

RELATIONS BETWEEN CUBA AND THE UNITED STATES

Will you accept Raul Castro as a friend?



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What issues are upcoming between Cuba and the U.S.?

Summary: The embargo on trade with Cuba and Cuba's status in the O.A.S. are under discussion.

NOTE: Most of the statistics in this report come from the [U.S. Department of State's 2008 Background Report on Cuba](#) (dated August 2008) and the [CIA World Factbook entry for Cuba](#) (last updated 4/23/2009).

Two issues are upcoming in relations between Cuba and the U.S.: the trade embargo imposed by the U.S. in 1960 (with its related issues of restrictions on travel to Cuba and restrictions on money sent there), and Cuba's status in the Organization of American States. Both were raised in April at the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago. The O.A.S. will meet June 2-3, 2009.

By executive order, Obama has already relaxed restrictions on travel to Cuba by Cuban-Americans, and has increased the amount of money they can send to family members in Cuba. He has stated that before making further concessions, he hopes for reciprocal acts from Cuba: for example, the release of political prisoners and the reduction of the fees charged by the Cuban government for converting American dollars to Cuban currency. Discussion of the decades-long U.S. embargo of trade with Cuba seems likely. Since Congress must approve the lifting of the embargo, we can expect to see Obama attempting to build public support for such an action.

The other issue up for discussion is Cuba's status in the Organization of American States. The treaty establishing the O.A.S. was signed in 1948. Like NATO, the organization was conceived as a defensive alliance to prevent the spread of communism. In 1962, after Castro took power in Cuba, the

O.A.S. voted that Castro's Marxist-Leninist ideology made Cuba's goals incompatible with those of the O.A.S. The resolution stated that while the current government was in power, Cuba would retain its membership in the O.A.S. but would not be allowed representation or participation. This O.A.S. resolution has been challenged several times in the past decades, and Hugo Chavez of Venezuela has said he will raise it again at this year's O.A.S. meeting, June 2-3 in Honduras.

Let's put these two issues in perspective by asking: Why was the embargo originally imposed in 1960? Is the situation now essentially different? What are the principles that should be considered when analyzing this situation and choosing a course of action?

Fidel Castro's Rule, 1959-2008

Summary: Fidel Castro ruled as a totalitarian dictator for almost 50 years, and during the Cold War had close ties with the Soviet Union.

On January 1, 1959, Fidel Castro took power in Cuba, after ousting Fulgencio Batista, the American-supported dictator of Cuba. (There isn't much good to say about Batista, except that he was somewhat less destructive of individual liberties and the economy than Fidel.) Fidel set out to nationalize all businesses, including those owned by Americans. Furthermore, at a time when the Cold War was heating up and the Soviets were

developing ever more sophisticated weapons, Fidel became a devoted comrade of the Soviets. Many other nations worldwide did the same, but Cuba was a mere 90 miles off the coast of Florida: the perfect launch site for a naval invasion or for missile bases, and hence an immediate and dire threat to American security.

In October 1960, the U.S. imposed an embargo on exports to Cuba. It also imposed severe restrictions on travel to the island and on the amount of money (“remittances”) that could be sent by the many Cubans who had settled in the U.S. to their families in Cuba. The U.S. broke diplomatic relations with Cuba in early January 1961. President Eisenhower contemplated sending a CIA-trained force of Cuban exiles to overthrow Castro, but by the time he left office in mid-January 1961, he thought that the exiles were not well-prepared enough to be successful.

President Kennedy thought otherwise. In April 1961 he was just finishing his first 100 days in office, the darling of the media and much of the American public. He authorized an expedition of 1,400 exiles to the island, but tried to conceal U.S. involvement with it. The latest-model American fighter jets stayed in neutral air space while the exiles were strafed by Soviet-made jets and run down by Soviet-made tanks. The Cuban people did not rise up to support the exiles. Within three days, the expedition ran out of ammunition and its members were captured or killed near the Bay of Pigs, where they had first landed.

Eighteen months later, in October 1962, JFK confronted Castro and Soviet Premier Khrushchev. Soviet troops were helping Cubans construct missile silos capable of launching nuclear warheads that could easily reach Washington, D.C., or anywhere in the American South and Midwest. The president demanded that the missiles (which were in transit) not be landed and installed. After many tense days, Soviet Premier Khrushchev backed down. This confrontation is perhaps the closest the Cold War ever came to a Hot War.

From the 1960s through the 1980s, Cuban soldiers and advisors were the heavily subsidized fighting arm of Soviet-style Communism as it expanded in Africa, Asia and Latin America. As the Soviet Union collapsed in the late 1980s, Cuba lost billions of dollars in subsidies and fell into what was euphemistically called the “Special Period.” In an attempt to revive the economy, Fidel instituted some economic reforms regarding private ownership of farms and small businesses. These reforms were quickly phased out after 2000, when he gained the economic support of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela.

This action is worth noting because it’s a reminder that time has not mellowed Fidel: he has no inclination to allow capitalism a toehold in Cuba.

Raul Castro's Rule, 2008 to Present

Summary: Raul Castro operates on the same principles as Fidel.

Fidel isn't in day-to-day control of Cuba any more; his brother Raul is. What do we know about Raul?

In 2006, 80-year-old Fidel, who needed surgery, temporarily handed political power to Raul, a spring chicken at age 76. In February 2008, a few days after Fidel announced that he would not run again for president of Cuba, Raul was unanimously elected president by the National Assembly (the Cuban equivalent of Congress). Raul now controls the military and the state security services, and is the Second Secretary of the Communist Party in Cuba.

Fidel, however, is still very much alive. He is First Secretary of the Communist Party and writes regularly for the official newspaper *Granma*, occasionally chastising Raul's actions. (See, for example, the [Wall Street Journal report of 4/23/09](#).) A substantial number of Cubans consider themselves not *socialistas* but *fidelistas*—faithful followers of the charismatic leader of the Revolution. Fidel's influence in Cuba remains very strong.

Raul fought alongside Fidel and Che Guevara during the Revolution. He was Fidel's enforcer, supervising the summary execution of dozens of Batista's supporters. In the decades that followed, he was a member of Fidel's government, albeit a rather quiet one. There is no evidence that he has ever disagreed with

Fidel's actions in principle, nor that he has any desire to change the aims and methods of the Communist Party in Cuba.

Let us now look at what Cuba and Raul Castro stand for, working from the broadest abstraction—their ideology—to its implications for individual rights, civil liberties, the economy, and foreign relations.

Cuban Ideology

Summary: Cuba's government today is explicitly socialist, as it has been for 50 years.

According to [Cuba's 1976 Constitution \(rev. 1992\)](#), Cuba is explicitly socialist: it is “guided by the ideas of José Martí and the political and social ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin” and has “the final objective of building a communist society” (Preamble). Further, “Cuba is an independent and sovereign socialist state of workers, organized with all and for the good of all as a united and democratic republic, for the enjoyment of political freedom, social justice, individual and collective well-being and human solidarity.” The Constitution states that “education is a function of the state and is free of charge” (Art. 39b) and that the state guarantees the right to free health care, including free dental care (Art. 50). Work is guaranteed (although not the career of one's choice), and those who cannot work are guaranteed enough to live on (Art. 45).

In a lengthy speech of 7/27/2008 entitled “[21st Century Socialism](#),” Raul Castro recounts the battles and advances of socialism. He talks the talk and walks the walk. There is no indication that he secretly desires major reforms, or that he would cheerfully give up his position as dictator.

According to Marx and Engels, socialism is a transitional stage between the horrors of capitalism and the bliss of communism—between the ownership of the means of production by a few private individuals, and the ownership of such means by the workers. In socialism the government owns the means of production, controlling and planning the economy to best serve the workers. In practice this means that there is no private property, and that every worker is employed by the state and is paid as the state decrees.

Ayn Rand, who grew up in Communist Russia, wrote:

When you consider socialism, do not fool yourself about its nature. Remember that there is no such dichotomy as “human rights” versus “property rights.” No human rights can exist without property rights. Since material goods are produced by the mind and effort of individual men, and are needed to sustain their lives, if the producer does not own the result of his effort, he does not own his life. To deny property rights means to turn men into property owned by the state. Whoever claims the “right” to “redistribute” the wealth produced by others is claiming the “right” to treat

human beings as chattel. (“The Monument Builders,”
Virtue of Selfishness 91)

How does the abstract idea of socialism play out in Cuba?

Individual Rights and Civil Liberties

Summary: Cuba is a repressive totalitarian dictatorship in which the rights of individuals are subordinated to the needs of the state.

Cubans have “the rights to assembly, demonstration and association” (Article 54), but “None of the freedoms which are recognized for citizens can be exercised contrary ... to the existence and objectives of the socialist state, or contrary to the decision of the Cuban people to build socialism and communism” (Art. 62).

Free speech and a free press are guaranteed, but only “in keeping with the objectives of a socialist society.” The press, radio, television, cinema “and other mass media” are “state or social property and can never be private property” (Art. 53). The Constitution allows freedom of artistic expression “as long as its content is not contrary to the Revolution” (Art. 39d).

Only recently have Cubans been allowed to own cell phones, but the cost of wireless service is several months’ salary (a typical worker makes \$17 per month), and must be paid in convertible

pesos, which can be acquired only by those who have U.S. dollars. Computer ownership was recently legalized, but access to the Internet is severely restricted with respect to who can gain access and what sites are available.

The Constitution “recognizes, respects and guarantees freedom of religion” (Art. 8), but religious groups that do not register with the state are subject to official harassment and repression. Assemblies of more than three (three!) people—for religious meetings or any other purpose—are illegal without government permission.

Movement within Cuba is restricted. Police routinely stop cars to interrogate passengers. Dissidents are often sent from urban centers back to their home towns for years, on grounds that they are “socially dangerous.” The penalty for attempting to flee the island illegally by boat or raft is several years in prison. The permissions required to leave the country legally cost about three years’ salary. Since much Cuban immigration was illegal, it’s difficult to get an accurate tally of how many fled Cuba. The ballpark figures seem to be over 100,000 from 1960 to 1979, and another 125,000 during the Mariel boatlifts of 1980.

According to the Constitution, Cuba has only one political party—the Communist Party—and it is “the highest leading force of society and of the state, which organizes and guides the common effort toward the goals of the construction of socialism and the progress toward a communist society.” In the elections for the National Assembly held in 2008, the Communist Party

won 98% of the vote. In the elections within the National Assembly for president, Raul won 100% of the vote. While membership in the Communist Party is not mandatory, it is required *de facto* for promotion or for holding any office.

The [U.S. State Department](#) estimates that there are some 200 political prisoners in Cuba and that another 5,000 people are or have been held on the vague charge of “dangerousness,” for which no proof is required. Police can detain without a warrant anyone accused of a crime against state security. Detainees can be held for years without a trial.

Two years of military service are required for both men and women. The current size of the armed forces is about 49,000, down from a peak of 235,000 in 1994, when Cuba was sending “advisors” to help Communist rebellions around the world. Since much of the Cuban army was funded by Soviet subsidies, the army’s shrinking size reflects financial considerations rather than a turn toward pacifism.

Economy

Summary: The Cuban economy cannot operate without substantial foreign subsidies, and it is deeply in debt.

The Cuban economy is socialist, and in accordance with the Constitution, it is directed and planned by the state (Art. 9a). The state owns the means of production and operates under the principle “from each according to his capacity, to each according to his work” (Art. 14). Except for a few small farms, private ownership is banned. Workers are allowed to join one and only one union, whose primary duty is to ensure that the state’s production quotas are met. The expropriation of private property is authorized “for reasons of public benefit or social interest and with due compensation,” but the compensation takes into account “the economic and social needs of the person whose property has been expropriated” (Art. 25): no wealthy capitalists need apply. Today the Cuban government says that 76% of the labor force works for the government, although the U.S. State Department estimates the total at more like 93%.

In the early 1990s, the Soviet Union collapsed and stopped subsidizing its satellites and allies. Cuba lost a significant portion of its revenue (an estimated \$4 to \$6 billion annually), and entered what the Castro brothers called the “Special Period.” From 1989 to 1993 the country’s GDP dropped by an estimated 35%. Raul Castro is sometimes credited with proposing to revive the moribund economy by action on the Chinese model: lifting

some restrictions on business, trade, and tourism while maintaining strict political control.

Then, in 2000, Venezuela's Hugo Chavez—an admirer of Cuba's socialist programs—signed an agreement by which Venezuela sent some 100,000 barrels of heavily subsidized oil to Cuba daily, in exchange for assorted goods and services. By 2001, the economic reforms of the “Special Period” were being revoked.

In 1986, Cuba defaulted on most of its international debt. It has not resumed payments, and therefore is ineligible for loans from institutions such as the World Bank. When the Republic of Cuba needs to borrow to purchase food, it must do it at short-term rates of up to 22%.

Cuba suffers dire shortages of basic goods. Raul Castro spent a substantial portion of his “[21st Century Socialism](#)” speech (7/26/2007) discussing in mundane, boring detail how milk could be more efficiently distributed. The Cuban government made [headlines](#) a few years back when it bought rice cookers to distribute to housewives. Buried in the text of the story was the fact that the rice cookers were distributed because of their low energy consumption. Demand for electricity was overloading Cuba's Soviet-era electrical system to the point where blackouts were common, even in Havana.

When there are shortages, Cuban leaders are wont to demand more sacrifices and order more controls as the economy worsens. In Raul's “[21st Century Socialism](#)” speech, he called for “organized work, control and dedication, day after day;

systematic rigor, order and discipline, from the national level down to the thousands of places where something is produced or a service is offered.”

As always, the inefficient state-controlled economy has spawned an “informal” economy where buyers and sellers exchange scarce goods at mutually agreeable prices. It has been estimated that 40% of Cuban economic activity is on the black market.

The Index of Economic Freedom (compiled by the Wall Street Journal and the Heritage Foundation) rates economic freedom based on such factors as tax rates, tariffs, property rights and government size. This year it ranked Cuba [177th out of 179 countries in economic freedom](#)—trailed only by Zimbabwe and North Korea.

Foreign Relations

Summary: Cuba’s friends are other totalitarian dictatorships and other communist or socialist nations. Raul Castro and the Cuban Constitution both condemn the United States.

One of the delights of Facebook is being able to check what friends you have in common before accepting a new friend. Who are Cuba’s friends, now that the Soviet Union is gone?

In a speech of 12/2/2006, Raul Castro referred to his “president and brother, Hugo Chavez,” the socialist dictator of Venezuela.

As mentioned above, Chavez signed an agreement with Fidel by which Venezuela provides Cuba with heavily subsidized oil in return for goods and services.

In a speech of 7/26/2007, Castro mentioned “our brothers in Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua, and our solid ties to China and Vietnam.” China recently invested \$500 million in Cuba. In the same speech, Raul mentioned the Movement of Non-Aligned Countries, whose past presidents include Tito of Yugoslavia, Mugabe of Zimbabwe, and Fidel Castro of Cuba. Other members of the Movement include North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Vietnam, Syria, and Sudan. (Am I the only one who thinks their logo of a globe surmounted by an olive branch looks like a grenade?)

On the State Department’s list of state sponsors of terrorism, right there beside Iran, Syria and Sudan, is Cuba. It maintains relations with several guerrilla and terrorist groups and provides refuge for some of their members.

How does Raul Castro feel about the U.S.? In a speech of 12/2/2006, he noted that “the U.S. government, in the opportunistic manner characteristic of them, have stepped up their hostility and aggressiveness against Cuba to an unprecedented high, in the hope of economically suffocating the country and overthrowing the revolution by intensifying their subversive acts.” He refers to “Washington’s multimillion-dollar campaigns of disinformation, the blackmail and brazen interference.” In a speech of 7/26/2007, he refers to “3,478 victims of terrorist acts directly organized, supported or allowed

to happen by the United States authorities,” and states that “There has been not one minute of truce in the face of the politics of the United States government, aimed at destroying the Revolution.” He describes the U.S. trade embargo as a “blockade” that “constitutes a relentless war against our people.” In a speech of 1/1/2009, he refers to the “unhealthy and vindictive hatred” of the U.S., and calls it “aggressive, treacherous and dominant.” In short, his attitude has not changed over the past few years, and indeed, one would not expect it to, given that the Cuban Constitution refers explicitly to “Yankee imperialism” (Preamble).

What points is Raul Castro willing to negotiate about? Back on [12/2/2006 Raul Castro publicly stated](#), “We take this opportunity to once again state that we are willing to resolve at the negotiating table the longstanding dispute between the United States and Cuba, of course, provided they accept, as we have previously said, our condition as a country that will not tolerate any blemishes on its independence, and as long as said resolution is based on the principles of equality, reciprocity, non-interference and mutual respect.”

That means: “We’ll accept your money and goods, but do not make any demands in return.”

Philosophical principles

Summary: Cuba should be treated as an enemy because it has consistently and for decades espoused principles that are opposed to those of the United States, and has repeatedly threatened U.S. citizens and expropriated their property.

When Hugo Chavez of Venezuela harangued President Obama about the Bay of Pigs, Obama replied that he was only three months old at the time. In a press conference 4/19/2009, Obama said that he wanted Cubans to see that “we’re not dug in into policies that were formulated before I was born.” But as Santayana said, “Those who do not learn from history are condemned to repeat it,” and there are several important lessons to be learned from Cuban-American relations.

The first question to ask is: What is proper U.S. foreign policy with respect to *any* nation? In *The Foreign Policy of Self-Interest: A Moral Ideal for America*, Peter Schwartz stated the principle of a proper foreign policy:

In her system of ethics, Ayn Rand presented not only a validation of self-interest as man’s moral purpose, but also an analysis of what man’s self-interest entails. She demonstrated that one’s self-interest is achieved, not by “instinct” or by whim, but by acting in accord with the factual requirements of man’s life, which means: by living as a rational being. Since the concept of self-interest pertains fundamentally to the individual, the idea of a

nations' self-interest refers only to the political precondition of a person's living rationally in a social setting, which means: freedom. Without freedom, man cannot pursue the values his life demands. Just as in ethics it is maintaining his own life that should be the individual's ultimate purpose, in politics it is maintaining its own citizens' liberty that should be the government's ultimate purpose. ... Freedom is the end to which all other political actions are the means. (p. 13-14)

Lenin (d. 1924), the first dictator of Soviet Russia, stated that "The capitalists will sell us the rope with which we will hang them." The U.S. does indeed have a very bad record of trading with our sworn enemies: all too often, we have bartered long-term security for the sake of short-term trade. We sold food to Soviets, who then used their meager income to build weapons. We trained and armed Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan, who defeated the Soviets and then turned their training and weapons on the country they had always called the "Great Satan."

Schwartz describes the proper course of action toward nations that do not value freedom, and that threaten the freedom of Americans:

"Engagement" with our enemies does not make them into friends; it only makes them into stronger enemies. It provides them with the moral sanction they do not deserve and with the material support they could not have

generated themselves. “Engagement” with the Soviets sustained them for over half a century; engagement with North Korea has enabled it now to brandish nuclear weapons against us.

The appropriate foreign policy toward such nations is the opposite of engagement: *ostracism*. Let these nations stand—or, more accurately, fall—on their own. We should stop sanctioning our own destroyers. We should stop helping them pretend they are moral, civilized nations. If they threaten us, the only message they merit is the same one that any domestic criminal ought to receive from the police: drop your weapons or you will be overwhelmed by force. (*ibid.*, p. 59)

The primary goal of American foreign policy should be to protect the lives, liberty, and property of American citizens. This takes precedence over trade, because one must be alive and free in order to trade. When we trade with Cuba, we fill the coffers of a recognized state sponsor of terrorism. It is likely that American dollars sent there as remittances or as payment for goods will work their way into terrorist pockets, with the approval of the Cuban government. In fact, given their hatred of the U.S. and all it stands for, there is no reason Cuba would not purchase nuclear missiles from North Korea or Iran and aim them at the U.S., as the Soviets tried to do in 1962.

We have an embargo on trade with Cuba not only because they have an ideology diametrically opposed to ours: we disagree with

many countries with whom we don't have trade embargoes. We have an embargo with Cuba because the present government thinks the U.S. is evil, and because Cuba is (yes, even after 50 years!) still a mere 90 miles away, and hence close enough to pose a serious danger for attacks by missiles or by naval forces. It would be extraordinarily short-sighted to help pay for the weapons with which our enemies can destroy us.

Why would Cuba consider closer relations with the U.S.?

Summary: Improved relations with the U.S. would give Cuba more hard currency and the prestige of having "forced" the U.S. to back off a long-standing policy.

Socialist policies lead to weak economies. Increased trade with the U.S. would bring Cuba much-needed hard currency. Easing the restrictions on remittances would have the same effect, except that the Cuban government would not need to produce any goods in exchange. Remittances are estimated at \$600 million to \$1 billion per year, even though President Bush reduced the maximum permissible amount from \$3,000 to \$300. The government takes 10% of the remittance amount when converting it to pesos. If the dollars are spent in "dollar stores," the prices of goods are often at least doubled. Again, the extra money goes to the government.

On a moral level, getting concessions from the United States would give Cuba the chance to boast of having made the United

States back off. The Castro brothers are certain to put this spin on any rapprochement between the U.S. and Cuba. If Cuba is reinstated as a full participant in the Organization of American States, the same spin will be applied.

Why Cuba will probably not improve relations with the U.S. too much

Summary: Efficient dictators always make sure they have an enemy to distract their subjects.

Having said all this, I don't think Cuba under the Castros will ever normalize relations with the U.S. For dictators such as Hitler, Stalin, and Fidel, there is an advantage to having their subjects paranoid about foreigners. The foreigners serve as the focus of hatred and fear, distracting the dictator's subjects from the causes and effects of unbearable conditions at home. If the subjects had too much time to think about their situation, they might just decide to rebel against the dictator.

Statism—in fact and in principle—is nothing more than gang rule. A dictatorship is a gang devoted to looting the effort of the productive citizens of its own country. When a statist ruler exhausts his own country's economy, he attacks his neighbors. It is his only means of postponing internal collapse and prolonging his rule. A country that violates the rights of its own citizens, will not respect the rights of its neighbors. Those who do not recognize

individual rights, will not recognize the rights of nations: a nation is only a number of individuals.

Statism *needs* war; a free country does not. (Ayn Rand, “The Roots of War”)

To the Castro brothers, the United States has been a godsend: an enemy who is nearby, powerful, and yet exceptionally unlikely to invade the country, unless it suffers a massive attack first. Fidel and Raul Castro may try to get more money via trade or aid, but they will never welcome the U.S. as a friend.

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