

First round of US-Cuba talks end as restrictions eased

By Alexander Fangmann
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The United States and Cuba have ended two days of talks, held Thursday and Friday last week in Havana. The first high-level discussions since 1980 are aimed at normalizing relations between the two countries. Though no significant changes were announced in the immediate wake of the meeting, both countries have described it as part of a “process.” In fact, there is now significant momentum behind a rapprochement, with Cuba eager to make accommodations to US imperialism before it faces a serious financial crisis, and the US moving to undercut Cuban ties to Russia and China.

The lack of immediate progress may set back the goal of restoring full diplomatic relations in time for the Summit of the Americas in April, which both Cuban President Raul Castro and US President Barack Obama are expected to attend.

The head of the US delegation, Roberta S. Jacobson, assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, indicated that rather than meeting this kind of deadline, the negotiations may be protracted, saying, “Our efforts to normalize relations will be a continuing process that goes beyond diplomatic ties and the opening of embassies,” and that “We have made further steps in that direction.”

The most serious obstacle that has emerged is the US insistence that its officials be allowed unrestricted travel within the country, including the ability to meet with the “dissidents” that it funds in efforts to destabilize the regime. This is entirely in keeping with the ultimate US goal of replacing the current regime in Cuba with a more pliant one. However, it has provoked resistance from the Cuban delegation to the talks, led by Josefina Vidal, head of the Foreign Ministry’s US Division. She made a statement in regard to the future free movement of diplomats, that “this consideration is

associated with better behavior.”

As if to underscore the US position, Jacobson hosted a breakfast meeting for dissidents on Friday. Among the attendees were a number of the 53 political prisoners recently released by the Cuban government as a result of the talks that led to this meeting.

Vidal said, “This is exactly one of the differences we have with the US government because for us, this is not just genuine, legitimate Cuban civil society.” In response to Jacobson’s claim that human rights are the “center of our policy,” the Cuban delegation pointedly referred to police shootings in the US as well as the continued detention of prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base.

Another sticking point in the discussions is the US designation of Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism—an inversion of the actual relationship, in which the United States has repeatedly supported terrorist acts and harbored terrorist fugitives, such as Luis Posada Carriles, convicted *in absentia* of the bombing of Cubana Flight 455, in which 73 people were killed.

Vidal expressed that “it would be difficult to explain that diplomatic relations have been resumed while Cuba is still unjustly listed as a state sponsor of international terrorism.” To this end, Obama has asked the State Department to initiate a review culminating in a recommendation to be presented to him in six months, a move revealing the extent to which the list in question—which includes only Iran, Sudan, Syria, and Cuba—is a political creation. This is, of course, entirely in keeping with the hypocritical and phony character of the “war on terror.”

Whatever the Obama administration’s pretensions, Washington’s efforts to open relations with Cuba have nothing to do with the promotion of “human rights” or democracy. Rather, the goal is to deny access to

Cuba's economy by regional rivals such as Brazil and Venezuela, as well as Russia and ultimately China, in its bid to encircle and contain the latter's rise. As if to emphasize the geopolitical calculations involved, while the meetings in Cuba were underway, the Russian surveillance ship Viktor Leonov CCB-175 was moored in Havana's harbor.

Moreover, there are a number of business interests hoping to take advantage of cheap Cuban labor, under the discipline of either the Cuban Stalinists or a future more pliant regime based on bourgeois layers currently being cultivated through remittances and more direct forms of funding. The US Chamber of Commerce led a trip to the island last year, and there has been a growing call from wealthy Cuban exiles to scrap the embargo in order to resume direct capitalist exploitation of the island's workers. Movement in this direction has only accelerated with the recent slowdowns in the economy, particularly oil and manufacturing which have been hit by slowing worldwide demand.

On January 15, further easing of travel restrictions for US nationals to Cuba took effect, wherein US citizens no longer have to apply for a specific license from the Treasury Department. Though tourism is technically still prohibited, a broad range of activities qualify, including professional research and meetings, journalism, educational activities, religious activities, public performances, sporting events, support for the Cuban people, humanitarian activities, and export or import of information or information technology.

Many US companies stand to profit from the changes, including agricultural and telecommunications firms which are now able to draw on more convenient financial arrangements that will fuel commercial activity. Financial services companies also stand to make swift gains from the relaxation. Travelers will now be allowed to use US-issued credit and bank cards, with MasterCard being the first to announce that its cards will be usable in Cuba on March 1.

At the same time that the US government hopes to reestablish Cuba as a semi-colony, the Cuban regime is appealing to US imperialism over fears that Venezuela, due to the recent fall in oil prices and its own ongoing economic crisis, will no longer be able to supply the nearly 100,000 barrels per day of oil to Cuba at extremely subsidized prices.

According to some estimates, the subsidies might

amount to 15 percent of Cuban GDP, and economist Carmelo Mesa Lago has stated that the nominal amount of Venezuelan support is more than that which was supplied by the Soviet Union, before its support was also withdrawn in a period of falling oil prices, and ultimately the dissolution of the USSR.

The Cuban regime is gambling that it might be allowed to stay on as a labor police force and junior partner to American capitalism as it seeks to exploit cheap Cuban labor. This entirely substantiates the political evaluation of the Cuban regime made by the International Committee of the Fourth International. The efforts of the ruling layer led by Raul Castro to ingratiate itself to American imperialism is likely a futile one, but it speaks volumes that it sees more hope in Obama and the US military-intelligence apparatus he represents than in either the American or Cuban workers and their revolutionary capacity.

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