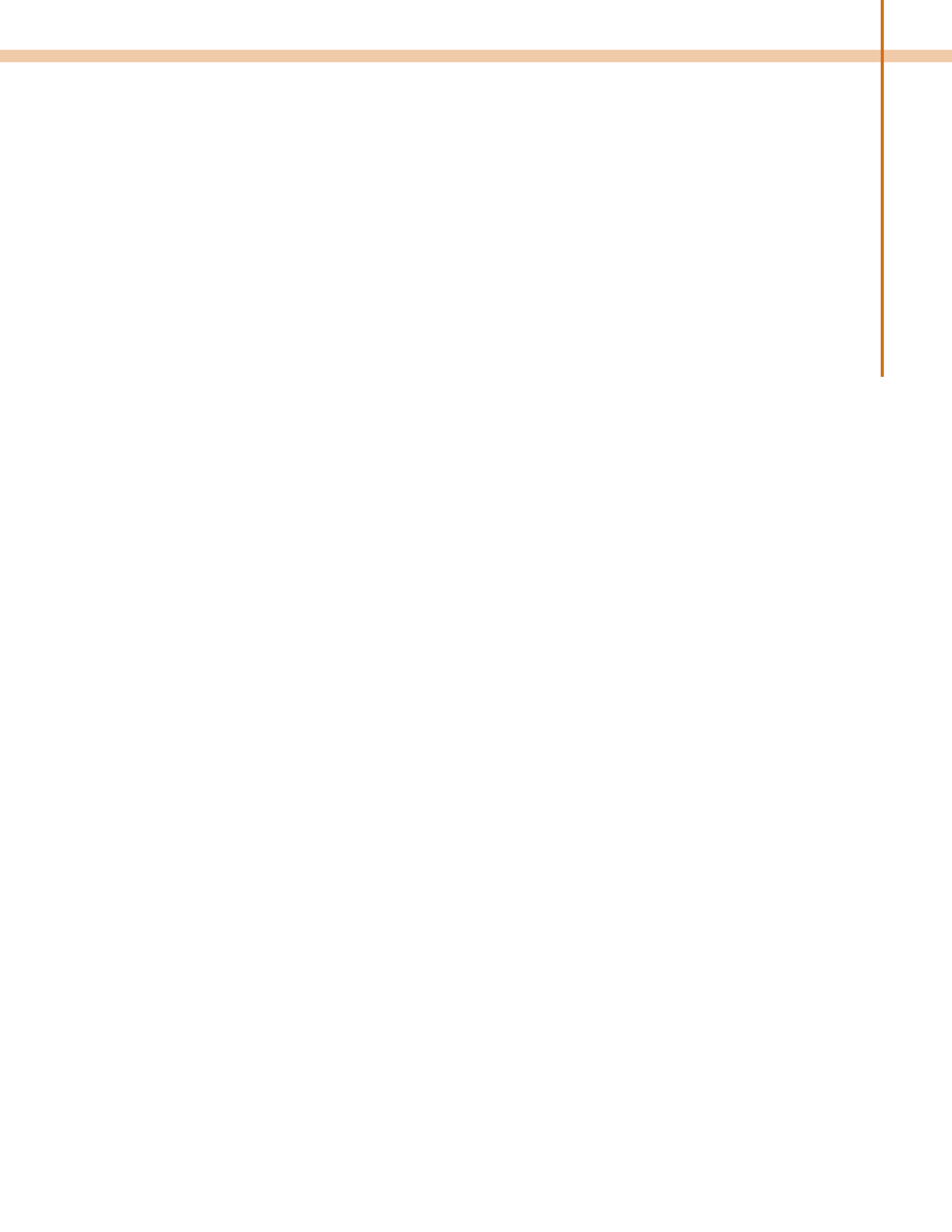

Engaging Cuba: Policy Options for the United States, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere









southern neighbors, despite the fiery rhetoric on the subject often heard in the media by certain outspoken Latin American politicians. In reality, Heine contended that most Latin American presidents, particularly those holding the most clout in the region—Brazil’s Lula, Chile’s Michelle Bachelet, and Mexico’s Felipe Calderón—are quite sympathetic to an official change in U.S. policy. Heine argued that, more so than anytime in the recent past, Latin America is extending a tremendous opportunity to the United States in helping improve U.S.-Cuban relations. It is up to the United States to engage.

More important than engaging the Cuban regime is engaging the Cuban people, argued Coordinator for Governance at the International Republic Institute **Dan Fisk**. Any change in U.S. policy toward the island must take into account the concerns and priorities of the Cuban people.

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Citing the Survey of Cuban Public Opinion, an IRI poll conducted in 12 Cuban provinces over July and August of 2009, Fisk noted that a mere 17 percent of Cubans are satisfied with the direction their country is taking. Furthermore, 75 percent of Cubans favor fundamental political change and 86 percent fundamental economic change. One in five Cubans cited food scarcity as their biggest concern, and more than 91 percent of Cubans support the ability to freely purchase and sell their homes, a right that is currently not afforded to them.

These survey results show that Cubans remain trapped in a system that does not represent them, suppresses their individual rights, and limits their ability to improve their lives. Given this situation, Fisk argued that U.S. policy should continue to encourage civil society actors to support independent counterparts on the island.

These “citizen engagement initiatives” should seek to provide the skills, training, material, and information that empower average Cuban

citizens. Despite the obstacles placed on private activities by the Cuban government, citizen engagement has an impact: witness the increasing internal organization and development of Cuban civil society groups and, most promising, the increased use of cell phones and email in the country. An informed citizenry is an empowered citizenry, he noted.

Cuba’s foreign policy and astute ability to play actors off against one another is the real success story of the regime, observed **Susanne Gratius**, Senior Researcher at Madrid’s Foundation for International Relations and External Dialogue (FRIDE). For more than five decades, the Cuban Revolution has been sustained (in economic terms) by strong external allies and, in political terms, by U.S. hostility. The Western Hemisphere accepted with resignation Cuba’s international integration without any concession to liberal democracy: the OAS revoked the special Cuba clause, the United States returned to the Clinton years and Latin America accepted Cuba into the Rio Group. Pushed by Spain, the EU is about to abandon the Common Position and might change its policy from conditioned to unconditioned engagement. Brazil could take the lead on Cuba’s full integration into the Hemisphere.

In short, Gratius argued that all previous efforts to open the Cuban regime have failed. However, she noted that for the first time the international community now has a common denominator regarding Cuba: engagement. Less external pressure might increase internal pressure for a political opening. But without lifting the embargo, we will probably never know if engagement works as a strategy to open up closed authoritarian regimes. Finally, she suggested opening a debate on the incentives for democracy in Cuba beyond the stereotypical “sanctions vs. engagement” dichotomy.



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