Obama, Castro to meet at Americas summit

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11 April 2015

The Summit of the Americas convened in Panama Friday evening, amid intense media focus on the anticipated meeting between US President Barack Obama and Raul Castro, the president of Cuba. Breathless reports from major news outlets have speculated on how long the handshake between the two will last.

Obama and Castro made simultaneous announcements last December of their agreement to "normalize" US-Cuban relations. Powerful business interests in the US have pushed for such a rapprochement, chafing at their inability to access a Cuban market that has been exploited by their rivals in Europe and Asia. Within the US ruling establishment, there is also a growing consensus that a massive penetration of Cuba by American capitalism will do more to bring the island back under Washington's domination than the policy of economic blockade maintained by successive US governments for nearly six decades.

At the same, the officialdom of the bourgeois nationalist regime in Cuba sees an opening to the US as a means of furthering its policy of privatization and capitalist development, which it hopes will preserve its own power and privileges along the lines pursued by its counterpart in China.

Cuba is participating for the first time in the summit, which is the seventh to be held since the first was convened in Miami in 1994. The gatherings are organized by the Organization of American States, from which Cuba was excluded in 1962 as part of the US retaliation against the 1959 Cuban revolution.

It is unclear whether the summit will produce much more than the handshake "photo op." The White House downplayed the prospects for any substantive discussion between Obama and Castro, allowing that the two might "meet on the margins" of the summit's Saturday session. The two did reportedly have a phone conversation after they both arrived in Panama Thursday night, though it was unclear who initiated the call.

US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Cuban counterpart, Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez, held what was described as a lengthy and "very constructive" meeting on the eve of the summit. It marked the first such encounter since then-Secretary of State John Foster Dulles met with the foreign minister of Cuba's Batista regime, Gonzalo Guell, in September 1958, some three months before the fall of the US-backed dictatorship.

There has also been intense speculation over whether Obama would announce a decision to remove Cuba from Washington's black list of alleged "state sponsors of terrorism." Sources in Washington indicated that the State Department has recommended such a move.

The Cuban regime was placed on the list in 1982, purportedly for harboring members of ETA, the Basque separatist group, and aiding Colombian guerrillas. The Spanish government has itself asked that Washington remove Cuba from the list, while Havana is presently hosting peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrilla movement.

Its inclusion on the list (together with Iran, Sudan and Syria) subjects any financial institution doing business with Cuba to punishing US sanctions mandated under the US Patriot Act. Cuba's removal would serve to substantially accelerate the rate of foreign capitalist investment in the island nation.

Obama has the power to announce Cuba's removal from the list unilaterally, with Congress given 45 days to comment on his decision, but not the power to approve or reject it. The failure to make such an announcement nearly four months after the move towards normalization has been attributed by US officials to unavoidable procedural delays.

Given the absurdity of branding Cuba a "state

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sponsor of terrorism"—an accusation that Havana has far more justification in leveling against the US government over its decades of aiding and protecting right-wing Cuban exile groups staging terrorist attacks against Cuba—this explanation seems hardly plausible. It is more likely that Obama has put off the announcement to avoid a confrontation with the Republican right, or has held it back as a means of pressuring Cuba for further political and economic concessions.

Broader economic sanctions which have been codified into US law, can only be lifted by a vote of the US Congress.

Cuba's minister of foreign trade and investment, Rodrigo Malmierca Diaz, told a forum of big business representatives, held in conjunction with the summit, that the actions taken by the Obama administration thus far "while small are significant," adding, "but the blockade remains."

The *Financial Times* reported: "The thaw has produced something of a Cuba frenzy among businesses. US executives said they were interested in investing in Cuba—a market comparable to the Dominican Republic's, as Francisco Aristeguieta, Citigroup's chief executive for Latin America, put it—under the right conditions."

The Obama administration clearly hoped that the rapprochement with Cuba would improve US relations with all the countries of the hemisphere, under conditions in which US capitalism is facing ever-increasing competition from its Asian and European rivals. The US remains Latin America's biggest trading partner only by dint of its free trade pact with Mexico. In Brazil, Argentina, Peru and Venezuela, it has been outstripped by China.

An obstacle to this change in US standing in the region, however, is posed by Washington's sanctions against Venezuela, particularly the latest round imposed last month after Obama issued an executive order formally declaring a "national emergency" to deal with what he termed "the unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States" posed by Venezuela.

The action was condemned throughout Latin America, including by all 12 members of the Unasur trading bloc, which includes Brazil, Argentina and Colombia.

In an attempt to defuse the Venezuelan controversy, the State Department dispatched Thomas Shannon, the State Department counselor and longtime chief operative on Latin America (from serving as a "political officer" during the genocidal civil war in Guatemala to coordinating the coups that ousted Aristide in Haiti and Zelaya in Honduras) to Caracas for talks with President Nicolas Maduro.

Obama, meanwhile, gave an exclusive interview to the Spanish news agency EFE in which he declared, "Venezuela is not a threat to the US and the US is not a threat to Venezuela," effectively contradicting his own order.

The exercise in damage control appeared to have the desired effect. Maduro, who had come to the summit carrying petitions bearing signatures of some 10 million people demanding the repeal of the executive order, declared that as a result of Obama's gesture, "the doors are opened to a new stage in our relationship, based on respect."

Nonetheless, the issue has resulted in the Summit of the Americas having no joint declaration to show for itself. Venezuela had demanded that language be included condemning the US sanctions, which Washington would not accept. As these documents require unanimous approval, the gathering will issue no such communique.

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