



S P O T L I G H T

# CUBA

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## How would both the United States and Cuba attending the Summit of the Americas impact their relationship?

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**F**or the past two decades, the Summit of the Americas has convened the western hemisphere's heads of state without the participation of Cuba. That is likely about to change. In April 2015, Panama will host the next summit. An invitation will be extended to the Cuban government.

The United States has long opposed Cuba's participation in the summit—and President Obama has yet to confirm the United States' attendance—but all signs indicate that both he and President Raúl Castro will be there. In December 2013, they briefly shook hands at the funeral of former South African President Nelson Mandela. That encounter caused a lot of commotion and no policy change. Will the summit be different?

This meeting is ripe with opportunities for the countries to attack each other. The United States is pushing to add a civil society component to the agenda that puts democracy front and center. Cuba could use the economic discussions to highlight the damage caused by the US trade embargo. But the summit could also present an opportunity to implement policy options that reduce tensions and open the door for further cooperation.

In this month's Spotlight we ask:

How would both the United States and Cuba attending the Summit of the Americas impact their relationship? Here are three scenarios:

- 1 Relations Improve.**
- 2 Relations Get Worse.**
- 3 Relations Remain the Same.**



## How would both the United States and Cuba attending the Summit of the Americas impact their relationship?

Here are three scenarios:

### 1 Relations Improve

Should the United States and Cuba use the summit to improve bilateral relations, look for all the action well before the summit itself. As with most high-level meetings, agendas and consultations are determined in advance. Since the summit will focus on the region as a whole, formal opportunities for bilateral engagement and policy shift are restricted to the lead-up to the summit. An improvement in the US-Cuba relationship would clear the way for a less tense and more productive meeting.

Several policy options are available to the Obama administration. The United States could restore diplomatic relations and remove Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terror, which also includes Syria, Iran, and Sudan. Though widely discussed, these measures are unlikely to be taken in advance of the summit. The Cuban government is currently facilitating peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC, a guerilla terrorist organization that has contributed to fifty years of violence in Colombia. Should Cuba be successful in brokering an agreement, this may serve as justification for removing it from the state sponsors of terror list—but the deal is unlikely to won't happen before the summit.

Instead, the White House may consider opening travel regulations further to allow all “purposeful travel”—this includes activities related to religion, education, humanitarian purposes, and similarly dedicated ventures—to fall under a general license, thereby allowing many more Americans to travel to Cuba. President Obama began allowing Americans to send remittances back to Cuba (similar to the policy originally implemented under President Clinton), which could be extended to allow formal investment in private businesses. A new Cuban entrepreneurial class has emerged in recent years under Raúl Castro’s economic reforms, and an influx of American investment could strengthen these fledgling small businesses. Supporting such enterprises strengthens the free-market in Cuba, a central goal of the United States. The administration may also explore ways for American-based telecommunications firms to legally operate in Cuba. This would provide new revenue for US firms while helping reduce communications costs for Cuba’s independent small businesses. Internet access could be widely expanded.

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(RELATIONS IMPROVE, CONTINUED)

**A regression in the relationship could involve stricter travel regulations and a refusal to partake in joint efforts in the future.**

But, cooperation is not a one-way street. Cuba may also look to improve the bilateral relationship as proof of their desire for hemispheric cooperation. The most obvious option for Cuba would be to release USAID Contractor Alan Gross. Having served five years of a fifteen-year prison sentence, Gross is in poor physical and mental health. His continued incarceration is a roadblock in the US-Cuba relationship, while his release would open the possibility of further negotiation with Cuba. The United States has previously been unwilling to exchange Cuban prisoners—originally known as the Cuban Five, now the Cuban Three—but that may change in the effort to return Gross back to the United States.

Finally, the Ebola crisis in West Africa poses a unique opportunity for cooperation. The United States has committed 3,000 troops to the affected countries and established a treatment center in Monrovia, Liberia. Cuba has committed 465 healthcare workers to the region, more than any other government. Coordination will be instrumental across governments and NGOs, making this fertile ground for US-Cuba cooperation. Havana hosted a meeting on October 29 looking at Latin America's response to the crisis, and the United States sent a representative from the Center for Disease Control, a refreshing demonstration of both countries' willingness to coordinate on issues of mutual concern.

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**Relations Get Worse**

If neither country take steps to improve the relationship, the summit will have a tense atmosphere. The United States will no doubt look to address the issues of human rights and democracy in Cuba with an emphasis on the role of civil society. If Cuba feels attacked, Castro will likely retaliate with rhetoric about American imperialism. Expect Cuba's friends such as Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Bolivia to back up Castro's accusations.

The summit could turn into a firestorm of pontification from both countries, preventing progress on substantive issues. The United States and Cuba could take action to walk back recent measures easing restrictions, resulting in stricter travel regulations; further limitations on the movement of diplomats; and a refusal to partake in joint efforts such as coordinating on environmental cleanup, transnational crime, and immigration.



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(RELATIONS WORSEN, CONTINUED)

If the summit is hijacked by this decades-long conflict, it will be harmful not just to the bilateral relationship but for each country's relations with the region. The United States has the most to lose in terms of regional leverage and influence, as it is placing renewed emphasis on greater partnership. It would surely exasperate Latin American leaders to have a regional meeting focused on this feud. The future and value of the entire summit would be questioned.

**Relations Remain the Same**

**3** President Obama has shown little willingness to expend political capital on what many consider marginal or intractable issues. Cuba fits both categorizations. With so many global crises at hand, President Obama may not be willing to take the political risks necessary to implement any change in Cuba policy.

Polls readily show that most Americans support ending the embargo on Cuba, but it's hardly a policy priority. The summit could set the stage for another handshake that ruffles some pro-embargo feathers and is applauded by advocates for change, but is forgotten by the next news cycle.

Cuba, for its part, does not lack for global diplomatic engagement. Should President Raúl Castro view the summit as yet another international forum in which his country is welcome—in spite of the protests of the United States—he may think this is victory enough. The summit and Cuba's participation serve as more than enough evidence of Cuba's strong standing with other nations.

Maintaining the status quo of the US-Cuba relationship doesn't preclude a productive summit. Other issues should be addressed. However, with Presidents Obama and Castro in the same room, it will be a challenge to get the media to focus on anything else.

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