

United States warns Spain over Cuba policy

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30 July 2007

The United States has warned Spain about its policy towards Cuba as the imperialist countries seek power and influence there as Fidel Castro's decades in power come to an end.

The long illness of Castro, the leader of the Cuban revolution and President since February 1959, forced him a year ago to delegate his presidential powers to his brother Raúl (76). Raúl's wife, Vilma Espín Guillois, a fellow rebel fighter against the US-backed Batista dictatorship, served for decades as first lady of the Cuban revolution. One of the most politically powerful women in Cuba, she died last month.

Spain has spearheaded the European Union's (EU) drive to improve relations with Latin America, particularly with Cuba. Europe sees an opportunity to break the tight control exerted by the US on Cuba's economy and foreign affairs, protect its substantial investments in the island's tourist and nickel mining industry, and exploit newly discovered off-shore oil reserves.

Spain is regarded as the EU member best placed to do so because of its historical ties and common language and culture. Throughout the decades-long US boycott of Cuba, Spain always maintained commercial relations with the country even during the period of the fascist Franco regime. In the recent period Cuba has displaced Venezuela to become the number three customer for Spanish exports in Latin America, after Mexico and Brazil. Exports to Cuba jumped nearly 16 percent in 2003 and have continued to increase, while Spain's imports from Cuba went up by 4.5 percent. By the end of the 1990s Spain became the second biggest source of foreign direct investment in Latin America, with its top seven companies holding assets worth nearly \$300 billion.

Spanish Foreign Minister, Miguel Ángel Moratinos, visited Cuba last April, the first European foreign minister to do so since 2003. That year saw the launching of an international campaign by Washington to isolate Cuba citing human rights violations, following the sentencing of 75 US-backed dissidents to jail terms in summary trials. Moratinos met Raúl Castro, Vice-President Carlos Lage, Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque and other officials. His visit was interpreted as a prelude to decisions by the United Nations to reaffirm its condemnation of the US sanctions against Cuba, while in June the UN Human Rights Council adopted a reform package that will see Cuba dropped from a blacklist and the experts charged with reporting on violations in Cuba and Belarus dropped.

During the visit, Spain and Cuba agreed to re-launch bilateral

cooperation programmes and hold regular talks, including discussions on human rights issues.

The EU has attempted to enforce a common position on Cuba, claiming it is seeking to use trade relations and economic interdependency as a means of promoting "liberal principles" in the country. It has adopted an official policy of "constructive dialogue" and opposed the US embargo, saying it is aimed at EU member nations' investments and trade with the Castro regime. More recently the EU has said that it will invite a Cuban delegation to Brussels to "discuss democracy, human rights and constitutional guarantees for the people of the island".

Moratinos declared, "The Spanish position won through—that means dialogue. The gamble of going to Cuba paid off. All the Europeans are following the same line and the Spanish strategy." He welcomed the fact that the EU declaration omitted any mention of European sanctions. Further meetings with the government in Havana are planned in September.

There is opposition within the EU to this strategy. Italy and Germany join Spain at the forefront of countries seeking dialogue, but Poland and the Czech Republic, former Stalinist states close to Washington, favour a tough line on Cuba.

The US has always considered Latin America as its own backyard and opposed any interference from its rivals. Ever since Castro and his guerrillas took power in 1959, Washington has sought to overthrow the regime, from attempting to isolate it internationally to supporting different adventures led by so-called dissidents (most of whom are heirs of the gangsters ejected from Cuba by the Cuban Revolution).

With Castro's failing health, the US sees an opportunity to achieve its long time aspirations for regime change. True to form, it has been encouraging dissident groups to organise some kind of putsch in order to install a pro-American puppet government. To help the process along, the US has maintained and intensified its trade blockade.

In October 2003 the Bush administration established a Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, co-chaired by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez. Its classified recommendations are said to involve plans for covert CIA and Pentagon operations, if not outright US military intervention. In July 2005 veteran Republican activist Caleb McCarry was appointed to a new post—the Cuba transition co-coordinator—to help "accelerate the

demise” of the Castro regime.

According to the commission web site, it was reconvened in December 2005 by Rice, who sent “an important message to the people of Cuba, the current dictatorship, and our friends and democratic allies: after 46 years of cruel dictatorship, now is the time for change in Cuba.”

Last month, Rice paid the briefest of visits to Spain—the first by a senior US official in the three years since the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE) government of José Luis Zapatero came to power in March 2004 and withdrew Spanish troops from Iraq. The former conservative Popular Party (PP) government headed by José María Aznar was one of Bush’s strongest allies, with then-Secretary of State Colin Powell regularly visiting the country.

Given its historical links with Cuba, Aznar’s Spain was seen as a potentially useful player in the process of regime change and appeals in this direction had been made, especially by the US Ambassador to Spain and Andorra, Eduardo Aguirre, himself of Cuban descent.

In the run-up to Rice’s visit, Spanish government officials and the media bent over backwards to present her arrival as proof that the US finally wished to end its “three-year diplomatic deep-freeze” of the Spanish government. It was going to be a photo opportunity showing the return of normal relations between the two countries. Off the agenda went subjects such as extraordinary rendition and the murder of cameraman José Couso in Iraq by US troops (several petitions had been handed in to take the opportunity of Rice’s stay to make her answer for his murder). Spain’s Latin America minister, Trinidad Jimenez, visited Washington before Rice’s trip to smooth things over, returned saying the US and Spain were “working in parallel” and implied Cuba would be off the agenda too.

However, Rice made clear that the purpose of her visit was not to re-establish friendly relations. She behaved like an imperial master issuing stern warnings to a lesser power not to “meddle” in its affairs. A few days before flying into Spain on June 1, she attacked Moratinos for failing to meet dissidents whilst in Cuba and did the same when she spoke to reporters on the way to the June 6-8 G8 Summit.

When Rice finally arrived in the capital, Madrid, she spent just eight hours there—squeezing in separate meetings with King Juan Carlos, Zapatero, Moratinos and the PP leader Mariano Rajoy followed by a press conference and a reception for US Embassy personnel. Reportedly, the subjects for discussions included Latin America, the Middle East, Afghanistan, Russia, the conflict in the Sahara and bilateral questions.

The *Washington Post* reported that “the fact that she did not stay overnight suggested Spain still had not been forgiven by the Bush administration” for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, despite Rice’s claim that differences had been “overcome”.

Moratinos and Rice tried to play down their differences,

saying they shared the goal of a democratic government in Cuba. However, when Moratinos defended Spain’s “engagement” with the Cuban government and suggested that eventually Rice would see the merit of that method, Rice rolled her eyes, turned to US reporters and silently mouthed, “Don’t hold your breath.”

Rice emphasized that Cuba had “a major transition coming” and the Western powers had “an obligation to act democratically, to support opposition in Cuba, not to give the regime the idea that it is just going to be transition from one dictatorship to another.”

Spain’s secretary of international relations, Elena Valenciano, said EU dialogue with Cuba would continue “in the same way as the US does with other non-democratic countries, such as China and Saudi Arabia” and stressed that the methods of “blockade and isolation” were not acceptable.

Moratinos, in a softer tone, said the meeting with Rice had been “very fruitful” but there were “some discrepancies” as to the “method and form” of tackling the Cuba question. There still had been no discussion about a meeting between Bush and Zapatero, he said.

The PP declared that Rice’s visit had shown that relations are far from normalized and that dialogue with the US continues to be as frozen as ever.

Meanwhile the Spanish government is pushing ahead with its ambitions in Latin America. On July 14, Zapatero visited Mexico and agreed a “plan of action” with the Mexican leader, Felipe Calderón, which will see a substantial increase of Spanish investments in the country—most of which are in the tourist industry, with its eight million-strong workforce, but also which encompass banking, telecommunications, public utilities, oil and natural gas. Zapatero stated, “I want to offer the support of my government and myself and everything that is in our hands to both the Spanish companies and the Mexican government so investments continue and help economic growth,” pointing to a planned 25 percent increase in tourism alone in the next two years.

Hostility between Spain and the US over the question of Spanish troops abroad has also not abated, with mounting deaths in Afghanistan and a few days ago the death of six parachutists in Lebanon. The newspaper closest to the PSOE, *El Pais*, condemned the division of labour in those countries where multinational armed forces are operating as “unacceptable”. It contrasted the way US pilots drop bombs from the safety of thousands of meters without any conceivable risk of retaliation, and then leave ground troops to face the consequences.



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