

The Impact on U.S.-Cuba Latin America Relations of Rapprochement between Washington and Cuba

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1. Introduction

With their simultaneous announcements on December 17, 2014, that the United States and Cuba would seek to restore diplomatic relations and pursue full normalization of relations, Presidents Barak Obama and Raúl Castro took a historic step toward removing the most prominent vestige of the Cold War in the western hemisphere. To be sure, the U.S. embargo against Cuba could be fully abandoned only through Congressional action, which was unlikely given that the chamber's Republican majority was virulently opposed to anything proposed by the President and still committed, albeit to varying degrees, to a policy of unwavering hostility toward the Castro government and the revolution it embodied. Yet the administration would prove over the ensuing year what advocates for normalization had asserted for many years, namely that the Executive branch had wide latitude with which to chip away at key provision of the embargo, opening the floodgates to enable a more normal flow of people and commerce and empowering officials in both countries to collaborate to achieve common goals in areas ranging from security and maritime and air transportation to travel and trade. No less importantly, by finally taking measures to abandon a 55-year old

policy of estrangement that Obama and most leading Democratic politicians had long acknowledged to be “stupid,” the President removed a major irritant that had diminished both his own standing and that of the United States (U.S.) government throughout Latin America. While the immediate and most publically visible payoff in this respect would be the successful convening in April 2015 of the Presidential Summit of the Americas in Panama, at which Presidents Castro and Obama were both celebrated for their courageous attempt to overcome more than half a century of recriminations and grievances, the longer term implications of normalization with Cuba for the reputation and influence of the United States in Latin America are likely to prove deeper and more enduring.

This chapter analyzes the causes and consequences of the Obama administration’s shift in its stance toward Cuba for U.S. Latin America diplomatic relations, situating these in the broader context of Latin America’s evolving interactions with the United States and the world beyond the hemisphere. The analysis addresses prospects for productive bilateral engagements between the United States and major countries in the region regarding matters unrelated to Cuba, as well as the likely trajectory of regional organizations that are of interest to policy makers in Washington given their potential significance for political and economic governance and intergovernmental cooperation. The chapter concludes with a reflection on how further advances in the Obama administration’s Cuba policies during 2016, debate about Cuba during the 2016 presidential campaign, and the inauguration of a new president and congress in January, 2017, may shape Latin American perceptions of the reliability of the U.S. as a diplomatic interlocutor and regional partner.

2. Two Critical Presidential Summits, and Anticipation of a Third

Barack Obama was elected to the presidency in 2008, on the heels of a campaign that hinged on optimistic promises to effect wholesale “change we can believe in.”¹ The country’s first African American president pledged to end U.S. involvement in unpopular wars in the Middle East, talk with America’s foes, close the U.S. military prison in Guantanamo Bay, and enact comprehensive immigration reform that would address the status of nearly ten million undocumented individuals of Latin American origin. Coming on the heels of a campaign in which he characterized the half-century-old policy toward Cuba as anachronistic and ineffective, many observers in Latin America and in the United States anticipated more than a

cosmetic opening to Cuba (Brenner and Hershberg, 2014). This, and the fact that Obama was replacing a predecessor who was singularly unpopular in the region, fueled anticipation across the region of a new era in U.S.–Latin American relations (Lowenthal, Piccone and Whitehead, 2009). Nowhere were the lofty expectations more evident than in the April 2009 Organization of American States (OAS) Presidential Summit in Port of Spain, where Obama received thunderous applause when he declared that:

“I know that promises of partnership have gone unfulfilled in the past and that trust has to be earned over time. While the United States has done much to promote peace and prosperity in the hemisphere, we have at times been disengaged, and at times we sought to dictate our terms. But I pledge to you that we seek an equal partnership. (Applause.).... So I’m here to launch a new chapter of engagement that will be sustained throughout my administration. (Applause.)”²

The passage of time, however, dampened regional enthusiasm toward the new administration, as leaders throughout the region grew disillusioned about the prospects for a new era of mutual respect and reciprocity (Brenner and Hershberg, 2014; Reid, 2015). The 21st century trend toward U.S. neglect of Latin America that had dismayed the most friendly governments in the region continued, and if anything grew more stark, under the Obama presidency, whose approach to Latin America was perceived not to have shifted significantly from that of his predecessor (Lowenthal, Piccone and Whitehead, 2011). There was no discernible movement on Cuba –modest steps to liberalize travel and permit remittances by Cuban Americans had little echo in Latin America, where observers mostly took note of the continuation of U.S. programs to effect “regime change” on the island– and the administration continued its predecessors’ intransigence with regard to drug policy and devoted little attention to building relationships in the region. The U.S. military detention facility in Guantanamo remained open, immigration reform was noteworthy for its absence, and U.S. diplomats continued to offer unsolicited opinions on matters that concerned domestic governance (mostly in small countries) and the proper stance of leading governments in the region with regard to foreign policy matters in the hemisphere and beyond. Washington’s criticism of the responses of major South American countries and regional organizations to the deterioration of democracy and governance in Venezuela is a good example with regard to the Americas, while complaints from North American policy makers and pundits that Brazil was falling short of its global responsibilities as an emerging power democracy were equally grating (Castaneda, 2010). The President himself, occupied with extricating the United States from two wars, avoiding a Great Depression, and securing passage

of his landmark healthcare reform, was perceived as completely disengaged from the region, and the advisors he had appointed for the region were perceived weak and often imperious in their dealings with Latin American counterparts (Brenner and Hershberg, 2014).

The extent of region-wide dismay was exhibited forcefully at the April 2012 Summit of the Americas in Cartagena (Hershberg and LeoGrande, forthcoming; Serbin, forthcoming). Only three years had elapsed since the meeting in Port of Spain, but the atmosphere could not have been more different. Testy exchanges between Obama and Latin American presidents focused especially on Cuba and the absence of President Raúl Castro, who had not been invited because of U.S. insistence that the Inter-American Democratic Charter preclude his presence. Speaking to the press, Obama lamented that in obsessing about Cuba, his counterparts were acting as if mired in the Cold War, seemingly unaware that the point of his critics was that the United States was perpetuating policies toward Cuba and the region as a whole that were themselves a lamentable example of Cold War-era behaviors. The Summit was widely declared a failure, and several Latin American presidents, including some of those typically most sympathetic to Washington, made clear that they would not attend the next Summit, which was scheduled to take place in Panama in April 2015, if the Cuban President were not invited (Armstrong and Hershberg, 2014; Hakim, 2012).

In hindsight, the Cartagena debacle was a critical turning point for the Obama administration's interactions with Latin American counterparts because it demonstrated to the President that his own credibility in the region was being undermined by continued intransigence regarding Cuba. Perhaps the President's memoirs will shed further light on the relative weight of Latin American opinion and his own desire to resolve the Cuba matter simply as part of his legacy as a competent leader unwilling to prolong what he had termed a "stupid policy." It is apparent, however, that after Cartagena, Obama came to realize that his Latin American legacy would be determined by whether he took meaningful steps to put aside the failed approach of isolation that had driven U.S. policy toward Cuba for more than half a century. Approximately one year later, nearly two years before the Panama Summit, his emissaries would begin secret talks with representatives of Raúl Castro, and the path had been opened toward the announcements of 17-D.

3. Underlying Dynamics of Change that Eroded U.S. Standing in the Hemisphere

The relationship of U.S.-Cuba policy to the broader landscape of its relations with the hemisphere cannot be understood outside the context of the shifting contours of Latin America's engagement in the global economy, underlying political trends in the region, and the changing configuration of regional institutions and alliances. These three distinct but interrelated sets of processes, which are discussed in the paragraphs that follow, operated together to erode U.S. influence in Latin America, albeit perhaps only temporarily. These trends coincided, however, with developments within both the United States and Cuba that ultimately would make rapprochement particularly opportune by the second term of the Obama administration.

A first underlying change stems from the diminished importance of the United States economy as a determinant of wellbeing in South America and a decline in the influence of economic institutions and ideas anchored in the United States. In part, though not exclusively, because of the decade long commodity boom that fueled a period of accelerated growth in South America beginning in around 2003, most South American countries had diversified substantially both their exports and sources of investment by the time that Obama came to office, and this trend accelerated during his first term. As China came to play an increasingly valuable role as a source of finance for Latin American governments, extractive industries and infrastructure, and with the Brazilian state development bank also extending its reach substantially across the region, both the U.S. government and the international financial institutions over which it exercises influence became much less important for the region.

Moreover, while the so-called "left turns" in Latin American political systems, which began in the late 1990s and accelerated by the middle of the first decade of this century, marked a rejection of the Washington Consensus economic policies that had prevailed since the 1980s, there was no analogous shift in the U.S. government approach to economic development in the region. The lone innovation regarding economic engagement with the region was Washington's effort to recruit Latin American adherents to the Trans Pacific Partnership, a proposed free trade zone that would span the Pacific. That effort, which marked a deepening of longstanding American priorities rather than a new direction for the hemisphere, resonated with only a limited sub-set of Latin American governments. An additional factor contributing to the sense that Latin America's economic fortunes were increasingly separate from those of the

United States was the region's rapid recovery from the downturn brought about by the Great Recession that had been caused by poor regulation of the U.S. financial system (Hershberg, 2015a).

A second set of changes in the region that distanced much of South America from the United States was political in nature. More than two decades had passed since most of the region had transitioned from authoritarian rule to democracy, and the regimes that issued from those transitions had become increasingly assertive on the regional stage. Gone were the days when South American governments were apt to tolerate even the implicit assertion that the United States was the extraordinary beacon of democracy in the hemisphere. At the same time, leftist governments far more skeptical of the United States than the initial governments following democratic transitions had come to power in most major countries in South America. Given that the "left turns" coincided with the commodity-driven boom alluded to above, and experimentation with alternative, more statist approaches to economic and social development, there was all the less grounds for the region's governments to secede to American pressure regarding hemispheric affairs.

At the same time, following the lead of Venezuela, a number of countries were adopting an explicitly anti-American stance which was not softened by the end of the Bush administration and inauguration of Obama. Indeed, as the perception that U.S. attitudes toward Latin America had not changed with the new administration, the positions toward Washington assumed by Venezuela and its allies in the ALBA (*Alternativa Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América*) became ever more strident. While many governments of the Latin American left had little sympathy for the ALBA rhetoric and profound doubts about the leadership of Venezuela under Chavez –and even more so under Maduro after Chavez's death in 2013– ALBA's presence did pull the region wide center of gravity farther away from Washington. That the Obama administration consistently responded clumsily to real or perceived provocations from Venezuela, and to a lesser extent Bolivia and Ecuador, simply magnified the impact that the ALBA countries had on American standing throughout Latin America.

Finally, a third underlying shift during the Obama years was the changed landscape of regional institutions. The longstanding consensus around the OAS as the most critical intergovernmental body in the Americas had broken down, and institutions such as UNASUR (*Unión de Naciones Sudamericanas*) and CELAC (*Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños*), which unlike the OAS did not include Washington, were taking on greater importance. Whereas it was once largely accepted that the OAS was the privileged institution for resolving crises of democracy and security, during the

new century these were consistently addressed by organizations that excluded the United States. It was an emergency meeting of the Rio Group, and not of the OAS, which addressed the military coup against Hugo Chávez in April 2002, and rumors of a potential coup in Bolivia dissipated in 2008 not when the OAS weighed in but rather when UNASUR unanimously approved the Moneda Declaration, which sent a strong signal to the Bolivian opposition (which, like that in Venezuela, was at the time funded by Washington) that the ouster of President Evo Morales would not be tolerated. Similarly, when later that year a regional security crisis erupted after Colombian troops crossed the border into Ecuadorian territory to carry out a military operation against the FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*), the incident was addressed not through the OAS but through an emergency summit of the Rio Group. In the one major crisis where the OAS was called upon to preserve democracy, the 2009 Honduran crisis sparked by a military coup that ousted President Zelaya, that effort failed in large part because it was undermined by members of the U.S. Congress and bureaucrats within the Obama administration itself.

Taken together, these economic, political and inter-governmental institutional trends combined not only to reduce U.S. influence but also, arguably, to diminish Washington's interest in Latin America. Most observers assessing Obama administration engagement with the region as late as in 2014 would have concluded that little would be done to recover the optimism that had accompanied his initial forays into hemispheric affairs. Yet beneath the surface a number of conjunctural factors were at work that would imbue the administration with an unprecedented level of interest in strengthening ties to the region. That interest would crystalize with the announcements of 17-D and remain evident throughout 2015 and as this chapter is being written during the initial weeks of 2016.

4. Developments that Favored Rapprochement

It is widely supposed that soon after assuming office President Obama intended to take meaningful measures to improve relations with Cuba. Not only had he stated during the campaign that he intended to do so, but the principal domestic political disincentives seemed to have lost their salience. Cuban Americans were far more politically diverse than in the past, as evidenced by Obama's winning the election in Florida handily, and many Cuba watchers perceived a substantial constituency throughout the country that would rally in favor of a diplomatic opening toward Havana.³ But

the administration pulled back, nonetheless, unwilling to confront a handful of militant Cuban American legislators who promised to hold hostage important elements of the President's agenda if he were to dismantle the policies of confrontation that they had labored for decades to sustain.

Although it was not immediately evident to outsiders, the calculus had changed significantly after the President's re-election in 2012. Obama would never again have to compete in an election, and the cost of alienating key Cuban American Congressional representatives was lower than it had been earlier in his administration. Moreover, having confronted aggressive congressional opposition to sensible policies across a wide range of issue domains, the President shifted increasingly toward the use of Executive actions to impose his preferences over the resistance of a recalcitrant legislative branch. His unilateral action toward Cuba, taken after more than a year of secret negotiations concealed from Congress and the executive branch bureaucracy (Kornbluh and LeoGrande, 2015), was in keeping with this new approach to governing.

Circumstances had changed in Latin America, as well, and this was opening new possibilities and incentives for American engagement with the region. The end of the commodity boom was causing a slowdown in South American economies, and the weakened administration of Brazilian President Rousseff was sending signals of a desire to overcome tensions that had been exacerbated by revelations of U.S. intelligence service spying. The increasing disarray and political polarization in Venezuela, meanwhile, was causing growing consternation in capitals throughout the hemisphere, and some of Washington's wiser diplomats were becoming aware of the need to converge with responsible Latin American governments around strategies to avoid fanning the flames of conflict in Caracas. At the same time another conflict that had long concerned U.S. diplomats, that which had plagued Colombia for half a century, seemed to be drawing to a close, as peace talks brokered by Cuba and Norway were making steady progress, opening the possibility of declaring success in Washington's longstanding cooperation with one of its principal allies in the region. Latin America was also back on the agenda because of the wave of Central American migrants who, fleeing violence and misery in societies whose problems had been exacerbated by short-sighted U.S. policies, were crossing the border into Texas and causing the administration a major domestic political complication precisely when the President was intending to announce executive actions to resolve the status of millions of undocumented migrants already in the country.

This was the broader set of domestic and Latin America-related considerations that occupied Washington at the same time that planning was underway for the April 2015 Presidential Summit in Panama, which leaders across the hemisphere were warning would not take place if Cuba were not invited. The success of the back channel negotiations with Raúl Castro that the White House had opened in 2013 offered the administration an avenue for advancing a number of objectives simultaneously, and to set the groundwork for significant improvements in US-Latin American relations for the remainder of the Obama presidency. As Serbin and Serbin Pont (2015) have written, *“(T)he ideological and symbolic leader of anti-American resistance in the region, Cuba, became the key to accessing a now diplomatically distant region as the embargo on the island had not only taken its toll on bilateral relations, but had become a key issue of dispute between the U.S. and Latin American countries.”* It is in this context that 17-D would prove a watershed not only for working toward reconciliation with Cuba, but also for achieving reconciliation with Latin America.

5. Celebration in Panama and Achievements Beyond

The consequence of the shift in U.S. policy was on display at the Summit of the Americas in Panama, which took on an all but celebratory tone in the afterglow of the 17-D announcements. Observing the handshake between Presidents Obama and Castro in Panama, Colombian President Santos lauded “the audacity and courage of President Obama and the Cuban government,” whose actions promised to “positively affect the entire hemisphere.” That assessment was echoed by most of the other heads of state in attendance, whose response was consistent with that of the Mexican daily newspaper *El Universal*, which headlined its resulting editorial “A New Era in the Americas”. Obama himself recognized the impact of what transpired in Panama, stating at his closing press conference on April 11 that: *“What’s been clear from this entire summit, though, is the unanimity with which, regardless of their ideological predispositions, the leaders of Latin America think that this is the right thing to do ... and (it) removes what too often has been a distraction or an excuse from the hemisphere acting on important challenges that we face.”*

The payoffs to the administration and to U.S. interests in the region were immediate and have continued to accumulate. Already at the summit itself, the dominant narrative of mutual respect and reconciliation that the Obama-Castro handshake symbolized rendered ineffective a competing narrative about U.S. aggression that

the Venezuelan government and some of its allies had hoped would be a central focus at the Summit. Efforts by the Maduro government to attribute Venezuela's catastrophic plight to U.S. machinations have fallen on deaf ears, and rather than trade accusations about one another's meddling, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and his Cuban counterpart, Bruno Rodríguez, declared on the occasion of the opening of the U.S. embassy in Havana that shared concern about Venezuela was a topic of productive discussion between the two senior diplomats. The prospects for a common hemispheric stance toward a peaceful resolution of Venezuela's crisis, and for eventual international efforts to assist in reconstructing the country's economy and polity, have increased dramatically as a result of the opening between the U.S. and Cuba.

The new climate has also supported enduring improvements in Washington's relations with Brazil. At a June 2015 state dinner at the White House during a visit that underscored Brasilia's desire to deepen cooperation with the US, President Rousseff deemed Obama's actions regarding Cuba *"a major gesture, the repercussions of which are huge for relations with Latin America,"* and at the closing press conference the following day she deemed resuming relations with Cuba *"a very decisive milestone ... in U.S. relations with Latin America. It is really about putting an end to the lingering vestiges of the Cold War. And it ultimately elevates the level of the relations between the U.S. and the entire region"*.

In Colombia, in turn, the New York Times has reported (Feb. 6, 2016) that the FARC's continued engagement with the peace process has been facilitated by the conviction that, if the U.S. could reverse its policy of hostility toward Cuba, it may also prove a constructive interlocutor in the building of peace in Colombia. That represents a critical priority for U.S. policy moving forward, as the Obama administration has requested, and is likely to receive, a congressional commitment to provide \$2 billion in support for the peace process over the next five years. The success of that effort will hinge in large part on the capacity of the Colombian and U.S. governments to sustain good will with the demobilized guerrilla army and its supporters.

By removing the basis for universal Latin American condemnation of American policy toward Cuba, the administration has also ensured that the approach taken by Latin American governments toward Cuba's own political and economic evolution will not be structured in diametric opposition to whatever Washington prefers. As Merke has argued (2015), Latin America was united against former U.S. policy, but it no longer has a unified response. Latin American states have very different interests and intentions *vis-à-vis* Cuba, and none of the major regional powers is in a good place to influence events

there. And if the limits to regional cooperation reflect the diversity of foreign policy positions among Latin American states, *“the change in U.S. policy toward Cuba is likely to widen these divisions.”* What that ensures is that whatever U.S. preferences may be as Cuba’s internal circumstances evolve, there is a possibility that it will find allies among other governments in the hemisphere.

6. The 2016 Election Campaign and a New U.S. Administration

During the 14 months since the 17-D announcements, the US and Cuban governments have made steady progress in what will be a long road toward “normalization” of bilateral relations. Arguably, they have come farther in less time than might have been expected, particularly given obstructionism in the US Congress and, importantly, among significant sectors of the Cuban regime that are wary of ceding economic or political control. Latin American observers of the process are willing to give both Washington and Havana the benefit of the doubt, and clearly stand ready to facilitate continued advances. In the long run, those advances are all but inevitable: the changing demographics and politics in the US, and the collapsed economy in Cuba, mean that the two country’s futures are intertwined. Only a change in leadership in either country could derail this overarching logic.

Of course, leadership changes are indeed in the offing in both Washington and Havana. Barack Obama will leave the White House in January 2017 following the November 2016 election, and Raúl Castro has announced that he will step down a year later. Assuming that the transition in Cuba takes place as scheduled and in an orderly fashion, there is every reason to expect that Havana will remain engaged with the normalization process. The outlook for the U.S. is less certain. Rather than go along with the consensus of the international community, Republican party leaders –and all of the presidential candidates except for Donald Trump– are united in calling for a unilateral prolonging of sanctions, regardless of global or regional opinion. That there seems little concern about the potential response of third parties to an abandonment of the negotiating stance regarding Cuba is evident in rhetoric along the campaign trail. Even though this may in large part involve playing to an internal party constituency, the fact that strong majorities of Americans surveyed express support for reaching out to Cuba needs not preclude meaningful steps backward in the event of a Republican presidency beginning in 2017.

Given that the likely Republican nominee will almost surely continue the drumbeat of rhetoric against the restoration of diplomatic relations, there can be little doubt that an incoming GOP (Grand Old Party) administration would begin its Latin American diplomacy with a major point of contention with virtually every government in the region. In that scenario, prospects for productive cooperation between the U.S. and Latin America on such shared concerns as Venezuela's stability, Colombia's peace process, or the prudent management of immigrant and refugee flows, would all be called into serious question.

Perhaps more importantly, there is every reason to believe that a Republican administration would not only backtrack on much that has been achieved in the bilateral relationship with Cuba, but would also return to a discourse of exceptionalism that has accompanied American unilateralism in the Americas and beyond. That discourse is a powerful current in American politics and culture, and even those leaders who recognize that it does not resonate well everywhere and that the influence of the U.S. is heightened when it deploys a rhetoric of partnership among equals, occasionally cannot resist its allure: "*The United States is and remains the one indispensable nation,*" Barack Obama told graduating cadets at West Point in May 2014, only months before the historic opening toward Cuba. "*That has been true for the century past and it will be true for the century to come*" (Klare, 2015).

This plays well to a domestic U.S. audience, particularly at a military academy such as West Point. But it is indicative of precisely the sort of posturing that, combined with the policy of confrontation toward Cuba, reinforced Latin America's growing estrangement from the United States during the quarter century prior to the past year or so. And as one of us has argued elsewhere (Hershberg, 2015b), for as long as this remains the case US-relations with its neighbors will be susceptible to strain, as it is precisely the sort of hubris that has rankled governments in the Americas who wish to engage Washington as equals, rather than as subordinates of the Colossus to the North. Should the President who assumes office in 2017 fail to understand this point, the chances are good that not only US-Cuban relations, but US-Latin American relations as well, will take a major step backward.

Notes

1. This and the following three paragraphs draw on Eric Hershberg and William M. LeoGrande (eds.) *A New Chapter in U.S. Cuba Relations: Social, Political and Economic Implications*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan (forthcoming 2016).

2. Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the Summit of the Americas Opening Ceremony" April 17, 2009, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago; The White House, Office of the Press Secretary <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-summit-americas-opening-ceremony>>; accessed August 28, 2013.
3. Notably, this is precisely what happened in the aftermath of 17-D, as Americans flocked to Cuba and opinion polls showed overwhelming support for the President's policy shift.

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