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Time for a deeper Cuba-CARICOM relationship

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On December 8, the fifth Cuba-Caricom summit will take place In Havana.

Cuba has made clear that it sees the encounter as opening what it describes as a unique space in the hemisphere at a time when the region is moving towards more fundamental integration within the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

As such it is an event of symbolic importance, demonstrating to the wider world, at a moment when relationships in the Americas are changing, that Cuba has a vital role and place within the region in which it is located.

The summit will of course also be functional, deepening Cuba's economic and trade relations with the countries of CARIFORUM; strengthening co-operation in areas such as education and culture; and exploring the ways in which Cuba and the rest of the region might take a more prominent collective Caribbean role in international relations. There will also be discussions on issues of common interest relating to regional health co-operation, particularly Ebola; in respect of energy; and on other issues of common interest.

Given the close relationship that now exists between Cuba and all its regional partners, the outcome is expected to be positive.

Not on the table, however, but undoubtedly in everyone's mind, will be how deeper regional integration with Cuba might relate to the possibility of a gradually normalising Cuban relationship with the US.

In Washington, it is now accepted at the highest reaches of the Administration that Cuba's reform process is real and that the US approach is outmoded. As one insider noted recently, the intellectual battle in the White House for a change of policy is won; the issue now is about how, when, substance, and deciding whether engagement will be 'Cuba lite' or 'Cuba heavy'.

It is also agreed that present events make the timing politically propitious during the US President's remaining time in office. The US mid-term elections are over; Senator Menendez, the obstructive Cuban American Democratic Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee is stepping down; the Cuban American community are no longer a monolithic bloc and most want change; key figures in the community once opposed to engagement such as Alfy Fanjul are prepared to speak out and consider returning as investors; even Joaquin Bacardi, the President of Bacardi has said emphatically and without any political rider that he hopes it will be possible to produce his rum again in Cuba.

There have also been important public demonstrations of the possibility of change. In September when an unresponsive US executive jet – the pilot and passengers had hypoxia – flew towards Cuban airspace, Havana and Washington were in touch in real time at high levels to obviate what could have been a damaging incident; Cuba-US exchanges in relation to Ebola have taken place despite the absence of formal diplomatic relations; and last month the former President, Fidel Castro, gave an almost unqualified endorsement in the official Communist Party newspaper, Granma, to a sometimes critical New York Times Editorial: in the process sending a clear signal to conservatives within the Cuban system that a changed relationship and dialogue was possible.

There are of course impediments in the way of change. The greatest of these is the fate of the three remaining Cuban Intelligence officers held in US prisons and that of Alan Gross, the USAID contractor being held in a Cuban Military hospital, who is in poor health. The principal of the possibility of an exchange is, in private at least, uncontested, but there are particular US concerns surrounding one of the three Cubans involved.

So important has resolution of this issue become that the US has been in dialogue with the Pope, the President of Uruguay, and others to use their good offices to convey messages that might in part help to resolve the issue.

Most commentators believe that if this issue can be solved, the door to a new relationship could start to open around the time of the next Summit of the Americas which will be held in Panama in April 2015.

President Obama and Raúl Castro have already symbolically and intentionally shaken hands publicly at the memorial service for Nelson Mandela. The probable participation of both President Obama and President Castro in the Panama summit, and a possible low key bilateral encounter there could mark another step forward, not just sending a potent signal of change in the Americas but also enabling an evolving US-Cuba policy to proceed.

Cuba makes clear that it is prepared to engage in exchanges on issues of mutual benefit but that the dialogue must be based on respect, equality and without compromising Cuba's independence, sovereignty or right to self-determination. Or, as President Castro put it in December 2013, 'If we really want to advance bilateral relations, we must learn to mutually respect our differences and get used to living peacefully with them.'

These are not idle words as it is not often understood in the US how deep Cuban nationalism runs. As a consequence there will also be the need to convince the Cuban people that engagement will not result in any loss of independence.

As for the nature of a changed US-Cuba policy, the first thing to be said is that it will not involve the lifting of the US trade embargo, though this may form a part of any long term approach to normalisation. Instead the focus will be on what the US President can do by administrative order.

The most significant signal would be for the US President to lift the designation of Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism. This would result in the ending of a range of the sanctions that have halted many transactions in the Hemisphere and internationally. Beyond that, President Obama could authorise the licensing of the US legacy carriers pressing to fly scheduled services to Havana and other Cuban cities. He could completely lift the travel ban, thereby enabling any US citizen to travel to Cuba or make it easier for US flagged vessels to enter Cuban ports and marinas. He could also sanction a wider range of formal exchanges on matters of common interest from security to the environment.

The Cuba-CARICOM summit is taking place at an important moment. Whatever Cuba and the US decide are matters for them alone, but the possibility of a change in US policy suggests that it is time for a much deeper engagement with Cuba.