

European Union, Cuba reach “landmark” agreement

By Tom Whitney, March 17 2016

Federica Mogherini, Vice President of the European Commission and the EU's High Representative for External Affairs and Security Policy, recently brought a delegation from the European Union (EU) to Cuba. She announced March 11 in Havana that the EU and Cuba would soon be signing a "Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement." Officials on both sides initiated the agreement to a bilateral negotiating process, which will be finalized after both sides complete internal review processes.

Mogherini met with Cuban President Raul Castro for three hours and joined Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodriguez at a press conference. She described the agreement as a "[landmark demonstration](#) of the improved mutual trust and understanding between us. It creates a clear framework for intensified political dialogue, and a platform for developing joint action and cooperation on global matters." There will be "new opportunities for bilateral cooperation, both technical and financial, and policy dialogues in many sectors."

Foreign Minister Rodriguez [described the agreement](#) to reporters as an "unprecedented step," adding that "differences in some areas still exist, but we can manage them in an appropriate way."

According to a [joint statement](#), the "parties attest the conclusion of the negotiations ... which will enable [them] to consolidate relations between Cuba and the European Union in the medium and long-term, a relation based on reciprocity, respect and mutual benefit"

The EU delegation in Cuba included Neven Mimica, European Commissioner for International Development and Cooperation, who met with Cuban government ministers responsible for foreign commerce and investment, natural resources, agriculture, and economic planning. He also conferred with ambassadors of EU countries represented in Havana. Other experts on the EU team [visited projects](#) already receiving EU funding, among them "sustainable agricultural initiatives and activities relating to the social and economic integration of Cuban young people."

From one-sided to two-sided negotiations

In her remarks, the EU foreign affairs head mentioned that, "the end of negotiations and upcoming signature of the Agreement mark the end of the EU's 1996 Common Position as the Union's instrument defining its external relations with Cuba."

The "Common Position" took shape in 1996, partly as the result of pressure from Spain. [An observer describes](#) it as having been a unilateral process requiring the EU periodically to monitor Cuba's attention to human rights and then to decide on trade and cooperation matters based on whether rights were honored, or not. NGOs, not the Cuban government, received any humanitarian aid from the EU.

Nevertheless, trade and other contacts expanded until 2003. That year the Cuban government jailed 73 so-called dissidents, many of them funded by the U. S. government, and EU countries

cut back on relations. After a while, again influenced by Spain, the EU eased its sanctions, and in April 2008 announced its decision to pursue a process leading to rapprochement.

Over the next six years the [EU provided](#) Cuba with support for post - hurricane reconstruction, agricultural initiatives, education services, and more - all together worth 140 million euros. Since April 2014 seven rounds of formal talks have taken place. Later that year the EU announced a six-year program of grants totaling 50 million euros directed at modernization of Cuba's economy and programs on food security and environmental sustainability. The pace quickened in recent months as the presidents of Austria and France and the prime minister of Italy visited the island. President Raul Castro made a state visit to France in February 2016.

The U. K. [Guardian attributes](#) the EU shift and the recent agreement to "interest by European countries in maintaining their position as trading partners with Cuba." Data suggest that's a status quo well worth preserving, and for both sides. [A recent report](#) identifies the EU as the top recipient of Cuba's exports, absorbing 27 percent of them. The EU is Cuba's biggest foreign investor and accounts for one third of tourists to Cuba. And, "The EU is Cuba's second most important trading partner, (accounting for 22% of total Cuban trade) and the second biggest source of Cuban imports (21%)."

Ultimately, [says Reuters](#), "Cuba wants capital, and the European Union wants influence." [Another analyst](#), Sarah Stephens of *Americas Quarterly*, thinks the EU may have pursued negotiations after first concluding that "Raúl Castro's leadership has changed in some fundamental ways the circumstances in which Cuban citizens [live and work](#)." She suggests also that the EU, long having acquiesced to U. S. pressure for a hard line on Cuba, now is enjoying some autonomy, which exists because the United States itself is opening up to Cuba.

"We agree that the U.S. embargo is completely obsolete and outdated," Federica Mogherini announced at the press conference. She denounced extraterritorial effects of the U. S. blockade as illegal. "The EU position is clear," she declared: "we don't accept that EU companies are penalized." [She promised](#) that "both Cuba and EU will work with the U.S. to push for an end of these measures, which cause undue harm to Cuban people and society."