

'This blockade is the largest economic war against any country'

written by Jose Ramon Cabañas

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Ambassador Jose Ramon Cabañas, Cuba's ambassador to the United States, opened the first session of the U.S.-Cuba Normalization International Conference: "After the U.S. Elections: For Normalization! Why We Must End the Blockade on Cuba!" More coverage will follow on this important conference. Although the U.S. blockade has never been harsher, the possibility for ending this cruel injustice has never been

closer. Let's make 2021 the year to end the blockade. The transcription is by Gloria Verdieu.

We understand the many efforts you must have undertaken to organize something like this. You have people coming from Havana, you have technical issues, but the common will among ourselves is simply to continue the fight against the blockade.

This conference is especially useful to educate and share knowledge about what the blockade is all about and that it impacts not only Cuba but the United States and third countries all over the world.

This blockade is the largest, most comprehensive economic war, not only in economic terms, against any country. Its main purpose is basically to overthrow the Cuban revolution.

We can start our arguments with why this was established. It has many pieces. It is a Frankenstein monster in its legislations, norms, sanctions and executive decisions.

We always like to quote from what we call the Mallory Memorandum. Lester Mallory was a bureaucrat in the State Department back in 1960. He wrote a memo saying in essence that the Cuban revolution has large support among the Cuban population. There was basically no opposition domestically speaking in Cuba, and to overthrow the Cuban revolution the United States needed to make the Cuban people surrender by hunger and imposing economic pressure.

That memo was before the presidential proclamation by President Kennedy imposing the embargo on Cuba in 1962. And if we read from that [Proclamation 3447](#), the main argument to impose an embargo on Cuba was about the relationship between Cuba, the Peoples Republic of China and the former Soviet Union. The Soviet Union is not there anymore, and China is the largest economic trade partner with the United States.

Since that moment on, we have been through a series of arguments to keep in place this policy. It is a state policy. Sometimes people relate the blockade against Cuba with one particular president. The fact is that we have had 12 presidents that have been living with these subjects and enforcing many of them.

It is important to understand the complexity of the whole structure of the blockade to know who we are fighting. We have to mention that several pieces of it are related to the [Trade with the Enemy Act of 1917](#), the [Foreign Assistance Act](#) that was passed in 1961, and I mentioned Proclamation 3447 in 1962 by President Kennedy, and [Cuban Assets and Control Regulations \(CACR\)](#) of the Department of the Treasury, passed in 1963.

The [Export Administration Act of 1979](#), [Export Administrations Relations of 1979](#), and the so-called [Cuban Democracy Act or Torricelli Act of 1992](#). Torricelli limits U.S. companies in third countries from dealing with Cuba, proving the blockade is more than a bilateral issue.

In 1996, the so-called [Helms-Burton Act or Cuban Liberty and Democratic Solidarity Act](#), whose name is a bad joke, which is probably the most comprehensive piece of legislation, where you have integrated all elements in regards to the embargo.

Still, you have Section 211 of the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act of 1999 that is something unique. It prohibits recognizing Cuban brand names in the United States. It was never discussed in Congress, but added in handwriting by a Cuban American lawyer.

And finally, the [Trade Sanctions and Export Enhancement Act of 2000](#) with new regulations about the blockade.

The blockade has been in place for 60 years. We have to say that several senators and representatives in the U.S. Congress have been trying to change the whole

thing, at least some parts of it. So far, they haven't been successful.

The blockade was there during the Obama administration years, although we established bilateral ties, although we signed 22 MOU's (memoranda of understanding) covering different areas of agriculture, the environment, public health and other issues. But the blockade, which is the core subject in the United States policy against Cuba, continued to be implemented.

During the Obama administration, we had several sanctions and measures and fines imposed on foreign banks to limit financial transactions with Cuba. It is important to remember that, even though the Obama administration years are probably the most positive moments we have had on bilateral relations with the United States in the last thirty years, the blockade was still actively enforced and implemented. From time to time, you heard people in the United States say that the agreements between Cuba and the United States at the time were one sided, and that is true because the embargo was still there and was a burden on the possibility of expanding further bilateral cooperation in many ways.

What has happened during the last four years under Trump rule is that we have had roughly over 235 new decisions: actions implemented against Cuba in a variety of sectors, including financial transactions.

It's a policy that has been more or less used to force the Cuban people to surrender by economic pressure, limiting the supply of oil and other commodities to Cuba. We have to say that the blockade is something that impacts every single sector of Cuban life, from education, to quality health care, to agriculture, to trade, every sector, including the cultural sector. If you meet an artist and you ask them how the blockade impacts, they will say that it impacts every part of Cuban life.

It also limits possibilities for people in the United States. They don't benefit from Cuban services and products. Just to mention one example: Cuba is a natural market

for the export of agriculture commodities from the United States. You have seen how travel expanded quite easily during those years. Roughly five-and-a-half million people from the United States, including many Cuban Americans, have visited Cuba since 2015. That was basically up to early 2019.

I don't need to mention the family connections. There is a large community of Cuban Americans in the United States. They have also suffered the impact of these regulations, the way they were implemented under Trump in the last two years. One hundred and twenty-one decisions were implemented to limit travel, to limit remittances, and other kinds of exchange. The impact of the blockade is all over.

The other day we were referring to the support we received from the solidarity movements during the Elián González campaign and to free the Cuban 5, when the solidarity movement made it possible to return the Cuban 5 to Havana. During those campaigns we heard many arguments. Why did we need to do that? Because it was fair that they should be sent back. They were fighting terrorism. In the end, we had an argument that everyone could understand: it is too much, it is enough. Sixteen years is too much time to incarcerate these people.

I would say 60 years of the blockade is too much. If some people don't understand the technicalities of the blockade, if some people haven't read this year's Cuban report to the United Nations to support our resolution that was presented a few days ago by our foreign minister, Bruno Rodríguez Parrilla, if people are not sensitive to the details (but many people are by the way), it's a good argument is that it is simply too much.

Sixty years of a failed policy, a fiasco. It is a moment to try something else. In that regard, it is important to remember that under the Obama administration we were able to engage in discussions — by the way, Ambassador Vidal was the head of our delegation for those negotiations — on many subjects. We delivered. There were important outcomes for both countries. People in the United States understood by a

large majority the advantage of having a normal relationship with Cuba the same way we have with Canada, the United Kingdom, Spain, France and other countries all over the world.

Now, after the outcome of the last elections in the United States, there is new hope among people in the United States that a new kind of relationship can be built with Cuba. You have heard the statement that we feel that people in the United States have a sense that this is an opportunity for change, and we have to say that we remain open to any kind of talks or conversations if the principles of mutual respect and reciprocity are adhered to. Those are the two keys for any future relationship between Cuba and the United States with the upcoming president or any other administration into the future.

We have heard positive statements from the candidates, we have heard statements from other people that probably will be related to the new government, but Cuba doesn't tailor a policy because someone is elected. We don't tailor policies addressed to specific people. The principles of our foreign policies are consistent and we understand that we have and will have differences with the United States — we listed them by the way in 2015 and 2016 — but we do believe that we need for the benefit of our population and for the benefit of the world and region to find common ground on several subjects.

I will leave you this initial comment, with the idea that if the blockade against Cuba was always an act of war, it is a crime these days to keep and enforce that blockade on the conditions of the pandemic under COVID. Not once during the last year has the current president in the United States lifted any measures but, on the contrary, the government has implemented and enforced several limits that ordinary Cubans have to face because of the blockade.

Anyone supporting the blockade these days is as criminal as the essence of the blockade. Hopefully COVID, the common cause to fight COVID in the United States

and in this hemisphere, will be an opportunity for all our countries to cooperate and to fight not only to find a cure but also a better future for our people.

