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Even anti-Castro Cubans want end to US embargo

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A famous political dictum says there are no permanent friends, only permanent interests. In reality, interests sometimes change, but frequently, even when interests change there may be permanent enemies.

The 60-year-old US embargo of Cuba has clearly failed to bring about regime change but is still in place albeit with some liberalisation of travel. The embargo is an exception in US foreign policy because the US has repeatedly demonstrated its pragmatism and a commendable humane capacity to forgive its enemies and rebuild cordial if not friendly relations with countries that it actually fought wars against.

The US was magnanimous in funding the rebuilding Europe through the Marshall Plan of vanquished enemies Germany and Japan. It is true that this generosity was also motivated by anti-communist Cold War strategy. But the US has relations with China, Libya and Vietnam and is committed to rebuilding Iraq.

At this time, the maintenance of the embargo by the US is an enigma and the rationale for its continuation is a mystery. Hubris, pride and inertia are all part of the continuation of a failed policy. The Cuban-American community domiciled in Florida no longer feels that this is the only or most constructive form of engagement in Cuba. In fact, 64 per cent of Cuban-Americans favour changing US foreign policy toward Cuba.

The Cuban political leadership no longer finds the embargo a useful means of whipping up feelings against Yankee imperialists. Cuba is welcoming more American visitors now that Raul Castro is liberalising towards a mixed economy with a more significant role for the market and private enterprise. The embargo cannot expunge the memory of Fidel Castro and what the Cuban Revolution has accomplished in education and health.

In an open letter to President Barack Obama signed by an unprecedented group of 44 former US officials, business executives, academics and Cuban American leaders, including Bruce Babbitt, secretary of the interior; John Negroponte, former director of national intelligence; former Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott; and retired Admiral James Stavridis, former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, have called for a change in US policy.

They list measures that are within the executive authority of the president and do not require congressional approval such as reducing US restrictions on travel, remittances, imports, financial activity and scholarships to US institutions and private sector internships in the US. They argue that this will reinforce the nascent transition to a market economy in Cuba. These proposals make good sense but it is going to take more than good sense to change US policy on Cuba.

The embargo has cost the US economy by preventing US companies from exporting to Cuba and excluding them from making investments in tourism and sugar production. For example, Cuba was the largest export market for US rice prior to the embargo but exports have declined sharply and there have not been any exports since 2008. It is the loss of economic opportunities that has galvanised the US business community against the embargo. Emblematic of a new approach is the decision of the president of the US Chamber of Commerce to make his first trip to Cuba in 15 years.

Maybe economics will succeed where domestic advocacy and international diplomacy have not.

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