



Cuba: Trump's “New Policy”*

Ricardo Torres

The “new policy” toward Cuba that President Trump announced to great fanfare in Miami last Friday features little that is new while seeking to restore oxygen to a failed approach advocated by extreme sectors of the Cuban-American community. While adopting language reflecting the worst traditions of American foreign policy, Trump’s declaration implicitly blessed much of the rapprochement between the two countries introduced by President Obama – diplomatic relations will remain intact, for example. But the new measures he announced have symbolic and practical implications. His Cuban-American backers expended great political capital to change the policy in hope of accelerating regime change on the island, but the Trump approach will instead retard change – while increasing the pain of the Cuban

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people. Moreover, it will undermine the activities of legitimate U.S. citizens, companies, and groups interested in contact with the island and compromise U.S. citizens' freedom to travel. They have acted against Trump's campaign promise to create jobs (threatening thousands of workers who depend on U.S.-Cuba interaction) and increased national security (putting U.S.-Cuba cooperation in counternarcotics, counterterrorism, and illegal migration at risk). The new approach also runs counter to Secretary of State Tillerson's repeated assertion that U.S. policy is not to impose its values and standards on others.

- U.S. national interests seem to have taken a back seat to internal U.S. political factors, particularly the opposition to Obama's policies among certain groups of the Cuban Americans that had seen their political influence decline over the past decade.

In addition to its symbolic weight, the Trump approach is likely to be felt most strongly in several principal areas. Despite continuing differences between the two countries, both governments had decided to move ahead together. It is difficult to overstate the sense of hope created during the Obama era, with immediate and tangible benefits for both.

- Cuba's internal situation has been changing recently, due to a gradual opening internally and to other nations. A steady increase in visits by foreign businessmen and Cuban travel overseas are evidence of this change. Trump's rhetoric and actions will only strengthen those sectors inside Cuba that exaggerate the external threat and want to reduce the space for debate in the country.
- The economic impact that Trump and his backers want – to hurt the Cuban government – cannot be separated from the harm it will cause the Cuban people. The new measures will probably reduce tourism, which provides a significant flow of revenue to vast sectors of the Cuban population that, in formal or informal jobs, benefit from that industry. Indeed, the much bandied-about private sector has been one of the principal beneficiaries of tourism development.

The Cuban government will assess its options in relations with the United States as well as in domestic policies. It will naturally have to

let the U.S. government know that cooperation has yielded mutual benefits to both countries and that this step backward will not be limited to areas that Washington prefers. Havana might look for more ambitious ties with alternative partners, including both allies and competitors of the United States. Internally, rather than slow down, Cuba's transformation should accelerate. The legitimate needs of the Cuban people should not be postponed in the face of this new adversity. The pace of Cuban reform should never be tied to external threats. As for the Cuban people, they will once again tell all who will listen that they themselves – not those on the other side of the Florida Strait – represent their interests. President Trump has empowered a small group of Cuban Americans to speak for people in Cuba whom they do not know, at the cost of sacrificing U.S. prestige and an array of its national interests. The absurd has become the accepted norm in American politics.

