

# Raúl Castro hints at readiness for dialogue with Washington

## Raúl Castro hinted that Cuba is open to normal relations with the United States, under certain conditions.

The Miami Herald  
Aug. 19, 2006

In his first public comments as Cuba's acting president, Raúl Castro hinted Friday that he is ready for dialogue with Washington. His words were typical Havana rhetoric, but they bolstered speculation nevertheless about a post-Fidel turn to pragmatism.

"The thrust is very largely on relations with the United States," said Brian Latell, a former top CIA analyst and Raúl biographer. "It's very firm, but at the same time it's highly nuanced. This may be the beginning of Raúl asserting his own distinct form of authority."

Others discounted the words as a message for dialogue. "It's the same dance to an old song," prominent Cuban dissident Vladimiro Roca said by telephone from Havana.

Raúl Castro's statements, disclosed during an interview published in the Communist Party's Granma newspaper, also focused on defensive-military readiness, issues that some Cuba watchers took as a stern warning to the island's 11 million people not to cause trouble.

But his reference to dialogue with Washington raised eyebrows in Cuba and abroad because of longtime speculation that when the younger Castro assumed power he would reach out to the United States to protect his foreign flank while securing domestic control.

"We have always been disposed to normalize relations on an equal plane," Raúl Castro said in the lengthy interview. ". . . This would be possible only when the United States decides to negotiate with seriousness and is willing to treat us with a spirit of equality, reciprocity and the fullest mutual respect."

In Washington, the State Department referred to Raúl Castro as "Fidel's baby brother," and said the Bush administration was not impressed by his remarks.

"What we want to see is a transition from the current dictatorship to a democratic government," spokesman Tom Casey said. "And we certainly don't think that a transition from Fidel to Raúl Castro fits that bill."

Expressions of a desire for talks with the United States if Washington respects Havana have long been part of the official government line. But Raúl Castro's use of them in his first public statements since he was handed power on July 31 gave them added importance. Just before his 80th birthday, Fidel Castro ceded power to Raúl following surgery for an undisclosed illness.

"It's precisely the timing that's interesting," said William LeoGrande, a Cuba expert at American University in Washington. "It's the first major public statement and he's criticizing the U.S. . . . but at the same time, he's saying, 'nevertheless, we're willing to have dialogue.'"

Those who have tried to negotiate with the Cuban government in the past said Washington should view Castro's words "as a positive statement" that should be acted upon, said Robert Pastor, an advisor to former President Jimmy Carter.

"The anti-Castro rhetoric by the U.S. and the anti-U.S. rhetoric by the Castro regime reflect 47 years of hostility," Pastor said. "The critical question on both sides is, 'Do they want to continue to posture or do they want to work together to define a framework that could permit a peaceful transition in Cuba and . . . move in a democratic direction?'"

Even some government opponents in Havana were intrigued by the reference to dialogue.

"It's a slight crack in the door," Oscar Espinosa Chepe, an economist and independent journalist, said in a telephone interview.

Others, however, dismissed the notion that Castro's words were an overture to reach out to Washington.

"He's not saying anything new, and the context is one of hostility. Raúl is not a reformist. He's a hardened, Stalinist military leader," said Jaime Suchlicki, director of the University of Miami's Institute for Cuban and Cuban-American Studies.

In the interview, prominently displayed on Granma's front page under the headline "Important statements by Raúl," the 75-year-old defense minister spent most of his time addressing what seemed to be his domestic audience -- his first priority as he takes over Fidel's authoritarian rule.

The nation's "combat capacity," Raúl Castro said, has been boosted with the mobilization of several tens of thousands of reservists and militia members and principal units of regular troops, including the Special Troops.

He said the increased security presence across the island was a necessary defense tactic.

"We could not rule out the risk of somebody going crazy, or even crazier, within the U.S. government," he said.

Although the increased security was couched as a way to guard against possible U.S. aggression, experts said it also was a message to the population to behave.

"He clearly was aware of either fears or expectations that things would be unruly during this time of uncertainty," said Susan Kaufman Purcell, director of UM's Center for Hemispheric Policy. "He's letting people know the military is mobilized."

Despite condemning U.S. policy on Cuba as "arrogant," he said:

"At this juncture, they should be very clear that it is not possible to achieve anything in Cuba with impositions and threats. On the contrary, we have always been disposed to normalize relations on an equal plane. . . ."

"That would have to be on the basis of the most unrestricted respect for our condition as a country that does not tolerate shadows on its independence, for whose dignity and sovereignty entire generations of Cubans have fought and sacrificed themselves," Raúl Castro added.

Purcell said the message was more likely aimed at U.S. opponents of Washington's economic embargo on Cuba.

Raúl Castro also responded to criticism that he had been out of public view since his brother fell ill by saying he will likely remain a behind-the-scenes leader.

"As a point of fact, I am not used to making frequent appearances in public, except at times when it is required," he said.

"I have always been discreet, that is my way, and in passing I will clarify that I am thinking of continuing in that way."