

OBAMA AND CUBA: Dialogue is not Foreign Policy

“ Good Morning, President Castro. It’s good to be in Havana.”

“ Bienvenidos a La Habana. I assume you are not accompanied by the United Fruit Company!”

“That’s all in the past, President Castro. We are looking for a new beginning to promote liberty and opportunity for all Cubans.”

“How can we help you? The dialogue with the United States should begin well.”

“Perhaps we could talk about human rights.”

“OK, let’s define what you mean by human rights. In Cuba, as you know, all children go to school and have access to good health care. Everything is free.”

“Yes, but the Cuban people lack basic freedoms. There is no investigative press, no independent judiciary. Cuba has scores of peaceful political prisoners, serving over 20 years for being ‘dangerous’ to society.”

“All our prisoners have been tried according to Cuban law. Some are mercenaries of a foreign power. The world knows there are other prisoners on our island in US custody who had no such judicial process.”

Dialogue, Cuban-style. That’s fine. But dialogue, the apple pie of diplomacy, is not foreign policy. Remember that the EU, with its wide-range of interests in Cuba, has had a dialogue on human rights for over a decade. It secured the release of 14 of the 75 prisoners of the March 2003 crackdown by dropping ‘diplomatic’ measures which included EU ambassadors inviting both government and opposition to their parties. But since then, only 6 more political prisoners have been released.

The US-Cuba dialogue may be long, cordial and laborious. The Castro brothers will be in no hurry to change especially if Venezuelan largesse continues to flow. They are content to be seen as partners of the Obama Administration and to be admitted to regional clubs.

Nevertheless, Obama has made a good start, addressing Cuba early, amongst innumerable foreign policy priorities. He was the center of attention at the Trinidad Summit and freed family contacts for Cuban-Americans. But these are 'domestic' measures and Obama needs a foreign policy for Cuba. Raul Castro has not come up with a new domestic policy. So he and Obama are both in search of a new direction. Obama is less constrained because Fidel and President Chavez will insist Raul does not deviate from the socialist model of controls. Inertia however suits the Castros and Obama won't lift the embargo all at once.

What could Obama do now independent of Cuban moves?

- As Senator Lugar has proposed, appoint a Special Representative for Cuba foreign policy.
- Announce that the US will coordinate its Cuba policy with Brazil, Chile, Mexico and the EU. All these countries continue to criticize Cuba for repressive policies and intolerance towards the political opposition.
- Be proactive in driving the dialogue. Propose a meeting in New York during UNGA in September 2009 between the US and a senior Cuban.
- Be imaginative. Offer scholarships for Cubans to study in the US. Candidates selected on merit by the US Interests Section in Havana. Invite Cuban musicians- for example, the remarkable Carlos Varela - and sports teams to the US.
- Keep some concessions, like official guarantees for export credit and on US property claims, in reserve. Be tough on prisoner releases. Only US insistence will deliver them all. Don't accept exile status like Spain. The opposition must remain in Cuba.

Obama should then develop his foreign policy toolkit:- aid, education, science, art, culture. Engaging does not mean approval of the Cuban Government. But to make plays in foreign policy you have to be on the field. And the grip of totalitarianism in Cuba will be loosened in unexpected ways.

It's time for the US, in Obama's words, to lead again on Cuba, and for US Cuba policy to stop being perceived as part of the problem by Latin America. It should become part of the solution.