



Reversing Obama's Cuba Policy?*

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In the two years after President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raúl Castro agreed to normalize relations, Obama tried to make his policy of engagement “irreversible” by opening up travel and trade that would create constituencies with a self-interest in defending engagement. He half-way succeeded. Despite the incendiary rhetoric in which Donald Trump cloaked his new policy when he rolled it out at a rally of Cuban-American hardliners in Miami, the sanctions he announced were limited.

- Obama granted general licenses for all 12 categories of legal travel and relaxed other restrictions on who could visit Cuba. Trump rolled back only individualized people-to-people educational

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travel, so people-to-people visitors must once again travel on organized tours. But they can still go, and bring back rum and cigars.

- Obama opened the Cuban market to U.S. businesses by licensing contracts with state enterprises in the travel, telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, construction, agriculture, and consumer goods sectors. Trump prohibited only contracts with Cuban enterprises managed by the military, and even then he exempted all existing contracts, and future contracts involving ports, airports, and telecomm – the sectors in which all but a handful of current U.S. businesses operate.
- Trump did not impose any restrictions on Cuban–American family travel and remittances. He did not break diplomatic relations or put Cuba back on the State Department's terrorism list. He did not restore the wet foot/dry foot policy that gave Cuban immigrants preferential treatment after reaching the United States. He did not abrogate the bilateral agreements on issues of mutual interest negotiated by the Obama administration.

Why such a flaccid set of sanctions from a president who stood on the stage in Little Havana and demonized the Cuban regime as brutal, criminal, depraved, oppressive, murderous, and guilty of “supporting human trafficking, forced labor, and exploitation all around the globe”?

- Because Obama's strategy of creating constituencies in favor of engagement worked. In the weeks leading up to Trump's announcement, he was deluged with appeals not to retreat from engagement. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce argued in favor of expanding business opportunities, not constricting them. Farmers argued for expanding agricultural sales. Travel providers argued for expanding travel. Fifty-five U.S. Senators cosponsored a bill to lift all travel restrictions. Seven Republican members of Congress and 16 retired senior military officers argued that disengagement would damage national security by boosting Russian and Chinese influence on the island. Polling data showed that large majorities of the public, of Republicans, and even of Cuban Americans support engagement.

- Even the executive bureaucracy was won over by the successes scored by the policy of engagement. During the last two years of Obama's presidency, Cuba and the United States signed 23 bilateral agreements. When Trump ordered an inter-agency review of Cuba policy, the consensus of the agencies involved was that engagement was working and ought to be continued. Trump rejected that conclusion because it did not fit with his political strategy of currying favor with the Cuban-American right, but the agencies fought back successfully against more extreme proposals to roll back Obama's policies entirely.

Trump's vicious rhetoric and his open embrace of the goal of regime change –through sanctions, support for dissidents, and “democracy promotion”– risks destroying the atmosphere of mutual respect and good faith that made the gains of Obama's policy possible. Already, hardliners in Havana who saw engagement as a Trojan Horse for subversion are saying, “We told you so!” Cuba's private entrepreneurs, who Trump's policy purportedly aims to help, will be hurt the most by the prohibition on individual people-to-people travel. However, the overall economic impact of his sanctions will be limited, both on U.S. businesses and in Cuba.

- Cuba's official response has been pragmatic but firm. A statement released shortly after Trump's Miami speech declared, “The Government of Cuba reiterates its willingness to continue respectful dialogue and cooperation on issues of mutual interest, as well as the negotiation of pending bilateral issues with the United States Government.... But it should not be expected that Cuba will make concessions inherent to its sovereignty and independence, nor will it accept any kind of conditionality.”

In all likelihood, political pressures from the constituencies Obama's policy created will continue to constrain Trump's impulse to beat up on Cuba, but his loyalty to the exile right and his penchant for bullying will make it impossible to realize further progress toward normalizing relations. That will have to wait until the White House has a new occupant motivated by the national interest rather than by a political IOU given to Miami's most recalcitrant Cuban-American minority.

