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Commentary: Key To Cuban Glasnost Lies In Washington

by John Neagle

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* If any significant internal changes emerge from recent Gorbachev-Castro meetings in Havana, the reasons will hinge more on the United States than on either Cuba or the Soviet Union. From the onset of close ties between Moscow and Havana 30 years ago, US policy has been the determining factor in Soviet-Cuban relations. Those relations have always been triangular, never just bilateral. Indeed, the central feature in all Cuban policies is the close relationship between the external threat and domestic policy. In this, Cuba is no different from the USSR. Both countries have been obsessed with national security imperatives. Yet both nations have addressed their respective security needs in significantly different ways. In the end, Soviet security required glasnost and perestroika because the USSR could no longer pay the social, economic and political costs of the arms race without undermining its own stability. This is not the case in Cuba. The fundamental logic with which the Cuban leadership operates is the need to assure the irreversibility of the revolution. And Havana firmly believes that in the context of continuing American hostility, a process like glasnost and perestroika would threaten Cuba's ability to defend itself. Cuban Communist Party authorities on more than one occasion have said to me that they cannot give up their ability to mobilize the Cuban people by introducing the market and mass consumerism. Revolutionary vigilance is the major defense of the Cuban regime. The Cuban authorities are deeply convinced that even now, the United States is not prepared to accept the Cuban revolution as a fact. They cite the trade embargo and the absence of normal relations to corroborate this view. The logic of this line of thought has been overwhelming. Internal experimentation will not occur until the external threat is removed. Some examples illustrate the correlation: Cuba began a dramatic opening toward market mechanisms and a freer press while President Carter was in office. As US policy toward Cuba became less hostile, the Cubans initiated significant internal liberal reforms. When relations between the two countries deteriorated in the early 1980s following the election of Ronald Reagan, the political, economic and cultural spaces that had been opened up were closed. Predictably, for example, Cuba abolished free peasant markets. In the last two years of the Reagan presidency, as confrontation declined and some negotiations followed, new spaces opened up. The most dramatic signs have been the release of political prisoners, the emergence of autonomous though limited human rights organizations, and even the publication of opposition newsletters. There are Cubans including members of the Communist Party who are favorable to the reforms in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China. But communist militants are the first to stress that those options are not available so long as the United States continues its hostility towards Cuba. Under such circumstances any major opening is automatically negated by the dictates of national security. The Soviets understand this well. Despite disagreements in the past, the Soviets have never altered their assistance to the island. They will not do so now. In fact, they may well reduce if not cancel altogether Cuba's debt. Gorbachev has underscored Cuba's right to determine its own future. He has also urged the United States to engage in new thinking on Cuba. This would be wise advice for the United States to heed. The key to Cuba's own glasnost and perestroika, strangely enough, is in the hands of the White House and not the Kremlin. If Washington drops its hostility, then internal pressures inside Cuba, as well as the Soviet example, could unleash an entirely new democratic era

in the Cuban revolution. [Nelson Valdes, associate professor of sociology at the University of New Mexico and LADB project director, is author of five books on Cuba.]

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