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The Implications of the Cuba -EU Agreement on Enhanced Political Dialogue and Cooperation

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Havana finds Brussels Again

On Friday, 11 March 2016, the European Union and Cuba signed a historic agreement, the Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement (PDCA), to further improve relations that have grown slowly since the start of high-level dialogue between the two parties in 2008. This coincides with the growing rapprochement between Cuba and the US under Barack Obama, and suggests that something deeper than meets the eye is happening in Cuba's foreign relations.

While this might be seen as marking the beginning of the end of an important chapter of the Cold War global relations that remained frozen after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Relations between the West and Cuba represent a rescue of Cold War diplomacy and power relations. Whether the recent developments mark a break with this ideological quagmire and if the Cuba-EU agreement will overcome the deep-seated conditions that have frozen the relations up to this point are key questions to be debated as we discuss the future of Cuba in the world. Also crucial is to reflect on the implications of this for the Cuban model of governance and development.

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provide members of the
policy community with
concise but trenchant
analyses of topical
issues. Comments and
suggestions are invited.*



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The Evolution of Cuba-EU Relations

Cuba and the EU simultaneously announced the conclusion of the agreement after months of tough negotiations, indicating in the process that this was a major advance after eight high-level dialogues in search of the basis for new relations between the two parties. Of course, the political dialogue happened in the context of the isolation of Cuba or frozen relations between Cuba and key western powers that followed the US policy on the tiny island for five decades reached a cul-de-sac, a dead end. The successful revolution against the Western-backed government brought the socialist revolutionary government of Fidel Castro in this island off the coast of the big capitalist force, the US, in 1959, leading to the freezing of the relations and pushed Cuba deeper and deeper into the Soviet bloc. Consistent with Cold War madness, the US imposed a complete economic blockage to force the island to its knees and cause its people to rise up against the post-revolution government as would be the case with many of the US' enemies in South and Central America. Cuba survived this and learned to endure the punishing blockage and demonization on the western public discourse. It decides to keep to its chosen path of a social revolution instead of the liberal route favoured by western powers.

During and after the Cold War, Cuba maintained its anti-imperialist posture and its commitment to ideological sovereignty, its choice of the strategic path for the island, to the chagrin of dominant global powers.

Repeatedly, the US intensified its efforts to bring Cuba to its knees, ensuring that the benefits of intense globalization after full-scale Cold War did not extend to this island state. Cuba continued to be one of the rallying points in southern solidarity against the vestiges of western imperial designs over the world order and a key actor in south-south cooperation.

Unlike the US, the EU had among its political elite those who had considered Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and the socialist experiment as exemplary in some ways. The EU had maintained commercial ties to the extent that Cuba had access to hard currency for trade. Accordingly, the EU imports from Cuba grew at an annual rate of 7.2 percent between 2010 and 2014, while exports grew at 5.2 percent, implying that the trade though modest grew in favor of Cuba. This trade was dominated by agricultural products and fisheries which the EU imported, followed by manufactured goods it exported to Cuba. In particular, Cuba imported machinery, appliances, chemical products, plastic and rubber goods, while the EU imported from Cuba cigarettes, foodstuff, beverages, mineral goods and animal products. The value of trade has increased consistently and steadily since 2003, from about 1,600 million Euros to about 2,100 million Euros in 2014, after a slump at the start of the global financial crisis in 2008 and 2009.

Though the trade volumes remain small and the trade balance remains poor, trade statistics tell the story of growing economic relations, and this suggests that with deeper dialogue between the two, the trade and investment trends will improve steadily in the coming years.

After the Iron Curtain

When the iron curtain between the Soviet Union and the West fell, the EU did not take long before it sought a new direction to the relations with the hope that it could influence and support political reforms in Cuba.

The 1996 Common Position on Cuba provided for political dialogue, humanitarian assistance and development aid for Cuba for purposes of promoting the western way in the island including liberal democracy and a liberal understanding of human rights. The number of EU states with bilateral relations with Cuba increased as Eastern European countries joined in the EU, so that in 2003, 16 of 23 EU states had diplomatic missions in Havana, which is an overwhelming portion of the EU. These together with the EU office develop a large array of relationships covering academic exchange, scientific programmes, cultural initiatives, tourism, sports and business.

In 2003, the relations worsened when there was a clampdown in Havana on dissident groups, which the EU interpreted as human rights violations, resulting in the EU imposing sanctions against Cuba. But the modest trade and contact with Cuba continued but did not increase or intensify in any significant way. Cuba considered economic relations crucial while resisting the EU's civilizing attitude in respect of political relations.

Cuba applied to join the Cotonou Agreement governing EU relations with African, Caribbean and Pacific countries (ACP) where it had been excluded because in the early 2000s the EU took a hardline stance on matters of democracy and human rights. Several times it placed Cuba in the agenda of the Human Rights Commission at the United Nations and the Cotonou Agreement promoted the idea of conditionality, making human rights a key precondition for relations and cooperation. For this reason, Cuba's overtures were not returned until the government clampdown on dissidents in Havana in 2003, coinciding with the US invasion of Iraq which shook Havana, led to a sudden decline of relations. For about a year, the two parties froze high-level dialogue and limited cooperation generally, and Cuba rejected EU aid, fearing it would be used to settle political scores.

But the return of socialists as government in Spain in 2004 saw this country lead a policy softening in the EU towards Cuba and the rest of Latin America. The case for lifting sanctions gathered momentum so that four years later the EU voted to lift the measures and begin high-level political dialogue. The transition in the Cuban leadership also assisted in improving these dialogues. Relations with Spain have remained special for Cuba's relationship with Europe, mainly because the outlook of a government in Madrid has a significant influence on Cuba-West European relations. Yet, the bilateral relations between Cuba and Spain have also weakened to mere formality as a result of the Cold War position that the whole of the West held on Cuba. While Spain has, from time to time, argued for a Cuban policy within the EU, but there are no indications that it has argued for full normalization on the - basis of respect for Cuba's sovereignty and identification of shared interests between Western Europe (represented by the EU in this case) and the island.

Cuba, on its part, has pursued a foreign policy that hinges on strong sovereignty and cooperation among Latin American and Caribbean countries and finding a new relationship with the West. It has pursued the idea of dialogue with both sides in order to help define its role in both geopolitical zones. Discussions with Latin America improved a lot with the assistance and support of Venezuela under Hugo Chavez, with Venezuela becoming the bridge between the two including in concrete cooperation in areas such as trade, health and education.

The Cuba-EU relations pivot on the changing EU relations with Latin America and the Caribbean, a complicated picture of growth and decline, year on year. The recently signed Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement provides for stronger political dialogue on matters of common interest in respect of global affairs; defining areas of functional cooperation; boosting economic relations; and bilateral development cooperation.

The EU needs new markets and Cuba needs expanded relations to support its gradual transition.

Whither Cuba after Rapprochement?

One of the main implications of this is that Cuba is being enticed to open up to the dictates of the West and its market forces in the hope that this would transform Cuba into yet another market and clientele state for western powers. This means that Cuba may lose its unique development and political path, and force it into a position similar to all small, island and developing states whose situation is well explained in documents of the UN conference on small and island developing states.

It could also mean that Cuba may negotiate its interests and outlook with those most able and willing to forcibly change Cuba sometime in future. Happening at the time when Latin American demands for policy and ideological sovereignty are being met with Western efforts to bring the region within the global western system, Cuba may join this trend in weakening the so-called leftist tendencies in the region or be part of the assertive Latin America demanding more equitable economic relations and asserting its political sovereignty. After all, many countries in the region and the Third World generally remain inspired by the discipline of the Cuban state in choosing the direction and pace of its development, having observed the devastation caused all over the south by the imposition of Western development aspirations on developing countries.

It is inevitable though that Cuba will be forced to make certain adjustments as it navigates the implications of this reaching out to it by major Western powers. If these powers are looking not just for friendly co-existence or co-presence, but are looking to open new markets previously closed to them by virtue of their own ideology-inspired sanctions and economic blockage and to expand the reach of their political liberalism, Cuba is to see massive infiltration, subversion and influence to alter its chosen path of development.

Because Cuba has learned resilience and self-reliance, thanks to fifty years of blockage, it is not desperate to receive help from the West and thus if it is wise it can determine the terms of the transition that it is about to go through.

The EU rapprochement is a calculated strategy in search of markets that have not been fully exploited and to advance western civilization into pockets of areas still lightly affected like Cuba. This will also open Cuba up to normal capitalist economic activities and corporations the world over will line up for entry into its mineral, agricultural, marine and tourism industries especially. When that happens, countries that have had longstanding political relations with Cuba will have to be ready to compete for economic opportunities that will follow economic reforms to come.

Recommendations

Africa and South Africa

Africa and South Africa need to analyse closely what the developments around Cuba mean in terms of challenges and opportunities for their diplomacy and cooperation.

They need to consider repositioning their diplomatic missions to explore opportunities in economic, cultural, scientific, educational and technological cooperation.

They need to be ready to stand in solidarity with Cuba should these developments lead to instability and major adjustment problems.

Cuba

Cuba must consider entering into heightened political dialogue with its historical friends such as Africa to consult on how to collectively respond to this interest by hawkish western powers on closer relations with Cuba.

Cuba needs to prioritize and to the extent possible enhance economic, scientific/educational and developmental cooperation with Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean to ensure diversity of its international relations does not diminish under the weight of intense engagement with the West.

Cuba must revisit the lessons of former colonies and former Soviet republics in order not to repeat their mistakes in managing westernization.

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