

Relaxing the EU's Common Position on Cuba would allow Europe to play a more active role in shaping the country's development

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Since 1996, the EU's Common Position on Cuba has made relations with the country contingent on democratic reforms. [William M. LeoGrande](#) assesses whether the EU's current approach requires updating in light of recent developments within Cuba. He writes that with the United States' influence undermined by years of hostile policies toward the country, a more conciliatory approach could allow Europe to play a central role in influencing Cuba's future direction.



The visit of Dutch Foreign Minister Frans Timmermans to Cuba earlier this month marks yet another crack in the European Union's 1996 [Common Position on Cuba](#), which conditions normal relations with the island on democratic reforms. "I think it is time for Europe to revise its position on Cuba," Timmermans said after signing a new bilateral cooperation agreement with Havana. "I think dialogue is a better way than turning our backs to each other." Days later, EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso acknowledged that a number of member states were pressing for a reevaluation of the Common Position, and Spanish Foreign Minister José Manuel García Margallo announced that the issue would be taken up at the EU foreign ministers meeting on 10 February. He added, however, that any new policy, "would have, as a determining factor, respect for human rights."

Since the 1970s, most European states have had a much less hostile relationship with Cuba than the United States has had. But the European Union's Common Position has much in common with the U.S. [Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act](#) of 1996 (also known as Helms-Burton, after its Congressional sponsors). Both were adopted in reaction to Cuba's shoot-down of two small civilian aircraft piloted by Cuban Americans, at a time when the regime was cracking down on dissent. Both make the normalisation of relations contingent on Cuban domestic political concessions. Both have therefore been adamantly rejected by Cuba as interference in its internal affairs. And both severely constrain the ability of Washington and Brussels to respond creatively to rapidly changing conditions in Cuba today.

To lift the conditionality imposed by Helms-Burton would require that Congress amend the law – something conservative Republicans would certainly block. Amending the Common Position will require unanimity among the EU's member states, something conservative governments – especially in the former socialist countries – have thus far blocked.



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To escape the policy straight-jacket imposed by this legislation, individual European governments have responded in ways much like U.S. presidential administrations. In Washington, President Obama has chipped away at sanctions against Cuba by using his licensing power to authorise greater engagement. Similarly, various European governments have expanded their bilateral economic and political ties with Cuba, despite the Common Position's

strictures. Trade between Cuba and Europe, at 2.5 billion euros annually, has roughly tripled in the years since the Common Position was adopted, and official development assistance to Cuba has quadrupled to nearly 60 million euros annually.

The argument against the Common Position is essentially the same as the argument against the U.S. embargo: sanctions on Cuba have not worked. Making normal relations contingent on domestic political change has only inflamed Cuba's strong sense of nationalism. Having achieved independence late and then fallen under the tutelage of the United States for half a century, Cuba does not respond well to foreign demands – in fact it defiantly repudiates them, sometimes even acting against its own self-interest.

As Cuban Vice-President Carlos Rafael Rodríguez once explained to U.S. diplomats, “The pride of small countries, which can even push them to make the wrong decision at times, and their feelings of dignity and sensitivity must be borne in mind.” Cuba, however, is not indifferent to its international environment. Historically, Cuban leaders have made adjustments, even on sensitive domestic issues like human rights, when those actions served its interests, so long as the decisions could not be perceived as yielding to foreign pressure.

As a result, policies of engagement have proven more successful than policies of hostility and confrontation. In 2010, quiet diplomacy by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's government enabled Spain to play a crucial mediating role between the Cuban government and the Catholic Church, leading to the release of more than a hundred political prisoners – the largest such release since the 1970s. One reason Spain was able to play this role was because, as EU president, Spain had pushed for a change in the Common Position, thereby earning Cuba's gratitude and enhancing Madrid's influence.

Outside the EU, the government of Norway, neither bound nor burdened by the Common Position, has been able to advocate for human rights and quietly support Cuban dissidents without incurring the wrath of the Cuban government that EU members have suffered for similar actions. The difference is that Norway has no public policy excoriating Cuban human rights practices or making bilateral relations contingent on them.

In practical terms, replacing the Common Position with an agreement on political and economic cooperation would mean an increase in economic ties, including trade, aid, and direct foreign investment (FDI). To date, investment has been limited not only by the EU's rocky relations with Cuba, but also by the difficulty investors face working through Cuba's bureaucratic morass and the political uncertainty created by Cuba's ambivalence toward FDI. That may be changing, however, as part of Raúl Castro's programme of economic “updating.” A new FDI law is scheduled to be unveiled in March.

On the political front, replacing the Common Position does not mean that European states, individually or collectively, would need to abandon their commitment to encouraging greater human rights and democracy in Cuba. A warmer political climate would enable EU member states to express their concerns more effectively through quiet diplomacy. What offends Cuba's leaders is not that other states have different views on these issues; it is that the Common Position makes normal relations contingent on Cuba conforming to European norms, a litmus test that no other Latin American country is required to pass.

Cuba today is moving in directions that the EU has long favoured. The “updating” of the Cuban economic model, begun in 2011, entails greater economic openness, reduced government regulation of private markets, and a larger role for private sector businesses. At the same time, there has been a very gradual opening of political space to debate the shape of Cuba's future. Challenging Cuba's one-party system or its socialist society is still out of bounds – although the meaning of socialism is itself undergoing an evolution from the hyper-centralised Soviet model of pervasive state control to something that looks much more like the market socialism of China and Vietnam.

Cuba harbours less suspicion of European states than it does of the United States simply because U.S. dominance is more fresh in memory than Spanish colonialism. With Washington still sidelined by its antiquated policy of hostility and embargo, an engaged Europe can play a central role influencing the direction of Cuba's contemporary

evolution, both political and economic. But that influence will come not from imposing conditions or making demands. Rather it will come from creating an international environment that gives incentives for Cuba to continue evolving in a positive direction, making Cuban interests and European interests ever more coincident.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author

William M. LeoGrande – *American University, Washington DC*

William M. LeoGrande is Professor of Government at American University in Washington, DC, and the coauthor with Peter Kornbluh of the forthcoming book, *Back Channels to Cuba: The Hidden History of U.S.-Cuban Negotiations*, (University of North Carolina Press).



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