

Cuba on the eve of a diplomatic rapprochement with the U.S.¹

By José Zepeda

■ Executive summary

In Cuba there is general consensus that the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with the U.S. means the fall of the second-to-last wall of the cold war era. When the embargo against Cuba is lifted and the country no longer figures on Washington's list of states that sponsor terrorism, that wall will have fallen completely.

Although the future of U.S.-Cuban relations is unpredictable due to numerous factors and the interests of a variety of parties in both countries, the agreement marks the beginning of a new phase in their relationship.

Diplomatic change will oblige Cuba to introduce internal political change, otherwise the risk for the government in Havana is twofold. Firstly, the economic changes caused by Cuban-American and North American capital entering the island will undermine the government's reform policies and leave them behind. Secondly, an important part of Cuban society will feel frustrated because of the lack of change and the government will be held responsible, especially because the embargo can no longer be blamed for this lack of change.

There is broad international support for the agreement between the U.S. and Cuba to re-establish diplomatic relations, and those who oppose it seem irrelevant. The role played by the Vatican is important, especially because the mediator, Pope Francis, has gained legitimacy and influence as the first Latin American pope. This contributes to the significance of the negotiations, creating confusion among Catholic senators and members of the U.S. Congress, many of whom are of Cuban origin, who strongly oppose the new diplomatic developments.

Senator Marco Rubio, a Republican and the son of Cuban emigrants, said of the opening towards Cuba: "It's absurd and it's part of a long record of coddling dictators and tyrants that this administration has established." These U.S. representatives feel betrayed, but they are paying more attention to their national electorate instead of considering the Cuban reality, i.e. the urgent need for change in Cuban society.

But many more people have been promoting the normalisation of U.S.-Cuban relations. Among them are conservative politicians and journalists like Patrick Buchanan and John McLaughlin, Democratic senator Patrick Leahy, and Republican senator Jeff Flake. An important factor in normalising diplomatic relationships has been the publication by the *New York Times* of a series of editorials insisting on the need for change in U.S.-Cuban relations.¹ In November 2014 the Obama government praised the work of Cuban doctors during the Ebola crisis in West Africa (*International New York Times*, 2014), while Havana and Washington initiated conversations for an exchange of political prisoners. In May some former government officials recommended President Obama to change the U.S. approach to Cuba (Howlett-Martin, 2014).

The most important measures announced were the re-establishment of a U.S. embassy in Havana, a measure

¹ Translated by Ingrid de Vries.

² Series editorials: <[http://query.nytimes.com/search/sitesearch/?action=click®ion=Masthead&pgtype=SectionFront&module=SearchSubmit&contentCollection=world&t=qry935#/Cuba economy Opinion](http://query.nytimes.com/search/sitesearch/?action=click®ion=Masthead&pgtype=SectionFront&module=SearchSubmit&contentCollection=world&t=qry935#/Cuba%20economy%20Opinion)>.

practically agreed on in the second round of conversations concluded on February 25th 2015; the expansion of categories of travellers authorised to travel to Havana; the quadrupling of remittance levels to Cuba for Cuban exiles in the U.S.; permission for Cuban banks to open accounts in the U.S. for Cuban citizens who live on the island; and a decision to review Cuba's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism. At the same time both countries have committed themselves to cooperate in various areas such as drug trafficking, the environment and human trafficking.

At present the Cuban community in the U.S. remits approximately \$2 billion to Cuba each year, according to the Council on Foreign Relations. Now the remittance level for the Cuban-American community to the island will be raised from \$400 to \$2,000 per quarter. At the same time the Cuban government will be able to increase its acquisition of U.S. food and agricultural products.

However, a series of difficulties remain. During the summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States in January 2015 President Raúl Castro of Cuba declared that there will be no normalisation of bilateral relations while the embargo remains in place, the Guantanamo Bay base is not returned to Cuba, the radio and television transmissions that violate international standards are not stopped, and no compensation is offered for the human and economic damage Cuba suffered as a result of U.S. steps against the country.

These points are very controversial, both for the U.S. (in terms of the colonial and doubtful use from a human rights point of view of the Guantanamo base) and Cuba (in terms of the importance it gives to controlling radio and television broadcasts that originate beyond its frontiers). At the same time the subject of compensation could open an era of long-lasting lawsuits involving Cuba, the U.S. and Spain. Perhaps this is something that would not benefit Cuba at all at the moment. Controlling the international and national media is also a controversial issue. Although there are less domestic restrictions than in the past, increasing access to uncensored news, and important developments in information and communication technology that affect this process, Cuban society still complains about restrictions on freedom of speech (Henken & Ritter, 2015: 74).

When Barack Obama assumed the U.S. presidency in 2008 he said that his country wanted a new start with Latin America. This simple remark embodied a complex political aspiration, because historically there has never been a relationship of equals between the North American power and the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. The asymmetrical character of this relationship polarised the way in which the links between the two sides were perceived. For some Washington has been a necessary ally to maintain the status quo; for others it has been the most important imperialist supporter of dictatorial governments. Especially in Cuba, polarisation has

nourished anti-Western and anti-U.S. discourses. This debate has suffocated many opportunities to stimulate democratic societies, states based on the rule of law, and politically and economically sustainable nations.

A fundamental change

In Cuba there are internal signs of progress in several areas, but the country's isolation and the embargo have had a very negative impact and, as congressmen and intellectuals who support Obama's initiative have stated, the embargo has merely strengthened the authoritarian character of the government instead of promoting democracy (Gómez, 2015).

But the failure of the embargo is not the only argument for this political change in the U.S. Washington wishes to prevent more loss of influence in the region to new international actors like China and Russia. Over the last 20 years the influence of the U.S. in Latin America has diminished as the countries in the region have diversified their commercial, political, technological and military contacts. On the other hand, the embargo has had a boomerang effect on Washington: in its desire to isolate Cuba, its political links to the continent were undermined, both in the United Nations and in the Organisation of American States.

In Cuba the impact of the re-establishment of relations is crucial, because it redefines the anachronistic relations between the two countries, which should be based on their historical, geographical and geopolitical nearness. Cuban historian Manuel Cuesta Murúa (2015), a critical voice from the island, defines the new relationship as a "historical turning point" transcending locality and region. In fact, the historical bond between Cuba and the U.S. has been strong since the 19th century, because of the Spanish-American War and the flood of immigrants to New York, before the better known migration to Florida after the 1959 Cuban revolution.

The diplomatic changes that are under way will oblige Cuba to introduce political changes, otherwise the risk for the government in Havana is twofold. Firstly, the economic changes caused by Cuban-American and North American capital entering the island will undermine the government's reform policies and leave them behind. And secondly, an important part of Cuban society will feel frustrated because of the lack of change and the government will be held responsible, especially because the embargo can no longer be used as an excuse for maintaining the status quo.

Immediately after hearing the news of the re-establishment of relations, internationally renowned Cuban author Leonardo Padura said: "It's true that [many problems] can be due to the sanctions, but there are others that are due to inefficiencies, structural, conceptual, or mental problems Until the Cuban economy manages to function efficiently many of the problems we have will not be solved."

The nationalist factor and citizen autonomy

Nationalism has always been a characteristic of the Cuban identity, firstly against Spain and later as a defensive weapon against the U.S. At the same time it is a powerful component of the identity of the U.S.

The logic, dynamics and nature of the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba cannot be understood only in social terms of state models (liberal democracy vs communism), like the principal actors in the cold war, or in terms of the embargo, but has to be comprehended precisely in terms of the nationalism that made it possible for the Cuban government to uphold the ideology of the revolution. As some former U.S. government officials recognised at a late stage, especially the late Robert McNamara, secretary of defence under Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, while Washington thought it was fighting communism in Vietnam, Guatemala, Chile and Cuba, the struggle and resistance in those countries were sustained mainly by nationalist sentiments.

Without this element, Castro's government in Havana and the Cuban model would never have existed. Nationalism permitted the creation of a defensive model that included a reduction of civil liberties. Nonetheless, Cuba is a special model, a kind of despotism with a social conscience, able to achieve high levels of literacy, health care and income distribution, among others, that have been very superior to the levels in most other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. In this way it achieved a disproportionate respectability in light of its geographical position, demographics and economic importance. At the same time, in the last two years the heritage of this legitimacy has given Cuba the ability to play an important role in persuading the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia guerrilla movement to negotiate with the Colombian government.

The reforms initiated by President Raúl Castro in 2010 to open the market to competition have generated half a million self-employed people. The government tried to encourage small-scale private initiatives to partly compensate for a reform that left about 600,000 state employees without jobs. Studies by University of Pittsburgh professor Carmelo Mesa-Lago indicate that there has not been enough employment creation to compensate for these losses; for him the reforms are still "too cautious, far too slow, and already face many obstacles that severely limit their effects" (Mesa-Lago, cited in Krauze, 2015).

However, in 2012 Cuba's gross domestic product per capita was \$6,221, while currently a labourer earns an average of between \$20 and \$60 per month. But public services and the economy in general are very inefficient, while simultaneously the first signs are appearing that the limited reforms are beginning to generate inequality (Archibold, 2015).

The nationalist anti-imperialistic element will no longer be effective, especially because many Cubans still want to

travel to the U.S., and even more so if Washington stops any undercover activities of the type that were undertaken during the cold war. At the same time, if the limited reforms do not generate any change in daily life, they will be surpassed by the investments of large enterprises and investors from the U.S. and other countries who see significant opportunities in a market of 11 million consumers, even though at the moment these consumers have limited spending capacity.

As Henken and Ritter (2014: 74) indicate, the benefits of deeper structural reforms that would create more jobs and improve the quality and variety of goods and services while also increasing tax revenues "will come at the political cost of allowing greater citizen autonomy, as well as wealth and property in private hands and open competition against state monopolies". Clearly, the process of normalisation will produce unavoidable and deep-seated changes.

Support for this process varies. Up to 64% of all Cubans born in the U.S. are in favour of the normalisation of relations, but support stands at only 38% among Cubans born on the island, according to a Bendixen & Amandi survey. Furthermore, 78 veteran political figures, experts, businesspeople, and members of the Cuban-American community, supported by a list of important former high-ranking U.S. government officials, have asked President Obama to work with Congress in order to achieve the complete normalisation of relations with Cuba.

The U.S. appears to have a very realistic approach to the consequences of the normalisation of its relations with Cuba. This emerges from the Pew Research Center survey published on January 16th 2015, which shows that 60% of U.S. citizens approve of Obama's decision to normalise relations, 66% favour an end to the embargo and 60% expect political changes on the island.

Comparisons

At the moment Cuba needs a more imaginative economy, more information and more openness towards the world – needs that comprise a complicating factor for a state accustomed to secrecy. Cuba is well aware of the process of change from communism to capitalism that took place over the last 30 years in the former Soviet Union and China. In the former the transition prompted by Mikhail Gorbachev failed and gave way to an authoritarian regime with a democratic appearance. In the latter economic transition prevailed, retaining communist rhetoric as a mark of national identity while simultaneously stimulating the creation of a middle class. Other models to look at are the impossible inward looking of North Korea or the pragmatic openness of Vietnam, which is similar to that of China.

Cuba's problem is that it lacks natural and demographic resources in comparison to these cases. At the same time, its modest population is able to find solutions by looking at other models that combine economic reform with political

openness and thus follow the example of the majority of Latin American countries in the last two decades (Grabendorff, 2014). In this sense cooperation with neighbours on the continent, especially those with more capacity and experience, like Brazil, will be crucial (Hirst, 2013).

Regional cooperation has become even more necessary because Cuba is losing one of its most important allies, Venezuela, because of the collapse of the oil price and the political chaos that is currently afflicting that country. At the same time the U.S. and Europe will want to prevent Cuba from becoming trapped once more in a conflict between Moscow and Washington, if the escalation of tension continues between the U.S./Europe and Russia over the Ukrainian crisis and leads to a kind of second cold war (Luhn, 2014). In this area the European Union and associated countries like Norway could play an important role. As for Cuba, it has to decide whether to join international institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Sweig, 2014).

It is also important that Cuba normalises its relations with the world through the international justice system by ratifying international agreements on civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights and recognising Cuban civil society both in and outside the island.

Historian Cuesta Murúa (2015) thinks a constitutional consensus has to be stimulated in order to promote changes in the law. In Cuban society there is a willingness to achieve a normal relationship with the U.S. But it is also important that Cubans achieve internal democracy and a new relationship with the region.

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