

# Normalizing US–Cuba relations: escaping the shackles of the past

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President Barack Obama's historic reversal of half a century of antagonism towards Cuba is reminiscent of Richard Nixon's 1972 opening to China, and will likely be remembered as equally momentous. The principal rationale for the policy shift, Obama explained in his speech of 17 December 2014, was the abject failure of the policy of hostility pursued by his ten predecessors, which had managed neither to unseat the Castro regime nor to force it to change in ways amenable to Washington. 'I do not believe we can keep doing the same thing for over five decades and expect a different result,' Obama said; and so he resolved to 'cut loose the shackles of the past' and pivot towards a policy of engagement.<sup>1</sup>

But the old policy's failure was not in itself an adequate explanation for the dramatic shift. If the policy of hostility inaugurated by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1959 was so ineffectual—as most analysts agreed it was—how did it endure for five and a half decades, through ten presidents, Democrat and Republican? And why did it change so abruptly?

The answer lies in a constellation of structural factors that kept the policy of hostility in place for years, but over that period gradually changed until they reached a tipping point that gave President Obama the political opportunity—perhaps even the imperative—to change course: (1) the threat Cuban foreign policy posed to US interests; (2) the political influence of the Cuban American lobby; (3) the attitude of Latin America towards the US–Cuban stand-off; and (4) the changes under way within Cuba since the assumption of the presidency by Raúl Castro in 2008.

## The dynamics of change

Scholars of US domestic policy have long recognized that major policy changes are hard to make, and that terminating longstanding, well-entrenched policies and programmes is even harder. Their analyses of how policies change provide useful tools to help us solve the puzzle of why Cuba policy was 'sticky' for so long, and then suddenly changed.

Kingdon's classic study on agenda setting and policy innovation provides an overarching framework for understanding policy change.<sup>2</sup> He identifies three

<sup>1</sup> White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 'Statement by the President on Cuba policy changes', 17 Dec. 2014.

<sup>2</sup> John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies* (Boston: Little Brown, 1984).

elements, or 'streams', that must converge in order for a major policy change to occur. First, a problem must make its way onto policy-makers' agendas; second, a feasible policy solution to the problem must be available; and third, the policy solution must be politically viable. If one or more of these necessary conditions is absent, the policy will not be adopted.

At any given moment, dozens of serious problems, foreign and domestic, vie for the attention of policy-makers. Problems that are not serious or urgent do not normally make it onto the agenda. Often, a crisis or looming disaster is required to move a problem up the priority ranking. Even an acute problem will not hold the attention of policy-makers for long unless the policy community can offer a solution that has a reasonable chance of success. Policy entrepreneurs are constantly churning out policy alternatives, generating what Kingdon calls a 'primeval soup' of options. But policy options must be feasible if they are to gain any traction. The burden of proof is on advocates to make a compelling case that the policy put forward will solve the problem at hand without negative side-effects, and that it is better than other available alternatives.

Finally, proponents of a new policy must bring together a winning political coalition behind it, and the political cost of taking action must be low or clearly outweighed by the gain. Because the US political system is structurally biased against change, opponents have multiple veto points at which they can kill a proposal they dislike. Every major policy change faces an uphill fight. Moreover, existing programmes and policies can rely on built-in support from clientelist groups that derive direct benefits from them, and bureaucrats who carry them out. The beneficiaries of a new policy are prospective at best and less likely to be well organized. In addition, to the extent that existing policy is inscribed in law, there will be significant legal obstacles to change.<sup>3</sup>

Welch extends the analysis of policy change into the international arena, drawing on organizational theory, cognitive theory and prospect theory.<sup>4</sup> Policy-makers are risk-averse, which makes major foreign policy changes especially difficult. All changes entail costs and risks, and major changes entail significant ones. There are political costs imposed by the opponents of change, and risks that the new initiative will fail. Even a successful policy shift requires the time, attention and political capital of senior decision-makers, whose agenda is always full. It is far easier to leave well enough alone, even if the status quo is less than optimal. Inertia is the prevailing dynamic. Overcoming it requires a significant change in the cost-benefit ratio of the status quo. Being risk-averse, policy-makers are more often moved to action by the threat of serious loss than by the prospect of gain. The status quo must come to be seen as severely costly in order to overcome policy inertia, especially if a change seems uncertain and risky.

<sup>3</sup> Peter DeLeon, 'Public policy termination: an end and a beginning', *Policy Analysis* 4:3, Summer 1978, pp. 369-92; Garry D. Brewer, 'Termination: hard choices—harder questions', *Public Administration Review* 38: 4, July-Aug. 1978, pp. 338-44; Iris Geva-May, 'Riding the wave of opportunity: termination in public policy', *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 14: 3, 2004, pp. 309-33.

<sup>4</sup> David A. Welch, *Painful choices: a theory of foreign policy change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

The urgency of solving the Cuba problem was highest during the Cold War, when Havana acted as a strategic partner of Moscow, and it diminished thereafter—until the emergence of progressive governments in Latin America that saw Cuba policy as a symbolic bellwether of US relations with the region. The rise of the Cuban American community as a force in southern Florida raised the domestic political cost of policy change significantly—until that community began to change. The reorganization of the Cuban economy launched by Raúl Castro in 2011 suggested a new openness on the island that made an alternative US policy of engagement seem more likely to succeed.

## **The Cuban threat**

During the Cold War, the rationale for Washington's antagonism was straightforward. As a strategic partner of the Soviet Union, Cuba pursued a foreign policy that conflicted directly with US national security interests. Havana's support for Marxist guerrilla movements in Latin America and pro-socialist independence movements in Africa threatened to tip the balance of global forces in the Third World against the United States. Initially, Washington hoped that isolation, economic denial and CIA paramilitary attacks would topple Cuba's young revolutionary government. When Fidel Castro proved more resilient than expected, the policy objective was redefined along more modest lines: punishing Cuba for its ideological apostasy, making it a negative example to deter other Latin American countries from following a similar path, and draining resources from the Soviet Union which continued to underwrite its Caribbean ally.<sup>5</sup>

The failure of the policy to unseat Castro prompted periodic debate among US policy-makers as to whether *rapprochement* might better serve US interests.<sup>6</sup> Cuba's position between the two superpowers provided Washington with an incentive to normalize relations if it could pull Cuba out of the Soviet orbit. That was the goal of early attempts at *rapprochement* by President John F. Kennedy, President Gerald Ford's Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and President Jimmy Carter. In each instance, US demands focused less on Cuba's domestic political and economic arrangements than on Cuban foreign policy—specifically, ending Cuban support for revolutionaries abroad and reducing its military relationship with the Soviet Union. Kennedy's initiative was cut short by his assassination. The Kissinger and Carter initiatives failed because Cuba's bond with the Soviet Union proved to be unbreakable. When Cuba sent troops to Angola and Ethiopia with Soviet logistical support, Washington regarded its actions as an escalation of the Cold War and reverted to its policy of isolation and economic denial.

With the end of the Cold War, the national security rationale for US policy evaporated. Without Soviet economic and military assistance, the Cuban armed forces were reduced to a home defence force. Most of their heavy equipment had

<sup>5</sup> The best account of US–Cuban relations since 1959 is Lars Schoultz, *That infernal little Cuban republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> These debates are chronicled in William M. LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, *Back channel to Cuba: the hidden history of negotiations between Washington and Havana* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

to be mothballed for lack of fuel and spare parts.<sup>7</sup> The total number of troops on active duty fell by over 80 per cent, from almost 300,000 to only 49,000, with no capacity to project force beyond the island.<sup>8</sup> The military budget contracted by more than half during the 1990s, the post-Soviet depression known as the Special Period, and never fully recovered.<sup>9</sup>

Cuba's troops came home from Africa and, in 1992, Fidel Castro announced that the country would no longer provide material support to revolutionary movements abroad.<sup>10</sup> The US Department of State's annual reports on *Patterns of global terrorism* confirmed that Cuban assistance to foreign revolutionaries had ended for lack of resources and because of Cuba's desire to re-establish normal diplomatic and economic ties with its neighbours.<sup>11</sup> In the US Southern Command's annual 'posture statement' on the security situation in the western hemisphere, the only Cuban threat mentioned from 2000 onwards was the possibility of mass migration when Fidel Castro handed power over to Raúl Castro. This worry appeared in the 2007 and 2008 reports, but disappeared thereafter once the succession from Fidel to Raúl had gone smoothly.<sup>12</sup>

In an interview after announcing his change in policy towards Cuba, Obama justified taking the risk of a new approach by noting that Cuba was 'a relatively tiny country that doesn't pose any significant threat to us or our allies'.<sup>13</sup> However, even as the Cuban threat receded, a new obstacle to *rapprochement* was growing, one that substantially raised the political cost of change.

## The Cuba lobby

In the 1980s, a group of wealthy Cuban Americans in Miami resolved to mobilize the power of their community using traditional modalities of US politics—votes and campaign contributions. The political and financial power of conservative Cuban Americans, organized most effectively by Jorge Mas Canosa in the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF), gave the community virtual veto power over US policy from 1981 to 2008. Cuban Americans punished any public official who even hinted at a policy of engagement with Cuba. Foundation directors and their political action committee, the Free Cuba PAC, contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to dozens of sympathetic congressional and presidential candidates in each election cycle.<sup>14</sup> There was no countervailing constituency.

<sup>7</sup> Juan Carlos Espinosa, "'Vanguard of the state': the Cuba armed forces in transition", *Problems of Post-Communism* 48: 6, Nov.–Dec. 2001, pp. 19–30.

<sup>8</sup> US Department of State, *World military expenditures and arms transfers 2013; World military expenditures and arms transfers, 1996* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, July of each year).

<sup>9</sup> Hal Klepak, 'The revolutionary armed forces', in Philip Brenner, John Kirk, Marguerite Rose Jiménez and William M. LeoGrande, eds, *A contemporary Cuba reader: the revolution under Raúl Castro* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), pp. 73–9.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Harvey, 'Castro ends the export of revolution', *Sun Sentinel*, 16 Jan. 1992.

<sup>11</sup> US Department of State, *Patterns of global terrorism, 1993* (Washington DC: Department of State, 1994), p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Posture statements of the Commander, US Southern Command before the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, 2000 to 2013, accessed through ProQuest Congressional Hearings Digital Collection.

<sup>13</sup> National Public Radio, 'Transcript: President Obama's full NPR interview', 29 Dec. 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Peter H. Stone, 'Cuban clout', *National Journal*, 20 Feb. 1993; John Newhouse, 'A reporter at large: Cuba', *New Yorker*, 27 April 1992.

Over two decades, CANF won a series of political victories, including the creation of Radio and TV Martí, the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992 (which tightened the embargo in hopes of bringing the Cuban regime to the point of collapse after the Soviet Union’s disappearance), and the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996 (aka the Helms–Burton Act), which wrote the embargo into law.

Well organized, single-minded, and strategically concentrated in the key electoral states of Florida and New Jersey, the Cuba lobby, as it came to be known, was a nearly perfect example of ‘policy capture’.<sup>15</sup> It built a core of congressional supporters with campaign contributions and intimidated the State Department bureaucracy into quiescence. No other interest group or voting bloc regarded the policy as salient, so the Cuba lobby had the field to itself. A rare exception was the 1994 ‘rafters’ migration crisis, which drew national attention, expanded the scope of the policy debate, and posed a larger political threat to President Bill Clinton than the wrath of Miami. Predictably, he adopted policies to end the crisis (restricting Cuban immigration to the United States) that the Cuba lobby opposed, but at the same time made ‘side payments’ to the lobby by tightening sanctions against Havana.<sup>16</sup>

The Cuba lobby was able to maintain this dominance because, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba ceased to be significant for US foreign policy. Washington decision-makers, with higher priorities to attend to, followed the path of least resistance by leaving the policy of hostility in place. As George H. W. Bush’s National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft observed, Cuba had become ‘a domestic issue for the United States and not a foreign policy issue’.<sup>17</sup>

Over the years, however, the politics of Miami gradually changed, and with them the political calculus surrounding Cuba policy. Polling by Florida International University since 1991 has chronicled evolving attitudes among Cuban Americans. When it began, 87 per cent favoured continuation of the US embargo. By 2014, 52 per cent opposed it, and 71 per cent no longer believed it was effective. In 1993, 75 per cent of respondents opposed the sale of food to Cuba and 50 per cent opposed the sale of medicine. By 2014, solid majorities—77 per cent and 82 per cent respectively—supported both. In 1991, 55 per cent opposed unrestricted travel to Cuba, whereas in 2014, 69 per cent supported it.<sup>18</sup>

These attitudinal changes were clearly linked to demographic changes. Exiles who arrived in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s came as political refugees,

<sup>15</sup> Mancur Olson describes the advantages enjoyed by cohesive interest groups: *The logic of collective action* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965). For a good review of the literature on subgovernment and policy capture, beginning with Lowi, see Daniel McCool, ‘Subgovernments as determinants of political viability’, *Political Science Quarterly* 105: 2, Summer 1990, pp. 269–93. On the Cuban case specifically, see Patrick J. Haney and Walt Vanderbush, ‘The role of ethnic interest groups in US foreign policy: the case of the Cuban American National Foundation’, *International Studies Quarterly* 43: 2, June 1999, pp. 341–61; William M. LeoGrande, ‘The Cuba lobby’, *Foreign Policy* online, 23 April 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/12/the-cuba-lobby/>, accessed 18 March 2015.

<sup>16</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back channel to Cuba*, pp. 280–301. On how expanding the scope of policy debate changes the political calculus, see E. E. Schattschneider, *The semi-sovereign people* (New York: Holt Rinehart & Winston, 1960).

<sup>17</sup> Frank Davis, ‘White House considers plan for commission to carry out a bipartisan review’, *Miami Herald*, 24 Nov. 1998.

<sup>18</sup> Guillermo Grenier and Hugh Gladwin, ‘FIU Cuba poll’, 1993–2014, <https://cri.fiu.edu/research/cuba-poll/>.

motivated principally by their opposition to Castro. Those who arrived during and after the Mariel exodus in 1980 were more likely to have left for economic reasons. Recent arrivals, especially those who came after the Cold War, are far more likely to have maintained ties with family on the island. The differences in age and experience among different waves of migrants produced sharply different opinions, with more recent arrivals being far more likely to favour policies that reduce barriers to family connections, especially the ability to travel and send money back.<sup>19</sup>

Another important reason for the change in Cuban American opinion has been the restoration of family ties in ways that were previously impossible. During the 1960s and early 1970s, it was difficult for families to maintain contact across the Florida Strait. Travel to Cuba was prohibited by the US embargo, and the Cuban government would not allow *gusanos* (worms) to return to visit. Direct mail service was cut off, and telephone connections were notoriously poor. Moreover, the prevailing opinion in both communities was one of hostility. To Cubans who left, those who stayed behind were communists. To Cubans who stayed behind, those who left were traitors.<sup>20</sup>

The end of the Cold War opened new opportunities for the two communities to reconnect. The collapse of European communism plunged Cuba into deep economic crisis.<sup>21</sup> The suffering endured by ordinary Cubans during this 'Special Period' prompted a significant humanitarian response from Cuban Americans. Remittances began to climb, from \$150–200 million annually in 1990 to some \$500 million by 1995.<sup>22</sup>

Although attitudinal changes in the community have been clear for some time, until recently they had not manifested themselves in voting behaviour. A far higher proportion of early arrivals obtained US citizenship, and thus still comprise a larger share of the Cuban American electorate than more recent arrivals (although by 2010, Cuban Americans born in the United States were the largest voting bloc, comprising almost half the Cuban American electorate).<sup>23</sup> In addition, early arrivals are far more likely to be registered to vote and more likely to turn out. Registration rates for those who arrived before 1985 are over 90 per cent, whereas for post-Cold War arrivals who are citizens, the rate is only 60 per cent.<sup>24</sup> However, the early exiles are becoming a smaller proportion of the community as new immigrants arrive at a rate of about 30,000 every year and as natural mortality takes its toll on the ageing exiles. With the passage of time, more and more of the post-1980 immigrants obtain citizenship and begin to vote.

<sup>19</sup> Grenier and Gladwin, 'FIU Cuba poll', 1993–2014.

<sup>20</sup> Susan Eva Eckstein, *The immigrant divide: how Cuban Americans changed the US and their homeland* (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 128–35.

<sup>21</sup> Jorge F. Pérez-López, 'The Cuban economic crisis of the 1990s and the external sector 1998', *Cuba in Transition* (Washington DC, Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy), vol. 8, 1998, pp. 386–413.

<sup>22</sup> William M. LeoGrande, 'Fresh start for a stale policy: can Obama break the stalemate in US–Cuban relations?', American University Center for Latin American and Latino Studies, 2012, <http://www.american.edu/clals/upload/LeoGrande-Fresh-Start.pdf>, accessed 19 March 2015.

<sup>23</sup> LeoGrande, 'Fresh start for a stale policy'.

<sup>24</sup> Grenier and Gladwin, 'FIU Cuba poll', 1993–2014.

The changes in the Cuban American electorate first became clear in the 2008 presidential election. Conventional political wisdom held that a Democratic candidate needed to win 30 per cent of the Cuban American vote to carry Florida. Before 2008, the only Democrat since 1980 to meet that threshold was Bill Clinton in 1996 (with 35 per cent of the Cuban American vote). Clinton's success after signing the Helms–Burton legislation tightening the embargo convinced Democrats that being tough on Cuba was smart politics.

In 2008, Hillary Clinton and John McCain followed the tried and true path of lambasting Cuba to appeal to conservative Cuban American voters. Barack Obama adopted an alternative strategy: he sought to cut into the Republicans' traditional electoral advantage by winning over the expanding moderate segment of the community. He promised to engage with Cuba and to end restrictions on Cuban American remittances and family travel. By carrying Florida in 2008 with 35 per cent of the Cuban American vote, Obama proved that a Democrat could take a moderate stance on Cuba and still make inroads into this solidly Republican constituency. The results of the 2012 election were even more striking. Despite Mitt Romney's appeals to the exile community's traditional anti-communism, Obama won almost half the Cuban American vote in Florida. Two statewide exit polls showed Obama winning the Cuban American vote, 49 per cent to Romney's 47 per cent, or losing it narrowly, 48 per cent to Romney's 52 per cent.<sup>25</sup> Having defied conventional wisdom that only a 'get tough on Cuba' platform would sell in south Florida, Obama changed the domestic political dynamics of the issue, making new thinking about Cuba politically feasible.

A poll released by the Atlantic Council in February 2014 also found broad national support for normalizing relations with Cuba, with 56 per cent of the public in favour. Majorities of Democrats, independents and even Republicans agreed. Surprisingly, there was even greater support for change in Florida, where 63 per cent of respondents favoured normalization. The poll also asked about specific US policy options, such as allowing US companies to do business in Cuba, removing all restrictions on travel, negotiating cooperation to fight drug-trafficking and taking Cuba off the terrorism list. Majorities both nationally and in Florida supported every option, in many cases by more than 60 per cent.<sup>26</sup> In Washington, administration officials were finally convinced that the politics of the issue had really changed.<sup>27</sup>

Polling in the wake of Obama's announcement confirmed that judgement. Among Cuban Americans nationwide, 44 per cent agreed with Obama's new policy and 48 per cent disagreed; but among those born in the United States, those who arrived in the United States after 1980 and those below the age of 65, pluralities supported the President. Only the cohort of older exiles opposed it. Pluralities

<sup>25</sup> Marc Caputo, 'Poll: Obama got big share of Cuban American vote, won among other Hispanics in Florida', *Miami Herald*, 8 Nov. 2012; Bendixen and Amandi International, *Exit poll of Hispanic voters in Florida*, 8 Nov. 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Atlantic Council, *US–Cuba: a new public survey supports policy change*, 20 Feb. 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/reports/us-cuba-a-new-public-survey-supports-policy-change>, accessed 19 March 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Dan Restrepo (former Senior Director for Western Hemisphere Affairs at the National Security Council), remarks at National Peace Corps Association, Washington DC, 6 March 2015. According to Restrepo, Obama's 2009 elimination of restrictions on Cuban American travel and family remittances was an incremental change in Cuba policy intended to test the idea that Miami politics had changed, and it succeeded.

also supported the relaxation of travel restrictions (47 per cent in favour, 39 per cent opposed), and lifting the embargo (44 per cent in favour of lifting it, 40 per cent opposed).<sup>28</sup> Among the general public, Obama's new policy was very popular. Over 60 per cent of respondents favoured re-establishing diplomatic relations, more than half favoured ending the embargo, and more than two-thirds favoured ending travel restrictions.<sup>29</sup>

The domestic political risk of a new opening to Cuba had clearly diminished; but were the costs of maintaining the status quo high enough to create a sense of urgency, pushing the issue onto the President's agenda?

## US relations with Latin America

A key element of Washington's original policy of hostility was to isolate Cuba from the western hemisphere. In 1962, the Organization of American States (OAS) voted to suspend Cuba's membership on the grounds that communism was 'incompatible with principles and objectives of the inter-American system'.<sup>30</sup> In 1964, Washington brandished evidence of Cuban support for Venezuelan guerrillas to win OAS approval for mandatory diplomatic and economic sanctions. Only Mexico and Canada refused to go along; every other member state broke relations with Havana.

This hemispheric solidarity proved to be short-lived, however. In the early 1970s, countries began to defect. Progressive governments in Chile, Peru and Argentina broke the sanctions by restoring ties with Cuba, and the newly independent nations of the English-speaking Caribbean, led by Jamaica, refused to impose them. Pressure began to build within the OAS to repeal the sanctions.<sup>31</sup> Those demands, combined with domestic pressure from Congress, led Kissinger to open negotiations with Havana to normalize relations. 'If there is benefit to us in an end to the state of "perpetual antagonism" it lies in getting Cuba off the domestic and inter-American agendas,' Kissinger's aide Harry Shlaudeman wrote to him in 1975 as the OAS vote approached. 'We have a poor hand to play and should ask for a new deal before we lose our last chip.'<sup>32</sup> In July 1975, the OAS voted, with US support, to end the mandatory sanctions regime adopted in 1964.

During the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, the United States was at odds with Latin America over the conflicts in Central America; then, in the early years of the new century, Cuba returned to the fore as 'new left' governments came to power in the region. Radical populists like Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador felt an ideological kinship with Cuba, and even moderate social democrats like Michelle Bachelet in Chile and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in Brazil rejected Washington's policy of hostility.

<sup>28</sup> Bendixen and Amandi International, *Flash poll of Cuban Americans' reaction to President Obama's change in US-Cuba policy* (Miami: Bendixen and Amandi, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> CNN/ORC poll, 18–21 Dec. 2014, <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2014/images/12/23/cuba.poll.pdf>; *Washington Post*/ABC News poll, 23 Dec. 2014, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/page/2010-2019/Washington-Post/2014/12/23/National-Politics/Polling/release\\_380.xml](http://www.washingtonpost.com/page/2010-2019/Washington-Post/2014/12/23/National-Politics/Polling/release_380.xml), both accessed 19 March 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Schoultz, *That infernal little Cuban republic*, pp. 174–5.

<sup>31</sup> Schoultz, *That infernal little Cuban republic*, pp. 261–71.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back channel to Cuba*, pp. 136–7.



In 2009, when Mauricio Funes was elected El Salvador's first president from the former guerrilla group, the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation (FMLN), El Salvador became the last Latin American country to restore relations with Cuba. A policy originally intended to isolate Cuba had ended up isolating the United States.

Washington paid some diplomatic price for its inflexibility (criticism at the Summits of the Americas, annual United Nations votes condemning the embargo), but for years the cost was more symbolic than substantive. Latin American governments were not willing to risk damaging bilateral relations with Washington over the issue of Cuba. By the time of Obama's election, however, that had begun to change as the politics of Latin American governments moved further to the left. When Obama took office, hopes ran high that he would finally tackle this anachronistic Cold War policy that symbolized a bygone era of US hegemony. Several heads of state—foremost among them Brazilian President Lula—called for an end to US sanctions against Cuba, even as they congratulated Obama on his victory.<sup>33</sup> When the hemisphere's heads of state convened at the Fifth Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago in April 2009, the Latin American presidents pressed Obama on Cuba, making it a litmus test of his declared desire to forge a new 'equal partnership' with the region. One after another they spoke of the need to reintegrate Cuba into the inter-American community. Obama tried to assuage their concerns, declaring: 'The United States seeks a new beginning with Cuba.' But his pledge was short on specifics.<sup>34</sup>

Two months later, at the 39th General Assembly of the OAS, Latin American states moved to repeal the 1962 resolution that suspended Cuba's membership—the symbolic cornerstone of Washington's policy of excluding Cuba from the hemispheric community. At first Washington opposed the repeal; but, faced with the prospect of a humiliating defeat, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton agreed to a compromise. The United States supported repeal in exchange for language that required Cuba to accept 'the practices, purposes, and principles of the OAS', including, implicitly, the commitment to democracy embodied in the Santiago Declaration of 1991.<sup>35</sup>

When the Sixth Summit of the Americas convened in Cartagena, Colombia, in April 2012, US policy towards Cuba was essentially unchanged from what it had been in 2009. Obama faced a solid phalanx of Latin American presidents no longer willing to passively accept Washington's intransigence. 'There is no justification for that path that has us anchored in a Cold War,' declared Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos, one of Washington's closest allies in the region. 'It is the hour to overcome the paralysis produced by ideological stubbornness.'<sup>36</sup> Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua and Rafael Correa of Ecuador refused to attend the summit because Cuba was not invited; Santos and Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff

<sup>33</sup> Brian Wagner, 'Latin American leaders congratulate President-elect Obama', *Voice of America*, 6 Nov. 2008.

<sup>34</sup> White House, Office of the Press Secretary, remarks by the President at the Summit of the Americas Opening Ceremony, 17 April 2009.

<sup>35</sup> AG/RES. 24.38 (XXXIX-O/09), resolution on Cuba (adopted at the third plenary session, held on 3 June 2009), in OAS General Assembly, 39th regular session, San Pedro Sula, Honduras, 2–4 June 2009, *Proceedings*, vol. I, p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> Vivian Sequera, 'US, Canada alone at summit in Cuba stance', *Associated Press*, 14 April 2012.

both declared that they would skip the next summit if Cuba was excluded again. The Cartagena summit ended inconclusively, with no major agreements and no final communiqué because the United States and Canada objected to extending an invitation for Cuba to attend the Seventh Summit in 2015.<sup>37</sup>

Obama was reportedly taken aback by the vehemence of the objections to Cuba's exclusion.<sup>38</sup> On the eve of the summit, when reporters asked Dan Restrepo, the Senior Director for the Western Hemisphere on the National Security Council, about the Cuba issue arising at the meeting, he replied that the United States and Latin America were fundamentally in agreement that Cuba could not rejoin the hemispheric community until it became a democracy.<sup>39</sup> The Cuba issue, he implied, was much ado about nothing. At the summit, even as the Latin American presidents expressed their opposition to US policy, a senior Obama official dismissed their concerns: 'They are about theater, not substance.'<sup>40</sup>

The President's aides clearly underestimated the anger building in Latin America over the Cuba issue. The willingness of key US allies such as Colombia and Brazil to scuttle the whole summit process suggested that although Cuba might be a symbolic issue, it had nevertheless become a serious threat to US relations with the rest of the hemisphere. Shortly after the summit, Restrepo stepped down and was replaced by Ricardo Zuniga, a career Foreign Service officer with extensive experience of working on Cuba.<sup>41</sup> Zuniga would later play the lead role in the secret negotiations leading to normalization.

As the Seventh Summit of the Americas approached, Latin America gave unanimous support to Panama, the host country, to invite Cuba despite US objections. That left Obama with a stark choice: boycott the summit in protest at Cuba's inclusion, or attend despite Washington's perennial insistence that the summit was only for democracies and Cuba did not qualify. Not only would a boycott have seriously damaged Washington's bilateral relations across the region, it might well have killed the summit process and dealt a severe blow to the OAS itself. By that time, however, the secret negotiations between Washington and Havana were well advanced, and part of the deal involved Washington dropping its objection to Cuba's participation at the summit.

'We've been severely criticized for [our policy on Cuba] by most countries, if not all, in this hemisphere,' said a senior administration official, explaining the reasons behind Obama's policy change. Recalling that the President was 'universally criticized' over Cuba in Cartagena, the official expressed optimism for the future: 'We believe that this policy shift and the way we will engage the Cuban government in support of democracy and prosperity will greatly help

<sup>37</sup> Scott Wilson, 'Americas summit ends without an agreement', *Washington Post*, 16 April 2012.

<sup>38</sup> White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 'Background conference call on policy changes in Cuba and the release of Alan Gross', 17 Dec. 2014; Tom Hayden, 'Obama, upset by Latin America criticism, replaces an advisor', *La Prensa* (San Diego), 17 Aug. 2012.

<sup>39</sup> White House, Office of the Press Secretary, press briefing by Ben Rhodes and Dan Restrepo to preview the President's trip to the Summit of the Americas, 11 April 2012.

<sup>40</sup> 'Despite Obama charm, Americas summit boosts US isolation', Reuters, 17 April 2012.

<sup>41</sup> Juan O. Tamayo, 'Diplomat with Cuba experience to handle WH Latam [sic—White House Latin America] policy', *Miami Herald*, 25 May 2012.

our policy initiatives around the hemisphere and our influence throughout the hemisphere.<sup>42</sup>

## Updating the Cuban model

Policy entrepreneurs have been proposing alternative Cuba policies for decades, along with detailed roadmaps of how to get there.<sup>43</sup> But whether these alternatives have a reasonable likelihood of success depends on how you define the objective. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has defined its policy objective as bringing capitalism and pluralist democracy to Cuba. Defenders of the status quo policy of hostility could always point to the experiences of Canada, western Europe and Latin America, whose policies of engagement with Cuba failed to produce any significant political or economic reform.

During the Cold War, US demands focused on Cuban foreign policy rather than its political and economic system. When Henry Kissinger opened a dialogue with Cuba in 1974–5, his emissaries were explicit about Washington’s expectations. The ‘ideological differences’ between Cuba and the United States were wide, and negotiations were not likely to bridge them. Nevertheless, US negotiators told their Cuban counterparts: ‘The United States is able and willing to make progress on such issues [of mutual interest] even with socialist nations.’<sup>44</sup> President Jimmy Carter’s plans to normalize relations with Havana turned on Cuban military involvement in Africa.

The end of the Cold War brought a shift in US demands. As retired US diplomat Wayne Smith put it, Washington ‘moved the goal posts’.<sup>45</sup> When Cuba’s objectionable foreign policy behaviour came to an end, President George H. W. Bush declared that the United States would normalize relations only when Cuba became a democracy.<sup>46</sup> The Cuban Democracy Act of 1992 (CDA) and the Helms–Burton Act four years later wrote these expectations into law. Thus Cuba’s domestic affairs became a central concern of US policy. Even Obama, when he declared in 2007 that the policy of hostility was a failure, nevertheless said that his goal would still be to bring democracy to the island. In 2009, he and Secretary Clinton made progress towards better relations contingent on domestic reforms, including the release of political prisoners, freedom to travel, leniency towards the Church and other democratizing measures.<sup>47</sup> Washington’s demand for domestic

<sup>42</sup> White House, Office of the Press Secretary, ‘Background conference call on policy changes in Cuba and the release of Alan Gross’.

<sup>43</sup> See e.g. John Planck, ed., *Cuba and the United States: long range perspectives* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1967); Wayne S. Smith and Esteban Morales Domínguez, eds, *Subject to solution: problems in Cuban–US relations* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1988); Vicki Huddleston and Carlos Pascual, *Learning to salsa: new steps in US Cuban relations* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2010); Jorge I. Domínguez, Rafael M. Hernández and Lorena G. Barberia, eds, *Debating US–Cuba relations: shall we play ball?* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back channel to Cuba*, p. 132.

<sup>45</sup> Gil Klein, ‘Bush lays down his conditions for normal relations with Cuba’, *Washington Times*, 20 March 1990.

<sup>46</sup> LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back channel to Cuba*, pp. 266–7.

<sup>47</sup> Barack Obama, ‘Our main goal: freedom in Cuba’, *Miami Herald*, 21 Aug. 2007; White House, Office of the Press Secretary, ‘Press conference by the President’, 19 April 2009; Department of State, ‘Hillary Rodham Clinton remarks with Haitian President Rene Preval’, 16 April 2009.

change did not go over well with Cuba's leaders, who regarded it as an affront to Cuba's sovereignty.

The bilateral dialogue between Havana and Washington remained stalled during most of Obama's first term, but major changes were under way in Cuba, driven by necessity. Raúl Castro came to office intent on reforming Cuba's economic model, or 'updating' it, as the Cubans called the process. The hyper-centralized system of state planning copied in the 1970s from the Soviet Union had left the Cuban economy stagnant, with low productivity and a distorted labour market that rewarded people for leaving high-skilled occupations in the state sector to work as taxi drivers and bartenders in the tourist sector. Raúl's solution was to pursue a Cuban-style market socialism reminiscent of the Chinese and Vietnamese experiences. He unleashed market forces in agriculture and urban services, expanded the small private sector, sought foreign direct investment, and demanded that state enterprises become self-sufficient or close their doors.

At the same time, Castro repealed a number of government regulations that restricted people's individual freedom. In 2008, the government legalized the purchase of mobile phones and computers. Three years later, it legalized the private sales of automobiles and real estate. In late 2013, the government abolished the requirement that Cubans get state permission—the so-called *tarjeta blanca*—before travelling abroad.<sup>48</sup>

Raúl Castro also developed a constructive relationship with Cardinal Jaime Ortega, which enabled the Church to mediate a 2010 confrontation between the government and the dissident group Ladies in White. That, in turn, led to the release of over 100 political prisoners. In his closing speech to the Communist Party's Sixth Congress in 2011, Castro went out of his way to praise the Church for its constructive role in resolving the conflict.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, Castro presided over an opening of political space for debate and discussion about Cuba's past and future. In an address to university students in December 2006, he implored the audience to question everything. 'Discuss, analyze, disagree, because the more you argue, the more you disagree, in the right place, at the right time, in the right way, these disagreements will always produce the best solutions.'<sup>50</sup> Addressing select Communist Party cadres in January 2012, he decried the party's 'false unanimity' and called for open debate. 'We need to accustom ourselves to expressing truths face to face, looking each other straight in the eye, to disagree and argue, to even disagree with what leaders say, when we believe that we are in the right.'<sup>51</sup>

With the top leadership criticizing Cuba's economic model and calling for more open debate, it did not take Cuban intellectuals long to occupy the new political space. Periodicals such as *Témas* and *Espacio Laical* pushed the boundaries

<sup>48</sup> Mimi Whitefield, 'Building the new Cuban economy', *Miami Herald*, 13 Dec. 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Raúl Castro, 'Central report to the 6th Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba', *Granma Internacional*, 16 April 2011.

<sup>50</sup> 'Versión ampliada de la intervención del General de Ejército Raúl Castro Ruz, en la jornada final del VII Congreso de la FEU', *Juventud Rebelde*, 21 Dec. 2006.

<sup>51</sup> Raúl Castro, 'Our responsibility is to promote greater democracy in our society, beginning by providing an example within the ranks of the Party', *Granma Internacional*, 20 Jan. 2012.

by engaging a broad range of topics from racism to youth alienation and the need for democratization. When two party apparatchiks who had presided over the ‘Gray Years’ of cultural rigidity in the 1970s briefly appeared on television, intellectuals pushed back by launching an ‘email war’ of criticism so widespread and intense that the Minister of Culture publicly called the TV appearances a mistake and promised that there would be no retrenchment in cultural policy.<sup>52</sup>

At first, Washington seemed not to notice these changes. But as Raúl’s new policies accumulated, it became clear that Cuba was undergoing a profound economic reorientation and that the political decompression was real, albeit limited. In this milieu, a policy of engagement became more attractive, since it offered an opportunity for the United States to influence the trajectory of change in Cuba, rather than stand passively on the sidelines. Moreover, the idea of bringing down the Cuban regime through economic pressure looked less and less appealing in the wake of failed nation-building experiments in Iraq and Afghanistan. A White House fact sheet describing Obama’s change in policy explained: ‘We know from hard-learned experience that it is better to encourage and support reform than to impose policies that will render a country a failed state.’<sup>53</sup>

The economic changes under way in Cuba also gave Havana a reason to improve relations with Washington. As Cuba reintegrated into the world economy, the United States stood as an obvious source of tourism, trade and investment. Just as Mikhail Gorbachev sought to end the Cold War so he could concentrate on reforming the Soviet economy, Raúl Castro has an interest in ending the Cold War in the Caribbean so he can concentrate on ‘updating’ the Cuban economy.

### **Looking ahead: the policy of engagement**

In Cuba, the televised announcements by Barack Obama and Raúl Castro were met with jubilation. People applauded, cried, hugged each other, and marched through the streets in celebration.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, although the historic agreement between the two men opened what Obama called ‘a new chapter’ in relations, the two countries are still on the first page. Many substantive issues remain to be resolved before relations are truly normal.

By far the most important change was the resumption of normal diplomatic relations—not because this entails any substantive benefit (the current diplomatic missions already function as if they were embassies), but because of its symbolism. Diplomatic recognition represented Washington’s acceptance that the Cuban government was not going to disappear any time soon, and that US policy would henceforth be to coexist with it rather than try to overthrow it. As Obama said in his televised address: ‘It does not serve America’s interests, or the Cuban people, to try to push Cuba toward collapse.’ That marks a fundamental reorientation of US policy.

<sup>52</sup> Arturo Gracia Hernández, ‘La política cultural de Cuba, sin dogmas ni sectarismos’, *La Jornada* (Mexico), 26 Feb. 2007.

<sup>53</sup> White House, Office of the Press Secretary, ‘Fact sheet: charting a new course on Cuba’, 17 Dec. 2014.

<sup>54</sup> The author was in Havana on 17 December and witnessed the Cuban reaction at first hand.

Nevertheless, Washington did not agree to dismantle the multiplicity of programmes supporting the old policy of regime change. The core of the US economic embargo remains in place: US companies cannot invest in Cuba or do business with state enterprises (except to sell food and telecommunications equipment). Cuban state enterprises cannot sell anything to the United States. Obama relaxed existing educational travel regulations, but the ban on tourist travel—the real potential money-maker for Cuba—remains in place. Removing these barriers requires Acts of Congress. With Republicans controlling both legislative bodies, ending the embargo will be a lot tougher than reaching agreement with Havana. Even if Obama recovers his executive authority to negotiate the end of the embargo, Washington will want compensation for nationalized US property and Cuba will want compensation for the damage done by the CIA's secret war and half a century of economic sanctions.

The United States continues to fund democracy promotion programmes to stimulate opposition—the programmes that led to the arrest of USAID subcontractor Alan Gross who was building independent digital networks in Cuban communities that could connect to the internet via satellite, bypassing Cuban servers. In his December 2014 speech, Obama signalled an end to US efforts to destabilize the Cuban government, but senior US officials are also saying that the democracy programmes are not going away. The United States still spends millions annually broadcasting TV and Radio Martí to Cuba, even though the television signal is effectively jammed and the radio has a diminishing audience. Cuba objects to the broadcasts as a violation of international law.

The litany of obstacles still to be overcome before US–Cuban relations are fully normal should not detract from the significance of the steps that President Obama and President Castro have taken. They have replaced a Cold War framework of animosity with a twenty-first-century policy of engagement and cooperation. The new chapter in relations they have opened provides the means both to manage issues where interests conflict, and to reach accord on issues where interests coincide.

The biggest payoff for Washington was in Latin America, where praise for Obama's new policy was universal and effusive. Colombian President Santos, whose 2012 plan to invite Cuba to the Sixth Summit of the Americas in Cartagena was thwarted by Washington, declared: 'In the name of the whole continent, we celebrate the audacity and courage of President Obama and the Cuban government', while Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto called the decision to normalize relations 'historic and decisive'.<sup>55</sup> Most South American presidents were attending a Mercosur summit in Argentina when they got the news, and the room broke into spontaneous applause. 'Latin Americans are celebrating,' said President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner. 'Today is a historic day,' said Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff. 'We imagined we would never see this moment.'<sup>56</sup> José

<sup>55</sup> Michael McDonald, 'Cuba move unites US enemies with Latin American allies', *Bloomberg News*, 17 Dec. 2014.

<sup>56</sup> 'Argentine President highlights restart of US–Cuba dialogue', Argentine news agency Telam, 19 Dec. 2014; Joshua Partlow and Gabriela Martinez, 'Latin Americans praise Obama easing Cuba embargo', *Washington Post*, 17 Dec. 2014.

Miguel Insulza, Secretary General of the OAS, added his imprimatur, congratulating Obama and Castro ‘for having taken these historic steps, as necessary as they are courageous ... This is a decision of great vision on both sides.’<sup>57</sup>

Not only did Obama remake policy towards Cuba, he rescued a hemispheric policy in disarray and avoided an ugly confrontation at the April 2015 summit. The administration anticipated that the goodwill engendered by the opening to Cuba would facilitate greater hemispheric cooperation on a range of issues, and this broader context was explicitly one of the reasons for Obama’s decision, according to senior officials.<sup>58</sup> In his speech to the nation, Obama said that the change in relations with Cuba ‘comes at a moment of renewed leadership in the Americas’. In fact, the change in policy will make possible renewed US leadership.

### **Costs, benefits and risks: how the calculus on Cuba changed**

The realist rationale for the US policy of hostility towards Cuba was weakest after the end of the Cold War when the Cuban threat dissipated. But there was no compelling reason for Washington to change policy; the cost of maintaining the status quo was relatively low, despite its lack of success. To be sure, US businesses were losing out to Canadian and European competitors, but the Cuban market was small and poor. Once US agricultural interests won an exception to the embargo in 2000 allowing them to sell food to Cuba, business pressure for a policy change receded.<sup>59</sup> For years, the diplomatic cost of hostility towards Cuba was relatively low as well. Although the UN General Assembly had voted overwhelmingly against the embargo for each of the past 23 years, most countries were not willing to make bilateral relations with Washington contingent on a change in US–Cuban relations. In short, addressing the ineffectiveness of the policy of hostility was not urgent; it was not important enough to get on the agenda of top policy-makers.

By contrast, the costs and risks of changing policy were high. The strength of the Cuba lobby guaranteed that any change would be met with vehement and powerful opposition. In addition, an opening to Cuba might be followed by Cuban actions that would make the initiative look naive and ineffectual. Washington officials recalled all too well that Kissinger’s offer to normalize relations was followed by Cuba’s intervention in Angola and Carter’s by Cuba’s intervention in Ethiopia. At a time when President Clinton was hoping to improve relations, Cuba shot down two civilian aeroplanes, killing four people. And after Obama himself pledged a ‘new beginning’ with Cuba, Havana arrested Alan Gross. Even for a President who came to office in 2009 declaring his desire to change relations with Cuba, the cost–benefit calculus was daunting.

<sup>57</sup> OAS press release, ‘OAS Secretary General celebrates “historic announcement” of resumption of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba’, 17 Dec. 2014.

<sup>58</sup> See e.g. Assistant Secretary Roberta Jacobson’s testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Federal News Service, 4 Feb. 2015.

<sup>59</sup> Morris Morley and Chris McGillion, *Unfinished business: America and Cuba after the Cold War, 1989–2001* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 192–3.

But that calculus changed. The cost of maintaining the status quo went up significantly as US relations with Latin America foundered on the shoals of US policy towards Cuba. The depth of Latin America's anger and frustration over the issue became apparent to Washington only during the 2012 Cartagena summit, a few months before Obama decided to open the secret dialogue with Cuba. Second, the political cost of changing the policy declined as attitudes in the Cuban American community evolved—a development confirmed by Obama's success in the 2012 election.

Finally, the prospects for an alternative policy of engagement brightened in the context of domestic changes already under way on the island. The possibility of exerting a positive influence on Cuba's domestic reforms reinforced the realignment of the major costs. Thus the conditions of policy change laid out by Kingdon and Welch were met, and a fundamental shift in US policy became feasible. Still, it took considerable political courage for President Obama to make the leap.

Some of the remaining issues between the United States and Cuba will linger unresolved beyond the two remaining years of Obama's presidency. But by changing the frame of US policy from one of hostility and regime change to one of engagement and coexistence, Obama freed himself and his successors from the 'shackles of the past'.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>60</sup> White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 'Statement by the President on Cuba policy changes'.