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COMMENTARY

U.S. and Cuba cooperate on many issues

BY JORGE DOMINGUEZ

Despite high-decibel rhetoric between them, U.S. and Cuban governments cooperate over many issues to serve the public interest of both countries and the political interests of their presidents. Some cooperation began in the 1960s, including the migration agreement signed in 1965. Cooperative relations widened and deepened during the Clinton administration and even more under President Bush. This cooperation is most evident in migration and border-security concerns.

The two governments cooperate to ensure safety at the border between Cuba and the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo. That has led to confidence-building measures, including regular meetings between U.S. and Cuban military commanders. The Bush administration's decision to hold these prisoners there deepened U.S.-Cuban military cooperation. The United States seeks, and Cuba willingly offers, cooperation to seal the border to prevent Taliban and Al Qaeda prisoner escapes from the U.S. base and to stop cross-border infectious diseases.

In 1984, with thousands of recent arrivals from the Mariel boatlift in federal penitentiaries, President Reagan signed a migration agreement designed to return to Cuba those Cubans found excludable under the U.S. law. Since then, every U.S. administration has fostered this cooperation. The Bush administration suspended bilateral migration talks in January 2004 because it wanted better cooperation with the Castro government to enable U.S. deportations of more Cuban excludables.

Since the Reagan presidency, U.S.-Cuban migration agreements presume that most Cubans do not have a legitimate fear of persecution from the Castro government and do not, therefore, qualify for U.S. refugee or political asylum status. The administration argues this position in U.S. courts.

The U.S. and Cuban coast guards also cooperate routinely. In the Florida Straits, the U.S. Coast Guard interdicts Cuban migrants lacking proper U.S. documents and returns them to Cuba. The Cuban Coast Guard permits these operations. The coast guards cooperate from time to time over drug-traffic interdiction, and Cuba has offered to strengthen this cooperation. When exile flotillas sail toward Cuban waters to commemorate Castro government atrocities, the two coast guards plan specific operational details and surround the flotilla to prevent incidents.

Exquisite treatment

The Bush administration, moreover, authorized agricultural exports to Cuba. The United States instantly became Cuba's principal food supplier and one of its top import partners. Cuba privileges U.S. exporters, paying them in cash. No other Cuban trade partner receives such exquisite treatment.

The U.S. government authorizes humanitarian donations to recipients in Cuba. Most contributions come from churches, other communities of faith and charitable and civic groups; following natural emergencies, some funds come from the U.S. government. The United States is Cuba's second largest source of donations.

The Cuban diaspora, principally from the United States, remits about \$1 billion per year to friends and relatives in Cuba. This sum greatly exceeds Cuba's earnings from sugar exports. Last year, the Bush administration liberalized the procedures for lawful Cuban-American remittances.

The two governments cooperate because each wants to control its borders, prevent undocumented migration, interdict drug trafficking, promote agricultural trade and govern security relations between them.

Helms-Burton

What about U.S. economic sanctions? Every six months since the enactment of the Helms-Burton act in 1996, Presidents Clinton and Bush suspended the statute's most important segment, Title III, which addresses properties that Cuba once expropriated. Both administrations minimally enforced the statute's Title IV, which seeks to deny visas to executives of

non-U.S. firms that traffic with Cuba. Thus, Helms-Burton has been neutered.

Nor is the U.S. trade embargo the principal explanation for Cuba's difficulties. Cuba has a hard time importing goods and services because its economy is grossly inefficient. Cuba, however, is free to import from all other countries. U.S. sanctions marginally increase Cuba's financing and insurance costs, reduce the choice in imported goods and services and makes it more likely that only second-tier international firms will invest in Cuba.

Why, then, the hostile rhetoric between national leaders and symbolic policies such as restricting travel? Presidents Bush and Castro benefit politically from such rhetoric. Aggressive Bush administration rhetoric makes it easier for Castro to sustain his elite coalition. Whether or not most Cubans believe that the homeland is in peril, elite "softliners" are held in check because the U.S. rhetoric increases personal fear about their fate.

Castro rhetoric

Aggressive Castro rhetoric and repression of human-rights activists make it easier for the Bush administration to sustain its policies. The war of words and symbols consolidates each president's political support where it matters most: the few people in each country for whom these issues matter more than others. Yet this aggressive rhetoric does not prevent substantive cooperation. And it inexpensively satisfies each president's supporters on both sides of the Straits of Florida. We should think more about U.S.-Cuban cooperative relations, and not be blindsided by the war of words.

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