

Scramble for Cuba begins with shifts among US ruling elite

Alexander Fangmann
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The opening of a free trade and manufacturing zone at the newly upgraded port of Mariel, along with moves towards expansion of market relations and private property by the petty-bourgeois nationalist regime in Havana have opened up a “scramble” for Cuba. Business and political figures in the United States have signaled a new willingness to do business with the Cuban regime in order to undercut the European Union, whose relationship with the Caribbean island nation is much more advanced, as well as Venezuela, Brazil, and China—Cuba’s top trading partners.

Since the December handshake between US president Barack Obama and Cuban president Raúl Castro at Nelson Mandela’s funeral, a flurry of reports have appeared indicating increased support among business and financial interests for an end to the US embargo and a resumption in trade relations between the two countries.

These sentiments were bolstered by an Atlantic Council-commissioned survey conducted in January. The survey revealed support among 56 percent of US residents for either normalizing relations with or engaging more directly with Cuba. Among residents of the state of Florida, which is less than 100 miles from Cuba and to which it traditionally has had close ties, the figure jumped to 63 percent. In Miami-Dade county, home to a large portion of Cuban exiles, that number is 64 percent.

Several significant Cuban exile figures recently broke from longstanding support for the embargo, and indicated a desire for shifts in US policy that would allow for more normalized trade relations with and investment in Cuba.

Jorge Pérez, a billionaire real estate developer, heavily involved in the recently opened Perez Art Museum Miami, spoke of his desire to see more Cuban

art in the museum, and more developed artistic exchanges, even with artists considered close to the Cuban regime.

Alfonso Fanjul, a member of the ultra-wealthy family which owns Fanjul Corp., the enormous sugar and real estate holding company—whose subsidiaries include Domino Sugar and Florida Crystals—has undertaken several visits to Cuba in the past few years, which have included meetings with Cuba’s ministers for foreign affairs and agriculture. Speaking to the *Washington Post*, Fanjul indicated that the embargo has frustrated business deals, saying “Right now there’s no way for us to consider investing in Cuba. How can you work a deal if you’re not legally allowed to do it?”

Fanjul also revealed a desire to go back to Cuba at some point, no doubt at the summit of a Cuba fully integrated into the world capitalist system. He said, “Yes, at the end of the day, I’d like to see our family back in Cuba, where we started. … But it has to be under the right circumstances.”

The position now more openly advocated by Perez, Fanjul, and others has been held for some time by Paul Cejas, a Cuban-born business figure and former US ambassador, who has for a number of years advocated a shift on the grounds that the embargo has not furthered US national interests and should be reconsidered. In a recent restatement of his position, he noted, “If you set a policy in place to seek a certain set of objectives, after a while, if those objectives are not achieved, you either change your policies or you change your objectives.”

In a February 7 appearance on Bill Maher’s television show on HBO, former Florida governor Charlie Crist explicitly laid out the concern that the embargo was freezing the United States, and particularly Florida and its business interests, out of new opportunities emerging in Cuba as a result of

recent privatization and austerity initiatives.

Crist said: “If we want to bring democracy to Cuba, we need to encourage American values and investment there, not block ourselves out and cede influence to China. It will take time, and we must do it in a way where American investment helps people, not the dictatorship. But the reality is that no state’s economy is hurt more by America’s Cuba policies than Florida. Changing these policies to allow Florida’s farmers, manufacturers, and construction industry to sell goods and services in Cuba would boost Florida’s economy and help businesses create more jobs in our state.”

Crist’s worry is animated by a recent announcement that the European Union will seek to negotiate an agreement on trade and investment, a move agreed to by all 28 of the EU’s foreign ministers. A Reuters report quoted an unnamed person involved in the talks, who said in regard to the aims of the accord, that “Cuba wants capital and the European Union wants influence,” in other words, a political and business foothold independent of the United States.

In January, the head of the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, DC, José Ramón Cabañas Rodríguez, the top Cuban diplomat in the United States, was invited as a guest of the Greater Tampa Chamber of Commerce in Florida by US House member Kathy Castor. The Tampa business group sent a delegation of 38 business and political leaders to Cuba in 2013, hoping to make the city a center for trade and travel with the island.

Major interests in the United States, including Fanjul, see enormous opportunities to swoop in and make huge profits exploiting Cuba’s low-paid and impoverished yet highly educated workers, as well as new outlets for US exports from which they are currently excluded. US food sales to Cuba have fallen by half since 2008, from a high of \$710 million, largely due to preferential terms being offered by Canada, Brazil, Vietnam, Russia, and France.

Cuba’s overall top trading partner is currently Venezuela, which sends approximately 100,000 barrels of crude oil per day to Cuba at subsidized rates in exchange for around 30,000 physicians and other health professionals being sent to work in Venezuela. Both countries recently signed bilateral trade pacts worth \$1.25 billion for cooperation in oil, energy, and petrochemicals.

Just behind Venezuela is Brazil, which Washington

sees as a major regional rival. Brazil financed the \$957 million overhaul of the port in Mariel through the investment bank BNDES. Construction of the port project was conducted by the Brazilian construction conglomerate Odebrecht, and Brazilian firms are already among the first companies to take advantage of the newly opened special economic zone in the port area. The special economic zones allow Cuban labor to be employed by foreign companies, with the Cuban government acting as a labor contractor.

The figures currently clamoring for change in US-Cuba relations see in the Cuban reforms an opportunity to get a foot in the door in order to reestablish untrammeled domination over the island, just as they enjoyed prior to Castro’s seizure of power nearly 55 years ago.



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