

The View from Europe
By David Jessop

Europe's changing approach to Cuba

Is there an outside possibility that President Obama might use his second term in office to ease relations with Cuba? This is one of the intriguing questions that has begun to focus minds in European capitals.

While much of Europe, and in particular those parts of the continent such as the Czech Republic, that experienced Soviet style communism, had previously been reluctant to have anything other than a strictly conditional relationship with Cuba, this approach is now in the process of flux. In part this reflects the failure of the conditionalities imposed on the relationship by its common position. This came into being in 1996. Reviewed every six months, it introduced an agenda for political change in Cuba resulting in Havana all but ignoring most EU states.

Europe's cautious approach also responds to a number of other factors.

Firstly, there is an awareness that Cuba itself is changing – about which more later – and that Europe must prepare to relate to a new largely technocratic, generation of emerging leaders who did not participate in Cuba's early revolutionary process. Secondly, there is the real possibility, if the US were to begin to ease its relationship with Havana, that Europe would be marginalised at every level, if it did not have in place by then mutually agreed language with the Cuban Government. Thirdly, it is recognised that key member states, despite the common position, are moving to enhance their bilateral relations. And finally, there is also a sense that as Cuba is the only nation in Latin America and the Caribbean with which the EU neither has, nor is negotiating an association or Partnership agreement with, there is no structured basis for an all encompassing dialogue.

At the level of Europe's member states the relationship with Cuba has already begun to change. The first indication of this came in 2007 when Spain signed a bilateral co-operation agreement, despite the existence of the common position. Later in 2011, and perhaps more significantly given Madrid's special relationship with Cuba, France and the United Kingdom agreed simple but all encompassing formal bilateral co-operation agreements with Cuba. These documents establish a commitment by both sides to identify ways to improve relations at all levels.

Since then there have been an increasing number of European bilateral exchanges, agreements on debt rescheduling, discussions on expanding functional co-operation in areas such as narcotics interdiction, the development of trade and investment opportunities, moves to re-establish export credits, steps to enhance cultural exchange, and a more general deepening of the relationship through exchanges between higher level officials.

In response to all of these factors, and after sensitive discussions between EU Member states, the European Commission has now begun the development of a negotiating mandate that, if approved, will set the scene for the eventual negotiation of a bilateral agreement that will be similar in scope to the association agreements signed with Central America or Andean countries. In other words, there is the prospect of a political, trade and development agreement that, if agreed by both sides, would establish with Cuba a basis for long term engagement, and which might include asymmetrical trade arrangements of the kind contained in the Economic Partnership Agreement with CARIFORUM. It may also offer new lines of development assistance.

However, this is far from being a done deal. For any such agreement to come about, not only will the negotiating mandate have to be acceptable to European member states, but whatever is eventually negotiated will have to contain the same inherent political conditionalities as appear in all such agreements that the EU has with other nations. Not only will this have to be acceptable to both sides, but any final agreement will require the approval of the European Parliament, parts of which in the past have been far from friendly towards Cuba.

Despite this a significant change in attitude is underway. Although not spoken about, the sense in Europe is that views in both Cuba and the US are changing.

There is a view that change in Cuba is real and that this will over time drive a new relationship with Washington. Some in significant positions feel this may come sooner than expected. They suggest that under the leadership of John Kerry as US Secretary of State, or later in the context of generational change in the Cuban leadership and within the Cuban-American community, dialogue may be possible.

With this in mind key European governments have been or are considering making a near one hundred and eighty degree turn on policy towards Cuba.

This is not to say that concerns do not continue about human rights and political expression or that dialogue on such matters with Cuba will cease, but rather that Cuba will come to be regarded within the same European frameworks as other nations, and should cease to be an exception.

There is a certain irony about this as Cuba has been a member of the ACP group since 2000 and was considering at that time becoming a signatory to the Cotonou Agreement, which includes a political preamble. However, it withdrew when a number of EU states suggested that if it signed the Treaty it would immediately be suspended. Despite this, the EU has remained an important trading partner, with a third of all trade, almost half of foreign direct investment and more than half of all its tourists coming from Europe. Indeed recent Cuban trade figures suggest that key trade beneficiaries are the Netherlands and Germany, nations that have until recently been reluctant to see an evolution in Cuba's relationship with the EU.

Underlying all of this is the real sense that change in Cuba is underway, albeit in fits and starts. President Castro's recent remarks to the Cuban National Assembly that he would not seek another term in office after 2018 not only made clear that the transition to the next generation is happening, but also set a time limit on implementing the change he is overseeing.

In addition, the National Assembly agreed to the appointment of Miguel Díaz-Canel as First Vice-President of the Council of State; a step that President Castro indicated should be seen as "definitive in the configuration of the future leadership of the nation through the gradual and orderly transfer of key roles to new generations".

What all this suggests is that the political and economic map of the Caribbean may, before too long, change beyond present recognition.

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