Sovereign Cuba, 125 Years Later

It is long past time that the US treated Cuba like the sovereign nation it is.

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This February 15 marks the 125th anniversary of the explosion that destroyed the battleship USS Maine in Havana harbor in 1898, touching off the Spanish-American War. Victory over Spain, achieved in just five months, brought to fruition a US ambition stretching back a century—dominion over Cuba. That dominion lasted half a century until Fidel Castro abruptly ended it in 1959, but it left an indelible mark on the psyche of Washington policy-makers—the idea that Cuba is not truly a sovereign nation but rightfully belongs to the United States.

"I have ever looked upon Cuba as the most interesting addition that could ever be made to our system of States," wrote Thomas Jefferson, who tried unsuccessfully to purchase Cuba in 1809. John Quincy Adams captured Washington's sense of natural entitlement, writing in 1823, "If an apple, severed by the tempest from its native tree, cannot but fall to the ground, Cuba, forcibly disjointed from its own unnatural connection with Spain and incapable of self-support, can gravitate only towards the North American Union." Throughout the 19th century, successive US presidents tried to cajole Spain into selling Cuba, but to no avail. In 1898, the United States took it.

Cuba would have been annexed right then, like Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, but for the Teller Amendment. Attached to the declaration of war against Spain, it promised Cuba independence. Instead, after four years of US military occupation, Cuba was given a kind of semi-sovereignty constrained by the Platt Amendment, imposed on the new Cuban government as a condition of US military withdrawal. It prohibited Cuba from entering treaties with third countries detrimental to US interests; provided for US military bases (including Guantánamo Naval Station, which remains today an enduring symbol of Washington's refusal to acknowledge Cuban sovereignty); and gave Washington the right to intervene militarily in Cuba to maintain order, which it did in 1906, 1912, 1917, and 1920.

By the time the Platt Amendment was repealed as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy, US economic and political dominance were well established. When a nationalist government came to power in 1933, Washington marshaled economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure to engineer its demise in just 100 days.

A central aim of Fidel Castro's revolution was to free Cuba from US domination. He accomplished it in short order, kicking out the US military mission, shunning the US ambassador, and nationalizing over $1 billion worth of US property. Washington responded by severing diplomatic relations in 1961, precipitating a divorce whose acrimony has lasted ever since.
Over the ensuing decades, the United States has been unable to shake its obsession with reclaiming Cuba. First came the paramilitary "Secret War" in the 1960s and the economic embargo, still in effect, aimed at overthrowing Cuba's government. Subsequent US laws and policies have been astonishingly explicit in rejecting Cuba's right to run its own affairs.

The Cuba Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act of 1996 (also known as Helms-Burton) specifies a long list of conditions Cuba must meet before the embargo can be lifted, including replacing its socialist system

with a free-market economy, installing a multiparty political system with equal media access for all, and paying restitution not just to US owners whose property was nationalized after 1959 but to Cuban Americans as well. Title III gives the previous owners the right to sue in US federal court any US, Cuban, or other foreign entity making "beneficial use" of that property. These provisions effectively deny Cuba's sovereign right to dispose of property in Cuba that was owned, at the time, by Cuban citizens.

In 2003, President George W. Bush established a Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba to "plan for Cuba's transition." The first 54 pages of the 423-page report were a catalog of measures "to bring about an expeditious end to the Castro dictatorship." The rest was devoted to detailing how the United States would then remake Cuba in its own image– legislature, executive, courts, armed forces, laws, markets, social services, transportation, communications, and environment. It was a blueprint so detailed as to make even 18th century colonialists blush. A second report in 2006 recommended more of the same, prompting OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza to comment, "There is no transition, and it's not your country."

In 1986, Fidel Castro expressed his hope for better US-Cuban relations, but only "on the basis of the most unrestricted respect for our condition as a country that does not tolerate shadows on its independence." In his first public statement after assuming the presidency in 2006, Raúl Castroreaffirmed that position, and in every major speech since then, he and President Miguel Díaz-Canel have reiterated that better relations depend on US respect for Cuba's sovereignty.

Last December, Vice-Minister of Foreign Relations Carlos Fernández de Cossio expressed hope that President Biden's relaxation of some of President Trump's sanctions might auger a warming in relations. But he warned, "The US government cannot pretend to treat Cuba as if it were part of its territory or treat Cuba as if it were a colonial dominion."

President Biden has been eloquent and steadfast in his defense of the principle of national sovereignty in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. "We all know what's at stake," Biden said in December. "The very idea of sovereignty, the U.N. Charter." But respect for national sovereignty must be universal to be authentic, applying to adversaries as well as allies. One hundred and twenty-five years after the United States first intervened in Cuba, pushing aside the independence fighters who had been battling Spanish troops since 1895, it is time—long past time—that the United States began treating Cuba like the sovereign nation it is.