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The US asserts itself with Cuba thaw



The breakthrough in US-Cuba relations came after months of secret negotiations (photo:dpa)

THE German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMFUS), a philanthropic foundation, think tank, and promoter of US-European co-operation, has hailed the shift in US policy towards Cuba as a great assertion of US power, writes [Professor Inderjeet Parmar](#), Professor in International Politics, City University, London, UK.

The organisation praises Cuba's health internationalism as a great and vital resource, the country's governance as effective, and highlights Cuba as playing a key role in regional order.

William McIlhenny, senior Wider Atlantic fellow in The German Marshall Fund's Washington DC office, described President Obama's thawing in relations as 'bold and strategic'.

It was, he writes, 'a major step toward aligning US policy with that of our hemispheric and European friends. It removes one of the last props for some of the surviving pockets of backward-looking anti-Americanism in Latin America, and eliminates an irritant to friends by making it easier for US subsidiaries overseas to engage in trade with Cuba.'

It is a far cry from the Cold War days, when Cuba was ignored, attacked and belittled.

Now that the US has declared itself open to discussing normalised relations with Cuba, its civil society supporters find that Cuba is not such a bad place after all. Yet, they have forgotten the socialist model of development that has helped Cuba to progress so far in health and education and of the damage caused by the US to that Caribbean country over the past 50 years.

Cuba appears to be a stable oasis, a nation with organisational capacity and control of its territory and surrounding coasts, as well as the capacity to do good in the region.

As Mr McIlhenny's GMFUS's report attests, 'Of all the countries in the Caribbean and Central America, Cuba may ultimately have the greatest capacity and will to contribute meaningfully to regional and global public goods. Its response to the Ebola epidemic in Africa dwarfed that of many large developed states, and its disaster preparedness expertise and response capacity in the Caribbean has long made worthy contributions to neighbours.'

There remains, of course, the old charge of anti-Americanism against anyone who dares criticise the US.

GMFUS claims that Cuba can now put its anti-Americanism behind it.

In fact, for decades Cuba made a principled stand against a superpower which threatened it and the world with a combination of nuclear war, military invasion, fomenting rebellion, economic sabotage and assassination.

In the Orwellian world of American freedom, criticising any of those policies is bordering on racism. And the US's civil society props continue to echo that line.

The geopolitical and economic benefits to the US and Europe remain central in thinking about the US-Cuba thaw.

Mr McIlhenny says, 'If the Atlantic, north and south, was the venue of conflict and diplomacy over Cuba, it is notable that it is in the Atlantic that the fruits of normalised US-Cuban relations will likely be greatest.'

He goes on to say that Cuba could become central to regional institutions if it transitions to 'openness', ie, neoliberalism, arguing that its institutional capacity and human capital are likely to be vital when organising regional and Atlantic co-operation.

It could also help Cuba's relations with Latin-America, he says. 'Paradoxically, perhaps, the normalisation of US-Cuba ties may make it easier for Latin America's open societies to engage with Cuban society more effectively in support of that transition.'

As US President Barack Obama noted, the US has tried embargo, blockade and sabotage, not to mention illegal attempts on Fidel Castro's life, none of which succeeded.

The US is now changing tack and this is an important move that may well result in significant improvements in the region and on Cubans' life chances.

Yet there is no mistaking the underlying motivation, as reflected in the GMFUS report: to subordinate Cuba to broader geo-economic and strategic imperatives in strengthening the US and weakening opposing statist, anti-neo-liberal strategies in Latin America and the Caribbean.