

The U.N. Resolution Condemning the US Trade Embargo on Cuba

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On Monday, September 28th, Cuban President Raul Castro is scheduled to address the UN General Assembly in New York. He is expected to call on the representatives of member states to support a motion to lift the U.S. trade embargo against his country that has been in place since 1962. Two days ahead of his scheduled address, Castro held a plenary meeting at UN headquarters where he claimed that the embargo has caused an estimated \$1.1 trillion in damages and identified it as the primary obstacle to the development of the Cuban economy.

In 1991, Cuba formally asked the UN for assistance in ending the blockade. Since then, the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly passed a resolution criticizing the impact of the embargo in each of the subsequent years. In fact, in the last vote, held in October 2014, 188 of the 193 members voted for the non-binding resolution, with only the U.S. and Israel voting against it and the three pacific island nations of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau abstaining. Over the last 23 years, no more than four countries have ever voted against this resolution, with the U.S and Israel being the constants. Meanwhile, support for the resolution has grown steadily with fewer abstentions, as members of the General Assembly, including many U.S. allies, cannot justify the devastating economic impacts on the daily lives of the Cuban people.

In December 2014, President Barack Obama announced his intent to re-establish normal diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Cuba. Since then, palatable progress has been made towards this objective, including the recent opening of embassies in Washington and Havana. Nonetheless, American companies are still not permitted to do business in Cuba on account of the American trade embargo, which remains intact in spite of President Obama's calls for Congress to lift it. In fact, the embargo has actually been "further tightened under President Obama's administration, particularly in the financial sector...The United States had historically used the enormous technological power of its recently denounced mass espionage system to persecute and monitor Cuba's financial transactions and economic relations. From January 2009 to September 2013, fines imposed on 30 United States and foreign entities for relations with Cuba and other countries amounted to more than \$2.4 billion." [1]

Presently, the Republican-controlled Congress represents the main obstacle to the complete elimination of the embargo, which would permit the free flow of U.S. investment into Cuba. This is evidenced by a recent interview with Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, where he explicitly stated that Congress was strictly opposed to lifting the trade embargo.

However, this position faces significant opposition from many American companies that regard Cuba as a new and profitable frontier to be conquered. For example, "Cargill, Procter

& Gamble, Caterpillar, and other major U.S. companies[2]” have lent their support to Engage Cuba[3], a privately funded organisation that advocates for lifting the trade embargo. This organization meets with industry and civic leaders and pressures lawmakers to lift the trade embargo. Reports published by Engage Cuba have stated that, in the event that the embargo is fully lifted, “U.S. merchandise exports to Cuba could reach \$4.3 billion” and “U.S. service exports to Cuba could reach \$1.6 billion”[4] per year. Engage Cuba is a profit-oriented organisation whose primary objective is to facilitate the domination of the Cuban market by major American companies.

President Raúl Castro has made it clear that Cuba will continue to support self-determination and the national sovereignty of each country regardless of any changes or improvements in U.S.-Cuba relations. However, despite President Obama’s pledge that, “On Cuba, we are not in the business of regime change”, which he made at the Summit of the Americas in April, there is evidence to suggest that the U.S. will seek certain concessions and guarantees from Cuban officials before ultimately agreeing to fully lift its economic embargo on the island. More recently, at the re-opening of American embassy in Havana, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry indicated that Washington expects changes to Cuba’s political and economic structures, when he stated: “We will continue to urge the Cuban government to fulfill its obligations under U.N. and Inter-American human rights covenants”.

Perhaps, Washington longs for a return to the scenario that prevailed before the revolution when Americans essentially managed Cuban domestic affairs in a manner that suited their own interests. Prior to the 1959 revolution, Americans supported Fulgencio Batista’s (1901-1973) dictatorial and corrupt regime, which oppressed the population and committed countless crimes against democratic principles, freedom and human rights. His ruled basically managed the Island in the interests of American businesses and organized crime.

Even though Cuba is well-known for its commitment to peace, social justice, equality and humanitarian aid since its Socialist revolution in 1959, U.S. officials have constantly criticized the Cuban government for engaging in actions against democratic principles. Washington often states that Cuba need to improve its record on free speech and human rights, release political prisoners, and institute multiparty elections. It is not surprising that Washington would make regime change a prerequisite for lifting the economic embargo[5], as the island’s regime stands as a symbol of resistance to neo-colonialism, capitalism, and Washington hegemony in the world. It appears that Washington has never abandoned the view expressed by Thomas Jefferson in his letter to President James Monroe in 1823, stating that Cuba would make “the most interesting addition which could ever be made to our system of states”, as it would allow the U.S. to exert control over the entire Caribbean. Despite recent developments in Cuba-U.S. diplomatic relations, it seems unlikely that Cuba would surrender its sovereignty or abandon its socialist principles, as summarized by the following statement made to the UN General Assembly by Cuba’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bruno Rodriguez Parrila, in 2014: “Cuba would never renounce its sovereignty or the path chosen by its people to build a more just, efficient, prosperous and sustainable socialism.”

Next month, the U.N. General Assembly will once again vote to call for an end to the American embargo. Given recent developments, the world will be intrigued to see the vote cast by the American representative. A vote for the resolution, or even an abstention, could serve as a powerful indication that Obama is truly committed to normalizing relations with Cuba, as he claimed last December when he publicly stated that he would go so far as to exercise his executive powers if need be.

Notes

[1] <http://www.un.org/press/en/2013/ga11445.doc.htm>

[2] <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/cuba/article24638041.html>

[3] Engage Cuba is a “public policy organization dedicated to coalescing and mobilizing American businesses, non-profit groups and concerned citizens for the purpose of supporting the ongoing U.S.-Cuba normalization process and enacting legislation to reform U.S. travel and trade restrictions with Cuba.” It is “supported entirely by American businesses and private foundations” (http://engagecuba.org/?page_id=21). Engage Cuba began organizing itself in April 2015 with the aim of helping “negotiate an agreement between the Florida-based Stonegate Bank and the Cuban Interests Section in Washington to resume bank transactions from the diplomatic mission.” Its members include “the National Foreign Trade Council, the National Association of Manufacturers, the Consumer Electronics Association, the Council of the Americas, and the American Society of Travel Agents. The coalition also brings together academic and civic organizations that favor rapprochement with Cuba, including CubaNow, Cuba Study Group, and the Center for Democracy in the Americas.” (http://engagecuba.org/?page_id=21)

[4] http://engagecuba.org/?page_id=62

[5] The U.S. trade embargo has been accepted as the best mechanism to reverse the socialist revolution by all of the ruling administrations since it was originally established. This position was best summarized by Lester D. Mallory, former deputy assistant Secretary of State, on April 6, 1960: “The majority of the Cuban people support Castro. There is no effective political opposition... The only foreseeable means of alienating internal support is through disenchantment and disaffection and hardship... every possible means should be undertaken promptly to weaken the economic life of Cuba... a line of action which... makes the greatest inroads in denying money and supplies to Cuba, to decrease monetary and real wages, to bring about hunger, desperation and overthrow of government.”

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