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## National Security

# Obama moves to normalize relations with Cuba as American is released by Havana



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Obama on Cuba:  
'Isolation has not  
worked' (14:55)

During his announcement on Wednesday, President Obama said a transformation of relations with Cuba would bring opportunities for both countries. (AP)

By **Karen DeYoung** and **Brian Murphy**

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President Obama announced sweeping changes to U.S. policy with Cuba on Wednesday, moving to normalize

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relations with the island nation and tear down the last remaining pillar of the Cold War.

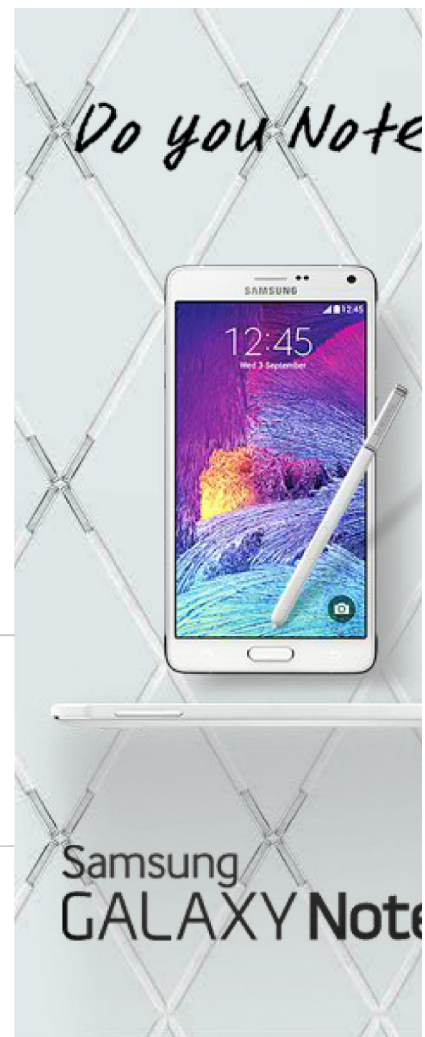
Under the new measures, the United States plans to reopen its embassy in Havana and significantly ease restrictions on travel and commerce within the next several weeks and months, Obama said. [Speaking from the White House](#), he declared that a half-century of isolation of the communist country “has not worked.”

“It’s time for a new approach,” he said.

The history-shaping overtures come after more than 18 months of secret negotiations with the Cuban government of President Raul Castro. The final touches appeared to be arrangements for a series of simultaneous prisoner releases.

Cuba agreed to release [Alan Gross](#), a U.S. Agency for International Development contractor imprisoned for five years, on humanitarian grounds. The Cubans also released an unnamed U.S. intelligence asset held for two decades, and in exchange U.S. officials released three Cuban nationals convicted of spying in 2001.

Alan Gross: 'I'm  
incredibly  
blessed' (6:46)



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After being imprisoned in Cuba for five years, USAID contractor Alan Gross arrived home in the U.S. on Wednesday. He thanked President Obama for working to ensure his freedom, and said he is looking forward to celebrating "the best Hanukkah." (AP)

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Gross, a Maryland resident, left Cuba aboard a U.S. military aircraft Wednesday morning, accompanied by his wife and several members of Congress and arrived at Joint Base Andrews. The Cubans landed in Havana. The unidentified asset was flown separately to the United States.

“What a blessing it is,” Gross said at a hastily arranged news conference in Washington. “Thank you President Obama for everything you have done today and leading up to today.”

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Although Obama has the power to establish diplomatic relations, the move was the latest in a series of steps he has taken to use executive powers to circumvent legislative opposition — and one that drew a [sharp reaction](#) from GOP lawmakers.

In a hard-edged appraisal of U.S. policies, Obama also noted that decades of embargoes and isolation against Cuba failed to topple its communist system and at times spilled back against U.S. interests in the region.

“We do not believe we can keep doing the same thing over five decades and expect a different result,” he said.

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Earlier, a [White House statement](#) said the U.S. stance against Cuba alienated Washington from “regional and international partners.”



The U.S. and Cuba are on course to reestablish diplomatic relations, crucial to aiding the island nation's economic and financial situation, Cuban President Raul Castro said Wednesday. (Reuters)

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As Obama spoke, Castro addressed the Cuban people with promises of a new chapter in relations with Washington but also noted that there are hard issues to work through.

The U.S. embargo “continues to create economic damage to our country. It must stop,” Castro said.

“We recognize we have profound differences, especially in the areas of national sovereignty, democracy, human rights and foreign relations,” he said.

But he added the countries have to learn to live with their differences “in a civilized manner.”

Across Havana, church bells rang as he spoke.

“In Havana, people listened raptly to Raul’s speech on the streets and gathered in hotel lobbies to watch Obama’s speech on TV. They burst into spontaneous applause at its conclusion,” said Geoff Thale, program director at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA), who is on the island for meetings with Cuban officials.

The outreach does more than break down one of the enduring legacies of the Cold War. It also reverberates across many political frontiers where the standoff between Washington and Havana played a role — from snubs against the United States by Cuba’s Latin American allies to the hero’s welcome given then-President Fidel Castro during a visit to Tehran in 2001.

The final elements of the deal were cemented in a telephone conversation Tuesday between Obama and Raul Castro — the first direct communication between a U.S. and Cuban leader since [relations were severed](#) in January 1961.

Officials said the call followed secret channel talks begun in June last year between White House and Cuban officials in a series of meetings held in Canada. The final planning meeting was held in November at the Vatican, where officials said Pope Francis had been instrumental in facilitating agreement.

The issue of Cuban relations, and particularly Gross’s imprisonment, was discussed during Obama’s meeting with the pope in March. Francis subsequently made a personal appeal to both Obama and Castro in letters sent early this summer.

The Vatican “has been deeply involved in this whole negotiation with the prisoners and played a key role,” said Sen. Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.), who was among a number of lawmakers meeting Gross on his arrival at Andrews.

Administration officials said that they did not expect a strongly negative public reaction to the moves, citing changes in the political sentiments of a new generation of Cuban Americans. Virtually all Latin American governments, including close U.S. allies, have long denounced the embargo and called for normalization of relations between the United States and Cuba.

But [Cuban American lawmakers](#) were quick to denounce the move.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) said Obama’s actions “will invite further belligerence toward Cuba’s opposition movement and the hardening of the government’s dictatorial hold on its people.”

Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) called the announcement “just the latest in a long line of failed attempts by President Obama to appease rogue regimes at all cost.”

The deal reached is a major diplomatic victory for Castro, 83, who has said he will step down in 2018.

Since taking over in 2006 from his ailing older brother Fidel — now 88 and all but disappeared from public life — Castro has repeated an offer to engage in direct conversations with Obama “as equals,” saying any issue would be on the table.

U.S. officials insisted that Gross's release was on "humanitarian" grounds and separate from what they characterized as a prisoner exchange of intelligence assets.

But, at its core, the swap is the same deal Cuba has been offering for several years: to trade Gross for a group of imprisoned Cuban intelligence agents that Havana champions as "anti-terrorism" heroes. The spies were sent by Cuba in the 1990s to infiltrate anti-Castro exile groups in Miami.

Havana's ceaseless crusade to ["Free the 5"](#) — which included paid advertisements in American newspapers and giant billboards in U.S. cities — was always more than a propaganda campaign. For the Castros, it was personal. Two of the five prisoners had already served much of their terms in prison and been released to Havana.

The Justice Department said that Obama had commuted the remaining sentences of the three and that they had been delivered to Cuba by the U.S. Marshals Service.

After a series of hotel bombings in 1997 by anti-Castro militants targeting the island's burgeoning tourism industry, Fidel Castro authorized Cuban officials to release information on the groups to U.S. investigators.

But the information the militants provided helped American law enforcement detect the presence of the spies, ultimately leading to their arrests in 1998 and subsequent U.S. prison convictions.

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Fidel Castro was said to be personally anguished by the fate of the spies and burdened with guilt for having inadvertently contributed to their arrests.

After the last major upheaval in U.S.-Cuba relations — the all-out campaign to bring home child castaway Elian Gonzalez in 2000 — Fidel Castro and the Cuban government started a similar blitz on behalf of the spies. But they got little traction.

Taking Gross into custody in 2009 changed the equation. His arrest, for distributing computer equipment as part of a clandestine U.S. effort, put new pressure on the covert U.S. democracy-building programs that were an annoyance to the Cuban government.

More importantly, he would become Cuba's bargaining chip.

Havana never charged Gross with espionage but instead convicted him for "crimes against the state" — essentially for trying to subvert the communist government and working for USAID programs that are illegal on the island.

Gross was sentenced to 15 years, and jailed at a military hospital, where his mental and physical health were said to be in steady decline. In recent months, he had refused medical care and diplomatic visits while threatening to take his own life.

At the news conference in Washington, Gross was missing several teeth, which he said he lost while in captivity.



Adam Goldman and Ed O’Keefe in Washington and Nick Miroff in San Diego contributed to this report.

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