

What Obama Really Said About Cuba, Foreign Affairs and the US

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At the annual State of the Union address on January 13, 2016, President Obama reiterated his Cuba policy regarding Cuba-US relations. He said:

"Fifty years of isolating Cuba had failed to promote democracy, and set us back in Latin America. That's why we restored diplomatic relations — (applause) — opened the door to travel and commerce, positioned ourselves to improve the lives of the Cuban people. (Applause.)"*

This is basically what Obama stated several years ago in the course of developing his Cuba policy. This is also what appeared in a series of *New York Times* editorials. Together this helped pave the way for the December 17, 2014 joint statement by presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro to restore diplomatic relations, a victory for Cuba. There has been no change in the US position. As Obama expressed previously in other ways, the old policy of isolating Cuba "did not work." It failed to bring "democracy" to Cuba, a euphemism for overthrowing the constitutional order and the Revolution in Cuba.

The old US Cuba policy, he reiterated as quoted above, also "set us back in Latin America." In other words, it hindered not only US credibility in Latin America but also its ability to maneuver there. The northern country's strategic goal in Latin America bears the same long-term objective of bringing "democracy" to those countries that have radically diverted from the pro-US, and pro-capitalist, road in order to forge a new revolutionary path based on national sovereignty and anti-capitalist policies. The most significant US target is Venezuela.

Obama expressed that his new Cuba policy "opened the door to travel and commerce." While this is true, it is not very much more than a one-way effort that rather favors the US. This runs counter to opening doors equally, on a mutual basis, for the Cubans to do business with the US and internationally.

When he stated that the White House and the administration "positioned ourselves to improve the lives of the Cuban people," what did he mean? An important objective of the policies designed to improve the "lives of the people" is geared toward the 500,000 people in the expanding self-employed sector of the Cuban economy. The immediate tactical goal of the administration is to strengthen this sector. In developing this policy, administration officials barely hide the policy's long-term objective. The goal is to develop this sector as a potential breach in Cuban society. This sector, according to the US game plan, would become at the very least indifferent and apolitical, if not hostile, to the Cuban government and the Cuban political system. This tendency would go hand in hand with these 500,000 self-employed people, as the US would like, looking to the US and its "values" (capitalism)

as the savior. Such a scenario, with its made-in-the-US branding, would be a cancer eating away at the Cuban socialist project and even its sovereignty.

Moreover, if Obama were really interested in the goal to “improve the lives of the Cuban people,” he could use all the Executive powers at his disposal to gut out important parts of the blockade that the Congress cannot block.

Now what did Obama really say about the blockade?

“So if you want to consolidate our leadership and credibility in the hemisphere, recognize that the Cold War is over — lift the embargo. (Applause.)”

Let us forego the fact that he favors the lifting of the genocidal blockade not for moral reasons, but rather to reach the goal of improving the US image in Latin America.

However, there is another point. If he is so much against the blockade, why divert the focus toward the majority Republican US Congress? As mentioned above, there is so much he can do on his own using his executive prerogatives. Blaming the Congress for blocking the Executive branch is to a large extent a ruse. His lack of real opposition to the blockade is likewise illustrated when, in 2014, under Obama’s tutelage, a German bank was fined \$1 billion for dealing with Cuba. Why should the Cuban people wait for the US Congress when the blockade has been – and still is – the principal obstacle to Cuba’s sustainable development?

Regarding Cuba, but in a very indirect way, Obama flamboyantly bragged:

“I will keep working to shut down the prison at Guantanamo. (Applause.) It is expensive, it is unnecessary, and it only serves as a recruitment brochure for our enemies. (Applause.)”

He does not want to “shut down” the prison because it is a torture chamber, a blot on humanity, but because it “is expensive, it is unnecessary.”

There are several issues regarding Guantanamo.

First, he has been promising this since he was elected. Why did he not do it, or do it right now? There is no need for Congressional approval. After all, Bush opened the notorious prison on his own without Congressional approval. Blaming Congress is once again part of US opportunist politics.

Second, what about returning Guantanamo to the Cuba people? Not a word was mentioned, even though the US naval base is part of Cuba. Just before playing the Guantanamo card, Obama said in the very previous sentence:

“That’s American strength. That’s American leadership. And that kind of leadership depends on the power of our example.”

The example offered immediately after that sentence is the one of shutting down Guantanamo. However, the example is not very persuasive since it is still open,

notwithstanding his legal right to do so on his own.

Despite the statements with regard to Cuba, he never acknowledged the following problem faced by his administration. The Cuban government is very aware that the US has only changed its tactics while maintaining its long-term strategic goal to subvert the Cuban Revolution. In this context, the Cubans are valiantly opposing US interference in Cuban affairs. President Raúl Castro and the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs have publicly warned the US. The Cubans are striving to make as much headway as possible in the context of the change in US tactics for the good of the Cuban and American peoples. However, Cuba cautioned the US that it will never sell its principles and will always steadfastly defend its sovereignty and dignity.

Now that is all Obama said, and did not say, about Cuba. But what he said about other foreign relations issues affects not only Cuba and Cuba-US relations, but the rest of the world. There are far too many examples to deal with here as it goes beyond the scope of this article. Thus let us take only two illustrations.

First, he took dead aim against China and Russia, which form an important part of the foundation of a new multi-polar world in a growing alliance with Latin America and the Caribbean regional blocks.

“...when it comes to every important international issue, people of the world do not look to Beijing or Moscow to lead — they call us. (Applause.)”

As part of the above-cited US remark that indicates the ferocious competition that US world hegemony sees in China and Russia, during the course of his speech, buoyed by the traditional applause, he took jabs at Russia (Crimea). He also did so with regard to China. He indicated how China was supposedly out-manuevered and pushed aside by the US though the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement. The TPP is a trade agreement among 12 Pacific Rim countries concerning a variety of matters of economic policy, which was reached on October 5, 2015 after 7 years of negotiations. The members include Chile, Mexico and Peru. It is being rammed through Congress with the representatives barely being aware what it is all about. Obama said:

“With TPP, China does not set the rules in that region; we do. You want to show our strength in this new century? Approve this agreement. Give us the tools to enforce it. It’s the right thing to do. (Applause.)”

Cuba depends on itself for its own sovereignty and independence. Even when it allied itself with the former Soviet Union, Cuba kept its distance and never became a satellite of the former USSR. Nevertheless, a growing multi-polar world very much favors Cuba. In this situation, the island can more effectively develop economic and political relations, as is the case now, with such countries as China and Russia, which have freed themselves from US domination. The striving of the US for world domination, even over countries such as China and Russia, cannot be underestimated. Any success in this direction will also affect Cuba. The concept and policy of “US imperialism” is not only still applicable; it is more than ever necessary to be aware of US imperialism as it camouflages itself in order to carry out the same policies. Its chameleon nature is all the more dangerous now as it goes through its

Obama phase. World domination has not ceased to be the objective of US imperialism. World supremacy is its very nature. Latin America and the Caribbean, including Cuba, is one of its targets in achieving world domination.

Second, regarding US foreign relations policy, in addition to this objective to block the growing trend of a multi-polar world, Obama stated, believe it or not:

“The United States of America is the most powerful nation on Earth. Period. (Applause.) Period. It’s not even close. It’s not even close. (Applause.) It’s not even close. We spend more on our military than the next eight nations combined.”

Why ask readers the rhetorical question: “believe it or not?” When this quote from Obama was sent out as a tweet during the very course of the address, several followers from the US tweeted back asking incredulously: “Wait, did he actually say that?” Yes, he did. Not only that, but he said with as much bravura that:

“Our troops are the finest fighting force in the history of the world. (Applause.)”

To respond to that can never do justice to the millions of people killed by the US military since World War II, from Korea to Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries with their allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. In fact, Obama said about Vietnam:

“We also can’t try to take over and rebuild every country that falls into crisis, even if it’s done with the best of intentions. (Applause.) That’s not leadership; that’s a recipe for quagmire, spilling American blood and treasure that ultimately will weaken us. It’s the lesson of Vietnam; it’s the lesson of Iraq — and we should have learned it by now. (Applause.)”

Obama, as is always the case with regard to Vietnam, laments the “spilling of American blood and treasure.” But once again, nothing was said about the over 1 million Vietnamese killed by the US military during its aggression and war against Vietnam. This has been the Obama position on Vietnam since his earliest days as a political figure, as he wrote in his 2006 book leading up to his first mandate in 2008. It is nothing new. Military might with a heavy dose of American chauvinism goes hand-in-hand with the opposition to growing multi-polar world.

Let us now turn to the Obama domestic policy. Once again there are so many issues. However, we will concentrate only on two.

First, some people may recall that when the movement by Afro-Americans and their allies against state/police racist attacks and killings, the grass-roots protesters raised the banner “Black Lives Matter.” Now, what were the responses of the right-wing racist politicians and groups and many of the police? To counter the growing Black Lives Matter movement, they put forward slogans such as White Lives Matter or even Blue Lives Matter (in reference to the blue police uniforms) or All Lives Matter. Now this is what Obama said in his address:

“Voices that help us see ourselves not, first and foremost, as black or white, or Asian or Latino, not as gay or straight, immigrant or native born, not as

Democrat or Republican, but as Americans first, bound by a common creed.”

Is this not an indirect (or even direct) attack against Black Lives Matter? Does this seemingly innocent and moral statement not signal once again his support for the establishment’s alternative. Does not its thinly veiled backing of the reactionary backlash negate the inherent violent oppression by the state against Afro-Americans based on the heritage of the origins of the US as a slave society? This aspect of his State of the Union speech is very similar to what he trumpeted as well in his pre-presidential books with regard to the US being a “post-racist society.”

This traitorous statement on being “Americans first” is put into further relief when one takes into account the following. During the entire Obama speech, not a word was said about the killing by police of the Afro-Americans in 2015 and their ongoing mass incarceration. As in 2013 and 2014, US society is being torn apart by the inherent racism still very much brewing, and even increasing, in that country. However, not one word is said in the 6,000 word State of the Union speech. This is par for the course. If the Speech detailed this extreme violation of human rights in the US, how could the US, with a straight face, then lecture Cuba and others about human rights and democracy? The Cubans have forcefully stated to the US: You want to discuss human rights in Cuba? OK, but we have to also discuss human rights in the US.

The second domestic issue, in addition to racism, is democracy in the US. Obama said:

“But democracy does require basic bonds of trust between its citizens... And [after giving some examples] most of all, democracy breaks down when the average person feels their voice doesn’t matter...”

Did (and does) the “voice” of the people matter when it came to the Occupy movement, which was attacked by the police and the FBI under the Obama administration? Was the voice of the Afro-Americans and their allies heard regarding the police or vigilante killing of Afro-Americans? Recall that the killer of Trayvon Martin, George Zimmerman, was exonerated by Obama’s Department of Justice in February, 2015. The cop killer of Michael Brown in Ferguson was given the green light to avoid trial and imprisonment by the Obama Administration when its Department of Justice report on March 4, 2015 likewise exonerated the murderer. Instead they opt for “trust” between Afro-Americans on the one hand and the state police/justice apparatus on the other. This policy is repeated again in the above-cited extraction from the State of the Union address: “basic bonds of trust.” While the people are bombarded by the joint media/administration war of words, impunity for the state/police has spiraled out of control. This situation does not constitute a very sound footing to lecture other countries such as Cuba on democracy and human rights.

There are many other domestic issues. However, let us close on this. Obama evoked Dr. Martin Luther King. The US president declared:

“Voices Dr. King believed would have the final word...”

Just the mention of the name of this great political and moral figure in US politics coming out of the mouth of Obama can make one’s blood boil. Dr. Martin Luther King was, unlike Obama, vehemently against the US war in Vietnam. King, if alive today, surely would be

against the record number of wars that the Nobel Peace Prize winner is waging in the Middle East. King was a courageous fighter against racism and poverty. King carried out his missions not as a trampoline for a lucrative political career, but by standing side by side with the people even at the expense of his own life. King's legend is far closer to the Cuban revolutionary heritage than that of Obama.

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Notes:

*All quotes from the Obama address are from the White House: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-%E2%80%93-prepared-delivery-state-union-address>

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