

A SÜDPOLITIK MADE IN WASHINGTON?

IN CONTRAST TO EUROPE'S COLD WAR EXPERIENCE, THE U.S.-CUBAN DÉTENTE HAS GOVERNMENTS NOT PAVING THE WAY, BUT TRAILING SOCIETY

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Among the few German words that have made it into the English vocabulary, after *kindergarten* and *zeitgeist*, is also *Ostpolitik*: the 1970s policy of outreach to Eastern Europe spearheaded by German chancellor Willy Brandt in an effort to overcome the Cold War confrontation. As the December 17 announcement to restore U.S.-Cuban diplomatic relations heralds “the beginning of the end” of the Cold War in the Caribbean, Obama’s policy shift looks like a “*Südpolitik*” *made in Washington*: a “southern policy” of détente and engagement with a communist regime long decried as the ultimate foe. How far can this comparison be taken? What, if any, lessons does the European experience hold for the current course of U.S.-Cuban relations?

Of course, the world has changed since the heyday of Brandt. Today, there is no Soviet Union; back then, there was no Internet, etc. *Ostpolitik* engaged with a solidly entrenched, if not petrified, state-socialist bureaucratic regime. In contrast, contemporary Cuban socialism has long since lost its past certainties. Cuban society is in flux, even if reforms are gradual, protracted, and may be driven as much from below as they are directed from above. Generational leadership

change is looming large. In such a context, a U.S. policy of engagement will be felt much more immediately than was the German *Ostpolitik*, with its long-term political horizon.

However, at the core of both policies is depolarization. A timeless African proverb says: “When elephants battle, the grass suffers.” To translate into politics, the more a conflict is polarized between two powerful actors, the more it sidelines and paralyzes those in between. When both sides stand in their trenches with guns loaded, those in between keep their heads down. In this sense, the baseline approach of *Ostpolitik* was, and what Obama’s *Südpolitik* seeks to do, is to depolarize the confrontation. Downscaling the military logic of confrontation is also about opening spaces for other actors beyond those in the trenches. When the elephants withdraw, the grass can recover.

In the German case, East Germany styled itself as the anti-fascist Germany, while decrying the West’s continuity of Nazi elites and revanchist forces. Fascist continuity vs. consequent anti-fascism was a very powerful—and a very polarizing—frame of legitimation. It took the *Ostpolitik* to undo it. In brief, in 1966, the West Germans elected a chancellor who unquestionably came from the anti-fascist side of Germany’s recent history. In fact, “Willy Brandt” only adopted this name as a *nom de guerre* after he went into exile, fleeing the Hitler regime. Right-wing forces found it outrageous that he would keep this name throughout his post-1945 engagement in German politics. Brandt’s *Ostpolitik* followed a multi-pronged strategy. In an unprecedented gesture of repentance at the time, he knelt down at the memorial for the Warsaw ghetto victims on a state visit to Poland. During international negotiations and political treaties, he prioritized recognition: recognition of post-1945 borders (in particular the acceptance that the formerly German lands to the East of the Oder-Neisse Rivers had become part of Poland)

and also recognition of socialist governments, including the East German one, as legitimate interlocutors.

Looking back at Brandt's *Ostpolitik* may help put things into perspective when we refer to the current U.S.-Cuban détente as historic and compare it to Cold War-era détente policies. However, Obama's key policy approach is the same as that of *Ostpolitik*: recognition. The Obama-Raúl hand-shake at Nelson Mandela's funeral already symbolically conveyed this message of recognition, and the December 17 declaration to restore diplomatic relations sealed the deal, institutionally speaking.

Recognition can be misread as support. According to hardline Republicans in Congress, Obama has betrayed democracy and extended a lifeline to a moribund dictatorship, making a "concession" without getting much "in return" from the Cuban side. However, such a perspective overlooks that recognition is a mutual affair. Moreover, the more profound, long-term challenges of normalizing relations are to the Cuban system. Opening to flows of trade, people, and information are not easy to digest for a political system like Cuba's, which had been built upon anti-imperialist armed struggle, a state-controlled economy, a state monopoly on mass media, an emphatic notion of national sovereignty, and the militarized political logic of a "besieged fortress."

Cuban leaders have legitimized Cuba's single-party system not so much on the writings of Marx and Lenin, but rather as a defense mechanism for a revolutionary regime that required "national unity" and "closed ranks" in the face of U.S. aggression (of which there certainly was plenty). Raúl Castro, who alternates military fatigues and civilian suits according to the occasion, made sure to wear his general's uniform when he read his December 17 announcement to restore

diplomatic relations with the U.S.—thus emphasizing the continued centrality of, in the last instance, military confrontation.

To be sure, the core embargo legislation is still in place. The U.S. still has overwhelming military capacity and still operates a naval base on Cuban territory. The Helms-Burton Act, which backs the right of emigrated Cubans to reclaim confiscated property under U.S. law, has yet to be lifted, keeping a Damocles sword over the houses currently owned by thousands of Cubans.

Nevertheless, following Obama's policy shift, the U.S. will start sending tourists, not troops. Instead of conducting military training in the Florida swamps, Cuban emigrants are eager to buy up Havana's freshly opened real estate market through middlemen on the island. Instead of isolating the Cuban market, Amazon, Apple, and company want to ship as many of their goodies as possible to the island, making it just as addicted to their products as the rest of the world. The more that big, bad Goliath puts away his stick and takes out his wallet, the more Raúl's display of his military uniform looks out of sync with Cuba's actual challenges.

This also marks a key difference between Germany's *Ostpolitik* and Obama's *Südpolitik*. In Willy Brandt's case, the government went boldly ahead of society. Only after he signed the 1970 Treaties of Moscow and of Warsaw, and in particular the 1972 Basic Treaty with East Germany, did West and East Germans begin to slowly restore the ties so dramatically cut off by the Wall's construction a decade earlier. In the U.S.-Cuban case, political leaders are trailing behind a process that society on both sides of the Florida straits has been advancing forcefully over the past years.

While hardline anti-Castro rhetoric may dominate Miami's air-waves, Cuban emigrants have actually been a driving force for the U.S. to normalize relations. Half a million of Cuban-

Americans visit the island each year, and approximately US\$2 billion go to the island annually in family remittances. On the Cuban side, insistent pressure from below has arguably led the government to adopt the 2013 migration reform, which allows hundred thousands of Cubans to travel to the U.S. and elsewhere with unprecedented ease (a key restriction being the receipt of an entry visa to the countries of destiny). As a result, on the eve of December 17, the much-cited “people-to-people contacts” were already a social reality, not a goal to achieve by government action.

In Cold War times, Western visitors may have smuggled some books or magazines, but their circulation and impact was minimal. Today, informational borders have become highly porous, from cell phones and Internet, to USB sticks and *el paquete*, a weekly updated package of digital content (from movies to a Cuban-style Craig’s List) that has become widely popular on the island.

Today Cuban society is more heterogeneous, more mobile, and has more means of communication at its disposal than ever before. Domestically, under Raúl Castro the Cuban government has gradually accepted society’s demands for more diverse media (although it continues to act heavy-handedly against what it deems as having “gone too far”). To determine the latter, the key justification remains external confrontation. But now that the elephants do not appear to be battling as fiercely as they did before December 17, it is likely that demands will increase for what could be a *détente* towards domestic plurality.

Actually this seems to be happening already. An example is the recent online forum of the Communist Youth newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*, which invited young people to discuss the announced reform of electoral law.¹ The audience’s response was anything but complacent, from a plea to elect the President directly to demands for a clear separation of the executive and

legislative branches, from statements that “nobody wants to go on voting like this” to frank calls for a multiple-party system. It may be safe to assume that such demands surpass what authorities will want to implement. Nonetheless, not long ago it would have been unthinkable that *Juventud Rebelde*’s website would even publish such questions, without accusing the questioners of being U.S. mercenaries or the like. The genie for voicing these opinions is out of the bottle, it seems, and will not be easily put back in.

Finally, Obama’s *Südpolitik* also has important economic implications. The “economics of détente”—as we may call them—are very different from those of the historic *Ostpolitik* experience. In Cold War Europe, people-to-people flows of goods and money were limited. Trade relations with the West, as well as the credits extended to socialist countries, were made with the central state, which used them in accordance with its priorities. In Cuba, in contrast, people-to-people flows are massive. And while the state, through markups on retail prices, tariffs, and other means, taps into the emigrants’ remittances and informal credits, these flows are essentially private and linked to family ties. Consequently, they favor those strata of Cuban society from which the emigrants came, that is, phenotypically “white” Cubans rather than those of African descent; urban rather than rural; pre-1959 middle and upper classes rather than the pre-1959 poor.

True, these trends started before the December 17 announcements. Ever since Fidel Castro legalized the U.S. dollar on the island in 1993, having family abroad or not became a key dividing line among Cuban society. However, these divisions have taken on new significance due to the internal dynamics of economic reform. Whereas, in the past, remittances from abroad essentially raised a family or individual’s consumption levels, today they can be used to invest in business and housing, leading to a much more profound re-stratification of society. The

economic impact of Obama's *Südpolitik* will only add to the rift. Obama's easing of restrictions can be expected to drive an economic dynamism which—ranging from increased U.S. travel to Internet services or credit card access—will disproportionately favor precisely those Cubans who are already linked to the hard-currency sector of tourism and migrant remittances. While increased ties, trade, and travel with the U.S. will help Cuba's economy to reach its 4 percent growth target for 2015, it will also accelerate the underlying process of increasing inequality in Cuban society that accompanies this growth pattern.

In addition, key investment projects by the Cuban state have been projected, clearly eyeing the U.S. market in a post-embargo future. For the ambitious new container port and free zone of Mariel, as well as for the large marina projected in Varadero, trade and travel normalization with the U.S. is indispensable for their economic viability. Both are located along the northwestern coast, where Cuba is closest to the U.S. Given that the foreseeable tourism and real estate surge will also concentrate in Havana, Cuba's economics of détente will massively shift the island's economic dynamism to the capital and surrounding areas, aggravating the already large development gap with the poorer Eastern provinces.

All this is, of course, a massive challenge for the revolutionary project whose quintessential legitimation had been to overcome precisely social cleavages based on skin color and social pedigree, geographic location and metropolitan proximity—the markers of pre-1959 Cuba. However, the Cuban elites themselves are part of this re-stratification of society. Most of Cuba's top Party cadres, managers, and army generals have relatives in Miami. Their sons and daughters, it seems, don't fancy becoming school teachers in Bayamo—but not few of them find it attractive to open posh restaurants in Havana or to enter the import-export business. Alumni of

elite Cuban schools like the “Escuela Vocacional Lenin” hold positions of influence in Havana as much in Miami, and they easily reconnect in a potentially powerful transnational network.

There is no parallel to these trends in the European *Ostpolitik* experience. In Cold War Europe, the easing of travel and communications in the 1970s did not lead to the emergence of trans-border networks that would mark the transformation of economy and society before or after 1989. In Cuba, it is the result of a societal détente preceding that between the governments. Barack Obama and Raúl Castro made history with their December 17 announcements to restore diplomatic relations. But all Cubans who in the 1990s began to mend family ties severed in the times of revolutionary fervor, all U.S. citizens who have claimed their right to travel, all émigrés sending remittances to their families on the island have been at the heart of the U.S.-Cuban “grass-roots détente” on which the government détente belatedly followed.

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ⁱ See <www.juventudrebelde.cu/cuba/2015-02-28/que-desea-saber-sobre-el-sistema-electoral-cubano>.