Obama, Raul Castro meet at Panama summit

Patrick Martin
13 April 2015

Cuban President Raul Castro and US President Barack Obama met Saturday on the sidelines of the Summit of Americas in Panama. It was the first face-to-face meeting between US and Cuban presidents since 1956, before the 1959 Cuban Revolution.

While press reports before the summit anticipated only a brief handshake, the Obama-Castro session lasted a full hour, and likely included substantive discussion of such issues as US-Cuban trade, steps toward the reopening of embassies in Washington and Havana, and sanctions placed on Cuba as a result of its classification as a "state sponsor of terrorism" by the US State Department.

On his way to Panama, Obama met with Caribbean leaders in Jamaica, and made comments suggesting that the lifting of the anti-terrorism sanctions was imminent.

The summit meeting is a sign of the accelerating effort by the White House and the Cuban regime to establish a new political and economic relationship between American imperialism and its former semi-colony.

The joint announcement last December 17 that the US and Cuba would reopen diplomatic relations was followed by three face-to-face meetings between mid-level officials of the State Department and Cuban Foreign Ministry, then a meeting Thursday between Secretary of State John Kerry and Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez, also in Panama, and finally the Obama-Castro session.

This session was preceded by successive public remarks, first by Obama, then Castro. Obama suggested that resumed US-Cuban relations might be more difficult for the government in Havana than for Washington—an indirect reference to the justified fears among the Cuban people over the prospect of subordinating their country once again to US imperialism, which for decades subjected Cuba to brutal exploitation.

"We are willing to discuss everything, but we need to be patient, very patient," Castro said. "We might disagree on something today on which we could agree tomorrow."

Whatever the exact nature of the closed-door talks that followed, the speech made by Castro at the Summit of the Americas was a revealing expression of the turn by the bourgeois-nationalist regime in Cuba towards a rapprochement with imperialism.

US opposition barred Cuba from six previous Summits of the Americas, held every three years since 1994. Castro said that he would make up for lost time by speaking for six times the limit set for each country—eight minutes—and launched into a 50-minute speech denouncing past crimes of US imperialism against Cuba and against Latin America as a whole.

The key section in this performance, however, came when he absolved Obama personally for past American actions. "I apologize to him because President Obama had no responsibility for this. There were 10 presidents before him and all of them owe some kind of debt except for President Obama," Castro said. "In my opinion, Obama is an honest man," he added. "I admire him. I think his behaviour has a lot to do with his humble background."

Castro elaborated on the significance of his tribute to the US president: "Believe me, I have given a great deal of thought to those words. I had written them down. I removed them. But there, I said it. I am pleased that I have said this about President Obama."

This was nothing less than a Castro stamp of approval for a US president who has waged war in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, bombed Libya, backed a fascist-led coup in Ukraine and is even now aiding the Saudi monarchy and the Egyptian military junta in their war on Yemen. To say nothing of ordering drone-missile assassinations in half a dozen countries, and carrying out a military buildup directed at preparing nuclear war

© World Socialist Web Site

against Russia and China.

Within the hemisphere, the Obama administration has sought to subvert the governments of Venezuela and Ecuador, instigated a coup in Honduras, and conducted quieter efforts to destabilize and undermine Brazil, Argentina, Nicaragua and other targets. The leaders of at least 11 countries at the Summit of the Americas made public criticisms of such US efforts, only to find the supposedly anti-imperialist Cuban regime fawning over the American president.

In his own remarks to the Summit of the Americas, Obama cited his desire to open "a new relationship with Cuba" as proof that the US government would treat the countries of Latin America as "equal partners." He attacked the president of Ecuador, Rafael Correa, for allegedly jailing critics in the press, after Correa made remarks from the same podium criticizing US policy in the hemisphere.

When Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro spoke, Obama had already left the summit to return to Washington, a snub that only underscored the determination of the US government to bring every government in the hemisphere to heel. That is the context in which the US-Cuban rapprochement is taking place.

Washington and Havana share one immediate goal: promoting American business investment on the island, which offers the prospect of profits for corporate America and personal wealth for the leading circles of the Castro regime, on the model of China and Russia, albeit on a much more modest scale.

This reality was underscored by another meeting held in conjunction with the Summit of the Americas. Cuban officials feted corporate executives at a top Panama hotel, urging them to visit the island and invest. Those attending included Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg and Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim, the world's second-richest man.

Earlier this month, five former US secretaries of agriculture sent a joint letter to Congress urging an end to the embargo of Cuba, arguing it had not brought about the removal of the Castro regime and was hurting the interests of US agribusiness.

The *New York Times* reported April 8 on the efforts of American corporations to prepare for the opening up of Cuba as a potential market and investment destination. Mark Entwistle, a former Canadian ambassador to Cuba who now provides advice on doing business there, told the newspaper, "There isn't a major Fortune 500 company that does not have a Cuba working group or some sign of interest because the possible reality is there will be trade and investment with Cuba."

The *Wall Street Journal* wrote breathlessly (April 3) about the "real-estate revolution sweeping Cuba. More than five decades after Fidel Castro seized power here, ordinary Cubans are starting to accumulate real wealth by buying and selling their homes. Authorities are dusting off plans to develop a luxury vacation-home market for foreigners." These include developments "built around high-end golf courses, something Fidel Castro all but banned for years after the revolution as a bourgeois pursuit."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site