

Will the American Elections Shake Up Washington's Cuba Policy?

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Theme: There are stark differences between the cold war outlook on Cuba promoted by John McCain and the more flexible approach suggested by Barack Obama.

Summary: On the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, the US and Cuba remain locked in a long Cold War that seems likely to persist, in some fashion, irrespective of which presidential candidate seizes the White House or how sure-footedly or ineptly Raúl Castro governs the island. The decisions on Cuba policy made by the next American President will depend to some degree on the influence of their Cuban American supporters and the political juncture that occurs in Cuba.

Analysis: American presidential election cycles have never been good for US-Cuban relations, but some years have been worse than others. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s was quickly followed by the US decision to ratify the Cuban Democracy Act in 1992, a measure to tighten the embargo that was initially opposed by then-President George H.W. Bush but embraced once his upstart challenger, Arkansas governor Bill Clinton, campaigned in its favour. In 1996, President Clinton felt compelled to endorse the widely maligned Helms-Burton Act, which codified the US embargo into law, to soothe Cuban American outrage after the Cuban government shot down civilian airplanes piloted by Miami-based exiles off Cuban shores. In 2000, the Clinton Administration's decision to return six-year old Elián Gonzalez to his father in Cuba provoked a firestorm in Miami and ultimately doomed Vice-president Al Gore's chance to win Florida –and the presidency– later that year to George W. Bush. In 2004, President Bush rolled out a 423-page Commission for Assistance to A Free Cuba and dramatically tightened the ban on US travel to the island in a successful bid to shore up eroding support among sceptical Cuban American hardliners.

By these dismal standards, US-Cuban relations in 2008 have been almost civilised –an even more striking occurrence given that Fidel Castro announced his long-awaited retirement in February, leaving his brother Raúl Castro in charge–. True, both of the main presidential candidates, John McCain and Barack Obama, have flown to Miami to give their major Latin America policy speeches before prominent Cuban American audiences, and there have been some scuffles and finger-pointing between the Bush and Castro governments about the failure to agree on whether and how the US should provide

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humanitarian assistance to Cuba in the aftermath of the devastating damage that the island suffered from Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. But even if US-Cuban relations show no signs of improving during the course of the American election campaign, nor have they deteriorated markedly.

President Bush's top political strategist Karl Rove has been reported to say: 'When people ask me about Cuba, it makes me think of three things: Florida, Florida, and Florida'. In that way, where candidates stand on Cuba policy is among a small number of niche ethnic issues that can make or break presidential campaigns. There is little question that the US electoral college has magnified the Cubans' influence far beyond what would have otherwise been possible. More than one million Cuban exiles have settled in southern Florida, and about 800,000 are voting-age citizens that account for 5% of the state's voting population. Florida's 27 electoral votes make it the fourth-largest vote haul in US presidential elections, behind only California, Texas, and New York. More important is the fact that Florida is the only state in the top four that remains competitive between Republicans and Democrats –demonstrated most famously in the 2000 election when the stand-off between George Bush and Al Gore resulted in a frantic recounting of hanging chads and butterfly ballots to determine the presidency–.

In October, Zogby and the Inter-American Dialogue released a poll of more than 4,700 voters that revealed 68% of Americans approved of lifting the travel ban on Cuba and 62% thought that US companies should be allowed to trade with Cuba. But discussions on Cuba policy remained largely on the margins of the presidential contest. When John McCain and Barack Obama met in their first presidential debate on 26 September, it was billed as a match-up on the crucial foreign policy questions confronting the US. In reality, however, the near-implosion of the US financial markets earlier in the week, coupled with the candidates' dramatic return to Washington to weigh in on the controversial US\$700 billion rescue package fashioned by the Bush Administration and congressional leaders, pushed foreign policy onto the back burner for the first third of the debate. The moderator Jim Lehrer of PBS guided the candidates through a predictable range of topics: Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, Russia, and the likelihood of another 9/11-style attack on the US. The phrase 'Latin America' was used only once, by Senator Obama, in reference to China's growing influence there. Brazil and Mexico, the two regional heavyweights with respective populations of 190 million and 110 million, were never mentioned at all. Venezuela was briefly invoked by both candidates, with Obama warning that the US needed to wean itself off foreign oil provided by 'rogue states' like Venezuela and Iran, while McCain mentioned Hugo Chávez as part of a list of foreign adversaries that he claimed that Obama had pledged to meet without 'preconditions'. McCain also named Raúl Castro as part of this same list.

An observer of these debates would infer that Latin America figures nowhere on the US foreign policy agenda, and this conclusion would be mostly right. In an election year where economic uncertainty has become so profound that it has partially eclipsed America's two foreign wars to become the issue of most pressing concern, Latin America remains very much off the radar screen of the American public, and questions about the future of Latin America policy are left virtually un-pursued outside of a small group of regional experts and specialised media. However, the lack of discussion of Latin American issues in the mainstream press does not mean that the candidates' campaigns have spent no time or energy in thinking through regional issues. Indeed, both John McCain and Barack Obama have assembled teams of Latin America policy experts, published position papers and made major policy speeches on Western Hemisphere

affairs, and mapped out approaches to the region if they achieve a victory to the White House. And on no single issue is the divide sharper, or their respective stances more illuminating, than on the issue of Cuba.

The general election battle between John McCain, the maverick 72-year old Vietnam War hero, and Barack Obama, the progressive 47-year old African-American lawyer, marks the starkest contrast between any two presidential candidates in recent memory. The vital importance of Florida, and its tempestuous Cuban-American voting bloc, meant that both campaigns were forced to define their stances on Cuba policy early in the process. Barack Obama first crystallised his views on the need to engage in dialogue with America's adversaries, including Cuba, in the Democratic debate on July 2007, when he argued that 'the notion that somehow not talking to countries is punishment to them – which has been the guiding diplomatic principle of this administration– is ridiculous'. Hillary Clinton disagreed, saying that 'certainly, we're not going to just have our president meet with Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez and, you know, the president of North Korea, Iran and Syria until we know better what the way forward would be'. In August 2007, Obama published an essay for the *Miami Herald* where he pledged to 'grant Cuban American unrestricted rights to visit family and send remittances to the island' and to use 'aggressive and principled diplomacy' through 'bilateral talks' to promote democracy in Cuba. He stuck to these themes throughout the campaign, while affirming his support for the embargo.

John McCain has frequently expressed his distaste for Fidel Castro during his quarter-century on Capitol Hill, but he had also helped to lead the charge on normalisation of relations between the US and Vietnam in the 1990s. Indeed, he sometimes struggled to explain why an approach that he supported in the case of Vietnam, a communist country where 58,000 American soldiers died in combat, was inappropriate for Cuba, an island just off the Florida coastline. In 2000, McCain told CNN, 'I'm not in favor of sticking my finger in the eye of Fidel Castro. In fact, I would favor a road map towards normalization of relations such as we presented to the Vietnamese and led to a normalization of relations towards our two countries'. By early 2007, however, McCain had overtly hardened his position on Cuba policy, gaining the support of prominent anti-Castro foes like the Florida legislators Lincoln and Mario Diaz-Balart and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, who declared that 'Senator McCain is a strong supporter of the US embargo of Cuba and... has been working with us to help bring freedom and democracy to the enslaved island'. In January 2008, Florida Senator Mel Martinez followed suit, praising McCain as someone with 'firsthand knowledge of the evils of communism', and adding 'I have total confidence that John McCain will be Fidel Castro's worst nightmare'.

It soon became clear that stark differences remained between the cold war outlook promoted by McCain and the more flexible approach suggested by Obama. Their sharpest policy differences were in two areas: Obama called for dramatically expanding the ability of Cuban Americans to travel and send remittances to Cuba, and he pledged to engage in dialogue with the Castro government. While some analysts have dismissed these proposals as trivial, they would nevertheless denote the sharpest break with the American policy of isolating Cuba since the end of the Cold War. In May 2008, their nearly back-to-back speeches on the issue in Miami highlighted how they viewed the Cuba issue. Whatever doubts McCain may have once harboured about the Cuban embargo had been fully purged from his political repertoire when he told a Cuban-American audience in Little Havana that Cuba was Fidel Castro's 'personal fiefdom', dismissing the reforms implemented by Raúl Castro as a 'smattering of small changes' that were meaningless to

‘the political prisoners that fill Cuban jails, to the millions who suffer under poverty and repression, and to all those who wish to choose their leaders, not suffer under them’. McCain pledged, ‘As President, I will not passively await the day when the Cuban people enjoy the blessings of freedom and democracy’. Instead, his Administration would forswear engaging with the Castro government while maintaining the embargo until the day when Cuba released its political prisoners, legalised opposition parties, and held internationally-monitored democratic elections. McCain also pledged greater support for Radio and TV Martí and dissident groups as well as stepped up efforts to convince European and Latin American allies of the wisdom of the US approach. If this all sounds eerily familiar, it is because John McCain is offering a firm recommitment to the same set of policies that have guided the Bush Administration in its dealings with Cuba. Indeed, one would need a magnifying glass to identify the differences.

Barack Obama elaborated on his views most notably before a meeting organised by the Cuban American National Foundation, which is still widely viewed as the bastion of Cuban exile politics. Although its policy views have moderated significantly during the Bush Administration, its influence in the Republican Party has also declined due to Byzantine schisms among rival factions in Miami. Obama told the group, ‘I know what the easy thing is to do for an American politician. Every four years, they come down to Miami, they talk tough, they go back to Washington, and nothing changes in Cuba’. He then recommitted himself to the premise that the goal of US policy is to democratise Cuba. ‘My policy toward Cuba will be guided by one word: *libertad*. And the road to freedom for all Cubans must begin with justice for Cuba’s political prisoners, the rights of free speech, a free press and freedom of assembly, and it must lead to elections that are free and fair’. Obama followed this standard political fare with a call for direct talks with Cuba. ‘After eight years of the disastrous policies of George Bush, it is time to pursue direct diplomacy, with friend and foe alike, without preconditions. There will be careful preparation. We will set a clear agenda. And as President, I would be willing to lead that diplomacy at a time and place of my choosing, but only when we have an opportunity to advance the interests of the United States, and to advance the cause of freedom for the Cuban people’. Obama’s call for diplomacy, together with his stated interest in removing barriers to Cuban American travel and exchange, suggested a likely departure from the policies of isolation advocated by the Bush Administration. Still, Obama did have one important applause line tucked up his sleeve for his Miami audience. ‘I will maintain the embargo’, he said, describing it as ‘leverage’ over the Cuban regime.

The apparent differences over Cuba policy between McCain and Obama have generated interest among a range of overseas actors, especially in Latin America, where Cuba policy is often viewed as a sign of how a presidential Administration will attempt to deal with the region as a whole. The EU, which has long been at odds with Washington over the Cuban embargo, is especially keen to know if it will possible to bridge this divide with the next US President. But few countries have as much riding on the answer as Spain, which is Cuba’s fourth-largest economic partner with bilateral trade exceeding US\$1 billion last year alone. In recent years, the Spanish government of Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero has taken steps to end the deep freeze that European relations with Cuba plunged into following Fidel Castro’s crackdown on dissidents in 2003. In April 2007, Miguel Ángel Moratinos became the first Spanish Foreign Minister to visit Cuba in nearly a decade, and Spanish support was crucial to the EU’s decision to end its so-called ‘diplomatic sanctions’ on Cuba this past June. The truth, however, that neither McCain nor Obama have offered approaches that would lead to a true rapprochement with Madrid on Cuba policy. The most can be said at this stage is that an Obama Administration would

likely be less vociferous in its efforts to implement the unwieldy extraterritorial provisions of the 1996 Helms-Burton Act. By contrast, a McCain administration may attempt to implement parts of the law –such as denying visas to European executives of companies with investments in Cuba– that could complicate Washington’s relations with Madrid and other European allies.

Conclusion: On the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, the US and Cuba remain locked in a long Cold War that seems likely to persist, in some fashion, irrespective of which presidential candidate seizes the White House or how sure-footedly or ineptly Raúl Castro governs the island. The decisions on Cuba policy made by the next American President will depend to some degree on the influence of their Cuban American supporters and the political juncture that occurs in Cuba. There is little question that both John McCain and Barack Obama would be markedly better positioned than George W. Bush to set the fraught US-Cuba relationship on a sounder footing. But McCain has shown little interest in charting a new course on Cuba policy, which means the possibility for change in this area, as in so many others, now lies in the hands of the junior senator from Illinois.

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