



新华社
XINHUA NEWS AGENCY

News Analysis: Obama's Cuba visit carries symbolic weight but real changes expected

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March 22, 2016

As Air Force One roared into the sky above Havana Tuesday afternoon and headed for Buenos Aires, the conspicuous emotion of U.S. President Barack Obama's visit to Cuba gave way to quiet contemplation.

Variouly described as an event to "transform" the Cuba-U.S. relations, or to end the "last remnant" of the Cold War as put by Obama himself, the real impact of this trip will take time to be seen.

In the short term, the trip seems to have left an equal sense of optimism and disappointment.

Ahead of Obama's arrival, an undercurrent of hope had risen that a major policy announcement would be around the corner. And Obama and his Cuban counterpart, Raul Castro, said they held frank discussions on democracy, international relations and other hot topics.

However, the economic embargo remains in place and Guantanamo Bay continues as an American naval base and military prison. These two key issues have become the center of discussions as the thaw began in December 2014.

The embargo seems to be a more egregious matter. Obama has repeatedly called on the Republican-dominated Congress to lift it, referring to the embargo as a policy that has failed for five decades.

While acknowledging Obama's commitment, Castro said that "much more could be done if the blockade was lifted."

On Guantanamo, there is no progress. Castro has made the return of this base a condition without which ties will not be normalized, but Washington has been a staunch opponent and Obama did not mention it in public comments during his trip.

Analysts say a return would be possible if the Guantanamo Bay prison is finally closed but it seems unlikely to offer a strategic position for American troops in the Caribbean region.

For Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow for defense and foreign policy at the Washington-based Cato Institute, Obama's Cuba trip had two main goals.

"One was to maintain the momentum toward a normal relationship between neighboring countries. The other was to consolidate President Obama's legacy on an important foreign policy issue. The opening to Cuba and the Iran nuclear agreement stand out as the major foreign policy achievements of his presidency," Carpenter told Xinhua.

Critics of the Cuban government have welcomed Obama's discussing issues such as democracy with Havana. However, no concessions have been received, prompting jeers that this was a vanity trip to gloss over the legacy of an outgoing president without gaining anything in return.

Carpenter said there are still many obstacles in the future for the normalization of the U.S.-Cuba relations as the two countries have differences on such issues as human rights.

On the other hand, there are numerous export-oriented U.S. businesses that are very eager to gain access to the Cuban market, and that should facilitate a further improvement in relations, said Carpenter, adding that much will depend on the results of the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Obama cannot change Cuba with a single trip and the conflicts between the two countries may take a long time to heal.

Nor was this as historic-making an occasion as Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972 or Ronald Reagan's speech at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate in 1987.

The Cold War has ended. In a globalized world where interests of countries are intertwined today, any opening up is desirable.