

The “Obama Doctrine”: Engaging Cuba but...

Written by Alessandro Badella

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/04/30/the-obama-doctrine-engaging-cuba-but/>

ALESSANDRO BADELLA, APR 30 2015

Since Barack Obama took the White House, scholars have been wondering if he would have a “doctrine” or “grand strategy” in foreign policy, a sort of trademark to deal with US international relations. Even if for some analysts the answer was “no” (Drezner 2011; Dueck 2011), and Obama’s foreign policy has been depicted as a mix of pragmatism and neo-Wilsonism (Indyk et al. 2012; Ralston 2011), in recent weeks the president himself described his own “doctrine” in these terms:

You take a country like Cuba. For us to test the possibility that engagement leads to a better outcome for the Cuban people, there aren’t that many risks for us. It’s a tiny little country. It’s not one that threatens our core security interests, and so [there’s no reason not] to test the proposition. And if it turns out that it doesn’t lead to better outcomes, we can adjust our policies (...). You asked about an Obama doctrine. The doctrine is: We will engage, but we preserve all our capabilities.

As the elaboration of such a “doctrine” explicitly referred to the Cuban case, we can look at the recent thaw in US-Cuba relations under the light of this foreign policy paradigm.

Engaging Cuba...

The first word that comes mind is “engagement”. This is what the Obama administration is pursuing with Cuba, especially since December 2014. In a historical speech, Obama laid down a new approach on Cuba that focused on the restoration of state-to-state relations with the communist island. In the last few months, this approach has had several consequences for the highly conflicted US-Cuba bilateral relationship. In general, the US is adopting some different policies to loosen the diplomatic and economic pressure on Havana.

First, the two countries held bilateral high-level meetings (and Obama met Raúl Castro in Panama in April 2015), which is an evident improvement that would probably lead to a restoration of normal diplomatic relations and to the opening of an American embassy in Havana (and a Cuban embassy in Washington). We could say that these two countries are no longer enemies.

Second, the president decided to endorse the removal of Cuba from the US State Department list of countries sponsoring international terrorism, to which it had belonged since 1982. Waiting for the final announcement, we should consider that this evolution in US policy is remarkable. In recent years, the evidences that Cuba was sponsoring and financing international terrorism were scarce as the State Department explained in its report for FY2013: “There was no indication that the Cuban government provided weapons or paramilitary training to terrorist groups” (p. 17). In fact, the main justification for keeping Cuba in such a list was the fact that the Cuban authorities never accepted the transfer of American fugitives residing on the island. However, as president Obama suggested, the US administration is now considering this fact lower in importance: the State Department and Obama are pursuing a review of Cuba’s terrorist status “according to facts and the law” (as Obama said in December 2014), and the fact is that the US, as in the recent past, has no evidence of Cuban involvement in international terrorism and it is not a US security concern. As the State Department pointed out, “While the United States has had, and continues to have, significant concerns and disagreements with a wide range of Cuba’s policies and actions, these concerns and disagreements fall outside of the criteria for designation as a State Sponsor of Terrorism”

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Third, the removal of Cuba from the above-mentioned list would help the restoration of diplomatic relations. In fact, in the last year, the sanctions correlated to the presence in the list have created several difficulties to the normal functions of the Cuban Interest of Section in Washington, as the banks managing the Section’s account feared an economic and legal backlash from the American authorities and refuse to keep active those services. In other words, the removal of Cuba from the list was a necessary step to take in order to re-establish normal state-to-state relations with fully functioning diplomatic and consular services.

Fourth, the Obama administration is pushing for a regional re-integration of Cuba, as the last Summit of the Americas, the first since the 1994 convention in Miami to invite a Cuban president and delegation, has proved.

Engaging Cuba for...

When Obama took office the bilateral relationship with Cuba was at the lower point. The state-to-state relations had to cope with the difficult legacy of a 50-year embargo, Bush’s “War on terrorism”, the everlasting mistrust from Havana, and the growing criticisms from Latin American countries about US policy towards Cuba. The Cuba issue had to be managed by doing something innovative and creative. From this point of view, we should admit that Obama did and does not lack any courage in trying to appease the long-time US foes.

The main question is: Why did Obama change US foreign policy towards Cuba by opting for engagement over isolation and economic sanctions? Firstly, at a general level, Obama tried to re-new the American image abroad, focusing on the dialogue with the Muslim world (i.e.: the 2009 speech in Cairo) and other anti-American leaders worldwide. “Dialogue” and “engagement” seemed to be the magic bullets to restore the American leadership, dismissing the aggressive neo-conservative quest for the American hegemony of the Bush administration (Obama 2007; Kupchan 2010). Obama, even during his first electoral campaign, declared his intention to meet Raúl, as well as other US ‘foes’. Secondly, in the Cuban case, the internal electoral dynamics played an important role too. Unlike the past decades, there was a strong input to reshape US relations with Cuba (Dominguez 2014): the demographic and political evolution within the Florida community that shifted toward the Democrats in the last few years testifies that Cuba is no longer an enemy to isolate and punish to gain the Cuban-American vote[1] (Girard *et al.* 2010). In other words, opting for an engagement with Havana would probably be less expensive in terms of electoral outputs than in the previous decades, while Obama is experiencing a strong wind of popularity among resident Cubans too. In sum, the answer to the above-mentioned question would probably lay between Obama’s vision of the American leadership after the “War on terror” and the changing political and electoral dynamics within the Cuban-American community. Moreover, as confirmed in his December 2014 speech, Obama has shown no sympathy for the economic sanctions which ultimately failed to help the Cuban people and advance the American interest in Cuba.

The test was set: “Let’s try” said Obama to the *New York Times* in early April 2015. In fact, trying to engage Cuba on issues of mutual and common interest is what Obama has been systematically doing in recent months: as mentioned above, US administration is pushing for a more creative strategy toward the island, which means engaging the Cuban government. However, another main question arises: Why engage Cuba at all? As I suggested elsewhere (Badella 2014a; see also a more recent article in E-IR), the engagement of Cuba is just another way to support, with a different timing and means, a democratic transition of the island. In my opinion, the openings to Cuba, in terms of people-to-people’s contacts but also traditional diplomacy, are aimed at creating favourable conditions to help the independent civil society in Cuba, while engaging the Cuban government separately. In other words, the democratisation of the island, even if conceived as a gradual, slow and step-by-step process, remains the real aim of the Obama administration, like its predecessors. During his presidency, in each discourse on Cuba, even in his December 2014 speech, Obama repeated the same rhetoric of support to the democratic forces on the island: the instruments are different (remittances, high-level talks, and family travels instead of economic sanctions and isolation) but the pursuit of what president Clinton called “our common [democratic] destiny” (Clinton 1994) has survived. What is relevant here is that the engagement with the Cuban government could be functional to a more effective democracy promotion in Cuba: in Obama’s eyes, offering some “carrots” to Havana, along with the people-to-people’s contacts and the empowerment of the Cuban civil society, could generate further openings in the economic and political system.

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Summing up, Obama, even if with different political tools, is not moving away from the long-dated US “state policy” toward Cuba (Schoultz 2002): promoting democracy and a democratic transition in the island. The recent changes and openings in the realm of the state-to-state relations are complementary to this new strategy for old goals. This is exactly what Obama has tried and is trying to do with Iran (Akbarzadeh 2011).

Engaging Cuba but if...

Yes, engaging but if... These two prepositions matter. As Obama pointed out: “if it turns out that it doesn’t lead to better outcomes, we can adjust our policies (...). You asked about an Obama doctrine. The doctrine is: We will engage, but we preserve all our capabilities”. This is to say that gaining or not, “better outcomes” matter too. This is exactly what Obama intended when, in 2009, he said: “I am not interested in talking [with Cuba] for the sake of talking” (Obama 2009): the US is expecting something from the Cuban government, something beyond handshakes and high-level meetings. In the Cuban case, the results of this “liberal deal”, expanding commercial and diplomatic contacts to open the island up politically and economically, would be extremely important for evaluating further steps. If democracy and the independent civil society will not spread, this “deal” would probably be a failure, as if Iran will not scale down its nuclear ambition[2].

The Obama doctrine almost resembles Carter’s “age of limits”[3] (Dumbrell 2013; Moynihan 1977), and Obama’s strategy in Cuba has something in common with that of the former president (Carter 2002; Badella 2014b). This new “grand strategy” Obama recently announced, which is highly based on dialogue and engagement with enemies, should pass the test of its outcomes. As Cuba was a great (failed) test for Carter’s policy of engagement in the late 1970s (Morley 1987: 255-266; Schoultz 2009: 291-361), the Castrist island could represent a major challenge for this “Obama doctrine”.

If democratic transition remains the main goal for the US in Cuba, opening up its economy would not necessarily lead to a democratic transition, as the Chinese and Vietnamese suggest (despite those countries entered the global capitalistic marketplace, and despite their internal economic changes, a strong process of democratization never took place). In the meanwhile, “Cuba is not Dubai”, as an official from the *US-Cuba Trade and Economic Council* recalled: the state is still a gatekeeper for the access to liberalized international investments. Obama is probably testing the water for further engagement, according to the above-mentioned “better outcomes”, hoping that Cuba would reciprocate US gestures, for example liberalizing further on the Cuban economy and the internal political process. However, the Cuban government seems eager to discuss everything with the US, even giving some important concessions, such as the liberation of Alan Gross and other political prisoners following the December 2014 agreement, but the political system of the Revolution seems to be off limits, as the Cuban Foreign Minister and Raúl himself confirmed in Panama (*Granma* 2015: 7).

Moreover, as emerged from the Panama Summit, the idea of an independent civil society (on which Obama’s people-to-people’s diplomacy with the island is based) is a thorny issue, as both sides have a different image of “*la verdadera sociedad civil cubana*”. As some scholars noted (Fernández 2008; Fernández 2003; Bobes 2013; Hansing 2011; Crahan & Armory 2007; Hernández 2003), the US is insisting on the independent civil society, which mainly means dissidents and opposers of the Cuban government (along with some non-political groups, such as the Catholic Church). On the contrary, for the Cuban government, “civil society” means the recognised mass organisations, which are directly controlled by the state and the party (i.e.: Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, Federation of Cuban Women, Union of Young Communists of Cuba, and other state-controlled NGOs). In Panama, the clash between these two coexisting elements within the Cuban society was extremely evident, as it will be in post-Castro Cuba (Fernández 2014). Moreover, there are several issues involved, mainly regarding the growing bilateral expectations (the US is expecting democratic reform, while Cuba is pushing for a repeal of the embargo, and so on...), while the opening of an American embassy in Havana would raise further questions.

What if something goes wrong? What if a bloody and devastating transition (on the Haitian model for instance) occurs in Cuba? What if, as happened in the past (de Miranda Parrondo 2008; Pérez-Lopez 2003), the Cuban government decides to crack down on private micro-enterprises after the economic recovery? What if the *Polity IV*[4] does not change or it gets worse? According to Obama, the US should “adjust [their] policies” and “preserve [their]

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capabilities”. While Obama is advocating an active and strong role for the president in controlling and implementing US policy toward Cuba, a role stripped away by the Helms-Burton Act[5], he seems also to be implying that these openings to Cuba would be measured on Cuba’s decision to cooperate with the US for a democratic transition (or “better outcomes for the Cuban people”, as Obama said to the *NYT*). This is to say that Obama is not perceiving the openings to Cuba as an everlasting and irreversible step, but only as functionally oriented to improve US goals on the island (in particular, democracy promotion score and effectivity and the Cuban democratic transition), while giving some “carrots” to Havana in order to reform its economic and political system, a re-edited version of the Cuban dilemma of the early 1990s: reform or perish (Schulz 1993). And this is exactly what he did before December 2014 (Badella 2014b; Morales Domínguez 2011). In other words, the president is not engaging Cuba for the sake of engaging an old-time enemy.

Obama is probably writing history in US-Cuba relations. And the “Obama doctrine” is Obama’s pen. However, the duration and pace of the appeasement with Havana and its further evolution (in both directions) is linked to Cuba’s internal political changes. This kind of relation (a new *modus vivendi*, a “new normal”) is anything but a normalized one. With or without an embassy in Havana.

Notes

[1] I refer here to a demographical and political evolution within the Cuban-American community because, as the FIU Cuba Poll has been showing, the “wave” of arrival from Cuba matters in the Cuban-American political choices: Cuban migrants from more recent migration waves seem to be more liberal on the Cuba issue (which means less favourable to the embargo and more favourable in restoring diplomatic and economic ties with Havana) and, in the end, they are supporting Obama (and his policy) and voting for Democratic candidates. On the contrary, the “old guard” remains faithfully committed to its Republican affiliation and to the use of coercive form of persuasion.

[2] Personally I am not against the US appeasement with Cuba and the removal of economic sanctions, I am just pointing out that such an opening to Havana is finalised to improve US national interest in Cuba (democracy promotion in particular) and should be judged as instruments to improve the Cuban human rights and democratic score.

[3] In his inaugural address, president Carter declared: “We have learned that ‘more’ is not necessarily ‘better’, that even our great nation has its recognized limits and that we can neither answer nor solve all problems” (Carter 1977). These words clearly referred to US failure in Vietnam, which implied the need for the US to restore an international consensus, as Obama had to do after the Iraqi failure.

[4] The *Polity IV* index measures the level of democracy (or the stability of a regime) in a country, considering different political variables such as the chief executive recruitment system, the competitiveness of executive recruitment, the openness of executive recruitment and other political indicators.

[5] According to the text of the Helms-Burton Act (in particular Title II), which transformed the Cuban embargo into an act of the Congress, the president would need the help of the Congress (and its approval) to remove the economic sanctions on the island. Unlike during the Cold War, the embargo codifications of 1992 and 1996 removed the presidential power to manage US foreign (economic) policy towards Cuba.

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