



Kerry and Hagel, two Obama nominees against Cuba embargo

President Barack Obama's proposed second term cabinet includes two long-standing critics of the US trade embargo against Cuba, although the chance of the 50-year-old US policy changing seem scant.

John Kerry, nominated to replace Hillary Clinton as secretary of state, and Chuck Hagel, tipped to succeed Leon Panetta at the Pentagon, are both veterans of the Vietnam war, which in part forged their views of communist regimes.

Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate in 2004, has until now been chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the panel before which he will defend his nomination on Thursday.

For years he has been pressing for changes in the US policy towards Cuba, which he considers wrong.

"In 1995 the United States normalized relations with Vietnam. The Cold War had ended, and we even signed a trade deal with a country where 58,000 Americans had given their lives," he wrote in an op-ed piece in 1999.

"Yet when it comes to a small impoverished island 90 miles off the coast of Florida, we cling to a policy that has manifestly failed for nearly 50 years."

In 2010, Kerry opposed pro-democracy support programs launched in Cuba by the government agency USAID. These had led to the arrest in 2009 of American subcontractor Alan Gross.

Gross was ultimately sentenced to 15 years in prison for having distributed communications equipment to civil groups.

According to the blog The Daily Beast, Kerry met secretly with Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez in October 2010 in New York to address the Gross case, albeit fruitlessly.

Kerry's office declined to answer a query from AFP seeking confirmation of the reported meeting.

But if Kerry is confirmed, the main roadblock to changing the trade embargo imposed after Fidel Castro came to power will come from Kerry's own camp and from his successor on the Senate panel, fellow Democrat Robert Menendez.

Menendez is a Cuban-American and vehement critic of the Castro regime. Last year he blocked Kerry's attempts to change USAID programs for Cuba.

On the powerful Senate Foreign Relations Committee Menendez can rely on help from another Cuban-American, Republican Marco Rubio.

Republican opposition to change is even firmer in the House of Representatives.

Hagel, whose confirmation hearings are scheduled for next week, is also known for sarcastic comments he made in the past about the US embargo and US policy toward Cuba.

In 2002 he said publicly that he viewed Castro as a "toothless old dinosaur." Years later he called America's policy toward the communist-run island "unrealistic and irrelevant."

In the world of Washington politics, Hagel has defenders, beginning with the ultra-conservative Cato Institute.

"Chuck Hagel doesn't have a Cuba problem. Just the opposite. He has shown common sense in ending one of Washington's most anachronistic foreign policies," the institute said recently.

But his former Republican colleagues in Congress have warned that it is impossible to seek any change in policy while Gross remains in jail.

Just as with the impasse over immigration reform, which has been held up in Congress for years, Obama has used certain presidential prerogatives to tweak policy toward Cuba, namely broadening permits to travel and send remittances.

Those who support doing away with the embargo think the government has maneuvering room for more presidential decrees.

But Obama said publicly before he was re-elected in November that he was waiting for some gesture of openness from the Havana government.