

POST-CASTRO

It's time to rethink the U.S. policy toward Cuba

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For 47 years Fidel Castro has ruled Cuba. For 44 years through 10 U.S. administrations, Washington has pursued a diplomatic and economic embargo of Cuba designed to force Castro from office. For at least 40 years, critics have argued that U.S. policy is a failure. While the 80-year-old Cuban dictator may return to power, his end is in sight -- and it is time to rethink our Cuba policy. What should U.S. policy be toward a post-Castro Cuba?

The operating assumption of U.S. policymakers and the Cuba-American community has been that when Castro dies the communist regime will fall to be replaced by democratic politics and a free-market economy, such as occurred in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s. This may happen -- although it is not likely to be a straightforward transition. But events surrounding Castro's recent surgery and temporary transfer of power to his brother Raúl suggest that the regime may make a peaceful transition to new leadership. This is clearly what they are planning for. Then what should U.S. policy be?

- **If Cuba were** any other country (think China, Vietnam, North Korea), the first consideration would be security. Does a Cuba governed by Raúl Castro or one of the younger senior Communist Party officials constitute a threat to U.S. security? Does it have weapons of mass destruction or support terrorists operating abroad?

If the answer is No, then the diplomatic and economic sanctions of the kind imposed against Cuba over the past four-plus decades would be difficult to justify. While it is the responsibility of U.S. officials to constantly monitor and reassess security threats, especially with unfriendly states -- and Cuba is no friend of the United States -- there is no credible case that Cuba is a threat to our national security.

- **A second consideration** is whether there are common interests. Given close geographic proximity, the United States and Cuba share a fragile marine

environment with major shipping lanes and recently discovered deep-sea petroleum deposits. Both countries also must cope with the same natural disasters. Then there is human traffic across the Straits of Florida. These are all challenges that could be better managed through closer government-to-government contact and coordination.

- **Economic gains** are a third consideration. Cuba could be an important market for U.S. exports and destination for U.S. private investment. The embargo has put Cuba beyond the reach of U.S. companies (and U.S. tourists) while European, Canadian, Latin American and Asian businesses trade and invest in the island's slowly recovering economy.

- **This suggests a fourth criterion:** Does our policy have the support of other countries, especially of our allies? The answer is a resounding No. Every year the U.N. General Assembly overwhelmingly passes a motion condemning the U.S. embargo on Cuba, and Washington typically can count on fewer than a handful of votes supporting the embargo. Designed to isolate Castro, U.S. policy has isolated Washington and opened the door for the rest of the world to conduct economic relations with Cuba.

- **A final consideration** is the nature of the regime. Is it freely and popularly elected? Does it respect human rights? Building democracy is a legitimate foreign policy goal, but one, as we are painfully learning in the Middle East, not easy for a foreign power to accomplish.

Cuba is a dictatorship and, if the communist regime survives Castro's death, it will remain a dictatorship. But Washington conducts normal diplomatic and trade relations with countries throughout the world (China, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia) that do not have democratically elected governments that protect the human rights of their citizens. We justify these bilateral relationships in terms of providing the economic foundation for the gradual emergence of democracy. With Cuba we deny the possibility of a Chinese-like path to market socialism (reportedly favored by Raúl Castro) that would trigger the forces of political liberalization.

Fidel Castro's death may provoke the fall of communism in Cuba. That is our desired outcome, although it will create its own policy challenges. However, if the regime survives -- which appears more likely now than it did 10 years ago before the embargo was tightened -- Washington is going to have some choices.

Should the United States continue to pursue the failed policies of the last 44 years, or should it take advantage of Castro's passing from the scene to deal with Cuba the way we deal with other countries, through a more nuanced policy that serves a broader array of legitimate national interests?

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