the U.S. blockade, particularly in areas such as tourism, services and infrastructure, since European investments are affected by the limitations imposed by U.S. legislation. With the current economic crises Europeans face at home, the importance of expanding markets and foreign direct investment in Latin American and Caribbean countries has been reinforced. Even more

meaningful than potentially expanding the Cuban domestic market are expectations that the island could become a regional hub to serve neighbouring islands together with the south-east of the U.S. (Feinberg, 2012: 15).

## Regional/global performance and soft power assets

Cultivating a spectrum of ties with the developing world has been a relevant dimension of Cuban foreign policy, contributing to the establishment of a coherent link between regional and global politics. Cuba's proactivity in the Non-Aligned Movement and at the UN General Assembly has enabled the country to expand its visibility in two relevant areas of international expertise: peace negotiations and South-South co-operation.<sup>18</sup>

Cuban diplomacy has aimed at projecting itself as a broker in complex international situations (the acceptance of Palestine into the international community), regional inter-state tensions (Costa Rican-Nicaraguan and Colombian-Venezuelan tensions) and intra-state conflicts (the Colombian peace negotiations).<sup>19</sup> Cuba has also downplayed the political impulses of allied countries that are aimed at challenging world powers. An illustration was the effort to stop Hugo Chávez's idea of creating a pro-Iran group in the Non-Aligned Movement as a reaction to the sanctions approved by the UN Security Council in June 2012.

Cuba's role in the Colombian peace process, together with Norway and accompanied by Venezuela and Chile as observers, is vitally linked to the regional/global dimension of the island's foreign policy.<sup>20</sup> This involvement is not new and previous attempts to promote a constructive dialogue between the Colombian guerrilla forces and the Colombian government had already taken place in the 1990s.<sup>21</sup> The present Colombian peace talks between the Santos government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), which follow a single-undertaking approach, involves a five-point agenda: land reform, political participation, ending conflict, drug trafficking and victim reparations. Havana's role in getting negotiations started was decisive and it has continued to ensure that the guerrillas participate in ongoing talks. Since October 2012 six rounds of talks have been held (one in Oslo and five in Havana), yet all these meetings focused on the first point of the agenda. For the Cuban regime, apart from deepening ties with Latin America, this involvement could facilitate relations with the U.S. and help to remove Cuba from the U.S. State Department's list of states that promote terrorism.<sup>22</sup>

16 The Obama administration's measures easing U.S.-Cuba travel were well received in Havana, yet also labelled as insufficient. These U.S. measures facilitate religious and academic contacts and simplify the sending of remittances to the island.

17 EU-Cuba talks have been resisted by ex-members of the Soviet bloc and conservative governments like those of Spain and Sweden. In 2005 the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and the Netherlands took up a negative position on negotiations with Havana (Knigge, 2005). Yet the recent visit of Polish representatives to Cuba to expand bilateral co-operation and trade may be a sign of change that could contribute to expediting Brussels-Havana exchanges (Prensa Latina, 2013).

18 Cuba, Yugoslavia and Egypt have been the only countries to twice assume the presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement; the Cuban presidencies occurred in 1979 and 2006.

19 Cuba co-sponsored the UN General Assembly resolution changing Palestine's status at the UN to that of observer with the aim of promoting its full membership in the organisation.

20 The peace process was launched in Norway on October 18th, after which five rounds of negotiations took place in Havana.

21 Cuba participated in the attempts of the Samper government to push forward a peace process in Colombia (Castro Ruz, 2009).

However, Cuba's performance as a peace mediator or facilitator does not imply acceptance of the current methods and prescriptions adopted or under debate in global governance arenas on conflict resolution and international intervention. Cuban foreign policy has a critical view of UN peace operations, normative innovations such as the Right to Protect, and recent NATO- and/or European-led interventions in the Arab world and Africa. These are perceived by Havana as conceptual and practical dissimulations that violate the principles of international law, perpetuate great power interests and waste enormous amounts of resources. Accordingly, preventive action aimed at meeting the social and economic needs of poor nations should replace militarised intervention (Baró Herrera & Chailloux, 2008). Cuba has been selective regarding multilateral organisations by giving preference to those dealing with the economic, social and cultural needs of the developing world. Examples are the UN Economic and Social Council; the UN Development Programme; the Food and Agriculture Organisation; the Pan-American Health Organisation/World Health Organisation; the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation; and, more recently, the Human Rights Council.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, the Cuban regime has been reluctant to expand its connections with the bilateral and multilateral donors of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Development Assistance Committee, acting much more as a Southern partner than an aid recipient. Cuba proactively contributes with humanitarian assistance and as a provider of health and education co-operation in various parts of the globe, often in post-conflict reconstruction scenarios in which UN-led missions operations take place.<sup>24</sup> Yet due to the current constraints in the state budget, Cuba now differentiates between what it considers to be services exports of public goods that can contribute to the establishment of reciprocal trade schemes, and solidarity and humanitarian assistance for vulnerable countries.

Lastly, Cuba holds a discretely defensive posture towards the ongoing configuration of a multipolar world order and has kept away from the debate regarding the reform of global governance structures. Cuban foreign policy believes that respect for the norms of international law depend on the full representation of the developing world without diluting the principle of the sovereignty of national states. Inner circles that reinforce the asymmetric distribution of power are questioned and considered detrimental to a genuine democratic multilateral system. Nonetheless, Cuba's caution towards the BRICS<sup>25</sup> and IBSA<sup>26</sup> in no way affects the strong bonds with all members of these groupings.

## Conclusion

Based on the above analysis, while Cuba and Latin America and the Caribbean have experienced a notable rapprochement, the trajectory is not conclusive because of the sensitive aspects of this process and to the challenges ahead:

- Since 2007 the Cuban government has conducted a reform process without affecting the fundamental nature of its political regime. The present restructuring, however, is not understood as a transitional trajectory similar to those experienced in Eastern Europe, Latin America or, more recently, the Arab world. The concept of transition is not part of the Cuban official lexicon.
- The Cuban government expects that Latin America may understand and go along with its reforms by offering support in certain areas that may contribute to the ongoing reform process, mainly in terms of specific economic needs. Along the same lines, any sort of lecturing from governments or organisations in the region regarding the appropriate political route for Cuba would be considered misplaced by the Havana regime.
- Lessons learned from the regional democratic trajectory indicate, however, that some sort of political openness can be anticipated as a natural consequence of Cuba's ongoing reforms, especially in light of their impact on younger generations. The Cuban regime is more likely to follow the Chinese and Vietnamese example in which political opening is more likely to translate into a generational renovation of political leaderships than an acceptance of a competitive political system.
- Venezuela's future could affect the island, particularly if the Chavista regime were to be destabilised. While the most recent Maduro-Castro negotiations aim to avoid more dramatic scenarios, they also indicate the magnitude of the risks involved in this bond. In this context, ties with friendly oil-exporting countries such as Angola have become crucial for the Havana regime.
- Cuba's presidency of CELAC has occurred at a beneficial time when the role played by regional institutions is tending to expand in a setting increasingly prone to moderation and pragmatism. (A clear example was the recent emergency meeting of the Union of South American Nations to address the post-electoral crisis in Venezuela. While the victory of Nicolas Maduro was not contested, a recount of the votes was unanimously recommended.)

22 Cuba was placed on this list in 1982 with the allegation of harbouring members of the Spanish ETA and the Colombian FARC.

23 On May 1st Cuba presented its assessment for the 2009-12 period to the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review, focusing on the recommendations accepted during the 2009 review process (UPR Watch, 2009).

24 Cuba has been actively involved in international medical co-operation for over five decades. Official records show that from 1963 to 2008 a total of 134,849 health practitioners were sent to 108 countries (38 in Africa, 39 in the Americas, and 31 in Europe, Asia-Pacific and the Middle East). The most successful programmes are the Medical Brigades, which have carried out over 433 million medical consultations, and the Miracle Operation, which has performed 1,825,274 eye operations in 33 countries (Marimón Torres & Cruz, 2011).

25 Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

26 India, Brazil and South Africa.

- When current Cuban-Latin American relations are closely observed, Venezuela and Brazil are the partners that seem to matter most. Condensed to actors, roles and outcomes, it could be said that while the Fidel Castro-Hugo Chávez ties have been vital for the survival of Cuban socialism, those formed by Raul Castro with Lula da Silva and Dilma Rouseff are central to the current push for economic reform. While the first relationship (Castro-Chávez) applies to an ideological framework, the second reflects the pragmatic approach that increasingly characterises the Havana regime.
- Expanded relations with Latin America have accompanied the Cuban regime's reform process, with careful consideration of its timing and priorities. This is a major difference from the U.S. and EU imposing conditions on the island for advancing the rule of law, democratic practices and economic openness (although in the medium term it will be easier to progress through understandings with Brussels than with Washington).
- Latin American and Caribbean solidarity in the condemnation of the U.S. blockade hardly goes beyond rhetoric. Cubans and Americans agree on one point when addressing their complex agenda: both sides consider this a bilateral/intermestic and not a regional matter. Recent non-governmental initiatives have suggested the formation of an ad hoc mediating regional group to push for a more flexible position on the part of the U.S. Countries such as Brazil, Colombia and Mexico that have a robust agenda in Washington and access to U.S. domestic actors would be crucial players for promoting an initiative of this kind.
- Cuban diplomacy is regarded for its soft-power assets, especially South-South co-operation initiatives and brokerage expertise, to foster peaceful solutions in areas of conflict. The possibility of expanding triangular co-operation initiatives is to be maximised by Northern and Southern partners, multilateral agencies, and philanthropic organisations. Recent Cuban joint action in Haiti with Brazil and Norway are positive examples of this process.
- Although the Colombian peace negotiations have moved slowly, they have not backfired. For Cuba, besides deepening ties with Latin America, a positive outcome could facilitate relations with the U.S. and help to remove it from the U.S. State Department's list of states that promote terrorism. The recent endorsement of the peace negotiations by 62 U.S. Congressmen and the growing support demonstrated by Colombian civil society are positive signs in this direction.
- For Latin America and the Caribbean a positive link with the Cuban process of change helps leave behind the damage caused by interventionism and ideological polarisations in regional politics. Yet if this rapprochement is to proceed it will have to cover the bilateral/

intermestic dimension of U.S.-Cuban affairs, which inevitably includes the U.S.-based exile community and involves a more ecumenical and sustainable idea of normalisation.

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