Cuba–US Relations and the Perspicacity of Fidel Castro's Thinking

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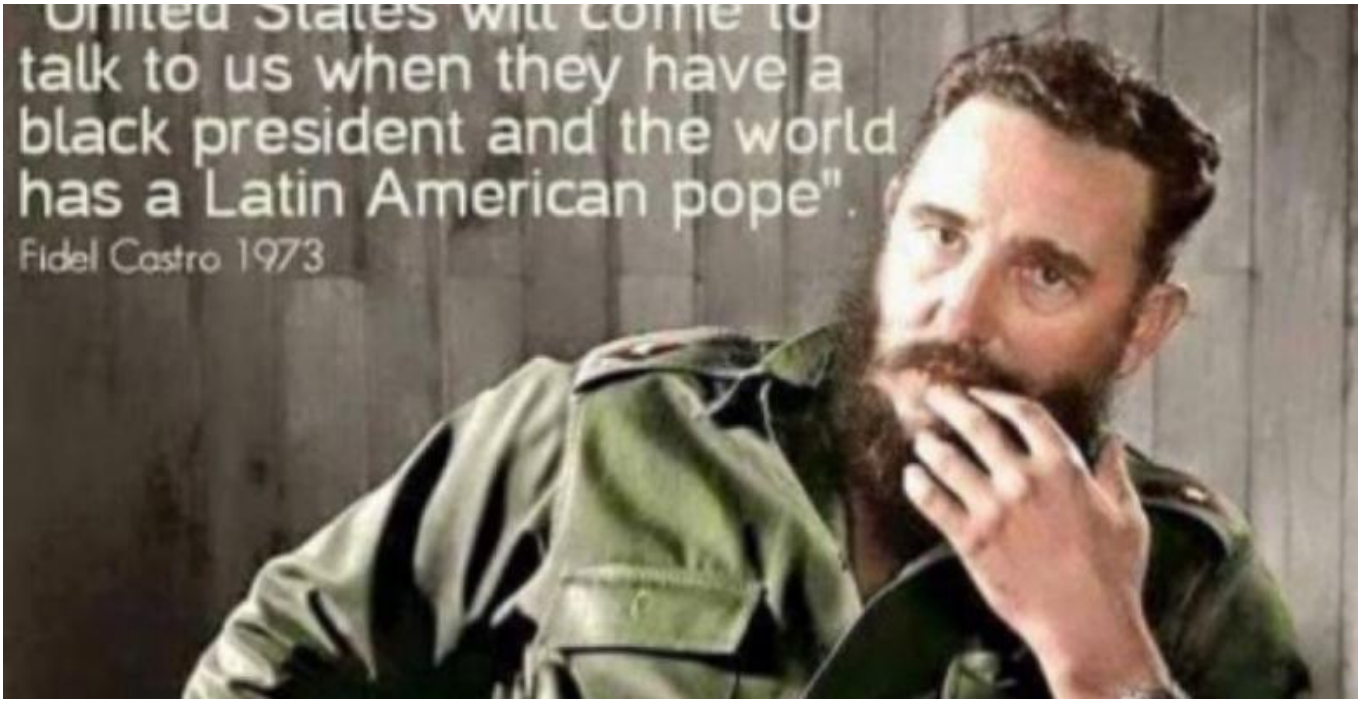

In an online interview with an alternative US-based website published on January 7, 2015, I was asked about my take on the seeming rapprochement between the United States and Cuba. With regard to the December 17, 2014 announcement, I responded:

"On that December 17, the situation caused me to think of the public statement Fidel Castro made to his followers on January 8, 1959, just eight days after the triumph of the Revolution:

'This is a decisive moment in our history: The tyranny has been overthrown, there is immense joy. However, there is still much to be done. Let us not fool ourselves into believing that the future will be easy; perhaps everything will be more difficult in the future'"(my translation).

However, I continue to follow events and reactions from all over the world and the full political spectrum from left to right. And I am thus forced to remember the statement by Fidel that initially and spontaneously sprung to mind on December 17, 2014. That day ushered in an 'immense joy' in Cuba and among many people in the world, and rightly so, as David was finally rewarded after more than five decades of persistent and heroic struggle against Goliath. It is this 'immense joy' that at times can camouflage the adversities that in principle are supposed to have been alleviated but that in fact contain the seeds of even more difficult challenges. I believe that the situation points to the notion that 'everything will be more difficult in the future.*'"*

Only days after the interview was published, I began to have some regrets about the assertions quoted above. Even though I was careful to indicate the obvious – that one cannot compare the contexts of 1959 with the 17D (as the Cubans refer to it, for December 17), the last thing I would want to do is quote Fidel Castro out of context.

My main point was to have readers appreciate the perspicacity of Fidel Castro's Thinking, as applied to today's entirely different context. In his customary astuteness, he was able to peer into the future – way into the future – and come back to the reality of January 8, 1959 in order to provide a sober long-term context for the new Cuban

Revolution.

In this article, the only aspect of Fidel Castro's widespread and profound thinking consists in examining an historic step in the Cuban Revolution. The remarkable insight he exhibited on January 8, 1959 allowed him to analyze dialectically how immense problems on the horizon can be camouflaged by the equally immense joy exhibited right after the Triumph of the Revolution. Despite providing the caveat that conditions in both periods are completely dissimilar, did I state my message clearly enough regarding applying his 1959 pronouncement as a guide to the current situation? While I was still convinced of the correctness of the assertion, there were lingering doubts in my mind. This uncertainty began to dissipate as I read with my usual keen interest what Cuban academics, researchers and journalists were writing. Some, but not many, wrote essentially something similar as I had. For example, Elier Ramírez Cañedo, the young researcher and co-author along with Esteban Morales of a 2015 watershed book on Cuba–US relations, wrote a two-part article on his area of expertise. The second part, to which I allude below, was published on his own blog on January 28, 2015, reproduced the very same day in Iroel Sánchez's blog *La pupila insomne*, followed by a reproduction on February 7, 2015 in *Cubadebate* and the Communist Youth League daily *Juventud Rebelde*. Elier Ramírez Cañedo wrote how Fidel declared on January 8, 1959 that "it is possible that in the future everything would be more difficult. I believe that now as well, it is possible that the future will be more difficult, especially in the realm of the ideological and cultural confrontation with imperialism."

The well-known journalist Rosa Miriam Elizalde penned an article on July 21, 2015 in *Cubadebate* with the telling title "Cuba–US: The Difficulty Is Coming Now" ("Cuba-EEUU: Lo difícil viene ahora"). Of interest is a reader's online comment made on that article about the significance of the January 8 declaration by Fidel Castro that states "no one here should think that in the future everything will be easy, maybe everything in the future will be more difficult." In October 2015, journalist Rafael Cruz Ramos expresses in a post on his blog, which was reproduced in *CubaSí*, his concern, among other things, about the current situation. He writes, "Fidel was right when he said that the current battles are more complex than those in the Sierra Maestra." Others have written similar articles.

In hindsight, it seems that my initial assertion regarding Fidel Castro's Thinking on this particular issue of steps in the Revolution was not out of place, given the correlations from some of the Cuban press, as mentioned above, and in light of the events that transpired since then (i.e., from the 17D to fall 2015), which I have followed closely. On the contrary, it was very appropriate. This conclusion constituted a mixed blessing, since it is not comforting to acknowledge that an ongoing Revolution since 1959 can still confront a situation that "may be" more difficult now than the period leading up to it. One can also counter my position by indicating there are not that many journalists or public figures who share this opinion. This is true. However, this apparent lack of widespread attention is another reason for ratifying the view on Fidel Castro's Thinking. The current manifest scarcity of caution among some may in fact reflect a certain amount of "immense joy" pushing the stark reality of US imperialism's intentions to the background.

Elier Ramírez Cañedo makes an extremely important qualification that the more difficult time now is to be found "especially in the realm of the ideological and cultural confrontation with imperialism." While it is a broad topic, one example stands out. When visiting Havana not long after the 17D, I could not help but notice the American flag being widely exhibited as clothing apparel on virtually all body parts, on taxis and cars, and in shops. As a Canadian, this struck me as a not too subtle warning. Canada is the closest ally of the US in the West, and Canadians are frequent visitors to their neighbour to the south. However, we do not see such a virtual carnival-like display of the US flag in Canada. In fact, many Canadians would abhor such fanfare as the nationalist anti-US imperialist sentiment in Canada, while not the highest in the world, is enough to draw the line. This negative pre-sentiment regarding the mushrooming of the US flag in Havana was confirmed and even further highlighted by journalist Luis Toledo Sande's series on the flag issue in three articles complete with photos, published in *Cubadebate* and blogs. In my view, these trends and many others corroborate Elier Ramírez Cañedo's concern about the complicated "ideological and cultural confrontation with imperialism" as a fallout with the 17D.

The US blockade against Cuba is now more than ever a subject of debate in Cuba and elsewhere, especially in the US. On October 27, 2015, in the United Nations General Assembly, the US was decidedly defeated in a record vote of 191 in favour of the Cuban resolution to lift the blockade and only two – the US and its closet political and military ally, Israel – in favour of maintaining it, and no abstentions.

Much has been written in Cuba and the US on the blockade both by the two governments and by experts on both sides. These debates concern primarily those measures that have been – and can still be – carried out by President Obama while the blockade is applied in full force both by his executive wing and the legislative body, the

Congress, of the US government. The main conditions of the blockade are the prerogative of the Congress. Some commentators indicate that there are contradictions or inconsistencies in the Obama Administration's policy with regards to the blockade. The narrative is that the US President is not doing what is expected of him based on his *apparent* opposition to the blockade and the use of his executive prerogatives to restrict to the maximum the effects of the blockade. I may be wrong, but it is perhaps not the case that there are in effect contradictions or inconsistencies.

However, if one carefully examines the official documents, the White House and Department of State seem to protect themselves by leaving the door open to the continuation of the blockade and restricting Washington's action to a strict minimum. The US statements seem to speak for themselves. Whether or not the Administration is really even in words in favour of lifting the blockade is at best not clear, as we can now see. It may be preferable to be on the safe side and not harbour illusions, but also pressure the Administration on that basis. In Obama's December 17, 2014 declaration, he listed a series of issues that he wants to address regarding Cuba, such as democracy and human rights, people-to-people travel and remittances from Americans to the "emerging Cuban private sector," that is, 500,000 self-employed workers. He then concludes that "as these changes unfold, I look forward to engaging Congress in an honest and serious debate about lifting the embargo." In other words, it seems that a condition for confronting the majority Republican in Congress is the evolution of change in Cuba according to US standards. His stand does not appear to be a principled unconditional demand that Congress lift the blockade. Secretary of State John Kerry expounded on this angle by saying:

> "Look, I can't tell you when the embargo will be lifted, because it really depends, to a large degree, on the *decisions and choices made by Cubans. They have to make it possible to lift the embargo*. And the Congress of the United States appropriately is very concerned about human rights, about democracy, about the ability of people to speak their mind, and to meet, and to do things. And we'd like to see – we're not asking for everything to change overnight, but we want to see Cuba moving in the right direction, and our hope is that it will." (emphasis added)

The impression was given in some media around the world that Obama called for the lifting of the blockade in his speech to the United Nations General Assembly on September 28, 2015. In fact, what he said, in talking about human rights in Cuba and Cuba–US people-to-people contacts, was, "*as these contacts yield progress*, I'm confident that our Congress will inevitably lift an embargo that should not be in place anymore" (emphasis added).

Words and semantics are used very deceivingly by US imperialism. The US employs words that seemingly take a just position but in fact camouflage the real nature of US tactics and strategy. Take as an example the 2009 US-orchestrated military coup d'état in Honduras and the expulsion of the constitutionally elected president Mel Zelaya. At first, both Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton did not use the word *coup*. Facing the outrage of all of Latin America, they finally used the word *coup*, but not *military coup d'état.* To employ this latter term would provide the legal basis for the restriction of military aid to the putschists, which Washington did not in any manner wish to do. In a similar fashion, facing international pressure, Obama and Clinton said they favoured the return of Zelaya to Honduras. However, on both occasions in which he attempted to enter the country, the US opposed it, claiming that this return had to be carried out with the full involvement of the US and its allies. Thus, the words of favouring the "return of Zelaya" in fact carried no meaning as did the so-called opposition to the coup.

Similarly, the semantics of supporting the lifting of the blockade carry little weight, given that they seem to be conditional to Cuba "doing more," "opening up" and so on. The older pre-17D crude diplomacy has changed in the 17D to "soft power" attempts to influence from within. This is carried out to a certain extent as "democracy promotion" programs still funded by the US. Obama said with regard to Cuba that the US is no longer in the business of regime change but the regime change programs are continuing. Thus, words from the mouth of the Imperial power cannot be taken at face value and must be scrutinized.

It is now well-known – and made explicit by the Obama Administration – that the US stance toward Cuba in the 17D is only a change in tactics, such as the re-establishment of diplomatic relations and the reopening of embassies in both countries. However, the US main strategy remains the overthrowing of the Revolution or changing it from within so that it has no resemblance to its pre-17D years. It is necessary to expand on the concept of strategy. It can be recalled that Obama came to his new position on Cuba because among other points, as he and others have admitted on several occasions, the American Cuba policy was isolating the US from Latin America and the Caribbean. The Summits of the Americas, led by the US and held every few years, in principle includes all the

countries of South and Central America, the Caribbean, and North America. However, Cuba has been systematically excluded. At the VI Summit of the Americas held in Cartagena, Colombia in April 2012, when Cuba was still not included, the conflict between the south and the north had arrived at the breaking point. The entire South demanded the inclusion of Cuba, threatening a de facto collapse of the next Summit if it did not incorporate the island. The next VII Summit of the Americas in Panama was to be held in April 2015. Thus, if Obama had not changed tactics immediately, the US – and not Cuba – would have been blamed for breakdown of the Panama Summit.

A corollary to the Obama strategy for Cuba is the US strategy for Latin America to defeat the new progressive and left-wing movements and governments such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and even the more moderate ones such as Argentina and Brazil. In fact, the US Cuba strategy is part and parcel of the strategy for Latin America. It is thus no accident that, while the impression is given that the US has softened up on Cuba and finally came to its senses, there have been US-assisted and supported destabilizing efforts in all of the above-mentioned countries. If they succeed in this in part or whole, it would be a major setback for the entire region, including Cuba. It would also be a defeat for the world, as Latin America and the Caribbean is the most promising region for socio-economic and political progress. The region is now a concrete foundation for developing a multipolar world that would leave behind the US hegemony-based unipolar globe.

Thus, the astuteness of Fidel Castro's statement on January 8, 1959 takes on relevance today, that is, that the situation may be more difficult in the future. This may be challenged by some, and understandably so, by pointing out that in 1959 Cuba was alone, while now Cuba is part of this new regional bloc whose members in general support each other. However, this new Latin America has been established with many sacrifices and struggles, such as in the case of Venezuela since the 1998 election of Hugo Chávez as president. Any significant defeat in Latin America may have, as the US desires, a domino effect in the region. The situation today is more difficult than in 1959, seeing as the peoples have so much more to lose. However, I think that the US will lose again. For example, in Venezuela, even if there is a temporary defeat or stalemate in elections, the Bolivarian Revolution has become, and is growing as, a material force in Venezuelan society. Once people are consciously and actively participating in their own ongoing empowerment and defence of their national sovereignty, this material force can in the long run defeat even the most formidable enemy.

From the US and its American blogger advisors to some Cuban bloggers, the image of the dissidents is changing from one that has been discredited as mercenaries of the US to another, younger sort. The new crop gives the impression that they are not interested in regime change funds. They are not easy to detect. Dissidence is being renovated in the context of the 17D, and is, in my view, a cancer that strives to eat away at Cuban society from within, targeting especially youth, artists, intellectuals and journalists.

The acumen of Fidel Castro's Thinking as applied to the 17D that "perhaps everything will be more difficult in the future" is ratified, in my view, in light of both the foregoing discussion and the fact that Cuban society has accumulated problems over the last decades.

However, like Venezuela and the rest of Latin America, there is no doubt in my mind that Cuba will overcome this more difficult and complicated situation. The Congress of the Communist Youth League was held in July 2015. Contrary to the disinformation disseminated by the mainstream US media about censorship and the press in Cuba, one could view on Cuban television virtually all the proceedings and debates in this Congress of 600 delegates. Never have I been so impressed by so many spontaneous and unwritten interventions, profound in content, by Cubans at these types of events. It strikes me that any of them could be future leaders of Cuba. Even though the conditions now are very different and may be more difficult and especially complicated than the period leading up to the Revolution, new generations prepare to continue the legacy, in the context of defying the current situation. The new generation of dissidents whose "dissidence" is being been recycled to match the 17D conditions is no match for the young Cuban revolutionaries.

Furthermore, those in the US who are banking on self-employed workers to drain Cuba from the inside completely underestimate the political/ideological consciousness and patriotism of the vast majority of Cubans. Cubans are steeped in this tradition. President Raúl Castro made it very clear in his remarks on December 17, 2014. He opened by stating right from the beginning:

> "Since my election as President of the State Council and Council of Ministers I have reiterated in many occasions our willingness to hold a respectful dialogue with the United States on the basis of sovereign

> equality, in order to deal reciprocally with a wide variety of topics without detriment to the national Independence and self-determination of our people.
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> This stance was conveyed to the US Government both publicly and privately by Comrade Fidel on several occasions during our long standing struggle, stating the willingness to discuss and solve our differences without renouncing any of our principles."

Cuba has gone through many years of revolutionary and patriotic struggles. In my view, one period consisted of 1868 to 1898, during the patriotic wars against Spanish colonialism and in favour of independence and a more just society. A second historic period was the negative one of US domination from 1898 to 1959. A third era was initiated in January 1, 1959, steeped in the 1953 Moncada action and the ensuing program as the basis of the Revolution. From 1959 to the present, Cuba has been going through this era.

The 17D is not historic in that sense but, rather, is another chapter in the current period with its promises as well as perhaps even more difficulties and challenges, in entirely different circumstances than the period leading up to the January 1, 1959 victory.