



## ДВУСТОРОННИЕ ОТНОШЕНИЯ

DOI: 10.22363/2313-0660-2017-17-3-568-574

### US-CUBA RELATIONS: A NEW WAVE OF CONFRONTATION?

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**Abstract.** The article seeks to analyze the role of the changes introduced by the administration of the former president Barack Obama in 2014—2016 into the bilateral US-Cuba relations; and the way in which the new presidential team are to reorganize this direction. The question on the attitude of Donald Trump towards currently existing policies aimed at solving the long-lasting problem with Cuban socialism is especially interesting since new US president has multiple times condemned the old ways practiced by the former establishment, but at the same time has shown readiness to act in a straight-forward and confrontational manner. One of contributors of the paper, Santiago Perez Benitez, deputy director of the Center for International Political Studies in Havana, is attempting to provide his professional expertise in granting an insider view from the Cuban side, evaluating the progress made since the 2014 and interpret the notion of the upcoming policy changes in Washington.

The importance of the Cuban issue in the framework of US. policy in the Western hemisphere is explained by the fact that a solution in this sphere could help remake a negative image of Pan-American policies that haunts Washington. Cuban issue has also been long considered a possible key for reestablishment of trust between the United States and Latin American countries. For president Trump, quite unpopular judging by the polls, Cuban issue also has a potential to earn support of his own constituents, who strongly support lifting the embargo from Cuba. However now after certain decisions of Donald Trump the future of US-Cuban relations seems to get gloomier by the day.

**Key words:** Cuba, embargo, sanctions, blockade, Donald Trump

The recent change in US-Cuba relations that happened due to the initiative of the Obama administration in 2014 has occupied the minds of many researchers in the field. Among the most prominent scientific aimed at getting a better look at the US-Cuba Thaw are Eric Hershberg, Alessandro Badella, Carlos C. Campos, Andres Serbin, William M. Leogrande, Michael Shifter and a vast number of researchers both of Latin-American, U.S. and even European origin [Badella 2015; Campos & Prevost 2016; Hershberg 2016; Serbin 2016; Shifter 2016]. In Russia, traditionally, the Cuban issue is researched by Boris F. Martynov and Vladimir A. Borodaev [Borodaev 1998].

### ОБАМА'S APPROACH

With the arrival of Trump it would be worthwhile to comment some relevant Obama's strategic initiatives, which inevitably will serve as a comparison basis for

the future course of US-Cuba relations. Former president's approach to the Cuban issue can be characterized by the following traits.

1. Rapid growth of priority regarding US-Cuba relations. It is now evident that after 17 of December 2014 the topic of Cuba started gaining significant importance since it was one of the few indisputably positive moments in the political course of the former president. Not only was the initiative to soften the tensions supported by the US population, but also by Cubans, Latin-American countries and practically the rest of the world.

2. Exceptionality of the United States. President Obama was the first president of the United States to visit Cuba for almost a century. At the same time, he felt the right to publicly criticize and pressure the Cuban leaders to introduce societal changes. This type of behavior in the international relations is called «arrogance of power» and could be perceived as an attempt to meddle in the internal affairs of a sovereign state [Leogrande 2015]. This is generally part of the notion that exceptional strategic and political position of the United States gives them right to perceive states like Cuba as a part of their sphere of influence. At the same time, former president was subjected to a certain amount of pressure from the US establishment, which demanded specific progress on US agenda given the perception that Cuba did not make any expected concessions.

3. Dismantling anti-imperialism. All of Obama's symbolic oratory display and his performance in Cuba was intended, among other objectives, to dismantle the negative historical image that the US had had in the Cuban people with its deep roots and motives<sup>1</sup>.

4. Reaching out to Latin America. With the new policy towards Cuba, Obama wanted to show that the US no longer pursued an imperialist vision regarding Cuba. The United States sought to redress its lacerated ideological, social and political hegemony on the continent, which it sees as its own, in the face of the advance of other international actors, especially China, Russia and the EU [Leger, Tzili 2016].

5. Amplified policy of change. Although the strategy of legitimizing the internal counterrevolution and attributing international projection to it to some extent remained with Obama; the new approach of Obama sought to extend the American influence to all the Cuban society, especially to the sectors identified in this visit. Among those: religious people, self-employed population, youth, civil society, state and partisan officials. By doing so former president directly included Cuban community in US to the equation of the «changing the system» in a form of reconciliation of the nation. The novelty of this was in the attempt to minimize the visibility of the US agencies, embassies and other governmental actors in relation to promotion of changes in Cuba, substituting it with the «change by the hands of others» [Lancinski 2015]. The media presented such policies of the last two years of Barack Obama's administration as a direct concern for the well-being of ordinary Cuban population. This perfectly falls in order with the 2015 US National Security Strategy which promoted the principle of «strategic patience», meaning that changes in Cuba should happen naturally and gradually alongside with the disappearance of antagonism tendencies in the relations and self-defense reactions<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> World News tonight with David Muir, March 21, 2016. URL: <http://abcnews.go.com/US/president-obama-family-arrive-cuba-historic-visit/story?id=37791583> (accessed: 13.04.2017).

<sup>2</sup> National Security Strategy 2015. URL: <http://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2015.pdf> (accessed: 13.04.2017).

6. Gradually lifting the blockade. Barack Obama subtracted political legitimacy from the scaffolding of the blockade which was undoubtedly positive. However, it is not done rapidly, but in a gradual, tailor-made manner with the emphasis of calibrating its consequences in accordance with the readiness of Cuban establishment to cooperate [Isacson, Kinosain 2016].

7. Making the course irreversible. With the adoption of a number of positive measures in the economic field, including the use of US currency, greater travel possibilities, joint ventures in the hotel area, agreement for flights and maritime travel; Obama administration sought to unleash dynamics in bilateral and cooperation ties that would be difficult to reverse in the future by the next administrations that turn out to be less committed to the relationship with Cuba. The support of business sector and general US population played here an important role. The emergence of specific interests alongside with the solution of common problems with Cuba, was also another strategic goal of US policy [Whitefield 2016; Lopez-Levi 2016]. The level of activism in the US-Cuban during the last two years was truly impressive. This includes 20 work groups on various topics and a special bilateral commission. There were 20 mutual visits on the ministry levels (7 from Cuban side and 13 from US) alongside with the 12 treaties in different spheres [Leiva 2015; Morris 2016].

And on the contrary, Trump is trying to enforce a practice when nothing that a previous administration has implemented can be tagged as irreversible and therefore the whole process could be compromised and undermined; especially since it was executed as a political directive and not in a form of law.

### **LOGICS OF TRUMP ADMINISTRATION**

The other direction is represented by the new general course that president Trump is attempting to implement — a more belligerent and nativist capitalism, which does not necessarily drift away from elements of Obama's previous strategy. It is seeking the same objectives, but in a more «impatient» way, favoring a more confrontational course of greater pressures, hostility, interference. All that is expected to stop the pace of progress in bilateral relations, produce a phase of instability and amplify criticism of Cuba at the international level, triggering campaigns of defamation and new multilateral pressures.

Donald Trump, although it would not make Cuba a high priority, is expected to intensify blockade, especially in the financial sphere [Mayer 2017]. He would seek to take away from Cuba the alleged benefits that, in the logics of his political and electoral rhetoric, granted Cuba the thaw with Obama in 2015 and 2016<sup>1</sup>. This scenario with the Trump administration does not exclude elements of cooperation with the Cuban government as some of those currently in the area of immigration, security, scientific exchange. At the same time, so-called unconventional wars or plans of subversion cannot be excluded.

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<sup>1</sup> Presidential Policy Directive «United States-Cuba Normalization», 14 October 2015. URL: <http://beforeitsnews.com/obama/2016/10/presidential-policy-directive-united-states-cuba-normalization-2477737.html> (accessed: 13.04.2017).

These are the most likely reasons for a raise in hostility from Trump administration in relation to Cuba:

— the groups that support current president do not share his predecessor's explanation that the instruments of the previous hostility policy have failed. They believe that by employing the methods of confrontation, many typical for the Helms Burton act<sup>1</sup>, can achieve the system change more expeditiously;

— perception of Cuba's vulnerability due to the economic problems it faces as a result of the Venezuelan crisis;

— relative strategic and military weakness of Cuba, it can be named the weakest «enemy» of the United States in terms of military potential;

— reactions to criticism from the right wing regarding the lack of concessions from Cuba, especially concerning the demands in the fields of changes in political system, freedoms and human rights;

— actions of right-wing Cuban-Americans for having acted in favor of the Republicans in the elections in Florida. It would not be so much because of the electoral potential of Cubans (Democrats won the Dade and Broward County), but because of the role that Cuban-Americans play in the structure of United States Republican party;

— possibility of “making concessions” to the republican establishment, whose candidates to the White House advocated in the primaries for a tightening of relations with Cuba, especially Marco Rubio and Jeb Bush. The Republican Platform, approved by today's White House Chief of Staff, Reince Priebus, is very hostile against Cuba. Trump's comments following the death of Fidel Castro in November 2016 are precisely along those lines<sup>2</sup>;

— the vision that Latin America does not continue to support Cuba with the same intensity and in the same way that it did in the years 2010—2015, given the changes to the right in the region [Serbin 2016];

— attempts to measure the “resistance” the new country's leadership can offer from 2018 to external actions, including provocations from US-backed counterrevolution movements;

— failure to realize important US business and economic interests in Cuba that theoretically may have the potential to curb eventual hostile government policies of Trump.

On June 17, 2017 Donald Trump publicly denounced the changes implemented during Obama's presidency, naming them inefficient and their terms unfavorable for the United States. During his speech, he had mentioned that it would not necessarily mean a complete shutdown of all the recent initiatives, just a renegotiation that should help to introduce a much better deal for the USA. However, such a blunt position does set resolution of the most crucial issues between Cuba and U.S. even further away and undermines the very foundation for any potential fruitful cooperation.

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<sup>1</sup> Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act, 1996. URL: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-104publ14/html/PLAW-104publ14.htm> (accessed: 13.04.2017).

<sup>2</sup> How Donald Trump responded to the death of Fidel Castro, «a brutal dictator». Washington Post, 26 November 2016. URL: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/26/here-is-donald-trumps-reaction-to-fidel-castros-death/?utm\\_term=.406f339dae37](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/26/here-is-donald-trumps-reaction-to-fidel-castros-death/?utm_term=.406f339dae37).

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It would be unreasonable to expect the new administration to impose the former president's Bush previous scenario. The rupture of diplomatic relations, or the sensitive economic interest of the United States in Cuba is most likely to cause more collateral damage, especially when the US general population's attitude is favorable to a more cooperative approach to United States — Cuba relations. Recent years have shown that soft power has proven in many cases to be more effective than the direct confrontation, economic and political sanctions. Such pressure only promotes the self-protection tendencies in the internal politics of that state, fueling the ideological struggle, thus leading to fewer possibilities for improving the situation. Even though republican supporters generally don't see Cuban direction in US foreign policy as economically and politically prominent, the fragile public opinion situation the party has been subjected to after the first contradictory steps of the new administrations concerning the issues of immigration imply the necessity to limit potential radical and intense policy changes [Zanona 2016].

At the same time, Donald Trump has been well-known for his critical position towards Cuba. He has already become famous worldwide for his hasty decisions, so it is hardly a surprise that despite the common sense, massive profits and public opinion he is still determined to enforce his confrontational model of US-Cuba relations. The most crucial questions are still unknown: "To what degree will the set-back occur?", "Which areas of cooperation are to be targeted?". The answers are most likely to determine the fate of the Cuban issue in Latin America and possibly the very future of the Inter-American system itself.

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Received: 14.06.2017

**For citations:** Pérez Benitez, S., Eremin, A.A. (2017). US-Cuba relations: A new wave of confrontation? *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, 17 (3), 568—574. DOI: 10.22363/2313-0660-2017-17-3-568-574.

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DOI: 10.22363/2313-0660-2017-17-3-568-574

## ОТНОШЕНИЯ США И КУБЫ: НОВЫЙ ВИТОК КОНФРОНТАЦИИ?

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В рамках данной статьи подробно рассматривается изменение ситуации в американо-кубинских отношениях по вопросу ослабления политических и экономических санкций, инициированного администрацией предыдущего президента США Барака Обамы; а также приводится прогноз развития этого направления внешней политики Соединенных Штатов при администрации Дональда Трампа. Осмысление взглядов нового президента США на кубинскую проблему представляет беспрецедентный интерес в ключе общей стратегии нового истеблишмента относительно Латинской Америки в целом. Кубинский вопрос, являющийся пережитком идеологической борьбы времен холодной войны, не теряет важности по сей день, так как по мнению научного сообщества именно его решение станет своего рода «ключом» к Латинской Америке, а также создаст необходимый базис для преодоления политической, экономической и социальной фрагментации региона.

Для государств ЛКА снятие эмбарго с Кубы означает возможность для построения доверительных отношений с Вашингтоном, что ранее было невозможным благодаря активному и агрессивному политическому курсу последнего в Западном полушарии. С точки зрения Соединенных Штатов грамотное разрешение противоречий с Кубой, которое находит широкую поддержку у граждан обеих стран, может стать уникальной возможностью отойти от негативного имиджа панамериканской политики и придать новый импульс к сотрудничеству в межамериканском формате.

Немаловажно и то, что для стремительно теряющего популярность и поддержку среди собственных граждан Дональда Трампа кубинский вопрос имеет все шансы выступить в качестве политического «спасательного круга». Однако последние события и высказывания 45-го президента США угрожают не только привести в заморозке уже существующих проектов сотрудничества, но и к полномасштабному сворачиванию всех инициатив, начатых его предшественником в данном направлении.

**Ключевые слова:** Куба, санкции, эмбарго, Дональд Трамп

Дата поступления статьи: 14.06.2017

**Для цитирования:** Pérez Benitez S., Eremin A.A. US-Cuba relations: A new wave of confrontation? // *Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Международные отношения*. 2017. Т. 17. № 3. С. 568—574. DOI: 10.22363/2313-0660-2017-17-3-568-574.

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