

Cuba's multi-level strategy at the Summit of the Americas

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Last week's Seventh Summit of the Americas in Panama will be remembered for the historic handshakes and broad smiles shared by Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro—the [first sit-down meeting of leaders from the two nations](#) since Fidel Castro marched triumphantly into Havana in early 1959. But this memorable encounter was merely the most visible piece of a much broader Cuban strategy at the Panama Summit.

The large Cuban delegation took full advantage of the several forums that comprise the complex Summit process. These periodic inter-American conclaves feature meetings among heads of state and foreign ministers, a CEO Summit for corporate executives, and a Civil Society Forum for representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The Cubans seized all three opportunities and fielded strong teams to advance their interests: to engage with the multi-level inter-American system, and to send clear signals back home of where government policy is headed.

Face-to-face diplomacy

In addition to the Obama-Castro encounter, foreign ministers John Kerry and Bruno Rodriguez held a lengthy bilateral. Since Obama and Castro [publicly announced their intention to renew relations](#) on December 17 of last year, negotiations have dragged on. Cuba is reluctant to grant American diplomats unrestricted travel throughout the island to engage with Cuban citizens, including political dissidents. This is the norm in international diplomacy, the United States argues, whereas the Cubans remain fearful that U.S. diplomats will provide encouragement and assistance to activists advocating for political pluralism. The Cubans want to be removed from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism, a designation which automatically invokes economic sanctions. The White House is withholding that relief as a bargaining chip in the negotiations.

In his opening plenary remarks, President Castro spoke passionately and at length, impressing the audience with his heartfelt remarks even as he came across as an elder statesman indulging in the memories and glories of his youth. Yet, Castro was also sending signals to the stalwarts in the Communist Party back home that he had not forgotten their sacrifices and was not abandoning their values. His engagement with the United States would not be allowed to endanger their tight control of Cuban society. Still, most significantly, Castro kept the door open to engagement with the United States by dramatically addressing President Obama, tossing him compliments: "President Obama is

an honest man...I have read his two memoirs and I believe he is a man who has remained faithful to his humble origins.”

By lauding Obama, holding a private bilateral, and appearing with a broad smile at a press opportunity, Castro reaffirmed his commitment to improving relations with the United States. He also may have been nudging his negotiators to wrap up the talks to allow the mutual re-opening of embassies. The Cubans are aware that not all of Washington favors improved relations, and that they must consolidate the process of diplomatic normalization while Obama commands the White House.

The CEO and Civil Society Forums

Presumably, the main Cuban motivation for engaging the United States is economic: to attract more tourists, financial remittances, and eventually productive investments from the United States and the rest of the world, and to extract a relaxation of sanctions, particularly those impeding international financial transactions. Cuban Minister of Trade and Investment Rodrigo Malmierca led a commercial delegation that included top executives from state-owned enterprises, as well as leadership from the [new Mariel Development Zone](#). At the CEO Summit, Malmierca was granted one of the few time slots for a keynote address. But rather than take advantage of this unique opportunity, the Cuban minister rushed through an uninspired text, offering nothing that could not be found in previous government press releases and official documents. More than two years after the passage of a much-heralded foreign investment law and over a year after the official opening of the Mariel Development Zone, very few new investments have earned official authorization.

While potentially interested in Cuban markets, executives I spoke with remain cautious, skeptical that the government has yet created a sufficiently business-friendly environment to warrant the risk. They speculate as to why so few new foreign ventures are underway: is it opposition from well-placed hard-liners, bureaucratic inertia, or lack of financing or other necessary business inputs? In private conversations, Malmierca hinted at a political obstacle: many Cubans identify the revolution with nationalizations of private property, so it will be difficult to explain to them why foreign investment is now so welcome.

The Cubans also fielded a significant presence at the Civil Society Forum. The dominant group represented government-affiliated “non-governmental” organizations (GONGOS) such as the official trade union or Confederation of Cuban Women, while opposition NGOs marshalled about a dozen persons. At a pre-Summit speech in Caracas, Castro had ominously labelled these opposition NGOs “mercenaries” in the pay of foreign intelligence services. Following that lead, the government-affiliated group staged aggressive, noisy demonstrations denouncing the opposition representatives and accusing them of harboring infamous terrorists. The GONGOS threatened to boycott the Forum (although some did eventually participate), and disrupted the Forum’s working group on democratic governance. Here again, the message being telegraphed back home was clear: the Cuban government does not consider these opposition voices to be legitimate actors and loyal

Cuban citizens should not associate with them.

Discernable signals

Altogether, at the three forums the Cubans demonstrated their strong interest in participating actively in hemispheric affairs and institutions. The Cubans are capable of fielding smart, disciplined delegations with well-scripted strategies and messages. Once again, the high-quality Cuban diplomacy demonstrated that it has few peers in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The messages transmitted at the Panama Summit were subtle but decodable. In the diplomatic sphere, Castro wants to move forward, to take advantage of Obama's tenure to relax U.S.-Cuban tensions and gain some economic advantages. In the business sphere, Malmierca reaffirmed Castro's oft-repeated admonitions that economic change on the island will be very gradual and socialist planning will not be discarded under his watch. In the political sphere, the Cuban Communist Party intends to maintain its absolute hegemony—political pluralism outside the Party is definitely not yet on the policy agenda.

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