

» Cuban revolution

[Opinion, Columnists](#)

Cuban revolution

| SREERAM CHAULIA

Published : Mar 21, 2016, 11:10 pm IST

Updated : Mar 21, 2016, 11:10 pm IST

Listen

Chat

US President Barack Obama's landmark visit to Cuba is redefining what it means to be a good neighbour and a great power in today's world.

US President Barack Obama's landmark visit to Cuba is redefining what it means to be a good neighbour and a great power in today's world. As the first American head of state to set foot in Cuba since 1928, that too 55 years after the US severed diplomatic relations with its spunky southern neighbour, Mr Obama is showing the way for an American foreign policy stripped of imperial hubris. His "new chapter" with Cuba and the rest of Latin America has upended centuries of Washington's colonial arrogance and ideological oppression.

The vital transformation that Mr Obama has engineered is in the attitude with which the US behaves in its own backyard. Unlike his predecessors going back to President James Monroe in the 1820s, Mr Obama has taken a progressive stance on Cuba and Latin America by kicking the habit of imposing the US' preferences upon its weaker neighbours and grossly disregarding the will of local people in the region.

This big shift could only happen under an African-American President who introspected about how deeply unpopular the US was in its own neighbourhood, and who understood the roots of Washington's aggression. Mr Obama's worldview is a wholesale rejection of the European colonial gene, which first occupied and committed genocide in Latin America and then transferred these functions from European powers into the hands of a US settled and ruled by white elites.

Until a black man finally broke the barrier and walked into the White House, it was impossible for American presidents to imagine that the Latino people could be their equals in dignity or that they could determine their own political and economic choices. Only a President who directly suffered racial discrimination and exclusion within the US could fathom the depths of neocolonial exploitation which successive American governments and corporations committed in Latin America and the Caribbean before, during and even after the Cold War.

Argentinian intellectual Juan Gabriel Tokatlian has documented the US' "dominance and discipline approach" towards Latin America in the 1950s as a continuation of the Monroe Doctrine of the 19th century. George Kennan, the doyen of American Cold War strategy, wrote that Latin America needed "harsh governmental measures" to repress communist sentiment and that the US must use its financial power, and other direct and covert means, to control the region's fate.

The bloody history of American-assisted military coup d'etats, assassinations, regime changes and the human rights abuses which followed were totally contrary to Washington's claims of standing for freedom and democracy against Soviet totalitarianism. For the people of Latin America, the US was the impediment to freedom. Thousands upon thousands of innocents perished in the anti-communist operations which Washington sponsored and carried out, leaving little doubt that Uncle Sam was a bully who profited from plundering and toying with the natural and human resources of the Hispanic people. Mr Obama's decision to unveil classified American documents about how the US government enabled the military's "dirty war" in Argentina of the 1970s is thus an act of expiation and cleansing of America's nefarious image.

There still are many obstacles to Mr Obama's determination to shed the hegemonic baggage and adopt a policy of genuine equality and respect. Right-wingers in the US have mocked his "unilateral concessions" and kowtowing to the Castro brothers and accused him of prolonging their dictatorship by undermining the decades-long US economic embargo. He has been caricatured as a naïve peacenik who got duped by the wily Castros to relaunch economic relations across the Straits of Florida so that they can break out of international isolation, pocket gains from trade and tourism liberalisation and entrench their communist authoritarianism.

To defend against this cacophony from the conservative Republican Party and the Miami lobby of Cuban exiles who detest any engagement with the Castros, the Obama administration has come up with the theory that restoring diplomatic ties with Cuba will eventually lead to the democratisation of the island. Mr Obama is being projected as the one removing the convenient excuse of "ugly American" interference and thereby applying pressure on the Castros to grant more economic and political freedoms to their people. Mr Obama's followers say that he has masterfully transferred the onus on to the Castros for their own economic mismanagement.

However, such reasoning is sheer political rhetoric. Mr Obama is not in the business of plotting regime change in Cuba. He is not cozying up to the Castros to weaken them and accelerate their downfall. He is simply redeeming America's disastrous image and lost influence in the Caribbean and the rest of Latin America through a live-and-let-live philosophy.

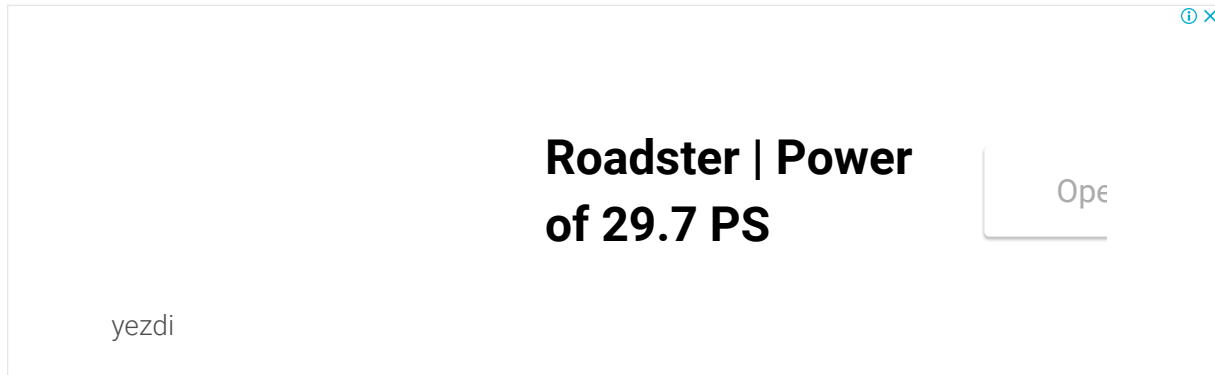
Mr Obama's foreign policy is premised on democratic consent from the American people, who unanimously support his easing of tensions with Cuba and Latin America. A post-ideological majority opinion exists today in the US which is in accord with Mr Obama's vision that it is time for the Cuban and Latin American people to choose their own paths without the US' meddling and bossiness.

Yankee imperialism has no base anymore within American society and Mr Obama is reflecting this public mood of reconciliation via his foreign policy. Even if a Democrat or a Republican becomes President in 2017, she or he would have to defer to this social reality before attempting any reckless reversal of Mr Obama's epic thaw with Cuba.

In historical terms, Mr Obama has normalised the US from being a colonial implant of the European genocidal project in Latin America into a good regional citizen who is admired and liked for its humility, pragmatism and non-judgmental nature. His egalitarian outreach to Latin America is also driven by a strategy for a US re-entry into a region where China has made inroads and America is greeted with suspicion and scepticism.

No great power can sustain its international clout in the 21st century without ensuring a neighbourhood that is welded to it through mutual economic prosperity and political harmony. Power is today a function of acceptance and trust, not fear and mistrust. The last time an American government was truly powerful in Latin America was during Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Good Neighbour Policy" of the 1930s, when Washington refrained from illegal and immoral military interventions and occupations. Sadly, it was too short an interlude. As Mr Obama walks the cobblestoned paths of old Havana, he can claim to have done something bigger and permanent. He has turned enemies into friends.

The writer is a professor and dean at the Jindal School of International Affairs



Latest From Opinion

THE ASIAN AGE
Delhi | Mumbai | Kolkata | London

[AA EDIT | Time to clean up Indian soccer](#)

THE ASIAN AGE
Delhi | Mumbai | Kolkata | London

[Sanjeev Ahluwalia | Can India be a developed nation before it gets rich?](#)

THE ASIAN AGE
Delhi | Mumbai | Kolkata | London