



## Obama's Cuba moment

Brian Hughes

April 11, 2015

There is no stronger symbolism of just how dramatically the U.S.-Cuban dynamic has changed than the president of the United States sitting for talks with the leader of the government regime in Havana, a meeting that was unthinkable in previous administrations.

When President Obama meets Cuban President Raul Castro Saturday, the most substantial dialogue between the U.S. and island nation in decades, it will test the White House campaign to deflect criticisms about engaging the Caribbean country.

After exchanging pleasantries Friday, Obama and Castro will have a lengthier discussion on Saturday, the White House said. It comes after the two spoke by phone earlier in the week and after Secretary of State John Kerry met with Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez in Panama in advance of the Summit of the Americas.

More important than the theater surrounding the historic meeting is the message Obama is carrying with him: that he will remove Cuba from the list of state sponsors of terrorism.

The president could formally make the announcement as early as Saturday, officials said.

In doing so, Obama will effectively clear the last remaining hurdle to normalizing ties with Cuba, launching in earnest efforts to establish embassies in Washington and Havana.

Removing Cuba from the terror list would be an economic windfall for the island nation, opening it up to banking interests that stayed away as long as the country was viewed as a state sponsor of violent extremism.

Critics, especially Cuban Americans in Florida, argue that Obama is making too many concessions to the Castro government without receiving commitments that the family-run communist dictatorship will halt blatant human rights violations.

Obama is banking that the opening of travel and easier flow of goods between the two nations is enough to drown out concerns about Cuba's governing practices.

"The terrorist list has become sort of a joke. In part, it's a joke because Cuba's been on the list as a hangover from the Cold War," said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign

policy studies at the Cato Institute. "There's a certain kind of practicality at work here. [Past practices] haven't improved human rights and living conditions in Cuba."

The lone other nations on the U.S. terror list are Iran, Syria and Sudan. Cuba has been labeled a state sponsor of terrorism since 1982.

Though Obama's trip to Panama for the Summit of the Americas was ostensibly designed to bolster relations with countries throughout the Western Hemisphere, Cuba overshadowed everything else.

The president had a much friendlier audience for his Cuba policy at the summit than the one he'll encounter in Republicans.

Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., expected to announce his own presidential campaign next week, has been the most vocal critic of Obama's Cuba blueprint.

"Cuba has done nothing to earn the legitimacy President Obama continues to bestow on the regime," Rubio said. "It is a grave mistake to de-list Cuba from the state sponsors of terrorism list, one that will further embolden the regime to step up their actions against America's interests."

However, Rubio and other critics would need to assemble a veto-proof majority to override Obama's removing Cuba from the terror list.

Unlike the administration's pursuit of a nuclear deal with Iran, which has encountered some resistance among Democrats — Republicans are nearing a veto-proof majority effectively giving them final say on a pact with Tehran — opposition to the president's Cuba push is almost entirely in the GOP camp.

Obama's message on Cuba in many ways mirrors his argument for re-engaging with Iran, insisting that establishing ties with a nation does not amount to an endorsement of its governing practices.

Keenly aware of potential liabilities for his Cuba strategy, Obama addressed a forum in Panama Friday attended by Cuban protesters and those with close ties to the Castro regime.

"We're here for a very simple reason: We believe that strong, successful countries require strong and vibrant civil societies," Obama said. "Strong nations don't fear active citizens."