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## Cuba-US Relations: the View from the Other Side

By John Kirk – Stephen Kimber  
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On Dec. 17, 2014, President Barack Obama went on television to declare the United States was unilaterally ending America’s “outdated approach [to Cuba] that, for decades, has failed to advance our interests.”

So why do so many American politicians and commentators still persist in arguing the U.S. has been “giving and giving” in dealings with Cuba, and insisting the Cubans reciprocate by... well, changing their government to suit American demands?

Let’s start with simple truths. Cuban did not impose a stifling, 55-year economic embargo on the United States that has failed to advance anyone’s interests. Cuba did not put the United States on

a list of state sponsors of terrorism. Cuba did not try to assassinate American presidents. Cuba did not attempt to overthrow the U.S. government.

During President Obama's historic visit to Cuba this week, Americans need to at least consider the perspective from the Cuban side of the Florida Straits divide.

The U.S. embargo — the Cubans call it a blockade — is still the law of the American land. According to the United Nations, the embargo, which has been virtually universally condemned internationally, has cost the Cuban economy over \$116 billion.

Ending the embargo is, not surprisingly, Cuba's *sine qua non* for normalizing relations with the United States.

To be fair, President Obama has used his executive powers to mitigate some of the embargo's impact, including, most recently, permitting the use of U.S. dollars in transactions involving Cuba. There is more he could do but, thanks to the Helms-Burton Act, the embargo's deleterious effects will not finally disappear until Congress votes to scrap it.

In the meantime, even strategically renewing the 1917 Trading With the *Enemy* Act, as Obama did in September to give him wiggle room around the embargo, is not only insulting — you claim to want to normalize relations with a country you designate an “enemy”? — but that law continues to ban many aspects of trade with Cuba. In 2012, an American businessman was even charged with violating the act for investing in Cuban real estate.

Thanks to extra-territoriality provisions in 1992's Torricelli act and 1996's Helms-Burton Act, foreign companies trading with Cuba and many international banks have been slapped with multi-million-dollar fines for conducting otherwise ordinary financial transactions.

How far can extra-territoriality go? In December, a senior executive with the Canadian mining company Sherritt had to be Skyped into an *Economist*-sponsored New York conference on “new opportunities for American companies interested in doing business” in Cuba after the U.S. government refused to allow him into the country because his company does business with Cuba.

While the Cubans view the embargo as the most serious impediment to re-establishing normal relations with the U.S., there are others.

Guantánamo? Although the naval station no longer has any American strategic or military significance, the U.S. continues to occupy those 45 square miles of Cuban territory under a 113-year-old neo-colonial treaty from Theodore Roosevelt's day. Cuba, which hasn't cashed an annual American \$4,085 “rent” check since 1960, wants its land returned. Washington says no.

Giving and giving?

Or consider the Cuban Medical Professional Parole Program, a Bush-era initiative still in place and offering speedy entry into the United States for any Cuban medic who defects. Its sole purpose is to undermine Cuba's highly successful medical internationalism initiative, which has

over 50,000 Cuban medical personnel in 60 countries, delivering care to poor people who otherwise wouldn't have access.

And then there are the ongoing U.S. attempts to promote Cuban "regime change." From overt and covert support for violent terrorist attacks against Cuba, to beaming propaganda radio and television signals into Cuba in violation of international law, to current State Department and USAID support for anti-government groups in the name of "robust democracy assistance." You can understand why Cuba sees that as a threat.

Although Cuba scores well on cultural and social human rights — health care, education — it does have a poor record in providing individual citizens with civil and political rights.

If Washington is really serious about improving those, however, it could start by stopping meddling in Cuba's internal affairs. How can Havana begin to liberalize its economy or political structure when the most powerful country in the world — 90 miles away — funds groups that seek its downfall?

Relations between the U.S. and Cuba have improved enormously since December 17, 2014. It is in the interests of both countries to continue this process apace. But first it is important for both countries to understand the position of the other, to walk in their shoes.

To date there has been little evidence Washington understands the Cuban concerns — and that is too bad.