



Engaging Cuba

by Susanne Gratius

For the third time since the re-establishment of diplomatic relations in 1988, the EU and Cuba are set to begin negotiations on a Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement. As HR/VP Catherine Ashton cautiously underlined, “this is not a policy change from the past” but part of the long stop-and-go process of rapprochement between Cuba and the EU. Two previous negotiation attempts – started in 1995 and 2000 respectively – were frozen because of the human rights situation on the island. But this time it could be different.

New drivers

First, unlike in the past, Cuba’s international reintegration is now backed by rising powers Brazil and Mexico, both strategic partners of the EU. This ‘Latin American factor’ provides additional impetus for strengthening European engagement and could even motivate a policy change in Washington. Fully accepted and recognised in its neighbourhood, Cuba recently hosted the second Summit of the Latin American and Caribbean Community (CELAC) – the EU’s main regional political partner in the region. The meeting in Havana demonstrated first and foremost the distance between Latin America and the United States, which is yet to alter its outdated policy towards Cuba. While the EU is once again trying to engage through political dialogue and cooperation, Washington has, for the moment, preferred to keep sanctions in place and ignore domestic calls for change. A recent poll

conducted by the Atlantic Council revealed that 56% of US citizens are in favour of ending the embargo, while nearly 60% consider the current travel restrictions to be inefficient and counter-productive. The demand of Republican Senator Jeff Flake to “end the Cold War in our own hemisphere” is also backed by a majority in the Cuban ‘enclave’ in Florida.

Second, Cuba has embarked on a reform and modernisation process – albeit an extraordinarily cautious one. Since Raúl Castro assumed the presidency of the island nation eight years ago, his legitimacy increasingly rests on the ability to guarantee efficiency and economic progress. His government approved – following the 2011 Cuban Communist Party Congress – a reform, adjustment and modernisation programme and a migration law that allows even dissidents to travel without special permit. Following the death of a dissident on hunger strike, the number of political prisoners has been reduced to between 80-100 people. In addition, dissident Guillermo Fariñas and the ‘Ladies in White’ – relatives of political prisoners – were allowed to travel abroad in order to collect the Sakharov Prize at the European Parliament, awarded to them for their work in promoting the freedom of thought in Cuba. The other side of the coin, however, is that human rights abuses continue, that the regime has been militarised, and that there still is no alternative to the one-party system. This being said, ‘Raulism’ is considerably softer than ‘Fidelism’ – and its political longevity much more uncertain.

Third, there are signs of change in the current US position, providing evidence that Washington is no longer opposed to the EU's full engagement. Gone are the days of hard-line policies, including political pressure on Brussels by a 'Cuba transition coordinator' appointed by George W. Bush (who also promoted a 'blueprint' for a democratic Cuba). The difficult negotiations witnessed between the EU and the Clinton Administration following the approval of the Helms-Burton Act are also a thing of the past. Introduced in response to a new wave of repression unleashed against dissidents, the Act reinforced the US embargo and led to the creation of the EU's Common Position on Cuba, approved in 1996 to strengthen democratic conditionality and avoid the placing of sanctions on European companies by Washington.

Today both documents, the Common Position and the Helms-Burton Act, appear somewhat obsolete. Obama's position is quite pragmatic and, like the Union's, more open to Latin American calls to engage with Cuba. Under President Obama, the special clause impeding Cuba's reintegration into the Organisation of American States (OAS) was repealed. Other positive measures have included the return to encouraging people-to-people contacts and the restoration of bilateral talks on migration. And further steps might follow.

A fourth reason for optimism is due to the institutional changes within the EU. Its policy towards Cuba is no longer shaped by its member states – particularly Spain as Cuba's principal European partner, or those who opposed Madrid's posture – but coordinated by foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, who will lead the future negotiations with Havana. The HR/VP has pushed for change in EU policy and successfully managed to reach an agreement on further engagement despite the initial opposition of some EU member states. Beginning in 2012 when the EU Council decided to pave the way for exploring new guidelines for negotiating with Cuba, this process has been long and arduous.

The pros and the cons

Although no decision has been taken yet, the EU now has the opportunity to test whether full engagement is more effective than conditional engagement. Much depends on Cuba. The government in Havana has reacted cautiously to the European offer, and the vice minister of foreign affairs has stressed the usual conditions of 'non-interference in internal affairs, mutual respect and the supremacy of national sovereignty'. Yet both sides stand to benefit from a mutual agreement.

For Cuba, a Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement with Brussels would guarantee a long-standing and more stable relationship with the EU. Depending on the financial commitments made, better relations with its main donor and second-largest trading partner could also be a much-needed boon for the ailing Cuban economy. As a side effect, an agreement with the EU would create a certain counter-balance to the risky business transactions with Cuba's unpredictable ally and most important economic partner, namely Venezuela. In political terms, it would be another 'victory' on the path towards the international recognition of the regime and send an important message to the United States that engagement with Havana is possible.

For the EU, a new Cooperation Agreement entails some internal points of contention. Not all member states favour full (and unconditional) engagement with Havana. Moreover, the European Parliament supports Cuban activists who opposed the regime, and most dissidents are critical of any possible deal between Raúl Castro and the EU. This is the reason why human rights will rank high on the EU's negotiation agenda, while Havana will downplay the issue and insist on the elimination of the Common Position. The outcome of these negotiations is still wide open: the usual 'zero-sum-game' of stagnation, or the signature of the long-awaited agreement. On both sides, the political gains of reaching an agreement would be bigger than the economic benefits, given that Cuba already entertains diplomatic, cooperation and economic relations with the EU.

Against this background, an agreement with Cuba would not constitute a radical change of EU policy but a consequent step within the broader framework of engagement. The recent poll by the Atlantic Council provides an indicator that public opinion in the United States is moving in the same direction. Whether policy will also follow is difficult to predict, but the 18 years since the adoption of the EU's Common Position and passing of the Helms-Burton Act have demonstrated that these strategies are largely failing to bring the desired political change to Cuba. In the end, after decades of divergence, Brussels and Washington might yet agree that sanctions and rigid conditionality can be counter-productive in attempts to promote democracy and human rights in authoritarian regimes. A different approach might be worth trying.

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