

ACADEMIC ARTICLES

CUBA IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE: WHAT HAS CHANGED?

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Abstract

On 17 December 2014, the presidents of Cuba and the US, Raúl Castro and Barack Obama, announced simultaneously to the world the decision of an exchange of prisoners releasing the three Cuban intelligence operatives still in jail in American prisons – Gerardo Hernández, Ramón Labañino and Antonio Guerrero – and the subcontractor Alan Gross, imprisoned in the island. Together with Gross, a CIA agent of Cuban origin was also released, and an agreement was reached to set free certain opponents of the Cuban government. The unexpected news was the decision to re-establish the bilateral diplomatic relations broken for more than 50 years. This article places the re-establishment of full diplomatic relations between Cuba and the US in the context of changing political relations in the Western Hemisphere culminating in Cuba's historic participation in the seventh Summit of the Americas in Panama in April 2015. The authors argue that growing independent-minded thinking of key Latin American countries and their progressive leaders was a key factor in explaining Obama's overture to Cuba in the absence of any fundamental concessions from the Cuban side.

Keywords: Seventh Summit of the Americas, Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of America (ALBA-TCP), Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

Introduction

On 17 December 2014, the presidents of Cuba and the US, Raúl Castro and Barack Obama, announced simultaneously to the world the decision of an exchange of prisoners releasing the three Cuban intelligence operatives still in jail in American prisons – Gerardo Hernández, Ramón Labañino and Antonio Guerrero – and the subcontractor Alan Gross, imprisoned in the island. Together with Gross, a CIA agent of Cuban origin was also released, and an agreement was reached to set free certain opponents of the Cuban government. The unexpected news that exceeded the expectations of millions of people around the world was the decision to re-establish the bilateral diplomatic relations broken for more than 50 years. We are referring to a historical bilateral conflict centred on the denial of the right of Cuba to be sovereign and independent, based on geopolitical criteria and security reasons of the US, which occurred with the triumph of the Revolution in January 1959. This was an event that carried the contradictions to extremes because of the socialist definition of the Cuban process and the inclusion of the former Soviet Union in the conflict between the two countries. It is a history of revolutionary Cuba that includes the failed invasion of the Bay of Pigs; the execution of terrorist acts by the CIA and anti-Cuban organisations established in the south of Florida that have caused thousands of victims being dead and wounded; the greatest nuclear war threat ever lived by humanity in October 1962 and an economic, financial and trade blockade that has caused billions of dollars of losses to the Cuban economy.¹

The potential change in relations between the US and Cuba must be understood in the context of how Cuba's relations with Latin America have evolved over the course of the last 25 years since the demise of the socialist bloc.² In 2009, a milestone was reached when Cuba and El Salvador, following the election of Mauricio Funes to the Salvadorian presidency, re-established full diplomatic relations. It meant that for the first time since soon after the Cuban Revolution in 1959, Cuba had full diplomatic relations with all the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. It will be argued in this article that the range of Cuba's diplomatic relations in the hemisphere has played an important role in the decision by the Obama administration to be the final country in the region to restore full diplomatic relations with Cuba. As will be discussed later, the unfolding of the Summits of the Americas process has apparently been at least partially responsible for the change in US policy. At both the 2009 summit in Trinidad and the 2012 summit in Colombia, Latin American leaders strongly urged the Obama administration to end its decade-long embargo on the island

and more importantly, at the 2012 meeting indicated that their participation at the scheduled summit in Panama in 2015 would be contingent upon Cuba being invited. Since the inauguration of the process in Miami in 1994, the US had insisted that Cuba could not be invited as it was not a ‘democratic’ country as defined by the US. As the Panama meeting approached, key Latin American countries made it clear that Cuba needed to be invited. For its part, Cuba indicated no willingness to democratise as defined by the US. As a result, the Obama administration faced unusual pressure from Latin America to change in some manner its policy towards Cuba.

We do not assume the re-establishment of the relations with the US to be a determining factor for the present relations of Cuba with its Latin American and Caribbean neighbours – in spite of its permanent influence on them – but as a result of long-undervalued realities that were acknowledged by President Obama in his speech, when he declared that the policies applied against Cuba for more than 50 years had not met their goals, but had been a real failure. By real failure, he meant that the Revolution had not been defeated.

The present relations of Cuba with the Latin American and the Caribbean countries have already moved past the long and complex historical process that led them from Cuba’s hemispheric isolation to the full reinstatement of the island into the regional community. In the light of the recent events, we have to remember that the joint rupture of diplomatic relations at the beginning of the sixties was based on political-ideological contradictions with the Cuban Revolution, led by the anti-Cuban policies of the US. However, the reinstatement of Cuba was accomplished by Cuba and its neighbours, regardless of the most severe conditions of the Cuban-American conflict.

As an example of this, in January 2014, before the 17th December announcement, Cuba successfully hosted the second Summit of Community of Latin American and Caribbean Countries (CELAC) and handed over the pro-tempore chair of the organisation to Costa Rica. The meeting stood out for a record attendance of Latin American and Caribbean Heads of State and of Government, 29 leaders, and the recognition of Cuba as a leader of the organisation during its period of office.

Also in 2014, the Cuban government held two summits of the Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of our America (ALBA-TCP) countries: the first one, in October, an extraordinary summit to analyse how to deal with the Ebola epidemic and the implementation of contingency plans to prevent an eventual outbreak in the region. The second summit, in December, commemorated the first decade of this integrative project, began by Presidents Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez. Finally, another strategic event was held in Cuba, the V Summit Cuba-CARICOM, also in December, which reaffirmed the strong ties of the island

with its Caribbean neighbours. As Gastón Alphonso Browne, prime minister of Antigua and Barbuda and president of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), said on the opening ceremony of the fifth Summit Cuba-CARICOM,

(...) the strong solidarity of the peoples of the Caribbean Community with Cuba becomes evident here and now with the attendance in this capital, Havana, of diplomatic missions of the 14 independent countries of CARICOM.

In fact, Havana is the only place, apart from Washington and the United Nations, where CARICOM is represented by all of its member states.

This shows how high we value Cuba; this shows our deep respect and high esteem for the people and government of Cuba. (*CubaDebate*, 8 December 2014)

The year 2014 also proved the continuity of the peace-building dialogues between representatives of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) and the Colombian government that have taken place in Havana since 2012, sponsor of the process together with Norway, and facilitator of the meetings.

Apart from the above-mentioned political-diplomatic actions carried out by Cuba in 2014, we can refer to the strategic visits of the presidents of Russia (Vladimir Putin) and China (Xi Jinping), both in July, before the participation of President Raúl Castro in the China–Latin America Summit held in Brazil. This proves not only the strength of the regional reinstatement of the country but also the new layout of its wider international relations.

Factors That Fostered the Reinstatement of Cuba in Latin America and the Caribbean

Clearly, the final chapter of the long process for reinstating Cuba in the regional community started with the beginning of the so-called post-Cold War period. It was a great paradox for Cuba to initiate this period with the collapse of its economy, resulting from its very close and long-standing relations with the USSR and the Eastern European bloc, but the ways Cuba looked at the region and the region looked at Cuba were very different. This is why it is important to review some of the events that directly influenced the redesigning of the new hemispheric scenario and, consequently, contributed to the radical changes that paved the way to the present socio-political rearrangement of Latin America. The full reinstatement of Cuba into the regional community took place in this new context.

The first of those events were the changes in the global foreign policy agenda of the US with regard to Latin America and the Caribbean. It is generally acknowledged that as part of the transformations of the new international context, Latin America and the Caribbean took a back seat in their priorities because

other regions such as the Middle East and Asia had precedence. This did not mean, as some wrongly believed, that the region had lost its historical and strategic position in the global matrix of the US foreign policy. The specialised bodies within the US policymaking bureaucracy assigned to relate to Latin America, readapted their agendas and redesigned the policies that were applied by all the US government institutions and agencies dealing with the region. New policies and decisions of regional impact were made in Washington: the different free trade projects, the rearrangement of national security post 9/11/2001, the regionalisation of the anti-drug policy, the reactivation of the US Navy's Fourth Fleet, just to mention a few.

This general continuity does not deny the introduction of significant changes and the redefinition of the Inter-American agenda of the US. There were many reasons for that:

- The end of the USSR and its socialist allies annulled the threats that accounted for so many military, economic, political and intelligence decisions that defined inter-American relations during the Cold War period. In fact, the main argument for fighting communism was replaced by new issues, like the fight for democracy and the defence of human rights and against drug trafficking. The military intervention of the US in Panama in December 1989 was an example of the new themes.
- Within this broad topic, we must single out the dissolution of the strategic alliance between Cuba and the USSR, which annulled the belief in threats from the island to the national security of the US. This caused a move in the US policies towards Cuba by focusing on the internal situation of the island, thus prioritising new issues such as the promotion of democracy – following the classic western point of view and human rights, focused on the political ones. Consequently, there was a sharp decline of the historical international influence Cuba had mainly on Third World countries. More attention started to be paid to the Cuban issue within a US domestic perspective between the bureaucracy in charge of the policies towards the island and the main Cuban-American right-wing organisations in the south of Florida. From our perspective, Cuban-American organisations in Florida were never in charge of US policy towards Cuba. That control always rested with the policymaking bureaucracy in Washington. The right-wing Cuban-Americans played a role as supporters of the Washington-based policy and were counted as voters by both Democrats and Republicans, but their ultimate marginality was demonstrated in December 2014 when the Obama administration announced the change of course on Cuba policy over the strenuous objections of the leaders of the right-wing Cubans. Instead, the administration focused on those

Cuban-American leaders who had long favoured normalisation in opposition to previous Washington policies.

- The end of the Soviet presence in the hemisphere, together with other factors such as the discontinuation of the armed conflicts in Central America called in question, apparently for good, the armed struggles as the alternative to be followed by the revolutionary forces of the region. The strengthening of such feelings legitimated elections as the fundamental means of political struggle for progressive groups seeking social change.

It is worth mentioning that, unfortunately, we cannot include in these changes the elimination of military coups, as proven by the one against Manuel Zelaya, the constitutional president of Honduras, in 2009. Such a putsch, though officially criticised by the US government, favoured important security interests of Washington, given the strategic subregional importance of Honduras and the establishment of connections between Zelaya and the ALBA and President Hugo Chávez.

In the 1980s and 1990s, neoliberal governments, allies of the US, came to power, in accord with the ruling tendencies in the global economy. Under these circumstances, Inter-American relations seemed to go through political stability, alliances and Inter-American cooperation, thus making the leaders in Washington look towards other geographic areas.

The second event to mention is directly related to the collapse of the USSR and the crisis of the so-called ‘real socialism’ without disregarding the impact of the Chinese political leadership and its new socio-economic project. The collapse of the old political and ideological paradigms impacted directly the long-standing prevailing left-wing tendencies in the region. Thanks to the elimination of the external influences and ‘benchmarks’ and the emergence of a social context that reacted against the ruling order – the so-called new social movements,³ the left forces started to redesign their political and social foundations. The core of this redesign was the substitution of the foreign ideas (primarily those of Marx and Lenin) by a deep immersion into Latin American roots, thus opening up a new political vision that included the recovery of the foundations of the Latin American and Caribbean political thinking of, for example, Bolívar and Martí, among others; the defence of important historical demands – the critical and head-on confrontation against the unfortunate legacy of the military dictatorships, and the restitution of the defence of the national concerns into the new political projects. Consequently, new political parties and electoral coalitions emerged with successful results, because the new agendas were basically nationalistic and focused on solving the serious actual domestic problems.

The results of the changes did not take much time to become evident. Many left-wing projects won important elections, ranging from the most radical to

more moderate or simply progressive or neoprogressive, because the neoliberal governments elected in the 1980s and 1990s failed to deliver on their promises. Not all of them ran on the same lines, but what was common to all was the building of communication channels and the understanding between the many new social movements that emerged throughout the region, and the unprecedented opening to the development of intra-Latin-American/Caribbean relations centred on integration projects.

The third event to mention refers directly to Cuba. We all know of the dramatic socio-economic impacts suffered by the island after the collapse of the USSR and the eastern socialist bloc. Before reviewing the economic issue, such acute impacts that could have made any other country collapse, we need to reflect on the whole dimension of the losses suffered by Cuba after losing its main strategic ally, and its social impacts: the loss of its oil supplier; the loss of the supplier of weaponry and military advisors not only for its homeland security but also for the emancipatory projects in which it was engaged in Africa and other regions of the Third World; the loss of the ally that incorporated the country into the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), through which the island developed most of its foreign trade and, therefore, obtained all kinds of supplies for its domestic consumption; and the loss of the socialist world that had a decisive influence on the adoption of schools of thought that shaped the Cuban academy and the socio-political life of the country:

This is the same USSR that used us as a strategic negotiating factor against its main adversary during the 'Missile Crisis', although it is fair to acknowledge that these negotiations with the United States in Paris, like in 1898, behind Cuba's back, resulted in an implied agreement of nonaggression against the island; the same Soviet Union that never really understood the history of guerillas and of 'guevarism'; the same that also made the Cuban foreign policy, so authentic and active that ran over its geographical and strategic borders, to unsuccessfully teach its formidable ally the essence of the Third World; the same country that at the end of its existence, under Mikhail Gorbachev, abandoned the Sandinista Revolution and helped to demobilize the revolutionary forces in Central America.

In brief, the collapse of the USSR and its European socialist allies meant to Cuba, according to official reports, a loss of more than 70% of its purchasing power, from 8,139 billion dollars in 1989 to 2,200 billion in 1992. (*Granma*, 10 November 1992, p. 3)

We have to recognise that, by applying alternative strategies, the Cuban government made great efforts to minimise the cataclysm it was facing. In that sense, we must remember the efforts made by the former President Fidel Castro to

attract Latin American entrepreneurs and open trading options with the region, trying to reinsert the country into the world economy. Consequently, we have to understand his regional activism in the 1980s, participating as a guest in the investiture of controversial neoliberal presidents such as Carlos Salinas de Gortari – Mexico, Carlos Andrés Pérez – Venezuela, and Fernando Collor de Mello – Brazil. During his participation in the investiture of the latter (1990), Fidel Castro (1990) said to a Brazilian journalist,

The perspectives of the relations with Brazil are wide and, as you say, trade has grown quickly based on the new products we are exporting and a policy we have followed: we have told the Brazilians that all they buy from us, mainly in terms of medicines, vaccines, etc., we will buy in Brazilian products. It is an exchange without the exchange; an exchange based on a commitment. We told them: do not worry about the foreign currency; this is not going to cost you a penny, everything you buy from us, we will charge it to a special account, and we will buy products from Brazil in the same amount. (159)

There were many reasons for this strategy: opening to new markets, managing the lack of liquidity of the Cuban economy, evading the pressures of the US blockade and sending messages of the new trading options of the island to the entrepreneurs of the region.

A law authorising foreign direct investment (FDI) was passed in 1982, and at the very end of the 1980s Cuba began the expansion of its minimally existent foreign tourist industry. But it was with the declaration of the Special Period on 29 August 1990, in response to the sudden rupture of the majority of their economic relations with the USSR and its European allies, that Cuba launched programmes to rapidly expand its regulated FDI and foreign tourism, as central part of its economic survival strategy. Both these were continually promoted and expanded throughout the 1990s. Many companies and businessmen from important countries in the hemisphere, such as Mexico and Canada, made their way to Cuba. In the case of Canada, we must mention Sherritt, a company that has been operating in Cuba for more than 20 years in important sectors such as oil, mining, agriculture and tourism (Kirk and McKenna 2007: 206–7). We refer to Canada as a strategic partner for Cuba, in spite of Canada's close relations with the US.

Mexico, in turn, became one of the main investors in Cuba, favoured by the relations of the government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–94) with Havana. Different Mexican economic sectors came to the island, like the Domos Group from Monterrey and the company Cementos de Mexico (CEMEX). In order to manage the unpaid debt to Mexican companies, the decision made was to reduce

the amount payable, 350 million dollars in 1994, according to *The Wall Street Journal* of 3 August 1994, by means of credit default swaps. That is, the Mexican government sold part of the debt to a domestic company which remitted the amount bought in exchange for participating in joint operations with Cuban companies (*Cubainfo*, 1 July 1994).

It is worth remembering that all these economic efforts of Cuba and their counterparts were always under the pressure, not only of the laws and regulations of the blockade, but of new actions to reinforce it. In October 1992, the US Congress passed the Cuban Democracy Act, commonly known as Torricelli Act after its promoter, Congressman Robert Torricelli. In its clauses, the law ratified the terms of the existing blockade and included a prohibition to the commercial transactions of US subsidiaries with Cuba (Morales Domínguez and Prevost 2008: 101–2). This was a highly significant blow to the Cuban economy, because although the total amount of these transactions was less than 800 million dollars per year, it represented the purchase of strategic raw materials for the country.

A few years after, when trying to cut off the trade relations Cuba had with Latin America and Canada, the US reacted to the controversial question of the shooting down of two planes piloted by Cuban-American political activists that flew over Cuban airspace. In 1996, President William Clinton signed the Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act, known as the Helms-Burton Act after its promoters, Dan Burton and Jesse Helms, which escalated the pressures against Cuba by penalising every company that invested in the island under new extraterritorial criteria (Morales Domínguez and Prevost 2008: 104–10).

However, in spite of Torricelli and Helms-Burton, the Cuban economic crisis began to regress by the end of the 1990s as a result of the internal changes made in the country and the development of the new Cuban-Latin American relations. Undoubtedly, a key factor was the accession to power of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, who had visited Cuba by the end of 1994 and had built a personal relationship with Fidel Castro that grew stronger until his death in 2013. After overcoming the political crises of 2002 and 2003, Venezuela of Chávez and Cuba reached a preferential oil supply agreement that allowed Cuba to solve one of the most critical problems the island was facing. Unlike the grounds of the strategic Cuban-Soviet alliance, marked by military and security factors, the new strategic Cuban-Venezuelan alliance, meaning a new foreign dependence, was built on bases that could better endure the criticisms of its opponents and detractors. The former logic of the strategic-military security changed to other logics such as energy security and human security, in terms of health, education and other social projects that Cuba developed with Venezuela. The Cuba–Venezuela agreements opened a new era for its relations with Latin America and the Caribbean, providing the basis for the creation of ALBA in 2004.

Relations and No Relations between Mexico and Cuba: Lights and Shades of the Road to Regional Reinsertion

The accession to the presidency of Mexico of businessman Vicente Fox in 2000 set in motion changes in the dynamic of Mexican-Cuban relations that grew from internal Mexican dynamics. Among other important issues for the whole of Mexico was the impact of the fall from power of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI – Institutional Revolutionary Party) after 70 years in power. On the other hand, the rise in power of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN – National Action Party) constituted a change in Mexico's foreign policy that threatened its long-standing emphasis on independence and national sovereignty.

While the election of Vicente Fox and the pro-US PAN to the presidency of Mexico in 2000 would definitely have consequences, at least in the short term, for Cuban-Mexican relations, there had been complications developing for Cuba in the two previous presidencies because both Salinas de Gortari (1988–94) and Zedillo (1994–2000) were determined to move the PRI away from its long-standing nationalist stance that held the US at arm's length. Of course, a key manifestation of that independent stance for Cuba was Mexico's refusal in the early 1960s, under heavy US pressure, to break diplomatic relations with the island, the only Latin American country that did not do so. As a result, Cuba placed a high value on its state to state relations with the Mexican government even as the Cuban Communist Party distanced itself from the increasingly conservative positions of PRI from the 1960s onwards. The importance of relations with Mexico to Cuba can be explained by the position that the Cuban government and Fidel Castro took on the disputed 1988 Mexican presidential election where Salinas de Gortari claimed victory over the seemingly legitimate claims of electoral fraud by the independent candidate of the Left, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. Acting on the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of another country (i.e., the election dispute), Fidel Castro accepted Salinas' invitation to attend the inauguration much to the chagrin of the Mexican left and progressive forces throughout the Hemisphere. While not an easy decision from a party perspective and taken before the development of the crisis in the socialist bloc, the decision to work with Salinas de Gortari proved beneficial to Cuba. As discussed earlier, following the collapse of the CMEA in the fall of 1989 and the ending of the USSR in 1991, the Mexican government facilitated important new commercial ties with Cuba as it weaned itself away from the previous East European ties. In the international arena, it continued to support Cuba:

The Mexican government continued defending the policy of nonintervention in Cuba in the meetings of the United Nations Human Rights Council and in the

meetings of Latin American leaders in Madrid (1991–1994), where countries like Argentina demanded a political opening in the island. Besides, Mexico reaffirmed its rejection to the American embargo, particularly the ‘Torricelli’ Act of 1992 and the ‘Helms-Burton’ Act of 1996. Also, in spite of the pressures from the Cuban exile community that threatened to reject the approval of the FTA, Mexico not only did not reduce investments in Cuba but rather enhanced them. (Morales Sod 2010: 104)

Nevertheless, not everything fitted into the special conditions that had prevailed in the bilateral relations, because Salinas received a well-known critic of the Cuban Revolution, Carlos Alberto Montaner, and also the powerful Cuban-American businessman Jorge Más Canosa, president of the Cuban American National Foundation. These actions were just the preamble for what was to come next.

Under the presidency of Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000), who became the PRI’s presidential candidate after the murder of Luis Donaldo Colosio, more actions were taken. He not only followed the second political track opened by Salinas to manage the relations with Cuba in a way that was less antagonistic to the US and the Cuban-American right wing, but he also changed the official discourse evidenced in the changes in managing the international affairs of the country, particularly in respect to Cuba. In presenting his foreign policy programme, Zedillo stated the following:

The definition of sovereignty as the sole right of Mexicans to make their own decisions, to freely design our development project.

The strategic interest of the country on a peaceful and safe context.

The use of ‘anticipatory diplomacy’ as the means through which Mexico can develop its development project in a peaceful and safe context.

Designing its relations with the United States on the basis of two main questions: firstly, the full commitment to the sovereignty of the country; and secondly, the assuredness that the country has reached a maturity that allows it to follow its compartmentalized policy, that is, assessing every question individually so as not to affect the whole, which has proven to be beneficial for both parties. (Bustamante 1994)

The administrations of Salinas and Zedillo had laid the groundwork for a changed US-Mexican relationship and a change in Mexico’s position vis-à-vis Cuba but ascension of Vicente Fox to the presidency (2000–06) made the change a reality.

The administration of President Vicente Fox, the first to come to power on behalf of a party other than the PRI, was the toughest period in the relations between Mexico and Cuba. On that point, a statement by Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda was conclusive: 'The relationship with the Cuban Revolution is over and, instead, the relations with a new republic have begun' (Interpress Service (IPS) 2002).

Castañeda was not only the architect that defined the changes towards Cuba but also the author of the so-called 'whole enchilada', a project that, under that popular expression, implied deepening and reassembling the relations of Mexico with the US in pursuit of signing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) plus the Security and Prosperity Partnership of North America (SPPAN), and a new migration agreement that would include the control of the illegal immigrants; the increase of visa grants; a programme for guest workers; border security measures and regional development actions (*Proceso* 2002).

Without getting deeper into this well-known story, we would like to, on the one hand, refer first to Mexico associated with the NAFTA, and consequently committed to be a part of the new strategic and security logics of the US, in response to the 9/11 events. On the other hand, to the rise of a new generation of Mexican politicians, not only members of the PAN, who stood up for these new strategic relations with the US and who were willing to cross off or minimise issues like Cuba, that belonged to a past history. Obviously, this first attempt, that made the blunder of dropping Mexico away not only from Cuba but also from Latin America, was brought up for a gradual analysis with the return of the new PRI under Peña Nieto, after the PAN duo Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón (2006–12). The latter tried to right some wrongs, but got caught in the domestic fight against drug trafficking.

Calderón tried to balance the bilateral relations, with no return to past ways, but the contradictions were not finally overcome. The major political-diplomatic event of this period was the signing in Havana, by the Foreign Ministers Felipe Pérez Roque (Cuba) and Patricia Espinosa Cantellano (Mexico), of a Joint Communiqué that more than restoring the bilateral relations provided both parties with instruments to negotiate and channel their differences. In this respect, some of its clauses stand out:

4-. Agreed on holding meetings of the existing bilateral mechanisms, yet undated, on issues as migration, drug trafficking, trade and industrial development, transportation, agriculture and fishing, foreign trade, tourism and health, as well as of the Joint Committee for Joint Development ...

5-. The delegations assessed the status quo of the treaties in force between the two countries. Both Chancelleries will keep in touch to identify the instruments that require to be updated ...

13-. In assessing the migration issue between the two countries, the ministers agreed on the importance of moving on to set up a legal framework that, with an integrated approach and under the principle of shared responsibility, guarantees a legal, safe and ordered migration flow ... (*Granma*, 14 March 2008, p. 1)

This last paper enunciated the realisation of the second action to be highlighted:

Memorandum of Understanding to Guarantee a Legal, Ordered and Safe Migration Flow, signed in October, 2008, in Mexico City. This agreement bound Cuba to receive the illegal immigrants deported from Mexico; it also strengthened the mechanisms to prevent and fight illegal migration, smuggling of migrants and slavery, as well as other offenses associated to them. (Aviña 2009: 55)

Finally, the road to what today seems to be a stabilisation of the new bilateral relations was paved by the different meetings held between the leaders of both countries: Calderón and Raúl Castro on two occasions (2008 and 2009), and also on two occasions with Peña Nieto. The most significant was the visit of the latter to Havana to take part in the second Summit of CELAC in January 2014.

Under the administration of Peña Nieto, the emphasis to open new paths to the bilateral business relations stands out. In November 2013, both countries agreed to renegotiate the debt of Cuba with BANCOMEX (National Bank of Foreign Trade of Mexico), so that the Cuban government was exempted from paying about 340 million dollars out of a total of around 600 million.

Recently, as part of the visit to Havana of 43 Mexican businessmen in May 2014, they opened an office named ProMéxico. On the Cuban side, the counterpart is the Cepec (Foreign Trade and Investment Facilitation Centre). Its focus lies, as expected, in the new Special Development Zone of Mariel (ZEDM).

To understand the present foundations of this new Mexico–Cuba relation, we can refer to the statements made by two officials who attended this meeting: Francisco González, general director of ProMéxico and the foreign affairs deputy secretary for Latin America and the Caribbean, Vanessa Rubio.

According to González,

... this is a new page in history and, economically, Cuba is managing the rearrangement of its economic model in an integrated, very logical, long-term and step-by-step manner, which makes things clearer for entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, Rubio affirmed that: 'her country endorses and backs up the updating model encouraged by Cuba which, in her opinion, is being developed in a responsible, integrated way and with a mid-and-long-term sense'. (EFE, 26 May 2014)

The irony of Cuban-Mexican relations is that now, even as Mexico has created a new and less independent stance towards the US, with long-standing consequences for the people of both countries, it is now the US that is potentially changing its stance towards Cuba and in the process validating the Mexican stance of engagement with Cuba that for so long was a point of dispute between the US and Mexico.

Cuba and the New Socio-Political Regional Configuration

How to understand Cuba, the historical referent of the Latin American left forces, in this new situation and its relations with those new social and political actors? Perhaps the first thing to mention is that the greatest contribution of Cuba to the present context was for Latin America to understand and learn from Cuba. From this assertion, we can understand what Boaventura de Sousa Santos says:

If it is true that Cuba actively tried to change the international scenario so the relations between peoples were fairer, it is also true that the hostile external conditionings, in which the Cuban Revolution had to develop, prevented the full realization of the potential renewal of the left that Cuba had in 1959. This impeded the world left to renew itself during the last fifty years following the legacy of the Cuban Revolution, but did so based on other referents. (de Sousa Santos 2009: 1)

When you go over the contents and the background of those new social and political actors, this assertion becomes perfectly understood but questioned. The Cuban Revolution vindicated the previous generations of fighters, influenced and trained others from its own generation and has stood above the most adverse circumstances by exercising solidarity surpassing all preceding actions. Such questioning arises mainly from understanding how diverse a region Latin America is and, above all, how much it lacked in understanding its history and reality. This explains the objective limitations that affected the Soviet influence and the incomprehension of those that expected the fall of the Revolution after 1989, and had to look for and accept answers that they neither found nor accepted.

That is why we must understand and, at the same time, bring into question a second statement of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, when he says that in the case of the Cuban Revolution, ‘resistance prevailed over the alternative’. On the one hand, it is true that the historical conflict between Cuba and the US has permanently loomed over the Cuban society, besides having set the marks in the relations of Cuba with its neighbours during the last three decades of the Cold War.

But, on the other hand, it would be naive to believe that Cuba has played the role of a simple spectator in its relations with the countries that represent the most radical left tendency at present. One thing is to understand that we are referring to political projects that developed with no external influence, and a completely different one is to assume that Cuba would not establish the strongest possible relation with those new governments. Even in the Venezuelan case, under the very close relation between Fidel and Chávez, no one can deny that the latter was the promoter and creator of the new Venezuelan political project.

Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua and Lula Da Silva of Brazil are two old friends/allies of the Cuban Revolution, and their agreements and disagreements with the historical leadership of the island are very different. The political relations of Daniel Ortega with Cuba reflect the first Sandinista government, FSLN as political opposition party, and the second Sandinista government continuity with a much wider profile than the Brazilian leader.

The relations of Lula with Cuba could be plotted initially at a high level when he was a union leader. A second moment started after the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the creation, by Fidel and Lula, of what would later become the Forum of Sao Paulo, a crucial event that led to the historical rearrangement of the Latin American left, having gathered more than 100 left-wing political organisations and movements in October 1992.

The third period of the relations of Lula with Cuba obviously came after he became the president of Brazil. Lula played a key role in achieving the full reincorporation of Cuba into the regional community and his personal involvement in defining the strategic project of the Cuban Port of Mariel. On Lula, unquestionably the most relevant Brazilian politician so far this century, Emir Sader offers a very pictorial vision:

Members of the former left and of international factions made not only a working-class leader with Lula, linked to the traditional labor unions, but also a leader of a new type of Gramscian left party, a democratic and socialist one. Lula was not any of those, neither a leader to the image of what the PT had become. He became a union delegate in times when the labor unions were banned by the dictatorship; a direct negotiator with the employers, a great leader of the masses, but with no ideology. He was never related to the left tradition, neither to its ideology, nor its historical political experience. He became a member of a social left – if one can call it so – without having any ideological or political links with it. He looked forward to improve the living conditions of the working class, the people or the country, according to the way his speech changed along his career. He is a negotiator, an enemy of ruptures and, consequently someone with no radical revolutionary tendency. (Sader 2009: 4)

Néstor Kirchner (Argentina), Evo Morales (Bolivia) and Rafael Correa (Ecuador) do not have a historical relationship with Cuba. Kirchner was a rising figure within Peronism, chosen by the population to avoid a new accession to the presidency of the neoliberal Carlos Saúl Menem. An accurate political picture of what happened in Argentina during the critical situation of 2001–02 was shaped in the following thoughts of Carlos Vilas:

It is possible to match the events of December 2001 in Argentina with the recent mass protests that have taken place in other countries of South America due to: the role played in all of them by the policy and macroeconomic adjustment schemes based, one way or another, on the so-called Washington Consensus; the goals and interests of the economic and financial powers; the aggressiveness of the popular bursts resulting from disavowing the respective political systems; and also to the capacity of the old political system to process the crisis, and to redirect and neutralize the mass protests when the social challenge does not have a political self-expression and cannot advance from rejection – essential initial moment in any search for an alternative – up to making feasible proposals. (Vilas 2005: 264–5)

In the case of Argentina and the governments from Kirchner's, we must start by understanding them within the spectrum of progressivism, included in the left. Their levels of 'leftism' were conditioned by the need of providing plausible answers to a population that went out in demonstrations against the politicians, and the critical internal situation they inherited and the new political dynamics of the region in response to a political context very different from the past. The relations with Cuba are a case study: a bilateral agenda marked by the traditional patterns of isolation; the opening of tangential spaces in terms of small businesses, together with some cultural and scientific-technical exchanges; and the use of a political discourse avoiding frictions with the most conservative Argentinian forces. Although it is true that the relations eased up with the government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, in regard to Cuba, Argentina has always managed its relations with the island a little behind the most radical governments – Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador – as well as the Brazilian one.

Evo Morales, a coca growers' leader, who became president of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, has proved to be a strong friend and ally of the Cuban government. The redefinition of the political relations with Cuba under his presidency has been evident, including projects for cooperation in areas such as health, education and sports, which have been taken to levels reached never before. Evo comes to be the highest peak of the relations of the Cuban government with the indigenous movements of the region. The Bolivian case also

deserves the accurate thoughts of Emir Sader who takes us to understand the present political process of that country, and praises the decisive participation of ‘hard-core thinkers’, the Comuna Group – Alvaro García Linera, Luis Tapia, Raúl Prada, among others – who contributed the theoretical foundations needed by an indigenous-rooted project to win over the regional history. To Emir Sader,

... the Comuna Group knew how to do so because they reviewed the Bolivian history, particularly from the 1952 Revolution; figured out its meaning; established the chronicle of the historical events of the country; comprehended the cycles that led to the exhaustion of the neoliberal phase; managed to undo the wrongs of the traditional left respect the historical subjects and, made the necessary theoretical work to arrange the marriage between Evo Morales leadership and the revival of the indigenous movement as the main historical character of current Bolivia. They rearranged the links between theory-praxis and politics, and helped the new movement to open the ways to fight for the economic and social redemption in the ethnic and political arena. (Sader 2008: 6–7)

On the other hand, Rafael Correa became the president of Ecuador, a country of much political unrest over the past 20 years. He has three basic competences: his solid academic training that has turned him into a convinced anti-neoliberal; his political capacity to manage such a complex national political panorama, and the clear definition of his political goals that have allowed him to achieve outstanding results in his Citizen Revolution. He has also pursued very positive policies towards Cuba. Most importantly, he brought Ecuador into ALBA following his election to the presidency in 2006, and the countries cooperate on a series of socio-development projects similar to Cuba and Bolivia. In hemispheric affairs, Correa has been a strong pro-Cuba voice being the only Latin American president to boycott the 2012 Summit of the Americas in Cartagena. This stance helped foster a united hemispheric stance on Cuba’s participation in the 2015 summit that was a factor in the change in US position on Cuba.

Intentionally, we have left the case of the relations between Venezuela and Cuba for the end. When analysing the background of Hugo Chávez, we find historical similarities that account for how he managed to establish such a far-reaching strategic alliance as the one he had with Fidel Castro, and that he passed on to his successor. A first element of coincidence, without disregarding the characteristics of each leader, is the military role that Fidel and Chávez had in common. Fidel was not a career soldier, but his life, first in the guerrilla warfare and then, after the triumph of the Revolution, has been under the insignia and praxis of Commander in Chief. Chávez, a career soldier, lieutenant colonel, was democratically elected president, but his political image was always explicitly

associated with the military leader. To both leaders, the logics of their political projects relied on the civic-military alliance.

A second element lies in the genesis of their leadership, a merger of their nationalist-anti-imperialist ideological training and its further radicalisation towards socialism. It is known that Fidel was a convinced Martí follower, just like Bolívar was the political paradigm of Chávez. Third, both leaders headed political movements aside from the traditional parties. They both created political movements, being clear on the limitations of the historical lefts in their countries. During their fight – guerrilla/military and political – to reach the power in their corresponding countries, they kept controlled relations with the traditional left parties and, finally, imposed a political – communist/socialist – party, to which the traditional forces had to join or break from for good.

The fourth element they shared was their Latin American and Caribbean vocation, with the well-known implications this had to the relations with the US. We close with a final question. Knowing the character and political ideas defended by Chávez, what, but the Cuban Revolution of Fidel Castro, might be his main left referent in the region?

Cuba and the Seventh Summit of the Americas

Most probably, those who did not follow the events that preceded the fifth Summit of the Americas held in Trinidad and Tobago in April 2009 were surprised by the importance the Cuban issue had in its agenda. During his electoral campaign, Barack Obama had stated his thoughts about reviewing the US policies concerning Cuba, coinciding with the important decisions made in Latin America concerning the relations with Cuba. By the end of 2008, the Group of Rio approved the definite incorporation of Cuba into the organisation and made a formal request to the government of the US to lift the blockade against the island and an invitation to both countries to start negotiations to settle their differences.

At the end of the first half of 2009, with the election of new progressive presidents in El Salvador and Costa Rica, Cuba was able to normalise its relations with both countries at the ambassadorial level. This meant that the Cuban government was finally able to re-establish diplomatic relations with all Latin American and Caribbean countries after 50 years of isolation, caustic encounters and constant ruptures. Immediately after, the international public opinion coined the criteria of the full reincorporation of the island into the regional community and, to many people, the glare of the fireworks of the news dimmed the necessary and more moderate analysis that it required.

This summit in itself summarised half a century of bilateral history, marked by the important changes made at the international and hemisphere levels. It was a

sovereign decision of the Latin American and Caribbean governments to insist on the presence of Cuba, independent of the criteria of the government of the US. However, could we assume that the position reached was solid enough to resist and avoid all the existing differences between Cuba and most of its neighbours? Latin America definitely assumed the support to Cuba in its demand to end the North American blockade, and also that Cuban government not to be judged by some of its neighbours on the controversial issues of human rights and democracy. Have the times changed? Have the national priorities changed? Are there concerns about the many glass ceilings that could be broken by the ‘boomerang effect’? Have they reached a new regional political agreement? and What about the conflict between Cuba and the US? All these arguments are included within the possible answers. But, above all, an essential postulate seems to be paving the way: the search for unity within diversity.

As Gabriel Aguilera (2009), an experienced Guatemalan politician and academic, said,

Today, unlike the generally anticommunist and anti-Cuban position of the 60s, the prevailing atmosphere in Latin America goes from tolerance to the decisive support to Cuba. At the same time, the ranges of autonomy in respect to the policy of the United States have been widened up with no comparison to those of the past century. (5)

Therefore, we have an evident full political-diplomatic reincorporation and a gradual, steady opening of the economic relations with the region, the countries of the ALBA-TCP, Brazil and Mexico, as the main partners for Cuba. And, in the midst of this scenario, Cuba is changing itself in its own way.

On 5 December 2014, the foreign ministry of the government of Panama started to send out the official invitations for participation in the seventh Summit of the Americas to be held in that country on 10 and 11 April 2015. In September, José Miguel Insulza, secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS), had stated the relevance and advantage of the participation of the Cuban government, and it seemed that the government of the US, through its secretary of state, John Kerry, had ceased to consider this an obstacle for the Summit. One of the conclusions you can reach is that the US had finally learnt how useless the confrontation with the region on the issue about Cuba is due to the prevailing conditions.

Consequently, we must find the reasons beyond different approaches. Thereof, the recent statements made by the president of Costa Rica, Luis Guillermo Solís, current pro-tempore president of CELAC:

We have to look at the Cuban issue with different eyes. I believe that the acceptance of Cuba in the OAS, although Cuba made the decision of not

participating in this forum; the presence of Cuba in the Community of Latin American And Caribbean States (CELAC), having been its Pro-tempore President, and the relations it has with all Latin American countries with no exception, makes it mandatory to have Cuba be present in other forums where countries that have no relations with Cuba, like the United States, are members.

He added: 'I cannot imagine how its presence could be avoided, neither the benefits of its absence in these hemisphere meetings. I believe it must be and I find it normal that it be present in all of them.' (*El País*, 5 December 2014)

On this basis, we may believe that Obama was aware that today, not counting the OAS, the Summit of the Americas is the only hemisphere forum that allows the president of the US to address his counterparts in the region directly, and that he must be ready to manage an agenda full of difficulties and demands. Therefore, this would not be simply another Summit, but a strategic priority for both the US and Cuba.

On 10th and 11th April, the historic meeting of the Summit of Americas took place in Panama. The Summit of the Americas process had been launched by the US in 1994 and drove forward its neoliberal agenda centred on the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The gathering of Latin American presidents that year in Miami unanimously endorsed the FTAA but with the conspicuous absence of the President Fidel Castro, an opponent of the FTAA, who was not invited. In contrast in 2015, President Raúl Castro was invited to Panama by the Latin American presidents over the objection of the US. In fact, the majority of the Latin American presidents, led by Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Rafael Correa of Ecuador, declared at the previous summit in Colombia in 2012 that no further summits would occur in Cuba's absence. This stance, by the increasingly independent-minded Latin American presidents, was a key factor in the decision announced by President Obama in December 2014 to begin a process of re-establishing full diplomatic relations with Cuba and bringing an end to the economic blockade of the island. An end to the blockade of Cuba was also a key demand of the Latin American presidents at the last two Summits of the Americas. Through his December announcement on Cuba, President Obama had sought to diffuse the Cuba issue and go to the Panama meeting in a position to reorder the summit's agenda to one of Washington's choosing. However, that hope did not turn into reality as in many ways the Latin American countries, led by Cuba and Venezuela, continued to take the lead away from the US, and in the process assert a new framework for relations in the Western Hemisphere not dominated fully by the US. It was significant that it was the US and Canada that ultimately blocked the issuance of a joint communique at the end of the meeting because it would not have been sufficiently neoliberal in its tone.

The most important speech of the summit was delivered by Raúl Castro, a powerful and revolutionary-minded presentation of 43 minutes, far beyond the 8 minutes he had been allocated. Castro delivered a history lesson, drawing heavily on Bolívar and Martí, which stressed the dangers to Latin American sovereignty and prosperity long presented by the US. He especially focused on long-standing US designs on the domination of Cuba and the role of his revolutionary government in thwarting those plans over the last half century. His speech also focused on contemporary issues, especially the recent US sanctions against Venezuela and declarations labelling that country and its revolutionary government as ‘a threat to the national security of the United States’. Raúl’s position on Venezuela was strongly supported by many other Latin American countries and helped to prevent issues generated by the US from dominating the meeting. The Cuban president’s speech also illustrated the deep divide between itself and Washington. The bilateral negotiations between the two governments seem to be moving forward but very slowly, because, to this point, Havana has made few, if any, concessions to the US on key issues. To obtain removal from the list of ‘nations that sponsor terrorism’, Washington sought to obtain the extradition of political figures, including Assata Shakur, who have political asylum in Cuba. In principle, Cuba refused those requests, and Cuba was removed from the list without making that concession. The Panama Summit and subsequent events clearly demonstrate that the dynamic of Western Hemisphere affairs is changing in a manner that aids Cuba in its long-standing struggle to resist US domination.

Notes

1. For a complete analysis of Cuban-US relations, see Esteban Morales Domínguez and Gary Prevost, *United States-Cuban Relations: A Critical History* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).
2. For a full elaboration of this subject, see Carlos Oliva Campos and Gary Prevost, eds, *Cuban-Latin America Relations in a Changing Hemisphere* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2011).
3. For a full elaboration of the new social movements, see Richard Stahler-Scholk, Harry E. Vanden and Mark Becker, eds, *Radical Action from Below: Rethinking Latin American Social Movements* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014) and Gary Prevost, Carlos Oliva Campos and Harry Vanden, *Social Movements and Leftist governments in Latin America: Confrontation or Co-optation?* (London: Zed Press, 2013).

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