Very distinguished guests of this Trilateral forum:

Cuba is in an exceptional situation that is difficult to understand.

It is a diminutive country that aligned its revolution with Communism, and ten North American presidents have been unable to submit or pacify it.

In the end, it was decided to wait for nature to take its course, and for the leader who headed an ongoing opposition to the democratic and economic values of the West to disappear. Challenging the Marxist theories that entrusted the progress of history to the march of productive forces and the opposition to and fighting of opponents, his longevity has frozen change in the country.

Certainly the physical absence of Fidel Castro will imply a dramatic shift for the Republic of Cuba, but the nature of that absence is related to the time in which it occurs and the prevailing environment of the planet right now, and in a very particular way, to the government of the United States of America, which will undoubtedly play a decisive role in whatever comes next.

In Cuba, both internal and external factors will play a part, and in contrast to Eastern Europe, Cuba runs the risk of having a transition interrupted by outbreaks of violence.

We cannot give ourselves the luxury of guessing what is going to happen, because the course of history is unpredictable, so instead, at this time I propose to state what, to me, seems to be desirable. In the first place, what we most want is a peaceful and negotiated movement toward democracy—even though this implies that the process will take more time than it did in Eastern Europe—and that all the actors involved in the process of reconciliation with Cuba find a way to be heard and heeded.

There are conditions for this.

In the midst of the political extremes being faced, there are a great many national and international interests that have come to understand that what is most serving will be to enter into a connected set of arrangements. The interests in the United States are varied and contradictory, and consequently, they adopt various and nuanced positions. The Cuban-American community itself is divided into different camps and the European Union and Latin America may also participate in ways that are far from uniform.

The second condition we propose is that Cubans act as the main protagonists, because defining their destiny is up to them. External actors may assume a cooperative role during periods of negotiation.
It must be considered that the disappearance of the authoritarian leader, who has figured as the fulcrum for internal and external stability, may unleash an avalanche of forces that have been contained until now. In their desperation, these forces seek direct conflict without extenuating circumstances.

Fidel Castro’s absence will cause fissures in the state mechanism he created because it shows characteristic traits of a charismatic political system that requires the leadership of a chieftain to function effectively. But there don’t seem to be any indications that it will crumble in one single night as the Berlin Wall did.

On one side, the Cuban economy, forged by the revolution and showing clear signs of decadence and bankruptcy, is receiving pure oxygen in the form of subsidized oil supplies from Venezuela, remittals from Cuban residents abroad, tourism, and Chinese investments in nickel and copper mining. To continue and expand these trends, the revolutionary government will have a large amount of foreign currency available to put into play when it becomes necessary.

On the other side, the political machinery of the Communist party and the committees for defense of the revolution still operate with a certain efficacy as mechanisms of popular control. The army, the other pillar of the system, is strictly subordinate to the figure of the institutional successor and Minister of Defense Raúl Castro.

It must further be considered that Fidel Castro had the ability to firmly establish the idea in one faction of the Cuban people that democratization of the country is equal to loss of national sovereignty, capitalizing on the not always intelligent attacks from the groups of stubborn exiles and their allies in the American government. It must also be considered that the change is associated with outside intervention, and that the dissidents in the interior of the island advocate conceding to the mandates of the State Department in Washington.

As a measure of revolutionary cohesion, the government in Havana will most certainly encourage fear in the popular conscience that the exiles will return with the intention of claiming for themselves the dwellings that the revolution freely granted to the popular classes, as well as the threat that the establishment of a capitalist regime will result in the dismantling of free popular education and the public health system.

In its fight for survival, the nomenclature of the Communist party may mobilize the ideological ghosts that have been incubating over the years.

As I have said, the Cuban transition, in contrast to the transitions in Europe, may slip toward chaos and violence.

The risk of a civil war 90 miles from the American coastline and 160 miles from the Yucatán Peninsula, with an abundance of refugees fleeing to the United States and Mexico, is not a chimera, but a risk that may come to pass if the hawks in the conflict are allowed to dominate Cuba’s transition: on one side there are the stubborn exile factions and a fundamentalist American government that insists on imposing its political and economic model on the island whatever the cost, and on the other, the more radical factions of the Communist party, which are closed to conceding the most minimal foothold to democracy.

Cuba is in an exceptional situation, and may intelligently negotiate the phases of transition that head its agenda.
At the crucial moment, the Cuban government should move with agility and prudence. In our opinion, it could offer the world a menu of options directed toward the international community and the domestic population.

It should do so in the absence of its main binding ingredient, Commander Fidel Castro, and it should initiate the path to turn itself from a country of an authoritarian leader into a country of institutions. The revolutionary government of Havana has a cadre of trained and prepared leaders who have a clear awareness of democratic and economic modernity, but there are also orthodox factions for whom things don’t have to change, convinced that authoritarian controls are sufficient to keep the system operating as if nothing had happened.

The acts of repression that have occurred in recent years show the presence of these stubborn and intransigent nuclei toward the inner factions of the Cuban government.

Which approach should prevail? It is an unknown.

An intelligent discourse outlining the main steps of transition would temper unease and dispel doubts. It would be a fundamental contribution toward a serene process.

Without Fidel Castro it is unlikely that things can remain as they have been until now. His absence must be filled with a new series of political arrangements and the emergence of young leaders who will satisfy the legitimate longings and preferences of the people. The country’s bankruptcy without the current president will necessarily require new arrangements among the elite, and incorporation of fresh outside capital, in brief, for an opening from the inside out.

I understand that the axis of the transition is the revolutionary Cuban government, which requires abandoning all intentions of annihilating it as suggested by the measures in the Helms-Burton Law.

It is up to the Cuban government to dedicate itself to implementing a program that contains a series of clear and verifiable measures that will lead Cuba to open through gradual political and economic liberalization. Included among those measures are: freeing all political prisoners, abolishing the death penalty, substitution of the Penal Code and extending the guarantees of due process in favor of the accused, recognition of the right of citizens to associate for political purposes, participation of non-Communist representatives in the Legislature, freedom of the press, relaxing restrictions on churches for religious practices, free hiring of workers, opening the self-employment and private investment sectors, etc.

There should be willingness to negotiate the payment of indemnities for expropriations of private properties during the revolution within a context of restructuring the onerous external Cuban debt and opening new international lines of credit, particularly those from entities such as the World Bank and the IDB, which lines have been closed until now.

Currently, international financing comes exclusively from private banks that impose short periods and onerous payments.

Elimination of the legal obstacles in both Cuba and the United States that impede the free cohabitation and reunion of families would be proposed.

General policies should be announced in matters of direct or associated foreign investment on the island, with a specific chapter for Cuban-Americans.
Upon acceptance by the Cuban regime of political and economic liberalization measures, the American government should lift the embargo on the Republic of Cuba.

No degree of pressure on the revolutionary Cuban regime will be able to lose as many political changes as those that will occur by establishing extensive commercial trade with the United States.

An ordered and peaceful democratic transition in Cuba implies the continuation of some current institutions, such as the Political Constitution of 1992, with the reforms that are being required to give institutional focus for the implemented changes, preservation of the free public education system and the public health system, and they must weigh the conditions in which the intelligence and security apparatus could be modernized so that it will no longer serve to repress dissidents, but will be employed to impede drug trafficking, organized crime, and international terrorist acts in the region.

In this vein, an initial contribution by the international community to democratic transition in Cuba would be to encourage the moderate factions, both those in exile and those on the island, to recognize the capacity of dialogue and support them so that they can become protagonists of national reconciliation.

It is equally recommendable that both the North American business sectors that would benefit from commerce with Cuba, as well as the more liberal politicians and academics, act as counterweights to the lobbying of radical groups before the American Congress to reject any sign of flexibility in Washington’s policy toward the island.

When the time comes, formation of a group of countries that are friendly to Cuba would be desirable, in which, among others, Canada, Mexico and Spain would participate, so that they could support the establishment of negotiations between the Cuban and North American governments, as well as between the Havana revolutionaries, the exiled leaders, and dissidents living on the island.

These negotiations should be developed within a framework of reciprocal concessions: each concession should be met with an equivalent concession.

Very possibly the Cuban government has the Chinese model as a negotiating alternative, with openness limited to foreign investment, and the relaxation of legal, tax and bureaucratic obstacles that currently stifle entrepreneurialism, that is, the national micro company. But it would be unsustainable if they refused to implement acts of political liberalization.

There is a grave element of uncertainty that fills the observers of the Cuban-American scene with concern, and that is that a good part of the action mechanisms of the U.S. government toward transition in Cuba are prescribed in the Helms-Burton Law. But their content is so rigorous that in practice they may reach the extreme of placing the government outside the processes of Cuban transition, or worse, turning it into the main obstacle.

Section 205 of that law establishes preconditions to the president of the United States taking action, among them the immediate dismantling of the entire governmental apparatus and the Communist party, as well as the immediate implantation of a series of measures that can only come about from negotiations. Helms-Burton authorizes the U.S. president to recognize a government in transition on the island, but it does not allow it to help to build that government, as if the transition could automatically occur by itself.

The law is so casuistic that it prevents application of any act of flexibility toward a Cuban government of which Raúl or Fidel Castro are members (this is expressly stated). That is, the U.S. president is prohibited from acting with the exact leadership with which it must agree so that the transition can occur in a peaceful and ordered manner.
Under the mentioned law, the transition assumes a surrender, not a process of negotiation.

Precisely what the nations that are friends of Cuba should seek to do is to support this process, facilitate it so that it occurs peacefully, and not wait for it to appear out of nowhere, or for democracy to arrive on the island imposed from abroad through armed violence.

Communism is no longer the main threat to free countries. Since the start of the 21st century, the gravest dangers facing our region are drug trafficking with its abundant violence, degradation of social relationships, deterioration of the state, and international terrorism.

These themes of fighting terrorism and drug trafficking could be the main bilateral subjects for the expansion, approximation and collaboration between the Cuban and North American governments, because they are fields in which the interests of both may coincide.

In light of what has happened in Latin America in the last decade, in what democracy has seeded in practically all of our countries, and in what globalization and neo-liberalism have spread, we must agree that things have not always turned out for the better, and they cannot be equally offered to all countries as a totally plausible and applicable software package.

Freedom and democracy have been accompanied by a wealth of corruption and far-reaching mantles of misery, factors that do not fully verify the prescription that the international financial entities offer as an alternative. In light of this evidence, the new Cuba might, possibly, attempt an alternative model that escapes these scourges, that provides freedom, individual and social guarantees, and that bypasses the abysses between income and well-being.

The first generation of Cuban revolutionaries is already in the process of extinction, as are their exiled counterparts, and those driving the successive stages are moving into retirement. Under Fidel Castro a new generation of leaders has been forming, a generation that has had contact with modernity and technology, a generation far removed from the echoes and hatred of the Cold War and confrontations with its exiled compatriots.

As happened in Spain’s transition, it is this new generation of Cubans that must take charge, seeing that Raúl Castro will not be able to repeat the deed of eternalizing himself in power, and in surviving his brother he will be called to head a regime of short transition.

This new generation of Cubans will have the historic opportunity to head a new destiny without great hindrances from the past and without obligations to ideological dogma, but with the weight of fulfilling the old promises of peace, prosperity and reconciliation that their ancestors left pending.

We hope that their talents are greater than those of their fathers, and that they give the world the wonderful spectacle of leading a nation that will grow with freedom and dignity after so many years of suffering and upheaval. Thank you very much.

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