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The White House National Security Agenda for Obama's Visit to Cuba

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Mondialisation.ca, 23 février 2016

Région : Latin America & Caribbean, USA

Ben Rhodes, Assistant to Obama and Deputy National Security Advisor, provides crucial input into the new tactical road map for Cuba policy regarding Cuba–US relations. Rhodes, who is also officially the speechwriter for Obama, is to be commended, along with the President himself, for the new Cuba policy, including the decision concerning the President's visit to Cuba.

One of the most important documents serving as the basis of this visit is the February 18, 2016 transcript of a Press Briefing by Rhodes and White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest. Unfortunately, it has not been widely disseminated. During the course of the briefing, Rhodes had to answer questions from journalists, which forced him to elaborate on the plan for the President's visit to Cuba as part of Cuba–US relations.

The briefing indicates that the US is on the offensive with regard to Latin America and the Caribbean; the Cuban visit constitutes part of this road map. However, in answering questions, Rhodes had to candidly admit and partially recognize that Cuba has its principled stand. Actually, it is more than that. The Cuban government, far from letting its guard down, is also on the offensive regarding Cuba–US relations.

Although many issues were raised during the briefing, only some of them are dealt with here.

Dissidents

After a summary of the visit to Cuba with a short mention of a second leg of that trip to Argentina, Rhodes entertained questions from correspondents. The first question concerned dissidents:

> "Q: Will the President meet with dissidents when he's in Cuba? And would you negotiate that with the Cuban government?
>
> MR. RHODES: Yes, he'll be meeting with dissidents, with members of civil society, including those who certainly oppose the Cuban government's policies."

The issue came up again. In response to another reporter's question, "Who determines which dissidents the President will meet with?," Rhodes answered, "We determine… and we've certainly indicated to the Cubans…" In yet another query on the same theme that compared Cuba to other countries where the US works with an established opposition,

Rhodes had to admit, “you have a one-party system [in Cuba], and then you have elements of opposition but it’s not analogous [to other countries].” Later on, in defending the administration’s decision to reopen the US Embassy in Havana, he said that the “embassy allows us to better represent our interests, to better engage civil society.”

Blockade

One of the correspondents mentioned that:

> “The trade minister [Cuba’s Minister of Foreign Trade and Investment Rodrigo Malmierca], earlier this week, prescribed things that he thinks the White House can do without the lifting of the embargo – allowing the dollar to be used in a third country, and permitting U.S. import of rum and cigars.”

It should be noted that only the legislature (Congress) can fully lift the blockade, because it is codified into legislation; however, important aspects of the blockade can indeed be mitigated by White House executive orders. Regarding the journalist’s appropriate question on the international use of the dollar, one also has to take into account the Cuban demand: the Cuban government wants to be able to use the dollar for international transactions not only in countries other than the US, but also in trade and commerce with the US itself. The Cuban delegation headed by Malmierca visited Washington in mid-February for several days. He went much further than mildly “prescribing things,” as Rhodes seems to imply. Malmierca strongly stressed the Cuban government’s position while right in middle of his US political and business counterparts. He dared to go on the offensive against the blockade as well on the need for the Obama administration to use all the executive powers at his disposal to effectively gut it. Rather than responding to the examples provided by the questioning, such as allowing the dollar to be used, Rhodes said:

> “[O]ur judgment is that the embargo should be lifted. Short of that, we want to look at what are the areas where we can open up space that can promote the greatest travel and commercial activity that ultimately benefits the Cuban people.”

In response to persistent questions about the embargo (blockade), Rhodes said:

> “[T]his is a government that was very comfortable for over five decades with the embargo in place and with the United States as essentially the source of legitimacy that they drew upon because of what we were trying to do to Cuba.”

How can the Cuban government be described as “comfortable” when in fact it has fought courageously against the blockade for five decades? In the 2015 United Nations General Assembly, it won the support of the entire international community with the exceptions of the US and Israel. However, Rhodes’s last words indicate that his road map is still quite convoluted when it comes to the use of executive powers to render much of the blockade ineffective. The Cuban government is forced to be in assault mode with regard to this executive option comfortably in the hands of Obama. Will Obama’s visit to Cuba make a decisive dent in the blockade?

Travel Ban

A journalist asked if the Obama administration will use an "executive order to lift the travel ban to the extent that [he] can." Rhodes response seemed to be evasive: "[W]hat we've aimed to do is promote additional travel, commerce and economic activity in Cuba that, again, we believe benefits the Cuban people." In response to another question on the blockade and in that context lifting the travel ban, once again travel is circumscribed by Rhodes. He said that the administration is continuing to allow travel only for "Americans who want to travel to Cuba to engage the Cuban people, or American businesses that want to engage in Cuba, but also, frankly, in helping ordinary Cubans." One can ask, then, are Americans who want to visit Canada or the UK beholden to "engage" Canadians or the British? Or if they wish to travel to other countries in the Third World, are they restricted to "helping ordinary people" there? Why is there a double standard? The use of an executive order to lift the travel ban as much as possible, in the words of the correspondent, is definitely a step that can be taken in the period leading up to the Obama visit.

Guantanamo

In response to a query on Guantanamo, Rhodes stated:

> "I'm sure that will be part of the discussion. I know that because I've had that discussion many times with my Cuban counterparts. They are insisting, obviously, that our presence there is not legitimate and that the facility be returned to them. But again, that is not on the table as a part of our discussions. We're focused on the range of issues that I discussed. But I'm sure that they will raise it. It continues to be an issue of concern to them."

Actually, to say that the Cubans are "insisting" that it be returned is somewhat of an understatement. The Cubans have been – and are – fighting tooth and nail on all international tribunes for return of the territory to Cuba. This demand is a mark of national pride and dignity for the Cuban people, and it constitutes a major roadblock to normalizing Cuba–US relations. As far as US–Cuba policy, why is this thorny issue that can be solved by a stroke of the presidential pen not "on the table"?

Wet-Foot, Dry-Foot Policy

On August 19, 1994, President Bill Clinton announced his "wet-foot, dry-foot" policy: Cubans who land on US soil ("dry–foot") could remain in the US, even if they did not enter the country through the standard legal immigration channels. However, migrants who were intercepted by the US Coast Guard at sea ("wet–foot") would be returned to Cuba. This policy applies only to Cubans, thus encouraging illegal emigration and a pool of people to be usedas a political tool against the Cuban economic/social/political system. The change of this Cuba policy is something that the executive branch can do in the same way that President Bill Clinton initiated it.

A question went right to the point. While in Cuba, is the "wet-foot, dry-foot policy … something that the President is going to address?" Rhodes response was disappointing, but clear: "We are not planning to institute change with respect to wet-foot, dry-foot… Our focus is on how can conditions improve in Cuba so that over time there's more economic opportunity and less of a need, frankly, for Cubans to have to pursue opportunity elsewhere."

The Argentine Leg of the Obama Visit

In the November 2014 Argentine presidential elections, after more than a decade of left-wing governments, the right-wing won the vote. During his electoral campaign, the new president Mauricio Macri promised, among other policies, to realign Argentina's foreign policy away from Venezuela and closer to the US.

Even though the subject of the Rhodes press briefing was the Cuba trip, he also said in his opening remarks:

> "Following the trip to Cuba, I'd just note the President will be traveling to Argentina. The Cuba opening also has to be seen as part of an effort by the United States to significantly increase our engagement in the hemisphere. This is a region that had long rejected our Cuba policy. Our Cuba policy had, in fact, isolated the United States more than it had isolated Cuba in the hemisphere. Argentina is a country that, until recently, had a President who had, I'll say, problematic relations with the United States. The new President there has indicated his interest in beginning and restoring and renewing U.S.–Argentina relations."

Rhodes is very frank about the new Cuba policy being linked to the US reputation and prestige in Latin America. In fact, the White House indicated its adoption of this orientation in various statements and documents released around the December 17, 2014 Obama speech to announce the new chapter in Cuba–US relations.

Even though the Argentine sojourn was relegated to a very secondary position in the opening briefing, it did provoke two questions. The responses further flesh out the road map leading to the Argentine visit. The first question concerned "…whether they [new Argentine First Family] can be an ally. And what kind of reception do you expect the President to get, especially considering the one that President Bush received when he went down there?" The Bush reception refers to the November 4–5, 2005 Fourth Summit of the Americas that was held at Mar del Plata, about 400 kilometers (250 miles) southeast of Buenos Aires in Argentina. This summit gathered the leaders of all the countries of the American continent, except Cuba. President George W. Bush's plan to push though the Free Trade Area of the America's plan (FTAA) was a debacle. The charge against it was led by the host, President Néstor Kirchner of Argentina; President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela; and President Lula da Silva of Brazil.

The response by Rhodes to the query is perhaps indicative of where his road plan is intended to lead:

> "With respect to Argentina, we definitely anticipate that they'll be a closer partner on a range of issues… He's [new president Mauricio Macri] signaled that he'd like to have closer economic and diplomatic cooperation with the United States. So we believe this is really a new beginning and a new era in our relationship with Argentina, and it mirrors the sentiment we see across the region, particularly since our Cuba opening, where there's much more receptivity to working with the United States."

The latter part of this citation indicates that, according to Rhodes, the US is, as planned, already reaping the fruit of the Cuba opening in Latin America.

In response to the second question requesting further elaboration on the Argentine visit,

Rhodes said that the goal of the Obama administration is to “demonstrate that a cornerstone of the President’s legacy is his approach to Latin America [that] involves the Cuba opening…”

Cuba Sticks to Its Principles

By playing the Cuba card, the US offensive in Latin America seeks to drive a wedge between Argentina and countries such as Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. The US game plan would also like to force differences between Cuba and the other left-wing countries. However, the Cuban revolutionary government carries out its own push to fully support the revolutionary processes in these countries. Cuba is also one of the main stalwarts of regional integration through the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC, for its Spanish initials). It includes all countries in the Americas except the US and Canada.

The US is using its Cuba policy to make tracks along the path of diplomacy, such as with the Obama visit to Argentina. However, the US has not limited its approach to just this relatively peaceful road: it is simultaneously interfering in the internal affairs of Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador in order to bring about regime change.

Thus, the situation in Cuba and Latin America is complex. We will see how it develops in the period leading up to Obama’s visits to Cuba and Argentina, as well as in their aftermath throughout 2016.

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