

Conference explores future of the Cuban embargo

Cuban and American diplomats, academics and practitioners gathered in Athens in March for a lively discussion on the current U.S. embargo against Cuba, including the impact it has had on both countries during the past 50 years and the possible ramifications of lifting or easing it in the near future.

“We had some very prominent participants weighing in on both sides of the issue, including a strong contingent of discussants from Cuba,” Dean Rusk Center Director C. Donald “Don” Johnson (J.D.’73) said.

“To have a pro-embargo former senior official from the Bush years and another from the public policy research institute the Heritage Foundation, not to mention the prominent anti-embargo panelists, on a program with a senior Cuban diplomat and academics from the University of Havana is especially unique,” he added. “The time is ripe for a new look at this policy, and I think this conference exposed some ideas that should be taken into consideration.”

Pros and Cons of the Embargo Remaining in Place

The keynote address, delivered by the Chief of the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, D.C., Ambassador José R. Cabañas, emphasized U.S. efforts to isolate Cuba.

Cabañas suggested that “after 50 years, the U.S. government should treat Cuba as an old neighbor and put in place a policy that responds to its national interest and the desire of the vast majority of its citizens.”

He added that Cuba “is the only country American citizens are banned to travel to, and this includes countries with which the United States is in war.” Annually, two million tourists from capitalist countries visit Cuba and “being islanders, Cubans generally love exchanging with the outside world.”





Cabañas said he believes “American citizens should have the right to travel to Cuba to enjoy the Cuban tradition” and they “should have the right to enjoy Cuban products that are often unique,” such as Cuban cigars, rum and coffee.

Today, Cuba has diplomatic relations with approximately 190 countries, including all of

the countries of the Western Hemisphere, except for the United States, Cabañas noted.

While the Obama administration has restored the right of Americans of Cuban origin to freely travel to Cuba and send remittances to relatives and has allowed more leisure travel to the island nation, that policy’s intent was not to “reverse senseless, inhuman measures that separated families” but to increase the influence on the Cuban people by exposing them to American values, according to Cabañas.

He also outlined specific areas in which easing of restrictions could benefit both the U.S. and Cuba – medical equipment and pharmaceuticals, energy, mineral resources and national security, particularly in regard to fighting drug trafficking and terrorism.

In addition to Cabañas sharing his views, several panelists also discussed the current impact of the embargo and its future.

Ray Walser, a Latin America senior policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation, presented several reasons why he thinks the embargo should go largely unchanged over the next several years.

“I believe the embargo is important, but that in the grand scheme of U.S. foreign policy it doesn’t stand as high on the priority list as many would hope,” Walser said.

He also discussed “primary reasons strongly rooted in the Cuban regime’s mindset” and in its “structural DNA” that will continue to obstruct relations between it and the United States.

“The differences ... are essentially creedal in nature and rooted in clashing principles,” he said.

“It is hard to point to any single steps toward real democracy. The tactics of oppression have changed but the strategy of ideological control and one-party domination remain paramount. Rights promised by international charters and instruments such as the Inter-American Democratic Charter are not respected in Cuba,” he said.

Walser added that a perusal of the U.S. State Department’s human rights reports, as well as those of the Human Rights Watch or Freedom House, still make for “sobering reading.”

“The regime manages to perpetuate an image of intolerance and heavy handed repression. It denies the sum of its people free assembly, free speech, free access to information and the capacity of civil society to unite for political change,” he said.

However, another panelist, Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus Archibald R.M. Ritter from Carleton University in Canada, disagreed attributing radicalization of Castro’s government in part to the embargo itself.

He called the embargo a “half-century of failure” that pushed Cuba into the arms of the Russian regime, which was profitable in the short term but also led to a “siege mentality.”

Ritter also remarked that the embargo made it easier for Castro to pose as a champion of Cuban independence and sovereignty and to generate sympathy for Cuba in the world, while failing to have a positive impact on human rights and political reform in Cuba.

“Cuba has simply learned to live with a disability,” he said.

Pathways to Removing Sanctions

Another panel explored the range of possible options for the U.S. government to lift or ease sanctions against Cuba and pathways through which that could be achieved.

Vice President for Policy and Strategic Planning of the International Republican Institute Daniel W. Fisk, a former National Security Council official in the George W. Bush administration, emphasized that President Barack Obama could submit legislation to alter the embargo, but that “the pathway to removing sanctions is with and through the American Congress.”

Former principal officer of U.S. Interests Section in Havana, Ambassador Vicki J. Huddleston suggested in contrast that all avenues to change don’t necessarily have to go through Congress.

She painted a scenario of actions that could be taken within the current administration, such as the U.S. Secretary of State launching new initiatives on investment and trade, allowing two-way trade

in communications equipment, environmental equipment, medicines and food, and lifting

more travel restrictions; the Treasury Department convening a bipartisan panel to consider how to finally settle expropriation claims; and the president initiating conversations with Congress about removing Cuba from the list of terrorist states.

Huddleston commented, however, that U.S.-Cuba policy will stay in a rut due to various “vested interests” unless the president “has the courage to change it.”



Watch the entire conference online at www.law.uga.edu/dean-rusk-center-events.

Possible Trade and Investment Opportunities

If sanctions were to be lifted, panelists said there would be a strong potential for trade with Cuba benefiting both nations’ economies in the areas of tourism, energy, agricultural products, nickel and other specialty items.

In particular, the Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture Gary W. Black pointed out that the Peach State would have a lot to gain if the embargo was eased as it is already fifth among U.S. states exporting to Cuba.

—Cindy Rice & Nina Kamber

Conference proceedings will be published in the Dean Rusk Center’s Occasional Papers Series later in the year.