

Trump Cuba Policy: What Will Happen in Coming Months?

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The official June 16 statement was barely uttered when the majority nationwide opposition to the Trump Cuba policy was once again reignited. Indeed, it was already extremely active and vocal before the Little Havana, Miami venue and date were announced on June 9. By stage-managing the event in Little Havana, Trump was preaching to the choir, one that does not even include the rest of Florida, where the majority of Cuban-Americans oppose the blockade, or at least support the Obama policy of making the blockade somewhat more flexible. Trump’s trademark manner of hand-picking events to spread the word across the country will not work. His Cold War rhetoric will not detract the forces that want to increase trade and travel to Cuba.

However, Trump’s policy is not yet set in stone. According to the June 16 White House Fact Sheet on Cuba Policy, the Treasury and Commerce Departments will *begin* the process of issuing new regulations only in 30 days. His policies cannot take effect until the new regulations are established, a process that, according to the Fact Sheet, “may take several months.” A lot can happen within this time frame.

Why Now?

In order to evaluate the current situation, we need to backtrack. Trump had a lot on his domestic and international agenda in the first 100 days and could not deal with Cuba. This country was and is very controversial. There are contradictions within his own party. A large number of Republican members of Congress, politicians at the state and municipal levels as well as Republican voters support the Obama policy and even want to go further in opening trade and travel. This has been and still is a formidable obstacle for Trump.

Thus, it was only last month, on May 3 (six months into his mandate), that he convened a special meeting on Cuba at the White House, including his top officials and Republican Florida **Senator Marco Rubio** and **Representative Mario Diaz-Balart** whom initially favoured breaking diplomatic relations with Cuba and shutting down the U.S. Embassy in Havana. In this meeting, it was clear that the upper-level civil servants at Homeland Security and the State Department wanted to continue the Obama policy. In fact, State Department **Secretary Rex Tillerson**, during his January 2017 Congressional confirmation hearing, was quite ambiguous with regard to any major change to the Obama policy. In another hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, just last June 13, Tillerson

was likewise obscure regarding a major rollback in Cuba policy. According to some American press sources, Tillerson has privately expressed support for the Obama policy.



Sen. Marco Rubio and Pres. Donald Trump
(Source: Pinterest)

National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and the White House **Chief of Staff Reince Priebus** agreed with the Trump/Rubio “from the top-down approach” to by-pass opposition. Thus, Trump handed over the task of drafting the policy to the White House staff and National Security Council whose advisor H.R. McMaster also agreed with the Trump/Rubio orientation (instead of entrusting Homeland Security **Secretary John Kelley** and Tillerson’s State Department), with Marco Rubio and Diaz-Balart as the main advisors. Now, how did Marco Rubio go from “Little Marco,” as Trump ridiculed him during the primaries, to Big Marco the Playmaker on Cuba policy? The Senator sits on the Congressional Intelligence Committee and was one of the few who exonerated Trump during the Comey hearings earlier this month. Is this one of the reasons that Rubio was provided this privileged position? How indispensable will Rubio be in the next few months?

Trump’s Policy Is a Compromise Between Hardliners and Anti-Blockade Forces

Despite Rubio and Miami’s Little Havana Batista followers wanting to break relations, it did not happen, and no one complained. Although Trump previously alluded to an about-face on diplomatic relations, he did not announce the breaking of relations, even though it is a cornerstone of the Obama policy. This is very good. However, to compensate for this, Trump substantially ratcheted up the rhetoric against Cuba and introduced important restrictions in trade and travel for Americans that roll back the Obama initiative. This is his compromise. Nevertheless, now that Trump is back in Washington and back to earth, he has to face the widespread opposition to his Cuba policy across the country, in diametrical opposition to Little Havana.

Some Economic Contradictions That the Trump Administration Must Confront

One of rollbacks concerns the right of Americans to travel to Cuba as long as they do so in one of 12 categories, such as for religious or cultural purposes. Obama loosened that restriction by allowing the Americans to do so in good faith. Under the Trump policy, they will have to prove it before leaving and travel as part of a group. This complicates the matter not only for U.S. citizens but also for the Treasury Department. How is it going to enforce this, especially at a time when Trump wants to cut back on this type of expense? According to White House sources who were permitted to brief reporters on the condition of anonymity, other categories of authorized travel will remain open to individuals. Is Trump

caught in a bind, or is he showing some light between Rubio and himself?

Rubio, in promoting the Trump policy, gave the example that they are trying to enforce the patronization of privately owned bed-and-breakfast establishments rather than state-run hotels. However, if, in a few months' time, the Trump policy is allowed to complicate travel to Cuba, how will these potential B&B customers get there? In addition, the powerful accommodations-networking firm Airbnb is not expected to take this lying down, nor are the major U.S. airlines companies or the giant online travel company Expedia, which just concluded a deal with Cuban hotels.



Four Points Sheraton Havana: The Only US Branded Hotel in Havana, Cuba (Source: TravelUpdate)

With regard to the new Trump policy of outlawing stays at hotels owned by the Cuban Armed Forces Business Enterprises Group (GAESA, Spanish acronym), what will the drafters of the new rules do over the next several months? Hotel giant Starwood recently opened a Sheraton Four Points Hotel in Havana in collaboration with Gaviota, one of the Army's main tourist companies. (The Four Points Hotel is 49% Hyatt-owned and 51% Gaviota-owned.) If the eventual new rules effectively annul this deal, **Robert Muse**, one of the most important American lawyers dealing with the blockade, contends they will be in contravention of the Fifth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. It stipulates that no one can be deprived of property without compensation. Perhaps Trump is seeing the writing on the wall, as it seems that he is not going to interfere in this transaction. Even if the hotel is allowed to continue operating as it does now, Trump will be faced with the ridiculous spectacle of Americans being barred from staying at the only American hotel in Cuba!

Likewise, what would the U.S. Treasury Department do if American visitors were to enjoy a snack or a drink at the iconic Sloppy Joe's Bar or the equally emblematic Floridita in Old Havana, unaware that they are both run by the Army enterprise group? If Treasury foolishly goes through with Trump's June 16 directive, the U.S. will be depriving American visitors from access to these landmark restaurant/bar reminders of U.S. presence in Havana before the Revolution.

While the Rubio-fuelled new Cuba policy is destined to gain support from Cuban-Americans, GAESA also controls much of Cuba's finances, including remittances. Thus, inadvertently, Trump can even face off against some Cuban-Americans who were charmed by the Trump Cuba policy as announced on June 16, but will wake up soon to find that it even goes against their own family interests.

Secretary of State Tillerson may not be the only one in the Trump Cabinet who seems to be in at least partial contradiction with the new policy. As recently as May 17, 2017, *after* the May 3 White House meeting, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture **Sonny Perdue** pledged his support for expanding agricultural trade with Cuba at a House Agricultural Committee [hearing](#). Secretary Perdue has long been a supporter of expanding agricultural trade to Cuba, having expressed his support at his Senate confirmation hearing as well as during his time as Governor of Georgia following a trade delegation trip to Cuba. This is just part of a larger picture whereby Midwestern farm states that voted for Trump also want to seek out the Cuban market for their exports.

GAESA also controls the new modern Mariel container port on Cuba's north west shore. Meanwhile, U.S. Gulf Coast ports and the Port of Virginia have signed letters of intent to work with this new terminal. What will they do?

And the Political Inconsistencies

Trump insisted on June 16 on the need to strictly enforce U.S. legislation on the blockade. He is undoubtedly referring to, among others, the 1996 Helms-Burton Act, signed by **Bill Clinton**. It extended the blockade even further toward being extra-territorial than its 1992 predecessor, the Torricelli Act. The 1996 act punishes third countries that deal with Cuba, as seen recently, for example, by the Trump Administration's fining of Honda Canada for dealing with Cuba, thus challenging Canada's sovereignty.



President Bill Clinton signs the Helms-Burton Act into law in 1996. (Source: cubaninsider)

However, the Helms-Burton Act also stipulates that the U.S. government cannot reach any agreement with Cuba while Fidel or Raúl Castro is in power. Well, Raúl is Head of State; does this mean that Trump is violating this piece of legislation? While this is a tongue-in-cheek question, the situation shows that the Trump policy is a compromise and that he is on the defensive, camouflaged by his rhetoric. Perhaps the most obvious political contradiction is that if the Cuban regime is so terrible, as he went over the top to describe it, why maintain diplomatic relations and an Embassy in Havana and even invite Cuba to the negotiating table, no matter how this reeks of hypocrisy?

On June 16, Trump made a point to single out Venezuela as well. It was another instance of gross interference in the internal affairs of a Latin American country, as he did with Cuba. The Organization of American States (encompassing all 35 countries in the hemisphere

except Cuba) is meeting June 19-21 in Cancun, Mexico. It is a regular session of all foreign ministers, thus the U.S. is being represented by Secretary of State Tillerson. What will the reaction of the member states be? Will Trump's arrogant outpouring on June 16 push more and more countries against U.S. interference in the region and thus have a boomerang effect on Trump's announcement? On June 18 it was announced that Tillerson himself is not attending the OAS Summit in Cancun. He is being replaced by **Kevin Sullivan**, U.S. Interim Representative to the Organization of American States and **Michael J. Fitzpatrick**, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Andean, Brazilian, and Southern Cone Affairs.

One should recall that the unanimous opposition by Latin American and Caribbean nations to the decades-long U.S. Cuba policy was one of the factors that pushed Obama to establish diplomatic relations with Cuba in December 2014. During the June 16 Trump performance in Miami, the body language of Tillerson in listening to Trump seemed to indicate a very reluctant approval of the new Cuba policy. Did he have in mind the Cancun meeting and what he may face as a result of Rubio's ill-advised Cuba policy?

Still Time to Act

As soon as the Trump speech was over, Engage Cuba, the main coalition against the blockade with the backing of bipartisan political and business support across the nation, issued a statement. It concluded, "Today was the speech. Tomorrow we get back to work." This is the main message of my words today, as a very initial reaction to Trump policy. The forces in the U.S. - from business to the travel industry, and from scholars/educators, community and politicians to the grass roots - still have several months to strive to influence the situation in favour of more open travel and trade with the goal to lift the blockade altogether. It can be carried out by taking advantage of the contradictions within the Trump Administration and his entire party, and be inspired by the across-the-board majority American opposition to the blockade. This is supported by peoples around the world who support Cuba's right to self-determination and sovereignty. They strongly oppose the U.S. attempt to interfere in Cuba's internal affairs to force it to "change" in conformity with U.S. desires.

In the meantime, only several hours after Trump's announcement, the Cuban government issued a strong statement that indicates, as it has since 1959, that Cuba refuses to bow to U.S. threats. The government also said that it is willing to continue a respectful dialogue with the U.S. on topics of mutual concern on the basis of mutual respect. This option of sitting down at the table would not have been possible if Trump were not forced to compromise, and thus maintain diplomatic relations with Cuba. Furthermore, Cuba being very aware of American domestic politics, did not single out Trump, but rather mentioned that he was once again ill-advised.

On June 19, at a special Press Conference from Vienna where he was visiting, Cuban **Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez** passionately detailed the real terrorist nature of those Cuban Americans from Miami lauded by Trump. He stated that the Trump policy "will reinforce our patriotism, dignity and determination to defend national independence in the spirit of **José Martí, Antonio Maceo and Fidel Castro.**" However, he reiterated that Cuba will continue to deal with the U.S only on the basis of mutual respect.

This situation of possible dialogue and the fact that the process will take several months in the face of increasing anti-blockade pressures are the positive points on an otherwise very bleak June 16.

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