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President Obama and Cuba

by Philip Peters

President Barack Obama entered office with a promise of change.

He follows an American president whose rhetoric for eight years expressed a strong desire to influence Cuba's future but whose actions concentrated, paradoxically, on building walls rather than bridges between our nations.

In his first year, President Obama has started building bridges. He allowed Cuban Americans to visit their loved ones in Cuba without restriction, set a new tone in Washington's discourse toward the island, and opened the door to greater diplomatic contact between the two governments.

These actions are significant, but they are very small in proportion to the fundamental change that many in Cuba and the United States would like to see. A poll taken in October 2009, for example, showed that 59 percent of Cuban Americans favor ending all U.S. restrictions on travel to Cuba.

Yet considering Cuba's place in United States foreign policy and the large number of challenges that President Obama confronts, it may be that President Obama's modest initial actions toward Cuba are aligned with his own political possibilities and priorities.

The American Presidency has large but limited power. Hence each Administration is forced to choose the issues and initiatives to which it will devote its energy, the way the President spends his time every day, the subjects on which he will address the American public, and how he will spend his political capital to influence public opinion and Congress.

Some of these choices are determined by the president's campaign and the voters' mandate. Many others are imposed, as President Obama learned with great clarity when he took office on January 20, 2009.

As a Senator, Barack Obama had opposed the decision to go to war in Iraq, but the war was in progress when he became President, and he had to decide how to move it toward its end. He had supported the decision to wage war in Afghanistan against Al Qaeda, but

he had to form his own strategy in that conflict. He confronted an American economy in crisis, with major failures in its financial system. There was a risk that the private credit system would stop functioning, creating a risk of depression. Like his predecessor, President Obama concluded that his only option was to seek Congressional support for massive government spending to stabilize credit markets and to stimulate the economy. On top of all this, President Obama is pursuing his top legislative priority, an ambitious plan to reform the health care sector.

Few presidents have confronted such a large series of challenges in their first year in office. In this context, it may be surprising that the Obama Administration took even small actions on Cuba policy, especially when one considers that it has not formed any major initiative toward Latin America and the Caribbean in general.

With regard to Cuba, President Obama began by delivering on his campaign promises.

As a candidate, he had told Cuban Americans that he would permit family visits without restriction, and last September he issued new regulations allowing them to visit as frequently as they like, and for as long as they like. As a result, last December there were about 50 flights per week between Miami and Havana. He removed limits on the amount of money that can be sent as family remittances, and he eliminated President Bush's narrow definition of "family," which had prevented visits and remittances to uncles, aunts, and cousins.

He also promised as a candidate to set a new course in American diplomacy by pursuing talks with countries with which the United States has had longstanding differences over ideology or security matters. As President, he renewed twice-yearly consultations with Cuba to review our countries' bilateral accords on migration matters. Cuba and the United States have also begun discussions with regard to re-establishing direct postal service.

He also took actions that he had not discussed in his campaign.

Last September, he removed almost all restrictions on gift parcels that Americans can send to people and non-governmental organizations in Cuba. Under President Bush, such packages could only be sent to family members and could only consist of a short list of items. Now, any American can send packages to Cubans containing any item that people normally exchange as gifts.

In June, the United States joined a consensus at the Organization of American States that repealed the 1962 resolution that suspended Cuba's membership in that organization due to Marxist-Leninist ideology and ties to the Soviet Union. Cuba's renewed participation now depends on Cuba requesting to return, after which a "process of dialogue" would take place "in accordance with the practices, purposes and principles" of the OAS.

The Obama Administration has quietly changed policy toward cultural and academic contacts, granting visas to Cuban scholars and artists that were routinely denied during

the Bush Administration. The Havana concert organized by the Colombian singer Juanes, a resident of the United States, could not have occurred without licenses approved by the Obama Administration. Los Van Van and Omara Portuondo are about to perform a series of concerts in the United States, and Cuban artists such as La Charanga Habanera have performed here already. Universities and research institutions are resuming the kind of academic exchanges they conducted with Cuban scholars in the past. And last September, a group of Cuban officials and scientists visited Washington to discuss environmental protection with American experts from universities and private institutions. The Americans traveled to Cuba in October to continue the discussions. The result is new collaboration in protecting our shared marine environment – and hope that the two governments might some day collaborate in this field as well.

President Obama has allowed American companies to negotiate with Cuba to provide three types of telecommunications services: roaming agreements for cellular phones, establishment of fiber optic cables for voice and Internet communication, and satellite radio and television services. To date, no agreements have been reached.

President Obama has also changed the tone in U.S.-Cuba relations. The clearest and most remarkable example was unplanned, and came in response to a reporter's question at the hemispheric summit in Trinidad last spring. Asked what he had learned in his discussions with other leaders, President Obama responded that many had talked about "the thousands of doctors from Cuba that are dispersed all throughout the region, and upon which many of these countries heavily depend." He remarked that Cuba's medical missions are "a reminder for us in the United States that if our only interaction with many of these countries is drug interdiction, if our only interaction is military, then we may not be developing the connections that can, over time, increase our influence and have a beneficial effect when we need to try to move policies that are of concern to us forward in the region."

In the arena of direct diplomacy with Cuba, the Obama Administration has sought to end the restrictions that limit American diplomats to Havana and Cuban diplomats to the Washington, D.C. area. The electronic signboard that the Bush Administration had installed on the façade of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana was turned off last June. The odd post that the Bush Administration created in the State Department – that of "Cuba Transition Coordinator" – has been quietly abolished. And while President Obama, like all his predecessors, presses Cuba for changes in domestic policies regarding civil and political liberties, his approach is different. According to a report last October in Madrid's *El Pais* that the White House did not contradict, President Obama sent the following message through Spain's foreign minister, who was about to travel to Havana: "Let him tell the Cuban authorities that we understand that they cannot change things overnight but that, after a few years have gone by and we look back, it should be clear that this was the moment when change began. If not, there will be deep disappointment."

One cannot minimize the importance of these changes in one year. However, United States policy toward Cuba is like a large machine that has been built over five decades by a multitude of designers and engineers – and the bulk of that machine is unchanged, in

form and function. Washington continues to label Cuba a “state sponsor of terrorism.” Its economic sanctions continue to block nearly all bilateral trade, with the exception of U.S. agricultural exports to Cuba. U.S. sanctions continue to affect Cuban commerce with other countries. And while the new freedom for Cuban American travel is welcome, President Obama has created a deeply contradictory travel policy where one ethnic group can travel freely to Cuba, while all other Americans face licensing requirements and penalties derived from the Trading with the Enemy Act.

What does President Obama’s first year tell us about the approach he will take toward Cuba in his next three or seven years in office?

First, it is clear that the Obama Administration is not seeking a major Cuba initiative, and is far more likely to act through incremental steps than bold strokes. It does not accept the thesis that it can transform United States relations with Latin America through a radical, unilateral shift in its policy toward Cuba. Cuba is unlikely to be made a high-profile priority in American foreign policy, which perhaps befits a relationship that includes many disagreements but is fundamentally stable and entails no security threats to the United States.

It is also clear that President Obama feels no need to use dramatic rhetoric to remind Miami or Havana of Washington’s deep ideological differences with Cuba’s form of government. When it comes to relations between the governments, President Obama is interested in dialogue – not talking for the sake of talking, as he reminds us – and it seems likely that today’s limited agenda will expand to other issues of bilateral concern.

When it comes to relations between our societies, President Obama is in a halfway position between policies of his own and those of President Bush. He must decide fundamentally whether he sees contact between our peoples – and specifically, travel by Americans – as a benefit for both nations and a source of American influence in Cuba, or as an activity that has to be regulated and policed by the U.S. government bureaucracy. Now, he is in the absurd position of having one answer that applies to Cuban Americans and another when it comes to 300 million other Americans.

But there are reasons for optimism. President Obama’s actions with regard to Cuban American travel and remittances indicate that his Administration does not share the Bush Administration’s strong opposition to any measure that would increase transfers of hard currency to Cuba – a factor that justified President Bush’s travel restrictions. His actions toward Cuban artists and academics indicate an interest in greater communication between citizens and greater connection between our nations’ estranged cultures. And his top diplomat for Latin America, Assistant Secretary of State Arturo Valenzuela, has suggested that some of the Bush travel restrictions might be undone this year, so as “to permit more fluid connections between U.S. citizens and their counterparts in Cuba.”

This scenario – the likelihood of continued gradual opening in American policy toward Cuba by President Obama – is subject to change. The United States Congress could change it significantly by passing a law to end all travel restrictions. And if the Cuban

government makes changes in domestic policies to address challenges affecting Cuban society, it is possible that such changes would draw a response from the American president, even though they are not part of any diplomatic strategy directed toward Washington or any other place.

When Pope John Paul II visited Cuba, a friend brought me a mass card with a printed inscription in the Holy Father's handwriting: "Open the doors to Cuba." Would that it were so simple, that the measures that prevent both our nations' citizens from traveling, learning, and debating each other without asking any government's permission could disappear at a stroke. It cannot happen at a stroke. But from Washington, for now, it seems as if a change has begun.

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