

# A Qualitative Content Analysis of US Foreign Policy towards Cuba during Barack Obama's Administration: Hegemony or Leadership?

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## Abstract

The United States' relations with Cuba are rooted in the US intervention in the process of Cuba's independence from Spain in the 1890s. The US preserved its interest-based approach towards Cuba during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which culminated in the Cuba's counter-hegemonic revolution in 1959. This revolution led to more than fifty years of hostility between two countries, which took a new form under President Obama's administration. Indeed, Barack Obama and Raul Castro surprised the world in 2014, announcing that they would reinstate full diplomatic relations and pacify bilateral tensions. Since World War II, United States has been the hegemon of the world relying on three pillars of its liberal bloc, i.e. liberal values and culture, economic and military capabilities, and international organizations. However, during Obama's administration, the occurrence of events such as the rise of new economic powers, Global Financial Crisis and the rise of left-turn in Latin America caused some speculations about the declining US hegemony and its transition to leadership. However, qualitative content analysis of the US Inter-American policies indicates that US hegemony in Latin America including Cuba is deeply rooted in the early decades of US formation. Moreover, the continuation of US economic embargo on Cuba and its long-lasting military presence in the island indicate that Obama's policy did not provide a leveled playing field to resolve Cuba's problems. Hence, US leadership in Cuba and true and equal partnership between both countries still seem unattainable.

**Keywords:** Barack Obama's administration, Cuba, hegemony, leadership, United States of America.

## Introduction

The Republic of Cuba (República de Cuba) is a leftist country located in the Caribbean. Following the Spanish–American War of 1898, Cuba proclaimed its independence from Spain and became a US protectorate in 1902 as a result of the US military intervention in the war. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Cuba suffered from political radicalization and social unrest that culminated in the US-backed dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in 1952. The suppression and poverty under the US-imposed regimes eventually led to the Cuban counter-hegemonic revolution in 1959. Northern hegemon found the Cubans' efforts to defend their right in contrast with its superior position in the Western Hemisphere. Indeed, the revolution began more than fifty years of hostility between the United States and Cuba. During the Cold War, the rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States led to different US-imposed policies to overthrow Cuban revolutionary government, including economic embargo, the Bay of Pigs Invasion in 1961, Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, etc. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba lost its leading trading partner and due to the devastating results of US economic embargo, experienced a period of intense economic hardship known as Special Period (1991–98), which was perfectly managed by the Cuban government and led to reforms in the country (Navarro, 2001).

Obama's administration was therefore coincided with Cuba's internal reforms and Latin America's left-turn. Obama shifted its inter-American policy from sanction-based isolation to engagement and restoration of relations. The news of Cuban Thaw in 2014 shocked the world, and due to the some speculations regarding the US's declining hegemony in the world, heated up the debates about the US willingness to cooperate with Cuba. Indeed, Obama stated that he intended to end an outdated approach that had not been able to advance US interests in Cuba. He focused on the changes to create more

opportunities for the American and Cuban people, and begin a new chapter among the nations of the Americas (Obama, 2014). However, Karen DeYoung in *How Obama's trip to Havana finally ended the Cold War*, argued that Obama used his executive power to remove trade, travel and other restrictions, but only Congress can lift the embargo (DeYoung, 2016). Moreover, Republican Senator Marco Rubio of Florida and Democratic Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey, both of Cuban descent, criticized Obama's action, saying that they would work hard to undo Obama's changes (Rogers, 2014). Since these political debates opened a new issue in the academic study of US-Cuba relations, there has been little academic analysis of this historic event. Therefore, this academic research, as one of the first investigations on Obama's Cuba policy, aims to examine whether US hegemonic approach towards Cuba took new form during Obama's administration and was therefore transformed to leadership.

### **From US Hegemony to US Leadership**

The United States of America was the only worldwide power that was not damaged by the Second World War. As a result, it sought to expand its dominant power throughout the world. However, after the mid-1960s, the economic recovery and the increasing unity of Europe as well as the rapid economic growth of Japan challenged its dominance; yet the US's economic interdependence and its involvement in the world economy accelerated after 1970 (Keohane, 1984). The US preserved its dominant position in the world even after the emergence of challenging issues during 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, Joseph Nye introduced the United States as the leading state of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries respectively, based on economic scale, scientific and technical leadership, location, military forces and alliances, universalistic culture and liberal international regimes, soft power, and its position as one of the main hubs of transnational communication (Nye, 2002: 555).

Therefore, the US gained a hegemonic position in the years following the World War II.

The Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) argues that “a hegemonic distribution of power, defined as one in which a single state has a predominance of power, is most conducive to the establishment of a stable, open international economic system” (Webb & Krasner, 1989: 183). However, a critical point of view similar to that of Gramsci and his followers suggests that hegemony is the highest combination of coercion and consent, that is “the working together of political society with civil society; of freedom with constraint; of superstructure with structure- always under a new moral and intellectual leadership” (Howson & Smith, 2008). Thus, for neo-Gramscians, coherent historical structures –including different patterns of social relations of production, forms of state and world order (Cox, 1987)- show that the United States of America has constructed its hegemonic bloc based on the liberal values and culture that are considered as an instrument for maintaining hegemony. The superstructure of this liberal relation of production includes liberal values and culture (such as democracy, human rights, etc.), economic and military capabilities (referring to the powerful military installments and capitalism), and international organizations (such as IFIs, UN, etc.) which have created the post-1945 international order, the so-called *Pax Americana*.

However, during recent decades, especially during Barack Obama’s administration, the US liberal order was involved in different issues. In other words, the occurrence of events, such as the consequences of post-September 11 policies, the rise of new economic powers such as the so-called BRICs countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the burst of the US housing bubble in 2007 and its ensuing Global Financial Crisis caused various speculations about the deteriorating position of the United States at the international level. Therefore, although the US power and influence in the international system still seem apparent for many, contemporary

opinions maintain that the US hegemony has been deteriorating over recent years (Brown & Ainsley, 2005; Friedman & Chase-Dunn, 2016). In this regard, several scholars such as Christopher Layne argued about the end of the post-1945 international order, known as *Pax Americana*. In Layne's view, the international system's economic and geopolitical center of gravity is migrating from the Euro-Atlantic world to Asia and is heralding the beginnings of an inter-civilizational power shift (Layne, 26 April 2012). As a result, it can be argued that the US hegemonic behavior was shifting to new forms of policy engagement such as leadership. In this sense, Knorr highlighted that the principal characteristics of leadership in international relations include the absence of coercion and mutual benefits. He maintained that "one actor gives something of value to another without condition, without any stipulated payment, now or later" and added that leadership refers to a situation "from the establishment of which all participants would gain -not one from the other, but all from sharing newly created values" (Knorr, 1975: 311). Due to the occasionally indistinguishable usage of hegemony and leadership, this type of differentiations seems confusing. To solve the problem, Sandra Destradi (2010) discussed that there is a fundamental difference between the concepts of hegemony and leadership. In Destradi's view, a hegemon intends to present its own self-centered objectives as common with those of subordinate states and forces these states to pursue and realize its objectives, while the leader guides - "leads"- a group of states in order to realize or facilitate the realization of their common objectives (Destradi, 2010: 921). She categorizes different models of hegemony in three groups: hard, intermediate, and soft and offers two models of leadership: leader-initiated leadership and follower-initiated leadership. Therefore, the difference between a hegemon and a leader rests on the objectives and goals followed by the dominant state. In sum, John Ikenberry argued that under these circumstances, the

United States should not give up its efforts to reinforce the liberal order and should pursue the grand strategy that it has followed for decades: deep global engagement. He asserted that “in this new age of international order, the United States will not be able to rule. But it can still lead” (Ikenberry, 2011). Hence, the analysis of the arguments about the changing policies of the United States towards Cuba requires the examination of the US hegemonic bloc and its evolutions in the Western Hemisphere, applying the theories of hegemony and leadership.

### **Methodology**

The application of the theories of hegemony and leadership in the US hegemonic bloc and its evolutions in the Western Hemisphere will be facilitated using qualitative content analysis. Qualitative Content Analysis, also known as latent content analysis, is a practical approach for simplifying data and making facts and figures more understandable. This method can be used for analyzing a wide range of textual data, including interview transcripts, recorded observations, narratives, responses to open-ended questionnaire items, speeches, postings to listserv, and media such as drawings, photographs, and video (Julien, 2008). Accordingly, analyzing qualitative data requires producing clusters or codes across the whole set of data, which are translated into “themes” or “categories” (Mayring, 2015). The abovementioned theories argue that US liberal relation of production includes liberal values and culture, economic and military capabilities, and international organizations. In this regard, the US hegemony and leadership in Latin America can be organized in the following categories:

1. Liberal values and culture are reflected in the US soft power and public diplomacy in Latin America; US media diplomacy for or against Latin American countries; US

cultural agendas such as promotion of democracy and defense of human rights, etc.;

2. Economic capabilities are shown by economic indicators such as the aggregate size of the US economy, its per capita income, and its share of world trade relative to Latin America's leading economies, etc. (Gilpin, 1975; Kindleberger, 1986; Krasner, 1976), signing commercial treaties, imposing sanctions, offering economic aid programs, adopting tariff and non-tariff barriers, etc.; Military capabilities: US military actions and interventions in Latin America such as establishing military bases, igniting war, planning coup d'état, etc.;
3. International organizations: establishment of Inter-American institutions, etc.

Hence, the following sections will be dedicated to the analysis of the US hegemonic bloc and its evolutions in the Western Hemisphere and Cuba, employing qualitative content analysis. Initially, an application of the mentioned categories to Latin America will be provided. In the second section, historical research and qualitative content analysis of US-Cuba relations before and during Obama's administration will be presented and discussed.

### **US Hegemony in the Americas before Obama's Administration**

The US emergence as a hegemon in the Americas dates back to the early years of the formation of United States. From the beginning, the United States saw its southern neighbors as poor, weak, fragile, lazy, uncivilized, non-democratic, and in short, inferior creatures that are required to be civilized. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the fifth president of the United States James Monroe (1817-1825) proposed its well-known Monroe Doctrine, which

not only undermined European influence in the Americas, but also justified the US's desires for occupying Texas, California, and the Caribbean Basin (Brewer, 2006). The Monroe Doctrine was in effect the basis of US's further intervention in Latin America countries. In other words, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the US was concerned about recognizing the independence of the American countries from their European Metropolises and that was in effect a policy to take the place of European powers in the region. This objective was realized in 1889 when the first continental meeting of all American republics, known as Pan-American Union, was held in Washington.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century began with the Platt Amendment, which released Cuba from the yoke of Spanish rule and made it a protectorate of its powerful Northern neighbor. This amendment heralded the age of US dominance not only in the Americas, but also in the world. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the US was preoccupied with its military expansionism in Panama (1903, 1925), Nicaragua (1912-1933), Mexico (1916), the Dominican Republic (1916-1922), Haiti (1915-1934), Guatemala (1920), Costa Rica (1921), Honduras (1924-25), El Salvador (1932), Cuba (1933), etc. Indeed, the United States was providing the basis for creation of its hegemonic apparatus through coercion. These efforts were culminated in the signing of the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (TIAR) in 1947 and the formation of the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1948, which replaced the Pan American Union. These two institutional bodies undertook the responsibility of facilitating the implementation of liberal economic, military and social policies in Latin America through force and consent, and made Latin America economically and psychologically dependent on the United States.

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was coincident with the



period known as the Cold War. During this period, the US became the dominant power of the world and Cuba's revolution in 1959 encouraged it to adopt more interventionist policies to contain its well-known rival, Soviet Union, in Latin America. In addition, the US institutional body became strong during the Cold War, and US-based political and economic institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) helped the Inter-American institutional organization to maintain US's superior position in Latin America. Accordingly, during the decades of 1960s and 1970s several coup d'état were supported by the US military in Latin America. In the 1970s, US policies in Latin America seemed to experience changes that lasted throughout the 1980s and 1990s. These changes include the advance of re-democratization, the debt crisis and liberal reforms under pro-market strategies of Washington Consensus. However, these new policy engagements did not create new environments in the Inter-American relations. In sum, during the Cold war, political plans such as President Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, President Reagan's National Endowment for Democracy, President Bush's democratic mission, along with CEPAL's Latin American Manifest and Washington Consensus tried to preserve the US's dominant position in its sphere of influence and keep Latin American nations close to North American domestic and international interests.

The end of the Cold War had a considerable influence on the US foreign policy. The United States was no longer preoccupied with the division of the world's economic, strategic or political blocs, because it was the world's only superpower and its liberal order was embedded in the Western world. As a result, the US interest-based approach towards Latin America continued in the post-Cold War era under President Clinton's democratic and counterinsurgency plans and President Bush's War on Terror.

Importantly, by the end of 1990s, hopes for the success of market-oriented reforms in Latin America disappeared and following the September 11 attacks, the US lost its interest in Latin America. As a result, issues such as democracy promotion, immigration, drug trafficking and free trade were put off until the required times. On the other hand, during the decade of 1990s, Mexico's Fox and Salinas, Argentina's Menem, Brazil's Collor and Cardoso, Peru's Fujimori were supporters of the same liberal market democratic reforms suggested by Washington Consensus that hit the region as a whole. Therefore, leftist governments emerged as winners of democratic elections in several Latin American countries such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (1998), Lula da Silva in Brazil (2002), Néstor Kirchner in Argentina (2003), Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay (2004), Evo Morales in Bolivia (2005), Michelle Bachelet in Chile (2006), Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua (2006), Rafael Correa in Ecuador (2007), Fernando Lugo in Paraguay (August 15, 2008), among others. The left turn in these Latin American governments was considered as a challenge to the U.S hegemonic bloc in the region. Certain analysts referred to that phenomenon as a "Washington's loss in Latin America" (Hakim, 2006). The consequences of these recent evolutions in the inter-American relations were represented in the Obama's policies towards the countries of the region including Cuba, which will be examined in the following sections. However, a qualitative content analysis of US behavior towards its southern neighbors confirms that over the years before Obama's presidency, the US hegemonic bloc was established by the interaction of the US liberal culture, liberal organizations and military and economic capabilities in Latin America.

Culturally, the promotion of liberal values and culture in Latin America was conducted by cultural exchange and media conglomerate. In 1930s, radio entered Latin America under US-based corporations such as CBS and NBC, along with specific

private US companies and continued under Rockefeller's Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs (OCIAA) during the Cold War. Television entered Latin America in 1950s and NBC, CBS and ABC invested in Latin American television stations. In 1970s, Latin American governments attempted to fight against this powerful instrument; large Latin American television networks therefore emerged, such as Mexico's Televisa and Brazil's Globo. Until 1980s, Latin American television was active in producing Telenovela and homegrown Latin programs, while US productions' import was still in place (Fox, 1988). Indeed, the US attempted to gain the support of Latin American audience for its policies. Today, the development of media communications has created a new wave of cultural hegemony. Massive American media corporations encourage Latin American stations to work with global corporations; at the same time, cable and satellite signals projected by their channels spread the US-produced content to all Latin American audience (Sinclair, 2004). CBS, MTV, Ted Turner's CNN, Time-Warner Sony's HBO Olé; Rupert Murdoch's Fox Latin America, Spelling Entertainment's TeleUNO, the Discovery Channel, Brazil's Grupo Abril, Mexico's Multivision and Argentina's Grupo Clarín) and Sky Latin America (News Corporation, TCI, Televisa and Grupo Globo) are few examples of this hegemonic agenda. The other powerful instrument of US public diplomacy in Latin America is Fulbright Commission, which provides scholar exchange between the United States and countries such as Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, etc. Clearly, the Fulbright Program as a Government to People (G2P) diplomacy holds its promise as a means of spreading American values abroad. We therefore, witness that the US cultural hegemony has had a significant contribution in the establishment of AmericanUS liberal values and culture in Latin American countries and the Latin American media; cultural actors continue their struggle against the

Colossus of the North in the increasingly globalized media sphere.

The current economic situation of Latin American countries is the fruit of US ambitions in the region. David Slater (2004) believes that the neoliberal project in Latin America has sustained US wealth through importing raw materials from the South and exporting finished goods from the North, as confirmed by the Latin American structuralist school. The neoliberal project has also sought to eliminate political opposition (for example, Fidel Castro in Cuba) or the campaign of postmodern guerilla warfare (for example, the Zapatistas in Mexico). Importantly, Third World countries are underdeveloped only because development is defined by neoliberal standards (Slater, 2004). Therefore, neo-liberal recommendations for Latin America's economic problems such as Washington Consensus have complicated the situation. Subsequently, Latin America needs alternatives for its economic problems.

The main arguments regarding Latin American military capabilities refer to the conflict-involved Latin American states. Since the first encounters of the European powers with the New World, bloody wars and struggles have been the most effective way to establish power. Passing over the details of early US-Latin American hostile confrontations, the United States frequently used military invasion in Latin America, particularly in the Caribbean region; these invasions started during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt in the first decade of the twentieth century and continued until the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Barton, 1997). The 20<sup>th</sup> began with the Platt amendment in 1901; Roosevelt contributed to Panama's separation from Colombia in 1903. He continued the US's military ambitions in the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua, which paved the US way for future military

intervention in these countries in the following years (Menjívar & Rodríguez, 2005). Two important measures were conducted in the wartimes: development of the Special Intelligence Service (SIS) and formation of the Emergency Advisory Committee for Political Defense. These two programs not only militarized Latin American US-imposed regimes, but also facilitated US intervention in the political structure of Latin American countries. One of the outstanding examples of the USUS military interventions in Latin America during the Cold War was the US Army School of the Americas (SOA), under Kennedy's Alliance for Progress. SOA graduates were among the worst human rights abusers, including Latin American most notorious dictators. These dictators created a win-win situation for the US hegemonic bloc. The United States wins, the US corporations win, American cultural values win, and the USUS "sovereignty" wins while Latin Americans lose (Cain, 2016). Today, Latin American countries are known as the conflict-involved countries. This problem is historically rooted in the US military intervention in the region, and is reflected in various drug trafficking and narcotic activities. The US interventionist solution was War on Drug (WoD); however, the war caused other dangerous problems. The militarization of police departments and an increasing level of force used by these departments in situations that are not related to illegal drugs are among the most dangerous problems (Egan, 1999). The War on Drug was therefore not able to eradicate drug traffic in the region, but caused more serious problems for Latin Americans, US.

Liberal organizations are another pillar of US interventionist approach towards the region. The main multilateral organizations in the Americas are Pan American Union and its successor, the Organization of American States (OAS). Since the early years of US-Latin America relations, these organizations have worked on the basis of US power, role, and

influence. Latin American countries became members of these organizations, wishing to have the advantages of a closer relationship with the United States in order to reduce the negative features of an inter-American context. However, these institutions act on the asymmetries of power: although the US constrains itself through membership of such organizations, these organizations do not have the same importance of their interests. The United States uses these organizations to further its own interests and when its interests are truly vital, it simply goes elsewhere for fulfilling them. In addition, the US's behavior in more recently established organizations such as the Summit of the Americas does not seem to differ much from the OAS model. Thus, power asymmetries and hegemonic behavior define the US role in the Inter-American multilateral institutions.

In sum, the categories of the US hegemonic bloc confirm that before Obama's administration, the US foreign policy towards its Latin American neighbors was based on its exceptionalism. From the beginning, the superior North and inferior South was the crucial element of the Inter-American interactions. Indeed, the main nature of US-Latin America relation was described by Carlos Fuentes (1986), a Mexican novelist and essayist who emphasizes that "What the United States does best is to understand itself. What it does worst is understand others.". Indeed, the US had a hegemonic position in Latin America, which was implemented through coerce and consent. However, during Obama's administration the occurrence of events such as the rise of new economic powers, Global Financial Crisis and the rise of left-turn in Latin America caused specific speculations about the declining US hegemony and its transition to leadership. In the following sections, we will analyze the US hegemonic position in Cuba before and during Obama administration in terms of the categories indicated in the theoretical framework.

### **US-Cuba relations before Obama's administration**

The history of the United States' relations with Cuba began with the US interference in the process of Cuba's independence from Spain. When Spanish colonies were fighting for independence during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Spanish rule became increasingly oppressive. The political situation of Cuba at that time was marked by numerous revolts against the Spanish rule. Finally, Cuban revolutionary movement *Grito de Yara* declared the country's independence in 1868. The result of this independence was the Ten Years' War between Cuban revolutionaries and Spain, which finally ended in 1878 through a truce. Although the truce provided Cubans with many concessions, Spain continued its colonial approach toward the island. Cuban revolutionary movements therefore reinitiated their activities in 1895, but this time the US intervened on behalf of the revolutionists. Indeed, the US battleship *Maine* was sunk in the harbor of Havana in 1898, which triggered the Spanish-American War. Finally, then United States and Spain signed a treaty in 1898, which granted US military involvement in the region. Ultimately, Cuba became a US protectorate in 1902. Importantly, the Cuban constitution, approved in 1901, included the provisions of the Platt Amendment, which was an addition to the Army Appropriations Act (Cuba, 2007). This hegemonic approach was the start of the US-interest based relation with Cuba.

The United States gradually took the place of the Spanish rule. American companies began massive investments in the Cuban economy and gained control of its resources, mainly the sugar industry. Moreover, the US military presence, with its naval base at the Guantanamo Bay and its ambitious economic interventions in the island created popular discontent that was intensified due to the corruption of the US-friendly political leaders. This situation led to various revolts against the government in 1906 and 1912, both of which justified US military and political intervention in the island.

During both World Wars, the US was the dominant power of Cuban agriculture, industry, and finance because of the suppressive regimes of its imposed dictators. However, deteriorating economic situations, such as floating enormous international loans, fluctuations in world sugar prices, and growing inflation along with brutal oppression by the changing regimes led to instability and unrest in Cuba. However, when this economic difficulty and political instability culminated in 1952, former president Fulgencio Batista seized power through the support of the army (Triplett, 2003) and began a suppressing dictatorship. Theoretically, Fulgencio Batista, as other US-imposed dictators, created a win-win situation for the US economic interests, corporations, liberal values and hegemonic bloc at the expense of Cubans' lives. Shortly, he paved the way for US military interventions and economic superiority in the island.

Batista's regime was the peak of the American military and economic intervention in Cuba. His actions, such as suspending the constitution, dissolving the congress, and creating a provisional government while postponing the elections angered Cuban revolutionaries. The result was an uprising in Oriente Province under the leadership of a lawyer named Fidel Castro in 1953. After suppressing the unrest, Batista announced elections in 1954, while banning the opposition groups. He was therefore reelected without opposition, he restored constitutional rule and granted amnesty to political prisoners, including Castro. Although Batista's economic plans together with stabilization in the world sugar price improved Cuba's economic life, Castro and Ernesto Che Guevara, with about eighty insurgents revolted against the government in 1956. At first, they were defeated by the army, but they continued their struggles under the July 26 Movement (Cuba, 2007). This anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism movement overthrew Batista's dictatorship in 1959. Due to this revolution, for the first time



since 1500, Cuba was a free nation. This revolution was indeed a resistance against the liberal bloc of Northern hegemon. As a result, the hegemon initiated its efforts to suppress this counter-hegemonic revolution using both coercion and consent.

Castro's government nationalized all sectors of the economy, including US-owned industries and hiked taxes on US imports. In response, the US gradually implemented trade restrictions, which encouraged Cuba to establish close ties with the Soviet Union. As a result, the US President Eisenhower stopped economic relations with Cuba due to Castro's nationalization of American property, its human rights violations, and its relations with the Soviet Union. The US also established an embargo on Cuba in 1960 and broke diplomatic relations in 1961 (Felter et al., 2017). Later that year, President Kennedy sent CIA-trained anti-Castro exiles to overthrow Castro. They landed in the Bay of Pigs in southern Cuba, but were defeated, some being captured and later released by the US tacit aid. This victory helped Castro reaffirm his anti-US government and increase his country's relations with the Soviet Union. In other words, the victory increased Cuban mistrust and nationalism in a way that Cubans allowed the Soviet Union to install nuclear missile sites on the island in secret. In 1962, the US found out that the Soviet Union had built missile installations in Cuba. President Kennedy therefore proclaimed a naval blockade of the island and an American spy plane spotted Soviet-owned missiles on the ground in Cuba in order to prevent further Soviet shipments of arms. After several days of negotiations, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev finally agreed to withdraw the missiles in exchange for a pledge from Kennedy not to invade Cuba (Felter et al., 2017; Triplett, 2003).

The American Cold War antagonism against Cubans continued. Cuba was expelled from the Organization of American States (OAS) in 1962 because of its counter-

hegemonic ideologies, which inspired anti-US movements in other Latin American countries such as Venezuela, Guatemala, and Bolivia. Given the failure of coerce and military invasion in suppressing Cuba's counter-hegemonic movements, which were massively endangering US interests in the region, the United States decided to use other hegemonic tool, such as OAS to further its interests in its sphere of influence. Furthermore, President Kennedy not only expanded the economic embargo to include stringent travel restrictions, but also began pursuing covert operations to kill Castro (see the documentary *638 Ways to Kill Castro* by Dollan Cannell) or overthrow his government. Similar economic and political instruments were used by subsequent US presidents to regain control over the outstanding counter-hegemonic country of Latin America. In response to these economic policies, Cuba extended its economic ties with the Soviet Union and Soviet-bloc countries. Furthermore, it signed several agreements with the Soviet Union on the issues of trade, financial aid and rescheduling debt payments, and joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON).

However, it seemed that the Northern hegemon decided to change its political approach in the 1970s. During the Nixon administration, the US and Cuba attempted to normalize their relations. In spite of the debates regarding Cuba's involvement in Angola and Ethiopia, common interest points were established between the US and Cuba and both countries accepted to operate under the protection of the Embassy of Switzerland (U.S. Department of State (b), n.d.). However, the Soviet relations with the Cuba and the fear of communism in the region were the most convincing reason for the superior hegemon to control and restrict Cuba. Strictly speaking, US economic embargo was still in force and the negative consequences of this powerful hegemonic instrument were still damaging Cuba's economic life.

The result of economic difficulties imposed by the US was the decisions of some Cubans to leave the country to supply their subsistence needs. However, in the 1980s, the US changed its policy emphasis on the immigration. At that time, Mariel boatlift, the mass migration of Cubans to the US (U.S. Department of State (a), n.d.), was organized with the agreement of Cuban president Fidel Castro, but was ended by mutual agreement of the two governments. Later in 1994, the US and Cuba negotiated on returning some of immigrants to Cuba. Moreover, the Reagan administration attempted to improve US-Cuba relations in 1981-82, but was stopped because it was claimed that Cuba continues to intervene in other Latin American countries. The Ronald Reagan administration also labeled Cuba as a state sponsor of terrorism. Thus, the US trade embargo continued to deteriorate Cuba's economy. Due to the food shortages and prolonged blackouts, the Cuban Government allowed Cubans to set sail for the US in 1994. In the end, the two countries signed migration agreements in 1994 and 1995, aiming to guarantee safe and legal migration (Crooker & Pavlovic, 2010). Yet, the permanent underlying problem continued to be the US ongoing economic embargo, which was increasingly affecting ordinary people's lives.

The US imposed restrictions on Cuban trade, and prohibited the import of Cuban products and the entrance of US food, medical supplies or capital to Cuba for about forty years. Therefore, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Cuba lost its major international sponsor and the deteriorating economic crisis led to the Special Period in the country where difficulties began for Cubans. However, the Northern hegemon preferred to pursue its interests and tightened the economic embargo by the Cuba Democracy Act in 1992 and Helms-Burton Act in 1996. Importantly, President Clinton justified the Helms-Burton Act as a retaliatory measure against the shooting down by the Cuban military of two US planes flying outside

Cuba's waters. Nevertheless, the Helms-Burton Act intended to make it more difficult for foreign investors and businesses to operate in Cuba (Libertad Act, 2001). Accordingly, advocates of the Act, especially the older generation of Cuban exiles in Miami, considered it as the accelerator of Castro's downfall. In other words, the United States used its liberal apparatus to destroy Cuba's economy, isolate it from the world economy, and destroy Cuban's lives with the aim of meeting its goals and furthering its interest in the counter-hegemonic state of Latin America.

After the Special Period, the US continued its hostility against Cuba. Accordingly, at the early years of his administration, George Bush attempted to continue Clinton's practice of waiving the provisions of Helms-Burton because it had created problems among allies of the United States. However, he ended up putting into effect new travel restrictions in 2004 that constrained intellectual and cultural exchanges and prohibited Cuban-Americans from visiting relatives more than once every three years (Cohen, 2005). Thus, overthrowing Castro's government under the banner of democracy and human rights became one of the most important US foreign policy priorities in the 2000s. Although some argued that the US trade embargo has been unsuccessful and inhumane, others responded that the US should continue its pressures on Cuba until Castro's downfall.

### **Explanation of US-Cuba Relations before Obama's Administration**

The collapse of the US-backed regime of Fulgencio Batista and the establishment of a socialist state has been a great counter-hegemonic effort in the history of Inter-American relations. Thus, the rise of Cuba as a contending social force against US liberal relations of production in 1959 was considered as a threat

against the US liberal bloc and characterized US-Cuba relationship by antagonism and distrust. Over the years after the Cuban revolution, successive US administrations followed policies that attempted to isolate Cuba economically and diplomatically.

Economically, the United States has sanctioned Cuba longer than any other country and economic isolation has become the major element of US policy toward Cuba. The US economic embargo of Cuba initiated under Eisenhower's administration in 1960, was intensified after the end of the Cold War in 1991, and was codified into law during the Clinton administration in the 1996 Helms-Burton Act (Libertad; Haney & Vanderbush, 2005). Although some changes were made to the embargo in 1999, allowing the export of certain US medical supplies and food products to the island, the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba under Bush's administration expanded existing sanctions (Felter et al., 2017). As truly argued by Cain (2016), following the Cuban revolution, the United States decided to take advantage of Cuba's geography as a small island, by cutting-off all supplies into Cuba and blocking all exports out of Cuba, attempting to cause Cuba's absolute destruction. Meanwhile, the enormous suffering of the innocent civilians of Cuba did not matter so much in its interest-based policies. Consequently, the American-backed embargo against Cuba that has lasted over fifty years shows that the United States did not stand for any disobedience to its hegemonic bloc.

Regarding the military dimension of the US-Cuba relations, the Cuban revolution shaped the US policy towards the country for the next half-century. The US intelligence services, together with Cuban exiles, attempted to weaken Cuba's counter-hegemonic government through overt and covert interventions. Statistics indicate that since the Cuban revolution, about 3,500 people have been killed in US-sponsored terrorist attacks (Castro

& Ramonet, 2009. Moreover, avoiding “another Cuba” became the main concern of the Pentagon, the State Department, and the CIA, and the fear of communism provided US presidents with another excuse for backing authoritarian regimes and abusive militaries in Latin America (Livingstone, 2009). Accordingly, given the fact that Cuba’s links with the Soviet Union were mainly the result of US-imposed economic embargo, US coerced behavior towards its Southern neighbor with the excuse of containing communist threat, was a reflection of US inhumane and interest-based behavior towards Cuba.

Cuba’s revolutionary challenge against American liberal values was thus an important event that shaped inter-American relations during the Cold War. Before the revolution, the US did not pay much attention to Latin America. As a result, although the Cuban Revolution was rooted in the repressive government and widespread poverty throughout Latin America, US policy-makers did not consider it a result of political corruption and poor material conditions in Cuba. They preferred to consider it a communist threat and adopted policies such as the Alliance for Progress (Taffet, 2007) that not only militarized Latin America, but also paved the way of the next presidents to offer US liberal hegemonic agenda under the banner of democracy, stability and human rights.

Thus, a standard explanation of US-Cuba relations from the 1959 Cuban revolution to the present would suggest apparent policy continuity. While some fluctuations took place over the last decades in the US policy towards Cuba, US presidents from Eisenhower to George W. Bush continued economic embargo and sought Castro’s crackdown. Interest groups, think tanks, and American anti-Castro communities worked hard to intensify the pressure on Cuba and the Latin American left. On the other hand, because of these pressures, Cuba underwent economic reforms. For example, Cuba opened its borders to foreign investors in areas such as oil exploration, tourism, and

biotechnology in an attempt to bring in hard currency. Castro also developed three limited liberalizing reforms for the domestic economy: (1) “dollarization” of the economy; (2) limited self-employment by individuals and their families in certain trade, craft, and service categories; (3) establishment of more independent enterprises for raising sugar and agricultural production (Pimpan, 2001). In addition, the US continued its hegemonic behavior and acted as an obstacle against Cuban improvements in education and healthcare.

Theoretically, before Obama's administration, the US employed a clearly hegemonic approach toward Cuba. From the beginning, the US considered Cubans' defense of their national right as a threat to its liberal apparatus. Although it was claimed that US trade embargo not only destroyed the Cuban economy, but also brought great suffering to the Cuban people, the US acted inhumanely by denying Cubans basic essentials such as food and medical supplies. Moreover, even though other Latin American and European countries preserved their diplomatic and commercial relations with Cuba, the US insisted that the ultimate goals should be to encourage Castro's resignation and promote a transition to democracy and respect for human rights. The US Government conditioned Cuba's return to the OAS or inclusion in the Summit of the America's process to its transition to a democratic government. Its request was accepted because it was the superior hegemon of Inter-American relations. In sum, before Obama administration the US adopted various policies ranging from economic embargo, military invasion, radio and television services, cultural leverage of Cuban exiles, covert actions to kill Castro, human rights and democracy excuses to re-establish the main essence of its hegemonic bloc, i.e. liberal relations of production, in Cuba. However, Cuba firmly resisted against any activity that attempted to overthrow its counter-hegemonic government.

### **US-Cuba Relations during Obama's Administration**

During the 2008 US election, it seemed that the US hegemonic behavior towards Cuba would transform and take new forms. Barack Obama, then presidential candidate, gave a speech referring to the time for pursuing direct diplomacy with Cuba, and promised meeting with Raul Castro who had replaced his brother Fidel as Cuba's leader. Thus, when he took office, he eased restrictions on travel and remittances, permitted Cuban-Americans to send funds into Cuba and allowed US citizens to travel to Cuba for educational and religious purposes. During his first term in office, Obama gradually lifted the restrictions in these areas.

On the other hand, Raul Castro attempted to manage the hardship resulted from US-imposed economic embargo. He opened Cuba's borders to foreign investors in areas such as oil exploration, tourism, and biotechnology, and developed limited liberalizing reforms (Pimpan, 2001). Statistically, according to Cuban government in 2013, the fifty-year US trade restrictions had cost the Cuban economy more than \$1 trillion (Charbonneau, 2013) Cuban reforms increased Cuba's private sector covering about 20% of the country's workforce and tripling the number of self-employed workers between 2009 and 2013 (Mesa-Lago, 2014). Thus, trade embargo was very devastating.

Surprisingly, Obama and Castro attracted the world's attention in 2014, announcing that they would reinstate full diplomatic relations and pacify bilateral tensions. This historic restoration was the consequence of several months of secret diplomacy arranged by Pope Francis. Both countries accepted the exchange of political prisoners and other concessions (Felter et al., 2017). Accordingly, the 2015 Summit of the Americas in Panama was held in a pleasant environment, largely because of US-Cuba's normalization of relations. Most Latin American countries also welcomed the Cuban Thaw.



The normalization of US-Cuba relations continued in the next months. Obama's administration lifted travel and trade restrictions, and removed Cuba from an official list of terrorism sponsors (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2015). The two governments cooperated in various fields including maritime navigation, oil spill response, scientific collaboration, and narcotics enforcement (Chase, 2017). They also reopened their embassies. Additionally, President Obama visited Havana on March 20, 2016, which was the first trip of a US president to Cuba in almost 90 years (since Calvin Coolidge trip in 1928). During this meeting, Obama insisted on more political and economic reforms, but Raul Castro pointed to the trade embargo, the most harmful US hegemonic instrument towards the country. The result of Obama's trip was lifting additional US travel and financial restrictions and offering travel services by commercial US airlines for the first time in more than fifty years (Robles, 2016). During his last days in office, Obama agreed to handle the undocumented Cuban immigrants with the collaboration of the Cuban government.

### **Explanation of US-Cuba Relations during Obama's Administration**

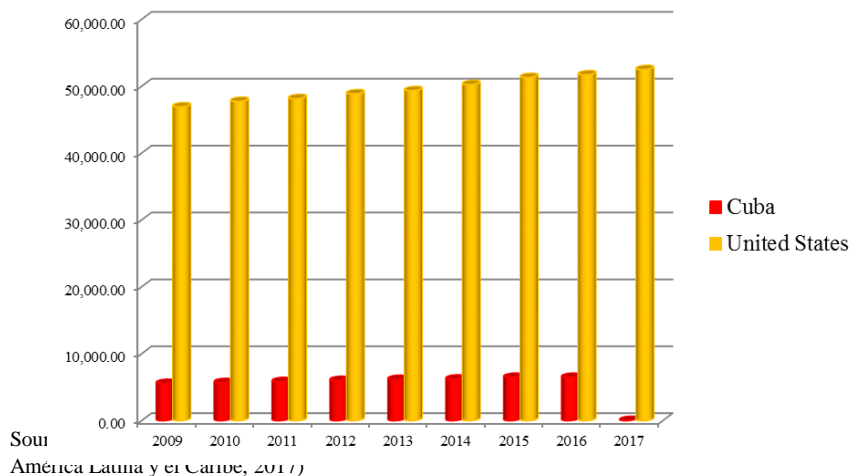
As a result of this historic restoration, different debates, analyses and polls emerged across the world. Certain analysts spoke about failed Washington policies toward Cuba. Others concentrated on the will of a new generation of Cubans and Cuban-Americans to change their leaders' reciprocal understandings. There were also debates about ultimate attempts for easing Cold War tensions. Moreover, all US-affiliated and most right wing Cuban polls supported the normalization process. According to a Pew Research Center survey, seven out of every 10 US citizens supported the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States (Cuban News Agency, 2015). Meanwhile, La Exclusiva Encuesta en Cuba de Univision indicated that the vast majority of Cubans

favor closer ties with the US (Univision, 2015). However, these analyses of polls did not reflect the opinion of left-wing Cubans who wanted the prosperity of their country and their negotiation with the US did not necessarily mean leaving their counter-hegemonic ideals behind.

Strictly speaking, during the 2008 presidential election, Obama's national vote share among Hispanic voters (71%) was the highest seen by a Democratic candidate since 1996 (Lopez & Taylor, 2012). Indeed, Cuban-Americans contributed to the Obama's victory and this was an inspiring reason for Obama to revise US-Cuba relations. Thus, it seemed that Obama's leadership in Cuba could open new doors of cooperation between both countries. It was also argued that this policy transformation was partly the result of the rise of leftist governments in Latin America, the relative decline of US regional hegemony, and the promotion of regional integrations such as the ALBA, the CELAC, and the UNASUR, among others. However, this argument was not true, since the inter-American system was already under the yoke of US interests in Latin America. Therefore, Barack Obama's policies toward Cuba were not realized in a leveled playing field for the American countries. In other words, although Obama took a historic step in easing tensions with Cuba, the actual event was more or less a show off. The US military presence in the island at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Station was not discussed, and only those restrictions that provided the US corporations with opportunities to take advantage of Cuba's touristic and commercial potentials were eased. In addition, the main pillar of US hegemonic bloc in the country, i.e. trade embargo remained in force, meaning that the main request of Cuba's counter-hegemonic government remained unmet. Accordingly, the following figures provide the basics of economic relations between the two countries. In spite of Obama's movements to publicize the normalization of US-Cuba relations, there was no

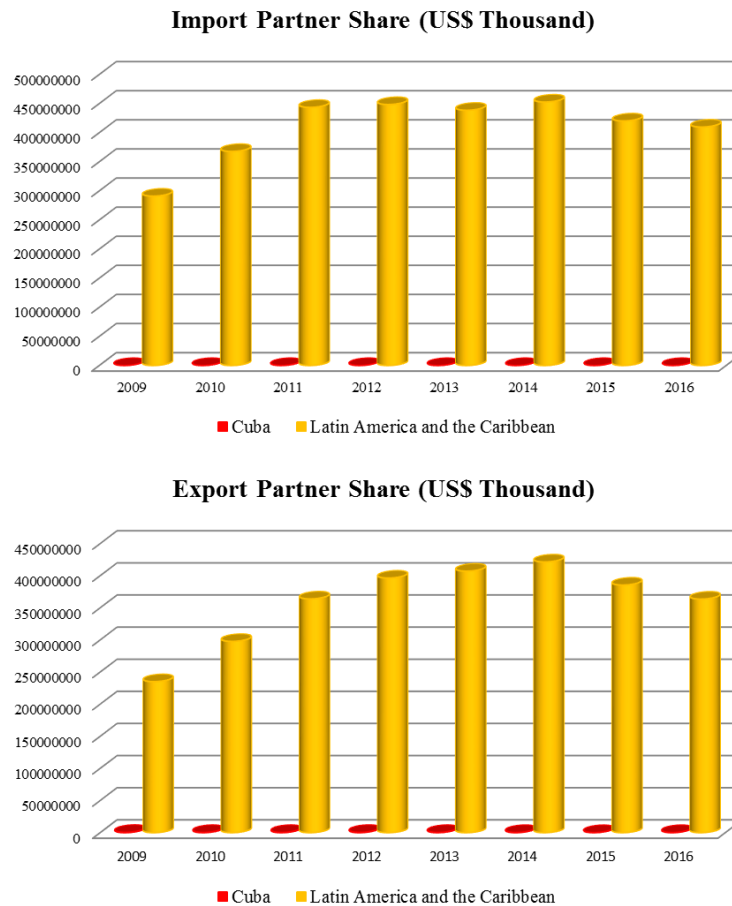
significant change in the principal economic indicators of these countries. While Cuba remained economically isolated and the supplier of food and agricultural products, the US export to Cuba valued at \$245 million in 2016 compromising 0.02% of the US global trade (International Monetary Fund, 2017). Subsequently, Cuba is still suffering from the US hegemonic embargo, which is continuously destroying the country's economy.

Before the restoration, Richard E. Feinberg in *Extender la mano: La nueva economía de Cuba y la respuesta internacional* provided few recommendations for resolving the US-Cuba's economic tensions. He discussed that Cuban resistance, gradualism, IFI Assets, Cuban needs, and pro-reform coalitions are among the principles of resolving Cuba's economic problems. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have to comply with their historical objective of total universality, integrating Cuba once and for all.



**Figure 1. Comparison of the size of US economy and Cuban economy based on GDP (constant prices, Billions of dollars)**

Mohammad Ali Mousavi and Elaheh Nourigholamizadeh



Source: (World Bank Group The World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS), 2017)

**Figure 2. Importance of Cuba for US Trade**

The commitment of the IFIs to Cuba must be managed with significant care and flexibility to generate confidence. Moreover, the United States has to pay more attention to the evolution of national and international economic policies of the island. The United States should not politicize or interfere in the process of readmission of Cuba to the IFIs, and US policies should encourage progressive economic reforms in Cuba, for

example, allowing American citizens (including but not limited to Cuban Americans) and organizations from civil society to assist the legal private sector of Cuba (Feinberg, 2011). However, Obama's plans for improving the US-Cuba relation concentrated only on the least important factors of US-Cuba's hostility, i.e. travel restrictions. Moreover, considering the Washington Consensus, the history of IFIs operations in Latin America is dreadful. Thus, Obama's economic policies in Cuba were influenced by its corporate interests that seek their own profit not Cuba's prosperity. Indeed, Obama moved towards adopting new hegemonic approaches towards the country.

Furthermore, the new US hegemonic policies are represented in the name of democracy and human rights. American political leaders in both parties insisted on the Cuban government's improvement of human rights record as part of its political and economic reforms, while they disagreed on the issue of lifting trade embargo. The Congressional Reports argued about the Congress's active role in shaping policy toward Cuba, especially the enactment of a legislation strengthening various US economic sanctions. They explained that "the US policy over the years has consisted largely of isolating Cuba through economic sanctions, while a second policy component has consisted of support measures for the Cuban people, including US government-sponsored broadcasting and support for human rights and democracy projects" (Sullivan, 2017). Referring to Obama's shift from a sanctions-based policy toward the engagement and a normalization of relations they added that the U.S would raise concerns about democracy and human rights in Cuba, because "the United States could do more through engagement than isolation" (Sullivan, 2017). They also affirmed that "the overall embargo, however, remains in place, and can only be lifted with congressional action or if certain conditions in Cuba are met, including that a democratically elected government is in place" (Sullivan, 2017). Therefore, the

American interest-based approach towards Cuba during Obama administration relied on new ways to impose liberal values.

Theoretically, US policies towards Cuba during Obama administration did not vary much from previous US administrations. The American military presence in the country still continued and the economic embargo as the most powerful instrument of US hegemony against the country remained in force. Political instruments of the US presence in Latin America, such as democracy and human rights were also unchanged. In addition, although Cuba was welcomed in the Summit of the Americas, this Inter-American organization acts as a way to further US interest in the region. We can therefore conclude that in spite of all media propaganda, the US policy towards Cuba during Obama administration was based on its hegemonic interest, using mainly coerce and sometimes consent. As long as the US continues its policies to intervene in the internal affairs of Cuba and disrespects its citizens, the US leadership in Cuba is an unattainable dream.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The United States relations with Cuba have always been based on a US interventionist and superior position regarding the island. Immediately after its independence, Cuba became the US protectorate, and Platt Amendment not only influenced Cuba's constitution, but also gave the Northern hegemon the authority to establish military base, control economic interactions, and suppress social unrest. The result of over the fifty years of suppression and poverty under the US-imposed regimes was the Cuban counter-hegemonic revolution in 1959. The Northern hegemon found the Cubans' efforts to defend their right in contrast with its superior position in the Western Hemisphere. Therefore, after the revolution, the United States used all its hegemonic capabilities to isolate the country. Culturally, the US

employed its media machinery to condemn Cuban's right for national identification. Politically, the United States fortified its naval base at the Guantanamo Bay and cut off its diplomatic relations with Cuba. Economically, the US imposed an economic embargo that was followed and even intensified by the successive administrations. The US hostility with Cuba's counter-hegemonic ideology was pursued under overt and covert actions to overthrow Cuba's revolutionary government. Fidel Castro was a "thorn in the side" because of his ties with the former Soviet Union and its ideological influence on several countries in the Latin America.

However, Obama's administration, which coincided with Cuba's internal reforms and Latin America's left turn, shifted its inter-American policy from sanction-based isolation to engagement and restoration of relations. The news of Cuban Thaw in 2014 shocked the world and heated up the debates about the US willingness to cooperate with Cuba. Obama reestablished diplomatic relations, removed Cuba from the US State Department's list of sponsors of terrorism, and eased the embargo regulations five times in areas such as travel, remittances, trade, telecommunications, and financial services. Yet, the US military base and economic embargo remained in place despite the Cuban government's attempts for their withdrawal. Therefore, the consequences of Obama's efforts were limited to his handshake with Raul Castro who, after the end of a historic press in Havana, raised Obama's arm above his head, announcing that the winner of this wrestling match is the US's deeply rooted hegemony in Latin America.

Theoretically, soft leadership establishes an order for the realization of the hegemon's goals through normative persuasion and socialization (Destradi, 2010: 927). It may therefore be argued that the US adopted soft leadership towards Cuba during Obama's administration as it lifted certain sanctions and eliminated the US Cold War antagonism. However, the

normalization process was not based on a leveled playing field. Historically, the US-Cuba relations have only been based on the United States' desire to cooperate with Cuba or isolate it, neglecting Cuba's requests. For example, US presidents such as Nixon and Reagan first showed an interest for easing restrictions, but ended up adopting more severe policies. As a result, Barack Obama's attempts to restore US-Cuba relations like his predecessors were again based on US military, economic and political interests and did not have a cooperative nature to provide a level playing field to resolve Cuba's problems, especially the economic ones. The normalization process cannot be considered as the realization of this leadership-based cooperation and the recognition of Cuba's national sovereignty. As long as the US continues its policies to intervene in the internal affairs of Cuba and disrespects its citizens, its leadership in Cuba and true and equal partnership between both countries remain an unattainable dream, as argued by Fidel Castro's 1995 interview with the US News:

I don't think it is so difficult to solve the problems between Cuba and the United States; it all depends on whether there is a dialogue, a discussion, or if the prejudices and hatred of people like the extremists and terrorists from the Cuban community, who try to impose their policies, prevail (Zuckerman & Robinson, 2014).

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