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# Latin American Perspectives on the Cuban Transition

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One of Cuban foreign policy's main achievements in the 1980s was the re-establishment of diplomatic relations with the major countries of Latin America; Cuba thus broke with more than two decades of almost complete isolation within the hemisphere (the exception was Mexico, which never cut ties with Cuba). The isolation began in 1964, when the Organization of American States (OAS) decided, under strong pressure from the United States, to impose sanctions that led to the exclusion of Cuba from the Inter-American system and to the breaking of inter-state relations with the members of the OAS.

An initial rapprochement took place in the 1970s, when some Caribbean states and governments of Salvador Allende in Chile, Juan Perón in Argentina, and Velasco Alvarado in Peru restored relations with Cuba; the OAS lifted the mandatory sanctions on Cuba in 1975. But only in the mid-1980s, under the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule in South America, did most Latin countries take a new approach including normalization of diplomatic ties with the Cuban government. Several factors lay behind the decision. First, the new Latin American democracies sought to distance themselves from the foreign policies pursued by the former military regimes, whose main premises were "anti-Communism, ideological frontiers, and alignment with the United States" under the banner of the cold war. By contrast, the new democratic governments began to develop their international relations under the doctrine of "ideological pluralism," which represented a Latin American version of *détente*. Within this new framework, coexistence and universality in relations with all countries-independent of the type of regime-were the basic tenets behind relations with other states.

A second important element was that the new democratic governments were placing renewed priority in foreign policy on relations with Latin America, including both bilateral ties and cooperation and integration in regional political and economic organizations. The reintegration of Cuba into Latin America under the principle of ideological pluralism, universality, and nonintervention in the internal affairs of other countries was needed if this policy was to be consistent. Former President of Venezuela Carlos Andrés Pérez expressed this predominant Latin American view of relations with Cuba in 1989, when he criticized the administration of US President Ronald Reagan for its approach on human rights in Cuba: "we must not permit a new confrontation between Cuba and the rest of Latin America...we must promote coexistence with a regime {that is} different from ours, but which is an integral part of Latin America."

Not only general principles explain this rapprochement between Cuba and Latin America in the 1980s; concrete national interests also motivated new policies. In some cases, like Colombia and Chile, achieving "national reconciliation" and the end of armed struggle required Cuba's

cooperation, for Havana had longstanding relationships with guerrilla movements that were struggling against their respective governments. During a 1986 visit to Cuba, for example, Argentine President Raúl Alfonsín explicitly demanded that Fidel Castro not interfere in Chilean internal politics to facilitate the moderate opposition's struggle against the Pinochet regime. During the 1988 inauguration of the new Ecuadorian president, leaders of the Rio Group met with their Cuban counterpart, again insisting that Cuba not interfere in the Chilean opposition's efforts to defeat the military regime by peaceful means through a plebiscite that was to take place later that year.

At that time, several Latin American countries were concerned that the East-West conflict would expand to include South America and would have detrimental effects on the stability and consolidation of democracy in the region. In this regard, several Rio Group leaders asked both Cuba and the United States not to transfer their conflict to the South American region. The new Latin American democracies were also concerned about the possible spillover effects of the Central American conflict to the rest of the continent; in open opposition to US policy, they sought to engage Cuba in negotiations to facilitate a peaceful resolution of conflicts in El Salvador and Nicaragua where Cuba was an active participant.

Moreover, for many Latin governments, the best way to remove the Cuba issue from internal political debate was to normalize relations with Havana. In effect, after this step was taken, Cuba became a domestic and foreign policy issue of secondary importance for the countries of the region.

When the Latin American countries decided to develop a new relationship with Cuba during the 1980s, they also took into consideration Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union and its active and extensive presence in world affairs. Cuban activism and influence in the third world, in the nonaligned movement, and in the United Nations had an impact on Latin American countries that were seeking to develop new ties and establish a broad presence in distant areas, or in international forums. In addition, some business people anticipated new trade opportunities to flow from normalization of relations with Cuba. (According to figures provided by the UN Commission for Latin America, in 1986 total trade between Cuba and the region amounted to only \$265 million, and in most cases bilateral trade was almost nonexistent before the reestablishment of diplomatic relations; the situation improved somewhat since then, as is illustrated below.)

Lastly, changes in Cuban policy towards the region and the perception by South American countries that Cuba no longer represented a "threat" to the established governments (with the exception of Chile, until 1988) or to regional stability made this rapprochement easier. Cuban authorities argue that Latin America, not Cuba, changed its policies; in the tense regional environment marked by the Central American conflict, open confrontation with the Reagan administration, and a Soviet Union that was beginning to disengage from the third world, Cuba gave new weight to a policy of state-to-state relations within Latin America, even if this meant confronting old allies who were launching frontal attacks on governments of the region.

On at least three occasions at the ends of the 1980s, when the governments of conservative Febres Cordero in Ecuador, populist Alán García in Perú, and Radical president Alfonsín of Argentina were being pressured and criticized by leftist groups, Castro lent open support to these governments, thereby legitimizing their strategies and goals. Mexican President-elect Carlos Salinas de Gortari and the ruling PRI (Revolutionary Institutional Party) invited Castro to the 1988 presidential inauguration in order to neutralize the left-wing opposition's accusation of electoral fraud. The opposition CRD (Democratic Revolutionary Party) was deeply upset by the Cuban president's decision to travel to Mexico for that occasion, despite their pleas to the contrary.

\*The original members are Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela; Panama was also an original member, but was suspended in 1988. The Rio Group was later expanded to include Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, and Paraguay, and a representative for Central America and the Caribbean.

### **Cuba No Longer a Model**

In the view of Latin American leaders, Cuba has ceased to be a threat not only because it is no longer "exporting" revolution, but because it has lost its appeal as a "model" to be emulated in the hemisphere. Even before the end of the cold war and the collapse of socialist states, few believed that the Cuban experience could be repeated or reproduced in other places in Latin America. Although the social, educational, and health achievements of the revolution have been widely recognized, Cuba's long dependence on the Soviet subsidies, its efficient economy, and its rejection of pluralist democracy have all diminished the appeal and credibility of the Cuban experience in the eyes of Latin Americans. The people of Latin America, after suffering the suppression of most of their basic rights under successive authoritarian regimes, do not agree with Castro's 1991 contention that pluralist democracy is "*multiporquería*" (literally, "multi-trash"). Disappointment with the Cuban process is shared by several socialists and members of the new left in Latin America; after suffering repression under military rule in Latin America and after living in exile in the bureaucratic socialism of Eastern Europe during the 1970s and 1980s, they have found new respect for the concept of representative democracy. Already in 1987 for example, Ricardo Lagos, the most prominent leader of the socialist and leftist parties in Chile, stated in an interview that "the tradeoff between equality and liberty has entailed a political model that I do not want for Chile."

### **The Benefits and Limits of Cuba's Regional Integration**

In an international environment where Cuba was at a disadvantage and confronted what it called "the most aggressive US administration in the last thirty years," the normalization of relations with Latin America represented an important success, not only because Cuba was reintegrating itself into the region but, more importantly, because this process facilitated Latin American political and diplomatic support on issues of critical importance to the Castro regime. During the Reagan years, for example, members of the Rio Group participating in the UN Commission for Human Rights did not support a US policy that sought to condemn Cuba as a gross violator of human rights. In 1990, Latin American countries voted unanimously in favor of a seat for Cuba on the US Security Council. In April of that year foreign ministers of the Rio Group meeting in Mexico City condemned the creation of "TV Martí" as a violation of sovereignty and

international law. ("TV Martí" is a US Information Agency television signal beamed into Cuba against Havana's will.)

In September 1992, Latin American countries played a key role in the approval of a Cuban resolution in the UN General Assembly rejecting the Torricelli bill, which tightened the US economic embargo on Cuba. Latin American governments unanimously oppose the use of unilateral economic sanctions against Cuba. Even the Argentine foreign minister (whose government has the most pro-United States position in Latin America) made a public appeal in 1992 for lifting the longstanding embargo. His and other Latin American governments are critical of this and other unilateral US sanctions against Cuba because they believe such actions only make the Castro regime more intransigent; because these governments do not want to lend legitimacy to policies that could be used against them in the future; and because the Torricelli bill threatens Latin American business with Cuba.

Mexican officials told the author, for example, that one of the biggest foreign investment projects in Cuba, a joint venture between a private Mexican group and the Cuban government to manufacture textiles in fifteen Cuban plants, using Mexican cotton and Cuban workers, was scrutinized by the United States under provisions of the bill. In Brazil, a deal between VASP airlines and Cubana de Aviación is also reported to have failed because of pressure on the Brazilian airline by the administration of George Bush. A top Cuban official close to Castro recently told the author in Havana that several Latin American businesses were interested in dealing with Cuba but were reluctant because they feared US reprisal. In some cases, US ambassadors have informed Latin American investors of the negative consequences of dealing with Cuba.

### **Trade with Cuba is Growing**

Despite these difficulties and the collapse of the Cuban economy, Cuban-Latin American trade has increased in the last five years, most of the increase occurring in exports from Latin America to Cuba. By 1990 Cuban trade with the area had reached a high of almost 7 percent of total imports and almost 5 percent of exports. Between 1988 and 1990, total Cuban trade with the Western hemisphere came to nearly \$7.5 billion (\$6.5 billion in Cuban imports from Latin America). In 1990, Cuban exports to Latin America were worth \$202 million, and imports, \$1.1197 billion.

In the political arena, the normalization of relations has also permitted high-level dialogue through the participation of the Cuban president and other Cuban officials in presidential summit meetings of Ibero-American presidents in Mexico (1991), Spain (1992), and Brazil (1993). After meetings with the presidents of Chile and Colombia at the 1991 summit, Cuba re-established consular and commercial relations with both countries, leaving Paraguay as the only state in South America that lacks official linkage with Cuba.

Cuba is also a full member of such regional organizations as ALADI (Latin American Association for Integration); the Latin American Parliament; SELA (Latin American Economic System); and GRULA (Coordination of Latin American Governments in the UN System). Beginning with their first summit meeting in Acapulco in 1987, Rio Group presidents have also

repeatedly called for Cuba's integration into the OAS. At the 1990 annual conference of the OAS in Asunción, a group of countries headed by Brazil, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela made a concrete bid for Cuban reintegration, but failed because of lack of consensus and US opposition. Castro's response was "if Latin America considers that the presence of Cuba in the OAS can be useful, Cuba will consider seriously this possibility when the time comes." This contrasted with the previous Cuban descriptions of the OAS as the "ministry of colonies" of the United States. Nevertheless, Cuban participation in regional organizations is limited by the nature of its political regime. Cuba has long been interested in the Rio Group, but has never been invited to become a member because it lacks the democratic credentials that are the main requirement for membership. The Rio group expanded in 1991 to include the new democracies of Chile and Paraguay, and a regional representation of the Caribbean states and Central America was considered, but Cuba was not approached. Although Castro has offered critical support to the Rio Group, he has also criticized Cuba's exclusion and insisted that the group does not fully represent the whole spectrum of Latin America and the Caribbean.

### **Setbacks and Unfulfilled Expectations**

The outcome of Havana's diplomacy has not matches Cuban expectations of the late 1980s, when Cuban-Latin American relations reached a high point. First, the definition of which country is most relevant to whom has changed dramatically since the cold war, the collapse of the socialist bloc, Cuba's economic crisis, and the extension of representative democracy to all Latin America. In the 1990s, Cuba's weight in international affairs was widely diminished-it is no longer, as Jorge Domínguez once put it, "a small country with the foreign policy of a major power." Cuba now lacks the resources to sustain a global and activist foreign policy. Furthermore, many Latin American leaders seek to improve relations with the United States, now that it is perceived as the "sole superpower." Notwithstanding the gains that Cuba has achieved in diplomatic relations, the Castro regime has become increasingly isolated in a region where the doctrine of ideological pluralism has lost much of its meaning. This isolation developed because of the democracy's expansion not just in the hemisphere, but in the rest of the Western world-the world to which Cuba belongs for cultural, historic, and geographic reasons. Moreover, the recent changes in Latin American governments under the new international environment have vitiated the "shared or integrated view" of relations with Cuba that existed during the first wave of democratic regimes after military rule in the 1980s. Therefore, the policy consensus gained during those years has also been lost in Latin American relations with Cuba.

Three policy approaches toward Cuba can now be distinguished:

- A non-interventionist approach, taken by countries mostly for domestic political reasons, geographical or geopolitical reasons, or foreign policy traditions. This approach emphasizes continued dialogue with Havana on bilateral and regional matters, and the integration of Cuba into the hemisphere (Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela fall in this category). Colombia, for example, at different times has sought Cuba's assistance to advance negotiations with those guerrilla groups which have a close relationship with Havana. Mexico and Brazil have a long-standing policy of resisting unilateral or collective decisions that represent an involvement in the internal affairs of other states because legitimizing those actions could backfire in the future. At the 1991 summit meeting of Ibero-American presidents in Guadalajara, Mexico, Brazilian

President Fernando Collor de Mello personally assured Castro that Brazil would oppose any external actions to promote changes in the Cuban system. In 1992, Francisco Rezek, Brazil's foreign minister, stated, "Castro knows that Brazil is a legalistic country, and that nothing would be more dangerous in today's world than illegitimate involvement in the sovereignty of a country." Brazilian government officials with whom the author spoke were critical of the strategy of "open confrontation" that the Argentine government is following toward Cuba; their preferred approach is "discreet diplomacy" to persuade Castro to adapt to the post-cold war period.

- A pro-US approach, adopted largely by countries under new governments that have opted to follow a new global foreign policy strategy detrimental to relations with Cuba. The governments of Argentine President Menem and, to a lesser degree, Alberto Lacalle of Uruguay have shown themselves in basic agreements with the US policy of pressuring and isolating the Cuban regime, though they oppose the embargo and other unilateral economic actions. Menem stated in a recent visit to Mexico that the US-Cuban conflict was "not between the United States and Cuba but between all democracies and a totalitarian regime that rejects any change."
- A middle-of-the-road position, such as that held by Bolivia, Chile, and Ecuador. In regional forums Chile has played the middleman between followers of the first two approaches; while it supports "the Cuban people's right to self-determination" and rejects decisions that isolate the Cuban regime, Chile has also affirmed a policy that holds Cuban accountable for actions violating basic universal human rights that sometimes take precedence over the concept of sovereignty.

This division among Latin American governments regarding Cuban policy has become evident in various recent policy decisions. In 1992, Argentina and Uruguay broke ranks with the other members of the Ro Group at the UN Commission for Human Rights in Geneva, voting against Cuba in a US-sponsored resolution. Until the last moment, the Chilean delegation tried to come up with an alternative Latin American resolution that would have also taken into account the negative external environment affecting Cuba; it failed because of a lack of consensus among the Latin American delegations. In the end, Chile also voted for the UN resolution because of the importance of human right in Chilean domestic politics; at the same time it made explicit its rejection of the US embargo.

The prospects for reintegrating Cuba into the OAS and Inter-American system seem to have decreased recently. Reintegration is increasingly conditioned on internal reforms in Cuba, a demand that has been rejected out of the hand by Castro. Carlos Lage, the vice president of the Council of State, Foreign Minister Roberto Robaina, and other high-level Cuban officials have tried during recent trips to Latin America to convince their Latin American counterparts that in the last Cuban legislative elections the government won wide support. They also tried to promote the idea that there are "different types of democracies"- so called direct democracy in Cuba, and "representative democracy" in the rest of Latin America. These arguments, however, have been greeted with skepticism by the governments of the region, who respond that political pluralism is integral to democracy.

As evidence of this, the OAS, in the "Compromiso de Santiago" adopted by foreign ministers at its 1991 annual conference, explicitly calls for the "defense and promotion of representative democracy" in the hemisphere; countries where the democratic system has been in jeopardy (Haiti, Guatemala, and Peru) have been subject to strong pressure and isolation by the OAS and the Rio Group. In this new framework, then, Cuba's prospects are bleak without substantial internal reforms.

Recent statements by several Latin American governments have called on Cuba to "make the necessary changes so that this country can rejoin the Latin American system." This phrase expressed succinctly the reality that Cuba's full introgression into the region depends on domestic changes precisely because joining the Rio Group requires a decision by consensus, and because joining the OAS will be hindered by the opposition of the United States and a few other governments. Moreover, the Cuban leader has confronted increasing pressure by his counterparts, most recently at the second summit meeting of Ibero-American presidents in Spain in 1992. The Cuban government blamed the host government of President Felipe González for promoting an agenda that concentrated on political issues, not on the economic and development challenges that the Cuban delegation believed should form the focus for these meetings.

### **Cuba's Strategy**

Cuban officials acknowledge the setbacks that Cuba has faced in its relations with Latin America in the early 1990s. A Cuban scholar who has long researched Cuban-Latin American relations, Juan Valdés, recently wrote that "the main efforts made by the Cuban leadership in its relations with Latin America have not yielded the expected results. The Latin American governments have developed weak and defensive postures, the level of political and economic coordination is low, and the local elites have not been willing to challenge the US hegemony." The current Cuban strategy is to advance in those areas where some success is attainable. Thus the doubled-pronged strategy is, on the one hand, to heighten international condemnation of the embargo and the Torricelli bill and, on the other, to promote trade and investment in Cuba.

During a recent visit to Chile, Carlos Lage met with economic ministers, entrepreneurs interested in dealing with Cuba, and conservative politicians that Cuba had been courting. Cuba has been cultivating relations with these conservatives-not only in Chile but also in the rest of Latin America-to expand its spectrum of contacts with influential actors in Latin American society. Surprisingly, some conservative politicians, and even high officers in the armed forces, who now reject US policy, have begun to express some admiration for Castro's "courage" in standing up to the United States.

### **Latin American Mediation Efforts**

All the government officials interviewed by the author during a recent trip to several Latin American countries expressed their certainty that changes are inevitable in Cuba. They displayed respect and even some admiration for the role Castro has played in Cuba and Latin America. Yet many now consider him outdated and an obstacle to resolution of Cuba's crisis. (Octavio Paz, the Mexican writer, called him a "reliquia"-something that is precious but which by now should be part of Latin America's historic legacy.)

Moreover, growing numbers of leftist intellectuals are calling for changes in Cuba, and there is a wide consensus in Latin American public opinion that the system in Cuba does not work. Even the Nobel prize-winning writer Gabriel García Márquez, who is a close friend of Castro, has publicly stated that Cuba must change in order to save the gains achieved by the revolution. Jorge Castañeda, an academic and an adviser to the Mexican opposition leader Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, has expressed the same perspective, saying that the key question is whether these achievements will outlast socialism, the revolution, and Castro. Téodoro Petkoff, a respected leader of Venezuela's MAS (Socialist Movement) shocked his Cuban audience in a speech during a seminar in Havana in 1992; after stating that the most important achievement of the revolution was that it gave dignity and respect to the Cuban people, Petkoff openly criticized the failure of the Cuban economy, the absence of liberty, and the one-party system that suffocates the initiatives of the same Cuban people. Petkoff ended his speech saying that US hostility, while reprehensible, should not be used as an excuse for avoiding reforms that Cuba needs; a "besieged fortress mentality," he concluded, is not the most promising way of lending new legitimacy to socialism.

From a Latin American perspective, the key issue now is how to facilitate a gradual and peaceful transition with minimal foreign interference in Cuba. Many Latin American governments, especially those that share the same geographical space with Cuba (that is, the Caribbean Basin), are worried that turmoil in Cuba could create regional instability and domestic crisis in their respective countries, so for them Cuba has become a problem of national security. Mexican officials have privately expressed for example, their fear of another "Roman scenario" in Cuba; they stress that for Mexico the number one priority is to secure stability in the area-with or without Castro. Nonetheless, most governments are reluctant to take any specific action because they have not agreed on a common policy toward Cuba and because they perceive that both the US and the Cuban governments are inflexible toward each other, leaving almost no maneuvering room for changes conducive to a transition in Cuba and an end to the US-Cuban conflict.

The lack of a common policy toward Cuba became evident at the 1991 presidential summit of the Rio group in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia. Cuba became the main issue of the conference: Argentina pushed for the hard-line policy including sanctions that would increasingly isolate Cuba, and the members of the COZUMEL Group (Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela) and Brazil pursued a policy of dialogue and negotiation with Castro, rejecting overt pressures on the Cuban regime. The confrontation grew so intense that the possibility loomed of ending the conference without a final communiqué. The situation was salvaged through the mediation efforts of Chilean President Patricio Aylwin; the communiqué-if read carefully-acknowledged that the governments of the Rio Grande Group would "agree to disagree" on a common policy toward Cuba. Ever since then, the Rio Group has avoided including this divisive issue on its agenda.

To expect all Latin American governments become intensively involved in the Cuban situation would be unrealistic, since the stakes involve differ significantly from one country to another. Few Latin American governments that faced difficulties by virtue of belonging to either the Contadora Group of the Contradora Support Group(both now constitute the Rio Group) during

the Central American crisis are willing to advocate courses of action that might invite reprisals or direct confrontation with the US government, this is especially true now, when many Latin American countries have put relations with the United States at the top of their foreign policy agendas, with an eye toward eventually becoming integrated into the emerging free trade area covered by the North American Free Trade Agreement. Castro has criticized Latin American efforts to further integrate their economies with that of the United States; he has told several of his counterparts that in the process they stand to gain very little and lose much of their sovereignty.

### **Good Will Needed on Both Sides**

The obvious conclusion is that any mediation effort by Latin American countries will require the consent and good will of both the US and Cuban governments. The last significant mediation led by a group of Latin American countries took place in the resort town of Cozumel, Mexico, in October 1991. The presidents of Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela decided that the time had come for a direct meeting with the Cuban president to discuss the prospects for change in Cuba and to find ways to end the confrontation between it and the United States. High-level officials from these three governments indicated to the author in interviews that their presidents decided to engage Cuba in a dialogue because they thought that the positive climate prevailing during the Guadalajara summit some months earlier had opened space for exploring how Cuba could be reintegrated into Latin America.

That these countries were involved in such an effort was not happenstance: Colombia, Mexico, and Venezuela have the most to lose from a negative outcome in Cuba because they share the same geopolitical and geographical space and have had strong, sometimes conflicting, links with the Castro regime since the revolution began. Should Cuba fall into crisis, these countries would probably face the worst fallout—internal turmoil, a stream of refugees, and increased tensions with the United States. As the foreign minister of Venezuela said: "the last thing we want to see is a bloodbath in Cuba...even if it is part of a return to a democratic system."

The difficulties of any diplomatic effort regarding Cuba became evident from the beginning of this initiative by the COZUMEL Group. Mexican and Venezuelan officials have said that these presidents decided to keep their meeting a secret until the last moment to avoid the pressure likely to be exerted by the United States and internal conservative groups opposed to a dialogue with Cuba. Venezuelan President Pérez, for example, announced his participation only after he had already boarded the airplane for the COZUMEL meeting.

The message of the three Latin American presidents to the United States and Cuba was clear: "they offered good offices to the governments of Cuba and those countries with which it might have differences to begin a rapprochement leading to the normalization of relations based on respect for its legitimate interest and in strict adherence to international law." The COZUMEL presidents encouraged Castro to begin the process of political reform. In response, at this meeting the Cuban president promised "to leave power if the Communist Party loses its overall majority in legislative elections that are to take place in the end of 1992." While Castro tried to convince his counterparts of the important "democratic changes" that had been introduced to the Cuban electoral system, Presidents Salinas, Pérez, and Gaviria saw their efforts as a beginning of

a long-term enterprise to induce reforms in Cuba through the combination of economic and diplomatic incentives. But they made no immediate offer of economic assistance, and the Cuban president did not ask for any. (Castro told journalists that he had not come "crying like Mary Magdalene for aid" from his Latin American neighbors.)

In the absence of a concrete offer of economic assistance, the COZUMEL presidents' leverage over Castro is minimal. But an aid package would have faced internal opposition in all three countries because their populations were already suffering from austerity as a result of economic reforms and because immediate benefits were not evident. For those benefits to become obvious, the external environment would also have to change so that the expected gains of such a policy could lead to reforms in Cuba. This, of course, did not occur. The Bush administration immediately dismissed the COZUMEL Group's offer to broker peace with Cuba, and US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher stated that "neither we nor the Cubans have ever believed that third-party mediation is necessary."

After this rebuttal, and the December 1992 confrontation within the Rio Group over strategies to cope with the Cuban problem, the COZUMEL Group's efforts lost momentum. Yet officials from these countries also blamed Cuba for its intransigence and for making concessions that were "too little, too late." Reflecting their frustration with Cuban policy, Latin American governments often refer to Castro as having "missed the train once again."

### **Prospects for the Near Future**

Latin American governments have recently begun to establish contacts with Cuban opposition groups inside and outside Cuba—which irritates the Cuban government and has created friction with several Latin American countries. Breaking a long tradition, Mexican President Salinas met with Cuban exiles Jorge Mas Canosa and Carlos Montanero in México City in 1992. Mexican officials told the author that the Mexican president was angry because Mas Canosa publicized a meeting that was supposed to be private; after this episode, they added, no further meetings would be held in the near future.

The dialogue with the moderate opposition leaders within Cuba has reinforced the predominant view among Latin American governments that domestic changes in Cuba should be implicitly linked to improvement in overall US-Cuban relations. Rolando Prats, leader of the Social Democratic Movement (a pro-democracy group in Cuba) expressed this view in a 1993 *New York Times* op-ed piece. In the article, he writes, "no government is likely to relax internal discipline and undertake liberalization reforms just when a vastly more powerful neighbor has increased efforts to isolate it and starve it out...to begin the journey to democracy, human rights activists in Cuba have long called the United States to negotiate its differences with the Cuban government...but Republican administrations have preferred to listen to the small groups of ultra-conservatives in Miami."

High-level officials in Havana have repeatedly argued that when the country is subject to increasing external pressure, it is a "strategic miscalculation" to show weaknesses and to begin with "concessions" that will only seal the fate of the revolution. In interviews, they have cited the "gross mistake" committed by the Sandinistas in Nicaragua—that of opening the system under

adverse conditions. A top adviser of the foreign minister also told the author that the government was concerned about possible "friendly subversion" by several Latin American governments in Cuba. Carlos Lage reaffirmed the view that "the road of making concessions is an endless one; once you begin, there will be new demands until the hour comes to...fold the flags and totally surrender."

In recent encounters Latin American leaders have encouraged Castro to allow human rights groups to operate without restrictions; to tolerate some freedom of speech for internal dissidents; and to begin an informal dialogue with moderate opposition figures who recognize the achievements and legality of the revolution. Several Latin American countries would even be willing to serve as hosts for this kind of dialogue. Unfortunately, when Cuban government officials hear these proposals they remember the fate of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and the Soviet Union after glasnost, and so they turn closer to the "Chinese model"-reforms toward a market-oriented economy under a rigid and authoritarian political system.

However, the seriousness of the situation might force the Cuban authorities to shift actual internal policy, if external incentives make those changes too difficult for the Cuban leadership to avoid. In a recent article, the director of the Center for the Study of America in Havana, Luis Suárez, noted the immense challenges and risks that the Cuban government would have face if the longstanding US policy were to change suddenly. Suárez writes, "the leadership might not be prepared to withstand this scenario...new contradictions might appear in the system, in the ideology, and in the political culture of the Cuban people, with the disappearance of an enemy that has contributed to the internal cohesion of the people and its leadership.

Little can be achieved if the prevailing view in the United States does not change. From a Latin American perspective, the risks of regional stability, the prospect of new tensions with the United States (some Latin American governments would be forced to react even if the United States were to become involved voluntarily in a Cuban crisis), and the costs for the Cuban people of prolonging the present situation are reasons enough for exploring new avenues to prevent the worst-case scenario of "traumatic change" in Cuba. For this to happen, however, it will be necessary, as Mexican scholar Carlos Rico put it, to pursue "policies that nurture a context in which valid nationalistic concerns cannot be credibly used (by the Cuban leadership) to contain political changes in the island."

Latin American governments are closely watching the Cuba policy of the administration of Bill Clinton. If they perceive that the United States is showing new flexibility toward Cuba, some governments might be willing to serve as mediators or to advance proposals that, because they come from Latin America, might be more acceptable to the Cuban leadership. If Cuba has to make concessions, it would prefer to present them as part of a process of dialogue with Latin American countries, rather than appear to be responding to US demands. Even Argentine President Carlos Menem, anticipating possible changes in US policy under the Clinton administration, during a recent visit to Washington offered himself as a broker for a renewal of a US-Cuba dialogue. But the COZUMEL countries, which are the most concerned about the Cuba situation, will probably be receptive to any signal from the United States that indicates a

willingness to renew that dialogue. That could be the beginning of the end for a policy that seems obsolete in the post-cold war world and that has failed to bring about the necessary democratic reforms in Cuba.

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