

Disaster, Disease, and Environmental Degradation: U.S.-Cuban Cooperation as a Bridge to Reconciliation

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How do countries locked in a cycle of hostility lasting half a century move toward reconciliation? One answer, suggested by scholars and practitioners alike, is through gradual, incremental steps. During the Cold War, international relations scholars seeking to de-escalate the arms race recommended confidence-building measures—actions designed to reduce uncertainty about how adversaries behave toward one another, and to increase confidence that their behavior will be benign. Although applied most often in the security realm, the logic applies equally well to any area in which adversaries have the potential to harm one another.

Charles Osgood's theory of "graduated and reciprocated initiatives in tension reduction" (GRIT for short) posits a positive-feedback model of confidence-building. A conflict can be de-escalated by one side taking the initiative to make a low-cost concession and communicating an expectation that the adversary respond with a *quid pro quo*. If this process is successful, a series of reciprocal concessions or a "peace spiral" can be set in motion, with each step more substantial than its predecessor, leading to a significant dissipation of hostility.¹

A related idea, albeit more narrowly focused, is the concept of "disaster diplomacy," which posits that cooperation on disaster prevention and relief can build bonds of trust between adversaries, leading to reconciliation. Disasters tend to elicit humanitarian empathy by reminding us that we are all vulnerable in the face of catastrophe, and they create an opportunity for cooperation.² There is no inherent reason that this dynamic should be limited to disasters. Any cooperation on issues of mutual interest ought to potentially set in motion the same dynamic of trust-building.

Over the years policy-makers in both Havana and Washington have shared the presumption that negotiations on small, narrow issues might lead to a diplomatic breakthrough. In 1977, when President Jimmy Carter issued Presidential Directive NSC-6 instructing his government to move toward normalizing relations with Cuba, he approved negotiating "reciprocal and sequential steps."³ In 1994 President Bill Clinton announced a policy of "calibrated response," in which Washington would respond to incremental positive steps by Cuba with positive steps of its own.⁴ President Barack Obama's pledge to pursue a new policy of engagement with Cuba began by opening a dialogue about issues of mutual interest, including migration, narcotics control, and educational exchanges.

Through half a century, the United States and Cuba, though bitter adversaries, have consistently engaged in diplomatic dialogue and reached agreements on various issues, from small matters such as fishing and maritime boundaries to major ones such as immigration. Jorge Domínguez has remarked on the surprisingly wide range of issues on which the two countries collaborate, despite their estrangement.⁵ Proponents of normalizing relations with Cuba have long hoped that successful agreements like these would open the door to negotiations on the core issues that have divided Cuba and the United States since 1959. Opponents of normalization have long feared exactly the same thing. Thus they vigorously oppose any dialogue or

cooperation, even in areas that would clearly benefit immediate U.S. interests, for fear that it will be the first step down a slippery slope to normalization.

The view from Havana has not been so different. At first Fidel Castro declared that Cuba would never negotiate with the United States so long as the embargo remained in place. He quickly relented, however, negotiating the release of the Bay of Pigs prisoners in 1963, an anti-hijacking treaty in 1973, fishing and maritime boundary agreements, and the exchange of diplomatic Interests Sections in 1977. Migration talks commenced (through Swiss intermediaries) at the time of the Camarioca exodus in 1965 and have since continued, albeit with fits and starts, with agreements in 1980, 1984, 1987, 1994, and 1995. At each juncture Castro tried to parlay negotiations on these lesser issues into negotiations on the core issue of the embargo. On several occasions Washington extracted concessions from Cuba by holding out the carrot of wider negotiations.

Yet despite significant successes, the two sides have never been able to translate the momentum of these tertiary agreements into real progress toward normalization. Indeed, as the history of dialogue and cooperation in several areas—disaster response, medical cooperation, and environmental protection—clearly reveals, that leap has never been possible.⁶

Disaster Response: Hurricane Cooperation

Cooperation between Cuba and the United States on hurricane tracking and prediction dates back to the early 20th century and continued even when bilateral hostility developed after 1959. Scientists working at the U.S. National Hurricane Center and the U.S. Weather Bureau in Miami stayed in contact with their Cuban colleagues, exchanging information on developing storms, even through the dark days of the Cuban Missile Crisis. After the Bay of Pigs, Cuba retracted permission for U.S. weather planes to enter its airspace, but when Hurricane Inez struck the Caribbean in 1966, the Cubans allowed resumption of the flights.⁷

By the end of the 1960s the meteorologists on both sides of the Florida Strait had developed close professional relations. The independent non-profit Center for International Policy held a series of meetings between U.S. and Cuban officials around the themes of hurricane preparedness. Cuban meteorologists were also able to attend training courses in Florida, which enabled them to meet their U.S. counterparts in person. “This has created a pretty close fraternity among us,” observed forecaster Hal Gerrish of the National Hurricane Center. Perhaps no one better represented the transcendence of common humanity over political difference than did Lixion Avila, a Cuban-American hurricane specialist working at the National Hurricane Center, whose mother still lived near Havana.⁸

Sometimes the meteorologists in Florida had a tougher time winning cooperation from their own government than from Cuba. Although Cuban officials had allowed U.S. weather planes into Cuban airspace for several decades, the State Department and U.S. Air Force refused to let the National Hurricane Center send Air Force C-130s near the island. Only the Center’s two civilian planes could be used to track storms over Cuba, which limited its ability to collect adequate data. Finally, in 2003, Center director Max Mayfield convinced the State Department to authorize the Air Force to allow the use of its C-130 “hurricane hunters” near Cuba.⁹

Cooperation in hurricane tracking was not matched by cooperation on hurricane relief. When the United States imposed the trade embargo and cut off all bilateral assistance,

humanitarian aid ended as well. In 1963 Hurricane Flora stalled over Cuba for four days. It destroyed half the sugar, tobacco, and food crops, left some 1,750 Cubans dead, and did an estimated \$300 million in damage. Despite the severity of the storm, the U.S. government announced that it would not offer humanitarian assistance, although it did allow the American Red Cross to offer emergency supplies, food, and equipment to the Cuban Red Cross.¹⁰ Castro angrily rejected the offer as “cynical and reprehensible.” Cuba was not interested in U.S. charity. If Washington wanted to help, it should “end the economic blockade, especially at this moment.” A few months later the Commerce Department denied export licenses to two private groups seeking to send clothing and powder milk to the island’s hurricane victims. Granting the licenses, Commerce said, would be “contrary to the national interest.”¹¹

In November 2001 Cuba was hit by Hurricane Michelle, a Category Four storm that did \$2.8 billion in damage. Washington responded by offering condolences, a disaster assessment team, and the possibility of humanitarian aid to be channeled through non-governmental organizations. Cuban Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque declined the offer, but in surprisingly polite fashion. The “kindly offered” assistance would not be needed, he explained, but instead Cuba asked to be able to make a one-time purchase of food to replenish its reserves destroyed by the storm. Since food and medicine sales were exempt from the trade embargo, there was no legal impediment to granting Havana’s request. U.S. and Cuban diplomats quickly came to an agreement on the basic terms of the sale, and the necessary licenses were granted to U.S. suppliers. The “one-time” purchase turned into a continuing commercial relationship, and by 2010 Cuba was purchasing over \$300 million worth of food annually from U.S. producers.¹²

U.S. offers of humanitarian assistance (always on the condition that the aid be channeled through nongovernmental organizations) became more or less routine thereafter, as did Cuban refusals. President George W. Bush’s commitment to regime change in Cuba poisoned bilateral relations, and the Cuban Foreign Ministry angrily dismissed a 2004 offer of assistance after Hurricane Charley as a “cynical and hypocritical offer” that “ignores the damage caused over more than four decades by the economic war . . . against our country.” Then, in September 2005, Hurricane Katrina gave Castro the opportunity to reverse roles. With New Orleans flooded, Cuba offered to send over a thousand doctors to help care for the sick and injured along Louisiana’s coast. Washington declined the help as unnecessary.¹³

At first it appeared that Hurricane Wilma in late 2005 might break this stalemate. As usual Washington offered to deploy an assessment team, and this time, instead of denouncing it, Castro accepted the offer, conditionally. The Ministry of Foreign Relations replied that Cuba shared the view that countries should “provide each other with mutual assistance in situations of disaster,” and would welcome the team’s visit. However, Castro wanted to widen the scope of the mission from simply assessing Wilma’s damage to also include discussing regional cooperation on disaster preparation and relief. Cuba wanted to be treated as an equal partner, not a supplicant for assistance. “Cuba has not solicited international aid,” Castro insisted in a televised interview. The Bush administration refused to engage in a broader discussion on the grounds that Havana was “not serious.” Withdrawing the offer to send a team, the State Department declared that the Cubans “wanted to make this into some sort of political show.”¹⁴

In 2008 Cuba was hit by the worst hurricane season in its history: five major storms wracked the island, inflicting some \$5 billion in damage, with over half a million homes damaged or destroyed. At first the United States simply repeated its routine offer to send an

assessment team followed by disaster relief via private charities. But as the scope of the damage became clear, the U.S. position softened. Even Cuban-American members of Congress, usually unanimous in their opposition to any U.S. engagement with Cuba, urged the administration to find a way to help. The Catholic Church in Miami and the Cuban American National Foundation, for years the leading Cuban-American voice for a hard-line U.S. policy, urged President Bush to relax the legal limits on remittances that Cuban-Americans could send to relatives. Although the White House rejected the appeal to suspend the limits on remittances, it accelerated processing licenses for delivering private humanitarian assistance, which reached \$10 million. More significantly, it increased the offer of bilateral assistance from \$100,000 to \$6.3 million, and it was willing to provide \$5 million of that amount directly to the Cuban government without preconditions—an unprecedented offer.¹⁵

But Cuban officials could not bring themselves to take U.S. help. In one of his “reflections” a convalescing Fidel Castro wrote, “Our country cannot accept a donation from the government that blockades us. . . . The dignity of a people has no price.” Instead, the Cubans countered with a request analogous to what they had done in 2001 after Hurricane Michelle—they asked that the embargo be lifted, at least for six months, so that Cuba could buy supplies, especially construction materials, from U.S. suppliers.¹⁶ President Bush was not willing to allow such a chink in the embargo, perhaps for fear that once general commerce with Cuba began, it would be hard to stop.

President Barack Obama changed the tenor of bilateral relations, calling for dialogue and engagement across a wide range of issues. In September 2009, a Cuban official suggested to the U.S. Interests Section in Havana that Cuba would be disposed to accept hurricane assistance in the future because of the improved atmosphere, so long as the aid came without preconditions.¹⁷ However, in June 2010 the State Department invited foreign embassy representatives to a hurricane preparedness workshop in Washington, and Cuban diplomats were excluded.

The lack of cooperation on hurricane relief represents a stark contrast to the successful cooperation on hurricane tracking and prediction. One obvious reason is that hurricane tracking involves small groups of professionals united by their common commitment to their profession and to saving lives. Not only does cooperation benefit both countries, but it also happens below the radar (pun intended) and thus has a low political cost, especially in Washington. The task of providing economic assistance to Cuba, even as disaster relief, is fraught with more political baggage, both in Washington and Havana.

Havana sees Washington trying to appear beneficent while it nevertheless continues its policy of promoting regime change through economic strangulation. Fidel Castro, in particular, proved unwilling to have Cuba appear to be chasing after Yanqui dollars—an image of Cuban subservience that had obsessed him since his first trip to the United States as Cuba’s leader in April 1959. Washington, for its part, continued to worry that humanitarian aid would be misappropriated, or at the very least that Cuban-American hardliners will criticize the U.S. government on those grounds.

Such fears have led policy-makers in both capitals to miss opportunities. Washington could have treated Cuba’s willingness to accept a disaster assessment team in 2005 as a breakthrough, and understood Havana’s desire to expand the agenda as face-saving. Instead, Washington treated the Cuban proposal as a trick to gain political advantage, and responded contemptuously. Cuba could have treated Washington’s 2008 offer of unconditional

government-to-government assistance as a significant change in U.S. policy, which it was, and accepted the badly needed aid. Instead, it rejected the offer, in part out of pride. Washington could have accepted a temporary lifting of the embargo for a narrow range of products that Cuba needed for reconstruction, thus alleviating suffering in Cuba and perhaps establishing a precedent for better cooperation in the face of future disasters. Each time one side made a gesture, the other could not overcome its suspicions and respond positively.

Medical Cooperation: The Haitian Earthquake

The earthquake that devastated Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on January 12, 2010, offered an opportunity for Cuba and the United States to cooperate on a purely humanitarian mission to alleviate extraordinary human suffering. The United States moved quickly to provide emergency assistance and coordinate worldwide offers of relief. Cuba had a well-established medical mission in Haiti of 400 doctors and paramedics who immediately began providing emergency aid to the injured, and hundreds more Cuban doctors soon joined that team.

Cooperation began with Cuba granting U.S. planes the right to fly through Cuban airspace as they evacuated the injured to medical facilities abroad. The offer garnered a public expression of appreciation from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and two relatively high-level diplomatic meetings ensued to discuss ways in which Washington and Havana could extend their cooperation. In January Secretary Clinton's chief of staff, Cheryl Mills (coordinating Haiti relief efforts at State) and Julissa Reynoso (from the Western Hemisphere Affairs bureau) met in Santa Domingo with senior Cuban foreign ministry and health ministry officials.¹⁸ Some two months later Mills met with Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez in New York at a United Nations donor conference. The discussion, according to Rodríguez, focused on how to rebuild Haiti's health system. "Some cooperative activities have taken place between Cuba and the United States, in the effort to provide emergency care," he explained, and more were expected to follow.¹⁹ Although no one at the State Department was willing to admit it on the record, U.S. relief workers on the ground in Haiti were providing medical supplies to the field hospitals that the Cuba doctors had set up. Cuban diplomats expressed annoyance that the State Department was unwilling to acknowledge the de facto cooperation on the ground.

Privately, however, the diplomats were planning significantly more extensive cooperation: the United States would build and supply a major medical facility in Haiti which Cuban personnel would staff. The two sides seemed close to agreement when Cuba asked that Washington suspend its Cuban Medical Professional Parole program, created in 2006 to entice Cuban medical personnel serving abroad to defect by offering them entry to the United States. The Obama administration refused. Cuba then proposed that Washington build two medical facilities rather than just one, and the talks fell apart. "We have not produced any agreements," lamented Jorge Bolaños, head of the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, after a third meeting, although he reaffirmed Cuba's willingness "to cooperate with any country, including the U.S."²⁰

Not even the horror of Haiti's disaster was enough to defuse the bitter partisanship that Cuba had engendered in Washington. Mauricio Claver-Carone, executive director of the conservative U.S.-Cuba Democracy PAC, argued against cooperating with Havana on Haitian

relief lest it open the door to improved relations. “It’s absolutely unconscionable,” he wrote, “to try to use tragic disasters— such as Haiti’s earthquake—as a springboard for bilateral relations.”²¹

Environmental Threats: Nuclear Power

Since 1959 two major environmental issues have offered opportunities for U.S.-Cuban cooperation aimed at avoiding accidents that could have a severe environmental impact on both countries: the development of nuclear power in Cuba; and the initiation of deep-water oil-drilling off the Cuban coast.

In 1976 Cuba and the Soviet Union signed an accord to build a nuclear power plant at Juragua, near the city of Cienfuegos, as the first stage in a larger plan to build plants in eastern, central, and western Cuba. The aim was to meet the island’s growing demand for electricity and reduce its dependence on imported oil. Construction of the first two-unit reactor site at Juragua began in 1983.²²

After the 1979 accident at Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania, and the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in the Soviet Union, the United States was acutely sensitive to the impact that an accident at a Cuban reactor would have on south Florida. In 1988, as part of a broader safety program sponsored by the World Association of Nuclear Operators, two officials from Cuba’s nuclear program, including the director of nuclear safety, visited the Duke Power company’s McGuire Nuclear Station and training facility.²³ The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) also undertook a study of the design safety of the planned Cuban reactors, and in October 1989 the State Department arranged for an NRC official and two Duke Power representatives to visit the Juragua site and discuss safety issues with their Cuban counterparts. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Michael Kozak testified to Congress that even though U.S. policy opposed construction of the Juragua plant, George H.W. Bush’s administration had opened a dialogue with Cuba on nuclear safety because: “When it comes to something like nuclear safety, we did not think politics should get in the way.”²⁴

What appeared to be a fruitful beginning to cooperation soon proved disappointing. The United States proposed continuing the dialogue on a “case-by-case” basis. Cuba instead proposed a formal bilateral agreement on nuclear safety and cooperation. The Bush administration was unwilling to conclude a formal agreement. As a report by the General Accounting Office explained, “U.S. officials thought that the Cuban government could use a formal agreement for propaganda purposes to indicate falsely that the United States did not have concerns about the nuclear reactors.”²⁵ Even ad hoc exchanges were subsequently curtailed.

In September 1992 Castro announced that the Juragua project was being “temporarily suspended” because Russia insisted that Cuba pay in hard currency for the equipment and technical assistance needed to complete it. The estimated cost—\$400 million—was money that Cuba simply did not have. In 1995, however, Russia and Cuba announced their intention to seek Western investors for a joint venture to complete the project.²⁶ The prospect of renewed construction reignited fears in south Florida and gave conservative Republicans a new issue with which to pummel President Clinton, who had concluded two migration agreements with Cuba, one in 1994 to end the Balsero crisis and another in 1995 to establish the “wet foot–dry foot policy.” Clinton’s willingness to negotiate with Havana convinced his congressional adversaries

that he was determined to normalize relations with Cuba, his disclaimers to the contrary notwithstanding.

“We’re talking about a potential Chernobyl right in our own backyards,” warned Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla).²⁷ She was able to get 131 members of the House of Representatives to sign a letter to Clinton demanding that he stop construction at Juragua by using “all instruments at your disposal to pressure the Russian government” to halt the project. In reply, Clinton reaffirmed his opposition to completion of the Juragua reactors, noting that he had expressed U.S. opposition directly to the Russians on several occasions. In addition the administration was working hard behind the scenes to dissuade any potential Western partners from joining the Cuban-Soviet joint venture. For Ros-Lehtinen, this approach was not sufficient. “The only solution to the Juragua national nuclear plant problem,” she declared, “is to destroy it in its totality.”²⁸

The vituperative congressional response put Clinton on the horns of a dilemma. If efforts to derail the project failed, Washington would have only two options, perfectly expressed by Harold Denton, the former Nuclear Regulatory Commission official who visited Juragua in 1989. “If they really are going to finish this thing, our only choices are to complain about it and not be actively involved, or try to find some way to interact with them and make sure they have as well-trained a staff as they can get.” The concerns about the safety of the Juragua plant were reasonable, Denton agreed, which was all the more reason to engage the Cubans. As he told *The New York Times*, “We ought to bend the rules a little bit and allow cooperation on safety matters.”²⁹

The Cubans appeared willing to reopen a dialogue on nuclear safety. In early 1996 the non-profit Center for International Policy organized a delegation of nuclear experts to visit Cuba. Cuban officials invited U.S. experts to inspect the Juragua plant as part of normal International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections if Washington would allow it, and said that Cuba was also prepared to discuss safety issues directly with Washington. The stakes were high. A study by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) projected that a serious accident at Juragua could spew radioactive contamination all across Florida and, depending on weather conditions, as far north as Washington, D.C.³⁰

In the end President Clinton did not have to make the tough choice between either engaging with Cuba to ensure the safe operation of the Juragua site or ignoring the deficiencies of the plant in the hope that someone else, perhaps the IAEA, would take care of the problems. By 2000 an estimated \$750 million was needed to complete the project. Cuba still could not pay the bill, Russia was still unwilling to cover it, and no other investors stepped forward to join the consortium. In December Fidel Castro and Russian president Vladimir Putin agreed to close the project permanently.³¹ Nuclear power would not be the magic solution to Cuba’s chronic energy dependency after all.

Environmental Threats: Offshore Oil-Drilling

The explosion of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico on April 20, 2010, and the subsequent hemorrhage of 6.6 million barrels of oil from the blown-out well, focused new attention on U.S.-Cuban environmental cooperation. As the spill spread eastward toward the Florida Strait, experts began to warn that the Gulf Stream could carry the slick onto Cuba’s

northern beaches and even to Florida's Atlantic Coast. In mid-May, almost a month after the blowout, the State Department, as required by international law, formally notified Cuba of the environmental hazard posed by the spill and began "low, technical" bilateral talks about its spread. "We provided background related to the cause of the spill, stressed that stopping the oil leak is our top priority, and explained the projected movement of the spill," said a State Department spokesman. "We also communicated the U.S. desire to maintain a clear line of communication with the Cuban government on developments." Havana gave permission for a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration vessel to enter Cuban waters to monitor the spill's spread.³²

In the end Cuba's coasts were spared; but the debate over U.S.-Cuban cooperation on energy, oil, and environmental protection was just beginning. The Deepwater Horizon disaster demonstrated that a blowout could endanger coastlines hundreds of miles away. The U.S. Geological Survey estimated Cuban oil reserves in the Gulf at about 4.6 billion barrels, enough to make the island a medium-sized exporter.³³ The Cuba government had already begun to lease blocks in the commercial zone for exploration to companies in Russia, China, India, Malaysia, Vietnam, Angola, Norway, Brazil, Venezuela, and Spain. The Spanish company Repsol drilled an exploratory well in 2004 and made plans to begin a production well in 2011.

The Deepwater Horizon accident prompted observers to ask what would happen if a Cuban well suffered a similar accident. The answers were unsettling. "The existing trade embargo prohibits U.S. assistance for containment, clean up, drilling a relief well, or capping the well," warned Brian Petty of the International Association of Drilling Contractors, the main industry trade association. "Absolutely no U.S. resources can be committed to containment or clean up. No U.S. rigs only miles away could be mobilized for a relief well."³⁴

As former oil executive Jorge Piñon explained, all the companies cooperate when an accident happens. "All they have to do is pick up the phone and contact petroleum equipment suppliers in Houston, and in a matter of hours they'd be on site." But that would not happen if the accident was at a Cuban well. "That's not the case with Cuba given the embargo, so days would go by as the bureaucratic paperwork was shifted from agency to department, and in the meantime the oil would be moving towards Key West and South Beach." Piñon argued vigorously for a pro-active U.S. approach that would remove all obstacles to an immediate U.S. response in the event of a Cuban accident, including preapproval of licenses to deploy equipment, technology, and personnel, regular exchanges of scientific and technical information to enhance Cuban safety, and even joint U.S.-Cuban exercises to practice containment and cleanup of a spill. The International Association of Drilling Contractors (IADC) shared Piñon's recommendations.³⁵

The Obama administration took small steps toward greater cooperation. In late 2009, when the IADC requested a license to send a delegation to Cuba to discuss offshore drilling safety, the U.S. Treasury Department Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) initially denied it. When IADC reapplied after the Deepwater Horizon accident, the license was granted. "Senior [Cuban] officials told us they are going ahead with their deepwater drilling program," said IADC president Lee Hunt upon his return. "They are utilizing every reliable non-U.S. source that they can for technology and information, but they would prefer to work directly with the United States in matters of safe drilling practices."³⁶

In July 2010, before the Deepwater Horizon well was capped, the State Department announced that U.S. companies could seek licenses “to provide oil spill prevention and containment support to companies operating in Cuba.”³⁷ At least one company, Clean Caribbean & Americas, a nonprofit cooperative of oil companies formed to provide oil-spill assistance, received a license to provide containment equipment to foreign companies operating in Cuba, but only after months of waiting.³⁸ Nevertheless, it appeared possible for firms to secure licenses in advance to transfer equipment and expertise to Cuba in the event of an accident if they were foresighted enough to do so and could predict what equipment would be needed.

The low-level technical discussions between U.S. and Cuban officials during the Deepwater Horizon crisis engaged the issue of developing a bilateral protocol for cooperation in handling an accident, although no formal agreement resulted. Former senator Bob Graham of Florida, co-chair of the U.S. National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, suggested using Mexico as an intermediary to discuss safety standards for drilling in the Gulf. “This is not a capitulation to Castro,” he argued. “Rather it is something in our self-interest to ensure that anything that relates to drilling have high safety standards.” Graham’s co-chair, William Reilly, traveled to Mexico to encourage authorities there to take on the intermediary role. “Cuba should also be a part of that as much as possible,” Reilly said. “As we move into deep waters we have every reason to be partners.”³⁹

But when the Department of the Interior hosted a 12-nation conference in April 2011 on the lessons learned from the Deep Water Horizon accident, Cuba was excluded, even though Secretary Ken Salazar acknowledged that the prospect of imminent drilling in Cuban waters was “an issue of concern.” Michael Bromwich, director of the U.S. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement, agreed that Mexico, Cuba, and the United States all shared a common interest in assuring that “the highest standards possible are observed in all of the drilling offshore.” He said reaching an agreement with Cuba on safety standards “would certainly be desirable,” but then “finding the mechanism to do that is tricky and needs to be explored further.”⁴⁰ It must have been the domestic politics of the issue that were tricky, because there was no indication that the State Department was exploring the issue with Havana.

Coordinator of Cuban Affairs Peter Brennan did not slight the importance of the issue. “It’s a priority for us,” he said. “It’s a national security issue.” But still the administration could not bring itself to engage the Cuban government directly to formulate a coordinated response plan of the sort that the Coast Guard had developed with Mexico in the Caribbean and Russia in the Aleutians. The “tricky mechanism” the administration settled on was to deal directly with Repsol on safety issues, and only indirectly with Cuba, under the cover of multinational initiatives. This, officials seemed to hope, would provide a margin of safety for the environment while blunting the political furor that would result from engaging the Cubans directly and bilaterally.

After meeting with Interior Secretary Salazar, Repsol promised to comply with all U.S. environmental safety standards in drilling the Cuban well, including allowing U.S. experts to inspect the drilling platform. Repsol also opened discussions with the U.S. Coast Guard about accident response contingencies.⁴¹ The Department of Commerce licensed the sale of a U.S. manufactured blowout protector for the Repsol rig, and expressed a willingness to license other firms in advance to transfer equipment and expertise to Cuba in the event of an accident— if the firms were foresighted enough to seek a license and could predict what equipment would be

needed. Nevertheless, Washington seemed satisfied that it had the oil spill risk under control. “I’m confident that once we get through this process, the United States will be able to respond to an accident quickly,” Brennan affirmed.⁴²

In December 2011, U.S. officials participated in a conference hosted by the Regional Marine Pollution Emergency Information and Training Center for the Wider Caribbean, a multilateral organization supported by the United Nations. They joined officials from the Bahamas, where the conference was held, Jamaica, Mexico, and Cuba to discuss offshore drilling regulatory standards, safety practices, and spill containment plans. U.S. participants “were impressed with the Cuban delegation’s professionalism and the country’s emergency spill response plan,” according to the trade publication, *Oil Daily*.⁴³

Industry professionals were less sanguine about the adequacy of the administration’s strategy. Although Michael Bromwich, Director, Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement in the Department of the Interior assured Congress that in the event of an accident, licenses would be approved “very, very quickly,” Paul Schuler from Clean Caribbean, which had already run the gauntlet of getting a license, had his doubts. Coping with a major spill would require drawing on resources from dozens of companies, he pointed out. Most would not have pre-approved licenses; they would have to go through the licensing process, “which, in my experience has not been quick.”⁴⁴

Even the threat to Florida’s beaches was not enough to convince Cuban-American members of Congress that a dialogue with Havana was justified. The way to prevent a Cuban oil spill from fouling Florida’s coastline, according to Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, was to prevent any drilling whatsoever in Cuba’s commercial zone. She sponsored legislation to extend the extraterritorial reach of the 1996 Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act to punish any foreign persons or companies that invested in or assisted the exploration and exploitation of Cuba’s offshore oil reserves.⁴⁵ If such legislation passed, it would discourage U.S. allies in Latin America and Europe from developing Cuba’s reserves, leaving the field open to Venezuela, Russia, and China.

The Limits of Cooperation

Decades of U.S.-Cuban cooperation on issues of mutual interest have failed to set in motion a spiral of confidence-building leading to a diplomatic breakthrough on the core issues involving Washington and Havana. The theorized dynamics of confidence-building measures, graduated reduction in tensions, and disaster diplomacy have simply not worked. Indeed, in the areas of medical cooperation, hurricane prediction and relief, and environmental protection, the dynamic has more often been reversed. Bilateral antagonism has impeded the building of anything more than relatively superficial cooperation, even when both sides have a clear self-interest in cooperating.

One reason is that the logic underlying confidence-building strategies and GRIT does not translate well from its original Cold War context. Because both superpowers, despite their differences, shared an overarching interest in avoiding nuclear war, risk-reduction strategies were rational. In the conflict between Cuba and the United States, it is not at all clear that reducing tensions and moving toward reconciliation is an overriding interest on either side, let alone on both.

At key moments in the past, Cuba has subordinated its desire for normal relations with Washington to a desire to project its influence in Africa and Latin America. For the United States, normalizing relations with Cuba has been a clear goal for only two presidents, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. Bill Clinton and Barack Obama hinted that they might be willing to move in the general direction of better relations, but nevertheless insisted that full normalization would await fundamental changes in Cuba's internal political and economic system. Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and George W. Bush were openly committed to regime change, not reconciliation.

Bilateral cooperation on small measures has not set in motion a dynamic leading to normal relations because there has never been a moment when both sides wanted to normalize relations on terms acceptable to the other. For gradual reciprocal actions to set the stage for diplomatic reconciliation, both sides must have the political will to reconcile.

Of late Havana has been more interested in improving relations than has Washington. Since assuming the presidency in 2006, Raúl Castro has repeatedly offered to open a dialogue with Washington on all issues dividing the two countries. The economic benefits from normalizing relations are substantial at a time when the Cuban economy is struggling. In the areas of disaster response, medical cooperation, and environmental protection the Cuban side has been consistently interested in extending and deepening cooperation, while the U.S. side has been reluctant. Other areas such as counternarcotics, counterterrorism, and migration show a similar pattern. The United States has been content to live with perpetual hostility toward Cuba because the costs have been relatively low; changing the policy entails domestic political risks that successive presidents have judged too high. Obama, while acknowledging that the policy of hostility has been futile, has been no more willing than his predecessors to break out of this impasse.

Nevertheless, the imperative of self-interest will continue to push Washington and Havana toward cooperation on issues such as these, even if the overall bilateral relationship remains strained. Hurricanes, plagues, and oil spills do not respect national boundaries, so neither country can adequately protect itself without cooperating with the other. If such cooperation cannot bridge the bilateral divide and lead to friendship between the United States and Cuba, perhaps it can at least move them from being unmitigated enemies to respectful adversaries.

Notes

¹ Charles E. Osgood, *An Alternative to War or Surrender* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962), 85–134.

² Louise K. Comfort, "Disaster: Agent of Diplomacy or Change in International Affairs?" *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 14, no.1 (2000), 277–94.

³ Presidential Directive / NSC-6, Subject: Cuba, March 15, 1977, National Security Archive, www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/news/20020515/.

⁴ William J. Clinton, "Remarks to the Cuban-American Community, June 27, 1995," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1995*, Book 1, The American Presidency

Project, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=51547.

⁵ Jorge I. Domínguez, “Reconfiguración de las relaciones de los Estados Unidos y Cuba,” *Temas* (Havana), no. 62–63 (April–September 2010), 4–15.

⁶ We exclude from this analysis several other arenas in which Cuba and the United States have engaged one another—immigration, counternarcotics, and military-to-military dialogue at Guantanamo (the so-called “fence-line talks”)—because they touch directly on security issues, which makes cooperation even more complex.

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