

## Too Little, Too Late for Cuba?

U.S. Opens Door for OAS Discussion on Post-Castro Era After Decades of Staunch Isolation

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WASHINGTON -- It has long been the great paradox of diplomacy in the Americas.

On paper, the Organization of American States -- the world's oldest multilateral political institution, whose 34 members are all democracies -- could have a profound impact on Cuba in the coming post-Castro era. All but two OAS member states have full diplomatic relations plus significant trade and cultural ties with the island -- the kind of multilayered and complex links that bind people to a shared future.

Yet at the same time, the OAS has been powerless to do much when the subject of Cuba comes up. The OAS is dependent on unanimous agreement for every decision.

*Unanimous.* This means that matters of consequence -- and hence of controversy -- frequently remain beyond its grasp. Essentially, the OAS has been unable to engage official Cuba even if doing so could mean advancing democracy.

For years, individuals within the OAS have tried to promote what might be called a more progressive engagement with Cuba's communist government, which was suspended from the OAS in 1962. One prominent attempt came in 1994 when Secretary-General Cesar Gaviria called for the OAS to end Cuba's isolation. "The doors must be opened to the airing of ideas," he said, "so that information will flow and so that the future will be debated in an impartial environment."

That effort was cut off at the knees when U.S. officials subtly but unequivocally demanded that Gaviria drop his call for a dialogue, which he did. Regardless of the wisdom of Gaviria's intentions, the OAS could not challenge a U.S. position that for more than four decades has favored isolation and sanctions over engagement with Cuba.

It was a bit of a surprise then to learn that the current OAS secretary-general, Jose Miguel Insulza, has been broaching the subject once again. Ever since Cuban leader Fidel Castro temporarily turned over power to his brother Raul before undergoing intestinal surgery, Insulza has been calling for the opening of dialogue with Cuba. In an interview, Insulza stressed that he is not seeking Cuba's return to the OAS, but rather a change in policy that recognizes that "we cannot wait until a transition (toward democracy) to maintain a minimum of conversation" between the organization and Cuba.

It was a bigger surprise that he wasn't cut off at the knees. In fact, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice seemed to be backing such efforts when she told OAS counterparts meeting last week in Panama that "the OAS must be ready to help the Cuban people." She added that "it is our responsibility as American democracies to help the Cuban people chart whatever course they freely desire."

Let's be clear: Rice is not directly supporting Insulza. As Thomas Shannon, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, clarified in an interview, "the secretary was not calling for the OAS to have a dialogue with Cuba now." All Rice is

saying, he added, is that the OAS "has to start by having its own dialogue" among its member states about Cuba.

Whether or not the OAS achieves unanimity and gets behind Insulza's efforts -- no small achievement indeed -- the critical question remains as to what the OAS can really do to "help the Cuban people." In other words, what resources will it marshal when change comes? Whose troops will serve as peacekeepers, if necessary? What top coordinator is ready to be dispatched to try and avert tragedy should a power grab be attempted by a Cuban American group, or perhaps by an OAS member such as Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez?

The OAS has a long experience in observing elections, in defending the human rights of some of the most unprotected people in the hemisphere, and in promoting cooperation in trade integration and fighting illegal drugs. Sadly, it is impossible to know now how any of that experience could be applied in Cuba. Because U.S. political considerations have undermined it at every turn, there has been very little discussion during this long, long preparation time over what the OAS can do or how it should proceed in Cuba.

An optimist might see the somewhat new U.S. position as a step forward. Washington is finally allowing the OAS members to talk among themselves about what they'll do to help the Cuban people. But if encouraging such conversation is all that is new, this is scant progress.

Meanwhile, the risk remains that the OAS will be stuck on the sidelines of one of the hemisphere's biggest coming developments.