

**Statement of John F. Tierney
Chairman
Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives**

Hearing on “National Security Implications of U.S. Policy toward Cuba”

As Prepared for Delivery

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Good afternoon. At the outset of today’s hearing on “National Security Implications of U.S. Policy toward Cuba,” I’d like to recognize the leadership that Ranking Member Flake has shown on this important issue.

President Obama’s April 13 announcement lifting restrictions on family visits and remittances to Cuba is a step in the right direction. I hope it is the first step in a longer journey. Indeed, the President left the door open to further changes when he stated, quote, “We also believe that Cuba can potentially be a critical part of regional growth.”

Current U.S. policy toward Cuba is anachronistic and unsustainable – and it is a source of contention between the United States and the rest of Latin America, as well as the European Union. In the lead-up to the recent Fifth Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago, the Costa Rican newspaper *La Nacion* observed that, quote, “all of Latin America is asking for an end to Cuba’s isolation.”

In today’s hearing, the Subcommittee aims to identify concrete ways in which increased U.S.-Cuba cooperation is in our own national security interest, ways it could support the safety and security of U.S. citizens, and the nature of the threat the U.S. would face should our interaction stagnate or lessen.

The U.S. and Cuba have many shared concerns and a long history of shared collaboration – such as joint medical research that predates the Spanish-American war; so-called “fence talks” between Cuban and American soldiers on Guantanamo; overflights by U.S. hurricane hunters to predict extreme weather; and piecemeal partnerships between our Coast Guards.

Most of this cooperation requires nothing more than political will to implement it. Increased cooperation in these fields could give political leaders in both countries the confidence they need to end this fifty-year era of mistrust.

An April 13, 2009 letter from 12 retired generals and admirals to President Obama gave a persuasive argument for greater U.S.-Cuba engagement. It stated:

Cuba ceased to be a military threat decades ago. At the same time, Cuba has intensified its global, diplomatic and economic relations with nations as diverse as China, Russia, Venezuela, Brazil, and members of the European Union.

...

Even worse, the embargo inspired a significant diplomatic movement against U.S. policy...when world leaders overwhelmingly cast their vote in the United Nations against the embargo and visit Havana to denounce American policy, it is time to change the policy, especially after 50 years of failure in attaining our goals.

These generals and admirals recommend, and I quote:

...renewed engagement with Havana on key security issues such as narcotics trafficking, immigration, airspace and Caribbean security...This idea of engagement underlies our current policies in Iran, Syria and North Korea, all much graver concerns to the United States – where Americans are currently free to travel.

Experts generally agree that U.S. national security would be strengthened if Cuba pursued alternatives to Venezuelan or Russian influence. Increasing energy trade with Cuba would contribute to U.S. energy security and would create competition with the “export-oriented” populist agenda of Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez, while dampening Venezuela’s efforts to strengthen its regional presence through visible aid to Cuba. U.S. energy trade could also limit the attractiveness of the more assertive foreign policy of Russia, and China’s increased presence in Latin America and investment in Cuba’s energy sector.

Cuba’s strategic location and its apparent seriousness of purpose in fighting drugs is another strong argument for comprehensive U.S.-Cuban cooperation. Closer coordination could also help close off trafficking routes in the western Caribbean and disrupt ongoing operations of South American cocaine mafias.

Equally important, Cuba’s evacuation plans, post-disaster medical support, and advanced citizen preparedness education programs are well worth studying. More than 1,600 Americans died during Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and the U.S. death toll from Hurricane Ike in 2008 came close to a hundred. Cuba’s death rate from storms over the same period, in contrast, was only about three people per year. Only seven Cubans died from Hurricane Ike.

Hurricane preparedness is one of the few areas where the U.S. and Cuba actually do talk to one another. The U.S. National Hurricane Center has a good working relationship with its Cuban counterpart, and hurricane hunters based in the U.S. regularly cross Cuba’s air space with its government’s permission. However, other forms of

cooperation with Cuba in hurricane response are nearly non-existent. An open exchange of knowledge and transfer of technologies could save lives.

All these factors, then, lead us to the inevitable conclusion that talking to Cuba is in our own interests as well as in Cuba's interests. Our expert witnesses today will detail some steps we should be taking. President Obama has taken an important first step. Now let us explore how we can go further and do better.