



Which Trump Will Cuba Have to Contend With, the Hard-Liner or the Dealmaker?

William M. LeoGrande | Wednesday, Nov. 16, 2016

Cuba was not a major issue in the 2016 presidential campaign, but U.S.-Cuban relations may be collateral damage of Donald Trump's stunning upset victory. Trump's campaign was never heavy on policy details, and over the months, he expressed contradictory views about President Barack Obama's policy of engagement with Havana. At first, he supported the opening (<http://www.tampabay.com/news/politics/stateroundup/donald-trump-says-its-fine-for-us-to-pursue-closer-cuba-ties/2244698>), though he said he would have gotten a better deal. Later, he seemed to embrace a more traditional Republican stance (<http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/16/politics/donald-trump-cuba/>) of hostility.

The language in the Republican Party's platform (https://prod-static-ngop-pbl.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/DRAFT_12_FINAL%5b1%5d-ben_1468872234.pdf) was reminiscent of the darkest days of the Cold War. It denounced Obama's policy as "a shameful accommodation to the demands of its tyrants," and offered normal relations only "after [Cuba's] corrupt rulers are forced from power and brought to account for their crimes against humanity."

But the candidate himself was largely silent until late September, when Newsweek broke the story (<http://www.newsweek.com/2016/10/14/donald-trump-cuban-embargo-castro-violated-florida-504059.html>) that in 1998, Trump secretly explored opening business operations in Cuba, in violation of the U.S. embargo, and then tried to disguise the illegal activity as a charitable project. In 1999, as Trump flirted with running for president in the 2000 election as the candidate of Ross Perot's Reform Party, he delivered a fiery speech (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YjEqTrHisFY>) to Cuban Americans in Miami, denouncing Fidel Castro as "a killer" and pledging to maintain the embargo. Newsweek's exposure of Trump's hypocrisy fueled speculation that his unconsummated 1998 business proposition might cost him Cuban American votes in 2016. Shortly after, Trump pivoted, announcing via Twitter: "The people of Cuba have struggled too long. Will reverse Obama's executive orders and concessions towards Cuba until freedoms are restored."



A home in Havana, Cuba, Nov. 8, 2016 (AP photo by Ramon Espinosa).

In the final weeks of the campaign, the Republican ticket focused on energizing its base in Florida, including conservative Cuban Americans. Campaigning in Miami, Trump and Pence both pledged to roll back (<http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2016/11/05/trump-pence-seek-cuban-american-vote-vow-to-repeal-obamas-cuba-deal.html>) every executive decision Obama had taken to improve relations with Havana. “We will support continuing the embargo until real political and religious freedoms are a reality for all the people of Cuba,” Pence said. “Donald Trump will stand with freedom-loving Cubans in the fight against Communist oppression.” In the end, Trump’s appeal to Cuban Americans had limited success. According to exit polls, he won somewhere between 52 percent and 54 percent (<http://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/election/article113778053.html>) of their votes, only slightly better than Mitt Romney in 2012.

Even in the final weeks of the race, Trump was at times more circumspect, avoiding details when pressed on his prospective Cuba policy. Obama had negotiated “a very weak agreement,” he said. “An agreement is fine. It has to be a strong, good agreement that’s good for the Cuban people.” Before developing his own approach, he told the Miami Herald (<http://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/election/donald-trump/article110344912.html>), “I want to listen specifically to what Cuban people who came to this country and who have lived in this country—Cuban Americans—I want to hear how they feel about it.” This suggested that Trump might not automatically abandon the diplomatic process Obama began, but instead stiffen U.S. bargaining positions. Certainly, if Trump talked to a cross-section of Cuban Americans, he would find that a majority of them supported Obama’s policy (<https://cri.fiu.edu/events/2016/the-2016-fiu-cuba-poll/cuba-poll-web.pdf>) of engagement, as did an even larger majority of the general public (<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/cp/international/obama-in-cuba/most-americans-support-ending-cuba-embargo-nyt-poll-finds>).

Cubans know how to deal with U.S. hostility—they survived more than half a century of it.

Which Donald Trump will Havana have to contend with—the hard-liner who promised to roll back everything Obama did, or the dealmaker willing to negotiate when it’s in U.S. interests? Would Trump abrogate the dozen bilateral agreements already signed with Havana in mutually beneficial areas like environmental protection and counternarcotics cooperation, or would he continue the talks underway on half a dozen other issues?

Cuba is unlikely to be a White House priority under Trump, so policy will depend in part on who manages it. One of Trump’s candidates (<http://www.politico.com/story/2016/11/who-is-in-president-trump-cabinet-231071>) for secretary of state, neocon John Bolton, falsely accused Cuba (http://www.democracynow.org/2005/4/13/headlines/top_state_dept_official_accuses_bolton_of_abusing_authority) of developing

biological weapons during former President George W. Bush's administration. However, another contender, Republican Sen. Bob Corker, chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, has been noncommittal (<http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/270575-senate-chairman-sees-possible-end-of-cuba-embargo>) on the issue of Cuba, and might counsel Trump to revise Obama's policy rather than trash it.

Cuban officials scrupulously refrained from commenting (<http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2016-07-20/the-blockade-is-an-outdated-policy-and-must-end>) on the U.S. presidential campaign while it was underway, simply saying that they hoped whoever won would carry out the will of the American people, who were overwhelmingly in favor of normalization. The day after the election, Cuban President Raul Castro congratulated Trump on his victory, and the daily newspaper Granma quoted the olive branch (<http://en.granma.cu/mundo/2016-11-10/raul-sends-message-of-congratulations-to-president-elect-trump>) in Trump's victory speech: "We will get along with all other nations willing to get along with us. . . . We will seek common ground, not hostility; partnership, not conflict." At the same time, the Cuban government also announced the beginning (<http://www.granma.cu/cuba/2016-11-09/ejercicio-estrategico-bastion-2016-del-16-al-18-de-noviembre-09-11-2016-02-11-21>) of its annual national defense exercises. The message to Washington was clear: Havana was ready to continue the diplomatic dialogue but prepared to defend itself if necessary.

If faced with a new Cold War, Cuba is likely to respond as it did in years past—by seeking alliances with other global powers capable of providing some protection against U.S. hostility. Russia, for example, is interested in re-establishing military bases (<http://bigstory.ap.org/article/1df5262286c04f3583a233bcf654ccc7/russian-military-considers-return-cuba-vietnam>) on the island, according to Deputy Minister of Defense Nikolai Pankov.

For those Cuban leaders who regard Obama's policy of engagement as a Trojan Horse (<http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2016-03-30/the-good-obama>) designed to subvert the regime with soft power, especially an influx of American travelers, trade and investment, a return to the old policy of hostility would be a blessing in disguise. Cubans know how to deal with U.S. hostility—they survived more than half a century of it. The government will invoke nationalist appeals to rally people around the flag, brand dissidents as a fifth column, and close the political space for freer expression that has opened up over the past two years. The hard-liners in Havana and the hard-liners in Washington are strange bedfellows who share a common interest in preventing the normalization of U.S.-Cuban relations.

Castro and Obama worked hard to make the policy of engagement irreversible. They made remarkable progress in just two years, but it is not clear if they created enough influential stakeholders to counter the cold warriors on both sides of the Florida Strait, or to convince Trump that making a deal with Havana is a better bet than blowing up the bargaining table.

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