

Implications for Future Ties after Trump calls Cuba ‘Responsible for Sonic Attacks.’ Part 2

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On Monday, October 16 President Trump blamed the Cuban government for attacks against American diplomatic personnel in Havana. The alleged sonic attacks sickened twenty-one American and two Canadian diplomats in Havana with hearing loss and some neurological damage. Trump went further in his accusation than any previous statements of his administration on the issue. The State Department has reiterated Cuban responsibility under international law to protect the personal integrity of diplomats but never made the Cuban government responsible for it, affirming not to know the cause of the sickness.

Where is the evidence for Trump’s accusation against the Cuban government? Nobody knows. Put to the test by the “incidents” as the State Department called them at the beginning, the Cuban government walked the extra mile to show goodwill to the Trump administration. As Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont) said, it is not in the interest of the Cuban government to damage the diplomatic relations restored in 2014 and the Cubans want to know what happened.

To appreciate this, consider the invitation by President Raúl Castro to ambassador Jeffrey de Laurentis who was in charge of U.S. affairs in Havana to send an FBI team to Cuba and cooperate in the investigation of the events. Given the history of suspicion and clashes between Cuban and American espionage and counterespionage, Castro’s invitation to the FBI was unprecedented. One reason for Castro’s offer was probably that Cuban experts have not been able to find out what happened. They are not alone. According to Adam Rogers from Wired American, scientists are not able to explain the incidents either: “...physicists and acousticians don’t know how ultrasound (high frequency) or infrasound (low frequency) could do what the State Department says happened to its people.”

At the beginning of October, the Cuban Foreign Ministry stated: "The information delivered by the U.S. authorities led the committee of Cuban experts to conclude that this was insufficient and that the main obstacle to clarify the incidents had been the impossibility to have direct access to the injured people and the physicians who examined them." ⁱ The obvious next step of an administration interested in solving this puzzle was to upgrade vigilant but responsible security cooperation with Cuba to know what happened. Any serious analysis of U.S.- Cuba relations would recognize that it is in the interest of the United States to find who was behind this attack and to test Cuba's offer to cooperate. The possibility of an accident due to the combination of surveillance and anti-surveillance technology cannot be discarded.

The press has suggested several potential culprits. Some so-called "experts" in Cuba are floating the hypothesis that a rogue faction of the Cuban secret services, alone or in alliances with Russia and North Korea, may be behind the "sonic attacks." The objective of this faction - according to these wild accusations - is to destabilize the détente with Washington initiated by the president Raúl Castro and blessed, although with reservations, by Fidel Castro.

This disinformation campaign is absurd. There are no colonels or generals in the Cuban secret services or in the armed forces who consider themselves more "anti-imperialist" than Fidel and Raúl. Anyone with a military position in Cuba who would undermine the stated policy of dialogue with the United States would be playing with fire. In Raúl Castro's Cuba, there is no license for self-employment or subcontractors in national security matters. Nothing is impossible in the opaque relations between Cuba and the United States, but the idea of a rogue faction in the Cuban security is a fable.

In contrast, there is a history of spoilers in Cuba and the United States not interested in advancing rapprochement but on reinforcing the dynamics of conflict in which their ideologies of confrontation are supreme. Inexplicably, not many in the press want to talk about them. As proudly confessed by one of Senator Marco Rubio's acknowledged mentors, Armando Valladares, anti-Castro opposition groups who were operating in coordination with the CIA, developed a plan to murder Raúl Castro in Santiago de Cuba in 1961 and simultaneously launch a mortar attack on American posts in the Guantanamo naval base to simulate Fidel Castro's angry response to the planned death of his brother. Under this scenario, the death of American soldiers would provoke a full United States' intervention to end Castro's government. The plan failed but it is hard evidence of the presence in American territory of anti-Castro political forces seeking any pretext to put the U.S.-Cuba relations on a course of confrontation even at the cost of a self-inflicted attack on U.S. troops. As Valladares has proudly declared, the current Cuban right-wing exiles are the heirs of this spoiler's tradition against détente between the two countries.

To be shocked by Trump's lack of interest in finding who is really behind the alleged attacks through cooperation with Cuba, one would have to seriously believed his "America First" proclamation. Back when Trump was running in the Republican

primary against Marco Rubio, the current president who had sent emissaries to explore business with Cuba, applauded Obama's decision to try a rapprochement process with Havana adding in a typical manner that he could have negotiated a better deal. Just some weeks before the general election, Trump changed discourse and promised to reverse the whole Obama approach to Cuba in a meeting with the Cuban exiles old guard. Today, Trump's policy towards Cuba is guided by Armando Valladares' pupil, Senator Marco Rubio, and Congressman Mario Diaz-Balart. Rubio and Diaz-Balart have a clear record of putting their desire for revenge and anti-Castro phobia above all interests of the United States even those of their constituents. In terms of Cuba policy, Trump's "America First" has proven to be "Miami Vice."

There is also another factor explaining Trump's enthusiastic endorsement of Rubio's accusation against Cuba: his own temperament that attacks the legacy of Barack Obama in any area. The whole Obama's détente with Cuba was predicated not on sympathy for the Cuban government but on the consensus among most foreign policy agencies that a cooperative approach would serve better the interests of the United States at the critical juncture of the 2018 presidential transition in Havana, when Raúl has said he will step down. The key to understanding Obama's approach to Cuba after December 17, 2014, was a strategic vision that saw a rapprochement with Havana as the best way to improve the U.S. image in the Western Hemisphere, a new opportunity for Cuba's incoming leaders after the passing of the Castros, and to close opportunities for American strategic rivals in Beijing and Moscow in the post 2018 era. None of this sophistication appears to be present in Trump's grand strategy for Latin America or to the world.

Transforming a problem into a crisis

The response by the U.S. State Department on the alleged acoustic attacks on its diplomatic personnel in Havana had three fundamental components: (1) the reduction of personnel in the U.S. embassy in Cuba, and therefore a reduction of its non-essential functions according to Washington: those not related to the protection of Americans, security collaboration and diplomatic communication with the Cuban government, 2) a travel warning against Cuba to American citizens presented as a routine procedure because of the inability of the Cuban government to guarantee minimum protections to not only to U.S. diplomats but also to travelers, and 3) a reduction of 60 percent of Cuba's diplomatic staff in Washington D.C. targeted to those officials who were working on building new constituencies for a policy of détente.

U.S. Secretary of State Tillerson has indicated that there is no will to close the embassy in Havana as Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL) has called for. U.S. diplomatic authorities have not accused Havana of the incidents and reiterated after Trump's declarations that they have not changed their view about it. But the forces undermining the policies of dialogue and exchange between the two countries are working at full speed. The 17 Cuban diplomats forced to leave U.S. soil and the reduction of personnel in the embassy in

Havana, as well as the alarm to potential travelers, will reduce the spaces of contact and encouragement in both countries that favor of a greater understanding. The announcement that the United States would conduct visa interviews for Cubans from Colombia is a charade and a threat to the stated goal by the two countries of pursuing a "legal, orderly and safe emigration."

Keeping the embassies open.

It is not clear what Trump's strategic vision about Cuba is or what type of relation it wants both countries to have, nor what their project to overcome this crisis is. It is difficult to see the responses by the State Department and the White House as evidence of anything but significant victories of the orchestration and machinations of the pro-embargo lobby.

The U.S. government has a responsibility to ensure the safety of its diplomatic staff and citizens in Cuba, but the relationship with the island encompasses more than that. Attacks against U.S. diplomats and civilians have been more dramatic and worse in other latitudes, such as in the horn of Africa (Tanzania and Kenya) or the Middle East (U.S.S. Cole, Khobar Towers, or the September 11, 2001, attack on New York City). In view of these events, the decision of previous administrations has been to increase protection, and in a matter of months, to re-launch the interaction with governments and societies.

It is worth mentioning the Canadian approach (two Canadians claimed to suffer similar symptoms to those reported by the American diplomats) has generally proven to be much more effective than the U.S. approach in Cuba. Ottawa has not withdrawn its staff or asked its citizens not to travel to Cuba. The Canadian analysis has been guided by evidence that these are damages that have hit specific diplomatic staff and not travelers in general. Given the level of intelligence cooperation between Ottawa and Washington, the stance of the government of Prime Minister Trudeau has been guided by a strategic perspective in which this incident represents a conflict to be handled with skill, not a pretext to deepen rifts with Cuba. It is about creating opportunities, not jamming the bilateral conversation where even the scientific evidence on acoustic attacks is inconclusive.

An embassy is a doorway to interact not only with governments but also with societies in general. WikiLeaks' revelations of diplomatic reports from Havana illustrate how even in highly conflictive contexts, professional diplomats and practitioners in Cuba warned policymakers in Washington years ago about unsightly, unrealistic, and unjustified anti-communist enthusiasm of the Cuban exile over an early collapse of the Cuban government and its opposition.

The stance of disengagement will harm the image of the United States inside the Cuban society in the long term. Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez accused the United

States of acting “in a hasty, inappropriate and unthinking way without having any evidence—and before the conclusion of the investigation that is still in progress.”ⁱⁱ As Condoleezza Rice explained in relation to Iran, where the host government's greatest negligence in protecting the U.S. embassy in 1979 was demonstrated, the absence of diplomats impairs the capacity for intelligent American action. In spite of this embarrassing episode of the occupation of the diplomatic seat in Tehran in 2008, the former Secretary of State was working to return U.S. diplomats back to the Persian country.

The decision for a drastic reduction of personnel and, especially, the cancellation of the visa procedures in the U.S. mission in Havana and D.C., as well as the warning to American travellers, are signs of haste, emotional decisions and lack of strategic vision. None of this will help determine who is behind the alleged attacks or protect diplomatic personnel in the future. History shows that in the handling of the bilateral relationship, since the rupture of relations in January 1961 to date, anger has never been a good adviser, neither for Cuba nor for the United States.

It is worth remembering that the proclaimed goal of American policy towards Cuba is in addition to the promotion of American interests, a "peaceful transition to democracy in Cuba". Although this formulation is not in line with the desire of extreme exiles in Miami of creating a vacuum of power in Cuba, it is in the interests of the United States not to destabilize Cuba and the Caribbean region. It is not in the best interests of the U.S. to treat Cuba as a pressure cooker by closing all escape valves. Does anyone believe that the virtual end of visa processing just after the devastation of hurricane Irma in Cuba will not have an impact on the objective proclaimed by Cuba and the United States of a "legal, orderly and secure" emigration? Without discarding the possibility of an incident, it is difficult not to take into account the main beneficiaries of putting U.S.-Cuba relations in disarray: The same sectors who opposed all of the twenty-three cooperation agreements signed between Cuba and the United States during the Obama era.

Within the real setback in the agenda of normalization of relations, there is the important consolation that the State Department's statement defined the reduction of diplomatic staff as only temporary. Neither embassy has been closed. For a while diplomat in both countries kept the incidents out of the public eye, perhaps to prevent hysterical and exaggerated responses. It is hopeful that within the administration, sectors with a minimum of rationality still serve as a restraint to Senator Rubio's proposals.

Obama's legacy depends on the constituencies that benefit from it. The spoilers on both sides of the Straits of Florida are aware that their interests, positions, and privileges are strengthened in conflict and animosity and chose to use the mystery of sonic attacks to advance their purpose.

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ⁱ CubaMinRex, “Cuba has never perpetrated, nor will it ever perpetrate attacks of any sort against diplomatic officials or their relatives, without any exception,” Oct 13, 2017, Granma
<http://en.granma.cu/cuba/2017-10-03/cuban-foreign-ministry-responds-to-latest-measures-by-trump-administration>

ⁱⁱ Padget, Tim, “Unsolved ‘sonic attacks’ mystery sours U.S.-Cuba relations,” Oct., 15, 2017,
<https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2017/10/15/unsolved-sonic-attacks-mystery-sours-us-cuba-relations>