

The Organization of American States (OAS) and the Re-establishment of Ties between the U.S. and Cuba

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The 7th Summit of the 35-member Organization of American States (OAS) will take place in Panama on April 10-11, 2015. It is anticipated that the summit will produce a historic re-establishment of ties between the U.S. and Cuba, with Presidents Raúl Castro and Barack Obama both in attendance.

The OAS is “the world’s oldest regional organization,” having been conceived during the “International Conference of American States, held in Washington, D.C., from October 1889 to April 1890.” However, it was not officially established until 1948 in Bogotá, Colombia. It currently includes 35 member countries and its main goal is to ensure that its member states achieve “an order of peace and justice, to promote their solidarity, to strengthen their collaboration, and to defend their sovereignty, their territorial integrity, and their independence”. Promoting democracy without intervention, respecting human rights, and ensuring security and “respect for the personality, sovereignty, and independence of States,” in addition to supporting economic, social, and cultural development have been main principles of the OAS. Each member is supposed to possess “the right to choose, without external interference, its political, economic, and social system and to organize itself in the way best suited to it, and has the duty to abstain from intervening in the affairs of another State.” However, it is also assumed that “economic cooperation is essential to the common welfare and prosperity of the peoples of the continent.”

Cuba was among the 20 founding member states of the OAS that originally participated in the 1948 Bogotá conference. Cuba’s participation would be relatively short-lived, however, as its membership was suspended at “the Eighth Meeting of Consultation of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs in Punta del Este, Uruguay,” which took place on January 21, 1962. At this particular meeting, the Washington representatives were hopeful that Cuba would not only be suspended from the organization, but that the OAS would also place sanctions against the island, largely as a response to the success of the Cuban revolution a few years earlier. However, it was not certain that they could secure the 14 votes required to pass these measures, given that the member states were not unified in their opinions on these matters, as “Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Chile, Bolivia and Ecuador were opposed to sanctions” and, Uruguay and Haiti were hesitant. For this reason, the U.S. engaged in private meetings with Haiti, where the Haitian representatives were convinced to “support the sanctions against Cuba” in exchange for the provision of aid from the U.S.

At the conclusion of the Punta del Este meetings, the U.S. was able to garner the 14 votes needed to have the OAS implement sanctions against Cuba and suspend the island nation from the organization, despite the abstention of six countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, and Mexico) and Cuba’s objections. More precisely, Cuba was excluded from participation in the OAS, on the grounds that “Marxism-Leninism is incompatible” with “the

principles and objectives of the inter-American system” and the primary goals of the OAS. Although Cuba was still officially a member of the OAS, its Marxist-Leninist government was “denied the right of representation and attendance at meetings and of participation in activities” for the period of January 21, 1962 to June 3, 2009, when its suspension was officially lifted.

It could be argued that these punitive measures directed against Cuba amounted to little more than retaliation against the island’s socialist revolution that allowed it to gain some degree of independence from U.S. imperial power. Cuba’s suspension from the OAS created a tense atmosphere among its member nations; while some hesitated to comment on the suspension, others like Mexico and Argentina explicitly stated that it was a direct outcome to the Cuban Revolution.

Since the 1960s, the Cuban government openly referred to the OAS as “the Ministry of Colonies of the United States of America.” In fact, on May 6, 2005, President Fidel Castro explicitly stated that Cuba would not “be part of a disgraceful institution that has only humiliated the honor of Latin American nations.” However, only a few years later at the 39th General Assembly of the OAS held in San Pedro Sula, Honduras on June 3, 2009, member states voted to lift Cuba’s 47-year suspension from the organization, with even Washington defending Cuba’s readmission. This change in heart was interpreted as an admission that Cuba’s suspension from the OAS, taken nearly half-a-century ago, was an error of the Cold War era and a signal that the country was no longer viewed as an enemy of open economies. Only a few days later, on “8 June 2009”, President Fidel Castro rebuffed the invitation when he “stated that while Cuba welcomed the Assembly’s gesture, in light of the Organization’s historical record ‘Cuba will not return to the OAS’. As recently as January 2014 Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez has said that ‘Cuba’s position in relation to the OAS remains unchanged, we will not return to it.’”

Since Rodriguez made his statement back in January 2014, Washington and Havana held a number of secret meetings culminating with President Barack Obama surprising the world on December 17, 2014 by announcing his intention to negotiate conditions for the restoration of diplomatic relations with Cuba. President Obama had previously expressed his hope that the U.S. embassy in Havana would be re-opened before the upcoming OAS Summit, which is scheduled to take place in Panama on April 10-11, 2015. Not long after President Obama expressed his optimism, Josefina Vidal “the head of the Cuban negotiators” stated that it will still take some time “before both sides are ready to open embassies”. Even if the embassy has not been opened before the summit begins, the meetings in Panama are, nonetheless, expected to produce the re-establishment of a diplomatic relationship between the U.S. and Cuba with Presidents Raúl Castro and Barack Obama both in attendance. Unfortunately, aside from being a symbolic historic moment, the OAS summit in Panama may not produce any actual tangible outcomes for the Cuban economy, as Washington does not appear to be in any hurry to lift the embargo against the island.

Washington’s image has been damaged among OAS members as a result of its enduring economic and financial embargo on Cuba, which was originally imposed in 1962. Washington may expect that re-establishing relations with Cuba and abandoning its failed policies aimed at isolating the island nation will improve its image and help strengthen its role in Latin America. More specifically, the U.S. administration may be hoping to rehabilitate its image in the eyes of certain OAS member countries that openly expressed

opposition to American's hostile policy vis-à-vis Cuba. Thus, the hope is that strengthening its economic, social, and political relationship with Cuba would naturally enhance such relationships with other OAS members and allow Washington to counter the increasing influence of global competitors, like China and Russia, in Latin America and the Caribbean.

However, it is important to remember that Obama has made it clear that Washington does not expect to "achieve full normal relations immediately", as he stated: "[t]here's a lot of work that still has to be done." That is to say, Cuba needs to make more substantial changes, which would include undertaking efforts to "reorganize their economy to accommodate for possible foreign investment." Given that half a century of isolation and economic restrictions did not work, Obama suggested that Washington needed "to try something new that encourages and ultimately...forces the Cuban government to engage in a modern economy. And that will create more space for freedom for the Cuban people". Thus, it appears that the U.S. government has not really abandoned its goal of transforming the Cuban economic and political system into one that is based on capitalism.

When Barack Obama was first elected, the members of the OAS expected him to initiate substantial changes with regards to the U.S. relationship with Cuba. Then, on December 17, 2014, he surprised the world by announcing his intent to re-establish diplomatic relations with Cuba and, more recently, stated his desire to re-open American embassy in Havana before the Panama summit of the OAS. Unfortunately, no tangible changes are evident with respect to lifting the embargo as the end of Obama's second term as president approaches. The Cuban government appears to be taking a very cautious and sensible approach to the negotiations to ensure the normalization of relations on terms that do not facilitate a return to the exploitation and serfdom that Cubans endured prior to the 1959 revolution. If Obama genuinely seeks the re-establishment of a relationship with Cuba, then the embargo should be lifted without any conditions as a first step, as a sign of good will, followed by the negotiation of details for the normalization of diplomatic relations. All things considered, it is highly unlikely that the 7th Summit of the OAS in Panama will conclude with President Obama making a grand announcement that the U.S. will lift the internationally unpopular economic and financial embargo of Cuba. However, there is a good possibility that we will be treated to an array of delightful photographs of firm handshakes between Presidents Raúl Castro and Barack Obama.

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