



The galloping reindeer of Cuba

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Not just the Cuban flag, but hopes too, were raised in July when Cuba's embassy in Washington was opened; the United States of America's Cuban embassy was restored in August and the slow march back to normal relations began. In two previous columns (Realism and the Caprices of Fate, Issue 254, and Turning the Page, Issue 257) I focused on this seismic shift in American foreign policy and, appropriately, *Offshore Investment* is holding a conference in Cuba this month.

Enterprising Cubans are eagerly awaiting the day when the American government draws back the curtains and allows light in and open trade can flourish. Some are former army officers, for example, who served in Fidel Castro's Africa wars (Ethiopia, Angola and the former Congo) in the cause of defending international socialism. They retired early because they were either too independent for Castro's liking or became too close with the Russians who were once Cuba's economic lifeline. In Africa the Cuban army found itself turning to private enterprise, covertly trading diamonds and ivory to fund its basic campaign needs such as food and radio gear. Unwittingly, their president turned them into entrepreneurs; once home from the wars some were changed into ministry bureaucrats and began to sell Cuban cigars, citrus, sugar and nickel to the world. That very same generation negotiated Cuba's joint ventures with foreign banks, hotel chains and biochemical concerns, planting the seeds for long-term relations; and their children have been taught well.

The US embassy in Havana has been wonderfully described as a rectangular building that looks like a cheese-grater. The US ambassador's residence, however, is the antithesis of modernity and is a magnificent neoclassical limestone residence which was built in 1941. It is a 32,000-square-foot two-storey mansion with four wings and 65 rooms, as well as spacious grounds. There was a plan for President Franklin D. Roosevelt to use it as a tropical retreat back in 1941; neither the president nor his country knew what the end of that year would bring. Similarly, the restored Cuban embassy in Washington is also a limestone mansion, although not as grand, built in 1917 and standing in stark contrast to its American equivalent in Havana; symbolising old money, it has an impressive marble staircase leading on to a grand ballroom.

Times change and today Japan has joined forces with America, both wanting to slow the rise of China as a major world power. Trade looms large in all this, with two rival camps: the 12-nation Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) being actively promoted by the US – but which excludes China – versus the Chinese initiative to create the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific which would include the entire 21-nation membership of the existing Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum. Meanwhile, to the detriment of the global economy, this power rivalry has effectively made the pace of progress towards common international trading standards similar to treading through treacle.

At the beginning of 1942, during the last world war, President Roosevelt at the time called China his country's main ally against Japan. Similarly, Russia today is in the bad books of the US, as well as the United Kingdom, but each relied heavily on Russia in the European theatre of the last world war. The population of America then was similar to Russia's, about 130 million, and although America would lose hundreds of thousands of soldiers, including a much smaller number of civilians, the comparative figures for Russia are staggering. Probably at least 11 million Russian soldiers and some 15 million Russian civilians lost their lives.

President Roosevelt even referred to Joseph Stalin as "Uncle Joe". I don't believe any American today would refer to "Uncle Vlad" – unless, of course, they were related to the present occupant of the Kremlin. And in the same historical context, when considering

today's "island wars" over disputed and uninhabited territory in the East China Sea, bear in mind that reaching amicable relations between Japan and China will always be hindered by history. Both countries had been at war with each other since 1937 following Japan's invasion of China and perhaps up to 20 million Chinese would die before world peace came in 1945.

Different rules apply in desperate times, but these are not the same desperate times; it's about global trade, not tyranny, and the only battles raging are more to do with hubris and control; it's almost as if we are harking back to Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century with its vanishing empires and struggles for power and status. It is a silver lining, indeed, that Cuba and America are talking again, but the same earnestness needs to be applied to relations between China and America.

The US secretary of state flew to Cuba to raise the US flag and, like existing relations with Cuba, was still not steady on his feet following surgery. Some years ago I spent an agreeable evening and dinner at the once-contemplated tropical retreat of President Roosevelt in Cuba as a guest of the Principal Officer of the US Special Interests Section in Havana. We had an interesting discourse on the state of Cuba's politics and economy at the time, shared with a European ambassador who was also a guest. Understandably, past relations between the two governments has created an atmosphere not unlike the one between soldiers standing guard on either side of the border between North and South Korea.

When Fidel Castro banned the paid Christmas holiday for workers in 1969 it was because, he argued, that everyone was needed to work on the sugar harvest. Eventually, however, 30 years later after pressure from the Vatican, he agreed to make Christmas a permanent public holiday. But although Christmas trees and lights were welcomed (with state stores offering 30% discounts on decorations to boost sales – perhaps inspired by a few ex-army officers) those displayed at the US Special Interests Section were not because they included a huge white Santa Claus with an image of galloping reindeer and a large figure 75 in neon inside a big circle. This reminded everyone of the 75 dissidents jailed in 2003 by the

Cuban government which had called them "mercenaries in the pay of the United States".

Despite the fact that relations between the two countries are now only coming out of cold storage, they have close historical ties going back well over a century and stronger than those which America shares with Japan, its staunch ally in the TPP. Near to the ballroom in Cuba's Washington embassy is a bar which celebrates Ernest Hemmingway's life and writings during his two decades in Cuba. Even if Fidel Castro might not agree, older Cubans, at least, believe that the writer is very much a part of their recent cultural history and the bar is a dead giveaway. Cohiba cigars, along with Mojitos and Cuba Libres, are enjoyed with a surrounding array of black-and-white pictures of the complex ailurophile that line the walls. A six-foot bronze reproduction of his signature even hangs above the bar.

Shared histories, however, don't blend together like rum and Coke; basic distinctions always remain. Despite Japan's immersion in American influence after the Second World War, as an example, there is the story (apocryphal) of Japan's confusion about Christmas. A Tokyo department store put on a lavish festive display with a huge tree decorated with lights, holly and ivy along with piped muzak carols. At the centre stood a huge Father Christmas, red-coated with a beaming smile – nailed to a large wooden crucifix. In this case, no offence was intended, unlike the galloping reindeer display at the former US Special Interests Section near the Malecón, Havana's broad esplanade; that's where flying baseballs, in my experience, can be far more dangerous than the spray sent over the seawall by the waves striking the shore – but that's another story.

In Hemmingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises* the author, wishing for a brighter future, expresses the sense of hopelessness and resignation that he sees in the world around him, ending with the words "Isn't it pretty to think so?". A Jay Gatsby might-have-been moment. The US flag in Cuba was raised the following month after Cuba's was in Washington and I hope that both sides will be more in step as negotiations gather pace. It is certainly pretty to think so.

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