

A large naval ship, possibly a destroyer, is shown at sea. The ship is white with a dark hull and has the number '71' visible on its side. The background is a dark blue sky and sea.

Potential Areas of Cooperation Between the United States and Cuba



American Security Project

A photograph of the United States Capitol building in Washington, D.C., viewed from a distance. The building is white with a prominent dome and is set against a blue sky with scattered white clouds.

Perspective

-
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In this Report:

Latin America and the Caribbean are critical regions for U.S. security, but the lack of open communication between the U.S. and Cuba weakens America's ability to operate in these areas. Open dialogue with Cuba will help the U.S. maintain security, and could also bring potential economic opportunities.

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IN BRIEF

- Isolating Cuba has hurt America's ability to address security challenges in Latin America more than it has helped. It is time to establish a more effective policy.
- Engaging Cuba offers better opportunities for political transformation than isolation. A more politically open Cuba is more likely to come when Cuba is connected to American politics and commerce, rather than disconnected.
- Addressing regional security problems such as disaster relief, transnational crime, search and rescue, and climate change are all made easier by communicating with Cuba and including it in regional security summits.
- Cuba has struggled with problems of energy security. Energy cooperation represents opportunity for profitability for both countries, as well as an avenue to improving relations in other areas.
- There is great potential for economic opportunities for both the U.S. and Cuba, but risk remains the biggest barrier for investment. Building relations at the top level can serve to reduce risk for U.S. investment, establishing mutually beneficial commerce in areas of agriculture, energy, pharmaceuticals, and more.

About the Authors

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Introduction

Latin America is threatened by a number of non-traditional security risks - drug trafficking, illicit migration, transnational crime, and environmental hazards are only some. The Cold War shaped this region into an area where superpowers and their proxies fought over influence and power. However, it now largely lacks the great power rivalries of the past. Today, as discussions of “collective security” grow to tackle the threats that cannot be addressed by “national security” alone, the United States faces growing security risks that are transnational in nature. A failure to address these risks in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America threatens the United States as well.



President Obama seated with Raul Castro at the Summit of the Americas. State Department Photo.

As the geopolitics of Latin America have shifted, for too long there has been one outlier: the U.S.-Cuba relationship. A great deal has changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991: markets have opened, travel has become easier, and diplomatic tensions have eased. Many countries that remain governed by a nominally communist party have normalized and even actively cooperated with the U.S. The exception is Cuba. The U.S. strategy of isolation and embargo has not achieved its intended objectives. Instead of forcing the desired change in the Cuban Government, this strategy has only harmed Cuba’s economy and development. It has also reduced American prestige and the strength of its relationships around Latin America. A more effective strategy to increase American influence and secure U.S. interests has long been necessary.

The move by the Obama Administration and the Castro regime to normalize diplomatic relations in December of 2014 could be groundbreaking, if it achieves its promise. The threats of the 21st Century can only be solved with cross-border cooperation. It is time to modernize the U.S. – Cuban relationship to meet the needs of the 21st Century, not to keep the walls of the Cold War standing. Cubans and Americans share a long history together—it is time to rebuild that partnership.

Cuba and Regional Relations

For too long, America’s strategic engagement with countries across Latin America has been weakened by the tense bilateral relationship with Cuba. This one sore point has added an underlying stress to all of America’s relationships with Latin America. At a tactical level, a lack of communication with Cuba has impeded America’s ability to effectively address the threats in the region, whether drug trafficking, crime, or disaster response. Ironically, many of the threats America faces in the region are now shared with Cuba, presenting an opportunity for the two countries to build cooperation on areas of mutual interest.

Bringing Cuba into Regional Politics

The foreign policy of Latin America has changed radically since the Cold War. Concerns have shifted to issues of development, climate and energy security, transnational crime, and disaster response. The multilateral nature of these security issues means the U.S. can play a different role in regional politics: one of convener and organizer—not hegemon. Omitting Cuba, the largest and most populous country in the Caribbean, only serves to impede the U.S.’ and others’ ability to effectively address these issues.

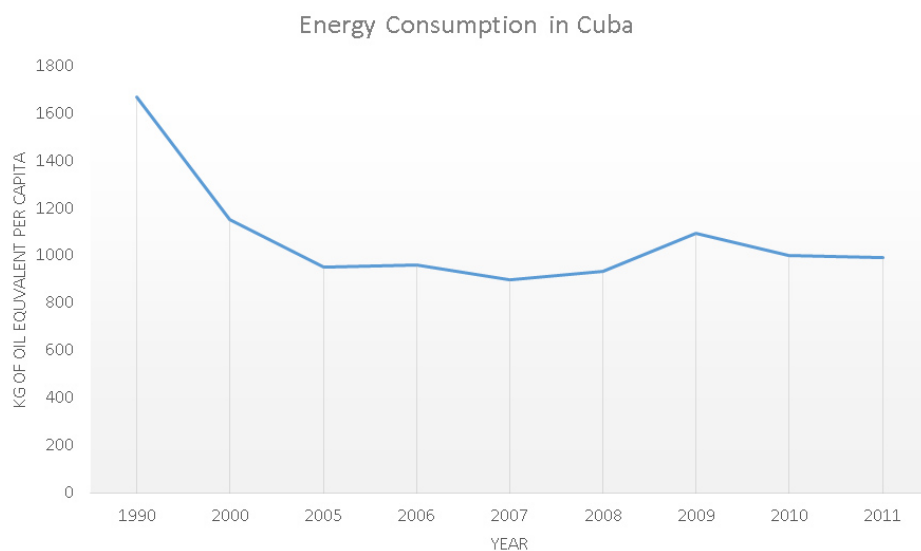
The U.S. strategy to isolate Cuba has been controversial throughout the region. For decades, U.S. relations with Latin America have suffered without functioning official U.S.-Cuba diplomatic relations. The United Nations General Assembly has requested 23 times that the U.S. lift its embargo against Cuba.¹ The damage has been most pronounced in relations with Caribbean nations in particular; they have been reluctant to cooperate with the U.S. so long as the embargo remained in place.

This has harmed security of both the United States and Caribbean nations. For example, the Caribbean is extremely vulnerable to the effects of climate change, particularly rising sea-levels and the increasing intensity of hurricanes. The 2015 CARICOM Climate Summit assessed that the region will be unable to deal with the adverse effects of climate change independently, and will require assistance from major powers.² A closer relationship will allow the countries to more effectively plan for these threats.

Addressing climate change and other regional security problems, such as energy security or transnational crime, requires cooperation with all regional parties. Isolating Cuba threatens the success of multilateral agreements aimed at mitigating these problems. A destabilized or struggling Caribbean could result in the displacement of populations which will seek refuge in America. As these issues will have an impact on the U.S., it is in America's interest to normalize relations with Cuba, and incorporate it into regional security summits that will require the country to uphold norms of international security.

Energy as an Avenue to Cuban Cooperation

The American energy revolution in shale gas, shale oil, and renewable energy means that the U.S. is well situated to become a regional energy supplier. Cuba has limited availability of domestic fuel; it imports roughly 130,000 barrels of oil per day.³ Most of this oil comes from Venezuela, but this may change as the subsidies that Venezuela provides to countries across the region are under stress.⁴ Moreover, that imported fuel is insufficient to meet demand in Cuba, which has been forced to adopt extreme policies of energy efficiency.⁵ Becoming an energy partner with Cuba represents an opportunity for the U.S. to have a voice in Cuban politics, as well as an economic opportunity.



Data from World Bank Development Indicators

Cuba has struggled with energy since the collapse of the Soviet Union, which had exported oil directly to Cuba in exchange for sugar. High energy costs forced a reckoning in 2006, resulting from rising oil prices, mounting trade deficits from energy imports, and hurricane damage to power infrastructure.⁶ The government enforced an “energy revolution”—not one about producing energy, but about minimizing energy usage.⁷ As a result, Cuba has one of the least energy reliant agricultural industries in the world, utilizing urban farms and minimizing reliance on machinery.⁸ Despite its efficiency in energy consumption though, its productivity is too low to meet Cuba’s needs, and must import food from other countries. The U.S. is actually Cuba’s primary food supplier, and has sold billions of dollars’ worth of food to Cuba since 2001—and studies show that there is further potential for profitable agricultural trade for the U.S.⁹

Despite success in overcoming energy shortages, Cuba still is a net energy importer and would benefit from access to cheaper energy.¹⁰ With respect to U.S.-Cuba relations, it is a good partner for natural gas. Cuba is one of the few islands that it would make economic sense to import liquefied natural gas (LNG). It is also close enough to the U.S. that a pipeline could even be possible. The U.S. has the potential to be Cuba’s most competitive energy supplier.

An energy focused relationship with Cuba creates opportunities for cooperation in other areas. Energy cooperation tends to reinforce peace and international ties, and this offers the ability to connect multiple policy issues and address areas of mutual interest. This will give Cuba more reason to consider U.S. interests, and also establish mutually beneficial economic ties through energy trade.

Patching the Hole in U.S. Operations

United States Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) is the military’s operational command group for the Caribbean and all territory south of Mexico. SOUTHCOM defines its key missions as counter-terrorism, countering transnational organized crime, and contingency response—all of these require cooperation with regional partners. SOUTHCOM’s commander—General John F. Kelly—made it a special point in his posture statement to Congress:

. . . terrorist organizations could seek to leverage those same smuggling routes to move operatives with intent to cause grave harm to our citizens or even bring weapons of mass destruction into the United States. . . These and other challenges underscore the importance of U.S. Southern Command’s mission to protect our southern approaches. We do not and cannot do this mission alone. . . Given our limited intelligence assets, interagency relationships and bilateral cooperation are critical to identifying and monitoring threats to U.S. national security and regional stability.¹¹

The lack of communication between SOUTHCOM and Cuba means that the U.S. is unable to coordinate with Cuba to address security issues inside their borders. This can be something simple like search and rescue, or tracking and diverting aircraft, but can also involve complex coordination problems such as multinational disaster relief efforts. Addressing these security issues does not require formal military cooperation, but open communication could allow SOUTHCOM to coordinate with Cuba when there is a mutual interest.



General John F. Kelly, USMC. DoD Photo.

The military's role in disaster relief, known as "contingency response," is a key mission for SOUTHCOM. The U.S. military functions as a coordinator with other nations in distributing relief, particularly important in the Caribbean considering its susceptibility to hurricanes. Normal relations with Cuba will enhance the ability of SOUTHCOM to coordinate disaster relief, saving both lives and resources.

Cuba also has potential to be a source of transnational crime. As a Communist country opening itself to foreign markets, it is vulnerable to organized crime and corruption.¹² While some would argue that this is

a reason to keep relations with Cuba closed, Cuba is opening its markets internationally with or without U.S. involvement. A strategy of engagement offers more opportunity to address these risks. Information sharing and coordination allows the U.S. to combat transnational crime, as SOUTHCOM has demonstrated in other countries.

Political and Economic Transformation in Cuba

The biggest barrier to U.S.-Cuba relations has been lack of political transparency. This is especially important for the prospects of foreign investment, where business owners need confidence that their assets will not be nationalized.

Cuba has been progressing towards a more open political process. The most recent "elections" marked the first time that anyone from an opposing party had ever been nominated. The U.S. has an important interest in promoting democracy and political freedom in Cuba, but this will not be quick or easy. The Cuban Government has been extremely wary of open efforts at democracy promotion. In order to be more effective, the U.S. may have to rely on more subtle ways of encouraging individual empowerment amongst the Cuban population—and this can only be done by engaging Cuba, not by isolating it.

Exposure to U.S. Culture

The Cold War shows that one way to open up communist nations is by exposing them to Western culture. The political and economic freedoms that Westerners take for granted are a big draw for those that may lack them under authoritarian regimes.

Cuba has already been exposed to Western culture through its relations with Europe, but the U.S. has an advantage of proximity. Familial ties from Cuban-Americans traveling back and forth expose Cubans to American ideas, and freedom of expression. The U.S. should continue lifting travel restrictions, allowing for freer travel for Cubans and Americans—simultaneously allowing for the soft exportation of American values.

In addition to familial ties, there is potential for cultural exchange through government sponsored exchange programs for students, businessmen, scientists, and more. Cultural exchange programs strengthen ties between countries by creating resilient partnerships at the individual level. American Security Project has previously reported on the positive impact of academic exchange on national security, improving American understanding of a target country as well as their understanding of America.¹³ Cuba is no exception to this, and normal relations will also bring opportunity for exchange programs.

An untapped avenue to exposing Cubans to U.S. culture is through modern telecommunications. Internet access in Cuba is prohibitively expensive. An hour of internet access at a cybercafé can cost about \$4.50 USD—about a week's wages.¹⁴ While Cuba reports that over 25 percent of its population has access to the internet, this includes those who use the internet for government work purposes. In reality only 5 percent of Cubans have freedom of access to the internet, and what is accessible is slow and censored by the government.¹⁵ Part of the reason that Cuba's internet is underdeveloped is due to its lack of access to American telecommunications technology. Freedom House reports that if the U.S. was to lift its restrictions in this respect, then there would be an increase in the availability of internet in Cuba.¹⁶



A media library with computer access funded by the US Interests Division in Cuba. State Department photo.

The internet may be an effective way of exposing many Cubans to freedom of expression. Although the Cuban government censors the internet, it is not to the same extent as other countries, such as China. Whereas China systematically blocks websites that it views as threatening, Cuba relies on a lack of available infrastructure and anti-speech laws to maintain censorship.¹⁷ Cubans do have internet access to Western media and information sources, including BBC, New York Times, and Human Rights Watch—it just is not affordable.¹⁸

Cultural exchange, improved internet availability, and freedom of travel are all good avenues to expose Cubans to Western values that they could have for themselves. The U.S. should not underestimate the appeal of its culture, proven by its large global following.

Cuba and the U.S. Economy

Cuba represents a breadth of economic opportunities for America. It has great potential as both a source and market for agricultural products, as a tourism destination, and as an energy consumer. It is a burgeoning and largely untapped consumer market. Opening trade with Cuba is not as simple as normalizing relations though; there are numerous challenges due to the nature of both Cuban and American politics, but they are barriers that can be overcome if the U.S. seeks to enter Cuba through the right markets. The American trade embargo will require Congressional action to formally lift, and the Cuban Government will need to actively dismantle its own set of barriers to trade.

Healthcare and Pharmaceuticals

Cuba is well known for its healthcare system, managing to balance quality and cost. Though Cuba lacks the capital to be a serious consumer of American pharmaceuticals, it does have the potential to be a producer and partner for American companies that are seeking areas to produce medicines where the technical expertise already exists.¹⁹

Healthcare products were authorized for export from the US to Cuba under the Cuban Democracy Act of 1992, and has grown from just over \$9,000 in exports in 2003 to \$1.1 million in 2015.²⁰

The potential for cooperation on healthcare with Cuba is uncertain though. It will be some time before Cuba is stable enough for American companies to make major investments in Cuba, especially when intellectual property rights are important and at risk of being nationalized—but the potential payoff for a small investment is high and should not be neglected.

Energy

Cuba suffers from the same problems as its Caribbean neighbors—energy is costly to produce (though costs are subsidized to consumers). It is not abundant locally, and importation raises costs. The U.S. has a growing production in oil, gas, propane, and renewables, providing an opportunity to become a competitive energy supplier for the region.

Cuba needs more energy. Energy is in such short supply that Cuba has made concerted efforts to maximize the efficiency of its energy usage, using almost exclusively electric stoves and forgoing fuel consuming machinery in agriculture.²¹ If Cuba had access to affordable energy though, it would have tremendous opportunity for economic growth in industry and agriculture. The U.S. has energy to sell, and has an advantage of proximity. There is opportunity for not only profit from energy sales, but to bolster the Cuban economy in other sectors.

Tourism

Tourism represents perhaps the most immediate potential for economic gains. Americans are already eager for the chance to travel to Cuba, a destination that is near, beautiful, and inexpensive. American tourism should be an incentive for Cuba to cooperate with the U.S. in other areas. With the normalization of relations, the U.S. will upgrade its facilities in Cuba to the full status of Embassy to provide diplomatic services to Americans, and travel restrictions will also be lifted. The safety of American tourists traveling in Cuba should also be paramount, as to ensure they are not arbitrarily or unfairly jailed by the Cuban authorities.



Viñales Valley in Cuba. Wikimedia/Severin.stadler

Agriculture

The agricultural market in Cuba has extraordinary potential, but suffers from shortages of equipment and energy. American companies that are seeking to produce crops in Cuba could have major gains. If the U.S. is able to establish energy cooperation to reduce the cost of energy in Cuba, then the potential for foreign direct investment in Cuban agriculture is incredibly high. It is predicted that the value of U.S.-Cuba agriculture trade could exceed \$1 billion annually under suitable conditions.²²



Agriculture in Cuba. Flickr/hl_1001

Under the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act (TSREEA) of 2000, agricultural exports were allowed on a cash basis to Cuba. From 2002 (the first full year of exports) until 2014, the value of agricultural exports has increased from \$139 million to \$291 million. In 2014, the largest single product exported to Cuba was frozen chicken, accounting for more than 50% of US agricultural exports to the country. Bulk commodity products like soybeans and Corn account for a further 43% of exports.²³ This existing trade provides a substantial base from which to grow trade between Cuba and the United States.

Not only does Cuba have fertile soil, but it has the advantage of proximity. Being no further than a ferry ride away allows producers to export crops to the U.S. cheaply. This also is something that makes Cuba a better partner for agricultural development and exportation compared to others, since its high population, large size, and proximity all offer potential for a bigger industry.

Barriers to Economic Cooperation

While cooperation between Cuba and the U.S. has great potential for economic benefits, it will take time to develop. Cuba's communist regime represents a threat to the property rights of foreign companies that seek to invest. Cuba is still in economic crisis though—the same crisis they have been in since Soviet withdrawal. Cubans have recognized that they cannot succeed in true economic prosperity without foreign investment, and in 2014 have passed new laws which will open Cuba to foreign investment.²⁴

The barrier in this case is *risk*. Cuba is an unproven market for American companies, many of which have long institutional memories stretching back to property seized in the 1960s. Even though Cuba is opening, no company can be certain that laws or government whims will not change. The initial embargo against Cuba was a reaction to Cuba's nationalization of American assets, worth about \$1.8 billion at the time.²⁵ For this reason, it is essential for the U.S. to engage Cuba politically and economically. The U.S. should make it clear that actions which threaten the property rights of American companies will negatively impact relations.

Conclusion

Improved U.S.-Cuba relations enhances the security of both countries. Questions of regional security, particularly transnational crime and disaster relief, require high levels of coordination. Cuba is the largest nation in the Caribbean, and U.S. efforts in dealing with these security issues would benefit from communication with Cuba. This applies not only to immediate security risks, but also to complex regional security issues such as climate or energy. Having major regional actors such as Cuba operating outside the system limit the ability of the U.S. and its partners to address such security concerns.

Open relations will also provide an opportunity for the U.S. to more effectively foster democracy and political transparency in Cuba. America has the best opportunity to demonstrate to the Cuban people how they themselves can achieve political freedom, but this effort will need to be measured, long-term, and patient. Isolating Cuba only entrenches its regime, but open cooperation exposes Cubans to ideas of how to increase the responsiveness of the Cuban Government to their political needs.

The potential benefits of U.S.-Cuba relations are not limited to security interests. There are significant economic opportunities, particularly given the U.S.' proximity and interpersonal connections to Cuba. Cuba and America are natural economic partners, and the U.S. should be undertaking reasonable effort to normalize relations and expedite the process of economic cooperation, while ensuring the security of American interests.

The U.S. has everything to gain, and very little to lose by normalizing relations with Cuba and opening avenues of cooperation in the areas of economic, diplomacy, and security. Antiquated policies based upon a security environment that no longer exists should not be a factor in defining U.S. foreign policy, especially when these actions only serve to weaken American security.

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The American Security Project (ASP) is a nonpartisan organization created to educate the American public and the world about the changing nature of national security in the 21st Century.

Gone are the days when a nation's security could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor and competitiveness of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with our partners and with all the tools at our disposal and address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this we must forge a bipartisan consensus here at home.

ASP brings together prominent American business leaders, former members of Congress, retired military flag officers, and prominent former government officials. ASP conducts research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them via events, traditional & new media, meetings, and publications.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, energy challenges, and our economic wellbeing. Partisan bickering and age old solutions simply won't solve our problems. America – and the world - needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge that consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities that abound.



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