



US-Cuba Relations: Is this the Beginning of a New Chapter?

*Dr Stuti Banerjee**

On April 11, 2015, President Barack Obama and President Raúl Castro shook hands at the Summit of the Americas in Panama, marking the first meeting between a US and a Cuban Head of State since the two countries severed ties in 1961. The White House also announced that the US will remove Cuba from the State Department's list of nations that sponsor terrorism, eliminating a major obstacle to the restoration of diplomatic relations after decades of hostilities. It was included in the list for its support to the leftist insurgency movements in Latin America.

The meeting between the two Presidents came four months after they declared that the two nations were restoring relations and high-level talks began to open a US embassy in Havana. The occasion was also marked by a prisoner swap with Havana releasing a jailed US contractor and an unnamed US intelligence asset, who had been imprisoned for 20 years, while the US government released the remaining three members of the spy ring known as the Cuban Five from the federal prison.

The announcements mark the beginning of what has been described as the 'normalisation' of relations between the two neighbours: different in size, political culture and economic values. Yet, Cuba is closer to the US state of Florida than the US capital city of

Washington. This close proximity means that the southern states of the US have huge Cuban migrant populations. Domestically, they are becoming an important constituency within the political landscape of the US. With the young Cuban migrants and second generation Cubans born and brought up in the US, normalisation of relations is seen as the way forward. However, the early migrants, who fled from the 'Castro regime', don't endorse the policy. They feel that the political sphere has not changed in Cuba and that it is still controlled by the government.

The meeting between the two leaders in Panama may be called historic, but it was largely symbolic as no decisions were made. However, the message was clear that similar meetings in the future would have more substance in the form of agreements and collaborations. The two leaders agreed that they have their differences, but they also agreed that they can do business with each other. The US trade embargo on Cuba, which requires Congressional approval to be rescinded, is unlikely to be lifted any time soon. However, experts feel that it would be repealed as relations develop. The comprehensive reforms in immigration laws and US drugs policy require more substantive cooperation between US and the region as a whole. Nonetheless the steps taken by the White House on these issues and on Cuba especially are going to improve the overall relationship between the US and Latin America.

Within the region, Washington's new Cuban policy would help in removing a long standing irritant in its Latin America policy. It would allow the US to build more positive and productive relationships with its southern neighbours. US relations with Brazil have become strained due to the National Security Agency's (NSA) espionage activities on President Dilma Rousseff. The recent protests in Brazil against President Rousseff on allegations of corruption have further added to the strain. However, the possible June visit by the Brazilian President to Washington is expected to lead to positive outcomes.

Good relations with Brazil, a powerful player in the politics of the region, would help the US offset the differences arising between Venezuela and the US. In March 2015,

President Obama applied sanctions on seven Venezuelan officials on grounds of human rights violations and corruption. This is in addition to the legislations passed by the US Congress in 2014, authorising penalties, such as visa ban and freezing of assets of those accused of carrying out acts of violence against the people.

Good relations between the US and Latin America, including Cuba, would allow the US to gather support to resolve other key hemispherical issues that remain pending. Chief among them is the movement of illegal drugs. The US drug policy has caused resentment. The Obama administration has rejected the term 'war on drugs' and is encouraging each country to work with the US to build policies to address the issue. The other issue of major concern is the US policy on immigration. The US administration's change to the immigration policy, which is making it easier for some illegal migrants to get citizenship, has brought about a positive change in the attitude of the governments. They are now more open to the US proposals that would stem this flow of illegal migrants; a large majority of them are unaccompanied minors.

The normalisation of relations between the US and Cuba would be beneficial to both. It would allow the US to restore relations with the countries of the region, who have traditionally viewed the US as interfering in their domestic matters. For Cuba, it would not just help establish contact with Cuban immigrants now settled in the US, but also help in economic growth. It would be a long process with both countries taking time to overcome the trust deficit that has built over the years. Nonetheless, the dividend outweighs the differences.

**Dr. Stuti Banerjee is Research Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*