

As the US-Cuba relationship thaws, the next steps depend on the domestic political will in both countries towards greater openness.

Last week President Obama announced that the U.S. and Cuba would be taking steps towards normalizing relations between the two countries. [Tanya Harmer](#) writes that the move to end the Cold War in Latin America is a triumph for the principle of non-intervention, and for President Obama's reputation in the region. She also warns that questions remain over Obama's ability to negotiate an end to the 53-year embargo with Congress, the role of new sanctions against Venezuela and the desire of Cuban leaders to open up the country further.



Latin America never had a 'Berlin Wall moment.' Even as we celebrated [the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Wall](#) last month, US-Cuban hostilities continued. And as long as they did, the Cold War in Latin America endured long after its sell by date. Finally, last week, things changed. As Latin American leaders have proclaimed, the carefully stage-managed announcement that Cuba and the United States were ready to normalize relations after fifty-three years spells the end of the Cold War for the region – or at least [the beginning of the end](#).

This is good news. The US-Cuban relationship has remained frozen for far too long; a relic of the past thwarting meaningful change in Cuba and casting a shadow over inter-American relations. It is hard to argue that Washington's standoff with Havana achieved its goals. True, [Noam Chomsky](#) reminds us that it imposed economic havoc on the island and stopped Cuba achieving its "feared potential." Yet the Castro brothers are still in power and Cuba remains a communist dictatorship. Isolating the regime has not demonstrably helped democracy or human rights on the island. On the contrary, continued US hostility has allowed the Cuban regime to maintain its grip on power by threatening that anything less would make Cuba vulnerable to US imperialist domination.

For the United States' image overseas, the refusal to deal with the Castro regime for over half a century has corrosively cemented the idea that Washington is more than happy to disregard respect for state sovereignty and non-intervention when it feels like it. Cubans are particularly sensitive to this. Since 1898, when the United States intervened in Cuba's war of independence against Spain, Washington's politicians have argued that they know what is best for Cuba. The [Platt Amendment](#), forcibly written into Cuba's first constitution (1902-1934), gave the United States the power to dictate politics on the island and forbade Cubans from determining their own foreign relations.

After the Cuban revolution triumphed in 1959, Fidel Castro responded to this historical legacy by demanding that the United States government respect the island's independence. He insisted on recognition without conditions and non-intervention in Cuba's internal affairs. He proclaimed that he was never going to hold elections with a gun held to the Cubans' head, especially when these preconditions were not applied to other dictatorial regimes.

Fifty-five years later, the Castro brothers appear to have got the formal recognition they believe they and their country deserve. The announcement was obviously stage-managed to avoid the impression that anyone had won. There were no preconditions, only mutual prisoner exchanges and simultaneous broadcasts.

Any kind of normalization always had to be carefully choreographed so as to represent the equal, mutual agreement of two sovereign nations if it was going to work. But insofar as it recognised Cuban independence and sovereignty, without demanding democratic transition first, it was a triumph for the Cuban regime.



President Barack Obama talks with President Raúl Castro of Cuba from the Oval Office, Dec. 16, 2014. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

It is also a triumph for the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of another state, which Latin American states have fought for since the 1920s. And in this sense, it is a triumph for Obama's reputation in Latin America. After years of disappointment in the region, he has been [widely praised for having reset relations with Cuba and underscored the United States' acceptance of non-intervention](#). His move is arguably comparable in significance to Jimmy Carter's signing of the Panama Canal treaties in 1977. That, too, was a regionally celebrated move that sought to redress an out-dated imperial position in the hemisphere, even if it cost Carter dearly at home.

What comes next is harder to judge. Travel, trade, cultural exchanges and remittances will increase. The United States and Cuba will open embassies in Havana and Washington respectively. US and Cuban delegations will sit at the same table at the upcoming Summit of the Americas in Panama in April 2015. The two countries will continue to cooperate on fighting Ebola. Cuba will rightfully be removed from the US list of countries that sponsor terrorism.

However, big questions remain. Answers to some of them depend on Obama's relationship with a new Republican Congress. Congress can block the appointment of a future US ambassador to Havana. More importantly, Congress can refuse to put a decisive end to the US economic blockade against Cuba, which is still the Cubans' most urgent concern. With commodity prices falling and Venezuela's economy in free fall, the Cuban regime can no longer rely on its neighbours' oil-funded generosity. Opening up to the United States as a means of ending the embargo therefore comes at a good time, even if the 18-month negotiations leading to last week's announcement pre-dated the current economic context.

How Obama's Cuba policy fits within his approach to the region is also hard to understand. The simultaneous announcement that [the United States is imposing sanctions against Venezuela](#) as it normalizes US-Cuban relations raises questions as to what the Obama administration's strategy for Latin America is. If Obama acknowledges sanctions have not worked in the case of Cuba, why apply them to Venezuela? In the past, Cuba's leaders have been more than willing to sacrifice better US-Cuban relations for the sake of solidarity with its allies. Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro [has so far backed](#) the normalization of US-Cuban relations and the correlation of both policies has not appeared to affect the other. How problematic new US hostility towards Venezuela will be in the future, especially if the normalization of US-Cuban relations does not move forward quickly, nevertheless remains to be seen.

The biggest question of all, however, is what happens in Cuba. Raul Castro has [defiantly proclaimed that the thaw in US-Cuban relations does not mean the end of Cuba's communist government or that Cuba will renounce its ideals](#). And in many ways it is unconceivable that Cuba will return to what it was like before the revolution. It is

doubtful that Cubans want to turn their back on the gains in healthcare and education that have been made since 1959. Yet, as [Owen Jones](#) recently wrote, social welfare policies and a gradual improvement in human rights “is not good enough.” The dictatorship has to end.

Rhetoric aside, it remains to be seen whether this has filtered through to the Cuban leadership. Raul Castro has made steps towards opening up the Cuban economy in recent years and it may well be that what is envisaged is a managed transition. If the regime wants any say in the process, the time to embark on such a transition is now. With no sight of a frail Fidel Castro in months and an aging revolutionary generation, time is of the essence. At least now, there is more breathing space to embark on a process of change and no obvious excuse not to.

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