

JULIETTE KAYYEM

US has tied own hands as Cuba drills

THIS MORNING, a congressional committee will meet in Sunny Isles Beach, Fla., to examine our capacity to handle an oil spill in the Caribbean. It is an important event, acknowledging a new reality: Expanding offshore drilling is not exclusively a US pastime. Like so many other North American enterprises, drilling has international appeal.

Perfora, nene, perfora. (In English: drill, baby, drill.)

Cuba is now set to begin tapping the ocean, and the need for rigorous engagement with Havana has never been more immediate. It should not wait for some hoped-for Cuban Spring or for the Castro brothers to die. There is simply no mañana.

Just a few days ago, a large Scarabeo 9 offshore drilling unit, the most powerful rig in the world, arrived off the shores of Havana. Recent seismic data has confirmed potential oil wells near Cuba's shores. The rig will hold 200 people, and has the capacity to manage two different drilling operations at the same time. It will operate 16 miles off the coast of Cuba, about 80 miles south of Key West, driving down into 5,300 feet of water to a depth of 20,000 feet below the sea floor.

As another Florida attraction might put it, it's a small world, and when it comes to drilling we're all in it together. The rig is Norwegian-designed, Chinese-built, Italian-owned, and flagged in the Bahamas. The Spanish energy company Repsol signed the first contract with the Cuban government to begin exploration. Repsol has joint partnership with companies from Norway and India. Additional drilling lease agreements exist between Cuba and Venezuela, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Angola; negotiations with China are ongoing.

Since most rigs begin drilling soon after they arrive, US government officials believe the Cuban platform will begin running "shortly." There is no reason to be paranoid about Repsol's plans; drilling happens all the time. A spill might not even harm Florida, as currents and barrier reefs serve as good protection. But when drilling happens in the ocean between neighbors, direct talks are generally the norm. In 1980, for example, the United States and Mexico negotiated an agreement for oil exploration and spill response known as the Mexus Plan.

Cuba raises unique concerns because we continue to refuse normal diplomatic relations with the country still run by the Castro brothers. So today's hearing will highlight lawmakers and scientists' best efforts to work around these prohibitions. Federal, state, and local agencies are taking this seriously. Because of prohibitions on direct talks with Cuba, the United States has met in five-party discussions with the Bahamas, Cuba, Jamaica, and Mexico under the auspices of the International Maritime Organization.

There are essential efforts. And there is no evidence that Repsol, a responsible company with a solid safety record, is shying away from its duties. Presumably, with the Cuban government's approval, it even allowed the Coast Guard to review the drilling unit before it entered Cuba's exclusive economic zone. That review had to take place off the coast of Trinidad.

But in this little foray around the globe, it is important to remember that the most valuable lesson from oil spill responses is that every effort should be made to prevent one from ever happening.

Congress should support an exception to our Cuban non-engagement policy for off-shore drilling. We should want, with all our neighbors, an agreement on rigorous safety standards, regulatory oversight, and containment strategies. Unfortunately, some of the proposals in Congress seek to punish any company in contract with Cuba, an effort

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that smacks more of Cold War politics than real-world economics.

The domestic politics here, though, are all whacky. The liberal groups that want a new Cuba policy tend to be the same that oppose drilling. And conservative groups that favor drilling are intent on punishing the Castros. But Cuba will drill no matter what we do, for the same reasons that we drill. Meanwhile, the Bahamas hope to sign their first lease by the end of 2012. Jamaica is soon behind that.

Maybe, by then, we will come to understand that the oceans do not belong to the Castro brothers, nor to those who continue to oppose them.

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