



## **President Obama's Visit to Cuba: Perspectives from the US and Cuba**

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### **Perspective from the United States**

President Barak Obama has announced that he would be visiting Cuba in March, 2016. The President's Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes is playing an integral role in the process of restoring the relationship between the two nations. He took part in the secret negotiations between the governments in Canada, with the support of Pope Francis and the Vatican. The announcement marks a step towards building a post Cold War relationship with the island nation, which is closer to Florida than Washington DC. This would be the first visit by a President of the United States to Cuba since the Communist revolution and also the first since President Calvin Coolidge's visit in 1928.

President Obama has stated that it is time for the US to take corrective actions in its policies towards Cuba. Decades of US isolation of Cuba have failed to accomplish the objective of establishing a democratic government and remove the Castros and the Communist Party from power. This policy has been disadvantageous to the US. The US has been isolated from its regional and international partners, constrained its ability to influence outcomes throughout the Western Hemisphere, and impaired the use of the full range of tools available to the US to promote positive change in Cuba.<sup>1</sup> The visit

would allow the US to engage with the Cuban government and the people without discord or suspicion of its motives.

The visit is also being undertaken with a possible view at helping increase the US interests and trade with the island nation. US companies, especially in the tourism sector are looking for opportunities to invest in Cuba. The close proximity and family linkages also mean that the number of tourists from the US to Cuba would see a rise as the relations normalise contributing to the economy. With more direct flights and ferries resuming their operations, opportunities and economic growth will follow. Cuba is also allowing its citizens access to Wi-Fi and internet hotspots to access information and to start their own business.

President Obama has been criticised by Republican Presidential candidates, Sen. Ted Cruz and Senator Marco Rubio, who stated that the visit was an approval of the 'oppressive' regime of Cuba. In addressing his critics, President Obama in his statement, announcing the visit, stated that serious differences between the two nations continue to exist on human rights, democracy and the freedom of press. They differ on their positions on each, but he hopes to discuss these issues candidly with the Cuban political establishment, while reaffirming US support to these values. He wants to reach out to the future generation, the young Cubans to help re-write this relationship.

President Coolidge's visit, nearly ninety years ago, was in the backdrop of growing resentment against American policies among the countries of the region and to rebuild good relations with Cuba, which had soured due to the Platt Amendment.<sup>2</sup> In this endeavour, he did not succeed as he was unwilling to change his position on the amendment provision. President Obama is also visiting Cuba at a time when there is an economic slowdown in the region and the political leadership of the nations is looking to the US to take the blame. President Obama, like his predecessor, wants to visit Cuba with a message of change and to write a new chapter in the relationship. It is hoped that he would be successful, unlike his predecessor.

## Perspective from Cuba

The upcoming visit by President Barack Obama to Cuba will be the latest development in the process of normalization that began between the two countries in December 2014. When President Obama and the Cuban President Raul Castro shook hands with each other at the Summit of the Americas at Panama in April 2015, it was the first instance of the Presidents of US and Cuba to do so since the severing of ties between the two countries in 1961.<sup>3</sup>

The meeting came four months after the two countries resolved to break the five decade long tradition of diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions. The two countries commemorated the softening of stance and revaluation of their policy towards each other by initiating a prisoner swap, during which Havana released a jailed contractor from the US.

Experts have suggested that the opening of relations between the two countries is mutually beneficial for both. It would help the prospects of the Cuban economy in expansion and development, and, for the US, thawing of relations with Cuba would help in broadening its influence in the Latin American region.

The mistrust and animosity between the US and Cuba is based in the Cold War era. The Communist political ideology followed in Cuba, the Bay of Pigs invasion, Cuban affinity towards the former Soviet Union and the Cuban Missile Crisis are some of the prominent events that manifest the character of relations that the countries have had till recent times.<sup>4</sup>

However, since 2014, Havana and Washington have begun working towards the betterment of ties between the countries. On December 17, 2014, the US and Cuba announced complete restoration of diplomatic ties between the two countries. This journey was embarked upon by a prisoner swap where three members of the Cuban-Five were exchanged for U.S. Intelligence asset, Rolando Saraff Truhillo.

Since then, the countries have opened their embassies in each other's capitals; however, White House is yet to name an Ambassador to Cuba. New travel and trade regulations were also issued by the US and the need for US citizens to obtain a government permission to travel to Cuba has been revoked. New direct flights have also been announced and the airlines are no longer stopped from landing on Cuban airports.

The reforms have made a small dent in the economic sanctions and should not be seen as purely diplomatic in nature. The travellers from the US to Cuba can now use US credit and debit cards and US banks will facilitate and authorize such transactions. US companies will provide travel insurance to such travellers. US companies have also been given the permission to invest in small Cuban Companies.

These initiatives have been criticized by the Conservatives in the US, particularly Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio, who happen to be Conservatives of Cuban descent.<sup>5</sup>

While the restoration of diplomatic ties between the two countries has been celebrated by the Cubans, what is most needed and desired by Cubans is the lifting of economic sanctions by the US. The economic embargo was placed on Cuba by the Kennedy administration in October 1960 and it has resulted in an estimated loss of approximately \$1.126 trillion USD since then.<sup>6</sup> The recent detente in the US-Cuba relations has given people hope that the economic sanctions will be lifted. However, the economic sanctions have their roots in the Helms-Burton Act that revolves around the federal law in the United States, which strengthens and continues the US embargo against Cuba.<sup>7</sup>

While the Cubans have been demanding the lifting of this sanction and the President has stated that "the sanctions will inevitably have to be lifted," the decision to end the embargo lies in the hands of the US Congress. Most experts believe that the complete eradication of the embargo seems doubtful.<sup>8</sup>

The Cubans have also demanded the return of Guantanamo Bay. The Castro regime that came into power in 1959 after the revolution has had a long standing demand of the returning of Guantanamo Bay. They state that the US occupation of the land constitutes a violation of International laws.

The US, however, denies any such violation as Guantanamo Bay was leased to the US in 1903. The legal provision states that the lease would stand permanent until revoked by mutual consent. The White House said that President Obama “does believe that the prison at Guantanamo Bay should be closed down ... but not the naval base.” The future of the Guantanamo Bay remains unclear as of now.<sup>9</sup>

Both US President Barack Obama and Cuban President Raul Castro would want this detente to be successful so as to leave behind a legacy of peace.

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*The Views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The White House, “Charting a New Course on Cuba,” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/foreign-policy/cuba>, (Accessed on 23 February 2016).

<sup>2</sup> The Platt Amendment, (1901) an amendment to a U.S. Army Appropriations Bill, established the terms under which the United States would end its military occupation of Cuba (which had begun in 1898 during the Spanish-American War) and “leave the government and control of the island of Cuba to its people.” The Platt Amendment laid down eight conditions to which the Cuban Government had to agree before the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the transfer of sovereignty would begin. The Platt Amendment’s conditions prohibited the Cuban Government from entering into any international treaty that would compromise Cuban independence or allow foreign powers to use the island for military purposes. The United States also reserved the right to intervene in Cuban affairs in order to defend Cuban independence and to maintain “a government adequate for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty.” Other conditions of the Amendment demanded that the Cuban Government implement plans to improve sanitary conditions on the island, relinquish claims on the Isle of Pines (now known as the Isla de la Juventud), and agree to sell or lease territory for coaling and naval stations to the United States (This clause ultimately led to the perpetual lease by the United States of Guantánamo Bay). Finally, the amendment required the Cuban Government to conclude a treaty with the United States that would make the Platt amendment legally binding, and the United States pressured the Cubans to incorporate the terms of the Platt Amendment in the Cuban constitution. Source: US DoS, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/platt>.

<sup>3</sup> Ashley Miller and Ted Piccone, "Shifting Gears? How Cuba-U.S. Rapprochement is Playing out at the Human Rights Council," 27 January 2016, Brookings Report, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2016/01/27-us-cuba-rapprochement-un-miller-piccone> (Accessed February 23, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Renwick, CFR Backgrounders (2015), Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.cfr.org/cuba/us-cuba-relations/p11113> (Accessed February 23, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> "Cubans Welcome News of Obama Visit in March," 19 February 2016, *Latin Dispatch*, [http://latindispatch.com/2016/02/19/cubans-welcome-news-of-obama-visit-in-march/?utm\\_source=feedburner&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Feed%3A+LatinAmericaNewsDispatchTodayInLatinAmerica+%28Today+in+Latin+America%29](http://latindispatch.com/2016/02/19/cubans-welcome-news-of-obama-visit-in-march/?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+LatinAmericaNewsDispatchTodayInLatinAmerica+%28Today+in+Latin+America%29) (Accessed 22 February 2016)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity (Libertad) Act of 1996, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Documents/libertad.pdf> (Accessed February 23, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> "Obama Chips Away at Cuba Embargo, Discusses Efforts with Raul Castro," 18 February 2016, Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-usa-trade-idUSKCN0RI1EF20150918> (Accessed February 23, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> "US Rejects Cuba Demand to Hand Back Guantanamo Bay Base," 30 January 2016, *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-31029946>, (Accessed February 25, 2016).