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US Unveils Blueprint For Regime Change In Cuba; Regional War Is An Option

by Mike Leffert

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The US's campaign for regime change in Cuba has taken a step forward with the publication of a report by the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba (CAFC), an organization co-chaired by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez. The report's orientation clearly supports the overthrow of the current regime and creating an externally imposed post-Castro succession plan, in place of Cuba's sovereign plan, now in place. It comes with a toolkit that includes a US\$80 million budget to be spent during the next two years and a classified attachment with a secret plan of execution.

The document drew Cuban condemnation even before its publication. On July 2, president of the Cuban parliament Ricardo Alarcon described it as an act of war. "What's most important is that they admit to a secret plan to overthrow another government. What on earth could the secret part say when the public part violates all kinds of international laws?" he asked reporters. From its first words, the report, beginning with Chapter 1: Hastening the End of the Castro Dictatorship: Transition Not Succession, leaves no room for doubt about the intent and aim of US policy.

A July 10 State Department Briefing hammers home the point that the US plans to intervene, "provided," said Secretary Gutierrez, "we are asked by a Cuban transition government that is committed to dismantling all instruments of state repression and implementing internationally respected human rights and fundamental freedoms, including organizing free and fair elections for a democratically elected new Cuban government within a period of no more than 18 months."

Cuba has its own, clearly articulated and documented and institutionally legitimized plan for succession, making it difficult for analysts to imagine how it would come about that a transition government that followed Cuba's sovereign blueprint would ask the US to come dismantle it. The report hedges here, but becomes explicit after enumerating the ways in which Cuba fails to meet US standards for other nation's behavior, declaring, "This state of affairs highlights the urgency of working today to ensure that the Cuban transition is genuine and that the Castro regime's succession strategy does not succeed."

The opening paragraphs of the report also hint that this is not just another bone thrown to anti-Cuba forces in Miami but a plan to intervene in the leftward swing of the entire region. The introduction tells the reader that "there are clear signs the regime is using money provided by the [President Hugo] Chavez government in Venezuela to reactivate its networks in the hemisphere to subvert democratic governments." The report provides a lengthy list of ways the US intends to help the Cuban people, frequently predicating the helpful elements with the caveat that it will do these things only if invited to do so.

In Chapter 2, *Helping Cubans Respond to Critical Humanitarian and Social Needs*, the CAFC promises to deal with water and sanitation, health care and nutrition, food security, shelter, protection of the most vulnerable populations, and educational systems. This requires, and gets, a reframing of some of these categories, given that Cuba is a recognized world leader in some of them, particularly health care and education.

In Chapter 3, the CAFC undertakes *Helping Cubans Get To Free and Fair Elections*. At issue here are the release of political prisoners, eliminating legal obstacles to freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and freedom of political association. To ensure that the new Cuban democracy looks like the kind of democracy the US most favors, there is a section on preparing for competitive multiparty elections and democratic processes. It will also support a free and independent media, free and fair election administration, and a professional institutional military.

Chapter 4 discusses the ways in which the US will, if invited, be *Helping Cubans Create Market-Based Economic Opportunities*. It is opportune to note that these chapters go beyond helping after the fall to detailing measures to precipitate it. This chapter, for instance, claims, "The policies of the Castro regime continue to debilitate the Cuban economy, impoverish the Cuban people, and isolate Cuba from the economic advances enjoyed by the rest of the Western Hemisphere." That being the case, the CAFC recommends the creation of an "inter-agency law enforcement task force for better enforcement of US economic sanctions on the Castro regime."

Controlling the world to save Cuba from itself Under this doctrine of improving the economy later by destroying it now, law-enforcement agencies in the US would be directed to investigate and prosecute Cuban Assets Control Regulation violations, "especially for those found to have been involved in organizing or facilitating unlicensed travel transactions with Cuba." The Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) regulations to be implemented with regard to this section would prohibit sending remittances through third countries. Instead, it would require that the funds be sent through licensed US-remittance forwarders. The list of people, officials, and agencies not permitted to receive these licensed remittances is to be expanded. There exists at present a *Lista de Esbirros* and a list of Specially Designated Nationals (SDNs) barred from getting remittances.

The use of the SDN would be expanded to designate companies, "including front companies, engaged in efforts to promote the sale of Cuban goods or unlicensed travel, remittances, and other transactions from the United States to Cuba." Similarly, US Department of Commerce regulations would be revised to tighten up on shipping to the island, deny export licenses for "discretionary, cosmetic, or other medical equipment sales that would be destined to be used in large-scale medical programs that cater to tourists and foreign patients and not exclusively for the benefit and care of the Cuban people."

While this appears to be a swipe at the facelift industry, it also has the potential to cripple international programs under which hundreds of thousands of the region's poorest people come to the island with their own government's help for eye surgery and other critical medical attention to which they would otherwise have no access (See *NotiCen*, 2005-08-25).

The recommendations call for other measures that would restrict this humanitarian use and permit US monitoring of the use of medical items exported from the US. Chapter 4 goes on to detail means to ensure that, as the US tightens policy, no other country can come to Cuba's aid, under a subsection headed Target Regime Foreign Income and Assets Abroad. This section broaches the issue of "assets illegally expropriated from US citizens after Castro came to power," for which the US has demanded untold sums in compensation without regard to how these assets came to be the property of US citizens in the first place.

Where Cuba has made substantial progress in exporting its mineral resources, the report seeks to undermine this production of income to "hasten the end of the Castro regime," by establishing an interagency Cuban Nickel Targeting Task Force and to reinvigorate the existing nickel-import certification and control regime and analogous cobalt-import control regime, "consistent with our domestic and international obligations." Plans include engaging "international partners and organizations to assist in developing information on and targeting regime assets abroad."

Enlisting former communists, expatriate Cubans in a crusade

Chapter 5, *The Role of the International Community*, gives recommendations for preparing to control the post-Castro Cuban military. It recommends that Cubans, however that term may be defined in this context, ask "former communist countries to provide defense and security experts to help as the Cuban military prepares to serve as a professional force under the authority of a democratically elected civilian government." What is missing here is how to get this military, quite well-known for its professionalism, to come under the command of someone other than Raul Castro, Fidel's brother, who is slated to become the nation's transitional leader upon the death of Fidel. Here, the US appears not to have learned from its experience on this very matter in Iraq.

Chapter 6 focuses on *The Vital Role of Cubans Abroad*, suggesting that expatriate Cubans can provide such things as information, research, and know-how, material support, resources, remittances, and, most significantly, loans and investment capital. This last plays directly to the longstanding dreams of the expatriate community to buy back the island, something to which the Cuban people are particularly sensitive. The CAFC in this chapter prepares the way for the establishment of financial institutions or "assisting US-based financial institutions to establish new branches or connections in Cuba. Cubans abroad could prove to be an important source of investment during the transition and especially in a Free Cuba."

Where US-based Cuban-expatriate organizations would be especially encouraged is in the statement on property rights. "The Commission believes it would be detrimental for a Transition Government to place impediments on the return of Cubans living overseas," says the section, before going on to explain how exiles from Eastern Europe returned home to help their homelands. "In turn, Cubans abroad should understand that action on confiscated property is best postponed until a fully legitimate, broadly representative democratic government is elected by the sovereign people of Cuba."

The final chapter covers *Preparing Now to Support the Transition*. In this, the US government invites all and sundry to participate in refining strategies with the establishment of a Cuba

Transition Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC) so that, when a legitimate transitional government invites the US to step in, all will be ready. Those invited to join the PCC include multilateral lenders, international organizations including United Nations agencies, members of the European Union, and many other countries.

Reporters covering the presentation of the report at the State Department were on balance skeptical of its assumptions. Questioned on the subject of the precondition that the US be invited to help, Caleb McCarry, CAFC transition coordinator, answered, "Well, obviously, you know, this would be at some point in the future when the president determines that, in accordance with US law, a transition government is in place that meets the requirements that are outlined in US law. It would have to be I think the point we're making here is that we want to help the Cuban people and we want to help a transition government that is committed to free and fair elections so that the sovereignty of the Cuban people will be returned to them and they can freely elect a government democratic government of their choosing. But what our assistance you know, is an offer, and that is and if requested, the United States will be prepared to respond."

Military invasion a distinct possibility

McCarry was asked to address the implication that some sort of US military force would be involved and if he envisaged "any possible sort of confrontation with Venezuela." His answer: "Well, the report, in terms of prospective recommendations, does include a recommendation regarding providing support during a transition, as authorized by US law, to assist the Cuban security forces in making the transition to working under a democratic government." At this point the reporter interjected, "Will that involve the deployment of US forces?" McCarry responded, "That's I just gave you the cited the part of the report that does refer to prospectively, in the future with a transition government, the kinds of assistance that might be provided."

The nonspecificity of response to pointed questions continued throughout the media conference. This, together with McCarry's confirmation that the report does contain classified annexes of the kind Alarcon mentioned, led to speculation elsewhere in the press that there is in fact a whiff of, if not a "declaration of war," the commencement of another administration democratization debacle, this time in Latin America.

An indication that this may be so has been Hugo Chavez's reaction to the commission and its report. "From here I tell the empire that now is when Venezuela will support the Cuban Revolution and the Cuban people," he said. "Imperialism does not only threaten Cuba." Reaction in Cuba among the very dissidents upon whom the US administration relies for much of the argumentation in the report was less than the Bush administration might have hoped for.

Cuban human rights activist Elizardo Sanchez was strongly critical of the commission's recommendations. He said he could not understand "why there should be a unilateral commission, worse a coordinator, of Cuba's future in a foreign capital."

Cuban dissidents reject the plan

Manuel Cuesta, leader of the dissident Arco Progresista, agreed, calling the recommendations "one further perseverance in the mistaken US policy towards Cuba and attempt of monetary and political tutelage of the [Cuban] opposition." Cuesta said this misguided policy "just gives the Cuban government more arguments to continue portraying the democratic conflict as a national-security conflict between Cuba and the US and the dissidence within Cuba as a local extension of US policy toward Cuba."

Meanwhile, with Fidel looking forward to celebrating his 80th birthday on Aug. 13, Cuba is proceeding with transition plans of its own. The Central Committee of the Partido Comunista de Cuba (PCC) has restored the secretariat, the executive body disbanded in 1991. It has ten members, plus Fidel and Raul Castro, and includes Estaban Lazo Hernandez, head of ideology and vice president of the council of state, Jose Machado Ventura, central committee organization secretary, Fernando Ramirez de Estenoz, from foreign relations, and five former first secretaries of provincial parties.

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