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## **Adjustments in U.S. Cuban Policy Stir Talk of Major Revision**

by LADB Staff

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In recent months, President Bill Clinton's administration has taken steps to relax the 39-year-old hard-line policy on Cuba. The changes do not represent a major policy shift, but they do provide strong-enough hints at further changes for some observers to predict a major revision in the offing. Bolstering this view is a controversial Defense Department assessment of Cuba's national-security threat to the US.

### *Clinton calls for a transition government in Cuba*

In January 1997, Clinton announced the Support for a Democratic Transition in Cuba initiative, which embodied the well-established understanding that relations with Cuba would be normalized only after the departure of President Fidel Castro. The initiative implied that Cuba could expect an aid package of up to US\$8 billion during the first six years after the establishment of a democratic transition government.

Under the proposal, the US would lift sanctions on Cuba, negotiate the return of the US Naval Base at Guantanamo, and assist Cuba in promoting a market economy. To that end, Cuba would arrange funding agreements with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and adopt IMF fiscal and monetary policies that would require privatizing state enterprises and abolishing socialism. Cuba also would establish an attractive investment climate through accords with the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), which assists US investment and plant expansion overseas with financial help and risk-reduction insurance.

Anti-Castro Rep. Robert Menendez (D-NJ), who prepared the proposal, said its purpose was to "create seeds of ferment" in Cuba, but beyond that, the proposal had no apparent applicability. While the State Department still considers it an expression of US policy, Clinton introduced the plan not as policy but as an outline of the assistance "that a democratizing Cuba is likely to seek." The proposal acknowledges that no country including the US nor any multilateral institution has committed to fund a transition government in Cuba.

### *Clinton asks Castro to send signals of change in Cuba*

If nothing else, the proposal highlighted Clinton's commitment to postpone any policy review until the post-Castro era. However, in October 1997, Clinton seemed to offer concessions to the current government as a quid pro quo for "signals" from Castro. "There's not much we can do unless they're [Cuba] willing to do something differently," said Clinton. The US could alter its policy only if Cuban leaders sent some signals that "they want to open up and change direction."

Following up on Clinton's policy reformulation, Michael Kozak, head of the US Interests Section in Havana, and an unidentified CIA intelligence officer met with Cuban Foreign Ministry official

Carlos Fernandez de Cosio in November. The US officials repeated Clinton's hope for signals and suggested that Castro might want "to respond in a positive way." The State Department denied the meeting represented a policy shift since the two officials recited the standing policy formula requiring changes before policy could be reviewed. The State Department did not say, however, whether "signals" counted as changes or whether signals from Castro would be taken seriously. Cuban exile leaders were quick to interpret the meeting as an attempt by the administration to "sneak" changes through. Clinton takes advantage of "new possibilities" in Cuba Since passing significant control of Cuban policy to Congress by signing the Helms-Burton Act in 1996, Clinton has portrayed himself as an onlooker in Cuban events, forced to wait for some exterior force to provide leverage for altering policy.

Asked about the embargo and the Helms-Burton Act at a "town-hall" meeting in Argentina last October, Clinton indicated that he was forced to surrender Cuban policy formation to the Miami exile leadership. He told the audience that Cuba's February 1996 downing of two planes belonging to the exile group Hermanos al Rescate (see NotiSur, 03/01/96) forced him to sign Helms-Burton "to stop a stronger piece of legislation coming before Congress." The exiles in Miami were "basically responsible for the policy," he said. In March, following Pope John Paul II's visit to Cuba and Castro's subsequent release of 299 prisoners, the administration announced a major relaxation of restrictions on humanitarian assistance to Cuba (see NotiCen, 03/26/98).

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said it was because of the "new possibilities" created by the papal visit. In April, the State Department confirmed that a Connecticut firm, PWN Exhibicon International, had obtained a Treasury Department license last October to set up a health-care trade fair in Cuba later this year. John S. Kavulich, president of the US-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, called the decision "the single most significant change in US commercial policy toward Cuba in almost 40 years." Pentagon says Cuba is not a security threat Suspicions that policy was rapidly shifting intensified in March with news of a Defense Intelligence Agency assessment of the Cuban military.

Press versions of the report said the Defense Department regards Cuba's military capability as so "diminished" that it no longer poses a security threat to the US. Its 130,000-force army has shrunk and shortages of fuel and spare parts keep its MiG-21 fighter-bombers on the ground most of the time. Gen. Charles Wilhelm, chief of the US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) in Miami, said the island "has no capability whatsoever to project itself beyond the borders of Cuba." The report was supposed to go to Congress March 31, but earlier in the month, a Miami Herald story on the report inflamed opinion among anti-Castro leaders in Miami and Congress.

A Pentagon official said anti-Castro forces were outraged that Cuba was being described as harmless, and they feared the report could have a softening effect on US policy. Sen. Bob Graham (D-FL), who requested the report, said it did not accurately reflect Cuba's threat and needed revision. He said Cuba is capable of producing biological weapons and of using "mass migration as a policy tool." He said the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and the shooting down of the Hermanos al Rescate planes are examples of a "pattern of provocation and threat to the well-being of Americans," coupled with "a pattern of unpreparedness on the part of the US to respond to Cuban provocations."

Hard-line Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL), who has been carefully monitoring recent administration moves on Cuba, called the report "more political than military." To Graham's list of threats, she added Cuba's plans to complete the nuclear-power plant at Juragua, Castro's "cooperation" with drug traffickers, and the electronic-surveillance station at Lourdes near Havana. Defense Secretary William Cohen responded to the criticism by holding up release of the report to assess its impact on Congress.

Pentagon officials said the document's language would be toughened to bring it into line with US policy assumptions about Cuba, in part by revising upward the possibility that Cuba might produce biological weapons. While neither this nor other government assessments say Cuba has or is likely to build biological or chemical weapons, a Defense Department official said, "You can't say there's no capability."

### *Assessment highlights Pentagon disagreement with US policy*

The assessment underscores a rift between the military and civilian policymakers. The Pentagon's view on Cuba is based on practical military considerations and the calculation that Castro is a rational player who would not provoke US military retaliation even if he could. During retired Gen. John Sheehan's February visit to Cuba, Castro told him, "I don't want to do anything to embarrass President Clinton."

While the Pentagon has not openly advocated normalized diplomatic and trade relations, it has pressed for a realistic appraisal of Cuba's military capability and the establishment of high-level military contacts between the two countries to reduce the risk of armed confrontation. Pentagon sources say administration policy, based on pressure to force a popular uprising or political and economic disintegration in Cuba, is likely to draw the US military into a protracted conflict with Cuba. "I believe the US military is concerned that, were the situation in Cuba to deteriorate and widespread unrest break out, there would be considerable pressure on the US to intervene militarily," said Ed Gonzalez, a Rand Corporation analyst. "In that event, they probably would fear becoming involved in a terrible mess on the island and becoming a virtual army of occupation."

The Defense Intelligence Agency report has generated the closest thing to a national policy debate on Cuba since the embargo went into effect in 1962. Furthermore, military leaders have begun to challenge the policy pronouncements of anti-Castro leaders, openly refuting many claims on which current policy rests. Alberto R. Coll, former deputy assistant secretary of defense in president George Bush's administration, told The Miami Herald that the US does not have a "rational dialogue" on Cuba's military capacity. "Anybody who admits there's a problem with existing policy is branded a pro-Castro apologist." Gen. Sheehan, former head of SOUTHCOM, said allegations about Cuba's biological weapons capability rest on its pharmaceutical industry, which was developed to supply medicines denied Cuba through normal trade channels because of the US embargo.

The Defense Department did not include Cuba in the 1997 annual report on countries considered likely to develop weapons of mass destruction. Nor has the military or the administration taken seriously claims that Cuba is involved in drug trafficking. Gen. Wilhelm said last year SOUTHCOM had no evidence that Castro's government is involved in or encourages drug trafficking. In March

1997, Cuban officials who testified for the US government in a Miami drug trial won praise in the State Department's International Narcotics Control Strategy report.

As for the Juragua plant, construction was halted in 1992 and has not resumed, and the likelihood of it going on-line in the near future, or of it posing an environmental threat if it does, is nil, according to a 1997 defense analysis report (see NotiCen, 12/11/97). The Pentagon also minimizes the importance of the Russian-controlled listening post at Lourdes. The administration has an understanding with Russia that it will not make an issue of it as long as the Russians do not insist that similar US facilities in Turkey and Japan be removed. [Sources: Cuba Update (Center for Cuban Studies), 11/97, 12/97; Reuter, 05/20/96, 10/16/97, 11/02/97; The New York Times, 03/14/98; US Department of State report to Congress, 01/28/97, press statement, 03/20/98; Associated Press, 03/28/98, 03/30/98; The Washington Post, 05/18/97, 03/31/98; Spanish news service EFE, 11/09/97, 03/31/98, 04/02/98; Itar-Tass, 04/03/98; The Miami Herald, 02/21/97, 12/12/97, 03/12/98, 03/29/98, 04/07/98, 04/08/98; Notimex, 04/09/98]

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