



HAS CHINA CAUGHT THE US OFF-GUARD IN CUBA?

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Of the many unexpected decision that the U.S. President Barack Obama has made during his presidency, with or without the authorisation of Congress, his latest to normalise relations with Cuba is most surprisingⁱ. If one examines the history of the United States-Cuba relations closely, it can be ascertained that Washington has viewed Cuba, post the Cuban Revolution, as an enemy of the United States and a threat to its security. In fact, because of Cuba's closeness with USSR, Washington broke off diplomatic relations with it in 1961 and the same year launched an invasion to topple the communist regime of Cuba, but failed. The 1962 Cuban missile crisis made it fairly evident that the U.S. was paranoid about the threat to its security from Cuban territory. Things have changed significantly in the U.S. but have remained essentially the same in Cuba. Fidel and Raul Castro are still the undisputed leaders of Cuba. With this background, it would quite interesting to find out what has possibly caused the US mindset about Cuba to change all of a sudden, that it is now ready to restore full diplomatic relations. Is there a Chinese reason behind this? Is China trying to do with Cuba, what erstwhile USSR did during cold war and the US wants to avoid a similar situation?

Background

The U.S. policy for Latin America and Cuba has remained similar. Washington does not tolerate any foreign country, especially its competitor to have strong economic or security relations with them. It is worth noting that the U.S. had not permitted even its close ally Japan to extend financial services to the Latin American countries when Japan wanted to open a bank facility for them after the decade long Latin American debt crisis that began in 1982 with

Mexico. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) dominated and controlled by the U.S., is the main financier of the regionⁱⁱ. That is why many of them despite having significant reserves and economic potential, continue to remain poor. Post Cuban missile crisis, the U.S. pushed Cuba into isolation and did not allow the Cuban economy to grow. Although, Cuba cannot possibly be a serious threat to the U.S. with its limited capability, the relationship, nonetheless, has remained hostile.

China Using Communism

When Obama had announced the US pivot to Asia in November 2011, the idea was that the U.S. would try to keep China restricted to Asian region. However, China seems to be trying to do in Latin America and Cuba, what the U.S. is doing in Indo-Pacific region. Current Chinese President Xi Jinping had visited Cuba in 2011 and visited again in July 2014 as part of his Latin American charm offensive. During his meeting with XI Jinping, the Cuban leader Fidel Castro has called upon China to cooperate with Russia and lead a new world orderⁱⁱⁱ. Capitalising on their shared value of communism, China and Cuba have strengthened their economic ties and now both are looking to strengthen their security ties too. This is perhaps the first time when China is using its value of communism, like US uses democracy, to build ties with a fellow communist country. The cooperation and understanding between Cuban Communist Party (CCP) and Communist Party of China (CPC) is also being enhanced as was evident when a Cuban delegation visited Beijing for the first CCP-CPC theory seminar early this year^{iv}.

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China is already Cuba's second-largest trading partner after Venezuela and its primary source of credit, filling the gap left by the US economic embargo on Cuba and its long-time exclusion from institutions such as the World Bank^v. And understandably this has left many in the US policymaking worried. China's latest act of awarding Fidel Castro the controversial Confucius Peace Prize [also called China's Nobel] explains China's intentions^{vi}. Reportedly, China started giving out its own peace prize since 2010 after the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Chinese dissident Liu Xiaobo. However, the Chinese government has distanced itself from the award.

Why U.S. is restoring ties with Cuba?

On his decision to restore diplomatic ties with Cuba Obama stated that "These 50 years have shown that isolation has not worked, it's time for a new approach."^{vii} Question is what could be the outcome that the U.S. is trying to achieve. As stated earlier, the U.S. perception about its security is very different from other countries. Most of military activities of the United States are focussed on securing US interests around the globe. That is possible only because US does not face any significant threat to its security from its neighbouring countries. However, China's presence in Cuba could create new security problems for Washington. It could easily change the perception of security threat to America that has remained almost on the same line since the cold war. Cuba still maintains a very hostile attitude towards United States.

So for Washington it would make a lot more sense if it could take Cuba out of the equation from U.S.-China competition. Reports claim that secret negotiations between China and Cuba had been going on for past 18 months to normalise the relationship. This suggests that U.S. had been wary of the increasing Chinese economic investment in Cuba ever since Cuba opened its economy in 2008. It would be difficult for U.S. to sit idle and watch China make the most of the economic opportunities that Cuba has to offer. It would not be wrong to assume that the US showed interest in Cuba only after seeing increased Chinese activities. As part of the restoration of ties Obama aims to expand economic ties, open an embassy in Havana, send high-ranking U.S. officials including Secretary of State John Kerry to visit and review Cuba's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism^{viii}. The U.S. is easing restrictions on travel to Cuba for family visits, official

government business and educational activities. However, tourist travel would continue to remain banned.

However, the road towards normalisation is not as smooth as it appears. The Cuba embargo was passed by Congress, and only lawmakers can revoke it and that appears unlikely to happen soon given the largely negative response from Republicans who will take full control of Congress next month. If Republicans win the 2016 Presidential elections in US then it is quite likely that the decision made by Obama would be reviewed.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies CAPS)

ⁱ "As Havana Celebrates Historic Shift, Economic and Political Hopes Rise", *The New York Times*, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/18/world/as-havana-celebrates-historic-shift-economic-and-political-hopes-rise.html>, accessed on December 18, 2014.

ⁱⁱ Lilian A. Barria and Steven D. Roper, "Economic Transition in Latin American and Post-Communist Countries: A Comparison of Multilateral Development Banks", *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Summer 2004, pp. 619-638, available at <http://www.stevendroper.com/banks.pdf>, accessed on December 18, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ "President Xi Jinping meets Fidel Castro as Beijing aims to capitalise on Cuba ties", *South China Morning Post*, available at <http://www.scmp.com/news/world/article/1557423/president-xi-jinping-meets-fidel-castro-during-trip-cuba>, accessed on December 18, 2014.

^{iv} "Senior CPC official vows to enhance China-Cuba ties", *China Daily*, available at http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-09/11/content_18584425.htm, accessed on December 18, 2014.

^v Ibid.,

^{vi} "China awards Confucius peace prize to Cuba's Fidel Castro", *The Week*, available at <http://www.theweek.co.uk/world-news/61752/china-awards-confucius-peace-prize-to-cuba-s-fidel-castro>, accessed on December 18, 2014.

^{vii} "US, Cuba patch torn relations in historic accord", *Associated Press*, available at <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/7f7f6bba9d934897a07b09039fd25e38/ap-source-cuba-releases-us-prisoner-alan-gross>, accessed on December 18, 2014.

^{viii} Ibid.,