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## Cuban Futures: A Transatlantic Perspective

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The recent health crisis of Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, one which required him for the first time in nearly a half-century to temporarily abandon power, has suddenly forced the international community to contemplate the possibility of political change in Cuba. Though Castro himself may indeed recover from what was announced as gastric surgery, he remains, like the rest of us, mortal. Entering his ninth decade of life he can hardly look forward to an extended future. Yet the reaction in Washington, Miami, Madrid and other capitals to his recent confinement underscore an inconvenient fact; that for Cubans and outsiders alike he has remained a fixed quantity, almost eternal in our (and their) imagination. Insofar as the United States is concerned, one might even argue that its policy has long been based on the assumption that Fidel Castro will live forever. (As it happens, this has also long been Cuba's policy for its relations with the United States.) Only very recently have Washington's strategic planners begun to draw up plans for the eventuality of Castro's disappearance. Whether those plans are realistic or even desirable is a matter to which we shall return later in this paper.

### The Succession Scenario

One of the surprising aspects of the media barrage which followed the announcement of Castro's surgery, was the degree to which journalists seemed unaware of the institutional arrangements for political succession, which had long been in place. Castro's announcement that his younger brother Raúl would temporarily assume his various offices as head of state and party should have surprised no one, since the latter is already vice-president of the Council of State and of the Cuban Communist party.

Moreover, since Cuba opened up its economy to limited foreign investment ten years ago, Raúl Castro has been accumulating large quotas of economic power thanks to his role as minister of the armed forces, the agency charged with administering joint ventures. At the same time he has been slowly placing his own people, some civilian, some military, in key ministries, particularly those relating to the economy. Simultaneously, as minister of the interior he controls the police and prison system. Such a gradual, relentless strengthening of power, acquired quietly and without fanfare, somewhat resembles Stalin's activities in the period between Lenin's death in 1923 and his triumph in the struggle for power with Leon Trotsky in 1929.

It is often said, with reason, that Raúl Castro lacks many of the qualities that made his brother a world-class figure. No doubt he lacks Fidel Castro's charisma and perhaps even his tactical brilliance. Although he participated in the movement that brought his brother to power he does not occupy a similar place in the iconography of the Cuban revolution. He enjoys no personal popularity and is even regarded by many Cubans as charmless, sinister or effeminate (or all three). His wife Wilma, head of the Federation of Cuban Women, is widely despised. But it is easy to underestimate Raúl Castro. He has shown a talent for organization, and within the armed forces at least, leadership. During the crisis of 1993-1994, when the Cuban economy hit rock bottom after Soviet subsidy ended, it was he who summoned up the courage to convince his brother to make the changes needed for the regime to survive. This demonstrated capacity for pragmatism and encouraged many outside observers to assume that once Fidel is gone his brother will carry out some needed changes, which can stabilize the regime and assure his own political succession. What is certain is that there is no figure within the regime (or for that matter, outside of it) in a position to challenge Raúl Castro's position as dictator-in-waiting. To be sure, in the event of his accession his political style is bound to be different; perhaps he will govern in a more collegial manner, dividing up major tasks amongst his civilian and military colleagues. He might well be less visible on the international scene and presumably even within the Cuban media. The only ambiguity resides in a biological fact: he is 75 and thought to be an alcoholic; he may yet predecease his brother.

In the absence of both the Castro brothers, can there be a tropical version of bureaucratic Communism in Cuba? It is possible but difficult to imagine. The Castro regime is already a dynastic dictatorship (with another brother, Ramón, delegated to deal with foreign investors), and recent attention in the state media given to Castro's two sons, Fidel Castro Diaz-Balart, a nuclear scientist, and Antonio, a surgeon, suggest that a "North Korean" or "Syrian" scenario is not unthinkable. What can be said with some certainty is that the regime, even without a Castro of some sort at the helm, can count at least in the short run on inertia, fear (both of the authorities and of the Miami community), and a sophisticated apparatus of repression to sustain it in power.

#### The United States and Cuba

Since Castro's accession to power, three main lines of U.S. policy have been pursued, sometimes simultaneously. The first (from 1959-60) was an attempt to overthrow the regime either by sponsoring an exile invasion in 1962 or covert action (assassination

of Fidel Castro). This period reached a crisis point with the emplacement of Soviet missiles on the island and ended with the so-called Kennedy-Khrushchev accords, whereby Washington pledged not to invade the island. This phase was followed by what might be called a policy of active containment through a diplomatic and trade embargo and also an open-door for those Cubans desirous of emigrating to the United States. The embargo reached its most acute point in 1995 when a Republican-controlled Congress passed the Helms-Burton law, which in effect codifies it in law and raises the bar to normalization by setting down a series of stringent conditions.<sup>1</sup> At almost the same time, the Clinton administration reached an agreement with the Cuban government (1994) under which Washington agreed to accept a floor of 20,000 unhappy Cubans each year, in exchange for which Havana promised to inhibit and discourage the massive and uncontrolled emigration of refugees. The latest phase, begun in 2004, assumes that the United States will play a key role in any transition to democracy in Cuba, even establishing a budget and a list of domestic priorities for the island. These concepts are embodied in a special report issued on the eve of the U.S. presidential elections; a “coordinator” has even been named with a staff to prepare the way for the expected change on the island. This latest episode has drawn criticism not merely from the Cuban government or its sympathizers abroad but also from prominent dissidents who resent the idea that a foreign power should decide how to arrange their country’s constitutional and economic future.

During the Cold War there was a serious strategic logic to U.S. policy. Castro trained guerrillas to subvert neighboring countries and engaged in military expeditions far from home, which in effect carried water for the Soviet empire. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, U.S. policy has been bent on achieving ideological coherence between the emerging democratic trends in other Latin American countries. Whether a democratic Cuba is such an urgent matter for the United States, even if readily achievable, is at least a subject worthy of discussion, particularly if it can only be achieved at the cost of chaos and disorder. Behind the current policy lies a well-organized, well-funded and strategically located Cuban-American community in Florida and New Jersey with a deep political reach into both political parties in the United States. The goals of this community are rather more diverse than many Europeans imagine; some genuinely desire to see a more decent form of government emerge on the island, particularly those who still have relatives living there; others wish to recover either property or the lives they left behind; still others wish to exact revenge for the humiliations (and more often than many Europeans suspect) the physical torture or family separations they have been forced to endure. The extent to which a genuine concern for human rights activates this community is unfairly caricatured in the media, particularly the Latin American and European media. On the other hand, the intemperate revanchist pronouncements of some leaders (broadcast on Miami radio which is easily picked up on the island) is plainly frightening to many Cubans and provides gratuitous support for the regime. Paradoxically, so does U.S. migration policy, which takes potential dissidents off Castro’s hands and makes it easier to siphon off potential leadership from what might otherwise be an alternative political community.

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<sup>1</sup> Among other things it specifically names both Fidel and Raúl Castro as leaders with whom the U.S. will have nothing to do.

In considering the Cuban Commission charged with mapping out the island's future down to the last screw and nail, it is worth bearing in mind that this would not be the first time the United States has attempted to refashion the island according to its own lights. The first republic (1901-1933) proved remarkably resistant to U.S. suggestions as to how to manage its economy and politics, in a series of frustrating episodes which played a significant role in promoting President Franklin D. Roosevelt's adoption of non-intervention in 1934. It became clear a generation later that President Fulgencio Batista had alienated vast sectors of the Cuban political community in Washington who had proved incapable of persuading him to step aside in a timely manner, or to save his regime when it entered into terminal crisis. The Cuban revolution, conceived as a democratic movement, was hastily supported by the U.S. government and public, but when it revealed itself to have more sinister designs, both on the island and on the Caribbean basin and beyond, Washington proved incapable of bringing it down. Nearly a half-century of embargoes and diplomatic efforts have proven equally fruitless. The existing regime now represents virtually half the country's independent history. Cubans cannot conceive of any other form of government and indeed may never have another, which is certainly nothing to celebrate.

#### The European Alternative

Since the end of the Cold War, if not before, many European countries and Canada have resented and actively resisted U. S. policies towards the island. Many strands go to make up this policy fabric. Castro's announced goals of socialist humanism, while grossly violated in practice, strike a resonant chord among many left of center political and cultural forces in Europe. The Cuban dictator is in an excellent position to harvest political support and sympathy from his (often pathological) anti-Americanism, which has lately reached new extremes in Spain, France, Italy, Germany and even the United Kingdom. Since the end of the Cold War he has been able to emphasize his country's small size and vulnerability, arousing sympathy among others who resent the U.S.'s status as the only superpower. Finally, some conscientious democrats in Europe have raised serious questions about whether U. S. policy can lead to where Washington claims to want to go. Particularly since the 1990s when Cuba opened itself to limited foreign investment (joint ventures) many European countries have seized on the opportunity to establish a presence on the island, from Spanish hotel chains to Canadian pharmaceutical companies to Israeli citrus producers. Many have argued that the fastest way to achieve a political opening in the country is to expose it to modern business methods and the people-to-people experience provided by tourism. While such activities have doubtless helped to stave off the worst consequences of the Soviet collapse, they have neither replaced the annual \$6 billion subsidy formerly provided to Castro by Moscow, nor have they advanced political or labor rights. Quite the contrary: they collaborate with a labor regime which essentially expropriates all but a small portion of the worker's income for the regime's own purposes and finance at least indirectly a strongly authoritarian political structure. The best thing that can be said about the European approach to Cuba is that if its purpose is to promote change on the island it is neither better nor worse than that of the United States.

## Is a European-American Understanding Possible?

The ideal European policy from Washington's point of view would be adoption of its own. So far the only country to fulfill this dream has been the Czech Republic, which for reasons of its own has chosen to step forward in support of dissident movements and to keep the human rights agenda on the European table. Meanwhile most European policymakers hope for a shift in U.S. policy that would put constructive engagement at the top of the agenda--in effect, to replicate its own approach. It seems extremely unlikely that the U.S. approach is likely to win any new converts in the foreseeable future, even in the event of a regime crisis in Cuba. As for the Europeans (and the Canadians), one may be permitted to doubt that they really resent the U.S. embargo as much as they claim to; Spain, for example, glories in its return to the island lost to the United States in 1898, and many foreign companies are prospering mightily in the absence of internationally-accepted labor standards or competition from the North American giant nearby.

Given all the items on the current conflicting U.S.-European agenda, one can also ask whether Cuba is of sufficient economic and geopolitical interest to engage much attention or interest. While Castro and his revolution cast a huge cultural shadow far out of proportion to their actual importance, the island itself has come to resemble Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and St. Vincent and the Grenadines, a speck on the political map, which survives on tourism, remittances, and very limited foreign investment. It is possible, and of course desirable, for Cuba to evolve into something more and better. To the extent that Cubans themselves chose a different path for their country it would be possible for the U.S. and the European Community to find a convergence of policies. As things stand now, the U.S.-European debate is a dialogue of the deaf, and probably also one which is largely irrelevant to the country which forms the subject of discussion.

The one area where the U.S. can claim some primacy is in the matter of geography. What happens in Cuba is bound to have minimal impact on the European Community. But if the Cuban regime collapses or the country descends into civil war, the United States is bound to be affected. This is so not only because of the presence of the Cuban community in Miami but also because generations of Cubans on the island are used to thinking of the U.S. mainland as a kind of redoubt of last resort. But recognition of this fact does not point in any particular policy direction; one might just as easily suggest that in the interests of U.S. border security it might be better to have a tightly-run military dictatorship in place as a (perhaps unattainable) bourgeois democracy or worse still, chaos. In any event, the United States cannot hope to wake up one morning to find that something like Uruguay, Chile or Costa Rica has suddenly blossomed on Cuban shores. That much said, to the extent that the European Community chooses to play a role in Cuba's future, it would gain considerably greater leverage over Washington if its own purposes and goals were more transparent and its support for genuinely democratic and dissident movements on the island were more obvious and more determined.