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Challenges To US National Security

Castro Still Reaps Empowerment From "Enemy America"

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In October 1962, much of the global community watched in mesmerized fascination as the United States and the Soviet Union stumbled up to the edge of nuclear and conventional conflict over the fate of Cuba as a direct threat to American security. Though a much younger Fidel Castro urged Soviet belligerence, cooler heads prevailed in both Cold War superpowers; Soviet nuclear weapons were withdrawn and the planned US invasion was called off.

POLICY GRIDLOCK

Some would argue that our US-Cuba policy has been stuck in a 40-year time warp. For the Cuban Communist leadership and a good number of Cuban Americans, it will always be April of 1961, with the Bay of Pigs invasion grinding to a bloody halt on the beaches at Playa Del Giron. Eleven million Cubans sit in splendid isolation on 47,000 square miles of territory comprised of one large island and 4,000 smaller keys, which sprawl across the Caribbean just 90 miles from Key West.

President Eisenhower broke diplomatic relations in January 1961, when the triumphant Cuban revolutionaries caused hundreds of thousands of the economic elite to flee Castro and his firing squads. More than 6,000 properties were expropriated. The revolution that liberated Cuba in January 1959 from the brutal and despotic Batista dictatorship was now the new authoritarian oppressor.

When President Kennedy declared the 1962 economic embargo, the drawbridge was closed and a chasm opened between the US and Cuba: it has only widened over the years. In 1992, the Cuban Democracy Act marked a significant expansion of the severe economic measures against the Cubans. In 1996, the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act (Helms-Burton) aimed to hammer the final nail in the coffin of the Cuban economy. Pundits confidently labeled this law the "Adios Fidel Act."

I have just returned from three days of briefings in Cuba, including a seven-hour private session with Fidel and Raul Castro. I have also been following the challenge of Cuban totalitarianism throughout much of my 36 years of public service, which has involved extensive travel and personal involvement throughout all of Latin America. We need to reconsider our current policy.

THE PROBLEM

US leadership in the Executive Branch and Congress needs to carefully reevaluate US-Cuba policy in the coming years and craft a diplomatic and economic strategy that better supports US national security goals. Some have persuasively argued that the existing US policy of economic blockade and political isolation now ill serves our need to promote democracy in Cuba, reduce unsafe and uncontrolled migration, and counter the threat to the US of Caribbean drugs and criminal activity.

Indeed, a strong case can be made that our current policy of isolation and hostility props up a goofy, failing Marxist dictatorship by giving it a plausible external enemy to blame for its unsuccessful struggle to create wealth and opportunity in a world now increasingly based on free

market economics and democratic political systems. There is a growing suspicion that Fidel Castro, US economic competitors, and extremist elements among Cuban exiles are joined in an unspoken conspiracy that is actually served by the US embargo and its official hostility. Castro has, in many ways, been empowered politically by embracing the notion of "Enemy America." He avoids being confronted with the structural failings of a crumbling economic system no longer propped up by massive Soviet subsidies.

There seems little likelihood that the aging revolutionaries who dominate Cuba's repressive government will be neutralized by the current US approach. Fidel and his gang have, after all, survived eleven US presidents. The US is an obvious first choice for needed Cuban imports of agricultural products, medicine, machinery, intellectual property, tourist management, and investment services.

In the face of our outmoded policy, however, our Canadian and European allies, as well as those in Latin America, have happily stepped up to the plate of economic opportunity presented by our absence. As we stumble towards the chaos that will likely occur within a few years when Fidel dies and the shaky architecture of his revolution comes crashing down, we are clearly losing our opportunity to help shape the next phase.

In sum, our policies do not achieve our purpose—they do little to expedite the fall of Castro's rule; rather, they harm the Cuban people and cause us significant loss of credibility in the international community. We have allowed US domestic politics to lock down a failed strategy in Cuba, one that is especially glaring when considering other post-Cold War policy initiatives. In particular, the US has lifted the economic blockade of North Korea, engaged in diplomatic and economic relations with the Republic of Vietnam, welcomed the active military partnership of the Syrians in the Gulf War, continued contact with the totally corrupt and violent Haitian dictatorship, and opened up a new and welcome cooperation with the People's Republic of China. It is time to reconsider our policy towards Cuba.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Make no mistake. Cuba is a repressive, one-man dictatorship which Human Rights Watch labels as having "developed a highly effective machinery of repression." HRW's World Report 2002 notes the incredible legal charges permitted under Cuban law: contempt of authority, disrespect, spreading enemy propaganda and unauthorized news, insult to patriotic symbols, and "dangerousness."

There is no free press, no freedom of speech, no right to assembly, no independent labor unions, no legal opportunity for political opposition. Hundreds of political prisoners have been arrested and subjected to physical and sexual abuse, malnourishment, and horrible conditions in overcrowded prisons. More than 246 cases of political imprisonment have been documented by the Cuban Commission for Human Rights. The International Committee of the Red Cross has been denied the right to conduct prison visits since 1989—the only nation in all of the Americas to do so.

There is a certain 1950's Kafka-esque quality to Cuban political repression. Squads of police dominate the urban areas and the rural transportation routes. An omnipresent domestic intelligence system with block committees of the communist party provides unrelenting state snooping and oversight. Political dissension is rapidly clamped down by direct police harassment, loss of jobs or living places, or arrest and incarceration. When required, state security forces will simply kill as they did in the tragic attack in July 1994 on an escaping tugboat filled with unarmed civilians. Forty of these innocents were murdered when their boat was rammed and capsized. The Cuban system is relentless and brutal.

THE CUBAN THREAT

It is the collective judgment of most serious and informed US military and intelligence officials that Cuba represents little significant national security threat to American interests here or abroad.

The 1989 collapse of the Soviet Union kicked the economic props out from under their military machinery and reduced their armed forces by 50 percent. It is doubtful that more than a dozen naval vessels are operational. A May 1998 US Defense Intelligence Agency Report states that "Cuba does not pose a significant military threat to the US or to other countries in the region." It further notes that Cuba's military capacity is "residual and defensive."

In the space of a decade, the massive Cuban armed forces of 235,000 troops, which opposed US interests in Africa, the Mideast, Vietnam, Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, plummeted to an anemic 60,000 personnel with little training, no fuel, and no modernization. The Cuban armed forces now place greater emphasis on making money off tourism than preparing to continue the 40 years of Cold War hostility and insurgency that they generated as an agent of Soviet power.

The Cubans remain as a curious legacy on the State Department April 2002 list of seven states that sponsor terrorism. The section on Cuba is a cursory 77 words, lacking any real specificity. The admitted presence of small liaison offices or intermittent visits by the FARC, ELN, ETA, and IRA do not pose credible evidence of real support for external terrorist acts. No real indication of involvement for al Qaeda operatives has emerged. Secretary Powell himself recently testified that he did not believe the Cubans now present a biological warfare threat to the US. The Brits clearly do not agree that the Cubans sponsor state terrorism.

Of course, it is clear that the Cuban intelligence services continue to aggressively conduct operations designed to penetrate US-based Cuban exile groups and to infiltrate and monitor US military capability. The recent arrest of US defense analyst Ana Belen Montes on spy charges and the earlier conviction of a Cuban espionage ring in South Florida underscore the fear of the Cuban leadership of terrorist attacks by Cuban exile groups on the island as well as their sense of paranoia and vulnerability to possible US military attack. The Cubans are also capable of continued state violence in violation of international law, such as their February 1996 murder of four US citizens flying a "Brothers to the Rescue" mission in international airspace.

Having said that, it is my own view that charges that the Cuban leadership actively condones or supports drug criminal activity are without merit. The evidence seems convincing that in the past several years the Cubans have actively cooperated with regional partners to conduct air and sea interdiction of drugs, starting with the October 1996 seizure of seven tons of cocaine off the freighter Limerick in response to US intelligence reports. They are also determined to minimize the growing exposure of their own workers and families to the increasing availability of drugs generated by the hundreds of kilograms of cocaine and marijuana that wash up on Cuban beaches as well as the growing tourist involvement in drugs.

On a case-by-case basis, the US actively cooperates with Cuban authorities by providing intelligence through our US Coast Guard LNO in Havana. In my judgment, more needs to be done in law enforcement, intelligence, and scientific cooperation on drug treatment and prevention.

In addition to counter-drug efforts, the Cubans want to cooperate on counter-terrorism. Conciliatory signals are clear at Guantanamo with the seeming full cooperation of the Cubans with the US military presence as we deal with hundreds of al Qaeda prisoners. The Cuban senior leadership made clear to me that they intended to support US Guantanamo policy and ease our difficulties in air access to the base. Their approach is cooperation, not confrontation.

CUBA'S ECONOMY-STAGGERING TO OBLIVION

The current central goal of Cuban foreign policy is to break the US economic embargo, lift the ban on US tourists, and gain access to foreign investment. Their revolution is crumbling around their ears and they blame it all on the US economic blockade and diplomatic isolation.

The truth is more difficult to divine. Cuba's economy began to unravel in 1989 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1993, as its GNP dropped by one third, Cubans were forced into desperate

capitalistic measures, trying the economic equivalent of becoming half-pregnant. Cubans were allowed to use and own US dollars. Hundreds of foreign investment partners from 57 countries were invited into Cuba with resources in excess of \$5 billion. The large state farms were broken up. More than 150 occupations were cleared for private self-employment. Small, free-market private tourist enterprises were authorized.

In 1997, there was significant reform of the banking system. Tourism increased sharply to 1.8 million people per year, including more than 200,000 annually from the US. Sugar production gradually increased to 3.5 million tons per year. Cuba produced 10 percent of the cobalt on the world market and more than 70,000 tons of nickel annually. Finally, new US legislation allowed Cuban-Americans to remit more than a billion dollars a year to family members in Cuba.

But it is not working. The Cuban economy is still grievously wounded. The gap between rich and poor has widened terribly. Cuban professionals in medicine, engineering, and science now scramble to hustle dollars as cab drivers and bus boys. Prostitution has exploded. Stealing from state enterprises and illegally offering services is common among the population, which does not have access to the dollar economy. Finally, Cuba's access to credit has been perilous ever since the 1986 default on their international debt. Real interest rates remain as high as 22 percent.

My visit to Cuba was part of an Orwellian scene. Beautiful, elegant Havana is crumbling. The buildings are literally falling apart. The clean streets and carefully manicured foliage set apart the peeling paint and wrecked facades. The city is dark at night from lack of household electricity. 1950s cars chug by, mixed with some modern vehicles belonging to foreigners, party officials, and the dollar economy.

Cuba suffers from a fundamental structural deficiency: its population is trying to compete in a free-market world with a failed Marxist command economy.

They also suffered devastating damage from Hurricane Michelle in November 2001. Finally, the 11 September terrorist attack on the US caused a huge negative impact on Cuba's tourist economy from Europe.

Castro and his leaders feel strangled by the US economic blockade. They need \$720 million a year of agricultural products from the US, and they need US tourists. In political desperation, they have turned on a relatively effective charm offensive aimed at the international community.

The United Nations in November 2000 voted overwhelmingly (107 countries in favor and 3 opposed) to lift the economic blockade. The Cubans have also found an increasingly receptive audience to re-evaluate policy in the US Congress, among governors, and with US business leaders.

Senator John Warner and 24 senators from both parties called for a December 1998 bi-partisan commission "to help shape and strengthen the future US-Cuban relationship." Former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger, Laurence Eagleburger, and George Shultz supported the measure; however, on 4 January 1999, the Clinton Administration declined to appoint the commission. In the words of Republican Congresswoman Jo Ann Emerson, "There's no doubt that a majority of our colleagues in the Senate and House support more trade with Cuba and lifting the travel ban, which is the heart of it all."

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

A Council on Foreign Relations panel chaired by Bernard Aronson and William Rogers recently produced a superb analysis of US-Cuba relations in the 21st century. It is worth reviewing their recommendations, which are, in my judgment, thoughtful and balanced.

Castro took power in 1959. The United States simply cannot allow these 43 years of confrontation to continue because of domestic political deference to some extremists among 1.2 million Cubans

in Dade County, FL. The younger generation of "Miacubanos" who have matured and become Americans must be the focus of US policymakers.

The Cuban communist leadership, however, remains locked in ideological rigidity. They are paranoid about the continued threat of more than 140 terrorist plots directed against them from 1990 to 2001 by US-based groups. They cannot forget the history of Cuban exile violence, such as the brutal murder of the 73 innocent civilians blown up off Barbados in a Cuban airliner on 6 October 1976.

To the aging, messianic, charismatic, and obsessed Fidel Castro, his revolution is in continuing peril. He sees himself as the pillar of stability-Chief of State, Head of Government, First Secretary of the 800,000-plus Communist Party members, and the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. Many of us believe that when he goes, Cuba will slide into chaos despite the brilliant younger cadre the Cuban government has groomed and trained.

The history we share with Cuba is an ugly legacy from the perspective of both nations. It is unlikely either nation can unilaterally break out of this confrontation. The solution may well require working through multinational mechanisms like the OAS to soften the domestic political stress on both systems. The US must also increasingly take into account and respond to the moderate US-Cuban community leadership. We must not allow extremist elements to stifle US domestic debate.

Finally, in my view, there will be no real glasnost while Castro lives. I spent a total of 11 hours with him during my recent visit. He was courteous, sharp, and mono-focused on casting his revolution in concrete.

The Cubans have managed to produce what may be the most organized society in Latin America. Cuba is the only nation besides the US and Canada in the hemisphere that has tried to produce decent health care and education for its population. And the Cubans have minimized societal corruption.

But the successes of the Cuban Revolution are now coming apart. The totalitarian leadership has lost legitimacy. There is no law. The economy is wrecked. Half the island would leave if the door were cracked open.

The US will have to creatively and carefully deal with the Cubans during the coming years. We will need incremental concessions by both sides to move ahead. President Bush and Congress have a clear challenge to meet.

Cuba is headed for chaos during the coming five years. Now is the time for patient and inspired US leadership to achieve an outcome of peaceful regime change in the post-Castro era. ■